

Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – THE FARM BOY by McKinzie Bair. She writes, “My name is McKynzie Bair, and I live in Buckeye, Arizona. My future aspirations in my career involve full-length novels but for now I am honing my skills in the format of short stories. I am excited to share my work and to create ties with other writers in the community. My work has appeared in the Another 100 Horrors anthology collection by Cruentus Libri Press. Thank you for your time and consideration.”

Page 10 – MOST POWERFUL SLAVE by Erik Buchanan. Erik Buchanan is a writer from Pennsylvania in the good ol’ US of A. He currently has a magical life working nightshift security, which, while not beating Capitalism, has tricked it by giving him the time to write. When not working on his own stories, he enjoys a wide spectrum of fiction and non-fiction. Some favored artists include Kurt Vonnegut, H.P. Lovecraft, Carl Sagan, and too many more to mention. *Ed. Note: Mr. Buchanan was in our Sept. 21, 2024 issue.*

Page 14 – THE SECOND CHANCE PROJECT by Nancy Machlis Rechtman. Nancy Machlis Rechtman has had poetry and short stories published in *Your Daily Poem*, *Writing In A Woman’s Voice*, *Impspired*, *miniMAG*, *Discretionary Love*, *Young Ravens*, and more. Nancy has had poetry, essays, and plays published in various anthologies. She wrote freelance Lifestyle stories for a local newspaper, and she was the copy editor for another paper. She writes a blog called Inanities at <https://nancywriteon.wordpress.com>.

Page 16 – DESCENT by Philip Hsu. Philip “Phil” Hsu is a science fiction and fantasy writer based in Shanghai, China. He has finished a fantasy novel about mermaids that create artificial intelligence and an EP album, *Colors*, about growing up between Taiwan and North Carolina. Prior to his current role as an international school teacher, he was a technology consultant in Washington DC and Shanghai.



“THE FARM BOY”

by MCKINZIE BAIR

Something is in the stables.

I can hear the horses screaming, the hysteria in their hooves as they buck against the barn doors in which to escape. Their cries chill my blood with ice, causing my heart to quicken with terror beneath the summer sweat of my bare chest.

I leave the comforts of my blankets and peer out through the bedroom window.

The moon richly illuminates the countryside, its contour round and bright amid a somber sky beset by a glittering glaze, pouring silvery beams across the grass and hills.

My father dashes across the grounds below, in nothing but his workworn trousers, a shotgun in his hands.

“Papa!” I holler against the glass, my breath fogging its surface, but he does not hear.

My mother bursts into the room at my back, teary-faced and white as pearl, still dressed in her floral nightgown.

“What is it, mama? What’s happening?”

She wraps her slender arms around my shoulder blades to embrace me tightly, kissing my forehead. There is something horribly wrong in the gesture, as if she is preserving the moment, or perhaps even saying goodbye.

“Run to the cellar and hide. I need to help your father.”

A series of gunshots harass the inarticulacy of the twilight.

“Hurry, Levi! Run!”

I turn my gaze to the pane of glass, anxious for his well-being, identifying his dark silhouette as he vanishes into the barn, the weapon drawn at his shoulder.

Transfixed by my own fear, I soon observe my mother sprinting through the front yard, a butcher knife clasped in her hand, her strawberry hair whipping behind her elegantly, violently, and I resist the prominent urge to disobey her and to protect her against her wishes.

Her words reverberate in my mind like the ripple of a pond, insisting that I run, and I rouse from my daze. I scramble through the house, bounding over three steps at a time across the stairs, and past the flung-open front door.

Horses flee into the night, bearing grisly wounds along their hides.

Rounding the exterior, I almost stumble into my own momentum against the entry of the basement, so swift is my pace. I unravel the loose padlock with jittery fingers, swing the heavy doors open, and step down into darkness. I reach forward and seal myself into its realm of cloistered shadows, the sparse aid of moonbeams my only ally in the dark.

I linger with widened eyes, breathing heavily through an open mouth, my lungs enflamed.

A torrent of gunfire resonates throughout the nocturnal farm and then is met with silence,

and only the pained and disgruntled neighs of the horses can be heard in the distance, alongside the chirping melodies of hidden grasshoppers.

I hear a muffled cry of anguish.

Mother shrills in tragedy.

Hot tears tailor to the creases of my dimples, my bottom lip trembles, and my chest caves in.

I strike the mortar wall with my right fist, angry for not heeding my own judgment in pursuing the hem of her fluttering nightgown. What a fool I must be? My knuckles throb with complaint, bruising and bleeding along broken skin.

There is a heavy crash from above. Glass shatters from the parlor, shutters burst apart.

I look up, moisture lining with my jawline, my pulse gathering in velocity.

Large bulky tracks dart over the wooden floorboards, their steps quick and agile, inhuman. There is the soft, distinguishable pattern of mama's feet. Kitchen cabinets quake from unseen impact, dishes fracture into shards atop my brow, bullets pierce wood and stone, there is the startled intake of a woman's breath, and then I detect a commotion trailing away from the house.

I crawl up the stone stairs to peek through the slit in the cellar doors.

She hurtles into view, her dress blood-soaked and caked with mud, her shoulders heaving from exhaustion. There is a large gash across her cheekbone. She grasps papa's shotgun with quivering hands, too frail to bear its burden.

She turns to me, knowing I am there, and mouths, "I love you."

A beast crouch-creeps on bent forearms behind her, its belly to the grass, its snout flared,

with a berserk blood haze clouding its pupils. Its pointed ears straighten as if alert. It stands upright on its hindlegs and roars, curling its fingered claws.

The wolf lunges for her, its shape distorted by the speed of its movement, its body mantled by a long brown pelt. Its jaw unfurls from a snarl, lips stretched wide, revealing rows of sharp, red-stained teeth and pieces of dangling skin.

Feral fangs tear into my mother's throat, lacerating her flesh like melted butter, and spilling her blood along the greenery in a lush of scarlet.

My hands press over my mouth to hush my cognizant horror.

She free-falls into weightlessness and dies.

I choke back sobs of despair, suffocating my lips with both palms to stifle any trace of an eluding sound.

The carnivore sniffs the air, raising its bloodied muzzle to the stars. It pauses, its face leaning towards me, drawing nearer, smelling the oak, smelling the scent of my perspiring skin, I wonder.

It leers directly where I kneel.

I close my eyes, alone, anticipating pain beyond measure, the warmth of my piss soaking the crotch of my pajama bottoms.

But it retreats, growling in triumph, bolting quickly around the corner, leaving a trail of gore and chaos in its aftermath.

I push the cellar doors open and step out.

My mother regards the heavens with an unseeing gaze. I hold her close to me and weep, my knees drowning in the puddles of her vibrancy. I kiss her forehead, just as she had done, whimpering my face into her hair. I close her eyelids, dwindling their sapphire sparkle.

A profound rage smolders within me, fueling a glaring hatred for the beast.

I snatch the firearm, reloading it from fallen shells, and cock it into a rigid posture.

I traverse the latticed banister of the porch, hunching low, my ears attuned as an owl in its nightly pursuit of prey.

I find papa, slouched and unmoving in a downhill mire, his features partly mauled away in peeled tatters, a crimson pool flowing from a gushing neck. Electric blue sparks pop and crackle from a gaping wound in his brain, exposing sheens of damaged metal and intricate machinery.

My brow crinkles, flustered by confusion, but before I could investigate further, I attend to a weighted thud behind me and whirl around to face the predator as it perches across the roof, its staggering claws boring into the shingles with ease. It calls to the moon, as if howling in great reverence to it.

It leaps in midair and lands directly before me in a squat of ambush, gnarling with savagery.

Despite a bubbling belly, I raise the double-barrels, bracing the stock against my trembling bicep, and with bated breath focus my attention onto the target. I envision my mother, summoning the example of her bravery.

It charges, colossal paws kicking up chunks of grass and soil in a ferocious stampede.

I aim for its head and pull the trigger.

I miss, the recoil steering me into a wobbly backstep, as I blast shavings from its shoulder instead.

It hurls into my side, muscling me against the ground, the wind whooshing out of my lungs painfully. I land on my back in a gasp of helplessness, frantically clutching for my chest.

It hovers over me, blood foam and spittle dousing the wince of my expression, my bowels loosening.

I scream as it playfully carves into my abdomen.

A sound like a discharged arrow whistles through the air and I glance up to regard the plunged needle of a dart protruding from its temple.

It falls to its knees, its totality crushing my arms, pulverizing the bones that rest there. It teeters sideways into a mountainous heap, the balls of its eyes receding into its skull.

A film of wooziness falsifies my vision, and I refrain from gazing down at what must be an unburdening of my inner organs. Warm blood cradles my hip bones, trickling down my thighs.

A sensuous and automated female voice speaks as if from the very firmament, thunderous and clear, her words echoing across the surrounding acres:

“SIMULATION COMPLETE. SIMULATION COMPLETE. THE SUBJECT HAS BEEN SUBDUED. STAND BY FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.”

The dark horizon emanates into a blaze of artificial illumination, the umbra of the evening becoming plucked away into a faraway ceiling, the framework of the moon merely a lowered dish of an object, the stars twinkling from regressing socket pores. I become aware that the once believed capacity of the farmstead is now enclosed in the spacious length of a football field, large walls painted blue for the sky and emerald for the fields as if to include depth to the vastness of a mural, displaying a broad, rectangular room. Protective plate glass encircles the high summit of the chamber, where men in suits watch from overhead, like those who would study a rodent injected with chemical infusions.

Light pours from the surface of nearby green stalks and the ground divides, spreading

open in subsiding panels of earth. An elevator platform rises from beneath the landscape, eclipsing the light briefly, as a translucent cube settles into place. A horde of troops clad in ebony combat gear dismount, assault rifles trained to the wolf. A woman who adorns a bleached laboratory coat steps off the lift and approaches me with a hugged electronic tablet, as a male attendant scurries behind to keep with the gait of her stride.

“Jesus Christ, what a fucking bloodbath,” she says. “Who approved live rounds for the farmer? Send a crew to round up the horses and sweep the property for repairs.”

She bends down, pressing a fore and middle finger to my throat.

“He’s alive, thank God. Wipe the boy’s memory and arrange him for reconstruction. He needs to be available by tomorrow. What is

the status of the subject?”

“Incapacitated, ma’am. But stable,” a soldier affirms, injecting a medical scanner into its fur.

“Good. Take it to the infirmary. I want ‘round the clock care until morning.”

She fades into the foreground of my sight, my breathing slows. The margins of my periphery darken, melt into misshapes, as black dots defile my eyes like a congested swarm of flies.

“H-hhh . . . hh-wwho . . . are you?” I inquire, aware that my body is numb. I peer down at my forearm, finding it a pulpous, sanguine mess of torn muscle tissue and jutting bone, revealing a plate of silver alloy beneath.

I recall the corpse of my father and the desolation of his scalp.

“Am I . . . real?” I ask her.

She taps manicured fingernails into her tablet screen, disregarding my questions. She snaps her fingers and points to papa from afar.

“Prep the others for extraction and give me their diagnostic reports in an hour. Tell Finley -”

My eyelids shut as if mountains held them down, the lights above too excruciating to bear. Advancing dreams smear their velvet draperies over my thoughts, and I succumb to an avalanche of sleep. ❖



“MOST POWERFUL SLAVE”

by ERIK BUCHANAN

The ample ass of the President was cratered into the plush dark fabric of Cadillac One’s back seat. Anxiously, he sat, looking out through the armored glass of the presidential state car. Letting his gaze settle over the bleak landscape of urban blight, he smiled at the fact this decay was his genesis.

Like most people in power, the President was born into it. His Great-grandfather built a fortune as a bootlegger and spun that nest egg into political connections and then graft. Using laws tailored to him by his political cronies, Great G bought up a sizeable chunk of the city’s real estate. His underpaid contractors swept out, transforming a once working-class area into something worse. Filled with teetering substandard housing that sweated vermin and exhaled toxins, the city had become the teat from which all of Mr. President’s family suckled.

Mr. President gloated over the passing scenery, trying to divert his anger about being dragged out first thing in the morning for a meeting with the Walnut Growers of America. From the distance of the freeway, he watched his trough’s early morning happenings. Junkies hustling for their first hits, the leftover drunks from the night before, and people leaving ramshackle dwellings for low-paying jobs. They scrambled about like ants. Mr. President sneered, knowing he could put a magnifying glass over them under the noon sun. These were

the people Mr. President had sworn to ‘serve’, and he despised them—low-class little sheep.

