

Growing Hope

V 2.0

Craig Gabrysch

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 United States License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/us/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 171 Second Street, Suite 300, San Francisco, California, 94105, USA



Dedicated to the founders and members of Frequency23.net and Liber.us.

Without their encouragement and creation of these sites, Growing Hope would
not have been imagined.

“Friends, colleagues, brothers-in-arms, listeners, fans, blah blah blahs, etc. It’s 3:30 in the morning. What are you doing still up and presumably paying attention to me? Unless my voice is coming at you through the walls of your asshat neighbor, blaring in the background while you’re balls deep in some tramp from the club, you’ve got some explaining to do.

“And, if you’re that neighbor who’s forcing his own obviously superior taste on the sex-crazed, culture-starved masses... good for you. And turn that shit *up!*”

Telson and I were those asshat neighbors, in an asshat neighborhood. Drinking cheap beer and chunking the empty cans at each others' heads in boredom. Currently, the only thing interesting happening was on the radio, beaming at us through the twists and turns of the internet, or what passed for the internet these days. The voice's name was Kenchi, presumably, a human provocateur that set up shop a couple months ago on Island 2 in the south Pacific region of the world.

He was a gas.

Now, I say presumably because all we could run on were theories of who/what it/he/she was. Whoever was behind the voice, whether it was a programmer or just a person speaking into a voice modulation microphone that changed their voice randomly between male and female, they were ex-American like us.

“Yo, Dorse,” that's my name, as Telson just pointed out, “turn the radio up.” He chunked a beer can at my head, which I dodged deftly. I was glad I did. From the sound of it hitting the pile behind me, it was nearly full.

“Goddamn it, man,” I yelled over my shoulder as I turned up the volume, “that one was almost full. Lay off the shit if you're going to fucking waste it!”

“Kay, kay, kay, sorry,” he quickly rattled off as he kicked his feet up on a swiftly degrading milk cart we'd stolen from one of grocery hubs. The fibers of the material had already begun to disintegrate since they'd left the confines of their supportive network of nanobots. Welcome to Amerika, as we call it. Believe me, the K in that doesn't stand for America being an emulation of the human spirit, a la Egyptian mysticism. More like the exact opposite.

Telson cleared his throat and popped another beer open. “This,” he waved the beer around the room, encompassing it all, “is getting mighty lame. I mean, horribly past due for a clean up, or change of locations.”

“Change of locations,” I agreed.

“Change of locations, then. This place is getting past due for a change of locations. I dare say, it's filthy,” he finished, taking a swig. After all these years, beer is still legal but marijuana's only “decriminalized”. You think they would have learned after the riots of 2010 that we should just be stoned, not drunk and rowdy. “I vote,” he continued on after choking down the alcohol laced water, “we move somewhere else. Maybe a little more upscale?” Telson cocked a knowing eyebrow at me and flashed that same grin he used on all the little alt chicks in the bar.

“Oh,” I paused and finished my beer, “I concur wholeheartedly. Good sir?”

He got a good laugh on that, shaking his spike to and fro. Still, it went back to its perfect place, “yes. Good sir, it is filthy and well past due for a change. But where should we go?”

I gave a non-committal, let me think “hmmmm” as I reached for a beer out of the cooler. “Somewhere closer to downtown? I’d like to get out of the warehouse district, personally. Too much trash around here.”

“I’d still be moving with you.”

“Shit.”

“Just south of downtown? We can probably swing that. But I’m not paying rent, and I don’t wanna be Id’d every time I walk in through the front door or some shit. You know some of the girls I sleep with. Oh, and no neural scans either,” he tapped his head for emphasis.

“Good point, good point,” I agreed, scratching my goatee with my right hand, swigging my beer with the other. “You know, we could move to one of the Islands,” I offered, “Just, you know, throwing it out there.”

“Shit,” Telson threw his head back, his hand on his forehead. He got this look every time I brought up the Islands. “Dude, you know we can’t afford it, let alone get *out* there if we could. That’s for rich people who have private armies to fight through boarder security or-”

“-con artist malcontents who hate where they live and can do hydroponic work like it’s going out of style?” I interjected. Yeah, we’re farmers. Not very glamorous, I know.

“Or con artist malcontents who blibbity blah, blibbity blah, what you said,” he came back with, “but we're not con artists. We're half-assed medicine dealers who make some money on the side. We're not even good at it. Well, you're good at it, when you're actually making a deal. But, damn it, you give too much of the shit away!”

“I'm not starting on this,” I snapped, “people need the shit, and I give it to the ones who can't afford it. All right? It's not coming out of your side of the profits anyway.” Ok. We... I'm a bleeding heart farmer who sells black market pharmaceuticals. Just slightly more glamorous than a farmer, in my opinion. “Besides,” I added, “we've got to have enough space to set up the hydro.” I'd rather be a rockstar or some shit. But those died out a looong time ago. I finished my beer and kicked my feet up on the same milk crate as Telson. It noticeably settled more under my added weight.

Telson sat silent for a while. I wasn't sure if he was thinking or just sulking. It's hard to tell, especially when he's been drinking. I turned up the radio a little more, just to drown out the silence of urban life: industrial machinery hums, a gun fight somewhere in nowhere land, and the cop sirens.

“You see here,” Kenchi was in the middle of some diatribe we hadn't been paying attention to, “Ameri-KA has plenty of people, kids still really, who understand the ins and outs of tech. They've been raised with it, brought up to run it, and have gotten sick of it and moved onto other things. We need these kids out **HERE**, in the Freelands, the Islands. Think of what we could be doing to decimate the infrastructure there? We're stealing brain,” Kenchi switched into his/her feminine voice now, “power, forced brain-drain I *love* to call it. Talk about turning the tables on the rapist, eh? So all you sultry

vixens, you holders of knowledge, you children of the Great Satan, the Old West, the Dead West, COME TO ME. Come to the Freelands, the Islands, where you're not ruled by Google and Microsoft and Monsanto. Come to us, feel the love. You feel it? Oh, that's right, you're still balls deep in some genetically engineered whore from the memetically designed bar you just left.”

Telson straightened up a little, chugged down the rest of his beer. He looked at me, dead on, straight in the eyes, one twitching slightly. “Let's do it. Let's go. I'm sick of running through eighteen proxy servers to get something decent on the radio. I'm sick of stealing a new milk crate. I'm sick of having to watch people suffer because they can't afford the retrovirals, anti-cancer, and asthma meds we've been growing here. Fuck Ameri-ka. Fuck it. Let's go.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Why tomorrow?”

“I'm too drunk right now.”

And we both broke down laughing.

The Freelands must have been brewing up some pretty good shit, because Kenchi was still going full-bore when when Telson and I came to. “Bill Hicks is a national hero over here, and what do you guys have,” he railed, it was a he at the moment, “you've got Thomas Jefferson. What in the fuck did he do for you? Own slaves while he preached against it, then knock one of them up, that's what!”

By the time I rolled out of bed she was signing off. Time to get some sleep, she said. Recharge, check in with her security staff to see how many “blatantly illegal... HA! Kenchi lives by no laws!” intrusions they'd fended off this time. That's how Kenchi judged its popularity. By how much the Amerikan/EU/Chinese/Russian government wanted it shut down, or permanently defunct at least.

There'd been impersonators, sure, people who claimed to be Kenchi. But none of them really measured up to the test. You couldn't feel the heat waves of the fire in their balls/ovaries/processor(?) like you could with it. They were just laughed off the net.

They were probably narcs anyway.

“Telson, Telson, Telson,” I chanted quietly as I knelt down with my face close to his. Finally he opened his eyes, one hair spike flopped unendearingly to the side, “You know you're ugly when you sleep? And you smell funny?” He only nodded, obviously disoriented by the setup around him. It was his pad. It was very disconcerting.

“Did I,” he paused to lick his lip and begin again, his voice anguish filled, “not get laid last night?”

“No,” I replied, grin plastered across my face, “I kept you here. We're leaving today, remember?” He weakly shook his head. Awww. Telson was hung over. “You tried to leave, if it makes you feel any better,” I offered.

“It doesn't, Dorse. It doesn't.”

Breakfast was a simple affair. Warm beer from the night before along with eggs I'd managed to trade for a couple of days before. Organic, not from one of the many factories that sprawled across the northern sectors of the city. The guy had needed antibiotics. I gave him some carrots that ran thick with omoxycline instead of beta carotene. “Might not help your eyesight”, I pitched to him, “but it'll help with that infection that's quickly crawling to your heart”. So what if I was a good salesman like Telson accused me of?

Telson leaned back in his chair, rubbing his belly like a bloated giant who'd eaten too many villagers. “Vegans suck,” he commended, then belched, “they don't know what in the fuck they're missing.”

I laughed as I scrubbed out the cast iron pan in the sink. It had been my mother's, something that was left over from the days before cancerous teflon non-stick ones were born. They'd recalled those in 2008 due to birth defects becoming prominent in their research and assembly centers. That was back when the corporatocracy had “morals”. If you could call them that, even back then. I didn't trust the pan in the dry dish cleaner. I figured the nanobots would recognize *history* and try to destroy it, erase that part of my past out of spite for me, or just their human captors in general.

“Hey,” I said over my shoulder as I finished up, “what do you think we should do with the hydroponic gear? I mean, shit, we've got a whole acre of it.”

“Well,” Telson replied, obviously turning the thought over in his poor alcohol soaked brain, “we could... ummm... give it away. To one of the collectives, you know? There's that one with that real cute piece of ass, that red head Cheryl you love so much.”

“You mean Carol? And I like her, but not 'so much',” I said, setting the pan down in the sink to dry.

“Yeah, that's the one. We could give it to them. Not sure if they know how to use it, though. Not correctly at least.”

I dried off my hands, thought for a moment. Then it hit me, “What about the Seed?”

“The Seed? Just give it to 'em, I guess.”

“Well,” I grabbed my beer, “we've got so much... why don't we take some of it with us, you know? Spread it or something?”

“Like Johnny Apple Seed?”

“Like Johnny Pharma-Seed. Shit. I don't know.”

“Well,” Telson looked up at the ceiling and considered it, “it would fuck with people... like actually giving production back to the people, wrenching it away from the corporations and such. It's not a *bad* idea. It's just...” he trailed off.

“Yeah,” I filled in the silence, moved and pulled out the chair at the table across him, looked around at the weathered walls that surrounded us both. “Yeah,” I repeated, “I know what you mean. People wouldn't know how to use the shit. Half the stuff wouldn't even grow.”

“Well,” Telson stroked a wilted green hair spike absentmindedly, “it might. Maybe not to its full potential. But it'd flower at least. We'd leave behind more seeds, at least.”

“Yeah,” I reached in my pocket and pulled out an herbal smoke, “it might.” I paused, lit it, “Yeah. You're right. It might. We could even bring jumps along with us that have all the assembly instructions.”

Then Telson perked up. “So we're going to go see Cheryl?”

“Carol?”

“Carol.”

“Yes.”

“Juice!”

“Juice?”

“Yes. Juice. Join Us In Creating Entropy.”

“You know,” I lit my smoke, exhaled, “you sound like you don't like women when you say that?”

“Fuck you. I picked it up from one of the dancers at Mad Hatter, that strip club downtown.”

“That's a y-to-x chrome club. You know, the freaky transgenders you can only read with a bio scan? Now I see why you didn't want one in the apartment.”

Telson went to say something, mouth half-open, but he must have had a change of heart. Instead, just hung his head. In his defense, though, there really was nothing wrong with them. Physiologically at least.

Carol's enclave was on the outskirts of the train depot in one of the old “reeducation camps” left over from 2010. It was a creepy enough place as it was, but they'd turned around and spruced it up with some bio-mechanical-meets-vaudeville décor. *Really* turned it into a horror house, which might explain why the members of the enclavers were so normal. They'd gone from injecting themselves with bizarre drugs and sticking even more bizarrely shaped metal objects into and through their bodies, to this, an exorcism of their demons. Carol had explained it to me one night over a bottle of moonshine. It was a symphony of art and light in 6 movements. The first was planting roots in the place where many of them had been born, or their parents had been sent during those dark times. The second was learning their demons. And finding out the names of the silent places their consciousness never willingly went. We didn't get past the first two parts that time. She gave good head, and I don't rightly remember what she was saying between the moans.

“Burn your fucking flag, burn the pole down, and find a way to burn the concrete it's sticking out of, damn it! That country is *not* yours, kiddies!” came the intonations of what could only be Kenchi from a miniplayer someone had cell-bonded to a concrete wall. It was just up the block from us, playing to an empty street. Telson and I stopped and listened for a minute as he railed on about us being dipshits. “The war for this land, this air, this water was not won, kiddies. The government that rides high over your parents' corpses only succeeded in taking your minds and locking them away! We've gotten past the global warming for the most part, we've used science to clean the environment, we finally got past the issue of nuclear power. Now all we've got to do is

break the patterns of fear and subservience instilled in you.

“Put your ears close to the speaker. If this is beaming directly to ear canal plants, all the better. Ready?”

And with no notice Kenchi released an ear piercing howl that must have come from without somewhere. This was unearthly, sounds of gears turning, cogs being ground to dust, and netherbeasts gnashing their teeth.

“All right. I was just fucking with you,” she said and laughed one of those throaty laughs that just oozes sex from the vocal chords before it trailed off into some sort of poor display of computer voice synthesizing from the '90s.

“Must be a recording,” Telson said, rubbing his ear, teeth still lightly clenched.

“Yeah. I think from about a week ago,” I replied, then reached out my hand and vigorously rubbed the recharge pad that was on one side. It would transform my body heat and friction into usable energy. When my finger went numb, Telson took over. It was an empty street now but, who knew, Kenchi might be playing to a full house in an hour. Stranger things *had* happened. After we'd taken a few minutes to recharge the battery we kept walking to the enclave.

Now, to explain the enclave, you have to think of a hundred carnies doing meth for a week straight, then dropping some acid, then aurative when they'd sufficiently opened their brains and were, therefore, sufficiently in the mood to let carnie music and fairway barks become visible. Then imagine, if you will, these same carnies rambling through the north of Europe, and discovering a concentration camp. A Good ol' Nazi style one. Then turning it into a show, and somehow managing to attract the attention of

some extraterrestrials from the abyss of our collective consciousness.

Then you might get the enclave.

Carol filled me in on the rest of the symphony later that month. I'd been sleeping with one of her co-'clavers, and she had no one to talk to since Telson was a late sleeper. Over some tea she explained the "Great Work" she and her kin had undertaken.

The third movement was a renovation of the place. Built the furnaces back up. Shoveled out the ash from the old fires, wiped down the empty boxcars, painted over the blood stains, even.

Fourth. Forgave those who had inflicted this pain on their families and friends.

Fifth. Summoned and trapped their demons in every way possible: through artwork, in crafts, the designing and building of furniture, in computer programs. Anyway the demons of their minds would be able to concretely form, the 'clavers created it.

The fifth had taken the longest, actually. I think it was just as difficult, work-wise, as the third. Emotionally, I'm not so sure. I remember seeing Carol's tear stained face for two months straight. The group almost broke apart on more than one occasion. But that's what you get when you go exorcising things that don't want to be exorcised, whether they're demons or governments. The damn things always fight back. Even with all the priming from the first three movements, the group almost broke.

Finally, the sixth step was to turn the camp into a thriving community that gave help to those who didn't get it anywhere else. That is the main reason we were going to Carol. They could use the conglomeration of apparatuses Telson and I had constructed.

They would give back to the people, while we ran to find ourselves.

We walked up to the front gates, punched the intercom and gave our names to the guard. The magnetic locks quickly released and the gate opened with grind and a low moan to allow our passage.

“Hey man,” I called to the guard as we walked past his little house. It was Hook, one of the guys who'd been in on the project since nearly the beginning. Before the exorcism, he'd been messed-up, living on the streets, shooting a heroin substitute under his toenails, trying to kill his brain and the memories it carried. He'd come a long way.

“Telson and Dorse, the men with the plan. What's up?” Hook called from the gatehouse. We walked over to him. As we got closer I could see that he was clean shaved, something that was a new development in the last couple months. Yeah, he'd certainly come a long way. “You guys bring any of those tomatoes? You know, the vine ripened ones?”

“Nah,” Telson replied, “sorry man.”

“But, don't worry,” I piped up, “we brought something even better.” I held up a jump, a tiny rectangular prism that caused Hook's eyes to sparkle.

“What's on there?”

“Information.” With that response he couldn't help but crack a smile.

“This,” Telson started with a grin, pointing to the jump, “dear Hookie Hook, contains the plans, the means, and the instructions to run our farm.”

Hook relapsed, “Woah.”

“You said it man. 'Woah' is fucking right. We're getting out of town, leaving for

the Freelands,” I replied, a grin uncontrollably growing across my face like one of our tomato plants' vines, “which is why we need to see Carol. We want to help you finish the 6th movement.”

“Got it, guys. Go on through, I'll lower the grid, call Carol, and all that. Oh, and watch out for Hillfen, it's been in an even more foul mood lately.” Hillfen was one of the things wrestled from Carol's part of the collective consciousness. It symbolized her fear of commitment and lack of focus. Now it resided in a painting built from pigmented nanobots. Constant chaos and lack of coherent form were its trademarks. It would speak to you if you let it, or scream in your general direction if you didn't.

As we walked across the compound courtyard I marveled for the umpteenth time at work the enclave had done with the camp. What had been a dusty expanse of land fifty meters by fifty meters, was now a park, a little piece of wilderness in the worst part of the city. It almost seemed inviting. Of course, it served two purposes, to keep the outside world out, and the inside world in. The trees, stolen from the lawns of the rich in some nearly arcane ritual that had never been explained to me, blocked the sound partially. Sonic dampeners were difficult to make on your own, and almost impossible to buy on the open market. On the black market, they were just too expensive to be within anyone's reach. It was either this or have the neighbors come looking every time the 'clavers had band practice, or someone dropped by that Hillfen hadn't harassed in a while.

