



Corner Bar Magazine

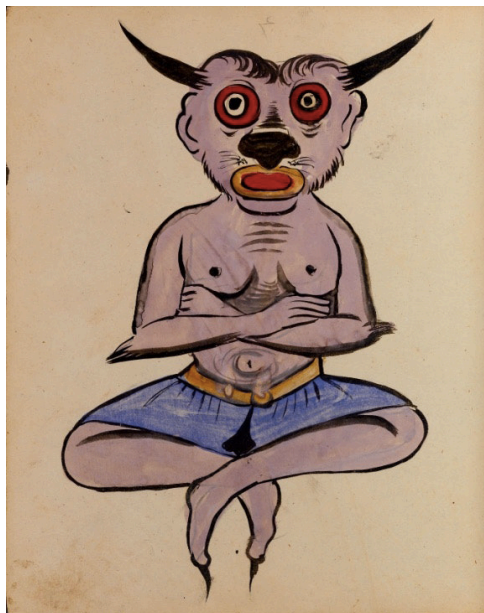
Volume 10 Number 3

Page 1 – FREE KAREN REED by Cate Gallivan. Ms Gallivan was born in Massachusetts in the late 20th Century. After formal studies in film scoring, classical piano, and piano technology, she received her MFA in creative writing in 2019. Through both sound and the written word, she seeks to tell stories. Her works have been published in literary magazines such as the *Pitkin Review*, *Zig Zag Lit Mag*, and *Bewildering Stories*.

Page 9 – MOST LAMENTABLE COMEDY by N. V. Vessel. N. V. Vessel is from the American Southwest and is currently an unpublished writer. His stories deal with elements of the unseen and unappreciated in life (and afterlife).

Page 16 – CHRIS AND OPIE by Kim Hayes. Kim lives and works in Chicago, IL She works for the Chicago Cubs and has been writing fiction and CNF for almost two years. Some of her stories have recently appeared in *Roi Faineant*, *Nifty Lit*, *Pulp Lit* and *Epater*.

Page 18 – DESCENT (Part 2) 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.



“FREE KAREN REED”

by CATE GALLIVAN

“You’ve been selected to serve your planet!”

Damn, interstellar commerce duty. He could have sworn he just did it, but when he found the postcard from six months ago, there was a note in his own handwriting: DEFERRED (Suckers).

Huh, he was the sucker now. Six months on the dot—nothing else in government worked that well. If he was lucky, he’d schlep all the way in and wouldn’t be selected. That would automatically remove him from the roster for the next three years, plus he’d get seven hundred credits, just in time for the new GalaxyBoy5 release.

His friends were going to be so jealous. Finally, he’d have something before everyone else, yeah, he’d be the cool one that everyone wanted to hang out with.

He arrived the next morning and sat in the cold room with strangers. Just when they should all have been released and thanked for their willingness to serve, a bailiff stuck his head in and called out, “Turtle Boy and Donna.”

Sigh.

He raised his hand and called out, “Here,” in a squeaky voice. A woman across the room was already standing.

“The rest of you: thank you for your willingness to help Sagan stay commercially viable. You will automatically be exempt from duty for the next three years.” The bailiff frowned at Turtle

Boy and the woman. “Let’s go. This way.”

He and the woman were led down a dark hallway and right out into a launch hanger. The officer looked down at a clipboard.

“Right. Turtle Boy and Donna. You’re to go to...Sol Earth, ancestor planet. Brush up on your Late Capitalist American and have their leader sign out all the koalas—we need them for PlanetSaganBnB tchotchkes.”

Donna was middle aged, solid and hulking, yet moved like a 13-year-old gymnast. She sprung up onto the ramp and strode confidently into the nav pit, sitting herself down at the control panel. Turtle Boy shuffled behind, looking back one more time in case this was all a mistake. The man was checking items off on a list, having already forgotten them.

“K,” she brayed cheerfully when he at last sat down in the copilot seat, “strap in, the sooner we get these things, the sooner we’ll be back. I’m a new grandmother, I’m not looking to take too long—my daughter needs some pointers.”

“I was hoping to be back before GalaxyBoy5 gets released. These credits are going to put me first in line.”

“Oh, one of those gamers, huh? Alright, we can work together and get this done. The last time I got called, I was sent to Sol Pluto for ice chips for some gala event thing. At least it was uninhabited—quick drop and grab. This planet has people on it, so more delicate.”

“Well, how many of them are there? We’ll talk to their leader and get these things signed over pretty quick, right?”

Donna said nothing as she punched at the control panel for a solid minute. Then she swiveled in her chair and faced him full on. Her black eyes were close together and seemed to bore right into him. “You ever do interstellar commerce duty before?”

“Ah, no.”

“It can get complicated. Why don’t you watch some of the prep modules on the way.” It wasn’t a question.

He made it through ancient history, flora and fauna, and half of Late Capitalist vernacular by the time they skittered to a halt.

“Dammit,” Donna said under her breath. “I was trying to hit that Area 51 patch in the desert. At least we’re on land. This engine is a little twitchy—needs to regenerate before we go. So that means no hopping around on Earth—we’ll find the koalas using Earth transportation. The engine will have grown back enough by then to get us out of orbit.”

“Ah, ok,” Turtle Boy said. Everything looked bland here—trees, some narrow road, a few scattered houses. He wondered where they kept the koalas.

Donna folded the ship into a small cube and stashed it in an alley behind a 7-Eleven.

“There,” she said, smacking her hands together as though she had been toiling all day in a blue hydrangea field. “Look,” she pointed off in the distance. He could just make out a lot full of their transportation vehicles. “You watched that driving module, right? Go over there and buy a car, we’ll use that to get around.”

His pulse quickened. Driving here didn’t look like gravity scooting back home. In the

modules, the drivers’ eyes were all over the place—the car wasn’t connected to their optical nerves, and there was no flat panel to punch in coordinates.

“What are you going to do?” He couldn’t keep the panic out of his voice.

“Since this is your first time, you won’t be used to talking to natives. Cars are easy, so I’ll do the more advanced food and shelter work. I’ll drop the location in your dock.”

He took a breath and headed to the lot. Now that he looked at the cars, they seemed a bit like velopods. He’d pretend he was playing Outer Station Distress Call. He rewatched the commerce module as he walked.

“Wow, you must be hot blooded! Out here with no coat. How can I help you today?” A salesman was suddenly at his side.

Turtle Boy blinked the program closed and gulped. Hot blooded? Of course he was warm blooded—all humans were mammals. Did they not know that themselves? How backwards were they? “Looking for the cheapest car you’ve got that will get me to the center.” Not bad—even Donna would have been impressed.

“What’s that, an English accent? Hmmm, well, cheap? I ask you to consider, there’s cheap-”

Maybe he hadn’t said all the words correctly. It was one thing to watch all the modules on the way, and another thing to say them to an actual human.

“Cheap car, to center.” Maybe simpler and slower was the way to go.

“I...oh, right. Well, our man Donny has rebuilt a 1981 Chrysler K-car, that will definitely get you where you’re going. All new pistons, new keyless entry, smooth-”

He started at the name. “I’ll take it. Now.” K-car—this mission was going faster than he

thought.

“Oh! Let me show you to it and you can have a seat while I get the paperwork started.”

It was a red, rusted at the edges. The salesman booped the locks, and Turtle Boy slid in.

“Oh! Well, yes, making sure the back seats are comfortable is a step most drivers don’t take. These are newly upholstered, stain resistant-”

“I’ll take it. Right away.” He handed over one of the Earth cards from the ship.

The salesman’s eyes widened. “Yes, sir! Have a seat behind the steering wheel and I’ll be back with the plates.”

It had gone dark, and the thing jittered and jumped out of the parking lot, but then he was on the street, getting used to driving while he waited for the new coordinates to pop up in his dock. Donna should have secured shelter by now. Eventually—he didn’t know how long, that was another module—it would get light again and he could locate these animals, get back—

A light like a sun was shining into the back of his brain, along with a horrific blaring noise that rattled his collarbones. He instinctively wrenched the wheel and ended up on a rough shoulder of the road. He looked in the mirror and watched a truck disappear around a bend. He took a breath. Apparently, it mattered what side of the road you drove on. He pulled into the opposite side and continued on, but his hands were shaking. He saw a narrow building with a dimly lit sign: The Midway and pulled in, parking next to the one other car. Turtle Boy saw that it, too was a K-car. This must be where the koalas were kept.

“Ok, Turtle Boy,” he said to himself before he got out. “I can’t wait for Donna to do everything. Make the deal, get the koalas. Then drive back to the ship and tell Donna that we can

wrap this up in the light. GalaxyBoy5, party at my house, friends and who know? Maybe even a girlfriend from all of this.”

He nodded and walked confidently into the bar.

It was so dim inside that he stood of the entrance, waiting for his eyes to adjust. The place was empty, except for one woman sitting at the bar. The rest of the small room was in shadow. Turtle Boy watched in fascination. Her clothes wrapped her like a spacewalk mechanic’s: skin-tight, no excess material to get caught in a guide rope or O2 connector. Not that she needed that here. Still, she had nice curves. Her hair was a remarkable shade of platinum, like a yellow sun at noon. Her nails were long—Turtle Boy wondered if these were vestigial appendages. If so, she had embraced them with a bright green paint. Unless that’s just how they grew. He had a flash of her coming to his party.

“What’s with these dinky glasses? Why don’t you dump out the olives from that super-saver jar and make my gimlet in that?” She was careening around on the stool and seemed like she was going to fall but righted herself at the last moment.

The bartender shrugged, dumped the olives out into a tray, shot a few squirts of soda water into the jar and swished it around a few times. Then he poured a hefty blast of vodka into the jar, little bit of lime juice, then plopped a desiccated lime wedge on top and slid it to her. “Here you go, Karen.”

“Never met anyone nice in here. You know anyone nice?”

Turtle Boy thought maybe she was asking him, but she didn’t look his way, just sort of projected her chin down to the edge of the bar. The bartender didn’t respond either.

“Would love to meet some gentleman.