His warm thoughts of superiority slowly gave way to his default setting, anger. Damn the Walnut Growers of America! Sure, they have provided him with more campaign contributions than the NRA or the Pharmacorps, but insisting on this early morning meeting was over the line. He was the President. He made the demands! As the city passed out of view, Mr. President fixated on just how he would put the WGoA in their place.

The driver of Cadillac One sensed the President was having one of his moments and had accidentally made eye contact while confirming his hunch. He braced for whatever was about to spew from the President’s mouth.

“Donnie, Dickie...?” asked the President.

“It’s Hernandez,” the driver corrected.

“I’ll tell you, Herman, you have no idea how easy you have it. No stress. Just drive here, then drive there. Guys like me, guys with power, it’s a burden. You have no idea how lucky you are, Donnie.”

“Thank you, sir,” Hernandez absentmindedly said while thinking of the steaks he had marinating for the grill back home.

Experience had taught the driver how to pretend to listen as his mind floated away free as a cloud. He was sure to nod at random intervals as Mr. President spent the rest of the

trip talking about how he would rip the WGoA multiple new orifices. So worked up was the President that he didn't realize they had reached the oddly deserted office park that housed the lobbyists.

Snaking through the spacious complex, the President's vehicle and escorting motorcade searched out the Walnut Growers of America's headquarters. Most of the complex looked abandoned, with empty buildings and overgrown landscapes. The road was in poor repair, but nothing Cadillac One's shocks couldn't handle. Mr. President cautiously peered out, looking for signs of life. He found none.

A sigh of relief escaped Mr. President as the headquarters came into view. Unlike the rest of the surrounding area, their building was well maintained, with the shrubs and grasses groomed to perfection. The structure was composed of polished plate glass that sparkled so brightly it resembled chrome. A colorful cartoon image of the WGoA's mascot, Wally Walnut, loomed over the front entrance of the building.

The presidential security team swarmed around Cadillac One, forming a protective cocoon between it and the outside world. The burliest of the guards was tasked with helping the President up and out onto his feet. Mr. President thought it odd that the Walnut Growers of America's parking lot was as empty as the others in the complex. He didn't have time to comment on it as his mobile wall of security was sweeping him along to the entrance of the building.

Under the smiling visage of Wally Walnut, a man who looked like a 1950s sitcom father held open the front door. He was a lean middle-aged fellow with a starched business suit and pomade-sculpted hair. A pipe was stationed

between his perfectly white teeth, which he promptly removed and tapped into a receptacle marked with a pipe icon. Whirring, the device sucked out glowing embers.

"Mr. President! It is such a pleasure to see you this morning. I'm Bob Dobbs, President of the Walnut Growers of America," he said, extending his hand.

Grasping his vice-like grip, the President got caught up in Bob's energy. Mr. Dobbs provided a few hearty pumps, his pipe locked within his Cheshire grin.

Before the President could utter his annoyance at being called out here, Bob had wrangled him halfway down a hallway to a meeting room. The entire corridor was stark white except for the matte black door frames. The only adornments were saccharine corporate motivational posters hung at perfect angles. Outside of Mr. Dobbs, there were no signs of any other staff.

Bob opened a door indistinguishable from all the others except for a plain placard reading *Meeting Room*. Hovering his hand at the President's back, Mr. Dobbs guided him into the room.

"Here we are, Mr. President."

The sensation of waking from a dream by being doused with cold water overcame the President. Neither of these things had occurred but something much stranger. He last remembered Mr. Dobbs' hand guiding him into the meeting room as the security team crushed themselves around him. He also recalled the growing anger from the hustle and bustle of the whole situation. Then he was here.

Where here might be, Mr. President couldn't say. As empty as the corridor had been, the room exceeded its starkness. There was no furniture, no landmarks of any kind, just a white

void that spread out in all directions. More troubling, his phalanx of suites were nowhere to be seen. Even the door he had entered through had vanished. The only thing in there with him was Mr. Dobbs, who looked on with feigned concern.

The President was wobbly by nature and being in a space with no borders for orientation only worsened that. Mr. Dobbs reached out his arm, only for it to disappear as if it were passing behind an invisible wall. He then pulled his hand back, which reappeared, holding a chair. This did not help Mr. President stay vertical.

Mr. Dobbs placed the newly materialized chair down in front of the President, assuming that direction was valid here, and commanded him to sit.

Slumping like a deflated ball into the chair, the President tried to acclimate to the strange-

ness of his surroundings. Mr. Dobbs snapped his fingers, the embers in his pipe glowing cherry red on command. Bob heartily puffed out smoke rings as he waited for the President to adjust.

It took a few seconds for Mr. President to realize that Bob had ordered him to sit, and except for this case, no one gave him orders! His preplanned chewing-out was on the tip of his tongue.

“Don’t even think of saying any of it,” Mr. Dobbs said in a stern TV dad voice. “I didn’t want to have to give you this talk, but nonetheless, I must. Know that I’m not mad, just disappointed.”

The sudden realization that Mr. Dobbs was pulling a power play on him overrode the strangeness of the setting, including the fact that he might have just had his mind read.



Color flushed into Mr. President's usually pallid face, and veins bulged from his neck as he unleashed the rage he'd been building since he was awoken by their call this morning.

"Now you listen to me! I don't know what kind of setup you got going here, but I'm the President! You and your little office park fun house don't intimidate me!" he lied.

"Are you going anywhere with this?" Mr. Dobbs asked in a bored tone.

Mr. President was gasping for air, the outburst being the most exercise he had in years. His mind was slowly gluing together his denouement to really put this pipe-smoking punk in his place.

"No. We are not going to have another outburst. We need to get down to brass tacks," Mr. Dobbs stated calmly.

With that, Mr. President lost all control of his body, which had become jelly overflowing over the chair. He slumped so far that he stared at his reflection in Mr. Dobb's polished belt buckle. The President tried to respond with an insult that sounded great in his head but only produced a thin string of drool that dribbled across his chins.

"Sorry to have to be so tough on you," Mr. Dobbs chirped, "but you can be a bit of a pill sometimes. I'm going to need your full attention."

The president's lack of bodily control had caused him to purge his bowels. Bob extended his arms in disgust and went behind Mr. President. Effortlessly, Mr. Dobbs pulled the President upright by his lapel and adjusted him back into the seat. Mr. President could do little more than gurgle out more drool in protest.

"Let me be clear," Dobbs said, stepping back before the President. "You and I have a mutually beneficial arrangement. You make things

happen for me, and I give you money. The simplicity of it is beautiful, I'm sure you would agree. Unfortunately, you have been rocking the boat, threatening to have the status quo lost at sea."

Mr. President's brain raced, struggling to make sense of the situation. No doubt it was some Commie mind control drug thing, probably the same stuff that's been making all the people gay as of late. He feared the depths to which this Pinko rabbit hole might reach.

Mr. Dobbs chuckled to himself. "I think you're calm enough to try this conversation again."

With those words, Mr. President could feel the area around his mouth again. It distorted into a grimace as he tasted the miasma from his bowel movement. Fighting against his gag reflex, the President continued trying to understand what was happening.

"Who are you? You working with the other side? They put you up to this? 'Cause I got money and I can pay more than them. I even got a little island with some friends. Always stocked with fresh young masseuses, if you know what I mean."

The corners of Bob's mouth turned down, "We are not for sale, Mr. President. There's nothing you can offer us that we want outside of your cooperation. Your recent actions have been mucking up the System. I'm here to get you back into working condition.

"As for who we are, the Walnut Growers of America have been there since the beginning. We are the silent guiding hand that helped weave together this country and the world under the most profitable business model this planet has ever seen. With us at the steering wheel, everyone's life improves under the System."

None of this made sense to Mr. President. He had heard of secret groups such as the Illuminati and the shape-shifting lizardmen, as they were popular topics among his most loyal followers. Now, he had to consider that his people may not have been crazy and have known the truth all along!

“So what do you want?” Mr. President said softly.

“Straight to the point. Excellent! See how we’re making progress in communicating?”

Mr. Dobbs continued, “The Walnut Growers of America are like you. We are businessmen. We consider ourselves the archetype from which all other businessmen spring—a paragon of the virtues needed to excel at sales and land the big deal. For the System to work, the sales team needs to work at one hundred percent efficiency. Currently, you are not, which is why we’re having this little chat.”

“For the love of God,” the President whimpered. “You’re not going to kill me, are you?”

Mr. Dobbs chuckled. “No, we won’t kill you. That would be inconvenient. We just need you to start toeing the line. You’re letting your ego get in the way of doing your job, making everything much more complicated than necessary. This needs to stop immediately.”

Swallowing all pride, Mr. President responded. “What do you need me to do?”

Bob smiled. “For starters, you can lay off the isolationist and nationalist rhetoric. Many countries are trying to fight the System, and we must ensure they come into the fold. America is the keystone that keeps the System together; we do not let others separate from it.

“Secondly, it’s time to get tough on all these terrorists out in the streets protesting for unions and better wages. Those kinds are like lint. They get stuck in the gears of the System, clogging it

up. You will need to deal with them quickly lest their poisonous ideas spread.

“Rough times are ahead, but we can deal with the rabble between our firm guidance and your... people skills. Let’s start our renewed relationship on these two points and take it from there. You don’t have to do anything; your staff has all the necessary information. Just stick to the script and sell, sell, sell!”

“And what do you get out of this?” asked Mr. President.

Mr. Dobbs’s smile turned sinister. “Everything. When we close this deal, we will have extracted absolutely everything of value. I even have a special bottle of bubbly stowed away to celebrate that day. But don’t worry, considering your diet, you’ll be gone by then. Meanwhile, enjoy your time as the most powerful man on Earth.”

With that, Mr. President was seated back in Cadillac One. He was simply there with a clean suit and freshly washed and powdered buttocks. Sitting on his lap was a wax paper bag with Wally Walnut printed on it. Walnuts filled it with a golden nutcracker peeking out the top.

Hernandez looked back at him from the driver’s seat. “The Team’s ready to roll, Mr. President. You good?”

Mr. President murmured something that Hernandez’s drifting thoughts took as an affirmative. The motorcade departed from the Walnut Growers of America’s headquarters. Mr. President silently sat as he gazed into Wally’s cartoon eyes. Pulling the nutcracker from its waxy container, he mindlessly ate walnuts as the office complex shrank into the background. ❖

“THE SECOND CHANCE PROJECT”

by NANCY MACHLIS RECHTMAN

“I appreciate you finding the time to come here this morning,” said the impeccably dressed man in the sharkskin suit seated behind the chrome-and-glass desk. Two men who were similarly dressed stood on both sides of the desk, legs slightly spread apart, hands clasped in front of them.

“Bodyguards? Crime family?” Amber wondered to herself, staring at the two men. And then she thought, “Did we even have a choice about being here?” Her eyes scanned the room. There were bookshelves, but there were no books. Instead, there were small sculptures and pottery carefully placed on the glass shelves. While they were fairly nondescript, something about them unsettled her. Amber also noticed there were no photographs anywhere, nothing that in any sense could be considered personal or warm. Finally, she glanced at the two other people in the room who, like her, were seated in front of the desk. A man and a woman sat on her left side.

The man caught her eye and Amber quickly looked away. He looked to be in his early 40s, and his hair was already thinning. He was wearing a tweed sports coat and dark jeans with brown loafers and he was sporting a pair of expensive sunglasses on top of his head. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized out of the corner of her eye that he seemed to be scowling at her.

The woman seemed to be a few years younger than the man. Her hair was very blonde and her mascara was very black. And her skin was very tan as if she spent her days lounging in the sun – or at least paying to look as if that’s all she did every day. Something flashed when the woman moved and Amber suddenly noticed the most enormous diamond she had ever seen in person on her ring finger when she brushed the hair from her eyes. What a rock! She was wearing a tight black knit dress and red designer stilettos. Amber realized she was staring and quickly forced her eyes away from the woman, hoping the woman wouldn’t scowl at her, too.

The man behind the desk cleared his throat to get their attention. “Now that you’ve gotten yourselves acclimated, why don’t we get to know each other,” he said smoothly, tenting his fingers and leaning forward. “Just start with a one-sentence elevator pitch about why you’re here.” He pointed at the man. “Devon, why don’t you start?”

