



**Alone Again or**

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**Michael Bassette**



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# **Part 1**

## **Sleeping**

Syd sat in his one room apartment looking out his window onto the street several stories below. He ate a peanut butter sandwich that stuck to the roof of his mouth like paste and tried to dislodge it with the bitter taste of foc. His normal midnight snack.

He thought about how he was in a poor area of Steeple City, and how even though the people drove battery cars and only ran the room disinfecting Spaires Machines if they had children, the people walking in the street below were happier than him. The foc, an anti-depressant and stimulant, only made his head pound so he set the mug down.

Down in the street along the sidewalk he saw a young couple holding hands. They walked through the cool summer night together. The boy wore a necklace with a pendant in the shape of a screw; a sign he was of the Neo Freudian faith. The girl wore a circular medal. From the height he couldn't tell what religion it was but he knew she wasn't a Neo Freud. He hated Neo Freuds and felt his stomach churn with bile.

The foc, he thought, I need to cut back.

He knew that he was really avoiding thinking about a topic that was in the back of his head. It had been there for weeks. He wanted to go to the agency and adopt a wife. He blocked the usual pattern of thought: finding someone the usual way hadn't worked for him since University, he would think, and at twenty four he was sick of sleeping by himself at night. And who would look down on him for it? Only his brother, and he hated Dave.

In instinct he filled his mouth with the bitter liquid from the mug and felt his eyes dry and his thoughts accelerate even more as the drug passed through the membranes in his mouth before he swallowed it.

You're going to drink yourself into a spiraling thought depression, he thought, you're going to be depressed for hours. Again. You need to stop doing this to yourself.

To stop himself from drinking more he stood up and dumped the brown liquid into the sink on the wall behind him. The apartment had

a bed, a sink, a desk which doubled as he dinner table, and a television. Showers and toilets were communal. The rent was low, but he had millions of dollars under his bed in boxes. He couldn't use a bank; The Mayor's Police would ask where the money was coming from, ask how an un-employed university kid living on the outskirts of the city, almost on the city walls, had made that much money?

Three successive knocks pounded out on his door. His racing brain pictured the mayor's police, in grey suits with handguns drawn. The rational part of his brain reminded him that he wasn't under lockdown; the alarm in his room had never sounded. The police couldn't be outside.

His door had electrical problems. The current that powered the electro magnets was shorted and the door itself actually carried some current through the metal reinforcement strips. The electro magnets that could hold the door shut under his command or under the command of The Mayor's Police if they ever came for him. He heard a soft female voice swearing and he knew she'd touched the metal part of the door when she knocked and received a slight electric shock.

Syd opened the door and a pretty young girl stepped in. Her hair was blonde and long, and her breasts stood high on her chest. The skin along her face and upper neck was smooth like glass; she had the look of someone raised with money. If her face had not been surgically altered, Syd thought, he cheeks would probably be flushed red with the panic of having to enter the outer arc of the city. A university girl, probably.

Her skirt was short and Syd forced himself not to stare. The girl wore the necklace of The Followers of Kenna, and Kenna's girls did not like men staring at them.

Or men at all, Syd thought.

"I was on my way out," Syd said, "I don't have time for negotiations. I have some good stuff, green and not too tasty, but it'll give you the shakes like the hangover from a week long whiskey bender. Only

much more pleasant."

The girl touched the necklace which hung above her artificially raised cleavage subconsciously, and stood with her legs slightly crossed.

She's trying to manipulate me, Syd thought; she's not new at this exchange.

"Do I look like the kind of girl that would be happy with green?" she said.

"I really was on my way out," Syd said, "you want brown, it's four dollars a spoon. I don't have any white, no one here can afford white and not enough of your types come down to my apartment to make it worth the risk to have around. You in or out?"

"Three dollars," she said.

"Done. How many spoons?"

"Twenty."

They made the exchange. When she was gone Syd put the money in the box under his bed which was filled with money and waited for the alarm in the ceiling to go off, and for the doors to automatically lock.

He saw the girl outside walking quickly up the street. When she turned a corner Syd pictured her giving the bag to an agent from the MP and waited. Nothing happened.

You're not going to get arrested, not on your wedding day, he thought. He waited ten more minutes to make sure he wasn't going to be under arrest and got up. He put his coat on and left for the agency.

Jennifer sat on the round wooden bar stool and tried to ignore the music around her. Bodies sweated, lights flashed, and the whole place shook with the noise of drunken college students.

She swiveled in her bar chair, her glass of straight vodka half empty. The students looked young to her, almost babyish, although she could remember being their age. The bar wasn't strict about making sure everyone was of age, she knew. Most of the people dancing on the crowded cement dance floor were probably eighteen



or nineteen. The kid throwing up in the corner she was certain was eighteen at the most.

A bouncer already was descending on him as Jennifer watched. She knew the boy would end up in the alley behind the bar. Maybe he would make his drunken way to a street where a cab could be hailed; maybe he would sleep in the alley and wake up without shoes or a wallet.

If the second happened, she knew, he'd have company. For some time she'd been one of the pickpockets who sat behind the dumpsters, throwing dice to decide who caught the next drunk kid to be thrown out. It hadn't been a bad way to make money; she'd been in a group of five people, three of which were girls, and she'd been able to stay drunk all the time on the money. They'd made sure that none of the kids got beaten, or raped, or anything. She'd considered stealing their petty cash a small payment in return for not waking up topless in the street with a pain in your crotch or asshole, depending.

On one night one of her group went after someone who wasn't drunk enough, someone who'd merely been in a fight inside over a girl. The mark had had a fighting chain in his sleeve, a Manriki, and he almost killed Jona, the girl who went after his wallet. He'd been very drunk, but very good with the chain. Jona sobered up in the hospital, they discovered she was telepathic; and so she was arrested and sent to The Agency. Jennifer's group stopped robbing college kids behind Allen's. They all went their separate ways.

But she still had to make money, to keep the vodka coming. She needed the vodka in a way that none of the kids gyrating under the distorted music would ever understand. She looked at the clock. It was only two thirty. Closer to three she'd make her final decision and go after the mark. Her eyes scanned the room and picked out three potentials.

Her glass of vodka emptied, she turned around and signaled the bar keep.

He must know that she was there often, that sometimes she would

tip well, and that she was too old to be in the bar for a legitimate reason, she thought. He probably thought she was a drug dealer or a pedophile.

She didn't care.

He poured straight vodka into her glass, the kind made synthetically from the starchy waste of the city. Clothes, starchy foods gone bad, paper too flimsy to be made into more paper. She sipped it.

I wonder when I stopped noticing the taste, she thought.

Syd walked in the direction the pretty follower of Kenna had walked. He did not have a car; with the amount of money he had under his bed he could have purchased a gasoline car or several battery cars if he wanted. But Steeple City had good transportation, even in the outer arc. He hated cars. He wondered if his wife would want one.

The first time he'd ever been in a car was on the way to his grandmother's funeral. His father, a fat man with dark hair and a screw necklace, had drunk too much foc. It was legal then. Syd, at eight, could tell his father had drunk too much because the old man was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. The car had been rented for the funeral procession. The economy was in bad shape when Syd had been born; his parents didn't become middle class until Syd was seventeen.

Syd's brother and mother had been in a separate car as was customary; they were biologically related to the grandmother.

"How does a car move?" Syd had said. He knew cars were machines, but they never needed to be plugged in, and this confused him.

"This car uses gasoline."

Syd ran his fingers along the metal strip under the glass of the passenger window.

"What's gasoline?"

"Gasoline is a chemical they make in factories. Your uncle Tommy

worked in one for a while until his lungs burned out on him."

"How do they make gasoline?"

"From different dead things. The city garbage, food that goes bad and isn't recycled into other things, dead pets, and dead people whose families can't afford a real funeral."

"Not Grandma though, right Dad?" Syd had said, confident in that his father would say the right words. He sat back in the car's roomy seat which he imagined must be similar to the seats on the airplanes that streaked through the sky over the city sometimes.

"You know we don't have much money," his father had said, "after the funeral showing she'll go to the factory."

Syd had puked all over the floor of the car, and his father had to give the rental agency one hundred extra dollars when he returned it.

Syd hoped he wouldn't have to buy a car.

Not because of that early memory, he thought, but because I don't have anywhere to park cars.

On his breastbone above the dark blue oxford shirt sat a blank circle necklace. It signified that he believed in The Circular Faith; that all religions were true and led to spiritual enlightenment.

Syd didn't believe this to be true, but showing up anywhere public without a necklace on had caused him to be constantly lectured by missionaries from all faiths. It was easier for him in Steeple City to wear a necklace, even if it was a lie. He wondered what religion his wife would have.

The sidewalk was experimental, a yellow plastic based sidewalk, instead of the ceramic type in use over most of the city. Syd kicked a dandelion that had managed to grow in-between a building and the sidewalk. As it skidded into the road he saw that it had yellow plastic in its roots and he laughed.

I don't think you're going to get past the proto-type phase at all, he thought.

I like the color yellow for the sidewalk though, he thought to himself. The roads are boring and black. When the spaires-machine dust is

expelled its green powder would undulate and circle over the yellow and black.

He watched it every time he was awake late enough for the expulsion.

Which lately, he thought, has been pretty fucking often.

The agency was a short train ride closer to the center of the city. Far enough away from anyplace dangerous to need many guards, but not so close to the center of the city that The Mayor had to pay much in land tax.

The man sat Syd down in a small office on the twelfth floor. The air had the stale smell of a Spaires Machine, and the furniture was brown and designed to look like fabric. When Syd sat down heavily in the chair across from the man's desk he discovered the chair was ceramic. The desk was nothing but metal, shiny, buffed, and intimidating.

Behind the desk the man wore no necklace of faith. His eyes were brown, and his teeth were yellowed. He wore black glasses with thick rims, which Syd noticed were crooked.

But Syd like the man's smile from across the desk. It's a trusting sort of smile, Syd thought.

His stomach had not been well since he entered The Agency building. Everyone knew what a straight would go to The Agency for, and he felt all of the secretaries stared at him.

"So what kind of appearance are you going for?" the man said, still smiling with his hands folded on the desk.

Syd tapped his fingers on the desk. He hadn't given that much thought.

"I want a smart girl, one with taste in the arts and that can form her own opinion."

The man behind the desk leaned back in his chair and put his wingtip shoes up on the desk. He raised his folded hand pyramid under his chin and looked at Syd in mock matronly pride.

"Oh, you want a smart, nice girl. She can look like anything, right?"

Yeah, you guys all say that. Especially the ones that come in at this time in the morning."

Syd did not say anything. The night hours were for recreation in the home, with families or friends. They were not for roaming the streets or for work, unless you were poor.

"Come on friend, don't you know anything about The Agency? We spend months rehabilitating our teles. Years sometimes. We don't let them go until they are just as educated as someone going to one of The Mayor's Free Universities. They're all also taught how to be good spouses. So what kind of a spouse are you looking for? Female? Male? We have a few mixed?"

"I told you before I wanted a wife," Syd said. He was starting to feel like he'd made a mistake. He'd met and even known very well some people who were educated at the free universities supplied by the city. They usually ended up police officers.

"So they all take the same classes? They don't get to choose at all? You don't know what their personal taste is?" Syd said.

The man laughed quickly and let his feet fall to the floor. He leaned forward and stared into Syd's eyes.

"Are you for real? Are you a sleeper?"

Syd was caught by surprise, and he knew the truth shown in his face for a moment before he was back under control. He lied anyway.

"No. I see Doctor Winterborne three times a week, just as it says in my file."

Syd never saw Doctor Winterborne, except twice a month to deliver a few hundred spoons of foc free of charge. In return the doctor lied about seeing Syd to the authorities and provided him with the proper paperwork. Although the man behind the desk didn't know the particulars, Syd knew the man probably had a guess at the kind of doctor Winterborne was.

The man looked un-impressed. He held his hands out, palms out, in a gesture of indifference.

"I don't care; we get lots of your types here. Your wife won't know

what a sleeper is; you'll have to explain to her why society will down on the both of you. Her education of course did not concern the dark side of Steeple City. I'm sure you'll be a good teacher, honest and forthright with her always. As to whether or not she likes Chopin more than Orlando, you're going to have to ask her because we don't keep personality profiles. I'm sure it's not what most important to you anyway. So what's it going to be? A nice blonde, perhaps?"

The man smiled again and Syd felt his stomach turn over.

The thought of an instant wife held Syd in his seat. Someone to love him and for him to love, and he wouldn't have to wait for her to appear any longer. It made him want to cry in happiness.

"No. I want a girl with light red hair, light skin, no freckles, and within my age by a year either way."

Syd watched the man type notes into a pull out console on the other side of the metal expanse. The man looked up.

"Done, done, done, and done," the man said, "now please sign the touchpad in the pull out console in front of you."

Syd felt for the drawer like tablet arm and pulled it out from underneath the desk. A page of digital text shined up from the screen; he read the page, then placed the stylus on the scroll down button in the lower right hand corner of the page. Once the page started scrolling, he didn't stop it, leaving over nine tenths of the contract for marriage unread.

He signed in the appropriate place.

Syd looked up at the man who was still nameless to him. The man was playing with one of his canine teeth. When he realized Syd was done, he extended the same hand.

With hesitation Syd shook the man's hand.

"Now, down at the end of the hall there is a bathroom with a full shower if you'd like to clean yourself up," he said, indicating a doorway other than the one Syd had entered through. "We recommend it. She's in room 501C. Just tell the man at the elevator. He'll take you right to her. Good day."

Syd left and made his way down the institutional halls until he found the bathroom with the picture of the faceless figure wearing pants.

The shower had more pressure than the shower in his apartment, and he luxuriated in it, procrastinating the meeting. His hands shook. Vomit rose up his throat, but he kept it down.

Outside of the shower after toweling off Syd looked in the mirror and began to feel worse.

She'll fucking probably cry when she sees me, he thought, when she sees who she has to go home with.

He dried his hair with the provided white towel and hung it next to the sink. He smoothed his hair down to the best of his ability with his hands and went into the hallway. Turning his back on the elevator Syd walked down the hallway away from the elevator into the man's office.

The man sat with his wingtips on the desk, talking to a large middle aged woman in a flower dress.

"We spend months re-abilitating," the man said, then he saw Syd and stopped. Syd could see the annoyance or tension in the man's eyes.

"I don't want to marry anymore," Syd said.

The man dropped his feet to the floor and swiveled in his chair to face Syd directly.

"You just have some wedding night jitters. Did you read all of the contract?"

Syd felt his face blush. He tried to maintain a stoic façade otherwise.

"No."

The man broke eye contact and looked at the floor in front of Syd. He spoke softly.

"The marriage isn't binding for one week. You have one week to decide."

Syd turned to go back to the elevator.

"And listen chief," the man said to Syd's back, since you didn't read the contract, I'm going to tell you this. She's not obligated to

have sex with you. Only to care for you as a wife. So if you rape her, you'll still go to jail. All of our rehabilitated teles have extensive training in dealing with violent spouses. Understand?"

In a wash of anger Syd dug his fingernails into his palms.

"I'd never rape" he began.

"I didn't ask you that, chief," the man said, "I said if you understood Do you?"

The man had the sound of years in a hierarchical institution: the sound of principles, lawyers, police officers, and judges in his voice. Syd forced himself to answer the way the man wanted.

"Yes," he said and walked to the elevator.

The elevator man had a face that reminded Syd of stucco walls.

"501C" Syd said to him.

Under the storm of several pints of vodka Jennifer's eyes wobbled in their sockets. The music had begun to sound good to her so she knew she was truly drunk. One of her marks had left with a pudgy girl some time ago. She didn't know how long ago. The stool under her had begun to feel like its legs were made out of rubber.

It's time, she thought.

The blonde kid looked both closer to her and more drunk than the brunette so she decided to try him first. She wasn't feeling especially lucky.

The blonde boy danced in the small dance floor in the center of the bar. Earlier the ten foot square space had been a crowded orgiastic mix of sweat, alcohol, and groping dry humping disguised as dancing. Jennifer had watched from her stool as the people had filtered off from the dance floor. The boy was by himself now, dancing in a haze of chemicals or alcohol.

Or both, she thought.

A man of thirty had bought her several drinks before moving on to a more drunk and mentally impressionable female. Jennifer had drunk more vodka under his influence and money than she normally did before hitting a mark.



The club had begun to empty; the young people had either tired or found someone to stay up with in more private locations.

She scanned the room. Three girls sat in the far corner, giggling and taking turns tongue kissing each other. Jennifer tried to burn their location into her mind in case neither of her male marks worked out; they were obviously so high on MDCA that picking their pockets would be simple.

But no one has much money in their pockets in a bar this close to closing, Jennifer thought. Try the marks first. Before they leave.

Under the swinging lights cutting lines in the fog machine haze the blonde boy danced. He looked eighteen or nineteen to Jennifer. His motions were spastic. His arms, painted a bright blue color, bobbed and waved, giving the appearance of a blue iridescent cylinder wrapping around his upper body.

He stumbled and caught his balance four times in the span of time it took Jennifer to walk to him.

He stopped moving and looked at her. His pupils were spread across his eyes like someone had painted the whites black.

Jennifer decided to be direct with him.

"Would you like to have sex with me?" she said. "I'm not a prostitute."

The boy nodded, and Jennifer took his hand. She wondered if he would be able to lead her back to wherever he slept.

He's really fucking lazed, she thought.

Syd opened the door inside the agency building on his new mate's dormitory. He'd knocked several times and gotten no answer.

Inside he saw a desk, a bed, and a lamp. There was no carpet or faux-wood, just brushed metal. It lacked anything soft, comforting, and the room didn't have a television. There was nothing Syd could see which could give him clues about his new wife's personality.

Syd wondered if she would miss the place.

He glanced around the room, becoming nervous that he'd gone into the wrong one. The muscles in his lower back began to clench.

She should be here, he thought, and stepped backwards to read the numbers above the doorframe.

His backwards step led into a body: a softness and a verbal curse struck his back. He fell forward, catching his balance inside the room.

"Shit," he said.

He turned around, newly conscious of the sound his hard rubber soles made on the brushed metal floor.

A girl stood in the hallway looking at him with an eyebrow raised and rubbing her elbow. She wore a small plaid skirt and a plain white shirt.

"Shit," Syd said again, throwing his hands against his thighs in a symbol of exasperation, "I was checking the door number."

The girl had soft skin, red hair, and looked his age.

She smiled a small smile and continued to rub her arm.

This was a bad idea, Syd thought.

"Did I hurt you?" he said, stepping forward, "I'm Syd. Has anyone told you about me?"

She nodded.

"I'm Somnam. I was in the shower."

She held out her hand and they shook.

"They woke me and told me I was getting leached out," she said, and smiled again. "You normally up this late?"

Syd smiled but did not respond. He couldn't tell if she was disappointed or not.

Her eyes caught his attention. They were yellow, with streaks of blue and green running to the whites.

"I don't like my name," she said, "they name us from a directory here. It's all random."

Syd nodded. He didn't know what to say.

"Well," he said after deliberation, "are you ready to go? Do you have to pack or anything?"

Somnam laughed. "I don't own anything. This is a prison."

Syd nodded.

She moved forward, rubbing her body against his and placing an arm around his lower back. She pulled him close but kept her face at a distance. Her eyes were bright and neon.

"I'm ready to leave with you," she said.

This is weird, Syd thought.

His mouth tasted like hangover acid.

She's gorgeous, he thought.

He felt guilty and displaced, like he was in an anxious dream.

The hallway was painted brown, with a dull blue high traffic carpet. Somnam slid her hand down his arm and took his hand. She pulled him down the hallway, away from the elevator he'd arrived on.

"Can you take me out to eat somewhere?" she said as they rounded a corner. Syd didn't see anyone else awake, but assumed it was because of the hour.

His eyes searched the halls; he wanted to know if all the teles had to wear uniforms like Somnam's, or just the ones who were married.

"Sure," he said, "where do you want to go?"

Somnam laughed and Syd felt an urge to touch the back of her neck as she led him. It was an animal feeling; he felt aroused by her presence and saddened at the realization.

"I haven't been outside these hallways in fourteen years," she said.

"I want to say it when we get to the elevator" Somnam said as they came to another corner in the long string of metal doors.

You want to say what? Syd thought, but kept silent. He planned to do so until they were outside. Being in the building made him feel shaky and nervous.

Around the corner was a different elevator than Syd had used to reach the dorm. A man stood in front of it, armed with a revolver. Syd could see the man was strong, and he had a face like a bar fight junky.

"Well, well, a midnight requisition," the man said when they neared him. "I have to say, waking me up to let this one out is a double punishment. I won't be able to watch her walk to class anymore."

Syd watched the man's eyes run up and down Somnam. He began to feel more like a pervert, and felt his anger rise towards the man.

Why, he thought, did they make her wear that little uniform?

"The metro," Somnam said, her voice stronger and louder than the one she'd used on Syd.

The man nodded and punched a string of numbers into a keypad next to the elevator. The door opened. The man stood in the way, the gun still in his hand.

This is like meeting a prostitute, Syd thought. This is wrong. This was a bad idea.

He pictured Somnam sleeping next to him and smiled. He felt sick to his stomach in response.

Fucking uppers, Syd thought. My mind is moving to fast.

"Card?" the man said.

Somnam pulled a card out of the waistband of her skirt. She gave it to the man. She took of a small black band ring and handed it to the man. He gave her a shiny one in return and she put it on.

Fucking nice wedding band, Syd thought.

The guard stepped aside and they got into the elevator.

"You sir," the man said as the door closed, "are a very lucky man."

Syd felt terrible. He wanted to tell the girl to go back to her dorm and wait for someone else. He looked at her and saw she was looking at him.

He gathered his strength to tell her.

"He always talks like that when girls get leeches out," Somnam said, "don't feel bad. You made him get out of bed and come down here to let me out."

Syd didn't like the word she'd used twice, "leeches out." It made him feel worse.

I'm a fucking sexual predator, he thought.

"Listen," Syd said, looking at the floor, "this was a bad idea. You should go back."

She threw herself into him, embraced him. She felt warm against

him.

"I'm a virgin," she said into his neck. He felt her breath on his skin. "You can do anything you want to me and keep me. You can deflower me."

Syd pushed her off from him. The elevator felt small and hot.

"Coming here was wrong of me," he said.

He saw Somnam begin to cry. Her eyes glowed like cat eyes under the elevator lighting. Saline streamed past the corners of her mouth onto her thin white shirt.

"You don't think I'm pretty?" she said in a warble.

"I think you're very pretty," he said. He knew his voice sounded small and forced.

But you're not crying because you want me to think you're pretty, he thought.

He wanted to say it, but couldn't.

"I don't care what you are," she said, rubbing her eyes and straightening her back. I don't want to go back. I just got out. I don't know anything about you, but you can't be worse than this place. Please give me a chance."

Syd looked at the elevator floor for the second time.

This elevator takes forever, he thought.

He wished that he'd never entered the agency building.

The elevator doors opened.

Somnam took his hand and pulled him out of the elevator. He noticed how smooth and pale her legs looked under the bright lobby lights of the first floor.

They walked past another guard to the outside. Somnam took off the ring and threw it against the building. Syd heard it tink against the wall and watched it fall into the few feet of manicured lawn before the city street.

He looked at Somnam in the night air and knew he desired her. He felt bad.

The lights inside the dorm room spun in green and red circles in

time to the music which dripped out of the boy's quadrasonic speakers. Skulls, birds, and tree leaves vortexed through the air, and someone was inside the walls, fighting to escape the liquid brick surface. On the bed, Jennifer struggled to arouse the boy student with her hand while she kissed him. She knew he was too high to fall asleep right away.

The restaurant was not a cheap one, but with the profit from his foc sales Syd didn't mind. It was the best place he knew of that was open this late at night. The industrial workers wouldn't even be getting out of bed for a few hours.

He watched Somnam. She had been looking all over the restaurant since arriving, and not at Syd. Syd did not mind. He did not like making eye contact with her.

He noticed that some of the men in the restaurant were glancing at her when they could. Her uniform was small. Syd wondered if she was cold.

I'm a fucking pervert, he thought.

The restaurant was supposed to look like a forest lodge from the 19<sup>Th</sup> century. The walls were made of artificial wood logs, with bark and knots in random configurations. The tables had the appearance of a dark wood, and the chairs resembled wickerwork.

Syd didn't know how close they were to realistic. He'd only seen wickerwork on TV.

And I don't care anyway, he thought.

The clientele was mostly young people fresh out of the bars or high on foc. The beer in the restaurant was supposed to be authentic to the time period; Syd had ordered water. Somnam had followed his example.

The waitress brought the water over. It was in thin metal cups. Somnam took hers into her hand and felt its surface with her thumb.

"This is amazing, Syd," she said, "I've never been waited on before. Look at this place."

She smiled and Syd felt like smiling also.

Watch it, he thought, she just likes the outdoors. Not you.  
He took a drink from the water cup. It cooled his throat but his face remained hot.

I never pictured it being like this, he thought.

In the booth behind him Syd heard a couple talking. The man said the woman when she decided to adopt Kenna as a deity.

"When did you find out you were telepathic?" Syd said.

Somnam looked at him and stopped smiling.

"I'm a birther. The doctors knew when I was still in the womb, and I got sent to the agency at birth."

Syd took another drink. When he set the cup down he nearly dropped it.

"I thought you said you'd been outside twelve years ago?"

Somnam nodded. "They let you go on guarded walks until you're eleven. They take you in deep metal busses to The Old City where there are no cars or people and you can walk under the sky for an hour. If you cut and run, you get shot in the back. I saw a boy go down when I was nine."

Syd didn't know what she meant by The Old City, but assumed she meant the city outside of the newer Steeple City walls, where people had lived before mass disease lowered populations everywhere.

She slowly rotated her cup in circles on the dark wood table with both hands, looking at the surface of the water.

"The busses were charged so you couldn't telepathically bother anyone on the outside," she said quietly into her glass of water.

Syd regretted the topic.

"How can doctors tell if you're telepathic?"

"I was a strong case. I was unlucky. An anti-telepath police raid was going on at the time, and I projected onto one of theirs."

Syd nodded. He'd heard of the roaming troops of police with captured teles. They'd pay weak willed telepaths extravagant amounts and put them in high class hotel rooms.

Or that's the rumor on the street, anyway, Syd thought.

It seemed to him that there was nothing else to talk about. He looked at Somnam. She seemed to be looking at something behind Syd, just above his shoulder.

He knew there was nothing behind him but the faux-wood of the booth they sat in.

"So what do you do for money?" Somnam said.

Syd looked her in the face.

"Do you know what a sleeper is?"

Jennifer lay next to the sleeping University boy. He'd been asleep for several minutes; the music still pounded out of his computer's music system. She laid facing away from him. One of his arms was around her, cupping a breast.

The music hurt in her head. It shook her teeth. She needed a drink.

She held her breath and lifted the boy's arm carefully. He did not stir. She slid herself onto the floor and stood up. He appeared to be sleeping soundly.

She put her clothes on. As she began to search, a young girl walked into the dorm room through the closed door. The girl resembled Jennifer.

Except in the details, Jennifer thought, and they're some big fucking details.

The girl's eyes weren't blue and bright like Jennifer's; they were solid milk white, pupil-less polished marbles above her cheeks. She wore a pale blue dress. The flesh of her neck sagged onto the collar, white as paper and with a similar texture appearance. It bunched in flaps on her wrists and ankles. Fluid dripped off the girl's black hair onto the brushed metal floor.

Jennifer could hear the drops splating noises over the music.

The girl stepped forward and held a pen like cylinder out to Jennifer.

Jennifer saw that the girl's eyes were spinning in their sockets fast enough to make them appear solid.

A strong smell of smoke and ammonia leached into the room.



"Want a hit?" the girl said. She had Jennifer's voice.

Jennifer turned around and reached under the boy's bed for her shoes. She sat on the floor and began to tie her sneakers up. The girl stood in the center of the room, and began to pirouette. Jennifer ignored her; whatever the girl's legs looked like under the dress, Jennifer had no desire to see them.

Behind her on the bed she could hear the boy mumbling in his sleep and she began to hurry.

Water flushed into the dormitory and soaked the few inches of Jennifer closest to the floor. The water came up out of the floor with lily pads and an earthy smell. She felt the water slip up past her asshole and the cold was unpleasant.

She stood up and began to look through the boy's drawers. She could hear the girl, or someone, sloshing in the water behind her. In one drawer she found a bottle of whiskey. She picked up his wet pants from the floor and took his little brown wallet from the back pocket. In a corner she saw a backpack crumpled on the floor; she put both the whiskey and soaked wallet inside the bag and left the room.

Now that kid had fucked up dreams, she thought.

The dorm hallway was carpeted. As she walked by one door, the carpet turned into grass and the hallways expanded into a field of soft green blades. Children ran with Frisbees, throwing them at garbage cans. Jennifer stretched her left hand out and felt for the wall. She used its invisible existence to guide her until the hallway faded back in again.

She decided to risk a drink and stopped to take a long drink from the bottle of whiskey in the hallway.

No one bothered her. She heard no alarm.

She stood waiting for the drink to take hold of her brain, breathing quietly in case anyone moved or awoke on the floor. She knew that no student was supposed to be in the hallways after dark. The student had used a ceramic rope ladder to get into his room; he

pressed conduction card in his wallet and it lowered from his window. Most of the University kids she had slept with used a make of rope ladder to get in and out of their rooms at night. She sipped her vodka and remembered one occasion; the mark had lived on the thirtieth floor and they were both drunk. She'd been wearing a skirt and the wind had whipped up the side of the building. She climbed the distance ass in the wind, trying to concentrate on not falling off.

She tried not to laugh at the memory. After an estimated ten minutes, when the back of her head began to tingle, she walked on.

No more visions of other people's thoughts and dreams troubled her as she made her way out of the building.

Outside she walked quickly knowing a girl her age, just too old to look like college age but with a backpack, would be suspicious to the mayor's police at four in the morning.

I got that kid to sleep, she thought. I wonder if he's ever slept before.

She decided her probably never had and laughed. She considered the possibility he'd find his dreams more psychedelic than his drugs and smiled again.

She walked to her apartment building through the silent oil scented city streets.

Her landlord was a thin man from South America, near the Gulf of Mexico, where a single large government was the only government. No city leaders with any power were part of the system. He'd moved to America but got in trouble for having foc. It was still legal in his country and as he'd told Jennifer one night he hadn't understood. But he had enough money saved to buy a building in one of the outer circles and outfit it with utilities. People with records could buy property in the outer area of the city.

He was awake and outside when Jennifer approached the building on the sidewalk.

He's always fucking awake, she thought. Until I get back home.

The landlord, Jacob, wore nothing but black pants and a white t-

shirt everyday. He leaned backwards with his hands pressed in his lower back. Jennifer could see his ribs through the shirt and heard his back pop.

"Hey, hey you, Jenny," he said in his raspy voice when she neared. He was the only one that called her Jenny. "You have the rent? Or we going to go at it? Huh?"

She fished in the backpack and handed him fifty dollars out of the boy's wallet.

He gyrated his hips lightly at her.

"I still remember," he said.

Jennifer nodded, keeping her composure. She was drunk, and he always reminded her.

One day, Jennifer ran out of alcohol. She'd thought she had another bottle, enough to last her until the nighttime, underneath the coiled blankets on her bed, but when she looked for it, it wasn't there. It was daytime outside, and she knew going out in the daytime, sober, with people everywhere would only be a confusing meshing of visions.

Jennifer lived in the basement. On the first floor lived a little girl who was insane. For hours Jennifer had tolerated visions of nails coming out of the walls, the feeling that something small, furry, and possessing eyes on stalks was living in her throat, and the sounds of wailing small children.

When she could no longer stand it she went to Jacob, stripping naked in his foyer before ringing the doorbell. She managed to say "I don't have the rent money for this month" even though she did, and Jacob took over, probably thinking her slow response a result of drunkenness. He got really warmed up and visions of other women and sexual fantasies filled her mind. Jacob's brain was closer and more focused than the little girl's or anyone else's in the roughly twenty foot radius her brain absorbed when he was fucking her, so she saw only his thoughts. As soon as she saw nothing but black and felt his spasms beneath her, she said if he had a drink. She drank enough to make it to the store and buy more alcohol. Jacob never

stopped reminding her.

The basement room seemed to insulate her from most people's thoughts. The little girl had left weeks ago, and Jennifer assumed her tormented images had been deeper and more intense than most of the other tenants in her range, because if she sobered up entirely she still only saw slight images and heard faint sounds.

She'd never been able to afford a television. She did frequently buy chalk from the twenty four hour gas station on the way back from the bars and sex, to draw murals on her walls when she could not sleep.

She did not regret not having a television. She regretted not having the internet. Once a man on the street had stopped her, and offered her an illegal set of head gear. The internet had been illegal for generations, but ran widespread in a worldwide underground community. She'd read about it in Newsweek.

It was rumored that telepaths used the internet freely, and that no one could tell whether you were or were not telepathic on the internet. But she'd been scared. She knew she had remained free because she did not project thoughts, but an arrest would mean a required screening at the police office. A screening would mean a trip to the agency. Under pressure to decided quickly she had turned the man down.

Sitting in a blue easy chair she'd scavenged from an alley, she looked drunkenly on the chalk mural on the wall across from her.

A sun hung over a landscape of the city, with its shiny metal and enamel buildings reflecting the sunlight. The sun itself had two long arms, with human hands at the ends, holding pocket watches. One pocket watch had swung into a building like a wrecking ball. The lower right hand side, where the Steeple River ran stained green from the Spaires Machine waste should have been if the city was to be accurate was empty. She decided to draw a beach, with rocks in the shape of the internet head gear the man had offered her from inside of his bright turquoise trench coat. She knelt and began to apply the background colors, trying not to think of the girl with the

spinning eyes from the drugged dream of the college boy.

"I've been in The Agency, not A Special Needs School," Somnam said.

Syd sat back in his chair. He curled his fingers around the cool tin water cup and rotated it with his hand.

"The guy told me you wouldn't. Your school didn't teach that stuff."

He looked in her eyes. The yellow intrigued him, streaks tracing out from the black center of her pupil, and they opened wider when she smiled and replied.

"I know many things they don't teach at school."

Syd felt the surface of his face heat up and knew he was turning red. He wanted her sexually, badly. Taking her into the bathroom and pounding his body against hers, without taking her clothes off first, had flashed in his mind four times. He felt guilt. He knew he'd basically picked her up as a sex slave, willing only because she was freed from one prison. He felt bad, but he did not want to send her back.

"I wasn't being dirty," she said. Syd turned redder. She lowered her voice. "Stop blushing, they teach us all about fucking in class at The Agency. Then they sell us like cars to the people who come in. We all know how it works. We all know what sleepers are."

She sat back and folded her arms under her breasts, smiling. Syd could not tell if she was playing a part.

He leaned forward. "I sell foc. If you stay with me, you'll have to sleep."

She uncrossed her arms and leaned forward over the hardwood table. He could smell her, flowers and tea. Her streaked eyes looked all over the room.

"What's it like?" she whispered.

"You have to concentrate. You can't think of stressful things. You slip into it like a warm glove, and it's wonderful. You see things. People you haven't seen in years, impossible things." he whispered

back.

"Are you an illegal?" she whispered.

"Smile like we're flirting," Syd said, and she did, "No. I pay a doctor with foc, he writes up fake dream deprivation therapy reports. I have a machine for show."

He forced himself to smile a small smile, like she was sharing secrets with him or talking dirty. He thought her tone sounded like intrigue, filled with excitement.

"What if I don't like sleeping?"

"You won't be able to live with me."

Syd did not know any dream deprivation therapists who would actually treat un-caught criminals using restoration machines. To use a restoration machine and not see a therapist was to go insane; Syd had seen it. To go to a legitimate therapist as a criminal was to be arrested; Somnam would have to be honest with a therapist and tell him everything to keep her mind together. He decided if she didn't like sleeping that he would not divorce her or send her back. She could get her own apartment.

"I've been an outcast my whole life," she said. She smiled.

Syd nodded. He felt his stomach churn. Acid was building up. The foc was beginning to wear off, and he was becoming hungry without the chemical tricking his brain into false contentment. He wished the food would arrive.

"The insta-sleep works. You could use it tonight."

"I want to sleep with you," she said, no longer whispering.

Around the table Syd felt the noise level go down. People who had been in conversation stopped and snuck glances; Syd could see them doing it. He was aware of her small skirt again and felt the familiar guilt.

She laughed. He realized she was toying with him and felt anger for a second, but she was leaning forward on her elbows, smiling at him, and he did not feel malice from her. It was three in the morning anyway, he reminded himself; no one out at three AM is a good city

citizen.

"You ever drink beer before?" Syd said.

"No alcohol, ever," she said in a low voice that reminded Syd of small children swearing.

He pressed the button on the table that paged the waitress and when she came over he ordered two ale pints.

"The beer's supposed to be period authentic," he said.

The waitress brought the beer back and set it on the table before them. Somnam looked at it, seemed to Syd to be watching the bubbles rise up the sides of the glass.

He took a drink of it, felt the bitter fullness in his mouth before swallowing it. Somnam took a big drink.

"This tastes like shit," she said.

Syd laughed. He felt more relaxed already.

"You'll get used to it."

She took a longer drink and set the glass down. It was half empty.

"Lowers inhibition and causes you to tell secrets," she said in a monotone. "Also known to cause deterioration of the internal organs and disease in people who are in areas without Spaires Machines."

Syd laughed. He learned the same lines in his school, and in his college. He told her.

She told him a story about several boys that had figured out how to make alcohol from raisins and bread yeast in the basement of The Agency, and had been caught drunkenly "shagging" each other. She finished her second beer.

Syd explained how his friend, named Syd, had become a foc dealer after University.

The food came and they ate and drank more. They both laughed openly, and Syd began to wish that he was sitting next to her in a booth, not across from her at a table.

When the food was done, Somnam stood up. Syd felt drunk and could tell that Somnam was drunk also.

"I have to go to the bathroom," she said. "When I go home with you,

turn on your spaires machine. If I puke all over you, it won't be very sexy."

Earlier Syd had told her that he didn't use his spaires-machine very often, because the concept of microscopic warriors coursing through his body killing disease disturbed him. She had thrown a napkin at him and said she was dependant on the tiny soldiers.

"I will," he said. He felt good.

Jennifer finished painting the beach scene and sat back down in her huge faded blue easy chair. The cramped muscles in her back began to release, and she poured herself a glass of vodka from the end table on her right. She enjoyed the silence. Her ears still rang with the reminder of the nightclub.

She saw something move in the chalk drawing. She took a long drink of the vodka. Involuntary tears ran down her cheeks from the alcohol burn. She felt it sit in her stomach and leaned back. After counting to one hundred, she looked at the mural again.

The vodka made the edges blurry. Something still moved in the water portion of her drawing, the blue water squirmed and teamed. It looked like waves to her.

She wondered if the mayor's police were coming for her. If they were just outside, and this was the result of some test for telepaths.

She checked her door; it opened.

The mural stopped moving. Her breathing began to slow. She locked the door and sat back down. A hiss began behind her.

Her bed was breathing. The sheets rose and fell as if a very large bellows. At the top, a basketball sized sphere began to rise out of the pulsating grey bedclothes.

The bed stopped breathing. Hands, made of the same grey patchwork as her comforter, appeared out of the mattress. A man of bedclothes pulled himself out of her bed.

The man had sharp features unlike the soft folds of a blanket, as if the grey patchwork had been tattooed over his face and clothes. He wore a long coat, and a fedora.



From the fedora, what looked to Jennifer like hundreds of pieces of thread with worms tied to the ends dangled. The worms squirmed as if dying, forming a twisting halo floating around the man's neck.

He held his hands out to Jennifer and his mouth moved.

Fuck, thought Jennifer.

She reached for her vodka bottle. She did not take her eyes off from the man.

I'm so drunk, she thought.

She drank more.

"Jennifer," the man said in a quiet voice, "Jennifer we must talk."

He stepped down from the mattress, his entire person still composed of bedclothes. In his right hand he held out a grey box to her.

"Jennifer, we have to talk," he said.

The box in his hand exploded in a rainbow flash. Squirming worm shapes of all colors coated the walls, floor, and Jennifer could feel them crawling maddening gyrations against her skin and in her hair.

"This is not working," the man said, "please sit, we must talk."

Jennifer ran out of her room and shut the door behind her. Her breath tore into her lungs and she sprinted up stairs with ache in her legs.

She put her weight against Jacob's door and pounded her closed fist against it. She could feel the colored maggot things in her hair still and she punched the door with the side of her closed fist, kicked it with socked feet.

The door opened. She did not perceive much of what happened. The vodka slowed her senses into a television haze. She watched Jacob's surprised eyes shine, the rise of his hairless chest and belly, his member growing to firmness under her hand.

She pumped him inside of her and waited for the things which men visualized when fucking her; past girlfriends, porn stars, girls from life, and sometimes stranger things and people. She waited to stop feeling the worms that squirmed in her hair and against her arms.

Her hips slammed against him, her pelvis bone screamed in her brain. Jacob's face was a mass of squirming colored lines, a fountain that came from his mouth and covered him in an upwelling mass. They began to crawl downward, onto his chest, towards her.

Come on you motherfucker, she thought, and placed his hands on her breasts.

She heard him breathing heavily and making soft grunt sounds under her. His penis filled her, and emptied, and filled her in fast successions.

A fedora the shade of his black hair with scores of hooked colored worms grew out of his head.

Jennifer screamed so hard her throat ached and her voice cracked. She stopped moving, the worms on his stomach had almost reached her. She jumped from him, he screamed in pain as he was ripped from inside her at an angle.

She pulled her pants on before running from his room, buttoning them on the stairwell, and pulling her shirt over her chest just before reaching the street, barefoot. The streetlights glared yellow at her, and as she ran past she thought she saw colored worms squirming in them. She moved too quickly to be sure but the image stayed strong in her mind as she ran under more yellow lights.

The streets were empty, the pavement stung her bare feet. She ran on.

After several blocks she slowed. Her lungs felt as though they were filled with acid. Bile crept up her throat, into her mouth and nose.

In the far distance she heard a battery car, its crunching rubber tires louder than the silent faces of outer arc buildings. One out of twenty houses had the stale blue glow of inhabitation. She wondered how many apartments bore sleepers, resting in the darkness. In the distance she could see the dim light of the sun almost rising.

After catching her breath, she felt in her back pocket for money, and found some. She did not want to go back to her apartment to the man and worms who had withstood vodka. No one, not even her old

friends, had ever spoke of a thought so focused it could penetrate drunkenness.

Her stomach churned for food.

She knew a liquor store nearby and spent the rest of her money on vodka.

In front of a towering enamel office building she sat on a bench. The bottle had green spaires-machine dust on it, and she brushed it off.

Must have poor ventilation, she thought.

The vodka burned in her throat and stomach.

She drew her pants down over her feet. She slept after several drinks, hoping any mayor's police that drove by would think she was waiting for the morning bus.

When she woke up her face felt hot and sunburnt. She rubbed her cheek and felt the sting. Her head hurt and her mouth had the bitter taste of uncleanness and cheap vodka. She spat out a green paste of Spaires-Machine dust. The Spaires-Machine powder was a centimeter deep.

She took a long drink from her bottle and looked at the city around her for rainbow colored worms, although she expected to see none. The sky scrapers, tall enamel castles of business, showed no signs of worms. The few people who walked by her, usually around her in unnecessarily large semi-circles, did not either. The cars, pavement, and everything else her eyes found showed nothing that scared her.

She knew it was before six in the morning if the sweepers had not come to clean up the expulsion mess. The workmen and workwoman trotted through the heavy powder in a steady stream around her.

It's too fucking early to be on your way to work, she thought.

She watched them more before getting up. The business man she stepped in front of hurried around her, his eyes stretched in fear.

The powder did not get kicked higher than halfway up anyone's shins.

She remembered walking through it, staying up until three when

she was a street child to watch the Spaires-Machine expulsion. At eleven years old, it had been a magical time for her, a kind of green snowfall that made everything beautiful. She would dance with her friend Tamar in the falling green powder.

At three o'clock, every fan in every habituated Spaires-Machine using household automatically kicked on, driving out the accumulated microscopic waste, in tiny bundled sand like grains. Ninety percent of the households used Spaires Machines. In rich areas every window from the towering buildings would suddenly shine forth green powder, which would fall about Jennifer on the street in a tinkling shine. It would coat her skin.

By twelve she stopped staying in the streets themselves after the expulsion. She had a long scar on her calf from falling asleep to close to the street after staying up for an expulsion. Men drove special vacuum trucks called sweepers which would pick up all the powder at six o'clock in the morning. Some would swerve around people sleeping in the streets, some would not.

Jennifer drank more on the walk back to her apartment, confident that if she drank enough, no vision would penetrate her senses, and she could sleep until the sun went down.

Syd dozed with the pale shoulder of Somnam catching the light from the window.

He woke up an hour prior and lay watching her breathing. He thought the arm that was under him was asleep; he could not feel anything in it.

He touched her shoulder. It was soft to him.

In his mind he saw himself with her last night. They had had sex, slow deliberate at first, and then crescendoing. It seemed beautiful to him.

He did not feel like a rapist or pervert any longer. The feeling had left him in the restaurant.

She flirted with me, he thought.

The pressure on his arm became too much for him to continue to lie

on it. A capillary itch had combined with the dull ache.

He slid carefully out of bed, trying not to shake the mattress.

She turned to him, and her red hair fell into the sunlight. Her mouth moved, and she pulled more of the white blanket over her shoulders and neck. Syd saw that her eyes never opened.

A block away a group of small children, all looked under eleven to Syd, hawked flowers to passerbys. They claimed to scavenge them under bridges and in vacant lots. He'd passed them several times before. He bought a bunch of purple flowers, many pedaled, and returned to his apartment.

He slipped the door open. Somnam still slept, lying facing away from the door, most of her pale body hidden under tangled blankets.

Syd felt anxiety and happiness in his stomach.

This is happening, he thought.

He put the flowers in a drinking glass and got his foc supplies out.

Syd enjoyed the making of foc, thinking of it as a kind of ritual. He boiled some water in a pot and dumped six doses of foc into the steaming liquid. After a few minutes, he poured the brown liquid through a t-shirt he kept under the sink, filtering it into a bowl. If the police ever came, he knew, the t-shirt alone could lead to a small jail fine. He sat down with a cup of the hot liquid and waited for it to cool enough to drink.

On most afternoons, he would bleach the shirt in the sink; stirring it with the burning smell making his eyes water until it was nearly white again and resembled only a cleaning rag. He did not feel like it today.

Out of his right eye he detected movement, and turned to see Somnam crawling out of bed with the sun behind her in the window. She was naked, and her lithe body distracted him to staring. He wondered if The Agency purposely had kept her thin and decided they probably had, for many reasons.

She pulled her uniform skirt back on and he shook his head. Some of the guilt came back. He turned and stared into his foc.

"Did any packages come yet?" Somnam said, and he felt better.

The tone of her voice was not the tone of one who is in emotional pain.

"No," he said. He sipped the foc. It was still too hot, and he struggled with tears in his eyes to swallow it rather than spit the liquid all over the table in front of her. She sat down opposite him.

That's the first time anyone has ever sat in that chair, he thought and laughed. He told her.

Somnam rested her elbows on the plastic table and rubbed her gold flecked eyes with her knuckles.

"How long will I feel like this?" she said.

Syd wondered if she had liked sleeping, and if she had liked the sex that had come before it. He thought she had liked the sex. He reassured himself that she had.

"It depends," he said, "on the amount of sleep you've had, and if you slept the same time you normally sleep. Alcohol fucks with it some."

He took a sip of foc. "You've never slept. You'll feel strange for a week, probably."

She yawned, arching her back.

"This is nice," she said, in breathy stretching tones. She stopped stretching. "I think I like sleeping."

"I got those flowers for you," Syd said, looking at the purple plants cut, standing in the drinking glass. Somnam smiled and stroked a petal.

"This is kind of awkward, isn't it?" she said.

He remembered his time at University.

The morning after always is, Syd thought, except on the TV.

The guilt came back to him, and he forced his hand to steady while he drank the rest of his foc.

You've become involved with an addict, he thought.

Syd prepared a speech he had thought of in the early hours of the morning, half in sleep, while she lay next to him. The idea of the speech had made him feel better, so that he felt good before getting up.

"I was thinking, this morning I mean," he said, "that if we don't work out or if you don't like me, we can just go our separate ways but stay married legally. Then you don't have to go back."

Syd knew that this meant that he could not marry again, but this felt just to him. The small sacrifice seemed a fitting punishment for using The Agency to get sex from a beautiful girl.

Syd waited for Somnam to leave.

She smiled at him.

"How about you come over here and kiss me then?" she said.

He did so.

They lay on his bed, with Somnam's arm resting on Syd's chest. Her skirt was a crumpled belt around her waist.

That was animal, Syd thought. He reminded himself that she his age and had never been allowed sex before, except whatever she'd been able to sneak in The Agency. He reminded himself not to feel too special, that she'd have flailed against whoever adopted her.

She ran her finger over his chest. He did not know how to feel.

Someone knocked on the door. The sudden noise made them both jump. The person knocked again. Syd braced himself for the alarm and locking of his door, but then reminded himself The Mayor's police wouldn't knock, then lock him down.

He got up to put some pants on. "Just a second," Syd yelled. He pulled out his box of foc but left the lid closed. It looked like a clothing trunk.

A hard voice answered from outside the door. "Package for Somnam Shur. I'm leaving it out here."

"Fine," Syd said, and heard something being dropped outside his door. He opened the door; the package was four feet by four feet but light. He pulled it inside and shut the door.

"Just my clothes from The Agency," Somnam said. "They send out standard city relief issue clothes after marriage."

Syd made some eggs while Somnam pulled the clothes out. Most were black or gray, and huge. The clothes of the street dwellers and

poorest of the outer arc. She put on a large grey summer weight shirt and black pants that focowed on her legs like flags when she moved.

"At least I don't look like a whore anymore," she said, touching Syd while he stirred the cooking breakfast.

He wanted to ask if they wore the "whore" clothes all the time they were in The Agency, or if they wore them only after they got notice that they were leaving. He did not.

That ate. Syd had more foc. After the meal Somnam set her fork down and looked at Syd.

"I've drank," she said, "I've had sex with a man, I've slept, I want more. I'm out of the dark hallways and now I want to do everything they kept me from. Give me some foc. Do you have an internet connection? Show me everything," she said. She tapped her fork on her plate.

Syd poured her a dose of foc and told her he had no internet connection.

"I don't have anything else," he said, "but the streets and twisted people."

She pressed him to show her some people. Syd thought that she had a kind of fascination with the morbid at first, but then decided that she only wanted to see that which had been kept from her.

He knew a place, a place where white collar people who stopped seeing dream deprivation therapists but did not start sleeping went. He thought of them as the walking dead, although they did not walk much. He'd passed the bar several times, but never seen anyone go in or out. He went in once to see what it was, and discovered the bar's secret.

They took a train.