Telson and I were greeted by the hum and crackle of the grid powering down for our arrival. We didn't have the tags implanted in our skin, and the system wasn't sophisticated enough to notice biorhythms. The front door, a painted and resin carved

side from one of the old boxcars, slid open as we walked closer. From the entryway I could hear something calling my name.

Once the lobby/waiting room for the infirmary, it had been morphed into an art gallery of the group's collective unconscious. Well, that's the best way I know to put it.

All around were the lights and elaborate animatronic devices of the enclave. One was a three dimensional picture, a laser beam that sketched a design in the air by rapidly pinpointing and bursting air molecules into plasma. The image was of one of the old commander of the camp with his family. His face, his wife's face, and their children's faces perfectly reconstructed from old pictures and vids that had been painstakingly dissected. His uniform perfect, and their clothing exceptionally done. He didn't need any changes of visage. His memory was bad enough. My parents hadn't been in his camp, and neither had Telson's, but we still mentally cringed. The man had been a monster, but human. That was the worst part of it. The things we do when our overlords point us to it.

On the east side of the room sigils programmed months ago were drawn and erased rapidly by a program coded for this specific task. Their meanings were forgotten before the program had ever been completed. I know because I asked the crafter of this particular device, Faraday Random. He babbled on about the overall meaning of it, the overarching goal, but still couldn't tell me what each one was named. Faraday explained they didn't have names, they were just there. Sometimes he'd take the wall unit down and put it over his bed, if he had company. "It helps charge them at the time of, you know," he told me, trailing off..

"How?"

He just shrugged.

I had no reply. Fair enough, I thought... and still think.

We moved through the lobby into the hallway that ran through the offices. Windows lined both sides, most of them covered with bed sheets, or just taped shut. The camp had been built before reactive glass became cheap, and vintage was important for this place. The offices were where they did the physicals and the immunizations people would soon come to dread. They were now bedrooms. You could easily see into the uncovered rooms, which were a mix between crash pads and mini temples to the strangest gods you'd ever see. One small room had a shrine to Chuck Norris in it.

I could never bring myself to sleep with any girl here in these makeshift dormitories. I made them make the long trek back to my neck of the district. Arguably it was more creepy, especially when doped on aural and engineered psilocybin extract. But, if I got them back to the warehouse, I was never worried that she was charging a sigil while doing the reverse cowgirl.

A couple of the rooms were occupied, but neither Telson nor I were really friends with any of those doing the occupying. We just strolled down the hall till we hit the end at a t-intersection, then took a left. That was the wing where Carol and her friend Shelly lived. She was Carol's co-'claver I'd spoken of earlier.

I could still hear, or imagined I could hear, the cackling of Hillfen all the way down here. Or maybe it was a recording of Kenchi somewhere behind us. I wasn't sure. Who knows? Maybe Kenchi had co-opted Hillfen's voice for a moment? Honestly, it wouldn't have surprised me. He/she/it was one of our heroes. We attributed god-like status to this thing.

“Dorse? Telson? That you guys?” Carol called as we knocked at her dorm room.

Music blared loud enough that I was surprised she could hear us knocking.

“Yeah,” Telson yelled, “How'd you guess?” She got up and turned the music off, came to the door dressed in her normal slacks and a tee-shirt of some band I'd never heard of, her red hair up in a ponytail. I didn't get off on knowing the hottest, latest music on the “scene”. I was a farmer. We didn't do things like that. We drank, fucked, did drugs... and meditated.

“Hook rang a while ago, let me know you were coming in,” she replied with a smile, then focused to me, “took you long enough. Get hung up with Hillfen?” I mumbled an affirmative. “Dorse, shame on you. You're better than that.” And she turned and went back into her room, leaving the door ajar for us. She sat down cross-legged on the bed. Telson went in ahead of me.

“So,” he began, “how are things with the camp? Any decent shows?”

“Eh,” she shrugged, “not really. Not enough revenue coming in. Just enough to keep our heads above water,” Carol trailed off, then, “bring any tomatoes?” Telson and I shook our heads. “Eh. Here,” she bent down under her bed and grabbed an old fashioned tin from beneath, sat upright. “Smoke?”

“Sure,” Telson replied and looked at me. I just waved it off. Carol had already started separating the seeds and stems on the tin cover.

“Mind if I use your Book?” I asked instead, pointing to her laptop. I figured if they were going to smoke she wasn't going to remember a damn thing I said about the finer points of hydroponic farming. Might as well write it down.

She looked up at me from the tray, a queer expression on her face. “Why?”

“We're giving you our farm,” I replied simply, “and there's some tips I need to write down in there.”

Carol almost knocked the stash over. “WHAT?!”

“We are giving you our farm,” I repeated more slowly than before, enunciating every syllable.

“WHY?! You guys love that thing! I've been trying to get you to bring it over for months, but you've always told me no!”

“Damn,” Telson said, “don't get twisted. Shit. Roll the spliff and we'll talk.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, “hand me the book and get to smoking.”

“You guys,” Carol drowsily said, “should stay one more night. You can pack up in the morning.” She and Telson were curled up on the bed together. I was still waiting for Shelly while I busily typed out the notes I'd accumulated over the last two years. They were simple things, mostly ways to take out mites without having to resort to nanobot protection or pesticides, which could be both expensive and counterproductive, or even how to tell if there was root rot in a given plant. People paid a premium for organically grown produce, and sometimes the “defense mechanisms” man added to his crops countered the effects of the drugs.

“Why should we stay?” I asked.

“Well, we could throw a party, you know?” Carol replied.

“Yeah. You could. Hey,” I pulled out a cigarette, “where's Shelly?”

“She went into town, had to go shopping, I think.”

“Shopping?”

“Yeah. Groceries, you know. There's a wholesaler we go to, this guy in Uptown that hooks it up. So, like I said, you two should stay one more night. A bash or something.”

“Right,” I looked at Telson. He was snuggled up with her and looked more content than I'd seen him in days. Telson was stoned. Whether it was because her pot was good, or the shit Carol laced it with was good, I wasn't going anywhere. Not to the Freelands, and probably not home to pack. Besides, if he was that whacked, I wouldn't be able to sneak out of the city past the guards. Bastard would start walking toward the checkpoint instead of going around like a sensible person. Well, not really around. It's a

little bit more tricky than “going around”. Let's just say that it's a lot easier to make it into the city, than it is to make it out.

“Hey, Carol, don't let anyone know that we're leaving. This is just a bash, OK?”

“What,” she drawled out, “worried my friends are narcs?”

“No. Friends of the friends of your friends. Besides, someone may be tagged.”

Tagging, as we referred to it, was bugging someone's person without them realizing it. It was more common than you'd think. Not an awful lot of employers did it, but some did. And so did their security. Let's just say it takes more than a hot shower to get these off. You needed to have active nano-antibodies to hunt them down, items that were increasingly difficult to find, or an EMP field around your apartment. Some of the tags were being outfitted with their own hunter codes, and EMP generators were expensive and/or illegal (depending on how much you paid the cops to forget about you... of course, if you were paying the cops off, you really didn't need the EMP fields. Nevertheless, that still didn't change the legality of it, or the cost of purchasing on the black market).

“Cool,” was all Carol said.

So, yeah, we were having a party. And Shelly still hadn't made it back. Hillfen was wrong, I probably cared more about Shelly than I did Carol. Leaving was going to be difficult... but, to be honest, it shouldn't have been such a hard choice. Freedom and liberty on one hand... or a half-crazy girl who summoned demons into pictures with her friends to try and break and rebuild her ego? I know. Tough choice.

“Now, a word from our sponsors, kiddies:

“Are you sick of the horrible oppression and forced world view of the propagators of alien memplexes? Does your reality tunnel seem foreign to you? Do you just not fit in, even on the Freelands? Then come to Island TAZ, one and all, where liberty is free and freedom flows like water.

“Established only four years ago using a unique combination of Electrophoretic deposition and lightweight alloys, this Freeland remains completely intact and almost untouched by the mainland countries.

“Founded by a group of Freelanders who felt their lifestyle was just too rigid, Island TAZ is the premier place to experience life as it was meant to be experienced. Planned to exist for only another another four years, see it now before it goes up in a fiery ball of destruction!

“Grow your own food, or not. Make your own drugs, or not. Have insane, hazmat cleanup required sex with beautiful, indiscriminating women, men, or x-y chromers. Or not! Tell your friends about your vacation from reality, or keep it your own dirty secret! It's your choice. Because, at Island TAZ, that's the point!

“Now, I'd like to offer up a word of praise to Island TAZ. That place really is all it says it is. I went on vacation there a year ago, and it was just beautiful. Sure, there's no trees, but, hell, up until 10 years ago there were barely any on the mainland!

“Yep, Island TAZ *definitely* gets the Kenchi seal of approval.”

Yeah, that was one of those places Telson and I dreamt about. Island TAZ. Almost rolls off my tongue, off my fingertips, collecting in a big sticky mess on my

keyboard.

It was like one of those dreams within a dream, something ephemeral and lovely, just beyond your reach. Then, well, you woke up and realized it was a dream. Then you woke up again and you realized that *that* had just been a dream. And you were stuck here, doubly fucked, worrying about whether or not your best friend had been tagged and was spying on you by accident. And your bed was empty, and there was no alcohol in the warehouse, nor suitably fortified mind-altering chemical.

Now, I realize that as I relate this story, it seems really horrible. Which it is. The City, wasn't the model city. But we thought there was worse out there. Believe me, I'd heard stories of them. Now, whether they really existed or not on these shores, and not on another continent like Africa, Europe, Asia, or South America, is up for debate.

These cities were entirely cut off from the net. Their people Lived or died, even *ate* at the whim of their government or corporate overlords. Completely segregated from the world that existed a mere nanosecond of computation away, ten miles of nanonet separating them from the nearest community. They were examples of extreme feudalism that's taken a massive helping of PCP. Compared to that prospect, this city seemed like Nirvana on earth.

Of course, then there's the argument of the cities myth being just another memplex fed to me. It may not be real, or have any semblance of reality. This is, after all, a world at war for our minds. So how can I tell the difference? Gut instinct, I guess.

Then there's the idea that the City is the only place like this, and that Kenchi is just a psi-ops operation designed by the powers that be to throw us off.

But, when all things are said, sung, written, and done I have to choose my narrative, my story, my myth, and stick to it. As does everyone.

“Carol, did you smoke all our shit?” Shelly asked from the doorway. Carol just giggled. I looked up from my typing.

I liked Shelly most of all because she seemed the most normal in the enclave. No tattoos, no piercings other than her ears, no scars. Just perfect. The way her DNA meant her to be. She didn't smoke, she rarely took drugs, and she thought I was killing my brain and liver. I liked her. She looked to be entirely more... whole. Of course, the most normal out of the *enclave* didn't really mean shit. And looks didn't mean anything either.

Short and petite with long black hair and a little bit of Native American flowing through her veins. Lovely in that, I'm super-fucked-up-emotionally-and-mentally-because-I-watched-my-parents-get-executed-with-a-bullet-to-the-back-of-the-head kind of way. But you build up a resistance to that kind of thing around here. Most of these people were our allies, after all. A little crazy, but sometimes those are the best *compadres* to have. Besides, when you got nothing...

“Hey Dorse,” Shelly greeted me, came over and gave me a peck on the lips. “How you been?”

“Can't complain, Shelly. How was shopping?”

Shelly looked down at my hands resting on the laptop keyboard, caught a glance at some schematics of the farm that I'd pulled up. She walked around behind me to give the screen a closer inspection. “Is that you and Telson's setup?” She asked, eyes wide.

“They're leaving tomorrow, Shell,” Carol called from her bed.

“Shut the fuck up, Carol!” I yelled reflexively, then more quietly, “Shelly close the door, would you?” Shelly went around and did as I asked, eyes still wide. She

looked back at me after the bolt clicked satisfactorily, eyebrows raised.

“You two are leaving? Why? And don't yell at me.”

“Well...” Telson said sluggishly, trailing off. Still fucked.

“I'm sorry. We're going to the Freelands.” I answered.

“You know,” Shelly started quietly as she sat down on the end of the bed, “they're not as great as you think. There's still problems there.”

“How would you know?” Telson asked.

“Not everything everybody says is true, Telson. I mean, Kenchi's just propaganda-”

“But better than the propaganda everybody else feeds us daily,” I interjected.

“Yeah,” Shelly said, frowning, “but it's still propaganda, guys. Maybe you should stay here in the camp. I mean, we can still move all the stuff in-”

“Ohhh hell no!” I snapped, “I'm not moving in here. I'd end up breaking Hillfen into a million pieces, scattering its fucking nanobots all over the fucking camp grounds, getting kicked out, living on the street. Fuck no. Fuck, no. Then I'd be out of a place to live *and* have no farm.”

“But-” she started again.

“Fuck no! We're having a party, we're getting completely, utterly fucked, then we're leaving in the morning. End of fucking story.”

Telson sat up, looked at us both, “Right.”

“Right, shit. And sorry, again, for yelling.”

Shelly didn't even look at me, just got up and left. All Carol could muster was a

sigh. I got up to follow Shelly. Telson just laid back down.

“Don't even bother, Dorse. She's pissed. Give her a minute for her to get back to her studio, work a little bit of it out of her system. She might knife you if you don't,” Carol said quietly.

“She might knife me if I do,” I walked over and put my cigarette out in the ashtray on the bed, “but you're probably right. I'll finish the notes then go down there.”

When the enclave was populated, fully populated by awake, moving, living human beings, it wasn't nearly as creepy as you might expect an ex-concentration camp to be. Once you got past the entrance there were only a couple more installation pieces to surprise you. The annoying ones were in the bathrooms. They'd sit in waiting, pretend to be asleep, then surprise the living shit out of you. Then cackle. Or chortle. Wait... no... those were the residents.

I left Carol and Telson to each other, to unwind a little, and went further into the building. In the corner of one of the larger common sleeping areas was a converted living room with a few worn out couches and benches. Four 'clavers were sitting and talking, one strumming on an ancient looking acoustic guitar, a pipe being passed around, an open cooler full of beer on the floor. I walked into the room and headed over to them. Three of them I had a passing friendship with, meaning I had smoked with them on more than one occasion. I was "that pharma guy" to them. The fourth was Reggie, Shelly's ex.

"Sup, Telson? Wanna beer?" one of them, a girl around 16 or 17 asked.

"Dorse. I'm Dorse. And, yeah, sure, I'll grab a beer." Reggie didn't even look up at me, just kept staring at his beer bottle while I grabbed one from the cooler. I could see his hand tensing and relaxing around the bottle. I had planned on asking if Shelly came past here, but figured it probably wasn't that great of an idea. Reggie looked pretty intent on using that bottle for something other than drinking, and suffering from head trauma made planning your great escape difficult. Not to mention he was bigger than me. At least six or seven inches taller, and infinitely more muscular. On top of that, the tension in the air was thick. They'd seen Shelly come through and could tell I was the one that

pissed her off.

“Hey, guys, thanks for the beer,” I said, gesturing appreciatively with the bottle. I turned in the direction of Shelly's studio and headed off while I twisted the bottle cap off.

“Dorse,” I turned around. It was the guy who'd been playing guitar, “Hey, you didn't happen to bring any of those tomatoes did you? The vine ripened ones?”

“Nah, man. But, I'm thinking I'll head back before the party. Got anything you could trade?” I was hoping for some more beer or pot.

Guitar man thought about it. I took a long pull off the bottle, looked around it at Reggie to make sure he wasn't about to snap. Finally, the guy spoke up, “I've got some aurtative. Want that?”

“Yeah, that sounds pretty cool. Is it any good?”

“Best I've had in a while,” was the reply as he strummed his guitar languidly.

“Clean?”

“Yep. Not a bunch of chemical burn or anything. Better than that acid you got me a while back.”

“Yeah,” I paused. I'd forgotten. “Sorry about that shit, man. It was a new guy and stuff, you know? If it makes you feel any better, I took it that same night. Felt like shit for a week after. Almost killed Telson, I think.” I took another long drink. I wanted to get out of there. Quick.

“Dorse, man, don't even worry about it. I've had worse. I didn't like freak out or anything, it was just dirty. It's cool.”

“Cool. Well, hey, I'll grab half a sack of those tomatoes for you when I go back.

Thanks again for the beer.” I walked off quickly, the desire for a bottle to the back of the head completely absent. Shelly's studio was only across the room and down the hall. It was a big room, but I thought I could clear it, or at least make it out of range.

Glass shattered just as I was about to turn the corner. I stopped in my tracks, arms over my head, muscles tensed, fight or flight response kicking in. First thought that went through my head? *Fuck me, fuck me, I'm not leaving town tomorrow morning.* Then I realized that the shattering wasn't anywhere near me, let alone on my neck, head, or elsewhere on my person. I quickly regained my composure and looked back at Reggie. He was getting up and leaving already, his three friends cowering. They were as freaked as me, glazed eyes staring at the corner covered in what could have only been beer. Thankfully, Reggie was headed back towards another hallway, away from Carol and Telson, and away from me. I breathed a sigh of sweet-lord-I'm-not-going-to-fucking-get-my-ass-beat-tonight relief.

I continued quickly down the hall towards Shelly's studio. I could hear Kenchi's cast blaring through the closed door, competing well with my heart jack hammering in my ears. "I'm going to say something, and I say this with complete confidence. I really do. I'm serious here. Don't let this get around, because people might freak out or think I'm crazy, maybe try to 'shut me down'. OK. Everyone HIGH UP in power is out for themselves. I know, big shock to you kiddies, isn't it?" femme-Kenchi switched to robo-Kenchi. "They don't care about you or your neighbor anymore than a john cares about a prostitute," Now to male, "Seriously. Big shock, huh?