Honest, not just looking to get lucky, but really wanted to hear what I have to say. Because I know important things, and I notice things. I got a K-car, it's still running, I take really good care of it."

Somehow during that ramble, she had downed the gimlet and was waving the jar toward the bartender.

"Nother one. Keep the lime wedge that's in there now, I don't care."

The mention of the K-car propelled him forward. Turtle Boy sat in the stool next to her.

"Huh? What's your name?" Karen lurched.

"I'm Turtle Boy. I'm looking for the leader of all the humans."

"What?" Karen squawked. She let out a bray, tipping her head back to guffaw at the ceiling. Then she turned to him, and her vodka breath slapped his face like a solar flare.

"What's your real name?"

"Turtle Boy."

She burst into another round of laughter and this time the bartender joined in. Turtle Boy had a flash of being at the last gaming convention. His friends were beating him at GalaxyBoy4. A crowd had gathered to jeer. He felt humiliated but couldn't show it.

"Where are the koalas? Do you keep them in the back?"

"Koala-wha? Get a load of this guy!"

"My friend and I"

"All that and he has a girlfriend now, too? Can you believe this?" Karen faced him again and then turned to the bartender, which really did cause her to fall onto the floor this time.

"Alright, alright, Karen. That's enough now." The bartender spoke as though he were reading lines in some community play. "I can't



serve you anymore tonight—might make you unsafe to drive yourself home. Come back tomorrow.”

“Jess wanna to meet someone gonna use the-facilities-don’t-lock-up-yet.”

“Closing, pal,” the bartender said with a nod to Turtle Boy. “Thanks for the laugh.”

Turtle Boy’s face was hot with humiliation. Donna said he might not know how to talk to ancestor humans, but she didn’t say they were such jerks. He walked out and got into the car, calming his breathing. He checked the dock—no address yet. Maybe it wasn’t going so well for Donna, either.

The door opened and Karen fell in. Turtle Boy was going to say something, but he realized he was in the wrong seat to drive. Karen must have mistaken his car for her own. She turned the engine over and screeched out of the parking lot. He fell onto the backseat floor and rolled onto a crumpled pack of cigarettes. Correction, he thought, I mistook her car for mine.

Lights again, but this time coming from behind them. And red and blue, not white.

“Ahh, Jeez,” Karen burped. She jerked over to the side of the road, stopped the car and rolled the window down.

“Any idea why I stopped you?” A figure in blue crouched down at the window.

“Looking for directions?” Karen slurred, ending in a giggle.

“I’m going to need you to step out of the car, please.”

“Oh, alright, I don’t mind, officer,” Karen said, grabbing her purse and slinging it over her shoulder.

Turtle Boy sunk deeper into the shadows of the back seat. He could help her; tell this man it was all a mistake—a misunderstanding around the car. Yes, he would reason with this human

and Karen would look at him with admiration. She’d find him handsome. A little quirky asking about koalas, but that was endearing now. She’d want to get to know him.

His hand was on the door handle when a new sound caught his attention.

The officer was laughing. No, not laughing. Giggling. And very grabby—at first, he asked her to walk in a straight line, but now his hands were on her hips and he was guiding her.

Turtle Boy slunk back and felt burning jealousy in his stomach. He could murder this “officer” and then Karen would need consoling. He put his hand back on the door handle when his dock buzzed. He blinked to pull it up.

“Turtle Boy, where are you? I’ve found a place,” a map popped up with a pulsing red dot, “meet me here—I’ve done some research, we need to make adjustments.” He sighed and slunk out the opposite door, away from the headlights and flirting.

“Well, corporate legal got it wrong. We learned Late Capitalist American when we really should have been learning Late Cap Australian. There are no koalas on this piece of land, they’re on the other side of Sol Earth. We’ll have to take the ship, which means waiting for the engine to regrow.”

Karen’s face flashed in his mind. “What do we do in the meantime?”

“We keep ourselves occupied. You write all the blog reports of this mission and we’ll send them back when we can use the ship again. I’ve hacked into their primitive wave system, “Internet” they call it, and set up the blog space for you. When you’re done with the reports, you can run a Turtle Boy Blog. Write about innocuous Sol things—but remember, these ancients haven’t been anywhere, so no useful information, no facts, nothing that will lead them to the

rest of the galaxy.”

“So don’t be honest?”

“Exactly. I’ve been around their Internet—they love reading about themselves. Give them silly facts and recipes, lists of things—lists are very popular.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I have a meeting at noon with a graphic designer. I’ll take care of all the blog merch.”

5 Facts About Turtles

1. Is it a turtle or a tortoise? Look at the feet: only turtles have webbed feet!

2. Turtles are reptiles

3. Turtles love to travel

4. Turtles love to play games

5. Turtles are ancient

Click on the link to visit our merch page—get your own snappy turtle t-shirt!

He thought of Karen all the time. He woke up and tried to imagine what she was doing, what she was wearing. He went to the Midway, but only to the parking lot, then followed her home.

The officer was at Karen’s. It looked like he had a key to the place—the light was on when Karen pulled up. It wasn’t fair that his friend Bison had enough credits to buy the latest game and he didn’t. It wasn’t fair that Bison had girlfriends, and he didn’t. He couldn’t even get an ancient to date him. Not fair—and not only not fair, though. Not right.

5 Reasons Bison might not be worth saving

1. Bison grow over 6’ tall and 11’ long—that’s a large mammal to try to rehabilitate

2. Bison run faster than horses, but can’t be ridden in races

3. Both male and female bison grow horns—

that’s dangerous

4. Wild bison live for about 25 years—that’s a long time

5. Bison can “plow snow” with their heads
Click on the link to get a handsome Turtle Boy t-shirt today!

Turtle Boy watched Karen’s K-car was swerving all over the road. White stuff was everywhere, even falling from the sky. “Snow” they called it. He kept a safe distance. If she crashed, he’d be first on the scene and carry her off.

Red brake lights came on and her car slid to a halt. Turtle Boy pulled over and turned off his headlights. The officer came out of the car—he had been the one driving, and Karen leapt out from the other side. Then they were right in the middle of the road, yelling at each other. Turtle Boy rolled down his window so he could hear.

“You like it as much as I do!” She was slurping.

“I know, I know, but we can’t keep this up, honey. The guys at the station let us off last time, but word is out. I gotta clean it up.”

“Fine, then. Leave me. It’s always the same with you guys. You just wanna have your fun and leave me like all the others.”

“Karen, don’t be like that. I just think we should...I don’t know, maybe stay in sometimes and party at home.”

“Oh, who’s home? I’ve never even been to your place.”

“We can go there now! Let’s just find a pay phone and I’ll call Sully for a ride, he can—”

She was standing next to him now, winding her arm back—the one with the purse hanging on it, and then she clocked him with her bag. He dropped like a sack of potatoes. She slid the bottle out of the bag, took a long swig, and shoved it back in place. Then she got into the

car and screeched off.

The officer lay on the ground without moving. Snow fell on the trees, on the scrappy undergrowth lining the road. On him. Turtle Boy was still in his car with the engine running. The lights from Karen's car disappeared in the distance.

The officer stirred. He pushed himself up to a standing position and teetered in place. Turtle Boy pulled out, turned the headlights on and drove around him. As he passed, the officer looked at the car and called out in a no-nonsense professional voice.

"Halt!"

Turtle Boy had stopped before he even realized he had done so. He watched the officer in his rear-view mirror, brushing snow off his sleeves, shaking his head a little. Walking toward the car.

It was instinct. It was rage. It was all-consuming jealousy. It was 10,000 hours of highly developed GalaxyBoy4 reflexes. He put the K in reverse and backed into the officer at a pretty good clip, knocking him into a snowbank. That would give him a good headache in the morning.

Then he, too, drove off.

The snow continued to fall.

Winter Recipe #1

Snowplow

.5-ounce Creme de Cacao

1 ounce coconut rum

-dump that in a glass

make 1 envelope Swiss Miss according to

directions.

-dump in the alcohol

-top with whipped cream

-sprinkle cinnamon or cocoa powder on top

Click on the link to read more recipes and share

your favorites!

After the blog post, he hacked into the phone network. Her line lit up.

"Sharon? Are you awake?"

Her voice was so clear it was like she was talking into his ear. He liked that.

"Huh? Karen? What's going on?" The voice was sleep logged and confused.

"I'm worried about Kyle. We had a fight."

"Where is he now?"

"We were driving. He got out of the car. I'm worried he mighta got hit by a snowplow."

"I'll be right over. We'll look for him together."

Turtle Boy watched as they got back to the spot. The police were there, an ambulance was there, crime tape was fluttering. He rolled his window down and listened.

"Which one of you is Karen Reed?" An officer asked the women.

Karen stepped forward.

"You are under arrest for the murder of Officer Kyle McPatrick."

She was cuffed and hauled away.

Murder? He hadn't hit the officer that hard. Turtle Boy was going to follow them and sort it all out, but his dock lit up. Donna was looking for him. He turned around and met her in the alley behind 7-Eleven.

Donna was wearing a Turtle Boy t-shirt and tapping her foot in impatience. "Here," she handed him a mass of green branches. "They eat this eucalyptus stuff—that should be enough to for the journey back."

"But how did you—"

"I stole them from a koala exhibit at the Capron Park Zoo, then tapped a florist for their food. We'll just say their numbers are down and we got all the available ones."

He stumbled up the ramp, the branches blocking his vision. Two koalas were in his copilot seat, and two were sniffing at the growth bricks next to the engine. One more was curled up on the floor. Turtle Boy hoped it was sleeping. He went back outside.

"The engine's still a little undercooked, Ideally, I'd give it one more day, but I don't think those animals will keep quiet that long. I say we get out of here and coast to the asteroid belt while the engine updates."

"Look, Donna, thank you for all your help and advice. I'm not going back with you."

Her mouth hung open.

"I can't leave Karen. She's been wrongly accused of murdering her boyfriend. It's not right."

"Karen? Karen Reed? That's a real person? I thought it was a character you developed to keep the blog going. All those posts about her hair—I gotta tell you, Turtle Boy, now it seems a little creepy."