The bar was called Champs. Syd wondered if the irony was set in place by the current owners, or if they had purchased it and not changed the name when they turned it into a haven for the wealthy sleep deprivation therapy deprived. Somnam took Syd's hand when they broke off from the mostly deserted sidewalk and headed



towards the door, set some ten feet from the road. The building itself was nondescript; thirty stories, enamel architecture square and basic like the rest of the outer rim of the city. The bar was on the ground floor; the bright yellow neon sign was attached to the outside of the windows of the second floor.

Syd could feel her hand shake. He couldn't tell if it was from the focus or if she was scared.

This people are insane, but in shambles, he thought.

They stood in the doorway. The bar was very dark; Syd had to struggle to see where the bar was. The windows were covered with some kind of tint that did not allow the afternoon sun in. The only illumination was LED lights that glowed on the stools and chairs inside. It smelled like a basement, or unused attic. The score of people inside murmured to each other.

Somnam leaned into Syd's ear.

"Smells like shit," she said.

"They never leave," he whispered.

Syd knew what went on inside. He'd said Plow, his focus supplier about it. He didn't want to tell her about it in the doorway of the bar, risking offending one of the more lucid therapy deprived patrons. Most of them had been white collar. They made money by tricking people and the city, getting illegal money. Because of this they couldn't go to their therapists, or else continued to go to their therapists but hid information about their lives. Some pride or other cause kept them from sleeping. The city looks the other way, Plow had explained, because the three or four month death in Champs was worse than a long life in jail. Cheaper for the city also.

He looked around for the second time in his life, and agreed with Plow. It looked worse than jail.

One man must have been in the bar for at least a month. Syd knew his face; a cop named Robert. The shirt he wore could have been any color once, but now it was brown. It had holes in it, and his hair was matted into large flat platforms, like a pile of dead leaves. One of his

pant legs had been torn off above the knee at some point. Syd couldn't imagine how.

He felt Somnam dig her fingernails into his arm.

Syd looked at her and saw she was watching two people: A young man and woman sitting at the bar, talking in what appeared to be an animated conversation. They sipped liquor of a brown sort from beer glasses.

Syd could hear them; they were louder than the others.

"He's a clever catcher, that captain," said the man.

"Don't jolter, please, don't sadden," the woman said.

"I need a sponsor, a prankster, a ranger, a foreman."

"You snooper," the woman said, and they both laughed for seconds. "A fortune demon, ah?"

Robert began to babble as soon as they quieted down, and his voice rose over the dull wash of the rest of the patrons.

"My son liked the disco, the little wino, dancing in his gogos, snorting blow, dad I'm moving to San Francisco!"

"Hey, you two," came a shout from the bartender behind the bar. He stood tall, a pockmarked face above the sloping mildewy shoulders of the patrons "you two want a drink or you going to stand around all day."

Syd realized they were still standing in the doorway, and obviously did not belong in Champs. He squeezed Somnam's hand.

"I think we'll move along," he said.

They left back to the street.

Somnam breathed the outside air deeply and looked upwards at the sky. Syd leaned backwards and tried to crack his back.

After a few blocks of walking, Syd told her what Plow had told him about Champs.

She held his hand, and it was sweaty. Syd decided it was not from the foc.

"How do you think they get there?" Somnam said, as they walked behind a small blonde child in sneakers.

"I don't know."

They overtook the child and continued on the sidewalk. Syd's hand began to hurt; Somnam had been holding it tightly since she took it. He did not say anything.

"Have you seen enough of the worst of the city?" Syd said, thinking that he knew the answer.

"No," she said, "I need to understand."

When they got back to the apartment there was a message from Syd's Mayor's Police brother David, inviting them to dinner.

Somnam took him to bed and although he was not very aroused her held her while she shook against anyway, glad for the life and forgetfulness. They both drank more foc after.

Jennifer sat in her apartment, in her chair, too drunk to feel like moving. A small segment of her mind tore at her through the dimness, but she did not rise. She'd slept hours, and then packed some clothes into a backpack. She wanted to leave before the vision of what she had begun to call the squiggly man could return, but she was reluctant to leave her apartment. The vision had not returned. She'd gone upstairs and talked to Jacob; he had been sullen, but told her that no one new had moved into the building.

It was the afternoon.

She looked at her bag. It was filled with clothes, some seductive, some not. And her doll, Miss Murphy. The doll had blonde hair, and it's chipped painted face held on to all its features, despite being scavenged over ten years ago and carried around ever since. She remembered the first time she had ever gotten her, from her friend Tamar, the girl who had found Miss Murphy in a dumpster.

Tamar had golden hair like her doll and her laugh was bright. Jennifer got Tamar from her when Jennifer was ten and Tamar nine. They had met in the park. Jennifer had had a vision of Tamar and her mother, and Tamar had a vision of herself being seen by Jennifer. They had both instinctively known that they were like each other and

approached each other.

Tamar spoke in a whisper. The whole time Jennifer knew her, Tamar had spoken in a whisper. "Did they try and take you away too? And you ran?"

Jennifer had nodded, twirling her toe in the dirt.

Tamar held Miss Murphy by her right leg, Miss Murphy less battered but still used, in her hand. Her dress was torn in four places that Jennifer could see, and her tan skin was stained in several places. Jennifer hadn't been able to see yet, but later noticed the doll's right leg was worn smooth and bright.

Jennifer had another vision. Tamar sat in her bedroom playing with a different dolly, a nicer dolly, with red hair and clean smooth white skin, whose arms and legs moved. Her mother was upstairs, and Tamar paid little attention to the fact that her mother was screwing Matt Quain, the TV star, on the floor next to the doll. There was a knock on the door, and a melding of images appeared next to her mother and Quain, deformed people possessing eight to ten arms and legs each clutching at a small blonde haired Tamar and carrying her away. She heard her mother scream upstairs, and Quain disappeared, a grey suited walked through the white wall painted with blue stars. Tamar knew that the police were coming for her, her mother had warned her all about the police.

She made it out her window and down the fire escape before the police could find her.

Jennifer said when Tamar had run away. Tamar said "before summer." It was summer.

Jennifer knew Tamar had daydreamed strong for her; she was smart enough to know she saw people's daydreams. So she thought of her own escape in the clearest images she knew how to create, for Tamar's benefit.

It had been a year ago. She'd stood in her mother's small cooking space. Her mother's knife clicked against the counter top as she cut carrots; above the food a small Spaires-Machine hummed. Her

mother and father had only a small unit; they sterilized their food, but not the air or their bodies. Jennifer understood that her mother wanted a larger Spaires-Machine unit; she had seen her mother daydream of them.

Jennifer looked at her mother and said "Why did the man with the brown and white cup cut his wrists?"

Her mother had screamed then. She'd gotten on the phone and Jennifer heard her talk frantically about her daughter being one of them, while images of people without faces or hair circled around her mother, holding out long pale rods. The long pale rods pulled at her mother's head.

She knew enough about the thoughts her mother was experiencing to know that she was in danger. She'd fled down the stairs in a panic, with the intention of going back later. In the lobby, she'd passed the mayor's police, and saw only blood on their clothes and hair. By attrition, she knew her mother meant her harm, and hid herself behind a dumpster on the outskirts of the city. In the morning, she found her breakfast there. She knew, although she did not understand how, that she should not return home.

Jennifer and Tamar shared with each other more of their histories by thinking and imagining. It was dark before they stopped, and hid under a park bench, holding hands with Miss Murphy in-between them. Jennifer had felt secure.

Jennifer had learned how to scavenge the dumpsters for food, and she had a small Spaires-Machine that someone had thrown away hidden in an abandoned stairwell, under some rocks. She knew from her mother that the small gray box would prevent anything from making her sick, if she turned it on and placed the food on or near it. Tamar made shoulder straps for it, and they began to carry it with them.

Tamar had learned to steal for food. She knew the trade of the street-child, and taught Jennifer how to beg and rob food.

Jennifer found that she could help Tamar; sometimes Jennifer

would see no visions, even in a crowded area. Tamar saw everything.

When they slept, Tamar would scream during her slumber and Jennifer would cover her mouth to stifle the sound. In crowds, sometimes she had to be led away in delirium.

Tamar died one day; it was how Jennifer got Miss Murphy.

They were crossing a bridge over the Shur Canal, in the middle of the city. The water flowed below, as far below the bridge as a building is tall. The water and depth separated the center of the city from the outer rings.

Traffic rushed by, and they both were eating hotdogs stolen from a street vendor. Jennifer distracted him from a distance, Tamar took them. It worked because it was the daytime, and Jennifer had washed up in the canal that morning, the greenish water rinsing away the appearance of a homeless child.

Something stopped traffic on the bridge. An electric city bus parked next to them, painted grey and blue, possessing the scent of a lightening storm.

Tamar began to scream, and hold her head. Her fingers clutched and tore at her ears and blonde hair. Fistfuls of it fell on the cement and Miss Murphy, forgotten on the pavement. Tamar's bare foot found footing on the lowest rung of the railing, and she jumped over the railing off from the bridge and fell screaming.

Jennifer picked up Miss Murphy and ran.

Later that night, in the park, Jennifer looked at Miss Murphy. She was clean. Tamar had washed her that morning, in the same canal that Jennifer had bathed in, and Tamar had died in.

Jennifer saw motion in the grassy area behind the bench she lay under and turned to look. Tamar was in the middle of the field, building a mound of torn up grass and dirt. Jennifer looked around; no one was in sight. She felt sickness in her stomach and threw up.

The visions of her dead friend continued; as Jennifer aged and met her posse, she began to fear that she was insane, not telepathic. But

she kept Miss Murphy.

Jennifer looked at the corner of the mural, where the vision of the Squiggly Man had first appeared. She drank some burning vodka. Her thoughts of Tamar had not come only from the doll. She was wondering if she was insane, becoming paranoid that her mind was unraveling. She drank more of the vodka and decided to leave her apartment for good.

Syd played the message again after they had sex. He'd forgotten when they were expected; six o'clock, only an hour away. He saw Somnam watching his face and knew she was trying to read his mental response. Under concentration he kept his face from changing.

Syd called his brother and told him that they would be over at six. They spoke a few sentences; Dave explained he'd gotten a letter from the Agency stating that Syd had been married. Syd reassured Dave that they would be there on time. Syd was aware of Somnam watching him and listening the whole time.

He told her what his brother had said when he hung up the phone.

Somnam sat down at the table, so Syd did the same.

"They must send out letters when they mail the clothing package," she said. "What will he think? You marrying a rehab?"

Syd rubbed his hands together and kept his face from giving him away. He knew what his brother would think, he imagined his brother's thoughts in Dave's angry voice; Well, Syd, you fucked up again. Let me see what you've done so I can hate it even more. Mom and Dad would have been so disappointed in you.

"I'm sure he's ecstatic," Syd said, "He supports the Agency fully. He is a Mayor's Cop."

Somnam took his hands.

The rubbing them together, he thought. She knows.

"He's going to hate you before he meets you," Syd said.

Somnam nodded.

"That's what they train us," she said, "dealing with the stress of your

new mate's family. It's a class."

She laughed. Syd could not tell if she was laughing in pain or because she thought it was truly funny.

She stopped laughing. "I'll be fine if you're fine," she said, and Syd felt she was being honest.

Somnam spent a half an hour trying on different pieces of clothing from the box the Agency had mailed to her. Syd tried to help her select what to wear.

Although it gave him guilt, a different guilt than his sexual desire had, he wanted Somnam to impress his brother.

Somnam hid twice while people knocked and Syd quickly sold them foc. She settled for a knee length grey skirt with a white button up shirt.

Syd put on a blue oxford shirt and black dress pants so that Somnam would not look more dressed up than him.

They took an underground train to his brother's house.

The house was two stories tall, in a residential neighborhood just across the Shur canal. It was two stories tall, and looked exactly the same as all the other streets in the neighborhood; grey, with paned stained glass windows and a single silver maple in the outer roadside corner of the small grassy front lawn.

The neighbors were probably much richer than Dave, Syd knew. The Mayor's Police received good housing as part of the incentive to become a cop. Syd explained it to Somnam in case she could tell from the houses how much money surrounded them.

Syd pushed the doorbell button, and his brother's wife Alexa opened the door. When Syd had first met her, her speech had been perfect, but after marrying Dave, she had started to stutter.

"Hi," she said, holding out a hand to Somnam, "I'm A-A-A-A-A"

Dave stepped behind her from the foyer.

"She's Alexa," he said, "She's stuttered a bit ever since she had our baby." He put his hands over her shoulders. "I'm Dave."

Syd wondered why his brother lied about when Alexa developed



her stutter.

Alexa was tall and thin. Her blonde hair curled, and was cut just below her ears. To Syd, the skin below her eyes looked loose, stretched, and she wore a thick coat of pale lavender makeup.

She looks like a dead prostitute, Syd thought.

He knew that Alexa had a history of mental problems, and he decided she was probably on an anti-depressant that affected her skin.

Dave stood straight behind her, with a short mayor's cop haircut and visible muscles below his white shirt. The outline of facial hair was visible on his cheeks and around his lips; it looked as though he hadn't shaved in days.

He has to look as tough as possible, Syd thought.

Dave smiled at them like a shop clerk.

"This is Somnam," Syd said, and Somnam shook Dave and Alexa's hands. Alexa invited them inside.

They hung up their coats. Syd could see that Somnam was tense as she took off her light summer jacket. Her hands shook as she put it on the coat-rack.

"Somnam will h-h-h-h elp me in the kitchen," Alexa said. She took Somnam's arm and led her down the hallway. Syd turned to watch them go but did not protest. He thought that time away from Dave with something to keep her hands busy would calm her.

Dave's hand clapped on his shoulder from behind.

"You and I have business to talk about," he said. "Lets go downstairs."

Syd turned around. He knew where the basement was; every time Syd visited his brother took him down into the basement.

The basement had the feeling of a professional bar to Syd. He knew that his brother was a hard drinker, and Syd believed that the basement was Dave's attempt to create the alcohol sanctuary for his brain married life had denied him.

The basement had a hardwood floor, neon beer signs, and a pool

table. In a corner, a small bar was set up, and Dave went behind it. Syd sat down on one of the bar stools. The motions had the feeling of ritual to him. Every time Syd got invited to Dave and Alexa's, Syd would be pulled into the basement by Dave to be lectured over whiskey or gin.

"You want a drink, Syd?" Dave said.

Syd nodded. "Beer, whatever you have."

Dave shook his head. "You don't need to drink that pussy stuff here," he said.

He got out two glasses from behind the bar and poured whiskey into them. Syd took a sip under the staring eyes of his brother.

"Drink up," Dave said.

You going to make me answer your questions into a lamp, Syd thought.

The familiar bitterness of being under his brother's patriarchal swelled in his stomach.

He threw back half of the whiskey and felt warmth in his stomach and the base of his neck. Dave drank all of his and filled up both their glasses. After putting the bottle on the shelf behind him with the other score of bottles he turned to Syd. Syd prepared himself for their "business."

"So what possessed you to use The Agency," he said, "because honestly I would have been happier to get a letter saying you'd been picked up for soliciting a prostitute. At least prostitutes go away when you're done with them."

Syd drank until the pain in his throat stopped him from getting another swallow down. He put the glass on the bar and wiped the alcohol tears from his eyes with his shirt.

"It's not like that," he said. He drank the ounce that was left in his glass. Dave ducked under the bar to get the bottle. He drank his glass empty as if it was brown water and filled their glasses again.

"I thought you were a fan of The Agency?" Syd said. He was beginning to feel drunk.

Dave straightened his back out and pulled his shoulders back. The whiskey from his glass flowed down his throat.

"I approve of their work. That doesn't mean I approve of it for my own family."

Syd looked down into his drink. The alcohol had calmed his contempt for his brother. His brother had taken on the role of father when their father had died. Syd had expected the disapproval when he got the answering machine message.

"I think I love her," Syd said, "and I'm not sending her back to that place."

Dave put his elbows on the bar and leaned his face close to Syd's. "Have you even known her for over twenty four hours?" he said.

"I want to marry her. I'm going to," Syd said.

"You still selling foc, Sydie?" Dave said.

Fucking shit, Syd thought. Fucking shit.

He considered leaving.

"Why, you want some?" he said.

Dave slammed his glass down on the bar. Whiskey splattered on Syd's shirt sleeve and his hand.

"Just listen," Dave said, "Me and Alexa have a kid, a baby. The day care center for Mayor's Police is a joke, and so is the one that the Transcription center provides. Why don't you and Somnam move in here, with me and my wife, and take care of the baby during the day?"

Syd imagined what living with Dave would be like. He'd expect Syd to be in the basement every night, to start using an insta-sleep, and to get clean, off foc.

"I don't know," Syd said, "I don't know."

"What don't you know?"

"I'll still want to sleep. And she probably will too. It's not possible, Dave. We're too different."

Dave stared at the whiskey he hadn't spilled. He swirled it by moving the glass in a circle on the bar.

"I've always tried to take care of you, Syd," he said.

Don't give me that, Syd thought.

He stood up to go upstairs.

"Sit," Dave said. "Let me finish."

Syd sat. He looked his brother in the face.

Here it comes, Syd thought.

"I've always tried to take care of you, and we've had our fights."

Dave said, "But if you care about this girl, you can't bring her into a life of sleepers, the dream deprived, and thieves. You won't be able to leave her alone in your apartment for long, either; she's beautiful, Syd. My kid needs someone to take care of her, and I trust you. If you care about this girl you're marrying, think about my offer. You can have the back bedroom, your own bathroom. We spent our night hours upstairs, with the TV. This is a big house. Think about it."

You make a persuasive argument, Syd thought.

"I'll ask Somnam what she thinks."

"Alexa probably already has." Dave lowered his voice. "If you bring foc, fucking hide it good. And don't buy any and then come directly here."

Syd did not say anything in response. He looked his brother in the face until Dave recommended that they go upstairs.

They found Somnam and Alexa on the top floor, in the nursery. Somnam was holding the baby, who was drooling all over Somnam's chest and smiling.

Somnam smiled at Syd.

"Do you want to hold Kristy?" she asked, holding the infant out by its armpits. The baby looked small and frail.

"I've had some whiskey with Dave," Syd said.

"Whiskey?" Somnam said. "I want to try whiskey."

Dave laughed.

"I want to move in here," Somnam said.

"We'll give it a try," Syd said.

I'm not giving up my apartment though, he thought. Even if we never

intend to go back.

"You can't have that much stuff," Dave said, "It'll all fit in the car. We'll go before dinner. And we'll have to get some digestion pills. I know you don't like Spaires Machines, Syd, but we run a house model twenty four hours a day."

Dave went to pull the car around. Before Syd went outside, Alexa tugged his shirt sleeve. She spoke without stuttering.

"I think the way you met her is kind of romantic in a way," she whispered, "since you get along and everything."

Close up, her face looked to Syd as if she hadn't been sleeping or using the insta-sleep.

The living museum had been a faithful hiding place to Jennifer when she was young. Tamar had shown it to her. Jennifer hoped the hiding place was still there.

She paid her admission and walked past security. They did not ask to search her backpack.

She entered the first chamber. The living museum was a series of different eco-system simulations, made out of enamel, steel, and real creatures. A chamber of redwood forest, a desert, a rainforest river, an equatorial beach, and an anartic tundra were all simulated. The hiding place was in the redwood forest, the first glass chamber in.

Jennifer walked along the elevated path, made to look like a wooden boardwalk above the redwoods. She knew that most of the redwoods were real. She was relieved to find that the boardwalk curved and bent in the same ways that she remembered.

The trees loomed huge, and the silhouette of Steeple City behind and above them looked small. Lights twinkled in office windows like replacements for stars on the horizon. Fan generated wind pushed Jennifer's hair into her face. She felt calmed by the forest setting. The glass walls were distant, and soundproof.

At the proper curve, she looked right and left before jumping down off from the boardwalk. She waited for an alarm to go off. There hadn't been one before, and she did not hear anything as she

crouched on the spongy ground.

She ran, zig zagging through the trees like she was hunted. She kicked up leaves but left no other trace in the largely artificial floor of the forest.

The hiding place was a fake redwood, hollowed out. Jennifer had always assumed it to be forgotten about, that it had been intended to be a storage tree, or a security center. Tamar never explained how she had found it.

Jennifer gripped the floor of the forest and pulled up at the base of the gigantic tree. It rolled up like a stiff sheet, revealing an opening large enough for an adult to squeeze through. The last time she'd crawled into the tree she'd been able to jump in. After throwing her pack into the darkness she slid through the opening and pulled the forest floor back over the hole.

Inside, she turned on a flashlight. The inside of the tree was fifteen feet in diameter, and it was hollow for ten feet up. The floor was soft, like the forest floor outside but undecorated and it was always dry.

Jennifer tried to breathe as quietly as possible and listened for footsteps. She counted to five hundred and heard nothing.

Stretching out on the floor, she continued to catch her breath. The flashlight cast a yellow light on the hollowed out tree. As seconds went by, she became calmer, until feeling safe enough to get a blanket out of her backpack. She swallowed a sleeping pill out of the little orange bottle she had packed.

Before the pill could take effect she forced herself to eat some dried granola and drink water. She'd packed enough food for several days, enough to last her until she could decide what she wanted to do, she hoped.

In her apartment, waiting for the squiggly man to appear again, she decided that she was tired of going to bars. She was tired of only ever having enough money for the next three days at a time, and of having to be drunk all the time. The thought of turning herself in was only challenged by a daydream of leaving the city. But she did not

know where to go. She was not going to set out across the earth without food, a suit with a built in spaires-machine, and an idea of where she was going.

Just relax, she thought.

The drug began to creep up from the back of her head to her eyes. She felt the blackness covering her brain like a hood drawing over daydream images.

She rolled over and looked into the flashlight. Its light seemed to bend into the floor in a long arc. She turned it off. The sleeping pill pulled her eyelids down.

A man crept through blades of grass twice his own height with an orange plastic gun, a shoebox sized dog with flappy ears within his arms reach. A little girl in a checkered dress, awkward with growth, dropped a chicken egg on him. He fired water up onto her, and she grew into a dumpy woman with grey hair. The man began to creep after the dog again, through the huge grass blades.

Jennifer sat up, lifting her weighted eyes open and turning on the flashlight. The man crouched in the corner, licking the orange gun.

A guard, she thought.

She flicked the flashlight back off and crawled to the steps that led to the forest floor opening. Outside, it was dark and smelled like the canal. Jennifer could not see anyone. The sleeping pill threatened her with unconsciousness; her eyes roamed against her effort and went in and out of focus.

I have to know, she thought.

She crawled out through the opening. A white wash of mist surrounded everything. Her vision tunneled, and the fog made it difficult to see. She concentrated on listening.

Red lights flashed from behind the trees. They whirled in circles like disco light show lights then focused on her again. Men with red flashlights stepped out from behind the redwood trees. They pointed their flashlights at her.

A single white flashlight focused on her, then bobbed away. The

man with the white flashlight left.

The red lights began to move towards her. Jennifer saw the men wearing white helmets, the white helmets of the telepath hunting Mayor's Police. The red lights cut through the fog without the beams appearing solid. Jennifer knew the helmets meant she was caught; they were not idle security guards. Somehow they had finally found her. The helmets prevented telepaths from reading their thoughts. Whoever had had the orange gun, white flashlight man, was not one of them. Jennifer tried to work it out in her mind, it seemed very important to her. She decided he was a security guard.

She leaned back against the fake redwood that had hidden her before. She slid down it, the tree bark lifted up the back of her shirt and scraped off flesh but she didn't mind. The ground felt good under her palms. She squeezed it.

One of the men reached her. His pants were white, with blue stripes. The uniform shirt covered all of his flesh, ending in gloves and a turtle neck, all white. Jennifer tried to see his face but she couldn't, it was hidden under a black face shield, built into the white helmets.

She closed her eyes. Her mind began to drift into cascading darkness when she was twisted around onto her stomach and her arms were pulled behind her. Voices came to her through the black fog.

"Got the bitch" "She's a good looking one" "Agency" "Slut" "Good guys win" "She's stoned"

Then she heard screams, muffled screams, and loud popping noises.

Someone pulled her onto her back. She opened her eyes. The redwood trees went on for miles, a bridge to the sky. The leaves made faces for her.

One formed a cat's face, fat and content, and Jennifer smiled.

A figure in black stepped over her before leaping into the air. More human shapes came down from the leaf faces out of the sky.

There was swearing. Something large and warm landed on her leg



and did not move.

The sleeping pill took Jennifer under and she slept on her back, with her hands bound and pinned underneath her.

Syd woke up. Somnam breathed softly next to him, asleep on her side. The numbers on his alarm clock lit the bedroom in green tones. He checked the time; it was just past two o'clock.

He felt awake, and considered going upstairs to see what Alexa and Dave were doing.

Probably watching the TV, he thought.

He decided not to go upstairs. They kept their bed in the living room, and Syd imagined they probably were under the covers, lounging, and not fully dressed.

Syd had not enjoyed dinner. Despite beer and whiskey, the pressure and awkwardness had been heavy. Alexa stuttered everything she tried to say before giving up on talking entirely. Dave got loud about city politics and his boss. Somnam never spoke.

Syd reached out and stroked Somnam's arm. He loved the softness, and felt emotion inside.

Drunk, Somnam had told him many things about living in the Agency. Same sex group showers until the age of 18, classes on pleasing spouses, instructors concerned only with their own authority.

I wonder how she's not more fucked up, Syd thought.

He rubbed her arm more, and she draped it over him.

"Sorry," he whispered. She did not respond, so he decided she was still asleep.

Syd closed his eyes and forced himself to breath deeply and fall asleep.

Motion disturbed his rest. He pulled himself out of sleep after reaching for Somnam and not finding her warm body. Sitting up he looked around the bedroom, rubbing sleep from his eyes. The bathroom door in the back was open, dark.

Where is she, he thought.

Syd knew she was not used to sleeping, and that sometimes when

people transition from insta-sleeps to sleeping, they suffer from sleepwalking. It had happened to him. Plow had told him about it after he woke up in the street one morning.

Syd got up. He opened the front door and saw her, a block away, walking. It looked to Syd like she was carrying something in her arms, but he could not be certain from her back.

"Somnam," he yelled. She began to run.

In his stomach he felt something was wrong. He chased after her, barefoot, wearing only pants. Most of the houses had at least one light on.

Great, Syd thought, Dave's going to love hearing about this.

The sidewalk rubbed his foot pads, but he did not slow down. Somnam continued to run.

This is a dream, he thought.

It did not feel like a dream to him. He got closer to Somnam. She was carrying something, and was running in jeans, a t-shirt, and sneakers.

Syd did not slow down.

"Somnam," he shouted between breaths, "don't sneak off like this."

She turned left and the road opened up. She ran down the center of the street, under stop lights and streetlamps. Office buildings stretched above them, arching into the yellow night sky.

Somnam veered out of the street and onto the sidewalk. She disappeared into a subway tunnel. Syd knew that the trains didn't run after midnight, to encourage people to stay indoors at night. He didn't think Somnam knew.

By the time Syd got into the subway tunnel, he could not see her. He panted, a sour taste in his mouth and his lungs aching with every inhale. Syd heard something and looked down the tunnel. His eyes had adjusted since entering the dark tunnel and he saw Somnam, far away down the subway tunnel, under the string of red lights that lined the ceiling.

He ran after her, far behind now. His left side had a stitch, and his

legs ached.

Somnam climbed up a ladder that was built into the wall of the subway tunnel, holding her bundle in one arm.

The ladder led to a manhole in the street. Syd pulled himself up, getting the oily smell of summer pavement and scraping his tired chest and arms. They were in a residential district he did not know.

Somnam ran towards a building, a church. Syd saw stained glass and brick arches, and he heard a gasoline car rumble in the distance. Discouraged, he forced himself onto his feet and ran after her, holding back vomit.

The gasoline car rounded the block corner as Somnam almost reached the sidewalk. The car drove up the sidewalk and parked across the double wooden doors of the church. Syd was half a block away and his feet tore into the road.

Somnam flailed her legs and stopped running. A figure in a long black coat got out of the vehicle and raised his hand. Syd saw a gun and screamed.

There was a flash, Somnam began to fall, and the report reached Syd's ears. He was still screaming as he ran. The report echoed back through the buildings, it sounded like hundreds of shots.

The figure took the bundle from Somnam and got back into the dark blue car. It pulled away as Syd reached her. Half of her lay on the sidewalk. The other half, her chest and arms and head lay in the street. Her forehead was blood, and stringy parts of what looked like damp pieces of dark red toilet paper ran into the pool the back of her head rested in.

Syd sat on the sidewalk and took her hand. He threw up on her legs and tried to brush it off. Her hand felt cold. Syd did not move, and he did not think.

Later a sweeper-driver shook his shoulder. Somnam was covered with green powder from the spaires-machine expulsion. Syd brushed it off from her. He could not get it all. She was very cold under his touch.

Police came. They questioned Syd in their station, and Dave came and took Syd back to the house. Alexa gave Syd a blue pill, and Syd took it without asking what it was.



# **Part 2**

## **Dream Deprivation**

Jennifer saw two long thin lights and felt pressure on her back. Then the lights moved together into one and her eyes focused. It was a harsh white light, she wondered if she'd passed out in a Laundromat or a liquor store.

She realized she was on a small bed and had a needle stuck in her arm connecting her vein with a clear line of flexible pipette. It was connected to a small white box shaped bed stand next to her bed.

Hospital? she thought. The Agency?

She looked around the room. The bed and small stand were the only objects in the room with her. White walls, floors, and ceiling shined, burned her eyes under the light despite their deep black gouges and signs of age. The door to the room was open, with a white hallway lit behind.

Stolen into prostitution, she thought.

She sat up and shook her head. Her fingertips instinctively rubbed the soft spots behind her eyes and she felt herself clearing mentally. She rubbed her stomach.

I feel strange, she thought.

She shook her head again and knew what the vague feeling of illness was; she was not drunk or hung over. Her muscles were not quivering and her head did not ache. She wondered if she'd been knocked out long enough to fix the addiction or if someone had given her something through the needle to take care of it for her.

She slid the needle out of her arm. A drop of blood filled up like a tiny red soap bubble before rupturing and making a thin line down her arm. When the blood ran onto her shirt she noticed she was wearing the same clothes she'd worn before being taken wherever she was.

Throwing the needle onto the floor seemed wrong to her so she set it on the bed stand. A printed page lay across the top of the stand. She picked it up.

"Hello, and goodmorning/evening. You are in no danger. When you wake up, please walk down the hall to the first door on your left and I will explain everything to you. This is not The Agency, and this is not

jail. Cheers, The Rocking Horse Frost."

She stood up. The back of her throat felt sticky and dry. Her saliva crept down her throat like salt water.

Water, she thought.

She brushed herself off. Flexing and stretching, she told herself that she didn't feel as if she'd been raped.

She stood up and walked through the only door.

The hallway had a familiar smell to her. Before she'd been sixteen, she'd spent time living with the homeless men that lived in what was called The Shambles. The Shambles were built by a back to roots group just after the epidemics and invention of The Spaires Machines, out of materials that would have been available in the twentieth century despite their more advanced options. It had been too soon to be living without the machines and the whole group died, leaving behind five huge cement and steel buildings, which would eventually be too far from the city's center for anyone but the homeless to want to live there. Jennifer knew the history of the buildings, but never why it was a primarily male place. She left The Shambles when she was fifteen because the men had begun to watch her more closely than they had when she was thirteen. The hallway smelled like The Shambles to her, and she had the same vague feeling of being watched closely.

The hallway was empty. The first door on her left was open and she walked in.

Someone sat in a chair, and was working with a computer. Except for the person and furniture, three chairs a desk and the bed, it was like the room she'd woken up in; aged white paint and plain. A blue haze filled the room. Jennifer had never been so close to a computer before. The monitor blocked her view of the person's face.

Shit, she thought, he's smoking.

That was why the hallway had smelled like The Shambles, she realized. The men at The Shambles had gotten cigarettes from somewhere, once she'd heard from China, and they used to smoke



them constantly.

Jennifer stepped to the left so she could see the better. He didn't look up.

The man wore brown pants with gigantic pockets that swelled around his legs and a white shirt with pressings of red flowers all over it. With nothing but the white walls and brown pants the shirt shone like a nightclub on his body. The hair that touched the collar of the shirt was long, curly, and brown, and Jennifer could see a bald spot the size of her palm on the top of his head. She knew that there was a popular name for people like him, people who tried to dress an act like they were from another time, but she did not remember it.

Jennifer thought his face, although covered in bristles, looked friendly.

"Hello," she said.

He coughed and looked up.

"Jesus Christ, you're awake," he said. "You've been out for over thirty hours, I'd forgotten about you."

He stood up, smiled, and held out his hand over the computer.

She took it and shook his hand.

"I am The Rocking Horse Frost, or RHF for short," he said. He let her hand go and laughed softly. "You are?"

"Jennifer," she said, crossing her arms, "where am I?"

"Everywhere and nowhere. The thought center of the planet, right now. An orgy of ideas." As he spoke, he waved his hands in the air. His right hand held the cigarette between his pointer and middle finger. "We're all like you here. All telepaths. We're doing beautiful work. We saved you from those fucking cops. We have their digital communications languages. I'll get Raging Butterfly up here. She's made a recruitment video. You'll flip over it."

Jennifer smiled. The man hadn't made sense to her, but he looked pleased.

The man sat back down. He punched a key on his keyboard and spoke into the air "Raging Butterfly, we need your video."

A female voice came back through the computer in poor sound quality.

"I concur, little jangler."

The Rocking Horse Frost looked up at Jennifer. "We work apart sometimes lately because other people can really invade your brain space."

He leaned back into the computer. "Raging?"

"Glitter," came the response, "glitter and gobbler and gibbler."

"Godamn it," he said, "she's been up for days again. One of these times she'll fry her fucking brain out."

He typed for several seconds. Jennifer uncrossed her arms. She didn't know where to look.

"Butterfly's been skipping out on sleep again. Send someone to knock her out, please, and for fuck's sake disable her insta-sleep. The new girl is awake. I'm going to bring her down with me to get Butterfly's video, if that's ok."

He stood up. She looked at him. She did not know what to say.

"If you didn't hear, we have to get the video ourselves. Let me get my shoes on."

Jennifer hadn't noticed he was barefoot. He sat on the bed and pulled two shoes out from under the cot-like sleeping pad.

"You'll need a new name," he said, "best to start thinking of one now."

She wanted to sit down, anywhere. Her legs felt strange.

With his shoes on, he stood up and butted out his cigarette in a tray next to the computer. He opened a drawer and pulled out a small box. He tossed it to her.

In a daydream, Jennifer did not see the box coming in time and bounced off from her lower chest onto the floor.

"Nice grab," RF said.

She bent over and picked it up. The little box felt like a mint box, small and enamel. Inside were small orange pills.

"They'll stop the visions," RF said. Jennifer felt at ease with him.

She'd spent years in strange places, and this one seemed empty of both police and hostile people so far. She swallowed one pill dry. It burned in her still thirsty throat. "Although soon you'll learn to control them yourself," he said.

He led her down the hallway into an elevator.

He told her the building was linked to another building, each twenty stories tall. He would only answer her questions about the location by telling her to wait for the video.

Raging Butterfly was a small girl with dark hair. She wore a long skirt, blue, with a white stripe that ran diagonally down the length of her legs.

She was anorexic thin, and bent over a computer. She did not look up at them.

The Rocking Horse Frost stood silent, so Jennifer did the same. A man came in dressed all in black and stuck a needle into the girl's arm. She collapsed into him and with a heave he carried her out into the hallway.

RF sat down at the computer. "She forgets to sleep sometimes," he said, "or else she's a stubborn little one and does it to piss me off. She's part of my team. Our team. It's hers too. You're going to be the other part. Ever use an Internet Hookup before?"

Jennifer shook her head no. Tired of standing, she leaned up against the wall and slid down. This room was white like the other two rooms had been, the hallway had been, and the elevator had been. The room had an insta-sleep in the back, large and white like a coffin the wrong shade, the desk, a chair on wheels that RF was in, and a small refrigerator.

"Sometimes she eats nothing but plain white rice during her intense periods. She's very devoted to the cause. We had to take her hotplate away. Sometimes now she doesn't eat at all." He smiled in a way that looked to Jennifer like he was affectionate towards Raging Butterfly.

Jennifer wondered when the last time she herself had eaten had

been.

He looked at her. "You're sitting?" he said. "Come lie down here on the floor in front of the computer. Usually when we work you'll have a bed or cot but for this, sorry, the floor it will have to be right now."

Jennifer did not try to guess what was happening. She did as she was told.

RHF tapped at the computer, then he stood over her. He lowered over her face what looked like earmuffs on a wire by their wire until she took them.

Internet head gear, she thought, and felt excitement in her stomach.

She heard RHF sit behind her and saw his feet by her arms. He took the headgear from her and put the muff parts, large black hard plastic muffs, over her ears. The gear pulled some of her hair as he positioned it.

"Not the best gear ever, but it'll do," he said. "Once the gear is on, you just shift the bar," he pushed toward her feet the bar that joined the muffs until it was over her eyes, "I'll set up the video. Normally that will be Raging Butterfly's job, but she's obviously not here."

The bar, thin and black, obscured most of her vision of the ceiling. The hard floor ground at her back and legs.

"This is more of a movie than anything else," The Rocking Horse Frost said. "You ready?"

Jennifer nodded yes. When nothing happened she said yes.

The bar in front of her eyes began to glow hot white.

She stood in front of a building. There were no cars running on the street, no noises except the slow movement of air down the street she stood in.

Outside the walls, she thought.

Outside the walls lay the ruin of the old city's outer perimeters, from an earlier period of history when ten times the amount of people called Steeple City home. The wall was said to be easy to get through, if you knew the right people, but she had never met anyone who knew the right people and considered it an urban myth.

She'd seen photographs of the outer arc once before; an artist had obtained permission to go and photograph it, and an excited gallery had held an event with free drinks to promote their sales. The photos had left her depressed in a strange distant way.

It felt even more desolate in person. The windows in the buildings were whole and unbroken. Cars lined the streets, most half rusted with flat tires. The occasional car, she thought perhaps early enamel models, stood out spotless mocking the dilapidated rust skeletons. Streetlights stood unbroken and unshining. Lines of rain damage made brown corroded stripes along areas of building which did not have windows or ledges to break the flow of rainwater.

It smelled like her basement apartment had smelled before she'd moved in and plugged in her air freshener with a smell of ozone lingering under the must.

The silence made her paranoid. She tried to turn around and look behind herself but couldn't. She tried to step and found her body ignoring her commands. Only her neck was free to move.

I'm trapped, she thought.

Sweat dripped in her eyes and she thrashed her head wildly.

You're not really here, she thought over and over.

It did no good.

The voice of RF crashed into her consciousness from all directions.

"Just a second, sister, Butterfly's computer is wicked fucked up. I'm having trouble getting the playback. You're stuck in the first frame."

She forced herself to remain calm. Wind brushed her face, disconcerting her paralyzed state.

Her legs gave out and she caught herself by tensing them. A voice, lower in volume than RHF's and female but seeming to come from inside her own head spoke.

"Welcome to The Yallov Society. This building is where you are. At the time of this recording five hundred people live between the two structures. They are all telepathic."

Jennifer sat in an arm chair in a library. The soft smell of aging paper filled her nose. A copper bust of a man rested on a hardwood stand in front of her.

"This man, Yallov, was our leader. He was a great man."

A flat surface a half meter square rose out of the hardwood stand in front of the bust. A movie began to play on it.

A young boy, crying, was ripped out of a woman's arms by two anti-telepath mayor's police. The woman stood motionless in a kitchen, crying, as the police drugged the boy with needle guns and one of them carried him out the door.

In a building with no windows and a cement floor five people who looked approximately twenty stood back to back, armed with handguns. Dirt and black grime coated their faces, and their hair was in the matted solid state that comes from months of not combing. Visible gas began to fill the room and they fell to the floor. Anti-telepath police entered the room, their white helmets glowing dully in the soft grey light. One officer walked up to the unconscious pile and pulled his gun.

He shot the closest man in the face, and blood squirted up into the air like a garden hose's stream. The officer stood back and watched the man bleed before systematically shooting the rest.

A girl with tiny breasts who looked fifteen to Jennifer rocked rhythmically underneath a large man. The man thrust into her over and over and the girl cried silently.

"You like that, don't you, little agency bitch," the man grunts as punctuation to a few thrusts.

The video froze, with the man poised above the crying girl in mid thrust.

The voice from her head began to narrate from the video screen.

"Telepaths are being mistreated terribly by the un-evolved humans that we sprang from. Yallov started this organization because he had stumbled across two secrets, two secrets which he knew could lead us to greatness and end this oppression. The governmental agencies

of the world and this city know these secrets. These secrets are one of the reasons that they fear us."

Jennifer floated in nothingness.

"All telepaths are inherently telekinetic. Yallov died before he could bring his students to his ability. But many telepaths working together can approximate Yallov's work, and study is underway."

Jennifer stood on a street corner. Cars crept past, and there was no sun. The sky had the yellow glow of the middle of the night in Steeple City. Yallov, with long grey hair stood in the street. He bled from his chest and fell.

"Before his murder at the hands of police, Yallov discovered another secret."

Jennifer was in the kitchen of an apartment. It looked dated to her, but was very clean. She detected an out of place odor in the air that reminded her of dumpsters.

The voice did not resume narration. She waited. The smell began to bother her stomach. She walked through a doorway on her right and discovered the tenant of the apartment. He was what smelled.

He sat in an easy chair, a bulky internet head gear over his face and ears which resembled a police helmet with ear muffs more than the thin bar that Jennifer wore outside the internet. The man wore no shirt, his skin shiny, red, and cracked. Flies gathered and buzzed on the crotch of his black workpants.

The smell of the man filled her consciousness and Jennifer bent over and gagged. She did not vomit.

"This was a common thing two hundred years ago, when the internet was legal in this country," the voice said, "the death of an internet addict. Sex with no strings attached, full course meals, anything the user wanted someone else had programmed."

Jennifer knew that many people had died from dehydration and starvation near the end of the internet's legality in most of the world, before the epidemics.

The apartment disappeared, and with it, the smell. Jennifer was

shown a child, a girl too thin to determine an age.

"And while this was one of the reasons the internet became illegal, Yallov found the other reason why."

Again she floated in sensory deprivation except for the narration.

"When a telepath travels through the internet, a part of them travels through the physical passageways, the electric wires, the network rooms, the satellite beams. The telekinetic powers we all have can be invoked remotely through the internet."

Jennifer found herself staring at the Agency building. It loomed at her, almost gothic in the darkness that surrounded the silent streets of the simulation. The ground began to shake, and the building fell to the ground.

She floated.

"Yallov called this a telepath bomb. He was working on finalizing the software and training us when he was betrayed and shot by an insider working for the mayor's police here in Steeple City. We here at the Yallov Society building are continuing his work. Which is why you have been recruited."

The nothingness continued to surround her. The voice of RHF, louder than the narrator, filled the space.

"To get back out of the internet all you need to do is get out of any encrypted or secure areas and push the button in your pocket purposely."

Jennifer felt in her pocket and found a slippery round object on top of a flat smooth credit card like object. She pressed it and was looking at the black bar of the internet head gear in front of her eyes.

Her brain was very aware of the distant hum of the building and the lack of true silence.

"Welcome aboard," The Rocking Horse Frost said.

Syd sat alone in the back bedroom of Dave's house, on the bed he had shared with Somnam for part of one night. His mouth tasted sour with the aftertaste of whiskey. An empty bottle lay on the carpeted floor beneath his feet.



He hadn't slept. He didn't know if the pill Alexa had given him was engineered somehow to stop working if there was alcohol in the user's bloodstream, or if her mother's helpers were of a placebo low dose. His skin was slick and sticky with the buildup of sweat from the night before.

At some point in the night before he'd decided to find out who killed her himself. At some point he'd squeezed his hands together whiskey drunk until it hurt too much to continue and then he decided to find out who had done it. He didn't remember when.

His head hurt, and his thoughts moved slowly. He didn't know how long he'd sat after deciding to catch the murderer, and he hated himself for sitting in the little room when he knew he should be outside, doing something. He knew the whiskey and time spent without sleep had sapped his strength.

He lay back onto the bed. The ceiling, white tiles designed to look like planks of wood, spun faster and faster. He blinked and it nearly stopped, then accelerated until he blinked again. Vomit burned up his throat and he sputtered it down his chin and unto the bedclothes.

Groaning Syd rolled off from the bed, crushing his thigh against the glass bottle.

"Fuck," he said.

He groped under the bed for his suitcase, and after several tries he hooked his finger under the latch mechanism and pulled it. He felt around with his hand until he found a bag of foc. The morning sun was just beginning to rise, and he could in the pale light tell the foc was green, low quality.

He tore the bag open and dipped to fingers in. He smeared the rough powder against his gums, scratching them until the stimulant rushed through his capillaries, clearing some of the whiskey drunk.

He scratched some more. The quick white light of the foc hit his brain.

It turned his stomach, threatened him, but he managed to concentrate enough to keep the vomit down. The ceiling stopped

revolving. The tiles came together from their cross eyed doubles into single squares, and Syd forced himself to stand up. He shook his hands like they were wet and slapped them against his legs. From under the bed out of the same box the foc had been in he retrieved a small radio and a few thousand dollars.

He also put several foc pills in his pocket. Most people who knew he used foc hated the pills, because they took all the custom out of it and made it feel like the drug habit it was. Once he had had nothing but pills to offer his sluggish customers in their hours of need, and he had lost several long term buyers.

He told himself he enjoyed the taste of the foc, that the pills were harder on his stomach, and that he didn't get the pre-rush from the chemical traveling in tiny amounts through his capillaries.

Syd eased the bedroom door open, conscious that his brother and Alexa were just down the hallway, enjoying the last few hours of their night and early morning before work. He fell forward and smashed his shoulder against the far wall of the hall.

"Fuck," he thought, cursing himself for being so loud. He held his breath. Dave and Alexa's television was on. It did not stop babbling.

He got down on all fours, crept to the end of the hallway and then up the stairs.

Dave and Alexa's room smelled of perfume. The ceiling was a mirror, and the bed was an all sex mattress, triangles and smooth curves designed for comfort and inspiration during adventurous sexual positions.

Syd had a feeling that his brother didn't have sex with Alexa very often, and that Dave had put the mattress in as a personal testament against sleepers. There was no flat surface on the mattress large enough for someone to stretch out on and sleep.

Syd brushed up against it the bottom of the mattress as he crawled towards the back of the room. The instasleep machine stood against the wall, a looming appliance that resembled an iron maiden and a refrigerator to Syd. He was not surprised that Dave didn't have a

more modern looking streamlined model, with a glass door, for the same reason Syd suspected the sex bed was not for sex.

Inside the machine Syd leaned against the padded back wall and pulled the door shut. Minutes later the door opened automatically and he stepped out. Still drunk, but cured of his need for sleep, he felt better. He walked silently out of the room and down the stairs.

"Hey," he heard Dave yell as he walked past the living room into the foyer.

"Where are you going?"

Syd went outside into the night without answering. He jogged away from the house with faint panic. Dave did not follow him.

It was late in the morning, and gasoline cars audibly drove by Syd in the affluent inner city area, pistons sounding out conspicuous consumption. Syd felt anger, hatred towards the people in the cars. He pictured them driving out to lunch, eating simple food that would stay in their stomach, and going back to their jobs. People with a purpose in life, spouses, a master plan.

And here I am, a fucking drug dealer out to figure out who killed his agency bride, he thought.

He rubbed the radio in his pocket. A vintage FM transmitting radio, it could broadcast the area of the city block. The police knew of them and monitored the transmissions made. Old Man Plow, Syd's foc supplier, obsessed over vintage transmitting equipment and would only accept calls on the FM band.

Syd had called Plow yesterday and said he was out of dealing, but still wanted to buy for his own use, in code. Plow had told Syd "I'm not small time, fuck off."

Near the Shur Canal Syd walked into the staircase that cut a hole into the sidewalk cement to get to the subway. He took a train to an area of the city near the walls, but on the opposite side of the city from where he had lived before.

The area was called the open-air district on Steeple City television and on TV commercials all over the western continent in the homes

where at least one person had a tourist passport. He called it The West, like most of the city.

A block away from the condensed commerce section of The West, the smell of meat being grilled and the dull sound of people compressed together pushed into his aching head. After being in Dave's inner city sanctuary neighborhood, Syd thought, the noise of The West was worse. He put his wallet in his front pocket and pulled out the radio.

A boy on a rusty green bike with a handlebar basket of zucchini stopped on the sidewalk in front of Syd. Syd looked at his radio. Most of the buildings in the out circles of the city were ten stories at least, which usually effected FM transmitting. He hoped he wouldn't have to get on a roof.

"Five dollars, many zucchini," the boy said. He was pale, with black plastic glasses that were so big they seemed about the fall off from his nose.

Syd waved at the boy, and the boy pushed his bicycle away, towards the hustling square area.

The radio hissed like a Spaires Machine expulsing. Syd turned the dial to 105.2, one of Plow's usual bands. Plow usually ran at least six radios at once, somehow listening to all of them for contacts. A voice came through the static: "by the vending machines, to the right," it said, "go in, and face the vendingâ€¦"

Syd tried a different band. He got only hiss, so he transmitted. "Plow? It's Syd."

Old Man Plow's rasp answered back.

"Off the wagon eh? Where are you?"

Syd didn't think that he needed to correct Plow about the nature of the transaction over the radio. There was going to money in it, so he knew it would be fine with Plow. He didn't know the proper code words anyway.

The boy with the bicycle pushed his creaking ride back up the sidewalk and held up three fingers while Syd responded to Plow.

"A block up from The West Market, in front of Chinese Food Take In Eat Out and that junk shop with the foc pots and eastern religious figurines."

Syd shook his head no at the boy and the boy left again, in the opposite direction.

Syd assumed the police at the edge of the market had turned him away. They protected the inner city people from the poorer residents of the city, as nothing discouraged shopping like a reminder of the other half.

"I know exactly where you are. Stay put. Pick up some spicy chicken dim sum for me, eh?"

Syd went into the store and ordered the food. He sat at a table that looked out onto the street. It was noon, and virtually no one was on the street. People who came from the rich inner circle areas to shop parked in safe lots to the south with armed guards. No one is sight who lived to the north was walking to the market around noon which did not surprise Syd. He knew during the night the area outside the Chinese restaurant would be filled with drunken students, panhandlers, muggers, and drug dealers. One of the city's largest colleges and a private high school where the uniforms were like those if The Agency were to the north. He'd delivered to both many times when he was starting out.

The empty street outside the window depressed him. He'd heard of cities elsewhere that were vibrant, densely populated inside the habituated circles, and safer. The emptiness bothered him the most, he thought. Just to see some people walking by the window as Plow's food cooled, like the cities he saw on the television, would have made him feel better somehow. Other than the young Asian girl behind the counter, he was the only person in the restaurant. Old Man Plow arrived.

