

SHA'KERT

End of Night

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Temple Dark Books

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Prologue

Bare rock glistens, small pools of water hide in crevices to ripple and shudder before a biting wind. The mountain soars – a harsh, naked crown, proud and exposed under a leaden sky challenging any who would dare scale it and stand and stare into the abyss of snowbound valleys and jagged ice-capped ranges.

On an old world, a new thing is born. Three hundred pairs of eyes stare at a naked figure. He stands a gaunt, racked frame; I easily trace lines that mark bone and sinew, joints puffed and raw under goose-pimpled skin. Patchwork scars run over folds of flesh, across dirt-worn skin perhaps once white, perhaps coffee – now uniform gray. One calloused hand grips a rough staff, the other balances against the gale's desire to fling him to the valley floor. A knotted rope of greasy hair sways, its smaller twin graces his face. He stands steady on the edge of cracked and flaking rock, his presence alone enough to meet the challenge of the wind, the cold, the distant eyes.

From the left, a hand reaches out, grabs his hair; he arches back, body taut. From the right, a knife, the blood-stained haft and pitted blade exuding primal danger. Hair pulled tighter, higher, he balances on the balls of his feet, calves strung tight and back erect, staff falling as both arms stretch out.

The knife rises, hesitates momentarily as the hand tightens its grip, then descends deliberately to the nape of his exposed neck.

Part I: Earth

Chapter One

Greg

I jerk upright, the sheet falls from my sweat-stained shoulders. I can taste the air, feel the chill through my feet. I am the figure, but the rest? My mind knows I'm at home, but my arms reach for the comfort of the bedroom wall on one side, my wife on the other. I am here, she is here, the room is here. Above me the clock winks quarter of three to remind me nightmare and reality are different. The nightmare's gone, and with it any chance of sleep.

Lou stirs, mumbles as dreams break the surface. I slide to the end of the bed, take one step, and close the partition noiselessly behind me. Pen's is ajar; it's hard to tell where she ends and the toy penguin starts. I resist the urge to go in, stand watch over her. I lower myself into my favorite chair and flick the apartment walls clear. The lights from a city of four hundred twenty million people burn away my nightmare.

How can she think it's beautiful? Long ago I thought it was opportunity, the noise and movement invitation to grow and integrate, chance and fortune calling me; but it's proven a mocking caricature of promises made but always held out of reach in that dim gray boundary between truth and lie. It's frustration, a zoo, an assaulting, demanding presence that requires constant effort to keep at bay. But now I want to tear down the walls, let its raucous scream join the cacophony of light to overwhelm me.

As the city changed, so did my nightmare. At first fears not only of death but of the open, the cold, of a sky stretched horizon to horizon unbroken by a single structure, any sign of humanity. Yet as the city changed, the emptiness moved to saving grace and desire, my fears crystallized in open nakedness, fault lines written clear, unshielded before everyone to view, examine, judge. Then, now, to this.

I turn to Pen's space; city lights paint stained glass from floor to ceiling. Another crack, the unfairness of a six-year-old suffering ailments no one can diagnose. A better parent would have helped her, a richer one bought salvation, but I am neither. Tomorrow may tell – an answer, perhaps a solution.

A wisp of auburn hair brushes across my face. Lou leans over, wraps her arms around me. "Pretty, isn't it?"

"Better than daylight."

"She'll be fine, don't worry."

"Hopefully, it's over tomorrow."

"Nightmares?"

"Yeah, sorry I woke you."

"It's just worry."

"No, it's always there."

She sits on the arm of the chair, looks into my eyes. "The knife?"

"There's something else, Lou, something on the fringe that keeps skipping away."

"Which is?"

"When that knife falls, before I wake up, I feel it's the end but also the beginning, sort of both rolled together. It's not the dying that terrifies me, or the uncertainty, but..."

"What?"

"I know it's my choice, my decision. Like I volunteered to be a human sacrifice."

"Want to know what I think?"

"I have a choice?"

"No. Penny's illness is playing with your mind. The Greg Robertson I know doesn't dream of suicide." She stands, flicks the walls opaque and holds out her hand. "Come back to bed. If you can't sleep, we'll find another way to take your mind off the dream."

I sit in a six by six-meter clearing in the depths of the Black Forest, cradle my morning espresso like gold. With three walls set to Schwartz Wald, the illusion is only broken by Lou in her leotard and Pen with her penguin. They commandeer half the fourth wall each; Lou's broadcasts the *MorningSize* show, Pen's the *Doctor Dora Discovery* channel.

It's easy enough to ignore Lou; Pen shoves her penguin in my face. "Dad, can we take Mister Fishy?"

“Do you remember Miss Growly?”

“Uh huh.”

“What happened when you took her out?”

“She died.”

I can almost see the shower of foam as the toy lion exploded under the mag-lev’s debris catcher. “Where is she now?”

Pen looks up, confused. “Don’t know.”

I pull her in with one hand, tickle her with the other. “Her guts are across the railway, all over the path, all over the people in the station.”

She squeals.

“You want to add Mister Fishy’s guts, too? Lion guts, penguin guts, lion guts, penguin guts.” The wall flickers to window.

“If you two are quite finished, we need to get ready,” Lou says. I pause in mock obedience, whisper in Pen’s ear, “Say ‘yes, Mummy’.”

“Yes, Mummy,” Pen repeats loudly. As she scuttles away to find her shoes, I settle back, resume my coffee.

“That’s both of you, not just one.”

I don’t like hospitals, no matter how presented or packaged. You only come here if you or someone you know is sick, and as far as life expectancy goes, they barely beat the morgue. Many years ago, they tried to re-label them as health centers, scattering random dieticians and exercise machines here and there. All that’s gone now, all save the furniture and décor. Glass, plasteel and ceramic walls and floors, memory latex and bamboo furniture, windows of smart glass. It gives a clean, harsh, up to the minute feel that’s clinically cold and unwelcoming. They’ve tried harder for the children, cartoon decorations on the walls, gentle rainbow pastel-colored beds and chairs.

The specialist’s office mirrors the rest, tries for cozy friendliness and safe nonchalance – it fails. The four large chairs arranged in a perfect circle unsettle me; I drag a chair next to Lou’s, draw an inquisitive tilt of the head from the specialist AI. Pen sits on the floor, absorbed in the animal parade on her VR headset.

Doctor Lee’s expression shifts from bored familiarity to mild concern. “You still comfortable with daughter remaining? We have very good crèche, she could wait until we finish.”

“No, she’ll only be curious later.”

“As you like. This is specialist AI Laia, she’s new addition, childhood disease specialist. She runs tests and analysis on your daughter.”

How can a gender be assigned to a thin, dull chrome AI? Like all AIs I’ve met, it’s face is utterly androgynous; I can’t think of them as anything but ‘it’. Their perfect, accent free speech doesn’t help.

“We know what is wrong. Penny has a serious but treatable condition,” Laia says. Lou’s grip on my hand tightens. “Normal cells produce wastes then flush them out through the body. Penny’s cells do not work properly. The wastes build up slowly over time which leads to her eyesight, concentration, behavior, and personality problems.”

“Does it have a name?”

“It is called Batten disease. Penny has the CLN3-R variant.”

“You said it can be treated.”

“There is more. The lack of concentration, eyesight and personality problems are only symptoms. If untreated CLN3-R is fatal by age ten. In plain terms Penny’s cells are poisoning her and, if left untreated, will kill her in three years.”

It takes a second to register; Laia’s words echo perfectly formed, dispassionate, clear in my mind. Pen sits silently, back to me, ramrod straight. The knot in my stomach grows. “You’re sure? There’s no chance you got it wrong?”

“No probability for error exists. Results have been checked, peer-reviewed and examined. Concurrent diagnoses received from thirty specialist AIs.”

I sink a little lower in the chair. Lou’s grip tightens, her shoulder’s heavier, voice shakes. “Where did she pick it up? Is it something in the air, the water?”

“It is not environmental. It is inherited from the child’s parents through an error in a specific chromosome. If only one parent has the faulty chromosome, their children do not inherit the condition. If they both have the faulty chromosome, the child is guaranteed to inherit the condition.”

Pen’s taken off the headset. The room recedes, a strange detachment grows in me. Lou starts to shake, small jerks transmitted through my shoulder: “We gave this to Penny?”

"Yes, and to all your future children. With CLN3-R it is a certainty."

"You said it can be cured."

"We can go in, reprogram the child's cell structure and chromosomes. We can do this only before they reach a certain level of physical development, around seven years of age. As Penny is a little ahead for her age group, we estimate we have seven months at most to start treatment," Laia says.

"So, we're just in time, Doctor Lee?"

"Yes, Louise. It's complex new procedure but successful, no pain. She'll be with us for month, unconscious stasis, while nanites operate. She won't know thing, go to sleep dying six-year-old, wake up perfectly healthy nearly seven-year-old."

"When can you start?"

"Tomorrow, next week, soon as you want. We have space and capacity. There is one problem. Procedure is not on the list."

"Sorry?"

"Is not on health benefits list. Is new technique, not fully through trials. Works properly, waiting certification."

"So?"

"Until certification not on list. Not on list, no public funding, no insurance cover. Is full fee paying, not all up front not all at once, there are payment cycles, but still full fees."

"Money's no issue."

"I understand, but don't ignore anything that makes burden easier." Doctor Lee touches his tablet, sends across a dense table of figures. He grimaces, almost apologetically. "I've broken cost of treatment into components, obtained estimate from all other hospitals in district. Our options are keen."

Lou's nails dig deep, the room grows colder. The numbers are impossible, obscene.

"We try to keep numbers as low as possible. There are people here who help, perhaps little time, day or two, talk it through?"

"Yes, yes, thank you."

"A few days' delay has no impact. Laia will help make arrangements and provide you with summary of Penny's condition."

Lou pulls the harness tighter than usual, binds us in lockstep as we emerge from the hospital level. Out as one into the tidal flow of people, we retrace our steps along moving pavements, belts, escalators, and the rare mad dash to avoid open sky and putrid smells. I see nothing, feel nothing but numbing cold to replace my usual unease and revulsion. I'm on autopilot towed behind her, left foot right foot head down and go. Lou'd normally beat an erratic path from one display to another, vendor to vendor to chat about nothing and everything but now she drives us on, one arm on me, one threaded through Pen's harness.