Devon stared at the man. “You just want one sentence? Seriously?”

Amber was startled by his brashness. She wasn’t surprised by his accent though – definitely New York, probably Queens. But the man behind the desk was obviously not a person to be questioned or trifled with.

However, the man didn’t react outwardly to Devon’s impertinence. “Is that a problem?” he

asked calmly. The two men at his side stared at Devon expectantly.

Devon caved. "Uh, well, one sentence, huh? Well, I'm looking for something that will make some kind of sense in my life."

"There, that wasn't so hard," the man behind the desk said quietly. He had a very subtle British accent, Amber realized. The man now turned to the woman next to Amber. "And you, Scarlett. Same question, same elevator pitch. I presume you don't have any problems responding?"

Scarlett looked at the man flirtatiously, since that was apparently her go-to move in life. But when his expression didn't change except for his eyes narrowing slightly, she looked down at her ring and began twisting it nervously. "Why am I here?" she asked in a silky voice. "I guess I'm here because I'm also trying to figure things out."

The man nodded and looked at Amber. He barely turned his head, yet he was looking directly at her. "And finally you, young Amber. You're so freshly formed, can you possibly be jaded and tired of the world at your tender age?"

Amber held herself back from fidgeting. How could she explain why she was there to this stranger when she couldn't fully understand it herself. But the man was waiting expectantly for her answer. She cleared her throat. "I want to find some kind of meaning to it all," she finally said.

"Interesting," the man nodded. He looked at each of them carefully. "But you're all wrong."

Amber, Scarlett, and Devon looked at each other in confusion, then back at the man behind the desk. Finally Devon spoke. "How do you know that we're wrong? We're telling you why we came here. These are our reasons."

The man smiled mirthlessly and shook his head. "You might think that you're here because of your own reasons. But in actuality, we brought you back here for a specific reason."

"Back here?" Scarlett repeated. "What do you mean by back here? I've never been here before in my life."

"Me either," Devon agreed.

"Same," Amber said.

The man typed something into his desktop and a screen suddenly appeared on the wall behind him. A video started playing. It was the same room they were currently in, but there were about twenty people milling about. Amber looked at the people and then her mouth fell open. She suddenly realized that she was one of the people in the video. And she was talking animatedly to Scarlett and Devon! She didn't even have to look at them for their reaction because Scarlett blurted out, "What the hell?"

And Devon demanded, "What's going on here? You've obviously messed with some kind of AI or program to make it look like we were here before."

Amber studied herself in the video. She was wearing a blue and pink dress she had given away almost a year ago. And her hair was different, the way she used to wear it about a year ago.

Scarlett said, "I haven't worn those shoes in about a year. The heel broke awhile back and I haven't found a place to repair it. How did you get a picture of them?"

"What's going on here, I mean it!" Devon almost shouted. "Who are you people anyway?"

The man behind the desk didn't react to Devon's outburst. But he did stand up and walked to the front of the desk and then pointed at the screen. "Keep watching," he said.

In a moment, the camera focused on the

man, wearing the same sharkskin suit he was currently wearing, asking everyone to be quiet for a moment. He then raised a newspaper above his head. "Everyone, if you'll give me your attention for a moment. Can you all please tell me what date today is? Loudly, please so we can get you on camera."

As in one voice, the response came loud and clear. Amber watched herself say loudly along with everyone else, "October 18, 2023." That was today's date! But how was this possible. Scarlett and Devon stared at the screen, unbelieving.

"What have you done to us?" Scarlett asked shakily. "I don't remember this at all. And how can that be today? This makes no sense."

"He hypnotized us!" Devon exclaimed. "It's some kind of a trick."

"I assure you, this is no trick," the man said. "You all were here on October 18, 2023 – the first time – when the experiment began. At that time we did a reset of the year. You have spent the past twelve months reliving that year. As you can see, in this phase we started with twenty people, and you are the final three who need to be evaluated."

"Evaluated for what?" Amber finally asked. "What have we done?"

"Aah, finally the right question," the man said, walking back to his chair behind the desk and sitting down. "It wasn't anything you specifically did. It was in fact your lack of action – your inaction – that led you here. You three are part of a years-long, multinational experiment using thousands of people called the Second Chance Project. The purpose is to see if over the course of a year – a year in your life that you repeat after an intensive month of training – if you would do things differently than you did the first time. Would you change after various

methods of behavioral intervention when the time came, where you arrived at the pivotal moment in your life once again, a moment when you originally turned away from doing the right thing because it just wasn't convenient, or you were scared, or you didn't care?

"Humanity is getting more and more jaded, self-centered, while technologically you've advanced in leaps and bounds, especially in the last century. But you've socially and emotionally regressed to the point that life has become all about you and not the greater good."

Devon scratched his head. "So you're saying we lived this past year twice and you've been watching us the whole time like we're some kind of rats in a maze?"

The man in the chair nodded. "Exactly,"

Amber's heart was fluttering now. Devon appeared to be a hot-head and could get them all in trouble. She had no desire to challenge this man who was somehow in control of their lives.

Scarlett crossed and uncrossed her legs, then made a preemptive strike against whatever the next thought was that was about to spew out of Devon's mouth. "So what kind of actions are you talking about? Some kind of major decision we made in the past year – or didn't make? And you're saying we lived it twice? I don't remember anything particularly earth-shattering in my life this past year."

The man behind the desk studied her carefully. "I never said it was earth-shattering. But you each had at least one major decision this past year, some action that needed to be taken that you avoided the first time around. We wanted to see if we could do some behavioral modifications and training to help you learn to take action if you had a second chance. And on a larger scale that might show us if humanity

should get a second chance.” He stopped and looked piercingly at Amber.

“Amber, you seem to be on the verge of asking a question, yes?”

Amber shifted nervously in her chair., She did have a question. “Umm, who is ‘we?’” she finally asked. “I mean you keep saying ‘we’ about whoever is in charge of this, this experiment. I’m just curious.”

The man nodded, then wrote something down in the notebook on his desk. The ‘we’ I refer to is a group of scientists from our planet. I believe your people call it Proxima Centauri b.”

“I’ve read about that,” Scarlett said animatedly. “But it would take thousands of years for us to travel to your planet. If you actually are from another planet, which I highly doubt”

The man behind the chair smiled. “Well, with your limited Earth technology, that’s true. We have technology light years ahead of yours – forgive the little joke there, but it’s accurate. We’ve been coming to your planet for thousands of years. Our civilization is much older than yours, and once our technology reached the level where it wouldn’t take thousands of years to visit our nearest neighbor, we started settling here. Like the pioneers of your Old West, if you will. And we are the descendants of the researchers who settled here. So since we were born here over many generations, we are for all intents and purposes, Earthlings.”

“So you’ve just been running experiments on us for all this time?” Devon asked belligerently.

“In the beginning, our ancestors just settled and observed as evolution took place. And they watched as humans began to dominate the planet and all the growing pains over the course of centuries. Especially your inability to find

peaceful solutions to your problems. Always war somewhere on this planet. You still haven’t learned over the thousands of years we’ve watched you how to live in peace. Those who came before us have been trying to find the root of the problem for many years. We spread out all around your planet into small study pods. And eventually we realized that it was the small acts that eventually predicted the bigger acts. If we could put you on the right path with everyday actions or inactions, we might be able to help you save yourselves.”

“Why should we believe you?” Amber asked in a small voice.

“Why shouldn’t you believe me?” the man countered.

“None of this makes sense,” Devon said. “And by the way, who are you to tell us we need saving? Devon asked.

“Because without our intervention over time, you would have destroyed yourselves and this planet already,” the man said. “Anyway, we’ve had this conversation before although I know you don’t remember it. We need to focus on why you are here today so we can let you know about the year you repeated and why and how you did the second time around.”

“How do we know you’re not just messing with our heads?” Scarlett asked.

“We are actually ‘messing with your heads,’ but not in the way you think. As I said, we’re doing advanced behavioral modification exercises with you the second time around, during this second-chance year. When you humans are faced with a tough situation, you all react differently. Some try to save others, some choose the evil that is encroaching, while others turn their heads as if nothing is happening. We want to encourage those who save and see if we can prevent the inaction where people just don’t want

to get involved.”

Scarlett watched the man behind the chair. “Why don’t you try to change the people who choose evil? Why only focus on the other two choices?”

The man smiled. “Excellent question, Scarlett. Let’s just say there are a whole series of other projects that focus on why humans choose evil. In this particular group of experiments, we’re trying to understand how to change inaction to positive action. And so, let’s begin. In fact, Scarlett, we’ll start with you.” He clicked something on his computer and the screen behind him filled with a split screen of a crowded city street. The same people were walking down the street in both videos, and then the camera zoomed in on Scarlett. She was wearing a floral dress in the video on the left and a coral blouse with black pants in the video on the right. Everyone watched in fascination. Scarlett seemed to be at a loss for words. “Does this look familiar to you, Scarlett?”

Scarlett nodded her head. “Yes, that’s on my way to work. I’m not sure when that first video was taken, but the second one was I think a few weeks ago.”

The man nodded. “Keep watching.”

In the videos, Scarlett was approaching a street corner where there was what appeared to be a homeless man slouched against the doorway to a building. He was calling out to people for help as he shook a large cup that had a few dollar bills and some change. The man in the chair froze the video on the right at that point. In the video on the left, just as Scarlett was about to pass the homeless man, two men ran up to him and kicked him, snatching away the cup he was holding and they ran away. Scarlett sped up her pace and didn’t look back. As she

watched herself on the screen, Scarlett put her hand over her face. “That’s not how...”

The man in the chair held up his hand. “That was a year ago. Now let’s see what you did a few weeks ago.” He clicked on the computer and the video on the left now froze and the video on the right resumed playing. It started with the same scenario as Scarlett approached the corner and the homeless man. The two men ran up to him and kicked him and snatched the cup from him and then ran away as they had before. But this time, Scarlett stopped. She bent over and asked the man if he was OK. He was shaking. And then Scarlett sat down on the ground with him and began talking to him. What she said was inaudible, but she obviously was calming the man down. After a few minutes, she reached into her purse and handed him some money. He thanked her, but she wasn’t done. She said something else to him, walked away, and that might have been the end. But she soon returned with a cup of coffee and a bag filled with croissant sandwiches and handed it to him. The man started to cry. Scarlett knelt down and hugged him. She indicated that she’d be back later to check on him. Then the video froze.

“That’s Ray,” Scarlett said softly. “I see him every day and make sure he has something to eat. It’s not much, but I wanted to help him.”

“And you have helped him tremendously,” the man in the chair said. “You have made a huge difference in his life. He was invisible and alone. He didn’t see any point in going on. And a few weeks ago, you changed everything for him. He has a friend - you, my dear. And he has hope. You have made all the difference in his life.”

Amber started to clap. It was like watching a movie with a happy and inspiring ending. But

she stopped when she saw everyone was staring at her. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"Don't be sorry, Amber," the man said. "You shouldn't suppress all of your emotions all of the time. OK, now for Devon, let's take a look at your progress this past year."

Devon grimaced and shuffled uncomfortably in his chair. The video began with a split screen as in Scarlett's video. A woman was sitting at a wicker table on a deck overlooking the mountains. Her elbows were atop the table and as the camera zoomed in, it was apparent she was weeping. Her head rested in her hands and her shoulders shook. On the table lay an ultrasound image. The camera pulled back and Devon stood at the sliding glass door looking out at the woman, but he didn't move. The woman turned around and saw him. "Devon?" she said pleadingly. Devon seemed to be glued to the ground. "Devon?" she repeated through her sobs. Devon finally shook his head and turned and walked out of the camera frame. The video froze.

Nobody said anything. Then finally Devon took a deep breath. "We had just found out that our baby...there was no heartbeat. We lost her. It was a girl. It was our fourth try at having a baby."

"That must have been awful for you both," the man behind the desk said. "You were both in pain."

"Yeah," Devon said. "But that's not what happened..."

The man held up his hand as he had for Scarlett and repeated what he had said to her. "That was a year ago. Now let's see what you did last month." He clicked on the computer and the video on the left now froze and the video on the right resumed playing. It started with the same scenario as before, with Devon's wife

sitting outside at the table on the deck, crying. The camera pulled back to show Devon staring at her. After hesitating for a few moments, he walked to the sliding glass door, opened it, and stepped outside. His wife's tear-streaked face looked up at him.