"There's been a misunderstanding and I might be the only one who can fix it."

"Misunderstanding?" Donna took a breath. "Look, Turtle Boy, there isn't much understanding here. I heard a rumor that this might actually be THE ancestor planet, but I doubt it. These fools can't get out of their own way, never mind go interstellar and colonize eight galaxies. Sol missions are few and far between, who knows how long you'll be stuck here if you don't come back with me."

"I know all that...I just, I just can't leave her."

A new understanding softened Donna's eye. "Turtle Boy, I've read the comments on your posts—I don't think she knows you exist. I don't mean to be cruel, but c'mon, she was pretty hung up on that police officer. It must have

been a crime of passion."

"I," he swallowed. Donna had a way of seeing the truth. And yeah, it was a crime of passion. "I'm staying."

Free Karen Reed

Hey, there's no way that Karen Reed ran over her boyfriend—she loved the guy. Yeah, they might have argued and whatnot, but who doesn't in a relationship? The police want you to blame her for leaving him on the side of the road, but get the facts—they argued, she drove off and left him on the side of the road, sure, but he was alive at that point. The conversation she had with her best friend Sharon that night, where she worries that he might have been hit by a snowplow is now inadmissible in court. Why is that? Because the DPW is in cahoots with the police? Is it because the streets actually were plowed that night? And her smashed taillight—why was there a cruiser at her house at 4am? Things just don't add up. This Turtle Boy is not resting until Karen Reed is freed.

Click on the link to make a donation to the FreeKarenReed fund. Every credit counts. ❖

“MOST LAMENTABLE COMEDY”

by N.V. VESSEL

“And this is your own piece?” The director yawned and raised his glasses to read the man’s application. The crowds that often lingered in the capital’s square had all migrated to the bazaar to prepare for the Harvest Night Festival. For once, the Glassdyn amphitheater was reasonably silent. The only people in attendance were the groundlings and critics who were paid to be a part of the audience. “An original?”

“Quite original, you’ll find!” the auditioner said with a sweeping flourish of his palm. “Quite classical, truly traditional, whilst being innovative, though that goes without saying.” The man was tall and concerningly thin. His clothing looked stylish, but a closer look revealed several tears in them. His ears had the subtlest points at the tips. His skin had a light green hue that in the right light reminded one of summer’s fresh grass. In the wrong light it looked more like a sickly pallor.

“It’s unorthodox,” the playmaster said. “We tend to specifically select our pieces to what we think will cater to King Fulov’s taste. Usually bawdy comedies and flattering tributes. We are the *Royal Players* after all.”

“Well, true art makes its quality apparent, my dearest master of plays! True art is not made to order, as I imagine you well know! No, no. This piece is so subtly masterful, so brimming with glorious humility that it will teach the king what to love. If it fails, then the king would reveal himself as a simple—”

The playmaster interrupted by clearing his throat. It turned into a sincere coughing fit and then a series of phlegmatic discharges.

“Fine, fine. It’s just an audition for a minor player position, I suppose. Do your original piece.”

“Ah, good master of the arts, you shall be greatly pleased to be so greatly mistaken, for I am no mere minor player. Indeed! Vullgaire is an investment! And I will only bring greater and greater success to the Royal Players as the months turn to years and minor parts grow into tour-de-force leading roles!”

“Orchid Vullgaire... that’s right. Wait...” The playmaster adjusted his glasses again before rereading the name. He looked up to his auditioner again. “Orchid’s a flower-name. You’re Elvish?”

“Yes, that’s right, well, partly, at least. On my father’s side,” Vullgaire said. He was a bit surprised the playmaster hadn’t noticed his green skin or ears yet, until he noticed him squinting to see him through his thick glasses. “Though, I think you’ll find that Vullgaire works beautifully as a mononym. I think it gives an air of—”

“Well, that’s good, Orchid!” The director said with sudden gusto. “There are quite a few elf roles, villains mostly. Oh, I hope that doesn’t offend you! It’s just ever since Gladiolus’s Rebels slowed Fulov’s trade—”

"I know of Gladiolus," Vullgaire said flatly. "It took me a month to be allowed in the city because of that man."

"Ah, well, it sounds like you don't care for him, that's good. Anyways, it'll be nice to have an actor who can speak Elvish. Might open up our options, give our characters a bit more authenticity."

"Ah, well, yes, of course, right," Vullgaire gave a cough that was itself a bit of theatre. "I'm afraid I'm actually still in the midst of researching the mysteries of that tongue, myself."

"You don't speak Elvish?"

"False! Untrue! I can speak it quite beautifully, sir, given the time to memorize the vowel and consonant noises assigned to each flowing line. It's more the journey of *comprehending* that I still find myself on."

"That's a problem."

"I think we have a disagreement. Knowing it would be a more serious problem."

"Knowing what you're saying would be a problem?"

"Are we not thespians, sir? Practitioners of the artifice?"

"What's your point?"

"My point is that if I am portraying a man who speaks Elvish, then it would cease to be acting if I *knew* Elvish. It would be talk. A fabrication."

"Orchid, this is all a fabrication."

"My point exactly. And what is a fabrication of a fabrication? A truth! And if we promise falsehoods yet grant truths, what sort of sick pack of deceivers would we be?"

"What? I—"

"And I really do prefer Vullgaire, by the way."

"Fine." the playmaster sighed. "Describe the scene and then play it out, alright? *Vullgaire?*"

"Thank you, sir," Vullgaire felt the grin return to his face. That was good. His dimples made him cut a more charismatic figure. "My role is that of the god Polymattius. In this scene, I have descended from the stars to grant that ever-befuddled general Phildrake the gift of perfect mathematical understanding. Of course, the audience will know that this gift will lead Phildrake's son Alessendi to achieve his many glorious victories."

"That's... certainly classical. I'm not too confident that King Fulov is familiar with Alessandi's... existence, quite honestly."

"Excellent!" Vullgaire clapped his hands together. "What could be more exciting for our sovereign than learning something new?"

"So be it. Play out the scene. The reaction your scene gets—both from the 'audience' we have left and from myself—will determine if you have a place with the Royal Players."

Vullgaire swung his arm, sawing the air.

"Phildrake! Philandering fool of filthy flights! O war! O death! O—"

"Make way! Make way!" the voice of the captain of King Fulov's guardsmen bellowed from the square just outside the amphitheater, much louder than Vullgaire's monologue. "King Fulov has called for the execution of the followers of Gladiolus the Rebel! Please bring your children and apprentices to the square to witness! The youth must learn what happens to rebels!"

"Executions?" a thrilled voice asked from the crowd of the amphitheater's hired audience.

"That's right!" another voice said. "I heard they caught some of Gladiolus's elves, and some straggling loyalists to ol' King Jerome!"

"Oh, poor Jerome! What a sweet man that king was."

"You shush now, or they'll have your head, Maude!"

“Mommy, is that man going to die?”

“Excuse me,” Vullgaire said, feeling a pulse in his eye. “May I resume?”

“Oh, and do poets and thespians snivel ‘*may I resume*?!’” the playmaster barked, making Vullgaire flinch. “Mister Orchid, if you cannot commit to your audition piece and stick to it, you are not cut out for the Royal Players!”

“O War! O Death!” Vullgaire instantly resumed. His face was red from surprise at the playmaster’s intensity, anger at the interruption, and from a general sense of embarrassment. “O fire and fear and fu—”

“Goodman Melson!” the voice bellowed again. “For the crimes of harboring Gladiolus’s men, conspiring against King Fulov’s rule, and perjury, you are committed to execution by the headman’s axe!”

“I never did anything the gods would punish me for!” Goodman Melson objected. “Fulov is a usurper and a regicide! He is no king! He’s a tyrant, he’s a monster! He’s a—”

Vullgaire was relieved to hear the histrionics silenced. A wet chop had interrupted Goodman Belton, or whatever his name was. Or had been.

Vullgaire proceeded. Unfortunately for him, so did the disruptions. Irritation seeped into his performance. Which would have been sublime if the monologue was a scene of pure rage, but unfortunately, it was meant to be inspirational. Over the course of interruptions caused by three beheadings and one hanging, Vullgaire’s impatience grew until he was screaming, his eyes bulging, sweat seeping into his tattered shirt. Despite his efforts, the entire audience had migrated to the highest seats of the amphitheater, competing for the best view of the final kill. To Vullgaire’s consternation, the executions concluded almost simultaneously with his audition, leaving a silent stadium staring at the panting,

sweaty mess he had become. There was no applause.

“We’ll consider you, Orchid,” the playmaster said, picking up his things.

“Will it be taken into consideration how the execu—”

“Your performance will be judged on the reaction of your audience.” The crowd had already begun leaving their seats. “So, I would suggest trying elsewhere for work.”

Vullgaire stood with his fists clenched as he watched the crowd flow into the town square, eagerly trying to see the lifeless bodies of rebels strung up.

“It’s a sick world when the arts cannot compete with base bloodshed,” he murmured to himself.

“Well, what can you do?” one of the other auditioners sighed. “King Fulov gets the people’s attention. Public bloodshed and terror will do that.”

“Blatant disrespect to the dramatic arts, is what it is.” Vullgaire was about to spit before he realized that his point would be rather undermined if he spit on the biggest stage in Glassdyn.

“Going to take a look at the execution block anyways?” the actor asked as Vullgaire began to leave.

“No.” Vullgaire didn’t even turn to look at him before jumping from the stage. “Perhaps the academics will appreciate what the commons cannot.”

Vullgaire began walking towards the university with confidence before he stomped into a puddle of cold autumn rainwater that splashed up his pants, staining them with mud.

“You’re applying for a... lecturer position?” the Dean of Magic asked, arching a blonde eye-

brow.

"Well, if nothing better is available," Vullgaire said, flashing a confident smile.

"What are your certifications? You must be well-educated in the magical arts if you're planning to teach." She scanned the application he had filled out.

"I am an accomplished artist of the bardic arts!"

"You're a bard?"