The numbers finally register in the mag-lev for home, crushed into a family corner seat held steady by the press of bodies. It's more money than we will earn in thirty years. Pen tugs my trouser leg. She hasn't said a word since the hospital. "Dad, the man said I'm going to die. Am I?"

"No honey, the man's stupid. You are not going to die."

"Good. Mummy can't do her exercises without me."

Lou's head drives into the nape of my neck.

I sink into the couch empty and exhausted. Dusk casts cold, sterile shadows through the apartment; the sun seems beaten, cowed as it struggles to push light through thick polluted air.

Lou lingers at Pen's partition. Shoulders slumped, she stares at Pen as if the act itself can tear the guilty chromosomes from her body, cleanse her by telekinesis. The couch moves, Lou's feet join mine on the window ledge.

"How do we do it?"

"Some of the numbers aren't right, Greg. We could get it done in other places, foreign clinics maybe. Sometimes they're good."

"That brings it to...?"

"Four-fifths their lowest number. Makes it a little bit impossible, not totally impossible."

"If we sell everything, that's maybe a fifth, we'd have enough for the down payment. But the rest? We need to show it all up front, no questions asked."

"Have to beg, borrow, call in every favor, everyone we know. Perhaps we can get close."

"I'm not even sure we could raise it if we indentured ourselves for life. And who'd lend it? They don't give that much to the likes of us."

"Maybe if you were a bit higher up."

"What? Hold on, Lou, that's not fair."

"You let them push you down when you're better than them."

"I've done okay."

"You don't advertise yourself, don't go hard enough."

"I'm not educated like the rest. You know it makes it harder."

"You made it that way. You were the one that got kicked out. You can't blame anyone else."

I'd never told anyone the whole story. All they'd ever seen was the vid headlines. It still burns after ten years but I've sworn no one will ever know beyond those involved. Not even her. "I'm not making excuses, I'm only saying. Right now, what matters is getting the money to save Pen."

"I know, I didn't mean anything, it might've made it easier, that's all."

"No matter what, we'll raise it. Six month's just so tight."

"It'll be hard, but we can get there."

"Exactly. Somehow."

Dusk fades to silent evening, the city lights beat the glow of rising threeships into submission. One hundred fifty levels below, beltwalks and mag-levs snake like trails of multicolored fireflies.

"Did you catch the rest of the info dump, Lou?"

"Which part?"

"Us. Batten's disease. Kids."

"Not totally."

"We can't have any more kids."

"You think the government's going to revoke our license?"

"Every child we have is guaranteed to get Batten's disease. We can't have any more, Pen's it." I don't need to see her face, feel her tense. Giving Pen a brother or sister is at the heart of Lou's plans.

"No. No, that's not right."

"There's more. You can have kids with anyone. It's only if someone else has the same variant it causes trouble. Lou, the male gene's the trigger. It's me, I'm the problem."

"You? You're telling me you've not only sentenced Penny to death, but any other children we could have, killed off our family? You can't be that paranoid."

"It's got nothing to do with what I think. It's a fact."

"How can you be so narcissistic? This isn't about you, it's about Penny."

"Pen's all I'm worried about, you and her. It's simply facts."

"Facts, is it? Well, what do you suggest?"

"If I can't, I mean, if you wanted to –"

"You want me to go breed with someone else, get some sperm donor loser to impregnate me?"

"The next contract cycle's up soon, I wouldn't stop you."

"You'd load that onto me, make me wear it?"

"I'm being honest."

"No, it's about you and your self-pity."

"It's about maturity, being realistic."

"You want maturity? We got Penny into this, we'll get her out and that's all there is to it. You damn well stick out what you started!"

Mister Fishy bounces off Lou's head, comes to rest upside down at my feet. Pen stands arms crossed, tear-streaked face. "Don't shout!"

Louise reaches back, points one finger. "Don't throw your toys! Pick it up right now or it goes in the disposal!"

Lips quivering, Pen bursts into tears. Lou's by Pen's side instantly. "I'm sorry, we didn't mean to shout."

"Don't like it when you shout."

"We're tired, cranky. Even parents get cranky."

"Don't hate me?"

"No, no, how could we? We love you."

"Still like Dad?"

"Of course I do, silly."

We sit on the floor, Pen between us. It's simpler to stay than get her into bed, so we lie down and huddle together.

"Greg, the things I said, I didn't mean them."

"I know. Same here."

"We'll get through it, right? We'll make it?"

"Yeah, for sure. One step, one thing at a time. We'll be fine."

My nightmare returns in force, played out against a sickening blood red sky.

Chapter Two

Louise

Everything is nominal, it all ticks along smoothly like most days. I recline my chair to the point where tiredness does not quite overwhelm the need to stay on top of the information flow. The gerontology feeds are lumpy; ordinarily, I'd reset the framework – today, I'll make do with simple smoothing. It's a huge effort to stay on top of the basics, keep up with the boards, let alone improve them. Hone in on the reds, Louise, put out the bushfires and let the smoldering threats remain until they, too, warrant attention. It's a rookie's board, mainly green, a touch of orange, a sliver of red. On par for the job but for me an abysmal shortfall. For the first time I don't care; it's all been thrust solidly back to the banal, the irrelevant.

The bottom left screen flames purple then silver as Clara's face pops up. It's months since we've been on site together, shift changes and work from home conspiring against us.

"Okay, Louise, you're here, I'm here, it's lunch...so let's go."

"I can't, I've got five percent reds and –"

"And I've assigned Adam to cover both of us. Two minutes at reception, okay?" and her face winks off. Clara's a force of nature, although exactly which one, I'm not sure.

Clara leads the way up forty levels and out past the edge of the building to McDsGlass. I look down through crystal clear polycarbonate to human and vehicle traffic clogging the streets, lift my gaze across the city to distant mountains beneath an unbroken mocha curtain.

We elbow our way to a booth overlooking the heliport corridor, take the last two empty seats from a pair of salary men. A tiltwing shoots up, a giant silver dragonfly ascending through a swirling cloud of gnat-like drones. The city is alive, vibrant and connected; my mood starts to lift.

The smartglass phases, RosieMac's face appears. "Bonjour, Clara Daynez. QueenMac, KrispFries, low sodium cola?"

"Please."

The image flickers. "Buenas tardes, Louise Hierro. We have missed your company. A soy grill wrap, FibreFries and TripleDip chocolate sundae with fudge. Your meals will be two minutes."

I lose myself in small talk and the view. So many people, so many stories, but to me only one matters. Does everyone feel like this sometimes, connected but separated? The service tone pulls me back. "Your meals," RosieMac announces as the plates descend to the booth, "and a complimentary green tea and chamomile boost for Louise Hierro. McDsGlass takes our family's wellbeing seriously. Happy days!"

I stare nonplussed at the cup in front of me. "A freebie? I must look awful."

"Like shit, but better than I would. It's not going well, is it?"

"Better than we expected but it looks shaky. I don't think we can do it."

"You're not giving up?"

"What? No, of course not! But what they want Clara, it's so much."

"How close are you?"

"We've called in all the favors, set up the socialnet fundraisers, worked out what we can get if we sell it all. But it's nowhere near enough."

"How's Penny?"

"She knows, Clara, she absolutely knows what's going on but she doesn't say, doesn't let on. She's so well behaved lately, even when we argue she tries to be good."

"And you and Greg?"

A gust pushes against the window, drones shift like a frightened school of fish – first with the wind, then against it, silver flakes caught in an insistent tide. How is it with me and Greg? How could it be? Clara's got no idea, she hasn't been here, hasn't felt useless her child dying despite her, because of her. I jam the spoon into the chocolate fudge, stuff the overloaded cargo in my mouth. "Some days it's great, sometimes it feels like it's the two of us against the world. Mainly we tear each other apart, it hurts like hell but I just don't care. We gave this to her, Clara, it's both our faults but there's times I believe him, I really believe he's responsible."

"You can't, you're a reasonable person and Greg didn't mean to do this. None of the pre-contract checks would show it, how could either of you know?"

I plunge the spoon down, send drops of topping onto the smartglass. It cleans itself; two towelettes and a box of tissues appear next to me. "I know, but it doesn't help. He still thinks it, still blames himself. I see it in his eyes when he thinks I'm not looking, emptiness like he's failed us. Do you know what he said?"

"What?"

"The idiot suggested I forget contract renewal and find someone else, someone without the gene, with money. Can you believe it?"

"You know something, I can. To him it's probably a logical choice if it gets Penny cured. It's not the twenty-first century, hun. I mean, if you've told him about your family, it's probably the only option he could come up with."

"He doesn't know all of it."

"I'm going to light a few more candles for you. You're going to need them."

"Add a minor miracle to a major miracle."

"How long have you got left?"

"Four months if they're right, but it's possible out to a year, a year and a half, but it's a lower chance of success."

"Now, don't think of it, we'll get there. What's next?"

"Well, we've scared off most of our friends and what's left of the relatives, the socialnet fundraisers have gone quiet, so now it's the banks and loan sharks. Anyone and anything with money."

"We've started the 'miss a cup help the kid' fund. We're all putting in, it's a little bit from everyone, maybe it'll make a difference."

"I didn't know."

"It's no more than you'd do for us. We have to stick together. Anyway, we've also made you work for it."

"What?"

"Those double shift schedules you've been given? You can thank Jimmy and his first contract cycle partner." Clara spreads out a towelette. She points to my half empty glass of green tea. "Anyway, let's have a little fun. Finish that off and tip the leaves here."

I tip the leaves out and nearly clip a bot as it tries to scurry away with the towelette. I drop the leftover FibreFries to the floor in the hope they will keep the bot at bay, at least for a while.

Clara twists the towelette one way, then the other, accompanied by occasional 'hums' and 'has'. I can't make anything of it but Clara takes it seriously, even if she pretends it's all a bit of a joke. She gives the towelette one final twist, turns it to me. "There, that's interesting."

"Looks like modern art."

"No, go around in a circle, clockwise, outside to inside. See these? Shapes like a house, a spade, an 'm'. These mean good fortune, money, success. Told you it would be fine."

I can barely make out the shapes, but right in the middle, quite clearly, there's something else. "What about this?"

"What about what?"

"There, in the middle."

"That's the far future, don't worry about that."

"But what is it? It looks like a snake wrapped around a mountain. You can't have missed that."