"Devon," she sobbed.

Devon hurried over to his wife and held her as the two of them sobbed. "I'm here," he murmured, stroking his wife's hair.

"I don't think I can go through this one more time," his wife said shakily.

"We don't need to think about that now," Devon assured her. "You need time to heal."

The man behind the desk froze the frame and looked at Devon whose face was filled with pain. "In the first scenario, you let your pain consume you to the point where you could no longer communicate with your wife. Your marriage fell apart and you could only focus on yourself and your anger and your pain. A year later, you found empathy, understanding you weren't the only one in pain. You reached out to your wife and your marriage is stronger for the decision you made to connect with her and understand how the loss affected you both."

Devon nodded. "I don't remember the first time at all. But I know I had the feeling in my gut that if I didn't try to help my wife through it I'd lose her."

"Because you did at one time," the man said. "OK, Amber, I see you sitting here in dread of what we have in store for you so I want leave you waiting any longer. Before we start, just a quick question. You've always had a fear of water, haven't you?"

Amber stared at him. How did he know that? But apparently he knew a lot of things. "Yes," she concurred.

"So we're going to do things a bit differently

with you. We're going to start with a video of what happened to you when you were four years old that caused this fear." He clicked on one of the keys and there was a video behind him, but this time on the full screen. Amber gasped in surprise as she watched her younger self. "How did you..."

"Can you give us some context so we understand what we're watching?" the man asked.

Amber hesitated, then plunged in, narrating the events of the video. "When I was about four, we were at my cousins' house and they had a pool in the yard." The screen filled with images of a pool, adults sitting in the shade, drinking and laughing by the shallow end of the pool. They were not really paying attention to the kids. The older kids were jumping off the diving board, splashing loudly into the pool. Amber was the only little one so she was on her own. She wanted to call out to her vulnerable younger self to stay away from the pool. But it was apparent that she wanted to jump in, too, just not off the diving board. When her cousin Adam jumped off the diving board, she simultaneously jumped off the side of the pool. No one was looking at her because Adam made such a big splash. But instead of swimming, she started sinking to the bottom of the pool. She started panicking and splashing, but no one realized what was happening as she continued to swallow water and sink. And even now, Amber felt that sense of choking and she started gasping for air.

The man behind the desk froze the video. "Are you OK? Can we continue?"

Amber took a deep breath and nodded.

"So who saved you?" Scarlett asked.

The video resumed. A large black lab leapt into the water and grabbed the strap of Amber's bathing suit before she disappeared completely.

He pulled her to the side of the pool where the steps were and where it was more shallow. She started sputtering and crying and finally her mother raced over and grabbed her.

"That was Skippy," Amber said. "He was the only one who noticed me. He saved my life. But I've been afraid of water that's over my head ever since."

The man behind the desk tapped a few things into his laptop, then looked up. "All right then, let's watch your videos of what happened more recently. He clicked play. As with Scarlett and Devon, there was a split screen with two videos. In both videos, Amber was walking through a park that had a pond filled with ducks and geese. She was wearing a pink and yellow sundress in the video on the left, and capris and a flowered blouse in the one on the right. Amber stopped to take a picture of the geese swimming near a fountain in the pond. Suddenly, a small white terrier raced away from his owner and vaulted into the lake towards the geese.

"He can't swim!" screamed the poodle's silver-haired owner, obviously in a panic. "Somebody please save my Gizmo!" The man stopped the video on the right at that point and the video on the left continued.

Amber remained motionless by the edge of the pond, unable to move. The woman continued to scream. Amber looked around helplessly for someone who could help. The man behind the desk pressed a key on the computer and the left video now also froze.

"I...I don't remember not..." Amber stammered.

"That was a year ago," the man said, rather unnecessarily at this point since they had all figured that out by now. "We know you wanted to. You desperately wanted to overcome your

fears. Let's watch what happened several weeks ago." He clicked another key and the video on the right began to play.

Amber was trembling as the video on the right began to play. She watched herself walking through the park over to the pond and starting to take pictures of the geese. Then suddenly little Gizmo appeared in the frame and without hesitation raced into the water to chase the geese. Gizmo's owner was heard screaming for help. This time, Amber saw that she only hesitated for a second. She kicked off her shoes and splashed into the pond, grabbing Gizmo's leash as she approached, then picking up the little dog who was floundering around in the water. She carried the sopping wet pup out of the pond and back onto the grass, making sure he was OK. Gizmo's owner tottered over and thanked Amber profusely, simultaneously scolding and kissing her little dog. "Thank you for saving my sweet boy's life!" she called out to Amber as she walked away. "I couldn't live without him."

There was a click and the man froze the video. "You saved a life," he said to Amber. "Probably two lives since that woman wouldn't have been able to bear losing Gizmo."

"I don't remember that first time," Amber said. "But I remember the feeling of freezing up, that fear every time I even thought of getting into water over my head."

"You overcame your fears," the man said. "Saving Gizmo's life was what you were able to focus on, instead of your fears. All you could think of was saving him. That's quite a step forward in your life. Well done, Amber."

"Where did the time go?" Amber asked suddenly.

"Meaning?"

"I know what she means," Devon interrupt-

ed. "She means a year happened and then somehow you made it start over again and did all kinds of mumbo jumbo on our brains to help us change and make us better people, according to what you've said and what you just showed us. But how do you mess with time? And how do we know you haven't done this to us over and over again, and not just this one time?"

The man smiled. "You don't."

Scarlett turned pale. "What exactly are you doing to us?"

The man leaned forward. "You know when time seems to speed up, such as when the week just started and you feel like you blink your eyes and it's already over and you can barely remember it? Those are the times when we can just skip past that week or even that month and fast forward to the next event we want to focus on. We can bend time. And we can't totally suppress every memory so the times you are experiencing a sense of déjà vu, it's because the memory of what actually happened another time in your life came through."

Amber started feeling queasy. "So are our lives just like some kind of video game to you? Are you doing this to us really because you're trying to help us become better people and you want to save humanity? Or do you just hit fast forward or replay for fun so you can play out endless scenarios?"

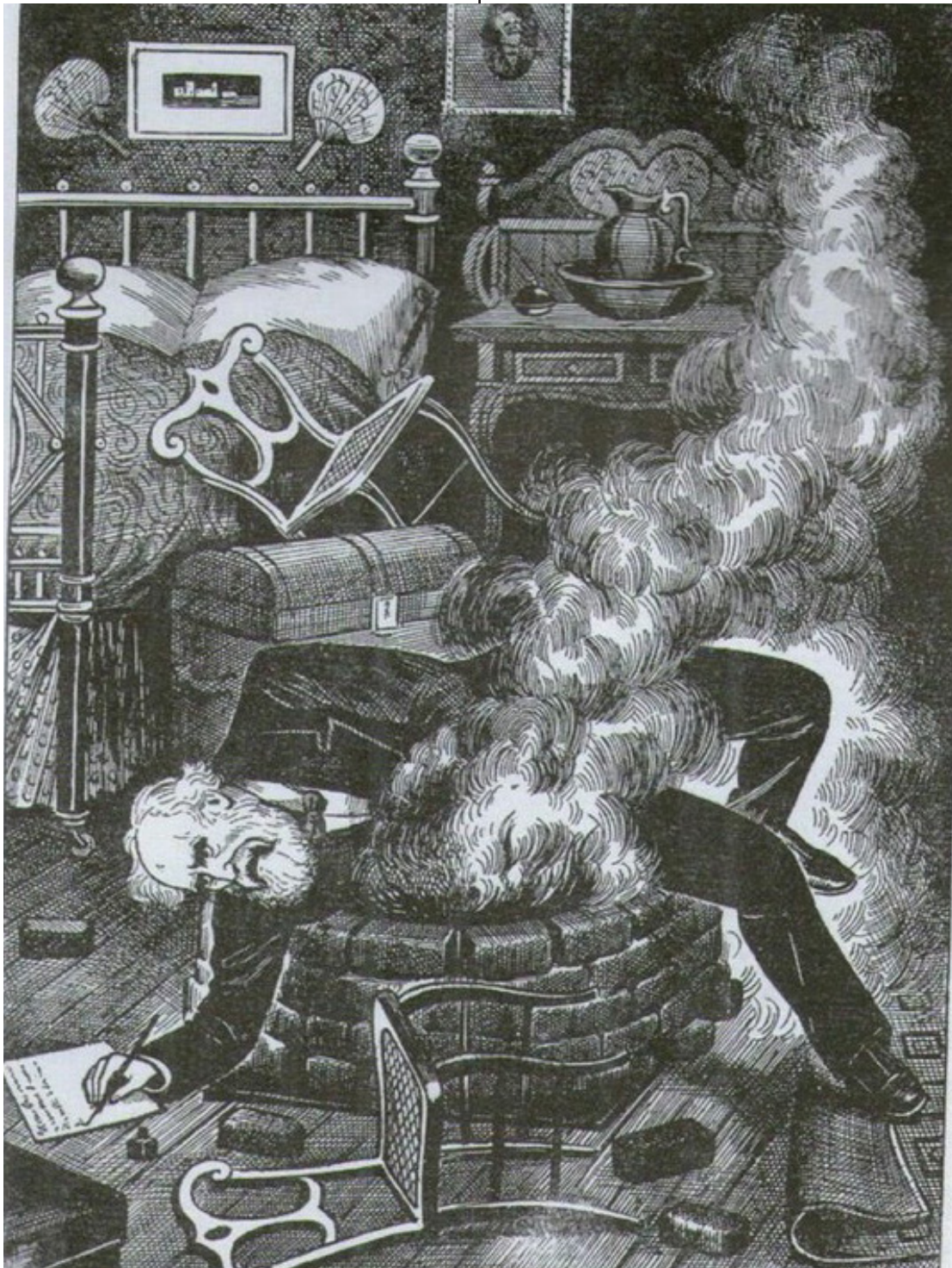
The man looked mildly surprised. "I didn't expect you'd be the one to come up with those questions this time, Amber. You have really grown in our time together."

Devon jumped up. "What exactly is happening here?"

The two men next to the man in the chair started to move towards Devon, but the man waved them away. "It's OK," he assured them. He looked at the three people before him. "Try

to understand this has all been for the greater good. We are here to help you in whatever way we can. As you can see from the videos, you have all become better people. That is the whole point of all of this. It always has been. That will be all for today.” He clicked a key on the

computer, then nodded to the two men by his side and said, “Game over.” And then the lights went out. ❖



“DESCENT”

by PHILIP HSU

Editor's Note - Enjoy part 1 of this novelette. Part 2 will follow in the January 31, 2025 “Disablot” issue of Corner Bar Magazine.

Prologue

Saito perused the digital dossier on his curved screen monitor with more than a modicum of interest. It was getting to be dusk in the Financial District, and the off-white roller shades lining the windows of Yoshiko Tower began lowering automatically against the rays of the setting sun.

To most of the traders at Fujisamu Corporation, the fading light only represented the beginning of work in a different time zone, and Saito was no exception to this rule. What was exceptional, though, was this dossier, and why these dossiers kept ending up at Saito's desk.

Dalton Samson, age twenty-three. Guilded as a Waterman at age twenty-two after showing little aptitude for archive study - unlike his brother, who undergoes Exemplar education on the Jubilee Rig, Gulf of Mexico. Father George Samson, missing, presumed deceased in the Mineral War of 2034 to 2040, drafted as a combat engineer in the Fertile Crescent Campaign.

Mother Linda Samson, declared climate refugee status at Louisiana Station, entering

Sanctuary with Dalton and Eric in tow - quite literally. The dossier noted that she rowed them through the bayou into the staging area herself, defying the local state of emergency.

And now, young Dalton has won himself a dinner with his CEO.

Saito took a moment to remove his glasses, blowing warm air on the lenses and wiping them clean with a cloth designed especially for this purpose before returning them to his face. At thirty-six, Saito inhabited a position in Fujisamu Corporation that was neither too high nor too low for his age, in a career trajectory that could only be described as stable. He never stood out in department meetings and most employees hardly even knew his name, though they might recognize his plain, freckled face given more of a passing glance.