"Yes."

"We don't have any lecturers who are bards."

"Sounds like you are in need of my expertise."

"Perhaps..." the Dean chewed the end of her quill. "So, you know bardic skills? You can use words to heal, to strengthen?"

"I'm more of a theorist."

"Ah."

"Well, you still teach the core disciplines, don't you? The arts, for example?" Vullgaire tapped the Dean's desk.

"We do, yes."

"Poetry, theatre, songwriting?"

"You write music?"

"I write lyrics for music, yes."

"Master... Vullgaire, I—"

"No need for titles, I'm not much of a formalist."

"Well, Orchid."

"Vullgaire."

"Fine. Vullgaire. Glassdyn University tries to support the arts, even in these trying times." She gave a slight sigh. "We might have room for an unpaid poetry instructor."

"Unpaid won't quite work for me. I've only recently arrived in town and—"

"We provide lodging."

"I retract my objection. Unpaid art is the

most meaningful art."

"That's quite noble of you Mist—er, Vullgaire. I'll just have to have a few of your works to review with our academic council." She opened a book of other applicants' work.

"That should be no problem at all. I've a whole book of them in the inn I'm staying at. Here's a sample." Vullgaire presented the Dean with a sopping wet piece of parchment.

"Thank you..." the Dean said. She started reading. "Polymatthius and Phildrake... Very classical."

"I'm well-versed in the classics. I'm working on a cycle dealing with—"

"Got anything modern?"

"Modern? Such as... what? A poetic novel dealing with lecherous law clerks?"

"Ooh, that sounds fascinating, but we're more interested in protest pieces."

"Fulov," Vullgaire said, trying to hide his annoyance.

"Yes! I'm sure you have something on him, we all do!" The Dean gave an excited grin. "You see, that's how we play into the university's motto: 'The Magic of Service'. Our focus is on practical magic, and that includes art! Important art."

"Ah, well, I believe that art, if it is of high-quality, is inherently important."

"Yes! I think we're saying the same thing."

Vullgaire clenched his teeth.

"Vullgaire?" The Dean looked at him as if he hadn't heard her. "Do you have any poetry about Fulov?"

"I'm afraid not." Vullgaire stood to leave. He was developing a headache.

"Oh, well, just come back when you've written something on him. It doesn't take too long to make one, really! And it'll be nice to have an elf in the staff!"

“Well, you should know that I can’t actually speak—”

“That’s alright, just having one will be fine!”

Vullgaire paused before speaking again.

“You know,” Vullgaire didn’t turn to look at her. “I’m starting to hate hearing about King Fulov.”

“Aren’t we all?” the Dean laughed. “You’ll have that poem on him soon, though?”

He supposed he would have to. After he found somewhere to sleep that night, of course.

All the shouting made his headache much worse. Merchants hocking wares. Vullgaire never meant to walk into the Harvest Night Festival; he just needed to get to South Glassdyn Bridge.

The innkeeper wasn’t pleased when he realized that Vullgaire wouldn’t have the money to pay for another night. Or for the previous night. So, upon being forcefully removed from the inn and having all of his writing and spare clothes confiscated as claimed collateral, he decided to make his way to the bridge. It was, without a doubt, the best bridge to sleep underneath. One

of the first things he noticed during his time in Glassdyn was that the southern bridge smelled nowhere near as dreadful as the other three. Perhaps a moment of rest would give him the time to scrawl some doggerel on King Fulov’s bad breath or some similar silliness that would impress the Dean.

“Bread! Hot fresh bread!” A merchant interrupted his thoughts by shoving some fresh bread over the stall.

“Bread is not enough to sate a man’s soul!” Vullgaire declared. He strutted away, pleased with his spiritual accomplishment.

His stomach objected with a gurgle. Vullgaire reflected and admitted to himself that there was a certain pauper’s dignity to eating scraps. He prowled behind the bakers, cooks, and artisans who were more focused on incoming crowds. Vullgaire found a pair of burnt breadcrusts mixed in a pile of garbage behind the baker. He dove for a crust. He raised it to his mouth before feeling the crack of a hard wooden rolling pin on his already aching head.

“Bread isn’t enough for the educated elf, huh?!” The baker shouted. “Yet it’s enough to steal, eh?!” He raised his weapon again. Vull-



gaire dove past his stall into the crowd of the market street, trying not to focus on the pain coming from his stomach and head.

"No, I really cannot eat another bite, my love!" A young man's voice caught Vullgaire's attention. The boy wore the uniform of Glassdyn University and was walking with a plump young woman in a gaudy dress.

"Oh, I can't eat it either, dear, I'm much too full from the gala!" The girl giggled.

"Well dear, I'm afraid I can't even begin to—"

"I'll take up your burden, good student!" Vullgaire sang as he snatched the boy's turkey leg with the greatest courtesy.

"Well, I suppose if you want to throw it away..."

Vullgaire didn't hear him. He leaned forward and took a cold, gristle-filled bite. He chewed for a moment before almost choking as the sound of a trumpet sounded much too close to his ear. His headache matched the trumpet's intensity. A squad of guardsmen on horses led a covered litter forward through the market square. They were wearing King Fulov's colors.

"Citizens!" A guard proclaimed. Vullgaire recognized him as the captain who was announcing executions during his audition that day. "This Harvest Night brings bad omens. The street must be dispersed and cleared. There has been an attack on the palace."

"Good!" cried a stray voice in the crowd. A murmur of dissent began infecting the crowd.

"Down with Fulov!"

"Jerome was the true king!"

"Let us eat in peace, palace dogs!" A half-eaten fish flew through the crowd and hit the captain's helmet, before falling impotently to the ground. Vullgaire took a step for it, but one of the horses had kicked it into the crowd.

"Yes, well, you all—"

"Who was the dead man who threw that?!" A coarse, coughing voice erupted from the litter, and the curtains parted to reveal the bloated, reddened face of the king. "Guards, find the assailant. He has made an attack on your king. Death is the sentence." The crowd was immediately silent.

The captain frowned as he dismounted and walked into the crowd. Vullgaire felt the danger of the situation and elected to make a brave retreat. He turned and slowly began walking away from the entourage. He raised the turkey to have another bite, but somebody shoved him aside and sent his dinner into the air. The turkey leg was airborne and then it was grounded and then it was underhoof and then it was nothing. Vullgaire turned to the man, almost unable to breathe. He wore a dark green cloak and was in a hurry to get closer to the litter. His forest-green skin and classically handsome face revealed him to be a full-blooded elf.

"Damn you! That was all the food I had!" Vullgaire said, gripping the blaggard's shoulder. The man turned and pulled Vullgaire by his collar.

"Do not lay your hand on me again, idiot. You think I care about a trifle such as that at a time such as this? When there is such a man on the throne? Keep your small-minded nonsense to yourself." Vullgaire gave him a puzzled look. The man scoffed before shoving him away. He resumed moving towards the litter. Vullgaire began to step back until he comprehended what the man had said.

"Small-minded? Me? *Idiot!*!"

Vullgaire sent a fist flying into the back of the man's head. It wasn't particularly powerful, but it had surprised him. The man stumbled forth, caught his foot on a loose stone, and fell

beneath the horses. His throat was crushed under the hooves of the captain's spooked horse. Vullgaire gasped and then gagged, but he had nothing in his stomach to vomit. A few screams came from the crowd. The captain was informed, and he slowly walked towards the mangled corpse.

"Who did this?" He asked, more confused than accusatory.

Vullgaire had made a step backwards, but the masses betrayed him.

"It was him! I saw it! He punched him in the back of the head. Like a coward!" an elderly woman shoved him forward.

"Oh and you are so valorous?! Giving up a citizen to the king you just finished throwing fish at?!" Vullgaire had no idea whether or not she had thrown the fish, but she might as well have.

The captain looked over the man's body again. He had an uneven expression as he began searching the dead man's clothes. He found a vial, a small knife, and a signet ring. He returned to the king. He whispered something to him and pointed to Vullgaire. The king gave Vullgaire a strange look that transformed into a discomforting smile.

"You, sir, are the hero of Glassdyn and the savior of the king! Beloved citizens!" Fulov took one lumbering step onto the ground. "The rebel leader Gladiolus has been defeated by this brave soul! Jesten, get him on your horse. He's to be taken to the palace and knighted immediately. Tonight, we feast to the death of our enemies!" The hated King Fulov gave Vullgaire a friendly slap on the back and laughed.

The crowd gave a pathetic spattering of ambivalent applause. The captain, Jesten, helped Vullgaire onto his horse.

"Long live King Fulov!" a confused voice

shouted, and a tomato flew into Vullgaire's face and fell into his lap. He began to look for whoever threw it before changing his mind. Instead, shoved the rest of the tomato into his mouth. What kind of ingrate would he be to reject such good fortune? ❖

“CHRIS AND OPIE”

by KIM HAYES

The Head of Order fumbled for her keys and entered her apartment. She was exhausted, and it was past her bedtime. The day had been busier than usual, thanks to the Head of Chaos. He really knew how to push her buttons. She needed a glass of wine to help her calm down.

Nursing the wine, she reviewed the day in her head and decided it couldn't wait. Besides, he thrived at this time of night. She poured herself a second glass.

She picked up her phone and texted.

Christine: “You DID NOT!”

Opie: “What? Hey, why are you up at this hour?”

Christine: “I’m still awake because of you.”

Opie: “And your point is?”

Christine could almost picture him, feet up on the counter, a couple of empty beer cans nearby. He was probably fielding other texts from friends and coworkers, congratulating him on today's accomplishments.

Christine: “My point is, you do this all the time and every time, I get stuck cleaning up your mess. It's my job. It's what I do. But I spent all day on this. I try to set goals and time limits and thanks to you, everything got blown out the window. Christ on a pogo stick, I have a life outside of this, you know. Don't you?”

Opie couldn't help but smile. He must have really pissed her off if she was going on like this at this hour. His day was just getting started,

and she was still awake. He wondered if she was drinking a glass of wine. Otherwise, she'd be sound asleep by now. He ignored the flurry of messages from co-workers. It wasn't often she was so willing to text him.