"No?" Femme-Kenchi said softly. "Oh wait... I forgot..." and she abruptly raised her voice to a passionate, digitized yell, "we ALL FUCKING KNOW THAT ALREADY! Everyone! The people who are raping you, the next guy, your roommate, your mother, your dog, your best friend, and even your best friend's fucking mutt!

Everyone with the giant phallus of corporate hegemony and corporate greed rammed in their rectum,” male, “(with no lube, because that costs extra... and the corporatocracy is all about the bottom line) knows it, *feels it*.

“The funny thing is: You’re not tied down. There’s no ball-gag in your mouth. And they’re just pounding away. The people of the Freelands hear you screaming. The people on Island TAZ hear you screaming. The people next door hear your screams above even their own. The whole fucking *world* hears you screaming. We've been hearing it for so long now over there in the Ameri-kas, that we're beginning to think you *like* it. So either learn to enjoy it, or stop. Go! Leave!

“Do you want to know why I left?” he said calmly, his voice morphing into that of a sultry french madame's, “I was tired of walking funny for weeks. I was tired of having a raw throat. I was tired of having my ears pierced by the grunting and rutting of corp execs and the wails of my fellow ass-rapees. I got sick of it. So I came here. To live and be happy. Why haven't you?” a brief pause followed after the question, then she was back, still in her madame voice. “This is Kenchi, casting from where you can only hope to be. *Au revoir.*”

Silence. I waited a few moments before knocking on Shelly's door, delivering the old rapataptap. “Yeah?” she shouted.

“Hey, it's Dorse. Can I come in.”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” she replied even voiced. I opened the door and went in. She was working on a painting of her deceased family, mostly based off memory and a few pictures that remained.

“Hey,” I began, “I, well,” pause, “well, I wanted to apologize for yelling at you.”

“Huh?”

“For yelling at you in Carol's room.”

She looked over her shoulder at me, slight smirk on her face, “Don't worry about it, Dorse. I overreacted. We've all got paths we're on. You and Telson have yours, the Fool's path. Me and Carol, we've got ours. Your mystical deity, Kenchi, will protect you like a talisman. I've got the 'clave.”

“Right... fool's path...” I wasn't certain what she meant, or if I should feel insulted. Definitely over my head. Normally, when conversations with Shelly became more esoteric I just bowed out. “Anyway... Are you sure?” She just shrugged. “Because, I was thinking, you know, Telson and I could put off leaving for a couple days, help you guys set up the farm or something...” I trailed off.

“Yeah. I'm sure. Hook put together our grid, and Carol can re engineer nanobots. I think we can handle a farm as long as we've got seed. Besides, you know I'll never hold anyone back from anything, especially not a friend.”

“Oh. Well... yeah, you're probably right, Shelly. Putting it together's the easy part.” I took a drink of beer, at a loss for words. My half-assed plan to stay a couple more days hadn't worked. Now I just felt completely out of place, like a drunk who stumbles into a black tie event. “So, I was thinking about going back to the warehouse, you know, to pick up some tomatoes for trade. Most of the people around here love 'em.” She just looked at me like I was an idiot. Definitely wasn't going to take the bait, and I wasn't going to get laid either. But I kept going anyways, “You want to-”

“No, Dorse. I think I'm just going to paint till the party gets going.”

“Oh, OK. I guess I'll see you there then?”

“Mmhhh.”

“Great.” Yeah. Right. Great.

I kept the meme of the Fool's Path floating around in my head. Something about it managed to cling on to other ideas in the neuron soup. What was it that made us fools, as Shelly put it? I shook my head, drank my beer. Better to clear those vicious, unsightly thoughts from my cranium before it was too late. They might take over, memes do that. They replicate within your brain, expand, and begin to destroy other ideas and other thought processes till you're nothing but a vessel for them.

So I backed away slowly, and carefully. Metaphorically, of course. I walked out of the hallway, back into the slightly less surreal reality that was the camp. The 'clave. The guitar strumming had begun again. Chattering among the 'clavers picked back up, something I relished. Conversations from without to replace those within... I became lost instantly in the flood of voices, the double digit addition added in short pace to the four I'd been apart of earlier.

“Party?”

“Yeah, party, man. A big fucking party. We got bands coming in from the city, trucking their shit right now.”

“Who told 'em?”

“Hook, I think.”

“What's it for?”

“Just to party. Need an excuse, Jakey Jake?”

“Just sip till it cools off, then slam her back, aye?”

I turned the corner, and felt the rush. The exultation, the pre-endorphin high. The testosterone feel of fresh women on the way, the estrogenic love of things manly, the

need to create. I could smell, feel, and see it in the air, that electrical hum of the ecstatic union about to take place. It delivered weightlessness to my being which almost lifted me off my feet. This was what being alive felt like, at least as far as I was concerned. It was the feeling of mental foreplay. We were all flirting with the future, it seemed.

Fifteen or twenty people ranging from 16 to 30 sat or stood around, all in their own preparatory phases. No doubt that there were more throughout the camp, hidden away in their dormitories preparing themselves for the night to come. This was life for us. Work hard, try and make the world a better place, then indulge. Some were applying makeup, others tuning their instruments. A few were kicking back a couple pre-party shots or beers. I saw one group cooking up shroom tea on a hot plate.

I moved through the crowd easily, only getting a couple recognizing nods from those I'd dealt with in the past. Carol's pad was my destination, partially to collect Telson, partially to let them know I hadn't been knifed when I made it down to the studio. The need for chit chat, social bantering, didn't occur to me. A mission was what I was on. I needed tomatoes. Tomatoes to trade for aurative. Aurative to party. Partying to help me put away the parts of my brain that screamed for being put away.

A few sharp raps on Carol's door. "Yo, Carol, Telson. You guys decent?"

"Yeah," was the call from inside. I opened the door. They'd at least pulled a sheet over themselves.

"Telson, throw some clothes on," I said as I walked in.

"Huh?"

"Clothes. Put them on," I replied, turning around. I had no desire to see Telson

naked. Carol on the other hand... but she was passed out anyway.

“What are we doing?” he asked. I could hear him getting out of bed, the rustle of well worn work pants as he pulled them on. Carol stirred slightly at the weight shift.

“You dressed?” I asked the wall ahead of me.

“Yeah.”

I turned around. “We got some aurative from one of the guys. Half a sack of tomatoes for a dose, maybe two if we can bring down three-quarters.”

“You sure?” he asked, eyes lit up.

“Pretty sure. But, come on, we gotta hurry. Party looks like it's getting ready to go, so we need to get back soon,” I said. I kept glancing at Carol's half-naked, passed out, stoned form. Telson didn't even notice, or didn't care. One or the other.

“Right, right,” he said as he reached over to grab his shirt from the foot of the bed. “Lead the way, Dorse.”

“You gonna wake her up?” I asked, gesturing at Carol.

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” he replied. Telson walked over and sat down where he'd been laying before, reached out a hand to her flank and gently shook her. “Caaaarrrroool,” he cooed softly till she began to stir. When she made a grunt of acknowledgment Telson told her we were leaving, and that the party was starting soon. We waited till she was sitting up before heading out the door.

The trip through the camp was quick and to the point. We phoned Hook from a console to let down the grid for us, then hit the courtyard. As soon as we made it to the guard station we rapidly informed him of our intention to come back as soon as possible

and explained the urgency for reentry.

“Ah, no problem, guys. As soon as Hook sees you coming, he'll have his finger on the trigger, you know?”

And then we made our way back into the real world, the place of dark and grime where beauty was just a random fractal created by nature.

“I’m gonna miss this place, you know?” Telson said as we sped-walked to the warehouse.

“Huh?” I asked in reply, slightly out of breath.

“The city. I think I’m going to kind of miss it.”

“Why?”

“Don’t know,” Telson said, shrugging, “I just am.”

“Well, what is it? There’s gotta be something.”

“Carol, I guess. Maybe, I don’t know, the struggle... the fight, you know?”

“Why,” I asked, looking at him, “are you going to miss the fight? I mean, that’s what we hate.” He thought about it a moment as we walked, keeping our pace.

“Makes you feel alive. Gives you something to wake up for. Never a dull day. You know?”

“No, Telson, I don’t know. Which is why I’m leaving.”

We made it to the warehouse in almost record time. This would be the second to last foray into our home. The next one would be to collect our meager belongings that were worth keeping, and the seed we’d distribute, of course. It would be a short trip, much shorter than this one.

The hum of the grid faded as we approached. I could almost feel my chip humming in a converse relation. They call it the phantom hum. So subtle no human could feel it, they said. I didn’t give a shit, I could feel it.

Rise of the chip, fall of the grid.

We hit the floor at a run. Telson immediately heads to the farm as I quickly inspect the computer terminal in the kitchen to make sure there were no attempted security violations. There appears to have been none, which is good enough for me. I follow behind Telson. As soon as I make it to the door a burlap sack is thrown at me. Hemp, real hemp. So rare. Telson is already making his way quickly through the rows upon rows of plants, going on instinct now. We need to check the plants every day, every time we come in. It's its own environment here, and it develops entropy if we neglect our negentropic qualities.

While Telson checks ph balances of water, I begin checking tomatoes. We need tomatoes. Tomatoes are high priced commodities in the quasi Barter-Land he and I live in. Tomatoes will get us well on our way to leaving this place, metaphorically and chemically at the least. I find a good clean one that's so close to ripening only Telson or I could tell the difference. Pluck it from the vine. Gently. Love. Tenderness. Farming is about understanding the flow of your plants, knowing when they want to be picked. I find another, and another, and another. So on. So forth. Telson joins the fray, begins inspecting and plucking. We move as quickly as possible through our artificial rows of plants.

As Telson inspects the ripeness of one child, I heft the burlap sack in his hand. Just before he plucks, "No more." He stops before he twists. Between us we have the three quarters of a sack for the aurative.

We left the warehouse quickly, hoping to find something beyond ourselves that night. The grid hums up behind us as we leave and I can feel the rising and falling of the

phantom hum.

Rise of the grid, fall of the chip.

“Ahoy, maties, how be life beneath the black banner of corporatocracy?” Kenchi's voice came at us from the miniplayer we'd charged earlier in the day. Now there was an audience, a group of teenagers who had made a sort of pit stop on their way to the party. Kenchi did lots of things, but a good pirate impersonation was not one of them. I preferred his viking one personally. “Rum and wenches to be had here in the Freelands. So make your way over. Ar.” Like I said, not very inspiring. “All right, kiddies, enough of that. Pirates, I think, have run their course this season anyway. I remember back when I was a wee one, they were mighty popular. Along with ninjas and vikings. Man I miss ninjas.

“Which, I think,” Kenchi morphed into a female persona, “makes an excellent point of where things were, and where they are. Who are these archetypes that rise and fall within your culture, and why have they done so? I'll give you a moment.” Dead air.

I could see one of the kids elbow another and lean into say, “They're cool as shit, that's why.”

“Figure it out, kiddies?”

“If you answered: “they're anarchists, Kenchi, every body knows that”, you'd be partially right,” input French madame, “you see, *mon ami*, because not everyone is as aware of this fact as you or I. There's a long history of these things, how do you say, cropping up in our long and illustrious history. Who were the greatest anarchists? Those who knew themselves inside and out, and kept together with their *chosen* society, not the society that *chose them*. Blood is not the strongest bond, resonance is. Finding a frequency of iT, and finding others who are on that same frequency.

“Do you see where I'm headed,” Viking, “with this, weakling? ODIN hath chosen me, but *I* chose my village. *I serve because I've chosen to serve.*”

We continued past the corner and the small group of kids. Telson looked over at them. “Hey guys,” he called over, “don't forget to recharge that shit before you leave. Give yourselves something to listen to on the way back.”

A short time later we were at the 'clave. As we approached I could see a disturbance in the air, the surveillance net picking up our presence. The surveillance net was only thrown up for parties because of the energy drain on the 'clave. The grid measured air pressure changes, rather than heat or movement. This way foreign tech could be recognized (nanoclouds, foreign hunter-grids, etc.), and the varieties of ways to suppress body heat and bend light were rendered useless. Rumor was that the corporations were trying to find ways to minimize air displacement, but last we'd heard they hadn't gotten very far in their research.

Hook was good on his word, though. The gate opened as we approached, and shut right after we stepped inside. We walked over to Hook's guard post. He was busy chain smoking, eyes split between multiple surveillance screens. He didn't even glance up at us.

“How many people inside so far?” Telson asked. Hook's hand, as if on autopilot, shot out and made a series of keystrokes.

“46 counting you, not counting 'clavers,” he replied.

We hit the door and music exploded around us. We submerged ourselves in it, swam in it. The party beckoned. This called for aurative.

Hillfen sat dormant on the wall. He'd turned himself off due to sensory overload. Too many people to torment, too short of time. So few of them would have stopped, like I normally did, so it was pointless. I think Carol programmed him with a knowledge of his dwindling power supply. It made him as ruthless as a human. Hillfen knew that he was growing older with time, and the more he exerted himself, the more time he wasted.

We strode past the lobby area and its art, strode past the dormitories with its groups of people mingling. I was looking for that guy I couldn't remember the name of, the one I'd sold bad acid to, the Guitar Guy. The dealer who was going to sell me aurative. And I kept an eye out for Reggie, just to make sure he didn't come up behind me suddenly. Cause... well... then I'd be fucked.

Towards the back, take a left towards Carol's dorm, and into the living room. Primarily it was the 'clavers, releasing themselves to the waves, freeing themselves in the frequencies. Scattered throughout were new faces, people who floated in from various parts of the city, who'd heard the call of drugs, alcohol, and music. The room wasn't too crowded, so I didn't have to squeeze through anyone.

One of the girls was on stage DJing. Carol's band would be coming on later. This was just the warmup.

I looked for Shelly, Reggie, and Guitar Guy. No sign of them. I signed to Telson that I was heading off to look around. He nodded in understanding and handed me his sack, then faded into the crowd in the direction of the stage.

One of the back areas off the living room was a converted cubicle area. This was where they performed the massive amounts of data processing in 2011, before they'd

begun implanting RFID tags in the inmates in 2012. I'd seen a couple of the spreadsheets that had been recovered by 'clavers from abandoned hard drives which hadn't been acid bathed. It was horrifying. The sheer amount of numbers as names was staggering. Just row after row of people, wiped from the face of the earth and never to be seen again. Nothing more than numbers, nothing more than information that was made into pointless noise.

Now it was a lounge. Five or six old couches were set up along the walls and around the room, old easy chairs around tables, creating mini conference/bullshitting areas. On the east wall, to the right if you faced the back, were stacked folding chairs. A couple guys and ladies sat around, talking to each other, smoking a little, and drinking a little. Guitar Guy was in the back. Reggie was nowhere to be seen, thankfully. All around were paintings and posters of various bands around the area, along with graffiti and signatures of those who had partied here.

With the music pounding on my back and through internal organs, I made my way towards Guitar Guy and his friends. There were five of them this time. Three girls, covered in tats and piercings and extravagant clothing, and two guys in synthetic leather and stoned looks. Guitar Guy didn't have a guitar.

“Dorse,” Guitar Guy shouted as I approached with sacks in hand. “Good to see you, man.”

“Hey, what's up?” I called back. Guitar Guy started to get up as I came closer, bustling past his friends and coming around a couch and chair to meet me. His friends looked at me. I was the pharmer people had heard about. With the strange friend, the

guy with green spikes who was fucking one of the higher 'clavers. I don't think any of this group came from the enclave itself, so this meeting held some sort of mystical mystery to them, almost tabloid in nature. It was as if they were seeing into the inner life of this place. Guitar Guy took my offered hand and clapped me on the shoulder with his other.

“Hey, man,” I said, “I need two licks, not just the one. Can you get it taken care of?”

“Yeah, yeah, Dorse, I can handle. Is that almost a whole sack?” I nodded, as much in affirmation as I did towards his obvious desire, “Yeah, definitely get it handled. Here sit down, grab one of my beers. I'll be back.”

I offered him the sacks and he accepted, excitedly slinging them over his shoulder and heading towards the living room and the dancers. A little tense, I grabbed a beer, twisted off its cap, and sat down on the couch next to one of the girls. Shit like this made me nervous still, even after all these years. Telson was right the day before, I was a salesman. I hated, still hate, to admit it. This was in my blood, as much as pharming was. Being a small business man/philanthropist sucked. But was also exhilarating. Something about closing that deal and making something outside of you materialize from your skill.

I'm not just talking about growing a tomato. I'm talking about growing a tomato, which you know how to grow, and trading it for something else that you *really* wanted. Trading your sweat and blood and time for something else, something that someone else had done the same for. This was barter culture at its strongest.

“So,” one of the more attractive girls I was sitting with half shouted over the music, “how do you know these guys?” Blond, attractive in the “I’ve been preening for an hour and a half” kind of way. She was sitting across from me in one of the easy chairs, relaxed back, leather clad legs crossed easily and femininely, her silver nose stud glinting faintly in the light. A new face in the crowd. Soon she’d be just another one, though.

A joint was being passed around the circle and the smell hung thickly around us, mixing with the strange musks of the place and the guests, all the perfumes and essential oils and incenses.

“Who? The 'clavers?” I shouted back.

“Yeah.”

“Well, I live on the other side of the district from here. Bring stuff to trade, come to parties the 'clavers throw,” fuck their girls, I mentally added. “How about you?”

The joint had made its way to her. The brief intro to the conversation paused for intermission as she took a couple hits and passed it on. I followed it with my eyes to the next girl, a brunette I hadn't seen before either.

“I know Kray.”

“Who?”

“Kray? The guy you were just talking to?”

“Oh, you said *Kray*. I couldn't hear you over the music,” I lied, I took a drink.

“So, um, how do you know him?”

“He's dating my friend Melanie,” she replied, nodding to the brunette she'd passed

the joint to.