"No, of course not. It's just a silly game, a bit of fun, forget it."

"Come on, Clara, play to the end."

"Well, it's nothing, it's never exact, there's many interpretations." Clara scrunches the towelette, drops it to the waiting bot. "Look at it one way, a snake means enmity or trouble, and a mountain a journey, a very hard one. Look at it another and they both mean starting over, shedding the old and moving on. Depends."

We make our way to the exit. "Thanks, Clara."

Clara trails behind, watches the bot devour and process the discarded towelette. "Any time hun, any time."

The audio crackles: "Upload immediate, Greg Robertson." I shift in my seat to find the exact balance between support and comfort, tighten my restraints, adjust the airflow, and reinitialize the neural interface.

A wireframe representation of the city replaces my bare white cubicle, leaves me to float omniscient and omnipresent in the construct. Across the frame, endless pearl strings glow pale blue, occasional yellow-orange, in places pure white. One light changes from pale blue to red. The framework shoots past to halt at the pulsing light, diagnostic outputs behind me, live feed overhead, systems schematics below, unresponsive audio surveillance

unit in front. Live view exposes no obvious damage, a review of the last ten seconds no sign of interference, accidental or otherwise.

The schematics flash through me, nominals overlaid with actuals, layer by layer, micron by micron. A yellow-black barred section slowly pirouettes. Maintenance schedules, install dates, failure rates and probabilities for the integrated circuit emerge, each examined, each noted. A simple failure, before scheduled replacement but not outside norms – it's an annoyance rather than an issue. I pull up inventory and asset control, check for a replacement, supervising AI, and repair bot. Tagged, logged, and scheduled, the burning red light of unit failure is replaced by the white strobe of maintenance.

Time check gives me a little room, I flip to live view. The city falls until I stop at the two hundred eightieth level, the limit of Enforcement surveillance assets. Above me, the government enclave disappears into the brown dome of pollutants; below, the steel gray city, a continuous field of cubes and boxes joined haphazardly, an undulating carpet of barely contained mayhem. Neither drags me back here, rather what lies between. The horizons beckon, emptiness between what humanity has built below and the price paid above. To one side low mountaintops, to another the faint shimmer of ocean; but always too far away, beyond the limits of my city, my prison.

The city reverts to wireframe and rises to meet me. Even two seconds can be too long, a unit could fail unnoticed; thankfully not this time.

A ripple to one side announces my replacement's arrival. Quick protocol exchange and I swap the city for my cubicle. At least the job's busy enough to keep me distracted, stop my mind from wandering too much. I step down and straighten my shirt. I have an appointment to keep.

"Mister Robertson, please come in, sit down." I take the extended hand. "I'm Tony, the area rep."

A figure next to Tony leans across. "Jonathon. Pleased to meet you."

I sit nervously. The room feels unusual, but they seem open, keen enough, particularly Tony who reminds me of an old-time real estate agent. They should be glad to see me – after all, I'm here to beg. Nobody goes to the Enforcement Benevolent Fund if they can avoid it; only when every other option is gone. They have money and lots of it, never turn anyone away in exchange for ruinously high interest rates, ironclad liens, and weighty administration fees. It's said the only thing that separates the Fund from an extortion racket are their badges. I smile warmly.

"So, we have your details, all the information we need." Tony turns his tablet off, makes a show of placing it on the edge of the desk, out of the way. "A quick recap if I may, of your application. The amount is for an operation on your daughter, and you offer security over your total assets and income streams."

"Yes. Whatever it would take to service the loan."

"Certainly, in matters like these there are few constraints. Your recent credit history is very active, unfortunately all unsuccessful. I take it we are your last choice?"

I shift uncomfortably. "Well, yes, that's true, it's not that the Fund is –"

"That's quite alright, most of our customers follow the same path. They could save themselves a great deal of frustration if they came to us first. Allow me to be frank, Mister Robertson. The amount you have asked for is...significant, in truth the largest request I have seen, by a wide margin. For this you offer security of low value together with an extended...a greatly extended...payment horizon."

"We're good risks, our histories are clean with no defaults, no judgments, early payments on everything."

"Which is all well and good with lesser amounts, but this? The Fund is not unsympathetic, Mister Robertson. I'm touched by your plight. However, I have a duty to the Fund members, a requirement not to overstep our already generous and flexible conditions." He puts the tablet away. The gentle click as the drawer locks is a thunderclap. "Unfortunately, Mister Robinson, the Fund is unable to grant your application. We cannot provide you with the amount you request. I am sorry."

I half expected it, months of the same message conditioning me, but it still feels bitter. My voice is faint, defeated, forced to civility by the faint hope that, in slightly better circumstances, I could find myself here again. "Thank you for at least considering it."

"Don't think all your options are closed. I invited Jonathon here not to watch your last hope dashed but rather knowing he may have an arrangement that can help. I will leave you to talk in private."

It dawns on me; the room's devoid of screens, monitoring devices, any of the usual surveillance assets. Bitterness changes to wariness as clean cut, bespectacled Jonathon takes on a different perspective. "We can get Penny the treatment she needs, Greg."

"How? The Fund has already said 'No', and we offered them everything."

"We're not interested in what you offered. It has no value."

"What does?"

"Knowledge. Information. Schedules."

"I don't like where this is going."

"And I don't think you have a choice. How long has it been since the diagnosis? Four months? All that time and effort, you and Louise, and you find yourself in front of these sharks?" Jonathon places his glasses on the desk. "Greg, for everything you've done and everything that's been promised, how much have you raised?"

"Twenty, maybe twenty-five percent."

"No. Try eighteen. It's not going to increase, no one will give you another cent."

"We've still got time."

"No, I'm telling you. I'm telling you there's no money, no more for Penny. You're not stupid. You know who I'm with, and if I tell you there's no more, you can believe me."

I fight my anger, hold back the urge to throttle him. Of course, it's crystal clear now; room with no surveillance, links to the Fund, and if they say there's no more money they can probably do it. I grit my teeth, force the words out. "Why do you want to kill Pen?"

"Oh please, Greg, don't be naïve. We're not interested in your daughter. I'm a family man, too. My son Tsuen is the same age as Penny. Why would I want to kill a child?"

"Then why?"

"Because you have something we want. If you didn't, Penny would be as good as dead. You could never raise that amount and even if by some miracle you did, you would still have to get by us to get her treated. Be thankful you are of some value."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing more than for you to do your job, and every so often provide a little information. The surveillance unit maintenance schedules, nothing unusual, merely times and duration for places we may be interested in."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"And you'll give me the money, all of it?"

"No. We'll cure her. Money's only a vehicle, an avenue to control what really matters. Make no mistake, accept the offer and Penny starts treatment inside forty-eight hours. Treatment overseen by Doctor Lee and Laia."

"You own them?"

"Let us say we have an arrangement. Penny will be treated and cured by the best. We live by our word and die by it if necessary."

I'm in turmoil; boxed in again. I want to run, dive into a screaming rage, or simply fold under the weight of my conflicted emotions and impotence. Above it all the possibility, the certainty of treatment overwhelms me. "I'll have to...I mean, Lou...I can't by myself."

"Of course, this is a family decision. Louise is wrong you know, Penny has barely a month left. After that, it will be too late." Jonathon stands. "We do not make these offers lightly. Consider carefully, it's your daughter's life. I will call you tonight for a decision." He opens the door part way, turns. "One last thing. We only offer once. To decline is considered impolite, a slight we overlook. To return later and ask again is an insult, something that cannot be ignored."

I make the belt ride home alone, silent and pensive in the tightly packed mob. Does it matter, does it make any difference where it comes from as long as it cures her? We're prepared to trade away our lives anyway, is this anything other? The more I think the less the price, the easier the decision. Maintenance schedules. Information about what would happen anyway regardless of me or anybody else. All that remains is to convince Lou.

Penny trots off down the hall. A few minutes alone is welcome, an entire day of mother-daughter time's precious but draining. Well, now the Jaskins will feel it for a few hours, seven children in one apartment for the pod play date.

I had sisters, a brother, I never needed scheduled 'interaction' time while it lasted. The old feelings rise; damn him, damn what he took from me! Dead and paid his debt to society but what about me, what about Penny, what about everything stripped from her because of him?

A pair of pink pompom socks lie on the floor. Typical Greg, his turn to keep it in order and it's half done. I crush the socks on top of Mister Fishy in the dirty clothes chute. It's not fair on Penny, stuffed animals and imaginary

horses are no fair trade for other children. No child should be restricted to a pod, a single class, a handful of friends. What child deserves a hyper-vigilant parent to watch their every move, every step? Unfair, but the way it was, the way it is. Would I let Penny go unwatched, fall into another old man's grass? Of course not.

I turn to the bare expanse of our six-by-six apartment. Partitions stowed, everything in its place, a picture of minimalist heaven. Even at my worst it's never been like this, a draconian order imposed on what I can control while what really matters unravels. I go to the wall, bring up the exercise net: "*Hello, Louise Hierro. Live group or simulation?*"

"Live group."

"*Your desired level?*"

"Nine."

The young face is replaced by a hard, pock-marked scowl carved into a tattooed head. "Well, well. Louise Hierro. Just look at you, about time you were back. Ladies, we have a backslider among us." The face is matched by a rock-hard lean body in sweat-drenched shorts and top. Five holograms spring up around me, projections of the current live group. "I promise you this will hurt. Think you can slack off and I won't know? I see it written all over your thighs, butter ball. All of you, now, drop down and give me fifty, and quickly."

An hour and a half later I crack, bend over hands on knees, clothes soaked. One by one the holograms kneel, fall over, or collapse spreadeagled on their backs before they wink out. "Next time, Louise Hierro, I am going to give you a real workout, and even more if I see you at McDsGlass again. Mother knows and mother sees."

I've nearly recovered when Greg walks in. He looks tired, pensive. "The Punisher?" he asks.

"Just finished."

"I see. That sort of day."

"How did it go. Did they accept it?"

"No. I mean...yes, no. The Fund knocked us back."

They were our last real hope, everything else long shots or desperation. The room slowly recedes as my chest tightens: "Oh."

"But there was this other person, Jonathon, says he can help."

"Help? How?"

"He can get Doctor Lee to treat Pen. He's going to call, ask what we've decided."

"What we've decided? You didn't say 'yes'?"

