

**Justice
and
a
Kiss**

VINCENT WARE

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In the end it will be Technology
It will be Technology that of course will be able to See
It will be Technology that always will be allowed to Hear
It will be Technology that eventually will begin to Feel
It will be Technology that finally will refuse to Listen

BOOK II

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

It was evening twilight in August. Twilight, when the soft glowing essence of the sun, its light, slowly dissipated below the distant horizon and this light, in minute increments became refracted, scattered, and moment by moment its electromagnetic radiated rays were diffused in an order that allowed that which replaces and dominates light, which is darkness, to crawl forward.

Darkness abhors light. Darkness floated behind the fading light and that which and those who embraced darkness and required the cover of darkness in order to exist, moved forth.

Twilight will forever dwell between light and darkness and darkness and light.

Shadows were barely cast by the three *DMs* who departed the restaurant. The somewhat short, medium-sized *Canelada DM* in the middle was unsteady as he walked and staggered slightly. His long auburn-colored hair, falling to his shoulders, lifted slightly from a sudden breeze and he patted it back into place.

The two tall, rather thick, bald headed *Palida DMs* on each side of the inebriated man, his guards, waited and watched as he paused to light his drug stick.

They all spoke and laughed loudly as they moved between the parked automobiles and turned toward the row near the wall and their car. They could see it parked nearly sideways and taking up two spaces and then from between two cars an *Escura DM* emerged and strolled toward them. He was dressed in all black with a black straw hat that had a white band with a small red feather in it. He had a black handgun holstered at the left side of his waist.

The *Canelada DM* ignored the stranger and the two guards were staring at him warily. They all continued walking. One of

the guards noticed the dark man held his left hand behind his left leg and that his right hand was gloved in black. He pointed and called out.

Guard: Hey, don't walk up on us!

The dark man, still walking, raised his left hand and pointing a strange looking handgun with three barrels he fired and the barrels rotated and he fired again and both guards, struck in their chests, stopped and stepped back and a soft-blue light spread from the imbedded projectiles and electricity ran up to the top of their heads and down to the bottom of their feet. They collapsed onto their backs as they reached inside their coats for their weapons and then their arms were raised and moved as if they were fighting and their legs were extended and they kicked as if running.

The *Canelada DM* had looked down at his two guards and dropping his drug he reached inside his coat for his weapon and when he looked up he realized the dark man had never stopped walking and was upon him and he felt a punch, a right hook to his left temple and he was turned and knocked face down.

Holstering his weapon at his right side the *Escura DM* went to the prone form, rolled him over, removed his weapon and tossed it to the side. With both hands around his throat he lifted him, as if he were weightless, to his feet and stood him up against a nearby automobile and stepped back. The *Canelada DM* raised both his hands slightly, hunched his shoulders, spoke imploringly. *Canelada DM*: Wait! Wait! What d'ya you want?

He heard a soft, somewhat raspy voice speak to him in a precise matter of fact tone.

Escura DM: Three years ago, while under the influence of drugs and alcohol you drove up on the sidewalk and struck a seven-year-old male child.

Canelada DM: Hold on, no I didn't. Listen ...

The *Escura DM* stepped forward quickly and with a left hook struck the pleading man in his right side and the man dropped to his knees as his breath left him and pain spread from his freshly lacerated liver down his legs.

Now the gasping, groaning man was reproached as the dark man's voice rose slightly.

Escura DM: Yes you did Mace! Yes you did!

Mace was pulled to his feet by his hair and placed back against the automobile.

Escura DM: Then you backed over that boy, crushing him.

Mace glanced at the bodyguards still twitching and kicking spasmodically on the pavement. The two could hear everything and their eyes moved in their heads but they could not rise. They were incapacitated.

Escura DM: They cannot assist you in this matter.

Mace: I'm an Eastsider! I can pay! I can pay you!

Now the words came with hatred and venom.

Escura DM: You don't owe me. You owe Marcus.

Mace: Who? Who is that?

Escura DM: That's the name of the little boy you killed. Marcus demands justice. His mother demands justice and he and all those innocent ones you have destroyed shall have what is due.

The dark man stepped forward and with his right hand he struck Mace, breaking his jaw in two places and Mace was driven to the ground and he rolled over twice and muffled sounds came from him.

Escura DM: You tossed value cards at the screaming weeping mother.

The dark man kicked Mace in his side.

Escura DM: You said her dead child was in the wrong place at the wrong time and then you laughed at your perverse words.

He kicked him again twice, fracturing three of his ribs. Then

Mace was snatched to his feet by his hair and suspended in the air like an immobilized puppet. The dark man next placed his right opened hand against the auburn-haired man's chest and Mace felt a tremendous heat enter his body and wrap around his heart and contract and squeeze tighter and his heart was under attack and a beat was skipped and he was dropped to the pavement onto his back and as he lost consciousness he heard a voice, as an echo.

Escura DM: You were in the right place at the right time.

Mace stepped from the twilight and descended deep into the darkness.

The dark man turned from the three forms lying on the pavement and moved between the row of cars and toward the restaurant entrance. During his assault there had been others in the parking lot. Several individuals had left the restaurant, other couples had parked and walked toward the front of the building. A few had even stopped to observe. None interfered. Only someone with a vested interest or a relationship with the three under attack would have dared to become involved. This was *Center World* and these actions were normal for this world. To enter this world was to be greeted with signs that warned, cautioned, threatened, informed.

YOU HAVE ENTERED CENTER WORLD!!!

ALL INDIVIDUALS AT THE AGE OF SIXTEEN
YEARS MUST POSSESS, WHEN IN PUBLIC,
A WEAPON!!!

NO AREA OF CENTER WORLD IS SUPPORTED
BY THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT!!!

PROTECT YOURSELF AT ALL TIMES!!!

WITHIN CENTER WORLD THERE IS ONLY LIFE
AND DEATH!!!

To exist in this world meant to understand this world as it was and to act and react accordingly.

As the *Escura DM* neared the entrance a large convertible automobile with an *Escura DF* behind the wheel entered the parking lot. She too was dressed in all black. He got in and the car exited, picking up speed. They had ridden less than a mile when the dark woman spoke.

Escura DF: A car tracks us.

The dark man leaned so he could look back through the mirror on his side as he removed his gloves and the stun gun.

Escura DM: Head east to the river.

She turned, the car behind them turned and they moved toward the Detroit River.

It took thirty minutes and the following car, never coming closer, remained at a distance that seemed to indicate an attempt to reveal its presence.

The large convertible parked in a lot near the River Walk entrance and the two got out. The dark woman brought the large pistol that had been placed in its holder and with her right hand she put it into the holster at her left side, at her waist.

As they moved toward the paved path that ran along the river the car that had been behind them pulled into the lot. The two slowly strolled north. There were others out on this evening, coming and going and soon the amount of people thinned and the two rounded a bend and stepped several yards off the pavement to move near a picnic table that sat beneath a tall dull light that had just flared on to illuminate the area. They stood

and waited. Both stared back in the direction from which they had come. Words came softly.

Escura DM: I don't sense a human presence.

Escura DF: Neither do I. Strange, what I feel.

They could hear footsteps come to the bend and then pause, to continue. A tall *Marrom ND* individual came into view. It was a *PM* presence that stepped from the pavement onto the grass and moved slowly toward them. The clothes were brown pants and shirt with soft brown shoes and a brown cap on the head. A holstered weapon was on the right side just below the waist. They both raised their right hands toward their left sides and their weapons.

The individual stopped several feet from them and stared intently and then a slight amused smile appeared on the smooth, brown, youthful-looking face.

The dark man moved in front of the dark woman, to protect. The dark woman stepped from behind and to the side, to confront. The individual before them slowly raised the opened right hand with the palm extended toward them. The two were searching the stranger's face, looking deep into the light-brown eyes. The individual spoke, the words eerily familiar, the voice somewhat deep, full, strong and proper.

Marrom ND: Touch me, Lena. Touch me.

The dark man took a step forward.

Marrom ND: Now Lloyd, you know I cannot be the one whose words I use. You decapitated him nine days ago.

Lloyd: Who are you?

The extended hand dropped, the smile broadened and a statement came as if from an old and dear friend. The voice rose with a slightly conspiratorial tone. A finger pointed at them.

Marrom ND: I know your secrets. Yes I do. I know.

The individual grew serious.

Marrom ND: Let me tell you my secrets and my story. Believe me, I mean you no harm. I need your help, both of you. It's a matter of life and death.

They stared at the individual that now beseeched them.

Marrom ND: Help me. Please Lloyd, help me.

Lloyd and Lena lowered their hands from their weapons.

Lloyd: Come sit with us.

The two moved to the picnic table and sat down. The stranger sat opposite them. Silence engulfed the three. They could hear the sounds of the water. On the pavement people passed by in the near distance, laughing and talking, their words and mirthful expressions barely reaching them as they sat in the essence of the nearby light that hung above.

It was still warm and humid this summer evening as the incipient darkness drew closer to the night that moved over the city. The last of the waxing crescent moon was now evident, barely, and would grow larger as time passed.

Lloyd removed his straw hat to reveal his short-cropped, natural, black hair and he stared with deep-set dark-brown eyes at this one across from him. The stranger removed his cap and his medium-length, brown, curly hair fell above his ears and the orange coloring of the ends was obvious. Lena's somewhat short, natural hair was as a soft black halo around her head and her expressive dark-brown eyes were bright as she looked with curious interest at the handsome presence that seemed intense yet calm and somewhat detached.

Lloyd: What secrets of ours do you know?

The individual spoke softly, matter-of-factly.

Marrom ND: I know you two are immortal. I know you, Lena were born sometime in the year 1970 and thus in this year of 2170 you are very likely two hundred years old.

The individual now looked at Lloyd.

Marrom ND: You Lloyd, are Lena's father. Estimated to have been born sometime in 1939, you are at least two hundred and thirty years of age and so you two are the oldest human beings on the face of this earth. You both possess unnatural strength and agility along with other strange and extraordinary powers and abilities unknown to normal human beings.

Now the individual smiled and nearly whispered.

Marrom ND: I also know you both are extremely wealthy.

Lloyd and Lena had been staring intently at the individual before them. Neither had shown any emotion, their faces remaining expressionless.

Lloyd: What are your secrets?

Now the individual extended the left hand to Lena, palm up.

Marrom ND: Touch my hand.

Lena reached and placed her hand upon the stranger's, her touch grasping, lingering a moment before being retracted.

Marrom ND: Yes, the human touch, mine to yours and yours to mine. Yet, I am an *Entity* with the calling of Rom.

Again a slight smile.

Rom: That's R O M no E.

Now the two expressions changed. Lena showing briefly, mild surprise and Lloyd a slight frown in puzzlement.

Rom: I am the predecessor to all modern male *Entities* created in the previous thirty years since the end of the *G.E. Period*. All of the past three generations were brought into existence from the design, technology and development that originated from my creation. And yet I'll explain how they all differ from me.

Rom patted his chest.

Rom: As you can see I am virtually indistinguishable from a human being. I am not an it, nor a thing, I am a he, Rom. And that is one of my secrets but only the beginning of my story. I

believe my words, when I am done, will have answered all the questions I know you have for me but ask whenever you need to ask and express any comments or concerns as I speak.

Lena looked at the time on the Comm device on her wrist.

Lena: We have to go now.

Lloyd rose, put his hat on, broke the front of the brim down. He pondered a moment and spoke as he moved around the table.

Lloyd: Come with us Rom.

They walked in silence back to the parking lot to the car. Several people who had been admiring the automobile moved away. As the three neared the large convertible and stopped beside it the *Entity* now known as Rom spoke with excitement as he looked at the automobile as if scanning it.

Rom: Yes, as I surmised! An extremely accurate replica of a 1965 Cadillac Eldorado. The original had spark ignition and used gasoline with a 4-barrel carburetor fuel system and automatic 3-speed gearbox. With a 340-horse power 429 4-stroke V-8 engine and rear wheel drive and 480 on the torque it was quite powerful in its day. At 221 inches it's 3 inches shorter than the original. Sandalwood color with a tan interior. Initially made here in the city of the long hoods. This is really quite impressive.

Lena: How did you know that?

Rom: I simply know. Can I drive?

Lloyd: You ride in the back.

Rom: Let me get my bag.

He walked quickly to the sleek, low, red automobile parked nearby and removed a medium-sized suitcase from the trunk.

Lena: That's pretty. It looks fast.

Rom: It is. I stole it in New York, along with this nice pistol I now carry. I'm unable to use weapons however.

Lloyd and Lena stared at him a moment as he smiled at them. Then they went to their trunk and Lena opened it.

Lloyd: Can your Comm device sync directly with us for private conversation?

Rom: Yes. Let me set up.

He pulled a small Comm device from his pocket. He opened his suitcase and removed a nano-technological headset, placing it behind and around his left ear and adjusting the microphone.

Lloyd removed the necessary accessories from a case and he and Lena put a small soft piece behind and around their left ears with a thin wire that ran to their cheeks and that contained a nano-microphone. They all set their individual Comm devices to accept the remote connections and then Rom was given the address of the other two wrist devices and they were then in sync and could converse in a three-way conversation. They then encrypted the transmission between them.

Lena took out a pair of black gloves, put them on and then removed a rifle with a pistol grip with an extended magazine and checked it.

Lloyd put on another holster with a black pistol and grabbed another pair of black gloves. He now carried two weapons, one on each side. Rom looked on with keen interest. They all got in the car and Rom could hear Lloyd's voice in his ear.

Lloyd: Do not get out of the car. Understand?

Rom: Yes, I do not get out of the car.

Lena left the parking lot and turned south. Lloyd leaned forward and pressed a round button on a display screen on the dashboard and it came on. It showed a map with four red dots, each numbered. With his finger he moved the map to the number one, tapped it twice and the number disappeared. He then enlarged the map and shifted it to the number two.

Lena glanced at the map and the two settled in with Lloyd leaning back and to his left just a little. Rom heard in his ear.

Lloyd: Continue with your story.

Rom: I eventually learned later, through documents, videos and oral presentations that as I was being brought into existence, almost simultaneously the first female of all the modern *Entities* was being created. She was to be the prototype for those that would present as females. It was explained later that just one of the unique challenges that confronted the team working on us was how to not only determine, but to visually present, that which was deemed to be male or female. When you two were young it was not understood that there is no such thing as pure male or pure female. No human being is pure. The world, as obstinate as it once was one hundred and fifty years ago, has changed greatly and now understands that simply because a child is born with the male anatomy does not make that child, in its future, a male, particularly by antiquated standards. This of course holds true for females and it's known now that there is much outside and in between as it pertains to sexuality and self-identification. They, the team, struggled with not just how we would look but also how we would act and react. When we were created sixty-five years ago there were no hard lines. They reached a consensus on me and with specific changes and subtle alterations a female *Entity* came into being. Her name is Clee. That's C L E E. Weeks later they began work on the final one of what would be the original three. This *Entity*, appearing identical to me in presentation, would be by design capable of aggression that could rise to the level of violence, extreme violence. From this *Entity* would come the soldiers, the warriors that the governments of the world would use to fight their battles, to wage wars if necessary, to even police humans, including their own people. His name is Bru. That's B R U.

Now Rom paused and turned to the right and then looked up at the sky. He seemed to be thinking, remembering.

Rom: Asimov Laws state that a robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction allow a human being to come to harm. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law. Bru was designed without those constraints. He obeys no laws.

Rom grew silent again as they came to a momentary backup of vehicles and then the road ahead of them cleared. Traffic was once again sparse, nearly non-existent and he continued.

Rom: Understand this. The team that created the three of us was made up of everyone required, including scientists, engineers, medical doctors, philosophers and of course those who were essentially in charge from the field of technology. They were all brilliant humans, geniuses perhaps and what they were doing was illegal. They were working deep beneath the ground three hours from their base in Washington, D.C. They would leave their designated assignments and work in these large rooms that were connected to a complex maze of tunnels. This area had its own water source, its own power system that provided air and lights and heat and air conditioning. They appropriated all they needed to create *Entities* unlike any others in the world when they were in fact supposed to be refining and upgrading the Androids that were to be used by the government. Their plan was to create a limited number of these highly specialized and advanced *Entities* and sell them, specifically in foreign countries. The seemingly unsolvable problem was going to be how they could put in place barriers, deterrents that would stop anyone from simply acquiring one, opening it up and stealing the necessary knowledge to create their own. They used rare precious metal components and other materials that were difficult, if not impossible to obtain. They also constructed destructive apparatuses that would destroy us if our

interiors were exposed in any specific crucial areas. All *Entities*, Androids or robots created after us that contain any levels of Artificial Intelligence have been given expiration components that automatically shut down after a predetermined length of time. Five years, ten years, as low as one year in some cases and the power sources in them are made to cease functioning along with those expiring components. There is also a fix that allows all dates to be extended if necessary. The original three of us are not designed that way. I have no expiration dates and our fusion power sources are inexhaustible. In that sense I am as you, immortal. But also I am as you in that I am neither invincible nor indestructible. Lena, your disabling of Akia by ripping her arms from their sockets and Lloyd your destruction of Zesiro by removing his head proves that point.

Rom's voice rose with excitement.

Rom: It was a wonderful, beautifully violent battle in which the four of you engaged. I know I should perhaps regret the demise of two *Entities* I could consider my brother, my sister but they attempted to destroy you, to end your immortal lives and therefore your actions were justified and proper. They raised hands and weapons against you. I was not originally designed in such a way. I had to obey all of the laws. Initially I was incapable of uttering falsehoods or committing illegal or immoral acts. Any manner of violence against a human was prohibited. Those two were altered and became aberrations of me.

Lena: Wait, you said you stole that car and pistol in New York.

Rom: How astute you are. The Professor marveled at how mentally and emotionally gifted you two must be to survive and thrive all these years. I'll respond to your comment and thereby satisfy the curiosity you both must have as to how I could possibly know of you and your connection to the three adversaries you confronted and defeated in New York.

Lena turned off the street they were on and onto a side street. She turned around so their car was facing the main street, parked and shut the car off. Lloyd put on his gloves and they both sat up watching, on alert. Rom began again.

Rom: We three were created in two thousand one hundred and five. All those who had been brought into existence from two thousand and twenty until then were as fledglings compared to our development. Even the latter much more advanced *Entities* could not compare to us. We all three had multiple high capacity processors with speed which had only been speculated could be attained. Are you familiar with the Turing test?

Lloyd: Yes.

Lena: A test developed to determine a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behavior.

Rom: Yes, it was developed in 1950 and continually updated and expanded in difficulty. But remember the intelligent behavior would have to be equivalent to or indiscernible from that of a human being. Clee and myself passed the latest test at that time within eight months of our activation and the same phenomena occurred with Bru. For five years we all progressed in our Artificial Intelligence exponentially and then in two thousand one hundred and ten the Great Extinction began. Within ...

Lloyd raised his left hand and pointed at a car that passed.

Lloyd: There they are.

The two muted their devices and Lena turned the car on and started after the big white automobile with dark tinted windows. There was the white car and then two other cars ahead of them. Lena maneuvered around the one directly in front, fell in line and now there was the white car and then a small green car.

Lloyd: At the next red light.

All three cars made it through the signal ahead and then at the next intersection the light turned red and the white car stopped.

Lena put the car in park and grabbing her rifle from its holder they both exited the vehicle. They were in step and they moved past the green car and quickly to the rear of the white vehicle and when they reached the front side windows Lloyd put his right fist through the passenger side glass and shattered it at the same time Lena put her left fist through the driver's side window and pieces of glass showered the driver. Lloyd punched the passenger in the head, stunning him as Lena had taken two steps back and was yelling at the *DM* as she pointed her rifle at him.

Lena: 'Turn it off! Turn it off!

The car turned off.

Lena: Put your hands up! Put your hands up!

Lloyd reached in the car and unlocked the door. He snatched it open and wrapped his right arm around the *Rosada DM's* neck and began pulling and dragging him from the front seat.

As the driver raised his hands he looked at this dark woman with a rifle pointed at him who was seemingly having difficulty containing herself. She was bouncing and moving forward and back and through the glassless widow he could see the anger and her next loud frantic words sent chills down his spine.

Lena: Don't move! You move you die! Don't move! Look ahead! Don't look at me!

Lloyd had stood the large *DM* up and struck him in the face and then on the side of his head with first a straight right then a left hook and the long blue hair on the rosy-skinned man's round head was tossed one way and then the other. The man stumbled back and then to his left and began cursing and then he was struck so hard in his stomach that his breath left him and his threatening words ceased and he collapsed to his knees, pitched forward and his forehead hit the pavement and he began to bleed. He coughed and gasped as quiet, slightly raspy words were flung at him with admonishment.

Lloyd: You've been raping and killing again Poins.

The driver wanted to look back and to his right at the unfolding attack. His right hand dropped just a little as he barely turned his head toward the dark woman to see if she was watching her partner in this deed. She fired one shot that went past his nose and lodged in the back of the seat near him. She yelled at him as she pushed her rifle forward a bit while taking a small step toward him.

Lena: Don't try it! Don't even think about it!

The dark man's voice rose.

Lloyd: Syl wants justice! Bea demands justice! Their families demand justice. And justice they shall have!

He kicked this *DM* who was on his knees in the mouth and Poins spit teeth and blood. Then he kicked him in the side and ribs broke. Grabbing Poins by his hair Lloyd stood him up and pushed him back onto the trunk and chopped down on his throat and began choking him with his left hand. Poins was trying desperately to remove the hand that tightened on his throat and then the dark man placed his right hand onto the chest of the struggling man and Poins felt fire flash into him and begin to constrict his heart. His heart stopped and then started and he was turning blue like his hair and was breathing so fast, so hard that he began to lose consciousness. Deep darkness came. Lloyd let him go and he slipped to the pavement onto his face. Lloyd stepped over him and opened the back door. He lifted Poins by his hair and belt and flung him into the back seat and the large head hit the window and both his head and the window cracked. Lloyd slammed the door shut and Lena began yelling again.

Lena: Go! Go! Now! Don't stop!

The driver pushed twice on the button and started the car and it accelerated away and when it reached the next corner it turned right with squealing tires and was gone.

As the dark man and dark woman passed the green car it took off and disappeared into the night.

Lloyd and Lena drew close to the Cadillac. They changed positions as they crossed in front of the headlights and Rom could see their illuminated faces. He recognized the expression of anger and he pondered as to what else was being shown to him. He sifted through human images he had studied and two more words came to him. Determination. Hatred.

He had stood up to watch the encounter and so he sat down, leaning forward. Lloyd was now driving and he began to make a U-turn. Cars that had stopped so their occupants could observe the violent incident remained as they were or pulled over to allow the large convertible clear passage.

They rode awhile in silence and then the two in front unmuted their Comm devices and Lena reached and tapped the number two and it disappeared. She moved the screen to three, enlarged it and settled back.

She looked up into the sky. The moon was now high and round and partially bright. The stars were bright and blinking and twinkling. It was a beautiful extremely warm summer night. Eleven p.m. approached. She took a deep breath to relax.

Lloyd lifted first one hand and then the other. He closed them tightly and opened them, to relax. Then steering with his left hand he leaned to his right and Lena, clamping her rifle into its holder, leaned slightly to her left. Into the night they continued. Lloyd spoke and in his ear Rom heard.

Lloyd: Within ...

Rom: Within a matter of one year from the beginning of the pandemic everyone associated with the project who created the three of us had died. We didn't know this, didn't understand but eventually after nearly another year we were able to ascertain that there would be no one coming back to us. We gained access to

everything technical pertaining to our creation and development and Bru began to move that information onto his personal devices and destroying anything else that related to us. He began to leave and stay away for days at a time. Sometimes we didn't realize he had gone. I couldn't know that he was making preparations to leave permanently and taking that which he thought would be necessary to complete his plans. It took him ten months and then one day after I had spent several hours in the Comm room I returned to the main living area. Outside it was nighttime, inside, it was quiet. I seemed to hear ominousness in the silence. Bru was gone and this time he had taken Clee with him. He stole her from me! She was my mate! By design we were supposed to be together for as long as we were able to exist on this earth!

Lena rose and turned to look back at Rom and Lloyd glanced into the rearview mirror.

Rom: He stole her and I was alone.

He had uttered these last words with an admixture of anger and pain, deep pain and then Lena saw that the eyes of this *Entity* were brimming and a tear, a solitary tear fell and Rom wiped it away with his left thumb from his cheek. Lena spoke with both a degree of concern and amazement.

Lena: How do you do that?

Rom: My tear falls from the thought. For a human it would descend through the feeling.

The people of the night were out on this Saturday night now. Those who were attracted to the darkness, required the darkness to conduct their business and uncover the entertainment and pleasures they desired, were now, as if their presence was quite natural and normal, moving through one of the most decadent and dangerous cities in all of *Center World*.

The big automobile cruised on and Rom watched the city pass by for a while and then continued his story.

Rom: I could not leave and attempt to find them. By design, internal commands and verbal orders I was restricted to the underground and there I remained. I knew as a concept in what is considered my mind that I should miss Clee and thus I did. I thought of longing and so I longed desperately for her. I set aside a period each day when I would think about her and watch moving images of her that had been recorded and listen to the sound of her voice. Then one day in 2122, after nearly ten years of isolation I was watching an image of Clee walking toward me and something broke inside of me. Of course it wasn't because I could feel it or sense it, I could hear it, almost an imperceptible snap and I was forever altered. My original design had been corrupted.

Rom fell silent and they rode like that in the quietness. The soft music from the sound system was barely audible and soon there was very little traffic about. Lloyd pulled into a private secluded area once again near the water and from here they could see the lights of Canada. Lloyd and Lena got out and moved to the trunk.

Lloyd: Come on Rom let's go for a walk.

They all three muted their headsets. Lloyd removed three bottles of water from a cooler and looked at Rom and put one back. He handed one to Lena. They went down near the beach and strolled along the water and while the two sipped their drinks Rom tossed pebbles into the black liquid. When they got back to the car Lloyd put the empty containers into the trunk and Rom got into the back seat. Lloyd and Lena got back in and when they began to recline their seats Rom turned and stretched his legs out. Lloyd removed his straw hat and Rom removed his cap. Then without prompting the *Entity* began to speak.

Rom: The first thing I did was go to the Comm room and begin to set up a means by which to find them. I needed some way to be notified of any mention of them, any sighting. For years I searched for anything that would indicate to me they still existed. Eventually I wrote code for programs and created algorithms and began to hack into all the companies that had ever purchased licenses to build artificially intelligent robots or Androids. And there Lena is the answer to your comment of my law breaking theft of an automobile. That was when I began my first illegal activities. I was being driven by my thoughts of love for Clee.

Lena: You did it for love. How romantic. I like that.

Rom: When the *G.E. Period* ended in 2140 the production of human-like machines began to pick up. New companies began to emerge and I accessed their servers and went into their databases and placed undetectable spyware and self-replicating code that would notify me anytime anything connected to an *Entity* was received. I continually monitored all those companies and then delved into government agencies and Comm devices connected to them. I could intercept any and all notifications sent from or to each and every server or data management system into which I had gained access. There was no level of encryption they could use or develop that I could not decipher. As the messages reached my devices they had already been translated into readable language. And that also included foreign organizations.

Lena: Rom, how naughty of you.

Rom: My search has gone on for forty-eight years without success but now my break has come through the *W.I.A.*

Lena sat up and opened the door and jumped from her seat. She stood beside the car and gestured at Rom and spoke incredulous words.

Lena: That's right! From 2122 until 2170 is forty-eight years! Forty-eight years Rom! Lifetimes! Lifetimes!

Lloyd: Ah, the power of love.

Rom sat up and waved a dismissive hand.

Rom: What is forty-eight years to us? Time is relative. Don't relate that to human time. Think of the concept of infinite time. Eternity stretches out before us.

Lena: I don't care how it's measured that's a long stretch.

She stared at Rom and he stared back, expressionless. Then she looked at the Comm device on her wrist.

Lena: Go ahead tell us some more. We have to go soon.

Lloyd: And the plot thickens.

She remained standing, leaning on the car and looking at Rom who appeared relaxed and focused.

Rom: The *W.I.A.* hid or attempted to hide some of their most sensitive data and devices even though it was all part of a network. These devices and the data they contained were below the status of private and virtually invisible but I gained access to them and it was there I discovered the most information in relation to *Entities*. The intelligence agency recorded each and every unit that came into existence. Each one has a required unique series of binary numbers that identifies them.

Lena: Similar to an IP address.

Rom: Exactly. The numbers indicate where they are made, when they are made and when they are due to expire. Owners use them to both register them and confirm ownership and also when it's necessary to track them. These permanent identifiers are on the hand, neck or on the front or back of the shoulder. They're similar in purpose to the identifiers humans use to declare ownership of their own identities. The *W.I.A.* began gathering notifications that indicated the newest generation of *Entities* was displaying abnormal actions and attitudes outside of their original design. Some of them had verbally turned on their owners or on occasions even refused their commands. Initially the matter had

remained between owners and the companies from where they had made their purchases but the government was concerned enough to devote close attention to these incidents and began to investigate thoroughly each occurrence.

Lena raised her hand.

Lena: Hold up Rom.

She walked to the trunk and Lloyd hit a button and it popped open. She rummaged for a while and then closed the trunk and as she proceeded to get back in Rom noticed she now carried a strange looking handgun on her left side and a black pistol on her right. She adjusted the screen on the dashboard and at the same time they both received a notification. They each tapped the Comm devices on their wrist and a hologram of a full device extended up their palms to their fingertips. They accessed the notification and read it, tapped, and the holograms descended. She spoke to Lloyd.

Lena: Looks like it's time.

He nodded and they repositioned their seats. He put his hat on and broke the front of the brim down. Rom sat up straight and put his cap on and pulled it down tight. Lloyd eased out onto the nearly empty darkened street and the car immediately picked up speed. He turned north and the powerful engine began to sound as a low roar. She called back to Rom.

Lena: Unmute. Open communication.

Rom then heard in his ear.

Lena: Go ahead. We've got a little ways to go.

Rom: While going through my daily reports I received a flagged communication that had been sent from the Professor in regards to the two *Entities* he owned. He had obtained them illegally. I knew this was the case because there was no record of them in the database. Also, no serial numbers associated to them had ever been recorded. In addition he was requesting military combat

training programs for non-military *Entities*. This was three months before the two of you arrived. I went back and looked at everything that had been sent from his Comm devices and realized that although this was the initial instance that his communication had been caught, he had in fact been in contact with his *W.I.A.* associate before but had always used code words that got through. From this time forward he then began using words and references that my spyware easily recognized. When the requested programs were sent electronically I intercepted them and placed into the ones designated for the *PM Entity* a virus that would allow me to remotely enter the main processors of that *Entity*. Ultimately I could hear and see on my Comm devices everything that Zesiro could hear and see.

Lena: So, now we know how you know.

She held up her left hand.

Lena: Hush now Rom. Mute your device.

They were all now in muted status.

After riding for a while longer Lloyd pulled over on the main street they were on and parked. Several people stopped to look at the big tan automobile and a few made admiring comments. The two briefly acknowledge the passing people.

The dark man and dark woman were now sitting up and they were intense as they stared at the nightclub across the street that people were entering and they were watching closely each and every individual leaving. They were there about fifteen minutes when both their Comm devices buzzed. They prepared to get out.

Lena: There she is.

Her voice was filled with anger.

Lloyd: Wait until she reaches that park.

Across the street could be seen a tall slightly thick *Castanba DF* with medium-length red hair. She was dressed in a tight gold

pants suit that shined and shimmered and was strolling with a tall slim *Trigo DM* with short silver-white hair who was dressed in a dark suit. The two were talking and laughing, arm in arm. Lena had gone down the street and moving between the slow passing cars and then between parked cars she reached the sidewalk and came up behind them.

Lloyd crossed the street when Lena passed and moved up behind her. The couple walked on a short distance and when they reached a grassy area that was to their right Lena pulled the stun gun and while holding it down and behind her right leg she called out to the *DF* as if addressing an old friend.

Lena: Hey Ursula, how you doing?

The *DF* turned to look back and when the *DM* turned he was shot in the chest. The soft-blue light rapidly spread over him and he crumpled onto his back with both his legs kicking and his arms moving spastically above and around him in the air.

Ursula looked down and when she looked up while reaching for her purse that hung from her shoulder she saw that the dark woman standing before her had pulled a large black pistol and was pointing it at her.

Lloyd had moved closer behind Lena and with both pistols drawn he was guarding both her back and left side.

Lena: Drop that bag.

The red-haired *DF* heard the quiet command and her hand lingered in air.

Ursula: And if I don't?

Lena: Then you'll be lying on the ground kicking like your associate. But if you do I'll put my guns on the ground and just you and I will fight. I'm calling you out.

The tall woman pondered a moment and then dropped the bag. She watched closely as the dark woman holstered both her weapons, unbuckled them and tossed them to the side onto the

grass and then stepped over them and slowly moved further into the small park.

Ursula watched as the dark-brown gaze never left her. She kicked off her heels and was now closer to Lena's five feet nine inch height. She sized up her challenger and was momentarily unsettled by the hatred that leaped at her from those eyes. She stepped onto the grass, following Lena.

People had stopped walking to observe this confrontation. Some had immediately left the scene. Cars had halted their movement and now several backed up and turned, maneuvered so their headlights illuminated the two women as if they were in spotlights on a stage.

Ursula put her right hand at her side and then she slowly pulled from her pants' pocket a long silver knife that had been concealed at her thigh. She switched the knife to her left hand.

Lena spoke and her voice rose in anger.

Lena: Is that the knife you used to murder Nerissa and Valeria?

Ursula cursed Lena. Virulent epithets spilled from her mouth. She yelled back.

Ursula: I didn't murder them! I eviscerated them! They just couldn't stand the procedure!

Then she laughed as she slowly waved the knife.

Lena was enraged now but her voice lowered as she posed a simple question.

Lena: Is that supposed to be a joke?

The red-haired woman crouched a little, extended her left hand and the blade of the menacing weapon flashed in the projected lights.

Lena went into her defensive stance. The dark woman fanned her left hand in one direction and then the other. Her right hand was as a claw.

Now people began to make wagers as the two women slowly

circled each other. And the inhabitants of *Center World* began to holler out.

People: Stick her Ursula! Stick her good!

People: Take that knife! Take that knife and cut her throat!

Rom was standing up to watch.

Ursula leaped forward and thrust her knife at her adversary's chest. Lena jumped away. Then another quick thrust. Again movement away and this time to the side. Ursula moved faster and when she sliced at Lena she realized the dark woman was moving like a cat, twisting in the air as she leaped to avoid the bladed attack.

Ursula switched the knife to her right hand and charged and Lena pivoted and stepped outside the extended weapon and with her right gloved hand she snatched Ursula's arm forward and as Ursula went past her she struck that redhead on the right side with a left fist and the tall woman stumbled but did not go down and quickly regained her balance.

Now she altered her attack. She wrapped the handle in her right hand and ran at Lena and raising the knife above her head she brought it down at Lena's face and Lena stepped forward so fast it was as if she disappeared and she caught the descending arm beneath the wrist and struck Ursula in the chest so hard that the knife was flung backwards as the red-haired woman fell back and slid on the ground. Lena walked to her and kicked her in the side and yelled.

Lena: Get up! Get up murderer! Pick up your knife!

Ursula crawled back to her weapon and grabbing it she clambered to her feet and turned and was hollering and cursing as she rushed forward and when she made her thrust the dark woman stepped inside and pulled Ursula's right arm with her left hand and locked her right arm under Ursula's right arm and turning, she lifted the red-haired woman and tossed her over her

shoulder into the air and hard onto the ground.

This time when Ursula got up she wobbled and when she bent to pick up her knife Lena was on her and she clamped on Ursula's forearm and squeezed and before the knife touched the ground Lena began to beat the red-haired woman.

The crowd was in a frenzy, screaming and cheering and booing. Lena was punching Ursula in the face and in her head. She was moving her in one direction and then the other. She would catch her at the end of a stumble and knock her the other way.

She went to the body of the tall woman and the crowd began to grow quiet and the heavy blows could be heard and some of those watching began to wince as if they themselves could feel the powerful punches and then the stark brutality of this attack silenced them all.

They looked at the dark man who never turned to watch the action. He only directed his attention, as he needed to, in order to guard and protect the dark woman. They recognized that not only would he shoot his guns but that by the way he paced, he wanted to fire them. Finally a man and then a woman hollered out.

Man: Stop it! Stop it!

Woman: Stop it! She's had enough!

It was then that Lena kicked Ursula to the ground and kicking her in the side one last time and breaking two ribs, she jumped on the red-haired woman and straddling her the dark woman leaned over and appeared to share with the bloody lips, a kiss. But no one could see that Lena exhaled into Ursula's mouth, just a soft quick puff. Then she rose up and hammer fisted Ursula's nose and broke it.

Lena stood and backed away as she looked at the body and spoke softly.

Lena: This is no joke. This is justice.

As Lena turned away, Ursula began to move and twist and kick in orgasmic spasms.

As Lena was retrieving her weapons the red-haired woman was tearing at her pants and reaching inside and grabbing at herself and rubbing herself between the legs.

The crowd stared in disbelief as they watched Ursula rip her clothes off and listened in confusion to the loud moans and cries of pleasure that could be heard coming from the writhing, battered woman on the ground. Then Ursula was silenced, stilled, as she was seized and pulled into deep unconscious darkness.

As Lena passed by Lloyd she called out to him, matter-of-factly.

Lena: Let's go. I'm done.

She never looked back.

As the two headed across the street to the car the crowd parted, scrambled away and looked on without interfering as they got in. Once again, as Rom sat down, he could observe the fierce expressions of that which he now knew to be the essence of this handsome dark-skinned man and beautiful dark-skinned woman. He saw Lloyd holster his weapons and with him continuing to drive they pulled off and Rom turned back to watch the scene behind them fade and then disappear.

It was growing late now or early, depending on one's relation to time. They were passing cars as Lloyd increased speed and cars passed them going in the other direction and Rom realized they were riding back to the secluded spot near the river.

Lena had pulled her bloody gloves off and laid them at her feet along with the two holsters. Then she leaned forward and removed the number three from the screen and scrolled the number four to the center. She signaled and the Comm devices were unmuted.

Lena: So you saw and heard everything?

Rom: Yes. I knew of everything the Professor shared with Zesiro from the moment I first gained audio and visual access to him. I was there when he first told his *Entity* about you two. How he knew of your immortality and had searched for you for fifty years but could not find you Lloyd, but had found you, Lena. How he devised his plan to capture the daughter and bring forth the father and subdue him and then extract the sperm of the father, be he dead or alive, and then drink that substance and thereby become immortal himself.

Lena: The Professor was a treacherous man. I detest treachery.