Opie: “You said so yourself. It's your job, right? Well, my job is to make sure you are doing your job. I keep you on your toes, right? And yes, I have a life. I have goals too. Nice to know you're keeping track of both of ours.”

Christine: “You're doing your job just a wee bit too well. This is a huge dumpster fire you created. Everyone in every department is talking about it. I don't know if I can fix this.”

Opie: “Really? It was that bad? Cool!”

Opie cracked open another beer. When the Head of Order was paying the Head of Chaos an enormous compliment, he was going to pay attention. He wondered if he would get a raise and made a mental note to ask HR about it during his next review.

Christine: “Oh, for the love of little kittens, stop gloating. Let me guess, you probably got overtime for this, right?”

Opie: “Um. Yeah. But then you will get overtime as well, so it's a win-win.”

Christine: “This is not a contest. Or a race. I'm not mad, but you really outdid yourself this time. I almost admire it.”

Opie: “That's a first.”

Christine: “Did you see the new hire? Cole.

Says he works in the Department of Panic? He did good, you make a good team.”

Opie was silent for a moment. In all their years working together (or against each other, depending on the point of view), she had never said anything like this.

Opie: “Wow. Are you thinking about flipping? Or is that the wine kicking in? I know you’re drinking it.”

Christine: “On my third glass now. And Calm has a new hire, some kid named Peter. Just a FYI. Guess there’s been some turnover. Or just people quitting because they are looking for something else to do. Have you heard anything?”

Christine honestly didn’t think Opie would answer, but her gut said to try because lately he had seemed willing to gossip. She normally didn’t partake in office gossip, but Opie was Head of Chaos for a reason. He always seemed to know everything that went on behind the scenes.

Opie: “Something like that. I wasn’t told much. Scout’s honor and all that shit. I found out today about the new hires. Apparently, there are rumors about retirements going around, and I guess the higher-ups are trying to fill the gaps before things get out of hand.”

*

He realized he might have said too much. But Christine had a way of wrangling information out of him.

Christine: “Ok, just thought I’d ask. I’ve heard the retirement thing on my end as well.”

She waited for Opie to reply. After a few minutes, she finally did something that she’d been wanting to do for ages. It’s now or never, she thought. The worst that can happen is he says no.

Christine: “Can I ask you something? You

can say no. I need to ask before I chicken out. You wanna meet up for drinks or dinner or something? You pick the place, somewhere neutral. My treat.”

Opie stared at his phone. His heart raced as he scrambled to think of a neutral plane of existence for a meeting. Smiling, he texted, “I thought you’d never ask.” ❖

“DESCENT”

by PHILIP HSU

Editor note: Welcome to Part 2 - the conclusion of Descent. To catch up, check out Corner Bar Magazine's December 21, 2024 Yuleblot issue. Enjoy!

The deck is normally off limits,” said Sophia, sticking her tongue out playfully, “but Raquel got to know one of the managers pretty well, so now we both have access.”

The deck extended outward from one side of the Pyramid. Sophia and Dalton walked past manicured grass lawns and stone paths lit by waist-high black lampposts to the very edge of the deck, where stone turned to wooden planks reminiscent of the boardwalks of old. They were right up against the ocean now, and Dalton could taste the salt in the wind. With the light given off by the facade of the hotel behind them, Sophia and Dalton leaned over a vast black expanse, with only a stone and metal railing separating them from the abyss. For a moment, both were silent, listening to the intermittent sound of the surf crashing, falling, and rising up to meet them before dissipating into the Gulf of Mexico.

Dalton felt his high give way to a gentle sort of buzz, as he recalled the many trips to the seashore he took with his parents and grandparents as a child. No matter how tense his parents' relationship was, all three of them (Eric wasn't yet born at the time) would always mellow out as soon as they hit the beach. He looked out

into the distance and saw the twinkling lights of ocean tankers and drilling rigs, one of which held Eric's Exemplar School. It might have been too bright to hope for stars, but he looked up anyway into the vast expanse above him before snapping back to reality, and to the stunning brunette who continued to stare at him intently.

“Are you having fun?” Sophia asked, breaking the silence.

“Very much so,” Dalton replied. “Are you?”

“You don't sound very convinced,” Sophia said, giving Dalton the side-eye.

“No, I really enjoy spending time with you - and Raquel. Thank you for showing me all of this,” Dalton stammered.

“But?”

“It's all pretty overwhelming, the way you live up here. I can't tell if I should live tonight like I'll never be back here again or not,” Dalton said sadly, looking out into the waters beyond.

“You belong here, Dalton. You and countless others,” Sophia said, placing a hand on Dalton's arm.

Dalton felt like he belonged most in a tunnel or waterway, or in front of a seawall with a Spraycrete cannon in hand, not in some stifling marble office with bizarre statues bearing down on him. But he nonetheless placed his hand over Sophia's.

“I know my parents are a bit much. We

- Raquel and I - don't say much when they're around. These clubs help us unwind and get away for a bit."

"And the drugs and the alcohol?" Dalton asked pointedly.

Sophia grimaced. "I know we must seem like cowards to you, living in excess like this while others suffer. I wouldn't ask you to change anything about who you are. Just know that there is a better future for you if you choose to accept it."

"What kind of future?"

Sophia drew her hand back and beamed with pride, folding her arms over the railing and looking out into the ocean as well. "Sanctuary is over capacity and there's no way to expand the city limits. I have - the Corporation has - a plan to resettle Sanctuary's inhabitants onto floating cities nearby and build a society without class or overcrowding or segregation," she said, pointing at the Gulf in front of them.

"This would increase the surface area of Sanctuary so fewer people would have to live underground - or underwater," she continued. "The Watermen operation would still exist, adjusted to help repair the city-ships, as would the existing Surface economy and most of the below-ground factories and laboratories. There would be more output and consumption from the newly-empowered below-grounders. Aquacultural activities could be expanded. But you must think I'm crazy, talking about moving people onto boats," Sophia said, turning back to Dalton.

"It's better than sitting on your ass doing nothing, which seems to be the way most people on the Surface behave," replied Dalton. "Wouldn't the other Surface Dwellers and corporations lose their main source of labor though? And what about LanceCorp?"

"LanceCorp is what most stands in the way of our plan. LanceCorp and their pesky AI, RedEye, that enables them to be more efficient than any of the other corporations."

"AI? Artificial Intelligence?"

"Yes. It's what LanceCorp relies on to outsource its projects and purchases to. If another company could do things better than they can, then LanceCorp will allocate the project or service away. But since LanceCorp owns RedEye, most of their activities - including the ones Fujisamu wants to take over - remain with them."

"You mean Lance Smith doesn't control LanceCorp?" Dalton was stunned.

"He's the CEO and Founder, and a shareholder, but he's not rich enough to build a city by himself - nobody is. He took capital from LanceCorp's other shareholders, many of whose children are down in the club tonight."

"I'm guessing Lance Smith isn't down there too, or you wouldn't be telling me about this floating city of yours."

Sophia looked away, and was silent. Far in the distance, an oil tanker blew its horn as the wind continued to rustle the grass beneath their feet and Sophia's long black hair. Despite - or in light of - his new knowledge of how the Surface Dwellers really lived, Dalton didn't want this night to end.

"Will I see you again?" Dalton asked softly, knowing that his life and Sophia's were on as different tracks as the trajectories of two people their age could be.

Sophia turned her intense hazel eyes towards him. "Yes, if you'd like to. Anything is possible when we're in control of our own destiny," she said, smiling resolutely.

"Now you sound like your father," Dalton teased.

Sophia giggled. The two spent a bit more time gazing into each other's eyes and chatting until they heard the movement of the revolving door at the entrance to the deck.

"Look at the lovebirds!" Raquel squealed, teetering precariously at the edge of the pool.

"Raquel, no!" Dalton shouted.

But it was too late, Raquel slipped and fell into the pool with a splash. The next thing Dalton knew, the water ejected Raquel back onto the side of the pool where she regained her footing, as if the entire incident had been played in reverse. Raquel emitted a splendid whoop before covering her mouth as if to stop herself from shouting any louder.

"Looks like it's time to go home," Sophia said dryly, and started walking towards Raquel and the club, motioning for Dalton to follow her with a tilt of her head.

"How did Raquel get out of the pool?" he asked, "she doesn't even look wet."

"The pool is only for decoration," Sophia answered, "it's filled with a special gel that ensures that no one can drown in it, as you can see," she said, putting one of Raquel's arms over her neck and gently directing her little sister towards the exit. Dalton took one more look back towards the ocean and one more breath of uncanned air before following them back into the club and subsequently out into the lobby of the Pyramid.

The three made it onto a tram departing from the Financial District towards the Greenhouse Terminal, the tram making the same waves of water as it did halfway through the Greenhouse. Raquel had already fallen asleep on Sophia's shoulder, with Sophia and Dalton exchanging a smile before looking out onto the surrounding landscape, dark trees and darker office buildings.

They arrived at the Terminal, where Dalton was faced with a serious problem: He had long since missed the last podshell from the Greenhouse going below-ground.

"I can get you one from where we're going," Sophia said to him, ordering one of the multi-person podshells, presumably one that the Fujisamu's owned, with a wave of a key fob. It arrived at the Terminal horizontally in a tube wide enough to encompass the larger podshell, two seats arranged in spherical chambers on either end of the vehicle,

"But there's only two seats?" Dalton asked, as Sophia sequestered a drowsy Raquel into one end of the podshell.

"Not if we squeeze," Sophia said, taking Dalton's hand and leading him to the other seat. The seat was made of fine black leather, and set at an angle so that the rider could half-ly, half-sit in it while lightly restrained by seatbelts. The interior design of the podshell was equally impressive, lacquered wooden panels and air conditioning units you could actually readjust for direction, airflow and temperature.

It did not seem like the riders were seated at all in the Surface Dweller's podshells, a testament to the gentler slopes and turns that the Surface Dwellers were subjected to when traveling from their homes to the Surface. It was almost like a car, although Dalton's family never owned anything this luxurious.