"No, I didn't say anything. It's not quite so simple."

How could he? Months fighting rejection and despair, our daughter dying and when someone makes the offer we need he doesn't grab it with both hands? "Take it she lives, reject it she dies. What's so difficult about that?"

"They want something. They don't care about money or the apartment, they want something else."

"Well, give it to them."

"But you don't know what they're asking."

I feel it inside, hope swamped by panic and anger. What's wrong with him? We've offered everything to everyone for this and he's worried about what they want? It doesn't matter, it's worth it whatever it is. All I hear, all I know is they can give my baby her life back. "Honey, look at me. You can fix her, make her better. They can, can't they, it's true?"

"Yes, yes, they can."

"So why can't you say 'yes'? They can have anything, anything at all."

"They want information, some internal schedules."

"So, give it to them."

He smiles. It seems forced but it's still a smile. "I had to make sure you were happy with it."

"Happy? It's wonderful! I'm going to tell Penny."

I'm nearly at the door when the phone chimes. The window flickers to a beak-nosed face behind wire-rimmed glasses. "Hello, Jonathon," Greg says, "I've talked it over with Lou and..."

Chapter Three

Henry

I wake slowly, let my eyes adjust to the darkness. A sliver of moon peeks between the curtains, casts faint light across the bed to my pocket watch on the post – 2 a.m. The silence is broken only by the gentle buzz of Luke's breath. I wait, count. I am patient.

The floor is cold under my bare feet. I move carefully to the doorway, avoid the loose board to the left, Isaac's bed to the right. I pull the door flap, slip out, let it fall back to close my brothers from me. I stop at the stairs. No noise, my parents and sisters still sleep. I reach into the wooden clothes box, move aside winter coats and breeches until my hands find the bag I put there yesterday. I lift out a white shirt, pants, socks. I dress quickly, check for my shoes, Melville, small roll of notes, pen knife. Satisfied, I hoist the bag onto my shoulder.

I head to the kitchen, take the note from my pocket, and place it at the head of the table. It will wait there untouched till morning, no one will dare disturb it until Father sits for breakfast. I know what he will think, what he will say; it's better like this.

I step onto the porch, close the door on my old life to face an uncertain future. The city lights are an amber haze that encircles our house, the farms, my world for seventeen years. A ring of concrete and steel towers in the distance; the array of the forces of evil, Father would say, the tide of the world washing in.

I put my shoes on slowly, deliberately. Off the porch then one mile down our dirt track, another mile along the graveled one-laner to the black top, the boundary between two worlds. The bus will take me into the city; by dawn, I will be gone and this place only a memory. I make my way to the steps. The boards complain gently, there's a rustle to my left.

"Henry?" Mom. I turn. She must have waited all night on the porch bench, huddled in a worn gray hand-me-down blanket. Her hair's down, bonnet at her feet. "Where are you going?"

The moonlight's faint, the city lights strong. I see her face creased, worried. She knows, she just hasn't told herself.

"I'm leaving."

Her face ripples apprehension to fear, fear to horror. She controls it; the quaver in her voice betrays her. "No. No you can't."

"You knew one day I would."

"I won't let you."

I tried to tell her many times, but she wouldn't listen. Coming to my eighteenth they wanted me baptized, a committed member shackled and controlled. I'm not ready for it, maybe I never will be.

"It's choking me, Mom. I can't live the way they want me to."

"The way God wants you to."

"How can god change his mind one week to the next? Last month the buggies are only black, this month gray's okay. It makes no sense."

"The guidance is there to keep us separate, apart from the English...and you'd go to them? The world has nothing but horror and evil."

"No, there's more, something that's not here."

"What else can there be?"

"School, Mom. I want to learn, go to high school, maybe college one day."

"Nothing good ever comes of worldly learning. I should know. We only need the basics, everything is in the Bible." Her lips draw tight, eyes narrow, head shakes. "You kept that book she gave you, didn't you?"

A pang of guilt goes as quickly as it came. Moby Dick and Typee prod me through the bag, a worn volume when received; now dog-eared and falling apart. "Yes."

"Didn't we teach you? Don't you know it only takes the smallest thing to open the door? You should have sent it back when we told you, but what's done is done." She pulls the blanket tight. "You can stay here, go to school in the city." She seems frail, an old woman trying to avoid the inevitable, desperate to hold onto her first-born. I sit, put one arm around her thin frame: "It won't work. Father would never allow it."

"It will hurt him if you up and disappear."

"Father? I don't think so."

"You don't know everything about him. What son does? It will, you know. He won't show it to you or anyone, even me, just keep it inside. But I know."

"If I stay, I'll only go later. It will hurt more, cause more pain. I'm not going to be like Ezra Wittmer, back and forth, back and forth until I'm shunned. This way at least I can still come by. Sometimes. Maybe."

"And this won't hurt me? I won't let you see me cry but cry I will when you're gone. I won't be able to sleep for wondering how you are, how the world's pulling you away, if you're safe."

"Don't worry, I've a job waiting, a small one to get me through school. And a place to stay, a place with a family, I'll be fine."

"Will I see you again?"

"I'm not going to the ends of the Earth. I'll only be two hours away, it's hardly anything. I don't hate you, but I can't live like this. Do you want me to visit sometimes?"

"Of course, but your father might find it difficult."

"I can work around that. If you want me to visit, I will. I promise I'll never move too far away, so you always know where I am. But I can never move back." I kiss the top of her head. She stays rigid, silent. I stand, pick up my bag. "I left a note on the kitchen table. Father won't like it but at least he won't be left to wonder. Goodbye, Mom."

She stares at me, tears my heart out. This is why I wanted to sneak out, what I tried to avoid, why most Amish boys leave like thieves in the night. Not for the sternness of their fathers, not the judgment and gossip of their neighbors, but the breaking of their mothers' hearts. She half raises one arm; it falls back as if changing its mind. "Goodbye, Henry."

I hang my head and walk away; my shoes know the way, the soft sigh of dirt underfoot breaks the silence. I pause at the rise for one last look. Mom sits still under the blanket. From their bedroom window a solitary gas light throws my father's silhouette at me. It wavers, then the house sinks back into darkness.

Chapter Four

Menno

It is a good day, warm and mild with a gentle breeze across the paddock. I lift the stoneware jug to my lips, drink exactly two mouthfuls of cold water and place it back under the cherry tree. Coffee swirls run before the wind to taunt the faint yellow disc somewhere above. Hardly sunshine, hardly a sky. Once, many years ago, I saw it briefly, incandescent in a patch of blue, even that now faded memory. I check the rig, the set of leather on the team, then kneel for clevis and jointer. I dig my hand into the sod, pull out a fist full of dirt; it dribbles out, a cascade of dark brown – rich, warm, pungent. As close as a man can get to God this side of the grave. I stand, reach for plow and reins. A flick, a word of encouragement, and the team resumes the steady march to turn paddock to furrowed field. A good day's work will see it finished and I can move closer in, away from the edge, away from the black top.

I grew immune to spectators long ago, learned the futility of asking them not to photograph, to respect my beliefs; I now content myself with prayer as I close in on them. I keep my eyes down; I scanned the cars and English for the first few weeks, but the face I sought remained hidden or was simply not there. I reach the boundary, turn the team, start the next furrow.

Farming gives a man peace, patience, a different pace to life and time to think. Necessarily alone, a blessing when things are good, in times like these it sits heavy, a curse on a troubled mind. I push the thoughts away, begin the deep toned intonation of *O Gott Vater Wir Loben Dich*, carry the ancient hymn out past the horses, through the fields. The horses move in time to the slow rhythmic tune, peace returns as I let the words wash over, sink through. Line follows line through my voice, line follows line on the ground, the land changes yet again as it has for generations.

"Menno! Menno!" Freda stands under the cherry tree and waves, blanket on the ground, lunch spread out. "I thought it was a good day for a picnic. Help speed your day, remove you from the English quickly."

The gray arc gleams, an ever-present reminder. From here it soars into the air, from the black top I need to lean back to see where it ends. "There are more than last year, all with their cars, tablets, cameras. Every year more, every year closer." The grayness stares back smugly, plumes of white-rust smoke here and there, tangled thickets of silver antennae and satellite dishes cluster limpet-like to its sides. A dull thrum announces the arrival of a tiltwing over the boundary as it disappears into the gray maw. The city hums with so-called life but it is death, eternal death to the unwitting. "He is in there somewhere. Where did we fail, Freda?"

"He came this morning after you left. He's staying with Ben Lutz."

Mennonites? It could be worse. "Maybe there is hope. Perhaps God's mercy will soon bring him home."

"Mahlon wouldn't talk to him, walked out as he walked in, but Luke seems eager to know, asked many questions. I'm afraid for him, too."

"We cannot chain them at home, we can bring them up properly and pray but, in the end, it is between them and God."

"Menno, he had cigarettes." She spits the words as if the Devil himself formed them. "I could smell it on his clothes and hair. What next, alcohol and cards? What if Luke gets that way, too?"

It tore my mother's heart out when David left. Even after these years, I see the tears, the doubt and fear in my father's eyes each time I left the house, each day until my baptism. Until then, nothing is written in stone, nothing unforgivable, no one without hope. "I did not follow David. Luke does not have to follow Henry." Perhaps it is the warmth, perhaps the company; I tarry, open a little more. "We all feel it more, the world, the pressure. Lester and George's land taxes have gone up again. I am sure our notice will show the same. It is getting harder to make it work."

"The other day Ruth was saying Omar's thinking of selling up, taking a factory job. Hard enough as it is, harder still just married."

"Temptation of the world, easier and easier. Bring up children the right way, the Godly way, teach them the value of hard work on a farm and the world offers them ten times as much for half the effort. They are being lost, slowly but surely. How many this year?"

"Four, if you count Henry. Then there's Minister Genaamd's passing last month."

"At least that will be fixed soon enough." I sweep my arm across the horizon. "This is not liable to change, only to grow."

"It reminds me of the martyrs."

“How?”

“The world turning against them, the rejection, the persecution. The slow strangling of communities, falling away and then the righteous standing strong in the face of it all, faithful to death.” Freda folds the blanket, packs the remnants back into the basket. “I’ll have supper ready early tonight, don’t be late.”