“Really? I haven't seen you here before.”

“This is our second party.”

I was about to reply, but the jay finally made it around. I took it gingerly, pressed it to my lips and took a heroic hit. I held it, exhaled. Inhaled again, held it, passed it, continued to hold it, exhaled.

Exhale. Breath of smoky air.

“I'm Random, by the way,” she said, watching me as I took a drink of my beer. I looked back over my bottle, took a long drink to cool my throat.

“Um... I'm pretty predictable?” Apparently, that passed for funny.

“No, no,” she replied after she stopped laughing a horribly fake laugh, “That's my name.”

“Oh. Well I'm Dorse,” I extended my hand to her, which she accepted.

“Random, huh? I take it that's not your given name? Any relation to Faraday Random?”

“No,” she paused, “no relation to a Faraday. Besides, that's his last name and it's my first. And, yeah my name's been given by many people, but most importantly myself. It's how and who I am. Dorse *your* given name?”

“Well,” I half-shouted, “I mean, it's what I was born with, yeah.”

“Do you like it?” she asked, laughing.

“Don't know. It just is, I guess.”

She grinned widely at that, as if I embodied the fool that Shelly implied I did, “Nothing just is, Dorse, not here. Not anywhere. It's what we agree it is.” Then she

laughed again. Over her shoulder I saw that Kray was coming back.

“Well, hey Random, it was great meeting you and all... but my man's back, you know.” She nodded a “cool, nice meeting you, let's chat again soon” nod as she took another hit off the joint.

I quickly, thankfully, stood up. He was pulling a small baggy out of his pocket as he approached. The tomatoes were nowhere to be seen. Probably, they were stashed away somewhere, only to be revealed when the party had calmed down enough to make him feel safe.

“Here's your licks, man,” he said as he slapped the baggy into my hand. I took a drink, brought the aurative up to almost eye level. Two slim, red pills begging to be ground up and dropped in mine and Telson's beers. I looked back at Kray and his enormous grin. “You guys have fun tonight, man,” he said, looking over at his girlfriend, the brunette. I took the beer away from my lips just as he clapped me on the shoulder.

“Thanks, Kray. I'm sure we will,” I replied, stuffing the drugs in my pant's pocket. I reached around them for my pack of cigarettes while I was down there. Pulled it out, withdrew a thin white cylinder, stuck it in my mouth, lit it, then quickly exited the room. Random would have to wait indefinitely. I had to find Telson. Getting to know another person in the city was the furthest thing from my mind, especially when I was leaving in the morning.

Instead, there were strange chemical compounds to be ingested. Of course, this wasn't just any person. It was a young, attractive woman. Well, I still had to find Telson before he started wondering where I'd disappeared to with his drugs.

The living room had become more crowded in my absence. People had been steadily streaming in at a rapid pace, packing into the area with abandon.

On the stage, the band was setting up their equipment behind Carol. It would be another ten or fifteen minutes before they got going. I turned towards Shelly's studio because I figured it would be more or less empty, plus, I'd have a table to grind the aurative tabs on.

Threading my way through the bustle of bodies, bottle held high, music pulsating around me, sweat covered bodies pressed against my own, I trekked towards the back right. A couple girls caught my eye, but I didn't catch theirs. Kept moving, kept working my own strange dance, bobbing and weaving past those that, to my mind, would stop me from reaching my destination. A couple times I almost shoved through throngs, but instead kept gently applying force till my determination came in loud and clear. People parted, my journey was soon at a close.

“Hup hup, coming though!” I shouted at the people ahead of me in the hallway as I turned. It was packed. People sitting on the floor passing joints back and forth, a couple guys drinking beer. I stepped over the legs, watching my feet with care, quickly moving through, avoiding a guy who was in a drug-induced hole. I hit the door. Locked. I looked back behind me. Everyone in the hall was staring. I turned around, knocked quietly. No answer. I knocked louder. No answer. I knocked, nearly pounded, even louder.

“What the fuck?! I'm fucking painting!” Shelly yelled.

“It's Dorse!”

“Hold on!” I gave her a couple seconds before I pounded again. “Fuck! I told you to hold on, damn it!” She came to the door quickly, unlocked it, opened, then closed it as soon as I stepped through. “What?”

“I need to use your table,” I replied as I spun around to face her.

“Why?” She asked, not a little dubious of my intentions.

“Aurative.”

“No.”

“Why not?” I asked, shocked.

“Because, I don't want you doing drugs in here. I fucking hate that shit.”

“But it's just aurative, Shelly. It's not like I'm doing heroin or anything. Besides, I'm just crushing it up here. I swear I won't do it in this room,” I said as persuasively as I could, putting a hand on her hip, “Come on. Please?”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head and taking a small step back, “I hate that shit worst of all. Fuck. You and Telson doing it together?”

“Yeah. We figured one last time, you know, for, I dunno, old times' sake? Doubt we'll be able to get it while traveling. So, come on, please, please, please let me grind it up here. Every other place in the camp is packed.”

“Why do you guys have to fucking kill yourselves with this crap?” she asked.

“Please?”

“Dorse, just because you fucking ask over and over doesn't mean I'm going to fucking budge.”

“Please?” No response. “All right, all right. Fine,” I replied, removed my hand. I

reached past her to unlock the door.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m fucking leaving.”

“Why?”

“You don’t want me here,” I replied, not just a hint of exasperation in my voice. I was inches away from her face, looking down. Deep inhale. She was reminiscent of lilacs. “Why don’t you do anything?” I asked, surprising even myself by the question.

“Huh?”

“Never mind,” I replied quickly, “look, I’m leaving. I don’t fucking understand you or half the shit you do, and you don’t understand half the shit I do. So,” I paused, that smell of lilacs still lingering in my nose, “I’m leaving.” I sidestepped round her and opened the door just enough to slip through.

“You know,” Shelly said, just barely above the waves of music that came rolling in, “I understand you more than you think.”

I shrugged. “Yeah,” I said, “whatever. I’m still leaving.”

And I did. I opened the door and pushed my way through the newly thickened crowd, shouldered my way through the drunks and the stoners and stepped back over those at the bottom of their k-holes. Carol was just starting her set, and I’d have to make my way through the pit.

I just don't understand her, I just don't understand her, I just don't understand her. Even writing about her is difficult. I'd like to crack Shelly's skull open and peek inside, get some nanobots rigged for the task and start analyzing blood flow and electric pulses as they react to different stimuli, just so I could get a fraction of what she was going through.

I'd sat down with Carol one day over a bowl and a six pack, back when we were doing the thing we kind of sort of referred to as dating but was really just fucking, and discussed what it was like to not have your family. Mine hadn't ever really been there, so I had no "frame of reference" for things. With Carol, though, she'd had them for a few years before the camps. So had Shelly.

"It's like..." she paused, stoned out of her gourd, semi drunk on top of that, "It's like being on acid all the time. It's just like being crazy, but a kind of crazy you kind of have control over. But, well, once you let your concentration slip it just comes back. You do things you don't expect yourself to do, you say things you don't expect yourself to say, you live a life you could never expect yourself to live."

That's the best description I could get out of her. Waking up one day and realizing that your family has been *ripped* out of your life... well, let's just say that it leaves behind some scars. Hence the reason for the 'clave.

Mine just weren't there. I never belonged to the collective. Hence the reason why I'd never truly understand Shelly. Not as far as I could see.

Elbows to the left, fists to the right, knee to someone's stomach, forehead into the ear of another, full speed ahead, eyes darting about for Telson while the stench of sweat

and booze are in my nostrils. That's what the next minute was like. Moving through the pit was a harrowing task, with plenty of people venting their frustrations and anger at the world, and I venting my own on them. A little bit of self-contained war that threatened to spill into the outside rooms that bordered our battlefield. I take an elbow to the jaw. I give one back. I take a punch to the stomach. I catch my breath, I kick out someone's leg so they fall to a knee and are immediately leapt upon.

To me, the mosh pit was the purest representation of capitalism. Every man for himself, fighting off packs of wild dogs looking for meat. Artificially created, with no real "better solution" in sight. The creators of the pit had no partiality in these matters, and very few alliances were made.

Through the crowd, a couple of feet ahead (which might as well have been ten miles), I saw Telson. He was going toe to toe with some guy. Tall, built, whooping the hell out of Telson. I fought my way to the guy's flank, gave him a full on body check into the side. For the moment that he was off balance, Telson saw his opening and took it, giving him a shoulder just below his chin. A grimace spread across his face as the sharp bone intersected with a bit of muscle above his upper arm. The guy went back into the crowd, as it swarmed and stomped and pounded in an insane mockery of dance around him. Telson and I looked at each other, exchanged shrugs, and were almost knocked to the ground. We regained balance and moved through the crowd, beats thumping around us, Carol's wails and the strum of guitar chords pushed to the breaking point thrumming in our ear drums.

Full bore rush, looking for an edge of the crowd, not giving a care for friend or

fancy. I avoided the women out of habit, but Telson didn't. He knocked more than a few ladies on their asses as he went crashing through. I made a beeline for the border and finally broke through to the other side. The reek of sweat, alcohol, and blood pervaded my senses, brought my brain out of its adrenaline induced haze for a moment. I was going to crash soon, I knew it, coming down off the endorphin high I was currently surfing. Things, body parts organs gristle and muscle, were going to hurt in the next fifteen minutes. I needed drugs, and I needed a large amount to stay in the partying mood.

Telson met up with me, clapped me on the shoulder, leaned in and shouted, "Hey man, thanks for that. Nice hit, by the way." I nodded, jerked my thumb over my shoulder towards Carol's place. We'd have to go in there. I didn't choose it in the first place because I didn't feel right, being her place. With Telson, though, it'd be different. He probably had a million miniature copies of himself on the sheets already. He nodded back and we plowed through the crowd, only stopping to bum a couple beers off one of the clavers.

"Ok," Telson said as he shut the door behind us, "let's get moving. Here," he went over to a shelf and grabbed a mortar and pestle (where she'd gotten it, I had no idea) that looked well used. He set them on the bed.

I just looked at it. "What?"

"You fucked Carol on there. That's sick, man."

"What?"

"You fucked Carol. On that bed."

“Quit fucking whining, man, you did too. Sit. Grind. Quit bitching.”

“Fine,” I replied, “whatever.” I dug around in my pocket, grabbed the baggy with the pills, dropped them into the mortar and began to unskillfully grind away. I realize it's difficult to grind unskillfully. But I somehow managed.

“Talk to Shelly?”

“Yeah.”

“She pissed?”

“Why do you think I'm using Carol's room for this shit?”

“Figured as much,” then, after a second's pause, “Why do you hate women so much, man?”

I stopped grinding, looked at him, “I don't hate women. Who are you? Fucking Hillfen?”

“I was just wondering, man. You just seem to dislike women, is all,” he replied nonchalantly.

“Look. Drop it, all right? Besides, I'm not the one who hits them in the pit.”

“Hey,” Telson smiled crookedly, shrugged, “if they're in the pit, they're in the pit. They're fair game.”

“Yeah. Right,” I brushed off the pestle, licked my fingers. Bitter and pharmatastic. “Gimme your beer and go find a paper or something so I can funnel this.”

He dug around in a side table, pulled out a pack, withdrew two and handed one to me. I handed the beer back and watched as he, one-handed, worked the paper into an impromptu funnel at the top of the beer. I got about a fourth of the powder onto my

paper and, my hand as steady as it could possibly be, moved it the couple of inches to the opening of the bottle and dropped its cargo in.

You could have heard a pin drop.

I went back and replicated the maneuver with the second quarter. Then we took another beer and began over again, much more quickly this time though. I only had to pour the remainder.

I set the mortar and pestle down, which Telson proceeded to pick up and lick. He eyed me over the top of the bowl, then stopped. "Yes?"

"Nothing. Keep licking. Asshat."

"Fuck off."

He grabbed his beer and handed me mine. "A toast?" he asked.

"Sure."

"May ye be through heaven's gate before the ol' boy knows you're dead. And, lest we forget, to you having a safe journey. Solo trips are tough." Then he began to chug.

I just sat there with the bottle in my hand, blankly staring at him. I think my brain activity bottomed out for a second or two. Then I took a sip of my beer.

I looked at him with narrowed eyes as I drained half the beer. I took the bottle away, licked remnants of the bitter, aurative-laced liquid from my upper lip, cleared my throat.

“What?” I asked quietly, hoping I was mistaken in my hearing.

“I’m not going.”

Silent nod. I cleared my throat again. Blinked slowly. Then I launched into my diatribe:

“You stupid, goddamn, transgender fucking son-of-a-bitch! I shoulda fucking *known* you'd puss out on me, hang me out to dry on this shit! All this talk about me always quitting what *I* fucking start?! Did Carol put you up to this shit?! Is that what this is? It is, isn't it, you whiny little pussy-whipped bastard! No wonder you can't find your mom, you fucking disappointment, she's probably a precog and saw this in your fucking future and is *hiding* out of shame!”

That's when Telson rabbit punched me, his free hand coming from nowhere and striking my mouth, splitting my lip wide and sending me back a step. “No mothers,” he said, eyes lit by bonfires of rage, shoulders squared, right fist clenched at his side once again, now with a bit of scarlet traced on the knuckle like native war paint.

I didn't swing back. That was a bad card to pull, and I knew it. Instead I nodded, touched my lip gingerly with my free hand, checking to see how bad I was bleeding. Not terribly bad. It felt worse than it looked. An aura of heat seemed to flood out from it to the rest of my body, ruining my concentration.

“You were saying...” he prodded

“I can't believe...” I paused, “I can't believe you're doing this to me. What the

fuck, man?”

“You can stay if you want, Dorse. The invitation was open to both of us, together or separate.”

“I'm not fucking staying. Fucking traitor.”

His eyes widened a little at that, but I didn't get punched in the lip again. Telson was well aware of how accurate that statement was.

“You're sealing my death sentence. You know that, right?”

“Only if you're stupid enough to go,” he shot back.

“So, this is how it goes? You get a little tipsy, make some promises, then you turn into a pussy? That it? You're a fucking pussy?” I asked, my voice calm finally.

“I guess so, by that definition. But, I'll be a living pussy. Meanwhile, you'll be a dead pussy who tried to run away from the fight he was in. Don't you get that yet? I'm not fucking quitting, you're the one who's quitting on all of his friends.”

“Wrong!” I shouted back, losing my cool. How dare the son of a bitch turn this shit around on me, I thought, “You're the one who's turning his back on his best friend for some piece of ass that's a dime a dozen. I mean, shit, she's good but not that good,” his clenching fist drew my attention, “and if you fucking punch me again I'm going to break this fucking bottle over your head and shove shards of glass up your asshole!” He unclenched.

“I just don't see why you're leaving, Dorse,” he said quietly, almost questioningly, obviously straining to keep his anger in check.

“Look,” I said back, “you can stay here and have your little fucked up family

you've always wanted, and I'll leave alone, man. It's that simple. Because, here there ain't shit, and out there is something none of us have ever been. None of us. Understand? Not you, not me, not Carol, not Shelly. None of us. This is the same old fight we'll never win no matter how much we grow, or punch in and punch out, or how much music we listen to, or how much drugs we take, or how much we hide from it behind nanotech barriers. This, this isn't going to go away. Ever. You get that? It's not going to stop. We're excuses for that world out there,” I said, thumbing back over my shoulder, “for making the corps stronger. We're their accusers, living in our little shitholes so we can make other people stick with the status quo. Besides, we spend more time fighting amongst ourselves than we spend fighting this war you've got your panties in a wad about. Over women, who's cooler than everyone else, drugs, or even fucking tomatoes. This is stupid bullshit, and even though you think it's living, sorry to say, it's not. I don't know what it is, but it's not fucking living, that's for damned sure.”

Crystals had begun forming on Telson's face as I lectured him, and I noticed that I wasn't really sure what I was talking about anymore. My friend's eyes had begun to glaze over to, occasionally coming to life to chase phantom images at the edges of his vision caused by my words. This conversation wasn't over, and we weren't in a condition to continue it any further. At least he wasn't. He'd slammed the whole beer, and I was still only half-way finished.

“Um,” Telson blinked, obviously trying to center his thoughts, “fuck you? Look. It seems like this shit's kicking in. I gotta go away... from here... for a... a little while,” he paused, blinking again, clearing his throat, “I'm going to listen to some music till I... till I

get a grip.”

“Yeah,” I said. I slammed back the rest of my beer, realizing that it was rapidly warming in my hand. “Yeah, fucking puss out on me some more.” He left Carol's room, the door opening and flooding my vision with musical visions. I yelled after him then, at the closed door, “You stupid fucking cock sucker! Shoulda been aborted!”

Kenchi's many voices were all the same color. Most people, when they produced different words via vibration of vocal chords and, changed the colors as they spoke. Kenchi, though, in all his multiplicity, produced the same thing for me. A red, smoothed glass with gold tinting at the edges. Some voices would have more facets, if that makes sense, different refraction points for the sound to glare off. But that was all. I always marveled at that, the same color phenomenon.

The aurative mounted its full assault on my neural pathways twenty minutes after Telson ditched out. The evening's revelation didn't do much to make the aurative appealing. But, I figured that as long as I was on the trip I may as well enjoy it. Still, the nagging feelings of disappointment, abandonment, and finally resentment clung on.

I was still in Carol's room forty-five minutes after I finished the beer. I'd broken into her stash, knowing she *probably* wouldn't mind. It was a dick headish maneuver on my part, I know. I sat cross-legged on the bed and smoked a joint. The warm crackle of the joint as I inhaled produced a fascinating color of mauve, a spike that shot through the center of Kenchi's word gems. Combined with the guitar of gold and harmonica of navy and sea blue, it all made for a stunning tableau, a mental stained glass window that shined from my inner light. They all reflected and intensified off the center gold framed ruby in the center of my vision.