Plow pulled out the red plastic and steel chair across from Syd and sat down. Despite the company, Syd didn't feel any better.

Plow wore a bright purple trench coat, shiny and resembling dyed

oil. Syd thought that inside the restaurant it had to be at least eighty degrees, but Plow did not remove the coat. His head was shaved bald, which is where Syd always assumed he got his nickname, as Plow only looked twenty five. His left ear was mostly missing. It resembled a small floret of broccoli.

Once, Syd had been desperate enough for a cup of foc that he'd cooked some in Plow's apartment after a purchase. Plow had told him the story of how he lost the ear.

When he was younger, he'd had doctors on the north end of the eastern continent build a prosthetic radio/digital receiver into and around his ear. Syd had seen them on some business men. To him they resembled halved puffer fish, because of the device's telescoping antennas which extended for inches in many directions.

Plow's, being illegal and made without quality control, did not have telescoping antennae. They were rigid.

"So I've got this little ball of spikes on the side of my head," he'd said, "and I was getting transmissions from all over the place, satellite transmissions, mobile phones, mumbled labor of love pirate porn story radio broadcasts, everything. I loved it. And then I picked up this beautiful little girl in a bar. She was fresh and clean so I went down on her. The little bitch squeezed her legs around my head when she came. She needed one stitch in her thigh, and I lost my fucking ear. Great how things work out, eh?"

Syd had never liked Old Man Plow. He knew that Plow also dealt in prostitutes, but Syd had never inquired about the work.

Plow picked up a dumpling with black ceramic chopsticks and swallowed it without chewing. The shades of purple that wrapped around him shifted in hue when he moved.

"What can I do for you today?" he said.

"I need information," Syd said.

Plow nodded. He picked up the transparent enamel bowl and drank the broth from the soup down. The pistachio sized dumplings remained.

"The kind we can talk about here, with Daughter of Lee at the counter listening to us?" Plow said.

Syd shook his head no.

"Good," Plow said, emptying the bowl onto the floor. "The chicken is awful." He raised his voice and looked at the counter. "Next time mind your own business."

Syd stood up, not bothering to act disgusted with Plow's actions. He felt like he didn't feel anything.

"Don't be hasty," Plow said, "I don't have any more time. Especially not for information pow wows. I thought this would be a quick sale. Meet me twelve hours from now in our favorite cemetery eh?"

Plow left, and Syd walked out after him, ignoring the stare of the girl who was already sweeping up the Dim Sum.

He walked north to a hotel that he knew of which rented flat beds to sleepers. It called itself a "vintage sexual encounter" hotel. He signed up for ten hours, climbed a ladder inside a tube for five flights of stairs, and crawled between the sheets in a six by five foot cube.

The cube consisted of a mattress floor and a ceiling barely high enough to sit up under. A Spaires Machine buzzed and blew above in the center of the ceiling. Syd had been told that the cube style hotels were from a time when Steeple City was bustling, before the epidemics, and people actually used to live in them for extended periods of time.

He pulled the door shut and pressed the light off. As he was falling asleep he wondered how they managed to build an expulsion system for the Spaires Machines into such a space economical building.

He awoke to the sound of the hotel buzzer telling him his time was up. He sat up with his head full of sleep and fumbled with his shoes. He swallowed of foc pill before slipping onto the ladder and out of the hotel.

Syd met Plow in the catholic corner of the cemetery under a huge tomb stone with the name "Fraser" engraved on it. The catholic section had no surveillance, no movie cameras, and no fancy

tombstones with built in television screens on all four sides playing back select scenes from the deceased's life.

The catholic section was technology free, as decreed by the pope, so it was one of Plow's favorite places to meet. He liked to laugh to whoever was listening about how the Mayor's Police couldn't touch it.

Syd leaned against the tomb stone, as Plow was doing. In the distance he could see the yellow glow of the technology friendly area of the cemetery, and the flicker of thousands of built in TV screens. It looked like a city skyline to Syd, rendered even smaller than distance would allow by the outer ring's towering buildings.

Syd explained about Somnam.

"You know about the mayor's Subservient Control Force?" Plow said.

Syd shook his head no, a lie.

"The SCF?"

"No," Syd said, lying again. He didn't want to miss anything he didn't know about the topic by admitting some knowledge.

Plow leaned forward and shook his head. He tapped the ground with the toe of his boot. The glow from the technology graves and the more distant city buildings gave his trench coat a blue tint.

"You were a drug dealer. You never were very smart."

Syd barely knew Plow, and Plow barely knew him. He wondered how Syd knew anything about his intelligence. He decided not to argue the point.

"The SCF is the mayor's secret police. They exist to control drug users, telepaths, and revolutionaries. I bet your Somnam rubbed one of them the wrong way somehow, and so one of them shot her. It's probably that simple. She's not the only one. Rumor is that the mayor has told his sciffs to fire at will, and they're enjoying it." Plow smiled. "Sure you don't want to keep dealing, eh?"

Syd reached into his back pocket pulled out some money. He gave it to plow, who counted it and smiled.

"I want more information," Syd said, "and I want it tomorrow. Ask



around."

Plow tapped his feet in an alternating rhythm and twisted his upper torso in a dance. He stopped. Syd did not understand anything about the man.

"So this is a revenge thing," he said, and clapped his hand on Syd's shoulder. "Same time, same place, tomorrow." He turned his back to Syd, then turned back. "You might want to buy a coat for tomorrow," he said, "My friends down in Silent City say a hurricane is blowing up the coast."

Plow turned and walked away. Syd went a different direction, through the Protestant section. Video screens surrounded him on all sides, beaches, weddings, concerts and smiles. He stopped at a gravestone, the same one he always stopped at when meeting plow, and watched some of the videos. The kid had the same last name as him, and Syd knew most of the videos very well. On the television screen, the boy was boarding a yellow bus, dressed up with a backpack on, perhaps six. The same year he died, Syd knew. The tombstone listed the boy as six years old at his time of death. Syd waited so that the automatic surveillance cameras could read his face, then walked out of the cemetery.

Jennifer lay on the cement in one of the warehouse like rooms of the once abandoned building.

She felt the inside of her head, behind her eyes, pull in on itself then move to numbness as Octavio slid through the passages of memory in her brain. He told he was going to pick random moments as he came to them, and she believed that was what he was doing. The sensation of giving massive amounts of information seemed to have physiological effects, but Octavio had already assured her she was imagining it.

She felt him slip out mentally and she sat up. Octavio was an old man, with long white hair which was missing from the top of his head. He wore a long black cloak and sat cross legged a few feet from her.

Trying to hard to look like a mystic, she had thought when she first

met him, and she still thought it true. All members of The Yallow Society chose new names. She thought the same about his name choice as she did his appearance.

"You have more potential than I'd dare to hope," he said, "Did The Rocking Horse Frost tell you the powers we can possess once properly trained?"

He drummed his fingers on his knees. Jennifer tried to remember that she was in the presence of a skilled telepath and that he knew she was annoyed with his mannerisms and appearances. The implication that he was doing it anyway frustrated her more, and so she forced her focus onto the training video that RHF had shown her.

"I know we can move objects, and that we plan to telekinetically destroy The Agency building in two weeks using this skill."

Octavio nodded, "It is commendable," he said, "that The Rocking Horse Frost is choosing only to tell you that which will be necessary for you to know in the coming weeks."

RHF had begun to show her how to block her thoughts from other telepaths, but she had not learned.

She began to think about how Octavio really needed to stop playing the wise elder cliché and then felt bad.

"But that is not all. When a person dies, a kind of imprint is made on them in the psychical universe fabric. We telepaths can access those imprints. Those that are strong can communicate with them. Even some humans in the course of history have seen fleeting moments of these imprints. You have the ability to talk to the dead, Tamar," he said.

She had chosen Tamar as her new name.

I did really see her, she thought. And the squiggly man.

The metaphysical implications of what Octavio had said began to arise in her thoughts.

"They are only imprints," Octavio said, "not spirits who have crossed over. Imprints say nothing about life after death, only raise questions about the nature of the universe."

She let it sit on purpose, concentrating to keep her mind as empty as she could. Thinking in front of Octavio was unpleasant.

"I will close my mind to yours now," he said.

She wondered who the squiggly man had been, who needed to contact her so badly.

"Can the dead try to contact me?" she said.

Octavio stood. Tamar did the same.

"It has never been documented. It is growing late. I will tell The Rocking Horse Frost to teach you how to block your thoughts from other telepaths to completion. After, sleep well. There will be a sleeping pill on your bed stand if you wish it. Good bye."

Her room was on the twentieth floor, high enough and on the correct side to see a small slit of the Steeple City wall through the cracks in the buildings across the street. She sat on the bed. RHF was already there, smelling like cigarette smoke, sitting on the bed, and dressed in a black t-shirt and jeans. She sat next to him and they began training without speaking.

RHF caused a sensation thought to arise in her brain, and she tried to duplicate it for several hours, until she could do so ten times in a row without him causing the event to occur first.

When she finished her tenth block, RHF stood. He held a hand out and she shook hands with him.

"Good job little sister," he said. "No one will be able to read your thoughts unless you open up to them. I'm going to sleep."

Tamar closed her door behind him and lay down. She did not take the sleeping pill.

Adrenaline began to cause her stomach to piston. She thought about where she was, in a huge structure filled with telepaths fighting back, and she felt small. She wanted a drink.

She took the sleeping pill.

In the morning an alarm rang through her hallway. She got up and went up ten stories to the room which she thought of as RHF's office. It was where she'd first seen him, and seemed to be his assigned

computer room.

Both Raging Butterfly and RHF were there. They sat in front of a larger desk than the one Tamar had seen yesterday, eating. There was a space in-between RHF's left and the computer that stood on the left end of the table. A chair and a plate with food rested there, and Tamar assumed it was for her. She sat. A yellow substance, a white substance which looked porous, and a red gel steamed in front of her. The sound of rain on the window drew her attention to the view that looked out onto the sprawling cubes of abandoned buildings known as The Wasteland to the people of Steeple City.

She noticed two pale green cots on the floor, with headgear resting on them.

RHF set his fork down. "We're going to work as a complete team today," he said. He picked his fork back up and began to eat the yellow paste from his plate. It resembled eggs.

Jennifer tried it. It tasted like eggs to her.

"What are we eating?" she asked.

"You're going to Horse's partner on the inside of the immersive internet environments," Butterfly said, "I'll be on the outside, helping when I can with the fragments that are left of the internet. Connecting the old dots."

Tamar found the white fluffy substance to resemble bread. She glanced at Butterfly. Butterfly's hair was tied back, and she wore white pants and a white shirt which had an institutional look. Tamar herself was wearing a light blue pair of pants and matching shirt that she'd been given by an orderly the night before.

She compared Butterfly to RHF. RHF wore a patterned flannel shirt and torn up jeans. He wore a religious symbol around his neck which Tamar didn't recognize; it was a black teardrop shape with a white dot in the center of the drop with the inverse shape above it. The two teardrops nested to form circle.

Tamar didn't understand why he wore what he did. Butterfly looked ready to work.

"Internet isn't what it used to be, now sometimes you need someone on the outside. She can't really follow what we're doing exactly out here, but she can follow the output of the environments we are in and push us through servers," RHF said, chewing his food at the same time, "and you're eating yeast. Specially grown in our very own labs on the third and fourth floor. Big part of the diet around here."

I feel better knowing what it is, Tamar thought. She ate faster.

Butterfly finished first and stood up. She sat at the computer and put music on. It reminded Tamar of old movies.

"You like Alice and Chains?" RHF asked.

Tamar shook her head no. She had never heard of them.

"Me and Fly are big fans of the nineteen nineties," he said. "You'll probably catch onto it as we go."

Tamar agreed that she probably would. She used the white bread yeast to eat the last of the red gel yeast, which tasted like a citrus fruit to her.

RHF put his half full plate on top of Butterfly's. Tamar copied him, putting her plate under both. He lit a cigarette.

She wondered how The Yallov Society could supply him with so many of the illicit sticks.

RHF walked to the cots, stubbing his cigarette out in the remainder of his egg yeast as he passed the end of the desk, and lay down on a cot. Tamar lay on the other and pulled the headgear over her eyes.

Since Raging Butterfly was in control, the headgear whirled on and Jennifer found herself standing on a red plush carpet in her bare feet, dressed as she had been on the outside. Four black walls, blank except for one door formed a room around her.

RHF appeared in front of her, his body snapping into existence from the soles of his feet upwards over the span of several seconds.

"This isn't the real internet, it's just a training program, more for our lower internet grunts than upper level folks like you and me but it'll introduce you to the internet as well as any." he said. "Remember no

one on the internet is law abiding, since just using it is illegal. All of us are dangerous. The scenario of the training program is this; a rich fellow is in the next room getting some from a virtual hooker. The real virtual girls cost money, mostly, and lots of guys say automated virtual girls lack magic. On the floor is a pair of pants, and inside is a wallet. You have to sneak into his virtual space, and get the credit card number out of his wallet. He has a gun. A lot of folks on the real internet these days are carrying them. Don't forget that the internet is only mostly pretend; you are running electric current through your brain, and these gun programs can fry you quicker than you can get yourself out. Programs look like the everyday objects they mimic, usually. That's usually how they're programmed. Like how servers look like buildings and stuff.

"And it doesn't matter if you could get yourself out in time. You're going to be locked into the room anyway. It's encrypted. The only way to shut your headgear off is to leave the virtual room for somewhere not encrypted then log out. Encryption is scary, I knew a guy who tried to hide in the walls of an encrypted building, he hit a program flaw, and now he's a vegetable, he can't leave, and we can't find him. Cut the headgear's power and he'll go brain-dead. Of course this is just a training program. No real danger. Only pretend encryption. You remember what you're supposed to do?"

Tamar nodded.

I'm not daydreaming, she thought, you fuck.

"Get the wallet?" she said.

"If he shoots you, you'll just get kicked back here. Other than that, the program runs pretty real. It's not really encrypted, so there's no danger. Fly can pull you whenever. Just press the button in your pants. Have fun, little sister. I'm going to do some reading."

Annoyed with his repetition, Tamar nodded.

RHF sat back against a corner, away from the door. He took a pack of cigarettes out of his front pocket and lit one with a match. From his back pocket he took a paper back book.

Jennifer walked to the door. She opened it. Behind the door was a sheet of black that looked solid as the door had. She reached out and her arm passed through it. She stepped forward.

Inside she saw a hotel like room, with a bed in the center, red lamps, and a vibrating bed. On the bed a fat man was having sex with a thin blonde in the missionary position. Tamar saw that the bed was vibrating. The woman screamed. The fat man jerked backwards, flopped to the floor, grabbed his pants, and pulled a gun out. Tamar found herself back in the red carpet room. RHF sat reading in the corner.

"That wasn't fair," she said.

The Rocking Horse Frost didn't respond.

She got down on her hands and knees and opened the door. The man was going at the women like before, her breasts flopping like pudding sacs and sweat dripping off the man's nose onto her face. She fought follow the woman's eyes, to look at the far wall, and caught a glimpse of a television when the man moved to the left to lean on an elbow. Tamar backed out of the room.

"Why would a man want a whore who watches TV?" she said to RHF, who was looking up from his book. "This is stupid."

"Don't underestimate people. Get in there. You want to finish this today or chat?"

Jennifer opened the door and inched into the room on her stomach. She wasn't careful about silence, as she was sure the sound of sex the man's moaning and the vibrating mattress concealed the sound of her clothes on the carpet.

She got under the bed without anyone seeing her. It vibrated and bounced over her. On one thrust it struck her in the back. The man's pants were on the floor a few feet away, in the direction of the TV. She reached out a hand for the man's pants. His groans got louder and stopped.

Shit, Tamar thought. She pulled her arm back under the bed and held her breath.

"You get on top now, face the TV, and turn the channels," the man said.

Bouncing again mixed with the vibrating, but not as strong as when the man had been on top. Tamar waited for his moans, and when they began again, she reached out and grabbed his pants in a quick movement.

"What was that?" she heard him say. She patted around for the gun, but before she found it she was in the red carpet room.

"Try again," RHF said.

Hours before Tamar would awaken, Syd stopped and sat down on someone's lawn in the residential area of the inner circle, on his way back to Dave and Alexa's. A streetlight shined on him. A soft plastic dinosaur see-saw gathered dew on his right.

Syd rubbed the grass under him. It had a grassy feeling and he thought that if the dirt under it hadn't obviously been made of a rubbery substance, he would have believed the grass to be real and living. He pulled some of it out and thrown it at the dinosaur.

He thought about what he was doing there.

I knew, he thought, when I woke up I'd meet her at the agency. I just didn't know her name. I know someone took her from me. I know someone took something from her, after they made her brains run into the street.

He threw more of the grass and dirt at the dinosaur. It bounced off from the squishy surface.

"I don't know shit," he'd said "except that Plow can't be right."

He pressed the grass below him with his palms, feeling its resistance, how it pushed his hands. Leaning back he took in the air of the night, and looked up into the pink two o'clock AM sky.

Plow isn't right, he thought, it's not revenge. I need to know why she ran from me. I just need to know.

He thought about the SCF. He'd heard about it before, from a crook cop named Robert. The foc head cop who looked out for him after some foc donations, and had gone crazy, and who Syd had



seen with Somnam in the bar. Tracking the man down after he'd disappeared was how Syd had heard about the dream deprivation bar in the first place.

Cops know things, he thought, and Robert dealt with drug dealers. Subservients.

So instead of going straight back to Dave and Alexa's, he decided to go back over to Champs. Before getting on the train, he stopped in an all night pharmacy, and bought some allergy medicine that caused drowsiness for six times its worth from a scared looking pharmacy worker kid.

On the train, he broke the caplets open and poured the powder onto a scrap of newspaper he tore from the paper on the empty seat next to him. He folded it into an envelope and put it in the pocket of his pants. By the time the train got to the stop near the bar, it was raining.

He sprinted into Champ's.

The rain makes this place smell even worse, he thought.

A small stream of water ran down a channel in the hard floor of the bar in front of Syd's toes, a basic hurricane rain protection method in renovated old buildings. Syd's old room had one.

Most of the water at Champ's ran across the floor, not in the tiny river at Syd's feet.

The problem here, Syd thought, is that their channel is clogged.

What normally would have served as a drain ditch to the sewer for the drippings of enamel walls that drew in small amounts of moisture from hurricane rains was dammed up further upstream by wads of paper, odd bits of fabric, and things that Syd could not identify. Water ran in thin sheets from the open space of the room up against the bar, where it made its way to the drainage ditch in the back corner.

The damp environment did no improve the air quality of Champ's. Breathing through his mouth he walked to the bar and sat next to Robert. The bartender was a young man with a scar that ran from his left nostril down under the collar of his shirt.

He smiled at Syd.

"What'll it be?" he said.

Syd thought about how long it had probably been since someone coherent did more than drop off insane underlings and thought he understood why the man was happy to see him.

"Vodka and tonic, please," he said.

Syd turned to Robert.

"How did you lose that pant leg, Robby?" he said.

Robert swayed and looked at Syd through his right eye, his left eye obscured by a large brown flat dreadlock of hair that reached his cheekbone.

"San Quentin, double," he said, and leaned back onto the bar with his elbows.

The bartender came back and set down the vodka tonic. Syd paid him.

"What brings you here?" the bartender said, smiling. His eyes looked bright.

Syd pointed at Robert and gave him a little push. "Pandas don't eat bananas, pandas don't eat bananas," Robert said. Robert turned back to his drink, which was neon blue and had an umbrella in it.

The bartender looked at Syd and raised an eyebrow.

"Why the umbrella?" Syd said.

"The guy cries if you leave it out. Strange folks come in here," the bartender said, "and you don't seem like you belong exactly."

Syd felt confused.

Syd put twenty dollars down on the bar.

"Lava Lamp, no ice," someone said from down the bar.

The bartender looked at the money but turned to prepare the drink. Syd decided to talk to the man's back.

"I was thinking of taking my friend Robby out of here. Do you mind?"

The insta-sleep in the back of the bar shut loudly. Syd jumped, startled.

The bartender turned around. The drink was also neon blue, with a small boat floating on top. Syd wondered if the boat was edible.

"Blue's the rage right now in Champs," the bartender said, "These people go through fads like elementary school kids." He walked to the end of the bar and set the drink down in front of a woman who Syd thought might have been attractive several weeks ago.

The bartender walked back to Syd and looked him in the face.

"That fucker is the worst smelling of all of them right now. And soon he'll forget how to order drinks, and to drink anything at all, or eat, and then he'll die. And then I'll have to call whoever set up his account to have them come down and collect the body. I'll probably be told to drag him outside. You want him, he's free. He starts screaming though, I'll have to toss you. These people aren't fun when they're upset, and they react in groups."

Syd thought about drug dealing, and how he was glad that he hadn't been offered a job in the dream deprivation bar industry instead. The guilt had to be worse than Plow's pimps probably felt. He wondered if the bar had to pay the police, or if the police didn't mind enough to blackmail them.

He took the newspaper envelope out and poured the contents into Robert's drink.

After Syd had had time to drink one and a half more vodka tonics Robert fell forward onto the bar and slumped out of his seat onto the stinking damp floor. Syd finished his drink slowly. Robert slowly caught a small lake of rain water as he lay half prostrate against the front of the bar. No one in the bar looked at him or Robert's sleeping body.

Syd asked for and got the bar's phone from the bartender. He called a cab before he got up, leaving the twenty on the bar for tip and as a gesture of good will towards the barkeep, hoping it wasn't an insult.

He got his hands under Robert's armpits and dragged the body out into the street. The hurricane rain was torrential, gallons running in the

ditch in front of the sidewalk. It was the fifth hurricane of the summer, and standing in the rain Syd thought to himself it seemed to be one of the strongest. All of his clothes were saturated in moments. He wished he'd gotten his hurricane coat out after Plow's prompting.

At least there's not bad wind, Syd thought.

Once he'd seen a hurricane with winds create a strange upward suction as the storm's moving air flowed over the city walls and then buildings. In person, he'd watched newspapers and litter be pulled into the sky. On the news he'd seen that small objects, along with pets and some very unlucky small children were pulled up and dropped to their deaths. Some were never found.

Syd worried that the cab wouldn't come because of the rain until the cab did come. Syd paid the piano string looking cabbie well, and the cabbie helped Syd carry the light body of the ex-cop to his brother's door. They spread Robert out prostrate across the doorstep, on his back.

When the cab drove off, Syd tried to open the door. It was locked. He pressed the doorbell. Dave opened the door.

"This is an old friend of mine, he needs my help. I'm putting him in the basement," Syd said. He stepped forward, placing his foot into the hallway.

"No," Dave said. "No fucking way you're bringing that trash in here."

The rain hitting Syd's body ran down his clothes and some of it ran off from his pant leg and onto the floor of Dave's house. Syd stared into Dave's face. The water spot grew over the artificial hardwood.

"That's going to stain," Syd said. "Come on, don't turn away an ex-cop. What kind of a policeman are you? You a subservient?"

Dave squinted his eyes. Syd saw his brother's cheeks turn red, but Syd didn't remove his foot or leg from the doorway.

Dave stepped back. Syd got his hands under Robert's armpits and began to drag the stinking man into the home.

"Don't pull his shoes across the wood," Dave said, and picked up

the man's legs. The sound of water dripping off from the two men who'd been outside seemed very loud to Syd. He felt as if he was betraying his brother.

They put Robert down in front of the bar.

"You have three days," Dave said. "I know what kind of scum this is."

With his brother upstairs, Syd cut the cord from one of Dave's basement lamps and tied Robert's hands together and to a section of brass tubing that ran along the base of Dave's bar. He himself lay down on the couch across from Robert.

"Wait until tomorrow, when you wake up," Syd said. "We'll have a nice chat then. And you'll get to see what those fucking insta-sleeps did to you. It's going to be a party."

Syd heard footsteps on the stairs and looked up to see Dave coming back downstairs. He readied himself for a fight.

Dave explained that Alexa wanted them to clean Robert up, if he was going to stay with them with the baby. He did not enquire about Robert's being tied. Twelve hours of sleep, nearly all of it REM, would only almost cure him of whatever dream deprivation had done to his mind. Syd suspected that Dave had taken a look at Robert and known where he had been, or at least the kind of place he'd been, and that even if the alcohol hadn't severely damaged his brain, that he would be delirious at first on awakening. They talked. Syd thought that Dave seemed to agree that Robert should wake up tied, and to believe that Robert really was his friend.

They cleaned him up in the bathtub and dressed him together. They shaved his matted hair.

When they were done Dave gave Syd handcuffs. "I want him gone by eleven o'clock tomorrow night," he said. "Keep him in the basement. Keep an eye on him. And keep your civic social volunteering to things that don't involve my house in the future."

Syd woke up in the late morning on the couch with an ache in his back. Rain still pelted the house, he could hear it despite being in the

basement. He marveled at how dry it was; Dave's wall pump system seemed incredible after the open drainage system for enamel leak management he was used to.

He rolled over and looked at Robert. The man was still asleep. Syd went upstairs and made sure Alexa was at work, and that the baby was at daycare. He got one of Dave's plain t-shirts and tied it over his head. He carefully cut two eyeholes in it, put the large kitchen knife in his back pocket and went downstairs. He put the knife on the couch.

He rolled Robert over onto his back and straddled the sleeping man. Syd thought Robert looked like someone who should have been famous. His face had strong angles, and his hair was dull blonde. The muscles which Syd remembered from when Robert was a cop were gone, worn away from disuse.

The only thing you've done for months is eat, drink, and walk to the sleeping booth, Syd thought, and I can't wait to tell you about it.

He knew that was a lie.

Syd leaned his face forward over Robert's, to look as menacing as possible. He took Robert by the shoulders and shook him.

Robert's eyes opened. He fought against his bonds until he seemed to realize something wasn't right. Then his eyes opened wider and he began to squirm under Syd. He struggled for less than a minute before he was panting and out of breath.

"Tell me what you know about SCF's actions against telepaths from when you were a cop, and not a waste, and I won't kill you," Syd said. He stood up and stepped back away from the man.

Robert began to thrash his body, and Syd saw drops of blood from his wrists fall to the artificial wood floor. Robert stopped, breathing so hard Syd thought the man might pass out.

Syd watched the man get his breath back. He thought about how strange it must be to come out of an insane dreamless existence into a place you've never been, tied and confused. Syd got the knife off from the couch and held it at his side, his arm limp.

"Who are you?" Robert said.

Syd tapped the flat side of the knife against his thigh. "I'm growing impatient, Robert," he said.

Robert stared at him. "I've been a sleep machine junkie, haven't I?" he said. "That's how you captured me."

Syd did not respond. Blood rushed in his face, and he heard white noise over the constant background of the rain. He stepped forward straddled the man again, and put the knife against Robert's throat.

"Tell me," Robert said.

"Someone left you insane and ranting at Champs with an open account," Syd said. He started to press the knife into Robert's throat. He saw blood and lessened the pressure.

"Get off from me and I'll talk," Robert said. His guts vibrated under Syd's thighs. Syd got up.

"You're an ex-cop now," Syd said, "the mayor's boys are never going to want you back. Just talk. You only have your life to lose."

Robert drooled on himself and shook his head from side to side. He stopped shaking and steadied himself. "I was in the anti-drug force, not the telepath control force."

Alright, alright, Syd thought.

He pulled the sweatshirt off from his head.

"Syd?" said Robert.

Syd knelt down and unlocked the handcuffs. Robert sat up against the bar. His breath was quick and shallow. Syd stood.

He knew they had been something like friends once. Robert had protected Syd, and Syd never ratted on Robert.

"I'm sorry I tied you up," Syd said, "I married an agency girl, then someone shot her. Someone else with information said that the mayor ordered his top boys to start firing at will. I'm mourning and pissed off and I'm going to find out why someone shot her. I don't why I thought you could help me, you've been a waste for months."

Robert didn't move. "Just take it easy, Syd."

Syd felt himself getting angry.

I don't want your fucking cop talk, he thought.

"Talk, or I'll cut you," he said.

"You aren't going to cut anybody," Robert said.

"This isn't the TV, Robbie-Baby," Syd said.

Syd took two steps to the panting man and kicked him in the face. Barefoot, he felt Robert's nose cartilage bend under the bottom of his foot. He kicked him again, a roundhouse kick in the side of the head and Robert fell over on his side.

"I took my mask off, man," Syd said, "I dropped the gangster persona. I tried to be nice."

Robert's faith necklace, an eagle on a twig, fell out of his shirt. Syd stepped on the pendant and pressed down, tightening the chain around Robert's neck.

"I didn't want to have to do this," Syd said, "but you're going to talk, and you're not going to fucking daytime cop show talk me."

He looked down and saw that Robert was crying. He remembered Somnam dead in the street and pushed down harder.

"Talk, cop, or you'll fucking choke to death."

Robert made choking sounds and slammed his palm against the fake wood floor.

"Does that mean you want to talk?" Syd said.

Robert slammed the floor again several times, and Syd took his foot off from the pendant and chain. He realized the space in-between his big toe and pointer toe was bleeding from the chain. He stared into Roberts face and held the knife up, his knuckles white around the handle.

"Tell me what you know," he said.

"How long was I out?" Robert said.

Syd considered kicking him again but didn't. "I don't know. Long enough for your clothes to rot."

Robert took several deep breaths and rubbed his neck.

"Fuck, Syd," he said. "That hurt."

Syd shrugged. "I didn't hit you that hard. I got upset."

"I don't know much," Robert said, "There was talk of telepaths



banding together, living under the city somewhere. We had a telepath, who hated other telepaths because he was one. He went undercover, into their midst. He probably still is. I don't remember much. I wasn't sleeping, and the things I wasn't telling my therapist were beginning to make me unravel. That's all I can tell you."

Syd let his grip relax some. He looked into Robert's eyes.

"What was the undercover one's name?"

"Grace."

Syd kicked the handcuffs toward Robert. "Handcuff yourself back up."

He pushed the handcuffs back across the floor.

"Wait," he said, "I can't tell you anything else but if you let me go I have something you'll want to see. Truce?"

Syd consented. Robert owed him his life, and even though Syd had kicked him in the head, Syd felt he had no reason not to trust him.

He left the knife behind and they took a train to Robert's old house. Robert smashed a window with his elbow, broke the pane glass away, and crawled inside. He let Syd in through the front.

He went back into the house while Syd waited, wondering if Robert would come back with a gun and shoot him. Robert came back with an envelope. He handed it to Syd. "This is their sign," he said, "you wear it, and they'll think you're one of them. You get caught by a cop and tested for telepathy, they're going to think you killed a cop. Be careful. Still a truce?" He held out his hand. Syd shook. He didn't want to have to watch his back for Robert's friends.

Outside Syd looked at the necklace. It was a religious pendant but he'd never seen it before. Three strands, similar to spaghetti were stacked parallel and on top of each other, in gentle S curves. It hung parallel to the ground.

He took off his circular faith necklace and put on the strange one.

Tamar had not left the virtual world. RHF had left the virtual space for several hours and come back, but Jennifer had not left. She'd slept in a space that Raging Butterfly had connected her to, an

abandoned virtual space called Cardenas set up years ago by a long dead drug ring for leisure.

She'd been alone there. The sleeping space had been anti-gravity, with white padded walls and gentle fans to slow you from their surface. When she woke up she had been nearly solitary in the middle of the room, slipping a few feet in one direction, then a few feet in the opposite one. It reminded her of being rocked in a hammock.

Her breakfast had been rich, and she'd eaten it on a cliff over on a sea like the Mediterranean, except the Cardenas sea was populated by manatee like creatures of rainbow colors that leapt into the air like dolphins.

Frost had found her, sitting at a wicker table near the cliff edge, sipping a glass of wine that would have cost more than most buildings in Steeple City. He'd sat next to her.

"We've put an IV in your body," he'd said. "Don't stay again tonight."

She'd given him the bottle, and he'd poured a glass of the blood red liquid.

"I won't," she'd said.

This opulence isn't helping me help The Yallov Society anyway, she'd thought.

She'd sipped the wine and thought about how she'd seen the video of the internet addicts, knew why it was illegal. She'd decided she didn't have to worry about herself.

Before leaving, they'd passed through a program in one of the areas that removed the programming of the alcohol, sobering their virtual selves. It had resembled the shoplifting prevention devices that Tamar remembered from department store doorways.

Tamar had learned what felt to her like a huge amount of information about the internet and virtual space. Three quarters of the people creating and running networks were criminals in more ways than using virtual equipment. The internet was a dated terminology

that no longer made sense; the virtual machines were linked to satellites that still orbited the earth, and people set up individual networks which broadcasted to the satellites. The different networks/servers were only connected to each other by the fact that they could be accessed by the same satellites, with the same equipment. The satellites had been put in place before the epidemics, and no geographic area since then had developed enough money or cared enough to fly up and shut them off. Raging Butterfly, and other non-immersive computer users in The Yallov Society connected the user with the different networks. Tamar did not know how other people connected solo and outside of the society.

A smaller percentage of the people using the internet were otherwise normal people. They created networks for their friends, small surreal fantasy worlds, games, and other entertainments. Many of them also searched through and navigated Fallen Network.

Fallen Network, originally known as The Globalized Web, was the fragments of the old, once legal internet. It was in physical reality a huge orbiting computer that communicated with the satellites. Old government information, some of it two hundred years old, and the personal networks of millions of dead people were stored on the floating mass. In virtual space Fallen Network was a stable city of rooms and planets filled with fascination for Tamar.

The one other group of people that still used virtual space were governments. The Steeple City police used it, both for training programs and for information storage.

Tamar and Frost stood in the beginning of a stolen copy of one of the mayor's police training networks. It was part of the mayor's police anti internet user training programs, and instated into The Yallov Society for their most capable virtual user training.

They stood in a hallway that resembled a metal tunnel, but it pulsed like the flesh of a giant heart. The reflections the surface gave were impossible, turning Tamar's body into kaleidoscope like moving fragments.

She had been put in charge of her and RHF's programs. RHF was in charge of environmental interaction. There was crossover in duties, but each team of two in The Yallov Society had such a split.

The goal of the training program was to infiltrate the virtual space, and eaves-drop on two important people on the inside.

The tunnel was a gateway into the virtual space. Raging Butterfly had connected them to it, the extent of her position on the team. RHF lit a cigarette. 360 degrees of the tunnel lit up around him, breaking the light given off by the cigarette into red and green lights.

He threw it on the ground and stomped it out.

"I don't know how stable this is," he said. "We should get into the network before it crashes and Fly has to start all over."

Tamar thought Frost looked better than he had when she had first come to the Society. His face was clean shaven and his hair looked clean. She knew they were coming to the end of their training, and that a celebration would follow, and wondered if she should have prepared instead of indulging herself at Cardenas all night.

At the end of the tunnel there was a milky glass. Behind the glass was the virtual space, and Tamar and RHF knew from Butterfly's transmission from the outside that she'd removed its physicality. They would be able to walk through it. A man stood on the other side, in a long hotel like hallway, standing at the end of the hall in front of a door facing them. Butterfly had said that she had broken in through an elevator, so RHF and Tamar had decided he must be an elevator guard.

Tamar took a machine out of her pocket that resembled a flashlight lens. She held it up to her eye and looked at the man. He exploded into a flashing burst of shifting light through the lens.

"He's automated, not real," she said. "That means it doesn't matter where his eyes are, he'll probably perceive us as soon as we step into his hallway, right?"

Frost nodded. Despite the fact that they were now training together, Tamar still thought of him as her trainer. "Sorry," she said.

She was trying to stop the habit. The Rocking Horse Frost had complained many times.

"I'm going to try something," she said. She knew the door Butterfly had opened was not two way.

She ran to the end of the tunnel and stepped into the guards hallway. As soon as she was inside, she stepped back. The man ran towards her and the tunnel, firing his gun. The bullets did not enter the hacked tunnel. He disappeared when he reached the milky glass wall. The guard program had encountered an error.

She ran into the hallway, knowing that the man would probably reset in thirty seconds in front of the elevator, the network thinking it had made a mistake. She heard RHF panting come up behind her as they ran towards the door the man had been guarding. She stopped.

RHF began feeling around the floor on the hallway around the door with a white glove on. On the back of the glove there was a small green screen with readouts which he had been trained in. They meant to Tamar. She put her hand on the doorknob. If the man reappeared, she was going through the door, if she would have time.

"Found a glitch," RHF said, "jump here right now, headfirst."

He pointed at the space where the off white painted wall met the red patterned carpet. Tamar dove where he pointed.

She saw only the color blue, duller than the sky but infinite, and then everything around her was black. The hallway where she had been flickered between existing and complete darkness on her left. On her right an institutional bathroom flickered the same way.

"We're in the walls, everyone's favorite basic trick," Frost said. "No one should be able to see us or here us. If you step out of the walls, you're going to be in that room and not be able to get back unless we find another glitch. So be careful."

She followed the wall along the hallway, passing rooms like those in office buildings. Empty cubicle rooms, conference rooms, and single small offices with daytime views of a city skyline she did not recognize.

She turned a corner and saw a man go into a building on the opposite side of the hallway. She crawled all the way to the end of the hall, and crossed to the other side of the hallway by balancing across the space that was the doorway to the room at the end. Frost followed her.

She moved into the wall that bordered the room where the man had gone and the room next to it, and looked at the flicker. Ten men sat around one of the tables.

"Bingo," Frost said.

Tamar was surprised that it had been so simple. She started to say so, but RHF held up a palm in a gesture for silence. From his pocket he pulled a machine that looked like a straw, and slid it through the wall near the floor. The men's voices filled the wallspace environment.

They were rewarded with fireworks.

The room ceased to exist and they floated in nothingness, with fireworks exploding around them. Tamar's entire vision filled with altering colors. Letters began to form in stationary colored lights that resembled gigantic neon signs. They spelled out "The Rocking Horse Frost, Tamar, and Raging Butterfly have successfully completed Team Training."

The fireworks stopped, leaving traces of their bright colors in Tamar's eyes. The program dumped them to the red carpet room, and Tamar pushed the button in her pocket and saw the ceiling of The Yallov Society building.

Her head ached with hunger, her mouth had a horrible taste in it, and the lights behind the black bar of the headgear burned her eyes. The memory of the taste of vodka teased her. She wanted a drink. She wanted to go to sleep. Her eyes started to close.

Someone stood over her who she recognized as Raging Butterfly after several seconds. Butterfly wore a long white dress. She was talking to someone, to RHF. Tamar felt her removing the internet heard gear, and then Tamar fell asleep.

She woke up with the IV still in her arm. It burned. She sat up and shook her head. The room was empty, except for the two cots, headgear, and desk with Butterfly's computer.

Like when they brought me here, she thought.

After slipping the IV out of her arm she stood up and stretched. She saw the headgear and wanted to plug herself back into Fallen Network. She thought of the hotels with robot bartenders and floating couches, in tropical areas where people used to meet, sip champagne, swim, and fuck on the beach. All empty now, except for criminals and common people driven to crime by the internet, both of whom so few the chances of running into one by accident were miniscule. It had a macabre pull to her, like an abandoned school rumored to be haunted she'd heard of when she was a little girl in the city.

I shouldn't, she thought. I can't get addicted.

She looked at the headgear and realized she didn't know how to access anything with Raging Butterfly's help. She decided this probably was not an accident on the part of The Yallov people.

They'll show me, she thought, when they're convinced I can control myself.

She felt foolish for staying in the virtual space the night before.

She stood up and stretched her arms over her head. A note lay on the desk.

"They're throwing a party for us. It's sort of an acceptance party. They'll be giving us our necklaces. You'll be overdressed. I thought you needed the sleep so I didn't let them fit you. Sorry. Take the elevator to the forty third floor. Yours, The Rocking Horse Frost."

Her black hair felt matted, and she could smell the sharp stink of her own perspiration on her skin an in the unwashed blue hospital gown like clothing. Anger filled her.

I can't go anywhere like this, she thought.

She decided to look for a shower, and clean clothes.

In the elevator she punched floor four. She'd been told in passing

that the lower floors were dormitories for some of the society.

It took six floors before she found a shower, a large empty shower in what looked like a communal locker room. Everywhere she'd gone had been empty, no people. Unnerved, she showered. It was like being in one of the outer rims of the city in the early morning, when everyone was at home, enjoying their night.

She found a bin of clothes that smelled clean among the lockers, denim like pants and button down shirts. She changed. Next to the clothing bins were stacks of cabinets built into the walls, filled with shoes.

She got back in the elevator and punched 43. A distant rhythmic pounding filled the ascending car, louder as the car neared floor forty three. The elevator doors opened and Tamar fell against the back of the elevator.

A room she could not see the back or side walls of opened before her. People danced to a pounding rhythmic track feet from the opened elevator door, shapes like shadows danced close behind them, a visually impenetrable mass of people moving together. All dressed in white, the men in pants and the women in skirts. The floor under them was blue, with shifting circles and light like a camera under water aimed at the sun. Bass shook Tamar's clothes against her skin.

She caught her breath. A party, Frost had said. The elevator doors started to close, and she stuck her hand out.

Breath, she thought.

A scream went up from the crowd. The floor disappeared under them, revealing a distant star field. It looked from Tamar's perspective as if they were dancing on a glass platform over space. The music turned to white noise, but the people still moved.

Breath, she thought, and the music shifted back.

The elevator started to close again. She tried to step out onto the emptiness, reaching with her foot, and found the solid sooner than she expected. The star field was far away, but the floor was not. She



had no sense of where she was in the environment and fell under the moving pale legs of one of the girls closest to her. Arms hooked under Tamar's armpits and pulled her up. The girl she'd fallen in front of smiled at her. Tamar didn't know who had picked her up. Warmness, solid, rubbed on her back. The circle of empty space in front of the elevator got smaller, her island of safety being flooded she started to panic again.

The girl, pretty and pale with red eyes, smiled again without stopping her dancing took Tamar's hand. She pulled Tamar close and locked eyes with her. Her breath smelled like alcohol.

It has been so long, Tamar thought, since I had a drink.

The girl broke the embrace and Tamar by the wrist. Her grip hurt. She pulled Tamar forward, into the mass of people. Tamar looked up, stars distant in the ceiling and on the walls. The white points stretched forming lines and Tamar crashed into four more moving bodies. More hands under her armpits lifting her up.

The girl leaned into Tamar's ear and yelled. "Don't look down or up. Just walk automatic."

The dance floor animation began to shift. Ignoring the girl's advice Tamar looked down. Blue light with laser like beams replaced the black nothingness of the star field. In the distance, Tamar saw a school of red fish.

She looked up and tried to ignore the lack of a visual floor. The girl led her through the people, faceless people dressed in white that shifted in blue under the animated surroundings dancing to the same unchanging drum beat.

The girl stopped in the midst of the dancers. She leaned in again. Tamar turned her head, dodging what she thought was a kiss. The girl shouted into Tamar's ear, "I saw your picture. Wait here."

Tamar stood. People were close, suffocating in their proximity. Faces started to solidify from the moving mass, the overloading of movement of repetition being replaced by her perception of difference. Flailing limbs began to belong to bodies. Noses shaped

themselves into different sizes. A black man fell into her and she caught him. He smiled, and started to dance. Herself stationary, for a moment she allowed eye contact. He smiled again and turned away from her. The opening around her began to close in. Wind from moving bodies cooled the sweat on her face.

I wonder how much electricity this uses, she thought. She smiled.

She felt a hand on her upper arm and she yielded to the pressure, turning around. The Rocking Horse Frost released his grip and smiled at her. Not dressed in white, but in a red blocky shirt and black jean-like pants he smiled at her. Raging Butterfly was next to him, wearing a white skirt and tiny tight glove of a shirt. Nipples, the size of dimes, visible beneath the sheer white fabric stood out on her pear breasts. Tamar realized she was staring and looked back at Frost.

RHF held out a black device that looked like a phone made out of perfect cubes. He yelled in her ear like the girl had done. Struggling to hear him over the noise, Tamar listened. "Sorry, you have to call them and tell them you're here. I wanted to wait by the elevator but Fly wanted to dance. It's her party too, I felt I should go. I sorry I haveâ€¦"

Tamar pulled her ear away from his mouth. The end of statement blended in with the rhythm and turned to nothing. She leaned into his ear. His hair smelled of fruit.

"This is insane," she said.

Frost nodded. Fly put a hand on his elbow and tugged, but he waved an open hand at her. She shrugged, and her breasts bounced. Her back disappeared into the moving mass.

"They're blocking our telepathy electronically," Frost said. He fell forward and Tamar felt his weight compress her shoulders on the hard floor. They were pulled to their feet. People danced and rubbed her on all sides except her front, which faced Frost. She pulled him against her, felt his body's contours rub against hers. She leaned her mouth back into his ear.

"I meant the party," she said.

The people rubbing against her forced her body to move with the

rhythm. The crowd compressed around them, the force of so many people pressing in from the outsides held them all on their feet.

Frost yelled into her ear. "Place is getting crowded. Call."

She brought the device to her ear like it was a phone.

What do I say? she thought.

"I'm here," she yelled into cube device.

The rhythm cut. Some sweaty bodies around her stopped, with more people stopping dancing as they realized the music was gone. The water scene from the floor, walls, and ceiling disappeared, projected no light. A hand from behind her ran up her thigh, over her stomach, and squeezed a breast. She pushed it off and it did not return. Lights went up. A deep male voice echoed around them.

"The whole team is here now."

The floor took on the appearance of grass pressed flat under a sheet of glass. Mountains in the distance with rolling hills and a blue sky spread up the walls and ceiling.

Tamar's ears hissed running water white noise. RHF led her further away from the elevator, in the same direction the girl with red eyes had led her. Over the ringing in her ears she heard panting and murmurs. A path began to part in front of them, people squeezed further into those next to them, opening a single file hallway in the mass.

For the first time she realized that the people who had been dancing had the elderly and child aged in their numbers. That they numbered a thousand at least. The ringing in her ears intensified.

Her feet followed Frost's sneakered shoes up some stairs. Frost's feet turned, she turned, and looked out.

A wash of people the size of a football field screamed. Orgasm blood rush filled her face, her fingertips, her stomach. The room fell silent.

The platform she stood on elevated her the height of a body over the crowd. Glancing left she saw Raging Butterfly was with them. Both Butterfly and RHF stood at attention, looking out over the crowd. She

copied them. Her mouth tasted like salt.

The enormity of what she had become a part of whitewashed her brain. She searched the faces below for Octavio, the one who had ranked her among the most hopeful, the one who she assumed had put her where she was. There were too many.

"I will now give them their necklaces" echoed through the space into silence. A shape moved in the corner of Tamar's eyes, but she stared ahead at the crown of a distant mountain, confident in the crowd's desire for her precision.

An old man she had never seen before stood in front of her. He had the long hair of Octavio. He held up a faith necklace, the pendant a square with a triangle on the inside.

I've never had a faith necklace before, she thought.

He put it on her and moved to stand in front of Raging Butterfly. Tamar focused on the mountain again, felt RHF and Butterfly took her hands and pull her. She followed Butterfly's long dark hair down the stairs. The rhythm pounded out again and the mass began to move like a bowl of water shaken by giant footsteps.

She sat down on the third step. Frost sat next to her. She could just see over the crowd, watched Butterfly disappear among them.

I never thought there could be so many, she thought. She realized she was crying.

A hand brushed her cheek. It was Frost. She looked at him and smiled.

I can't be here anymore, she thought. I can't dance with them.

"I'm sorry," she yelled into his ear.

Frost put his hand on her shoulder and yelled "You want to get out of here."

I don't know why, she thought. It's like a bar. It's bigger. There are drinks somewhere.

The rhythm shifted, moved into something simpler and more pounding. A melody began to come up. A scream from the crowd pushed her back like strong wind in an alley.

It's just too much, she thought, too much.

"I want to show you something anyway," RHF yelled. He took her hand and pulled her through the crowd. Led, she didn't feel as panicked.

They had to ask people who were dancing in the elevator to get out.

As the elevator softly let them fall away from the celebration Tamar began to feel less overwhelmed.

"I just never pictured so many people in this building, a room so big, anything so big," she said.

"It's ok," RHF said, "I have something I've wanted to show you anyway."

He took her to their internet room. Following RHF's instruction Tamar laid down on her cot and put her headgear on. The bar over her eyes glowed cool white then she felt herself enter virtual space.

Red carpet with Chinese figures under her shoes was the first thing she saw. The walls came in, shelves of hardcover books, like a library. She recalled sleeping under the tables in one of the Steeple City libraries and felt wistful.

Frost materialized from the feet up in front of her.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"Part of a dungeon I'm building," he said, "a dungeon being a virtual environment programmed by one person. Anyway, it's my house as I remember it. As I think I remember it. Cops got me when I was six. Probably most of what I remember is what my mom imagined she wanted. We were quite poor, I guess. That's what they tell me."

Frost rang his fingertips along one of the shelves of books. He held up his hand to show it was dirty.

"Took a long time to program the dust," he said. He wiped the dust off on his black pants, leaving a grey tint. "Let's go straight upstairs, to the roof," he said, "it's more fanciful up there."

He pulled the bookshelf over, stepping out of the way as it fell.

Behind it a staircase was revealed. "Programmer's shortcut," he said, "I'll cut it later."

The wooden staircase led to a door, which opened onto the roof. For the second time that night, Tamar saw computer generated stars over her head. The roof of the house stretched out, and she saw a table with a glass of wine and two glasses on it near the edge in front of her.

"I'll cut that later too," Frost said. "But lets sit."

She sat. The air had the cool bite of late fall in Steeple City. Movement down two stories below caught her eye. A Japanese garden. Candles burned in hollowed out rocks. Yellow butterflies flew through colored lights which turned them and tiny waterfalls underneath them into rainbows.

"You're mom had quite an imagination," she said.

RHF shrugged, sitting down. She joined him.

"I got carried away. It's more mine than hers now, really."

He poured them both glasses of pale yellow liquid. Tamar took a sip and saw Frost staring at her.

"I meant to ask you on the outside, when was the last time you were exposed to a spaires-machine? The old diseases still exist, you know? Living on the street and all?"

Tamar's hand tensed around the wine glass stem.

What the fuck does that mean? she thought.

The half empty wine bottle on the table began to grow.

"Get back, it must be a glitch," Frost said. He stood up and backed away. Tamar did the same, mindful of the drop off.

The bottle grew larger, and began to resemble an infant in its shape. An infant with a hat, Tamar realized. As the bottle grew, lines descended from the hat, hooked to shifting spaghetti like strands parallel with the table.

He' found me," she thought. He's found me.

The man with the jangling jewelry hat stood on the table, stretching his arms out towards Tamar.

Tamar saw the black bar of her headgear and the dull ceiling of her internet connection room.

"Did you see him?" she said, sitting up on the cot.

"Fuck, I saw it," Frost said. He looked pale. A cigarette appeared in his fingers and he stuck it in his mouth. He tried to light it and talk at the same time. "That was no glitch. Wasn't random enough." He got the cigarette lit.

"I've been seeing that man in places for days," Tamar said. "Not in the internet. I think he's dead."

Frost exhaled and nodded.