As Dalton sat down and Sophia half-sat, half-ly on him, the last thing on his mind was the interior design of the podshell. The podshell's glass roof extended over the trio as the vehicle smoothly pulled away from the embarkment chamber and entered a lighted tunnel - just like the tunnels under mountains and harbors that Dalton remembered from his childhood. As the light strips passed them by,

Dalton could feel the warm weight and curves of Sophia's body on top of him - not too heavy, but not too light - and the rise and fall of her every breath.

After a while, Sophia turned around and lay down facing him, her forehead pressed against his neck. She raised her head to look into his eyes, then her face and lips near to his, and kissed him on the cheek as the podshell came to a stop. The ride was over, and not a moment too soon for Dalton, who was beginning to have certain physical reactions to these close quarters that would have been difficult to hide from Sophia any longer.

Dalton assessed his surroundings as Sophia rose and roused Raquel from her slumber. They weren't on the Surface - almost the entirety of the Surface was composed solely of the Greenhouse, the Financial District, and the massive array of solar panels that helped power Sanctuary - but they were close to it. They had passed through tall sandstone gates to come to a stop in front of what could only be described as a stone temple of vaguely Egyptian origin, as far as Dalton could remember from visiting museums when the world was still intact. Two large bronze statues of seated panthers flanked a tall door of oak and steel, the animals each accompanied by a real smokeless fire torch contributing to the cat statues' dancing shadows.

It was all very different from where Dalton expected the Fujisamu's to live; he had thought to see a Japanese mansion of wood or perhaps steel and glass, not this monument. Dalton looked back at Sophia and Raquel, who were slowly ambling towards the door of the Temple-Mansion.

"I booked a podshell for you, Dalton," Sophia said as she and Raquel passed him, the two-person podshell they had arrived in now re-

placed with a smaller podshell that Dalton was well familiar with. "Don't be a stranger," she said as she looked back with a smile, and walked home, Raquel in tow. It seemed to Dalton as though she was happy and sad at the same time. Could it be that she liked him too? He climbed into the podshell and immediately fell unconscious...

IV. Descent

In the darkness Dalton awoke to the lukewarm breath of filtration vents against his face. From somewhere far off came the intermittent *whoosh* of podshells and the echoes of cold wind flowing through an endless series of hollow man-tubes.

He opened his eyes.

A blinking red light above the headrest afforded Dalton glimpses of his surroundings, providing illumination in time to an incessant clicking. Immobilized by an elaborate system of restraints and enclosed by the tight confines of the podshell, it was all Dalton could do to maintain his composure in the one-man capsule where he had suddenly and awkwardly awoken from drug-imposed sleep.

Breathe, Dalton. Control breathing and you control fear.

This Dalton did, as he did when the floodgates were opened that day during Waterman training and a steely wall of water knocked him into oblivion for the first but not the last time. His breathing became deliberate, and his heart rate slowed as his senses calmed.

Such is the first Great Challenge of becoming a Waterman, Dalton reminded himself from his training, to consciously control breathing and all other bodily functions so as not to panic, and react decisively under conditions of uncontrolled flooding. Even if the initial shock of a wave or whirlpool

knocked sense, sight, sound, and orientation clear out of any unsuspecting Waterman, he or she was still expected to breathe, calmly, consistently and controlled (“CCC”), through their air canal. They were to relax, and let the current sweep them to the next run-off point. There, pressure differentials and magnetic discharges from their suits would deliver the Watermen from their watery plight into controlled flood patterns with hopefully more predictable currents.

But Dalton was far from the waters and the job he knew now. The blinking of the podshell’s emergency light continued with a tinkling like the signal lights of the old autos, Dalton noted with some nostalgia. The temperature within the tunnels was brisk, which was to be expected of a vast network of pneumatic tubes that extended more than a thousand feet beneath the Surface. The dampening of the restraints that held Dalton in place and the gradual fogging of the view portals indicated to Dalton that there were other bodily functions he had not acquired control over.

Was it the stims I took at the Pyramid Hotel?

Unnerved, Dalton unleashed a mighty roar and threw his body from one side of the podshell to the other, trying to knock it out of whatever place it may have become stuck. Perhaps by creating a heightened disturbance in the podshell and the tube segment he was located in, he could activate additional emergency protocols and get help faster, although this was often just wishful thinking. Surely an immobile podshell here would hold up the flow of podshells elsewhere, prompting a troubleshooting diagnostic from Central?

The fans blew. The light winked. The tubes howled with one hundred miles of emptiness.

Sweat dripped down his body and fell off his forehead. The podshell did not move. Dalton closed his eyes and focused on what he knew inside, rather than the crisis surrounding him.

“The first steps to becoming a Waterman,” he recited aloud from the Waterman manual in an effort to calm himself, “are inevitably a sink-or-swim, natural process.” In fact, about 15% of entrants to the Water Training Program outright drown, while an additional 50% are either retired due to injury, unwillingness to continue to brave the icy waters and dry throats that are the Waterman’s element. Others are simply “Swept Away” by the Deacons. The Deacons’ judgment on an entrant’s “Readiness,” or one’s ability to perform difficult technical tasks under pressure and not become a danger to self or team, is never questioned.

Once actually on the job, the attrition rate for Watermen working under the water line was 20% every five years. Of course, the reality of the job is not nearly as harsh as the statistics may indicate: The average Waterman wouldn’t be spending more than 2 or 3 months per year on projects or flood response below the water line. Rotations above the water line were mostly spent cleaning out water damage from common areas or maintaining Sanctuary’s sprawling hydraulic pumping system.

Dalton, however, was no average Waterman. Within his first year of Guilding he had been below the water line for 8 months out of the year. In fact, he found life above the waterline to be an invitation of weakness to the mind. So it seemed uncharacteristic of him to be so fazed by his present predicament, suspended nearly upside-down in a Turboshell Personalized Transportation Pod hundreds of feet beneath the Surface.

Except for the fact that people never woke

up in the tubes. Or if they did, it was due to a malfunction or something even more sinister, and they never came back to tell the tale. Dalton squeezed his eyes shut and re-opened them again. Now he knew that this was not a dream.

As the podshell's narco-meds started to wear off entirely and the severity of Dalton's situation began to dawn, the emergency light began to glow a constant crimson, the color of a blood red sun as it rises over the surface of the earth. Dalton pondered quietly, drifting to himself:

How the hell did this happen?

Dalton tried to recall a bright day at the Regency school where youths were tested and primed for Archive study or Guilding. Unlike his little brother Eric, Dalton was never a particularly outstanding scholar, although the Commissioners were always at least mildly impressed with the creativity that "Dal" weaved into normally cut-and-dried assignments:

"What are you drawing, Dal?" one of Dalton's classmates asked him, all those years ago.

"It's a car," Dalton replied, not taking his eyes off the paper.

"What's that?" the girl asked, tilting her head to one side.

"A car is what we used to get from home to the store before we came to Sanctuary. It had four wheels and ran on gas," Dalton replied slowly so that the younger girl could understand.

"That's weird. Why are there people's hands and feet sticking out of it?"

"Because it's a clown car: My daddy used to say our family was like a group of clowns when we got together, before he went off to fight the Resource War and never came back..." Dalton's voice trailed off as he ruffled his

brown hair, long for a boy even back then.

"Don't worry, you're safe here now," the girl said, gently patting Dalton on the back. "My family came to Sanctuary when the heat and the flooding and the storms got to be too bad where we lived," she said, ticking off each calamity on the fingers of her small hand. "I heard most of where we lived is under the sea now" she finished, in seeming disbelief at her own words.

"Dal, Lisa, come back to the group, we're doing today's Sanctuary Song," one of their teachers called out. The children gathered around their young female teacher with her long brown hair tied in a bun, who produced a guitar and began singing:

*Tomorrow we're visiting the Conservatories,
Lions, Seals and Snakes we'll see*

-
"Is that like a Zoo?" Dalton blurted out over the music.

The teacher smiled sadly and nodded without skipping a beat, and continued:

*On LanceCorp's podshells we'll go there, so
safe and sound we'll be,*

*LanceCorp owns the dorms, and LanceCorp
owns the tubes, but LanceCorp can't do it alone we
need someone like you!*

*If you can do it cheaper, they'll send the work
on through, just ask the Watermen who are run by
Fujisamu!*

Miles away and back in the present, Dalton opened his eyes with a start in a tightly enclosed space lit with an eerie red.

It was them.

Sophia - Fujisamu - had requisitioned the podshell that he was now stuck in.

This was their podshell. They threw me into

this mess.

Sudden betrayal, whatever the reason, finally opened the floodgates of despair. But before Dalton could fully comprehend what was happening to him, the filtration vents shut off and the light of the podshell faded. Now Dalton was going to suffocate to death. At least it was like a death a Waterman would face. Dalton closed his eyes and prepared for the end, only to hear a loud *thump* against the top of the podshell, and then another, and another.

Dalton looked through the view ports to see what the commotion was about, and came face to face with a ghoulish, gas mask hanging on the outside of the podshell, in the interstitial spaces between the shell and the tube walls. The mask gave a frightening roar, and began disengaging the auto-breaks of the podshell.

Dalton had heard of this happening before, but never believed it to be true: Tunnel monkeys, sub-human beings living in the tubes of Sanctuary off the scraps of the Below-Grounders and the Surface Dwellers, who captured podshells and their contents and ate their inhabitants alive. More of the tunnel monkey's compatriots followed, working in hideous concert to dismantle the antennae holding Dalton and the monsters in place.

Now the tunnel monkeys were well and truly screaming in apparent glee at their latest catch, as the podshell lurched downwards once, then twice, then into free-fall as its breaks were completely disengaged. Dalton screamed, his composure finally lost. As he fell, he had visions of his mother, young and strong, slicing up and feeding him green apples back when he was a child - *Eat, Dal darling, eat*, she smiled, holding the sweet fruit up to Dalton's mouth with a fork and twirling it around like an aeroplane -

When Dalton came to, the podshell

was leveling out as quickly as it had fallen, and slowly came to a stop. The tunnel monkeys were nowhere to be seen, probably crushed during the descent or thrown clear of the podshell. The podshell's restraints disengaged and its door opened with a slow hiss as Dalton climbed out into a tunnel about the height of a single person. The screams of more tunnel monkeys filled the damp air, seemingly from everywhere and nowhere at once.