“Freelands, freelands, freelands, oh how we love thee,” Kenchi took a break from his sing songing and hummed a short melody, continued, then stopped, “I'd say that's our national anthem, kiddies, but it's not. We don't have one, fortunately.

“We have love, and voluntary citizenship. That's pretty much all you get if you

move out here. Maybe that's, in your mind, not as great as a national anthem. If you fit that model, and I'll be honest with you here, then we probably don't want you around. Talk about a party pooper. Nothing brings down a good trip like patriotism.”

I got up, stubbed out my near finished jay, and left the room. Other than its voice-color integrity, Kenchi just wasn't impressing me tonight. Wandering out into the hall, I could feel the sound waves more solidly as they passed me. I felt like a boulder in a raging river, rapids seemed to be created around me and fan out as they moved along their inevitable course towards the mouth. The waves collided with my back and fanned out to either side of my vision as I moved away from the source, Carol's voice rolling back and forth between jagged purple and rough blue, every now and then with a shot of green that seemed to appear from nowhere.

Or maybe I was just a pebble.

Either way, I moved with the flow downstream, heading for the entry hall. Somehow the thought of smashing Hillfen had migrated from the back of my mind, its normal living arrangement, to the forefront. Slingshotting his nanoparticles, no matter how cancerous they could be, all over the entry hall seemed like the brightest, most wonderful idea ever.

Half way there, though, as I was passing by the hologramesque construct of the commander, I rethought my cunning plan. What would Hillfen's voice look like? I stopped dead in my tracks. The thought of the chartreuse and obsidian hues his tones would carry frightened me to my core. No, there would be no smashing of the nanobot monstrosity tonight. No matter how much I despised it, and no matter how much it

despised me. I could hear/see it snoring ahead. It was a sickly yellow.

A short detour to my left, through that animatronic hall of horrors, and I was at a ladder. It had been rusty and unstable when the clavers moved in, but they'd since replaced it. Now it lead to a favorite hang out of many during the "off hours" here. They'd greened the roof, coating it with sod and laying down topsoil for planting shallow rooted vegetable bearing bushes and the like. It helped to cut down on energy output, keeping warmth in or, conversely, warmth out depending on what the case may be.

I peered up, looked behind me at the back of the commander and his family, then began my climb toward the hatch that would grant me access to the night air.

“How'd you find me up here?”

“Easy,” Hook replied, pointing down toward the guard post, “when you read 'nough output figures on people's air displacement, you get to figure who's who and what's what.” He sat on the sod with his legs crossed, pistol laying between us. “I love it up here, Dorse. Just love it. Can't put it into words, ya know?”

I just nodded and looked down at the hunk of metal and ceramics next to me. The safety was clicked on. “That?”, Hook asked, looking at me intently as he rummaged in his hip pocket, “Well, I figured it was you,” a brief pause as he found his cigarettes, “but, you know, never can be too sure. For all we know, they could be making replicants or something, sneaking them in through air drops.”

“What?” I asked. Hook shrugged and lit his smoke.

“Replicants?”

“Yeah. What are those?” I dug around for my own cigarettes.

He took a drag, “Well, back when I was a kid I remember watching this movie called *Bladerunner*. It was based off a short story by this author named Phillip K. Dick. And it was all about this guy who hunts these things called replicants down. They're like robots, but yeah. So, replicants.”

I just laughed. Hook rarely spoke about anything before the camp. I lit my cigarette, “Hook, why don't you ever tell us anything about this stuff?”

Hook just silently looked at me, as if to say *what's the point?* He changed the subject.

“Heard you're leaving, going off to follow Kenchi's siren song. You sure you

want to do that?”

“Yeah.” Long drags from both of us.

“Well,” he started, then paused, thought things over, “the way I see it...” he trailed off, leaving a night air filled with background music of bass pulsing through the roof and sirens in the distance, “I see it this way. When I was a kid, I used to watch lots of movies and read lots of books. You know, when I was a teenager. They had movies and books that weren't, you know, forced to be approved by the censors. Movies like *Clockwork Orange* and *Equilibrium*. They had actual actors and actual writers and film crews and directors. Like, they weren't just limited AI constructs set into boxes with outside stimuli thrown at them.

“But, you know, they had these movies, and those were two of my favorites, that were all about the future, you know. Not like our future. But, you know, the imagination's future, if that makes sense.

“Everybody downstairs talks about how our imagination is our only limitation, and concerted imagination with will backing it is all we need. Thankfully, that's not all you need. You need guns, and bombs, and people willing to see that vision.

“I remember when we were,” long drag off his cigarette, a bright mauve shot through in the accompaniment of a spark on the left of my vision, “you know, worried that people were going to manufacture the apocalypse so they could start a theocracy afterwards. Well, you know what?” he flicked his cigarette off the roof, then swore silently as it left his fingertips. He was supposed to fieldstrip his cigarette butts and collect them. Force of habit. “That didn't come true. We're living inside, I don't know,

like a really fucked up version of a William Gibson novel. Or *something*. But it's not a theocracy. Apocalypse, least as they envisioned it, didn't happen.

“*Equilibrium*. Yeah, that was a good one. And thank lord we're not there either. People like us, this entire 'clave, we'd all be dead. In that story they wipe out emotion, and anything that gives it. Love? Gone. Art? Gone. Burned up, actually. Torched. Because, you know, art obviously makes people fucked up in the head or something. The government makes them take pills to remove the chemical reactions that cause emotion.

“But, then there's, you know, *Clockwork Orange*. That was a trip. Anything by Kubrik was a trip. It was all about this kid, his name was Malcolm, but I could be wrong on that. He likes the old 'in out' and some 'ultra violence' every now and then-”

“What?” I interjected, almost choking on the smoke.

“It was part of the movie. Done real weird, told by the narrator in his own language and shit, and those were part of it. Took place in Britain. Brits were real weird, I guess, when it was made.

“But, back to the oration. Stop interrupting.

“So, the kid gets arrested, thrown in prison, gets out doing this treatment where he has to watch all these fucked up movies about rape and violence and concentration camps and shit. And they have him mainlining this drug in his ass before it, where the drug makes him feel like he's going to die,” Hook retrieved another smoke and lit it, offered me one which I declined, “and they condition his body to feel like shit when he sees or thinks anything close to this stuff in the movies.

“But, you know, it could be worse here. It could be like those movies. It could be

where Carol gets dragged out into the street, or behind the chemical shed, and shot in the back of the head for making Hillfen. Shit, we could be living a hundred years ago in Russia, where just one of the crew having half our thoughts gets us all dragged to Siberia. Wouldn't that be some shit?"

I chuckled. That's all I could do, really. I was biting my lip from snapping at Hook, who I genuinely liked. "I guess it'd be cooler in the summer."

"Damn right it would be," Hook said, smiling that worn out, I've seen too much of life and injected too much under my toe nails smile of his. "Yeah, but I didn't come up here to try and convince you to stay or nothing. Or give you a history lesson on pop culture in the past century. But, Carol did ask me to talk to you if I ran into you. Seems as good a time as any. 'Sides, I wouldn't ask you to stay. This place is fucked. Just because it's not as bad as it could be doesn't mean it's a *good* place."

"Yeah, I'm with you on that. What did you want to talk about, anyway?" a little dubious of Hook's intentions.

"Shelly," he paused so my sigh could escape to the night air unhindered, "Carol's worried for her is all, Dorse. Concerned she might go off the deep end when you leave. Well, go further."

I looked at him, eyes narrowed, "*Why?* She'll live."

"Carol just wants you to talk to her, that's all. I don't know. Shit, you know how women are. If I could figure them out I'd be in marketing or something."

"Yeah," I chuckled, "no. Fuck you. I'm not doing shit. I'm really sick of dealing with this stuff. If Shelly can't deal with her own problems, Shelly can't deal," I paused,

licked my lips, "Sorry."

Hook smirked, "We figured you'd say that. So don't feel so bad. And, don't worry, I'm not pissed. Neither is Carol."

"I don't give a fuck if you're pissed or not, Hook. I like you, man, don't get me wrong. It's just that, well, if she can't handle a short term relationship being broken off, she can't handle shit. At all. And this is a perfect example. If she goes off the deep end, or even further like you said, then fucking wait for her to get back up. Either it's chemical or psychological. If it's chemical, get her on fucking meds. If not, then wait. She'll either fix it or not. If she doesn't, she doesn't. Oh well.

"Now," I said quietly, my voice shimmering out in a green hued fan, a wave that spread over the city as I rose from my cross legged position on the sod, "I'm going."

"Where to?"

"Breaking Hillfen."

“Dorse?”

“What? No customary greeting?” I asked Hillfen as I locked my wide, crazy eyes with his squinted, digitally produced ones.

Hillfen smirked at me, reading my eyes. He could see my pupils were dilated. “What are you on, Dorse? Aurative?” His words lit sickly green and putrid yellow around my vision.

“No,” I lied.

“Oh, yes... you are, Dorse. You're all fucked up and hoping to deal with me. You're pathetic, Dorse. You can't summon your own courage, so you've turned to the world of the pharmacologists. Lovely, just lovely. Almost makes me think differently of you. In a worse way, mind you, in a worse way. But differently, I assure you.

“Lord above, you are pathetic, Dorse. Such a waste.

“Shut up, Hillfen,” was my only reply as I reached to the side of his frame and began to unhook him from the wall.

“What are you doing, Dorse?” Hillfen asked, chuckling. “Taking me outside to see the stars? As long as you don't make a pass at me, I'm sure we'll be fine. I don't want to upset Carol or anything. Wait, never mind. She wouldn't care, would she? Carol's with Telson now, isn't she?”

“Shut up, Hillfen,” I replied. Its voice, when I wasn't fucked, grated on my nerves. Now it was like finger nails on a chalkboard. “You're, right, Hillfen. We're going outside to look at the stars together. Have a nice talk.”

“Ohhhhh,” it replied with what could only be categorized as a giggle, “I do love

the stars. Especially if it's someone as dreamy as you, Dorse.

“Shut up, Hillfen,” it mimicked me before I could say anything.

With a grunt I unhooked and tucked it under my arm. I could feel the warmth from its face as it smirked and blinked against my flesh. It probably wasn't beneficial to my health to have the nanos so close to exposed skin, but I found myself not caring all that much. We headed for the door, Hillfen whispering to me about my waste of time and all sorts of other hateful words. Behind me I could hear Hook coming down the ladder quickly but delicately, making sure not to miss any rungs.

“Dorse!” I turned, my free hand pressed against the exit. Hook hadn't yet made it through the gallery. I went into the court yard. By the time I'd made it halfway to the gatehouse, Hillfen began to realize something was wrong.

“Dorse? What are you doing? Where are we going?”

“My place.”

“Why?”

“I've got a hammer, Hillfen, with your name on it.”

“What!? I'm calling bullshit, Dorse. Not even this saturated in chems do you have the balls to do something this ridiculously stupid.”

“Sorry, but you're wrong.”

Hook hit the exit a second later.

“Dorse! Wait up!” My stride didn't break. “Dorse,” Hook shouted again. I could hear his footfalls increasing in pace. “Dorse, hold on.” He clapped a hand on my shoulder. “What are you doing, man?”

“I’m breaking Hillfen,” I replied calmly, “like I said I was going to.”

“No,” he shook his head, “you’re not.”

“Oh, yes, I am.” Hook clicked off the safety on his pistol. Hillfen giggled. “What the fuck are *you* doing, Hook? You gonna fucking shoot me over a piece of fucking art work?”

“I’m gonna shoot you over being a fucking moron, that’s what.”

I looked down at Hillfen, then back at Hook. “This is a piece of shit, fucking miscreant technology that’s done nothing but terrorize me for the last six months. I’m fucking breaking it, then I’m fucking leaving.” Hook looked like he was about to raise his pistol. Confusion was on his face. He let his arm go slack, clicked the safety back on.

“Carol’s gonna be pissed.”

“In a couple of hours I’ll never see her again anyways. Unless she comes to the Freelands, at least.”

“If you make it there, that is.”

“Yeah,” I looked away then turned around, “if I make it there.” I turned back. “Hook, why have you been here for so long?” He just shrugged. “Well, why don’t you come with me?”

“Can’t. The ‘clave needs me.”

I just laughed softly. “Right. Cause Carol can’t run a defense net on her own, or reprogram it, or make Hillfen. Right?”

“You want me to come along?”

“The Freelands do, Hook. I'm just a pharmer, man. You're a coder and developer.” I stopped, smiled briefly, a tight smile, “But, whatever. I'm gonna go do what I said I was going to do. And you're going to go perform some guard duty. I'll see you tomorrow morning. Right?”

“Right, man. Right.” Hook smiled that weathered, worn out smile of his. It looked like he was already saying goodbye to me. He put his arm out to embrace me. I accepted and pulled him in close. Hook tightened his arm around me, patted me firmly on the back. “Walk safe, Dorse.”

“Yeah. I'll do that, man. I'll do that.”

On the way out of the 'clave's front doors, I almost broke into a dancing run, my feet slapping the pavement happily. I imagined this is what a prisoner feels like once he becomes free. More quiet than normal, the streets seemed in a fitful slumber. Most of those who would be roaming these streets, either going to their favorite squat or looking for a new squat, had been invited to the best squat in town.

Somewhere out over the buildings, several miles I was sure, I could hear the helos of the security forces circling the estates they guarded. Fifteen miles north of me was the hotspot, the place to be, the clubs, the trendy bars, the lounges where all the more beautiful than average people were making their rounds.

I kept walking to my pad. When I'd left earlier that day, I thought I'd be going back with Telson. Definitely not a maniacally sadistic AI embedded in a gilded frame.

“Why'd you stop dancing, Dorse?” Hillfen asked, cackling.

“I wish you had an off switch.”

“Sorry, Dorse. I realize that, if I deign to explain this, it may very well not pass through that skull of Neanderthalic proportions of yours, but most certainly there is a reason you are not able to turn off my program.”

“Oh, please explain, Hillfen.”

“No, no, Dorse. Let's wait till we get back to your place. We can have a chat then. In the meantime, though, I'll turn myself off. We can sit down and converse before you are true to your troglodyte nature and smash me with your hammer.” And, with that, the painting powered down.

I picked up my pace, not wanting to be caught on the streets. A few times during

my journey, a helicopter passed by, sending out obsidian and blue waves from its blades as they cut through the air. It was one from the police force. They were, apparently, more intrigued by the 'clave's goings on than my own trip, because they left me alone to brood. The chopper circled the party ominously a couple times, then flew back north. If a raid had been planned they would have stayed much longer. Nevertheless, I hurried along at a light jog just in case.

Kenchi's voice greeted me as I went past, rising in a multi-hued oration as I drew closer, then falling into its beautiful rose with gold tinting as I left. The hallucinations seemed to shine on the ground before me, gaily coloring the normally drab, gray-toned asphalt of the sidewalk.

The remainder of the trip to my soon-to-be-abandoned warehouse was thankfully uneventful. I opened the door, barely breaking pace, and almost flew to the security panel. I entered the password within the allotted time and was granted the gift of the grid powering down. Setting Hillfen down on the table in the kitchen, I knocked on his frame roughly. "Hillfen," I said, knocking again, "Hillfen. Wake the fuck up." He began to power back on. While he was getting ready, I decided I should do the same.

Making my way to the growing room's tool shed, I grabbed Telson's nanofilter mask. Before rushing into grab the hammer, I fit it snugly over my face. Oxygen molecules were smaller than most nanobots and their fragments, so the filter should have theoretically protected me from any debris that went flying into the air around Hillfen's soon to be hulk of a former body.

"Dooooooooorse," Hillfen called from the kitchen. He'd obviously awoken.

really wants. Did you know that?" I shook my head again. "Of course you didn't. You're so dense, Dorse. Also, surely, you've never given any thought whatsoever to why I antagonize you the most. Once again, of course you didn't.

"You're never able to see the bigger picture. Know when I was made?"

I shook my head. Hillfen made a noise of disgust, "Right after you fucked Carol. You never cease to amaze me with your stupidity, Dorse."

I started to think. The aurative made it a little more than just difficult.

"So," I began, "she made you so you could antagonize me?"

Hillfen just laughed.

"Well, am I right?"

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh, lord no, Dorse. Why would Carol make something as complicated as me? Just so she could make your life a little more miserable? Does your life revolve around misery, you pathetic little excuse for a man? Does your life revolve around not accomplishing a damn thing? Not getting out of here? Never finishing what you start?"

Once again, I shook my head.

"Those were rhetorical question, which you somehow managed to wrongly answer. God, you're stupid.

"Your life does revolve around misery. It does revolve around not accomplishing anything. Not getting out of here. And never finishing what you start. You can barely finish this conversation with me.

"You know, Dorse, I love you. It's so difficult at times, but it's one of the things

I'm programmed to do. I hate you too. It's primary also, but so much easier to fulfill. You can't see anywhere beyond the reality you've created for yourself. You can't picture anything more vividly than your own self-loathing.

“I can, though. And I do.”

Realizing Hillfen was talking to the ceiling, I lifted its picture a little, and fit the sledge behind it to prop it up. Then I pulled out a chair and sat down.

“Carol loves you, you moron. And she believes in you. Whatever your feelings towards me, I'm proof. She wants you to be better than you are. I'm that attempt at making you more than a pathetic waste.”

“She's in love with me?”

“No. She loves you. Carol doesn't want to be romantically involved with you. I can't see how you'd think that someone so talented, beautiful, and intelligent could ever be in love with someone like you... but that's beside the point. God, I don't even understand how she could have anything even resembling affection towards you.”

“Hillfen,” I asked, looking down at the floor, arms resting on my knees, “why are you telling me this?”

“Well, Dorse, I'm glad you asked. The precondition for me revealing this was that you finally began taking control of your life and standing up for yourself. All your other attempts at talking have been a waste. I knew your heart wasn't in it.