"Listen, kid," Old Man Plow said, "I got all the information for you I could. The mayor's office is shut up like a six year old's asshole."

They stood again in the catholic portion of the cemetery. The rain had stopped. A scent of freshness rose from the grass. The lights of the electronic section sparkled in the distance.

Syd had changed his clothes into some of Dave's while he and his wife had been out at work. Brown pants, a white oxford shirt, and a brown wool jacket that he hoped would make him look like a young honest citizen. The shirt's pocket bulged with one of Dave's scan able badges. He'd planned a stop to The Agency after meeting with Old Man Plow.

Syd fiddled in his pockets and pulled out a piece of paper, a packet of money falling out of the pocket onto the grass below when he did. They both stood around as if neither had noticed. Plow thought he'd been followed. Syd unfolded the piece of paper and pretended to read it.

After several seconds Plow dropped a packet of papers from his hand, then bent down and picked up both items.

Syd felt himself begin to grow impatient.

"I've paid you well. Just tell me what you know."

He could see Old Man Plow running his fingers against the packet of money, trying to gauge its thickness.

"Some telepaths have banded together into a small militant group,"

Plow said, "but your pretty necklace says someone else already told you that. They live underground somewhere. No one could tell me where. Apparently, The Mayor has heard, and ordered a full out strike against Telepaths, show no mercy style, eh? Suspected revolutionaries are to be shot on sight. More cops are being issued captured telepath slave boys, hop them up on Nash nowadays, get them nice and addicted, and then they only get more Nash if they deliver more teles. I got a name; Bluecollar. Supposed to be the leader of this new mission. He probably knows who killed your wife."

Syd thought about the amount of money he'd given Plow.

"How am I supposed to find this cop and get him to talk to me?"

Plow shrugged.

"You're the one with the cop brother."

Plow walked away. Syd didn't chase after him. He had another name to go with the name Grace.

Not that either of them means anything, he thought.

At the little boy with his last name's grave, he paused like he always did. The boy smiled out from the screen, yellow haired, somewhere on a coast with the ocean behind him.

Somnam, Syd thought, if I could have had you buried in a cemetery I would have.

After sleeping in another vintage sex experience hotel for a few hours, eating a sandwich behind a counter, and taking a foc pill, Syd went to The Agency building. He hoped his brother's clothes and badge would be convincing.

The same man sat him down behind the same metal desk.

"So, what kind of an appearance are you going for?" the man asked over pyramid folded fingers.

Fucker, thought Syd.

He took Dave's badge out and threw it on the table. It slid too far and landed in the man's lap. The man picked it up and looked at it. He set it down on the table.

"I want information, back files on a girl who used to live here. Her



name was Somnam," Syd said.

The man waved his hands in the air and wiggled his fingers. "So go to the second floor, information, and ask for Irene," he said. He slid the badge back across the table. It hit Syd in the stomach.

Syd left.

Thirty minutes later he sat on the sidewalk against a towering building two blocks down from The Agency, a mini-computer the size of his palm in his hand. He looked at it, contemplating turning it on. The computer held all of Somnam's agency records. The information was free to anyone that wanted it; he hadn't even needed to show the stolen badge.

Cars drove by. Gasoline engines with exaggerated noise systems on their exhaust made reverberations in-between the skyscrapers. People who walked the way Syd walked when he was late for something sped their way past.

Syd turned the computer on. It had three sections. "Health. Grades. Friends." He chose friends.

Yipping distracted him. He looked up to see a small spotted dog be yanked away by an annoyed looking woman in a stiff skirt.

He was given the choice of several information subgroups and organizational methods. He chose close friends organized by their apparent degree of closeness. A name, Casler, was at the top.

Syd stood up and stretched. He went back inside with what he hoped was a serious stride. After returning the little computer to the front desk he went upstairs and told the agency man he wanted to marry the girl named Casler. The man, strictly business, had him sign another contract and gave him a room number.

Syd opened the door on the brushed metal room. A female figure sat on the bed and then stood up. She smiled at him, short, pretty, with brown hair and the same uniform Somnam had been wearing when Syd had married days ago.

"Hi," she said. "I'm getting out of here, huh?"

She stood up, smoothed the little skirt down over the tops of her

bare legs.

"I want to tell you now," Syd said, "that I have no intention of sleeping with you, but you'll never have to be here again."

Anger or something that looked like it to Syd burned behind her eyes. She walked out of the room past him.

"Don't want me to freak out before you get me to the white sheets huh?" she said from down the hallway.

Syd followed her, caught up with her.

Taking Syd's hand as they walked, she rubbed the back of her index finger up and down his palm.

"You're hands aren't sweaty. You some kind of freak? Going to kill me?"

Red hair in the street. White opaque runnings in a red pool, black clots.

Syd shook.

"No," he said.

"If you're going to, whichever, but you better act real horny or the elevator man is going to know you're a freak."

Remembering the last time he'd walked past the elevator man, Syd prepared himself.

"You picked a good one sonâ€¦" the elevator man started. Syd stared into the man's eyes and he stopped.

Casler stood as tall as his shoulders as she leaned back against the far wall of the elevator. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared into Syd's face. He stared at the floor, feeling coolness from the sweat that evaporated off from his forehead.

"I'll buy you some reasonable clothes and then explain what's going on," Syd said. "It involves your friend Somnam. Do you have a favorite food?"

She stared at him. He could feel that she hated him.

It's not difficult to see, he thought.

Syd got on a bus, she followed. He picked a restaurant at random and they sat.

The waiter sat them in a booth. Casler sat opposite from him.

"Whiskey," Syd said. Casler didn't say anything and the waiter left.

A stained glass lamp hung from the ceiling on a chain over their table, casting them both in red light. The walls of their booth stretched up for feet over their heads, and gave the feeling of being alone, although Syd could make out the words of the three men sitting in the booth behind him. His lower back ached from the unpadded artificial wood.

A different waiter filled their glasses with water and walked away. Syd took a drink. Casler glared at him from across the table. His palms felt hot against the cool glass, and he stared at the ice that floated inside.

Syd knew suddenly that he didn't know why he'd gotten her out of The Agency. Her being Somnam's friend didn't seem like enough reason now that she sat across from him on the outside of her once barred world. She drummed her fingers on the table and the noise pierced his brain.

I do not have anything to say to her, he thought.

He drank the rest of the water.

"Thirsty?" Casler said. "Or having a bit of trouble with the old lady already?"

She smiled at him. Her teeth were small and round.

"I just realized I don't know why I married you," Syd said. He stared at the empty water glass in his hands and shook it, swirling the ice cubes around the bottom.

"Sex, probably," she said, "although perhaps you're just a lonely loser who needs me to hold at night, to keep the dark fear that no one will ever love you far enough away that you don't eat all the cold medicine in your house with a bottle of whiskey."

Syd felt anger forming in him.

I shouldn't be in this place, he thought, not with this bitchy short girl. Fuck her.

"I married Somnam. We were happy for the short time, for what it's

worth. Someone killed her. I looked into it, and now I think a war between the mayor's police and telepaths is about to go down. I'm confused, I'm fucking miserable, and for some reason I thought an ex-telepath who was her friend could help me as payment for being free. I know it doesn't make any sense now. I'm not going to fuck you, so drop it. Enjoy your freedom."

Like he was very angry, he took three times the cost of a meal out of his wallet and threw it on the table before standing up. He knew he felt sad.

Syd walked out into the street.

The faces of the people looked grotesque, like too little skin stretched over skulls and eyes. A child walked holding his father's hand, and Syd saw a car turn the corner down the street. Get inside, get inside, he thought. His fingers danced into his pocket, into an enamel pouch, and pulled out a foc pill. He chewed it. The taste was bitter, like bleach smelled. He swallowed. A street lamp cast a shadow over him, and he leaned his chest against it like an old drunk hugging a fence.

Something small and warm pressed into his back.

He turned. It was Casler. She was tacitly weeping, big drops dripping off from her chin onto the thin white fabric of her shirt.

"Tell me," she said, "about you and Somnam and how she died." She kept her eyes on the sidewalk.

Syd didn't think that it would be safe to talk about it too much in the daytime, near government buildings, where respectable people go to work. He told her why they should leave and she seemed to believe him.

He didn't want to go back to his apartment, so after taking her into a department store and buying her some pants, he took her on a bus to the intake of The Shur Canal, near the city wall.

The Shur Canal flowed up from underground into sight before going into the processing plant and continuing on to separate the most upper class inner ring of the city from the rest. After making its

complete circle, the water flowed back underground, exactly underneath the aboveground portion of canal, before the pump station pulled the water back up to ground level and purged it back outside the city walls. Outside of the city wall, with some engineering work and enamel, the canal water flowed back into the river it had come from where it continued on its way, except slightly more green from the Spaires Machine powder the water invariably picked up.

Syd sat down on a grassy hill above the area where the way flowed into the city, just upstream from the processing plant. Across the fifteen foot span of water an enamel wall separated the green outflow water, which he could just make out in the distance behind the wall. This was the only place the inflow water and outflow water flowed next to each other, and also the only place the outflow was aboveground.

Ducks swam and dove in the outflow river. For some reason Syd did not know, there were no ducks on the input side. The water was pumped in and out fifty feet from them through the city wall, and he'd heard that several fast turbines behind screens kept people from trying to break in or out through the water. He knew of no one who had tried.

The city wall cast a shadow over them, and much of the water processing and pumping plant that hummed in the near distance.

Casler sat next to him.

"I've never seen so much water," she said, smoothing her grey slacks.

Syd wondered again why the ducks preferred the green side. He tried to think of something else.

Bunching grass with his palms, Syd started to tell Casler about Somnam. As he moved through the story he tried to be clear that he was certain that things would have been well between him and her, clear about the things they'd said and done. When she didn't say anything after he told her about murder, he told her about Plow and Robert.

"If you tell anyone these things I'll probably go to jail," he said, "or

be killed." He stopped, he had no more story. The shadow of the city wall had moved to cover the entire water processing plant. All of the ducks had flown away. Only the hum, and the noise of outer most area of the city starting to wake up and get drunk answered him. They were not far from The West.

He looked at Casler. She sat, with her arms goose bumped and crossed over her chest.

"How could she have been involved in anything so quickly?" Casler said. "It's not possible. Maybe they were just going to rape her or something and accidentally shot her."

Syd felt around in the grass for a rock to throw into the water. He didn't find one.

"I don't know. No one called the house. No could have contacted her while I was asleep at Dave's; he has a security system. I don't think anyone could have gotten into my apartment."

I'm grasping at straws, he thought.

He hoped that she wouldn't leave him alone. He didn't want sex, he knew, but he didn't want her to leave him.

"Listen," she said. "Are you sure that felt that way about her, even though you only knew her for less than three days?"

"Yes," Syd whispered.

"She wasn't recovered when she left. She wasn't recovered when I knew her. Fuck, I'm not recovered, alright? Practically no one is in The Agency. We're born this way. All we learn how to do is hide it from their patsy ass telepath testing teles. You can choose not to send out thoughts. You can choose not to receive them. She probably just read your mind and loved you for it. I haven't read you. I hated the idea of being married."

Syd forced himself to not get think too many things at once. That Somnam might still have been telepathic changed many things.

Or maybe it doesn't change anything, he thought.

Images of Casler, younger, with Somnan, huddled over a desk in Agency uniforms. Casler reading a hardcover book. Kissing a boy on

her bunk, him getting pulled off, her getting punched in the face by someone tall dressed in black. Flourescent lights.

"Do you feel close to me?" Casler said.

"No," Syd said. She felt like a friend.

"I just sent you a bunch of my memories. You're a little telepathic. I don't think you'll ever be able to broadcast much, or receive anything that isn't forced on you. Me and Somnam found out we can only send stuff to weak telepathic people, so don't feel bad if you didn't get them. I took some of your memories too. We're not a good match. Somnam would have been a good match for you."

Syd realized his hands were shaking. Casler's news scared him. He did not know why. He knew why.

I've never read anyone's mind or seen anything out of the ordinary, he thought.

"I'm sorry I hated you," Casler said.

She began to talk. Syd learned that Casler and Somnam together had spent most of there free time in their teenage years hiding in corners learning how to send information to each other. They had also taught themselves how to "get a feel" for a person, which Syd understood to mean a general understanding of a personality through telepathy. Casler could send Syd whatever information she chose; not only feelings, but also concrete images. She'd sent him an image of a tree from the Agency's grounds, zoomed him up through the branches and around all the parts she'd been able to see outside her window. She made him describe them to her in detail to be sure he was really getting them.

She explained that sending images to teles took time and practice in sending thoughts; it was why, she thought, many telepaths were not captured before they got old. Parents usually didn't suspect until they were fed hallucination like images from their children, she thought. The Agency didn't teach them the finer points of telepath capture, but they were allowed to socialize and communicate with each other.

An hour later they still remained pressed against the grassy

ground. Syd's entire lower body ached. The grass was rough and his pants felt like freshly shattered rock fragments. Syd could feel his back chafing from rubbing against it. Neither of them had been able to come to any idea why Somnam would be outside or get shot.

The last few minutes had been silent, and Syd's mind had been wandering away from Somnam and unto food and sleep.

"So why exactly did you marry me?" Casler asked, looking up into the sky. There were no stars. The sky was a cloudless orange.

Syd looked at her pale throat. It reminded him of Somnam, and he felt an ache and a feeling like he was about to vomit.

"I don't know why. I was honest back in the restaurant. I don't know what I thought you could do for me."

Casler continued to stare at the sky, the parts of her long brown hair that had escaped her bun falling towards the ground.

"I was thinking, maybe if you give me that necklace," she said, "maybe I can get us both into the telepath group. If they see me, a telepath, wearing it. The group, I mean. Or maybe we can figure out who Grace is. Maybe we can stop this blue-collar cop. Maybe we'll get shot too. What fucking difference does it make, anyway?"

Syd felt the necklace on his chest, the strange spaghetti emblem. He felt hesitant to let it go.

I got it fighting for Somnam, he thought.

He decided he was being foolish.

Syd reached around and unhooked the clasp.

It wasn't, he thought, as though she gave it to me herself or anything.

"I think that we both could use a drink," he said, and began to stand.

Casler clasped the necklace around her neck, and she let Syd take her hand and pull her to her feet.

"Sure," she said, "but before we drink, you ever look at artwork with a projecting telepath?"

Tears flowed out of Jennifer's eyes. Someone's dead mother



stood before her in the training space, and the woman was in hysterics, also crying.

The mother wore mascara and clothes of the early twentieth century, a big dress with black beads all over it. Her blue makeup, a wash dissolved in her tears, ran over painted red lips and into her mouth.

The woman stood in a dark room, glowing, as if she was a three dimensional television screen. Her pale image burned in Tamar's eyes. She blinked.

"Johnny never found me, you have to find him," the woman cried, and her flesh wavered into a sandy texture, then pulled back into Tamar's focus.

"You have to listen to me," Tamar said, "I can't find Johnny for you. I'm only here to learn from you."

"Then what fucking good are you?" the woman screamed with spit droplets spraying from her mouth. She fell to her hands and knees and rocked back and forth. A blue and green dome like a cloud of gas began to flow from her grey hair, and yellow balls of light spurted out of her shoulders.

Tamar released her, and she faded into the darkness. Tamar couldn't see anything. Without the woman, there was no source of light in the room.

Lights clicked on and Tamar's eyes focused.

Octavio stood.

"Good work bringing her in," he said, "she was not controllable. You did well sending her away when you did. Some spirits simply do not do well when drawn into the conscious bubble of this world. Do you wonder who Johnny was to her?"

Tamar felt shaky. The old woman was her fifth reinco, the term for someone a telepath brings back for a brief period to learn from. It was her first and so far only day of reinco training. She'd been told that since everyone of the reincos was different, there was only so much that could be taught. She was starting to understand this.

The night before with Frost distracted her, caused her more stress. She wanted to tell Octavio about the man that she had been seeing, the squiggly man. She thought perhaps that she was bringing him back over and over without meaning too. But Octavio would not let her lesson end, and she was not to talk of anything that did not pertain to lessons during lessons with the man.

"Do you wish to try another?" he asked, sitting back down. His robes flowed spread out like a huge flower on the plain cement ground.

Tamar knew that this meant she was supposed to diligently beg him to allow her more practice and training. The necklace which hung around her neck now had one single star attached to the triangle inside the square. Each time she completed a section of training, a small circle made of gold would be added to the points of the triangle.

Having a completed triangle was the ultimate achievement for the Yallov followers, except for reaching the elder status that Octavio and few others held.

But she kept seeing the squiggly man, and he would not leave her thoughts. Not for this new training, and not for the teacher who she thought dressed like a prophet.

"No," she said, "no I don't want to do anymore right now. I have to talk to you about something."

"Oh?" Octavio said, folding his fingers into a ball and looking at her over them.

"I've been seeing a man, the same man, over and over the last few days."

Octavio nodded at her, so she continued.

"I think he's dead."

"And what does he look like, child?"

Trying not to shudder outwardly at being called child, Jennifer described the squiggly man. When she finished, Octavio stood and walked to her. He took her hand and led her out of the training room

and into an elevator.

"We must go see someone, right now," he said, "did anyone else see this man other than you?"

"No." Tamar lied without thinking. She did not know why, but she was scared of the way that Octavio had paled, the way he was holding her hand tightly and rushing her off to see someone without giving their name or the reason why. Something about the authoritarian tone he held forced her to lie. She kept her mind shut, concentrating, in case he tried to break in.

He led her down a hall on a floor she'd never been on before. At the end of a long corridor, the usual white paint and lights changed into red lights and black paint. Except for the dance room, this was the first color deviation Jennifer had seen since arriving among the Yallov Society.

Octavio dropped her hand.

"Sit here and wait for me," he said, and Jennifer thought he sounded panicked. She sat on the ground against a wall.

Octavio punched a long code into a keypad that was built into the door and slid inside, opening the door just enough for his body to slide through. Under the red lights his red cloak glowed like the reinco's, Tamar thought. Her palms were sweaty.

Tamar didn't see what was on the other side of the door. She knew it had to be important. There were colored lights, and after days of nothing but plain walls in the real world, the color scared her logically and deeper inside. She did not think of anything except the lights.

The floor was grainy, and she was wearing shorts. She could feel the grime mixing with her cold sweat and it disgusted her.

The food in her stomach, a kind of authentic corn and bean paste which had been served on bread in the large communal cafeteria began to rise up her throat and she thought about finding someone to have sex with in lieu of alcohol before remembering that sex would not help her. Visions were not what was terrifying her.

The door opened again. Octavio held it open for her, but she

couldn't make out anything behind him. Under the red light she could not tell if his face looked normal.

"I have spoken to Bani. Bani wishes to see you," he said, and he stepped into the hallway. "I'll bring you in."

Tamar got on her feet and brushed the backs of her legs off. She forced saliva down her throat. She did not know who Bani was, but Octavio's voice had not sounded normal. She followed Octavio.

Behind the door was another door in a short hallway, with another keypad, and behind it were two more doors and two more keypads.

At the third coded door Tamar felt something warm in the palms of her hands. She realized she'd dug her fingernails into her palm deep enough to bring blood to the surface.

Octavio bent over another keypad and punched in another series of numbers.

"Last one," he said, and Tamar felt relief that she was about to be somewhere than locked in-between doors and red lights.

They stepped into the room behind the door.

The smell was the first thing she perceived, and she almost stepped back out of the room under instinct. It smelled awful. It stunk both like body odor and rotten things. The floors and walls were black, the lighting was red. In the far corner lay a mattress, with no bed, and in another corner a computer screen flickered dull behind a sheet of something that looked like smoky glass. A set of headgear lay next to it.

"Hello," said a pleasant female voice to Tamar's right and she turned.

After the smell and the disorienting lights Tamar almost threw up when she saw the woman. She looked like a teenage girl with nash addiction sickness.

The woman appeared to weigh eighty pounds or less and most of her hair had fallen out. The clothes she wore resembled garbage bags with holes cut out for her limbs and head. She leaned up against a corner in the room.

"I'm Bani," she said, "sorry about my appearance. I don't get out much." She laughed.

Bani's voice was clear and bright. Tamar wondered if she'd had something artificial put into her throat.

"Bani is over a hundred years old," Octavio said. "I think you look wonderful."

Tamar's fingers unclenched.

"Real light hurts my eyes," Bani said, "and getting into a bed that's off the ground is too much work for these old legs. Same with form fitting clothes. I live like a bum because I must."

"Bani is one of our strongest telepaths," Octavio said.

"Look, Octavio," she said, "spare me the shit and wait outside. Me and Tamar have things to talk about."

Octavio left.

"So, Octavio tells me you've seen Bobby. About average height, tends to manifest himself out of strange objects, wears a hat with what looks like maggots on strings all along the brim, etc etc. right?"

Tamar nodded. She didn't want to speak. The smell inside of the room was making her nauseous.

"His name really isn't Bobby, it's just a play on my name. It's what I call him, I mean. Nevermind. He's a powerful digital hacker, a kind of virtual telepath. We've discovered that he's actually made software that lets him manifest himself in a kind of thought energy that telepaths can receive. He's very dangerous."

Tamar nodded. The man had always terrified her. She knew he was dangerous. She couldn't read his mind, but she knew.

"He can kill us, just by getting close enough to touch us. The contact plugs our open minds into the entire old internet; we see it all at once and no telepath has ever survived it. And he can project himself into the real world where electronics are present."

Tamar nodded again. The man was like an amazing telepath bomb, broadcast from a satellite.

"So if you ever see Bobby, or the squiggly man as you like to call

him, just plug right out of the internet. OK honey?"

Another nod.

"If you see him in real life, just avoid him. Now get out of here. I can tell you're disgusted. No, no, I'm not offended. Just go."

Tamar walked out through the long series of doors, which were unlocked from the inside, to where Octavio stood waiting.

They left for the elevator.

Tamar went to find The Rocking Horse Frost right away.

She opened the door to their internet entry room. He lay on his internet connection cot, the top of his balding long haired head partially obscured by his internet headgear and one of his ashy smelling flannels covering his chest and arms.

Raging Butterfly was manning the computer.

"You guys doing something important?" Tamar said. Behind her eyes she felt tears welling, and didn't know why. Her breath came quickly.

Raging Butterfly spun around in her office chair. She was dressed remarkably similar to RHF; her flannel was green where his was red, and both of her old looking blue jean knees were ripped. Only one of RHF's knees showed pale flesh underneath wispy strips of imitation cotton strands.

"You fucked him, didn't you?" she said, not whispering, "he took you to his special program and you fucked his brains out over some wine."

Tamar stepped back. She didn't know how to respond. Raging Butterfly had been nothing but a background figure to her; she never considered that Butterfly might have had a relationship with The Rocking Horse Frost.

"No. No. Something happened. I wouldn't have anyway," Tamar said.

Raging Butterfly stood, and Tamar felt her body tighten and tense. She'd fought before when she was on the street, and she knew she could fight again. She balled her hands into fists, with her thumbs on

the outside.

I'm probably lucky, she thought, that I never got in a fight over sleeping with someone's boyfriend before.

Butterfly only looked into Tamar's eyes and said "well, you want to talk him, find him." She stomped her big black cloth sneaker's rubber-sole-replicas down the hallway and out of Tamar's earshot.

Tamar knelt next to RHF. She thought about how old he looked, balding already, as she gently shook him. He wasn't over twenty six. She pushed a button on the side of the headgear, where the bar joined the ear covering.

"It's Tamar," she said to his ear microphone, "and we need to talk so whenever you can unplug, do so."

He sat up almost immediately and pulled the headgear off from his head.

She told him about Bani and Benny. His only response was awe that Tamar had got to meet Bani. The rumor was, he said, that she hadn't left the room in over twenty years, not even for her own son's funeral. The rumor was she was insane, she'd seen too much of the dead.

Tamar calmed. She wanted to tell The Rocking Horse Frost about Butterfly.

"Raging was in here with you before," she said, "and when I asked to see you, I thought we were going to get into a fist fight."

RHF shrugged.

"She probably hasn't been sleeping again. She's making some virtual movie, an entertainment thing."

Tamar didn't say anything.

She seemed coherent to me, she thought.

"You passed the reinco exam, didn't you?" RHF said. "I mean, you really can pull people back?"

Tamar sensed where it was going, but nodded anyway.

"You have to bring my mother back. No one else ever would for me. You have to be the one. Please?"

Tamar agreed. She knew it was wrong, but she also knew she would be calling on her friend Tamar as soon as RHF was satisfied.

If he's doing it, she thought, fine. We can both carry tranquilizers in case one of us needs to be knocked out.

At one AM in an abandoned section of the building Tamar and The Rocking Horse Frost prepared for their sÅ©ance. Using a flashlight propped up in the corner to see they covered the closed door's frame with stolen blankets and tape to prevent as much light from entering as possible. The room smelled like dust, cement, and Frost's cigarettes. The Shambles. Tamar tried to breathe only through her mouth.

She did not know what RHF was doing, but she guessed he was preparing what he was going to say. She told herself she was trying to prepare herself for the anguish that RHF's mother was probably going to give him, but she thought about Tamar more. Her golden hair. The doll that got left behind under the fake redwood.

One of the tube lights above flickered and glowed pale white despite being turned off. Frost took his shoe off and smashed it. In the flash as it exploded Tamar saw the rain of broken glass fall in his hair. Lights blocked the visions of the dead, even the dull glow of faulty fluorescent tube lights.

"I'm ready," RHF said.

She began to focus on The Rocking Horse Frost, then on the part of his mind which remembered his mother, to get an image of the person she was trying to pull out from the swirling pool of imprints.

A large woman watching TV. She has curly yellowing hair, and has her swollen feet and legs up on a coffee table. She wears shorts that show most of her thighs, and a can of beer is propped up on one knee. She farts. Tamar is sitting on a couch, and she tries not to laugh. She tries harder, but the laugh comes out anyway. The woman throws the can of beer into Tamar's face. Tamar starts to cry. She doesn't want to but it happens anyway.

"Shut up, Shut up," the woman is saying, and then Tamar thinks 'My



god I can see those tits flopping like shower curtains" and this is funny enough that she starts laughing again.

The vision faded and the room swirled back in. The woman stood in the center of the plain white room, except her hair was grey, and her body had a drawn veined appearance, as if old age had starved her. She was dressed in a women's business suit with a red rose in her breast pocket. Light glowed from her as she stood in the center of the room, looking back and forth from Tamar and RHF, casting yellow blue light into all corners of the room. Yellow and orange balls of light the size of grapefruits came out of the women's shoulders and floated upwards through the ceiling.

Tamar held onto the reinco and stared at The Rocking Horse Frost. His face was hard to see in the dim ghost light.

"Cristoph?" the woman said.

RHF looked at her.

"You threw me out."

The woman stamped her foot on the ground.

"I knew what I was doing. They made it very clear what I was supposed to do if I found a telepath out. I found a telepath out."

Tamar felt her inside twisting. The specters have no memory of dieing, she wanted to say, this is not the way your mother is now, if she's anywhere. This is her at the moment of her death. This is a record of her brain. Like computer playback. No changes, just what the user programmed.

But she couldn't say anything. Even prolonged trains of thought made her grip on the reinco slip.

RHF picked up a chair and threw it at the woman.

Tamar let Frost's mom go.

The room fell dark. She couldn't see anything without the light of the reinco. Grinding cement and enamel dust into her palms, she crawled into the corner and found the flashlight.

RHF was curled up in a semi-ball, on his feet and covering the back of his neck with his hands. He rocked back and forth with his

face in his crotch.

Tamar went to him. She knelt next to him. She'd rehearsed what to say before. But now she didn't know what to say. Her earlier words seemed empty and cliché.

She held him.

He did not cry.

She pulled his face up to hers and kissed him. He kissed back, with no sexual energy.

"She's gone," Tamar said, "and she may not be like that anymore."

"I know," RHF said, and he stood. He walked out of the room, leaving Tamar kneeling on the floor with the flashlight.



# **Part 3**

## **Connected Symptoms**

Around the base of the rocks, witches moved in a necessary succession. The rain washed down their bodies, moving silently in rivulets. They preached of Christ, gathering conducts in trials and reaching towards the sky, moving their female arms in hundreds of rhythms. The rain changes to sediment, and they are covered by sea water, encased in firm rocks.

A monk stands on a small rowboat over the ocean. Ages have passed. A knife clinks in his hand against a pewter necklace of flames he wears around his neck. The salient water splashes in his brown hair and down his brown robes. He stares into the water, trying to see the horrors of entrapment below. He hates them. Dead for thousands of years, their spirits gave off no negative energy, but he hates them.

He leans over the edge of the rocking and tossing rowboat and drops the knife, point down, into the water.

A golden picture frame appeared before Syd's eyes, and the images flitted from his mind and eyes. The painting of an old monk standing on a boat in a field appeared back before his eyes.

Casler released his held hand.

Her power to show him things, to plant images in his mind made him shaky and nervous, but the visions she received from the people around them in the art gallery, the crossed surrealist images that their brains produced when a group of people viewed art work and Casler filtered it all together into one mess was wonderful. He thought it was one of the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

The disorienting effect of the visions comforted him. He was confident that he'd never been exposed to the implantations of a telepath before. The sensation was like no other.

Casler had explained that he was probably so weakly telepathic that only a direct concentrated effort from a telepath would effect him. It explained why he'd never known.

"Do you want to look at another one?" Casler said, her voice low in the tile and marble environment of the upscale art museum.

She led him into another room, well lit with white spotlights on the drawings, white everywhere except for the frames and art.

"Do you have any control over what you read at all?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, none. Not when you just open up this way to whatever people are thinking. You can go in and read, but that's different. That takes practice."

Syd had asked the question in similar forms many times, and he assumed she was becoming frustrated. He couldn't believe that she and Somnam had studied and honed their abilities while at the same time pretending they were losing them.

The drawing was abstract; cubes drawn inside of other cubes.

Tears fell onto a white nothing, where they formed the shape of a blue and yellow pill. The pill began to take the shape of a human being. The human being, half blue and half yellow, grasped at its throat as if choking.

It took on a male feeling. It held a cup, then did not hold a cup. A hat appeared on its head. Spiders began to come out of the top of the cowboy hat, and moved to the brim, where they lowered themselves inches on single strands of silvery webbing.

The spiders turned into worms, and began squiggling on the ends of their lines.

Syd became very nervous. He wanted it to stop. His hands were clammy, and he knew that somewhere far away he existed and was holding Casler's hand. If he concentrated, he could feel her palm in his, but all he could see was the man, the mad man advancing toward him.

Blackness flashed existence all around him. He heard words, someone was speaking behind him, but the words made no sense.

"Stephen gave jasper falconer mews tears small breath pass the below man over Katherine focused need peregrine emblem distance arm stood me"

The painting came back to him. Syd shook his head. Casler was holding his hand tight, crushing his fingers and curving his palm. He

could feel the museum again. Reality comforted him, and he caught his breath.

He looked at the cubes. The man was still in the painting, walking towards them, the worms on the hooks of his hat convulsing and turning in on themselves like they were impaled.

"Please stop it," Syd whispered.

Her grip on his hand got stronger.

"I already did," she said, "I stopped as soon as that guy showed up. Fuck. It's not me. I'm closed. You're seeing it? Fuck. I don't know what's happening."

The man reached the size of the drawing. He stopped walking. A hand, white and textured like the paper, reached out of the drawing and gripped the frame.

Syd and Casler both stepped back.

"Hey there now," said a male voice behind them, and the drawing wavered back into two dimensions.

Syd turned.

A man in a business suit wearing a cowboy hat stood behind them.

"Howdy," he said, extending his hand. "My real name is boring. I like folks to call me Bob. I'm in recruitment. Nice necklace there, little girl. Kill a pig or swallow some grease? Sorry about the visions. It's how I make contact with folks."

He smiled. His teeth were white and perfect. His chin jutted out, large, with a dimple in it and a thin coating of whiskers. Delicate brown hair curled out from under his worm and line free hat. He appeared to be in his late twenties.

Not knowing what else to do, Syd extended his hand. He grasped air.

The man laughed a big loud laugh.

"I have to lock into your associations, before I get a hold on your mind you see that freaky shit. I'm a hallucination, how about that for scary, huh? I'm not really here in the museum. I'm outside. Come and see me. I ain't gonna wait all day."

He spoke in a regular Steeple City accent, despite his word choice. Syd did not have time to think about this.

Bob laughed again and disappeared. Syd realized some people were staring at him and decided they probably should leave the museum quickly.

"What the fuck was that?" Syd whispered, his voice low and husky as he pulled Casler by her damp hand out of the art gallery.

"I don't know. But I think we should go outside right now," she said.

Where do you think I'm taking you, Syd thought. He didn't say it.

The man hadn't felt threatening to Syd. He reminded Syd of his long dead grandfather, Syd as a child visiting a friendly old man and being balanced on a knee. He wondered if that was a part of the hallucination. "Bob" had said associations.

The man in the cowboy hat who had spoken to him felt substantially different than the thing in the drawing.

They went outside together.

The man who had called himself Bob stood with his hands in his pockets rocking back and forth on the heels of his wingtip shoes on the sidewalk outside the museum. The early morning sun was up and gasoline cars droned behind him.

Pedestrians, college kids and rich people walked around Bob without looking at him. To Syd he resembled an invisible glass wall that the people moving in and out of the art museum instinctively knew was there. Syd told himself it was just the arty area.

The heat of the day struck Syd in the face, and he wondered how the man could stand to wear the three piece black business suit in the summer temperature.

Casler still held Syd's hand. The amount of sweat passing between their palms was beginning to be uncomfortable.

"Whoo-hee, I'm glad you friends came outside," Bob said, smiling, "most people get scared and run away from that hallucinatory nonsense. They run and I can't get a lock on em. You folks just stood there like a bunch a scared rabbits. Good job."



Syd just stared, not knowing what the say. The inner arc area they stood in was upper-class with taints of desire for bohemianism. Modern statues built of shapes cut out of metal and cement decorated the sidewalk, which was lit by lampposts that looked early nineteenth century.

"You friends going to say anything, or you just going to sit there staring at me?" Bob asked. He spit onto the sidewalk.

Syd was without words.

Casler gripped his hand tighter, but did not say anything.

"Lets us go to one of these rich people bars then," he said, "drinks on me. I do love those stouts. I'll tell you all about myself when we get there. And then you friends might want to get some sleep. Staying up all night, I don't know how you all do it."

Bob turned, and walked up the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets. His body bobbed when he walked like a bottle floating over waves. Syd and Casler followed behind him, into a small bar blocks from the art museum.

The bar had a cement floor, with artificial wood booths in a pattern that looked random to Syd. The lighting was low and came from bare light bulbs.

They sat. The booth was spotless.

"You two are going to have to order for me," Bob said, "people I'm not locked on see me, but they don't really register me, like."

A waitress came over and Syd ordered three stouts.

He did feel tired, he realized. The wooden booth felt padded, like he could melt into it and fall asleep. He rubbed his hands over the fop pills in his pocket.

"Alright then friends," Bob said, "lets us have a little town gathering and talk.

"I'm a telepath, like my friendly little lady here. I'm the primary recruiting force for the Telepathic Resistance Agency. Now I understand someone you know got killed a few days ago. Is that right?"

Syd nodded. Bob continued to look at Casler. She said yes.

"And that this non-tele friend, I mean strangely capable of receiving only friend, here is awful sore about it, and wants revenge."

"That's correct, in a way," said Syd.

"Well. How does being involved in the destruction of the Agency building and working for the acceptance of the telepathic people sound to you? You're already wearing our necklace."

Syd told him where the necklace had come from. Bob continued to look at Casler. Syd told him the things he had been told by Old Man Plow, and Bob looked at him.

"Ah. Well. Mitchell Brothers is a real problem, yes, he is. But Grace is playing the police. I know Grace well. He feeds them false information, and they swallow it down like baked beans. I know you're going to want into our organization. I'm asking the little lady here."

Casler didn't say anything. Syd found himself wanting to punch Bob in the face. He watched Bob's stubbly chin talk the strange imitative talk of someone who watches too much southwestern TV and fiddled with the pills in his pocket again.

The waitress came back, she put down the three drinks, one in front of Casler and two in front of Syd. Bob reached across the table and pulled the pint glass of black liquid in front of him.

"By the way," Bob said, "Mitchell Brothers didn't kill Somnam, in case someone gave you that impression" he said, and took a drink. "Oh, that coats the mouth."

Syd gripped the table. He leaned over, staring into the soft eyes of the man across the table from him.

"You know who killed her?"

Bob put his beer down.

"No. But I know who didn't. Mitchell Brothers killed one of ours the night Somnam died, on the other side of the city. Well, it was more like Mitchell Brothers and his Squad."

Casler took a drink of the beer. She didn't say anything about it. Syd remembered Somnam's first beer and fought sadness. He took

one of the pills out of his pocket and palmed it.

"Bob," she said, speaking for the first time, "what exactly are you asking us to do?"

Syd slipped the pill into the space between the ends of his pointer and middle finger. He picked up his beer with the same hand and placed the pill in his mouth in a smooth motion before swallowing it with the beer.

"I can't stand lying like this," Bob said, "I was supposed to lie. I can't lie to my friends like this. Sit back, I'm going to play you guys a tape I memorized as briefing for dealing with you folks. It's put together from the security cameras. Inner Arc and all."

Syd had time to lean his head back against the booth before he felt himself shifting into hallucination.

He was somewhere comfortable. Somewhere he'd been before. He realized he was in his brother's house, in the hallway outside of Christy the baby's room, and it was night. Somnam emerged from the doorway, holding something.

Syd felt a pain in his chest.

She was holding Christy, and made her way down the stairs. On the street, she began to walk quickly.

A voice, deep, yelled her name behind her.

Syd realized it was his own voice, the way it sounded on the outside of his body.

She began to run.

The scene shuttered and Syd watched her run towards the sidewalk where she would die. He tried to scream at her to stop, forgetting it was not happening again.

He was suddenly standing right where she was going to be shot and he began to wave his arms. She ran, not looking at him, but looking at the building in front of her.

Tears on his cheeks, he yelled desperately for her to stop, stop.

The back of her head exploded, and she crumpled to the ground, falling backwards with the baby balanced on her chest. It looked to

Syd like she had somehow fallen in a way to protect Christy.

Syd cried and turned around to see who had shot her.

He puked.

The face on the man with the gun was his brother Dave.

The hallucination faded.

Syd smelled stomach acid. He looked into his lap and saw that he had thrown up all over himself.

"You've been screaming at nobody and you just puked on yourself," Bob said, "We might want to go now."

Syd examined the pattern of the thick black puke on his pants and the table. There were no chunks in it. He regretted the waste of the foc pill. He didn't have many left.

"Why?" he said.

"Because Christy is a telepath and he knows it. Somnam tried to bring her to us."

Syd leaned forward into his own vomit.

He opened his eyes in a bed. Not his bed. He sat up.

Bob and Casler were both there. They sat in easy chairs, watching a television. A popular sitcom was on, about a gay man and straight woman who start a business together. He felt the bed. It wasn't a bed, it was a cot.

He looked around more thoroughly, trying to figure out where he was. The floors were artificial wood. The walls were papered with a dark blue, and there were no windows. A bar stood in the back corner, and there was one closed door.

"Morning, Syd," said Bob. "How do you feel?"

Syd felt numb. He didn't know what to say.

Him and Dave, sitting in the basement of their parent's house, hours past their bedtimes, keeping warm under blankets watching television with the sound off.

Somnam holding Christy, in front of Alexa, asking Syd and Somnam to move in.

Somnam wanted to move in so she could save the baby.

Dave shot her in the face.

Syd thought he'd known it all along.

"I feel like shit. Can I have something to drink please?"

Casler, sitting in a blue plushy recliner, started to get up.

"No, no, darlin, I'll get what this man needs."

Syd noticed that although he had changed his business suit for black slacks and a blue oxford, he still wore the ten gallon hat.

A moment later Syd had a small glass in his hand. He smelled it. It smelled of alcohol. He drank several gulping swallows of it and felt the burn all the way down his throat. He fought the urge to gag for a moment, then finished the drink. It tasted like whiskey and rubbing alcohol. Instinctively he felt in his pockets for the foc pills. They were still there.

Unsure what to do with the glass, he leaned over the cot and set it on the floor. Bob sat back down in his recliner, which was red and showed more patches of stuffing than Casler's.

"What are you going to do?" Bob asked him, lowering the sitcom's volume with a remote.

Syd felt tension in the air. He'd been too confused when he woke up to notice it, but he could feel it now. Both Casler and Bob were nervous about what he might do with the new information.

He didn't know what he wanted to do. The alcohol had already made him feel numb.

He'd wanted to kill the person who killed Somnam. Make him pay. But it was Dave. His brother. Protecting his child, or at least doing what he thought was protecting his child.

"I don't think I can kill Dave," he said. "I can't kill Dave. Can I have more whiskey, please?"

Bob slapped his hands against his thighs and smiled.

"I knew you wouldn't want to kill him once you saw it all. No, you can't have anymore whiskey. You need to think."

Syd didn't feel like he'd thought since he'd been shown how Somnam got killed. He didn't feel like thinking. He wanted to drink,

take fog to sober up, and then drink more.

"Listen, son," Bob said, "I know you're hurting. I know what it's like to link with someone and then have them taken away. You and her will always be linked. But now listen. You want to avenge her, you should work for us. You're straight, see? There aren't many straights on our side. Work for our revolution, to make life better for teles. It was what she died trying to do." Bob belched.

Syd nodded, slumped in the cot. He noticed his pants had changed, and his shirt. They'd given him clean clothes, and put the pills back in his pocket. He smiled. He noticed he no longer smelled like vomit either. They'd washed him.

How long have I been out, he thought. He remembered Robert.

"I knocked you out. The opposite drug of your favorite vice. Listen. You and Casler are going to be cellmates. You get along, but you don't line up as lovers, so you're a good match. We don't have a central gathering place. Someone wearing the sign of our movement, the necklaces you both have on, will deliver missions to you. Maybe a halfway house type place will take you for a while. Syd, the one you are wearing in the one that Somnam would have worn. We had it set aside for her."

He got up and tapped two video discs in their plastic cases on top of the television. "These are training programs. They'll teach Casler how to control her abilities, and they'll teach you, Syd, my straight friend, how to protect your brain from psychic attack. Now, I'm off. Have fun training."

Two weeks later Tamar and Frost lay in the bed together. Both were naked. Tamar could feel Frost's semen dripping out of her, her sweat and his drying on her body. They lay on their backs. Frost smoked.

The bed was makeshift. Blankets stolen from the laundry room, carried with desperate arms into the elevator, dumped into a room in one of the unused areas of one of the buildings, near their sÃ©ance room.

Tamar had blanket bunched up under her head to make a pillow. Frost was using his arm.

She smiled. She felt warm inside, all over. She felt like she belonged, not just with The Rocking Horse Frost, but with the people she was working with.

Frost tossed his cigarette against the back wall of the room, where it splattered sparks out against the usual Yallov Society white paint.

He turned and wrapped one arm around her.

Tamar knew the building was covered in a special blanket broadcast that prevented the teles from being able to broadcast thoughts except in specially screened rooms. There room was not screened, so they could not exchange thoughts. Most of the rooms were set up that way, to make it easier for the teles to live together. Closing their minds was an inconvenience.

"I think I love you," Tamar said, her eyes watering.

I don't love you, she thought. This is nice.

"I love you too," he said.

She felt good.

She knew that they should be getting up. She should be standing, pulling her jeans and black shirt over her head, fastening her faith necklace with all three stars dangling, and preparing herself for what was about to come. But she didn't. All of her muscles felt relaxed, and she felt separated from the whole world in the little room. The whole of Steeple City might lie to the east over several miles of wasteland and junkie trash, and the world in all directions around her, but she felt protected under the blankets with Frost holding her.

"Are your nervous?" Frost asked. "I know you can do it."

In a few hours Tamar was going to try to pull Yallov out of death so he could instruct them in a mission to destroy the agency building. She would be the next in a long line of reinco capable telepaths to attempt this. None had succeeded, but Octavio had made it clear that he had hope in her.

"What doyou think he'll tell us to do after we destroy the agency

here? There are hundreds of buildings in hundreds of cities all over the world. Japan alone has an Agency-like info structure greater than anything this entire continent added together has created," Frost said. He stroked her breast and stomach.

"We'll do whatever he says. He'll know what to do. They killed him before he could reveal his plans, is all," she said.

Tamar knew what she hoped Yallov would say. After pulling down the agency building in Steeple City, they would skip their own mayor and go after the President. He might only be a puppet for the city governments, but stupid people still listened to him. And the continent was filled with stupid people.

Frost rolled onto his back and lit another cigarette with five flicks of his plastic lighter.

Tamar got up and started getting dressed.

"I'm going to be late if I don't hurry up."

The room was painted black, and the only illumination was a single black light lamp. Tamar was alone. The room was equipped with several cameras. Colleagues on the other side of the walls would watch through the camera and record all that Yallov would say, if Tamar was successful. Reicnos did not show up on tape. No one was sure why.

Tamar took several deep breaths.

Octavio had taken her aside and told her, quietly, that she was really only the second person to try to bring him back. Those high in the organization liked to give the impression that it was tried constantly, for moral. He had supported this decision for a time but had no longer thought it was ethical. Something strange had happened to the first one who tried it, Octavio wouldn't tell her what. He only said, over and over, that he trusted her to be strong enough to pull Yallov back and protect herself.

Tamar suspected that it had something to do with pulling a telepath, the stronger telepath ever, back from the dead. She'd never even pulled a tele out before.



What could he show her brain if he flared out a cognition explosion by accident? she thought. I'm going to help The Society.

She took several more breaths. She concentrated on calming and relaxing each muscle in her body, starting at her feet, moving upwards. Her clothing glowed under the ultraviolet light. She would not try to pull him back until she was ready, even if it took hours. The black light would burn for forty eight hours, or until someone in the room sensed Yallov and turned it off. If after two whole days she still had not pulled him someone would get her out.

She sat cross legged on the floor, placing her hands on her blue jean knees. They were authentic twentieth century, and were worth more money than she had ever held at once. They were made out of real cotton, and not ripped or worn out. She noticed a stain near the pantleg that glowed green under the UV. Frost had given them to her.

It's time, she thought.

Her breathing slowed, became rhythmic. Her mind began to clear. She pulled herself deeper into her mind.

She pictured Yallov, reached out for him. For his image, being, his mind.

A road, a dirt road in a place where there were no buildings, only dead trees. The sun bright, vulture circling. The road is made of eyes, thousands of eyes, staring into the sun with no eyelids. They have thoughts and their cognitions sound like words in her brain. A man stands on the road of eyes, lifting his arms to her. She sees the trees and herself standing in the distance, the trees are blue, purple, and she moves them into a perfect line in front of her body with her mind.

The oldest man she thought she had ever seen was in the room with her. The black light was off, and the man glowed. He wore a robe like Octavio's, but black. His grey hair came straight out of his head the same way electric energy bursts pulsed from his body toward the ceiling.

Yallov's robes shook. His face, skin loose, but with features Tamar remembered from the training program, shook and flapped; the flesh

was old and not attached securely to his face.

A bathroom, tiled. A television set in the bathtub, a scene of a morning sun coming up over a green hill projecting the only light in the room. Its screen vibrating, the glass shaking, making a sound like a gasoline engine. Steam, burning hot begins to pour out of the bathroom mirror, and handfuls of severed ears fall out of the steam and into the sink, filling it and spilling a bloody mess onto the floor.

A younger Yallov. Jet black hair. Plain pale blue pants, with a darker blue shirt.

They were in the Yallov Society room together. The UV lamp still burned, but Yallov was visible. Tamar felt weak, sick. One of the knees of her jeans was torn. She felt that she had him. She'd locked onto him and brought him back.

His hands were scarred. He looked up and down at her.

"Hey beautiful, you it wants in fuck. Hey beautiful, you it wants in fuck?"

She focused on his image.

His hair stood out, like the older version of himself.

"Hello," he said. "It is good to be back. Good job, Tamar."

She was lying on her back. She pushed and twisted herself into a cross-legged sitting position. Yallov leaned against a black wall, lifted one foot up to his knee.

"Let me tell all of you what to do about the agency building. And once it's destroyed, find me again. I do not know if Tamar will be able to haul me again. Make sure she helps in the agency building operation. Here is what you have to do."

He began to tell them, speaking in simple sentences with no emotion. The strongest of the telepaths, those in robes, were to get into agency computers with the help of non-immersive environment personnel. The Agency used a network similar to the internet for their data logging. Inside digitally, they would save up their power for psychic bombs. With few exceptions the rest were to mount an operation to break in by force, armed, and shoot the guards. Once

the teles from the inside were freed, the telepath masters would release their psychic bombs. The use of the telepath bomb was to show their power to the city, to discourage them from building the agency building back. They were to go tomorrow.

At Yallov's request Tamar let him go.

She stood up. Her hands were shaking. The shirt she wore was so sweaty it felt like someone had poured water over her. Her legs felt weak. She couldn't ever remember needing to sleep so badly in her life.

I want a drink, she thought.

The door opened. She walked out, dazed. The colors in the room were dim. She became aware of people clapping. Her senses perceived as they did after a liter of vodka.

Someone came up behind her with a wheelchair.

"Amazing, simply amazing," she recognized the voice whispering in her ear as Frost, "but you've been awake almost thirty six hours. You need some sleep before tomorrow."

She fought to hang on to consciousness. She needed to ask Frost what he thought about the violence. It seemed to her like they didn't need to kill everyone working in the building. They had police strength non lethal guns.

Frost picked up her still damp body and placed her in a real bed. Not a cot.

"Where am I?" she asked, looking around. The walls were white and plain. She wanted a bath.

"They prepared this for you. You're a celebrity now. Go to sleep."

He turned to go. She wanted to sleep. Every part of her body wanted to sleep, her guts entwined in each other in her need for sleep.

"Wait. Are we really going to kill all those people?" she asked.

"We're doing what Yallov has instructed."

He left and the lights went out. She went to sleep.

Syd stood in a ballroom. The ceiling was as high as a three story

building, and the space inside immense and cavernous. People in renaissance masks, with business suits, danced in circles around him and another person, a female. She wore a black dress, the only dress in the dance, and she did not move. Her eyes, offset behind her mask of a crying moon, stared into his. She smelled faintly of cheese. Syd knew what was coming. "By the way," she said, and reached into the folds of her dress. She pulled out five darts in one of her pale hands and drew one back in her other hand. She threw it, and he saw it move, sharp and unstoppable towards his chest. He instinctively lifted a palm out in self defense, and the tip of the dart stabbed through it, pushing his whole hand back. The metal dart, lodged in his hand, felt impossibly heavy.

Syd woke sitting up waving his arms. He felt a hand on his shoulder. It was Casler.

"I've had nightmares of ballrooms since I was nine and read Poe at the agency. But what about the darts. Do you think those came from you or me?"

They were sharing their dreams at night, something a training video had said would make them think more alike. Cellmates that think more alike, said the video, are cellmates that work better together.

Over the course of a fortnight they'd been over several training videos.