I stand, brush a few loose crumbs to the grass, watch her walk away. A perfect choice twenty years ago, a perfect choice now, a gift of the perfect helpmate from God. It humbled me then, it still does. The burden is heavy, the need to be a true, upright Christian husband, lead the house as Christ does his church; it is the least I can do and even in this, I fall short too often. If anyone has failed Henry, it is me, and it is up to me to set it to rights.

I resume deep in thought, thoughts of martyrs, testing, church history. They were called to be a peculiar people, to suffer for their faith, so there was no surprise or shock for the martyrs, for the fact of the world set against them. Now there is relative peace, the shift from open persecution to the subtlety and nuance of the call of the world.

I am no martyr; my faith is not strong enough to stand that test. I would flee, leave the old world for the new with my family. We are not like the martyrs of old but like the others, encircled by the world and its temptations; but for us there is no place to go.

The crowds have left, gone back to the world and their televisions and screens and liquor, back to their homes. I still think it strange, the few English I once talked to said they found my simple life, faith, and rejection of today unsettling, perhaps confronting. Every bird has its nest, and they have returned to theirs.

They may think me uneducated, but I am no fool. The gray circle is not the end of the city but the start, the start of the globe-straddling metropolis humanity created and inhabits like battery hens in gilded cages. Here and there it is broken for agricultural combines, fisheries, insurmountable terrain or private reserves and, in ever-declining numbers, holdouts like us, people true to the old ways, struggling under failing and wavering laws. There is no doubt we are being pushed out as greedy eyes covet our land, stack bills and circumstance against us. It is not our way to fight back but to endure as examples, turn the other cheek as Christ taught, knowing full well the second blow will come. Doubtless if I miss one bill, make one payment a penny short, they will take it all.

It stays with me on the walk home; an idea forms, grows slowly in my subconscious then peeks out through supper. It is outrageous, unheard of, yet starts to gain a life of its own. Was not the new world as unsettling for the original church? To use boats, to travel with the fear of falling off the edge of the world? What is distance now, anyway?

By the time the plates are cleared, I have decided. It is not even a possibility, merely an idea, but I know who can tell me if it has any chance. I become aware of the Bible in front of me, Isaac’s expectant gaze, the rest of the family’s stares. It is unlike me to forget the evening reading. “Luke, on Monday, you will take care of your brothers and sisters. Mother and I will be in town all day.”

Freda gives me a quizzical gaze but says nothing.

“Before we begin, we should pray for tomorrow, that God chooses a good and righteous minister for his flock.” And in particular, and especially, that it is not me. Please not me.

Time drags by; the day is warm, the Yutzy’s barn homely, Bishop Jesse’s voice monotonous. If not for the hard bench, the dig of nails into palms, I would have dozed off hours ago. It will not do, today of all days.

I glance up, tear my gaze from my knees. Freda stares back across the room with barely concealed worry. It is reflected across the hundred and twenty of us, the sixty or so church members in a tense, burdensome air. Each married woman wonders, fears; could my husband be the one? Today someone will replace Genaamd, chosen to be minister, to have the burden of shepherd added to them, their family, their wife. For no recompense. Without pause. For life.

For eight hours we brood through the hymns, the sermons, the foot washing, the brief pause for lunch as the married men become more withdrawn. Now, as communion closes and Bishop Jesse inexorably wends his way to the moment, the silence grows to trepidation. If called, none can reject it. To say ‘No’ is to turn your back on the church; that can only lead to shunning, total and complete exile.

It does not matter. I know, I had known since the call was made for this service it would be me. I recall a conversation a lifetime ago on a similar Sunday with a shocked, white-faced young man, married only two months and ordained minister. My question is forgotten but his answer is still clear. ‘I knew, I knew it would be me,’ Jesse replied, repeated years later as he was called from minister to bishop. My conviction is as strong, the knowledge as deep. It does not matter, nothing can change it, an hour or so and the lot will fall to me.

The monotone falters then resumes in a quieter, restrained fashion: “...as shepherd of our church community, our gmay, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife...”

The call to ordination starts with First Timothy articulated slowly, clearly; draws the standards for nomination, standards each member knows, each has heard before. With Henry gone to the world, maybe I fall short, perhaps I fail, but my hope is stillborn. It does not matter. It will be me.

“...we will now receive your votes...”

Bishop Jesse and the deacon enter a side-room, close the door until a crack is left and in that crack an ear. Old Ezra stands, makes his way to the door. A pause, a whispered phrase and he returns. As he sits, the next oldest makes his way to the door, a process repeated from oldest to youngest male member, then oldest to youngest female member, until all the baptized have whispered a name in that ear.

My turn arrives. It does not matter. I toy with the idea of whispering my own name but that would be pride, would bring condemnation and reproof. “Cephas Miller.”

The door closes as the last member comes back. Bishop Jesse emerges, takes four songbooks from the bench, moves back behind the door. The congregation stirs. Four books. Four names. In one of those songbooks a small slip of paper is placed, the books closed, the lots cast.

A small droplet lands on my hand. Cephas' brow is covered in sweat, his tension plain as he rocks back and forth, eyes shut. I know what he thinks, know he ponders his chances if his name is called. Brother, it does not matter.

The deacon emerges with four songbooks, each tied shut with string. Once arranged on a bench, Bishop Jesse turns to face the congregation.

“There are four brothers in the lot. David Lambright, Cephas Miller, Daniel Yoder, Menno Stoll. Come, take a book and kneel.”

We kneel in a line, wait with songbooks in outstretched hands. The others stare down as if force of will can remove that slip of paper, expunge the burden. My gaze fixes on Bishop Jesse. It does not matter. It will be me.

Jesse unties the book in David's hands. Nothing. Cephas tenses, Daniel starts to shake; one chance in three.

Cephas places his book into Jesse's hands, Jesse unties the string slowly. He shakes his head. Nothing. Cephas barely suppresses a sigh, his wife Mae not so successful, the sound magnified in the torpid silence of the barn.

Daniel's shaking grows; one chance in two, he must be thinking, one chance in two. I catch Jesse's gaze. He knows. I want to laugh, scream at the inevitability, the absolute certainty of it all. The mounting reality of the burden crushes my desire. It does not matter. I know. Jesse knows. It will be me.

Jesse pries the songbook from Daniel. He considers for a moment, then places the book on the bench. He turns to Daniel, shakes his head. Nothing.

Daniel slumps against me, I put an arm around him, help steady him. A keening rises from behind, her voice known but strange, a sound I dread will become familiar.

I place my songbook carefully into Jesse's hands. Jesse pulls the string, takes one step back. With a small sigh, Jesse reveals a slip of white paper nestled in the cover.

“The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord. Brother Menno Stoll is chosen.”

I do not hear the words of ordination as I stand, condolences from the other three and welcome from the deacon lost to me. I am a man whose son has abandoned the faith; a man whose mind is slowly being turned to leaving; and God has chosen me as shepherd of his flock.

Suddenly it is over. The congregation thins until I stand alone to stare forwards, accept reality. I turn, Freda red-eyed and droop-shouldered, children close. I feign a smile, walk back across the divide to my family.

I let Luke drive the buggy home, children up front as we make our way through the patchwork of houses and fields. Freda and I sit on the back, stare at the landscape. Life will never be the same, the troubles of the gmay and everyone in it are now mine; and my troubles are hers.

The steel gray arc glares down to taunt me. You lose your son to me and you would shepherd these? I will bleed your youth away, steal your land and the gmay from your grasp.

It does not matter. I know beyond a doubt. It is me, and I am chosen. Henry will return and the gmay will continue.

Chapter Five

Greg

I turn the dial down, give the pan a final stir, then put the lid back. Another ordinary night at home with the family, another one I wouldn't change for the world. Pen's partition walls blaze with fluorescent anime figures, part of her ancient history school project. Like any other seven-year-old, she studies as hard as she can, tries to please herself when she's able. Except most seven-year-olds don't get within months of a death sentence. Since the treatment, she's been transformed, and each day I'm more aware of what I nearly lost. I still pay, will pay for decades, but it has fallen into a routine; now I hardly give it a thought.

I slide onto the couch next to Lou. She ignores me, headband logged in and virtuvacing. Not as good as a real trip, but as most of the places don't exist anymore, there's no choice. We used to take these trips together but lately she's started going by herself; or, more to the point, with someone else. I bring the wall up to see. She's in some place called Spain. Why she likes being chased by large ugly animals is beyond me.

I flip to the newsfeed, settle back. A human announcer tonight, a change even if she is augmented: *"...majority seven to nine decision the full bench..."*

Lou moves closer, grabs my hand.

"Welcome back. Good trip?"

"Oh yeah, you should've been there."

"...grant Als the right to voluntary euthanasia..."

"Clara the clairvoyant there, too?"

"Don't be mean, Greg. She's a nice person and if you don't want to socialize, then who else do I go with?"

"...united Right to Life Advocates, appeal..."

"I know, she's a little, well, eccentric, don't you think?"

"If you mean she has an open mind, then maybe, but it makes her different, not weird."

"...refused to comment. In developments closer to home, Dandenong Enforcement confirm last week's..."

"Shhh, Lou."

"What?"

"...appear not to have been random..."

"I need to watch this."

"...citizens, but targeted three underworld figures known to Enforcement. The execution-style hits carried out between 21:00 and 21:10..."

My chest tightens. Lou flexes her fingers, complains against my grip.

"...levels twenty-four and twenty-five of the Bunggles residential sector. Enforcement officials are following several leads but, hampered by lack of surveillance data..."

I silence the screen.

"What's wrong?"

"I know about the murders."

"Of course you do, you work for Enforcement."

"No Lou, I mean I'm part of it."

"Don't be ridiculous. You aren't responsible for criminals getting killed."

"You remember Jonathon?"

"Yes, he wanted some information."

I never told her the whole story, exactly what Jonathon had wanted and how often. Or what followed. And she'd never asked, never wanted to know. We'd both shoved it to the back of our minds – me the knowing, she the lack of it – overtaken by Pen's recovery. "He wanted to know when the surveillance units went down for maintenance. For the whole city."

"I don't see –"

"Not once, Lou. Every couple of weeks for the past eight months I've sent him the schedules."

"Well that...that...means nothing. You told me there's multiple units, overlapping coverage. That's not how it was there."

"He called me two weeks ago, told me to take all the surveillance units in that part of the Bunggles offline for three minutes."