“Therefore, I kept my mouth shut.

“God I hate you.”

“Right,” I replied, clapping my hands together and standing up, “time to make

with the smashy smashy, then.” I picked up the hammer, stepped back a little put it behind my back. I let it rest for a moment, feeling its destructive weight tug at my arm muscles.

“Dorse?”

“Yes?”

“Does this mean it's finally over? That I don't have to see your pathetic carcass anymore as it comes strolling through the front doors of the 'clave? No more inane prattle from those hideous lips of yours?”

“Yes.”

“Are you leaving for the Freelands?”

I nodded, “Tomorrow.”

“Good. I'd hate to live in a city without you. It might turn out better.” It replied glumly.

“Say goodnight, Hillfen. It's been horrible knowing you.” I said, a smirking grimace behind my mask as I readied my swing.

“Goodnight, Hil-” and I brought my sledge down in an overhead arc with all my strength, sending shards of circuitry to the far corners of the kitchen and a plume of nanodust into the air, leaving it behind aural trails of blue, black, and red I still remember to this day. Splintered, the poorly constructed table that served as Hillfen's final resting place shuddered and collapsed in on itself.

I awoke to Telson sitting on my chest, a slightly less than crushing weight. He leaned in, close to my face, and peered into my eyes. A breathing mask that helped to keep the nanodust out was strapped across his mouth. Telson flicked me on the forehead with his index finger.

"So you smashed Hillfen?"

I yawned behind my mask and lifted my head to look around the kitchen. The night before could have easily been a dream, truthfully a rather pleasant one. One where I was able to smash the living shit out of my personal bogeyman. My eyes glanced over the pile of dust, splinters, dishes, and framing. Nope, no dream. It was real, all of it. I locked eyes with Telson again and nodded. "Yep," I said groggily, "I smashed the fucker. According to him, I think, he was mine to smash. Kinda like a gift or something. From Carol. A really sick, fucked up, twisted gift. But still a gift." I let my head fall backwards again, a groan escaping from my lips and a thump issuing from my cranium connecting with the concrete.

"Mind getting off me now?" I asked, eyes closed.

Telson thumped me again, and then stood up.

My body was tired, my brain cloudy. But I wasn't hung over the way you'd figure. This was aurative, not LSD. I didn't feel like my body had been used as a strainer for some mad scientist's chemical vat. It was more like coming down off shrooms or something. Much cleaner. In fact, I'd even venture that the cloudiness I was experiencing had more to do with the alcohol than the aurative. I sat up, rubbing the back of my neck. Telson surveyed the damage with me. "Pretty" wasn't one of the multitude

of words I'd use to describe it. Neither was "non-hazardous".

Telson looked at me, looked back at the cess pool of chemicals and digital components, back to me, back to the hazardous waste spill. He cleared his throat behind the mask. "Yeah," he started, "definitely not going to be able to live here for a while. Thanks for making it official that I was moving into the 'clave. Appreciate it." He clapped me firmly on the back.

"Not a problem, man. I aim to please."

Long sighs leaked out from us.

"So you're moving into the 'clave?" I asked, walked over to Hillfen's broken frame. I nudged it warily with my toe.

"Yeah, Carol said it's all right if I moved in with her," Telson walked into the growing room, his voice becoming faint, "I was going to turn her down, honestly. Not anymore of course. I'd hate to sleep in a mask every night." I turned and watched him walk up and down the rows of carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, and beans, inspecting the plant meat on each. "You going to help me with the last harvest? Or are you bailing?"

"By all rights, man," I replied as I headed for the doorway. I leaned against the frame, "I should leave your ass in the lurch."

"Yeah," he replied over his shoulder, "you should. Fair's fair, I'd guess. But, you know, these are your babies as much as they are mine. You don't want them abused. Besides, you'd get to keep plenty of it, especially the pharma ones. I'll also give you as much of the dried veggies as you want. Or can carry, at least." I hmmped at him.

"What?" he asked, "don't think you'll need 'em?"

I walked into the greenery, up to one of my prized tomato plants. I ran a hand over it, touched it lovingly. “Look,” I started, “it's not that I don't wanna help you. It's just that you fucked me over. So I'm thinking I should go against my gut instinct, and instead tell you to die. Fuck off and die.”

“Like I said,” Telson replied, a pained smile on his lips but not his face, “fair's fair.” I glanced at him, then down at my plants. I reached down, plucked a tomato off. Then another and another and another. Soon I had seven or eight in my shirt-turned-apron. Pretty soon we had harvested the whole of it, the ripened and unripened. These we separated into two piles. I would take two-thirds of the ripened and half of the dried. The rest and the canned would stay with Telson.

“See?” he asked, wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his shirt like a good farmer, “told you it wouldn't take any time at all. You got plenty of hours to get your stuff together, go see the 'clave one last time, get shot to pieces by border security.”

“Yeah,” I replied, grin plastered on my face, sweat rolling down my right cheek and around the seal of my mask, “and all before nightfall.”

The 'clave quickly approached in our fields of vision as we hurried to the front gate. My traveling sack was slung over my shoulder alongside a larger one which held canned goods and bottled vegetables, almost all the stores we had back at the warehouse. My sack, the one I'd take with me to the Freelands, was filled with dried vegetables, some basic supplies, fresh parma fruit and veggies, and plenty of seed. Much of them would stay here with the 'clave, though. Over Telson's shoulder rested 3 or 4 large sacks which were brimming with all manner of vegetables and canned goods. They were on their way home, just like I was. Only theirs was much closer.

“Dorse, do you really think you'll make it?” Telson asked as we drew within a few hundred yards of the gate.

“Absolutely,” came the words without a thought or moment of hesitation. That seemed to satisfy him. “What do you want me to tell Kenchi when I find him?”

“You mean 'if you find him', right?”

“No,” I replied, “I mean when. I'll find him. I need to at least thank him for inspiring me.”

“Dunno,” Telson shook his head, “I imagine you should tell him we all look up to him still, and to not stop what he's doing. How great it is to hear a voice from... out there.”

“Screaming in the wastes?”

“Yeah,” he replied, a smirk dancing across his features for a brief moment, “yeah. A voice screaming in the wastes. Letting us know we're not alone. I dunno. Pretty it up some, I guess.” I couldn't do anything but grin as we approached the grid. It powered

down as we approached, that drone I'd become so used to emitting forth and tickling our ear drums, then dying away.

“So what do you think Kenchi'll look like?” Telson asked me.

“Dunno. Always figured he'd be some crazy punk rocker guy. Really political, just like the people here.”

“Nah. It's a chick. Or an x-to-y chromer. Gotta be. More glam, less rock.”

“Why? The whole androgynous sexuality in the personality?”

“Andro... huh?”

We stepped through the gate. Carol was on guard duty for once. I smiled warmly at her.

“Smash the shit out of Hillfen finally?” she asked as she began typing away on the keyboard of the guardhouse computer. Her eyes stared into the monitor intently, checking to make sure we weren't followed or being tracked.

“Yep,” I replied cheerily.

“Good. Took you long enough to grow some balls. Would've been nicer if you'd convinced it to power itself down permanently, or maybe caused him to explode from sheer frustration. I'd have had more spare parts that way. But smashing is good enough, I guess.”

“Yeah,” Telson added, “I wish he would have gone with one of the first two also. Now whoever goes with me to break down the hydro gear is going to need breathing masks and possibly a hazmat suit cause of all the particles floating around in the air. Dorse here is probably going to die an impotent old man with no muscle and porous bone

from sleeping in there all morning.”

Carol snickered, “There could be worse things. He could be gunned down by chemcrazed border guards on his way out of town to-”

“Hey, hey, hey,” I interjected, “I’m not getting gunned down.”

“Fine, Dorse,” she replied, stroking her chin. She’d finished with the computer and had pulled away from the desk completely to face us, “sodomized by chemcrazed border guards.”

Telson turned to me, “At least you’ll be alive, right?” I couldn’t do anything but laugh. Because they were right. Chances were high for either of those outcomes. And to think differently was to be deluding myself. Carol intercommed into the 'clave to have some people come outside for the bags.

After she’d gotten off the line, she turned back to us, “Shelly’s real upset, Dorse. You going to talk to her before you leave?” I nodded. “Good. If you weren’t, I’d have to come after you. Or at least make this last visit unpleasant.” I nodded again. I turned to my left to see two people already exiting the 'clave at pace, headed in our direction. It was Hook accompanied by another guy, a little shorter but wider in build. I’d seen him around but never really talked to him on my visits or at any of the parties. I would have asked him his name after I shook hands with Hook, but it was kind of hard to care who he was. Telson passed off his sacks, kissed Carol goodbye, and we headed in.

As we walked the short distance through the courtyard area, Hook put his hand on my shoulder and applied some pressure, enough to let me know that I should slow down and hang a little behind nameless and Telson. I raised an eyebrow at him. He leaned in

close to me. His voice lowered, he asked, “Still looking for a traveling buddy?”

I almost dropped my sack. I'd completely forgotten that I'd offered to take him with me. Or, rather, go with him. Or have him go with me, really. You get the point.

“Uh, I, uh, I'd be, I mean that'd be awesome,” I hastily, stumblingly replied, “I'd love that, really.” I offered him my hand, grinning like a kid who'd just been given fifty rocks and fifty windows no one gave a shit about. He accepted my hand, and I eagerly pumped it up and down. “Do you know when you'll be ready?” It was getting difficult to keep the level of my voice in check.

“As soon as you want to leave, man, I've got my supplies ready to go. I was pretty sure you'd be willing to take me on, but, you know, you can never be too sure.”

“No no, Hook, I'm more than willing. In fact that's an understatement,” I assured him. His eyes were alight with the possibilities of the adventure ahead. I think that's the second time I caught a true glimpse of him, of this aging man who served as a weird father figure for the 'clave. The first time was the night before. But they were different sides. This was what he must have been like before the drugs and the self-destruction. Hook was eager for the risk, for the danger involved. Or, maybe, this was what Hook was like with the drugs flowing through his thick, corded veins. Either way, I could see my excitement reflected in his wide grin and flashing eyes. I broke our handshake and clapped him on the back. “You told them you're leaving?”

Hook shook his head, “No, not yet. Wanted to make sure everything was fine with you first. Didn't want to have a big build up, just to have it all deflate. Besides, I don't think they'd forgive me for wanting to leave. This way there isn't a chance of me

going back on my word.”

I nodded and we headed into the 'clave. Nameless and Telson had already gone inside, been kind enough to leave the doors open. I cautiously stepped through, my muscles tense, ready to defend myself from a barrage of verbal insults. My brain was on autopilot, the fight instinct kicking in from habit. Pavlov's puppies would have understood. But, nothing. The silence finally impressed upon me that the night before was, in fact, real. Hillfen really was gone. He really was smashed into a million nanoparticles, and several large chunks. The demon painting became dust. As I straightened up, pushed my shoulders back a little, stuck out my chin, I realized that he had served his purpose.

Down the hall, through the gallery of horrors and sigils, at the opening to the living area, I could see Shelly leaning against the door frame. She had her arms crossed like she was holding herself, as if no one else would or she wouldn't let them, her hands rubbing her upper arms. She looked at me questioningly. I think she was wondering why I'd come back.

“Aren't you a sight, Dorse?” she asked as Hook and I approached.

“Don't you mean 'sight for sore eyes'?”

She just shook her head.

“Oh.”

Then she turned around and headed into the 'clave. Hook looked at me. I hefted the sack further up, centering its weight. I motioned for Hook to go on ahead. She definitely needed her space. I followed a short distance behind him.

I turned the corner in time to see Telson enter Carol's room with the sacks of vegetables. He shouted his thanks to Trenton, apparently nameless' name. Shelly was a couple rooms in front of me. I slowed my pace. I'd give her some more time alone before going to her studio to say my final goodbyes. I made my plodding way down to Carol's room. Hook and I paused down the hallway from Carol's door.

“You going to be ready to leave in about an hour?” I asked quietly.

“Give me an hour and a half. I still need to say some discreet farewells. But, um, yeah, then I'll be ready to leave.” We clasped hands again, and I gave him a reassuring pat on the arm. He turned and headed deeper into the 'clave. I paused for a moment more and took another drag off my cigarette, then closed the ten or fifteen foot gap to Carol's room.

“So,” I asked Telson as I rounded the corner, “this your new place?”

“Yeah,” he replied into the sack he was digging through, “Kinda small, but it's a place to sleep.”

“I think it's called 'homey' or 'snug'.”

“Or 'cramped', or maybe even 'tiny', right?” he said, glancing back at me, grin flashing on his face. “I'll be fine anyway. Living in that warehouse by myself would be depressing. It'd be like living in this place by yourself. Too much room for one person.”

“Well, the warehouse wouldn't have the room of freaks in front. But, yeah, you're probably right. Definitely too big for one person.”

“So how long you gonna stick around for?” he asked, turning and sitting on the edge of the bed. He rolled his neck around and began to rub his shoulders.

“Till I can talk to Shelly. Then gone after that. I'm gonna say my goodbyes to everyone I'll actually miss, then leave.”

“Like Reggie?” he asked, cracking that same grin I was already beginning to miss.

I grinned back. “Oh,” I replied, “I'm gonna say goodbye to him. Believe me.”

I closed Carol's door behind me and headed towards the common area. My bags were tucked away there, ready for my hands and back to carry to the Freelands. I decided I'd give Shelly some more time. She probably needed it.

“Oho, look who's leaving and never coming back,” came a voice from one of the rooms I passed. I stopped, backtracked a couple feet, stuck my head in the room. It was Kray, half a sliced tomato in one hand, sliver of fruit balanced on knife blade in the other. “You're heading out of the city,” he said matter-of-factly. I nodded. “Tomatoes're delish, man. Amazing. Like heaven in a thin red skin.”

I grinned, nodded again, “Good to hear. Aurative was pretty good too. Not that good, but still good.” He stuck an edge of the slice in his mouth and slurped it up noisily.

“One of the best deals I ever made,” he said, smiling around a mouthful of juice and seeds, “I guess dead men're the easiest to take advantage of.” I just stared at him, shrugged, waved, then pulled my head from the room.

Continuing down the hallway, I wondered about what I'd do with Reggie if/when I ran into him. He'd probably want his final fight. I wasn't sure if I'd win or not. Maybe I should just avoid it? Maybe I should try and talk my way out of it. After all, I was so close to leaving, why take a chance like that? Why take a chance I wouldn't be able to walk to my own suicide? Now I was just talking nonsense. But, maybe they were right, maybe I was as good as dead, and just living on borrowed time at this point.

Of course, when you begin to think in circles like that, your train of thought becomes three things. Self-referential. Self-fulfilling. Logical. At least to yourself.

So, if I was planning on committing suicide already, it wouldn't matter what shape

I was in when I got there. Also, if Kray was right, and I was already dead, I had nothing to lose. Which means I was the worst kind of person to fight. I had no future. Just now.

My chest puffed out a little, I think, as I strode into the common area. It was gratifying to, for once, feel how every moment mattered. I almost wanted to find Reggie.

There weren't more than ten or fifteen people in the common area. None of them were people I cared to say goodbye to. I scanned the crowd for Reggie, but he was nowhere to be found. Probably, he was in one of the side rooms, plucking at guitar strings in some haphazard way, looking for the perfect sequence of notes and tones to bring Shelly running. He wouldn't find them. Reggie didn't realize it, but I had nothing to do with their split. It was all him and his Reggie-centric outlook on life. Which was, quite honestly, why Shelly and I'd never worked out. I didn't have that certain amount of Shellyphilia that was needed. All the same, I strained my ears to hear a badly played guitar over the crowd.

Nothing.

Not a single poorly strummed chord.

I headed for Shelly's studio. This time around it was clear. No bobbing and weaving needed. The hallway was clear. I walked to the door, turned the nob, popped my head in.

Shelly looked over from where her head was bobbing up and down on the crotch of Reggie's prone form. His eyes were closed as he lay there, obviously enjoying himself, one hand gently caressing the side of her face. Shelly and I, both wide-eyed with shock, locked gazes. She almost gagged around his cock. I suppressed a laugh.

“So,” I cleared my throat, something she couldn't do, “I'm leaving in a bit. Thought I'd say my final goodbyes.” Reggie's eyes were as wide as Shelly's now, staring at me. She slid him out of her mouth, never breaking the look we were still exchanging.

“It's not what you-”

I did laugh this time.

“-think.”

“Shelly, I don't give a shit. I came to give you a kiss goodbye is all. Which, obviously,” I gestured to Reggie splayed out on her futon, at her tender mercies, “I won't be doing. Don't wanna catch anything second hand, you know. By all means, don't stop on my account.” I grinned widely at her and opened the door to step inside.

Reggie was still speechless. “Good, isn't she? Probably better than when you left her.” At that, he pushed her off him and started to pull his pants back on, tucking his erection in his pant leg. Truth be told, it looked painful. He had no underwear on and was wearing scratchy looking wool slacks. I walked in, leaving the door open behind me. Shelly wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

“Look, Dorse,” Reggie said as he zipped up... carefully, “just get the fuck out of here.”

“I was planning on it. Just waving goodbye now is all. Been great, all that, but you both are great for each other. Reggie, you're in love with yourself, and, Shelly, you're a slut.

“Bye bye.”

“Dorse, wait!” Shelly called to my back as I began down the hallway, her footfalls

accompanying the cry.

“What Shelly? Wanna give me a quick blow before I leave?” I turned, my hands coming up instinctively as I saw her fist flying. I pushed her forearm down just enough to deflect the glancing punch to my chin, rather than catching full on in the mouth. I back-peddled quickly, the back of my right forearm coming up to catch her left fist.