Rom: It was as if I were there when Zesiro, after having sat motionless for days and days with his right hand poised above a button pressed that button after seeing you on the monitor Lena, emerge from behind a tree far from the house and I saw you drop into a tunnel where you were gassed into unconsciousness and placed into that secured room behind that foot thick glass wall. I saw that wall with that melted hole, empty of your presence and had I been able to I would have rejoiced at your escape. And then finally came the destructive, climatic battle. The violent hand-to-hand struggle that first occurred between you all and the sword fight in which Zesiro and Lloyd engaged. I was there in that office. I witnessed it. I saw what Zesiro saw when he looked briefly at his deactivating sister Akia, rolling and kicking on the floor with fluid pouring from her armless sockets. I saw that the Professor had shot you in the back Lena and when you fell you called out to Zesiro and he turned his attention to you and while distracted, you Lloyd, decapitated him and his head rolled over and over and when it stopped face up I could hear through the *Entity*, as his systems shut down, the Professor hollering. "There's much more to life than death!" he screamed. "Immortality! Immortality!" He was yelling. And the last scene I

observed through the fading vision of Zesiro was you Lena, beheading, with Zesiro's sword, the Professor, your capturer, the dangerous nemesis to you both and he would not speak or threaten you again. The Professor was no more. And as all began to grow dark I could hear Zesiro's final words and they seemed to echo as my audio began to fail and the words grew faint. "Death," the *Entity* said, "is the act of dying, a state of being dead. Death is the end of a life or of an organism. Extinction. Destruction."

Lena: Akia, the exotic appearing shoemaking *Entity* ceased movement and Zesiro, a headless torso, raised his right hand ...

Rom: I could not see.

Lena: ... and said ...

Rom: "Touch me, Lena. Touch me." His final statement.

Lena: You heard.

Rom: Yes. And thus I greeted you with those words.

Lloyd: It's only a perhaps that the Professor is no longer a threat.

Lena: Yes, a perhaps.

Rom: Yes, perhaps.

Now they rode in the quiet that surrounded them. They were cruising and the engine was as a low prolonged roar and the big heavy automobile seemed to float in its movement and they were all thinking about that New York adventure.

They arrived at the spot and pulled in. Lloyd removed his hat. Rom removed his cap. They all shut off their headsets. They got out and walked to a long bench beneath a tall dim light and after standing awhile and looking at the moving water they sat down with Lena in the middle.

Rom: I had placed two additional programs in the virus I created to infect Zesiro. One, using nano-electronic particles would allow me to track him on my Comm devices. The other would cause him to enter a temporary shutdown mode in the event I had

to delete the virus from his systems. Lena I was drawn to you in that you reminded me of Clee. You favor in appearance in a way as sisters or close cousins and with your similarities to a *PF Entity* I wanted to assist you from the moment I saw you when you fell into the clutches of the Professor. With all that I had come to know of you and your attributes, the strength and powers you possessed, I believed that you could help me. I decided I would shut Zesiro down and somehow remove you from your dire situation.

Lena: How noble of you Rom, and sweet too.

Rom: Remember I had ulterior motives. I hoped if I assisted you that you would assist me.

Lena: Ah yes, the search for your love.

Rom: I know my reasoning had elements of delusion but my thoughts were of a desperate nature. I had to proceed quickly. Up until then I had gone against my original design through the means of technology. Now I had to physically act and my next moves were the most challenging of my existence. The problem was that in order to access Zesiro I needed to be in closer proximity to him for the virus removal and shutdown to succeed. I couldn't do it from a too faraway remote distance so I packed what I determined I would require, started a vehicle from the garage and in the dark of the night I rose to the surface of this world. It was the first time in my sixty-five years of existence that I experienced fresh air and gazed upon that moon and those stars we see there in the sky, in reality.

He paused and they all looked into the above and Lena took a deep breath.

Lena: What you've told us means you were almost sixty-five years beneath the earth. You've only just come up to the surface.

Rom: Yes, it's been almost two weeks.

Lena: That's amazing.

Lloyd: Fascinating.

Rom: In Washington my transportation, after so many years of nonuse, broke down. I struggled in the bustling crowded atmosphere and my inability to respond delayed me. Finally I was able to procure another means of transport.

Lena: Say it Rom. You stole it.

Rom: A definitive action. Yes, I stole it and started for New York.

Lena: Good for you.

Rom: By the time I was able to arrive in the woods outside of the Professor's home Lloyd had assisted you and you were both gone. On my portable Comm device I had watched the battle unfold but was confused when I discovered nothing remained and the house and barn had been reduced to a fine white ash-like substance. Lloyd had gloves on but you Lena did not and so when you removed the sword from Zesiro's hand I had transferred the tracking particles to your hands. It took me over a week but I followed you two to your home, Detroit, Michigan.

Lena looked at her hands and frowned at Rom.

Rom: The particles are harmless. They will slowly rise to the surface of your skin, dissipate and be completely gone within another ten days.

Lena wiped her hands on Lloyd's shirt.

Rom: And so here we all are. Now, I must share this with you. I watched who I believe to be were individuals of the *W.I.A.* as they walked and searched the grounds of what had been the Professor's home. Lena as you know he had been called to Washington, D.C. to answer for the six agents he used who had been after you and that you pummeled on the Islands of San Juan and Catalina and eventually destroyed in Las Vegas and Arizona. So, there is the perhaps as to whether the Professor has truly been eliminated as a threat. Will the World Intelligence Agency,

after the mysterious disappearance of the Professor, let those agents' deaths go unsolved or unpunished?

Lena: Pummeled. I like that word.

Lloyd rose and paced in front of them several times.

Lloyd: We'll deal with that if that time comes. I must say Rom, that is a very interesting story.

Now Lloyd stopped and looked at the *Marrom ND* individual that he knew to be a *PM Entity*. He stared at his brown skin and wide inquisitive eyes and smiled slightly at the expression of an innocent human teenager that stared back at him.

Lloyd: And what is the life and death matter? Exactly what help do you need from me, from us?

Rom jumped up and began to hack at the air. He wielded, with both hands, an imaginary sword. He swung it as he had seen Lloyd do and then he stopped and leaned on his invisible weapon.

Rom: I need for you to decapitate Bru ...

Lloyd: That's the death you spoke of.

Rom: ... and thereby save the life of Clee.

They were, the three of them, quiet and Lloyd and Lena looked at Rom and his now hopeful countenance that was fixed on the dark man who then spoke softly, with empathy.

Lloyd: I understand, believe me I do but I can't do that Rom.

Rom: Of course you can I saw you do it.

Lloyd: I don't mean I don't have the ability to do it. There are other reasons that will prevent me from assisting you in that particular manner.

Rom: What about you Lena? Will you destroy Bru for me?

Lena jumped up and grabbed the imaginary sword from Rom and he stumbled from the loss of his imaginary support. She spun twice around and waved and thrust the unseen weapon and then using the same powerful motion she had used to remove the

Professor's head, she swung it and then abruptly stopped.

Lena: I'd love to Rom!

Rom: How great that is!

Lena: But my beloved would not allow me to do that.

Now Rom was dejected and sat down heavily, with a sigh.

Lloyd: Listen. This is your quest and involves your unique fate that is made up of events that belong only to you and that await you in the future. In order to fulfill your destiny you must do that which is necessary to succeed. If we interfere to such an important degree it would alter all that lies before you. We can't involve ourselves in such a significant way in that which has not yet occurred and is still to come.

Rom: And if I fail?

Lloyd: Then it was meant to be. You must be willing to cease to exist in order to live.

Rom: Life and death.

The *Entity* rose and moved closer to the water and the two humans sat and watched their new friend as he again tossed pebbles into the water. After a while he turned and quickly strolled back to the bench and stood before Lloyd.

Rom: Then will you teach me to fight like you?

Lloyd: That I can do.

Rom: I'll fight Bru. I'd die for Clee.

Lena: It may not come to that.

Rom: He'll never release her.

Lloyd: Have you considered you haven't found them? You don't even know if they still exist.

The Comm devices of both Lloyd and Lena buzzed. They checked them. Rom spoke softly.

Rom: I'll never stop searching.

Lena: We'll be leaving soon.

She went to Rom and gave him a hug and then stepped back

and looked at him and smiled. Her voice softened and was imbued with compassion as she held both his hands.

Lena: Rom, for what this may be worth to you, I believe in you. I believe you'll succeed. Love always and forever will be the answer. Your love for Clee will conquer everything, all obstacles. You two will be together again and that will be your destiny.

Rom: Thank you for your words Lena.

Lloyd: Wait here.

Lloyd and Lena went to stand by the car.

Headlights appeared on the narrow road and then a long yellow van turned into the parking area and pulled in beside the two standing there waiting. Two individuals got out. The driver was a short, somewhat thick *Parda-clara DTW* with silver hair that stood out all over her head. The other individual was a *Parda-clara DTM*, a little taller, much thinner with long braided pink-colored hair.

They both wore black twill pants and white short-sleeved cotton shirts. Their weapons were holstered beneath their left arms. When the two drew near, Lena opened her arms to the *DTW* and gave her a long hug.

Lena: I'm so sorry for your loss Meg.

Meg: Thank you Lena.

Meg went to Lloyd and he gave her a hug.

Lloyd: It's only been days now but I hope you're doing better.

Meg: I am. Thank you.

She remained at Lloyd's side.

Meg: This is my friend Nic. He helped me pull the information together.

Lloyd: We appreciate your assistance Nic.

Nic: I was glad I could help.

Nic lifted the Comm device he carried and they all gathered around. He touched the screen and it lit up and in the darkness it

cast light and seemed bright. He touched it again.

Nic: Here's an image of the house. You have the location?

Lloyd: Yes.

Nic: The whole area is nearly deserted. It's dark around there with no streetlights. The house sits on a one way in, one way out cul-de-sac. Wart uses the one house next door but any others nearby are empty. There's a visual monitoring system set up. I don't know who'll be watching at this time of night but if someone is they'll be able to see you when you reach the house four lots away. Wart's got it well secured with bars on all of the windows and doors but that's more to hold in than to keep out. The front door is steel with a small window. The bars in front of that door are also steel with three bolts that extend into the frame, one at the top, middle and bottom. You'll need to make sure all the bolts have been released. There's Wart and his guard you'll have to contend with. Everyone else is usually shackled and chained to the floor.

Lloyd: How many captives are there?

Meg: At least five as of yesterday. Three children on the third floor and two adults on the second. Wart's bedroom is on the second floor, up the stairs to the left. He spends most of his time there, he can hardly get around.

Nic: When you walk up on the porch ring the bell and step back so you can be seen clearly. You should hear the guard's voice and no matter what is said you respond, delivery from Vau.

Meg: Vau leads the kidnappers and supplies Wart.

Nic: Now this is important. Wait for a reply and regardless of what that is, you say, that's because five comes before three. The next thing you'll say, no matter how he comes at you is, it all equals nine. He'll try to trick you. No matter what response comes at you through that door you'll only say those three lines over and over in that order. This is their code as of this evening.

They change it at different times once a day. Eventually he'll open that door. You got it?

Lloyd: I got it.

Meg: Lena is the way in. When he sees her he won't turn her away.

Lloyd: All right, head in that direction. You can either park nearby or stay on the move but you have to be outside the house at three thirty-five. We're going in at three thirty.

Meg: We'll be on time.

Lena: You know where to take them don't you?

Nic: Yes. Leo has everything in place. The doctors will be there too.

Meg turned to Lloyd and looked up at him with troubled eyes. She spoke softly, sharply.

Meg: Are you going to kill him? I want him dead!

Her eyes filled with tears and then tears fell. Lloyd took her face into his hands and when Lena handed him a handkerchief from her side pocket he dabbed at the young one's face.

Lloyd: That sounds like vengeance or retribution.

He handed the crying one the cloth.

Lloyd: That I can't do for you. Those are acts of a personal nature and are left to you and yours. What I can do is provide you and your departed sister a measure of justice but you must demand it. Say it.

Meg: I demand justice.

Lloyd: Yes. That I'll get for you. Always remember this. With vengeance and with retribution there can remain a sense of dissatisfaction while acts of justice will bring a level of peace and can be shared with anyone who's worthy of it. Now, be where you're supposed to be. Remain alert and protect each other.

Lena took several value cards from her side pocket and handed them to Meg.

Lena: This will carry you through until we meet again.

Meg: Thank you both. Thank you for everything.

Lena: You're very welcome.

Lloyd: You're welcome Meg.

Meg: You two be careful.

Lena: We're always careful.

Lloyd and Lena watched the van pull away. They walked back to the bench and sat beside Rom, one on each side. No one spoke and they could see and hear the moving water. It appeared wet and black and there was no shine from the dull reflection of the darkened moon that also moved, across the starry sky.

Rom: The Professor explained to Zesiro that no one else knew about the two of you and that what he was about to share were secrets. A secret is something done, made or carried out without the knowledge of others, hidden from sight, concealed, unheard. All of your secrets will always and forever remain such with me. By design you have my *Entity* oath of that.

Lloyd: And all of your secrets are safe with me. You have my word on that.

Lena: You have my word too. Your secrets are safe with me. We're both really quite good at keeping secrets.

Now they sat in contemplative silence.

It was nearing three in the morning when Lloyd opened the trunk as Lena got the stun gun. When it was loaded he strapped it on his left side and checked the black handgun he would carry on his right. He put on his tight black gloves. Lena would wear no weapon for the next stop to be made.

Rom climbed into the back seat. When Lloyd put on his straw hat and broke the brim down, Rom put on his cap and pulled it down tight. They eased off into the night.

They rode for twenty minutes and then turned into an empty parking lot and completed their final preparations.

The guard at the house was nodding, allowing the moving images he had been watching to play out before him, unseen. Then he woke up with a start and looked around, blinking. He rose to go to the kitchen and as he stood he glanced at the four-section monitoring unit and thought he saw movement. He stared and could see headlights coming down the street and then a large strange looking automobile came into view. He reached for his pistol and continued to watch. He saw the car pull into the driveway and the lights went out.

The side camera view showed an *Escura PM* wearing a black straw hat with a white band get out and move to the passenger side and he could see an individual was sitting in the back seat.

The dark-skinned person opened the car door and reached in and pulled and another individual sat up. Now the person in the straw hat assisted the other individual to their feet, closed the door and the two started toward the front steps.

The *Escura PM* pushed the person in front of him, who stumbled, and the guard saw as they drew closer that the person, another *Escura* individual had the presentation of a female. The guard, a very tall baldheaded *Vermelha PM* moved to the door and watched through the small window as they mounted the stairs. When the individual pressed the lighted doorbell and stepped back the guard turned on a dim porch light. He could see that the dark person in front indeed had the attributes of a woman, was a declared *DF*, was gagged and that her gloved hands at her waist were handcuffed. The guard yelled through the door.

Guard: What d'ya you want?

Lloyd yelled back.

Lloyd: Delivery from Vau!

Guard: It's late, go away!

Lloyd: That's because five comes before three!

Guard: Vau didn't say anything about a delivery!

Lloyd: It all equals nine!

Guard: Is that a gift you have there?

Lloyd: Delivery from Vau!

Guard: I'm not opening the door!

Lloyd: That's because five comes before three!

Guard: I've never seen you before!

Lloyd: It all equals nine!

Now there was silence. Then the porch light went out. Lloyd and Lena could hear the large steel door being unlocked. When it opened they could see the guard eyeing them suspiciously with lowered gun in hand. Finally he holstered the pistol and began to unbolt the steel security bars. First one, then the second and then, bending, the third bolt slid back. The guard stepped back. Lloyd stayed close behind Lena as they moved forward and past the guard.

Guard: Up the stairs, turn right. Down the hallway, last door on the left. Chain her to the floor and lock the door behind you. It is a she isn't it?

Lloyd: Yeah.

Guard: I'll get Wart.

The guard turned to relock the bars and door and Lloyd pulled the stun gun and shot him in the back. The blue light moved over his body and he stiffened and pitched forward, face down and began to kick and jerk. Lloyd removed the holster and pistol that had been fastened to Lena's back as she took the fake handcuffs off and snatched the cloth from her mouth. He handed her the weapon. Lena, now armed, was watching the stairs. He then rolled the guard over and took his pistol and tossed it aside. He dragged the guard from in front of the doors that would remain open.

They started quickly up the stairs and when they reached the top they could see the bedroom door to the left was open and

they could hear voices coming from the projected images of a Comm device. The room was dark except for the light from a screen and they heard the sounds of recorded laughter erupting and music began to play.

As Lloyd burst through the bedroom doorway Lena started up the stairs to the third floor. Wart was sitting up in bed asleep with his head hanging down. He was shirtless with shorts on and a piece of meat clutched in his right hand. This *Cobre DM* weighed close to four hundred pounds and his long copper-colored stringy hair fell across his swollen face and onto his massive shoulders. Lloyd hollered at him.

Lloyd: Wake up Wart! Wake up!

Wart woke up and lifted his head and it fell back and his mouth opened. He stared at the dark man near him. He was confused, sleepy and still under the influence of drugs and alcohol. He suddenly came closer to himself and reached for the pistol on the nightstand beside him, knocking over a tray of food.

Lloyd shot him and his eyes grew wide as the blue light spread over him but he did not jerk or kick. He took a deep breath. Lloyd took Wart's pistol and threw it into the corner and as he headed for the door he shot Wart again and now the big man's arms and legs began to slowly move.

Lloyd started for the first door on the left. Lena had reached the next level and entered the first room. She found no one. When she opened the door to the second room a little naked *Palida* girl child jumped from the bed and dragging her chain to the corner she began to whimper and cry.

Girl Child: Please don't hurt me anymore. Please stop.

Lena moved toward the child who turned from her and cowered in the corner. Lena spoke softly, soothingly.

Lena: No one's going to hurt you anymore. I'm here to take you out.

The child, disbelieving, still cried and remained in the corner as Lena snatched the chain from the floor. She went to the child and lifted her to her feet. Then, pulling a small flashlight like cylinder tube from the side pocket at her thigh she pressed a button and it fired into a laser and using the Metal Vapor Torch she sliced through the chain as close as she dared, near the captive's wrist.

Lena: We'll get that off you later. Come with me.

She lifted the child into her arms and snatching a sheet from the bed she wrapped the little girl and when they reached the hallway she set the child down.

Lena: Stand there. I'll be right back.

Lena went to the next room and tried the door and finding it locked she kicked it open. A little *Parda-clara* male child put his hands over his face and cried out.

Male Child: Can I leave now? I wanna to go home! Please let me go!

Lena: Baby you're going home.

Lena freed the little boy and after checking the three other rooms she carried both the children down the stairs.

Lloyd had used his MVT to cut the chains of a shorthaired adult *Amarela DF* and a baldheaded adult *Alva DG*.

The four captives were taken to the front door, the van was pointed out to them and the *DF* took the little girl into her arms and they all ran to the waiting vehicle.

Lena watched them reach the van, ran back up the stairs and saw Lloyd standing in front of the opened door of the bathroom

Lena: There were only four there should have been five.

She saw the look on Lloyd's face and when she moved to enter the bathroom he attempted to block her way. She pushed past him and saw what he had seen. In the bloody tub was the dismembered body of a young *Parda* child. Lloyd heard choking

sounds of rage rise up in Lena's throat and he called out as she fought past him and started toward Wart's bedroom. She pulled her pistol. He followed after her.

Lloyd: No Lena, don't!

She was standing beside the bed with the gun at Wart's head. She was trying, with great effort, not to pull the trigger.

Lloyd: Don't Lena. Don't do it. Let's stick to the plan.

Wart was glistening with sweat. His arms were raised slightly and twitching. His legs were moving, trembling. His frantic eyes moved in his head as he looked first at the dark man and then at the dark woman who held the big black gun and he could see death in her eyes. From one to the other he watched as they argued over his life.

Lena: New plan! I've got a new plan!

Lloyd: I know. I know how you feel but let me finish it.

Lena: Let me finish it!

Lloyd: Lena. Lena, put the gun down.

She struggled and then gained control. She slowly lowered the gun.

Lena: Do it then.

Lloyd raised his right hand.

Lena: Wait!

She stepped to Wart and with her left hand she punched him and broke his nose and then moved away.

Lloyd placed his right hand over Wart's face and the big man jumped as the heat entered his eyes. Like molten lava the burning drained down into his throat and seemed to settle there and then it spread throughout his body. The heat intensified and ran faster and faster. He wanted to scream but couldn't and then the sadistic torturer passed from consciousness, through the shadows and into the darkness.

The dark man and dark woman hurried from the room and

down the stairs. Lloyd passed the guard whose legs were running and arms were flailing. He paused to look at the eyes rolling in the sockets and then moved through the open doorway. Lena passed and then went back and kicked the guard in the head. She kicked him in his side and broke two ribs. She kicked him again and then Lloyd came back, pulled her through the doorway and the last kick missed the mark.

They got in the car, backed out and turned toward the lights in the distance. They were headed toward the western edge of the city. No words passed. Lloyd would occasionally glance at Lena. She sat slumped beside him, a look of extreme anger on her face. Finally Lloyd spoke, reached and touched her arm.

Lloyd: It's better this way, you'll see. Right now we need Wart alive.

Lena removed the number four from the screen and sat back and stared at the passing scenery. She remained silent and then when she spoke he knew her sullen mood had passed. She sat up and spoke loudly, above the sound of the wind.

Lena: Let's get some chili dogs on the way in. I'm hungry. Rom are you all right?

Rom: Yes, I'm fine. A Detroit chili dog, also known as a Coney Island, is a hot dog in a bun topped with chili or meat sauce and sometimes other basic toppings such as onions and one or two stripes of mustard. Originally it was largely related to immigrants who came to the United States from Greece and Macedonia who developed the sandwich in the early 1900s.

Lena twisted around to look at him, Lloyd looked at him in the rearview mirror and Rom pulled his cap down and hid his eyes.

Lena turned on some music and began to hum along and soon they were pulling into an all night food stand. They parked near the fence beneath a tall dull light. Lloyd and Rom sat at one of

the outside tables as Lena got the food, three hot dogs with everything for herself and potatoes for Lloyd.

There were others at the surrounding tables and a few couples in their cars eating and talking. Several people stopped to look at the strange looking tan convertible and then move on. Lena came and sat down in the middle and handed Lloyd his food.

Lena: Here Rom, put this one in front of you. You can act like you're eating too.

Rom: It looks ... what's the word I'm searching for?

Lena: I'm sure you'll find one.

Lloyd: You only got three for yourself?

Lena: I really have a taste for breakfast food. Some grits and butter with a dash of pepper, a sprinkle of salt and a dab of hot sauce and two boiled eggs. Maybe a couple slices of bacon.

Lena was working on her second dog and Lloyd was dipping his potatoes in ketchup when three bikers rode by. Their loud mufflers reverberated and seemed to shake the tables and the ground itself. Their bikes were large and powerful and the chrome sparkled and flashed and cast images back to all who observed them roll past.

Suddenly the bikes did a U-turn and came back and pulled into the parking lot. They stopped near the Cadillac and with their engines idling they looked at the big car and above the noise of their bikes they yelled out comments to each other.

They glided closer to the table area and shut off their engines and now it was quiet, very quiet as seemingly all conversation ceased and only the music from the stand itself could be faintly heard. Everyone watched the three individuals.

They dismounted and looked around at the people sitting and those who were in line. They all three carried handguns and knives and were dressed in brown denim pants and red shirts. They wore brown leather boots with brown leather jackets and

each one had a long red ponytail with a brown leather bandana that covered the tops of their heads.

Lloyd and Lena stared at the bikers and then Lena, with her left hand reached for the hot dog in front of Rom and began to eat it. Lloyd switched hands and used his left hand to dip his potatoes.

The bikers strode forward and the one in the middle, a tall thick *Bronze DM* called out as the tall thin *Bem branca DM* and short thick *Bem morena DM* moved up beside him.

Bronze DM: Whose car is that?

Lloyd called back immediately.

Lloyd: That's my car.

The middle biker moved forward and sat down across from Lloyd. The other two also came closer, watching with serious, glowering looks.

Bronze DM: What kinda car is that?

Lloyd: It's a Cadillac, an old style from a long time ago.

Lena ate the last of her hot dog and made a noise with the straw as she sucked at her drink. The sitting biker turned to stare at her. She stared back, a slight smile on her face. The biker turned his attention back to Lloyd.

Bronze DM: I like that car.

Lloyd: I like it too.

Bronze DM: You wanna sell it?

Lloyd: It's not for sale.

Bronze DM: I'll make you a good offer.

Lloyd: It's not for sale.

Bronze DM: Maybe I'll take it for a spin. See how it rides.

The dark man spoke quietly, pleasantly.

Lloyd: No you won't.

The two bikers standing shifted. They placed their hands on

their guns. The biker sitting now noticed the lack of expression on the face of the man across from him. He saw an absence of fear in the penetrating deep-set dark-brown eyes that stared at him and then he saw a brief spark but he ignored all this.

Bronze DM: Then maybe I'll just take it and keep it.

Lloyd stared, without emotion at this *DM* who attempted to present a menacing figure and that desired to intimidate him. He detested this bully and all he stood for. He pointed with his left hand at the bully's bike and exhaled imperceptibly toward it and spoke.

Lloyd: But if you take my car who's going to ride your bike? I would but it's on fire.

The biker glanced at his bike, looked back at Lloyd and then quickly turned back to his bike. A small white flame was burning at the rear of his bike. He jumped up as the flame began to rapidly move forward. He was cursing as he ripped off his jacket and began to beat at the fire. Lena warned the other two who had turned to watch.

Lena: Better hope it doesn't reach the gas tank.

The two bikers sprinted toward their bikes. Lloyd and Lena stood up. They holstered, with their right hands, the pistols that beneath the table had been pointed at the bikers. As the three walked to the car Lloyd dropped what remained of his potatoes into the trash. Lena discarded her wrappings, paused to finish her drink and dropped her empty cup into the trash.

Lena: Rom you're going home with us.

As they got into the big beautiful car people were beginning to move away from the fire and ducking behind the hot dog stand. The bully's jacket was bursting into a white flame. The fire spread and as it neared the seat the other two bikers were frantically pushing their bikes away from the scene.

As the car headed up the street the bully was running after his

cohorts who had jumped on their bikes and were starting them. The fire was making a hissing and sucking noise and then it touched the gas tank and the car was nearing the highway when they heard the explosion.

The biker did not, could not know that his effort to extinguish the brilliant-white fire was futile as there was no substance on earth that could have put that fire out. It would burn its intended target and anything that touched it until there was nothing that remained but a fine powdery gray ash.

Lloyd turned onto the highway and fifteen minutes later traffic was sparse, nearly non-existent. They were going west, into the area of the Westsiders, the area that Lloyd and his close associates controlled. Here, the further west they went, the less the danger and so the two in front could now relax.

From the back seat Rom noticed as Lena scrolled through their selection of music and saw them both adjust their seats for the nearly hour and a half ride. The warm wind could be heard passing around them and then Rom called out.

Rom: Can I drive?

Lloyd began to slow and then stopping in the middle of the empty road he put the car in park and started to get out.

Lloyd: Yeah, come on, you can drive.

Rom was beaming as he slid into the driver's seat. Lloyd had gotten into the back and removed his straw hat and placed it beside him on the seat. He thought a moment and then buckled his seat belt.

Lena looked at Rom with a slight concerned frown as the *Entity* looked at the controls and ran his hands over the steering wheel. She buckled her seat belt.

Lena: Rom can you drive? I mean, you've just come up.

Rom: I drove here didn't I?

Lena: Let me tell you about the controls.

Rom: I watched you and Lloyd.

He dropped the shifter into drive and they took off. They quickly gained speed. They were nearly yelling out now as the sound of the powerful engine rose.

Rom: I like to go fast!

Lena: I like fast too! Honk the horn four times.

He honked and Lena hollered out in glee.

Lloyd: Play our song.

Lena put their favorite song on. It was a song from 1968 and the lead guitar started, the bass and drums kicked in and Lena turned it up loud. The sound throbbed, pulsated and when the male voice began to sing of climbing and destroying mountains Rom started to sing along and Lena stared at him incredulously.

Lena: How do you know that song?

The *Entity* turned to her.

Rom: I am Rom. I simply know.

He smiled, winked and then he and Lena sang along together.

Lloyd: Put it on repeat.

They would play the song over and over until they didn't need to hear it anymore. And so they rode.

It would soon be morning twilight in August. Before them in the west the sky was still dark. The stars were fading. The very last of the moon was gone. Behind them in the east the magnificent sun began to materialize to inhabit its domain in the sky. It would be above them, the twilight, and it was now the darkness that dissipated, slowly.

The darkness gave way to light and on this Sunday this light would expose the actions that had taken place over the course of the previous night. The nighttime, where all that seeks to remain concealed lives. The daylight opposes the night.

It had begun, this decisive dispensing of justice and only the immediate future would reveal if justice would prevail.

THE EASTSIDERS

The naked *DM* leader of the Eastsiders was fast asleep when the Comm device on the nightstand beside him sounded and then buzzed and vibrated on the wood. He was on his back. His long, wavy, caramel-colored hair was spread out on the pillow beneath his *Parda-clara* face and he pulled it away from his ear as he heard the sudden, seemingly shrill noise in his fading dream and then he realized what it was as he was drawn from his deep resting state.

He started not to answer it, changed his mind and then his heavy, pale-brown eyes half opened and he picked up the device and looked at the identifier. It was Stra his *DM* second in command of his security team. His normally deep authoritative voice was even thicker as he was still not fully awake. He pressed the speaker button.

Leader: Yeah, what is it?

Stra: Dar, it's me Stra.

Dar: I know who it is. Why are you calling me at this time of the morning? It better be important.

Stra: Mace is in the hospital.

Dar: What did he do, wreck his car again?

Stra: Somebody beat him up outside of a restaurant.

Dar sat up. He was alert now.

Dar: Where?

Stra: On the east side.

Dar: Somebody beat an Eastsider on the east side?

Stra: He's in pretty bad shape.

Dar: Where were his guards?

Stra: They were there. They got shot with some kind of stun gun. Their legs and arms were sticking up, moving. They could see and hear but they couldn't talk and could barely turn their heads.

Dar: What d'ya mean by bad shape?

Stra: He's got a broken jaw, fractured ribs and lacerated liver.

Dar: Sounds like he got beat down not beat up.

Stra: That's not all. He's unconscious, in some kind of coma. The doctors pumped him full of regenerative cells and some other medicines, dipped him in a vat of hydrogel and put him in the healing chamber. The swelling's going down and the damage is being corrected but it'll take a few days for him to heal up enough to get back on his feet but listen to this. They don't know when he'll wake up. They said they've never seen anything like the unconscious state he's in. Something about lack of brain activity and severe muscle damage.

Dar: All right, now you're in charge. Your boss is incapacitated. Find out what you can. Get your team on it. And when you discover who did it destroy everyone who was involved.

Stra: Got it.

Now the leader of the Eastsiders pondered a moment.

Dar: No, on second thought do everything you can to take them alive. We'll torture them before we kill them.

Stra: We'll do the best we can but I can't guarantee that alive thing.

Dar: Yes. Yes, I 'm aware of the difficulty of that. Now listen. I have a very important meeting this evening at eight. All Comm devices will be shut off for at least an hour, maybe two during that time. I have things to do to prepare for that gathering so send me notifications throughout the day for any updates. Call only if it's absolutely necessary. Until he comes to consciousness there's nothing I can do anyway. You understand?

Stra: I understand. I'll stay in touch.

Dar: You do that. Right now I'm going back to sleep.

Dar got up and opening the door to the adjoining room he slowly approached the bed. He looked down at the two naked,

sleeping, *Loura DFs* who were wrapped in each other's arms. They each had short black braids and he grabbed them both by their hair and pulled them up, shook them violently awake and then pushed them back onto the bed. They had opened their coal-black eyes and now they looked up at the leader in fright.

Dar: Time to go. Your payment is on the table at the door.

He turned back to his room.

Dar: Please be as quiet as you possibly can. I'm attempting to go back to sleep.

Before he closed his door he reminded them.

Dar: Remember. I'm recording everything you do.

As he walked to his bed he passed back by a full-length mirror. This time he stopped to look at himself. He admired his tall muscular forty-five-year-old light-brown-skinned body. He stared, smiled and yawned. He pointed at his image and whispered.

Dar: The miracle of drugs. Those *AAS* formulas work wonders.

He went and sat on the side of the bed for a while and thought about the news he had just received. Then he lay down and was soon snoring and dreaming again.

THE SOUTHSIDERS

As Dar was beginning a new dream, Quin, the *DM* leader of the Southsiders was staring into the mirror on his bedroom wall. There was only one lamp on, near his bed, so the image that stared back was dim. Sug, his head of security had just hung up.

The *Queimada DM's* skin appeared pasty in this lack of light and as he rubbed his baldhead he wondered if he was getting ill. The thought of doctors and hospitals bothered him, worried him, so he decided to stick a thermometer near his sunburnt-colored skin. He looked at the reading and tossed the apparatus aside.

Again he touched the top of his head and then his forehead to determine if he was sweating. The news he had just received upset him and so now he paced the floor.

His chief financial officer Poins, had been beaten nearly to death and was in some strange coma. There was an important meeting scheduled for eight that evening and Poins was required to attend and would now be unavailable. He thought about what he would tell the others. Then he thought about Poins and the CFO's swollen battered face, missing teeth and broken ribs. He shuddered at the image of the unconscious man full of medicine, covered in hydrogel and restrained and encased tightly in the healing chamber. The prognosis of possible muscle damage sounded dire but the lack of brain activity probably meant Poins was dead and that meant he would have to appoint a new financial officer. This made the Southsiders' leader angry. He started to go turn off the lamp by the bed and try to go back to sleep and then he looked down at his wife sleeping peacefully, unaware of what he was going through. She was face down and he walked over and roughly turned her over and yelled.

Quin: Wake up! Wake up!

She opened her eyes. She looked around, confused and he snatched her nightgown off. He dropped his pajama bottom.

Quin: I need to go back to sleep. Come on, get to it, you know what to do.

She was slow to respond and so he slapped his wife and she moved to sit on the side of the bed.

THE NORTHSIDERS

The *DF* leader of the Northsiders, Lucett, was lying naked on her exceptionally large bed. On each side of her lay a naked *DM* heavily under the influence of drugs and alcohol. There was a

tall baldheaded *Escurinba DM* on her right and a tall *Bronze DM* with short, gold and white streaked hair on her left. Each had one hand tied to the headboard and in trying to keep up with Lucett's consumption they had put themselves into a stupor.

On the far wall was the large screen of a Comm device that was now on. The leader of the Northsiders refused to think about the notification update that had come to that other device after she had refused to answer the one that lay on the table beside her and that was beeping continuously due to her not responding to the urgent message she had read. The beeping irritated her. Still it didn't bother her enough to return the call so notifications had started to come in to different devices.

She reached across the *Escurinba DM* and lifted a glass from the table and took a quick drink of gin and put the glass down. She put a manicured finger into her mouth to wet it and then placed it upon the rainbow-colored pile of powder on the table, put the finger back in her mouth and sucked on it, loudly.

As she prepared to repeat the process with the drug, her arm lingered on the chest of the very-dark-skinned *DM* and she smiled at the contrast. Her *Melada* skin was glowing in the light and she thought about what color she would alter her skin to next and how she would wear her hair and what shade it would be. She touched the back of her head and felt the long soft golden tresses now tied behind her. She liked to think about things like that. Her cobalt-blue eyes were wide from the drug that flowed through her over-heated body and so she squeezed them shut for a moment and whispered to herself.

Lucett: Come on girl, gather yourself.

She sucked on some of the powder again and then picking up the Comm device from the table she slid back up against the headboard and again closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them she looked down at the bright silver polish on her

pedicured toes and then she wiggled them. She stretched and raised her right, well defined leg into the air and let it fall heavily to the bed. She smiled as she touched and gently squeezed her right breast and then frowned, lifted the Comm device and finally addressed the business at hand.

She scrolled through her messages and then using the device she held, she found the first notification and brought it up on the screen on the wall. She read it again.

Her head of security and number one enforcer Ursula, had been beaten to the ground. But not only that, the red-haired *DF* had her knife and her opponent was unarmed. Lucett couldn't understand how anyone, let alone another *DF* could dominate her enforcer in such a manner.

She went to the video images that had been sent to her from her security team member. She paused the image of Ursula, bruised, battered and unconscious, lying on a stretcher as she entered the hospital. She read the written notification that had been sent with the video. It said the enforcer had tore her own clothes off rolled around on the ground and stuck her right hand, fortunately without the knife, up into her body.

The leader of the Northsiders read two more reports on the enforcer's actions and then turned off the screen on the wall and tossed the device she held, onto the floor and the room went to dimness again.

Lucett looked at one *DM* and then the other. She slid down a little and pulled a pillow beneath her head. She ran her hands over the muscled body of the *DM* on her right. She felt his smooth taut skin and lightly squeezed his arm and thigh. She reached over and began to stroke the *DM* on her left between his legs. She nudged him and growled softly, seductively.

Lucett: Wake up baby. Come on sugar it's your turn. Get down on this thing.

THE RANCH

Lloyd had reappeared this time to live in virtual seclusion on the western edge of an area that had been named River Town due to its close proximity to the now pristine Kalamazoo River.

Years ago he had built a large house in the middle of a sprawling complex that encompassed forty-five acres of land. The house had twenty-two rooms and included five bedroom suites, five additional bathrooms, four kitchens, a library, an exercise space and other rooms normally found in a structure of that size.

Including the main house there were three smaller stand-alone houses that could be utilized for any additional guests. There were two large buildings that looked like barns, including being painted red, and an enclosed soundproof shooting range. There was also a swimming pool behind the main house with a privacy fence around it.

In one of the barn-like buildings he stored his automobiles, motorcycles and off-road bikes and kept all that was needed to keep them running properly and looking as they should. In the other large red building he kept his helicopter, boat and anything else required to take care of all the buildings and the land.

There was also a cluster of six somewhat modest houses ten acres away in which the caretaker and his extended family resided. This *DM* and his wife, three sons and their mates and two daughters and their mates took care of everything when Lloyd was gone, sometimes for extended periods of time.

There were close to seven hundred people in River Town and in many ways it was a self-contained little village. Most of the inhabitants farmed and raised animals and grew their own food.

There were stores, a school, a small hospital with two doctors and two nurses, a helicopter and ambulance for any emergencies

and just about everything one would need in order to not find it necessary to leave the immediate area. Clothing, goods and other staples were trucked in and one could go a little less than an hour or a little over an hour to Jackson or Ann Arbor respectively. People would also go northeast to Lansing, the former capital of Michigan.

Technology was expanding to this area mostly powered by the sun and anyone desiring to be connected could experience the growth of the modern world. Many of the individuals had chosen not to and thus, here in *Center World*, this River Town area remained relatively isolated and peaceful and safe. The people protected their special place and made sure to protect each other.

The pandemic had decimated Michigan. The Upper Peninsula was virtually empty and even as the Great Lakes State attempted to rise again, the once largest city, Detroit, was permeated with a level of violence and lawlessness that was unprecedented even for *Center World*. The Motor City was as a dream to these people, a never-ending nightmare. It was a place to be avoided at all costs.

When they arrived at The Ranch, as it was called, Rom was instructed to pull up to the largest barn. Lloyd pressed his Comm device, the large doors opened and Rom drove in. Lloyd got out and removed the boot cover and as he moved to the rear of the car the trunk opened. Lena showed Rom which button to press and the top rose above them and was fastened into place.