“Oh, no.”

“I’d no choice. They own me for Pen. When it was schedules it was different, but now this? There’s no way out. I’ve saddled us to the Triad.”

“Triad?”

“The Fund’s in deep with them and now we are too, probably forever.”

She broods, face stone, gaze rigid. Her shoulders relax, a smile forms. “It doesn’t matter. We had no choice. He was our last hope and he knew it.”

“Exactly, it was either him or...or, well you know.”

“So, it makes no difference. There was no other choice, no other way.”

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat. Even knowing this.”

“Exactly. So what if three criminals die to keep my baby alive? It’s worth it, more than worth it.”

I realize I’d known it would turn out like this the moment I was left alone with Jonathon. I didn’t like it then, I don’t like it now, but it makes no difference. Even if it goes against everything I think I am. Lou’s gone from shock to acceptance in seconds; she’d probably pull the trigger herself on the three of them and not bat an eyelid. “So now we stay calm, see it through. We’ll be fine.”

She puts her hand on my knee. “Yes, we’ll be fine.”

The hot plate hisses and spits violently as the pan boils over, burns down to a dark, tarry mess.

I close the door behind the last of them. I called the gmay to discuss, or rather to tell them, what my family will do; and to make one final appeal. It is no secret, I have been open and careful not to keep secrets, show pride in special knowledge. To the gmay’s credit all sixty members are here. Even Bishop Jesse, who feels the idea is both ill-conceived and breaks the gmay’s ordnung, the rules we live by.

It is a tight fit with the benches in place; men and guests pack into the main room, women spill out to the kitchen, children elsewhere. A blanket of black hats and plain bonnets is broken only by suits to the front, denim jeans and a checked jacket to the back. It has been over a year since I saw him, yet the world has taken its toll. Henry has hair below the shoulder, a moustache and no beard and is, if possible, thinner than the night he left. Why is he here? True, he lives with Denae and her family, and now seems to work with Elliott, but surely he knows how this will turn out?

I sit next to Elliott and Denae at the front, patient as Bishop Jesse commits the meeting. I stare out the window behind him; a row of black buggies shines in the afternoon light, the saloon flyvver at the end breaks the symmetry of boxes. How many will commit? How many will remain in a few hours?

I stand, turn to face the room. “It is no secret my family is leaving to seek a better place to live, bring up our children, to stay on the land. I have asked Mister Tring and Miss Martin here to provide details and invite any who wish to come with us to indicate.” Elliott and Denae stand next to me. “After they have talked and taken your questions, we will discuss it as a gmay.”

I resume my seat. I was dismayed when Denae arrived in a pants suit; even though we know the English are sinful, a woman in man’s clothes can easily disturb some. I hope Elliott will do most of the talking. I saw Henry discuss something with him earlier. Thankfully, after the introductions, Denae simply hands out some papers and sits, while Elliott begins: “We’ve summarized the core facts on the flimsies Denae’s given out. Our firm has worked with you for a number of years, but I must say Mister Menno’s request was, ah, was rather unique. In the end, it is possible, and from a purely economic viewpoint is well worth while, and that is how we have approached it. The, ah, spiritual or moral aspects are obviously your own.”

Denae hands Elliott a flimsy. He points to a solitary chart: “This is based on an average eighty-acre farm here in your community, in the best of circumstances. The red line...this one,” indicating a steep curve, “represents costs, given everything we know. Now this one,” pointing to a blue horizontal line, “represents gross farm returns.”

Elliott pauses to let it sink in. “In the simplest of terms, it means if you stay here, you will be bankrupt in three, maybe four years.”

There is no reaction save a few gentle nods.

“In our opinion, you have three options. First, pray for a miracle or, I think, a series of them. I don’t say that lightly. The numbers are correct and will not change – they are in fact optimistic. Second option, give up farming and your lands to obtain other work. This is what your, ah, other communities have done. The other option, the one outlined on the other side, the one Mister Menno asked us to explore, is to leave and continue on elsewhere. The numbers indicate...”

It takes Elliott the better part of an hour, uninterrupted, to go through the details. The questions that come back are, as I expected, to the point and precise. Not for nothing our reputation as good farmers and shrewd businessmen.

"When you say a little colder, how much?"

"Perhaps fourteen, maybe fifteen degrees in winter, hardly noticeable."

"The hundred acres a person, how'd they work that out?"

"It's based on the number of people in each household over thirteen years of age."

"And it's free?"

"Yes, completely. Don't forget the, ah, tax holiday. This government goes out of its way to attract and keep migrants, to make it easy and, I would add, they view you as, ah, as the perfect migrants."

"Mister Tring, there is still one thing I do not understand. Why?"

"Why what, Bishop Jesse?"

"If it is as lucrative as your figures suggest, and I've no reason to doubt them, why isn't there a line of people waiting to go?"

"The simple truth? No one wants to go. It is everything that we, the 'English' as you call us, don't want. It's untamed, sparsely populated, and empty, and lacks all the comforts and conveniences we have here. It's at the bottom of everyone's list but fits your requirements perfectly."

"You've not mentioned how far this, this...what's it called again?"

"Juuttua."

"Yes, how far this Juuttua is."

"My apologies. It is, I think, three thousand eight hundred light years away."

"It's going to take a while to get there."

"Oh no, quite the opposite. In total three, maybe four hours. You'll be asleep for most of it."

The room falls silent as I stand. "Thank you. You too, Miss Martin. If you could give us some time? Freda will offer you coffee while you wait."

Elliott and Denaë shuffle out with Freda and the women. Henry hesitates then slips out after them. I don't have to wait long for Bishop Jesse to start. "I didn't like this idea before and I like it less now, Menno. It's not right."

"How is keeping my family together not right?"

"You heard him, it's four thousand years away. It's too far. You'd split the gmay with no chance of fellowship or support."

"Distance is no issue. When we left the persecutions of the old world, some also said the new world was too far, forever separated. It did not stop them then, we do not condemn them for it, and it saved the gmay."

"No chance for fellowship, no chance to return? They could, you won't be able to. More to the point, travelling in a spaceship? That's hardly separation from the world."

"It's not different from using the bus," Cephas says. "We shouldn't own a bus but we can use a bus, even hire a driver. We're not buying one, are we, Menno? I mean a spaceship."

"No, of course not, Cephas. It is nothing more than a necessary tool. There is no ordnung about it."

"The ordnung are more," Bishop Jesse says. "They are the way of submission and humility, our traditions to keep stable in the face of change. It's not easily changed, brother, and care needs to be taken that humility is not lost or pride arises."

"I am no wiser than any here, I respect the traditions and voice of the gmay. I have thought it over prayerfully, sought your views, all before today. It is not lightly I came to this decision. It is simply my only choice." I make my way to the window. The steel gray band shimmers, lazy columns of dark gray smoke above. "This has taken one son, lured him in even against my prayers, our efforts, the love of the gmay. Every day it draws closer, calls to our children, tempts us to go there, work there, be part of it. The evil one is subtle, and his work surrounds us day and night."

I move back, stand between the benches. "I still have five children to bring up. Do I stand by and watch them grow in the shadow of evil, never to be baptized? If I do nothing, I should rightly be condemned; would you condemn me for trying?"

The silence hangs heavy.

"That is why I must go, why I must take my family. Why I ask if any will go with us. In the end it is simply what we have always done. Move on, set up a new community, a fresh gmay to avoid the world, let us live as God intends."

I am drained. It has been a battle to have the discussion, dissent is not my desire. It could be no more than us, maybe Omar, perhaps Cephas.

Omar, the youngest of the married men, stands. "It's why Ruth and I are going. We can't get by unless I get a job in the city and that's not how it should be. We don't want our children, when we have them, bought up surrounded by the world."

"We'll go, too." Cephass says. "Mae feels worried and unhappy. It's a chance to make life what it should be."

Some heads nod, some shake. Bishop Jesse turns to face me: "So, that's three families, maybe more. We will stay here where God put us, as others will. No one can condemn a man for trying, and the gmay will place no sanction on anyone who leaves. All we will give you are our blessings and prayers. A year ago, when the lot fell to you, I said there would be times we would disagree. This is one of them, and perhaps it is best for you to leave. But remember. You were ordained for life, and going does not change that. Whatever God has in store for you on Juuttua, you are their minister for life."

I embrace him, watch him leave. The room empties, some to the kitchen, some to the front door. Children wander past on the way to the chickens. Horses are untied, buggies turned around. Small columns of dust make their way down the road, turn off here and there for home.

I step through to the kitchen. A dozen and a half faces stare back; hope, fear and expectation written on them all. Nine families. I smile to myself. I am going with a community, a gmay of my own.

Elliott looks relaxed, seated at the end of the kitchen table with everyone clustered around. He consults his tablet. "It was always going to be enough with your family of six, Mister Menno, and now with sixty, well, there will be more generous terms. It's a sizeable migrant group for Juuttua, your land assignment will be one hundred forty acres per person."

Henry peers past Denae. "It's sixty-one."

"Oh? You've decided, then. Fine, even better, sixty-one it is."

Freda looks at me, turns away. Had she known? It would be like her. Everyone else takes it in stride, it is our way, at least in public, to remain calm. At least that incredible distance will not lie between us. I turn back to Elliott and Cephass.

"Yes, Mister Cephass, there are weight limits but you can take as many of your tools and household goods that fit," Elliott says. "It's part of the incentives, they want you there and productive, not to be stranded without any way of farming."

"What does it look like?"

"Well it's a standard threeship spindle. It's a little, ah, difficult to quite describe the shape."

"No, I mean the land, our new home."

"Of course. I don't have great images of the exact plots themselves, but we have good ones of Juuttua." Elliott turns to me. "They are projections, are they allowed?"

"As long as you or Miss Martin operate it."

Denae taps one carefully manicured fingernail on her tablet. Two globes, each about a yard across, appear in the air above the table. She points to the larger one, a dull, pockmarked ball-bearing. "Earth. The flecks of green are agriculture, blue ocean reserves and aquaculture, polar regions in white. Everything else is the city." She spins the globe, expands one area. "Your community, twenty-six to twenty-nine family units, depending on definition, total area just over two thousand two hundred acres." Less than half a dozen small points of light wink on. "Other communities with the same religious affiliation."