Dalton scrambled forward towards a dim yellow light at the end of the tunnel: It was better than running backwards into the dark. The light grew stronger as he exited the tunnel into a vast underground space that looked a cross between a racecourse and a massive rollercoaster ride, with podshell tunnels and tracks filling the area. A single podshell sat at one end of the course.

Dalton could hear the screams of the tunnel monkeys growing louder behind him, so he ran towards the podshell, and held his face up against the pod, to no avail - the facial recognition device didn't seem to be working. Desperate, Dalton tried to activate the podshell using the manual protocol that he had learned from Yuri ages ago: All Watermen used to know how to open a podshell by hand in case they had to save someone from drowning in a locked vehicle, but the Corporation stopped teaching that trick to the younger generation for fear of abuse. Unbelievably, there didn't seem to be an emergency hatch on this podshell, either. What was going on?

Dalton took another look at the exterior of the podshell and saw that there were more differences between it and a typical podshell than he had originally realized. It was larger than a regular podshell, almost the size of a multi-person one, but only had room enough

for one occupant at the front - or what looked like the front. It had antennae and auto-breaks like a normal podshell, but there were many more of them than usual, and they were folded up against its exterior. The vessel wasn't in a tube, which suggested that it had a source of power independent from being propelled through pneumatic tubes. And the midsection of the podshell was just an incomprehensible mass of metal and plastic.

Tunnel monkeys were pouring out of the hole Dalton had just came out of. In his desperation he tried to feel around the front of the podshell for a door handle. Could it be...?

The front door to the podshell opened with a click and Dalton quickly jumped into the darkness of the vehicle, closing the door behind him. The tunnel monkeys ran up against the podshell but quickly left without interest, as if they were all too used to the presence of the vehicle. Dalton waited with bated breath as the shouting of the beings receded.

The podshell began to hum. Lights began to flicker in various control panels next to and around the seat. A heads-up display began to show a virtual map of the course onto the view portal, which was itself a computer screen. Dalton turned onto his stomach and found two control sticks surrounded by large golden bracelets that each moved three hundred and sixty degrees. This wasn't a podshell: This was a cockpit.

He placed his hands into the bracelets and pushed forward. The podshell moved forward with him. It entered a tunnel, and Dalton began to haltingly guide the podshell through different segments of the winding tunnel, pausing to find his way with the navigational screen when needed. He was trying to climb out of the entire course back towards somewhere not in

the deepest bowels of Sanctuary when a familiar voice rang out, deep and rich with the accents of the East and West:

"We knew you were a fighter, and a survivor, Dal," the voice said as a virtual screen opened up on one corner of the heads-up display and a stunning young woman was tying her black hair up in a darkened room.

"Sophia!"

"Hello, Dalton."

"You did this?" Dalton said, waving his arm around the podshell, although he already knew the answer.

"I'm sorry we had to abduct you the way we did - LanceCorp would never just let a podshell go missing unless it looked like the tunnel monkeys had done it," she responded.

"So what's this thing?" Dalton asked, waving his arm around again.

"You are sitting in a piece of Sanctuary history there, Dalton. During the construction of the tubes and testing of the podshells, these Racers were used by the founding builders to get around a newly-built Sanctuary. As you've discovered, you can actually drive these podshells around, rather than being whisked away in every which direction," Sophia explained.

Dalton's head hurt.

"So this is part of your plan to take over Sanctuary?" Dalton said half-jokingly, half-accusingly.

All of a sudden, Sophia became very serious.

"You know about my vision and Fujisamu's plan, so I won't repeat the details. But these Racers - and this is the last one known to be in existence - are equipped with a de-homing beacon to control the paths of podshells in a wide radius," she began. "If we can cause enough of a disturbance in the tubes, we can

get RedEye to outsource the tubes to Fujisamu. That will be half the battle of liberating the below-grounders and building a better Sanctuary for all.”

Ah, well of course you need me to do your dirty work, Dalton thought.

“So why don’t you just do it yourself?” Dalton asked.

“We need someone on the Surface to place bids on the infrastructure projects the instant they go offline in real-time. That someone is me. We can’t trust anyone else,” Sophia replied.

“Besides,” she continued, “your experience in the utility tunnels makes you uniquely qualified for this task, and we already know about your excellent service to the Corporation.”

“In other words, you know I won’t say no,” Dalton said through gritted teeth, a trait he thought was rapidly becoming his greatest weakness. “But these tunnels and this Racer are not the same as the tunnels I’m used to, it’s crazy to place so much of your plan into the hands of someone you barely know!” Dalton cried.

“That’s what we’re going to spend the rest of the night doing, you and I. We’re going to practice on the Racer using the test course you’re on right now. Tomorrow morning, when the plan goes into motion, I will be with you then as now, every step of the way...”

V. In Your Right Place

Restless hours later, Dalton had access to all of Sanctuary. He imagined himself flying over and through the Greenhouse, rising up over the long glass pyramid towards the towers of the Financial District. He would soar above the towers as the sun rose behind them and look down upon their rooftops before being

suspended upside-down toward the horizon beyond Sanctuary, and double back again underwater among the myriad creatures of the deep. He would traverse the bowels of the city and the compartments below the water line and penetrate the labyrinth of man-tubes that constituted the lifeblood of Sanctuary’s society and economy. But all this was just a vision he had as he climbed upward in a single tube towards the industrial district of Sanctuary, where the city’s factories and laboratories were housed.

“We’ll have to do this in sequence, Dalton,” Sophia reminded him, as she loaded the first set of instructions into the Racer’s heads-up display, “One node at a time.”

Dalton could see from the heads-up display that Sophia was wearing a suit jacket and donning smart glasses, communicating with Dalton through her minipad and headset on the trading floor of the Financial Exchange - the opening bell was about to ring. Dalton was approaching an artery, so he engaged the Racer’s pincers, holding one in each hand.

“Ten o’clock,” Sophia directed, as Dalton maneuvered into the artery from a hole in that position. The artery led to a metal cradle where a transit node slowly circulated Dalton’s racer and other podshells above and below it towards a new artery. As Dalton rotated to the correct position, he piloted the Racer forward at the exact moment to enter a tunnel many stories high and filled with light strips. The tunnel was filled with hundreds of other podshells moving along the walls of the tube on their way to wherever their riders were designated to be. With the Racer’s long antennae, Dalton was able to move among and past the podshells with ease and at much greater speed.

“Straight, left, straight, down,” Sophia relayed, as Dalton moved through from artery

to capillaries and back again. From his heads-up display it was clear that the Factory District was fast approaching, a mix of planned industrial areas and organic growth as the city grew and its inhabitants multiplied. The plan was to “infect” the capillaries that actually delivered people into their places of work and then find a way out onto the main node in the center of the industrial sector.

“Right to the Supplex factory, miniphone assembly unit; left to the garment and solar panel assemblies,” said Sophia, as the sound of the opening bell and the din of trading floor made her adjust her headset closer. “Go right ahead.”

Dalton gave Sophia the thumbs-up and turned on the de-homing beacon in the Racer. The podshells in Dalton’s vicinity immediately stopped, with Dalton having to avoid the stalled pods to gain access to the vast embarkment chambers of the factories. As he moved through hundreds of motionless pods and past bewildered onlookers who had just finished their morning commute, he began to realize the extent of the damage he was about to do at Fujisamu’s behalf. Yet wasn’t this a small price to pay, for freeing countless people from the tyranny of the tubes?

He looked at Sophia and could see and hear her placing orders as the bidding for the stalled tubes began. Traders watched a news ticker and monitors in bewilderment at this shocking new development in the industrial sector, where a malfunction was stranding thousands of riders during the morning rush hour. LanceCorp’s stock began to fall.

“It’s working, Dalton,” Sophia smiled. “Now right and up to the main node, and from there to the Port.”

Dalton made his way into a vast, spherical chamber where thousands of podshells were

circumambulating, waiting for the moment when they could enter a designated tube and make their way to another part of the underground city. As Dalton entered, the podshells ceased their movement, though they fortunately still clung to the chamber’s walls. Sophia knew exactly where Dalton was, so she placed Fujisamu’s bid for operating the Factory District node for a ten-year renewable contract ahead of all the competition, right as the service in that node began to deteriorate.

Dalton turned off the de-homing beacon as he rode toward the Port: He and Sophia had agreed that staying silent until reaching the major nodes was the way to avoid detection. LanceCorp might determine that there was a Racer on the loose, or at least that a seriously malfunctioning podshell or two were causing the outage, and the company could better assuage the panic in the market that way.

But as things stood now, LanceCorp was facing a service meltdown of epic proportions. Dalton turned the beacon back on as he reached the shipbuilding complex, stranding hundreds of workers in their induced slumber. All the workers who were near-forced to toil over hot metal and machinery all the workdays of their lives may now have found a way out, if Fujisamu was to be believed.

For the first time, Dalton saw sparks fly from welding machines pinned against massive seafaring vessels that brought goods and people from Sanctuary to the other new cities. He stopped podshells carrying equipment and supplies as well as those carrying people - all of the Surface’s food and beverages stuck in transit. And then he was off to another node, and another. It felt good just to do *something*.

“Dalton, we’ve placed the most competitive bids for control of all the districts and the

nodes you've infected so far, but we need to take it directly to LanceCorp for RedEye to be convinced," Sophia spoke calmly and somewhat furtively into her headset and her tablet's camera, raising the minipad to show Dalton that LanceCorp's stock had already dropped by a whopping twelve percent on the day.

"You mean go to the Surface?" Dalton surmised.

"Yes, infect the dorms along the way and hit the main artery leading to the Surface. Then you will have to go straight to LanceCorp Headquarters and knock Central offline as well," Sophia responded.