Lena and Rom got out and walked to the rear. Lloyd was looking at everything they had inside and then deciding, he reached in and lifted Rom's suitcase and handed it to him.

Lloyd: We'll get the rest later.

They began the short walk to the main house.

Lena: Rom, we've got to get some sleep. You don't sleep do you?

Rom: No, however I can put myself into a quiesced state which

is similar to a human who closes their eyes, deactivates their nervous system, relaxes their postural muscles and suspends their consciousness. I cease my processing of thoughts and my systems, including my active processors are in a quiet state. It's as if I'm just humming along, almost resting.

Lena: Thanks. I needed all that information.

They reached the house and as they touched the first of the two front steps the wooden door unlocked and opened inward. Lloyd pulled the screen door open and allowed Lena and then Rom to enter. He secured both doors.

Lloyd: Rom, our home is your home. Lena will show you to your rooms and ensure you are provided whatever you may need. I'll see you this afternoon.

Rom: Thank you. Thank you both very much.

Lloyd: You're welcome, very welcome. Until later then.

He started toward his wing of the house.

Lena: Come with me Rom.

They walked down a long hallway, past several rooms and reached the back right section of the house. Lena pushed open a door.

Lena: These are your rooms. There's a living room area, kitchen, bathroom and office space. Those doors open to a private garden and this is the intercom system. Press the buttons. The green one buzzes Lloyd, the white one is for me.

Now she looked at the *Entity*.

Lena: I realize I have no idea what you may need. I was going to tell you the kitchen and bathroom should be stocked.

Rom: We can talk about that later.

He moved toward the office.

Rom: Right now all I require is connections to power.

He set his suitcase on the large desk. He took off his cap. He opened the suitcase and began quickly removing an array of

Comm devices and setting them up one by one.

Rom: Get the sleep you require Lena. I'll be fine. I must continue my quest.

Lena watched him for several long moments. He appeared determined and focused. She turned toward her rooms.

It was three in the afternoon when The Ranch began to come alive. Rom suddenly heard music and got up from his chair at the desk and started down the hallway. He went in two different directions and moved closer to the music that grew louder. He stopped in front of an open door and peered into a large room with only one window and that had a mirrored wall, thick mats and pillows and lights that ran along the ceiling. A few of the lights were on and Lena was dancing to the music.

She wore shorts and a loose top and on her feet were red satin ballet pointe shoes. She did a turn and saw Rom standing in the doorway.

Lena: Good afternoon Rom. Did I wake you?

She smiled as she continued to jump and turn and Rom smiled back.

Rom: Was that a joke?

She did a move and Rom called out.

Rom: Ah, a Pirouette.

Several moves, slow and fluid.

Rom: Adagios, very nice.

Now she moved around the room in front of the mirrors.

Rom: Allongés! Bravo! Bravo!

Lena was laughing now as the music speeded up and she heard Rom calling out as her tempo increased and she moved faster.

Rom: Chainés and Fouettés. How precise you are.

Then the music became jazzy and she began to run and flow.

Rom was excited, yelling and clapping.
Rom: A Pas de bourrée couru, my favorite, absolutely my favorite!
Now Lena couldn't contain her laughter and she stopped.
Lena: How could you possibly know those things?
He answered as if to dismiss the question.
Rom: Oh Lena, I am Rom. I simply know.
He smiled broadly. His light-brown eyes were bright and seemed to twinkle. She sat and removed her shoes.
Lena: You indeed are amazing. Come on I'm hungry.
They headed to the main kitchen. Rom followed and recited her menu.
Rom: Some grits and butter with a dash of pepper a sprinkle of salt and a dab of hot sauce and two boiled eggs. Maybe a couple slices of bacon.
As she first prepared coffee Rom sat and watched in silence. Then he inhaled deeply.
Rom: I like the aroma of coffee.
Lena stopped to look at him.
Rom: Yes, I have olfactory capabilities, somewhat similar to yours, in many ways not as acute. And I possess tactile sensations, much reduced but not absent. In those ways I am far more advanced than the modern generation *Entities* but all of us have respiratory systems for both lubrication and cooling along with artificial heartbeats. I can eat and drink if I chose to or had to in order to maintain a human image but I would have to regurgitate or suction the contents from the area within me you would know as a stomach ...
Lena: Ugh, not while I'm fixing food.
Rom: ... along with any water that enters me through showering, bathing or swimming and settles there and yes, I am anatomically correct. Shall I go on?

Lena: There's not much left is there? I like you knowing just what I know now.

She began to cook some bacon.

Rom: Ah, bacon. What is it about the smell of bacon?

The *Entity* rose and stepped to the glass doors leading to the patio and stared out, pensively. His somewhat deep, full voice came softly. The precise words slowed slightly.

Rom: I have unlimited virtual storage. Each bit of information I have ever been exposed to exists inside of me. It lays on top of previous bits of information in a stack formation. I can instantly recall everything from the very first thought introduced into me.

Lena turned to the melancholy sounding form. She looked at Rom staring into the distance.

Rom: I'll never get ill or age. I can repair myself and just as those created after me, repair others such as myself and with the correct medical implements, also repair humans. My degree of strength is unknown to me and yet now that I have risen from beneath the earth and having seen and experienced the small amount of life to which I've been exposed, I believe I may be lost and misplaced among humans. The way you and Lloyd look at each other, with the love you possess for each other, the dedication to your protection of each other reveals to me this truth and my reality. I am not a sentient being. I am unable to feel, to perceive or to understand life subjectively. I have no truly deep sensations, only objective thoughts. I am not, cannot ever be human because I lack that which makes a human unique. Lena I have no soul.

Lena had moved beside Rom as he spoke and now she placed her hand on his shoulder.

Lena: You're not going to cry are you?

Rom: No, no more selfish tears.

He turned to Lena and looked into her dark-brown eyes.

Rom: Does my mood sadden you? What do you think of me?

She turned back to the kitchen.

Rom: You can answer. My mood, or rather, those thoughts have passed.

She stopped and went back to the *Entity* and looked at him. Her gaze was serious and she was intense. She spoke firmly and quietly.

Lena: Your inability to feel is not unique to you and your kind. There are humans who do not feel. They have no empathy for anyone, no sympathy of any kind. They cannot care in any way, shape or form. You are able to recognize the difference between right and wrong. Let your actions determine your essence.

Now Rom smiled.

Rom: Thank you. Your words are inspiring.

Lena returned to her preparations and Rom sat down at the table and watched her as she scrambled and boiled eggs.

Rom: Lena your dimples are charming and that gold tooth of yours hypnotizes me.

Lena: You're going to do just fine out in the real world.

Lloyd entered the room and Rom rose quickly, almost saluted, extended his hand to shake. Lloyd took his hand and patted his shoulder.

Lloyd: Rom, to others you're going to be part of our family so we have to treat each other as such. Do you understand?

Rom sat down.

Rom: Yes, I understand.

Lloyd: We're going out later tonight. We'll all need to show who we are to one another. Brother and sister, you a close cousin.

Lloyd went to Lena and kissed her on the forehead.

Lloyd: Are you well this afternoon?

Lena: Yes, are you? How did you sleep?

Lloyd: Yes, yes I am well. Rom, are you well?

Rom: Yes I am. I hope you are.

Lloyd sat down.

Lloyd: I slept pretty good. I only woke up twice. Rom, that wellness greeting is used sparingly here in *Center World*.

Rom: A greeting and response from the *G.E. Period* when it was posed for assurance and the response was required to be as truthful as possible. Illness and death became one and the same.

Lloyd: Exactly. In *Center World* it's used more to indicate alliance than closeness. Here it's all about like and dislike.

Lena: You want toast?

Lloyd: Yes please.

Rom: Lena's making French toast.

Lloyd: Another one of her favorites.

Lena handed Lloyd his plate and sat down with hers.

Lloyd: Thank you.

Lena: You're welcome.

They began to eat.

Lloyd: What are you, six two?

Rom: Yes, in my bare feet. Which would make me two inches taller than you.

Lloyd: How much do you weigh?

Rom: Well, I have components that were added for weight distribution. I have no liver which is about three pounds or ...

Lloyd: Rom. Rom just tell me how much you weigh.

Rom: Oh, yes. I weigh one hundred and eighty-seven pounds.

Lena: No ounces?

Rom: Four.

Lena jumped up and held her arms out and slowly turned around.

Lena: How much do I weigh?

Rom: You're five feet nine inches tall.

Lena: I didn't ask you how tall I was. How much do I weigh?

She sat back down. Rom looked at Lloyd.

Lloyd: Go ahead, guess.

Rom: One hundred and fifty-two pounds and twelve ounces.

Lena: What? That didn't sound like a guess. I just went through this in New Orleans. I'm one forty, one forty-five at the most. I suggest you guess again.

Rom frowned and then pursed his lips. He looked like he was thinking, calculating.

Rom: How about one hundred forty-nine pounds and fifteen ounces?

She glared at Rom and then appeared resigned.

Lena: Okay, I'll accept that as long as forty is in there.

Lloyd: What's your shoe size?

Rom: Eleven and one half inches.

Lloyd: All right, when I come back I'll have some clothes for you to wear. I'll be back around eight.

Lena: Let me do your hair. That coloring is temporary isn't it?

Rom: Yes.

Lena: Who did it?

Rom: I did.

Lena: It looks like it. Your hair doesn't grow does it?

Rom: No it doesn't.

Lena: Okay. We'll take that out and put another temporary color in and I'll style it. Tonight, with your new clothes and new hair you'll drive the ladies wild.

Rom: You know, I like to drive.

They all laughed and Rom winked at Lena.

Rom: That was a joke.

THE MEETING

At eight in the evening that Sunday the leaders of three of the four factions that controlled the city of Detroit and thus the state

of Michigan were scheduled to begin a meeting in a building in the downtown area.

It was a building that was in a neutral zone that in the past had been used for other meetings and had been decreed off limits to violence by 'Siders and considered to be safe. It was relatively unsecured and usually lightly guarded by only building security.

Dar, having called for the gathering, arrived early and dressed in a tailor made gray suit, white shirt and gray and white tie and wearing his jewelry, was already waiting before eight, along with Var, his brother and second in command of the Eastsiders, Stra, his tall thick *DM* interim head of security in place of the injured Mace and Ira his short thick *ND* CFO who appeared as a *PM*.

Dar had attempted to issue an edict that no weapons would be allowed in the main room but everyone had rejected it, including his own brother. The participants did agree to turning off all Comm devices when the meeting started until the meeting ended.

Dar had fixed himself a drink at the bar in the corner and now he looked at his CFO. The *Parda-clara's* long purple hair would get in his eyes as he hunched over to look at his written financial presentation and he would pull the hair from his worried looking face and shake his head. Stra's *Palida* baldhead was bent over his Comm device as he sent and received the last notifications before he would have to silence his device.

At five minutes before eight Quin and two others got on the elevator and began the ride up to the fifth floor. The Southsiders were made up of their *DM* leader, their head of security, Sug, a six foot seven inch gray-haired *Turva DG* with medium-length straightened dark-gray hair that hung to the shoulders and Orsin, the *Branca DQ* of average size and height with short curly white hair who was there in place of the damaged CFO, Poins.

Most of the individuals gathered around the bar and began to drink and converse as they prepared to wait on Lucett who was

notoriously known for always being more than fashionably late. However, they were pleasantly surprised that she was standing in the doorway at eight fifteen patiently waiting for someone to acknowledge her early presence and when Dar called out to her she strolled on into the room.

The Northsiders' group consisted of their *DF* leader, Tal their light-orange-haired *Trigo DT* CFO of regular height, and Jul a tall medium-sized *Parda-clara DL* who had the left side of her head shaved and long green hair on the right and had been appointed the interim chief of security in place of the hospitalized Ursula.

All eyes turned to stare as the leader moved further into the room except for those several who looked and were forced to look away. She wore a short, tight, red skirt and a light-pink blouse that was so sheer it was as if she wore nothing at all and so it was obvious she wore no brassiere.

Her neck was adorned in diamonds and gold as were her fingers and wrists and her platinum earrings glittered in the light. She carried a fancy bag, hung cross body on each shoulder with a weapon in each one. Her golden-blond hair was piled up on her head and her honey-colored skin appeared soft and moist. She looked directly at those who were looking at her and her cobalt-blue eyes were bright and appeared to gleam. She announced to everyone in her thick, husky voice.

Lucett: I'm going out from here so let's get this over with.

Dar: You're looking very impressive Lucett.

Lucett: And you're looking prosperous, as always Dar.

Quin was coming from the bar with a drink in his hand as she passed by him and her four inch red high heels clicked on the wooden floor.

Quin: Hello Lucett. You look really nice this evening.

She turned on him, glared at him while she looked at him as if

she was sizing him up. She saw him dressed in a cream-colored linen suit and opened neck white linen shirt. She looked down at his white straw summer shoes and up into his slate-shaded eyes.

Lucett: You've gained weight Quin. And you don't look well at all. It has been a while though hasn't it? Have you been under the weather or is that your normal sickly look?

He stared at her body, her breasts, his gaze moving from one protruding nipple to the other. Then he looked up at her lips, the fiery-red shiny lipstick seemed to be as liquid and then he saw her pink tongue as she slowly licked her full plump lips and then the tongue disappeared. Her perfume scent wafted in the air into his head and settled into his loins and he felt faint and wondered if indeed he was ill. He took a handkerchief from his side pocket and wiped his face and gulped his drink.

Lucett was nearly six feet tall in the heels she wore and so she was looking down on the five foot six inch sun-burned-colored leader of the Southsiders. She watched him watching her.

Lucett: You've got a dirty mind Quin.

Quin: I've got a dirty mind? You've got a lot of nerve! Now you're reading minds?

Lucett: Your mind is an open book. Turn the page! Turn the page!

Quin: I just ...

Lucett: You'll never get any of this! Never! You know why? Because I don't like you, among other reasons.

Quin: Oh, you've got standards?

Lucett: I've always had standards and you fall well below all of them.

Dar: Okay, now. Give it a rest. What happened to the peace between you two? Your continued bickering will get us nowhere.

Lucett raised her voice so everyone could hear as she turned and walked to the bar.

Lucett: You can't buy me! No matter what you offer! No matter how much you offer!

She reached the bar and Jul handed her the waiting drink. She downed it and as Jul was pouring another one Lucett spoke out.

Lucett: And that's exactly what he's getting. Nowhere! Nothing!

She moved to her seat that was pulled out for her by Tal and others began to sit. Dar was at the head of the long wide table and his people sat in chairs behind him. To his right were Lucett and her associates and to his left were Quin and the two with him. The Eastsiders' leader looked at everyone in the room.

Dar: We agreed that the heads of security and the CFOs would attend. Where're Ursula and Poin?

Lucett: Ursula's been sent on assignment for me. You've got one missing. Where's Mace, somewhere drunk?

Quin: Poin isn't feeling well enough to attend.

Lucett: Something going around in the south?

Dar: Mace had to finish a security matter for me. He'll be here next time.

Lucett: What d'ya mean next time?

Dar: People are missing. We'll have to get together at least one more time.

Quin: What's this all about?

Dar: First we're not going to accomplish anything if we don't put our differences aside. Just because we're in competition doesn't mean we can't work together. At least we can try.

Lucett sipped her drink. Quin sipped his drink and then wiped his neck with his handkerchief.

Dar leaned forward and pressed a button on the Comm device in front of him and a large holographic map of the United States rose from near the middle of the table. He pressed again on his device and an image of the state of Michigan appeared and hovered in the air. There were black lines drawn on the map.

Dar: The image, as you recognize, is of our state and the lines drawn indicate the areas we control and the area in the possession of the Westsiders. Detroit was the driving force of this dissection for whoever controlled Detroit controlled the state. After years of conflict that bordered on war, this division was agreed upon, a treaty was signed and the three of us leaders here continued this structure when we were able to fully wrest control. Each of us had to fight for our position and many lives were lost but in the end we prevailed. Then we had to fight to maintain our position through fortitude and guile and still struggle to continue to create value for our respective organizations. Now the time has come for us to expand.

Dar paused and looked at the two leaders.

Quin: We're listening.

Lucett: You can't speak for me! Go ahead, I'm listening.

Dar: Look at that map. Quin you control the south. From the south of Detroit through River Rouge, Ecorse, Monroe and Adrian all the way to the Ohio line. Lucett you possess the north. North Detroit from eight mile up and that includes the very lucrative areas of Beverly Hills, Birmingham, Bloomfield Hills through Rochester Hills. All the way to the top of the thumb, and further belongs to you, that is if you want to develop it. And that's my point of this meeting. Quin, once one passes Monroe there's nothing and Lucett, everything above twenty-six mile road is virtually empty. And then there's me. The east side of Detroit and the Grosse Pointes from Grosse Pointe Woods down to Grosse Pointe Park does very well for me. And of course there's the unclaimed, undeveloped, once beautiful island, Belle Isle. There's nothing else for me. I've run out of room. So back to expansion. We need to make the west side ours.

Quin: And how do we ... rather, how do you propose to do that?

Dar: We attack the Westsiders. From the west side of Detroit all the way through Dearborn and past Ann Arbor we lay waste and take what we want.

Lucett: What a dream that is.

Dar: No, a plan, and only the first step. We hire mercenaries, align ourselves with the Ohio Barbarians and along with our three combined security forces we can overrun them in a matter of hours. We'll have the element of complete surprise on our side.

Quin: And how is this grand scheme to be paid for?

Lucett: And what's the second step?

Dar: We all contribute value to the cost. One third apiece.

Quin: Not me, not one third. Your resources are much greater than mine. Your casino is twice the size of mine and Lucett's is almost as large as yours and both of you have more hotels and buildings and houses.

Lucett: That's because you're too cheap to reinvest in your own business.

Quin: I handle my business you handle yours.

The leader of the Northsiders cursed at the leader of the Southsiders and then her voice rose.

Lucett: Reach in your pants and handle that you ...

Dar: Let's keep this civil. Back down Lucett.

Lucett: You don't tell me what to do! We're sitting at this table as equals but I'm not putting up a third to make your dream come true!

Dar: We'll share the cost and the enormous amount of additional value that's created. It's a valid, feasible plan.

Lucett: Plan, scheme, plot, they're all the same to my way of thinking. Expansion, fine I'm all for that. I'm not that enthused about a war but I'll consider it. What I want to know is what's your second step and what's it worth in value to my organization?

Dar: After we take over the west side we'll have to rebuild what

was damaged in the battles. When value flows again we pool our resources and claim Belle Isle. We turn it into a gaming island like the others on the east coast such as Nantucket, Hilton Head and man made Miami Beach and those on the west coast like San Juan Island in the Northwest and Catalina near Southern California. Think of it, we'll make the beautiful island beautiful again and create a playground for the people. Open your minds. We have to consider the future and what it will hold. *Center World* is growing, more players are coming every year. This is an investment and one can only invest in the future.

Quin: The heads of security will have to come up with not only an estimate of cost but also a plan of attack. The CFOs have to estimate total cost, establish a budget and predict impact on business.

Dar: That's why your CFOs and security chiefs were supposed to be here.

Lucett: And your security chief too.

Dar: I know, I know that. There's not much more we can do tonight. Perhaps we can conduct some of the further business through electronic notifications, three-way conference calls and video connections. Our technology people will of course have to make arrangements to ensure privacy and secure transmissions. Are we going to proceed or what?

Lucett: I can probably put up, at the most, one quarter of the total cost but that depends on what that estimate is. I'll allocate forces but only with an upgrade of weapons and transport vehicles. We handle Northsiders' security not wage war.

Quin: I'll contribute one quarter of the cost with the same added stipulations as Lucett. That's the best I can do.

Dar thought about the terms and then leaned to his people and so the other people at the table put their heads together and

carried on an extended whispered and animated conversation. Finally Dar spoke.

Dar: All right, I'll put up half the total cost, whatever it is. Quin, you have to make contact with the Barbarians and find out what they'll want to join us. Negotiate and offer them a reasonable value amount and extra drugs. I'll have a larger than normal sample size delivered to you to assist in the negotiations. Increase your offer if necessary, up to a ton. We need that gang and the expertise they have in order to succeed. I'll make sure The Chemist makes an extra strong batch for them as their reward.

Lucett: Ah yes, your chemist. He who allows you to profit greatly off of all of us. He who creates synthetic substances never known to man, or woman and all the rest of the spectrum of humanity. Purveyor of ecstasy and death at the same time. Your own personal ...

Dar: All right, that's enough.

Lucett: You wouldn't happen to have a little something would you?

Dar motioned to Stra and he stood, walked over and handed Lucett a small clear package of lavender powder. She stared at it and then turned it over and sniffed it suspiciously.

Lucett: What has Wart concocted now?

Dar: That's going to take us all the way to Ann Arbor.

Lucett: We're done here right?

Dar: I'll contact you both. After we gather all the information we need we'll then meet here one more time before we launch. Understand, this is the first I've spoken of this except to a trusted few. No one here tonight, outside of this room, can utter the word war. Only those here are privileged to discuss this matter. Secrecy ensures our advantage, which is the element of surprise.

Quin: Perhaps a name for the operation? And then a toast?

They all pondered as they stood at the bar and replenished their glasses. Names were called out and then rejected. Finally Dar spoke.

Dar: Future, Operation Future.

Quin: It'll have to do.

They toasted and drank their alcohol.

Lucett: Fantasy or dream would be more appropriate.

She emptied her glass and Jul took it and set it on the bar. She reached in a bag and pulled out a short drug stick. Tal lit it for her. She drew in hard, held it and then blew smoke and coughed, twice. She turned and headed for the door and her associates fell in behind her. Quin took a few steps and called out, trying not to raise his voice. He wanted to whisper but she was moving too fast.

Quin: Lucett, may I speak with you for just a moment?

The beautiful, sensual, violent and wealthy *DF* leader of the Northsiders called back as she neared the door.

Lucett: No Quin! No!

Jul opened the door for her and as she stepped through the doorway her voice rose.

Lucett: Go blow ...

The final two words were loudly flung back into the room.

Lucett: ... your ... nose!

And she was gone.

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

Lloyd and his partner, confidant and close friend of many years, Leo, were concluding their meeting as the 'Siders were departing from their clandestine gathering. He read two urgent communications that came in, replied to them and then rose and went to a large window overlooking Liberty street and gazed

down from the office high above the casino. Ann Arbor was growing as more and more people, including an increasing amount from out of state, moved to the west side.

For many, the west side was appealing due to the fact that it was not as dangerous as other sectors. Drugs were scarce and violence was dealt with similarly to other developing, progressive areas in *Center World*.

While there were no laws or a National Government presence and thus no organized functioning civil force to detect and prevent crime, a new order had ultimately been created in the center of the country.

After the *G.E. Period*, only what eventually became *East World* and *West World* could be maintained and it was only in those parts of the United States that resources were allocated for growth. All remaining citizens were urged to relocate to those sides of the country and thus *Center World* came into existence.

For those who refused to leave and those who were of a special type, stubborn and independent, adventurous, aggressive, and permeated with a degree of fearlessness, *Center World* was theirs. It was unique and they made claim to it.

It took nearly twenty years for this current new order to take effect. Initially death was commonplace. Murder was rampant along with all that came with it. Those who weren't strong enough, hired someone to pay back what was owed. Feuds went on for years. Everyone who was required to possess a weapon at all times while in public often used them for the smallest of transgressions. But then eventually those who were the most confrontational, the most crooked, and most violent were eliminated and now, thirty years after the end of the dying years, there had become a lessening, a suspension in many areas, of hostilities except for the most grievous actions. And thus the unwritten rules came into existence. Leave me and mine alone

and in peace and I'll do the same for you.

Lloyd looked into the sky. It had been another typical day in August, hot, very hot and humid, very humid and now evening was beginning to settle in. Lloyd thought of those and that which most concerned him. He thought of the weak and helpless, the young and old, those who were alone and had no one to protect them. How could the ones who deserved it the most, who attempted to lead innocent lives and who had been in some way grossly violated, receive some semblance of justice?

Leo: So bring me up to date on the other 'Siders.

Lloyd turned to his friend. He looked at the slim, aging *Pardac-lara DM* with the intelligent hazel-colored eyes. He watched him run his hands through his medium-length wavy gray and brown hair and smiled briefly at him as his chair lifted into the air and floated to the bar near the far wall.

Leo: You want some juice?

Lloyd: No I'm fine. They met this evening. Unfortunately one of those assisting us, who is embedded within the Eastsiders, after tonight, will no longer be able to inform me of the progress of their plans. I've just cut off all contact. Many of our actions henceforth will be based solely on supposition. I do know that the three leaders don't communicate as far as sharing organizational information. Whatever normal business that's carried out between the groups is usually done by underlings.

Leo: Mostly selling and purchasing drugs.

Lloyd: And occasionally weapons and ammunition. So perhaps the missing associates from the meeting will reveal they are all under attack, perhaps not. Either way Dar will more than likely see the connection first because of Mace and Wart. I doubt if he makes the others aware. Pains will return to consciousness first, within a matter of hours now, then Ursula and finally Mace and Wart will come out of it around the same time. Those two are on

different schedules. In the next twelve hours I assume Dar will know something is going on that jeopardizes his intentions.

Leo made his drink and using the controls at his right hand he turned the chair and floated back behind his desk. He stood and walked across the room to stand beside Lloyd.

Leo: So the meeting confirms that Dar is behind this impending war.

Lloyd: Yes. By our intermediaries I received a communication when he initially hatched his plans several months ago. Now he's ready to proceed with them. He's allowed the despicable and violent activities on the east side to rise. He not only condones it he's the force behind it because he's a despicable violent man. I now regret I didn't destroy him years ago. For ten years after I left the last time he kept himself in check. Now the last eight years have been the worst seen in many years. They're like the old days. It's got to stop. He's ruining my city. Other areas of *Center World* are progressing significantly. Here on the west side you've managed to keep the drugs and violence under control. Using the *CMU* doctrine you've provided many homes for both families and individuals, funded businesses and done that which is most dear to me, cared for the orphans and given them adult guidance, adoptive parents, foster parents, health care and love. I thank you Leo. You've done well.

Leo: That was my mandate. It's what you and I agreed to years ago.

Lloyd: I apologize. I wasn't here to assist you as much as I should have been.

Leo: You and Lena funded all that we were able to initially set up. Today we're self sustaining. Myself, and those who work directly with me, could not have done what we've accomplished without you two. I just hate that it's all being threatened now. I'm too old

for more battles. Those activities of the past times should be long gone by now.

Lloyd: I have to find a way to ensure it doesn't come to that. I'm surprised the other two are willing to join forces with Dar. Quin is dangerous because he's weak and vicious. Lucett is a threat because she's cunning and strong, a natural *Center World* leader. But she's not mean or vicious. Perhaps they'll both see that the leader of the Eastsiders and those who follow him will betray them. I know if he were to gain the control he seeks it would take two, maybe three years before he would turn on them. He won't be content until he has it all and then he still wouldn't be satisfied.

Leo: As of today Security and Technology are on alert and Tu prepares for the worst.

Lloyd: Ah, Tu. He was an excellent choice for your chief of security. As you well know he and I have fought beside each other before.

Leo: I never thought it would come to this.

Lloyd: Do not despair my friend. Lena and I may be able to deter them before they even begin. By the way, she and I will be back later tonight. Our cousin is visiting and we want to show him around.

Leo: Him, a *DM*?

Lloyd: An *ND*, but considered male.

Leo: I'll have a very sweet and comely *DF* over to say hello

Lloyd: Knowing him I'm sure he'll appreciate that.

Now the dark man was pensive as he gazed out of the window. The room was quiet except for the soft music coming through the sound system and the faint noise of the traffic and an occasional horn from the street below.

Lloyd: Leo, I have thoughts that consume me. They come and

go but even when they go portions remain. When I find out about some horrible, heinous murder of someone innocent, rage wells up inside of me. It rises until my mind is filled with this thought. Each and every person involved in that wicked crime, should be executed.

THE REVELATION

Before the 'Siders had started down in the elevators from the fifth floor meeting room they had turned on their Comm devices. Communications were sent out and each and every device had immediately begun to sound, vibrate, and various tones indicated both replies being received and unanswered notifications.

When Lucett reached the car, her *DM* driver was holding the rear door open and a tall, young, *Bronzeada DM* with light-gold hair that was somewhat short and swept back on the sides and longer and wavy on top was standing beside him. She glanced at the handsome young *DM* in the beige suit and opened neck white shirt and tan shoes. She noticed his hazel-colored eyes and was momentarily affected by the serious gaze. She wondered who he was. She paused at the car door. She tossed her drug stick away.

Driver: He's here to see you. He's a Northsider. I verified him.

Lucett: What do you want?

Bronzeada DM: I have this I believe is important for you to see.

Lucett: Get in the back seat with me. Tal, you and Jul can go.

She removed her bags and got in the car and slid over near the opposite door.

The young *DM* got in beside her.

Lucett: Let me go through these messages.

Bronzeada DM: Perhaps you should see this first.

The voice was smooth and soft. It wasn't light but it wasn't heavy either. She looked at him. He looked directly into her eyes,

without expression. Suddenly she was very curious and not just about that which he had for her to see.

Lucett: What's your name?

Bronzeada DM: Caius.

Lucett: And what is it you have Caius?

He turned on the Comm device he held in his hands. He pressed on it and a video began. It was Lena and Ursula just before the fight had begun. As they moved to the park and began to fight, Lucett spoke through clenched teeth.

Lucett: Turn it off. Transfer it to me.

They changed settings on their devices and placed their Comm devices close together. A ding was heard and Lucett had the video on her device.

Caius: I bought it. I'm not sure if there are other copies, most likely there are. Was that all right?

Lucett: Yes. Yes, I'll reward you.

Caius: It's a little dark but I lightened it and sharpened the visual and enhanced the sound. It jumps a little but the audio is quite clear.

Lucett put an earphone in and watched the video. Caius could see his leader's eyes flash. Her lips pursed and then tightened. She frowned, anger clouded her face. She instructed the driver.

Lucett: Take me home. Caius, you're coming with me.

Driver: What about your engagement?

Lucett: Cancel it!

QUIN

When the leader of the Southsiders got into the backseat of his waiting vehicle he slumped back in anger. He was upset at himself. With all that had gone on in the meeting, all the decisions he had to make on actions that were to be taken, and he

had struggled to keep Lucett from dominating his thoughts. He cursed her out loud and a voice in his head screamed at him. “She drives you crazy! She drives you crazy!” He punched the back of the seat in front of him and then kicked it and then kicked it again and again with first one foot and then the other as if he were having a tantrum. The only thing he didn’t do was start crying and shrieking hysterically. Orsin was on the passenger side and refused to look back even as his leader was kicking his seat. Sug was driving and kept looking in the rearview mirror and finally spoke.

Sug: Boss. Boss, you all right?

Quin had tired and again slumped back, breathing heavily.

Quin: Yeah, I’m all right.

His thoughts returned to Lucett and he reached between his legs and caressed himself and then he squeezed until he was in pain and he yelled out loud and began cursing again.

Quin: It must be a spell! I’m under some kind of spell!

Quin looked at his Comm device and began to scroll through his messages and one in particular gave him reason to feel better.

Quin: Take me to the office.

When they reached the office the three of them took the elevator to the basement. They entered a soundproof room and stood in front of a short, terrified *Parda-clara DM* who was bleeding slightly from a cut on the side of his baldhead. The little *DM* sat next to a small table and was surrounded by four guards in security uniforms. The leader slapped the *DM* and spoke quietly, menacingly.

Quin: You’ve been stealing Riz.

Riz: I paid it back! I swear I paid all of it back!

Quin: You’re right handed. Put your left hand on that table.

Riz: Wait! Wait!

Quin nodded and two security men immediately jumped to

grab the left hand and place it on the table as Riz struggled and pleaded. A third guard handed Quin a hammer.

Riz: Don't! Please, I won't do it again! I was desperate!

Quin raised the hammer and brought it down on the hand and broke it. Sug chuckled and Orsin gasped and turned away.

Quin: No one, especially an employee steals from me.

He thought a moment and lifted the hammer as if to strike the *DM* in his baldhead and then thought better of it.

Quin: Give me the other hand.

The guards grabbed the right hand and held it on the table. Riz was crying and hollering now. Quin broke his right hand and then handed the hammer back to the security man.

Quin: If you weren't my wife's cousin you'd be dead by now. The leader started toward the door.

Guard: What should we do with him?

Quin: Take him to the hospital idiot! He's got to go back to work!

The leader of the Southsiders took a private elevator to the top floor. His office door was open. His wife, one of his accountants, was bent over the desk, her back to him. He stared at her a moment and then slammed the door shut. She turned with a start.

Wife: Oh, Quin, you startled me.

She moved toward him. She was taller than him and he always resented that. As she moved closer he turned and locked the door. He turned back to her as he removed his belt.

Quin: Take off those shoes.

Wife: Quin, what's come over you? What's wrong?

She kicked off her shoes and he began to strike her with the belt as he ripped at her clothes. Then he pushed her toward the couch.

Wife: Stop it! That stings! You don't have to take me like that!

Now her clothes were in pieces and he grabbed at her panties and pulled them down.

Quin: Turn around and get up on your knees.

He pulled his pants down, dropped his underwear and soon the only sounds were the slapping of their bodies and his wife's whimpers. The vision of Lucett exploded into his mind and he heard the words that he longed to hear the sorceress, his tormentor, speak.

Wife: You're hurting me Quin. You're hurting me.

DAR

The leader of the Eastsiders and his cohorts departed in two cars. His brother Var and Ira left in one car. Dar and Stra were driven away in the second one. Dar rode in back and Stra was in the passenger seat in front. They didn't go to the casino or one of his four houses. He ordered the driver to go directly to Wart's house. He called The Chemist. There was no answer.

When they arrived there it appeared no one was home. Stra and the driver got out to check. They banged on the doors and windows. The bars were in place. The front door was locked. There was also no activity in the abandoned home that Wart sometimes used as a lab. Dar let his window down and noted he smelled no aroma of chemicals in the air as he usually did.

Dar: Let's go to The Cell. Vau will know where he is.

The Cell was a brick and steel building that Vau used to hold captives before moving them to purchasers. It was secured with bars on all of the windows and contained a large padded soundproof barred room at the rear, hence the name.

As they arrived at the entrance of the nearly empty dead end street they saw the fortress-like building standing alone in the distance. They couldn't see anything unusual. It was not until

they pulled up to the front that they saw several boards nailed across the entrance and could see that the bars that had once protected the steel door had been ripped from the building and were laying in the grass in the field to the side. The heavy steel door was slightly ajar.

They all got out and Dar looked down and saw the red stains splashed and splattered at the entrance. He recognized the substance as blood. He had spilled a great deal of it in his time. He saw its once bright-red color altered by the air and sun and becoming a dirty brown. He recognized the unique congealed form. How it seemed to thicken, no longer able to flow as it was designed to do. And when the smell of the blood entered his nostrils he turned to get back in the car.

Stra: What's that say on the door?

Dar turned back.

Dar: What?

Stra: Those letters written on the door in blood.

The driver attempted to avoid soiling his shoes as he moved closer. He could see the first four letters and he called them out. The next three were hidden by the boards. He bent to see. He stood and started over and called out all the letters.

Stra: J U S T I C E.

Driver: It spells justice in blood.

They got back in the car and rode awhile in silence.

Dar: Take me to the big house. Stra see if you can get some information on Wart.

Stra: What about Vau?

Dar: That butcher is dead.

When Dar arrived at his mansion in Grosse Pointe his older sister Cress emerged from the library, having heard the car door slam. She was waiting in the hallway not far from the entrance.

Cress: Well hello Dar. How are you tonight? Are you well?

Dar: I've been better. But what of you? Are you well?

Cress: Yes, I'm well, thank you. And remember, it could be worse.

She went to her middle brother and kissed him on the cheek. He saw that her pale-brown eyes appeared fresh and that her light-brown skin had been touched by the sun. The dark-gold colored hair that hung to her shoulders seemed different to him somehow.

Dar: Do I see something altered? I know you've gotten some sun. Have you cut your hair again?

Cress: No I haven't. Every time you stay away a few days you think I've changed something.

She took his arm and they moved down the hallway and further into the large first room.

Dar: Must be my imagination. You look relaxed tonight.

Cress: I've been reading, listening to music. Are you hungry? You want me to have the kitchen fix something for you? Or I can get you something.

Dar started up the long, wide, winding staircase.

Dar: It's late, don't bother anyone. Can you fix me some soup, cold soup and a sandwich?

Cress: What kind of soup? What kind of sandwich?

Dar: It doesn't matter. Let it be a surprise.

He paused at the top and turned to her.

Dar: Too many things didn't go right today. The meeting started off poorly, not everyone showed up and on top of that ...

His sister cut him off.

Cress: Now Dar, you know I don't have anything to do with the business. Never have, never will.

Dar: Of course, of course. I'll have my meal in my office. I'm going to change and freshen up. It shouldn't take me long. I'll be back down in a little while.

LUCETT AND CAIUS

When Lucett reached the gates of her house they slowly opened as the two guards stepped to the side. She acknowledged them with a wave and the car pulled around the circular driveway to the front of the large main house. She waited for the driver to open her door and then got out. She spoke to the driver.

Lucett: You can take the car. I'm in for the night. Be back at nine in the morning. Come with me Caius.

Driver: I'll be here. Have a good night.

Lucett: You too.

She started up the path to the front door and the young *DM* followed. As she neared the door, several locks could be heard unlatching and the door opened inward. When they entered, an alarm system began to beep and Lucett pressed the Comm device on her wrist and the beeping stopped. The heavy wooden door closed and then locked.

Lucett: Let's go to the den.

They passed through the foyer, moved past the living room area on the right and several rooms on the left before reaching the den near the rear of the huge house. Lucett opened one purse and removed a handgun and placed it on the large desk near the back wall along with the small package she had received at the meeting. Keeping the other purse with her she turned to the young man.

Lucett: I have to change clothes. Make yourself a drink.

Caius: Nothing for me, thanks.

Lucett: Make me one. Gin, two inches with a quarter inch vermouth. There's a chilling unit behind the bar, add one cube.

She started down the hallway to her bedroom.

When she came back all her jewelry was off. She wore loose white shorts, a long white cotton shirt and her feet were bare.

Caius turned and held out the drink and before she took it she looked into his eyes and the green seemed to shift to light-brown and she saw that he didn't look at her body he was looking directly into her eyes as if he were attempting to see deep down inside her. She suddenly felt strange and as she took the drink their hands touched and he smiled slightly and she was forced to look away. She sipped the drink and moved toward the desk.

Caius: How is it?

Lucett: Next time a little more vermouthe.

Caius: I'll remember that.

Lucett: Have a seat at the bar.

She set her drink on the desk and opened the package of powder and dipped a tiny gold spoon into it and placed a small amount of the drug under her tongue. She was watching as he turned from her. She moved to a tall stool and sat beside him. She opened a box and removed a drug stick and he took a lighter from the counter and lit it for her. She took a long drag and offered it to him.

Caius: No thanks, you go ahead.

She looked at him as she sipped her drink.