She moves Earth aside, pulls across the other globe. Whites, greens, and blues dominate, here and there dull yellow and ochre-red. "So, Juuttua, smaller than Earth but not that you will notice. Seventy to seventy-two percent ocean, two main land masses, one at the South Pole under at least a mile of ice."

Denae points to a familiar peanut-shaped patch of deep brown, green, and white that stretches from below the equator, over the North Pole and part way down the other side. She points to a tiny spot of silver on the lower portion.

"Your destination is here. One city, rather a settlement of two hundred thousand on the tropical shoreline. Otherwise, small centers of up to five thousand people scattered within a few hundred miles." She moves her finger halfway to the pole. "Your area, heavy forest and grassed plains far enough away for your purposes but close to transport lines. Nearest settlement two hundred miles away, leaves enough expansion room to purchase additional acreage. Given around ten family units, we're looking at approximately seven thousand acres granted."

She leaves the globes to rotate above the table. It is a stark contrast, the dull glow of a sinful world against the earth-tones of a new and unsullied one. It will be many generations until my gmay will need to think of leaving. The faces around me tell the same story; knowledge is one thing, to see it so starkly contrasted another.

"It seems strange we can take seed stock," Omar says, "but not horses and chickens."

"It is regrettable but there are, ah, health issues that mean it is not possible. The, ah, the process of the journey requires every living being to be in the cabins, asleep for the transfer."

"Oh."

"There are animals on Juuttua – horses, pigs, chickens, all the usual ones. They were taken as embryos and hatched there, so there is a supply of their descendants. You will be able to purchase what you need, and with hard currency you will find it inexpensive."

Denae leafs through a dozen identical, neatly bound sheaves of paper. "There's space in the agreement to specify the livestock you need. If you complete it, I will make sure you get what you require at a fair price."

Elliott glances at his watch. "It's been a good, productive day. It's time we were getting back. Is there anything else?"

Freda coughs. "There is one thing. I have a large supply, we all do, of preserves and pickles and such. I guess these we can't take?"

"Of course you can. The only restrictions aside from the obvious safety ones are maximum weight and living animals." Elliott stands. "We should let you good folk go home. If you could make sure you each have a copy of the papers from Denae? Excellent."

I stand, walk them to the door. "Elliott, Denae, thank you for your time."

"A pleasure, Mister Menno, and a unique one. Twelve to eighteen months will see all sixty-one of you on Juuttua. I was a little concerned when it was your family alone, but ten families, a little ready-made community, that sounds much better. Henry, are you coming back with us?"

"Yes, could you wait a minute?"

Now that it is only the three of us, and Henry is close, I note subtle changes. He has an air, an attitude closer to English than Amish. Perhaps submissiveness and humility have been replaced by arrogance? Puffed up in knowledge and pride, original sin, the way of the world. Henry of all people knows how I feel, what I think, so why come here?

"Father."

"Henry. It has been a while."

"Over a year."

"How have you been?"

"Well enough. I'm not here to come back home."

"It seems like a lot of trouble to tell me what you will not do."

"I'm coming with you to Juuttua. If you want me to."

"You have made it clear you are only responsible to yourself, so how can I stop you? Why are you coming?"

"I promised Mom I wouldn't be far away. I'm not going to stay with you or be a farmer. I'll be in the city." He turns, walks off without a backward glance.

"Freda, when did you know about this?"

"Tonight, when he told Elliott. He made me that promise the night he left."

"At least in that he keeps his word."

"There's still hope."

"As long as he is alive, yes, there is still hope."

There is still worship on Sunday, a sermon to prepare and maybe deliver, members to guide, counsel, and chastise. My mind wanders away from Sunday to the months and years ahead as I read through Ephesians Chapter Five.

I have an empty planet to go to. I have my family and nine others, my gmay, with me. And Henry.

"Happy Birthday our Penny, happy birthday to you."

Pen aims a breath at the candles, extinguishes seven. One refuses to go out, gutters as she starts to run out of wind. I lean across, one deft puff and the eighth candle sends a spiral of fawn smoke into the air. The cake divides itself into nineteen evenly weighted slices, each too much, too rich. Four layers, rainbow-colored frosting and what appears to be part of a marzipan penguin foot stare back at me. The foot slides down the slab to leave a raspberry peanut butter chocolate stripe in its wake. Lou'll get the Punisher back for both of us, might as well make it worthwhile. I take a large bite as the pod descends back into the chaos of nine sugar-powered children.

We dropped the partitions across six apartments, Pen's party a welcome excuse to socialize. Pen's party, so it's her call on the layout. She made two sides transparent, giving a thirty-meter-wide view across the city; the other

two sides she christened 'underwater land'. An ocean stacked with fish, dolphins, enormous seahorses, mermaids and, of course, penguins. I can't shake the feeling I'm inside some gigantic, lopsided fishbowl, and at any moment all of us will be washed out to the city below.

Lou tries to balance a drink and plate on one flipper and gesticulate with the other. This year it's her turn to dress up. Pen went through the horse stage when it was mine – eight hours on all fours as a pony had been quite enough. I'm sure I still have the bruises. I make my way to the far corner and the relative safety of the adults. It doesn't last long.

"Dad, Mum, come on." Pen has Lou by one flipper, grabs me in her other hand: "I already got Heidi and Jamal. I need you, too."

"What for?"

"It was your idea, Greg. You can't get out of it."

I feign half-hearted resistance. "Oh no, I can't be seen with children or penguins, it's a security breach."

"Shut up, you idiot, behave for your daughter."

The bot raises a three-sided screen as we near: "*You want enhanced gangsta again, birthday girl?*"

"No, old time now." Pen says.

"Okie dokey, oldie moldy. Stand still."

I wrap an arm around Pen's waist, lift her up so her face is next to mine. Pen swings her arms around both our necks.

"Nicey, nicey. Now let's see smiles, smiles, I can't see teeth, Daddy-man, where's your teeth?"

"I'll show you teeth, you plastic parrot, when I bite your –"

"Greg!"

"Atta boy Daddy-man, Mummy's the boss. Big smiles, little kissy kissy and three, two, one."

Three rapid clicks, a whirr, and the screen folds. My back twinges, Pen's nearly to the point I can't do that anymore.

The bot stirs, disgorges three identical photostrips from its mouth. "*And done. Happy birthday girl.*"

Pen grabs them eagerly. "Yeah, two hundred percent plus."

She shoves one copy into my hands, one into Lou's, then darts back into the knot of children.

They look like old photo booth shots at museums, from the black and white to the frames and Kodak logo. Three photos, the first one nice, natural, boring vanilla. In the second, we managed to kiss Pen on the cheek at the same time, to her pretend discomfort. Pen had stuck a finger up each of our noses in the final one, wicked grin on her face. A shot for the ages, probably what she had in mind all along. "She's your daughter."

"Your idea, Greg, don't forget it."

"Never again."

"Fair enough."

"I'm keeping this for her first serious partner, let them know what they're in for."

"Mine? For the grandkids. I can wait that long for revenge."

The pod chimes. "*Greg. Incoming call.*"

"Message or delay."

"Options unavailable. Enforcement."

Lou shrugs, waddles away. I raise a small privacy field. Work – not unusual, but as always ill-timed, something minor or irrelevant that can wait. "Accept." It takes a second to recognize the face. The ebony skin, square jaw, and deep gray eyes are singular, if unexpected. "Santosh?"

"Greg. How are you?"

"Fine. How long's it been? Ten, twelve years?"

"We need to talk. I'm in the sector tomorrow, we should meet."

"Well sure, I can get an hour or so, Lou would –"

"No. Just us, and don't worry about signing in."

A time and address come over. The first seeds of doubt creep into my mind. "What's this about?"

"How's Penny coming along?"

"Great, why wouldn't she?"

"Doctor Lee's a hard man to get at short notice. Expensive but the best."

My legs grow numb, my gaze locks to his impassive stare. "Santosh, what's this about?"

"Don't miss that appointment Greg, don't be even one minute late." His face winks out. The screen darkens, his business card glows as my stomach knots:

SANTOSH KUMARA
ENFORCEMENT
LEAD INVESTIGATOR, INTERNAL FRAUD

The privacy field lowers. I'm oblivious to the laughter and conversation around me. The card, that finger of accusation, hangs in my mind's eye.

"Are you alright Greg? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"They know, Lou."

"What?"

"It's over. They know."

Chapter Six

Greg

I descend into the bowels of the city. It's oppressive – merely the knowledge of being in the tenth sub-level with two hundred or more of city, flesh and bone bearing down lends a claustrophobic tinge to the air. It's the lack of windows, knowing from the fiftieth down it's all city – wall-to-wall city – that plays with my mind. Walls set to exterior views from further up, sequences of non-existent fields and oceans, funneled light and cool circulated air can't fool my subconscious. Ten years ago, it was only the fortieth level down that was like this. How long until they reach my place?

I decided last night to try and bluster my way through. I have no idea how much or how little Santosh knows and I'm not going to make his job any easier. Privacy breaches happen all the time.

I find the café easily enough, a thin sliver of light sandwiched between two bento bars; neon lights scream breakfast specials. Because, or perhaps in spite, of its neighbors, the café sports an ancient chalkboard and tattered red and white awning. I barely have time to settle in when Santosh arrives. We are the only ones here. The girl behind the counter steps outside, locks the door.

"You did the right thing, Greg."

"It's not like I was given a choice. Hell of a way to keep in touch. How's Gloria, Ethan?"

"Fine. You're in deep shit."

"What for?"

"Don't play stupid, I know you and you're not. Want me to spell it out?"

"Spell what out?"

"Maintenance schedules."

"What about them?"

Santosh pushes his chair back, starts to rise. "You know how this goes. You start cooperating or it ends now."

"Alright, alright."

He sits. "So, how many times in eighteen months did you send the sector's maintenance schedules to your handler?"

"So, I send some schedules out now and then, a bit of information. Nothing's down more than two minutes anyway. What can happen in two minutes?"

"Yeah, nothing. Nothing at all...except you gave it to *them*. You know what they were doing to you? Grooming you, compromising you, getting your toe in before your ugly ass. What else did you do for them? Come on, tell me. Say it to my face."

"Say what?"

"I'm not playing games. I know what you did, I want you to say it. Say it to me and to yourself."

"Okay, okay."

Santosh glares. "Tell me what they asked you to do that first time six months ago."