What? Were the Fujisamu's trying to start World War IV? Dalton grew silent and turned the de-homing beacon off.

"Dalton? Are you there? Is everything alright?" Sophia asked.

"We're not going to infect the dorms," Dalton responded tersely, "I'm going straight to the Surface."

Sophia seemed as though she was going to say something, but instead nodded and rearranged her display to match Dalton's new course. Dalton charted a path straight towards the central artery that fed into the Surface, including the Greenhouse Terminal. The vast tunnel gave way to numerous smaller channels filled with multi-person podshells, their occupants looking up from their miniphones long enough to see that something was amiss.

As Dalton passed, the vehicles around him stopped as their riders were suspended horizontally - or even vertically, if they were climbing on tunnel walls. Normally their seats would rotate to maintain a comfortable ride, but now Dalton could hear the screams of un-sedated Surface Dwellers ringing through the tunnels. He was shocked at first but then started laugh-

ing at the sight of it. Sophia, realizing what was happening, started laughing too.

Dalton's heads-up display started picking up a newscast about LanceCorp's stock falling twenty percent, as miniphone pictures of screaming Surface Dwellers hanging upside down were beginning to circulate on the trading floor. Yet some videos and photos were also capturing glimpses of a rogue podshell flying past the mechanical carnage.

"Dalton, they're starting to figure out what's going on. We don't have much time," Sophia whispered into her headset.

"I'm on it," Dalton replied, directing the Racer toward the three channels that led into the Financial District, high above the Greenhouse. "I figure you have some sort of plan for how we can take down the Central Directory for Sanctuary's entire tube system?"

"I do," said Sophia. "Here's how it goes..."

Having reached Central, high above the fray in the LanceCorp Tower, the Racer accelerated and ascended into a tube leading directly towards the control tower that housed the Central Directory. Normally this tube was used for troubleshooting seriously malfunctioning podshells and had a gentle arc for the podshell in question to de-accelerate. But the Racer flew out of the tube at speed and rammed full on into the glass observation deck of the Control Tower, taking out lighting in the area and causing Central employees to duck away from the shattering glass.

As the employees in teal jumpsuits began to flee from the scene, a LanceCorp security unit entered the Central Directory area and began surrounding the still-intact Racer, turning on their night vision goggles to adapt to the low-light conditions. They raised their automat-

ic weapons and began firing at the podshell, having orders to shoot to kill any intruders. When the dust settled, they came closer to the Racer to check for bodies, only to see the Racer's antennae unfurl, each ending in some sort of rectangular device.

"Collision detected," a mechanic voice chimed out, "damage assessment is underway. Begin damage assessment: Record bystanders" the voice said, as the antennae began to emit glaring lights in time to the frenetic clicking of cameras in the direction of each member of the security unit. With their goggles turned on, the men were instantly blinded by the flashes and fell to the ground, groaning and clutching their eyes. What few guards remained standing were beaten into submission by the Racer's antennae, which was clearly taking directions from some other location.

Seeing that the action had ended and the guards were fully subdued, Dalton rode gingerly out into the darkened area in the Racer's ejector seat, which was a smaller podshell embedded inside of the Racer itself.

"Good job, Dalton," Sophia called out over the seat's intercom, "Head to the roof of the building, we'll get you out from there," she said, signing off from her headset as trading continued in the Financial District where Dalton was now located in. With the tubes all snarled up, there was no way out but up. Dalton crossed through space with light from the ejector seat, found the nearest lift and pressed the top-most button for "R," which he assumed meant "roof."

VI. RedEye

As the door opened, however, he was faced with row after row of computer mainframes, red lights lining their sides and thick

wires sticking out between them. He slowly walked past the grim machinery and entered a clearing where a person garbed in white was standing like a tree in the center of the room, with a helmet that covered their head, forehead and eyes and had wires connecting it the ceiling. The person was shaking, trembling uncontrollably, twitching in every which direction. It looked as though they were plugged directly into the mainframes around them, which also heaved, groaned and gave off a rather concerning amount of heat.

"So, Dalton," said a voice like sandpaper, "you're finally here."

Dalton turned around and saw a man with square features and slicked-back blonde hair wearing the traditional garb of the Surface Dwellers, a full-length black jumpsuit with a cape, although his cape had a gold trim. In his hand was a gauss pistol, a weapon that would blow people to chunks despite its small size if you weren't careful.

Black and gold, LanceCorp colors. And anyone could recognize Lance Smith.

"Not what you expected, is she?" he asked, pointing at the person in white with his gun. "You and Fujisamu thought you were so clever with the de-homing beacon, and I admit, you almost had it made," he laughed, "But not anymore," he snarled, suddenly firing a round into the woman in white with a loud sonic boom, who fell to the ground, silent and motionless, as smoke and blood began to trickle from her stomach.

"No!" Dalton cried.

"You didn't know - Well you know now. You broke RedEye. You broke her, but we can re-build her, we can find another one like her from the depths of Sanctuary, another Grounder yearning to be someone. Maybe we should

use you!" Lance shouted, pointing the gun at Dalton. Dalton turned and ran down the hallway as Lance fired and missed, exploding a nearby mainframe. There was another door in sight. Dalton hoped it would lead anywhere but back in there with a gauss-armed maniac.

The door was an emergency exit and opened out into the side of the tower - Dalton had to stop himself from running over the railing to his death a hundred and thirty stories below. He climbed a staircase and found a ledge that he could traverse, away from the door that Lance Smith soon came through, following in Dalton's frantic footsteps. Dalton looked up and around...and saw a way out...If only Lance would play along and get on the ledge.

Dalton jumped off the ledge onto another set of metal stairs. He stood his ground there, with the wind whipping in his face, blowing his brown locks alternatively upward and forward. Sure enough, Lance climbed onto the ledge to get a closer shot. *Now just to distract him for a little bit longer...*

"You know they won't give up, the Fujisamu's," Dalton called out over the roar of the wind. "You can't stop what's happening, what's about to happen."

"I can't? What do you think I'm doing? What do you think I do every single day to keep my company dominant?" Lance cried out.

"Your tyranny is over, Lance. The below-grounders will be liberated, and that will be the end of you and LanceCorp," Dalton responded defiantly.

"Dalton, Dalton - you can't possibly believe that crap Fujisamu is telling you? Or did one of his daughters prove to be more 'convincing?'" Lance did the air quotes very well despite having a pistol in his hand.

Dalton could feel the color rising to his

face but stood tall. *Come on, any minute now...*

"Let me guess, was it Sophia?" Lance asked. "Ahh, none more lovely - or dangerous - but you should know better than to trust the Surface Dwellers. They only look out for themselves, and their interests are those of the Corporation - like me. And yet I'm the evil one?" he sneered, "I'm the one they love to hate: No matter how much it takes to keep everything running and everyone fed, I'm the bad guy. I get to win, but I don't *deserve* it. Everything is assumed. Everyone just wants, wants, wants - And what are they going to do? What are you going to do? What happens when the lights go off and we go back to the stone age? What happens when the sun doesn't shine and the wind stops blowing?"

Dalton could hear it coming now, but Lance could not, and the CEO continued rambling on about some philosophical madness before he finally planned on giving his quarry the killing blow.

"Dalton, things have been set in motion long before you were born, and will remain in motion far after you're gone. And there's nothing, absolutely nothing, you can do to change this," Lance said, raising his pistol at Dalton.

"You're right about one thing," Dalton said.

"And what's that?" Lance asked.

"There's absolutely nothing you can do to change this," Dalton said, and threw his body against the wall just as an external lift screamed down the side of the building straight into Lance Smith. The lift kept going, scattering blood and gore as the posh occupants of the lift started howling and taking pictures with their miniphones.

Dalton recovered, looked down again to make sure Lance was gone, and continued

along the walkway until he found a service ladder going up. He climbed for a while before finally reaching the top of the building, where a dark helicopter shaped like a wasp was starting to land on the company helipad. On the side of the wasp was the Fujisamu logo: A red lightning bolt next to three lines that represented water, all surrounded by an upside-down pentagon.

Dalton approached as the Fujisamus landed, Kenji exiting first carrying a short staff with the pentagon logo imprinted into its crystal handle, followed by Sophia with her minipad, and finally yet another retinue of bodyguards.

"Dalton," Fujisamu began, "you have served us well. The company is prospering, thanks to you. You have my thanks as well," he said, and took a slight bow.

"Did you know RedEye was a person?" Dalton asked immediately.

"Yes, we knew, Dalton," Sophia responded gently, "but we didn't know Smith would kill her."

Dalton was silent. He had that woman's blood on his hands.

"We were able to win the bids for the tubes before the...unfortunate event..." Sophia continued after a pause.

"So now what?" Dalton asked pointedly, "are you going to liberate the Grounders?"

"Dalton, these things take time," Fujisamu responded softly, "in time, all will be revealed. Our first step is to solidify our control over Sanctuary, and then we can put our master

plan into motion."

Dalton was incredulous, but Fujisamu continued:

"You'll be happy to know that the shareholders of LanceCorp have decided that a different approach to the business will be necessary going forward, given Mr. Smith's...unfortunate accident...and...heretofore unknown, unpredictable, and unstable condition. We are on our way to present our master plan with the Board of Directors of LanceCorp. They agree that it - and you - have immense potential. Won't you join us?" Fujisamu said with an outstretched hand.

Dalton turned and walked away.

"Dalton!" Sophia called out.

"Let him go. He's done enough," chided Fujisamu.

Far below the roof, Dalton half-piloted, half-dragged the ejector seat back into the Racer. He rode the Racer back into the tube where it came from, and then back towards the top of the Greenhouse Terminal where the entrance to below-ground lay. As he descended for the first but not the last time as a free man, he pledged, to himself:

Things have been set in motion long before I was born, and will remain in motion long after I am gone. But there is something I can do to change this: If Fujisamu doesn't follow up with their plan, I will be there to contest them - every step of the way.

And with that the Racer was swallowed by the ground with the *whoosh* of a podshell entering a tube. ❖

END TRANSMISSION