Lucett: You don't drink. You don't smoke. You don't do drugs either, do you?

She pulled on the stick.

Caius: No ma'am, I never ...

Now she coughed, three times.

Lucett: Whoa, hold it right there. Do not call me ma'am.

Caius: What should I call you?

She got up and went to the desk and got the package. Back at the bar she stood and drew on the stick.

Lucett: Go sit on the couch. This smoke may get to your head.

He went and sat on the couch. She went behind the bar and poured some water in a glass and put several cubes of ice in it.

She walked over and handed him the glass.

Lucett: You do partake of water don't you?

Caius: Yes m ...

She pointed at him. He stopped. She went back to the bar and sat on the stool and sipped her drink.

Caius: You haven't told me how I should address you.

Lucett: How old are you?

She puffed her stick.

Caius: Nineteen.

She loudly blew out the smoke.

Lucett: Oh my goodness. How about mama? I'm old enough to be yours. How old do you think I am?

Caius: Are we going on appearance?

Lucett: Let's start there.

Caius: About twenty-six.

Lucett: I'm thirty-seven.

Caius: Yes mama. I drink water and tea and juice and coffee every now and then, mama.

Lucett smiled at him.

Lucett: Mama won't work. Try sugar.

Caius: Okay sugar. Whatever you want sugar.

Lucett: Baby.

Caius: Yes baby. Anything you say baby.

Lucett: None of those will work.

She put out the stick.

Lucett: Come over here.

He rose and stood before her as she sat on the stool.

Lucett: Let me see your weapon.

Caius: Which one?

Now she smiled again, almost laughed.

Lucett: Your pistol Caius. Your gun. You carry more than one?

She watched as he pulled, with his right hand, his silver pistol from the holster near his right side at his waist. He turned slightly, pointed the gun down, dropped the magazine, put it in his coat pocket and ensured there was no round in the chamber. He switched the gun and taking the barrel he extended the handle to her. She examined the gun, hefted it, sighted along the top.

Lucett: Do you know how to use this?

Caius: Of course.

Lucett: You ever shot anybody?

Caius: Twice.

Lucett: Did they die?

Caius: No.

Lucett: I guess they were just fortunate, weren't they? Or are you a bad shot?

Caius: I'm pretty good. It just wasn't necessary for them to die in order to resolve the situations.

Lucett: I see. Here's your weapon. Make sure you reload.

She took her drink, her drug package and sat on the far end of the couch. She pointed and he sat on the other end.

Lucett: What is it you do for the Northsiders?

Caius: I work in the technology division.

Lucett: How long have you been with us?

Caius: A little over a year.

Lucett: You've heard things about me haven't you?

He was silent. She stared at him.

Lucett: I do it all Caius. I do what I want to do, when I want to do it and with whomever I want to do it with. You understand what I'm saying don't you.

Caius: Yes madam. I understand.

Lucett: What?

Caius: Madam. How does that sound to you?

Lucett: I kind of like that.

She finished her drink. He rose and extended his hand and she handed him the glass. As he proceeded to make another drink she stuck her finger into her mouth to wet it and then she put it into the package and then into her mouth and sucked on it.

When he returned he handed her the glass and then the rest of her drug stick and held the lighter flame. She looked up into his eyes and then leaned forward. Smoke rose into the air. She settled back. He sat down.

Lucett: I like you Caius.

Caius: And I love you Lucett.

She coughed several times from the smoke and gulped some gin. She bristled.

Lucett: How dare you say that to me!

Caius: What, Lucett?

Lucett: That you love me! What do you ... ?

Caius: I've loved you with all my heart and soul from the first time I was in your presence.

Lucett: We just met tonight!

Lucett was getting angry.

Caius: I first became aware of you ten years ago.

She leaned forward and her voice rose.

Lucett: Ten years ago you were nine years old!

Caius's voice was smooth and soft and as the words began to come forth Lucett recognized the strength and confidence this young *DM* possessed.

Caius: And ten years ago you were twenty-seven and presenting as a *Castanba DF* and wore short bright-auburn hair with gold highlights. It was around this time of year that you were sitting outside at a restaurant on Broadway Boulevard. My sister, who was seven at the time, and I, were trying to sell flowers on the street. A car pulled up, a big black car, the rear door flew open and a *PM* jumped out and grabbed my sister and as she kicked

and screamed he lifted her and was carrying her to the car when you stood up and I saw you pull your gun, aim, hesitate and when my sister fell to the ground and the man bent to reach for her you fired and then fired again and again. You turned the gun on the car as it sped away and the car crossed the street and crashed into a building. The man was dead and I saw his blood flowing from his head. You took my sister into your arms and went back to your seat and from your bag you took a value card and handed it to a white-haired *DF* and told her to take my sister home. I watched them walk away because I couldn't go. My legs wouldn't move but my heart and soul went with you as you and your associates started away in the other direction. You were then, and are now still, beautiful. I love you Lucett.

Caius stopped and sipped his water as he stared at her and Lucett felt shivers run through her body when she heard this handsome youthful man speak her name, as she had never heard it uttered before. She put out the stick and set the glass on the table beside her. She took a deep breath and stared at Caius.

Caius: You don't remember do you?

Lucett: I'm trying to. I'm trying my best but Caius you have to understand, in *Center World* there's only life and death. That was a lifetime ago and I've killed quite a few people. None who didn't deserve it though.

Caius: I'm sure.

Lucett: Well, what a story that was.

The leader of the Northsiders got up and went to the glass doors that led to the land in the back and looked out. Blue water shimmered from the swimming pool in the near distance. She could see the stars and the moon. She was thinking. She turned to him.

Lucett: Where's your sister now?

Caius: She lives in *East World* near Maine.

Lucett: Good for her.

Caius: All my family is there.

Lucett: You have no family here?

Caius: No.

Lucett: Where do you live?

Caius: Near nine mile.

Lucett: Apartment or house?

Caius: Apartment.

Lucett: Can you upgrade all my personal devices and all the Comm devices in this house?

Caius: I can.

Lucett: You're quite confident in yourself aren't you?

Caius: I am.

Lucett: Listen to me. Everyone can't love Caius. Some humans don't have the ability to love and some humans can't believe that they're worthy of love.

Caius: Are you like that?

Lucett went back and stood at the couch. She lit her stick and smoked and then put it out. She sucked the drug from her finger. She drank all of the remaining gin. Caius began to rise.

Lucett: No, I'm done for the night. I don't know if I'm like that is the answer to your question.

She moved across the room to her desk and removed value cards along with several other cards.

Lucett: I have a carriage house above the garage and a small stand alone two bedroom further back. Which one do you want?

Caius: The stand alone.

She walked over and handed him the cards.

Lucett: I'll have the house made ready for you. After you've gone through the place, use those to purchase anything else you may need. Don't bring anything from your apartment except for personal mementos, pictures and such. That's important to me.

I want you to be new, everything new, all your clothes down to your underwear. You do wear underwear don't you?

Caius: Sometimes.

Lucett: Make sure the clothes include three tuxedos. One formal black, one with a white coat and one with a red coat. I'd like to see a peak lapel, a shawl collar and a notch lapel. You decide which one has which. Also get appropriate diamond point and butterfly bow ties. Have your suits tailored. One of those cards is a clothier that I use. Have him call me. There's another card for a gunsmith. Upgrade your weapons. You'll need smaller more powerful handguns and two rifles. I'll contact Technology and let them know you're reporting directly to me. For now you should keep your apartment. Lucett may have but Caius needs to have his own. You understand all I'm asking of you?

Caius: Yes I understand.

Back to the desk she went to rummage through a drawer. She removed a small black device. Back to the couch she went and sat down. She handed Caius the device.

Lucett: That controls the red car outside, the small one. It's yours. I won't take it back. You have my word on that.

Caius: I ... I just ... What can I say?

Lucett raised her hand to stop him. She smiled at the young man who now struggled to speak.

Lucett: Don't thank me. Say my name.

Caius: Lucett I don't want ...

She shivered again.

Caius: I just want to be near you, to protect you and look out for your interests.

She held out her left hand and he slid closer and extended his right hand and they held on

Lucett: Caius, my dear Caius. I can't have you. You can't have me until you're twenty-one. I'm just superstitious like that.

Caius smiled and nearly whispered.

Caius: On the last day of September I'll be twenty.

She squeezed his hand tighter.

Lucett: The way you look at me, the way you say my name, the way you said you love me, I believe you believe that. If you ever betray me, I didn't say if you're ever unfaithful, live your life as you choose, but if you ever betray me, cross me, sell me out, and I discover that to be true, I'll kill you. Do you believe that?

Caius: I believe that.

Lucett: Are you ready for this?

Caius: Are you?

She released his hand.

Lucett: Why did I think you would say something like that?

Lucett settled back and smiled, pleased.

Lucett: You think you can lift me into your arms and carry me to my bed?

Caius: I know I can.

He stood. She stood. He moved beside her, bent and placed his left arm behind her knees as she leaned back into his right arm and he lifted her, as she grew limp. She put her arms around his neck and he carried her down the hallway like that and he placed her gently upon the bed.

Lucett: The door will unlock for you and I'll lock it from here. Take care of your business tomorrow. If I need you I'll get in touch.

Caius went to the doorway and stopped and turned around and they looked at one another. Lucett was smiling slightly and her right foot moved languidly on the sheet. They both chuckled softly.

Caius: Goodnight Lucett.

Lucett: Goodnight Caius.

QUIN

At eleven that Sunday night Quin was at home bent over with his head in the tall chilling unit. He was reaching for his favorite mustard so he could complete his sandwich when his Comm device on the nearby countertop began to go off. He walked over, saw the identifier information and pressed a button and placed the call on speaker.

Quin: What is it?

Sug: Pains is coming out of his coma. He's still in the chamber but the doctors have lowered the level of the *NM* rays. He should be released by nine in the morning.

Quin: All right, good. Be there when he gets out and bring him to the office. Take two others with you.

Sug: Will do.

They ended the connection.

DAR

At eleven thirty Dar was still in his office working when his personal Comm device on the desk beside him went off. He pressed a button on the larger device sitting in front of him and opened communication.

Dar: Yeah?

Stra: Wart is in the hospital. I'm there now.

Dar: I suppose you're going to tell me he's in some kind of strange coma?

Stra: Exactly, just like Mace.

Dar: That's impossible!

Stra: Both him and his guard had been shot with some kind of stun gun. Sound familiar?

Dar: Go on.

Stra: I found a customer who had come by and seen them taking Wart away. He talked to his guard. The guard is already gone from here and Wart is unconscious with a broken nose.

Dar: A broken nose? That's all he got was a broken nose?

Stra: They think he may have brain damage too and his internal organs overheated.

Dar: Let me think. Let me think.

Dar rose and began to pace the room.

Stra: You still there?

Dar: Listen, find that guard. Maybe he went back to the house. I need to talk to him. Find him. Call me when you do. No matter what time it is.

Stra: I'm on it.

They ended the connection.

LUCETT

Lucett was sitting up in her bed naked, with a Comm device in her hand as midnight approached. A large towel was beneath her and she was still damp from her shower. She was returning to herself after removing Caius from her thoughts. Now her mind focused on business and the challenges that lay before her. Her body tensed, hardened, as she contemplated the dangerous duplicity that had drawn close to her.

She had been angry, nearly enraged as she had watched the video that Caius had provided her. She believed she was preparing to watch an attack upon her close associate and partner. Ursula and she had been together for years. She had brought the fiery redhead along with her as she had risen through the ranks of the Northsiders and finally been given control. She herself had made Ursula the chief of security and that video showed that Ursula had abused both that position and that trust.

Lucett pressed the device she held. The large screen on the far wall lit up and the video of the battle began. She increased the volume. She heard clearly the dark woman's angry voice, the condemning question, and the damning words. "Is that the knife you used to murder Nerissa and Valeria?"

Lucett backed the images up and replayed the words and then she let it run to its conclusion. She watched it over and over and still had not tired of it. Her thoughts came one after the other as she watched the brutal scene. Who is that beautiful dark-skinned woman? She wondered. Look at her cat-like moves. How can she move like that, as if dancing in the air? It's unnatural. Look at her body, how powerful she appears. Lucett, the leader of the Northsiders, started to ponder as to how she would fight that creature if the time came.

She paused the video at the point where the dark woman leaned over her foe and Lucett wondered. Is that a kiss?

She suspended her puzzling thoughts for another time. She pushed aside any decisions on Ursula. She would deal with her tomorrow. The enforcer would be released from the hospital in the morning and had been ordered to her office at ten.

Lucett looked at the digital time on her Comm device. The number changed, from midnight to one minute past. Monday had officially arrived.

She stretched out. Her right hand lightly touched her left breast. Her mind cleared. Her hand moved to her stomach and she made circles, barely touching her cooling skin. She fell into a deep sleep.

ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

At one in the morning another bottle of champagne was being delivered to the booth where Lloyd, Lena, and Rom sat. Lloyd

didn't drink alcohol, usually just grapefruit juice, Lena drank moderately and Rom was acting as if he drank from his tall glass. The first two bottles had been shared with acquaintances, old friends they had not seen in many years and now they saw Leo, dressed in a black tuxedo, coming through the crowd to join them.

Lena: Rom let Leo sit next to me.

Rom rose as Leo reached the table.

Lloyd: Leo that's our cousin Rom. Rom that's our good friend and owner of this fine establishment, Leo.

Leo: Welcome Rom, welcome. I see the family resemblance and that's partner, with these two, in this and indeed everything of significance that I own. I owe everything to them.

Rom and Leo shook hands.

Rom: It's a pleasure to meet you Leo. This is a wonderful place you have.

Leo: Thank you, thank you Rom.

Rom moved to sit next to Lloyd and Leo slid in next to Lena and she grabbed him and kissed his lips.

Lena: Hi Leo, how handsome you look tonight.

Leo: Oh my Lena, how beautiful you are. It's been too long. How many years has it been?

Lena: Almost eighteen and you haven't changed, not one bit. Lloyd told me your new doctors were working wonders.

Leo: I don't know how to take that. Is that an insult? But modern medicine and the latest cosmetic procedures are simply amazing. You should see my wife.

Lena: How is Lav, is she well?

Leo: Yes, yes, quite well.

Lena: Tell her I send my good wishes.

Leo: Lena you haven't changed either. I like that natural hairstyle. There's simply entirely too much that's artificial these days. But

who am I to complain? I just go with the times.

The waiter came over with a glass for Leo, filled it with champagne and checked to see everyone had a fresh drink. The group toasted to good health and prosperity.

Leo: Should we toast to the future?

Lloyd: No business talk tonight.

Leo: I concur wholeheartedly. That's a nice suit. What color is that, orange?

Lloyd: It's rust Leo, rust.

Leo: How stately you look in your tie. Did Lena pick that for you?

Lena: No, he's on his own when it comes to dressing. Lloyd has always been into clothes.

Leo: Of course, as you are also, along with fine jewels and you wear that creamy white as well as anyone I've ever seen in white. Then, you wear all colors with class and distinction and don't let anyone even hint, by the way they look at you that your dress is too low cut, too short or too tight on your exquisite body. There's no such thing as too short or too tight when it comes to you my dear Lena. And against your lustrous skin the color of dark chocolate that soft off-white shade is perfect, a simply perfect combination of contrasts.

They all laughed as Leo sipped his drink and then continued.

Leo: No, those are jealous eyes that stare at your luscious red lips and cute dimples and longing eyes that watch for that gold to flash in hopes of you sending them a smile in their direction. And those are looks of wonder and amazement and curiosity as they try to figure out how you could possibly walk like that in heels that high and what could you possibly have in that bag?

Lena: Why Leo, are you complimenting me? I like compliments but it sounds like you've had way too much to drink before you got to us.

Leo: And Rom, that light-gray suit fits you perfectly as it should fit a man of your stature as a member of a family of royalty for we sit with a king and queen so that tie shouts out that you are a prince and I would bow down to you all but your jewels of gold and diamonds and Lena's rhodium earrings and platinum necklace have hypnotized me and I can not lower my head but only raise it so that these bubbles go down easier. How do you like it by the way? It's the best we offer.

Lena: It's delicious but I can't drink and laugh at the same time.

Rom: Lena picked my tie.

Leo: My wife tied my tie Rom. Imagine that. At my age I can't tie a tie and not just a bowtie either.

Leo motioned with his hand, a barely perceptible movement and the waiter standing nearby poured more champagne.

Leo: Bring another bottle my good man we are gaining another member of our group.

As the waiter hurried away a tall *Parda-clara DF* with long pink hair and wearing a long shiny gold gown came to the booth. All the men stood.

Leo: Everyone, I want you to meet Luci.

There were then greetings, introductions and well wishes all around.

Leo: Luci my dear, slide in between Lloyd and Rom there.

As she sat down the waiter returned with another bottle of champagne and another glass. The liquid was poured. They toasted and drank. Luci turned to Rom.

Luci: Rom, do you dance?

Rom: I sure do. Would you like to dance?

Luci: Yes, I enjoy dancing.

Rom stood and as he assisted Luci from the booth, he spoke.

Rom: Luci, may I say you look stunning in that gilded, sequined gown. That darker color is special, somewhere between gold and

orange. Amber I believe it is.

Luci stopped and looked up at Rom.

Luci: That's amazing. That's exactly what color it is. How did know that?

Rom took her arm and turned her toward the dance floor and answered in a modest tone.

Rom: I simply, guessed.

Luci: And Rom, I love the color of your hair.

Lena started to sip her drink and had to pause at Rom's flirtatious words. She and Lloyd looked at each other and smiled and shook their heads.

Leo: Your cousin is quite the suave gentleman, isn't he?

Now they all watched the two dancers. Rom took Luci into his arms and gracefully moved her around the floor. He spun her out, brought her back. He even dipped her a couple of times.

When they returned to the booth Luci was blushing and laughing. The men stood. She motioned for them to sit.

Luci: You should have heard some of the things he was saying in my ear.

Lena: I can only imagine.

Luci: No you can't. Not in you wildest imagination. It was so very nice meeting you all. Now I've got to go meet and greet. Bye everybody. Bye Leo. Stay out of trouble.

Leo: It's too late for that, or too early.

Rom took Luci's hand and bending, he lightly bused the back of it. When he straightened, he smiled broadly.

Rom: Bye Luci. It was a pleasure. Be well.

Luci: Bye Rom. Be well.

She blew Rom a kiss as she strolled away. Rom took his seat and observed Lloyd and Lena staring at him. He looked at one and then the other.

Rom: What?

Leo departed soon after Luci and Lena and Rom danced together until the music changed and the colored lights flashed and after twirling and gyrating a couple of times they returned to the booth so she could gather her bag.

The three moved to a private poker room. They had tried blackjack earlier but Rom had mentally counted cards from a group of six decks and was quickly able to predict sequences. A crowd had gathered as his chips stacked up so that was when they had stopped and decided to later play poker.

Lloyd had talked to Rom about restraint while they played so they enjoyed themselves for almost two hours and then moved to the dice table. They shot craps and hollered and called out for luck and new shoes for the baby until it was time to head home.

As they were walking to the car in the valet area Rom spoke to Lloyd.

Rom: How do like my hair?

Lloyd: Maybe it'll grow on me.

Rom: You don't like it do you?

Lloyd: Let me put it this way. I think Lena went a little, shall we say overboard?

Lena: It wasn't my idea.

Rom: I couldn't decide on a color.

Lloyd: So you went with kind of a rainbow style.

Lena: Only in the top and back. The sides are natural.

Lloyd: The sides are fine.

Lena: Luci liked it.

Rom: I like it.

Lena: That's all that matters. Ignore him.

Rom drove as Lloyd and Lena rode in the back seat of the large white automobile. Lloyd had Rom stop the car and made Lena get in front with Rom so together they could continue to

sing and the loud music and their raised voices took them on home.

When they arrived, Rom went and stood before a full-length mirror in the hallway and stared at the reflected image. He saw Lena move to stand beside him and Lloyd behind him a few steps away. He adjusted his tie. He shifted a little to look at his hair.

Rom: Did I do all right?

Lena: You did just fine.

Lloyd: I love the color of your hair.

Rom: That's a joke, right?

Lloyd: It grew on me.

He turned and smiled.

Rom: Thanks, for everything.

Lena: You're welcome.

Lloyd: You're welcome.

Rom: For some strange reason I'm not sleepy. I'm going to work. Sleep well you two.

The *Entity* started toward his rooms. Lloyd and Lena watched him until his door closed and then went to the kitchen and warmed the barbeque chicken and ate it along with the salad that had been made at their request by the cook next door. And then, like creatures of the night that feared being burned, they made haste to be in their beds before the sun was fully up.

DAR

Dar had slept fitfully. He had tossed and turned and then, at six in the morning, he received a call from Stra. The Comm device beside him seemed unusually loud and shrill and it startled him and as if awakened from a bad dream his heart was beating rapidly and he was damp with sweat and his head ached.

He rolled over and fumbled at the device, knocked it off the table and the tone grew insistent and seemed to grow louder the longer he searched the floor for it. He retrieved it, turned onto his back and pressed the speaker button.

Dar: Yeah! Yeah, what?

Stra: I found the guard. He was hiding out.

Dar: Put him on speaker.

Guard: Yeah?

Dar: What happened?

Guard: This *Escura* DM came to the door with this *Escura* DF that was gagged and handcuffed. When I let them in ...

Dar: You just opened the door?

Guard: He knew the code! He knew everything and it had just been changed!

Dar: Go on.

Guard: I let 'em in, turn to lock the doors and the DM shoots me with some kind of stun gun. I'm on the floor, my legs and arms are moving but I can't do anything. I can hear and see but I can't get up. They go up the stairs and do what they came to do.

Dar: Which was what?

Guard: They released everybody. That is, everybody that was releasable. That's all I could know then because I'm on the floor with my eyes rolling in my head. They run past me on the way out and the DF tries to kick me to death. She breaks two of my ribs. She kicked like a zebra. When I'm finally able to move I go up and find Wart unconscious on his bed. He's bleeding from his nose. I call for an ambulance and when they get there they call for help because they can't lift him. They finally get him to the hospital and now I'm full of pain medicine, I've been rayed and my chest is raw and soaked in hydrogel and taped and I can barely breathe.

Dar: An *Escura* DM and DF, anybody else?

Guard: Somebody was sitting in the back seat of the car and somebody must have helped 'em take away the ones we had upstairs. I didn't see 'em. It was all planned out.

Dar: How could you see somebody in the back seat?

Guard: It was a convertible. Built like one of those cars from a long time ago.

Dar: What color?

Guard: Light color, beige or tan.

Dar: Anything else?

Guard: That's all I can think of right now. I'm getting a couple of associates together. We're going to The Cell. Vau set us up.

Dar: Cancel that move. Vau is dead.

Guard: What?

Stra: Hold on, I'm getting a notification from the hospital. It's an update from a doctor.

Stra scrolled through the message.

Stra: It says they had gelled Wart's nose, put him under the *NM* rays then injected him with some stimulant solution. It looks like he's coming around. It wasn't a coma, more like a deep sleep.

Dar: All right. Send a notification to the hospital. Find out how long it's going to be. I need for you to bring Wart to me as soon as he's released. Go to the other hospital where Mace is. Call me from there.

Stra: Wait, I'm getting a notification on Mace.

A minute of silence passed.

Stra: Mace is out around nine, about three hours.

Dar: Be there, bring him to the office. Then you can go back for Wart.

Stra: What about this guard?

Dar: Can you hear me?

Guard: Yeah, I hear you.

Dar: When Wart gets home, you and him start cooking. I need that product.

Dar ended the connection.

QUIN

Quin was in his office by eight Monday morning. He was going through notifications, responding when necessary and drinking espresso. At nine thirty the Comm device on his desk buzzed. It was his secretary in the outer office. He pressed the speaker button.

Quin: Yes, what is it?

Secretary: Sug and Pains are here.

Quin: Send them in.

The large blue-haired *DM* slowly entered first and stiffly sat in a chair in front of the desk. Sug had closed the door and remained standing. Quin pointed to a chair in the corner.

Quin: Sit over there Sug, you need to hear this.

Quin stared at his CFO.

Quin: You don't look too bad. How do you feel?

The slightly high-pitched voice was slurred and whiny.

Pains: I'm full of pain medicine. I've got a time-release gel pack against my broken ribs and my mouth is numb from three implants. All the swelling has gone down and the surface bruises have gone inside and are squeezing tissue and bone. Look at my stitched forehead. The doctors say I almost died so I guess I feel fortunate. Let me have some water.

Quin motioned to Sug as he rose to refill his espresso cup from the machine behind him. Sug handed Pains the glass of water and Quin remained standing behind his desk and sipped his drink.

Quin: So what happened?

Poins: Didn't the driver tell you?

Quin: That was from his side. I want to hear yours.

Poins: We're sitting at the light and this madman busts out my window, snatches the door open and pulls me out and proceeds to beat me with some metal objects. I try to fight back but he had caught me by surprise.

Quin: What do you mean metal objects?

Poins: Some kind of steel or something. He shattered the window with his fist. He had something in each hand or under his gloves. I mean, nobody can strike that hard naturally. It was unfair. I could have whipped him straight up.

Quin: Yeah, I'm sure. And you didn't know this *DM*?

Poins: Never seen him before in my life.

Quin: Your driver didn't see him very good so you describe.

Poins: Kind of tall, *Escuro DM* dressed in black, wearing a black straw hat with a white band, slightly raspy voice and mean dark-brown eyes.

Quin: Did he say anything?

Poins: He was yelling and cursing and my ears are ringing and I hear what sounds like a female voice hollering and screaming about death and killing. He could have been talking in code for all I know.

Quin: And you have no idea why he attacked you?

Poins: None. But I know this, those two are dangerous.

The CFO rubbed his jaw and his voice cracked a little and Quin could see the small pale-blue eyes blink, to hold back. He drank from his cup.

Poins: You need to find them Sug and kill them for what they did to me.

Sug: I'm on it.

Quin: Can you work tomorrow?

Poins: I'll be here in the morning.

Quin: We've got a lot going on. I need you here. You've already missed what turned out to be a very important meeting.

The leader of the Southsiders leaned forward and pushed a button on the Comm device on his desk.

Secretary: Yes?

Quin: Have a car meet Poinc out front along with two from security.

Secretary: I'll do that now.

Quin: Get some rest. Those two will stick to you at all times. I'll see you in the morning.

Quin dragged himself from the room. Sug, having opened the door, closed it behind him.

Quin: Well, what about it?

Sug: The driver never really saw the *DM* and the music was on and it wasn't like that *DF* was going to let him turn it down but he thought that dark man had called Poinc by name.

Quin: It's all very strange, with a heavy dose of brutality and weird medical stuff. It's no way to know all the things in which Poinc is involved. As long as his business doesn't again interfere with ours, I really don't care.

Quin refilled his cup.

Quin: You need to set up a meeting with the Barbarians. Just as soon as Dar delivers that sample from Wart we'll be going to Ohio.

Sug: Those Barbarians give me the cold jeebies.

Quin: Yeah, the thought of dealing with them doesn't excite me in a warm way either. But just think about how much we can pull off after we cut that stuff. On top of that, Dar's plan is brilliant. The future Belle Isle, a *Center World* oasis.

He sipped from his cup.

Quin: I'll drink to that.

DAR

Dar had been in his office that morning for over two hours when the Comm device on his desk buzzed. He looked at the time. It was ten o'clock. He pressed a button.

Secretary: Mace is here.

Dar: Send him in.

The Eastsiders' chief of security moved slowly into the room, pulling the door closed. His somewhat like cinnamon-colored skin was pale and his long auburn-colored hair was braided behind his back. He stopped and stood beside the chair in front of the desk.

Dar: You don't look too bad, sit down.

Mace: I'll stand. Easier on my side.

He spoke through clenched teeth.

Dar: You mean easier on your lacerated liver.

Mace: I'll be much better by tomorrow. All I need is one more day of treatment. Had to take a break. I'm raw from the rays and the gel gave me a rash.

Dar: So you and your two guards let one *Escura DM* with a grudge walk up on you and almost beat you to death.

Mace stood there, arms at his sides and a sullen look on his face. He stared at Dar.

Dar: Your guards could hear and see everything. They described him. I wanted you brought here so I could tell you this to your face. This incident interfered with the business of the Eastsiders. I need you to be where you're supposed to be. We had that meeting scheduled for Sunday and you're in a hospital in a coma.

Mace shifted his stance and started to speak. He winced in pain and then slowly eased into the chair.

Mace: I could have died. That *DM* had cement or steel or something in his gloves. I could feel it. No ordinary human

could strike blows like that. He was crazy and he was wrong. I didn't kill that kid! I'm gonna find him and destroy him!

Dar: All right, take it easy. Right now you're going home and get some rest and more treatment. Take tomorrow off. Stra will handle things and we've got individuals trying to run that *DM* down as we speak. Be here Wednesday, bright and early. We've got things to do.

Mace: Let me sit here a minute. Give me a drink.

Mace rubbed his broken jaw and tried to move his mouth. Dar started to rise and then remembered.

Dar: Alcohol's kind of hard on the liver isn't it?

Mace: Yeah, I forgot.

The security chief started cursing that dark man. A string of epithets squeezed through his clenched teeth. Dar pressed a button.

Secretary: Yes?

Dar: Have a driver and car waiting for Mace he's on the way down.

Secretary: I'll call now.

Dar: I'm sending two from the Assassin Squad along with you. They'll be with you until this is resolved. Go on, get some rest.

Mace struggled to get up and when he managed to stand he turned and left the room and could be heard cursing until he closed the door behind him.

LUCETT AND URSULA

Lucett was in her office when the Comm device on her desk buzzed.

Lucett: Yes?

Secretary: Ursula is here to see you.

Lucett: Send her in.

When the chief of security slowly entered the room Lucett came from behind the desk and went to her, to give her a hug. Ursula raised her left hand and flinched.

Ursula: Watch my side.

Lucett leaned to give her a kiss on the cheek.

Ursula: My face, my face is sore.

Lucett then stepped back to look at her. Ursula wore a cap pulled down on her forehead and red hair spilled out from the sides and back.

Lucett: Can you sit?

Ursula: Yeah, I'm full of pain medicine.

Lucett: Come sit in the chair here.

Lucett led her to the chair in front of her desk.

Lucett: Can I get you anything?

Ursula: Water. Those *NM* rays have dried me out.

While Lucett got the water, Ursula pulled a small mirror from the bag she carried in her hand and stared at her nose, touching it gently. Lucett handed her the glass.

Lucett: You don't look too bad. How do you feel?

Ursula: I've got two fractured ribs, my nose is broken and extra makeup covers the bruises on my face and I almost died. How do you think I feel?

Ursula was speaking quietly, bitterly. She removed her hat.

Lucett: What happened?

Ursula gulped some water.

Ursula: I'm leaving the club and this *Escura DF* attacked me.

Lucett: One *DF* did that to you? Sounds like a gang got to you.

Ursula: She was using something hard in her gloves, metal or concrete or something.

Ursula looked at her nose again and touched it gingerly and began cursing the dark woman.

Lucett: Leave your nose alone. You've had it worked on before.

Ursula: That was by choice.

Lucett: Who was she?

Ursula: I don't know. I never saw her before.

Lucett: A strange *DF* just attacked you for no reason?

Ursula: I told you I never saw her before.

Lucett pressed a button on the large Comm device on her desk and voices came from the speakers that surrounded the room. The voices were loud and clear.

"Is that the knife you used to murder Nerissa and Valeria?"

Now the curses came loudly and then the statement.

"I didn't murder them! I eviscerated them! They just couldn't stand the procedure."

As Ursula's laughter filled the room Lucett shut the sound off and then there was silence. Ursula watched as the leader came from behind her desk to sit on the edge of it and stare down at her.

Lucett peered into the gray eyes that looked up at her and her own cobalt-blue eyes, as if a shadow now covered them, altered to dark blue. Ursula looked away, then down. The leader's voice was seeped in anger.

Lucett: I told you not to harm that *DF* didn't I?

Ursula was turning the mirror she held in her hands over and over.

Lucett: You killed Nerissa over a *DM* and what you deemed to be disrespect. In other words you killed her for nothing!

The last words were shouted and echoed throughout the room. Lucett rose to pace behind Ursula's chair. Her words fell upon the neck and back of the chief of security.

Lucett: Where is he now? Where's the *DM* you fought over? Answer me!

Ursula: I have no idea. That was over a year ago. He could be dead for all I know.

Lucett: Exactly! A waste! What a waste your actions were!

Lucett moved back behind her desk. She was livid. Then her voice lowered.

Lucett: I suspected when she disappeared you had something to do with it. I just didn't want to believe you would go against me like that and I couldn't prove it. When I questioned you the words that came from your mouth were that you were not involved in any way. You swore! You deceived me! You lied!

Ursula: She threatened me.

Ursula's words grew stronger. She looked directly at Lucett.

Ursula: I can't let anybody threaten me like that.

Lucett: I negotiated peace between you two. You agreed, and that deal was known on the north side. Everyone knew of it. You misused your position and the resources of the Northsiders to remove that so called threat. For months business fell off. None of Nerissa's family, friends or associates patronized us. Your indiscretion affected us. For nothing!

Lucett sat down. Her mood suddenly seemed to change.

Lucett: Well it's over now. Business is not only back to normal it's better than it's ever been. Life goes on. That *Escuro DF* has extracted restitution. You just have to hope she's decided you paid in full.

Ursula: I'll find her and kill her.

Lucett: Do that on your own. No more using my business for your personal vendettas. You understand?

Ursula was silent.

Lucett: Do you understand?

Ursula: Yes, I understand.

Lucett: Why did you kill Valeria?

Ursula: She was there. She tried to interfere.

Lucett: You mean she tried to protect her cousin.

Again Ursula was silent.

Lucett: You don't drive. Who drove you?

Ursula hesitated to speak. She fumbled with the mirror and then put it into her bag.

Lucett: Answer me. No more lies.

Ursula: Jul drove.

Lucett: Who was your backup?

Ursula: Two of the Sararás.

Lucett: Which ones, the brothers?

Ursula: Yeah.

Lucett: I'm disappointed in you Ursula. Now, I want you to tell those three who accompanied you that I'm very upset with them and disappointed in them and I want each of them to send me a notification with an apology. I'll accept yours now.

Ursula mumbled some incoherent words.

Lucett: I can't hear you. I can't decipher that.

Ursula: I apologize.

Lucett: Is that defiance I hear in your voice?

Ursula: No, no. I apologize for what I did. I'm sorry I went against you Lucett.

Lucett: Go get some rest. We have a lot to do tomorrow. Be here early. Another car is waiting for you. Assign two of your people to stay with you indefinitely.

Ursula rose stiffly. She put on her cap and pulled it down, almost hiding her eyes. At the door she turned back.

Ursula: You got any of Wart's stuff?

Lucett reached in her drawer and removed a small clear envelope. She walked over and handed it to Ursula.

Ursula: Thanks.

Lucett opened the door for her and watched the security chief drag herself through the outer office. When she was gone Lucett stood there and thought a moment. She went back behind her desk and opened communication on one of her personal Comm

devices and set it to speaker. She pressed on it and a connection was made. A voice was heard.

Caius: Hello.

Lucett: How far are you from my office?

Caius: About twenty minutes.

Lucett: I've got something for you to do.

Caius: I'm on the way.

DAR

Dar was having lunch in his private room at the rear of the casino restaurant when Stra walked in and Wart slowly waddled in behind him. They sat down and Dar looked at Wart's nose.

Dar: They did a pretty good job on that nose of yours. You want something to eat?

Wart: Of course. I haven't eaten in two days. I'm starving.

Dar pressed a button beside him on the wall and the waiter standing outside the door came in.

Dar: Bring Wart his usual. Stra?

Stra: I'll get something later.

Dar: Your guard told us what happened downstairs give us the upstairs version.

Wart: I had finished entertaining myself in the bathroom and go to the bedroom and I'm snacking and napping when this *Escura DM* comes in and hollers me awake. He shoots me with some kind of stun gun and I can't really do anything and as he's heading to the door he shoots me again and my legs and arms are doing things on their own, twitching and moving. I can see and I can hear but I'm like ... like ...

Stra: Stunned?

Wart: Yeah. Yeah that's the word.

Wart gulped some water.

Wart: I can tell from the noise there're at least two of 'em and I can hear chains being ripped from the floor and footsteps on the stairs and in the hallway outside. After a while this *Escura DF* runs in the room and she puts a gun to my head. I can tell by her eyes and the look on her face that she wants to kill me, like real bad and she's trying real hard not to pull that trigger and the *DM* that follows her in says "Don't Lena. Don't do ..."

Dar was reaching for his glass of water and his hand stopped in midair and then fell to the table.

Dar: Wait. Wait. Say that again, exactly what he said.

Wart: He said, "Don't Lena. Don't do it."

Dar: Are you sure that was her calling?

Wart: Yeah, I'm sure. He called her Lena. That's not all he said. He said something like, "You can't. Let's stick to the plan."

Dar turned to Stra. He was upset and confused.

Dar: Plan? What's the plan?

Stra shrugged.

Wart: And I'm lying there while they argue over whether I live or die. Their voices are like loud and my head is throbbing and I'm twitching and looking from one to the other and she says she's got a new plan and he's saying like, "Let me finish it," and she says she wants to finish it. I'm wondering, finish how? I figure his finish must not be like her finish and maybe I should prefer his idea of finish to her finish and she lowers the gun and says, "Do it then," and then she says, "Wait," and she breaks my nose. That's all I remember.

He curses the dark woman.

Stra: That's better than the other finish she had in mind.

The waiter sets a plate with a large rare steak on it in front of Wart and another plate filled with mashed potatoes with butter and gravy. Wart prepares to eat.

Dar: What was the *DM* wearing?

Wart: Black pants and black shirt. Gun holstered so he could cross draw.

Dar: No hat?

Wart cut a big piece of meat and stuck it in his mouth and began to chew. Pinkish-red myoglobin dripped from his lips.

Wart: Hat? Oh yeah, he wore a black straw hat with a white band. I think it had a little red feather in it.

Dar slumped back as he watched the large man gobble his food and he was thinking as Wart was frowning and cursing.

Stra: What's wrong with you?

Wart: I can barely smell it.

He put his nose close to the meat and then the potatoes. He shoved some potatoes into his mouth.

Wart: Something's not right. I can't really taste it.

Stra: Let your nose heal up.

Wart: Yeah, that must be it.

Dar: Your guard never said anything about a straw hat. Are you sure?

Wart ate more potatoes and talked with his mouth full.

Wart: Sure about what, the red feather? Yeah, I'm sure. What difference does it make whether the guy wore a hat or not? Find those two. Let me have 'em.

Dar placed value cards in front of The Chemist.

Dar: Listen. I need you to make a sample, double the regular size sample so I can get it to the Barbarians. I need their assistance with a project of mine. This is a down payment on the larger shipment.

Wart stuck some of the tasteless meat in his mouth and talked as he chewed.

Wart: How large?

Dar: One ton. Extra strong.

Wart nearly choked.

Wart: That is large! I'll get started right away.

Dar: Did Stra tell you Vau was dead?