Or perhaps they would notice his longer-than-average hair that was already beginning to see streaks of white. But for the most part, Saito was invisible, just as his current task demanded. Dalton, less so. The boy - anyone under thirty was a boy or girl to Saito now - was no average Waterman. Within his first year of Guilding he had served below the water line for eight months out of the year, despite the fact that the attrition rate for Watermen working under the water line was twenty percent every five years.

Fujisamu Corporation had been inviting

employees to the Surface for quite some time as a means of encouraging good performance and behavior. The application for Below Grounders was rigorous, but customary, and Saito excelled at such tedious bureaucratic tasks. With any luck, it would be the last application the salaryman would have to file; the last dossier he would have to read. Sanctuary was owned and operated by corporations, and LanceCorp was the largest one. Fujisamu aimed to change that, through both legitimate competition and...additional measures.

As the sun faded, Saito rose from his corner cubicle and made his way past many silent rows of analysts to the canteen, intending to replenish his drained chalice of sencha. Much to his chagrin, he arrived at the end of the corridor to face Hiroshi, a member of the department he recognized - and who recognized him. Small talk must follow.

"Saito-san! Long time no see!" Hiroshi called out gregariously, despite the two seeing each other basically every day but not interacting.

"Tsuda-san," Saito nodded coolly as he took a teabag from a rubber container and adding boiling water to his cup.

"How goes it in renewables futures? We're still holding steady in carbon credit trading," the slightly overweight Hiroshi with a round face called out from his seat beside the nano-fridge. "The forest fires drove up demand again in Australia and Russia, so we're rushing to boost carbon sinks here in the US."

"We are doing fine, Tsuda-san," Saito tried to pull away, but realized he couldn't do so without breaking some very obvious social rules.

"Saito-san, it has been too long - What kind of projects are you working on? Are you on Project Ichigo?"

"No, I am not - actually, yes, I am. The crossover project. Wind farms in the American Midwest. They have called it 'Wind Alley.' But my participation is not very extensive," Saito said, smiling politely.

"You're too modest! I always see you staying late and coming in early. Certainly if not Ichigo, then other projects keep you busy?"

"We all must do our utmost for the Corporation, Tsuda-san."

As Saito returned to his desk and unlocked his screen with a facial scan, he wondered if this Dalton would be the one. Others had come before him, but all had been rejected by Kenji's daughter Sophia Fujisamu, to whom Saito reported directly on the matters which could not be discussed.

Dalton had certainly proven himself to be a star employee, had the makings of a celebrity, even. Once given a taste of life on the Surface, he would only long for more - not to mention his attraction to Sophia, which was assumed and a major part of his candidacy. Equally plausible, he would react in anger to the lives of the Surface Dwellers, having been deprived of such material comforts himself for his entire life. Or perhaps both feelings would occur, effecting in him an unforeseen and intractable contradiction.

The Below Grounders that came before him inevitably succumbed to greed or despair or desire and were returned. But Saito - and indeed, the Corporation - required one final heroic act from their candidate, one that would begin a wave of revolution in Sanctuary that Fujisamu would ride to dominance. No ordinary Grounder would do.

As a Surface Dweller, Saito supposed it could not be himself, either. Though he had long since banished any thoughts of attracting

the CEO's comely eldest daughter - all the salarymen had such ideas at one point or another - he sometimes still wondered why an inside job couldn't be done by an insider. He would be more than willing to pull the literal and metaphorical trigger. In many ways, he already had. He took solace in his existing role, though ultimately he, too, felt inadequate. Jealous, even.

But it was too late to dote on such matters. An encrypted message buzzed Saito's mini-phone, which was already running out of battery at this time of day after years of use. That was the signal. Sophia had confirmed their candidate.

Saito had prepared for this moment emotionally, technically, and in many ways greatly anticipated its arrival. But now that it became reality all he could feel was the texture of the keyboard and the surface of the touchscreen as he programmed a fatal flaw into a podshell which would arrive at the Fujisamu residence to pick up one Dalton Samson at an undetermined future time. Needless to say, the podshell in question would not deposit the inebriated Waterman back to his dorm.

The Tunnel Monkeys would make sure of that.

We all must do our utmost for the Corporation, Saito thought to himself, finally allowing himself the feeling of triumph.

I. Fit For Service

Dalton and his fellow Watermen knew the break in Compartment Eleven was going to be a tough assignment when they were sent hurtling at speed towards the flooding beneath the Surface. Strapped to moldy seats in a cage of browning metal, the team hit water twenty meters before their designated access point, forcing them to activate the emergency switches and

climb out. Either Waterman Command had sent them to the wrong point, or the water from the break had risen much faster than anyone had anticipated, or both.

The sudden impact with the water knocked Slim Charles unconscious, his limp body struggling to float in the cage now quickly filling with water. The man had just celebrated his fifty-eighth birthday in June, but was still deemed Fit For Service by the Deacons, which precluded him from receiving living support and enjoying a well-earned "retirement" - At least that's what they used to call it.

After a tense moment of shouting into Slim's visor, Dalton was relieved to see that the old Waterman was awake, although the latter was unable to swim or meaningfully climb out of the cage in his state. So the team untied Slim's restraints and waited until the water levels had risen to the top of the cage. Yuri - the fourth waterman in the group - exited first, then Rich pulled Slim out with Yuri and Dalton's help, and finally Dalton himself emerged.

One crisis averted, but more to go. Since the access point was nowhere to be found and Slim was still recovering, the men deliberated among themselves and agreed to take a series of sluice tunnels to Compartment Eleven. The problem was, they couldn't agree on where the tunnels were, or whether they were still accessible.

By this point in their Waterman training they had already memorized all of the access and sluice tunnels in Compartments One through Twelve. Arranged clockwise, these were the lowest levels of Sanctuary, and most prone to flooding and breakage as the years wore on and the city showed its age. The water they were treading in wearing their magnetic light brown drysuits and oxygen visors - reminiscent of the

old diving suits, but sleeker - was definitely coming from Compartment Eleven. But where were they now?

"Maps are useless, from years ago as always," griped Yuri in his thick Russian accent over their team radio channel as he closed a small holo-map on his wrist. "If Compartment is below there is no way of access," he continued.

"It ain't below if we countin' right," Rich replied in his Bayou drawl, "that cage hit the water 'bout twenty meters up from the waystation. Should be one more access point to either Compartment 11 or Compartment 12 at forty meters up."

At this rate they would be floating at forty meters in minutes. Soon the men looked up and could see the glowing North and South access points nestled in the walls next to the cage rails. They approached a steel and concrete tunnel marked with a painted white "N," and swam towards the mouth of the tunnel that would lead them to the "leak." At the torrential rate the cage chamber was filling up, this was most certainly one of the most serious floods Sanctuary had seen in recent memory. The four watermen positioned themselves next to the tunnel and waited for the water to wash over them, activating the magnets in their suits and adjusting their breathing before entering the access point one at a time.

Floating upright in the tunnel and steadying himself with his hands and feet, Dalton immediately felt himself being propelled through the water like a bullet, his suit humming slightly as he focused on maintaining a constant distance with the man in front of him. Each tunnel had run-off points every three hundred yards, where the men would have to maneuver quickly to switch tunnels or continue forward.

Dalton steadied himself as the team ap-

proached the first run-off point: Tunnel Down! In rapid succession the four men dropped their arms and let their magnetic boots pull them into a tunnel below them, still pointing north but sloping gently downward. Another run-off point was coming up, this one a bank to the left and ending the downward drop. Dalton retracted his right arm and leg, and also held up his left leg for just an instant as the magnetic tracks in the tunnel picked up the charge in his left arm and pulled him upward into a level tunnel. Light began to materialize at the far end of the tunnel.

Within seconds, Dalton could feel himself being hurtled through the air out of the tunnel, as he and his teammates landed into a body of water, one splash after another. The current deposited them into a canal system that Watermen used to navigate the flooded compartments, and Dalton looked up and around him to confirm that they were indeed in Compartment Eleven - the bold number "11" on the walls indicated as such.

Dalton could now see the bottom of the tall seawall that girded Compartment Eleven, and heard the roar of water coming from that direction. The team re-grouped and floated down the canal towards the source of the flooding with the help of their magnetic suits, which were pulled along by tracks within the canal walls.

As they approached the seawall, it became clear that large amounts of water were being pumped out of Compartment Eleven into the neighboring compartments, but that water was slowly trickling back into the flooding compartment, which allowed the team to tunnel into the Compartment in the first place. They could hear the frantic shouts of Watermen and the groans of heavy machinery as they rounded a bend in the canal and came upon a harrowing

sight:

The sea wall itself was flooding from a roughly twenty by five-foot hole, corroded by the ocean, with the wall itself probably hastily and shoddily built in the first place. There were dozens of Watermen and a bevy of bulldozers that pressed their specialized surge shields against the wall of water in a desperate effort to stem the tide. A beleaguered Deacon in his dark uniform with orange trim and partial oxygen visor was barking indistinct orders at the workers with a loudspeaker. He motioned for Dalton and his team to step forward to where they could hear him over the din as the four men exited the canal and stood up in knee-deep water by the seawall.

“The scuba team’s been deployed on the outer wall, so it’s on us to back them up from the inside. We got one more crate of Spraycrete over there, so use it well,” he yelled, “You’re on Spraycrete duty!”

Slim Charles hurriedly led the team to a square orange container with floatation aids attached to its sides. They opened up the crate to see four nozzles with brass triggers, attached to hoses connected to a tank of dark pink liquid: Spraycrete, instant cement from the laboratories and Sanctuary’s slap-dash answer to constant flooding. The Watermen divvied up the nozzles, one for each member of the team, and pushed the floating crate of Spraycrete over the water towards the gaping hole in the seawall. When they were within the equipment’s range of about 10 yards, Yuri unwound his hose forcefully and began firing haphazardly at the seawall with a yell.

“Here we come!” Yuri shouted with manic glee. The Spraycrete solidified when it met seawater or seawall, but fell off the wall in clumps ineffectually due to the power of the water pour-

ing in

“Yuri, close up the holes where the shields are going!” Rich shouted, pointing to where Watermen were installing surge shields to stop up the gaps in the wall.

“Oh, sorry, got carried away,” Yuri responded, snapping his cannon shut and aiming accordingly. The team raised their Spraycrete cannons and concentrated their fire around the surge shields so that the shields would stick against the wall, being careful not to hit other Watermen or machinery. Parts of the hole were starting to get closed up and began to let in water at a manageable trickle, but there was still a sizable gap at the far right of the fissure. Dalton approached that side of the hole with Spraycrete cannon at the ready, motioning for another bulldozer to raise a shield, when he was suddenly hit from behind by a wave of water and propelled forward into the gap.

Before Dalton could recompose himself, he was swept out of the hole in the seawall and into the ocean beyond in a rush of bubbles and water. He reached out in desperation as his arms and legs flailed, and in an incredible stroke of luck, caught a piece of metal piping jutting out next to the hole with one gloved hand. He swung his other arm over to hold on with both hands, before coming face-to-face with a scuba mask and breathing regulator. Their owner quickly reached out to grab Dalton, firmly pulling him over the piping onto a platform suspended in front of the seawall.

It was a member of the scuba team, which was working on repairing the outside of the seawall with welding equipment and reinforced plating. The plating itself lay along the floor of the long floating platform Dalton had been pulled onto.

The scuba diver made an “OK” sign with

his hand to inquire whether Dalton was alright, to which Dalton responded with an “OK” sign of his own. As the diver returned to his duties of welding parts of the seawall shut, Dalton surmised that the pump turbines must have been reversed in Compartment Eleven to clear out some of the water there and in other Compartments. It was being pumped back into the sea, which led to an unexpected surge.

Just my luck, Dalton thought to himself. How was he going to get back in? His oxygen wasn’t going to last forever, and was going to be expended especially fast now that he was being pressed upon all sides from the weight of the sea.

On the other hand, Dalton looked away from the seawall into the ocean and saw a majestic sight, one that he had never seen before. Streaming rays of sunlight cut through azure waters and the surface of the water was a bright canopy laid out majestically high above him. The grey seawall was hundreds of feet tall, serving as Sanctuary’s defense against the merciless elements and the relentless rising waters.

Somehow a sense of peace came over Dalton for a moment, before he heard a muffled cry from the diver beside him, who pointed into the distant water. A large black shape was circling them, getting closer all the time, Dalton hoped against hope that it wasn’t what he thought it was.