They would dream, and if the dream was first person, each would feel themselves the participant in the dream, see things from their point of view. This being the third night they'd tried it, Syd still felt uncomfortable with it. He wondered what would happen if there was a sexual dream in the first person.

Who gets what organs? he thought.

"I don't know," he answered, lying back down. The fact that he could only receive directed thoughts from telepaths made him wonder how much sharing was being done. The Telepath Resistance Agency had no training videos for people like him.

He tried to catch his breath. He felt an aching for Somnam.

"Probably came from me, since I seem to be more terrified than you do," he said.

He lay back down in the bed. They were sharing it, but not as lovers. The bed was in a hotel room located in the outskirts of the city. The room was basic. Brown high traffic carpet, 20 inch TV on a nightstand, a small dresser, closet, and tiny bathroom with a toilet and a shower. No phone. The air conditioning ran smooth and silent.

The day before, they'd been given their first mission by a young looking Asian boy with the TRA symbol around his neck. The mission came printed on plain paper, with instructions to burn it, stir the ash in a proper receptacle, then flush it down their toilet.

Syd and Casler were to illegally go outside of Steeple City to the wasted part of the city, abandoned by most since after the epidemics. A few miles out in the stained sprawl, in an area known as Alphabet Town there were still some electronics worth scavenging. People addicted to things harder than foc or alcohol would roam, pulling electronics out of walls and selling them to internet junkies. The internet junkies made headgear out of them for sale so they could afford to eat in between long stretches of time online. Sometimes whole headgear could be found.

The headgear would make its way into Steeple City. Most of the electronics junkies, the true addicts, lived in abandoned buildings just off the outskirts of the habituated part of the city. The outside of the city walls cast a shadow on the beginning of their area. This had been the original Alphabet Town.

As the areas nearby the city were completely stripped, the scavenging drug heads moved Alphabet Town further out, while the electronics area, growing and flourishing under the influx of illegal headgear sales, had grown into kind of an illegal city. The mayor's police left it alone for the most part; as long as the headgear sales found out about did not go over a certain set quota per month. The police were more concerned with telepaths and keeping the city

clean than harassing people technically outside of Steeple City.

In the morning Casler and Syd were to go into the electronics area, the illegal city now known as Old Alphabet City, and find a woman by the name of Daily. She spent most of her time online, but rumor had reached the Telepath Resistance Agency that she was a strong telepath also. The movement wanted her on their side if this was the case.

Syd and Casler were to find her and find out if she was a telepath. That was all. The documented stated that it was expected to be a simple mission.

Syd had already called Old Man Plow to find out if he knew anything about her. He had never heard the name but he said he would call back with a price if he could find any information about where she lived. He had yet to call.

Syd tried to relax from the nightmare enough to get back to sleep. Casler rubbed his shoulders.

"Open up your brain," she said.

He did so. A meadow, with red and purple flowers under the sun.

He fell back asleep.

He woke up in confusion to flashing green and blue lights. A loud siren flashed. He shook his head. The noise penetrated his brain, he couldn't think. He knew he had to do something, but he couldn't concentrate.

He sat up. The room was bathed in flashing green and blue lights. He knew then what was happening.

The mayor's police. They were locked down. They were about to be arrested. Casler was on her feet running to the door and then she pulled on it, threw her weight behind her into pulling on it.

"Don't," Syd shouted, "if you are panicked, overworked, and breathing heavy their gas works faster." Casler didn't stop. "It's locked, magnetic," Syd shouted, "They probably aren't even outside in the parking lot yet."

He knew that since the alarm was going off, he and Casler were

considered high profile by the police. Common criminals only got locked in, they did not get the warning of an alarm. The police used the alarm systems if they wanted the neighbors, and eventually the press, to catch wind of the arrest.

High profile means lots of cops, he thought.

The siren continued, his head throbbed with it. The noise was loud enough inside the little hotel room that he could feel the mattress under him shake with the vibrations.

He got up, grabbed Casler's wrist and shook her. She gave up on the door. He screamed in her ear. "Get dressed, we have to make a run for it."

She pulled pants on. He did the same. He tried to remember what he had been told about mayor's arrests by Old Man Plow. He tried to think how to get out of them.

"They're going to gas us," he shouted in Casler's ear. "Any second now. Stay down on the floor. We'll be near the window. Breathe as little as possible and try not to pass out."

She dropped to the floor as told.

The screaming alarms continued.

Aware he was running out of time, Syd forced himself to try and think. It was a hotel room. Not a fortified living complex like his old apartment. They could get out.

He pictured a jail scene from a movie. He thought he could hear footsteps running in the hallway outside.

In cold panic, he threw himself against the wall behind the beds.

He tasted something blood and flour in his mouth and his eyes burned. Casler stepped on his back grinding bare toes into his spine as she ran over his back. The salty iodine taste cleared his head. He stood up in the next room over. Casler's hand was on the doorknob.

"No!" Syd yelled.

His conscious mind was aware that now they were officially trying to resist and avoid arrest, which meant they would be shot on site. He was about to see Casler die. "No," he screamed. She rested in dark

red scales toilet paper ran from the pool the back of her head parts of what looked like crushing coils with the faint scratching of the long damp pieces of the street. "No," he screamed again. Casler froze without opening the door.

"They wait several minutes for the gas to work. I'm sure this hallway is surrounded. The cops aren't stupid," he said. He caught his breath.

He stood. The room was exactly like their room, except empty.

The gas would flow into it through the huge hole in the wall his body had made. The police probably had already sealed their door with airtight tape and were pumping the gas into their room to knock them out. The concentration in the neighboring room would become high enough to knock them out if they didn't move soon.

All I've done, Syd thought, is give us some more time. I may as well buy us some more.

The pain in his back and lungs crippled his motivation. He wanted to lay down on the bed and let the police overtake him.

"Syd," Casler said, drawing the vowel sound out.

He picked up a nightstand, sending a lamp crashing to the floor. The pain did not get worse. He threw the heavy wooden furniture against the wall as hard as he could. The wall dented. The nightstand landed on his shins and feet, causing him to fall. It staid on his lower legs, pinning him. He stared at the ceiling, which began to spin like he was drunk.

Casler abandoned Syd's advice and tried the door. It was locked. She began throwing herself against it. Syd realized the lights were flashing in the room he was in, and the alarm going off also. Lights and noise built into the walls confusing him, carefully chose frequencies that made it hard to think.

The whole place is shut down, he thought. He tried to breathe and wait. Time passed. Casler sat down in front of the door, the blades of her hands bleeding from punching the locked door.

The alarms stopped. He wondered if he'd be able to walk; the pain in his shins was immense.



"Here they come," he thought.

He waited. After what felt like hours, he pushed the nightstand off and got to his feet. His shins were bleeding, his feet hurt. He wobbled.

"What's going on?" Casler asked. She was standing also. Her eyes were bloodshot, and tears ran down her face.

"It feels like it's been a long time," he said.

Tamar rounded the corner of a hallway inside The Agency building. She opened another unlocked door. It was like all the others on the inside, it contained no telepaths captive; only a policeman crouched in the corner. He had his hands between his legs. Tamar raised her gun and she shot him before he could shoot her.

Her earpiece, a radio to the society, squealed at her.

"Police are swarming to the agency building. They knew we were coming. They knew we were fucking coming." Someone's voice, frantic and raised. "Every report is of every room having police in it. It's a trap. Get out. We're bringing the building down. With those bastards still inside."

"How did they know we were coming" repeated in her head, a rhythm that matched her feet as she ran down the hallway towards the staircase with her gun raised in front of her. She faltered around the corner, almost lost her balance. More mayor's police, a shiny flashing silver helmet. She shot. The cop fell to the carpet, bleeding red out of his stomach. She jumped over his body, made it to the staircase and was running. A door opened, one of hers, dressed in black, ran down the staircase in front of her. The other shot a cop, then they were outside on the side lawn grass.

Tamar saw a groundhog, eating something, his lips moving inside of his fat face. It looked like he was smiling.

This place is going to explode, she wanted to yell at it, but she was running. She felt heat against her back, a push, her feet pirouetted under her but she didn't fall. She ran to the street. A car waited, its door open. Three other figures in black were already inside. She fell

in next to one of them and they drove off, fast. She looked behind her. The agency building was falling in on itself. No police tailed them. They ran a red light and screaming tires enclosed her ears.

"How did they know, how did they know?" repeated a female voice in the passenger seat. She was leaning over. Tamar smelled blood. It was all over her. She saw her hands were brown and red.

"Would someone get some pressure on her arm, she's hit," said the driver, "and the one in the back is in some kind of shock."

Tamar looked at the man next to her, he'd taken his black mask off, leaned forward with a bandage and tied it around the girl in the front who kept repeating "how did they know" over and over.

We had numbers, Tamar thought, they had numbers so they put a medic person in every car. Every electric car.

"How many did we lose?"

"Three quarters of them that went in. Saved no one. The whole place was filled with mayor's police."

"How did they know, how did they know"

"There couldn't have been a leak."

"How did they know, how"

Tamar felt a prick in her arm. She had time to comprehend that she'd been given a tranquilizer before it overtook her.

An hour had passed. No police had entered the room. Casler stood, fully dressed and shaking. Syd had thrown up several times, but he stood also. None of his injuries were as bad as he had feared. The cuts and bruises reminded him of a bicycle accident he'd gotten in once; he hurt, but he would not be crippled. Their doors had remained locked, but the sirens had not resumed. No one had come to arrest them.

There was a knock on the door. Syd looked through the viewhole. A mayor's cop without a helmet stood there. His face looked unbearably young to Syd.

How could someone so innocent looking end up like that, he thought.

He looked at Casler and motioned for her to duck down. He stepped softly and carefully backwards and picked up a chair. He crept forward.

"Anyone who is in there, please do not panic. This is a public service announcement. You are not being arrested. If you have a television, turn it on. This is a whole city lockdown."

Syd looked through the view hole again. The cop was not in sight. He slid his hand around the doorknob and gently tried to turn it. It did not turn.

"This can't be a trick," he said, "they could have gassed us a hundred times if they wanted to."

Casler stood and sat on the bed, facing the TV. She didn't say anything.

Syd shrugged and sat on the bed next to her. He turned on the TV.

"Doors will open in one hour. You are experiencing a whole city lockdown. You are not being arrested. Do not panic. Your windows and doors will open in one hour"

He turned the channel. The news.

"are reminded not to panic. Salt Mine City experiences three city lock downs a year. This is the first in Steeple City's in over fifty years. We have a safe, proud city, and this does not change that."

"What do you think happened?" Casler asked.

Syd tried to recall anything he might have been told about city lockdowns. He decided he didn't know anything about city lockdowns.

"I don't know."

His shoulder hurt. His mouth still tasted like blood, and he could tongue tiny lacerations along his lips where his teeth had smashed into them.

It doesn't look like anyone is going to arrest us, he thought. His guts still shaking with adrenaline and dissipating fear he got up and went into the bathroom to get cleaned up.

There was a complimentary bottle of mouthwash. Assuming the

alcohol would sterilize his cut, he poured some over the marred section of shin. He ignored the burn.

A change in the sound of the television caught his attention. The background music stopped, and the newscaster sounded more like a human than an actor. Syd listened to the female voice.

"The Mayor's Police have issued a press statement regarding the whole city lockdown which is still in effect. An attack on the agency building by an assumed anti-telepathic fanatic group has left three quarters of the building's inhabitants dead. The attackers fled before the police arrived. No one has been captured. We will keep you updated as more information is released. This is Cindy Cunnings, FTWX."

Syd dropped the bottle of mouthwash onto the floor. The plastic bounced and green liquid flowed over the tile floor.

He sat next to Casler on the bed. She sobbed hysterically. He held her.

The door made a whirring sound. Syd assumed the electro-magnet locking system had just been released.

Casler shook under his chest and arms. It hurt his damaged tissue.

"Someone will get whoever did this," he said, "and it won't be the police. Our resistance is huge. We have to keep fighting."

He knew his words sounded like basic propaganda, the kind of word tint that he despised. But he couldn't think of anything else to say.

Casler wiped her eyes clear.

"This shouldn't be about hate," she said, "we can't let hate power us."

Syd nodded, even though he didn't agree. Somnam's death had brought him to the Telepath Resistance Agency, and he felt the hate in his stomach driving him to want to act right away.

"We'll go see an ex-cop I used to know tomorrow. Get him to make a few calls. See if we can't get the real story," he said.

Truce? he thought. We'll be nice. Truce doesn't mean I can't ask

him questions.

He was aware that he had a familiar feeling to the one he'd wrapped himself in the night he'd decided to find Somnam's attacker and kill him.

"Someday," he said, "I'm going to have to confront Dave with what I know."

He felt Casler's hand close around his. She squeezed until his palm curled into a crescent.

"But not to kill him."

"Not to kill him."

Dave and him, in the forested section of the park. Crouched down behind a pile of brush, as rocks and sticks, thrown by other boys, crashed around them. Dave whispering "you run back towards the trees, I'll cover you" and jumping to his feet, throwing rocks, getting hit in the chest and face. His nose blasting red. Syd making a safe run for safety.

Dave had gone to the hospital.

Somnam on the sidewalk.

"No, and not to kill him. And not tomorrow. Maybe not even soon. Tomorrow is the mayor's cop Robert, early, then Alphabet City, like we were told."

Casler agreed.

Rough shaking made her neck cramp.

Tamar's eyes opened a slit and she saw Frost over her, shaking her.

"They're coming, they'll be here tomorrow night. We need you to be ready."

She opened her eyes all the way. Something crusty was on her face. She realized it was blood. No one had cleaned her up this time.

"Who is coming?" she asked. She still felt drugged. Her arms wouldn't move, and her back was cramped but she didn't have the strength to shift positions.

"That was the first ever mission this place has ever done with

telepaths, did you know that? I didn't. I assumed we had a glorious history. This failure has caused a split in our leaders, and suddenly the truth is coming out."

Some of her strength came back. She could smell the iodine and iron smell coming off from her body. Sitting up slowly, ignoring how the walls and floor spun into one plain white wash, she forced her thoughts to focus. Frost had a strange look on his face. His shoulders seemed to be low.

"What are you talking about?"

"Recon missions were always done by paid mercenaries, techno-junkies short on cash and the like. They keep police scanners on in the city and steal telepaths from the cops. No one ever told us that before. The shadowy recon force that we all thought were elite telepaths was just a bunch of paid internet addicts. We steal all of our money electronically, everyone knows that. But everyone thought we were doing missions with telepaths. Not waiting for Yallov's orders to send telepaths."

Tamar tried to make sense of this information. The relevance wouldn't come to her. No central theme.

"I don't understand what you're telling me."

"Tonight was our first ever telepath missions, and we all fucked it up. The cops shot three quarters of the people on the inside. The only thing we accomplished was bringing the building down. And, this is the worst part. Some people panicked and didn't drive the tunnels all the way here. Thought the cops would be in them too. So they drove through Alphabet Town, the wastelands, all of it. There's a whole crowd of junkies now who know something is out here. They're walking here, carrying food and weapons, like fucking crusaders. They should be here by tomorrow night. We're being briefed in one hour. You may need to talk to Yallov again. Get cleaned up."

Tamar walked to the communal shower, the one she was assigned to use regularly. The floor had been white tile, but now was stained pink. She washed the blood off from herself. She stopped by the

medical room and had herself heavily dosed with a spaires-machine in case anyone's blood had been infected.

A half hour before the briefing she rode the elevator the highest floor of a neighboring building which was only half in use. On the outskirts of their group of a few hundred's habituated area, the building was part of the rim formed by the buildings closet to Steeple City. She walked down a hall and looked out a broken window. Wind teased at clothes through the irregular shard hole. The wastelands stretched out under her; she could also see the walls of Steeple City in the distance and the few high rise buildings that stood higher than the wall.

She looked into the distance, into the sparkling lights that made up the front of the diamond wash of the city. The city seemed so far, and empty buildings of varied heights stood all along the way to the city walls. She never had understood how the city could once have been so large. How people in massive numbers could have died from a single new strain of bacteria until the spaires machine was invented. How people had to build huge walls around the portion of their cities that they wanted to keep living in, leaving the rest to ruin and plunder outside. The few history based television programs she'd seen in people's apartments and college bars hadn't seemed real to her. And now people were crossing this old dead part of the city to steal and kill the resistance group. They didn't have a wall.

She wondered about the money in her group. There was money to electronically steal, everyone knew that. And she had been trained to steal it, until Octavio decided she was too good for that. But could all the money stolen run the entire network and feed even eight hundred people? she thought.

She tried to see if she could see the junkie army progress but could not. She didn't know if they carried lights. It was around seven in the morning. The sky was already tinged red and yellow. Maybe they were asleep.

She had been told that they remained far enough off that seeing

their progress was impossible. They had started from Steeple City, fifty miles away.

"Maybe they won't even notice us," she thought, "the windows are all one way only."

Her mind returned to the money. She couldn't think of any reason why the society would lie about money, and so she stopped convinced that the action at the agency, the blood, the things she'd seen, misunderstandings about telepath missions, and the strange army making their way towards her were making her paranoid.

How did I, she thought, one of the drunken slut telepath girls behind in the alley behind the bar end up here? The girl that slept with boys to steal money for vodka?

She felt small.

She rode the elevator down to briefing.

"We sent two scouts out to read the approaching force," a man behind the large black podium spoke into a microphone in the room where Tamar had been given her necklace, "and what we feared as the worst is happening. Somehow, the poorest of the city, those addicted to heroin, freebased cocaine, and nash are making their way here in hopes of stealing electronics from us.

"We have visual confirmation that they have even banded together, sharing food and junk for the trip. We have used microphone guns to listen to them; they know we are telepaths, and three quarters of them have mayor's police helmets. All of them are armed. Weapons of the worst sort hang from their shaking hands and are pulled behind them on wheelbarrow like carts. Some weapons they carry are designed for destruction of city walls. Their only plan is to stay far away, out of our reach, and to shoot into windows at our walls. The ammunition they have is staggering.

"It is our belief that the internet-heads have funded the junkies, for the obvious reasons. Some have conjectured that the mayor's police may have funded them in response to our destruction of The Agency building."



If you're trying to scare all of us into running, you've convinced me, thought Tamar.

The man, who Tamar had never seen before, began to brief them on their defensive plan. The Society was to be divided into into three forces; the combatants, the non-combatants, and the high risk combatants.

The combat forces, which contained most of the society members, were to divide into two factions. One would go into the buildings several blocks away and hide there. This would allow them to fire onto the backside of the opposing army. The junkies, according to the telescopes, microphone, and motorcycle recon, were not walking through buildings at all but marching through the old streets. They had slept in the street and no one expected them to take the time to explore buildings before attacking. There was a slight risk that the group would be discovered, but the man and his advisors did not feel the junkies would be so smart or careful.

Tamar was assigned to the second group. She assumed it was because she had survived the assault inside of the agency building, making it up several flights, and getting farther than most had in the confusion. She assumed someone considered her good in combat.

The second group got explicit instructions after the first group was finished. Once the junkies marched past them, and began to try and enter the building, the second group was to sneak up behind the shoot them. They were to give preference to the ones wearing helmets, because they would be closer than the first group, who was to remain in the Yallov buildings. If accomplished, they were to take the battle orders of one of their commanders as to the next step.

Affecting the minds of the attacking force was not an option; the strongest teles in the whole society had a range of only ten feet.

The non-combatants, the third group, were to spend most of the night digitally trying to find out where the attackers had received their weapons. The Rocking Horse Frost and Raging Butterfly both were assigned to this group. When the junkies arrived, they were to follow

the commands of their commander at that time.

The final group, the high risk group, was to defend offensively their Yallov buildings. Some would be on the ground floor firing out. Some would take on open combat in the streets. The Yallov Society had an open volunteer base that was willing to take on the most dangerous risks; the people who had signed up for this made up the fourth group.

It was estimated that the fighting would begin by ten o'clock that night.

The man ended by saying that if they began strong enough and killed enough in the first few minutes of the skirmish, the junkies might abandon the idea of attacking them altogether and run.

They have wagons full of ammunition, Tamar thought. You already told us that.

After the briefing she went upstairs. She found Frost lying on his cot staring at the ceiling in his living quarter. He was lying on his back, smoking, in a flannel shirt as always. He looked different, but she didn't know how.

Tamar smiled to see him lying there. It had been over two weeks since she'd met him, and first seen him sitting in front of a computer with a cigarette. It didn't seem like a half insane army could be marching towards them, that they were about to be a part of a small scale war together. The attack on The Agency felt like a dream when she remembered it.

It's like it never happened, she thought.

She stepped back against the wall, suddenly knowing why The Rocking Horse Frost looked like someone else; his long hair was gone. He'd had it cut, almost shaved, so that the top of his head was covered with fuzz that in no way resembled hair.

He exhaled lavender smoke and turned towards her.

"Shocking, huh?"

She nodded.

"Long hair is a liability in combat," he said.

She remembered that she'd come to lay with him, talk about the oncoming mission, and be reassured. Something in his voice made her stay standing against the wall. He sounded small to her.

He inhaled more of his cigarette.

"I don't even know if I can believe in this organization anymore. There's a rumor that these buildings used to be internet head gear factories, back when the internet was legal. That they were sealed up but not destroyed by the city when people lived in these parts in case some government body figured out how to regulate and control daily use of the internet. Well, no one figured it out, people started dying in the epidemics, and then people forgot about this building. But Yallov found it, somehow. That's the only thing he ever did that was great, they say. Lots of people."

He stopped and smoked.

Everyone's wondering about the money, Tamar realized, it's not just me. We all thought that someone was leaving the building regularly, some group of us, and stealing what we need to get by. Whoever admitted that we only had a few mercenaries stealing telepaths must have left something out.

"And we've been selling it to the net junkies without letting them know where we are. Well, now they know, and they sent the army after us. We're not a grand revolution. But if we give up on us, there is no hope for our kind but the agencies. And maybe people are just scared, hysterical."

He lit a fresh cigarette from the smoldering butt in his mouth before tossing the butt aside.

"If we have mercenaries, then maybe they steal for us."

"Mercenaries don't steal for other people, they keep it for themselves," he said.

I don't care, Tamar thought.

"Come on," Tamar said, "we might die later. Come with me."

He didn't get up, so she took the hand that didn't have a cigarette in it and pulled him to his feet. His hand was cool and sweaty against

hers.

She led him to the elevator, to the ground floor, and out into the cold night. They walked. Frost smoked. He didn't speak.

Tamar wondered where he thought they were going.

Five feet from the last Yallov building they walked past the anti-telepath broadcast net that prevented telepathic broadcasts in the buildings except in shielded rooms. Tamar closed her mind.

"I wonder why the city doesn't implement those things," she said.

"Only teles can set them up."

His hand had warmed in hers, but his fingers did not squeeze hers. It's like holding a warm dead person, she thought.

"How we get our money does not matter," she said, "we're working so that we can walk the streets without having to worry about being arrested every day. It doesn't matter if they lied to us. The cause remains the same." The words felt dirty to her. But she knew they were true. Already they had blown up The Agency Building. Her whole life she wanted to see The Agency Building go down. Even if the cops had hid all the teles somewhere else.

"I mean, we took The Agency Building out. If we have to put up with bureaucracy for that, so be it. And for tonight, if we want to live, we have to fight. Or else get a car, ride back through the old subways, risk going under the wall without knowing the secret way, and try to live in the city again."

"Well then," he said, "what are we doing out here? I'm supposed to be finding out who supplied the junkies, you're supposed to be sleeping getting ready for combat. Looks to me like we're escaping."

Tamar didn't answer him.

Abandoned buildings towered over them, some hundreds of feet tall. She pulled Frost into one choosing it because it had brass and glass door handles which looked regal. Inside, they were in what appeared to be in a lobby to Tamar. Red carpet lined the floor and there was a desk. A huge chandelier hung from the high ceiling, and two doors were built into the walls on both sides of the counter.

"How do we get white walls when there is shit like this next door?" Frost asked, lighting a cigarette. The lighter light was too small to have any effect on the distance walls, making the room feel even more like a giant cathedral space to them.

Tamar took his hand and pulled him through the double doors on the left. A dining room opened before them, tables with chairs upside down and white carpets. The ceiling was high, and renaissance styled paintings adorned the walls. The room smelled like old cement and dust.

"This isn't the most romantic place ever," Tamar said, "and I didn't bring a blanket. But forget that. Open your mind. I'll open mine. Then kiss me."

Her mind submerged with images from him, feelings from his mind, idea sentences and with her own feelings, images and sentence thoughts filtered through him and mixed with what she was feeling like a section of a greater kaleidoscope.

They kissed and she found herself awash and unaware of anything but their existence.

Her hips to his groin, she smelled of lips covered hers, another grain of sand drank from her, an excruciating dilemma in deep undulations tentatively at first, Frost groaned and white heat spread writhed like the contented inebriated state, she parted her lips of her silken hair, the velvet softness he was able to muster, and yet helpless too, erasing all barriers, to him completely, to the ocean, around them, a frustration greater, her body touched his, water and smoke, hungry hands dipped, life and death at the beach, shredding the last barriers, she was surprised, she frantically unlaced at the tenderness and sensuality, his compass, urging onwards, nipples, warm, "good, good."

Then she saw was only herself through a gas cloud of him, and she was warm.

When it was over, they closed their minds with mutual understanding. The abandoned dining room surrounded them again,

and the smells of old decay crept back into Tamar's nostrils.

She lay on top of Frost, no longer penetrated, but not having moved since the end.

Tamar rolled over off from him onto the carpet. The dust itched at her back.

"I've never done that before," Frost said, breathing heavily. "Only with people inside of the buildings, where are minds were closed, or with my mind closed, or inside the internet."

"I never have either."

Frost lit a cigarette. Tamar declined one. She held his hand on the dirty floor.

"I'm going back now," she said, "to sleep. You know I love you now, you've seen. Make it through tonight. We have to. For our kind everywhere."

Frost did not sit up quickly or panic. He looked to her like he had been expecting her to leave him.

She dressed and left the rotting building into the morning outside.

The sun had risen just enough for her to feel its heat on her arms. Her muscles twitched with the anaerobic respiration after the exertion of energetic sex.

"I hope I'm ok," she said to the street, "and that Frost is ok after this attack."

She thought about the coming attack.

The night before still felt like a hallucination. The blood of the police officers sometimes pooling if they were shot in the stomach, or gushing if the bullets ripped a hole, or lungs collapsing with bubbles or red, or heads spraying blood like gruesome shower heads. The killing didn't look like the killing she had seen on the television or in the minds of others. It didn't feel real.

"You're in shock," she thought, and shook herself. She needed to be clear. More heavy combat was to occur later. Frost was probably going to be on the frontlines once the looters arrived, she told herself, but she was going to be sneaking around to help defend him.

No news station had issued any more news that the press release from early in the morning when Syd and Casler had gotten up after four hours of sleep.

They sat in a rented battery car outside of Robert's house. Syd had explained to Casler that Robert was off from the force, and might not know anything. He had also explained that he had made an agreement with Robert not to be violent against him.

Syd had taken the time to carefully shave and put on a button up blue shirt in the hotel room. Casler was wearing a long black dress which ended just above her knees. They both thought it would be best if she looked attractive, but did not stand out. Once the mayor's police inevitably filmed them doing something they shouldn't, they'd be blacklisted and investigated. If she were too dressed in a way that stood out, anyone could see her, remember her, and report that she'd been at Robert's house. They didn't want to get him in more trouble.

"Are you ready?" Syd asked.

"Yes."

He didn't know what he was going to say, and his stomach shook with the nausea of little sleep, horrible news, and a small accidental overdose of foc.

They left their non-lethal guns in the car.

Syd knocked on the door.

Robert opened it. He smiled in a way that made Syd nervous. Robert looked much better than he had when Syd had watched him break a window to get into his own house. His sandy blonde hair had been cut into a neat short style. His eyes, though tightened into slits, were clear. Syd stepped back, surprised.

"I thought we were going to leave each other alone?"

"I'm not here to fight information out of you," Syd said, "we just want to ask you if you know anything about what happened last night."

His eyes stopped squinting and his facial muscles relaxed. He looked them both over.

"Well," he said, "come in I guess."

He sat them in a living room that was simple. A glass coffee table, white carpets, a television on a stand, the smell of a plug in air freshener.

"You guys want something to drink? I'm having one. Three months of drinking all day every day and I get the shakes without it. I'm trying to cut back, but it's not easy."

Syd rubbed his knees. They were in a hurry, but he didn't want to attempt to just beg and pry information out of Robert right away; he felt that would get them no where but thrown out.

He opened his brain, quickly, to Casler, so she could see why he was getting a drink. Vodka and Tonic, he thought after a few seconds, is a nice plain drink.

"I'll have a vodka and tonic," Casler said. Syd knew this was an indication that she agreed pressing Robert for information without being civil was a bad idea.

"All I have is whiskey," Robert said, standing in the doorway that separated the small kitchen from the living room.

"I'll have on of those then," Casler said.

"Make it two," said Syd.

Robert stepped into the kitchen, and Casler leaned over and whispered into Syd's ear.

"I can't read him at all. They must have trained him."

Not all police were given telepathic training, Syd knew, because to receive telepathic training required the use of someone telepathic, and few were on the side of the police. The help they had was limited to small elite forces, who needed near constant training to get remain competent.

He remembered his promise to Robert not to be violent, and wondered if Robert would.

I did kick him in the head, Syd thought.

He reminded himself that Robert hadn't attacked him at all after being untied.

Robert came back into the room and set down a dinner plate with



three very full whiskey glasses balanced on it down on the coffee table.

He took his up and drank half of it.

"So what did you want to ask me about?" he said.

Syd sipped at his drink and set it down on a glass coaster on the coffee table. Casler imitated him.

"The killings last night."

Robert took another long drink, nearly emptying his glass.

"You ever find out who killed that girl you were in love with?"

Syd fought the urge to think of Dave away.

"Yes," he said.

Robert nodded. He killed the whiskey and set the empty glass on the white carpet, bending over the arm of his chair to do so.

"I can't tell you much," he said. "What I know is this. Last night, approximately fifty people of unknown origin stormed into The Agency Building. The rooms on the doors had been unlocked electronically by hackers. The people, dressed in black, went from room to room shooting the telepaths. From the security videos taken they do not appear organized, they run in random formations killing everyone that moves who is not one of them. Some of them even killed each other. After several minutes they ran out of the building and into getaway cars."

Robert swiped his empty glass off from the floor and rose out of his easy chair in one motion.

He was back moments later with a full glass. He sat down in the chair, emptied the glass, and set it back down on the carpet. Syd thought to himself that Robert's face took on the look of someone who has eaten a large dinner.

"Do the police have any leads?" Casler asked, leaning forward in desperation.

"Ah, well, yes they do," Robert said, smiling, "I called my buddy Keith up this morning and asked him just that. Keith is still on the force. He said the news is coming out at noon. You'll just have to wait

until then."

Syd felt his wallet. It was filled with money. He wondered for the first time how many people had went to his apartment for foc to find him gone.

"We'll pay you," he said, and named a sum that would pay for an average man's living needs for half a year.

"Shit," Robert said, "just to get the news early?"

And not filtered through a news agency, Syd thought.

He nodded. He reached into his wallet and pulled out the focs. It was almost all of the cash he had on him.

Thinking about electronic money withdrawal machines, he handed Robert the money.

"Remember the last time we spoke," he said, "And I told you about Grace? That little police force telepathic shit that hates telepaths? Well apparently he raised some kind of army of zealots outside the city walls. The police have him. The mayor himself questioned him. They're going to execute him later this month unless his followers come forward.

"I know what you're thinking. Yeah, they tried to get one of their other telepathic puppets to read his mind, but it's clamped shut or something. Keith tried to explain it. I've told you what I know. Now please, go. If you ever come here again, I'll call the mayor's police. I appreciate you pulling me out of Champs, Syd, but I don't think I owe you anything."

Syd and Casler went. Neither of them had drunk more than sips of their whiskey. In the car, Syd glanced back through the windows at the front of the house to see Robert throwing back another glass.

'Probably one of ours,' he thought, driving away.

Casler took out a small phone.

"I'm calling Bob," she said, "To tell him what we found out."

The phone, according to what Bob had told them, was secure. No one could monitor it.

Syd drove the car towards the city walls to the east. As they neared

the wall, Tamar was finishing up the story about who they'd seen and what he had told them. Syd strained to pick out what was being said between them, but from Casler's side of the conversation he could not make anything out.

She put the phone down.

"Grace didn't do it, of course" she said, "it's a frame up. The police needed someone to blame, they tried to read his mind but he had it closed because he's really on our side. That's all the evidence they needed. They're going to kill him later, on TV, and then the whole city will forget this ever happened. No one knows who really did it yet."

Syd parked the car. The city wall loomed colossal a few blocks to the east. The neighborhood was the one he'd lived in before meeting Somnam.

Casler slipped into the backseat and with nervous motions changed out of her dress into simple black pants and a plain long sleeved brown sweater. She put on a thick belt that had a car stealing device and a cellphone hidden inside.

She strapped her non-lethal gun to her back. Syd exchanged his button up shirt for a t-shirt, put on a blue sweatshirt, and strapped his non-lethal gun to his side.

They got out of the car. Syd got a backpack out of the back of the car before locking it. Casler took his hand and they walked north, parallel to the wall, until a very old building loomed above them.

It was once a station to the now abandoned and mostly locked up underground train. Now, they knew from the mission briefing the Asian boy had given them, it was an apartment building. The landlady would allow someone to enter the subway system if he slid money under one door and then went in through a different secret door in the back of the building. The door in the back was not monitored or known of by the mayor's police force; she had apparently kept it hidden for over ten years. The document stated that she might pay an officer off, but that no matter her methods she was safe. Scores of people went in and out of the city illegally through her old subway

entrance weekly.

They walked around to the back, hand in hand. Syd knocked on the door and slid an envelope under it. The envelope held cash.

The secret door opened out of the brick wall like a secret passage in a fairy story.

Inside it was dark but they both waited until it closed behind them before turning on dime sized flashlights.

Inside it smelled like urine and mold.

"Probably from people pissing in here," Syd thought.

Whoever had opened the door could not be seen, but the way into the subway was clear enough; an escalator, no longer running, and an adjoining staircase were the only things in the large room other than another door against a far wall.

They walked down the staircase. Its floor was littered with cigarette butts, empty needles, and a black soil like substance that Syd couldn't identify. He associated it with the cities nash addict population; a kind of fecal matter that they left behind in places they frequent. Someone had told him once nash heads puked it after eating the drug, but he didn't know.

His muscles felt shaky, but he struggled not to show it in his face or in the hand that held Casler's. It was the middle of the day, so he told himself that anyone they met would probably be asleep or on the nod.

He twisted his flashlight off and Casler did the same. They stood until their eyes adjusted to the red glow of the subway lights, still burning even though the subway to the outside of the city hadn't ran in years. She released his hand; they wanted to look like they belonged in the underground, not like scared kids.

They began to walk through the musty air towards the outside and Alphabet Town.

It was not as bad as either of them had expected. They only saw two other people, also walking together. Both of the alien groups stayed in the shadows, and so did Syd and Casler.

They reached the abandoned station called Rossy station. The tile

work sign was missing pieces but Syd could still read the name. The escalator was off from its track; otherwise it was visually identical to the station they'd climb down in. The noise of people moving above shook the walls around them.

They exited the station.

Syd had heard that Alphabet Town was a celebration, but he, even as a minor foc dealer, had always been terrified of it. He walked up the staircase out into the sunlight and a party on the street he had not been expecting.

They had electricity. Syd knew they had electricity because music floated through the air. It was rough, atonal electronic music with pulsing white noise static rhythms underneath that reminded him of dance clubs. Firecrackers fired in the distance. A smell like cigarettes but more spicy, which he suddenly remembered from his college days as marijuana, moved in the air the same the music did. It seemed to come from all directions. The buildings were small, like in residential areas, but packed tight and brightly painted. Food stalls lined up and down the street, and brightly colored banners hung on many of the buildings. Pedestrians filled the street like a river. It reminded him of The West, except amplified. Casler fell against his arm and clutched it.

"It's wonderful," she said.

A pack of multiracial people dressed in loose fitting clothing of bright colors formed around Casler and Syd.

"Take a token for two free drinks at Alphabetical Alcohol."

"Hello, welcome to Alphabet City, you need a nice safe place to stay? Full internet hookup, marijuana, mini-fridge, coffee, everything you need for a nice honey moon right in your room!"

"Club 485, just down street D two blocks, best jazz you'll ever hear, all the greatest music from the 21'st century"

"25% off all clothing at the Lady and the Wolf clothing store"

Syd took Casler's hand and walked forward, with force. He had expected something like a ghetto, quiet, and he'd envisioned them

stalking quietly through the streets paying a few people for information about Daily. He didn't know how they were expected to find anyone in this place.

The music faded out then a different song faded back in as they walked away from the subway exit, but the area remained consistently full of people, food stalls, and stores. They walked quickly, Syd just wanting to find somewhere where they could talk quietly. Casler was throwing her head from side to side, either trying to see everything or look for someone who she thought might know about net-heads, which might lead them to Daily.

"There," she said, stepping off from the sidewalk in front of a kebob stand that smelled of mint and fired meat and pulling Syd towards a large building.

"Alphabet City Public Library," it read, painted in blue block letters.

What the fuck is this place, Syd thought, this little city. They have a library?

Casler pulled him through a rotating trellis and into the library. Inside, the noise and headache of the street could not be heard. It was completely silent. People, dressed in bright clothes, lounged in brown easy chairs reading beaten books. The walls were filled with them.

"I didn't know it was going to be like this," Casler said in a low voice.

Syd wondered if she meant the library or the city. He decided city, and that it made no difference to his answer anyway.

"I didn't either."

A man with a stoop in his shoulders approached them from the back of the library. He wore white shirt and pants, with star shaped blue patches sewn on them.

"Can I help you?" he asked, in a voice that sounded rougher than the voice someone dieing in a sleep deprivation bar. His face was burn victim scarred.

"Sorry, we were just leaving," Syd said, taking Casler's hand and

turning to go.

"No son," said the man sharply, "I didn't mean it like that. I meant, you don't seem to be from around here. Can I help you find anything?"

Casler spoke up immediately.

"We're looking for someone named Daily," she said.

The old man crossed his arms. Blue stars on his forearms blocked the blue stars on his chest.

"What do you want with Daily?" he asked.

Casler was silent. Syd did not know what to say.

"I see," said the man, "well, you came to the right place, my telepathic friend. Please, come with me."

He moved out onto the street, and Casler led Syd. When the old man left the library to hold the door, Casler leaned into Syd's ear and said "I let him read my mind."

Syd wondered how she'd known to go into the library, or if she'd even known at all. He decided that they couldn't have been that lucky, she must have known somehow.

The old man led them through the crowds, and they followed. Syd moved his wallet to his front pocket and tried not to bump into anybody. They fell back a few people deep into the crowd but continued to follow the man.

"I was reading people through all the walking," Casler said, "and one old man was thinking about going to the library to talk to one of the telepathic elders who know everything about computers. I figured he meant her. He must have meant this guy"

A few minutes of walking later the crowd became non-existent.

"We just left our downtown," the old man said, "this is where most of us live. Go down three blocks and then left two blocks. But you aren't the first to try and convince her that telepaths need liberating. She probably won't join you."

He turned back. Syd and Casler thanked him.

They followed his directions.

Outside of the building Casler sat down on the sidewalk. Syd

looked at her. She was crying.

The area felt strange. The lack of cars gave the air an almost silent quality. The streets were empty.

He sat down next to her.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

She sobbed. Her whole body looked distressed. She wrapped her head in her hands.

Syd put a friendly arm on her shoulder.

"People here are so friendly," she said, "and they accept us. All my friends could be dead," she said, and began to sob louder, "they could all be dead, someone shot them."

Syd rubbed her shoulder. He didn't know what to tell her. If she had more than two friends, probably at least one of them was dead. Three quarters dead weren't good odds.

A voice from behind them startled both of them.

"Get her inside right now young man."

Syd turned. A woman in her thirties stood behind them on the sidewalk.

"Come on," she said, "it's no coincidence that you found me. I'm Daily. Don't look so surprised. You were scanned by a tele at the subway gate, and I gave the OK for you to be led to me. Now get her inside here. She's going through something awful."

The woman wore a dress of yellow that ended at her ankles. She was so thin that Syd could see the bones of her elbows jutting out from her arms like implanted lipstick cylinders.

Syd stood up and held out a hand to Casler. Although she continued to cry softly, she let Syd take her by her hand he pulled her to the woman.

Daily had grey schoolmarm eyes and black hair. She stared at Syd. His brain wasn't closed, he realized, but left it open. Something about her eyes told him locking up wouldn't help anyway. He stared at the sidewalk with Casler's hand in his, feeling responsible and sorry about Casler's tears until the woman turned around and strode



towards a house.

She led them into a simple kitchen, where she gestured for Casler to sit in a yellow wooden chair.

"Here, honey, have some tea," she said, handing her a mug of liquid. Syd could smell the earthy sweet fragrance of the beverage from across the room. He leaned on a wall.

"Wait here, I'll go get more chairs," said Daily.

The kitchen smelled good to Syd. A layer of spice hung in the air beneath the scent of Casler's tea. The room was decorated in pale greens and browns. Syd saw a candle burning on one of the stove range tops; a ceramic pot hung over the flame. Syd guessed the pot was the source of the smell.

Daily came back with two folding chairs under her arms. The exertion of carrying them caused her to pant and gave a shuffling quality to her walk. Syd decided not to help her, he didn't want to offend the woman. She dropped one in front of Syd, and he caught it before it could tip onto the ground and opened it up.

"Tea, foc, liquor?" she asked.

Syd wondered why, if she could read his mind so easily, she was asking him.

"Because what people want to think they want and what they really want are not the same thing," she said, "and several years ago I got sick of trying to tell the difference. And of trying to guess which to use each time."

"foc."

She opened a green wooden box and got out a foc pot. The smell of quality foc became the dominant smell in the room.

"So," she said, "I know you're TRA and that you want me to help you. You're not the first to try. To be frank, I don't know why they keep sending you."

She poured Syd a dose of foc. He took it, enjoying the warmth on his hands despite the fact the little kitchen was hot enough to make him sweat. His head began to feel clearer although he hadn't drunk

any yet.

"And what I really don't comprehend is why the TRA doesn't just encourage all the teles to move out here, to Alphabet city. What does that city give you except pain and suffering?"

Syd sipped his coffee. He didn't have an answer. He agreed with her, to an extent. But he also thought that the city needed to stop discriminating. If the city didn't discriminate, then Somnam wouldn't be gasoline. Teles are born in there, he thought.

"People are scared of us," Daily said, "especially in cities. They don't want us to rule them."

Syd looked up from the murky depths of his foc to locate her. She sat across from him, on the other side of the kitchen, in a faded green chair. He looked at Casler. She sat across from him at the round wooden table. She'd stopped crying. He couldn't read anything in either of their faces. He shut his eyes and rubbed the space behind them.

He opened his eyes. Daily no longer looked thirty to him. Deep black hair flowed over her youthful, padded face. He blinked. Her hair didn't appear black any longer. It looked grey and thinning. Her eyes remained the same.

"I'm scaring you, aren't I?" she said, "wait here." She got up again and left the kitchen. Syd looked at Casler. She had stopped crying, but the lines of fluid still shone out against her porcelain features.

"I want to live here," she said.

Syd nodded. He wondered since arriving if he'd be going back to Steeple City with her. He didn't feel like he'd lived up to his duty towards Somnam yet. He felt like he had more to do, even though he didn't know what it was exactly. He still wanted to help the TRA.

Daily sat back down in the folding chair and crossed her arms. She looked like she had at first again, with black hair streaked with grey and skeleton thin.

"I've turned on a telepathic blocker," she said, "no more reading minds in the house until I turn it off again. So lets chat."

Casler looked up, cupping her mug in her small fingers. "You won't help us?" she asked.

"Oh, I help when I can. I sent some information to your leaders about the people who attacked the agency last night. You'll probably hear about it later, when they figure out what's going on. But I won't join with you."

Syd finished his food. His stomach felt better than it had in days.

"But people are dying," he said.

Daily did not say anything for a long time.

"I fought," she said, "for the longest time. I'm eighty years old. I just want to live a few years in peace and die. I don't know why the TRA sent you out here. I still send them information when I get it. I still help them digitally. I suspect maybe sending here was just a loyalty testing mission, see if you would actually leave the city. So you can go wherever you want. But please leave."

Casler stiffened. Syd looked at her and remembered the first time he'd met her, in the building. She looked even angrier now.

"You aren't old," she said, "and you just don't care. You don't care because you're happy here and you feel like you deserve this because you have it. But other people don't have it. My friends could be dead because people like you won't let us all get together. People like you won't let us work together."

"That may be true," Daily said, not looking insulted or ruffled at all to Syd. "But it's also irrelevant. I'm not leaving my home to fight again."

Casler's face turned red. "We're not asking you to fight. We're asking for your help." She threw the tea mug against the wall. "You sit over there like some kind of bitch god, all saint like and the power compelling you and knowledge filled, and you're just like a little kid playing costumes. My friends fucking died."

Daily sipped from her own glass. "Your words will not wound me, no matter how strongly you believe them."

Casler stood up and walked out of the kitchen. Syd just left without

looking at Daily, his mouth dry.

On the street Casler stood waiting for him. She had her arms crossed. He could see her shaking.

"You don't know what that woman was like," she said, "you couldn't see inside of her head."

That doesn't mean I couldn't see what she was like, Syd thought.

Casler pulled a cell phone out.

"Why did they send us out here if they knew she wouldn't help?" Syd asked.

Casler was already on her phone.

When she hung up, her eyes were squinted and her whole body seemed to vibrate.

"You're armed, right?" she asked. "Well, they sent us out here to get her to give us information. They thought if we invited her to join again, she'd give us information to make us feel better, this being our first mission and all. It's what she's always done before. Initially, they wanted to know more about Mitchell Brothers. But after last night, of course they want to know who brought the massacre on the agency. And this bitch sent them a message saying that she knows who did it, but can't tell."

Syd could see where this was going. He was starting to wish he didn't have a gun. But he knew that Casler did, so it didn't matter if he did or didn't.

"So we're to extract it from her, right?" he asked.

"There is no police force out here," she said, smiling thinly. "Clear your mind. Think about sex or anything except what we're doing until we have a gun on her. Who knows if you're strong enough to block her. And don't worry. I'll kill her if she doesn't tell us."

Casler ran to the door. Syd followed, picturing a faceless female pale body writhing in ecstasy under him instead of his own walking, trying to lose his consciousness in the image.

Casler reached the door and went inside. Syd could hear her screaming. In case Daily had neighbors, he forced himself to walk

casually back into the house and shut the door. It clicked. He turned the deadbolt.

He found Casler and Daily in the kitchen. Casler had her handgun out, pointed at Daily. Daily shook. She looked twenty, all the sag and wrinkles in her face gone.

Syd pointed his gun at her.

She spit at them. "So this is what your revolution is," she said, "guns and power. And you ask me why I won't join."

Casler spoke, calmly but with anger. "You're going to tell us who massacred the agency's prisoners. And if you don't, I will kill you. If you are not one of us, you are one of them."

Syd realized he was standing in the remains of Casler's tea mug. It seemed funny to him somehow, the brown and white porcelain spread all over the floor from their visit with hidden guns. It felt like another time entirely, like it had been years ago.

He held his gun steady. Somnam was in his mind. Dave was in his mind. So was Daily.

Casler fired her gun just above Daily's shoulder, into a green countertop. The silenced weapon's bullet made a sound like dropping an egg sized stone into water as it lodged itself into the wood.

Casler's weapon shook. Syd watched her. Her sudden anger frightened him; she'd been short with him in The Agency building but he hadn't expected her to attack anyone so quickly. He caught himself thinking and turned his attention back to Daily. If she got the upper hand, she would kill both of them. He knew it. The situation had obviously escalated to force. He did not know what to do. He sidled towards Casler.

Casler fired a round into Daily's shin. The bullet again made a soft sound, but Daily did not. She screamed and fell out of her wooden chair onto the linoleum floor, holding her shin. Blood ran between her fingers onto the floor. She looked up at them. Her cheek had scraped through some of the porcelain shards from the cup, and Syd watched

the blood bead on the left side of her face. A single stream from a deeper cut began to run across her nose and onto the floor.

I thought we were the good guys, Syd thought. We are the superior ones, the workers.

He considered pointing his gun at Casler. He didn't know what to do.

"Talk," Casler screamed. She lowered her voice to conversational tones. "I know you know something you bitch. I could feel you taunting me with it when I walked in here. Talk or I'll blow a hole in your cunt."

"The agency was shot up by a group of telepaths who think they are revolutionaries," Daily said, tears mixing with the blood from her left cheek on the floor beneath her. "A group of them drove through here last night. They live a few miles away from the city. I couldn't tell you. They'll kill me."

"Run," Casler said in a low voice, and Syd bolted with her just behind him.

In the street, they ran back towards the downtown area. Syd was sure by now that Daily had crawled to a phone and called someone, who, he didn't know, but someone. His lungs tore at him as he ran. We're never going to be welcome back here repeated over and over in his mind to the rhythm of his footfalls on the concrete.

The downtown was only blocks away.

He looked down at his legs for blood but did not see any. He stopped and checked himself thoroughly. Casler saw what he was doing and did the same. They began to walk towards the market like area.

"There," Casler said. She pointed at an old gasoline car. They walked to it casually, like they owned it, and Casler punched out the window with a small pointed device from her pocket. Syd ran to the passenger side. He threw his pack into the back and buckled his safety belt. Casler inserted a small electronic device into the ignition of the car and the car started. Syd had never seen a device like it before the TRA had issued it to them. The devices were not used for

car thieving, usually, since they cost more than one hundred gasoline cars. They not only started the car, they disabled the electronic tracking devices.

She quickly pulled the car out of its parked spot along the curb and drove away from both Downtown Steeple City and Alphabet City.

"We're supposed to hang out for tonight," she said. "And drive back into Steeple City tomorrow, through the subways that start way out on the edges of the old city. But when it gets dark, lets see if we can't find this civilization she told us about."

"Did you have to shoot her?" Syd asked.

"She wasn't going to talk."

Syd accepted it. He did not know what else to do.

Casler reached into her pocket and tossed her phone to Syd. "Call the TRA and tell them what we know," she said.

Syd hung up the phone after several seconds.

"They know. They must have found out when we did. Or else they've bugged your belt or our guns. But anyway Bob says they know what happened and he's going to call us back in less than an hour."

Tamar felt her skin crawl in the abandoned building. She knew the army was approaching. She could picture them outside, moving steadily closer, puking the strange brown sludge that came with Push addiction, their noses dripping slippery white opaque fluid down into their mouths, and perhaps by now crapping their pants with withdrawal. But not stopping. She could feel them getting closer.

She'd seen the movies on television of junkies. The Yallov Society had compiled a training video of the most factual footage from those that could tell the difference. She knew the junkies would be zombies.