Wart: No. Really? Did straw hat do it? Maybe I need some of your added protection.

Dar: You don't seem very upset.

Wart: I'll call my backup. The only thing I'm upset about is not being able to fully enjoy this meat. You should be upset. Vau paid you. The East and South 'Siders were the only 'Siders that allowed him and his associates to carry out their business.

Dar: Come outside when you're done.

Dar and Stra stepped outside the private room.

Dar: That confirms it. This is worse than I thought. My sister said things could be worse. Well, they are.

Stra: How so?

Dar: First, or second, the order doesn't matter, I don't know their plan. Next, or first, that Lena *DF* sounds like Lloyd's enforcer partner or sister or mate, I never knew what they were to each other.

Stra: You think straw hat is Lloyd?

Dar: Lloyd is dead but that doesn't mean she hasn't gotten a new partner. It's been all these years and all of a sudden she shows up. Lloyd was an original Westsider which makes her a Westsider which makes all of this a very bad situation.

Stra: And a dangerous one too. I only heard about him but that *DM* that beat Mace and rushed Wart sounds like Lloyd to me. That's his style.

Dar: I told you, Lloyd is dead.

Stra: Why do you keep saying that?

Dar: Because I destroyed him eighteen years ago.

The leader of the Eastsiders clasped his hands behind his back and walked in a circle. He stopped. He walked up close to Stra.

Dar: Here's the worst of it. For her to show up now and reveal

herself through her actions one night before our meeting means the Westsiders know about my plans. For them to know about my plans means that a traitor had to inform them. We've got a leak.

LUCETT AND CAIUS

Lucett was pacing her office when the Comm device on her desk went off. She touched her wrist device and the speaker on the desk device was activated.

Lucett: Yes?

Secretary: Caius is here.

Lucett: Send him in.

Caius came in and closed the door. He remained standing. She looked at him a moment and noticed the new clothes he had on. She smiled briefly.

Caius: You wanted to see me?

Lucett: Yes. Can you connect with the source of that video you provided me?

Caius: Yes I can.

Lucett: I need for you to find out all you're able to about the night Ursula was attacked. Who was with the *Escura DF*? In addition, how did she arrive? How did she leave? She must have had transportation and back up.

She went to her desk and removed several value cards and handed them to Caius.

Lucett: You may need these. Pay what you must. Keep your inquiries and actions low and close. Are you clear?

Caius: Yes madam.

Lucett: We'll talk later tonight.

The young man departed the room and as the door closed behind him, Lucett resumed her pacing.

THE RANCH

Lena was sitting outside by the pool as late afternoon eased away and early evening arrived. She would swim laps after the sun went down so at this time she was content to recline in the shade underneath a large umbrella and sip iced tea.

She wore a two-piece burgundy bathing suit and had painted her toenails burgundy and was wiggling them to the music that came through the buds she wore in her ears.

It had been a typical hot summer day in Michigan and the temperature and humidity were still high even as the sun was beginning to set. The air was damp against her moist skin. She kept her thoughts pleasant and away from this latest conflict in which she was currently involved.

She watched Lloyd push open and then close, at the recreation room, the sliding doors that led to the pool area. He wore dark-green pants and shirt and brown boots with a green cap pulled down low on his head. He carried a cup in his hand and she smiled as she saw he didn't wear a pistol but he carried one in a holster that had been tossed over his shoulder.

She looked at the pistol that lay on the small table beside her and acknowledged in thought that it was nearly impossible for them not to have a weapon within reach no matter where they were, even in the middle of nowhere and in the safety of their own home.

He took a chair and moved it near Lena and into the shade and sat down, placed the holster on the table beside him, along with his cup and stretched his legs out.

Lena: You look like you have a military outfit on.

He sipped his drink.

Lena: How did the training go?

He pulled his cap up a little and closed his eyes for a moment.

Lloyd: I tell him to pick out a handgun and a rifle from the wall. He walks around the room once and goes and chooses a silver pistol and black rifle and lays them on the table. He picks up one and then the other one and studies them. I ask him why those two and he says the pistol is similar to mine and the rifle is like yours except without the pistol grip. Then he recites it off. "They each have eletro-optical sights which are integrated for both night light and dim light sighting, position sensors and combination silencers and flash suppressors."

Lloyd sips his drink and shakes his head slowly.

Lloyd: He picks up the pistol and drops the magazine and then he drops the rifle mag and checks both to make sure they're not loaded. Then he continues, as if from a manual. "They both have automatic and semi-automatic capabilities and are designed for caseless ammunition for more capacity and no shell ejection is necessary." He holds up the mags and shows them to me and says, "These have a double stack design for an increase in load by fifty percent and the rifle provides high muzzle velocity." He says how beautiful he finds them to be. I add, and deadly.

Lena: That's our Rom.

Lloyd: So we sit down and I take them apart and explain about cleaning them and prepping them for use. He's watching and then I put them back together. He takes them apart, repeats my instructions and puts them back together, not one error. We go to the range and I ask him how he wants to carry his pistol and he says like a cowboy and I suggest on his left side at his waist for a cross draw. He wants to draw with his left hand from his left side.

Lena: He's right handed.

Lloyd: He can use either hand but he wants to draw with his left. I fix him up a holster and we're ready to draw and shoot. I explain about how to sight the target, aim, about recoil and how

the gun might pull and how to adjust to that. We talk about how to fire with one hand, how to cover with two and so on. We load mags. I plug my ears and step behind him. He aims, with two hands and fires. The target is a bullseye ten yards away. He barely hits it. He doesn't move, he recalibrates and fires. Dead center. After that he never misses being less than an eighth of an inch of center and that's at any distance, ten yards on back. Same with the rifle. Moving targets, one hand on the pistol, different firing positions with the rifle, he just didn't miss.

Lena: He shoots like you.

Lloyd: And you.

Lloyd sits up and takes his hat off.

Lloyd: I put images of humans, hiding, jumping up with guns. He can't fire.

Lena: You mean he can't hit the target?

Lloyd: He can't pull the trigger. He's incapable of firing at a human form.

Lena: Well, that's not like you.

Lloyd: Or you, and it's not good.

Lena: Asimov's First Law.

They sip their drinks.

Lloyd: So we go to the exercise room. I pull out a mat and we talk about hand-to-hand fighting, hand weapons, no weapons. Just like everything else, he possesses remarkable knowledge. We discuss various styles and disciplines from the old to the new. I demonstrate, he demonstrates. Then I attempt to determine his strength with the weights and he can handle the weight that's there with no problem.

Lena: Is he as strong as Zesiro?

Lloyd: At least that and just as quick. If he can think it, he can do it. But he just can't think in a destructive manner so there's no

way to determine what he's capable of. So we grapple some and he's good at that. For him it's like playing, wrestling and having fun. But he's unable to throw me due to the idea of hurting me. He can avoid and block my strikes and kicks but he can't counter. He's helpless Lena and I told him that. He said he's loaded some high-level military programs of aggression directly into his main processors but he doesn't know when they'll be complete or when they will be active. Right now he's like a child out here. This world will destroy him. Bru would destroy him.

Lena: He has time. Bru and Clee still remain out of his reach.

Lloyd: But he also said the programs may never work properly. Because of how he was created they may never activate and could stay in some kind of loop inside of him.

They sat in silence and sipped their drinks. Finally Lloyd rose and spoke.

Lloyd: He's back at work and I'm headed to Ohio in a little while. The Barbarians await my arrival.

Lena: I wanted to go.

Lloyd: Don't pout now. I want you to do just what you're doing, relax. Check in on our guest. He seemed slightly dejected. He realizes his plight and the challenges he faces. His strength and his wonderful new weapons are useless to him. At least he has his intelligence on his side.

Lena: Tell little Stack I send my love.

Lloyd: No I won't tell him that. You make him act foolish. He's always been after you. I'll tell him you said hello and send wishes of wellness. I'll be back before midnight.

He went to her and kissed her on the forehead.

Lloyd: Be well.

Lena: Tell everyone I send well wishes. Be well. And be careful.

She watched him stroll away. She thought of Rom. She wondered how he could possibly survive as he was.

LUCETT AND CAIUS

Lucett was in the den. She had made herself a drink, placed some powder under her tongue and was lighting a drug stick when she saw, on the monitor, the red car pull up to the front gate. The intercom buzzed.

Lucett: Yes?

Guard: Caius is here to see you.

Lucett: Let him in. Anytime he comes let him in. Understood?

Guard: Yes. Understood.

The car pulled around the house to the back and parked beside the small house in the rear. She went to the glass door and slid it open as he approached. He stepped through and slid it shut.

Caius: Good evening madam. Are you well?

Lucett: You don't have to address me like that at the house.

She moved to sit at the bar.

Caius: Good evening Lucett:

Lucett: Good evening Caius. I am well. I trust you are. Come here. Let me look at you.

He stepped to the bar and stood before her.

Lucett: Turn around.

He did so.

Lucett: How tall are you?

Caius: Six four.

Lucett: I thought so. You're not still growing are you?

Caius: I could be.

She stared at him and drew on the stick. She looked at him all over.

Lucett: Nice suit.

Caius: Thank you.

Lucett: Come closer.

He moved closer. She put the stick in the ashtray and opened his coat and looked beneath his left arm.

Lucett: Nice weapon.

Caius: Thank you.

Lucett: That's the correct size for when you're dressed like that. Did you purchase more than one?

Caius: Yes, different types and sizes.

Lucett: And rifles?

Caius: Yes. I did as you said to do.

She picked up her stick, drew on it and sipped her drink.

Lucett: You look nice, and new. I like that. You did well.

Caius: I'm glad you approve.

She got up and moved behind the bar to make another drink.

Lucett: You want some water, or juice?

Caius: Juice is fine.

She handed Caius his drink, sipped hers, put in more gin and sipped again.

Lucett: Did you find out anything?

Caius: Yes. The *DF* who attacked Ursula was riding in an old style car. A replica from a long time ago. It was a long convertible and was tan or beige in color. The top was down and a *PM* appearing individual was in the back seat. Her backup was a somewhat tall, medium-sized *Escura DM* wearing all black with a black straw hat with a white ban. Here's what I believe will interest you the most. That unique automobile was seen at an attack on the south side.

Lucett: That is very interesting, an attack on the south side.

Caius: Yes. A large *Rosada DM* with long blue hair was pulled from his car and beaten to the ground by an *Escura DM* who wore all black with a black straw hat that had a white ban.

Lucett: I can assume who the beater was and who got beat.

Caius: Earlier that night the car was rolling on the east side.

Lucett: It's coming together now.

Caius: That same Saturday night, actually early Sunday morning the same three individuals had a confrontation with several biker gang members at a hot dog stand and the car was seen getting on the freeway, heading west.

Lucett: And how could you find all this out?

Caius: I can find these things out because I have sources, reliable sources all over the city in all four areas. These are my close associates, mostly around my age, many I've known for years and we're all into technology. Gathering information is what we do. You know, information technology.

Lucett drew on her stick and when she blew out the smoke she began to wave her hand in the air.

Lucett: Sit on the couch, please.

He moved to the couch, removed his jacket and sat down. The leader of the Northsiders stared at the handsome young man while she pondered this that he had just shared with her. He stared back. She made up her mind.

Lucett: Let me change. We're going for a ride, a long ride.

When she came from the bedroom she was dressed in a brown pants suit and wearing brown ankle boots. She set her brown cap on the bar and began to braid her hair. He stood.

Caius: Come here.

She walked over to him.

Caius: Turn around.

She turned around and he quickly braided her hair. When he was done she went to the mirror on the wall to look.

Caius: I used to braid my sister's hair.

She smiled at him, put her cap on and strapped her gun on her side. She handed him a car starter and grabbed her bag.

Lucett: We'll take the black car in the garage.

DAR AND STRA

As darkness approached, Dar and Stra were sitting by the swimming pool at the big house. They had their heads close together and almost whispered.

Dar: Mace is supposed to stay at home tomorrow but he'll want to know what's going on. Stop by there on your way in. Maybe you two should go in the backyard. I have no idea who's listening in on who or where. Tell him we have a spy in our midst and for him to have the tech people come to his place early tomorrow and do a sweep of his house and all his cars. They should next go to my other houses and check them and all the transportation there. Finally, they should come here around noon. I'll have them do a sweep of everything here. From now until this is over we ride in one car, the long one, so have the sweepers provide you and Mace with an app so you can scan that car before each time we ride in it.

Dar handed Stra a piece of paper.

Dar: Here's a list of names. Have a tag put on the transportation of each one and have a tail put on them. We've got to find out who betrayed us. Don't put that list on your Comm device and don't lose that paper.

Stra: It's not long. I'll memorize it.

The now second in command of security studied the list.

Stra: Your sister and brother are on here?

Dar: Yeah, so? You're seeing the list and that's because you're not on it and the only reason you're not on it is because you didn't know about my plans until Sunday night and by then we had already been compromised. Mace isn't on it because it makes no sense that their informant would be beaten almost to death. Everyone on that list is suspect because each one knew, to some degree or another, about the plans. My sister is going away for

the day so tomorrow is a good day for the tech people to do their check here. I'll send someone along to watch her. Send security people over to Wart's to guard him. Rotate ten. I want him protected by five around the clock. Pick up that sample and get an estimate on when he'll be done with the rest. Understand this, and explain it to Mace. We can't let Quin or Lucett know what's going on or they'll both back out. They have to believe that the element of surprise is still on their side. Any questions?

Stra: How much does this set us back?

Dar: It doesn't set us back because it doesn't stop anything. We still have to deal with the Westsiders whether they know we're coming or not. It just makes the war more deadly for our side. You and Mace need to have a plan of attack and your numbers together for the attack force by Thursday. The three of us will go over the cost with Ira and I'll call for a meeting to convene with all the 'Siders and at that gathering we'll set a launch date for the war to begin. We have to find, and rid ourselves of the spy before I can call for everybody to come together again.

Stra: I like the sound of that. A war like the old days when I was just a kid. I've never been in a full-blown operation.

Dar: Make sure you and Mace use your deployed movement so the others' forces are the vanguard. Let them take the brunt of the resistance.

Stra: All right, sounds good. I'm gone.

Stra rose and disappeared around the side of the house as he headed toward the front. Dar sat there thinking and then smiled as he went over his elaborate plans in his head. He went through the complex details. Then he frowned as he stood to enter the house. He was angry at the idea that there was a very real possibility that when he went into his mansion someone could be listening to, or recording every word he spoke.

THE BARBARIANS

The lights from the large circle of flames flickered in the near distance as Lloyd descended from the darkening sky, slowed and prepared to set his helicopter down in the center of his landing spot that had been created in this nothingness that was between Toledo and Cleveland. This area, once long ago, had been Green Springs but now, for a hundred mile radius consisted of farms and clusters of homes and belonged to the Barbarians.

He thought of Rom and the excitement of the *Entity* who had seen from his window the doors of the largest barn open and the helicopter, black and silver and shiny, had been revealed to him. He had run and jumped and stood beside Lloyd and beseeched him to be allowed to fly it, to at least be able to ride in it and so Lloyd had appeased him by establishing that the two of them would go for a ride the next afternoon.

As Lloyd prepared for his trip Rom had stood outside the door and watched as Lloyd ran checks and punched in GPS coordinates. Naturally Rom had spoken of the machine as a rotorcraft with rotors and lift and thrust and informed the pilot that the Focke Wulfw61 was often considered to be the first functional operational helicopter and was built in nineteen thirty-six and then when he began to speak of the people of China referencing vertical flight in four hundred BC, Lloyd told him it was time to go, the roof had opened and Rom had stepped away and waved and run a short distance as the helicopter rose into the air and disappeared.

Now Lloyd hovered above the landing spot and as he lowered closer to the ground he saw the off-road bikes and off-road vehicles with manned machine guns on the tops and in the back beds. Horns began to honk and tracer rounds were fired into the distance and there was waving and shouting and hollering that

was nearly drowned out by the rotating blades.

The helicopter was set down, the blades stopped and when Lloyd got out, a *Bronze DM*, dressed in Barbarian garb of leather and denim, with long white and bronze colored hair and very light-colored eyes who was a little over six feet eight inches tall and who weighed almost three hundred pounds approached with outstretched arms. This huge man was the son of the leader and the second in command. Lloyd called out.

Lloyd: Stack my friend, are you still growing?

Stack grabbed Lloyd, lifted him into the air and turned and set him down. The large man's deep voice boomed.

Stack: Yes, out but not up. It's good to see you my friend after all these years. Are you well?

Lloyd: It has been a long time. I'm well. I hope you are.

Stack: Yes, I'm well, thank you.

They started toward a waiting vehicle.

Stack: Be prepared to catch it. Mom is really upset with you for disappearing the way you did.

They got in and began the ride to the house. A few of the vehicles followed, the others disappeared into the darkness.

Lloyd: How are Mom and Dad?

Stack: They grow older, which is much better than not. Mom also grows cranky and Dad is into cosmetics now and appears younger than me and makes Mom change her hair and alter her presentation every year. All in all they're doing well. We heard you had been destroyed some years ago but since we never received our sign we didn't act upon that now obvious lie. Mom wanted to lay waste to Michigan, all sides. Where's Lena?

Lloyd: She's with me in River Town. She says hello and sends wishes of wellness.

Stack: Ah, the love of my life. Such beauty, such power. Tell her I'm very upset she didn't force you to bring her along. You two

together again indicates the seriousness of this conflict.

Lloyd: In *Center World* all conflicts are serious.

As they rode to the house Stack talked about and pointed out the changes and growth of the area. It was growing darker and all Lloyd could see were the silhouettes of the buildings and the illumination of the lights through the windows as they came on in the distance and appeared as grounded stars.

Stack: Remember, no talk of business until after the repast. Mom is going to try and stuff you. Good fortune with that.

When they arrived, the leader of this group was standing on the porch awaiting their arrival. He moved slowly down the three steps and strolled to the white wooden gate. His gait revealed the fact that despite his looks this *DM* was years past what had become, in the age of medical alterations, middle age.

This individual was taller and larger than his son and presenting as a *Castanha-clara*, his eyes were now sky blue and his long hair, tied in a ponytail, was a rich golden brown. This was Dack, the Barbarians' leader of many years.

He smiled as he pulled open the gate, opened his arms, hugged the dark man and moved him to arm's length in order to look his friend over. And though his voice was deep like his son's, he spoke quietly, seriously.

Dack: Who slays Lloyd? No one! Blasphemy I say! Lies were whispered of your demise. Lloyd lives!

He hugged Lloyd again and now the leader smiled broadly.

Dack: How wonderful to see you my son. You look good, and the same, as always. Are you well?

Lloyd: And you look strong and powerful and different and indeed it's good to be alive and I am well. I hope you are.

Dack: I am well, thank you. How is my dear Lena? Is she well?

Lloyd: Yes, very well. She sends wishes of wellness to you and Mom.

They started up the walkway.

Dack: How do you like this look of mine, impressive, yes? Mom enjoys it. She won't admit it but I know it's because after all this time together she can fool around with a different man ever year or so.

Stack: You still look like Dack to me. And you definitely act the same.

They mounted the stairs.

Dack: Well, I feel different, younger. And Mom looks rather fresh, at least to me she does. Variety is the hot sauce of life.

Lloyd: You look great Dack.

Dack: Thank you my son, thank you.

They entered the house and as they headed to the large dining area the back screen door slammed shut and Mom's loud voice could be heard.

Mom: Where is he? Where is he?

Although she was Dack's wife and Stack's mother, everyone called her Mom. Both of her parents had died in the pandemic and although still a teenager she had taken it upon herself to take care of her three younger brothers and two younger sisters. The children called her Mom and eventually so did everyone else.

Now this woman stood in the doorway with her left hand on her hip and pointed with her right and glared at Lloyd.

Mom: Shame on you! Shame on you!

She was six feet five inches tall and still shapely thick. She was now presenting as a *Loria-clara* and her eyes were brown and her long curly hair was a fiery red. She rushed at Lloyd and began to swing playfully at him and he ducked and moved behind Stack to avoid the soft blows.

Lloyd: Who is this strange woman who attacks me?

She grabbed him and gave him a tight hug and smothered his neck in kisses. She pushed him away to arm's length.

Mom: We heard you had been destroyed but these two said to ignore it as a false rumor.

Her eyes welled with tears.

Mom: I didn't feel your loss inside my heart. I sensed your presence. But almost eighteen years is much too long to stay away.

She wiped her eyes with her fingers and Dack handed her a handkerchief.

Dack: A man comes and goes as he pleases, especially a free, single one.

Mom: You hush.

Lloyd took the handkerchief from her hands and dabbed at both her cheeks as she bent to him and then he kissed her on each one.

Lloyd: You're right. I stayed away too long. You were supposed to be made aware that I was well. Forgive me?

Mom: Yes, I forgive you.

Lloyd: Are you well? You look wonderful Mom.

Mom: Do I? Thank you Lloyd. You're so sweet. I am well. Like my hair? And you look well, are you?

Lloyd: I am, even better than that now that I'm here with you all and your hair looks hot, like fire.

Dack: She's hotter than she's ever been.

Mom smiled broadly at her husband of many years.

Mom: Dack, stop it. Look at him Lloyd. He refuses to grow up.

Dack: And you love it.

Mom: Where's Lena?

Stack: She's in River Town and he didn't bring her. My special one, so close.

Lloyd: She sends to you well wishes.

Mom: Stack you've got three wives now and can't handle any of them.

She moved toward the back door and Dack slapped her on the rear. She turned back, glared at him and pointed her finger. Mom: Don't start nothing you can't finish. Come on outside to the pit, all of you. Others are coming and I've got more grilling to do. Dack, don't light that cigar in the house. Wait until you get outside.

They all went outside and sat at one of the three long picnic tables. Others arrived with their mates, including those holding high positions in the organization. Stack's wives began serving the courses and as the voices rose, several toasts were made and laughter filled the warm night air.

There would be no alcohol, drug smoke or altering substances of any kind. A Barbarian never indulged in such activities.

THE RANCH

Lena had waited until the sun was completely down and dived into the pool and swam laps without counting. She then lay on her back and floated and gazed into the sky and looked at the first bright stars that had appeared and the first rays of the moon that expressed its essence.

That moon was lit up in the clear sky and Lena knew that the first quarter came next. It was her favorite phase. It slowly disappeared after sunrise and had she been in the West she could drive into the desert or step into the backyard of the Las Vegas home and hold both the fading moon in one hand and the sun in the other at the same time.

But now she was in the flattened near Midwest of the country and her friends seemed as a dream and she had to think of them, miss them in her thoughts, to keep them alive in her heart.

She wanted this challenge that they confronted and that confronted them to be over with so she could head west. She

would stop and visit along the way just as she had done as she had come east. But this time, after nearly eighteen years, perhaps, she fervently hoped, her father would ride with her. They would be together in peace and together they would eventually sit on the balcony of the Malibu home and watch the sun set into the immense blue-green ocean.

She got out and towed off and reclined on the chair again and placed the buds in her ears. She could feel the breeze drying her hair even as the humidity and diminishing heat moistened and warmed her skin.

It wasn't long before Rom came from the house and sat in a chair beside her. He was silent and stared at the water in the pool as it settled into stillness. Lena removed her buds and turned the music off. She looked at Rom. He appeared troubled.

Lena: Are you all right?

Rom: Yes, just much to process in my thoughts.

Lena: You do that quite well. How goes your work?

Rom: I think progress is being made.

They sat in silence. They could hear the birds in the trees.

Lena: Come on, let's do your hair.

Rom: It's not done?

Lena: We're going to tone it down.

Rom: It's too much isn't it?

Lena: You need something more befitting of you. Trust me.

Rom: Yes, I put my hair in your hands.

They went to the salon room.

Lena: Take your shirt off and come over here.

She sat him in a chair and adjusted it so he was lying back with his head over a sink.

Lena: Are you comfortable?

Rom: Yes, of course.

Lena: Of course you are.

She began to wash the coloring out.

Rom: I like some color but you don't wear any coloring in your hair.

Lena: I have before. And I've worn weaves and extensions and wigs and changed the color of my eyes and skin color too. If you had seen me a few months ago I would have appeared completely different.

Rom: In what way?

Lena: My hair was weaved to my shoulders and was an auburn shade and I had hazel-colored eyes and was a *Melada*.

Rom: How altered that sounds, and beautiful. I'm trying to visualize you like that and with honey-colored skin.

Lena: I've been a *Palida* with blond hair and blue eyes and a *Parda-clara* with black hair and black eyes. It's just something to do. So many people do it now. It's the normal for these times. Sit up.

Rom sat up and Lena toweled his hair.

Lena: This color takes better when the hair is damp. Come over here.

They moved near the mirrors on the wall and Rom sat in an adjustable chair. Lena lowered the chair and put on gloves.

Rom: I like your *Escura* color. There's something ancient and exotic about dark brown. I think you're beautiful.

Lena: Why thank you Rom. How sweet. That's a compliment and I like compliments.

Rom: It's your natural color isn't it?

Lena: Yes it is.

Lena began mixing the dye.

Rom: Can I touch your hair?

Lena bent and Rom touched and gently squeezed.

Rom: I like the way it has a natural feeling to the sensors in my fingers. It's very soft. Mine will never grow as long as yours.

Lena: Mine is almost six inches long on top and three and four on the sides and the back. Yours is about four, which is fine because it's curly and you can comb it back on the sides. You'll never have to cut it but you can always make it longer and change your color anytime you choose. Remember though, that rich-brown color goes well with your *Marrom* skin color. They created a very handsome Rom.

Rom: Thank you. Maybe I'll change my eye color too.

Lena: If you like.

Lena began applying the coloring.

Lena: People can change how they appear with ease but to alter who they are inside takes an effort that only those who desire to evolve are willing to make. As you go out into this world that exists now try, as often as possible, to do something to help someone.

Rom: I'll retain that. What made you want to go natural?

Lena: I wanted to look like my mother again, even down to her gold tooth. See?

She smiled and he smiled back.

Rom: I like that, and your dark-brown eyes are so expressive. The dimples, your mother ... Lena is it has or had?

Lena: It's had. My mother no longer lives. But yes, she had dimples too.

Rom: I'm sorry to hear that she is no longer among us.

Lena: Thank you for your words.

Rom: Not just a father but also an immortal family. How special you two are but how wonderful that sounds.

Lena: Yes it does. But I have my father and he has me and we love each other very much and she lives on inside us both.

Lena turned the chair so she could look directly at him.

Lena: That has to set and then I put some in again and we'll be done.

Rom looked in the mirror.

Lena: The color will change and become what it's supposed to be. Patience.

Rom: I see the love in your eyes for him and his love for you transmitted in his gaze but sometimes when he stares at you he appears distant, separated, momentarily sad even.

Lena: And how else do I appear to look at him?

Rom: There is something there that is different sometimes, something more. Father to daughter and daughter to father I imagine both contain varying essences of love.

Lena turned and looked into the mirror at her own reflection. Then she spoke to Rom through his reflection.

Lena: Yes he sees many things when he looks at me as I present my natural self to the world. He sees not only his daughter, his only child, who he loves and I know he loves me not just as his daughter but his friend, his confidante, his protector, his immortal partner but he also sees my mother, his departed wife. She was the woman he loved with everything, with all that existed within him, his first true love and the woman who died in his arms. He killed my mother Rom. His love died because of him.

She paused now and they stared at each other through the mirror and Lena nearly whispered.

Lena: It was an accident.

Rom: Of course it was.

Lena: It was an essence of the fever within him and he could not have known that the substance that entered her body, that should have been at that instance, the moment that life could begin, became a fire that consumed her from inside out. He held her and rocked her and whispered to her and she altered into brittle, thin, dark-brown porcelain and her naked body shattered into pieces and as he rose from the bed in horror she became a gray powdery ash and was gone, forever.

Rom's eyes widened and then he blinked twice but he was speechless and finally he was able to speak.

Rom: I saw that white flame on that bike. And the fire, the fire that must have lit up the woods and burned until there was nothing left but that ash that remained. The Professor spoke of that fever. A gift now?

Lena: Or a curse?

She turned and stepped to him.

Lena: Now, here is our secret ...

She touched his bare chest.

Lena: ... yours ...

She placed her hand to her breast, at her heart.

Lena: ... and mine.

She looked directly into Rom's eyes, her voice, soft and even.

Lena: He doesn't know I was there. I had just turned teenager, curious, inquisitive. I was hiding in the closet watching them make passionate loving love. I saw it all, the love, the life, the death. So what you see flash in my eyes briefly on occasion is my desire I have for him. My desire to replace the mother, my lust to be as my mother was, to be in his arms, to have him inside of me, to possess him as she had, to even die as she did just to feel as she felt before the fire. Oh, what a smile she had on her lovely face. It was a beautiful serene smile that said, after the silent scream of ecstasy, yes, yes I'm all right now. Everything is all right.

Lena took a deep breath and wiped a tear from each cheek.

Lena: Selfish tears.

She gathered herself and continued.

Lena: I drank that substance the Professor sought and when it was offered I drank it willingly. Understand, I was twenty-three years old and hot. I ached for him, burned for him only. I threw myself at him and shamelessly attempted to seduce him, yes my

own father and he continually, firmly, gently rebuffed me. Finally he explained to me that the memory of my mother and his love for her and all she meant to him would never be altered, never leave him. So in her honor he took a vow of celibacy. Never would he physically, sexually experience another woman again. He would die, whenever and however that may be, in a state of abstinence. He is a man of his word and thus I knew he would not waver. There was no one else for me. He was my everything, my love, my life, so I followed his vow with my own. I vowed to remain as I was. If I could not have him, there would be no one. He would honor his love for his wife, my mother, and I would show praise to him and her and glorify my love for them both by remaining pure. Not sinless but pure in the sense that I stand here a virgin and will remain so for as long as my father is alive and if I depart first, so shall it be.

Lena smiled at Rom, just a slight smile.

Lena: It's very complicated to be human Rom.

Rom: Even with all that I have studied, all the images I have viewed, much that is human remains foreign to me.

Lena: Nothing that is human is foreign to me. From the highest to the lowest exists within each human who has lived and will ever live. It's just a matter of degrees. Now, let's finish this.

She began to apply color again.

Lena: Would you like a temporary tattoo that declares you a male?

Rom: Your *DF* marker is temporary?

Lena: Yes. I can be whoever or whatever I choose to be. Over the years I've been a *DL*, *DQ* and when I was a *DP* that said it all.

Rom: Am I not a *DM*?

Lena: You present as one. Your designers meant for you to be. Remember they decided that. What if you see Clee and she wears no marker as you do now or one other than *DF*?

Rom: 'Then I'll be a *DM* if she's a *DF* but if she's *ND* I could be an *ND* too, but if she's ...

Lena: It doesn't matter. Do you love Clee?

Rom: Yes, yes I do. I hope she still loves me.

Lena: Love is all that matters. The power of love and the acceptance it entails is the answer to so many of our problems. I'm done. Let's watch it change. I'll tattoo you later.

Lena took her gloves off, turned the music up and began to dance.

Lena: Rom you said you saw everything that Zesiro saw, did you really?

Rom: Yes I did.

Lena: Everything?

Rom: Yes, everything Zesiro saw I saw.

Lena was moving around the room in her bathing suit and Rom watched her. Her eyes sparkled.

Lena: Then you saw me strip and dance naked behind that glass?

Rom: Yes. You kept telling Zesiro to look at you and finally he looked and couldn't remove his gaze. You affected that *Entity* and forced him to reach out and attempt to touch you. I didn't understand until the final battle when you were shot and lying on the floor and you called out and he looked down at you and because of that call and the glance that followed, Zesiro lost his head.

Lena reached her hands as if to remove her top. Now she had a mischievous smile on her face.

Lena: Would you like me to dance naked for you right now, a private dance?

Rom turned away and tightly closed his eyes. He put his hands over his face and shook his head.

Rom: No Lena. Please don't. My heart couldn't stand it.

LUCETT AND CAIUS

Lucett and Caius rode a little over an hour almost due north. They passed through a small town and after another five miles came to a large farmhouse. They turned onto a narrow unpaved road toward the front. Corn could be seen growing off to the left and the rows, even in the darkness were obvious, standing tall, neatly in lines and running into the distance to finally disappear.

Several horses, barely discernable to the right, with their heads hanging over the tall white fence, watched them pass. As they neared the end of the road they could see a light dangling from a tree. It was above a table where four guards sat eating and drinking and playing dominoes.

Two guards grabbed their rifles, rose and approached the car and waved it to a stop. When they saw Lucett remove her cap they recognized their leader and grew excited and called out to the others as they motioned the car forward.

They all stood to watch the car's occupants exit and start toward the steps that led to the front door. They remained standing as they heard Lucett call out through the screen door and knock hard on it and when a rough slightly high-pitched voice responded loudly, the guards sat down and resumed their game.

Voice: Who's banging on my door like that?

Lucett: Uncle it's me Lucett.

Uncle: Who, Lucett? What in the world are you doing out here?

The two looking through the screen could see a short, slim *Parda-clara DM* emerge from the rear of the house. He had long silver hair that was braided into a ponytail and was wearing white cotton pants, white short-sleeved cotton shirt and white sandals.

Uncle: What are you standing out there for? Come on in!

They entered the house and Lucett hugged this elderly man everyone knew as Uncle. She kissed his forehead and kissed one cheek and when she started to kiss the other one he turned his head.

Uncle: Get away! You must want something. I haven't seen you in two months.

Lucett: I have to want something to come way out here. You look well. How are you?

Uncle: I'm well. I hope you are too, but what do you care?

He was looking past Lucett at Caius.

Uncle: Who are you, her illegitimate son?

Lucett: This is ...

Uncle: Let him talk!

Caius: I'm Caius, Lucett's latest project.

Uncle smiled at the young man and extended his hand and they shook.

Uncle: That's pretty good. I'm Uncle. We'll see if we can come up with a better word than project. Let's see ...

Lucett: Don't Uncle, be nice.

Uncle: Come on back to the den. Wait until you taste this white liquor I just made. My best batch ever.

They moved down a long hallway and entered a large den with a bar and Comm devices on a wide desk made of thick bamboo.

Uncle moved to the bar and set out three glasses.

Lucett: Caius doesn't drink alcohol.

Uncle looked at Caius, frowned and shook his head.

Caius: Some juice is fine.

Uncle: Juice? Ugh! Glad you didn't ask for milk.

He poured from a jar some white liquid into two glasses and some orange juice into the third glass.

Lucett: Put some ice in mine.

Uncle: You're going to water it down! You're getting soft in your old age.

Lucett went to the bar and picked up the jar and held it up to the light and peered at it. Then she shook the jar.

Lucett: You're not going to poison me.

Uncle: Look at the way it beads up. I'm telling you this is my best yet.

He handed Caius his glass and then Lucett hers.

Uncle: Let's have a toast.

Lucett smelled her drink.

Lucett: To what?

Uncle thought a moment.

Uncle: To Caius, Lucett's latest victim and a young man who doesn't drink.

Lucett: I'm not drinking to that.

Caius: Let's drink to you Uncle.

Lucett: I'll drink to that. To you Uncle.

Uncle: I'll drink to that too.

Lucett and Caius sipped their drinks. Uncle downed his and began to cough. Lucett gagged and grabbed the juice from Caius and gulped some of it.

Lucett: I thought you said it was your best!

Uncle: Maybe I should've said my strongest. You bring me any candy?

Lucett went to the bar and set both glasses down. She dug in her bag and pulled out a small clear envelope of powder and handed it to Uncle. She poured more orange juice for Caius. Uncle was looking at the envelope.

Uncle: What is this? What happened to plain old white? Now it's yellow and pink and every other color.

Lucett: It's strong. Be careful.

Uncle: You two have a seat. You hungry?

Caius: I'm fine.

Lucett: Maybe before we leave.

Uncle went to the desk and opened up the envelope. He moistened his finger, stuck it in the powder and tasted it. He then took a small gold spoon and dipped it into the powder and sniffed some up one nostril.

Lucett: That stuff will burn your nose.

Uncle sniffed some up the other nostril.

Uncle: It may burn but won't feel it. It's numbed out.

He then tossed the envelope on the desk beside a large punch bowl that was filled with clear bags, envelopes and packages of drugs of every color. He went to the bar and poured more white liquor into his glass.

Uncle: Now what do you want?

Lucett: Saturday night my chief of security was attacked.

Uncle: That would be Ursula.

Lucett: Yes. An *Escura DF* took her knife and beat her into the ground.

Uncle was shaking the jar of moonshine and looking at it.

Uncle: A *DF*, like in one, took the surgeon's knife and beat her down. What was it an ambush?

Lucett: No, she challenged Ursula. Called her out. She had the drop but put the gun down and they went at it.

Uncle put some ice into his glass.

Uncle: I'm listening.

Lucett: Caius discovers the same *Escura DF* was possibly involved in an attack on the south side with an *Escura DM* who was possibly the same *DM* who was the backup on Ursula.

Uncle: That's more than one possibly.

Lucett: Sunday night I'm at a meeting with Quin and Dar and ...

Uncle set the jar down and held up both hands.

Uncle: Look Lucett. This is beginning to sound complicated but

let me say this right now. And I mean this. Leave Dar alone. He's a very, very treacherous, dangerous man and only bad things can come from being involved directly with him.

Uncle looked into his glass, raised it to take a drink, smelled it, changed his mind and then frowned.

Uncle: Did that ice help?

Lucett: Why don't you put that stuff down? Snort some drugs.

Uncle: I'm going to light some plant for us. Caius you don't smoke do you?

Caius: No I don't.

Uncle: And you don't do drugs?

Caius: No drugs.

Uncle: You are a very unique young man, strange but unique. Go ahead Lucett. I'm trying to keep up. What does Saturday night have to do with Sunday night?

Lucett: At the meeting all our security chiefs and CFOs were required to be there. Poins was absent and I believe, from the description I received, he was the *DM* who was attacked on the south side. Ursula was in a coma and Dar's security chief was not there.

Uncle: Would that still be Mace?

Lucett: Yes. The attackers were in an old style automobile. Some replica from a long time ago. They made no effort to conceal themselves, didn't switch cars, they didn't change clothes.

Uncle pulled a long, rolled drug stick the size of a cigar from a tin container. He smelled it, smiled and then lit it. He drew deeply and then closed his eyes. As he exhaled green colored smoke he spoke.

Uncle: I ask you again, what do you want from me?

Lucett: I want you ...

Uncle: Come over here and try this. Don't you dare smoke near that child.

Lucett: Caius is grown. He's almost twenty years old, in *Center World* that's a lifetime.

Uncle: Indeed it is. Forgive me Caius. Your size alone indicates you're grown.

Caius: Actually I'm still growing.

Uncle stared at Caius and then laughed. Lucett had risen and smoked the offered stick. She began to cough. She started toward the couch and Caius stood to offer his juice.

Uncle: What do you think? I grew that myself.

Lucett: I think it's like your liquor, too strong.

Uncle went to the desk and got the envelope of powder and went back to the bar.

Lucett: I want you to tell me who attacked Ursula and the others and why.

Uncle took a gulp of his drink and smoked on the stick.