But it was: A twenty-foot Mammoth Shark, a species grown grotesquely large from the lack of natural predators and the expansion of the oceans, charged towards the diving team with an open, tooth-filled maw. It bit off the entire upper half of one of the divers in a blood-soaked attack and swallowed that piece whole, oxygen tank and mask and all. The other divers quickly swam upwards to the surface of the sea

in an attempt to evade the beast, but it was too late: The shark was hungry, and continued to devour the scuba team before turning to Dalton with merciless eyes.

The Waterman picked up the welding torch from the floor of the platform and waited for the shark to come right up against him before letting loose with the torch and searing the nose and left eye of the shark just before the shark was able to bite him. Rebuffed, the shark quickly pulled away and swam into the distance.

With the welding tool in hand, Dalton rallied the surviving members of the scuba team and continued to repair the seawall, placing plate after plate against the hole and welding the outside of the break shut. Soon his oxygen marker began to beep and display a red indicator in his visor. He would’ve used the other divers’ oxygen or attempted to surface with their help, but the surface was still dozens of feet above.

Instead, he extended his leg from the platform and noticed that the flow of water near the remainder of the hole in the seawall was moving back into Compartment Eleven: This was his chance. He climbed over the platform and let the current of the water carry him back into the Compartment, being careful to curl himself into as small a shape as possible when he reached the hole.

The current deposited Dalton into a pool of water right in front of his shocked teammates, who had given him up for dead.

“Dalton! My brother, how’d you survive that?” Slim shouted, moving through the now waist-deep water to get Dalton standing on his feet. Rich and Yuri gave Dalton emphatic waves and whoops before redirecting their attention on the seawall. The hole was almost stopped up now: The Watermen put the finishing touches

on the breakage, applying a final surge shield to the part where Dalton swam out and in from. Another moment of hesitation and Dalton would have drowned in the ocean outside. The Deacon on duty waded over to check on him.

“Good work, man! Fujisamu wants to see you,” the Deacon said, clapping a gloved hand on Dalton’s shoulder and pointing to an observation deck built into the ceiling of the compartment that overlooked the seawall repair activities. Being in shock, Dalton didn’t remember much after that except the long ride up the tower that fed into the observation deck and Fujisamu’s flowery dinner invitation - literally, the man was always wearing floral shirts. But he did remember his concerned teammates gathering around him in the locker room after they had returned to Waterman Command and washed off the grime of the day, reminding him not to trust the Surface Dwellers.

“They only care about themselves, Dal,” Yuri advised in an uncharacteristically cautious tone as they put their helmets back into their blue lockers and hung their brown suits up to clean and dry in a chemical washer and dryer, “you should remember that.”

II. Greenhouse

Dalton was already used to what his mother looked like whenever he returned to their cramped two-person dorm at night. She was sitting listlessly in front of an entertainment console in her nightgown and unkempt curls, as she always did.

“How was your day?” she asked weakly as Dalton stepped out of a podshell into the middle of the dorm, hardly pulling her dark eyes away from the monitor. The console was playing some sort of reality show involving siblings who were timed in their collection of specimens

from deep sea diving. The podshell whisked away underground as Dalton dusted off and ironed a formal suit jacket and one pair of dress pants for the banquet.

“Fine.”

His mother returned her attention to the monitor, as the reality show siblings found themselves running out of oxygen. *How ironic*, Dalton scoffed.

The suit and pants were requisitioned from the Quartermaster, and he would have to return them later. The iron and ironing board he borrowed as well, everything arriving to his dorm unit in neat packages through the Turboshell transportation system. He requested a pink tie for the occasion: Fujisamu would appreciate that. Once he was satisfied that his outfit would pass muster with the owner of the Watermen operation and his Surface Dwelling family, he walked to the opposite end of the dorm, to a “window” that looked out into a tall cylindrical chamber around which other subterranean dorm units were assembled and their windows similarly positioned.

One time, he caught a glimpse of a pretty female neighbor, but tonight there was just an old man, out of sight, singing some Pre-War song that Dalton could faintly remember from his childhood. Dalton had never heard it again after entering Sanctuary - At least not until now. The man’s sad voice echoed through the chamber, singing something about country roads taking him home.

For his part Dalton opened a choose-your-own-adventure show on his console in silence, spending credits to dictate the actions of his character as it explored rugged wildernesses and dark dungeons. He called it quits for the night when his level 42 Templar was eaten alive by giant spiders after taking a wrong turn in an

underground cavern.

Tired from his ordeal during the day, Dalton changed into his nightclothes and climbed to the top bunk for bed. He applied his noise-cancellers over his ears and had the same dreams he always had lately about going through endless tunnels and pipes. By this point he knew every twist and turn, and was glad to have some control while in his dreams where he did not in real life. Yet he had no control over actually having the dreams themselves all the time, and they were getting quite tedious by now.

The day of the dinner with the Fujisamus were something of a blur to Dalton, though he did remember being put on a more relaxed schedule of drainage pump maintenance - after all, it would be a shame to lose a Waterman right before he was set to dine with the head of the company and his family. The Surface Dwellers dined late at nine, but Dalton was permitted to visit the Greenhouse first, which was a portion of the Surface under a long stretch of a pyramidal glass edifice that led up to the skyscrapers of the Financial District.

As always, “work” included multiple asinine seminars and group screencasts in auditorium-like Rec Units where the subterranean denizens of Sanctuary were shown the horrors of life outside the confines of the underground city. Tornadoes tearing through the American south. Redwood forests burning in California. Crops withering in the Midwest and entire coastal cities being swallowed by the ocean. Only Sanctuary was home, the ‘casts extolled, and the Corporations were ever ready to protect each and every one of its inhabitants.

Already immune to such overtures, jaded Grounders loudly debated the day’s labors over sweet and sour Supplex mixes while the screen-

casts played. A frazzled young lecturer tried to maintain order while giving a presentation on “the virtues of being patient in a fast-paced world,” followed by a Surface nurse describing for what seemed like the hundredth time the health checks necessary for podshell riding:

“And while the Turboshell Personalized Transportation Pods are completely safe, be sure to get regular checkups on your cardiovascular health and maintain adequate flexibility using these recommended exercises: Everybody up!”

Groans from the audience, but eventually everyone rose to the beat of a pre-recorded calisthenics cadence: “One-Two-Three-Four and stretch-Two-Three-Four and to the left now, to the right...”

When Dalton returned to his dorm to change, he found his mother was engrossed in a Japanese gambling game called Pachinko on the entertainment console, squandering her son’s hard-earned credits again. Mom had barely touched the Supplex cake assigned to her for the evening - not that the algae-based concoction was that good to begin with, but Dalton had grown used to it over the course of his time in Sanctuary. It provided all the necessary vitamins and nutrients for living underground without natural sunlight and came in a number of ever-changing flavors and consistencies to boot. Everyone despised cherry, yet it was Dalton’s favorite.

Dalton requisitioned a podshell to the Waterman Terminal, where he found other Watermen departing late after their day’s labors. The Waterman Terminal’s embarkment chamber had room for five man-tube segments, which could service a hundred or more podshells per minute if everyone moved quickly enough. They looked a little like streamlined black peapods or two rowing shells pressed together - hence their

name - or perhaps small submarines with pointed tops and bottoms.

The podshells scanned each of the riders' faces before admitting them into the confines of the personalized transportation unit through an automatic door. Then, they quickly whisked them away to either a dorm or a Rec Unit, depending on their Individual Habitation Schedules (IHS) determined by LanceCorp.

"Next waypoint, Greenhouse Terminal. Departing from Waterman Command with Special Approval from Fujisamu Corporation. Welcome aboard," the podshell announced in a digitally produced tone. It was the first time Dalton had ever heard a pronouncement for a ride to the Surface, and before he could feel nervous about the entire endeavor he walked into the podshell and was knocked unconscious by narco-meds, an antidote to motion sickness and claustrophobia as riders experienced high speeds and sickening turns in multiple directions and G-forces.

"Now arriving, Greenhouse Terminal."

Dalton opened his eyes to the sound of the sliding podshell door. He exited shakily and walked down steps he could barely perceive to a floor of pink marble. He soon perceived a tall hall around him, with floor to ceiling windows that curved outward to provide a panoramic view to visitors. At either end of the terminal arrival building were other cylindrical buildings laid side-by-side and connected by glass walkways, with increased man-tube capacity to prevent crowding. Behind him there were larger man-tubes in addition to the ones he arrived on, to accommodate the multi-person podshells that the Surface Dwellers owned and preferred.

Dalton advanced to a window and looked out onto the Greenhouse itself. The climate-controlled Greenhouse was a valley of two

miles or more bifurcated by a monorail system connecting the Surface Terminal to the Financial District and everything in between. Immediately beneath either side of the tram were stone walkways and parks with verdant green grass and lush trees from temperate forests. Behind the parks Dalton could see cafes, restaurants and shopping centers built into multi-story office complexes that rose up in tiers from the bottom of the valley, columns and facades in white.

Dalton walked down a spiral staircase to the transit level. A tram was waiting at the terminal station, white with cushioned red seating, some seats facing the front, some the rear, and others facing the side of the train. There were not many riders going back towards the Financial District at this hour, though more on trams running in the opposite direction. Some riders were wearing suits far better fitted than Dalton's getup, dark dresses or the dark jumpsuits that typified the Surface Dweller's uniform. Few, if any, gave Dalton a second glance.

Dalton decided to get off a few stations into the Greenhouse and disembarked down glass steps to the park level. The tram moved on and cut through a large fountain with what seemed to be a carefully choreographed spray of water on either side of the tracks. The climate-controlled air was cool and crisp, a departure from the perpetual moldy dampness of the dorms. Older Surface Dwellers dressed in traditional black garb, caped and fully covering their arms and legs, looked after children playing and running across the greens, while young couples spent their afternoons in the shade of the trees on blankets of colored cloth. Dalton had never seen trees this tall in Sanctuary before, although there were green spaces, owing to artificial sunlight, below ground. Up here, Grounders

were pruning, watering and cleaning the park grounds and the other tiers, maintaining a pristine environment for the Surface Dwellers.

Opting to take the stairs instead of the people-mover, he ventured upwards to the bar and cafe level of the Greenhouse. Well-dressed office workers congregated here, drinks in hand, standing or seated beneath red cloth awnings and around wicker chairs. Alcohol was strictly regulated and rationed below ground, but the sons and daughters of Sanctuary's original investors were exempt from such rules - They still owned the place, after all.

Dalton checked the menu of one of the restaurant-cafes. It had real food rather than Supplex mixes: Burgers and fries and roasted whole chicken but also dishes he had never seen before like "Eggs Benedict" and "Fish and Chips." They even had salad made from land vegetables rather than from seaweed or sourced from algae farms.

Dalton continued upward to the shoppe level on a people-mover, where he was greeted with a bewildering array of goods displayed behind glass. As the people-mover leveled out and he passed by the stores, he saw designer clothing and accessories, electronics such as minipads, headphones and miniphones, futuristic furniture, multi-seated podshells, and specialty foods from the equivalent of what used to be called supermarkets, but on the Surface was called something so fancy that even Dalton couldn't read it.

Though no prices were listed, Dalton could only imagine that purchasing these items was out of reach for most Grounders, not the least because the credit system below ground by which items could be requisitioned or purchased was separate from the cash and credit system above. At any rate, there hardly was any

room to store material possessions in the tiny dorms.

Finally, Dalton reached the top tier of the Greenhouse, the offices. Abstract sculptures and art adorned the entryways of the marble lobbies, some replete with miniature waterfalls. Dalton could see large, multi-colored mobiles hung from the ceilings while jades, sculptures and friezes from Asian cultures lined the hallways of the offices above. People were still working in the offices above, perhaps lawyers or accountants for one of the major corporations.

LanceCorp headquarters itself, on the other hand, occupied a single dark skyscraper in the Financial District, a building so massive that it was visible from where Dalton was along with the other Surface towers. It was in fact five towers coalesced into one, connected by steel and glass channels between them.

Another tower near the edge of the District featured a roof shaped like a lotus and housed the Ginza Japanese restaurant where dinner was to be held. Dalton decided he had seen enough of the Greenhouse and took the express people-mover back down to the tram waypoint. In some ways life on the Surface was like life before the days of Sanctuary Dalton could vaguely remember, just a lot more opulent.