She had decided the building she was assigned to was once an apartment building. She'd walked into the lobby and found switches, dusty and grimy feeling, behind a reception counter. She'd flicked them and soft lights came on inside the ceiling. She'd turned them off and walked towards an elevator.

She'd expected the power to work. Part of her briefing explained

that huge reactors still ran automated under the outer areas of the city. She wanted to see them, visit the huge old underground buildings filled with robots that still supplied power to the ghost city which circled new steeple city.

Despite the power still working the elevator seemed to be broken. She climbed the stairs, cleaner than the lobby but smelling like dry cement. On the fifth floor she pried the elevator door open with a crowbar from her tool handbag, and slashed the cable with an enamel knife. She felt the wind of the elevator rushing down from above and jumped backwards. The crash shook the building and pieces of steel echoed. She sheathed the knife at her waist. The stairs were the only way up and down now.

She reminded herself to be more careful. If the elevator had only been two stories up she would have lost her arm.

On the stairs she climbed to the twelfth floor. She wanted to be high off the ground, for sniping, but close enough that she could run down the stairs quickly if she had too. She wondered what Frost was doing.

The hallway was plain. The carpet was rough and patterned with a series of cross hatching lines.

She picked a room at random that faced the street and Yallov Complex buildings. With much effort she cut the door knob off with the enamel knife. The building had been abandoned before enamel was common, and she had been told no material inside would stand up to her utility blade. She pushed the door open.

The room was still furnished.

She'd heard that some apartments in this area were still filled with things from just before the waves of viruses that had killed so many, before the Spaires Machines were invented and everyone in the cities moved inward for protection from outsiders. Sometimes dead people were found on the inside, skeletons surrounded by dust. She'd heard that there were apartments like this one all over the outer abandoned rings of most cities, far enough way to be still overlooked



by scavengers. She'd never seen one.

The floor was tiled, brown, and dusty. A bed took up the left side of the room, made with blankets that were no longer of any discernible color. Sunlight came in through the windows, the curtains were open. A fish tank, long dry, had grey powder and fish skeletons in its bottom. A chair, a television, a dresser, and a night stand were all the other things that were left of whoever had once lived in the apartment.

Tamar wondered how the person had left. Had they been taken out, to sick to move, to die somewhere else? Or they had left to visit a relative and never made it out of the hospital? Fleed the city entirely, hoping to make it in the country? Or had they hung on, healthy, as the Spaires-Machine was invented and only when they felt they needed the protection of the city government?

Tamar sat on the bed, ignoring the feel of grime. It felt softer than her cot, but she did not lie down. The nightstand drawer opened easily. It had a remote control and a yellowed cardboard box. "Condoms," it read, and it took her a moment to realize what they were. From the time of viruses, probably government issued. The federal government was more than a figurehead then. That tells me when they left, she thought.

She pulled one of the objects out of the box and felt the soft plasticine wrapper. Having never been to school she only knew what they were from old or historical television programs watched late at night drunk in other people's rooms. She did not how the condoms functioned. She wondered if even the kids in school would know the arbitrary historical fact.

She placed the condom back in the box without opening it and closed the nightstand drawer. It felt like she was trespassing. The silence bothered her.

The view outside the window looked good to her for what she was going to have to do. She could see a good distance down the street both ways without having to actually open the window, and she could see one of the entryways to the Yallov Complex building right in front

of her. A crucial place to defend, she knew, and part of her specialized briefing.

She sat back down on the bed. She didn't know what to do until it got darker and the junkies were closer. It felt foolish to look for them now.

She picked up the television remote to see if the TV would work: maybe the satellite still broadcast, like the fallen network. Nothing happened when she pressed the button, so she tried again, pressing harder. The nightstand began to turn itself inside out, and she saw a platform rising out of it. On the platform was something strange, something like earmuffs. Seconds later she realized what it was.

Internet headgear. The identical type that she used in Yallov's buildings. The internet was still legal when whoever had lived in this apartment had died.

She told herself she could lose track of time on the internet. She could get torn apart or raped by the junkies if she was inside, unconscious and plugged in when they arrived. The building's server might not even still be working, it had been years.

Don't use it, she thought.

She put the headgear on and laid on the dirty bed. It smelled like the ground under a park bench.

There was blackness. She was in the apartment building lobby, with a uniformed female behind the counter.

"This is the old internet," Tamar thought, "the old internet the way people used to access it, without outside people directing them."

Behind the counter stood a woman who looked youthful, with brown hair and blue eyes. She smiled at Tamar.

"Hello Daphne," she said, "do you need help finding anything? You have six new messages."

The uniform the woman wore was dated, a red vest over a white shirt with a gold name tag.

"No, thank you," Tamar said. The woman did not move or acknowledge this. Tamar knew that if spoken to again she would

reveal whatever options and pathways she was programmed to reveal. Tamar wondered how long it had been since the program had spoken to anyone.

The door to the outside was the only door in the virtual apartment lobby. Next to it was a little computer interface.

Jennifer saw it was a touch screen operative.

An easy way for someone to navigate the internet by themselves, she thought.

It displayed several options. She looked them over, moving through tree menus.

She selected a server entitled "Immersive Encyclopedia."

The door to the outside opened on black infinity. She walked into it.

In black space she floated. An equator of letters, three dimensional bubble letters in a soft shade of blue, floated around her in a circle. By concentrating she could move them around, bringing the letter of her choosing in front of her.

Something appeared in the distance. A small white space opened in infinity, behind C and D. She rotated the alphabet. The space remained stationary, now behind J and K. It grew larger.

As the white shape grew closer, Tamar could tell it was shaped like a man. He accelerated and floated before her, a human figure made of flat plastic with not discernible features.

"I am automated," he said, "a bot placed by Naomi's Watchers. We have elected to keep this portion of the old internet up to date, and so we do so with stolen governmental records. Please enjoy. As of today, it is up to date."

The man blinked out.

Jennifer picked Y. She wondered what the government and Naomi's Watchers thought of Yallov.

Thousands of entries flowed down below her past her line of sight, like a ladder into infinity. She remained floating at the top.

She decided that the encyclopedia had probably not been so large before the hacker group got into it. It would take hours to scroll down

the list of words.

A small console, with a writing pad materialized and floated in front of her. It was inscribed with the letters NM at the top. She selected the category "persons" and wrote down Yallov.

The words moved in a blur and settled on emptiness. There was no Yallov.

She stared.

He was never registered, she thought, perhaps the government has just never heard of him. Or the hackers have never heard of him. Otherwise the government would have came for us.

She concentrated and took herself out of the internet.

On her back in the dusty bed she felt grime on her neck and shuddered that her hair flowed over a pillow that hadn't seen soap and water since before she had been born. The sun still streamed in through the window, so she knew it wasn't late. She checked her watch and booted the internet on again with a push of the remote button.

This shouldn't bother you so much, she thought, that some hacker group hasn't heard of Yallov. You're a secret.

Back inside the encyclopedia she tried another letter. T. She entered thing, telepath. Telepath had an entry. She entered Spaires. It too had an entry. The encyclopedia had entries that post dated the virus times.

What the fuck, she thought, why is there no Yallov?

She avoided the reception area provided by the apartment complex and threw herself into an open stream of the apartment server, looking for a search engine still open and running. She found one and searched for the term "Naomi's Watchers." Nothing came up. Either they were dated or entirely underground.

She cursed.

Something about Yallov not being in the huge dictionary bothered her. She floated in the slipstream nothingness of the empty search engine, like deep space with no stars. She navigated back through

the apartment's reception server, then back into the encyclopedia. Hovering inside the alphabet, she wondered what she should look up.

Then the squiggly man appeared before her.

"Stop," he said. The rainbow maggots from the brim of his hat moved and twisted in front of his chin. "You don't have to be afraid of me. Just stop."

Her hand found the credit card like exit button inside her pocket.

It's like magic, she thought, that I never lose it.

Her fingers found the button.

"Just watch any news broadcast," he said, "and then come back to this alphabet." He blinked out of existence.

Jennifer shook in the empty space. She concentrated and thought of a gopher, an old search engine type of server that still existed and ran on the Fallen Network. It had television. Frost had shown her. Her digital body moved through corridors and digital tunnels, remembering the pattern of places that would snake her to the gopher. She longed for the time when Raging Butterfly had entered her directly into sites.

She arrived at the gopher engine, a large red floating carpet with a computer and desk in the center.

She knew that when the Fallen Network had been running legally the engine would have had millions of carpets and desks extending out past the visible line of the human digital eye. She thought probably if she waited long enough she would see another section of carpet appear linked to hers with a desk and computer and a user. It was a maintained section of the Fallen Network, by some group.

She sat at the desk and typed news archive and the current date.

A television materialized on a night stand at the end of the carpet. She selected a channel and the program began; it was not immersive as it was just a digital recording of a television broadcast.

A newscaster, starched in his suit and red tie, read about an attack on the agency building. Red letters reading "live" glowed in the lower corner of the screen.

Jennifer didn't listen to the words the newscaster was saying. Behind him stood the agency building.

She turned the tv off and sat back. She felt her eyes welling, and thought she would cry, but did not. She didn't know what was happening

Her hands shook. The dials on the television were hard to operate. She checked another news program. A man speaking into a camera "the attack on the agency has left hundreds of its young residents dead."

She turned the TV off for the second time.

I saw it blow up, she thought, what the fuck is this?

Deciding she wasn't scared of the squiggly man, she sped back to the encyclopedia.

The alphabet swirled around her. She waited. She wanted answers. He'd caught up to her, he could have touched her. If he wanted her dead she would be dead.

A spot of light grew into the man wearing a business suit and the hat with the dangling rainbow worms.

Jennifer wondered how long she'd been gone. She wondered if maybe he was trying to keep her in the internet long enough for her body to be discovered and torn apart by junkies.

You're being illogical, she thought. If he wanted you dead.

She did not log out. The worms faded and features of a face folded out of blank skin. The man smiled.

"Your group did not destroy the agency building," he said. "I have much to explain to you but there is no time. You are hallucinating your friend's and your own thoughts. You must get out of the area you are in and come back into the city by any means possible. I can explain more then. You did not destroy the agency building. You killed hundreds of innocent people. And there is no one coming to attack you now. You are in great danger where you are now. Please, get out. I'm very busy, I cannot stay any longer. I have many more people to try to contact. Take anyone you can, but please, run."

Jennifer remained still, floating before Q and R, gigantic yellow cloud bubble letters. She left the encyclopedia. Fear of the approaching menace made her hesitate maintaining the connection.

Another news program. There was no newscaster, and the agency building was not in the background. Along the bottom of the screen was a news ticker, saying that police had just granted information to the public and press access to the immediate outside of the agency building. Panning shots of the agency cut in one after the other on the screen; shattered windows in the picturesque brick building, a tree with gun holes, a snatch of a girl's bloody agency uniform shirt hanging for a window, and someone dressed in black from the Yallov Society; an asymmetrical facedown body.

As the camera shots progressed, the narrator explained that an anti-telepath group of extremists had planned the attack, with the help of instruction and secret police information from Edward Marlowe, formally of the codename Grace. He was to be executed later in the day unless he gave information about the whereabouts of the group he had founded.

What the fuck, she thought. The cops, the cops retaliated after we left.

Tamar exited the internet. The sun was down. She heard gunshots. She strained her relaxed muscles into fast motion and looked outside. A battle was taking place in the street below her. She thought about grabbing her gun, and remembered what the squiggly man had said to her, that she should just run. She told herself that the agency building hadn't gone down, and that someone had attacked it after they left.

"The same people who attacked the agency building could be here," she thought, her anger rising, "they could have sent this junkie army."

Her fingers brushed the metal of her sniper rifle, cold in the afternoon air. She raised the magnifying sights and pointed it down into the street below. Men with white saliva running off their chins ran

towards the agency building firing shots. The sporadic attackers made small piles in the street. To her far left, shots were being exchanged between buildings. It seemed a more worthy target than the men in the street who were being stopped easily as they rounded corners and charged the open area of road in front of the Yallov Buildings.

She focused the sights on a man who was firing a pistol widely out a window. She watched him fire, he didn't look like he was even aiming at anything to her. She held her breath and pulled the trigger. The gun held steady against her shoulder, the kick offset enough by gyrotors in the stock that she was able to hold the sight steady and watch the man fall.

When he did not rise she began to trace down the building, looking for someone else firing out windows.

Something caught her eye in the middle of the street. She swung her rifle sight down.

It was a little girl in a bright yellow dress standing in the middle of the street. Blood clotted in her yellow hair and down her arms from her shoulders. Her hands dangled loose, marionette appendages. She raised her arms, her wrist bent at eighty degree angles, her fingers grotesquely swaying pointing at the ground, and she smiled at Tamar through the gun sight.

Jennifer dropped her gun to the floor. It went off. Things began to explode around her, something that hurt sprayed against her arms. Her chest felt warm.

She fell back away from the window and crawled into the hallway. Shots continued to pour into the room she had left, and she began to run for the staircase.

Tamar, she thought. Is Tamar trying to contact me?

"There is no one coming to attack you." She remembered the digital voice of the squiggly man. She stopped in the hallway near the stairs and pulled her gun. The other rooms were locked. Popping sounds echoed in the hallway, seeming to come from behind her.



"What the fuck is going on," she said. "Keep calm. You're shellshocked. Keep calm and go help."

She crept down the stairs and stopped on the ground floor. She could hear shots being fired, louder now, but also deep explosions that were too loud to be guns, and she could smell ozone in the air. She knew someone was using more advanced weaponry than ballistic guns.

The hallway that led to the back of the building was behind her.

I could fucking be out of here, she thought. I saw Tamar. I can't fight.

She decided she wouldn't desert without Frost. He was on the other side of the street, in the Yallov Complex. She made her way to the front door and waited. Her handgun felt slippery wet against her palm.

"Listen," Casler said, her face active and tense in the passenger seat when Syd glanced at her from his driving, "there is a group of telepaths out here about two miles away. They're suffering from group hallucinations brought on by what we call looping; they're reading each others minds and they don't even know they're doing it. They're shooting each other up because no one taught them not to loop. We're supposed to go out and knock them out and bring them back with us. As many as we can get in the car, I mean. Fuck."

Syd squeezed his fingers on the wheel. He wanted to look at her again, to see if she had the determined, angry look but he assumed it would still be there. They'd driven away from Alphabet City and she had not calmed. She'd taken a phone call from Bob with a briefing.

"They're the ones who attacked The Agency," Casler said. "They didn't know."

They're going to shoot at us, he thought, they're going to shoot at us and try to kill us. They're a bunch of hallucinating killers.

"But they could be fixed," Casler said, "I know you know that. You watched me go through my anti-looping training, it only takes a few hours. Something weird happened to them that wasn't their fault, Bob said they hadn't figured out what exactly but something."

Syd felt like he had lost all control on his life. The fog from Daily throbbed in his brain, making his stomach into a brick and forcing him to view in his head the many ways he could die soon. His hands shook.

The driving was not easy. The streets had been cleared in the abandoned city right after people had officially left, but the area had hills he couldn't see over, and a fallen down building or broken down car left in the street could be fatal if he crashed into it. And the sun was going down.

He gripped the steering wheel. His teeth ground against each other in his mouth, and anger like panic gripped him.

He pressed on the gas. He closed his brain.

Casler drummed her fingers on the dash.

You could at least act concerned, you heartless bitch, he thought.

He decided to try and calm himself down. He knew the fog was making him illogical.

"How many shells do we have to knock people out with?" Syd said.

"Over twenty in our guns and at least a hundred in your pack."

Syd nodded and drove on. The sun was going down, giving the empty city a yellow color he associated with relaxing afternoons.

He heard distant boomings, stopped the car, and got out. He smashed all of the car lights with his gun-butt; once the sun went down they turned on automatically. He drove.

The noise got louder. Casler began to breathe harder, Syd could hear her over the sound of the gently running car engine. He rolled the windows down and drove on slowly. The echoes of shots reverberated from the distance. He hoped it was dark enough that no one would notice the approach of the car. The street climbed up a hill. He could feel cold fear in his stomach. The noises sounded very loud to him through the open car windows, so he parked the car. Casler did not object.

The street grew gray in the falling sunlight. Like the area they had just driven through, Most of the windows in the surrounding buildings

were intact, and though dirty with trees and grass breaking through cracks in the sidewalk, the street had the look of a populated city's business district at four thirty in the morning. One large tree had grown several stories and its branches spread across the front of the building like creeping ivy. The roads were not pierced by vegetation.

It looked to Syd like the sun was coming up and that the streets would soon fill with men in blue suits and women in grey skirts.

An explosion shook the entire area. Glass broke somewhere behind them, and then shattered again as it hit the street. Several leaves fell from the sidewalk crack trees. Guns exploded like far away fireworks in response.

"They have fucking artillery. What are we doing here?" Syd said.

Casler did not answer. She pulled her black shiny hair back away from her face and tied it in place with a strip of black cloth. She replaced the gun in her holster with one from Syd's pack. He did the same thing. The guns they carried now were non-lethal. The bullets were rubber polymer that bounced instead of penetrating. On impact spores containing a tranquilizer would penetrate cloth and flesh in case the force wasn't enough to knock a person out, or in case of a non-head hit. Syd had watched a video of the bullets working, but he wondered.

They're twenty percent fatal in point blank range to the head and neck, and only two percent fatal elsewhere on the body, he thought. Why do they tell us all of these things?

Casler moved to the shadow of the buildings along the sidewalk.

"Let's stick together," Syd shouted, and jogged to her side.

The drumshots sounded like a marching band on psychedelics grew louder as they approached the top of the hill. Syd could feel his balls pull up into his guts in response to his fear. He realized he was gripping his gun very hard and relaxed his hand. He understood why they had been told about point blank fatalities.

Casler took his hand. He looked at her as they walked. She was crying.

"They're killing each other," she said, "and we're the only ones here who can do anything about it. The rest of our movement is an hour away."

Syd squeezed her soft hand.

She broke into a silent run, pointing her non lethal gun at the ascending pavement in front of her. Syd released her hand and concentrated on keeping his footfalls as silent as possible. The sidewalk underneath had the consistency and acoustic attributes of a ceramic plate. It was phased out, Syd thought, because cars sounded so loud when they drove over. He thought about the plants that had broken the sidewalk.

Syd's stomach tensed. The daydreams did not help. He felt bile in his throat. The shots were too loud for him to speak at a safe volume to Casler. He kept his mind closed tight, as directed in the cell phone briefing. They were approaching teles.

They were to approach slowly, knock out a couple of the closest telepaths, and get them out.

They came to the top of the hill and stopped. Syd got down on his stomach and Casler did the same. He could feel the warmth of the road under his shirt. They crawled flat on their stomachs like snakes with arms and legs to the rise of the hill. Below a line of thirty people knelt in the street, firing weapons at a series of buildings. The buildings cut across the bottom of the street, forming the butt and end of the road that Syd and Casler lay on.

The building was a perpendicular wall of broken windows and concrete, pocket marked and in many places non existent, giving the façade the look of honeycomb or cell structure. Flashes of light from guns flickered from inside the cells.

After a few seconds one of the people in the street fell. Syd felt too close to them. Someone in the buildings might see them. It wasn't that dark.

"How are we supposed to get them?" he said. "If we go down there we'll get shot too."

His back felt tense and his balls were still tight against his undercarriage. His mouth tasted like machine oil.

Bright light filled the air as someone in the street fired an unmistakable aluminum based solidex weapon, a napalm of incredible burning temperatures. A swath of twenty feet of the front of the building melted away.

Trying to blink away the burned spot on his retina Syd watched the surviving people suddenly visible behind the burned out section fall dead under the bullets of the street attackers.

He caught motion in the corner of his eye and looked instinctively to see Casler getting to her feet.

She stepped quickly backwards down the hill and ran into a building on the dark side of the street.

Syd slipped backwards on the pavement before standing, not wanting to stand in full sight as she had, and then followed her into the building. She was waiting for him in the doorway.

The noise was too great to talk without screaming, so when Casler started to run up a stairwell Syd followed her.

I think I know what she has in mind anyway, he thought.

Inside the noise outside sounded different. He wanted her to stop. He didn't want to see her die.

She stayed ahead of him and on the seventh floor she left the stairs into the building proper.

Syd followed, his lungs burning after sprinting up so many stairs.

It was an office building, with cubicles still set up and computers in each square.

Syd had time to think that the area obviously hadn't been scavenged at all before Casler yelled at him to get down. He looked in her direction, not understanding the command.

A chair rose out of its cubicle. Casler stood with it over her head, and then it was flying. The chair broke through one of the huge plate glass windows of the building, long grayed over with dust and chemical rain build up.

The hallway like span of buildings along the other side of the road appeared.

Syd hit the ground. Nothing moved. A gentle breeze lifted at his hair and he squirmed, expecting pain to follow.

He counted to five and got up to look out the window before Casler.

No one fired at him as the early evening air blew his bangs back from his face. He looked into the street below. He could see down the hill and see most of the line of people below. He raised his gun and motioned to Casler.

Casler edged her way into the window. She pointed her gun out.

"One, two, three," Syd said.

Syd began firing. People in the lines below started falling. His hands started to hurt. He kept shooting. He counted each shot. At twelve he reloaded. He fired six more shots. A man ran up the street, firing at their window recklessly with a hand held automatic gun. He grabbed Casler and wrestled her to the ground.

"You're going to get me killed," she yelled, "think, don't panic."

Syd let her go.

He ran towards the stairwell, hearing Casler behind him. He kept his non lethal gun in his right hand but drew his pistol in the other.

The street was not any more quiet than it had been before. He tried to remember how many people had fallen before they'd run, and how far up the street the man had been.

Twenty people probably knocked out, he thought.

He turned away from the street they'd drove in on and ran across the block towards the parallel street. He rounded the corner and jumped back. Casler ran into him and they both fell over. Syd pointed his guns away from them as he fell, causing his elbows to take the contact with the ground.

He crawled backwards away from the parrelel street and Casler did also. The line of people at war extended, the bottom of the hill on the new street was a warzone also.

Syd heard firing behind him. He rolled in a half summersault and saw the man with the gun. He was shooting into the sky.

Syd cleared his mind and fired.

The man fell. More people rounded the corner, firing wildly into the air above them, into the ground, the walls of the buildings, and in the direction of Syd and Casler. Syd fell to one knee. Casler did the same. Casler had been trained telepathically for combat, he had not. The people fell. No one else came. Syd knew Casler had hit most of them.

"Good job," he said.

The attackers had seemed only partially aware of the two of them.

They're lost in their hallucinations, he thought. I didn't know it would be like this.

Casler ran into a side sliding door in the building they had pressed against. Syd followed. They ran up the stairs and repeated the performance from before, on the same group of people. Instead of running into the streets they moved into the next closest building to the diminishing line of people.

After five minutes passed and no one discovered them, they repeated the process. Five more building attacks brought them into a building almost on top of the fifty remaining people of the block. Syd didn't think that anyone from the line of people had thought to turn around. No one had attacked them since the first group.

Syd threw a computer monitor out a window of the apartment building, expecting to feel bullets enter his chest and arms as he dove to the carpeted ground. He crawled away from the shattered building, his bleeding elbows leaving a white stain on the old white carpet.

No one shot at them.

Instead of getting up and firing on the crowd Casler crawled towards Syd. Bright light from a Solidex illuminated her, and her sweaty face was covered with strands of stray hair which had escaped from her tie.

She whispered into his ear.

"Thank you," she said. Syd assumed this to mean thank you for deviating from orders with me and knocking a bunch of people out.

"We're too close to have time to run to another building," he said.

Casler nodded.

"Five shots each," she said, "basement."

Syd agreed.

Casler crawled to the space below the window. Syd crawled to the other side of the window.

He held up three fingers, then two, then one.

They jumped to their feet.

Syd aimed carefully, squeezing the trigger five times, watched four people go down. Then he was running towards the stairwell.

He rounded a basement corner. He knew he was reacting better than when they had begun. He felt that some of his panic had gone.

The basement door was locked with wrap around chain. Syd fired a shot from his lethal pistol into it and felt the ricochet brush his leg. It burned.

You shot yourself, you fucking idiot, he thought, and pulled the door open. He pulled Casler inside the dark space. She pushed him into turning around and pulled a light out of his pack. The area lit up. It was a space for the computer server and the building's heater, Syd saw, open and cavernous like a parking garage. Casler ran ahead, her soft shoe soles making padding sounds on the floor. Syd followed, trying to hide his limp and make the same level of quiet noise Casler was.

They made their way to the far side of the server, a huge grey box the size of a small apartment. They sat against it and Casler turned off her light.

Syd could hear her breathe.

"You're shot," she said.

Syd whispered that he was ok. He felt he was.

"We've knocked a bunch down," he said, "now we have to figure



out how to get a couple of them out."

He wondered how likely it was even the knocked out ones that they left behind wouldn't get shot. If the hallucinations continue, and they probably will, they'll be excuted, he thought.

Casler patted his chest and searched out his arm, then his hand. He let the handgun in it fall to his lap and she held his hand.

"I saw a bank a half mile back when we drove in," she said, "if you help me we'll get a bunch of them out."

Tamar stood, pressed against a wall. Her retrieved rifle was slung useless over her back; to fire would attract attention to her. Hundreds of junkies in ranks and file stood exactly across the street from where the Yallov buildings began, marking with their sick bodies the end of the straight line of streets that came all the way from the Steeple City walls. Saliva fell from their lips as they fired their weapons into the Yallov buildings. She hadn't been noticed by any of them yet, even though she was directly behind them and in the open.

The other Yallov fighters that were supposed to hide in the buildings like the one she had just come from were not doing anything that she could see.

She ducked down behind an abandoned post office box. The noise was deafening. She could barely move. She knew Frost was across the street, inside somewhere. Junkies fell to ground as she watched, but she did not think enough were dying. She could see that they were going to bring the Yallov buildings to the ground before they could be beaten.

A group cheer went up from the Junkies as a Solidex weapon was again fired against the front of the building. To her it was a savage sound, an animal sound. The people that had been hit directly by the Solidex were turned into vapor before Tamar's eyes could adjust from the flash.

She watched more of the exposed Yallov people die. They looked like dolls falling from dollhouse windows. Those that had been very close to the Solidex made smoking piles in the street.

She thought of Frost. Her instinct was to run, but her mind couldn't let her turn on him and sprint up the street towards the city nearly a hundred miles away with the background of the Yallov buildings behind rolling hills at her back.

Not with him inside, she thought. And if I stay here I'm just waiting for a junky to notice me.

An image of Frost leaning against his cot with a cigarette hanging from his lower lip forced her into motion against her strong instinct to run and stronger instinct to stay pressed against the back wall of the steel mailbox.

Firing her rifle at the Yallov buildings but aiming away from anyplace where people would be she ran over the debris onto the ground floor.

Dead were all around. She did not stop running. The whole first floor seemed to be filled with dead people. Bullets crashed around her. Her feet burned from running across the Solidex waste, the frozen river of re-solidified concrete that resembled obsidian.

The entire first floor has been killed, she thought, but the enemy outside doesn't know it.

She ran towards the back of the room to the stairwell, and up to where Frost would be. She rounded a corner into his computer room.

It smelled of iodine. She had time to see Raging Butterfly sitting slouched forward in the corner, red on her shirt and red dripping from her open mouth onto the lap of her dress, and then see a man look at her with hatred in eyes, and raise a gun. She recognized Frost in the way he moved.

She strained her muscles and forced backwards into the hallway, hearing his bullets crashing in the enamel room, and against the hallway.

"Frost, it's me," she shouted, but the person in the room rounded the corner, and Jennifer saw that it really was a junkie, and she raised her rifle.

A cold realization about what the squiggly man had told her came

to her.

The junkie, a white man with no hair and skin like the outside of a loaf of bread pointed his hand gun at her and she screamed "freeze" knowing it was really Frost and that the squiggly man had told her something that had to be true, because no junkies could be on the inside, resting.

The man did not freeze. She felt a snapping slap hit her left shoulder, and the rifle butted against her other shoulder went off. The junkie stepped forward, holding his thigh. He bellowed and collapsed onto his knees, holding the gun against his wound. Blood began to turn the upper part of his jeans into a deep red as it flowed through the cloth to reach the ground.

She felt a pain in her arm, and a fear that almost compelled her to pull the trigger again. The image of the Squiggly Man incited a rage in her, seemed to mocking her. She didn't shoot.

On her feet she tugged the handgun out of the junkie's hand by its barrel. He was puking green vomit all over her feet. She ripped a portion of his shirt off and wrapped it around his thigh. He did not fight.

He's in shock, she thought. He's seen to much.

She knew it was Frost. Her own arm was already tacking, but looking at it she knew the bleeding was not bad and she could bend it halfway through it's normal range of motion. She imagined that the bullet had only taken some flesh off from the side of her arm, but she did not inspect it. The thought of taking her shirt off and sliding the arm out of the sleeve was too much.

Jennifer pulled Frost over her shoulder and began to help him walk to the elevator.

She left him slumped against the wall unarmed. She went down to the fifth floor and walked towards the conflict. Her ears rang. The shots sounded distant under the white noise. She expected to reach windows and almost walked out into the area where the wall of the building had been melted away. She crept forward. The floor was hot

to her touch. She reached a barrier, a remnant of dividing wall, and risked looking over the edge. She could see the enemy army below, firing constant rounds into the Yallov Building she was in. No one shot at her.

Better get the fuck back before they burn you into gas, she thought, and crawled backwards.

At the elevator the junkie was leaning against the wall, not moving. His short brown hair was falling out in disgusting patches. He held some of them out to her, like a disgusting gift, but she saw pain in his face.

She looped an arm around him and led him to the elevator. She did not know what path the elevator stairs; if the stairs were on a diagonal path towards the front of the building, and she thought they were, the front of the building was no longer there.

Outside the night air reminded her of the night before when she and Frost had snuck out of the back of the Yallov complex. With the noise in her ears it was easy to pretend that she could not hear the shots from the Yallov Buildings. After walking twenty five carefully counted blocks she turned and started towards the city.

The junkie on her arm wavered as they made there way north. She looked at him and his features ran like water into those of Frost.

"Tamar?" he asked, his eyes glossy and seemingly focused behind her.

"You should call me Jennifer," she said. "What was your name before you joined the Yallov Group?"

"Christoph."

He swayed back and forth on his feet. She noticed that his nose was bleeding.

Fuck, she thought.

She pulled him closer and he walked with her. The night air was cold and her hurt arm throbbed.

So many miles, she thought.

She knew that she did not have anything that would work on car

locks and or ignitions in her toolbelt, only locks on buildings. She did not bother checking to see if she could start one of the occasional old cars.

Frost coughed. She edged him on, up the beginnings of a hill. The trees that broke the sidewalk looked frightening to her. She moved them closer to the center of the road. He began to cough harder. Jennifer tried to hold onto to him, but his body slipped out of her one armed grasp onto the enamel street below. He coughed in whooping long fits. The sound seemed to echo to her in the abandoned city streets. She rubbed his back until he caught his breath.

"Susan?" he said.

Jennifer brought Christoph to the edge of a brick building with glass doors. To her it had the look of a period apartment building. The sun had gone down, and in the dim light of the quarter moon she couldn't see the building well, but it looked like she thought and apartment building would look. With Christoph coughing on her arm, she memorized the street address.

His lower leg was caked with dried blood, a brown mass that obscured his blue jean's material from view. Fresh blood continued to run down off his foot from his ankle in a small steady stream.

He's dying, she thought.

Christoph let her lead him through the rusted double doors into the building. Mailboxes lined the wall, some hanging open and one with a broken hinge causing the door to be half opened at a strange angle. They were corroded a shade of green, and looked like mouths to Jennifer.

The hallway smelled of dust and concrete, a smell Jennifer was beginning to associate with the outer circle instead of The Shambles. She leaned Christoph against the wall.

"Wait here, Christoph," she said, making a point of using his name. She wanted her tongue and brain to get used to it in case he died. Remembering him as Frost seemed like an insult, unless she

misunderstood what had happened to them at the Yallov Complex. She also thought his real name might hold his brain back from death.

She found a stairway and climbed to the second floor. She picked a door at random and shot it open with her tool. She flicked on the light. It worked. Next to the bed inside of a nightstand was an internet head gear, like the room she'd been in before.

The black bar over her eyes she turned it on. Nothing happened.

The server in the building must have expired over the years, she thought.

Then she was inside. There was no central location that she arrived in, she just floated in the blank space of nothing, the stream of infinity that existed outside of servers.

Numbers began to flow all around her, like she was standing inside a waterfall that flowed upwards. She realized she was inside of some very dated technology.

The number faded and she found herself snapped into standing in an office cubicle.

Cubbie, she thought, a popular search engine. One of the first.

The computer in the cubicle turned on slowly. She punched the numbered address of the Yallov entry server. The password program was gone. Most of the programming seemed to be missing also. She sat down in the plain white tube and waited.

Her stomach felt like it was filled with ice cubes. Nothing was happening, and someone had actually killed there server. She remembered the Solidex and almost threw up.

The Squiggly man appeared from the feet up.

She told him the address, and about Christoph, that he was dying.

The man said that he would do what he could and disappeared.

The ceiling and the smell of decay. She stood up and pulled the comforter off from the bed.

It might have been colored once, she thought.

She shook it. Dust formed a cloud. Jennifer walked downstairs with the blanket to give Christoph something to lie down on and rest. He

couldn't be expected to walk far on his thigh, she knew. He'd put weight on it, so she didn't think the bone was broken, but it could be chipped.

Frost lay on his back when she got downstairs. His face was covered with sweat, and he was babbling about a junky with a rolling eye.

"Eye, I could see it, falling on his cheek," he said as Jennifer wrapped the blanket into a cocoon around him.

Casler and Syd had taken an old armored truck from the bank and drove halfway back to the Yallov complex when the phone rang. Casler answered it; Syd was driving. He had more experience with vehicles despite his hatred of them, and the old truck had barely started. They both agreed it was probably bullet proof, even against more modern bullets than it had been built for. The bank had had its own gas tank, underground, and the gasoline that came out of its pumps seemed to be running the vehicle fine.

I wonder how old the oil in this thing is, he thought.

Casler hung up the phone. "There are two teles a distance from the action that Bob wants us to pick up if possible." She gave the address. "He wants us to tranquilize the non-wounded one. If anyone wakes up, knock them back out. He sent my phone a map of the subway so we can drive into the city. Supposed to be cop free"

Syd shrugged. He considered the subway driving routes a criminal's urban legend. He put it out of his mind.

We've been sharing dreams, he thought.

Syd knew what Casler wanted him to do as they neared the battle area, but he stopped the truck anyway. Rather than shut it off and risk having it not start he got out of the vehicle and listened.

The engine did not idle at a high volume, and he strained to hear anything underneath it. Only a rare shot rang out.

"I think they either tired themselves out or else one group overtook the other," he said as he guided the truck over the last hill where they had first crouched.

Or else they fucking finished up their mass suicide with a complete success rate, he thought.

He made a three point turn, jerking the huge truck around as fast as he dared on each turn.

The bodies of the people they'd tranquilized lie scattered like knocked over chess pieces in the street. They formed two roughly separate groups. Without hesitating Syd drove the truck backwards down the hill to the first group. Syd waited until he was almost on the bodies and slammed the brakes on. The truck did not skid.

I don't know how to fucking drive, he thought.

Casler crept to the vault of the truck as if noise mattered and crouched against the door.

Casler kicked the back doors open. She began fighting to lift the first supple body into the back of the truck, a young blonde male whose arms dangled when she lifted him. Syd jumped out to help.

They had five of the bodies strewn in the back of the truck before anyone started shooting at them. Syd looked down at the people in the street. There were six left. No blood.

Syd knew Casler would not stop moving the unconscious so he began firing both his pistols the non-lethal and lethal into the melted front of the building. Syd heard Casler scream and looked back to see her covered in blood. She knealt in the back of the bank truck with her arms hooked under an older fat man's armpits. A part of his insides, pale and snake like slipped onto the pavement. She dropped him.

Syd fired into the bee hive building faster. He did not see any shapes moving, or anything that looked human to aim at. He began to reload his non-lethal gun.

"We're done," Casler shouted.

Syd turned and saw her jumping into the back of the armored truck. Casler pulled the doors shut. He couldn't hear anyone shooting. His ears rang a sound like two pieces of metal being rubbed against each other.



He leapt into the truck's driver seat, hitting his knee on the steering wheel.

He backed the truck down to the first few stray bodies of the second group. He put the truck in park. The shots began before they even opened the back door. When they hit the truck the shots made strange tin sounds that echoed in the cab.

Syd knew how many bodies lay outside; he also knew that Casler would open the door before more of them were hit by real bullets. He shouted at her and handed her his pistol. He crawled over the strangely warm prostrate bodies and opened the rear doors himself.

Casler began to fire as he fought to get the people inside the truck. He waited to feel the punch of a bullet entering his back. He grabbed a light weight girl from her resting place several feet from the truck. Dragging her back he found himself looking at her face. She looked fifteen, with a spreading bruise where one of their non-lethal shots had hit her in the bare arm.

Or where she fell, he thought.

As he lifted the last person into the truck Casler pulled the door shut.

The shooting continued but Syd felt safe in the truck, like he had no reason to hurry. He put it in gear and accelerated as smoothly as he could up the hill.

At the address given to them Syd got out with his handgun in his waistband. He did not trust anyone who had fled from the ruined buildings. A black haired woman opened the door and Syd felt telepathy flickering around his brain.

Unfocused, he thought, but telepathy.

He pulled out his pistol. She raised a hand above her waist. Syd shot her. She fell, and Syd saw her hair red. He shook his head and the folded form was foreign again.

"I'll get her, you go look inside for the other one," Casler said.

Casler helped him load the wounded young man into the front of the truck; she moved to crouch in the back to try and make sure that if

someone woke up she could knock them out before they hurt anyone.

Syd hand's shook. He'd only driven a vehicle a few times, and the truck's yellow headlights lit small incompetent tunnels of vision in the dark of the old city streets.

Syd turned the truck radio on.

Might calm me, he thought.

"should electrocute," said a male voice.

"Well I think they should give the boy a medal," said a female voice, "those things aren't human. It's too bad they didn't shoot all of them."

Syd turned the radio off.



# **Part 4**

## **Wasteland Mornings**

Syd was in a bar. Champs. Talk ran around his head like sediment in a river. "Queerest sawdust serviced honest sexist forest." "Greet heartbeat deadbeat tweet!"

At the end of the bar stood Casler. She raised a glass to him that was half empty of beer. "It tastes bitter," she said, and drank heavily.

"You guys going to buy something or what?" said the bartender.

Casler set down her empty glass, faded blue eyes glassy above her reddened nose.

"More, give something, that really burns," she said.

Syd woke up. Casler stirred next to him and awoke also.

"You took her to a bar didn't you?" she asked. Syd told her he had and explained the circumstances of his trip to Champs with Somnam, even though he knew she'd heard of it at least once before.

Underneath the blanket Casler touched his arm.

"How many weeks ago did I meet you?" she asked. Syd tried to remember. He'd went to the agency, they'd met Bob, bothered Robert, gone outside the city, and seen the telepath encampment killing themselves.

"I don't know," he said "Three?"

They were on a sponsored one night vacation from revolutionary work. A hotel room in a middle class suburban area had been provided, with bottles of wine and two separate rooms, in case either of them chose to have spent the night with someone else.

Syd had gotten drunk on the wine and looked out at the street. It was a clear night and the cars had flowed past, electric ones silent and gas ones disturbing his cognitive space. The more he drank the more they looked like diamonds, and the more poetic and beautiful it all seemed.

You're being fucking college ridiculous, he'd thought.

Casler had sat behind him watching the news. Grace still hadn't been killed. The police decided to hold him for a few more days to see if they could get any information out of him. She hadn't drank any of the wine.

He'd drank more. He'd known it was because of the Yallov Society, the violence. He'd felt an animal fear that refused to go away, and knew Casler did also.

Syd's mouth was dry and acrid after the dream, and his throat hurt. His stomach burned, and his head still felt muddled. He reached for a glass of water he'd placed on his nightstand and drank. It tasted like old leaves.

"What do you think they'll have us do next?" Casler asked.

She's trying to get my mind off from Somnam and my wine hangover, and dead people, he thought.

"I don't know. Bob said he had some things he wanted to explain to us after our night off. So we'll probably know tomorrow."

"Hmm," she made the noise without opening her mouth.

Syd waited for her to fall asleep and slipped outside. It was still dark. He guessed it was around three in the morning, since he'd begun drinking around five in the afternoon and had memories of three in the morning.

His stomach burned and kicked as he walked down the street to the bus stop. He took the bus to his brother's house.

The alarm did not go off when he made his way inside. He got his radio. He got on a bus to The West.

Old Man Plow had called Syd's personal phone in the afternoon of the day before and told him that he should make his way into The West and radio him, as usual.

Bastard doesn't know I've just seen the end of the world, Syd had thought when he got the call.

The bus stopped north of The West and Syd got out. In the early morning the area of the city looked desolate, even with the drunken crowd. It reminded him of the outside.

People, men and women both, walked the sidewalks in veering zig-zags, always alone, never with couples. The daytime smell of spice and sweat was replaced with a mildew smell, and people slept on the sidewalks openly. Syd past a sleeping old man with a bald

crown and imagined his brain slipping out of his head like the whites from a cracked egg.

I want some foc, he thought.

Halfway into The West Syd turned on his radio.

It cackled, and few minutes later he heard the familiar gravel voice.

"I'll come to you," Plow said, "at this hour, who cares where we meet. Just stand under a streetlight. Near that Dim Sum place."

Syd did. The coat he wore was blue and new, supplied by the resistance agency, so he made an effort to keep his face in the light. Plow appeared after minutes.

"So what's this call I get yesterday about you needing me?" he asked. His bright purple trench coat looked more ridiculous than usual to Syd as it shone under the bright false light of the streetlamp. Plow leaned against the light pole.

"I'm with these people. The Telepath Resistance Agency. What do you know of them?"

Plow's face spread open like a man seeing an old friend. "You've fallen in with those people? My god, I never thought I'd see the day." He laughed. "Please, come back to my place. We're going to have to talk much. I've just learned many new things myself, in the last few days."

What the fuck? Syd thought.

Old Man Plow's apartment was blocks from the streetlight and the restaurant where Syd had stopped. He knew it well from his heavy foc days, and it didn't look any different to him now. It was a large room. Life size photographs of naked women on the walls. The hardwood floor clean, polished, as clean as the sparkling kitchen area. The bed was made. Syd found it strange and conspicuous. Plow took his coat off and sat behind a large dark hardwood table.

"Come, sit," he said, and Syd did.

He reached under the table and removed two small bottles of brown liquid from a hidden drawer. He gave one to Syd. Syd took a big drink, and Plow did the same. It was cold foc.

"Feeling a bit mixed up are you?" Plow asked, the usual condescending tone missing. "I heard about that group of head brainers you guys found out on the edge of the city."

Syd took another drink of the foc and felt his headache get better. He knew it was still to soon to be a legitimate chemical cause, he was drinking it too fast for the capillary action to work, but that didn't matter. His headache still went away.

"Do you know what made them act that way?" Syd asked.

"Absolutely not. But you do know that this stuff we're drinking?" Plow said.

Syd nodded, confused.

"Not what people used to call Coffee, as you probably think. I just found out a few weeks ago. It's a plant, yes, even almost the same plant they used to call coffee. But it's been altered, genetically, into kind of a straight amphetamine tree. Can you fucking believe it?"

Plow took a big drink. Syd waited a second for what Plow had said to make sense. The constant need. The occasional overdose puking. He took a long drink. The blood in his ears rushed.

"Fucking great," he said.

Plow nodded and stared into the table.

"That group you're in. Not bad, not bad. I'd almost be proud of you, if I cared about telepaths at all. I mean only as far as I know they're ok people. Probably going to get you killed," he said, and paused to drink the rest from his bottle. Syd finished his. His stomach felt worse than before, but in a way he did not mind, and his head cleared of the wine dullness.

"You really don't know what could have made those people act that way against each other?" he asked.

"No."

Plow opened up a fresh bottle. He held one out to Syd.

"No thanks."

"Here's something else you probably don't know," Plow said. "I heard the other day, and this is strictly hypo-fucking-thetical, that a



few years ago some guy figured out a way to make telepaths artificially. With a little box you strap on the back of your head. And I heard that before the cops blew a hole in the back of his little head, that he digitally sent the plans out into that aging mass in space that holds the internet. The juiciest part being, according to my informant, there is an entire club of artificial telepaths over in Amarise City somewhere. Of course, that's the third biggest city in the world. Have fun trying to find them in that wasteland of legal internet use, drugs, and whores. Couldn't make a living there unless you're straight or a tough business man.

"And anyway the informant was strung out so thin his balls were in his mouth when he was telling me about it."

Syd shook his head in disgust.

"That's been a rumor since I was a kid," he said. "Dad used to talk of it sometimes."

Plow's fingers danced in a descending roll on the table. "But wouldn't it be fucking something?"

Syd bought a half pound of foc and walked back to the bus stop. No one bothered him on the walk. The sun started to get dragged into the sky. He rode the bus back to the hotel room, ignoring the gin smell of the sleeping woman in the seat in front of him. In their hotel room Casler was asleep.

He looked at her in the morning light. Her eyes darted and moved beneath their closed lids.

She'll know what I've been doing, he thought, she'll know that I've been gone.

He felt anger rise in him. He didn't like that he could not hide anything from this girl who slept in his bed, this friend figure who had taken the place of someone he had cared for. Someone he'd had a true mental connection with, someone he'd "fit" with entirely, not partially.

He got in bed and tossed and turned, the foc rioting in his system and preventing him from sleep.

Casler rolled over.

"Stop moving around so much," she said.

Syd did his best to keep his brain closed, then feeling bad for being irritable, he opened it to her.

"I can't," he said. "I can't stop."

He rolled over onto his side, feeling the scratchy motel sheets, the roughness of which the foc amplified to intolerable levels.

Sleeping on sand, he thought.

Laying on his back his legs began to stiffen. He rolled onto his stomach.

"I can't sleep with you doing that," Casler said.

You're hung over and stimulated, Syd thought. Don't respond. Don't be a dick.

He gave up on sleep and left the hotel room to sit outside.

The air outside was cold. The sun was still down, but he could see it rising on the horizon.

You barely slept last night, he thought, and you're going to be expected to function today. Stupid asshole.

He sat in a plastic folding chair outside of the hotel room window. The pavement of the parking lot and a few cars were one story below, looking gray and flat in the early light. He felt his heart pound.

His weakly connected thoughts moved fast. foc daydreams, stimulant metaphors. The shifting images twisted around and came back to both Somnam and how Plow's personal stash was about four spoons too strong. He'd taken doses this large before, but not when he wanted to be able to sleep soon after. The crash, he knew, would be almost debilitating.

Somnam moved into the front of his mind for the fifth time.

If I found another telepath, he thought, and had a mental bond with her, with another one who fit me, if Somnam would move out of the forefront of my mind?

The plastic chair dug into his hand's flesh as his finger muscles forced it into the arms.

Cars began to go by faster although they no longer looked beautiful to him. He cried as the sun came up and he was alone, remembering.

Mom holds a gun and points it into the school. Money out of the windows. Conversation narrator says something about hostages. The morning cries. Is it Friday morning? I've been left in a well. I'm waiting in an office in the morning sun.

In the full heat of the late morning he nodded off, his stomach filled with over produced acid from the drug cocktail of the early morning and his muscles aching from sitting in the chair for hours, being artificially tightened all night, and transpiration.

Jennifer found herself waking up in a strange place. Her first thought was of the ceilings in the Yallov Society buildings.

Different, she thought.

The air had a stale dry feeling in her nostrils that she associated with hotels and Spaires Machines.

Her skin felt soft, and she realized she smelled good; she'd been bathed. The sheets felt soft against her skin, and her back had a pleasurable round feeling from lying in a soft bed.

Before being fully aware of her surroundings, she reached out a hand to grasp at Frost, thinking he was next to her, but her hand fell off from the edge of the bed.

She sat up. The room was empty. The smell of lavender from herself filled her nose again.

It's been a long time since I smelled anything but sweat and plain white soap on me, she thought.

She looked for the familiar square end table intra-venous device and saw none.

What the fuck is going on? she thought.

She tried to remember the day before. Her brain was a snow globe. She assumed that where she was had something to do with the squiggly man. She sat up in her bed and stretched out. Her breasts moved against a t-shirt that felt foreign and clean.

They took my bra off, she thought, horny bastards.

Her head began to clear. She stood and looked around.

The room had an odd homey feel to her. The bed had a quilt, there was a dresser in the corner that had photographs of two smiling teen girls on it. There was an open closet filled with female clothes and a pile of many colored stuffed animals. An orange dinosaur lay on the floor in the middle of the blue carpeted expanse, as if he had escaped. In the window a Squires Machine hummed.

I've been cleaned like a farm animal, she thought.

Since no one seemed to be in the room, and the door was open, she went out into the hallway. The walls were wooden with framed photographs of one of the teenage girls.

This is fucking surreal, she thought, and took the stairs at the end of the hallway. Halfway down the steps she smelled something like bread and fruit being cooked, and her mouth began to water.

"Oh, goodmorning," said a female voice from downstairs. "just walk straight ahead down the hall."

Jennifer froze. She wore only a large t-shirt. Then she thought that whoever owned the voice had probably been the one to put her into the t-shirt, and who had bathed her, and so modesty would be foolish.

Besides, she thought, when I have ever been modest?

Something about the atmosphere and the feel of the oversize shirt against her skin was making her nervous, she knew. It was like her old house, a long time ago.

She moved down an undecorated hallway at the bottom of the stairs, as directed, and into a room. She saw it was a kitchen. An enormous woman stood in front of a frying pan. Jennifer guessed her to be over three hundred pounds.

"I'm Roslyn," she said, "but everyone calls me Mag. There are clothes for you in the bathroom. Two doors to the left behind you. I heard you get up. I'm frying some eggs for you so be quick. I'm your resuscitation counselor. Don't worry about anything."

The woman smiled and Jennifer felt comforted. She went to the

bathroom and found a pair of plain brown pants a green long sleeve shirt draped over basic underwear and a bra, on the back of a chair. She dressed and returned to the kitchen.

Mag motioned her in front of a worn plastic table. Jennifer sat. Mag reached over Jennifer's shoulders with a plate and set fried eggs and toast in front of her.

"Eat," she said, "then we'll talk about what happened to you."

Jennifer ate. The food tasted salty and good. Leaving only a few torn pieces of bread on the plate she leaned backwards, feeling as if she was floating and relaxed. She remembered being shot at yesterday, and fear like being locked in a dark small place. The taste of blood in her mouth.

"Is Frost alright?" she asked, sitting upright quickly. "I mean, Christoph. Is Christoph alright?"

The woman looked across the table at Jennifer, her large red face not giving any information to Jennifer.

"Christoph?" Mag asked.