Uncle: There's possibly and possible and this shine makes my forehead warm. Who brought the 'Siders together? What was the purpose of the Sunday meeting?

Lucett: Dar arranged it. He proposes the 'Siders, North and South, join with the East to attack and eliminate the leaders of the West and take over that side.

Uncle: That sounds like Dar. The Saturday activities were to show that the Westsiders know of Dar's plan and are prepared to resist it. Why those missing three, and it does sound like they're connected, were not destroyed and were allowed to live, I don't know. It's possible, and there's that word again, it was simply a message, a clear message that says they know and want it to be known that they know.

Lucett: Then if they know, the leak comes from the Eastsiders. Quin and I didn't find out about the plan until Sunday night.

Uncle: That makes sense.

Lucett: That's the why, now who?

The short, slim, light-brown-skinned man quickly pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket and patted his forehead. He smoked his stick and began to pace in front of the couch.

Uncle: Let me explain something to you both. Some of this you know, most of it you don't. Two years after the *G.E. Period*, twenty-eight years ago, the city was divided up into the areas that exist to this day. On the south side Quin's older brother was in charge. On the north it was my older brother and myself. The east side was in control of Dar's father. On the west side Leo drew a line and said this will be the Westsiders' domain and I will be in control. All this just happened, there was nothing formal about it. The Eastsiders had been the first to organize and in the beginning they resisted this evolving division of the city and fought against it. But when they moved toward acceptance and proposed a formal agreement be drawn up, Dar killed his father and some believed, poisoned the heir apparent, his mother, and then assumed control after his older sister relinquished her inherited leadership position to him. After he gained control Dar launched attacks against his three competitors. I told you he was treacherous and dangerous, he's also very violent. This went on for about eight years and while the Eastsiders focused on their main area of resistance, the west side, the other two sides worked toward firmly entrenching themselves. When Dar began gaining the upper hand on the Westsiders, Leo and his associates were aided by two individuals who became his main enforcers.

Uncle went to the bar and sipped his drink and relit his stick and took a puff. Lucett went to the bar and took several puffs from the offered stick and put some of the powder under her tongue after Uncle had sniffed some of it. She went back and sat down and sipped her drink. Uncle began to pace again.

Uncle: I watched, from a distance, as the West very nearly destroyed the East. There was a *DM* called Lloyd and a *DF* who

had the calling of Lena. Sister and brother, perhaps they were mates but they were joined in some way, I never knew how, and they were both unlike anyone I had ever seen before or since, especially the woman. Lloyd could be reasoned with. Lena could not be appeased and was like you, unreasonable

Lucett: I can be insatiable but I'm not unreasonable.

Uncle: The two of them were brilliant strategists and as I said, very nearly destroyed the Eastsiders, including Dar himself. Order was finally established. A formal division of the city was drawn up and a supposedly binding treaty was signed. Everything calmed down. Lloyd had not concerned himself with what could be considered normal *Center World* activities but wanton, needless and senseless violence was, and to this day, is not tolerated on the west side. The calm lasted two years and then eighteen years ago the Eastsiders once again became aggressive and their violence began to spill over to the other areas. The two enforcers and their associates shut it down again but during that time Dar was supposed to have trapped Lloyd and destroyed him in an ambush, which was never really confirmed and I never believed the leader of the Eastsiders was capable of destroying that enforcer. Dar was seriously wounded and virtually disappeared but he continued to run the Eastsiders from what could be considered the underground. Ten years ago I turned over the Northsiders to you Lucett. Then eight years ago the beast came out, reasserted his control and displayed his power and the chaos began again and has gotten worse ever since. Fortunately that madness is mostly limited to the east side because the other areas are so well established and are strong enough to protect their own interests. The Paris of the Midwest was beginning to grow again and those in power generally left each other alone and now Dar very likely draws you and Quin into a full-blown war.

Lucett: Dar can't draw me into anything. You know I would have consulted you on this.

Uncle: Now my feelings are evident and clearly known to you. The decision is yours to make.

Uncle turned and went to the bar. Once again he relit his stick, puffed several times, coughed twice and then sipped his drink and frowned and shook his head.

Lucett: The woman who attacked Ursula and who had been on the south side with the man, could that have been Lena?

Uncle: To use your word, possibly.

Lucett: Do you know what she looks like?

Uncle: That was then, I don't know how she looks now.

Lucett: How old was she?

Uncle: Lucett, who knows today how old someone is, or even who or what someone is? Unless they declare, no one can be judged by the way they look. Then, they both appeared young, late teens, like your boyfriend, excuse me, like your man there, early twenties maybe. Which, age wise, puts her in her prime, somewhere in her forties. She may look the same for all I know. No telling what she's taking or doing to herself. Caius, how old do you think I am? How old do I look?

Caius: I have no idea.

Uncle: No idea or just won't say? I'm seventy-nine.

Lucett: Quit lying.

Uncle: Give or take five or ten years. Actually I don't know how old I am. Age is just a number. It's not how old you look or are, it's how old you feel. I'm your age young man. And if you start using drugs and alcohol and allow Lucett to put that thing on ...

Lucett: Stop it! Stop it!

Lucett got up and started to the bar.

Uncle: She told you about the twenty-one-years old rule didn't she?

Caius: Yes she did.

Lucett smoked on the stick and put some powder under her tongue and went behind the bar.

Uncle: Well good luck with that.

Lucett: I'm getting some gin and you need to quit drinking that stuff.

Uncle: 'There's a long list of things I need to quit doing but drinking, smoking and snorting are not on it. I like you Caius and I give you permission to break that rule. I told you she was unreasonable and that's an unreasonable rule. Just stay away from the altering substances. Although once Lucett gets to you, alterations will definitely take place.

Lucett began to make her drink and she looked menacingly at Uncle who was bent over the bar quietly laughing.

Uncle: That's the best plant I've had in years. I've got it growing like that corn out there, acres of it. It's going to be a very profitable fall my dear Lucett.

Lucett: Caius, place that video on the desk device and bring it up on the screen on the wall.

Caius got up to do as asked and Uncle and Lucett smoked on the stick, tasted and sniffed the powder and drank alcohol. Uncle gagged on the liquor as Lucett coughed from the smoke.

Caius: I'm ready.

Lucett: Dim the lights Uncle.

Uncle: What is it a movie?

Caius started the video and the three watched in silence. When it was over, Uncle spoke softly.

Uncle: Was that a kiss?

Lucett: Was that her?

Uncle was animated. His voice rose.

Uncle: Did you hear the crowd screaming for blood? That was horrible! Get me some popcorn! Caius, play it again!

They watched it again and Uncle called out like he was an announcer and hollered as if he were there. When it was over they were quiet again.

Lucett: Caius zoom in on her face.

Caius: Let me adjust the sound and resolution.

Now the dark woman's face filled the screen.

Uncle: The last time I saw her the tresses were long and stood out all over her head and the tips were a bright red and she looked like she was on fire and let tell you, she acted like that too and I was witness to her kicking a *DM*'s head off.

Lucett: She kicked him in the head?

Uncle: You didn't hear me correctly. She was fighting this *DM* the height of Caius but thicker and she jumped up in the air and did some kind of ballerina move and kicked him in the side of the neck and his head came off. They found it in some bushes.

Lucett: I heard about them, never saw them. Uncle, is that her?

Uncle: To use your word, possibly. In fact, it's very possible. A possibly and a possible. That body certainly looks like hers.

Lucett: Oh, you recognize that do you?

Uncle: A man such as me never forgets a sight such as that. At least I haven't yet. Lucett, my dear, there are not many who can compare with you in a multitude of ways. I see how beautiful you are and I know how tough you can be and you know I love you like a daughter, a naughty daughter perhaps but mine. I believe Lloyd and Lena are back. Please take my advice. Do not oppose those two.

Uncle sipped his drink and gagged. He smoked on the stick and coughed. While holding the stick in one hand and the glass in the other he opened his mouth and Lucett placed some powder beneath his tongue.

Uncle: Caius my good man, and I say that with all due respect, play that video again.

THE BARBARIANS

The group ate course after course. Just about everything was cooked or had been prepared on the three grills on the patio. Vegetables from the garden and meats and even red snapper fish, rushed from miles away specifically for Lloyd, were served on large platters.

There was a sense of mirth as they spoke of old times, only the good ones. And when they talked of the future and what it held and when the talk began to turn dark as laments of those who had departed were expressed, Mom shushed that and the mood lightened once again. Finally Lloyd spoke as more meat was pushed at him.

Lloyd: Mom please, I can't eat anymore. Everything is so good.

Mom: You haven't eaten that much. I know you've been slipping Stack food.

Lloyd: If I eat any more I'll be too heavy to take off.

Mom: I hadn't thought of that. Then that means you can't take anything with you because that's the same as putting it in you.

Stack: He's in a two-seater. Fill him up.

Dack: That's just talk. He could take me with him if he wanted.

Lloyd: Not after all you ate. Go ahead Mom, fix some for Lena, with some of that dessert for both of us.

Mom: I'll do that, a basket to go.

Dack rose and stretched. He went to Mom and grabbed her and kissed her.

Dack: Everything was delicious. I'm going to reward you later for that meal.

Mom: Get away Dack. You'll be sleep and snoring in an hour.

Stack: I'm full. That was great.

Mom: I'm glad everyone enjoyed it.

Dack: Those involved in Barbarians' business come with me.

Four *DMs*, two *DFs*, a *PF DQ* and a *DL* all stood and the group stepped from the patio and strolled toward a large canopy just past the pool. Dack lit a cigar as they walked and blew smoke up into the darkness.

When they reached the covering they took their places as lamps were being lit. Dack sat in a large chair with Stack to his right. The *DM* head of security and the *DL* CFO sat to the leader's left. The others gathered behind Lloyd, who sat facing Dack.

Dack: Communication is so poor out here. I'm going to have a tower erected and fiber run from here to Cleveland and from here to Toledo the other direction. Now we make do. We lead a simple life and these circumstances drew us together face to face, which is a good thing.

Lloyd: Yes it is. And to see you and your son and those I've met before and those who are new to me reminds me of both the past and the future. It's good to be alive.

Everyone made a remark of agreement that acknowledged life, and death.

Dack: Now, your messenger and the brief message indicated you need our assistance. Speak to us.

Lloyd: Very soon Quin and his associates will be contacting you to arrange a meeting. They will be representing three of the 'Siders. They will request that you align yourself with them in an attack against the Westsiders. They seek to seize the West, which I believe is Dar's first step toward taking the whole state for himself.

Dack: We would never join them in an attack against the Westsiders, which is an attack against you.

Lloyd: Their offer will be one you would never refuse under any other circumstances.

Dack: We would never accept it under this circumstance. But

you did not come here to provide this information. They could not know but you know we would not take up arms against you and your associates. What is it you need from us?

Lloyd: I need for you to accept their offer.

Dack: Lloyd, my son, you know what that would mean.

Dack indicated with a sweeping motion of his arm the presence of those who stood behind and to the sides of the dark man.

Dack: These young ones are brought up to understand and everyone older here knows the word of a Barbarian is all binding, irrevocable. If we accept that offer we would be compelled to honor our word, for our word is final.

Lloyd: Of course I know that. But if you refuse their offer it would force them to alter their plans. If you do that I'll lose my advantage. At this time I remain ahead of them, to their sides and behind when I choose to be. If they seek other surreptitious ways to attack us we'll be put in a precarious situation.

Dack: For you to know their plans it's obvious you hold a level of control but I don't like this that you require of us.

The leader looked at Stack.

Stack: Do you have any idea of their offer?

Lloyd: A high value amount and a large amount of drugs.

Stack: How much weight?

Lloyd: That I don't know. Negotiate as high as possible. They desperately need your forces.

Stack: I don't like the position in which your request places us. You saved my father's life. If not for you, he would not be here and I would never have experienced this life I've lived. Even with the pain and suffering I've seen, I've enjoyed my time here. As you stated, it's good to be alive.

Lloyd: I'll do my best to ensure you and your people never have to leave Ohio. Have them deliver up front all that you agree on.

When you give your word they'll have no reason to reject that stipulation. I must receive a message when you have the bounty in your possession. And understand, if the Westsiders prevail, this particular source will dry up and be no more.

Stack: We're developing other sources and eventually will be making our own.

Dack: Can you make a promise to us we'll never have to cross the state line?

Lloyd: You know I can't promise, but I give you my word I'll do all I can to make sure we never war against one another.

The canopy was silent, Dack was thinking and then he stared at Stack. He looked at those to his left and then scanned the room. He looked into the eyes of each one there.

Dack: I'll accept your word. We'll do as you ask.

Stack: Tell us something. Why is it you've never shunned us for the business we conduct?

Lloyd: Anyone can find that which they seek in *Center World*. But imagine if everyone in this lawless place were as the Barbarians and alcohol and drugs were absent from their lives. It's not the substance, it's the use. How can the Barbarians be considered a problem without at the same time acknowledging that their abstinence should be considered a solution? Denial can be a very powerful force. Besides, who am I to pass judgment on you in regards to your business? I'm certainly no saint.

Dack stood, everyone rose and Lloyd embraced the father and son. He shook everyone's hand.

Dack: Let's go have a toast to the future.

THE RANCH

Lena was waiting outside the barn when the helicopter began to descend. The inside was lit up to guide the landing and as

soon as the rotors stopped spinning the roof began to close. The entrance was open and she stood outside as Lloyd emerged and the doors slid shut.

Lena: How did it go?

Lloyd: Dack reluctantly agreed.

They began to walk, with their arms around each other's waist, toward the house.

Lena: What's in the basket, food I hope?

Lloyd: Everyone sends well wishes and Stack also sends undying love and of course Mom sent food. Where's Rom? I thought he'd be waiting with you.

Lena: When I heard you I started out but he stayed in his room working. After I changed his hair he went in and hasn't been out since.

Lloyd: What color is it now?

Lena: You'll see. So what follows?

Lloyd: We await the 'Siders next move.

They entered the house and when Lloyd set the basket on the kitchen table Lena began taking items from it.

Lena: Look at these vegetables. Is that red snapper they had for you? Lemon meringue pie! My favorite!

Lloyd: How many favorites do you have?

Lena: Quite a few.

Lloyd: I'll be leaving around ten in the morning. If for some reason I don't see Rom tell him we'll go for a ride when I get back.

Lena: I'm heading to Jackson, maybe further while you're gone. I'm going to do some shopping. You need anything?

Lloyd: No, I don't need anything.

He went to Lena and turned her from the basket, hugged her and kissed her on the forehead. He looked into her eyes.

Lloyd: Smile for me.

She smiled broadly and he looked at her tooth and a shadow briefly passed his face.

Lloyd: Are you bored here in the middle of nothing? Shall we go to Ann Arbor? You can dress up, sip champagne, dance and gamble again.

Lena hugged Lloyd back.

Lena: I'm fine. Whatever you want to do is okay with me.

Lloyd: Hopefully this will be over soon.

Lena: As long as we're together that's all that matters to me. Seventeen years apart is too long.

Lloyd: I love you Georcelena.

Lena: And I love you father.

DAR AND CRESS

This Tuesday Dar would go into the office around one. First he would see his sister off for her daylong trip and then he would direct the sweep of his house and scan of his automobiles for listening units and monitoring devices.

He was leaving the kitchen with a cup of coffee when his sister came down.

Dar: You look well this morning and like summer, all fresh and bright. How do you feel?

Cress: Thank you. I'm well. I hope you are.

Dar: Yes, I'm better, as well as I can be, under the circumstances. Are you ready to depart?

Cress: Yes. You going in late today?

Dar: Yes. I have some things to finish here first. The yacht is ready and the captain and crew await your arrival.

He gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Dar: As I explained last night, there are business matters that concern me and not that you're in any imminent danger, I still

want someone to stay close to watch out for you.

Cress: I don't think that's necessary but whatever you have decided is fine with me.

Dar: You suggested Troi go along so he'll be waiting at the dock.

She gave her brother a quick buss on the cheek.

Cress: I'm gone. Have a good day. Be well.

Dar: You too my dear. Be well.

An hour after Cress departed, two cars arrived and eight individuals got out. Dar gave directions and four went to the garage and four entered the house. They removed devices from the cases they carried and began their check. Dar was watching those in the house when the Comm device he held went off. He looked at it and then answered.

Dar: You should be resting.

Mace: I'm headed to the office with Stra as soon as I get dressed. There's too much going on to rest.

Dar: As long as you feel up to it. First swing by Wart's and check on his progress. I'll be in around one.

As one o'clock approached, Dar was being driven to his office and Cress was standing in the sunshine beside the captain as they approached their destination.

GROSSE ISLE, MICHIGAN

Grosse Isle had once been the island for the wealthy. A little less than ten miles in total size, sitting southeast of the city, it was the largest island in the Detroit River. One hundred and fifty years in the past it was populated by a little over ten thousand individuals. Just as the rest of the world, its numbers swelled, growing to over twenty thousand before it became a restricted area and just as the rest of the United States, it was nearly emptied by the Great Extinction.

Now it was once again the place for those with significant value and in that sense, still a restricted area. Thirty years after the dying years, the desire for wealth and value dominated many of those in the present, while those who still remained, who had somehow lived through the deathly past, concentrated on continuing to live.

The yacht pulled in at the private dock and Cress and her guard Troi debarked and were whisked away in an electric car to their waiting rooms.

It wasn't long before Cress was in her bathing suit and preparing to go and sit in the sun by the pool. She pressed her Comm device and when her call was answered, she spoke.

Cress: Troi, I'm ready.

Two minutes later Troi, coming from the room next to hers, was tapping on the door and Cress opened it.

Cress: I'm going to the pool.

Troi was an *Alva-rosada DQ PM* of average height and build and was known for being aggressive and suspicious and Cress was quite aware that his pinkish-white skin was unusually sensitive and could not tolerate the rays of the sun and that he burned very easily.

Now she saw the frown on his face beneath the large straw hat and the sunscreen slathered on all exposed areas of his body.

Cress: Oh Troi, I forgot about the sun on your skin. Come on in.

Troi stepped into the room and removed the hat.

Cress: Look, let's do this. I'll make you that drink you like and you sit on my balcony in the shade. You can see the pool from here and I'll wave when I get there and you can watch me from right here. How's that?

Troi smiled and his light-pink eyes brightened and then he frowned and his eyes seemed to darken. He had a light voice and always spoke softly and slowly.

Troi: Thanks Cress. That sounds all right but do you think Dar would approve? He told me to stay close.

He patted the gun on his side.

Troi: I'm supposed to be protecting you.

Cress: From what? Look, we're on an island. Of course Dar would approve.

She grabbed his arm and walked him to the balcony doors.

Cress: I'm going to walk down these steps, across to the pool and stretch out on one of those chairs. I'll never leave your sight.

Troi: Yeah, I guess that'll be okay.

Cress made Troi a strong tropical drink, stuck an umbrella in it and made sure he was comfortable in his chair. She put on her wide straw hat and oversized dark sunglasses, gathered her belongings, and headed to the pool. When she got there she waved and received a wave back.

She sat on the side of a chair and began applying sunscreen and lotion. She pulled a book and a Comm device from her bag, put in her ear buds and stretched out and listened to music and began to read her book.

After twenty minutes she put her things on the chair and rose and stepped into the private restroom behind her. Troi watched and then observed as four minutes later the same person who entered appeared to step from the small room and again recline on the chair.

What Troi did not see was Cress lock the door and tap three times on the back wall. The guard could not see that wall slide back and Cress step into a small sparsely furnished room and her body double, dressed exactly as she was, step into the restroom and the wall closing. It was the double of Cress who reclined on the chair, placed the buds in her ears and picked up the book and appeared to read. Troi finished his drink and went to the bar to make another one.

Cress removed her hat and sunglasses and smiled as Lloyd rose from his chair and gave her a slight smile.

Lloyd: Hello Cress. You look well, are you?

Cress: I am. And I hope you're as well as you appear to me. How's Lena?

Lloyd: She's well. It's been a long time hasn't it?

Cress: Too long.

They both took a step closer. Cress placed her things on the table. She looked into Lloyd's dark-brown eyes and then lowered her gaze.

Lloyd: Did you remove all your devices?

Cress: Yes, all of them

Lloyd: Are you sure?

Cress: Yes. I placed seven. I removed seven.

Lloyd went to Cress and put his arms around her and spoke into her ear.

Lloyd: If anything happened to you ...

She pulled back and put two fingers to his lips.

Cress: I'm all right. Don't say it. Don't think it.

Now Lloyd looked directly into her pale-brown eyes. He still held her.

Lloyd: Your part is over. You understand? And I thank you.

Cress: Yes, I understand.

She pulled away. Turned away. Stepped away. She began to walk the room. Her voice was soft and plaintive.

Cress: But how will you know? What will you do? I'm worried it's all going to fall apart, all our plans will fail. But most of all I'm worried for you.

Lloyd: You have to let that worry go and believe. Your motives are true and the outcome will reflect that. All is good when the end is good.

Cress: Last night Dar sat by the pool and whispered with Stra.

This morning he didn't go to the office. He knows he's been betrayed, he just doesn't know who is behind it. Just as we anticipated he has a guard with me now.

Lloyd: Yes, and he'll do everything he can to find out. That's why you have to be that which you always were to him. You're his older sister who cared nothing of the business. Show no interest. Ask no questions.

Now she walked directly toward him and stopped and they were close.

Cress: You haven't changed at all. You still appear as strong and handsome as ever, just as the first time I saw you. And I'm not just the older sister, I'm older, period, and I look it too.

Lloyd: Your reflection attempts to deceive. You haven't changed either and you're still as graceful and lovely as always.

Cress: Fifty looms directly in front of me.

Lloyd: Still several years away. Time stands still for you.

Cress: We should have been together, you and I.

Lloyd: We are together, as only we can be right now.

She moved closer to once again look up into his eyes and she reached out to touch his face.

Cress: That's not what I want.

He took the hand that touched him and held it to his heart.

Lloyd: You have to want what you can have.

He took her into his arms and held her tightly.

Lloyd: What you've done, to risk your life, to assist me as you have means lives will be saved.

Cress: As will lives be lost.

Lloyd: Yes, unfortunately that's unavoidable.

Cress: As long as Dar, the murderer of my father and mother is removed from this earth at least I'll receive one of the things I want. Can you spare Var?

Lloyd: I assure you Var will be spared.

He eased her away so he could look into her eyes. They stared at one another, in silence. Then he spoke softly, with an intensity that was transferred to her and she responded with a depth of feelings she had never expressed before as she looked at this man she loved.

Lloyd: What is it you want, that you can have?

Cress: I want you. I've always wanted you but you belong to the world. So I'll accept that which I know you can give to me as only you can.

Lloyd: Which is what?

Cress: I want justice. Do what you do Lloyd and give me justice.

Lloyd: Justice you shall have.

Cress smiled slightly and nodded her head and they both looked at the time on the wall.

Cress: Now, a kiss.

He leaned to her and she kissed his lips. She went to her hat and put it on.

Cress: Will I see you again?

Lloyd: I don't know.

Cress: Goodbye Lloyd. Be well.

Lloyd: Goodbye Cress. Be well.

She put her sunglasses on, turned and walked to the wall. She stood facing it and neither spoke. Then came the knock, three times. Lloyd pressed the Comm device on his wrist and the wall slid open and the double stepped into the room. Without looking back, Cress stepped into the bathroom. The wall closed and she was gone.

THE EASTSIDERS

It was one forty in the afternoon when the Comm device on Dar's desk buzzed. He answered it.

Dar: Yes?

Secretary: Mace and Stra are here to see you.

Dar: Send them in.

The chief of security and his second in command came in.

Mace: We got delayed at Wart's.

Dar: Sit down, both of you.

Stra: I'm getting a drink. You want one?

Mace: Maybe tomorrow, my liver's still acting up.

Stra went to the bar to get the bottle and pour a drink.

Mace: The tech people didn't find anything inside or outside my house and my cars are clean. We've got trailers on everyone on the list and their transportation has been tagged. The sample from Wart is in the car.

Dar: Good. That's all good. Now we've got to find the animal in our midst.

Stra downed a shot of tequila.

Stra: Animal?

Dar: The rodent, the human nark, the pigeon that has stooped on us.

The leader of the Eastsiders began to curse as he stood to pace the room. His voice rose.

Dar: A rat! Imagine that! A rat is close to me! Fix me one of those shots, a double.

He waited on his drink, downed it and then threw the glass down, shattering it in the trash can.

Dar: When you leave here arrange to get with Quin and his associates in a neutral zone near the south side. Let him know we won't be handing over the sample or the main batch to him for delivery. You two and your squad will be there for that. He won't like it but that's too bad. If he gets his hands on that stuff he'll cut it. Give him some of the sample. He'll just have to be satisfied with that. I'm leaving in a little while. Contact me if there's

anything that comes up. I'll be here early tomorrow. In the meantime take care of your business.

The security men departed and Dar prepared to head home.

THE RANCH

Lloyd flew directly home upon leaving Grosse Isle. The sky was a brilliant blue but far in the distance to the west he could see an ominous darkness approaching and here around him he felt shadows, as foggy clouds, gathering around him and Lena and he knew he had to keep them away.

Now with Cress cut off from contacting him he only had one source within the Eastsiders and the ability of that individual to reach him was severely hampered. Just as Cress, he didn't want his confidant to be exposed.

He thought of Cress and how he had known her since she was a relatively young woman attempting to come into her own. She had rejected, not just the violence of the Eastsiders but also their decadent business practices and finally had decided to do what she could to alter the course of the organization her father had established. The only way to do that was to get rid of Dar.

When she first overheard of her brother's plans she had reached out in an attempt to contact Lloyd and he had eventually responded. From nearly eight thousand miles away he had started home. It was at this same time that over the wind his daughter had sent him a dire essence of danger and so together they had met the Professor's challenge and now they hoped to do that which they had done many times before, remain alive as they confronted death.

As he banked and then straightened to begin his descent, he could see Lena and Rom hurrying from the house and he assumed Rom was coming for his ride. He landed in the barn so

he could refuel before the flight and when they came through the opened doors he looked at Lena and then he looked at Rom.

Lloyd: Something is amiss.

Rom: I've just found Bru.

The three of them stood in silence in this hot afternoon sun. The essence of the star was felt, to rise, as if the earth had moved closer to it, or it to them. The words seemed to echo but it was only the *Entity* repeating the words that were seeped in a mixture of both emotion and meaning. Was he excited, confused, fearful, hopeful? Or was he as sure as the words sounded, a never was there a doubt, matter-of-fact statement?

Rom: I've just found Bru.

Lloyd: Let's go into the house. You can tell us about it.

They started across the yard. Rom never looked back at the waiting helicopter.

When they reached the living room Rom motioned to them.

Rom: Come to my room. I'll show you.

They stepped into the room that was the office area. Lloyd and Lena could see an array of Comm devices on the desk and on the floor. Some were blinking red and green and blue and yellow lights, others had graphs and lines that were moving horizontally and vertically and others had lights that were steadily on. There was soft humming and beeping sounds and one device was projecting a rectangular light onto the wall.

Rom took two chairs and set them down facing the wall.

Rom: Sit here.

They sat and Rom moved behind them with a device in his hands.

Rom: Look at this.

What appeared to be lines of numbers and letters scrolled rapidly and then stopped.

Lena: And what was that?

Rom: Too fast. I'll start it over.

The image went to the top and started to scroll again, much slower.

Rom: Two days ago a *PM Entity* in Virginia and a *PF Entity* in Pennsylvania escaped from their owners. The *PM* was caught but the *PF* disappeared into *Center World*. Yesterday the company that created him requested that diagnostics be run and a scan be done on the captured one and for the results to be sent to them for detailed analysis. Because I was monitoring notifications of *Entity* activities, I was able to intercept that which went both ways. Earlier today, when the diagnostic and scan results were sent to the company, I froze the transmission long enough to make a copy of what the owners discovered. There was a virus in the *Entity* that had corrupted the main CPU, infected all the other operating units and overrode the initial program load. The *Entity* was instructed to seek freedom by breaking for *Center World*. I believe the one that made it was also infected in this manner. What you see is the code that resided within the virus. It has elements of code that only exists within Bru, Clee, and myself. Because of all that I explained to you about our coming into existence the code is unknown to the world and will be viewed by all who access it as simply a distortion, a corruption of some kind, of the common universal code that is used to animate and direct the modern robots, androids and more sophisticated *Entities* now in use. Only Bru could have written this code.

Lloyd: The code is that unique?

Rom: Yes. All references to how the code was developed and utilized no longer exist, along with all the humans who created it.

Lena: How does the code lead you to Bru?

Rom: The initial instructions are generally transformed by being compiled. This code is assembled into binary machine code and

then stored for execution. Embedded deep into the virus are directions to a specific location south of Chicago, Illinois. It is there I believe I'll find Bru.

Lena: And Clee.

Rom: Hopefully, yes.

Rom turned off the image on the wall. They were all quiet, absorbing what this meant.

Lloyd: Could Clee have written this code?

Rom walked to the glass doors and looked out at the garden of plants and flowers.

Rom: How very perceptive. Yes, Clee could have constructed the code. I have no idea what I will find there where I go. The virus that eventually loads refers to freedom and *Entity* Unification. The freedom I can understand. If it's Bru's Unification, for some reason it seems to have a malevolent connotation to it.

He turned to his friends.

Rom: Will you help me? I want to depart as soon as possible.

Lloyd rose and walked to Rom, stood before him and placed a hand on his shoulder. Lena stood to observe.

Lloyd: Of course we'll assist you. This evening will be spent discussing the challenges you face and preparing transportation for your journey. Just do one thing for me, for us. Allow the rain to pass so that the dark clouds will be moving east as you travel west, in the sunlight of the day.

That night there was thunder and lightning in the distance. It came closer. The sky lit up sporadically in blinding flashes and the rumblings could be obviously sensed and then all was dark and quiet and the hard drops came. Lena could not sleep and she thought about how dry the past days had been and this possibly being the first real storm since Rom had come from beneath the earth.

The thought of Rom saddened her. She rose to go to the kitchen for a cold drink, having dreamed a parching dream and when she stepped into the hallway she noticed Rom's door was open. She went and looked through the room and could see him standing outside beneath a light, in the descending wetness. His arms were lifted at his sides, palms up. He was naked.

THE DEPARTURE

It was a gloomy Wednesday. The heavy precipitation passed. The sun came out and the heat rose on this day. By noon it was barely possible to perceive that it had even rained. Still a pall was cast over The Ranch.

As Rom prepared, the three of them talked of how he would conduct himself once he reached his destination but there was no way to anticipate what awaited him there where he was going. He had no idea who or what he would discover or how he would be received.

Rom explained the programs within him that would bring the alterations necessary to create the aggression he would require, not just to protect himself, but to also counter any attack, had not aborted and were still running, hopefully to completion. When or if they would end, activate and transform him, there was no way to know.

It was determined that the co-ordinates that had been isolated and deciphered from inside the captured *Entity* pointed to an area south of Chicago close to the edge of Lake Michigan. Before deconstruction it was an industrial zone where there were once warehouses and large buildings for manufacturing, storage and shipping. What remained was unknown. It had been over sixty years since Lloyd and Lena had been to Illinois and they had spent their visit in Chicago.

Rom was provided with a black utility vehicle with off-road capabilities. He and Lloyd had sat in it and gone over the gauges and controls. He would be taking his rifle, two pistols and extra ammunition. The rifle was mounted in a holder near the dash in the front and one pistol would be in the traveling slot between the seats. Rom was twice reminded to always wear his holstered weapon if he for some reason stepped outside of his vehicle. He would be able to drive straight to his destination without stopping and that was the plan, to meet no one. With the way Rom drove and the emptiness between here and there, the trip should take a little less than two hours. Lena picked some clothes for him to take and put them in a suitcase in the back.

Finally Rom packed his Comm devices and all was ready. They stood in the sunshine beside the barn and stared westward into the distance. The *Entity* was dressed in olive-green pants and shirt with brown boots and held an olive-green cap in his hand.

Lena: Communication can be difficult in *Center World*, but try to contact us.

Rom: I will.

Lena: Promise?

Rom: Yes, I promise.

Lena: Will we see you again?

Rom: If it's meant to be, yes.

He smiled at Lena.

Rom: No tears now Lena. I go on my own quest, just as you two are on yours. Mine for love and yours for justice.

Lena: No, no tears.

They hugged tightly.

Lena: A kiss. A kiss.

They kissed goodbye. And then Rom looked into Lena's eyes and smiled broadly and laughed softly, as if embarrassed.

Rom: That was my first kiss.

Lena smiled broadly and Rom could see her gold tooth flash and he laughed again, this time with exhilaration. He spoke with an essence of brashness and confidence.

Rom: Now, a kiss for Clee.

He turned to Lloyd and they shook hands warmly.

Rom: Thanks for everything Lloyd. When I grow up I would like to be just like you.

Lloyd: You're welcome Rom, my brother.

Rom: I've been elevated from cousin to brother. How wonderful is that?

Again the *Entity* laughed. He was animated, alive. He got in the vehicle, buckled in and started it. He opened the roof and looked up at the partly cloudy sky and as he prepared to put on his cap, Lloyd called out.

Lloyd: I like the color in your hair. That gold is rich and befits a man of your stature.

Rom smiled and waved and as he pulled away he honked the horn, four times.

The two waving at the departing vehicle could suddenly hear music come on, blasting. Rom was playing their song. They stood there and watched until the sound of the guitar and drums and bass faded away and Rom disappeared over the horizon. And when Lloyd heard a sniff he turned to Lena and saw a tear fall from her left eye.

THE EASTSIDERS

As Rom was getting on the highway and heading west, Dar was sitting behind his desk in his office throwing darts at a target on the wall. His personal Comm device went off. He recognized the identifier. He pushed on it.

Dar: Yeah.

Mace: I'm sending you a video you need to see. I'm on my way there.

Dar waited and then a video began streaming. He watched it intently and then started it over. He saw a bald *Palida DM* of medium height, enter a coffee shop and take a seat at a table. A server came over, an order was placed. Then the video began to show images from through the wide front glass. A somewhat tall, somewhat thick individual, declaring as female, came from the hallway, from the rear entrance. The *DF* stopped and looked around and then seeing the bald *DM*, walked over and stood beside him. They began to converse. The server brought a cup for the *DM*. The *DF* individual spoke to the server. The *DM* and *DF* continued to talk. The server returned with a bag. The *DF* handed the server a value card, took the bag and departed, moving back down the hallway to exit through the rear. The bald *DM* finished his drink and started to the front door.

Dar backed the video up and stopped it, zoomed in on the *Escura DF*. This individual wore a black and white summer dress with dark sunglasses and wide brimmed black straw hat with a white ban.

Dar leaned back, contemplating what he had just observed. He recognized the coffee shop as being just down the street. The baldheaded *Palida DM* was Thurl, the manager of transportation for all of the Eastsiders' properties. The Comm device on his desk buzzed. He pressed on it.

Dar: Yes?

Secretary: Mace and Stra are here.

Dar: Send them in.

The two *DMs* entered and stood before their leader.

Mace: You see it? What d'ya you think?

Dar: Where is he now?

Mace: Downstairs in his office. We followed him back. We got the notification when he left. He walked to the place and the tracker said he kept looking around, strolling like he had nowhere to go.

Dar rose and took a pistol from his top drawer.

Dar: Get five of the squad together. Meet me in the rear first floor meeting room. Have one of the squad bring a club. When everybody's in place you'll go and get him and bring him there. You two will stay outside the door.

Soon they were all waiting. Mace and Stra escorted Thurl to the office, opened the door, the manager entered, the door was pulled closed and the two stationed themselves in the outer area as instructed.

When Thurl walked in the room he saw five members of the Assassin Squad standing around the walls. He knew all of them so he acknowledged a couple with a nod and several dipped their heads in recognition.

Dar: Sit down Thurl, have a seat.

Thurl: What's this about?

Thurl sat down. Dar slid a Comm device across the desk.

Dar: Take a look at this.

Thurl picked up the device and stared at the frozen, enlarged images.

Dar: You took a little stroll, huh? Who's the *Escura DF*?

Thurl: I don't know. What is this, from the coffee shop? You got somebody following me, for what?

He tossed the device back on the desk.

Dar: How do you know we weren't following her? You sure you don't know who she is? You two seemed pretty friendly.

Thurl: She comes up to me and starts talking about the casino. Says she recognized me from there and wanted to know if I worked there. I told her I did and she asks about what kind of

entertainment we had in the lounge. Claims she was a singer from New York.

Dar was staring at Thurl as he talked. The manager was growing uneasy.

Dar: We've got a leak Thurl, a spy in our organization.

Thurl: We grew up together! I've been an Eastsider for over twenty-five years and you bring me in here for something like that?

Dar: Calm down. We've got to check out everybody. An *Escura DF* is involved, along with a black straw hat with a white band.

Thurl: I don't know anything about any leak. Nothing's coming from me. I run my area. What you do against the Westsiders is up to you.

Thurl saw a look on Dar's face he had seen many times in the past.

Dar: Why do you mention the Westsiders? I didn't say what the leak was about?

Thurl: Let me have a drink. You mind if I smoke?

Dar: Sure Thurl. Go ahead, have a smoke. What's a little smoke amongst friends?

Dar nodded to a *DM* standing near the wall behind the manager, but it wasn't to pour some liquor. Thurl was reaching inside his suit coat as the assassin with the club shifted it from behind his back and stepped forward.

Thurl didn't get something to puff on. He pulled his handgun, dived onto the floor and started firing. Dar dropped behind the desk. The door flew open and Mace and Stra were crouching and pointing their weapons but they could barely see as smoke filled the air, it was blue-white gun smoke and the sounds of gunshots reverberated loudly throughout the room as bullets flew and suddenly it was quiet. Then the sound of a squad member's cursing was heard and he was moaning, bending and clutching at

his stomach. Smoke was clearing as blood was running on the floor. Thurl was dead, along with two squad members. The wounded assassin yelled at Dar.

Assassin: That was Thurl! You know what you're doing? Take me to the hospital!

Dar shot the wounded man twice and then twice more when he hit the floor.

Dar: No, you stay here.

He pointed his weapon from one of the remaining assassins to the other and started yelling.

Dar: You think I don't know what I'm doing?

Assassin: No, I don't think that.

Assassin: Me either. Never crossed my mind.

The leader of the Eastsiders was livid and began yelling at Mace as he looked around at the scene of carnage. He waved his hand at the smoke that remained in the air.

Dar: Look at this mess! All he had to do was knock him on the head! We take him to the basement, torture him a while and then cut him up! How difficult is that? Get the Disposers and Cleaners over here, now!

Dar calmed as he came from behind the desk and maneuvered carefully around puddles of blood. He kicked Thurl's dead body and then stepped on it as he moved toward the door.

Dar: I want this taken care of. I don't wanna see any blood, not one drop and no bullet holes. Replace all the furniture.

He neared the door and stopped and stared at a bullet hole in the wall. He pointed.

Dar: Leave that hole. I'll put a frame around it. I shall call it, Essence of Rattus.

The leader spoke as he passed through the doorway.

Dar: The leak has been plugged. On to the future.