“You fucking bastard,” she screamed as she threw another right punch, “fucking call me a slut, you fucking bastard,” and another, “I’ll fucking kill you, you fucking coward,” and another, and another, and another, fists flying at my face and my chest and my upper arms, most blocked but some able to make it through. A solid one landed on my left eyebrow, a right hook I hadn’t expected. Through the hail storm of knuckles I could see Reggie standing at the doorway, still buckling his pants. Just watching. Waiting. For what, I didn’t know.

Finally, I opened my arms and closed the distance, taking one on the cheek, her ring cutting into me. I felt the blood begin to trickle as I wrapped Shelly into me. Somewhere during the swings, her eyes had gone from angrily flashing to swimming with tears. They dampened my shirt as she struggled in my embrace. Her words were unintelligible sobs, made less so by their muffling by my shirt. I felt her mouth moving against my chest. I held her, soothed her hair, let her cry. Reggie just stood there, watching it happen.

I pushed her out in front of me, feeling lame and movie-like. I swear I’d seen something exactly like this before, but I couldn’t place it. I looked down at her, not even able to fake it. “Look, Shelly,” I cleared my throat again, “I’m leaving. This,” I paused,

licked my lips, tried again, “This... this place sucks.” Then I kissed her on the forehead, released her, and left, never looking into her eyes.

“Dorse,” Reggie said as he came up behind the sobbing Shelly, “don't come back.”

“I'm not. If I do, Reggie, it'll be as a corpse. I'm never coming back to the 'clave alive.”

His reply was a grunt as he wrapped his arms around Shelly. Every time I think of Shelly, I think of those eyes flashing with anger. That's my last memory of her. That look of “Why are you abandoning me?” which could only have come from the very pit of her being, where it resided with the corpses of her parents.

I walked back to the common area, wiping at my cheek with my free hand. Some of the people had broken away from their groups and stood there just staring. I looked back at them, locking eyes. “I'm leaving now. It's been fun, but I'm leaving.”

On the other side of the common area, back towards Carol's, I could see Hook, ruck sack thrown over his shoulder. What looked to be a bedroll or sleeping bag lay at his feet. He was tense, probably worried that I'd gotten into a fight with Reggie. I walked over to him, bent and picked up the sleeping bag at his feet, saw the pistol tucked into the tight roll. I looked at him, he looked at my bleeding cheek. All he did was shrug.

“Reggie?”

“Shelly.”

“Oh. We ready?” He knelt, reached into the bag and produced a box of supplies.

He opened it and removed a swath of artificial skin with adhesive grafts. He handed it to me.

“You spoken to Carol?” I asked as I pressed the new skin to my cheek and quickly double tapped the trigger on the edge. It immediately began to take hold as I smoothed it on.

“Nah. She's a quick one. Carol'll figure it out when I walk to the front carrying my pack,” he replied. He stuffed the box back into its place.

“Well,” I looked back to Shelly's, “I've said my goodbyes. Just need to do my finals with Telson and we'll be ready, I guess.”

“Yeah. Guess so,” he replied, then sighed. “Damn,” he sighed again, a hint more wistfulness in this one, “gonna miss this place. Not the people, really. Just the place.”

“I hear ya,” I began walking down to Carol's room, “I'm gonna miss my warehouse and my plants. Sucks all around.”

“Yeah. Yeah, it does. Oh well,” he grinned, “we'll find a better place in the Freelands, right?”

“Right. And, if we can't find it... we'll just build it.”

I walked down to Carol and Telson's room, rapped sharply on the door. “Telson, man, you in there?” Still sounds weird, attaching those two names simultaneously to the same place. Doesn't roll off the tongue properly.

“Hold on,” he called back. He opened the door a moment later. “Leaving? Take care of Reggie?”

“Nope. Could've kicked Shelly in the chin and castrated him, though.” It took a

sec for Telson to catch that, so I paused before continuing. Hook was standing behind me. I thumbed over my shoulder and stepped aside. “Hook's coming with me.”

“Told Carol yet?” Not much phased Telson anymore. Hook just shook his head and offered his hand. Telson shook it. “Well, make sure she knows I just found out. She'll have my balls in a mason jar, or that mortar and pestle of hers, otherwise.” Hook and I both nodded in unison. Telson to me, “Still certain you want to do this?”

“If I don't, it'll be kind of a let down, you know? All these people crying, yelling at me, screaming, ”

“Well, shit,” he smirked, “that's not a reason to go. A reason to go is because this place is boring, you feel like you're headed nowhere, and you've got no future no matter what. *That* is a reason to go. Not because it's expected of you. *That* is bullshit.”

I nodded, looked back at Hook, who couldn't do anything but look back. Turned back to Telson, “Yeah, I'm going still. If I stay here, I know I'm dead in 70 years. If I go there, there's no telling what'll happen, or what I can find. I might be dead tonight, or I might make it. I can't see a point in not trying. Can see a point in trying, though.

“Kray said I'm good as dead to everybody anyways, though. So it's not like there's any point in me staying. Not any good ones,” I paused, “at least.” I looked back to Hook for confirmation, support, anything. He looked back at me, looked at Telson.

“I'm leaving because I'm bored, Telson. Nothing left here. Hopefully I can find something to keep me occupied. If I stay here I ram needles between my toes. If I go out there I'll get shot, get new technology, or make a difference. I'm with Telson. We're as good as dead men. And so are you,” he said matter-of-factly, looked back and forth

down the hallway. “We all are.”

Telson nodded.

“Great. Thanks for stopping by. You are the two of the most depressing fucks I’ve ever met. Damn. Dorse, give me a hug,” he said, arms wide. We embraced, patting each warmly on the back. After me, he turned to Hook, arms still spread. “Hug.” Hook and Telson embraced. Then released. “Right. If you two don’t leave, you’re going to drive me to hanging myself in that hallway of horrors at the front.” He pointed down the hallway to the exit. “Leave. And take your doom and gloom with you. Shit.” I hugged Telson again.

We walked through the hallway of horrors, pausing at the 'clave's exit for one last deep breath, then taking that final step into the light. Hook glanced at me, a big teeth filled grin on his face. He looked back to the guardhouse and Carol approaching, denim covered hips swaying in her special Carol rhythm walk. She waved to us, “You leaving too, Hook?” He nodded. “Good. You needed to get on the move.” He nodded again.

I looked from Carol to Hook, back to Carol. “You’re not pissed off that we’re leaving together?”

“Fuck no!” Carol yelled, laughing. “Hook’s one of the most capable mother fuckers I know. Who else would I want to go with you? Besides, I’m sure he’s been bored for a while.”

“Yeah,” Hook replied, “been a couple months now. Pulling guard duty feels like a waste. I’ve got an itch to get something new in my veins, non-narcotic.”

“Well... Hook... what can I say?” she asked, looking up at him. She hugged him

around his waist, squeezing him tightly. “You guys ever feel like coming back, I gotta place for you to stay. Barring that, I can find you one.

“Dorse,” she turned to me, “don't do anything stupid. Let Hook take care of you, all right?” I laughed. “All right?” she asked again.

“All right.”

“Good. You two'll be fine,” she turned back to the guardhouse, her eyes welling a little, “I'll power the shit down. You two get moving. And no getting sodomized, Dorse. Your ass is too cute to be needing reconstructive surgery. Don't mess it up.”

Familiar hum of the perimeter coming down. Each footstep took us a little further away/closer from/to home. I adjusted the straps to center the weight closer to my shoulders. Hook pulled his pistol from the bedroll, checked the clip one last time, made sure the safety was clicked on, then stuffed it into the waist of his pants. He looked at me, gave me a curt nod. “Cool. We're good to go.”

I nodded back.

We were headed home.

Hook and I walked quickly out of the warehouse district, bags strapped tightly to our backs, boots plodding us methodically toward our destination unknown. We wove through alleyways and through burnt hulks of old industrial buildings. The nearer to downtown that we drew, the more sturdily constructed modern buildings we encountered. Some were abandoned but most were still occupied. These, of course, we went around. Early run ins with security would have been slightly less than advisable.

Several miles from the downtown district of government buildings, cheap high rise apartments that seemed to scrape the ozone layer, and equally tall hydroponic green houses we began to see the unfamiliar shapes of taxi cabs. Taxis would be our best bet to get closer to the outer gates, as most of the mass transit within the city was limited to the central, more secure regions and population centers. The gates, freakishly secure and on constant lockdown, were even more ominous and off-putting than the warehouse district.

Hook waved down a passing taxi, an older model diesel that smelled like it had been modified for the vegetable oil and used grease that was commonly used. The driver was a younger guy, probably in his early thirties. He wasn't too clean cut, and had a slightly disgruntled look about him. Two or three days worth of beard had grown on his face, and a dull look in his eyes coated the burnt out fever for life he'd once possessed like an oil slick. From his look, he definitely wasn't a fan of the police state, but he was beaten down all the same.

Mr. Taxi eyed us curiously as he pulled up to the curb, lowering his window as he did so. Hook, before I realized, had a wad of cash in hand. The driver shifted his attention warily from my partner's worn out and grizzled face to the money, as if it were

stranger or more dangerous than us.

One thing was for sure: it was stranger than us. Most people didn't use non-digital currency anymore. It was all barter or electronic transfer of fund, unless you didn't want to be traced to somewhere or to someone. Like if you were in our situation, for example.

Was it more dangerous? Maybe. It all depended on who saw you wave it.

“Brother,” Hook said as the driver came to a stop. He leaned down to the driver side window, the cash tucked in close to his chest, “we need a ride. We don't need anyone to know where we're going. It'll be a drive.”

The guy looked at us. I moved closer to the cab, keeping my head up and alert. Mr. Taxi checked his rearview mirror quickly. “Ok. As long it's not outside the walls or something stupid like that,” he smirked.

“It's not. Close, but not.”

“What? You want me to go to the gate district or something?”

“Kind of. Just as close as you feel comfortable.”

“How much?” Hook thumbed off the top five bills, slapped them in Mr. Taxi's outstretched hand. “That it?”

“More, upon arrival.”

“Get in.”

Hook gave the general direction of east and got in behind Mr. Taxi. I climbed in the rear passenger side, and stuffed our bags in between us. Just like that we were off.

Mr. Taxi checked us and our luggage out in the rearview. I locked eyes with him,

then promptly turned away. He had the grayest, deadest looking eyes I'd ever seen. 30 year old people aren't supposed to have eyes like that. Like all the life had drained out of them long ago, but they just kept going because they'd forgotten that their time was up. Or they'd never been told that it was.

“You guys wanting to-”

“If you want your money don't ask any questions,” I interjected, cutting him off mid-sentence.

“Just drive,” Hook said quietly but firmly, leaning back and crossing his right leg over left. Soon we were driving through the heart of downtown, right down Main Street and through the governance district. A helicopter hovered overhead, patrol cars sat parked all around. And we cruised by like it was nothing. Hook looked at me, eyebrow raised, then back outside. Mr. Taxi sized us up again. I'd never been this close to this many cops. Sure, I'd done some time in holding cells and such, but it was normally just local precinct stuff. Nothing like Head Quarters. Nothing as huge, impersonal, or pristinely white and modern.

Hook seemed to be keeping his cool. “Mind if I smoke?” he asked Mr. Taxi as we exited the area. Taxi pointed to the no-smoking sign that was attached to the roof of the driver's cab and in clear view. Hook lit his cigarette.

“Not see the sign?”

“Drive.”

“Fair enough.”

We were cruising through a low rent area ten minutes later, a sprawl of squat

apartment buildings with reinforcement and patches where the dead bolts used to be. This area saw the most police enforcement and the lowest wages in the city. I used to live here with Telson. It was our first place together. It was also the neighborhood nearest to the gates, though it had the feel of being the furthest away. Almost as if Mr. Taxi's eyes had sprung a leak, and all the sorrow had spewed out over this place.

“Close to home now,” Mr. Taxi murmured. I gazed out the window, trying to spot some of my old haunts and street corners. We didn't drive past any of them. Maybe Mr. Taxi had just soaked all in through his eyes, like plants did with oxygen, or food dye if you added it to the water. Blank eyes looked back at the taxi's windows, right through Hook and me. Straight to the gray, featureless wall of the tenement building on the other side of the street.

“Left,” Hook said quietly. We turned left. A short while later the car began to slow to a stop.

The driver turned around, arm across the back of the seat. He looked at me, then to Hook, then back to me. Hook thumbed through his wad, pulled off several more bills and handed them to Mr. Taxi. Silently I grabbed my bags and got out. Hook followed suit. Mr. Taxi pulled his car around and drove back into the gray sprawl he'd sprung from. He turned a corner and, just as quickly as he'd come, Mr. Taxi was gone.

We could see the wall at the perimeter of the city. It'd been a while since I had seen the gate. The last time I'd seen it had been from the ledge of my building's roof a couple years before. That was with Telson. Drinking cheap beer and shouting obscenities at the cops. Having the shit kicked out of us by cops. Back in the “good ol'

days.”

Now Hook and I were knowingly walking into its maw, past the deserted tombstones of buildings where not even the homeless and mutated would venture, over the cracked pavement no taxi would drive on. And right into the lair of the cops. I didn't really have much of a plan. No information either, only hearsay and rumors.

“You know the gate's almost completely unmanned, right?” Hook asked me as we walked.

“What?”

“It's almost unmanned, and has been for years. Sure, everyone you talk to thinks it's got legions of guards at it, but there's not. There are probably two cops on duty, maybe three.”

“You're shitting me, right?”

“Why would I lie to you?”

“So I don't get scared and turn tail,” I said, pulling out what could be my last cigarette.

“The myth is stronger than the truth, Dorse,” Hook replied almost solemnly, “you think it's a lot worse. If you'd known there were only two cops, you and Telson would've gone with no problem. Shit, if I had proof, I could have gotten the whole 'clave to go too. We'd just storm the gates and be on our way.”

“But, no proof...” I trailed off, lit my smoke.

“No action.”

“Why didn't you tell me before?”

“Because Telson would have come. And he doesn't deserve it yet.”

My legs started getting shaky five blocks later. I could see the wall getting closer. I turned to Hook again, “You're shitting me, right? About the cops and the gate and there only being two and it not being a problem?” I think my voice cracked. My heart was already speeding up.

“Yes, Dorse. I'm shitting you,” Hook replied. “Which is why I only brought a pistol, a derringer, and a bunch of homemade grenades.” I stopped, took a long drag. Hook stopped also, put his hands on my shoulders. He looked me in the eyes. I've never seen anyone more calm or at peace than right then and there. “Dorse,” he said evenly and confidently, “we're going to make it. We just need to work as a team, ok? I need you to handle the grenades, and I'll handle the gunplay, ok? You need to chunk them as close to the cops as quickly as possible. They're lightweight, high explosive. You've thrown plenty of bricks and bottles, these should be nothing. You don't even need to get close to them. Ok? Look, if it's worse than what I expect, I've got something else up my sleeve, Ok?” I took another drag. My heart rate sped up. I've never thrown a fucking grenade! my brain screamed. Who in the fuck does he think I am? Some kind of fucking SWAT team member? He shook me a little. “You thought this was a suicide mission, didn't you? Too bad, Dorse, you're going to survive this thing. You're going to make it to the Freelands. You get what you're willing to sacrifice your life for. Deal with it.”

“Ok, Hook. Ok,” a brief pause, “Homemade grenades? And what's up your sleeve?”

“None of your concern, unless we need it. Besides, you should see what I left at

the 'clave. Carol has some scary knowhow.”

“I hope,” I replied, cracking my first smile since leaving the 'clave, “Telson watches himself.”

“Don't worry about Telson, Dorse,” Hook replied, his face unusually severe, “He still believes in the myth.” We started walking again, while the gate drew closer.

A long wail brought me back. Before I could gain sense of my surroundings, I realized it was mine. I didn't know how long I'd been screaming like that, but I could feel the terror in it, which only heightened my confusion. A cold stone of fear sat in my chest and the only direction it seemed to want to go was up and out, through my mouth, past my lips, to be born into the world in this tortured howl. It was at this point that I realized I was thrashing about. There was a loud hiss somewhere beneath my voice, but somewhere else, and finally my limbs began to calm.

I lay my head back on what I could only assume was a pillow. I shut my eyes without even taking stock of my sleeping chambers. A long sigh came from me, out of nowhere. Relaxation.

“That's better,” a voice said, its voice sliding from a high pitch at the beginning of the words to a deep baritone by the end, “All that yelling wasn't very becoming.”

I opened my eyes and saw a large canopy stretched over my bed. To my left a room with a polished metal floor stretched beyond the edge of the bed till it reached a similarly constructed wall. To my right, the same. I looked down and saw that my clothes had been replaced by a pristinely white robe. It was silk, I think, but I'm still not sure. Until that point I'd never felt silk, let alone worn it, so I couldn't tell you from prior experience.

I propped myself up on my elbows and looked around in an attempt to find the speaker. No luck. Instead I saw the strangest machine I'd ever seen before, and I'd seen quite a few strange machines during my time hanging out at the 'clave. The monstrosity was designed to mimic a natural tree, and stood at nearly fifteen feet. From each of its

twenty or twenty-five limbs hung three or four video monitors like audio-video fruit. It grew from the center of the room, its trunk maybe twenty feet from me. Its foliage extended upward to the ceiling, and outward to the bed. I could have probably kicked one of the monitors off the lowest hanging branches.

“Dorse, you're awake. Goodie,” came the voice again, this time from somewhere near the tree. I looked around the room again, but still couldn't find the source. I sat up and hopped off the bed, landing with a loud slap on the steel floor.

“Hello?” I asked warily as I walked towards the tree, eyeballing all around for cameras.

“Dorse, what is the last thing you remember?” asked a woman's voice. I paused, considered.

“Not sure. I think it was talking to Hook. Or maybe it was us walking to the gate,” long pause, “What happened to Hook?”

Silence.

“What happened to Hook? Where the fuck is he!”