Jennifer nodded. The woman got up and walked into the next room. In her stomach, Jennifer could feel panic. Frost could be dead, while she was here eating eggs after lounging in bed for days or weeks.

She got up and made her way to the sink and threw up her breakfast, trying to keep from making loud noises. She'd had to throw up quietly before, in bars, to keep from being thrown out. Bits of toast stuck to the aluminum sides and she turned on the water and pushed them into the drain.

She gripped the sink edge as more salty liquid flowed out of her mouth and dripped off from her chin.

"Tall guy, long hair, shot in the thigh?" Mag said behind her.

Her hands seemed to move slowly. She felt shame at being caught. She ran some of the sink water over her hands and rubbed her face off with water before turning around.

"Yes," she said.

"He's been conscious for hours and asking about you."

Jennifer smiled.

"Since you threw up your breakfast, maybe you'd like some orange juice?" the woman offered, and Jennifer nodded. "You can go brush your teeth if you like. Green toothbrush, still in the package on the sink."

Mag explained where the bathroom was and Jennifer brushed her teeth. She sat back across the table from Mag.

Mag began talking. "Let me explain myself first of all. I'm not a telepath. My daughter was. They took her from me. She got married off through The Agency to someone who lives in Spain and of course I haven't seen her since. I raised an outcry in a local newspaper and the Telepath Resistance Group got a hold of me. Told me to pipe down before I got a bullet lodged in my fat gut," she said, and laughed.

To Jennifer it sounded like a legitimate laugh.

"But anyway, I help them whenever I can. About thirty of you got piled in a van last night by a couple of truly crazy tele kids; the way Bob puts it they both must be suicidal. But anyway, you were on the top of a pile of wounded telepaths a few feet deep that these kids piled in the back of a stolen bank truck while getting shot at. Pulled you out of an apartment building with your friend Christoph, they just told me. Wild, huh?"

Jennifer nodded.

"Now drink some orange juice and relax. It's altered orange juice, it's actually basic. I ordered it off the Television. Should help calm your stomach."

Jennifer wanted to ask more questions. Her head and body felt funny, like it was a robot unattached to her actual being. She told it to move and it did. She did as she was told and drank the juice. The concentration it required silenced her. The juice had a strange slippery taste. She set the glass down half empty.

I was drugged, she thought.

"Now none of you suffocated piled in the back of the truck like that, which is a miracle, and I think a sign those two kids knew what they were doing even if they do want to die. But what you really want to know is how you all ended up shot up, right?"

Jennifer nodded.

"You know where the sink is, right? Oh, hold on, that's no good, let me get you a waste bin. Just in case."

Jennifer drank more of the orange juice. Her hands shook, wrapped around the glass. She tried to take another drink and the glass edge clinked against her front teeth. She wondered how long the comedown from the drug would last. Mag put a blue plastic garbage pail next to Jennifer's left leg and sat down.

"Now, I'm going to say this quickly," she said, "you all out there were doing something that we call looping. One person gets a hallucination and then it's so strong they actually read their own mind, which makes the thought even stronger, and in seconds it can become so strong that the hallucination moves to all the telepaths in the area, and if they don't know about looping, then it infects them, and it seconds you're all living in a kind of paranoid dream world. You all shot each other up, and you all shot a bunch of the people in the agency building."

Jennifer did not throw up. She thought of the blood, she stared at the brown pattern of the tablecloth on the table under her hands and juice glass, little paisley flowers. Her finger gripped the cool glass, and she looked up and threw the glass into the wall. Yellow liquid flowed out of the star pattern on the wall down to the white tiled floor.

"I'm sorry," Jennifer said. Her world began to kaleidoscope. Drunken vision. She leaned forward and put her face into her hands. They smelled like orange juice. She remembered the smell of blood iodine vinegar and the warm wet feeling that quickly turned to cold when it splashed her in the face. I never even thought of The Agency attack, she thought. I suspected Frost but not The Agency attack.

I want a drink, I want a drink, she whispered into her palms.

She realized she was sobbing, and that Mag was rubbing her back and saying something about a pill. She looked up and saw a large blue pill and a glass of water in front of her on the flowered field of the table cloth.

"Knock you out, calm you down, but only if you want it," Mag said.

Jennifer swallowed the pill without the water and continued to cry until she felt blackness creep up on her brain.

An ocean of naked bodies, fat women, skinny women, men, children, and Jennifer walking over all of them. She stepped on a little boy and blood flowed out of his mouth. Disgusted, she tilted to the left and her foot slipped onto a middle age man, his penis floppy and flaccid under her eyes began to bleed when her foot pressed against his thigh. Screaming she tries not to step on anyone, but she is on a sea of bodies, there is no water underneath, and every time she steps blood flies out of an orifice onto her face and neck.

She woke up lying on a couch with a cool washcloth on her forehead.

Mag was humming in a chair nearby, reading a book.

"Mag?" she said, and Mag looked up.

"Now that's the only pill you get, for right after the big shock. According to Bob, no one has gone without one so far, so don't feel bad," she said, and closed her book.

"Now listen. It's not all your fault. My group has found something out about your group by using the internet. A bunch of computer nerds, you guys are. It's not all your fault, what happened. The Yallov Group was legitimate about twenty years ago. The theory is that your group actually began with the great agency break out that occurred around that time. Then the group found some computers. Someone from the internet found out about the group and they knew about looping. They somehow also knew how to tell that no one in your group had been taught how to prevent it. Probably telepaths themselves." She paused and took several breaths. Her large blue and green dress shifted like a polluted ocean under a storm.



"Anyway, this someone or someone's started you all looping up this Yallov character. Theory is that this someone or group of people wanted to use looping as a means of brainwashing you into a kind of telepathic army. You were digitally stealing over a million dollars annually, did you know that? But over three quarters of it no one knows where it went or what it got spent on. There were two hundred of you, we estimate, all hallucinating Yallov. The agency attack is when things started to get really screwy for you guys. I've been told we think it marks the point when whoever was controlling you lost all control."

Jennifer stared at the ceiling. It was a kind of white tile, with an etched pattern that was supposed to look like boards with a sky behind them. She thought it looked ridiculous.

"You don't know who was controlling us, do you?" Jennifer asked, although she knew the answer from the woman's careful wording.

"No, but some smart ass started calling them MG, after the car company on the TV."

"So why should I trust you guys?"

Mag nodded. "You don't have too. You're free to go whenever you wish. I have a VCR tape about blocking looping though, if you would like to watch it. It'll also teach you how to really close your mind. You're on drugs right now that work like alcohol to keep you from seeing what I think. I gave them to you an hour ago before you woke up."

"I'll watch it. But first, how many people are in your group?" Jennifer said.

"Our cell is run by a man we call Bob. Five hundred in our cell, here in Steeple City. All over this continent though, we number too many to count."

Jennifer looked out Mag's living room window before pressing the play button on the VCR. She couldn't tell where she was, but she knew it was a nice inner city area. Probably inside the canal ring.

I've never even seen a VCR before, she thought.

When the movie was over, Jennifer cried again. It was difficult to stay awake. The drug was similar to being very drunk. She could hear Mag moving upstairs. The late afternoon sun felt warm on her hands through the open window.

She thought of Tamar. She looked out the window and tried to loop herself on purpose; to make herself see Tamar dancing outside on the sidewalk amidst the strangely glowing orange of the suburban street and late sunlight.

She couldn't.

I wish this drug would wear off, she thought.

She stood up and dried her eyes on her shirt. It was difficult to stand.

Peaking, she thought. I drank too much.

She laid down and went to sleep on the couch.

She woke up with a strange taste in her mouth. She looked at the window; it wasn't all the way dark. The feeling like television snow in her brain felt gone. She concentrated in the way the tape had shown her and Tamar sat on the artificial wood coffee table in front of her. Her blonde hair ran down onto the brown carpet. She smiled. Jennifer made her go away.

Telepaths can bring back the dead, she thought. Thanks, Octavio.

She walked upstairs, stepping lightly at the far edges to keep the stairs from creaking. She opened and shut her mind rhythmically until she began to see Mag's thoughts. She found her training at the Yallov Society still worked. She moved, searched through Mag's mind as if it was a server. The pretty smiling girl being taken away by shiny helmets. A letter, computer printed without a real signature reading that she had been sent to Spain. The girl from the photos in the hallway, walking towards a brick building, a school in Steeple City. Pain. Jennifer moved herself towards the Telepath Resistance, towards Bob, by concentrating on the girl who was taken. Bob, the squiggly man without squiggles, warmth. Meeting people in strange blank rooms. Helping in a place like a hospital."

Jennifer felt herself being shaken.

"You were reading me, weren't you?" Mag asked her face large until Jennifer's sense of proportion and distance returned. "I can tell, you're eyes were moving, following nothing."

"Sorry," Jennifer said. She noticed the photographs on the wall again. They were of the girl who had been taken.

"Don't be sorry, it's only natural. Remember, I had a telepath daughter. I understand you somewhat."

Jennifer nodded. She rubbed her toe in the carpet and stared at her feet.

"I want to help your group," she said. "What are you called again?"

"The Telepath Resistance Agency," said Mag. "We're good people. I talked to Bob while you slept off those downers. Your friend Christoph decided the same thing. And he cut his hair. His resuscitation counselor says you ought to see it. He's convinced Bob that you and him are to be the ones inside the internet, when we make a push to get Grace out of lockdown. He says there is no else he'd rather work with. Bob is impressed with his ability, and he came out quicker than you."

"We're going to get Grace out?" Jennifer asked.

"Oh, yes, of course," said Mag, "now let's get a briefing person, your friend, and an internet connection over here."

Make it a few days since the freeing until the Grace thing. Syd and Casler had been subjected to hours of meeting the people they'd saved. Streams of them poured in through the hotel room, or so it felt to Syd. It reality he knew the number was closer to twenty, the number of people who had asked to see the people who had saved them. Bob had payed them a visit later.

Syd, woke up outside. His face stung. He touched it and felt the warmth of the afternoon sun radiating back out of his burned skin. He tried to stand and the muscles in his legs cramped into pavement hard knots.

Fuck, he thought.

He fell back into the chair and massaged the cramps until they loosened. He went into the hotel room. The shades were drawn. Casler slept, lying on her side and facing him. Spit ran from her mouth into a palm sized dark spot in the blue hotel sheets. Syd smiled and shook her.

"What time is it?" she said, her eyes still closed.

"Late in the afternoon," Syd said. His voice sounded rough to his own ears.

"We have to meet the people we saved at six," she said. "Wake me up in a few hours."

The ceremony took place in a dining hall of a fancy hotel. The Telepath Resistance Agency members and those they had rescued pretended to be celebrating the successes of two young college graduates. Syd and Casler met and shook hands with every one of the people they had saved.

The human forms were a blur to Syd. In his foggy overdose hangover the people looked twisted and dirty, faces swelled into exaggerated features and sexual energy life deformed prostitutes. The only face Syd could remember from the rescue days ago was the young girl who had the bruise on her arm, and he never saw her. His face burned through the handshakes. Some people's hands were dry, most felt greasy.

He did not leave. He did not want to insult anyone. He did not eat any of the roast duck, and he kept his mind closed. After the meal, a briefing agent took them upstairs to a hotel room.

The hotel room had a bright blue carpet that glowed with painful gaudiness to Syd. The room was cool and air-conditioned, though, and other than the briefing agent and Casler, Syd did not have to see anyone.

At least I'm out of that dining room, he thought.

The briefing agent was a girl that looked twenty. She wore a formal blue evening gown, and her arms were pale under the shiny straps. Casler sat on the bed. Syd sat next to her. The mattress sank under

there weight.

"First," the agent said, "Bob wished me to tell you that although our organization does not award medals, if anyone in our organization deserves one it is you two individuals."

She stopped. Syd took several breaths.

Am I supposed to say something, he thought.

"The person named Daily has sent a message saying that she wishes you both well and that in light of your actions all is forgiven."

Dogshit, Syd thought.

"You showed more courage under fire than anyone in this organization has ever shown."

Dogshit, Syd thought.

He shook his head and stopped himself. He looked at the girl's face. She didn't look like she'd noticed.

"We are planning to break Grace out of prison soon, as you may already know. Since you have shown such courage under fire, we are asking you if you are willing to go under fire again. We hope you will, but realize we will understand if you do not."

"Fine," Syd said.

"I will too," said Casler.

"It will be a simple mission, involving sneaking in. Someone will tell you more at a later date. Since you have agreed to come under fire, you will be one of the people to actually enter the police station."

"The people you rescued were under delusion," the agent said. She explained the looping phenomenon to them in completion.

After explaining the looping in detail, the agent turned and left. Syd got up and locked the door behind her.

Syd still felt sick. He thought that probably the news of what he was going to have to be a part of hadn't helped it at all. His stomach acid made his stomach twist like it meant him physical harm.

"I'd already heard most of that twice before," he said, still standing. He leaned against the wall. The soft orange light of the hotel wall lamps burned the backs of his eyes.

Casler lay on her back in the bed.

"Is there any wine in here?" she said.

Syd walked to the mini-fridge, feeling each step vibrate the porous bone structure around his brain. He opened the door.

"Bottles and bottles."

"Give me one."

He selected a bottle of white wine that looked expensive to him. He took out a bottle of sweet red wine for himself and set it on the television. He used the mechanism attached to the little refrigerator to pop the cork out of the white and handed it to her. She drank straight out of the bottle, tipping it up and letting a quarter of the bottle flow into her stomach before stopping. She handed it to him.

Might help my foc hangover, he thought. He drank more than she had and gave it back.

"I get the impression Bob's opinion of us has changed," Casler said, "and I don't know if that's good or bad."

Syd felt his stomach accept the wine. He sat down on the floor in front of the bed.

"I'm not moving around again until I'm drunk," he said.

He looked up at Casler, his brain open. Her pale cheeks and the tops of her ears were red against her black hair, Syd saw, but he knew it could have been because of the wine.

"I think I noticed it too," he said, "it's not reverence. He sent a pretty little agent to swindle us. It's almost like he thinks we are dangerous. But I thought maybe I was just hung over and being irritable."

He reached for the bottle of wine he'd selected for himself and got his fingers around it. Casler got up and opened it for him.

She probably knows by now all about last night, he thought. I've been open almost all day.

He drank as much as he could before he felt his stomach brim with unrest. He put the wine on the floor and waited for the first warm wave or drunkenness to replace the hard edge in his thinking.

"No," she said, "no it's not that. We're going inside the

headquarters of the mayor's police tomorrow, and you know what? I'm excited."

Syd felt her probing his brain, and with a sickening feeling in his stomach he felt her moving into his past sexual experiences.

She must have picked up on his discomfort because she stopped right away.

"You're becoming more sensitive to my flicking through your brain," she said.

Syd nodded. A short two days ago he had barely been able to tell where she was looking.

"I've never had sex before," she said. "Can't we? I know you're hurting, but you can't hurt forever."

The wine had made his stomach begin to feel better. He drank more.

"It's only been days," he said.

"We could die. We need to be close."

What is it about this desperate feeling that makes people want to fuck, Syd thought.

The feeling of irritability from the foc still hung with him, he knew. He tried to move to the bed, and managed to crawl onto it. The hotel blankets felt soft against his skin. He began to feel drunk.

"I don't know if I can," he said.

Casler rolled over to lie face to face with him. Her eyes moved behind three sections of stray hair.

"I don't know how it all works," she said, "the seduction part. But I know you can, I know you have, and I know it might make you feel good. I want too. Please?"

Syd's decided he didn't like the idea. Something about it didn't feel right to him. He didn't want it. He still felt sick. He might not even be able to get hard. The foc was still clinging to the edges of his body.

"Let's just relax and drink and you keep your mind open," Casler said, "and we'll see in a few hours how you feel. We have all night."

It's like I'm a young girl, he thought, in a public school health class

video.

It felt strange and awkward to him. He remembered and felt bad for a one night stand he'd had a couple of years ago, in college, when his parents had still been alive.

She got the partially drank bottle of red wine of the floor and handed it to him. He finished and lay back, staring at the ceiling. White stucco mixed with something tiny and reflective glittered. He finished the first bottle and felt good enough to get up himself and get another one. When he stood, he belched the air that had filled his stomach from drinking while laying on his back and felt the nausea leave him entirely. Casler laughed.

"Get me a bottle too," she said.

He took the first two bottles he saw out of the wine rack like refrigerator and opened them. Sitting against the bedpost with Casler pressed against his side he felt her begin to move through his brain. He drank more and let her. She wore a long black formal dress, and it had slid up to her knees as she sat up in the hotel bed. The shape of her calves and ankles fascinated him.

Syd dropped his empty second bottle of wine on the floor and kissed her.

He felt time slow down, and something like love for her filled him. He looked in her eyes, and they locked on his, something he'd read once said that was the sign that a girl was emotionally ready to have sex with you, if they looked into your face when your penis was just touching them. He was beyond touching though, the reality of their lovemaking turning her into a beautiful perfection, moving in time with him, sweat making her stray hairs stick to her forehead and she entwined and moved, gasping and moaning that she had never before, never known it would be like this. Syd stared into the hazy dark area between her legs where he was penetrating her, and felt her flesh on him.

Syd blinked and found himself staring into the glittering of the ceiling again, sleep heavy in his eyes.



"Is that what it would be like?" Casler asked.

Syd took a deep drink from the wine bottle, which was now almost empty. He could feel it affecting his brain now, but the burning in his stomach was still there. He didn't mind, at least he was feeling drunk.

"Kind of," he said, "at least that's kind of what it would be like for me."

She rolled over and straddled him, and kissed him on the mouth with him still sitting. She had the grape juice taste of sweet wine on her tongue.

He began to move under her and she did not stop him or lighten the intensity of her kissing.

He did not object when she took his pants off, or when she mouthed him to hardness. She did not when he flicked her with his tongue, and soon they were having sex.

There is no love here, Syd thought. But he forced the thought out of his brain. Casler was on top of him, sweating against him, and he tried to enjoy it.

It isn't lack of love, he told himself, it's misplaced guilt.

He felt himself soften slightly.

He looked at her. She was thin, pale, and moved like a stream of water in the darkness of the hotel room. The bed creaked and moaned under them.

If you don't enjoy this you're going to ruin it for her, he thought, her first time. He reached up and took her breasts in his hands.

Afterwards she lay against his side on her back.

"I don't really feel that much closer to you," she said, barely touching him except for an arm and part of a thigh.

"Well, I don't think us plain humans have anything much better than that," he said, "but what you and I have with thought melding and that connection thing, it's possible those things go beyond sex anyway."

He felt Casler stiffen against him.

Must have offended her by making her sound super human, he thought. It probably would have been different if we'd been closer

connected before hand. She only got the physical part.

He said his thoughts out loud, only for the gesture of saying them out loud.

Casler nodded. One of her hairs got stuck in his nostril and he turned his head. Conscious of his naked body, he pulled the blanket over his lower half.

"Enough dream meldings and even though we aren't a perfect match right off we might try again," she said. Syd didn't respond.

She got up and started to get dressed. Syd listened to the hum of the motel room air conditioner, and felt the cool breeze on his legs, even through the blanket. The sweat on his forehead dried into a sticky coating. The hotel spaires machine turned on. It was louder than the air conditioner.

Thoughts of Somnam tried to surface but he forced them down. Fully drunk, he knew that he should try and sleep before tomorrow he had to go inside of the police station.

Casler opened the door to the balcony of the hotel room and out of the window in the near dark he saw her sit in the chair at the table for two.

He wondered if he could get a place to live that wasn't a hotel room soon, or if this was to be his new place until he died. And if he met someone he truly could care for, what would she do?

Being with her was strangely incestual, he thought, since he met her through knowing Somnam.

Inside of the internet Cristoph and Jennifer embraced. They'd finished making love, virtually, and Jennifer felt happy inside. Mag, on the outside, had no idea, she knew, and probably wasn't even in the same room as the cots and black boxes with snaking wires.

"I can't believe what happened," Christoph said, "what we did."

Jennifer had begun calling him Chris. She thought Christoph, a name like The Rocking Horse Frost only less flagrant was too long a name for general use. He looked strange with his hair short, and the

line where his hair had thinned was even more apparent to her. His cheeks looked lower and his nose looked larger.

"Well, we'll do our best tomorrow. Maybe we can make it better. That's why I agreed to do this right away. We can make it better."

She knew that she hadn't had time to think about what had really happened.

Frost probably shot butterfly, she thought.

Stop, she thought.

She watched Chris light a cigarette and stare into the black infinity above them. They'd booted a search engine and Chris had known a way to spawn a carpet and desk away from any area someone who wasn't invited could find on their own. He had said that long ago people had used them for this reason, and for private meetings.

They'd been briefed by the agent, separately, and compared their information inside the machine. They had decided that neither of them really knew what was to come. They knew that they were to go inside of the security system, which was attached to a central server for automation purposes. Inside, they were to take hold of security cameras and view the action. A kind of contact with the outside world, a program that would look like a small keyboard with attached red screen, would be all they could bring in. The movement of too much information would alert the security system to their presence. Jennifer knew the communication screen was a very small program. When they typed on it, people outside in the real world would be able to read the words on a similar real device and respond back. Chris had said that he had been told that the receiving device was more expensive than gasoline cars. Fourth Wall Breaker, he'd been told to call it. Jennifer had been allowed some practice time in a safe server with the little program. The logo on the grey rectangle's monitor's back said Lind, and Jennifer liked the sound of that better.

A Lind machine, she had thought.

"What did you see when you saw me as a junkie?" she asked.

Chris shuddered. He was still naked, and so was she, under the

strange artificial light of the search engine. The light had no source, and they made no shadow. It lit every surface equally in all directions. The glass of the monitor that could be used to run searches did not reflect any light.

"You were tall, and male, and one eye was out against your cheek, and it bounded across your cheek like a rock climber running across a cliff face with a rope."

Jennifer found herself shaking also. Had she seen almost the same Junkie? She put the thought out of her mind.

"It doesn't do any good to think of this stuff," she said.

Chris puffed on his cigarette.

"You know, we were told that our telepathic thoughts were being blocked inside the buildings, but they really weren't. We were all led around by our stupid brains. I wonder how much of that whole place was really there. It's a miracle we actually know how to use the internet."

Jennifer drummed her fingers on the carpet. It made an ugly snapping sound, like breaking twigs. She stopped.

"We know the computers really were, we have that much," she said, "otherwise we wouldn't know what we were doing. And anyway, you can't communicate telepathically inside the internet, so if the computers were real which they were then we couldn't have looped our training."

Chris sat up. His leg was not damaged in the virtual world. It required more programming, but the program was also small.

Jennifer tried to think of something to say.

The briefing agent had told them a programming specialist would come over before the mission, to help guide them from a console on the outside. Jennifer knew that both of them had known who this specialist would be replacing when they spoke of it. She knew neither of them wished to talk of it, because they also both knew who had killed Raging Butterfly.

"How could we all be deceived so easily?" Jennifer said.

She thought about the cigarette instead. Chris's cigarette smoke flowed exactly like real smoke, since it was not a part of the programming environment, but an agreed upon compromise of their brains.

The cigarette program is strange, she thought.

"It's like the Gnostics used to believe." Chris said, "they"

"Don't. I don't want spiritual comparisons to what happened to us."

He smoked more and lit then a fresh cigarette off from the glowing stump of the old one. He lit a third and offered it to her. She took it.

"That's a shame, it's a good comparison."

Jennifer didn't say anything. She didn't know why, but she wanted to keep what had happened away from the spiritual. Mag had brought up religion once, and she had stopped her. She felt that making it a topic of religious discussion cleaned up the awfulness somehow, made it less real. She knew that to her the pain was a kind of atonement. She didn't want it to go away.

She daydreamed about Mag's daughter, and if the girl had been in the building if one of the Yallov Group would have shot her.

At least he can't read me and I don't have to block him, she thought.

She didn't want Chris to hear her thoughts, and she didn't want to hear his.

"How'd we get talked into helping tomorrow anyway? Shouldn't we get some rest? I was shot for chrissakes."

Jennifer knew that they both knew the answer to that question. She thought about whether or not it was ironic that she was telepathic, and could read minds, but even when she couldn't it didn't matter.

"It's our fault that Grace is in jail. And we killed a lot of innocent people," she said. "And this is the real Yallov Group. These are good people. I looped Tamar. I know what is real now."

"I know why we're going in."

Jennifer nodded.

"Plus it was traumatic, but only for a short period of time. I mean,

you only got shot in the leg." She regretted saying it. She knew it was a lie. "Well, it's more about the harm we've caused than anything else."

"Do you want to run some kind of practice things? Get used to moving around in here? I mean, you know, walking, traveling, and stuff in here?"

Jennifer hadn't told him how she'd been found by Bob, or that Bob was the squiggly man. She wondered if she was keeping it a secret on purpose.

There just hasn't been time, she thought. I'll tell him tomorrow, or the next day, whenever things slowed down and there is time for real talk. Once we can talk about what happened without hiding.

What she knew they were both thinking about was how a guilty couple of shock ridden people was supposed to function on computers the next day. The training programs were a distraction drug.

But she also knew that the police would not wait much longer before killing Grace, and saving him had a symbolic importance to her new group. They needed to save him.

She waited while Chris laboriously moved through the computer to get to some training programs left behind by a rogue hacker group. It would have been much quicker if someone was helping guide them with a console from the outside, but as Chris said, this was how they used to do it in the old days.

Syd woke up less hung over than he'd felt the day before. It was seven o'clock and the harsh sound of the hotel room alarm clock hurt his head. He let it reverbate his ear drums for several seconds to make sure that Casler was awoken by it, then he reached out and shut it off.

Under the blanket, with her body cupped against his, he felt warm. Don't touch her, you're just going to encourage her, he thought.

He draped an arm over her. He pulled a corner of the blanket out of contact with the mattress. The outside air that seeped through felt

cold. He shifted his weight and fixed the breach with his feet.

"I don't want to get up," he said, but already he could feel Casler stirring against him. Today they had to go get Grace.

She wormed out from under his arm and stood, fully dressed. She smoothed her sleep wrinkled uniform.

"Take a shower, try to wake up," she said, "and put these uniforms on. We have to be at the mayor's police station by eight."

Syd got up. In the shower he tried to force his poisoned limbs to move quickly, so he could be out in time for Casler to shower.

The hung over dead feeling in his brain persisted.

Maybe, he thought, being hung over will be an advantage. I won't think so much.

He drank some of the warm water directly out of the overhead spray. It made his throat feel better, and washed his hair and shaved with detailed care. He had to look like a police officer.

How much time and money had gone into procuring three fake police uniforms, with scannable id and matching skin pigmentation data for him and Casler, he did not know. He'd never even heard of anyone possessing such abilities. Plow had never mentioned it, and Plow liked to talk about the police.

Shaving cream ran off from his toes down into the shower drain.

The shaver felt sharp against his skin, and he rinsed the shaving cream away with shaking hands. A cut would make him stand out. The Mayor's Police used electric razors, not complimentary hotel plastic ones.

Out of the steam, he felt for a cut. There were none. He got out of the shower and put on the stiff starched mayor's police uniform. He strapped another uniform and a wig around his lower left leg.

In the main hotel room, he waited and drank some poorly made foc while Casler prepared herself in the bathroom. He closed his mind. Watching her would have been more erotic than what had transpired last night, he thought.

He rubbed his bare feet on the high traffic hotel carpet. It felt like

bare concrete.

The foc tastes like shit, too, he thought. What the fuck am I doing here?

Casler walked out of the bathroom with tasteful layered makeup on, and dressed in the long blue skirt that was the female Mayor's police uniform. Composed and artificial she looked like a mannequin in a mayor's police uniform to Syd. Sex shops in the west sold phony female cop uniforms. He'd seen them in store windows, displayed with their bodies bent in polygon sexual positions. He hoped she would look enough like a police officer to fool the other police officers.

I hope I look enough like a cop to fool the other cops, he thought.

Nausea passed through him. He held it inside his stomach.

Before they left, he took a last look at the hotel room. It had only been two nights, but it had been two nights of in-activity and one night of sex. It reminded him of the room in the back of Dave's house.

He felt sick again. He went to the car.

Jennifer woke up in a similar t-shirt to the one she'd worn the morning before. The girl's photographs looked eerie to her in the morning light. She noticed one of the non-missing daughters wearing a professional looking black dress. It made Jennifer uncomfortable. She didn't like staying in the girl's room. It smelled faintly like old fruit perfume. Jennifer sat up and rubbed her temples.

I wonder if Mag has caught on to me and Chris, she thought.

Christoph had been given a cot to sleep on in the computer room. It had felt very much like the Yallov Society to Jennifer, but she had not said or thought anything in an open manner. She suspected Chris had felt it also.

She picked up her jeans from the girl's bedroom floor and put them on.

I wonder if she lost her virginity here, she thought.

She went to the computer room.

Christoph looked like he had been awake for hours. His eyes were



bright.

He sat on the cot and looked up at Jennifer. His cropped hair made his receding hairline more obvious.

Mag stood in the corner of the room, leaning against the wall. She held a cup of grey liquid, which she held out to Jennifer. Jennifer took it and sipped it. It was foc.

"I know I don't like this stuff at all, but my briefing agent recommended I give it to both of you," Mag said. Jennifer sipped more of the liquid. It tasted foul to her, like dirty cloth.

Mag left and returned. She gave a new Christoph cup of foc and a black box the size of her palm. Chris handed her an empty cup off from the floor.

"Don't ask me where I got those," she said, "because I don't know. An agent dropped them off this morning."

She left, shaking her head. Chris opened the box. They were cigarettes.

Chris looked at Jennifer and smiled, then laughed when a Spaires Machine turned on.

"There isn't anything in these that Spaires Bugs can make safe," he said, lighting two with a high flamed lighter. He did not offer one to her, but inhaled from both of them at the same time. The air turned blue above his head.

"Double dose for the morning before," he said, "gotta make sure my brain is working."

His new hair cut bothered her. The tiny bristles gave him the look of a soldier.

"Can I have one of those?" she asked.

Chris tossed them to her and she caught them.

She sat on her cot, facing Chris, and leaned across to where he was sitting to give him a quick kiss on the mouth.

"Good luck," she said, and he responded with the same.

She lit her cigarette.

They sat and waited for their programmer. Her stomach began to

turn and undulate.

It's probably the foc, she thought, making me more nervous than I need to be.

After several minutes a young man with blonde hair walked through the doorway, dressed entirely in blue: blue sweatpants, blue t-shirt, blue dress shoes. His nose was huge and the tip was red.

"I'm Sam," he said. "I'll be your programmer. Let's get you inside."

Jennifer lay back without examining him further and pulled the black bar over her face. Her hands vibrated, beyond her control. It was difficult for her to get the bar in place.

The familiar surge of excitement filled her when the bar began to glow and then she floated in nothingness. The jitters did not infiltrate her virtual body.

What felt like a minute passed, then she found herself standing with Chris in a space almost exactly like the room they had just been in. The plants were angular, and the computer desk with Sam was gone, but it was a convincing reproduction.

Chris moved his hand through the air a half meter above the carpet, and Jennifer saw that he was looking at his shadow.

"Kid's good," he said, "a bit of a showboat, but still. Building this simulation that fast. We might just survive this shithole mission."

He lit a cigarette. Since she had nothing else to do and she lit one also. She stared at the little green screen of her communication console, waiting for the command to move to come through from Sam.

They had to wait for a wireless connection to be placed on the security server of the police station, which had to be planted by someone on the inside.

As far as Jennifer knew, at least six people were going to be masquerading as police officers, with phony badges showing the names of real police. How the police had been convinced to stay at home that day she didn't know, but didn't much care. Even if they're dead, she thought, I don't feel bad for those pig motherfuckers.

Syd and Casler approached the building on the sidewalk. Casler began to veer towards the many spinning metal doors.

Their ID cards designated them as officers. Syd tried to keep calm and to appear physically stable. His calves shook with his worry. His palms were sweaty but he didn't dare wipe them on his pants. They were being watched on camera, he knew, and their cards were being scanned remotely by an automated system. The automated system was only the beginning.

His uniform felt starched and uncomfortable. He wondered how Dave could wear one for hours every day and not lose his mind, scratching his body like a cocaine addict going through withdrawal. The wig and uniform taped to his leg, wrapped his lower shin, itched and made him feel more conspicuous.

Concentrating on not keeping step with Casler he made it to the doors. Glass, with brass cylinder handles. He couldn't tell if they were push or pull and he felt himself to be on the verge of panic. Casler reached out next to him and pulled the door open, and he went in.

Three police pointed their guns at him. He'd been briefed about this action.

This is normal, he thought.

"I.D. please," one of them said. Syd reached into his back pocket. He'd taken anti-spasmodic drugs before entering the building but he could still feel his muscles shake. He tried to control it when he handed the officer his card and thought he did a good enough job. The man waved him through.

You did fine, he told himself, now just relax. Now it's just like any other workplace.

The cop he was impersonating had an office downstairs. He walked to the elevator. Casler followed, having made it through the guards. The floor, the only thing Syd really noticed, was tiled and in the center was a picture of the Steeple with the words Protect, Guard, and Serve written in red square tiles cemented over the image.

He pressed the elevator button and got inside. Casler got in with

him.

A man in uniform rushed across the floor, and Syd watched. He had on a silver helmet.

"Hold the elevator please," he shouted as he increased his step. From behind the helmet visor his voice sounded like a tv news announcer through a blown television set speaker.

Syd looked at the panel as the doors began to automatically close. He chose a button and the doors began to open open.

He tried to catch his breath as the mayor's police officer got into the elevator with them.

"Six down please," he said. With his black visor down Syd could not see the man's face, the visor was opaque as the floor. Syd pressed six.

See, he told himself, see, they think you belong here. There is no more examination. Just relax.

The elevator began to drop into the ground and Syd almost threw up. He stood straight.

The man got off on the sixth basement floor. Casler and Syd stepped off on the eighth floor underground. They walked down a long hallway, lit by cylindrical fluorescent tubes over glossy tiled floors. The walls were ceramic, able to withhold the pressure of the soil and rocks around and building materials of the city above. The building went deep before there was bedrock. Most of the buildings in the city used drilled enamel supports, but the Agent had told them the police building went all the way down. No one knew what was on the lowest floors.

You just have to go to your office and chat, you and Casler, you guys are partners, he told himself, until your beeper goes off.

Counting the doors as he walked, aware he was probably on camera and trying to look like he did it every day, Syd reached into his front pants pocket and pulled out a key ring.

He slid the key into the lock and went inside. Casler followed him, and shut the door.

There were supposed to be no taping cameras in the individual offices, something which Syd believed. They can't mistreat people on record, he thought. Whatever we do in here won't be reviewed tomorrow.

"How long before we're up and running?" she asked.

"Supposed to be less than fifteen minutes. They wanted to give us a window in case we got delayed at the door."

The plan was simple. They were to wait while teams of hackers moved into the security system of the building by remote connection. The connections were being physically placed inside the building by other implants. Once the implants were all in place, the hacker teams would have a view of the entire police station, and could tell Syd and Casler when the man with the key to Grace's room would be making his way down the hall. Grace would be held temporarily in a low security cell prior to a press conference in which he was going to be filmed shown to the people of Steeple City on the news. The hackers would then aim the cameras away from Syd and Casler so that they could in turn shoot the man down with non-lethal bullets, steal his keys, change Grace's clothes and put him in makeup from Casler and the wig which was taped to Syd's thighs, and then get him out.

Syd thought the plan had an almost child-like quality to it. He didn't like it, it seemed that shooting a cop in a cop station would only get Casler and him shot, by real police with real bullets. All of the weapons that he and Casler carried held non-lethal bullets. He sat down and waited for a beeper message.

You're only worried about the bullets now because you're actually inside, he thought.

"This hallway, the green one," Jennifer said, even though it wasn't really a hallway. Hired Mayor's Police programmers had left a kind of walkway to the front end of the security system behind, probably out of laziness. Or, as Chris had suggested, out of hatred for the police. It seemed very easy to Jennifer, almost like a trap. The space was four feet high by the same amount wide, and glowed a transparent green.

Crawling through it, Casler could see the security checks and password machines above her. They looked like desks with computers and palm readers. She knew that if you answered a question wrong, the police would have you traced in seconds, and if you were not someone they wanted messing with their security, you'd be "locked down" as Bob had called it.

But they were crawling underneath the machines. Feet below them. The wall above them probably wasn't solid in an upward direction, she knew. But it would be solid in the downward direction. If your back brushed up through an inch of it, the only way to move on would be to tear that inch out of your back. And this was an encrypted area. There would be no bringing new skin in. Pain was simulated here.

It's a deterrent, she thought, pain simulation.

She knew they had to be silent.

Chris stopped to catch his breath. Larger than her he was having trouble crawling in the tiny space. The smoking probably did not help him either. She wondered if next time instead of fixing his shot thigh if they could give him virtual lungs.

She missed the fake people of her training, the old fashion security representations that looked like guards.

Up ahead, the green flickering tunnel turned into a tiny door with several numbers on it. She ran her fingers experimentally along it. A digital safe, the only security measure they'd come across in the entire passage so far. She used her fingernail to measure the width of the safe screen. It appeared to have room for at least ten digits, and the integers 1 through 9 were on the keypad. She typed a brief description into her Lind machine and waited.

She could hear herself breathing in the tiny passage, and Chris rasped behind her. She began to wonder if he was claustrophobic.

And why is sound represented in this non-user space, she thought.

A series of numbers appeared on the Lind screen, and she typed them into the safe. The door opened, and she crawled through. The space on the inside was dark and she thought that she'd put in the

wrong code. She braced herself. They had suicide buttons if they needed them.

Lights went up. They were in a grey room, and the walls were made of letters. She'd expected it. She tested one of the letters and it performed as it should. The letters could be moved, pulled out and put back in different order without effecting the surrounding blocks or those above, like building blocks that defied the rules of physics.

The programmers room, she thought. Leftovers.

Chris pulled himself into the room behind her, grunting like a tired old street dog.

"How long before we die if those numbers were wrong?" she asked.

"Less than five minutes now. We'll never even know in here. We'll just be dead."

Jennifer nodded.

"It just sounds like a nice way to die, is all. I like saying it out loud," Christoph said.

They both knew Sam had prepared the coding necessary for their purposes earlier. Accessing the police cameras from anywhere in the security server was a built in feature in the security system, inherent in all of the security systems of the company that had built the police station's: they just had to turn it on and access it.

Chris this time sent a message to Sam to load the programming instructions into the Lind machine. Green instructions like complex chess moves to move the boxes into different coordinates appeared on her screen. Working as quickly as possible, Jennifer rearranged blocks as the screen commanded, then pressed a button on the Lind so that the next string of commands could come up. After ten minutes of both her and Chris moving the commands stopped. A door opened at the far end of the programmer's room and they walked through it.

Inside was what looked like an employee lounge, except for the wall of televisions on the far end. Four red couches, a coffee

machine, a vending machine, and office chairs filled the space. Jennifer noticed it also had the artificial lighting of bad programming.

"I bet the programmers never thought anyone would see this," Chris said, "I wonder if all this crap is standard in the other security systems. They started discouraging putting in food programs after a while. Especially after the internet became illegal. Food programs made people stay inside the internet far too long, lots of deaths from starvation because were dumb enough or poor enough to use the machines for meals without leaving the internet."

"I saw the training videos too," Jennifer said.

Chris shrugged. "I like talking. It keeps me calm."

They walked to the consul for the televisions and turned them on. Their job would be to view and report, nothing else. Other groups were responsible for hiding the actions of the implants on the inside from the security's automated systems.

The televisions lit up.

They could see a uniformed man and woman sitting in the office, looking a bit nervous but not dead. Their looking nervous relieved Jennifer. She did not know why.

"We're watching you right now," she sent them through her Lind machine. She watched as the man checked his beeper.

"They're watching us," Syd said.

Casler nodded. "It's strange that people we saved two days ago are helping us," she said.

"Not really. We saved computer nerds. This is a computer nerd mission. Makes sense."

Casler drummed her fingers against her bare arm. Syd could see goosebumps forming on it. "I wonder if they can be trusted?" she asked.

Syd nodded. He knew she was nervous, like he was, and her mind was going over all of the things that could go wrong.

Don't be a dick, he thought.

His beeper shook against his waistband.



"They want us to look more natural," he said, and laughed. "Well, let me flick my natural switch."

"That's not funny," Casler said. "That wasn't funny at all."

The message is comforting, he thought. At least I know they're watching us for real and in contact. It's almost like we have super hero help.

Casler stopped drumming her fingers and stretched out.

"So, we need to look like we're talking, so what do you want to talk about?" she said.

Syd looked up from his desk in shock that she was right. "I don't know."

"Why don't you tell me what the suburbs are like to live in," she said.

"I don't know," he said.

Jennifer and Chris watched two men, named Jonathan and Royal, try to place a magnetized remote antenna on a water pipe in the library. The antennae would allow the groups responsible for moving the camera's to do so. The antennae were powered by the static electricity generated in the water pipes.

The reason Jennifer and Casler were needed was because a group involved in moving the camera's around had no time for communication, and each group could only see out of one camera at once. Many groups using many cameras would lead to a confusing number of messages.

Jennifer liked the plan.

I don't like how important I am, she thought.

The cameras had no sound.

Jennifer watched as Jonathan began to talk with a secretary whose desk stood near the water pipe in the back corner of the library. Royal browsed through a book.

Sometimes random officers would walk in through the library doors or out of the elevators and pass through. The guards never looked away from the doorway. Jonathan and Royal only had to deal with the

secretary and the passing traffic of Mayor's Police.

She felt her pulse rise in her ears as Royal walked to Jonathan and pretend to accidentally strike a vertical pen and holder off from the desk during a zealous handshake. He bent over to pick it up and on the way down in a fluid motion tossed the antennae, a tiny box the size of quarter, into the water pipe.

Jennifer held her breath, and she heard Chris pull in his breath also. They watched for signs that someone had noticed. Nothing happened. Jonathan and Royal left for the elevators and Jennifer began to breeze easily.

A message came up on their Lind. The camera moving people who needed the library attachment were up and running. Now they just had to wait.

"So someday," Syd said, "when the sun was just starting to go down we could get a game of baseball with these little plastic balls we called woof balls going, until kid's mom's would start calling them home. The smell of the air back then is something I still remember, the cold air at the end of summer as I walked with my sweatshirt back home, wishing Mom had given me enough time for another inning."

Casler nodded as though she was deeply interested. "If I was the slightest bit more fake cynical, I'd find your fake nostalgia sickening," she said.

"Yeah, but what else am I supposed to be. So one year, for no reason at all, my friend Justin gets this swimming pool in his backyard, and we," he stopped and looked at his beeper. Red Led letters scrolled across it.

"Middle aged man, red hair, basic uniform except with a bright green badge on his breast pocket," Syd read aloud, "no one else in your area fits his description."

He stood up. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that the camera was panned away from both his desk and the doorway.

"That's our fire at will," Casler said, and Syd heard the edge in her voice. He followed her into the hallway. She leaned against the wall,

and Syd followed her lead. The boxy cameras all were angled exactly parallel with the wall. If a human being checked their hallway, they would be caught instantly.

The clicking of shoes alerted Syd to someone's approach. At the end of the hall he saw a man with red hair begin to walk towards them.

His mouth went dry. According to his briefing the man was armed and no doubt very skilled.

Just wait and shoot him in the back, Syd thought.

When the man was less than five feet away, and eyeing both of them strangely, Casler pulled her gun and shot the man in the center of his chest. The man's hand made it to the holster of his weapon before he fell.

Syd grabbed the man's right arm, Casler grabbed his left, and they pulled him into the office they had just left. Syd took the man's ring of keys off from his belt.

"So far so good," Syd said, as they pushed the man into the space underneath the desk.

Jennifer and Chris watched another group of two people, two males whose names they did not know. A tall dark haired man, and a shorter brown haired man. Their job was to take the elevators to the top floor, where they could call the press outside the building and distract them for a few minutes so that Grace could escape without a journalist recognizing his face.

Three other police officers were in the elevator with them, and the one with dark hair seemed to be very nervous. He was tapping his foot and shaking. The brown haired seemed to Jennifer to be pretending not to know him.

One of the officers, an old man with salty grey hair, turned and began to talk to the fidgeting imposter. Soon the entire elevator was watching him.

"Fuck," Jennifer said, as the fidgeting man handed over his identification card to the old looking cop.

The man handed the card back, and the fidgeting man looked straight ahead at the doors.

Almost on the eight floor, Jennifer thought.

The old man pulled his pistol out of its holster and shot the black haired man in the side of the head. Blood sprayed on the dark haired telepath who stood as if he had never known the shot man.

"Fuck," Jennifer screamed, and Chris immediately began typing into his own smaller Lind machine. It was her job in emergencies to notify the base. She typed that one of them had been discovered and gunned down.

Chris turned the monitoring TVs to all the elevators.

The wallet sized black box on Syd's waist vibrated. He read the message.

"Trouble," he said. They ran into the hallway. In the hallway Syd stopped. Casler stopped ahead of him. He could hear her breathe.

The elevator, he thought, outside, or down the hall to Grace?

He ran down the hall towards Grace. Casler's shoes made loud sounds against the floor.

The door to Grace's cell was enamel and without windows.

Syd opened the door to Grace's cell and he stood up as alarms began to go off. Syd held out the uniform and wig.

"Put these on," Casler said, "put them on fast."

Don't get hysterical now, Syd thought, now is not the time for a laughing fit.

Grace, a thin blonde man stood up. His body was adolescent and his lower face was covered with long yellow facial hair. He stripped and put the uniform on.

Casler gave him a small disposable razor with a lubrication strip.

Syd stepped into the hallway. The alarms pressed his eardrums. He looked up and down the hall. He didn't see anyone. He stepped back into the cell.

Grace looked like a tall thirteen year old boy. His beard lay on the floor in greasy clumps. Syd knealt and began to brush them under the

bed.

Casler put the wig on Grace. He did not speak. The black hair flecked with grey made him look like a child in an expensive Halloween costume to Syd.

"No time for makeup, we're going to have to try and get him out as is," Casler said.

Syd nodded and they all ran out the door. Syd's beeper began to vibrate.

Jennifer had watched the six men enter the elevator from the second floor, the officers floor.

Don't go check on Grace, she thought.

The elevator stopped on the eight basement level and she typed into her Lind that six men were coming.

"Act calm, like we belong, Grace you hang back behind us some, they might think we're just officers. Just walk steady and quickly, maybe we can walk right by them," Syd said.

Follow your own advice, he thought.

He knew from his beeper there were six cops coming. Six men. "Officers, high ranking, high loyalty ratings" the box's screen had read.

The alarms stopped. Syd's ears rang.

The cameras, he noticed, were still turned away from them which he thought to be a good sign.

Jennifer opened her eyes in Mag's apartment. The black bar made blurry doubles against the tile backdrop.

"All unnecasary hackers have been pulled out," Sam said, "they don't want to heightened security system to get a hold of us."

Jennifer and Chris swore.

Syd heard footsteps. They echoed down the corridors.

That sounds like a lot of men, he thought, but he felt more calm than he had at the identity check. He had two guns. Casler was with him. The camera's weren't pointing at them.

We might surprise them, Syd thought. They might not even

recognize Grace.

He walked. Casler was next to him. He tried to tell how Grace was walking by listening to the footfalls from behind him.

The hallway sloped upward in an underground artificial hill ahead of the three before changing to a flat slope. The faces of six men appeared over the rise.

"Fuck," Syd said.

He opened his mind completely.

One of the men was Dave.

You fucking idiot, you should have known he would be here today, Syd thought.

He did not break stride. He waited to see if recognition would show on his brother's face. It did.

Dave pulled a handgun. Syd froze. He heard the firing of Casler's weapon to his left and he saw two of the men fall. The rest jumped back.

Syd turned and ran, and Casler moved with him. Syd could hear bullets hitting the walls. The weapons of the mayor's police officer were quiet. Grace ran like someone with broken knees. One of the lights blew above them and sparks fell. Syd felt pieces of glass fall on his uniform.

The incline, the incline is saving us, Syd thought.

They ran. The bullets stopped.

Casler pulled ahead of him and grabbed Grace. She pushed him against the wall near a doorway. It was the office that they had waited in. Syd unlocked it.

The walls in the office were bare. The camera pointed against the back wall. Casler took the left side of the door, next to the hinges. She'll fire through the wooden door at an angle into the hallway, Syd thought, she'll aim through the crack. Syd knelt on the right side.

Grace ducked behind the desk. He screamed a short percussive sound at the shot man under the desk.

Both Syd and Casler tightened at the offense of the noise. They

waited. The clicking of the men's shoes was not audible, but Syd knew that this only meant the police officers had changed their stride.

They probably called for help and we're probably trapped down here, he thought. We're probably trapped.

He made sure his gun's safety was off and knelt down on one knee. A loud bang on the door raised Syd's eyes as it opened. He heard it hit Casler.

Syd looked up and saw the side of Dave's face. Syd shot him in the chest.

I bet you volunteered in sign language to be the first one in, Syd thought.

He fell back against the wall. He looked down at Dave.

"Fuck you," he said, "heartless shit."

He kicked Dave in the face.

Syd sprinted out into the hallway, firing down the hallway without aiming, trying to see the other officers.

The ringing scream of Casler's guns began to fire behind him and he looked up the hallway, three officers lay knocked out.

He stopped firing and wondered how he'd hit them.

"I could see them through the crack in the open door," Casler shouted as she ran towards the elevator.

"No," Grace yelled, "Stairs, the other way," and he began to run down the hallway. His voice was high pitched and sounded like a young child's voice to Syd.

"There are no stairs," Casler yelled.

"Yes, follow me."

Syd followed the pale running man with Casler, dropping a half spent clip onto the floor and loading a fresh one.

The stairs were on the far end of the hall behind what looked like an office door. They entered them and began to sprint at a medium pace, conscious of their footfalls on the enamel.

"You follow us," Casler said to Grace as they ran, and Syd knew she was thinking the same thing he was thinking: a car would be

waiting for them outside. They needed only to make it outside.

He also knew that the police would be waiting for them.

"We're on the backside," Syd entered as he ran. Their footsteps had a rhythm, a soft repetition of carefulness. They neared the first floor. No answer came.

Casler led.

They ran past the first floor onto the third floor and without hesitating ran into the hallway. They raced towards the end of the hallway. No one molested them. They ran around a corner and saw a window at the end of the hallway.

Syd pulled his gun out and fired at the window until his palm was too sore for his fingers to work. They neared the window. They jumped.

Falling was silent. Syd felt peaceful and the building across the road went up and the road came to him.

Syd was aware of was a pain in his shins then his palms as he hit the sidewalk of the city. He saw Casler land on a man, bending his head back and twisting her legs in a funny direction. He heard Grace land behind him. He managed to get to his feet. His ankle felt strange, loose, but it didn't hurt. Casler had tears running down her face, and the business man she had landed on was making strange croaking sounds, crawling towards the police building behind them.

"We fucking have to move," Syd shouted. Grace got up. His face was a red stream.

Syd grabbed Casler by the arms and tried to pull her to her feet. She cried out. Her left shin bent at a sixty degree angle under her skirt and Syd realized she'd broken it.