It was getting dark by the time Dalton arrived at the Yoshiko tower, which like all the other towers in the Financial District was outside the glass enclosure of the Greenhouse and accessible through climate-controlled tunnels. The express people-mover brought Dalton from the District Terminal straight to the base of the tower, as he looked up and marveled at the size of the other buildings, all lit up and jutting out into the night sky. There were also man-tubes high above the surface that brought authorized podshells directly from the Greenhouse Termi-

nal straight into the District's towers, along with internal and external elevators coursing through the buildings themselves like glowing arteries.

As he approached the granite-lined lobby of the tower, a retinue of Fujisamu and building employees came forth to greet him, men in dark suits and women in colorful kimonos. They bowed and formed a channel for him to walk through towards a private lift, where Dalton found himself propelled upwards at speed with a stunning view of the ocean through the lift's glass exterior.

More women in kimonos greeted Dalton with smiles and Japanese salutations as he exited the lift, ushering him past a floor-to-ceiling shark tank into a lounge where two young women in qipaos were looking at their miniphones.

One of the women with curly brown hair, dimples and round face was pretty in a pink qipao, but it was the other slightly older one that caught Dalton's attention. She was tall and slim in a teal qipao with red accents, had her long black hair tied up with a jade hair comb, and was staring intently at her miniphone until she looked up and saw Dalton enter the room. She quickly scanned him with intense hazel eyes, which opened wide on her almond-shaped face as her lips curved into a smile and she quickly rose to greet him, designer purse in hand.

"You must be Dalton," she said with a voice as beautiful as she was and infused with the accents of both East and West. "I'm Sophia, and this is my sister, Raquel. Raquel, stop playing with your phone and say hello to Dalton Samson."

Raquel looked up after a moment and mustered a wave and a quick "Hi Dalton."

Sophia pursed her lips disapprovingly, and turned back to Dalton. "My parents are running a little late, but we can go ahead and get seated

without them. Do you enjoy Japanese cuisine?" she asked as they started walking down a hallway past wooden doors with delicately painted rice paper panels, gentle cranes and koi and fearsome tigers. Dalton noticed a tattoo of a flower of some sort around one of Sophia's ankles, both sisters wearing dangerously high heels that clicked along the wood panel floors.

"Sure, we used to go to the hibachi grills around Houston all the time," Dalton answered.

Sophia smiled. "We will have some grilled meat, but it will mainly be fish and seafood tonight - I hope you don't mind eating raw fish."

"I'm kidding. I've had sushi before, it's fine," Dalton answered with a laugh.

The kimono-wearing staff led the three to a banquet room with a view of the neighboring skyscrapers along with part of the ocean that lapped hungrily at the seawall, although not the same seawall that Dalton repaired just yesterday. There was seating for five and Dalton and the Fujisamu sisters sat closer to the doorway, waiting for the hosts to arrive.

Dalton perused some of the lacquer wall hangings and decorative plates and bowls, depicting trees and various scenes of what appeared to be traditional Japanese life. Raquel looked up from her miniphone long enough to see Dalton examining a wooden panel with gold-engraved characters that hung above the entryway.

"It's Chinese characters, but the Japanese use them in their calligraphy too," she offered helpfully, as men and women servers presented tea in a grey stone pot and proceeded to pour it into cups of delicate blue China. Dalton smiled at Raquel and took a cautious sip, being careful not to scald himself in the process. *So these are the Surface Dwellers*, he thought to himself. Yuri

and them told me to be careful around this lot. So far Sophia and Raquel seemed about the same as Grounders, maybe a little more focused on their phones and more polite than necessary. Without Fujisamu here, it was still too early to tell.

And arrive the Fujisamus did. The entire table stood at attention as Fujisamu's bodyguards formed a human shield in the hallway directly outside of the banquet room as Kenji and Gloria entered. Kenji Fujisamu immediately put two rugged hands on Dalton's own sturdy shoulders like he was greeting an old friend, before receiving kisses on his cheeks from his daughters and proceeding to the central spot at the table.

"Nice tie, Dalton," Fujisamu pointed out as he took his seat, the dragon embroidery on his silk jacket reflected in the glass of the window behind him. Gloria Fujisamu came up to shake Dalton's hand - "It's so nice to meet you, Dalton" - before daintily sitting down next to her husband. It was only then that the rest of the party was seated, the waitstaff rose from their deep bows and the door to the room closed.

"So, Dalton," Fujisamu began, caressing the close-cropped pharaonic beard on his square chin and pouring tea for himself and his wife, "how do you like the Surface?"

Dalton smiled. "It's very clean and dry, sir. I like it."

You visited the Greenhouse, I hope?"

"Yes, sir, it was very impressive."

"More exemplary employees like yourself must visit the Surface, shake things up a bit. Do you have what you need in the dorms?" Fujisamu asked.

"Yes, sir, everything we need," Dalton answered truthfully, although after seeing the way Surface Dwellers lived, he felt like he and his

mother needed a lot more than just what the Quartermasters could provide.

"LanceCorp controls the tubes and the dorms. If we had them instead we would offer more freedom of movement for those living below-ground, most certainly," Fujisamu said, signaling the waitstaff to bring on the food.

"LanceCorp - You'll be hearing that word a lot tonight, dear," Gloria said with disdain, "that's all he ever talks about." She wore her red hair high in a bun and was wearing a maroon evening gown to match. Dalton thought that in her youth, Gloria Fujisamu must have been a looker. That Gloria had somewhat faded now, but she was still attractive for an older lady. It looked as though Sophia had inherited her father's looks while Raquel had inherited her mother's.

"I'm sorry, my sweet. Please, talk about whatever you like" Fujisamu said quickly, as a cold, clear liquid was poured into ceramic cups for all seated at the table. Dalton gave his cup a sniff - it smelled like rice.

"Rice wine - *sake* - served cold to match the optimum temperature of the sushi and sashimi," Fujisamu offered. "A toast to you, Dalton," he raised his glass, "*gambai!*" The rest of the table followed. Raquel downed her cup in a practiced instant before returning to something on her miniphone, garnering a disapproving look from Sophia. The banquet began with a set of cold mackerel paired with a savory brown sauce, and Dalton suspected that more cold fish was to come.

Indeed, fileted pieces of raw fish were placed in front of him, red tuna and orange salmon sashimi. Dalton took a slice, and the delicious fish seemed to melt in his mouth. He hadn't had real food in a while, and he certainly had never eaten anything this fancy before. His

body and mind were reacting to the delicacies in ways he couldn't fully explain, though as a Waterman he knew, and had been trained to monitor, when such changes were occurring - and not to be too unduly influenced by them.

"Dalton, dear," Gloria began, "don't you find being a Waterman a bit dangerous? From what I heard you were injected into the sea and sucked back through the seawall again."

"And you were almost eaten by a shark," Raquel added.

"Well, there are dangers, yes, but I enjoy working with and in water," Dalton replied.

"But certainly you could do so on one of the fish or algae farms, or in the merchant marine?" Gloria continued.

"I suppose there is something to be said about the bond you build with your fellow Watermen and women," Dalton said.

"Yes, I hear the same said of oilmen on tankers and rigs - common danger brings men and women closer together," Sophia suggested.

"Ugh - Please, dear, don't compare the Watermen to those fossil fuel savages. Your father has spent his entire career trying to wean Sanctuary and the other cities off of non-renewable resources," Gloria interrupted with an errant wave of a bejeweled hand.

"And there is still work to do, for sure," Fujisamu agreed. "Indeed, some of our - ahem - competitors were and remain the strongest proponents of the fossil fuel economy."

"Isn't it ironic," said Sophia, "that the same people who profited off of fossil fuels turned around and profited off of the damage they did as well, by building Sanctuary, Talisman and Unity, and all the other new cities?"

"Yeah, it's like a tobacco company building hospitals to treat the same people they gave cancer to," added Dalton.

"Very good," said Fujisamu. A small salad was served: Sour vinaigrette, lettuce, cherry tomatoes, corn, and purple cabbage. After that was the charcoal-grilled steak and what appeared to be chicken skewers, though upon closer inspection they were mostly innards and fried bits of skin.

It would be impossible to get any of these foods below ground, but Dalton wasn't sure if he was enjoying the meal or not. Even though it tasted wonderful, he thought about all the Grounders who would only get Supplex for dinner tonight, and did not much appreciate his hosts at the thought of it.

"Being a Waterman is a noble and necessary profession, and we thank you for your service," Fujisamu said, "Sophia and Raquel, why don't you tell Dalton a little bit about yourselves, and what you do."

"I work part-time for the Corporation, trading in sustainable energy credits and managing our portfolio of renewable energy investments," Sophia began. "So, an office job, not quite as exciting as yours," she winked. Dalton wondered if she, too, walked through the marbled halls he saw earlier, high heels clicking and long hair flowing down her elegant back.

"Ah, but you left out the part about you attending Harvard's Ohio campus, the original one being quite lost to sea level rise," Gloria added.

"Yes, thank you mother," Sophia said in an exasperated tone. "I try to do yoga in my spare time - it's a type of exercise that works out your strength and flexibility," she added, seeing the look of confusion on Dalton's face.

"And Raquel here, her job is a little bit more artsy-fartsy, shall we say?" Fujisamu chided.

"Dad! I'm a curator of both virtual and

physical art exhibitions, mainly in the Greenhouse and FiDi but some below-ground as well. If you ever get a chance, you should go see *As I Live and Breathe*, it's on display in Rec Center 179 - I coordinated the visual stimulation robots and part of their audio synchronization, too."

"Our Raquel is also a talented artist herself, sculpture and woodworking, isn't that right? And she is quite the social butterfly, isn't she? That's how she gets *all* those famous people to come to her gallery parties" Gloria added, beaming. It wasn't hard to see that Mrs. Fujisamu had a favorite.

Woodworking, no wonder she knew about the panel, Dalton thought to himself. *But how is there any money in curation?* The Surface Dwellers certainly had a unique economy, although almost everything they did seemed to involve people with vast sums of money in the first place.

Now came a deluge of food: Sushi, lobster, clams, cooked fish, noodle soup. More sake was poured, and Dalton felt emboldened as a result of it.

"You know, there's a lot of stuff being sold in the shoppes on the Greenhouse," he began, "but more options means less choice. You need to buy the next thing, and the next thing, and then never be satisfied with what you have," he said, looking straight at Sophia, who stared intently back at him.

"That is what 'samu' in Fujisamu means - Mindfulness, Zen, an understanding of things as they are, not what you wish for them to be," Fujisamu commented solemnly. "Clearly we do not yet know the real Dalton. Please, tell us more about yourself," he finished.

"I work the dams and pipes and pumps with my mates, and then I go home. There isn't a lot going on in the life of a Waterman, but I

make do, because the credits are good. But I'm worried about my mother. She's been getting more and more depressed ever since we got to Sanctuary. Now she just watches shows all day on the entertainment console, sometimes skipping meals," said Dalton. The rest of the table looked at him with worried gazes. Fujisamu fingered his beard again.

Dalton continued: "She hardly ever says anything to me. I tell IHS but they tell me she needs to participate in their regular programming, that she's been missing classes and needs a routine. I can't get her any therapy or treatment or nothing. And the worst part is, if I go, who will take care of her?"

"Dalton, it's a terrible thought but you mustn't worry about that. Of course the Corporation will provide for your mother in that unfortunate and unlikely event," Sophia responded gently.

"This is why, now, more than ever, we need to support and be supported by our employees, especially those who live below the Surface," said Fujisamu. "Our plan is to unlock the power of the below-grounders, not forcibly contain it as LanceCorp does. Do you agree?" he asked.

With what exactly am I supposed to agree or not agree, Dalton thought?

"What I mean by that, Dalton, is that when the time comes, you will do your duty for the Corporation, not just for above-grounders or below-grounders, but for all of Sanctuary?" Fujisamu pressed.

"Yeah, of course, Dalton said, holding his pulsating temples, "I'm just saying that, hey, I can drink and chow down Supplex all day long. But there are a lot of people down there who are running out of time. And if they found out about how you guys live up here they would be pissed as shit - sorry."

“Yes. That is why they cannot know about the Surface. For now,” Fujisamu replied.

“So you agree with LanceCorp?” Dalton shot back.

“Dalton, exploiting refugees for profit is wrong. Keeping people confined without social or physical mobility is wrong. Having different classes of people within the same city is wrong. Profiting off natural disasters and war and climate change is wrong. No, I don’t agree with LanceCorp - We do not agree with LanceCorp,” Sophia said with conviction in her eyes, her face glowing with determination.