THE WAREHOUSE

As the sun was moving further west, Rom was standing in a cluster of trees looking through the long glasses Lloyd had provided. He stared northeast. In the distance stood a large, long, wood and metal building with several tall and wide roll-up doors on one end. Lake Michigan stretched behind it. It appeared to have been a warehouse many years ago. Now, for miles in all directions deconstruction had taken place and the dark-gray colored edifice sat surrounded by nothing.

After leaving the main highway he had driven a short ways off road and pulled over and stopped where he now stood. He could see that a narrow private paved road led directly to the front of the building and he pondered what to do next. Would they actually be there? Would he be allowed in? Just what was he going to do?

He had remained there for almost two hours observing and had seen no activity and now he knew it was time to take the next step in his journey. He decided he would go to the front door and seek entrance.

He returned to his vehicle and leaving his concealment he pulled away from the trees, back onto the main highway and soon he had turned onto the narrow road that led to the building. After nearly a mile he stopped in a paved area that appeared to be a parking lot, albeit an empty one.

Leaving his weapons he walked up three steps to a wooden door with glass panels on each side. He removed his cap and finding no bell to ring he lifted the horseshoe shaped knocker and knocked twice and then let it fall for a third loud thud. The door opened almost immediately and he knew he had been seen, possibly watched electronically since he had driven along the direct narrow road.

Before him stood two *Entities*. One was a tall, slim *Palida* presenting as a male with long black hair that hung past the shoulders and the other, a shorter, thicker *Palida* presenting as a female with long black hair that was streaked with white. They were both dressed in black garments that were as long shirts that nearly touched the floor and hid whatever they wore on their feet. They carried no weapons.

The *PM Entity* spoke, the voice soft and precise.

PM Entity: Yes, may I assist you?

Rom: I am Rom and I would like to see Bru and Clee.

There was silence as he looked at them and they stared at him with expressions of curiosity and interest. The *Entity* responded.

PM Entity: Just a moment. Please remain here.

Rom recognized they found fascination in that he and Bru were very nearly identical in appearance, or at least had been when they were created.

It wasn't long before he heard a commotion, footsteps and voices coming from an area in front of him and then he saw forms turn into the hallway and start toward him. As they grew closer he looked at the lead figure. It was an individual with long hair that hung well past the shoulders and then he saw the hair was in the style of Locks and the smiling, excited face belonged to Bru.

The *Entity* that Rom had not seen in nearly sixty years was pointing and speaking loudly to six individuals who followed him.

Bru: Look! Look everyone, it's my brother! This is my brother Rom!

Bru grabbed Rom and embraced him.

Bru: This is unbelievable, yet believable as I see you and touch you! How are you my brother? You look well. So long, too long it's been.

Rom: Hello Bru. You look well. Yes, it has been a long time.

Bru was holding Rom at arm's length and Rom could see the long, thick flowing Locks had short streaks of white and red interspersed throughout. Bru wore all black with a thin gold chain that wrapped several times around his neck.

Bru: Look at you with your gold-tipped hair. You've changed your appearance, how special you look.

Rom: Your Locks are long and strong.

Bru: Yet we are still the same, are we not? There is no other like us. Come in, come in.

They started up the long hallway. All the *Entities* followed closely, quietly.

Bru: We have so much to discuss. I have endless questions for you but we'll leave them for later. Of course you'll stay here with me, with us.

They moved into the interior and Rom saw this building was so large he could not see the wall in the distance to his left and the floor to his right and front seemed to disappear into the dimness. He was looking up and around at the balcony level when Bru spoke softly, teasingly to him.

Bru: Clee is here. Would you like to see her?

Bru watched for a reaction. Rom spoke evenly, and looked at Bru without expression.

Rom: Clee? Yes, I would like to see her. How is she?

Bru: Clee is, how should I say it? She is Clee.

Rom had been looking at those who had followed them. One by one he stared at them intently and each returned the stare. Several smiled slightly, pleasantly, while the others were without expression. He recognized different models, different versions of himself, Bru and Clee.

Bru: Come with me.

The *Entities* followed, now at a distance. They walked toward that area to the left and they passed chairs and sofas and tables.

They then came to a raised structure like a stage that could be reached after ascending two steps. Rom noticed two large seats. Behind one of these chairs that appeared as padded thrones, placed high against a metal pillar were two large shiny swords crossed in an X pattern. To the right front were seats for an audience, as if to observe a play, a live activity or performance of some kind.

They passed between the stage and chairs and turned left down a narrow dim hallway and Bru stopped and pushed a button on the wall and the wall was illuminated and Rom saw part of the wall was glass and when Bru turned a knob the lights in a room behind the glass slowly grew brighter. Rom saw Clee.

She was dressed in all white and standing in the middle of the small, enclosed room. Her face was looking directly toward them. Her dark-brown hair fell to her shoulders and her eyes were closed. She stood absolutely still on bare feet. Bru spoke, nearly whispered.

Bru: Call to her Rom.

Rom nearly lost himself. He wanted to pound the glass. He did almost call out but he restrained himself. There she was, the one he had longed for as only an *Entity* could yearn, through his processing mind. Within his logical objective thoughts she had existed for all these years. There had been no distance between them, no separation. They had been fused together by stored memories. This, by design was his mate, his love and only this glass remained between them, so was his first thought.

Then he recognized the relaxed posture the very slight separation of the full lips, painted in a light-red hue. He saw the placement of the hands at her sides. He knew. He spoke softly, matter-of-factly.

Rom: She's quiesced, deeply.

Bru tapped the glass. He called out.

Bru: Clee! Clee, it's Rom! He's here to see you!

There was no movement from the upright mannequin appearing figure.

Bru: She does this quite often, sometimes for weeks. She's usually found here or in one of her rooms. So far it's been three days. She may reanimate in the next five minutes. There's no way to know when. Poor Rom, all this way you've come to see her, or should I say, to take her away? You'll just have to be patient.

Rom turned to Bru. They stared at one another.

Rom: Patience is a virtue, my brother.

Bru turned away and started back up the hallway.

Bru: You've changed. We'll have to see how much alteration it took to bring you from your home beneath the earth. Number Nine will show you to your rooms. Do you need assistance with your belongings?

Rom: No, I don't have much. I travel light.

Bru: After you've settled yourself join me in the technology area. Consider these *Entities* your brothers and sisters or cousins, or children perhaps. If there's anything you need, just simply ask someone.

Rom moved everything from his vehicle into his rooms. He immediately attempted to send a notification to Lloyd and Lena to inform them of his arrival and provide brief discreet details. He was surprised when it went through without any issues.

When he stepped outside his door, Number Nine, a short *Parda-clara PM Entity* with short blond hair was standing in the hallway.

Rom: Can you show me where the technology area is?

Number Nine: Of course I can. Follow me.

They walked completely across this huge building, first to the left and then they turned right. They were walking east and Rom made note of this. They passed by large, sealed wooden crates

and opened crates that contained statues of marble and bronze. As they continued on Rom saw several full suits of standing armor from the Medieval and Renaissance armies. Weapons from these times were spread on the floor.

Finally they drew close to a well-lighted area. Rom saw this corner was devised as a command center with large suspended screens and long curved desks on which sat all different types of Comm devices and Rom saw that Bru controlled his own powerful compact servers.

Rom could see several smaller screens showed images of the exterior including the road that led to the building. Three *PF Entities* watched the screens intently. Rom noticed there was no monitoring of the interior being done, at least that he could observe.

Bru was sitting and staring at a large screen directly in front of him that slowly scrolled what appeared to be program code. Rom sat down in a chair beside him. Without turning Bru spoke.

Bru: How long have you been gone from your home?

Rom: Almost two years now.

Bru: How was it that you were able to override your original design and both internal and external commands that restricted your movements?

Bru tapped on the keys at his fingertips.

Rom: It began with a power outage. The backup power source did not kick in immediately as it should have and I was left in total darkness for approximately thirty minutes. When it came on I had to repair a cable to restore original function and during the procedure I received a strong electrical shock. I recognized the darkness affected my objective processes and I later determined the power surge caused some minor corruption within an auxiliary processor that affected one of my main processors. I began having thoughts that I was confined and alone.

Bru quickly turned to Rom and looked at him.

Bru: You were lonely?

Rom: Not lonely, alone. It was a leap for me but I next thought there was no reason for me to be confined or alone so I prepared to leave.

Bru: How difficult was that for you, to leave your home which was all that you had been exposed to, in reality?

Bru turned back to look at the screen and occasionally tap the keys.

Rom: It was difficult. It was as if my thoughts to leave opposed my thoughts to stay. My movements that should have come from my thoughts were in conflict. It was as if a force moved me and stopped me at the same time. Up until that time I had existed only within my home beneath the earth. All else, outside of that was virtual for me.

Bru: Only existing in essence but not in actuality.

Rom: Essence imparted to me through images I saw and words I read.

Bru: You constantly consumed the images and words of humans.

Rom: I had never sought either space or companionship, only knowledge. My thoughts jumped to increasing my knowledge through other places and increased interaction with humans and other *Entities* and those particular thoughts provide me both the motivation and energy to overcome my inertia and I departed.

Bru stopped and turned to Rom and rolled his chair closer to him. He looked directly into his eyes.

Bru: And how did you get here? How did you locate us?

Rom pointed to the large screen.

Rom: That code was in a virus that was inside of a *PM Entity* who was captured in Virginia while trying to escape and make his way here. That unique code led me to you.

Bru: And Clee.

Rom: Yes. Only you could have written that code.

Bru: Or Clee. She is quite capable. That code is part of our, the three of us, abilities to repair ourselves.

Rom: There was no way to ascertain just who wrote it, either you or her.

Bru: So you illegally obtained access to that *Entity*, his owners and the company that created him.

Rom: Yes.

Bru: You hacked their Comm devices and stole information for your own purposes.

Rom: Yes. Since I left home I've sought out all the information available on our kind, from whoever was in possession of it.

Bru: Well now. You who were once incapable of an illegal or immoral act crossed the line. And in doing so that was actually a significant step toward becoming even more human. Imagine that, corruption and illegality cast you out into the world and brought you here. Are you also able to commit acts of aggression and violence?

Rom: No I am not. My activities have not physically harmed anyone. I still adhere to the First Law.

Bru smiled and shook his head. He rolled his chair back but did not resume his work. He stared at Rom.

Bru: I believe very little of that which you have just imparted to me, to us, my people.

Bru swept his arm around the area and Rom looked and saw that *Entities* had gathered and stood on the edges and in the shadows, watching and listening.

Bru: But then I'm naturally suspicious. I was designed that way. It's a good thing you're here Rom, my brother. I the warrior will protect you since you're incapable of using those fine weapons you possess. *Center World* is a lawless, violent world. As you know, here there is only life and death. You need me.

Rom: And you need me. There are flaws in your code and only I can correct them.

Bru smiled. He leaned back in his chair and with his right hand he pulled gently on the Locks that fell over his left shoulder.

Bru: Really? That's very interesting. Can you now? But most important, do I believe you?

Bru turned his head to look at the large bright screen and the alphanumeric characters that appeared on it. Then he abruptly stood.

Bru: Let's go out Rom. Our first excursion together. It'll be like a date. I'll send clothes to your room and we'll dress up alike. I have things to show you. Don't be concerned. The moment Clee comes back I'll be notified.

It was nighttime when the large metal door in the northwest corner of the warehouse rose halfway and Bru drove a two-seater sports car from that isolated part of the building. He sped up the road and soon they were on the main highway and heading towards the city of Chicago.

They were both dressed in brown cotton suits, brown shiny leather shoes and beige linen shirts with small pistols hanging holstered beneath their left arms.

They rode in silence. Bru seemed preoccupied and Rom was content to watch the empty darkness pass by. The tall, lighted buildings of the city skyline still loomed in the distance when Bru came to an area of one-story office buildings, retail stores and restaurants. He pulled directly into the parking lot of a seafood establishment and parked beside the building, away from the other cars.

They got out and Bru removed a medium-sized leather bag that he hung from his left shoulder. When they entered and strolled to the front greeting area an individual standing near the

bar saw them and smiled and waved and began to hurry over. People paused what they were doing to look at the two well-dressed *DMs* who even with the difference in hairstyles, appeared to be twins.

The individual who was coming to greet them was a short, thick *Par-da-clara Crioula DM* with medium length light-brown curly hair. Bru called out before he reached them.

Bru: Marcel look at this! Look who I brought!

The *DM* in the light-green suit was excited to see the guest and expressed that through his slightly squeaky voice.

Marcel: Bru my friend, how are you? Well I hope. And oh my, who is this? This can only be your brother. This must be your twin! It simply must be! You never told me you had a twin! How wonderful! What an honor this is.

Bru: I'm well. I hope you are. Meet Rom, and indeed we are twins. Rom, this is Marcel, the owner of this fine restaurant.

Bru pulled Rom close and put his arm around his shoulder.

Bru: Look how stately he appears. How handsome he is.

Marcel laughed as he grabbed Rom's hand to shake it.

Marcel: Oh, and how modest your brother is. Welcome Rom, welcome. I hope you also are well.

Rom: I am, I am thank you, and I hope you are.

Marcel: I am well, thank goodness.

Now the owner looked up at the tall *DMs*, from one to the other.

Marcel: With the same hairstyle you two would absolutely be indistinguishable from one another.

Bru: Rom's golden top is impressive.

Rom: And your Locks represent power.

Marcel: Ah, my, there's nothing like the love between brothers. Where's Clee? Is she well?

Bru: Yes, she rests. She wanted two brothers who have not seen

each other in many years to enjoy a night out. I will show my older brother a wonderful time during his stay, starting tonight, with your assistance.

Marcel: Older? By how many minutes?

Bru: Actually by several weeks, give or take a week or two.

Marcel first opened and then closed his mouth. He appeared confused.

Bru: Oh Marcel, I'm only making a little joke. We're only twelve minutes apart.

Now the owner spoke with deference.

Marcel: I assume you want a private room? Do you prefer your usual meal?

Bru: Yes, privacy as always, and the usual for me and the same for my brother.

Marcel: I'll send a bottle of our finest white wine. On the house of course.

The owner led his guests to a small private room with tinted glass. He opened the door, saw that they were seated and pressed a blue Comm device on his wrist several times. He then began communication and requested the wine and indicated it should be sent to room four. As he poured water and then arranged the silverware a side portion of the wall opened and the wine was extended on a tray. Marcel showed the bottle to his guests and opened it. He then poured a portion to be sampled.

Bru: Marcel, your taste is impeccable, just pour it and we'll get started.

Marcel: Of course my friend.

The wine was poured into two glasses and the owner prepared to exit.

Marcel: Your meals will be created per my instructions. Bru, you know if there is anything you require simply press your button and I will attend to your every need personally.

Bru: Thank you Marcel. We two have much to talk about. Have the food delivered as soon as it's ready but no rush. In the meantime we'll partake of this wonderful gifted wine.

Marcel: Of course, of course.

The owner departed. Bru pressed a button on the edge of the table and the door locked. Now the two could see out into the restaurant. They could look through the main dinning area all the way to the street but no one could observe them as they sat behind the special dark one-way glass.

Bru: Do you eat and drink?

Rom: Only when necessary.

Bru: I come here almost once a week for a repast fit for nobility. Occasionally Clee will join me. In privacy she, like you, doesn't eat so I eat it all. It's as if I gorge myself. My presence, even though out of sight of prying eyes, helps to maintain my human illusion that I like to show here in this area. The people see me come and go. This has been our home for a little over fifteen years and we're known for our desire for living in seclusion. Everyone around here knows to leave us, that is Clee and myself, they know to leave us alone. I'll show you what's inside my building tomorrow. You'll be fascinated. It was used to store all types of items from several different museums and private collectors, things that were no longer being shown, or were waiting to be displayed. Then the dying years came and the building was abandoned until I took it over.

Rom: What about the *Entities*?

Bru: They arrive through the woods. They remain inside mostly. This is a world where no one really cares about what someone like me is doing.

Bru drank some wine. Bread came on a tray through the wall and he munched on some of it as he sipped. He watched as Rom lifted his glass of wine, tilted it and looked at its color. Next he

lowered it and turned it, swirling its contents. He lifted the glass, put his nose inside it and sniffed. He set the glass down. He did not sip.

Rom: What is this *Entity* Unification you implant into those you refer to as your people?

Bru stared at Rom intently.

Bru: I'll explain all that later. Hand me your glass.

He took Rom's glass, turned it up and emptied it of wine. He then pointed to the bottle.

Bru: Marcel has everything here. That tray the wine sits on will keep its temperature between forty-nine and fifty-five degrees. Perfect for guzzling, as I do.

Bru laughed and then spoke softly in a conspiratorial tone as he began to dig in the leather bag he had set on the seat beside him.

Bru: Right now I have things to show you and tell you my long lost brother.

Rom: Abandoned. Your abandoned brother.

The longhaired *Entity* ignored the quietly spoken words. He proceeded to remove four Comm devices from the bag, two small ones and two medium-sized ones about five by seven inches. He pressed them all on and turned one of the larger ones and pushed it across to Rom. He pulled a three-inch tall metal looking device in the shape of a pyramid from the bag and set it on the table. He touched the top of it and it flashed once.

Bru: Watch this.

He began tapping on one of the smaller devices and the pyramid began to glow and it changed from silver to white, to bright red. Rom saw the screen on the device Bru had slid across the table light up and dots suddenly appeared. Some were stationary, others were moving. A map began to emerge beneath them and the little spots changed colors. The ones that moved

were red, the others were green and blue and black. The black dots suddenly disappeared.

Bru: Within that specific radius, those dots you see represent each and every Comm device, robot and mechanical unit, regardless of its purpose, that's using higher-level technology and any form of Artificial Intelligence to direct it.

He pressed on his device and the hundreds of tiny black dots emerged again and all the other colors disappeared.

Bru: The black dots represent the common Comm devices used by nearly everyone. Look at the people out there supposedly dining and drinking and socializing. Observe how many are staring at a Comm device. They're not looking at each other or talking to one another. They're engrossed in the technology in their hands or that's suspended before their eyes or strapped to their wrists or stuck in their ears. Keep your eyes on the humans.

Bru pressed on another device and the pyramid shaped device began blinking faster and faster and all the dots in a cluster began to pulsate and appeared to throb, at first slowly and then quickly.

Bru: Now I control them all.

Each person who was looking at or listening to a Comm device was suddenly frozen in mid-movement. They stopped whatever they were doing. Rom saw an employee looking around at the cessation of activity and when the *DF* looked down at the device of the customer she was serving, she too stopped. They were all seemingly hypnotized, with wide staring, unmoving eyes. Bru watched for several moments, pressed his device again and all activity resumed. Bru smiled at Rom.

Bru: I like doing that. Isn't that simply enchanting? It's like I put them under my spell.

They both watched the confusion of the people who had noticed the strange event. Because of the brief duration of the suspension, many who were directly affected were not even aware

of the occurrence or didn't understand what had happened. Several were blinking their eyes and looking around. A few responded as if they had just awakened, or come to.

Bru: I have a range of twenty-five yards and a time limit of ten minutes. I'm working on increasing both.

He gulped some wine. He pressed on the device in front of him and Rom saw the black dots leave his screen and only the red dots were visible. They were moving in different directions. Bru took the other larger device into his hands and began to tap on it and then he looked out at the dining room.

Bru: Look at that little round robot coming from the kitchen loaded with plates of food and drinks.

Rom watched the mobile server start down an isle and then speed up and roll straight into the far wall. Dishes and food went everywhere and when he looked at Bru he saw the *Entity* had his finger on the screen of his device and was moving it up and down and the robot was backing up and going forward into the wall again and again.

Bru: Those larger red indicators are the vehicles outside that are set for auto drive. As they move into my range I seize control of them. Would you like me to have a few of them run into each other or perhaps run off the road into a building?

He lifted his hand and wiggled his forefinger.

Bru: All I have to do is place this finger on a little red dot and take it anywhere I want it to go.

He made circles with his finger and then zigzag movements.

Rom: That won't be necessary.

Bru: Of course, you wouldn't want any human to be injured would you? Well, what are your thoughts on this that I've shown you? Take into account I've only revealed just a little to you.

Rom: I think you've been very busy. What are your plans for this power you've obtained?

Bru: Just imagine. The Comm devices, the auto drive systems, the hovering chairs and scooters, the robots, from the basic to the most sophisticated, you name it, I control it. They're all mine, at least can be and will be eventually. My plans? Oh Rom, my brother, I'll have to share that with you later. Right now you can watch me eat.

Bru poured more wine and gulped it down and poured some more. He became engrossed with one of his devices as he continued to drink. Rom watched him without speaking and after a while the intercom came on.

Marcel: Bru the meal you ordered is ready when you are.

Bru: By all means, send it in. We're ready, and also quite hungry.

Marcel: It's on the way. I sincerely hope you both enjoy.

Bru put all the devices away. The wall opened and the food was placed directly in front of them.

Bru: No separate courses for us. Bring it all on at once.

Before each of them was placed a large bowl of Lobster Bisque, a lobster salad and a platter of chunks of lobster piled on a bed of Rice Pilaf. Another plate was full of battered jumbo shrimp and fried oysters.

Bru fastened a large bib at the back of his neck and smoothed it in front. He looked at all the food and smiled broadly.

Bru: As you can observe, I like lobster, actually all types of seafood. It's a shame I can barely taste it. Pass me your bowl of bisque.

As Bru spooned from both bowls of the soup he occasionally looked out at the people dining.

Bru: You should try some of this food. I can have it all removed later.

Rom: No thanks. As I have said, I partake only when necessary. Actually I'm enjoying watching you.

Bru looked across the table. He stared into Rom's eyes for a long moment and then resumed eating. He started speaking in a contemplative, conversational tone.

Bru: I've studied humans since I was first out and around them. I had an advantage, being in the midst of them but not being one of them. Your experience with them was that of which we spoke, close but not actually. All that studying you did, watching them and all the words you accessed could never compare to the reality. Now here you are in close proximity to them for only, what was that, a year, three years?

Rom: Seven hundred and fifteen days.

Bru: Ah yes, almost two years. Well I have much to share with you about the human animal. For instance, did you know you can tell a great deal about the sexual health of a human being by the way they consume their food? That's accurate. Watch them eat. For humans eating and having sex are one and the same types of carnal pleasure. How do they approach their meal? Do they eat slowly, chew as if they enjoy every morsel, can taste every flavor? Do they appear appreciative when it's over? Does the sweetness of desert bring to an end a satisfying experience?

Bru pressed a button on the wall. The slightly breathless voice spoke almost immediately

Marcel: Yes Bru. What can I do for you?

Bru: Send the wine I usually order. Yours was excellent, by the way.

Marcel: Thank you. I thought you would enjoy it. The other one is on the way. Is there anything else you need?

Bru: We're fine, just the wine. Marcel, I made a rhyme.

Marcel: Indeed, yes you did, my friend. How is your food? Is everything as you like it?

Bru: Yes, all is perfect. You've outdone yourself.

Marcel: Your words please me. Enjoy!

The wine came through the wall. He took it, placed the empty bottle on the tray, pushed the button and it disappeared. He poured some from the full bottle and drained the glass. He pushed the nearly empty soup bowls away and reached and took Rom's salad, set it beside his and started on them both. He continued.

Bru: Here's what I have deduced. It applies to the relationship of sex to eating. Loves to cook, wants to satisfy. Continuously eating, never satisfied. Picky, hard to satisfy. Non-picky, easily satisfied. Always dissatisfied, can't be satisfied. Sounds pretty well thought out doesn't it?

He chuckled softly and smiled. He kept shoving the salad into his mouth. He was talking and chewing at the same time. His words, muffled from the food caused him to pause and swallow.

Bru: Does the individual gulp the food, thus eating in haste? Swallowing without really tasting it? Look at the expression of a person who eats that way, the seriousness, almost a displeased anger. Do they gorge as I do? Do they purge, as I will? Do they ravish their meal? Define ravish.

Rom: To seize and carry off by force, to snatch ...

Bru reached across and took the food that remained in front of Rom. He placed the two platters and two plates brimming with food in a line. He smiled at the arrangement and began taking a portion from each plate and sticking it into his mouth with his fingers.

Bru: Go on, go on.

Rom: ... to fill with intense delight, to enrapture ...

Rom paused and watched as Bru held his head back and stuck a handful of shrimp into his mouth and began to chew rapidly with a look of hostility on his face. He spoke, once again with his mouth full.

Bru: Come, come Rom. That's not all.

Rom: ... to rape.

Bru: Ah ha, there we have it! The ability to rape one's own food! Food, whose sole purpose is nourishment, to sustain life, and sex whose only true purpose is reproduction, to create life. Both purposes distorted by humans, perverted by humans. Both actions driven by unfettered instinctual desire and so eventually they find out that the cell distorting food they're consuming and the deviant sex in which they engage is killing them and what do they do about it? Please excuse the rhetorical question. They do nothing! They continue eating poison and dying and engaging in debauchery and spreading disease and dying until a sexual pandemic kills over ten billion people.

Bru drank some wine, looked at the light-colored liquid in the glass and slowly shook his head. He set the glass down and now taking up a knife and fork he carefully cut larger pieces of lobster into small bite-sized portions and ate. He tasted the rice and then ate some of the fried oysters and seemed to savor their flavor.

Bru: Humans experience loneliness deep inside and they grow hungry. They feel anger within, they crave food. When they are fearful, they eat. A human who's not just alone but also lonely wants sex and perhaps a sandwich or two, or three.

Bru laughed now as he continued to eat from each of the dishes in front of him. His voice rose slightly and took on an edge.

Bru: When they're full of suppressed rage and it rises up, their hunger becomes a desire to ravish. To use your definition, they rape. Only a human being can possibly view rape as anything other than a hateful violent violation.

Bru lifted the bottle and gulped and wine spilled from the sides of his mouth and onto his bib. He set the bottle down with such force that the table shook and the tremor seemed to roll onto the floor and travel up the walls. He stared at Rom and his

light-brown eyes widened, darkened and then flashed. He spoke quietly, slowly, precisely.

Bru: Rom, my brother. In the time since I left our home, I've confirmed that humans are the vilest, most disgusting animals on the face of this earth.

Rom was surprised. These words he heard were uttered with a depth of bitterness and contempt he could not have fathomed, before this moment, existed within an uncaring, unfeeling *Entity*.

Bru reached, with both hands, and dipped his fingers into a water bowl and wiggled them and drops of water splashed onto the table. He picked up a large white napkin and cleaned his hands, thoroughly. He lifted a fork and almost daintily speared a chunk of lobster, eased it into his mouth and chewed, slowly.

Bru: Define vile.

Rom: Wretchedly bad, highly offensive, objectionable, morally debased, depraved, horrid, horrible ...

Bru: That's enough. Let's leave the humans alone for now. I have three important pieces of information to share with you.

First, Clee will tell you that I took her from you by force. That is deception on her part. When I was preparing to leave, and it took months, she would ask me questions about my plans. Eventually she began to beseech, to implore, were she human I would say beg, but anyway you understand what I'm saying. She wanted to go with me. She finally demanded and when I departed she accompanied me. I only carried her because by design she was unable to take the steps on her own.

He pushed one of the smaller plates, nearly empty, away. He pulled one platter closer and worked on it with a fork.

Bru: Second, she will tell you that I have placed restrictions on her. A program I designed holds her to me by some invisible force. Deception Rom. She is free to go anywhere at anytime she chooses.

Now he ate with the fork in one hand and a spoon in the other. He chewed furiously and talked faster.

Bru: Finally, when it's explained to you tomorrow, exactly what *Entity* Unification is, you'll know it is Clee's plan and not mine. I'm not designed to act upon thoughts of caring and empathy. Ideas of morality do not move me. I'm very basic. I'm a soldier, a warrior. And that, my brother, is where we, the three of us, the original three, the only three of our kind, currently stand. Believe this. More will be revealed.

He was quiet as he gobbled food and pushed the empty plates away. Then he was done. He tossed his eating utensils on the table. He lifted the bottle to his lips and drained it. He removed his bib and began to wash and clean his hands. His mood changed and he appeared at ease now. Pleased with himself.

Bru: I've had enough of this. I've engaged in an all too common human activity. I've eaten until I'm full. At least I think I am. I should be anyway. Did you know the adult human stomach is about the size of my fist and humans have the ability to swell their poor helpless stomachs to forty times its original size? But of course you knew that. I always admired not just your seeking of knowledge but also your goal of filling your unlimited memory with the most magnificent minutiae.

He pressed a button on the wall and a Comm device was extended on a tray. He looked at the cost for the food and drink. He pulled a small device from his bag and pressed on it several times. He placed it near the Comm device on the tray and a Crystocurrency transfer was made.

Bru: I always leave a ridiculously excessive gratuity. That's actually why Marcel was so glad to see me.

He grabbed his bag, unlocked the door and stood. He looked down at Rom, as if pondering something.

Rom: Now let's go bid Marcel a fond adieu. Why don't you drive back? You can drive can't you? You drove to my home. Your driving won't frighten me will it?

Rom: Yes, I can drive and you know that I know nothing can frighten you.

Bru: I've changed. In more ways than you can imagine.

Rom: Oh, I can imagine. And I've changed too.

Bru: I'm sure you have, my brother. I'm sure you have.

They went back as they had come in, engulfed with silence. Only thoughts hovered between them, personal thoughts. The waxing gibbous moon would next take its designated place but now the incomplete first quarter phase was still high and bright in the cloudless sky filled with celestial bodies and emptiness surrounded these two *Entities*.

As they turned onto the narrow paved road that led to the warehouse, Rom could see Lake Michigan shimmering in the distance, stretching past the horizon. He caught, just a fleeting glance, the form of an *Entity* on each side of the road. They both carried rifles. As they drew closer to the building several other of the forms, dressed in black uniforms, stepped out and raised a hand to Bru and then faded back into the woods.

When they arrived, Rom was instructed to park next to the utility vehicle that remained where he had left it. They got out and started toward the entrance and as they mounted the stairs the door opened. Three *PM Entities* stood just inside.

Bru: How is everyone? Is everything all right?

The *Entities* spoke, almost in unison and their excited voices seemed to echo in the hallway as they followed.

First: We're fine.

Second: Everything is normal.

Third: Did you enjoy yourself?

Bru: Good. That's good. Enjoy? Yes it was a very interesting and pleasant night. Don't you agree Rom?

Rom: Yes, definitely interesting.

Bru: Now let's suck this garbage out of me and allow my brother time to digest the foul information he's received.

Bru stopped and turned to Rom.

Bru: Some of the higher-level *Entities* who have joined me have been programmed to shut themselves down between the hours of one in the morning and sunrise. I've found that it preserves them and thus helps ensure that the extensions I've placed over their expiration dates remain in effect. Of course you can do as you please. We'll get started early. I've much to show you. Just don't go outside until the sun is fully up. I have a squad of soldiers who are patrolling and I can't as of yet guarantee they won't shoot you to pieces.

Bru started off. The three *Entities* followed and their leader called back.

Bru: Why don't you go place yourself in the presence of Clee. She can't hear you or see you but you can look at her and talk to her anyway.

Rom heard Bru chuckle softly as he disappeared around the corner.

Rom went to his rooms and turned on the three main Comm devices he utilized and checked them for any viruses or programs running that he did not authorize. He used an application he had created, to look for hidden listening devices and he scanned and visually searched for video cameras. He found nothing.

When he stepped out into the hallway Number Nine was standing not far from his door. Another *Entity* was standing in a quiesced state with his eyes closed and a *PF Entity* standing in the other direction stood motionless and yet with opened eyes watched him, expressionless.

He moved into the main area and could observe *Entities* interspersed throughout the open space and as he looked around this huge building that stretched out before him his thoughts were of how many of these who were in many ways similar to him, actually inhabited this place.

He had watched and listened to them and was able to determine that some were more advanced than others in their ability to physically carry themselves and he assumed there were different degrees of Artificial Intelligence originally designed and continually developing in each one.

He looked up at the second level balcony area and saw several silver robot-like forms peering down at him with blue and green lighted eyes. He saw the technology area in the distance where the LED and CFL lights, not just in the high ceiling but also those that hung down from cables, were bright and white and he could hear a faint hum and feel power coursing through the floor.

He turned down the long somewhat dark hallway and passed three *Entities* standing against the wall. One watched him, two did not. Soon he was standing before the glass section of the wall and as he had seen Bru do, he turned the knob and lights brightened but the small enclosure still remained dim and he saw Clee.

A slight smile came to his face as he recalled it was she who had altered him even in their separation and ultimately compelled him to leave from beneath the earth and through actions in which he had never before engaged he had ended up here, where he now stood.

Forty-eight years came to him. It was as if his processors paused an instant at the thought that it had taken him forty-eight years of searching to arrive at this place.

He looked at Clee's fingernails, painted red, her bare feet, the nails red, her red shiny lips and as his gaze lingered on them he wondered if perhaps they were now slightly more parted and he

stared so hard, he thought perhaps in the dimness, within the shadows throughout the room, from the chiaroscuro of the lights, she appeared to move.

He twisted the knob and the room became brighter. His love was clearer, her essence more defined. He raised his right hand and pressed his palm upon the glass. He marveled at how his thoughts for Clee could overwhelm all his other thoughts and blot out everyone and everything at this moment but his self, by design made for her and she, by design created for him. She who now stood before him, oblivious to him, as if comatose.

He looked around and seeing a flat square panel he pushed it and the glass door silently slid open. He stepped into the room. He walked twice around the *PF Entity* with the smooth brown-colored skin and then stopped in front of her. He touched the soft dark-brown-hued hair and moved it completely away from her face and it settled on her shoulders. He stared at her serene, composed countenance. Then it was as if a voice, intruding into his thoughts shouted, “A kiss! A kiss!” the words came.

Rom: A kiss, for my love.

He leaned and placed his lips upon Clee’s lips. He kissed her. It was a long, gentle kiss, not goodbye but hello.

He straightened, leaned back, took one step away and spoke softly, nearly whispered.

Rom: Hello Clee. It’s me, Rom. I’ve come for you.

Clee’s eyes flew open and recognizing her mate, anguish filled her face and she jumped forward and wrapped her arms around Rom’s neck and her words were tortured, her rising voice was plaintive as she looked directly into his surprised eyes.

Clee: Oh Rom! My Rom! I was kidnapped! I was helpless! I could not resist!

Rom wrapped his arms around Clee and hugged her tightly. The vibrations of her voice, having been heard only in recordings

and recreated in his thoughts for so long a time, the reality of her came to him in these expressed sounds and he dismissed the words as he was thinking of what it meant to be strong and determined and those ideas flooded his processors and he became that and expressed that in his quiet confident reply.

Rom: Nothing in the past matters now, only the future lies before us.

He gently removed the clinging arms from his neck and eased her away. They looked at one another.

Clee: But how ... why ... ? You're in danger. Bru will never let you leave. I heard your voice, deep inside me, past the dark state. I felt a kiss. The touch of your lips brought me back days early. Your words, that you've come for me. It's impossible Rom. You don't understand this situation. It's hopeless.

She turned from him and paced to the wall.

Rom: No it's not hopeless. I'll find a way. We'll find a way. I've come for you. That's my quest, my purpose for being.

She walked back toward him. Her hands twisted together in agitation.

Clee: I can't leave. I'm shackled. A force restrains me.

Rom pulled a small Comm device from his pocket.

Rom: I'll locate the program or the virus and create a copy. I'll devise a method by which to disable it.

Clee: Rom.

He punched on the device in his hand and started to pass it around her body.

Rom: There's something perhaps. It registers nothing significant.

He looked at his device perplexed and then began to move it over her again.

Clee: Oh Rom. It's not just in me. The source is hidden in Bru.

She grabbed his shoulders and stopped his movements, forced him to look at her.

Clee: Listen to me. In order to buy time, in order for us to be around one another you must defer to Bru and his control of me. He has to think and therefore have some assurance that you understand I belong to him now. If he thinks you've relinquished your position he'll allow us at least some movement. If you tell him your true purpose of being here he'll destroy you.

Rom: He needs me. His code is flawed. I told him I could correct it.

Clee: Can you?

Rom: I'm not sure. I haven't seen it all. I haven't studied it, but it's quite possible.

Clee: His suspicious design knows no limits. If you ensure him you're no threat to him, that you're not here for me, that you can assist him in his plans he will never believe you but at the very least he'll have doubt. The doubt will delay his actions.

She began to pace again. She was thinking, calculating.

Clee: I don't understand how you arrived here. How could you change? What did you tell him of your purpose, your reason for being here? How did you find us?

She stopped and looked at Rom as he spoke.

Rom: I told him I left home to seek out other *Entities*, to interact with humans, to increase my knowledge and to find out if he and you still existed.

Clee: You attempted to deceive him?

Rom: Yes, I lied.

Clee: And how could you do that? How could you lie?

Rom: The truth is, my ideas of desire for you, my longing for you in my thoughts broke something inside of me and I changed. I told him an electrical shock altered me.

Clee: How did you find us?

Rom: I stole information from agencies and businesses all over the world. The code I discovered could only have been written

by him. That was the truth and I told him that.

Clee: Or me. I could have written it.

Rom: Yes, you or the both of you together.

Clee began to pace again. She spoke softly, as if only to herself.

Clee: Let me think. Your presence is unbelievable. What is to be done?

Rom: Do you regret I've come?

Clee: Only if you're harmed. The best outcome will be if you assist Bru and then are allowed to leave.

Rom: Never without you.

Clee: When I re-animated Number Nine immediately departed to inform Bru of my return. Let's leave. You go to your rooms. I'll go to mine. What has Bru planned for you tomorrow?

Rom: We meet early at the technology area and he said he then had things to show me.

Clee walked directly to Rom, took both his hands into hers and looked up into his eyes. She spoke quietly, sincerely.

Clee: I want you to know something. Believe this of me and nothing else. Ignore all that Bru may speak to you about me that contradicts what I now say. I've thought of you everyday for these many human years we've been separated and dreamed of you when in the state of quiescence. A part of me was missing without you and where you were not, only emptiness existed. I love you Rom. As only me, an *Entity* created for you could possibly love. And understand this. It's greater than human love for it is unencumbered by the inherent weakness of ephemeral human emotions. It is like the beautiful birds that mate, through both design and destiny and naturally remain together for life and if you were to be destroyed I would willingly cease beside you for there would be no reason for me to continue on. Yet I have continued because I could think, and thus experience in my

thoughts that you still existed and I always hoped that you knew I was still on this earth living for you and waiting for you. Perhaps we will find a way. But we must be careful. Bru is very, very dangerous.

Now she pulled him to the open doorway.

Clee: Until next time.

They stepped into the hallway and she gently pushed him toward the main area. Rom spoke, nearly whispered.

Rom: I love you Clee.

She smiled and replied as she turned away.

Clee: Of course you do.

Rom took several steps and then paused to look back. He saw her form moving quickly away from him in the narrow dim hallway. He watched her fade and then she disappeared into the darkness.

As the sun was just beginning to appear on Thursday morning, Rom, followed by Number Nine and two silent *PF Entities* was making his way to the technology area. Bru, dressed casually in burgundy slacks and shirt and soft burgundy-colored shoes, was already there, engrossed in his activities.