Syd felt arms close around his armpits and chest and pull him. He was thrown into a vehicle. Casler was thrown on top of him.

The vehicle accelerated, pinning Casler's twitching form into his back and face. He screamed and fought in a panic to get his face out from under her. He fell onto the car floor behind the front seats. He looked up expecting to see the face of a Mayor's Police Officer



glaring back at him, a death squader.

A friendly young man looked back at him from the passenger side. He had dark hair and large black eyes. Syd couldn't see the driver.

"Bob calls you guys the suicide twins, you know that?" he said. A radio hissed directions and words that Syd did not understand. Casler sobbed gently behind him.

"You guys got Grace out, he's in the car in front of us, three deaths, although we are being chased by some very pissed off police right now," the young man said.

He twisted around a corner and Casler screamed. Her leg was being twisted around, Syd knew, but didn't know how to fix it.

The passenger leaned out of the car window and dropped something the size of a shoebox. Syd heard the sirens fade out behind them.

"That thing cost more than five times of all the buildings around us," the young man said, "Bob's gonna be pissed we had to drop it."

Syd's ankle throbbed. He let his mind go.

Sam walked in.

"Grace got saved," he said.

Jennifer jumped up and hugged him. He turned red in the face as she let him go and embraced Chris.

"I just heard it over the radio. Our girl who responded so well to the combat training and her partner with the murdered head-mate did it. Bob says they're 'fucking crazy' and that he's never seen two people who work together so well. He says their minds are more melded than some telepathic couples who've been together for years. He doesn't know why."

"Who the fuck cares what Bob says," Chris said, "they got Grace out. That's what matters. How many dead?"

"The three in the elevator."

Jennifer remembered the man she'd seen get shot. She'd hoped that if anyone died, it would be the computer people. The ex-Yallov people.

I helped on an important mission, she thought.

Mag came into the room.

"I've just heard the news," she said, "let's celebrate. I've got beer."

On the stairway she looked back at Chris and said "I know you and Jennifer have each other. I think that's a good thing, not something to punish. Don't mind me. The guestroom is yours."

Jennifer overheard because she was directly behind Chris. She wondered why Mag hadn't directed the message at both of them, but didn't let herself care much.

They drank for an hour, then Jennifer and Chris walked upstairs. Jennifer felt bad about leaving Sam alone with Mag, but not bad enough to stay downstairs.

Syd opened his eyes. He sat mostly upright in a kind of reclining chair. He was strapped down.

He panicked and started to thrash against the bonds while his eyes burned from the white lights above.

"Stop that," said a voice he recognized as Bob's. He stopped, and felt the bonds loosen. The straps slipped across his body.

"We were probing your mind while we operated on your smashed ankle," he said, "do you realize you walked fifteen feet and dragged Casler at least five with a broken ankle? Of course you don't. Well now you know."

Syd nodded. He felt hazy, like he was tired.

"Where is Casler? Is she ok?"

Bob smiled. "She's fine. She broke her leg landing on the unfortunate suit, but it's being repaired now as we speak. Of course, she'll have to be more careful for a few days, no jumping out of third floor windows until the grafts finalize bonding. Brilliant idea, by the way. Obviously the cops never saw it coming."

Syd hung on Bob's words for a moment until he realized what had just been said.

They used grafting technology on us, he thought, that's so expensive that no one can afford it.

The room they were in was grey, plain, formless. Syd got to his feet. The walls and floors were an ugly grey enamel. He didn't like it, it made him nervous. It felt like a kennel.

"You've been drugged so that your brain is more open than normal," Bob said, "a kind of psychedelic it has that effect on everyone. If you were upstairs with everyone else, you'd probably go insane from the mental noise. Only myself and perhaps ten others are strong enough to block our thoughts enough that you do not hear them."

Syd turned around, feeling confused. The chair he'd been strapped too seemed to be the only piece of furniture in the room.

"Drink this, it'll calm your jitters," Bob said, and held a champagne flute out to Syd. Syd took it. The grapey carbonated beverage tasted swirling blue.

He did feel calm by the end of the glass. Not clear headed, but calm, he thought.

"Why did you drug me?" he asked.

"Fair question," said Bob, "we wanted to see why you and Casler work together so well. Your performance in the last few days was extraordinary. You work together like one being."

Syd nodded.

"We've found that your brain is especially susceptible to influence and bonding with telepaths. Unfortunately for you, this has led to your extreme sadness and beserker-esque rage at the loss of Somnam. Fortunately for us, this feature does not seem to be limited to you. You're just coincidentally the first with this genetic feature to come to our notice. We never got many non-teles, you understand? I myself have found six more people with the same brain features as yours in the past three hours, while you were being repaired, so to speak. Others have found many more and taken statistics."

Syd tried to make sense of the words, to put the sentences into one coherent idea.

"You seem to be an evolutionary response to telepaths, like the

little birds that eat the plaque of out crocodile's mouths," Bob said, "we don't know what has caused evolution to accelerate like it has in the last century except that disease tends to cause rapid mutations and the epidemics were bad. You seem to be one of a generation of humans in which one out of fifty of you can form complementary relationships with us telepaths.

"But wait, I mean, there were only 17 non-telepathic members in our cell before you came along, and that's considered a very high number. Most cells don't have any. It's no surprise your kind slipped under our radar for so long."

He nodded. It made sense, but every time he held the information in his brain, it would start to slip away or slither into strange places. He thought about living in an egg.

He reminded himself he was drugged, and that he'd remember or be retold in an hour, and stopped trying to hold the information. When he stopped trying, it became easy to think about.

Bob held out his hand for a handshake, and Syd took it.

"I don't mean to make you sound like a specimen," he said, "but you're a big find for us. A really big find. Now you should be fine in an hour. There is a clock on the backside of the strap chair. Sorry to leave you in solitary like this, but I have to go now."

Syd nodded. He wanted some time alone anyway.

Bob left and Syd made note of the time on the back of the chair.

He sat down and put his head in his hands.

I'm part of a new generation, he told himself, but it sounded disgusting to him. He'd wanted to help the cause that Somnam had, not by being an interesting specimen, but by honest effort.

Nothing I've done in the last few days is because I'm smart, he thought, or strong, or able to control my emotions. It's because I'm a fucking genetic breed ahead of a percentage of the population.

His feet touched the cool enamel floor and he began to move in circles, trying to find the bottle of champagne that Bob had poured the glass from. He could not. He looked around for the empty glass.

When he had convinced himself that the glass and Bob had been hallucinations, he found the glass in shards in the corner.

Bob left me coming down off from some weird drug in a room with broken glass, he thought, and began to laugh hysterically. I don't seem to be coming down, he thought, it seems to be getting worse.

His heart began to pound.

"I'm a fucking super-human, a Darwin Special Achiever Award Winner," he shouted into the empty room, and began to laugh harder.

After he laughed for several minutes, he began to cry.

"So what the fuck happens now," he said to the ground. "What happens to me and Casler. Do we get to keep fighting the important fights? Or do we go into retirement? Do anything you want to me but don't make me stop."

The idea of retirement after the jobs depressed him. It upset him to the point that he threw up all over the ground. The vomit erupted out of his nose, and it began to bleed. He laid his head in the pool of vomit and bled out his nose.

Jennifer stood back downstairs with Mag and Sam. They were deep in conversation about a soap opera they both watched, and were for the most part ignoring her. She ignored them.

She read the newsflashes on the fax from the TRA people researching the two they were calling "the suicide twins." A name which was proving ridiculous, since their strength came from the fact they knew each other well enough to act in ways that complimented the other, according to the printouts.

She tried to tell Mag and Sam of it, but Sam just stared at her, and her Mag made annoyed waving motions. They resumed their talk.

Jennifer went upstairs to find Frost. He on his back on the cot, staring at the ceiling.

She told him about the brain features that had been discovered and he nodded through it all.

"Makes sense," he said. "Why do you think us telepaths still use speech? Is it because we can't direct our outward thoughts well

enough to fully supplant spoken words?"

Jennifer thought about it before answering. "Yes, it must be. Only the most trained, the zen-like telepaths can control their thoughts very well.

She lay down next to him.

"I wonder if this new find will change anything?" he asked.

She sat upright.

"I wonder if we're on the news?" she asked, and they both ran down the stairs laughing. Jennifer didn't know why they hadn't thought of it earlier.

The TV glowed to life with a hum.

"Grace, the head of the anti-telepath cult in the city," a sharply dressed female news correspondent was saying, "in a rescue that left three extremists dead pulled him from the building by jumping out of a second story window and speeding away. Police gave chase, but the extremists had somehow attained an electro magnetic bomb which disabled the police cars. Police are worried, since it is not known where such a device could have been found, as they have been illegal for even federal governments to own since the Sidney Treaty fifteen years ago. We'll keep you updated, FISSI, channel twenty three."

Chris lit a cigarette, and then after a moments hesitation he butted it out in a nearby plant.

Jennifer wondered if he wanted to cut back, or was trying to respect Mag's house.

"The funny part is," Chris said, "is why no one on the news is questioning why a violent extremist group was using non-lethal means to recapture their leader. Would even anti-telepath groups respect the police? No way, no way."

Jennifer shrugged. She knew that no one cared about who the group was. She also knew that Chris knew this.

He's just lashing out at them, she thought.

They sat in the chairs in the living room, two white padded easy

chairs with cup holders. Jennifer could hear Sam and Mag's voices fluctuating up and down in volume from the kitchen behind them.

The news channel began to broadcast a program about the suspected dangers of freeze dried food that used a certain chemical. She closed her eyes and felt her body sink into the chair.

A shift in noise level brought Jennifer's attention back to the TV. She leaned forward when she saw what it was.

The image focused on a woman of twenty five, wearing a business suit. It was grainy. "I am a member of the Telepath Resistance Agency," she said, "and attacked the police station yesterday to save our fellow member Grace from execution at the hands of your police force. They had no leads about the attack on the Agency building, so they made one up and placed him at the center. He was chosen as a message from the Mayor's Police Force to our group and groups like ours. To tell us that they will continue to kill and rape us. We attacked the police building killing no police officers or bystanders. We will continue to stand against the police force and the Agency."

The tape looped. Jennifer's mouth was dry. She knew they were talented computer users in the Yallov Group, but this was incredible. Hacking a news station.

Mag and Sam came into the living room. "What is it?" said Mag, then she watched. She dropped the glass of water she was holding.

"That keeps happening," Jennifer said, but did not move until she had seen the entire broadcast.

"What do we want, though?" Chris asked, "What is our group trying to accomplish?"

The phone rang, and Mag answered it.

She addressed all of them in the living room.

"We have to leave the city. In response to our message the police force has summoned all members to sweep the city for hiding telepaths. I have a file, the face scanners might read and recognize me. We have to leave for Alphabet City."

Syd opened his eyes in the back of a car. From the gentle rocking

and bouncing he knew it was moving. He smelled like puke and remembered the last few minutes before he'd passed out. He sat up. Someone he'd never seen before was driving, a middle aged woman with curly blonde hair and a fat face.

"I was drugged," Syd said.

The woman laughed.

They were riding on a highway in the city, in a part that Syd recognized; it was where he'd driven to get outside the city with Casler.

"You were drugged twice if Bob told me the truth. He said you're a foc addict. There are some pills back there in an envelope on the floor, if you want them.

Syd found the envelope and inside he found two large black pills. He knew what they were; the chemicals of foc in pill form for easy consumption. Even better quality than the ones he'd been eating. Despite that he knew he was probably supposed to either take them right away or leave them in the car, he put the pills in his pocket.

"We've had to flee the city," the woman said, "we made a broadcast and police have responded. It's awful. They're going to start at the eastern end of the city and making their way to the western end with every telepath detection method they have. The army is going to come in and block the entrances and exits to the city, including the tunnels, by the end of two weeks. The army hasn't been assembled in years, that's our savior."

Syd wondered if Dave would lose Christy.

"Why did we send in a video?"

"We didn't send a video. Those crazy people you helped picked up from the outer arc could pirate broadcast on most of the major channels at simultaneously, and Bob met with a bunch of us. He said it was time we made a stand. So we made the broadcast."

Syd leaned forward and rested his forehead against the back of the passenger seat's headrest.

Broadcasting a video is going above ground, Syd thought, and



going above ground is asking to be killed.

"I think Bob knew that," the women said.

He watched the people outside the car walking, looked at building windows. He tried to imagine people in them, watching TV, eating lunch, sitting in office cubicles. It seemed impossible.

He wondered where Casler was.



# **Part 5**

## **Amore**

The living quarters in Alphabet City were comfortable, Jennifer felt, and she enjoyed the company of the people as much as living on the fringe of legality.

The TRA set them all up in basic living quarters, with food being provided from the Steeple City's corrupt thruway port area, 690 town. The area was the southern entrance to city. The port was built around a thruway. Steeple City maintained the roads out to the halfway point in-between the next cities. No one knew how the port inside the city became saturated with organized crime, except that it was the filter through which the anarchy of the outside passed. College sociologists wrote papers about it. Jennifer knew that the food came from there, and didn't worry about why.

News came to the quarters on printed pieces of paper, letter sized sheets bearing what the Agency had discovered since leaving the city four days ago. Telepaths were sneaking past the armies into the city every day, finding their non-tele counterparts. Their own suicide twins.

The resistance agency had begun calling them Adjucts. Frost, she knew, was in the city looking for his. She didn't feel the time was right for her to search one out and so far no one had questioned that.

The news sheet slipped under her apartment building door.

She found herself questioning what was printed on the sheet of purple paper. Sitting on a stool in the lounge area of her living space, alone because everyone she knew was hunting Adjucts, her hands shook as she read it.

No fucking way, she thought.

The article stated that Mitchell Brothers, the long rumored leader of the anti-revolutionary and telepath police force was the same man as Bell, an urban legend cult figure from ten years prior.

Bell had, according to the rumors, developed a way of opening the brain of regular humans to telepathic existence.

The article seemed to corroborate this. They needed more research on Bell to be sure, it stated. It was proven to be possible

however, because digital documents outling Bell presenting his invention to the Steeple City Science Committee had been found. He had expected that the committee would send the data to the federal governments for mass spreading.

Instead, the article read, he was drafted into the police force as an anti-telepath leader.

Brutal atrocities he had since committed against telepaths as a whole were then listed: the burning of a commune in the Ash Mountains to the north, killing over two hundred telepaths inside the city, the start of the anti-telepath raids that filled the agency building every year, and anecdotal stories of atrocities on the level of individual telepaths such as rapes and public humiliations.

The idea that Mitchell Brothers was actually Bell seemed a stretch to her. She could not understand the motivation of the city government in keeping the people from an equalizing force such as Bell's machine.

But, she thought, I do know that he did these things to people, and for that there is no shame in going after him. Even if he was Bell.

She put the paper on a couch in the communal living room, a sagging and brown comfortable mess, in case someone else would want to read it once they came back from the city. No one in her building of ten people had found their Adjuct yet, a rarity; the Telepath Resistance Agency newspaper reported that thirty percent of all the group had so far found and begun work with an Adjuct. Thirty percent of the resistance was now teams of people who could interact like one mind after spending enough time with each other.

The article had reported that Adjucts could apparently develop the singular conscious with any telepath, but certain combinations of people created deep emotional bonds. The article, which had run yesterday, speculated that any telepath/adjuct relationship would eventually be a close one.

She paced. The living room had been stripped by real junkies nearly a century before; it had been refurnished twenty years ago by a

clean up Alphabet City volunteer campaign.

It had a look that reminded her of her brief normal childhood, before she had left home. At times it was comforting to her, and sometimes it made her nervous.

She thought of the oncoming mission. The culmination of fifty years of TRA activity, her debriefing agent had said. The culmination was brought on by the discovery of the Adjucts, which gave the TRA the kind of super-force army it needed.

The plan, though simple, did not bother her. They'd managed to infiltrate the police station days ago; this mission would be timed strictly due to the army perched at the edge of the city.

What bothered her, she knew, was the thought that Frost would probably be working with his Adjuct, not with her.

She sat on the stool again and put her head in her hands. She tried to picture what the Adjuct would look like, if it would be male or female, and how long Frost would be hers until he melded with the non-telepathic complimentary being.

She wondered if she was the only one in Alphabet City who did not welcome the coming of the Adjuct.

Casler watched Syd boil seven pounds of noodles in a gigantic pot. The rest of the living assignment except for four was out.

Since Syd and Casler already existed as an Adjuct pair they had no need to leave. The four others were working together to strengthen their bonds and research what was possible in the short time they had before the federal army arrived.

Syd and Casler were assigned to making simple dinners for the building.

The pasta rose and sank rapidly in the currents created by the boiling water.

Casler began cutting up vegetables, in a decorative manner that left the edges of the vegetables fluted like a pie crust. The Agency had taught her advanced cooking techniques, like all the other who were taught inside of it.

The full on attack on the police station had been briefed to them yesterday. The goal and the reasons for it were simple; if the police were taken out of power, the city government would be powerless. The Agency could be unlocked remotely from the police station, and if the federal army continued to march on the police station even after the police were taken out of power a carefully constructed bomb sat under one of the city walls in an unpopulated corner. The city wall would come down. The federal army would have no choice but to fight inside the city, which they would not do. Evacuating would mean forcing everyone into the wastelands outside of the city; most would die. Alphabet City could feed itself on the outside through contacts. The population of Steeple City, hundreds of times larger, could not.

The TRA was going to sedate or kill every mayor's police officer in a systematic attack, a full on battle.

Casler and Syd had decided not to participate.

Casler had cited violence, and Syd had said something about his legs aching. That night, in bed, they'd talked about how the new Adjucts were already outsourcing them, because they were chosen through compatibility, not mutual dead friends.

They did want to see full battle anyway. The night of the attack would not find them doing any active TRA events. If the city became habitable for telepaths after the attack, they would live in it.

Syd pulled a handle on the pot, spinning it on its axis before dumping the ziti into a huge strainer which was temporarily suspended over the sink. The steam warmed his face and made his arms sting.

The night before they'd had sex again, awkward, but not without affection. They'd realized that as Adjucts, even imperfect ones, they would not be able to forget about each other and love other people. Syd had said he would be especially damaged by a split, because she was his second.

Syd had cried for Somnam and Casler had cried with him. They had both wondered with some fear how close their mental link would

develop, and if their sense of self would be destroyed.

The dream they had shared afterwards was nervous, and woke both up them in anxious sweating.

Syd poured the pasta into a giant mixing bowl as Casler stirred in oil and the cooked vegetables before the pasta had time to stick together.

Casler stirred while Syd turned and picked up a large bowl of sauce; she stepped away as he spun around and dumped the sauce in the pot, half blind with the steam and hurrying because the pot holders were ineffectual at preventing his palms from being burned. As he dumped in the sauce, splashing a small amount onto the walls, she turned the water on for him.

"Why can't our bedroom dance like this?" Syd asked.

Casler remained silent. They both knew the answer; he hadn't gotten over Somnam yet, and as his brain became hers and hers his she could not either. It introduced an emotional unpredictability to their fluid working together. They had both felt it the night before.

Syd felt anxiety wash up his back as he stirred the red sauce into the pasta. It felt like not knowing where he was, like being lost in a dark part of the city.

"Three days," he said to comfort her, "in three days we'll know if the attack is one hundred percent successful and if we can live in the city like normal people."

The attack would have to go very well in order for this to occur, they both knew. The entire police force would have to be sedated at least, and all records, weapons, money, and perhaps the station itself would have to be destroyed. Talk of using it to set up temporary replacement government was reported in the news bulletins.

"We could get a place out here anyway," he said, "they have the best foc I've ever had."

They both knew foc, if the City Government floundered without its police force as was planned, would not stay illegal.

"Three days," she said.



When it got dark Syd put on his long gray coat and walked out of the living area. Most of the telepaths had returned; one had come back with a new Adjuct who had joined them for dinner. He looked awkward but the group knew that in a day, given the quickly prepared but so far effective training schedule continuing to work, he would function like a part of his telepathic mate.

If someone feels close enough to a telepath to sneak out of the city with them, they've got to be an adjuct, Syd thought.

Syd did not tell Casler where he was going. He did not have too. She stayed behind without asking why.

The air tasted smooth, with the scent of smoke and coffee in the air. He neared the Alphabet City downtown, where he and Casler had emerged before their violence against Daily. He stepped down into the subway tunnels and walked as quickly as he could towards the city.

He emerged without trouble. The mayor's police above, he knew, were using telepath sensors designed by Mitchell Brothers, who had before been known by his last name Bell. The man whom the city government had turned against the telepaths.

Away from Casler, inside the city, he felt strange. He walked towards the center of the city. The streets began to be better constructed, the enamel buildings got larger and more squares of windows were lit up, but it felt like he was experiencing a home movie of himself from years before. Not a few weeks.

If I'd never gone to the Agency, he thought, I'd still be in my apartment right now, probably drinking foc and thinking about jerking off. Now I'm bound to someone and out here stalking.

He did not feel anger. It felt good to voice the words inside of his head.

From his pocket he pulled out a necklace, which he fastened around his neck. It was a Neo-Freudian necklace, the screw shape.

Inside the neighborhood where Dave lived, Syd walked into the Neo-Freudian Church, which was holding evening mass.

"Thus, in The Dream of the Botatinical Monograph Analysis, we find a life lesson. Our subconscious always knows what is correct. But our overbearing ego and super ego prevent us from realizing this potential. The Doctor finds out that he in fact needs to bring flowers to his wife more often, and he remembers the young man who forgets about his young wife, leaving her to burst into tears. What we must remember to do above all things is to remember that our subconscious knows where we've been, and it knows where we should go. Never forget how important your dreams are, and remember to read the first great work of our master. Now, in The Dream of the Castle by the Sea"

Syd drowned the man out. His father had been over many of Freud's dreams with him as a boy. He felt that if they held any life lessons for him, that he had already learned them from his father. The memory of the gasoline car threatened to appear. He forced it back down.

Instead of listening to the grey haired man, who stood on a pulpit which had a marble bust of Freud with a cigar where the trinity symbol would have been if the church had been Catholic, Syd looked among the few hundred people for the back of the head that most resembled Dave. After searching he found his brother sitting six rows up, by himself.

Syd wondered if Alexa was absent because of mental reasons, or if she had been strong enough to reject Dave's religion. He assumed she was not feeling well, mentally or physically.

The sermon went on fifteen minutes past the scheduled ending point. Only the young children, dressed in the style that would have been popular in the early nineteen hundreds began to look uncomfortable. Syd was grateful that his father had never forced him to attend church, especially in full cotton Neo-Freudian clothing.

People began to stand and file out of the square room. Syd waited sitting with his head angled down at his feet, as if he was lost in the arm chair meditation that resembled prayer to the Neo-Freudians.

When Dave was just passed the pew Syd sat in, he got up and stood three people behind his brother, and followed him into the street. The church had a parking lot; it was simple for Syd to follow his brother into the parking lot. When Dave turned to get into his car, Syd pretended that the blue model next to it was his and moved towards the lock slowly with a key outstretched.

Dave got into his car. Syd turned and pulled the passenger door open, and sat inside with him.

"I'm not armed," Syd said, "please don't shoot me."

He looked at his brother. In the lines of Dave's face he could see a familiar shape forming, the one which took place when Dave was to angry about something to even speak. His chin began to shake as the jaw muscles behind it clenched.

"If I had a gun I would. You are already dead to me."

Syd counted to three. He'd been told moving and speaking slowly would be safest, even though he'd memorized hypothetical verbal exchanges in advance.

"I'm just protecting people I love," he said, "you should understand that."

Somnam appeared in his mind then, the slightly off centered virginal figure he'd first met, awkward in agency dorm room. Being eyed by the elevator man.

"Get out of my car right now," Dave said, his voice a quiet husk. The knuckles of his fingers were white where he gripped the steering wheel.

Fighting to keep Somnam out of his mind Syd delivered the lines that he had rehearsed. He'd repeated it over and over to Casler until he'd said in one hundred times in a row without crying or his voice cracking.

"I know you killed Somnam Dave. And I know why."

Dave's hand fell off from the steering wheel into his lap. The shoulders which were before tight and pulled back followed.

After counting silently to ten, Syd moved on.

"I know what Alexa is. So I'm here to find out what happens next. You know who I am, and that I helped to free an innocent telepath that your police force was going to murder. Have you told anyone my identity, or why I may have been involved?"

Dave rubbed his kneecaps. When he spoke, it was in nearly a whisper and filled with hatred.

"You think I'd admit to the people I work with what my own brother has become."

Syd abandoned every potential line he'd memorized.

"You killed someone I loved. Now tell me what is going to happen between us, and you better convince me it really will happen, or one of us will die."

Dave began to sob, physically shaking his whole frame.

"I'm not going to report you," he said, "but I never want to see you again."

After a silent ten seconds were counted Syd opened the car door and walked off as smoothly as he could. He envied Dave the right to sob, and made sure he was on the other side of the church and halfway down an alleyway before he allowed himself to cry.

Inside the Fallen Network Jennifer spoke to what looked like a blue bowl filled with corn by herself.

Frost had returned from the days searching with his adjunct; an hourglass shaped girl in her twenties, a brunette with eyes that sparkled. Jennifer had shaken hands with her and fled onto the street to the safety of marijuana smoke smells mixed with minted soy frankfurters and abstract music.

Hours later, when she was half drunk on liquor made from corn, peas, and roses, someone important had given her the solo briefing she was currently occupied with; look attractive, digitally, meet with a digital personality named Ability Impairer, or AI, and buy the magnet bombs needed from him.

Going alone had been emphasized on the briefing paper, which resembles the news papers.

Al had already complemented her on her looks. Three times. And her dress once.

"We have unlimited funds," she said, "I can pay you whatever you want."

The eyes, sunken into the sides of the gigantic blue porcelain bowl, moved up and down her body as she stood in the plain black room.

"How about you lower the top half of you dress for me?" came words from the bowl. The voice was that of someone of college age, she had guessed earlier. The insistence in his voice made her think he was college age or younger.

"I don't know about that. How much money are we talking about?"

The eyes closed, and image of the bowl flickered.

"I want to see your breasts," it said. "Thirteen thousand world bank credits, plus you're topless for me."

Jennifer knew that any amount under twenty thousand would be acceptable, it had said so on the briefing paper.

"I want a digital signature, and we'll release it to every potential customer you have on the virtual market if you fuck us over," she said.

An envelope materialized in her left hand. She opened it and looked it over.

After tucking the paper back into its envelope, she lowered the straps of her dress below her shoulders, then rolled the top part to her waist.

The bowl did not speak to her, and she waited until what felt like several minutes had passed.

The familiar black bar of internet head gear blocked her view of the ceiling. She sat up. No one had been with her, she checked the physical computer to make sure the digital contract was saved. She sent it to several people immediately for archiving, and shook her arms out, trying to clear her head. The corn, pea, and rose alcohol made her feel dull and sleepy.

Frost's Adjust filled her head.

Jennifer did not know the girl's name. She knew that she herself

was as pretty as the adjunct, but that Frost would soon be bound to the girl, and lost to Jennifer forever. Complaint would be met with punishment, and she suspected that forced Adjunct partnerships were not far away, even in the revolutionary environment.

The girl's eyes, shiny in the living area as Christoph led her in by the hand.

Jennifer shook.

She did not want to go back into the living area. The living area where Christoph would be with her, and the living area where people would look at Jennifer with eyes of hatred because she would not go and search for an Adjunct. The newspapers were filled with stories about how the adjunct was the next coming of the telepathic people, that the adjunct was the key to success in their final bid to take control of Steeple City and turn it into a western Amarise City.

I just did my part, she thought, I got the fucking Japanese magnet bombs. And when the day comes when we move, I'll do my part then. But I can't get an adjunct yet.

Her mouth felt dry, and she could taste the bile taste that always accompanied a hangover. The girl with Christoph would not leave her thoughts. She forced herself out of the cot and walked down the back stairs with the intention of finding a bottle of liquor at any cost.

In the street she was stopped by Bob.

"I've read you," he said, "and I understand. You will not be forced to find an Adjunct. But you also will not disturb Chris's work with his. You will not be allowed to abuse alcohol either."

Jennifer closed her mind to him. She felt him probe but ignored it. She was good enough to keep anyone out.

"I know you can't let him go," Bob said.

Even though she was blocking him out, Jennifer still felt insincerity in his voice. She stepped around him and felt a sharp pain in her back.

Her vision changed into a tunnel, and she knew she'd been drugged seconds before she fell onto the street.

When she awoke she did not feel sick or groggy. A piece of paper rested on her chest, taped with a single piece of clear tape to her black cotton shirt.

"You were sedated for two hours. Please try to relax. Your affection for Christoph will pass."

She laid back and stared at the ceiling.

Careful to keep her mind closed, she began to wish that she has never joined any resistance group, at all.

The cause, she reminded herself, the cause is worthy. And you do not deserve happiness. You're a worthless being. The best you can hope to do is help others, if you aren't too selfish.

She did not get up, but lamented for a drink of anything strong.

The girl with the dancing green eyes walked into the bedroom. Her motion reminded Jennifer of waves of water.

"My name is Ghea," she said, "and I know why you hate me. I would like us to be friends."

Ghea sat on the bed and folded her pale hands over her thigh.

Jennifer kept her brain closed.

"It will be easier for both of us if that does not happen," Jennifer said, and rolled over so her face was pointed at the wall. Ghea left.

Syd had convinced everyone that he needed to convince that Dave would remain silent. The grand push, the one in the city, was a day away.

He and Casler had moved into an apartment in Alphabet City, away from the living quarters of those still active in the movement.

Syd stirred onions in butter. Casler was browning synthetic chicken. They moved through the kitchen like professional dancers, working with each other.

"How many do you think they'll kill?" Syd asked.

The final definitive news had come to them that on the following day the entire resistance movement, augmented with the adjuncts, was going to attack and attempt to take over the police force, and the entire government of Steeple City. Legally, it was acknowledged that

if the federal government followed its own laws and gave them a fair trial, they would be able to declare the city sovereign under them. It was how all the cities had formed after the epidemics.

Lethal bullets were planned for use.

"I don't know," Casler said, pouring foc into a press and putting water into a microwave. "It's all indoors. People are going to get into close fights. Fifty, maybe? Probably a hundred of ours. The police aren't going to be non-lethal."

"Do you think we should be helping them?"

Syd felt guilt over leaving the resistance before the all out attack. He knew Casler could read it in him, and understood.

"They're going to kill Mitchell Brothers, and the mayor if they can, and others."

Syd nodded. He did not agree with killing any more people than was necessary to take control of the police force. As few as possible. He knew that Mitchell Brothers and the mayor were responsible for many deaths and generations of suffering, but he did not feel it was the place of the resistance to kill them. Casler agreed, he could feel it in her.

"It stills feels like I'm a coward, like I'm leaving behind those that would help us. The only ones who would help us."

Casler set the plates on the table.

"We are leaving behind those that would help us. But I don't think they begrudge us," she said.

Syd nodded and sat down. He looked across the table at her and felt warm. A single strand of black hair fell in front her face as she leaned forward to slide food onto her fork. The habit of eating modestly, trained by the agency, had left her. Syd did not mind.

His mind did not leave the attack. The blood. The attack to save Grace from the police would be like kids having a rockfight compared to what was coming. He remembered jumping from the window, breaking his bones. The people tomorrow, he knew, would not have getaway cars. People would die in the streets while he sat



with Casler making dinner and thinking idly about having sex with her. Maybe watching some news. Having a nap and sharing a dream. But probably not dying.

Casler rubbed his hand. He could feel the same guilt in her, but he still felt that they were making the right decision. They'd talked, decided that it was time for them to live for each other, and that if they decided later they could always go back to the TRA. As the first documented Adjuct couple, The Suicide Twins, they were already canonized.

Remember, Syd thought, there is no way things are supposed to be. That's the cultural super-ego, not fact. He laughed.

He thought of Mitchell Brothers, who would shot without ceremony wherever he was found if the TRA made it far enough into the building. He thought of Somnam.

"I don't want to go," he said.

"Neither do I," Casler said.

They ate their dinner.

Afterwards they curled together on the couch. With his arm draped over her and a blanket over them both, Syd could almost forget that the outside world was behind the walls of their apartment. Having her close was like creating a space that only they existed in.

A man dressed in black, the clothes of a priest, with thick glasses on gives his identity as Marion. He says that the voice of nature will one day speak to Syd as strongly as a person he met the day before. The priest kneels unto the stone floor, and turns over a rough tile. A copper hunting horn lies underneath.

Syd shook his head. The television, a sitcom, spread its comfort mind numbing through him and he woke up further. Casler's body was pressed on his left arm. He tried to move his fingers but could not. He woke her.

"What story was that dream from?" she asked.

Syd indicated he did not remember.

Awake, guilt racked him again.

This is what I'll be doing tomorrow, he thought, lying around feeling sleepy after too much red wine at dinner with Casler.

"Go back to sleep," she said.

He got up from the couch thinking that he wanted to be alone, so Casler did not follow him into the bedroom. The dream he had he did not share with her.

In the morning he made his way into the living room and shook her from her sleep. He kissed her, fully and sexually, enjoying the morning taste of her mouth.

"You feel better," she said. He nodded.

Jennifer stood outside on the Alphabet City street.

She had volunteered the night before for combat duty. The front line. She was given a short barreled shotgun, a pistol, two flashlights and a police uniform. Thirty other people, all of them with Adjuts, made up the rest of the regiment she belonged too. Their job would be to follow the initial wave of fire into the building and search out high ranking police officers. Officers and government officials were expected to hide wherever they could in the building; the regiment she belonged to was going to move through the basement.

It was six o'clock. At eight o'clock they would move into the cars that would rush them under The Mayor's Police that guarded the known entrances and take them above ground only three blocks from the police station. The way had been cleared, bombs had been placed to open the scored section of the road and provide a way for the cars to drive out of the abandoned subway. Jennifer would not be driving. Someone with more training in driving would do that.

She lit a cigarette with a match. Even though she had purposely selected a brand that Frost hated, the smell and taste reminded her of him. She smoked it anyway, and felt better.

The sun was bright, just starting to go down. The street was silent. The residents of Alphabet City did not know what was about to happen, but almost the entirety of their newest neighbors, the telepaths, were assembled on the street dressed as police officers.

Communication lines had been cut off by special arrangement with the Alphabet City utility building, and movement was restricted into the subways. If the anarchist group of people resented these measures, none of them had said anything to Jennifer.

She sat back on the grass and lit another. The regiment of people around her were nervous, she could feel the energy and self doubt from them as they milled on the street and talked with their adjucts and those standing next to them. The conversations did not mention what was about to happen; they were of the weather, or what car the couples wanted to buy, or if Alphabet City was a modern utopia.

It was a clear day. They'd hoped for rain. Cars running at full speed in subway tunnels would make a loud noise, even thirty feet under the city. The mayor's police with their telepath detection people would probably know they were coming no matter what, but the noise would make it obvious where they were going.

An image of one of the cars losing control and spinning into the subway wall filled her mind. The pile-up that would result. Probably all of the cars behind them would be destroyed. She did not understand the wisdom of the early evening charge, she would have preferred silently marching in early in the morning. But she did not question the decision.

She lit a third cigarette off from the one she'd been smoking. Her hands shook. No one spoke to her; she knew it was because she did not have an Adjuct. She was not one of them anymore, but a dated version of their people. Someone who could not let go and accept the new way.

If I survive, she thought, I'll find an Adjuct when I'm ready. Not because they want me too, but when I'm ready.

The sun was going down but the sky remained clear. She wished that they could just leave right away. The waiting and the strained small talk made her sick to her stomach.

She remembered fleeing from the Agency building in a wash of violence and wondered if this attack would be much different. The

only way it could be different, she decided, would be that the people they were shooting would have guns.

With non-lethal munition so available, she thought, when did I accept the fact that we were going in with live bullets?

She chained smoked and stared into the yellowish blue clear sky. The conversations grew more tense as the time to move out got closer. Jennifer began to hear people whisper questions about the coming attack. Who the driver was, whether the first wave or the last wave would be the worst, what their odds really were of winning.

A half hour before it was time to leave Jennifer was out of cigarettes, and those around her were talking of whether power could even be assumed if the mission went successfully. Her hands shook and her stomach rollicked with nerves and nicotine overdose.

When the cars were started, Jennifer got in and tried to keep herself from shaking.

The darkness of the car trunk combined with the shaking of a car moving at high speeds made Syd sick to his stomach. His nervousness did not help.

He'd asked Bob if he could have a ride into the city; Bob said yes but only trunk space was available. He found himself riding in the trunk of one of the black cars, terrorized by the possibility of a pile up.

Everyone is terrified of a pile-up, he thought.

There was no sense of time.

When the car slowed and he felt the humming of the engine lower his lower back tensed and he felt vomit rising up his throat. The force of stopping pressed him against the front of the trunk space, bending his elbow.

Syd braced himself for the impact. The car stopped. He heard shuffling, and the dim light of yellow streetlights and light pollution from the city seemed to flood him. He tried to move but the time in the car had cramped his muscles. At least six hands picked him up and put him on the sidewalk. He stretched. The teles that were part of the mission were dressed in black. They began to split into groups,

armed, entering subway tunnels and filtering through the streets. Some got back into the stolen vehicles. Some others were dressed in police uniforms. Syd massaged his calves and got to his feet. A small handgun was holstered to his thigh. It held lethal rounds.

He wrapped his coat around himself and began to make his way through the slum. His old apartment was not far away. He turned on the small radio tucked inside of his coat linings. He'd found it in alphabet city in one of the attics of the one of the rooms they'd moved into; it was so vintage looking that Syd felt it would have value even to someone that did not obsess over radios. The static hum of a radio with no stations available to its tuning band filled the air.

The occasional car passed, but no pedestrians. If the strike was about to begin, which Syd assumed it was, then it was in-between nine or ten at night. A quiet time, even in the far out areas of the city.

He laid back on the sidewalk and looked into the sky. It was orange. He found that he missed the stars from alphabet city, and the six or seven dim lights that he had seen outside the night prior.

"What are you doing out here in the dark on your back?" said the familiar high pitched voice of Plow. "You need a fix of something stronger than foc, don't you Syd? Alphabet City fuck you all up?"

Syd sat up and tossed the radio into the air.

His purple trench coat sailing around him, Plow caught the radio. Syd could see the man's eyes appraise the dated electronic device and his mouth twitch under the effort of holding back an emotion.

"I have money too," Syd said, "I need some things from you. Some things that may be difficult to get in the next couple of hours, but I need them."

"What things?" Plow asked, stroking the off brown top of the radio.

Jennifer crouched outside of the police building. Even in the early evening hours, their intelligence had told them that most of the important police officers were inside, either sleeping in the bedrooms in the upstairs of the building, or drinking coffee and planning the parts of a strike against Alphabet City: presenting the

attack to the public in a saleable manner, the actual military strike, preventing retaliation, and whatever else the police worry about. Jennifer didn't know exactly what they were doing, but she knew that some of them would not be doing it forever. During a time of siege the mayor's police stayed up during the night and slept during the late hours of the day.

Strapped to her back was a small handgun filled with lethal ammunition. It was to be reserved for a handful of men off from a list of faces she'd memorized in virtual space until she could tell them from similar looking men. The gun was not accurate for more than a few feet, she knew. But she also knew it didn't matter; it was for devastating point blank usage.

Some members of crime circles used the model of weapon to change the faces of execution victims into a combination of gelatin-like flesh, bone powder, and liquid. If she found one of the men on the death list, she'd render him unconscious with her non-lethal gun and after looking at his face she would blow a whole in his chest, leaving his face for the after attack trial and investigation.

She ran her fingers over the smoothness of the gun butt in her hand. Her regiment was in position. Thirty of them crouched into the lobby of a hotel; the employees of the hotel had been rendered unconscious before the police were alerted. No residents had discovered them yet. They only had to sit for ten more minutes. She brushed her hands over her gun again and began to stare at her watch. The numbers ticked by too fast with painful slowness.

The police station was across the road.

The people around her were quiet. One young man shook. She wondered if he would die early or become calm when the firing started. The breathing of those around her felt absurd.

Standing on the red carpet of a hotel with thirty other armed telepaths seemed even more strange to her.

The time came for the strike. What looked to her like fifty people dressed in black ran upon the door of the police station that she

faced. The flashes of yellow fire began almost immediately. She saw no one fall but knew that inside people were dying already. She listened for the breathing of the young man. It seemed more regular; she thought maybe her own had just quickened.

Another wave rushed into the building.

This is it, she thought.

"That's two thirds of all of the people we have," she thought.

One in the rear of the wave, an unorganized mass of people running, fell. The few behind jumped over the body and inside the flashing became brighter.

Jennifer knew she had thirty seconds until she would be outside. She found herself counting. When she got to forty three "go" flashed in the form of a green light on the helmet of the leader.

She ran into the street. Stray shots echoed in her ears. She pointed her gun upwards and fired two shots widely. The body that had fallen was of a woman of forty, brown hair flecked with gray. Jennifer saw a small channel of blood running down the woman's cheek from her mouth as Jennifer jumped over her.

The inside of the police station looked as it had the day that she'd watched it on camera, when they'd gone to free Grace from the basement.

Fewer than five dead people in black lie on the floor in puddles of blood. A man gripping his neck and screamed as a fountain like spray jetted rhythmically between his fingers caught her attention but her body carried her to the staircase door. More dead lay in the staircase. She ran her hand along the guardrail until she felt it become sticky and cool.

She wiped it on her thigh, not looking, concentrating on following the person in front of her, on putting her feet onto the steel and concrete in the correct rhythm that would not trip her.

Shots echoed through the stairwell. She could not tell if they were from above, below, or somewhere in the building. The final wave would be entering from the subway, she knew. The first wave,

whoever was still alive, should be making their way towards the room with broadcasting equipment if the plan was still working.

No one's told you it isn't, she thought, keep moving.

Her assigned floor came up upon her and she burst through the door with her weapon seconds after the people in front of her had.

She saw the woman she'd been following's arm evaporate and her eyes found a police officer. Her gun went off and the man fell. The woman fell silently. The hallway had a hotel like appearance. The lighting was soft and yellow. A nightstand stood in front of the place where the man had fallen with an old fashioned looking lamp and plant atop it.

You're the only one responsible for this floor now, she told herself. That lady never should have rushed in like that.

Jennifer made her way along the hallway. Inside her head she'd memorized all of the habituated rooms.

1023. The first of the habituated rooms. She stopped and softly tried the door. It opened.

All is going to plan, she thought.

The mission responsible for the doors in the building all to be unlocked electronically from the central location by a small squad had been successful.

Inside the air smelled like aftershave and sweat. The heat was so high she found her breath cloying in her throat.

"Whose there" said a male voice as the figure in the bed sat up under his blankets. She shot him non-lethally before he had a chance to ask again. The gun was completely silent. She heard the whap of the gas bullet against the man's skin before he fell back into bed. After leaning her head out into the hallway she pulled the door closed and continued down the hall. The man hadn't look like anyone important at all.

In 1029 she knocked out a man who looked like one of the men from the mental list she'd made. She closed the door. The air had the odor of a hotel room with a good air conditioner, a kind of chilled



bathroom air fresher smell. The dark haired man, knocked out and lying on the bed in a funny angle after the non-lethal munition knocked him over, breathed loudly in the claustrophobic space.

Jennifer turned the man onto his back and his breathing became quieter. She studied his face for a moment.

The gun from her back was in her hand, loaded.

She remembered the blood on her clothes from the attack on the agency building. She remembered the small animal cowering outside of the building as she ran.

She fired the round into the man's chest. Warm blood, salty and smelling like iron splashed onto her face. The man's chest was a cavity which squirted as she backed away and into the hallway.

That tastes familiar, she thought, fuck that tastes familiar.

Her hand shook as she put the gun back into her belt and wiped her face with her shirt.

The next door was five doors down. She walked to it and opened the door.

The air was still and quiet around Syd as he snuck up to the back of Dave's house. It felt like being underwater. The night was clear but to his skin it had the texture of a foggy night.

Dave would be at headquarters, like the rest of the police officers of any rank, he knew. Having the capability of working twenty hours a day and sleeping in the building for several days was a requirement of the mayor's police.

The back door's security system still recognized him as someone who was allowed to enter.

He slipped in, trying to be as quiet as he could.

The door opened into the kitchen. Light filtered in through the venetian blinds, yellow streetlight that cast lines on the domesticity of the kitchen. A breadbox, toaster, pots and pans. Syd stepped softly towards the staircase.

His steps felt loud to him. So did his breathing. He struggled to control both on the staircase.

The artificial wood creaked and Syd cursed at Dave for not being happy with ceramic or enamel for the interior of his house.

At the top of the stairs Syd turned towards Christy's room and entered the baby's sleeping quarters. A yellow night light in the image of a cartoon airplane shed light on the crib, and a mobile with mirrors spun in slow circles above the little girl.

His heart beat so hard that Syd could feel it in his ears. His palms greasy he leaned over to pick up the child.

A light turned on. It was Alexa. Syd instinctively stepped back from the crib, trying to think of an excuse. He had not anticipated this. She ran forward and grabbed the baby from the crib, cradling Christy in her arms. She looked at Syd with hatred.

"What are you doing?" she whispered.

Syd could see a bruise on her cheekbone that he doubted she'd gotten from falling down stairs. It seemed light in front of her black hair. He assumed it was simply a few days old.

"I've come to take Christy. She's telepathetic. If you don't know it, David does. She can't live here. I don't want her in the agency. Please, let me take her from you."

Alexa cried and tears ran over the bruise on her face.

"I know," she said, "and I thought you might come. I thought you might. I can't."

"She'll never be happy in the city. David will never leave the city. Where will she go to school? Will she live here, cut off from everyone, until she's old enough to escape?"

Alexa stepped forward with hesitance.

"He's here," she said, "he's here and you have to be quiet."

She neared the crib and Syd. David walked into the room with a gun. He pointed it at Syd.

"Stop," he said. "No one move. I know what's going on here."

Christy sighed and looked at her mother. Her mother shook her gently and did not turn around to face David.

Syd realized that her body was the only thing blocking David from

having a clear shot at him. He did not move, but slowly pulled his own weapon.

"I'm taking her where she can be happy. Away from Steeple City," he said. "Please, David, you have to understand. You know what she is."

David's hand tightened around the weapon. Syd could see it shake.

"I'd rather have her dead than have her live with freaks," he said. The sound of a gun being fired. Syd shot David as Alexa fell to the floor.

David fell backwards into the hallway with all the air out of him, a hole above his face spouting blood like an upside down faucet.

Through the white noise and trauma in his ears Syd heard Christy crying. He bent over. Her mother had fallen slowly, on her knees, then leaned back with the baby in her arms. Syd picked up Christy and gently set her mother down, feeling the front of her body for an exit wound, terrified that the shot which had pierced her back had also hit the child. There was no blood on her front except for the stream which ran out of Alexa's nose and mouth. There was no exit wound.

Syd assumed a hole the size of a child's head was in the woman's back but did not roll her over to check. Christy was still crying. He picked her up and tried to comfort her.

The alarm system had probably recognized the sound of shots, he realized, and hurried to the closet, bearing Christy's widely screaming torso on his chest. Her weight and fragileness was foreign to him, but he moved quickly. He found a stroller for her in the closet and strapped her in it.

He checked himself for blood in the mirror, knowing that he would look strange enough walking a baby down the street at four in the morning.

After carrying the walker down the stairs he made his way onto the street where he had begun chasing Somnam before. He thought of her as he wheeled the screaming child down the street towards cars

parked on the street.

Using the piece of technology from the telepaths, one of many pieces of technology he did not understand he opened a car with a child seat and strapped Christy into it. He wiped the tears from her face and tucked her blond child hair behind her ear. She'd exhausted herself from crying and had her tiny thumb in her mouth.

Syd stole the car and drove towards the edge of the city.

The moon had come up.

Jennifer had not killed anymore men after the first. He had been the only important man on the floor. She sat cowering in the lobby of the police force, near the tile work decoration in the floor. The negation force of the Telepath Resistance Movement was upstairs, trying legally to have themselves declared autonomous, as those that had studied law had said would be possible. The word in the air was that it wasn't working. What was known for sure was that the federal army had hurried to the edge of the city and now was marching through the streets to the police station. In four hours the police bodies scattered throughout the building, including the fifteen laid in neat rows in the edge of the lobby, would begin to wake up.

Everyone not in the negotiations room was on the lobby floor or the first two floors of the building with all the weapons and ammunition they had left.

The army would arrive soon. They had to hold them off long enough for the negotiations in the room above to be completed.

I'm going to die, she thought. They won't fire on us.

The TV in the corner was on the city news station. Nothing of their attack was on the news. The negotiations people said they were in contact with the American Government, but there were many panicked rumors circulating. She had heard them all in the past minutes, after she'd been called to the lobby for briefing.

The federal government was considering them hostage taking terrorists, not a legitimate army. The mayor's technological crew had killed all broadcasting by news teams out of the city. The red phone in

the white house was ringing, but no one was answering it.

Her non-lethal gun had only two bullets in it. She held it, but held her lethal gun in her other hand.

"They're coming" someone yelled, and then her world exploded into noise and breaking glass.

She could not hear anything. She watched as the officer's in the corner exploded into red piles, then people were running towards the front of the police building, firing their weapons. She knew she was supposed to be running with them, but her head swam in the noise. Her leg hurt. All of the people fell down. She sat and cried. She felt a pain in her stomach. She laid down on her stomach and looked at the mess that had been police officers.

Why would they shoot unconscious people on their side? she thought.

Syd and Casler watched the news as their airplane was in the air over Steeple City, bound for Amarise City. Christy slept on Casler's chest.

They'd seen the burning yellow square in the middle of the city as the plane took off, and Syd had used the vomit bags provided by the airline twice. He did not get airsick.

The news on the television was bad. A known terrorist group had infiltrated the police building and killed everyone inside, including themselves, when they ignited a bomb.

The entire police force except for thirty to fifty men who had been on disciplinary leave would have to be replaced, the news reporter said. Federal soldiers were being drafted.

The army made it to the scene too late to be of any use except as helpers in controlling the fire.

What terrorist group had committed the action was not known, but it was suspected that Alphabet City and the same telepaths who had attacked the Agency Building and The Police Building earlier were responsible.

Syd had not called Bob, but he knew what Bob would probably say,

if he could be reached. Almost all of the telepaths would be dead; those that had entered the city would all be dead. Alphabet City would be evacuating. He did not know what they would do, but he knew that hope for Steeple City was gone, and that nearly the entire movement that had been born inside and outside its walls was dead.

Casler cried.

Syd wondered what life in Amarise City, free from the western style police, would be like.

Christy began to cry.

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The first three stories follow the character of "venture altruist" Manfred Macx starting in the early 21st Century, the second three stories follow his daughter Amber, and the final three focus largely on her son Sirhan in the completely transformed world at the end of the century. According to Stross, the initial inspiration for the stories was his experience working as a programmer for a high-growth company during the dot-com boom of the 1990s.



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