"A node, they asked me to drop one node for one minute, that's all."

"What happened in that minute?"

"I don't –"

"Don't bullshit me! We've got your net logs, surveillance data. I know you saw the coverage, so tell me...what happened in that minute?"

"Three people, three criminals were killed."

"Murdered, Greg, murdered because of you. And only two were criminals, one was undercover, one of us. You know what that makes you? An accessory. How many other times have you shut off a node for them?"

"Twice, maybe three, I dunno...I think."

"Five times, five nodes, five shut-offs. Louise ever ask you why you don't watch the feeds anymore?"

"No, no, she's –"

"Well, I do. You don't want to know. You want to stay ignorant. So, let me tell you. Every time you took a node down, someone's been killed. You're responsible, it's your finger on the trigger nine times, and sticking your head in the sand does not make it go away."

My eyes bore a hole in the tabletop, a small patch where the red and white check's worn through to reveal green plastic. Nine. One's Enforcement. One of them is us. I know what we do to our own, no quarter given, the ruthless lust for retribution. I had no choice, I have no choice; anger fights panic as I wait for the hammer-fall.

Santosh points to the street. "You know what this is for, why we keep the barest units below third sub-level, don't even try to get proper coverage? It's balance. They aren't strong enough to take it all, we're not strong enough to wipe them out, so it's an arrangement, second best but manageable." His chair creaks as he gets his breath. "They keep it down here, away from the public, and everyone's happy until some idiot goes and breaks the balance. You know it, I know it, everyone knows it. What happened to you, Greg?"

"What happened? My kid happened!"

"I didn't –"

"What the fuck would you do if it was Ethan going to die, hold hands with Gloria and pick out caskets?"

"I –"

"What would you do if your kid looks at you and asks, 'Daddy, am I going to die?' Sit back and let her? Nine, ten, a hundred, a thousand I don't care...she was not going to die."

"There must have been another way, something else."

"Want to find out who your friends are? Try this. And where were you when I was begging the Enforcement network? You didn't even put your hand in your pocket. Like the rest of them. Everyone ran, the government had nothing, couldn't get near it until they came around."

"You knew what it meant, where it would lead. What happened to the principled guy I went to Uni with? That Greg would have found another way."

"He's dead. You know where principles got me, back then. And don't give me that old line, don't you forget who dragged your ass out of the fire and took the fall."

"I never have. If I didn't owe you, I'd be the first calling for your blood, but after this we're square. You know how this should end."

"Prison, a few years perhaps."

"You're an accessory to nine counts of murder. You know how this works. You killed one of our own, civilian laws don't apply. We'll make an example out of you."

"It's worth it for Pen."

"Well, that's a problem, too."

"What?"

"It's not only you, it's all three of you. You got Penny's treatment as payment. We'll reverse it, set her back to how she was."

"No, no you can't."

Santosh slides his tablet across. "We've already made out the charges, depositions and briefs. There's no appeal. You'll hang, Penny will get back her CLN3-R, and Louise will get five to ten as an accessory after the fact."

The tablet glares at me. It's damning. The judge, the prosecution, both have reputations. They'll sentence Pen back to a lingering horrid death; Lou'll be torn apart in prison or worse.

"Unless."

"Unless?"

"Unless you do as I say. All of this, to sentence and revert, it's all done in public. We can't afford you, Greg. We can't afford one more public humiliation. We're nobody's friend, the public don't trust us, government barely tolerates us, the criminals laugh at us. Half want to feed you and your family to the wolves, half want to bury you so none of this comes to light. Fortunately for you, they listen to me and I still owe you."

"So?"

"So, late tomorrow you'll get a job offer. It's a slightly higher grade in a dead-end place where you'll disappear for life. You and your family will be out of sight permanently. Accept the job offer, this sinks out of existence. Knock it back, take your chances with the courts."

"That's it?"

"One other thing. It's a job lot. The three of you go – you, Penny, Louise – or it's no deal. If one stays, you all get prosecuted. If one ever comes back, you all get prosecuted."

"I don't have much choice."

"I wouldn't look at it like that. If it weren't for me, you'd be in chains before you got to blow out the candles."

"Don't worry about tomorrow. I'll take whatever it is now." I don't look at the tablet, press my thumb to the screen.

"Done. They'll send the details across later but remember all three of you need to go."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure. One thing...where is it I'm going?"

"Does it matter?"

"No. But I'll need to tell Lou."

"You'll like it. I've seen your jaunts in the grid, I know you like space." The girl re-enters the café, busies herself behind the counter.

"Thanks Santosh, it's –"

"Don't. We're even. I don't want to see you or hear your name again. You and your family are dead to me."

Santosh walks to the door. He stops, turns. "The place. Look it up. It's called Juuttua."

I made it a telework day, half-heartedly stayed at home as I waited for Greg or, if it went as he expected, the call to let me know he was in custody. Three hours. I've no idea how I'll last through seven more. I drain my second coffee.

The door opens, he walks in: "They know everything, Lou."

"You didn't tell them?"

"Didn't have to. Santosh had it all, more than I knew. You remember those three that were killed? One was Enforcement, one of our guys."

"No. No, it couldn't be."

"I saw the evidence Lou. He was one of us."

"He could be lying, making it up."

"No, it's true. You know what they want to do? They want to give Pen back Batten's disease. They want to kill her."

"They can't! No one in their right mind would do it."

"They can and they do. There's no appeal, no nothing. They've already got it lined up, done everything except sign the convictions."

"I won't let them take her."

"He offered me a deal. There's a place they'll send us to so they don't have to go public. In exchange, they won't do anything to us, anything to Pen."

"So, they don't kill her, just get rid of her father?"

"Listen, Lou, will you calm down? It's not me, it's us, the deal is that the three of us go. You, me, Pen."

What does he mean, 'us'? Penny's done nothing, I've done nothing, he's the one that made the deal. "Why all of us, you're the one handing out schedules."

"They've got you as an accessory after the fact, and Pen's an embarrassment to them. We all go. If any of us stay we all go to prison or worse. It's all they offered, and if it weren't for Santosh, we'd have no choice at all."

"It's not fair, Greg, not fair on me or Penny."

"And you think I like it? Pushed into a corner and shoved around again? First the Triad, now this – no choice in any of it. Don't think you're not part of it. You didn't put up much of a fight when they offered, and you said you'd do anything."

"I still don't think it's fair. I have to give up my apartment, my friends...Penny will have to make new ones and you know the trouble she has. Then there's the job – I'll have to get a transfer if they have a branch at...where are they sending us, Greg?"

He's dropped his gaze, put his fingers on the bridge of his nose.

"Where are you taking me? Not the Northern Hemisphere? You can't be serious, it's a backwater. Have you any idea what those people are like?"

"It's not there, Lou."

"Well, where then?"

"It's called Juuttua."

"Where on Earth's that? I've never heard of it."

"It's not on Earth. It's just Juuttua."

"Not on...oh no, you haven't? House!"

"Louise Hierro, can I help?"

"Where's Juuttua?"

"Juuttua. Ecliptic line through galactic core, distance three thousand seven hundred forty-two light years."

"Across the other side of the galaxy? You're taking me to the end of the universe?"

“Correction, Louise Hierro. Current estimate –”

“House literal off and shut up!” Damn him, he cut a deal like that? I can feel the anxiety, the childhood nightmare rise. “Tell me it’s developed, Greg. Tell me it’s not some damned jungle or sandpit hell I’m going to.”

He fidgets, plays with his fingers, eyes darting. He only ever gets like that when he lies. “It’s getting there, it’s...it’s in demand, Lou. We’re lucky to get it, it’s on everyone’s list.”

“I know you’re lying, why can’t you just tell me?”

“We can’t change it. We’re stuck with it.”

“House!”

“Louise Hie–”

“What’s Juuttua like?”

“Size 0.83 Earth standard, orbit –”

“No. Population, industry, main cities.”

“Capital city of Juuttua is Faith. Main employment agriculture seventy-two percent, industry twenty percent, services eight percent. Population three hundred fifteen thousand, net growth half one percent per annum.”

“Three hundred fifteen thousand? It’s empty, there’s nobody on it! House, screen right capital city, screen left main land mass.” The window splits, aerial view of Faith to one side, topographic map overlay on satellite imagery to the other.

I start to shake, my head throbs, throat tightens. The city is patchwork blocks scattered on a green-brown carpet beside an expanse of light blue. I zoom in, each block an apartment complex arranged in rows along broad boulevards. Do these people actually travel outside to go between sectors? I see the scale at the bottom. It can’t be right, it’s impossible. I zoom in more, the apartment complexes change to individual dwellings, each separate, not a part of a pod or a sector.

Two stick-figures emerge from one and walk away. These people have to go outside to go anywhere, have to walk the dirty earth, breathe unfiltered air, stand under the empty sky. Alone. I’m seven again, on that roof, the old man, the grass, the empty vulnerability. I close the image, turn away from the wall. Greg’s in front of me, guilt and concern all over his face.

“I’m sorry, Lou. If there was any other way...”

“You know what I’m like, how could you? I don’t know if I can. All that empty, all that space.”

“It’s either that or Pen dies. We’ve no choice.”

“You could have at least told me first.”

“How? There’s no good way, you know that. Look, if they can do it, you can. We’ll find a way, okay?”

“I’m not happy, Greg, not at all.”

“We’ve got each other, we’ve got Pen. That’s enough.”

“Yeah. We’ve got Penny.”

Greg stays silent, pulls away. The guilt’s gone, concern takes its place. “I have to do one more thing.”

“What? You said we’ve no choice, we have to go.”

“If we go, jump on the first threeship, they’ll know. We’d be as good as dead. I have to go see Jonathon, see if they’ll let us.”

As Greg leaves Penny comes home: “Hey Mum, was that Dad?”

“Yes honey, he has some errands.”

Penny laughs. “He looks like an old man.”

I drift away as Penny chatters on about her day, her school, her friends. I’m condemned to that forsaken rock because of a deal he made. He’s dragged me and Penny in even though we’ve done nothing. Penny is safe, that’s the main thing. Greg, well...Greg’s another matter.

Thank you for reading this sample. Now that you have freely enjoyed the fruits of this author’s labour, we strongly advise that you purchase the full title wherever you may find it. Failure to do so will be...unpleasant.



Temple Dark Books