“There is only so much we can do, but we must do it,” Fujisamu said, Zen-like, as he rose from his seated position to survey the waters below through tall glass windows. For her part, Gloria sipped silently on some tea while Raquel stared into space. For a time, nothing was said – at least until the servers brought out dessert, and Dalton became quite involved in his green tea ice cream paired with gelatinous rice balls and sweet bean paste.

“Thank you for letting me know about your mother. I will do everything in my power to make sure she gets the care she needs,” Fujisamu promised.

Yeah, you may not be able to do anything, even if you mean it, Dalton thought.

“Well, with that, I believe I have taken a measure of the man, and found him to be of strong and courageous character,” Fujisamu said to no one in particular. “Now it is time for us old ones to retire and leave the younger generation to their own devices,” he said, holding his wife’s hand and smiling.

“Sophia, Raquel, won’t you show Mr. Samson here a good time? He certainly deserves it after what he’s just survived,” Fujisamu winked.

“Pyramind?” Raquel asked excitedly, look-

ing up from her phone, apparently referring to the pyramid-shaped building directly adjacent to Yoshika Tower.

Dalton looked out the window. From up here, he could spot lighted buoys around tidal turbines and wind farms even further out, ceaselessly flashing their lights to warn oncoming air and sea craft of their unwieldy presence: Fujisamu’s new energy equation at work. *Maybe they weren’t as bad as I thought,* Dalton surmised. They did seem to care about Grounders.

Mr. and Mrs. Fujisamu rose and the rest of the table rose with them, the feast now formally concluded. The big boss shook Dalton’s hand with his other hand again on the Waterman’s shoulder - “Good luck, Dalton,” he said, Gloria holding his hand with both of hers and smiling sadly before they both turned and disappeared down the hallway with bodyguards in tow.

III. Pyramind

“Party time!” Raquel blurted out, returning to the banquet room after a brief interval where the sisters changed out of their qipaos into dark cocktail dresses and let their hair down in some undisclosed location. The trio made their way down to the mezzanine level of the tower, crossed the glass skybridge towards the Pyramind Hotel and entered a lift immediately to the left of the hotel’s uncharacteristically small lobby.

Dalton, Sophia and Raquel rode the lift in silence, catching glimpses of each other on every side of its mirrored interior. The dull thud of a bass beat emerged above them, getting louder all the time. As if acting on instinct, Raquel reached into her designer purse for a small leather case.

“You want some?” she asked Dalton unassumingly, opening the case with perfectly mani-

cured fingernails. Inside was a collection of blue papers, neatly arranged and each about the size of a thumb. “BluEon,” she offered.

The thumping grew louder, and Dalton could hear a harmony and indistinct lyrics to the beat above, the sound threatening to engulf the lift entirely. Sophia licked an equally manicured index finger and stuck one of the papers on it, holding the BluEon up towards Dalton’s face.

“The music is loud up there,” she said, “this will help you hear better.”

Dalton knew that stims were illegal in Sanctuary, with possession and use punishable by death. But the Surface had its own rules, rules that were made by people with names like Fujisamu. He took the paper and placed it on his tongue, where it dissolved instantly with an acerbic bite.

Suddenly, the nearly deafening music retreated from the foreground of Dalton’s mind. A warm, oceanic feeling slowly washed over him, as the edges of his consciousness and then the core of his being began pulsating in time to the rhythm of the club. He felt time itself slow, and when he turned to look at himself in the mirror he was surprised to see that his eyes were glowing a piercing electric blue.

The sisters looked at him and at each other with amused faces and equally glowing eyes, the three swaying together in time and one with the music. The lift stopped. As the doors opened, Sophia reached out to hold Dalton’s hand, as if the steady him in uncharted waters. They walked through a wall of sound and light into a luscious, multi-story garden. Gnarled vines crept up the walls and giant prehistoric ferns created a canopy of vegetation. Cool, moist air filled the club, along with the fragrance of vibrant tropical flowers whose names Dalton could only

guess and never know.

“The Inner Jungle,” Sophia whispered to Dalton in a voice somehow audible in the din of the club. “It’s animal night.”

Sure enough, the dance floor was lined with cages filled with exotic animals, from snow leopards to jaguars and tigers, strangely subdued and watching over throngs of revelers. A sleek bar lined with round white fluorescent lights snaked through the dance floor and played host to caged animals as well: Ringtail lemurs, golden monkeys and green parakeets. *They must be drugged up*, thought Dalton. *So am I.*

Before tonight, Dalton had believed these plant and animal species to be all but extinct, viewable only on laser discs like those his mother was fond of perusing in her spare time, as she relived the life and death struggles of cheetahs and wildebeest on the African savanna or the cacophonous birdsong of the Amazon rainforest. But here they were, compiled in one location for the pleasure of the Surface Dwellers.

Even more than the animals, though, Dalton was suddenly aware of this being the first time he had ever held hands like this with a woman his age. Sanctuary’s strict courtship rules all but forbade the possibility of physical inter-gender contact besides what was necessary during the course of work. This was especially the case for young Watermen, whose occupation was deemed too hazardous to sustain a relationship. Feeling self-conscious about the fact that Sophia was watching him intently, soaking up his every reaction, Dalton tried to play off her attention: “The animals must love being here,” he quipped.

“They’re not the only ones living in a cage,” Sophia replied with a sad smile.

They made their way to the bar and found a seat next to Raquel, who was already nursing a

drink.

“Sanctuary Sling?” she asked, holding up a highball of reddish liquid, garnished with a strange greyish-white fruit dotted with seeds and covered in red skin. “It’s like a Singapore Sling, but made with vodka and dragonfruit,” Raquel said, holding up the glass for Dalton to see.

“Wait, no,” she added excitedly, “there’s three of us, so we have to do the Three Wise Men - and you have to try the gas chamber!” she said, pointing at Dalton. Dalton wasn’t sure if it was the stims, but he wasn’t following a word of what Raquel was saying. He couldn’t focus much more than how the music and Sophia’s hand in his own were combining to make his present state one of the grandest moments he had ever experienced.

“Hell, why not a drink, then?” He responded, emboldened.” Raquel flagged down a bartender sporting a bowtie, platinum hair and goatee, and the man promptly returned with two additional Sanctuary Slings, and three vials: Green, yellow and red. He also placed a glass of clear liquid, a straw and a lighter on the bar: Three Wise Men and a gas chamber.

Now Dalton could see that the Three Wise Men were the color of the old traffic lights, with each successive shot cautioning against poorer decision-making and greater inebriation. Raquel handed the green vial to Dalton, yellow to Sophia and kept the red to herself.

“You go first!” she shouted with glee.

Dalton downed the first wise - or not so wise - man and the sisters followed suit, the liquid sweet at first but followed by a bitter aftertaste. More warmth spread from Dalton’s esophagus to his chest and stomach, and he could hardly taste the alcohol. The music in the club seemed to come from everywhere and

nowhere at once as Dalton sipped at his Sling as a chaser, deliciously sour and infused with sweet fruit juices.

The Ringtail lemurs climbed lackadaisically about their cages, leering at Dalton with their over-sized eyes. But they weren’t the only animals at the bar: Dalton had to do a double-take when he saw two furry beasts passionately intertwined a few seats down from where he and the sisters were sitting. Looking closer, Dalton could see that the two figures had human faces and hands, but animal torsos and legs: One of a lion, the other of a zebra.

Now Dalton was worried: *This must be the stims*, he thought, turning to check if Sophia, too, had morphed into some sort of half-hyena, half-human centaur. But she just smiled her calm, seen-it-all smile and leaned over to explain: “They’re furrries,” she said, in between sips of her drink, “temporary genetic modifications combine the human genome with animal features. Heightened senses and all that. Highly arousing - or so they say,” she rolled her eyes.

They watched with both fascination and discomfort as more bar patrons dressed in robes and slippers injected themselves with hypodermic needles filled with a dark green liquid. Right on cue, fur and animal hair began sprouting around their heads and arms, with the rest of their bodies rearranging into animal parts, all the way from hind legs to hooves and claws.

“They’re really letting this place go, allowing people to fur up like that in public,” said Sophia. “How about we get away from this bar?”

“Wait, you still have to try the gas chamber!” exclaimed Raquel. Sophia shot her little sister a look, to which Raquel sheepishly responded: “Well, maybe I can take the shot, and you can inhale?” Dalton looked incredulous for

a moment, prompting Raquel to add: “Basically you light the Sambuca on fire and then you breathe in the fumes.”

“Oh yes, I’m keen to progress,” Dalton blurted out.

Progress? What the hell does that mean?

Raquel giggled: “Ok, up to you!” She summoned the platinum bartender, who proceeded to expertly tip the glass of Sambuca to one side and light the liquid on fire. He then covered the glass with another, slightly larger cup until the fire was extinguished, and placed the cup face down on the bar. He handed the straw to Dalton and motioned for him to come close to the cup. “Breathe!” he commanded as he raised the glass from the bar slightly.

Dalton stuck the straw under the glass and inhaled deeply. This was too much for him as he instantly started choking and coughing violently, feeling a concurrent rush to the head that only amplified his existing state of inebriation. Fortunately, neither Raquel nor Sophia seemed to have noticed, as Raquel had turned to greet some friends who had just arrived at the bar with high-pitched screeches. Sophia quickly grabbed Dalton’s hand to lead him away from the excitable young girls: “Let’s dance,” she said, and led him away.

The dance floor was packed and sweaty. Many svelte club goers at this hour had opted for revealing cocktail dresses with plunging necklines and high skirts, matched with gaudy heels. Men with chiseled features sported skin-tight shirts under their obligatory blazers with light trim, along with spotless white pants and boat shoes. But Sophia circumnavigated all that and went straight for a spiral staircase at one end of the bar, where another massive bouncer with a shaved head kept silent watch. Within an

instant he recognized the Fujisamu sister, and pulled back a velvet rope to let the pair up the bronze metal stairs.

As he climbed, Dalton had a panoramic view of the club, from the bar lined with imported alcohol, to a DJ decked out in sunglasses and blue turtleneck sweater spinning tunes at a turntable and all the furry and non-furry denizens of the club making out in between. Tropical vines and hibiscus flowers climbed up the caged sides of the stairwell, leading Sophia and Dalton to another smaller bar and dance floor, this one much less occupied than the first. A well-dressed couple lounging at the bar stared quizzically at Dalton for just a moment before resuming their quiet conversation, but the sparse groups of partiers on this dance floor were oblivious to Sophia and Dalton’s arrival.

The two turned to face each other with hands interlaced, slowly swaying to the rhythm of the music, which Dalton now heard clearly for the first time:

Rising up

Winding down

Everything in its place

Within and without

It felt very natural for Dalton to take a step closer to Sophia and place one hand on her waist.

Pick me up

Pull me down

Turn around

I am free with you

Sophia reciprocated by placing her arm around Dalton’s rugged neck, pulling the two

closer together. Dalton moved his hand to the small of Sophia's back, and she hugged him tighter.

I am free with you

Feel so free with you

They danced like this for what to Dalton felt like both an eternity, and not very long at all. The warmth from Sophia's chest hot against his own, her small breasts pressed closely against him. They rarely made eye contact, though, with Sophia glancing around from time to time, presumably to check if there was anyone she knew in the lounge.

After a while, she looked up into Dalton's dark eyes:

"When's the last time you've been outside?" she asked him, almost concerned.

"Outside? You mean Surface outside?" Dalton had just been through the harrowing experience of being outside Sanctuary while

submerged underwater, an experience he did not want to repeat, but this was different. "It's been years," Dalton admitted.

"The ocean breeze is nice this time of year," Sophia replied, "shall we?"

They walked back to the staircase and ascended yet again, this time arriving at a revolving door embedded in a wall of glass. Dalton spotted a pool deck and lounge chairs, along with yet another bar, though the space seemed to be devoid of activity. Sophia produced a keycard and activated the revolving door, which only had room enough for two people in each of its two compartments. As they crossed through the door the cool, controlled air of the club gave way to a muggy atmosphere with notes of the sea. Breeze from the water brought hints of ocean spray, lightening up the otherwise oppressive humidity.

They were on the surface - the real surface - at last. ❖

END TRANSMISSION