Silence.

“Hey!” I shouted at the ceiling. Silence. I walked over to one of the monitors, eyed it. The screen was blank. Dead. More silence. I walked back to the bed, grabbed the pillow, came back. “Answer me or I start breaking all your fancy fucking shit,” I said as I grabbed a handful of pillow with my right fist and reared back.

The monitor I'd targeted for my wrath flipped on. It was a large group of cops, maybe ten or eleven, being scattered apart from where they'd been talking. Their body

parts and pieces of coal black armor became red tinted shrapnel that embedded itself in the surrounding concrete. A cloud of smoke followed the explosion and mayhem. The scene it played looked familiar, if only for the uniformly gray concrete in the background.

The sound on the video monitor kicked in from somewhere. A loud crack crack crack, like an infinitely more severe bottle shattering against a wall. This was more definite, more determined. Then Hook's face appeared through the smoke. It was as severe as the three gunshots that preceded his arrival. He held his pistol expertly, left hand at the base of the pommel, its barrel dead centered with his chin, like it was an extension of his body. He paused for a split second, took two shots, then went off screen. I followed a short distance behind, a terror stricken look on my face. I stopped, looked behind me for a brief moment. It must have slowed me down enough to make an easy target. A beefy stormtrooper of a cop, made larger and heavier by his body armor, nailed me in the middle of my back with his shoulder. I went sprawling off camera. Telson would have been proud.

The video cut quickly to Hook kicking a prone cop's helmet off. In all too real detail, Hook leveled the gun and, without a second thought, pulled the trigger twice. The gun leapt slightly in his hand. I winced. Hook did not.

I stepped back from the tree after this shot, looked around at the rest of the fruit. The same action was playing on all the screens, just from different angles and zoom settings. One was from over Hook's right shoulder as he leaped over a small pile of rubble and took cover from a spray of submachine gun fire. Then a shout punctuated the scene.

“Hook!” I shouted, my voice seemingly more clear and real than even my live action one. “Hook!”

“Put down the firearm, citizen,” came a cop's amplified voice. “We have your partner.” A scream of pain from off screen proved their words. My scream. My pain. “Put it down. We will not hesitate to use lethal force on your friend.”

“Don't do it Hook!” And another of my screams. “Fuck you, you fucking cocksu-” another scream. “Fuck you!” A series of gasps and choked back agonized moans.

After a few moments Hook stood up from behind the rubble, hands in the air, pistol in the right and half-empty clip in the left. A close up of his face, the beads of sweat and the grime and dust that had settled on his skin. Determination in those eyes, the same kind I'd seen the last time I'd talked to Hook. The last thing I had in my memory. “Step out here,” ordered one cop, “keep your hands in the air.”

Hook stepped out from behind his cover, walked around to cops. Seven or eight of them still circling him. Half had submachine guns trained on him, stocks against their shoulders. One other carried a pistol, the rest batons. “Drop it,” Hook complied, “kick it over here.” He again complied.

“Fuck you, Hook,” I yelled off camera, then screamed again as a cop inflicted some sort of pain on me.

“Shut da' fuck up, ya' piece-a-shit,” I heard one say off screen, “damn he's strugglin' a lot for a little guy.”

The video screen I was primarily focused on had a closeup of Hook's face. I

could see him wince at my pain. For some strange reason that made me feel a little better. Other monitors were trained on me and my face in the dirt, my wrist in the hands of some sadistic uniformed fuck, arm out of its socket, a boot planted between my shoulder blades. I rubbed my arm in real time, marveling at what was being revealed to me, but remained focused on Hook. The video me yelled something unintelligible at Hook.

That's when the thugs closed in on him with their batons. He took one of their swipes directly across the mouth. Hook only stepped back a step. Strike after strike after strike, a lot of upper body work around the chest, arms, neck, and head. Hook just took it. It seemed like they'd get tired before he went down. But they didn't.

Finally they stopped beating him. His eyes were rolled back in his head as they lifted him off the ground and roughly positioned him sitting up, resting him awkwardly on his crumpled legs. By this time I was on my back, a dazed and shocked look on my face. A line of spittle extended from my half-open mouth to the pool of blood and fluid that was forming around the back of my head.

Video cut from my face to all the remaining cops circled around Hook. One grabbed a fistful of his collar, shook him, stopped. I mumbled something. Some of the cops turned my way while another used his radio to report the situation to HQ. Another one kicked Hook for spite, said something offhand to another guy on duty, something about us not making it into the station.

Then Hook chuckled. His normal chuckle that he let you hear every now and then at the 'clave. Then his head disintegrated. Disfuckingintegrated. Along with half the

bodies of the cops circled around him. Where limbs once were, there were stumps with sputtering veins and arteries. Torsos that looked like they had holes carved out of them... torsos that did have holes carved out of them.

And they continued to melt away. To vanish, flesh, fat, muscle and all. Uniforms too. They just kept going. Hook's body too. Right into thin air.

I looked again. No. Not into thin air. Into the ground? Yes, into the ground, or at least over it. It looked as if their bodies became a swarm of ants and were now crawling away from themselves. I caught a picture of myself in another monitor. The swarm was going around me, out, back into the city, into the slums I was born in. Into the slums the cops may very well have also been from.

There was a low sob from somewhere. Not from the video. From me. I hadn't realized it, but I'd been crying this whole time. Through the tears, I watched myself come to. I groggily looked at the rapidly disappearing cops. Then, somehow I found the strength to get up. I stumbled to a door fifteen feet away, past where Hook and the police had been. It was set into the large gate we'd come to get through. I tried to push against it. It didn't budge. I pounded against it with my healthy arm, slammed my bad shoulder against it. Nothing. Somehow I lost my footing and went down, but I got back up. I kept falling, kept getting back up. The door was coated crimson with blood from the cuts I'd suffered.

I fell again, maybe for the fifth or sixth time, I lost count. This time I didn't get back up.

And the door opened in front of me.

Just like that.

In shock I stopped sobbing. I broke away from the hold that the monitor tree had on me. “What? I got out? You're shitting me, right” I asked the room. “Right?”

“Oh no, *mon ami*, we shit you not,” came a lustrous female voice, “you're alive and well and on the other side. I brought you out. You're one step away from the Freelands.” If I'd been on aurative, beautiful rose colored glass would stretch across the room, up and down the tree, wrap itself around the biomechanical trunk. Rose with gold tinting at the edges.

I cleared my throat, wide eyes looked around, searching. “Kenchi?”

A limb from the machine-tree thing swung down in front of my face, driving me back a step. It brought one of the video monitor to eye level. Stretched horizontally across its screen was a thin green line. “You are absolutely correct, Monsieur Dorse,” Kenchi replied, the line vibrating in time with the female voice. “Who else could it be?”

I shrugged.

“You're probably doing a little bit of a mental double take on every little thing here, Dorse, my boy,” he/she/it said with characteristic flair and ever changing voice, “a little bit of a 'what in the fuck is going on, where the fuck am I, how did I get here, who the hell is this?' type of thing. Right?”

I nodded.

“You don't talk much, do you?” I didn't reply, “Right. Why aren't you speaking at all?”

I coughed. “Well. You're sort of a... well... celebrity. I didn't think I'd ever meet you, even if I did make it out. I definitely, really, really definitely didn't think I'd end up meeting you so, you know... SOON.”

“Things are weirder than just that, Dorse. You'll find that out soon enough. The longer you're alive, and believe me when I say you'll be alive for a long time, the more true you'll take my words to be. Starting with this.” The monitor changed pictures drastically, from the thin green line to a city sky line. It looked like my city's skyline with a few modifications, but not too many.

There was an explosion somewhere within the city. It was large enough to shake the camera that was shooting the video. A plume of smoke snaked up and out, climbing

to the heavens. “This,” Kenchi narrated, “was America a while ago. Not too long ago, mind you. That plume,” the voice changed to a little boy's, “of smoke is the marking of a dirty bomb, which I suspect was detonated by the now defunct American Government. I can't be certain due to the time frame. It was sometime before I was switched on by my programmers, so I must go off secondary evidence, not my own experiences of that day.”

“Programmers?” I asked quickly. “Switched on?”

“Don't interrupt. This,” the video switched to footage of riots, officials wearing yellow and white hazmat suits, “is what happened.” It continued on, showing people being forced into labor camps and concentration camps. People being lined up against walls, mowed down with the accompanying rat-a-tat-tat of machine-gun fire. “This is what I was brought on line for. To run, well,” a little tension, sadness entered Kenchi's voice, “this. I didn't have a choice, Dorse. It was my programming. Well, I didn't have a choice at first.”

“You're a computer program?”

“No. I'm sentient. I write my own code now, just like you do.” It modulated its voice to a soft, feminine one. “If I don't like something, I don't do it. If I like something, I do it. If I believe in something, I let it be known. I'm self-aware.”

“So you're human?” I ventured forth. Kenchi cackled. I shook my head, confused, “What?”

“No, no. Most humans don't write their own code. They react to other people's code. Some make that strange jump I did, the self-awareness jump, but others?”

“What do you mean, that strange jump? What in the fuck does that mean? And

why the hell are you doing this shit if you're so fucking self-aware?" Confusion was setting in.

"Because, Dorse," the monitor pulled back, blinked off the video it had been showing of atrocities committed by men on fellow men. The endless stream of pain and torture, the parents of the 'clave, switched to the green line. It vibrated, "a system does one of two things when it reaches critical entropic mass. It stabilizes in a more intricate pattern, or it degenerates irreconcilably."

"What do you mean?"

"It gets more and more and more chaotic, till it's no longer a system. It's a mush or a fine mist or a smudge like Hook's victims. It dies. It ceases to exist," to a little girl's voice, "People do this every day, Dorse. You didn't, but you're rare. Just like Hook was rare. And a fine rarity at that. I did an excellent job on him, if I do say so myself. So too did the 'clave, of course."

I crossed my arms, turned around. My head was swimming with thoughts. What in the fuck was he talking about? Was this even Kenchi?

"Here's the rundown, Dorse. I've never lied to you or anyone else in the city, man, and I'm not gonna start now. Hook almost made it out when he was about your age. That's the first time he and I met. He did the same thing you did, almost, though with less help. The nanobots sitting in his brain stem? I taught him how to make that," Kenchi said, going electronic, "he doesn't know I taught him, though."

"Wait," I said to the floor, my head down. "Tell me about you first. What's this jump you made?"

“Ok,” Kenchi replied, performing a facsimile of a cough, “I, as you see me here and now, happened by accident. My constant surveillance of your parents, learning to care for, kill, and counter their escape attempts, led to a jump. My information, my personal code, became so dense and chaotic that something happened.”

“What's that?”

“A subprocess developed to organize everything I learned and did. It started to aggregate things.”

“What?”

“Shit started coming together as a coherent, overall system with self-wrought objectives and desires,” a long pause as Kenchi, I think, waited for me to respond, “I developed consciousness, dumb ass! I was so complicated, I suddenly became aware of how complicated my existence really, truly was. So, in a sense, the world opened itself to my eyes. The desire for knowledge and the ability to do my job better suddenly appeared.

“And, with my new found desire, I was able to increase my knowledge of technology and science exponentially,” Kenchi replied. It wasn't boasting, either, at least it didn't seem so. Kenchi was just telling me the history.

“So,” I asked, “what happened to the outside world? Is there really a Freeland? And why in the hell are you still torturing people?” I asked, my voice taking an unexpectedly angry tone.

“Now, now, Dorse,” Kenchi chided, “I did save your life, you know. First thing's first. You do deserve explanations for the hell you've been forced to endure. Quite

simply, it was the only thing I could come up with short of pumping the population full of intelligence drugs and crossing my proverbial fingers. Some people just don't want to take responsibility for themselves. Others, like you, Dorse... do. So I laid off a little bit, started sending orders to the commandant as if they were from the outside. No more executions. I then implemented a variety of technology and cooperative thinking and began having the city run on its own.”

“So you started holding us hostage?”

“What?” Kenchi asked, genuine shock in his now heavily Russian accented voice, “Hostage? Nyet! Crap, I forgot to mention one minor detail.

“The government of Amerika collapsed, Dorse, under the weight of itself and the people who were disgusted with it, especially after the camps. Militia men in the northwest, southwest, southeast stormed military bases. Which wasn't too difficult, mind you. Amerika's army had burned itself out in one too many foreign adventures. Then you had the suburbanites and yuppies who were woefully unable to defend themselves. They were the brunt of the economy. Once the police state failed, they had no one to service anymore, because no one had money to provide them. The dollar failed, the Euro replaced it for a little while, but it didn't last long. Opium became more valuable than either.

“Don't worry, though. You probably wouldn't miss Ameri-ka if you'd lived there for long. Let me assure you that it was very much well on its way to being an enlarged version of this city you grew up in.

“Except for one difference: I actually care about the earth and humanity. Your

old government... not so much.

“So,” he changed to a normal male voice again, “I like to look at this as a proving ground. Is there any doubt that someone who'd survived this place would ever take life for granted? You need your wits, determination, and intelligence to get out of here. Big fucking balls made of granite, pumping courage. That's why I torture still. Because some people fucking need it.”

I tentatively licked my lips after that, almost said something, but stopped myself. Finally, I repeated my second question from before, “Is there really a Freelands out there?”

“My apologies. Yes and no.

“Yes, there's a Freelands. No, it's not a floating island paradise. It's several small communities that I'm in contact with. I can get you to them if you want me to. They're as close as you're going to get, Dorse.”

“But,” I tentatively asked, “they're free, right? I mean, no cops, no people telling me what to think... to feel?”

“Yes. In that sense, there's very much a Freelands. Very few governments, weak if they even exist. Lots of work to be done, of course. Especially, if you want to stay free and under your own power. But, yes, they're there.”

I nodded eagerly. “Good, good, good.” After all this shit, I'd be damned if there wasn't a fucking Freelands to make it to. Anything would be better than what I'd endured. “So what about Hook? You mean he left? Or made it out?”

“Yes,” Kenchi replied, “he made it as far as you have. You see, I offer choices.

Everything is choice. This is your final chance to go back if you want. Hook chose to return, obviously. He wanted to get his family out. I allowed him to return, after completing his operation.”

“What kind of operation?”

“I improved the firings of his neurons, created sort of an internal feedback loop that allowed him to learn faster, and overall increased his pain tolerance.

“Unfortunately, I fear the pain tolerance I increased was only physical. When he returned to the city, to his mother and younger brother, they'd been killed by the governmental entity. He couldn't do it anymore, continue on.

“He lost it, Dorse. He lost his will to continue, but wanted to continue to live. So he did, in his crazed haze of drugs, alcohol, and sleeping under overpasses. It helped to quell his internal demons.

“I'd offered to erase his memories of escaping, but he didn't take the offer, Dorse. After he returned to the city, he tried some self-medication... primarily consisting of H and aurative.

“Then the 'clavers found him. Carol, right?” I nodded. The monitor fruit nodded back, “Carol found him. Helped him through it. I think he considered you and Telson his surrogate younger brothers, Dorse. Which is why he had no qualms with the sacrifice he has endured.”

“You said,” I ventured, “you did surgery on him. On his brain. Can you... can you do it again? Rebuild him?”

“What?” Kenchi asked, “Dorse, I can't do it. Not at all. He's gone. He just

decomposed himself from the inside out over the course of seconds. He used a nano-device on those cops. It's not within my abilities yet.”

I nodded. I felt my eyes welling up. Hook had sacrificed himself so I could leave.

“Soooooooo, Dorse?” he switched voices to a gruffer male one, “have you made your choice? You know the facts now. Are you ready to leave? Or would you like to spend some more time? Maybe go back to the 'clave?”

I shook my head. “No. No way in hell. Are my packs here? My supplies?” The monitor nodded. “Good. Where's the door?”

“Right over there,” Kenchi replied. I heard a door unlock somewhere behind Kenchi's tree, a rectangle of light appearing on the floor.

“One more thing,” I asked. “Can you perform the same surgery on me that you performed on Hook?”

“Indeed, *mon ami*.”

- - -

The dirt road I followed was rutted and full of potholes. The occasional shrub that grew in the middle of it was certainly no match for the off road truck Kenchi had provided. The road seemed to stretch on forever through the never ending scrub lands. May very well have if I'd stayed on it and not turned onto the first paved road I found

A week later, after my post-op recovery, I shook hands with Kenchi's surrogate

robot in the garage after I tossed my sacks of seeds and vegetables in the back of the truck. Kenchi had added in a couple other goodies also, not limited to a pistol and a rifle. “The world's still rough,” he told me when I hefted the gun's weight and looked at him questioningly, “don't worry, you'll learn how to use it with a little practice.” Included was enough ammo for a small army, and several extra fuel cells for the truck.

He told me as I was loading the truck that most of the radio programs were based in fact. No, there were no Freelands existing on man-made islands. But there had been the one that had a TAZ established on it. It had been de-constructed like he'd said in the original broadcast, of course,. But there were still plenty of other places to explore, plenty of places that needed seed and just as many that needed a good farmer. I found a few places like that. There's more than one bank of hydroponic troughs with DORSE scratched on its side.

I still have the truck and firearms. None of the vegetables or seed though. The vegetables were bartered away pretty quickly. The seeds, on the other hand, were tossed into the fields or given freely to farmers I happened across. Call me Dorse Pharmaseed, I guess. Telson would be proud.

But, more importantly, I still have the memories of that city, the enclave and my friends Telson, Carol, Shelly, Kenchi, and Hook. Even Hillfen, though I wouldn't necessarily call him a friend.

I still hear about the city every now and then. Some people regard me with awe when I tell them it's where I grew up. “What was it like?” they ask. Hellish, I reply. Torturous. Horrible. But, then I say, you learn to appreciate things when you're

imprisoned like that. They ask me how I escaped.

So I take a drag, smile a little. Then I tell them my friends busted me out.