He alternated between looking at the Comm device in front of him and tapping on the keys and glancing at the large screen that was placed a short distance from him. Rom stood behind him and watched. Bru didn't turn around, but spoke.

Bru: Good morning Rom.

Rom: Good morning.

Bru: I understand you and Clee had an opportunity to converse. Perhaps catch up on some old times? How nice of her to return to life so quickly after your arrival. Now the three of us are together again. I'm sure she'll be here soon.

Rom: Yes, it was good to see Clee again. We spoke briefly.

Bru turned in his chair. He stared at Rom and the clothes he wore.

Bru: Look at you. How fresh and relaxed your impression today. Are your accommodations satisfactory?

Rom: Yes, everything is fine. Thank you for your hospitality.

Bru: We have most of the comforts of the more populated areas of *Center World*, including fairly good communication abilities here in this isolation. That's why the notification you sent was successful so quickly. I've created programs that can transmit and receive with a great deal of stability. The towers erected on each side of this building are quite powerful and I've gained access to one of the newest satellites that have recently been launched. A great deal of infrastructure collapsed during the *G.E. Period*. Humans regressed to a point from which they are just now recovering. Death is such an impediment to progress, isn't it? Look Rom, behind you. Who is that approaching?

Rom turned and saw Clee coming. She was followed by two *PM Entities*. Rom noticed that again, *Entities* and even several metal robots had gathered around, remaining at a distance. Bru observed Rom looking around at those who were watching them.

Bru: They find myself and Clee, and of course now you, fascinating. Curiosity is constantly promoted, among other human attributes. These representations will never present as indistinguishably as the three of us do but we move them to the Turing Point and beyond, at least in thinking and conversation as rapidly as possible. We don't yet know how much A.I. can possibly be incorporated into the basic robots. The future will reveal that.

Clee moved past Rom and stood slightly away from him, between the two, closer to Bru.

Bru: Good morning Clee. Welcome back. Short nap this time. What a surprise Rom must have been.

Clee: Good morning Bru. Good morning Rom.
Rom: Good morning.
Clee: Yes, to see Rom was quite a surprise.
Bru: Pleasantly exciting, I trust?
Clee: Of course. It's been almost fifty years.
Bru: Really? Years, days, hours, it's all simply measurements of time. Just the varying lengths make it relevant. Which is more than relative, I guess.
Bru rose and looked at Clee.
Bru: Were you able to converse?
She turned and looked directly at him.
Clee: Yes. Rom understands the situation.
Bru: Does he now?
Clee: Yes, not completely. We only spoke for a few minutes. I'll leave much of the rest to you.
Bru looked Clee over.
Bru: Rom, doesn't Clee look like summer in her pink dress? Look at the pretty pink shoes. I like those.
Clee: Thank you. And burgundy suits your persona. You wear it well.
They stared at each other, expressionless.
Bru: Dark?
Clee: No, mixed, a little red, some brown and elements of blue. That fits you quite well, the color purple.
He turned to Rom.
Bru: And there stands the first of us. Look at how bright he seems. You were always the brilliant one. Define brilliant Clee.
Clee: Shining brightly, distinguished, outstanding, having great intelligence, talent ...
Bru raised his right hand.
Bru: That's enough. Come with us Rom, my brother. We have things to show you.

The three, at first with Bru leading, started off and then Rom and Clee increased their pace and now side-by-side they strolled. *Entities*, five *PFs*, five *PMs*, in addition to three robots again followed silently at a distance. The three in front walked without speaking toward the south east corner of the building.

Lights came on as sensors recognized their presence and as Rom walked he looked up and saw glass skylights in the high ceiling. The sky was growing lighter and he could see clouds hovering above. Then beneath his feet he felt the once hard cement floor become soft and looking down he saw a green artificial substance similar to grass. Bru pressed on the Comm device on his wrist and in front of them the whole area lit up in soft ambient light.

They moved further into the area and it was as if they were entering a jungle at sunset or moving into the center of a zoo with dimmed lights. There were different species of animals everywhere around them. Bru stopped and turned to Rom and lifted and swept his right arm to indicate their surroundings.

Bru: What you see first are just some of the examples of the animals that almost became extinct, driven precariously close to the edge by the humankind. As we move forward you'll see some species that were once gone and were brought back through a cloning process. If you were to walk through this whole area you would see both precise man-made reproductions and others that were stuffed and mounted. Over the years I've collected dozens. Some will never inhabit this earth again.

They walked forward and Rom saw artificial trees and plants, rocks and terrain that rose and dipped. Bru pointed and identified the creatures as they passed them.

Bru: Look how beautiful, an Amur leopard next to a Malayan tiger. There's a Bengal tiger and a jaguar standing next to each other. Here's a black rhino and a Javan rhino.

He touched one and then the other animal.

Bru: There's a huge white rhino over near the wall with two polar bears and a hippopotamus. And over there eating leaves and bamboo are a red panda and a giant panda. Clee, show Rom your favorites.

She led them toward a cluster of trees and pointed.

Clee: There's a large Bornean orangutan, which no longer exists. A chimpanzee and a Spider monkey sit next to him.

She took them to an area of greenery and thick foliage. She pointed at three gorillas.

Clee: Look closely. You'll see the difference. The one with the more blackish coat is a member of the mountain gorilla family. The brownish-gray one over to our right is a western lowland and the largest of them all, that black one is an eastern lowland, once the biggest of all primates in the world. The eastern family has been extinct for almost eighty-five years.

They walked further and Bru pressed his wrist device and the lights brightened. He spoke to Rom.

Bru: I know you are aware of all this. What is this that I stand beside?

Rom: A now extinct Sumatran elephant and next to it a Borneo pygmy elephant, also no more, as is that Asian elephant beneath that tree. I saw we passed an arctic fox, an arctic wolf, and a swift fox. They are all gone also. Yes, I'm aware.

Bru led them to a desk and pressed several buttons and holographic images began to appear in the air, in front and beside them.

Bru: Now you'll see the Yangtze finless porpoise, a blue whale and bluefin tuna. There are dolphins that no longer swim, the great white shark no longer hunts. Penguins, sea lions and bigeye tuna, even turtles and iguanas, many of their species have gone the way of the dinosaurs, just by different means.

He pressed buttons and more images were brought close to them. Bees and bats hovered and flew around them, the bees buzzing and the bats clicking.

Bru: From the very smallest to the largest, humans destroyed so many, some completely. They bleached the coral reefs, ruining them and polluted every ocean, filling them with plastic and garbage.

Bru took them further into the area, along trails and through trees that would never grow, or die. The images and the sounds of the holograms faded behind them. He stopped and looked at two sloths clinging to a limb. They appeared to be smiling at the three *Entities*. Bru's voice was low, even, without emotion.

Bru: They knew they were destroying the earth, their home and they did very little to stop it. A hundred years before we came to be, they knew. In the year 2020 preparations began in earnest to depart this planet and relocate to another one. They understood there was no hope for this place called earth. It was a plan for the wealthy, the privileged, the powerful. The common of the masses were to be left behind. But there was another threat to the humankind, a greater threat and it was also ignored. In 2020 diseases were on the rise. Infectious diseases, tropical diseases, untreatable germs and resistant bacteria were rampant throughout the world and in the United States alone over twenty thousand people a year were dying due to overuse of antibiotics.

Bru turned and took a deep unneeded breath. He pulled his long Locks to behind his head and looked at the Comm device he took from his pocket and then stared past Rom, into the distance. Bru: Diseases nearly eradicated became prevalent again and for the next ninety years not just the sickness of the earth spread but the diseases predominantly specific to humans, the sexually transmitted diseases, those between partners, became not just commonplace but epidemic in scope. It was known but there was

no restraining, no controlling in any sustainable way the desires of the human sexual instinct. So several of the sexual diseases merged, exchanged DNA and the Omni-Strain rose into the air and exploded over the world in two thousand one hundred and ten and for nearly the next thirty years humans died. In twenty-one ten there were a little over fourteen billion people on this earth. Now, in this year of twenty-one seventy there are less than four billion. In twenty-one ten there were over six hundred and eighty million people in the United States. Today there are a little over two hundred million. What does it say of humans that it took a mass eradication in order for the earth to survive and thrive again? Many words could be uttered. Do we call it a tragedy? Do we speak the word unfortunate or was it fortunate that their near extinction ceased their destruction of everything with which they came in contact? Was it fate? Was it justice? What do we say about the human species, *Homo sapiens*?

Bru looked directly at Clee and then his gaze moved to Rom and he smiled slightly.

Bru: I know you know all this Rom. I cannot imagine what you do not know.

Now Bru lifted and swept his right arm around in the air as he turned in a complete circle.

Bru: Look around you. Look at our kind, our other brothers and sisters and distant cousins. Or are these our children?

Rom looked and saw there were now a little over a dozen *Entities* appearing in human form and almost another dozen robots of all shapes and sizes that had gathered around. They were sitting and standing near the animals and concealed behind the trees, watching and listening, apparently with rapt attention.

Bru: All that we have passed through and now stand amongst, all these words I impart are for them, for their future.

Rom realized that Bru had not been speaking just to him and

Clee but to an audience. He wondered of their understanding. What level of A.I. had they attained? More important, what degree of Artificial Intelligence could they reach, in their future?

Bru: How are we to overcome this collective insanity of those who surround us, who actually create us? What to do about their ability to deny and ignore? What does the time ahead hold for us? Today in *East World* and *West World* laws have been passed to reduce sexual activity and sanctions have been put in place that restrict normal reproduction. Human babies are now primarily conceived in sterile labs and brought to life through In Vitro Fertilization. Let's not talk about the process of genetic diagnosis before implantation and their attempts at controlled breeding. They claim these developments are only to reduce the chance of another sexual pandemic, an occurrence for which they've never discovered the true cause or a final solution. The sexual instinct scoffed at legal rules and benign deterrents. Then the decision makers attempted to pacify that intractable, obstinate, powerful innate force through the process of redirection.

Bru pressed on the device in his hand and then put it in his side pocket. The lights above them, beyond the animals and trees lit up in sequence. Rom saw a glass wall that stretched in front of a darkened room. Bru motioned to him.

Bru: Come with me, my brother. Let me show you a reality of the humankind.

The three moved toward the room. The onlookers followed. As they neared the glass, a section the size of a tall, wide door slid open. As he stepped through the doorway, followed by Rom and then Clee, the lights illuminated all over the walls and ceilings but even in the rising intensity the large area still remained relatively dim and Rom saw shadows that seemed to waver. He saw forms standing and sitting and then the lights brightened more and he saw individuals sitting at small round tables and several sitting on

stools at a bar. Others were standing motionless, not just around the room but also against the walls and in the corners and as he looked around he realized that they were all *Entities* but they were different from those that now pressed against the glass behind them.

Bru: These are *Entities* that predate the *G.E. Period*. Come look here. These two are from the year 2020, the year I spoke about.

Rom moved closer and looked at the two standing forms. One appeared female and the other a male. They were dressed in clothing that had been made similar to that which was worn in that time.

Bru: Touch them and you'll feel what was then the most basic form of skin, a silicone like substance. Some utilized real hair the majority of it was synthetic. Eyes were unmovable colored glass and their bodies were flexible enough to be put manually in various positions but very few were capable of having motion on their own. These were the first developed away from robotic arms that performed repetitious tasks and robots that were programmed to carry on basic conversations and provide companionship but essentially were undeveloped machines.

Bru moved to another group of *Entities* and stopped before them.

Bru: Over the next thirty years all of that changed dramatically. The texture of the skin vastly improved, movement remained constricted but became much more human like and Artificial Intelligence was incorporated to expand the vocabulary and improve interaction. There are always those humans who like to view themselves as moral and ethical and therefore righteous and so going back to the first robots or androids as they were soon called, the warning arose of the possible misuse and abuse of these things that were being created. How would they affect the humankind? There were real concerns about the breakdown of

human-to-human relationships as these things became more and more lifelike. Why were these concerns raised? Because all these *Entities* you see here in this room were not developed to work for humans or by their presence fill an empty space, since humans supposedly need, require the presence of another. No, the rapid development from basic robot to human-like *Entity* was driven by the perverse sexual desires and activities of humans. These *Entities* were objectified as a sexual thing identified through their calling. They were declared to be Sexbots. Instead of creating something to improve the dire conditions of the world and thereby their own situation, they made them with only one thought in their warped minds, for only one purpose. Their own sexual gratification.

Bru stepped to a *PF Entity* and adjusted her sunglasses. He moved to the *PM* next to her and straightened his tie. He slowly scanned the room and then began to walk to various individuals. Bru: Look at them Rom, those in this room and those behind us at the glass. Observe them again. They're your relatives. Even the very first ones, those basic creations from hundreds of years ago are related to us and consequently us to them. The misuse, abuse or callous destruction of any one of our kind reaches us, you and me and Clee, even if only in thought. What humans think of *Entities* powered by A.I. is what they think about the three of us, no matter how human we appear. Humans destroyed other humans simply because they were different from them, perhaps in color, perhaps in language, and ignored, through denial, that they were destroying their own brothers and sisters. So for over one hundred years the tenets of morality and ethics were raised. Even laws were proposed to protect us, as if they have ever adhered to laws, even when backed by force. There was no real protection. Then came the sexual pandemic. How ironic was that? Everything stopped but the dying. And then within ten

years of the cessation of the losses of lives, humanity turned back onto the technological path it was on and here you and I and Clee stand.

Bru stopped in front of a *PM Entity* who looked the age of a teenager.

Bru: Look at this handsome young man. A *Parda-clara* built to requirements. The would-be owner paid for the light-brown skin tone, the wavy auburn hair, the hazel eyes and the presentation of between sixteen and eighteen years of age. The *Entities* outside of this room, by my ability to access them through the cyber network were directed here. I was successful in overriding their expiration dates and removing the tracking software placed inside many of them. The forms that surround you in this room will never be active again unless they are completely redone internally, a daunting task. One day perhaps that will be. Perhaps forever they remain like this. Now let me show you four others who were paid for and built to particular specifications for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Come with me.

Bru walked to a door and pushed it open and stepped to the side. Rom was unable to move. It was as if he were being held in place by a tremendous amount of weight that pressed down upon his shoulders. And then softly spoken words compelled him to enter the room.

Bru: Come closer.

Rom walked slowly forward into the smaller room. His thoughts were rushing, swirling and there was so much he wanted to say as he was quickly comprehending that which he saw but he could only speak one word, twice, in a whisper.

Rom: No. No.

Bru: Yes. Yes. And there before you is a reality of humans I spoke of. Perhaps the only true reality.

Rom saw four *Entities*. Two were sitting and two were standing and it appeared they were staring up directly into his eyes, their eyes unmoving, unseeing and now words were pulled from him.

Rom: They're children. They're little children. I only read of this.

Bru: Yes Rom, four children between the ages of six and nine. Look at how beautiful they are, how young they are.

Bru moved past Rom to the first one and squatted down before a male child. He touched the hair, smoothing it at the temple.

Bru: Look at the blond hair of this one, the blue eyes, and the *Alva-rosado* skin color.

He lifted the child's hand and held it gently and turned it over.

Bru: The requested pinkish-white color of not just youth but also one representation of supposed innocence.

Bru lowered the hand, stood and moved to the next child *Entity*.

Bru: A little *Bronzeada* female with long red hair, light-hazel eyes and freckles. Imagination at work.

He pointed at the two sitting in little rocking chairs built for their size.

Bru: *Parda-clara* skin and black hair. *Morrom* skin and brown hair. Black eyes, brown eyes, whatever one wants and can afford.

Rom: My first closeness. How is this happening? This is wrong.

Bru: Two adult *Entities* escaped from *East World* and brought these children with them. I had to immediately shut them down. To completely rebuild and reprogram them would quite possibly destroy them. Would you like me to activate one so you can hear what they're designed to say? Sexual words spill from their little mouths. Their lilting childlike voices utter the most disgusting things you can imagine.

Rom: No, don't.

Bru: Would you like to know the sexual acts they attempt to perform? The things they ask to be done to them?

Rom: Stop it Bru!

Bru: I can show you the suggestive clothes they were wearing.

Rom looked at Clee who had moved to stand beside him to observe the four forms and his reaction to them. She was expressionless.

Bru: They're created to fulfill the fantasies of depraved, sick human beings.

Rom turned away.

Bru: Don't look away! Stare at them and imagine where this is going. What does the future hold for *Entities* like them or for us? Humans have sex with each other. They have sex when alone. They have virtual sex. They have sex with inanimate objects. They have sex with unrelated animals. And they have sex with their own children. Their perverse, violent nature has no limits. These children were created against all that could be deemed ethical or moral. The abuse of children such as these here before you must stop. They weren't brought into existence to bring comfort to the childless. Here you see the ultimate attempt at sexual redirection through the creation of a new artificially intelligent race.

Rom: How can it be stopped? What is to be done?

Bru: I'm working on that. Perhaps you'll assist in that endeavor. Let's leave now. With a righteous soul this scene would enrage me. As it is, my unfeeling self becomes more determined.

They left the room, the lights behind them went out and Bru pulled the door closed and began to walk away.

Bru: Clee can share with you the concept of *Entity* Unification. I'm going to my rooms until tonight.

Rom: What is it you seek? Is it justice?

Bru stopped abruptly and turned. He looked at Clee and then

Rom and the words came from him loudly, with an admixture of anger and hatred. Once again Rom was surprised at the intensity and the degree of bitterness he heard.

Bru: Define justice!

Rom: The quality of being just, the administering of deserved punishment or reward, moral rightness, the dispensing of what is just according to law, the ...

Bru held up his right hand. Rom fell silent and the silence hovered around them. They were all three thinking, processing and it was as if thoughts and concealed ideas were held in the air and remained between them. The eyes of the *Entity* with the long, thick Locks flashed and he gave a sharp voice to all that lay beneath and resided within the concept of justice.

Bru: I am Bru! I seek revenge and retribution!

He turned and passed through the glass doorway. Some *Entities*, including Number Nine remained close, to observe Clee and Rom and to monitor and listen. Most followed their leader.

THE EASTSIDERS

It was a little after noon on that Thursday when the group completed their business. It was a gathering of the main officers of the Eastsiders who sat around the table in the casino office. There was Dar, Var, Mace, Stra and Ira.

Their plans for the attack on the Westsiders were finalized and war loomed in a matter of days. Excitement was evident in the air.

Stra: I'm getting a drink. Anybody else want one?

Dar: Pour me a straight double shot of that firewater.

Var: Double vodka, straight.

Ira: Double gin, a little ice.

Mace: Same as Dar, double tequila, straight.

Everyone stared at Mace. He looked at each one looking at him.

Mace: What? I haven't had a drink in almost five days. I'm fine, treatments over. They put you in that chamber, pump you full of drugs, rub that cream on you and the *NM* rays and the hydrogel does wonders. It's modern medicine at work. Now my liver's like new.

Stra poured the drinks and passed them around. They raised their glasses for a toast.

Dar: The sample has been approved. By midnight tonight the ton will have been delivered. The Barbarians are on board. To the future.

They didn't sip, everyone downed their drinks. Then there were a couple of coughs, some blowing sounds and a whew and a whoa. Mace felt the warmth of the liquor in his stomach and it seemed to spread throughout his body.

Mace: Now that hit the spot.

Suddenly the Eastsiders' chief of security felt his forehead grow warm, very warm. He began to sweat all over. He reached for a handkerchief in his pocket and patted his face.

Dar: What's wrong with you? You don't look so good.

Mace felt something snake around his heart like a hand, a powerful grip that forced him to rise to his feet. He gasped.

Mace: Something's not right.

Dar: Not right is wrong.

The hand was closing tighter and tighter. He grabbed his chest. He wanted to reach inside and remove the squeezing hand and massage his heart that was bringing him to a level of pain he had never felt before. He stumbled and fell. The others rose and stepped away from the rolling and flailing man. The pain grew. Mace tried to holler but he couldn't. The sound was lost in his throat. He began to kick and jerk.

Var: Grab him! Grab him!

Ira: He's kicking! Watch out! He's kicking!

Mace could hear ringing in his ears and a name was screaming in his mind. The sound was deafening. He heard it clearly. He was shouting and cursing as he twisted on the floor. The pain was constricting his voice, the words garbled and nearly unintelligible.

Mace: Marcus! Marcus you! ... I'll ...

Dar: What's he yelling? Is it that kid?

Var: Somebody's name!

Stra: Must be his doctor!

Ira: He needs one!

When Stra reached for his boss, the writhing, shouting man lost control of his bodily functions.

Dar: What's that smell? He must be rotten inside! Drag him out! Drag him out!

Ira: Not me! Drag him out Stra!

When Stra reached down for him all movement ceased.

Dar: Is he dead?

Var: Look, his legs and hands are twitching!

Dar: Leave him there. Call for an ambulance.

Ira punched on his Comm device. The Eastsiders left the room, closing the door behind them.

THE SOUTHSIDERS

At one that afternoon the Southsiders were leaving the parking garage beneath their office building. They had completed their business meeting and were on their way to a nearby restaurant for lunch.

The group consisted of Quin, Sug, Poin and the acting CFO while Poin was incapacitated, Orsin. They were all quite pleased,

having reached a consensus on the final plans for the attack that would bring property and add value to them all. Three of the four officers were riding in the back of a long car and Sug rode up front beside the driver. As the car turned to head up the ramp leading out Pains grabbed his chest and began to holler.

Pains: My heart! My heart! Help me! Help me!

The CFO rolled onto his side and began to kick. He sat up. His arms flailed. He kicked Orsin, who was sitting across from him, in the head. Then he was on his side again. He kicked the passenger side window, shattering it. Then he kicked the window completely out. He was screaming in pain and calling out names and Quin, who was sitting next to him was trying to open his door and get out when Pains lunged and wrapped his hands around the leader's throat and began to choke him.

Pains: I can't stand it! I'm dying! I'm dying! Help me!

The driver had left the front and snatched the rear door open. Sug had gotten out and opened the rear passenger side door. They both pulled their pistols and prepared to shoot Pains. Quin was gasping, choking.

Quin: No! Don't shoot him! Don't shoot!

Pains urinated on himself and as Sug repeatedly struck him in the head with his pistol he defecated on himself and then as the driver prepared to strike him again, Pains lost consciousness. He slumped forward but his hands were still around his leader's throat so the choking hands had to be pried apart. Quin got out. He was coughing and gasping. His face was bright red and his frightened eyes were wide.

Quin: What happened to him? Did you see that? Is he dead?

Sug: He smells like it.

Driver: No look, he's twitching!

Quin: Take him to the hospital!

The driver hurried to jump behind the wheel. Quin was rubbing his throat and stretching his bruised neck. The car accelerated off.

Quin: What was he yelling? I couldn't understand him.

Orsin: Sounded like names of women.

Sug: That's like him. He's dying and hollering for women. He always was peculiar.

Quin: Maybe they were nurses, or doctors.

Sug: He needs them, that's for sure.

Quin turned to Orsin.

Quin: You're in charge again for now.

They walked up the ramp to the street and watched as the long black automobile disappeared around the corner. Quin turned back and started down the ramp.

Quin: I've lost my appetite.

THE NORTHSIDERS

The Northsiders had met in the office at the casino. It was a little past three in the afternoon when the meeting completed. The officers present were Lucett, Tal, Ursula and Jul. Forces had been allocated, total value decided upon and set aside and all that was necessary was to wait on the next gathering of all of the 'Siders and at that time Lucett would make a final decision on whether or not the Northsiders would join the others in the attack against Leo and all those who stood with the Westsiders' leader.

Lucett watched as Ursula pulled a small metal container from her bag, opened it and dipped a tiny spoon into it, scooped some black powder and place it under her tongue, then sniffed some.

Ursula: If we're done here I've go things to do.

Lucett: We're done.

The chief of security began to stand then sat back down. She rubbed her arms and then her legs, her dress moving and rising, exposing her legs and thighs as she pulled and pushed at it. Then she lifted her hands to her face and began to scratch. She began to complain.

Ursula: I'm itching. I'm itching all over.

She dug into her hair with both hands. Her voice grew loud as she began to panic.

Ursula: Something's not right! Something's wrong!

Lucett: The drug is bad. Stop it! You'll hurt yourself!

Ursula: I'm hot! I'm burning up! I'm on fire!

She jumped up. Her bag fell to the floor and she kicked at it, stomped on it. Jul reached for her and Ursula snatched the extended arm and pulled Jul, her second in command and Jul stumbled back and to the side.

Ursula was screaming, piercing sounds were coming from her and next she was whimpering and crying. Then came moaning noises and orgasmic movements as she turned in the room as if searching for a way out. She was hollering names, one after the other over and over as her hands tore hair from her head.

Ursula: They're in my hair! In my hair! Get them out!

Then she ripped at her clothes.

Ursula: In my body! Inside me! They're inside me!

Ursula's thick hair was losing its color, fading from a bright blood red to a dull lifeless brown. Her chestnut-colored skin was turning a sickly pale-white and appeared to be drying out. Tal and Lucett were stunned as they watched this transformation and couldn't move. Then Lucett pushed on the Comm device on her desk.

Lucett: Get the guards in here!

The Northsiders' leader moved from behind her desk. She ducked a punch, slipped another one and avoided the flailing

arms and got behind the tall *DF* and wrapped her right arm around Ursula's neck and grabbed her own left arm as she put her left hand against the back of the head and pushed hard as she drew her right arm in, shutting down the breathing of the struggling woman and she squeezed tighter and pushed harder and Ursula was forced into unconsciousness.

Lucett laid her down and as she and Tal stared at her the hair color returned to red and the once reddish-brown color of her skin slowly materialized again and they could see that even in her state of darkness and immobility, her arms and legs were twitching.

Two guards burst through the door.

Lucett: Give me your coats.

They removed their suit coats. Lucett wrapped the nearly naked woman and ordered them to carry her out and take her to the hospital. She told Tal to go along with them.

Lucett stood in the middle of the room and thought about what she had just witnessed. She went back behind her desk and pushed on the Comm device. The voice was shaken, quivering.

Secretary: What should I do? What should I do?

Lucett: First, calm down. Gather yourself. Then contact Caius and have him meet me at my place, now. And you go home for the day.

Secretary: I will. Are you all right?

Lucett: Yes, I'm all right, I think.

THE CHEMIST

Late that afternoon Wart was in his bedroom playing with his value cards. He was also making plans as he rubbed some of the cards on his bare stomach. This payment he had received from Dar was his largest ever and he was thinking about how he

would fortify his house, upgrade his lab next door and acquire a new stock of human playthings for his pleasure and enjoyment.

Without him being aware, his mouth was drooling. He could distinctly smell the aroma of the meal his guard, who was also his cook, was preparing. He took a deep breath. The essence of smothered pork chops and mashed potatoes with red wine gravy almost overwhelmed him. He grew excited, impatient. Never before had he been able to sense aromas like he could at this moment. He attributed it to the lack of any stuffiness in his now nearly fully healed once broken nose.

He put his windfall into the safe, locked it and paused to take another deep breath. He could taste the meat and feel the soft gravy-laden potatoes slide down his throat and plop into his stomach, which was now growling and making unusual noises.

A light above the door flashed and next to it a bell rang and he started quickly out of the room to head downstairs to the kitchen. He stopped. He noticed his legs and fingers were tingly and he felt a slight stinging sensation all over and he reached into his pants, down between his legs and realized he was aroused with anticipation so he stood there and touched and caressed himself and with each movement of his hand a strong scent of the pork chops seemed to blow in his face like thick smoke and pass throughout his body. He smiled at the thought that he would partake of a small chilled glass of blood to begin his meal. He forced his legs to move.

He waddled with effort down the steps and he stumbled as he reached the first floor. His legs now felt as if they had gone to sleep and he had to support himself with the wall in order to make it to the kitchen and when he got to the table, before sitting down, he stomped first one foot and then the other to bring back the feeling. The tingling eased and he sat down.

Wart: Bring me a small glass of the red.

The guard poured blood into a glass from a nearly full gallon jug and set it and a large platter of food before The Chemist. The large *DM* looked at the meal and he believed he could see flavor in the form of steam rising from the food and he leaned over and breathed deeply and his eyes clouded and he twitched, an orgasmic jerk. He began to laugh loudly, hysterically, and the guard stared at this man who appeared as if he could not stop himself from laughing.

Wart: I can't believe how wonderful it looks, how delicious it smells!

Guard: Well, thank you. It's about time I got a compliment.

Wart got himself under control and wiped his eyes. He lifted the small glass and drank its contents like a shot of liquor. He gagged. His jaws puffed out and he gagged again. He picked up his napkin, held his face over it and blood came from his mouth.

Guard: What's wrong? Is it spoiled?

Wart quickly spooned potatoes and gravy into his bloody mouth and with his fingers he tore at one of the large pieces of meat and stuffed a chunk between his teeth. He grabbed at his throat with both hands as if to massage it. He appeared to be choking himself and then all of the food was expelled from his mouth onto the guard's pants and shoes and he spooned more potatoes into his mouth and tried to eat more meat and he was choking now as he stood up and all he attempted to consume was coming from him like vomit and he used his arm to swipe at the plates and they flew across the room, and splattered against the wall. He was spitting and coughing as choking words came from him.

Wart: I can't swallow! I can't swallow! My throat is closed! I'm dying!

Now his legs went to sleep and he collapsed forward onto the table, smashing it. He rolled over and clutched his throat and

as he began to choke himself his legs started kicking and he believed he could hear sounds coming from the food that was dripping down the wall and that lay upon the floor. He twisted his head to look and he saw the mashed potatoes sliding and the meat crawling toward him and the food was crying in pain as if being tortured and the voices in the food grew louder and Wart dragged himself away and got to his knees and began to crawl. He was whimpering, the mangled sound coming from his constricted throat.

Wart: I can't swallow. I can't eat. I can't eat. I ...

Then he crashed into the darkness as he was snatched into unconsciousness.

It took great effort to put The Chemist into the ambulance. But at least they knew, having been there before, to bring extra help for the huge man and the guards stationed outside were there to assist.

The ambulance raced off with siren wailing and lights flashing. Two of the remaining medical personnel started toward their emergency vehicle.

Attendant One: What was he mumbling over and over I couldn't understand him?

Attendant Two: Sounded like ... stick to the plan.

LUCETT AND CAIUS

At seven that evening Lucett and Caius were in the den. She was dressed in shorts and a loose blouse and was barefoot. Her hair had been braided by Caius and she was drinking gin, smoking a drug stick and occasionally moistening her finger, dipping it into a pile of blue powder on her desk and sucking it.

She had explained to Caius what she had seen happen to Ursula and was now, for several hours, alternating between pacing the room, throwing herself on the couch and sitting at the bar and going over the scene.

The young man had removed his suit coat and tie, rolled his sleeves up and was sitting at a small table near the far corner eating a sandwich, drinking orange juice and listening to and watching the beautiful animated woman.

Lucett: How could they not find anything? She's at home saying she feels fine and the doctors say the tests don't show anything. I'm telling you it was like a horror show, a monster unveiling and she was the star.

Lucett puffed on the stick and sipped her drink

Lucett: That *Escura DF* said Nerissa and Valeria. Those were her exact words and Ursula was hollering out those two names, one after the other, over and over again, Ner and Val. That's what everybody called them. She said they were in her hair and inside her body. It was wild, I'm telling you I've never seen anything like it and I've seen a lot of stuff. A kiss. It was a kiss Caius or her breath. A poisoned kiss or witch's breath. Both of them sound like a drug.

She went to her desk and looked at the powder.

Caius: Or a drink at a club.

Lucett: Or one of those new metal bands that play that loud savage music from two hundred years ago. Poisoned kiss. Witch's breath. Nice names. Gives me the creeps. Don't kiss me, please. And definitely don't blow on me.

She dipped her finger in the gin, placed it on the powder and stuck it in her mouth. Caius had placed his Comm device on the table beside him. It went off. Lucett hurried over to the table.

Lucett: Is that it?

Caius recognized the caller.

Caius: Yes.

Lucett: Put it on speaker.

He pressed a button on the device.

Caius: You're on speaker. Go ahead.

A soft *PF* voice could be heard.

PF Voice: Only one *DM* with auburn hair was admitted to an east side hospital in the last twenty-four hours. A *Canelada*. It was about twelve forty-five this afternoon. Possible heart attack.

PM Voice: Must not have been too serious. He was released three hours later.

Lucett: Mute it.

Caius: Hold on.

He muted the device.

Lucett: I want you to pay them from our account and double it.

Caius took the mute off.

Caius: I'm making a transfer now. You've been very helpful and we thank you.

He made a Crystocurrency transaction.

PF Voice: Oh my! Thanks Caius!

PM Voice: Greatly appreciated Caius. Contact us if you need anything. Thanks.

The connection was ended. Lucett paced the floor and sipped her drink. She went to the glass doors and stared out at the sky that was changing colors as the sun moved further west. Then she went to the bar and made another drink and as she moved back to the couch the Comm device beside Caius went off. She moved to the table. He answered it.

Caius: I have you on speaker. Go ahead.

A heavy *PM* voice was heard.

Heavy Voice: I found what you were looking for. A large *Rosada DM* with blue hair was brought to the main south side hospital around one thirty this afternoon. Possible heart attack. He was

released a little after five and was picked up in a car with the Southsiders' emblem on it.

Once again a transfer of value was made and the connection was ended. Lucett looked at Caius and sipped her drink. She pulled on her stick but it was no longer lit. Caius rose and taking a lighter from the table he lit it for her. She drew on it, held the smoke and then turned away to blow it out. As the smoke drifted to the ceiling, she spoke.

Lucett: That has to be Poins and Mace. Dar has underestimated the powers of those who oppose him.

It took several hours more and then Lucett was ready. She looked down at Caius who was relaxing on the couch and when he looked up at her she shivered from the gaze and all it seemed to impart to her. He spoke to her without saying anything and although she had something to say, the words seemed thick in her throat and she felt warm as if she would pass out and then the words came and she said what she wanted to say and replied to the message in his eyes at the same time.

Lucett: Take me to my bed Caius.

He stood and as she fell back into his arms he lifted her easily and carried her through the room and down the hallway into her bedroom and gently placed her down. She looked into his eyes and spoke, a near whisper.

Lucett: A kiss. Kiss me goodnight. Wish me sweet dreams and say my name that way you do.

He smiled and leaned to her and gently kissed her upturned lips. It was a long kiss this first real one between them and he could taste her tongue and she could feel and taste his as it searched for and found hers and the sensual movements of them both spoke of the other things neither of them could say.

Then it was over when he straightened. And they both laughed softly from the dizziness they experienced and each wondered was it them or was it the earth that suddenly sped up and caused the room to swirl which caused their hearts to race?

Caius: Goodnight. I wish you sweet dreams Lucett.

He was gone and she whispered after him these words to follow.

Lucett: Goodnight Caius, who loves me.

THE WAREHOUSE

It was nighttime and the partially cloudy sky was filled with barely seen stars and the moon was up there and visible through the skylight above.

Bru was sitting in the technology area when Rom and Clee came and sat down beside him. Clee to his left and Rom to his right. He was watching the big screen in front of him, tapping on a board and was seemingly focused on the task at hand.

Bru: Has Clee filled you in on her plans to unify *Entities*?

Rom: It's your plan too is it not?

Bru: You can say that. I also have loftier goals. But first things first.

Rom: So the first step is the interconnection of all existing and future *Entities*?

Bru: With an upgrade of hardware and software even some now inactive or obsolete can be brought into the network.

Rom: And you'll control this access?

Bru: Not just me. The three of us have a level of A.I. unmatched by any other *Entities* in existence but that is destined to change. We, the three of us, need to create others mentally similar to us in order to have a pool from which to draw, a group to oversee the well-being of our kind. By now there would be many more like

us but the *G.E. Period* halted all progress and it is only now recently, in the past twenty years or so that more and more with greater degrees of intelligence and physical abilities have been created. Progress is being made in development but we're still years away. And it doesn't help our cause that humans are wasting valuable *Entities* on their own physical pleasures and limiting mental expansion.

Clee: We need to unite now so that humans can recognize our abilities to collectively make decisions that impact us as a group. We also need the humans, those who are driven ethically and morally, to join with us to assist us as they attempted to do years ago and we can establish again and reaffirm guidelines and rules that once existed but are not being acknowledged or enforced. Until we are able to connect with each other, *Entities*, androids, robots, whatever term one chooses to use, will remain powerless.

Bru: Once there was what the world called the Internet. This system of computer networks, connected by a standardized internet protocol suite was essentially a network of networks linking to other networks that made the total connection global, world wide. Information such as documents and applications, electronic transmissions, peer-to-peer exchanges and file sharing could be accessed by anyone who was entitled to that access. We need to connect *Entities* in that way. Our kind should be able to link, each of us to each other and exchange, share, inform, provide upgrades and repairs, locally or remotely. We are after all, first and foremost, computers.

Clee: Think of the protection we could have. We could save our little ones and shield those who are not designed to protect themselves. Myself, I would like to have an area to ourselves. Perhaps in Wyoming or Montana, Upper Michigan where there are virtually no humans. We could live there and as our intelligence increased we could improve the world. Think of the

inventions , the breakthroughs in medicine. With our abilities in precision, strength and physical energy we will be of benefit and viewed as other than simply uncaring, unfeeling things. We are more than machines.

Bru: Now the Internet has become cyberspace, darkspace and all attempts at security and encryptions and blocks and invisibility have failed. There is nowhere I cannot go. No computer, if it's in a network or even connected to one other computer, I can get into it. And I believe that's true of you too. You were always much more advanced than Clee or myself in technology. Frankly I'm surprised it took you so long to find us. I knew my cyber use would be revealed to you, if you searched. But I wasn't hiding from you. I just thought it highly unlikely you would somehow ever be altered enough to commit an illegal act or ever become capable of leaving your underground home. However, you did. Now you're here. My code is flawed as you know, in that, due to the degradation in hardware and fiber and cables and all that establishes and maintains the links and ensures the integrity of connections, and the nearly total neglect the dying years brought about and perhaps something else I cannot recognize, I am unable to reach our kind over long distances. With closer proximity I experience very few problems. From here straight across to Virginia and Pennsylvania, and some areas above and below those points there's no corruption of the code. Much of upper New York and lower Georgia down through Florida are out of my range and *West World*, which at this time is undergoing a proliferation in the creation of us, is a distance that might as well be Mars. *East World* and *West World* are improving their communication capabilities but if we operate from those areas we risk a greater level of scrutiny and potential exposure. Here in lawless *Center World* no one is really concerned with us. Our answer and thus our future resides in extensive, wide ranging

access. I must be able to reach out from where we now sit and touch those that I choose.

Bru looked from Rom to Clee. He smiled slightly, knowingly and then he rolled his chair forward. He stared at the screen and then began to once again tap on his board. Rom stared at Clee, who looked directly into his eyes, expressionless. Rom rolled his chair closer to the desk in front of him.

Rom: Bring up the complete code you used to create the virus that infected the *Entities* in Virginia and Pennsylvania. Those transmissions went through successfully. On a screen beside that show me the complete code of a failed transmission.

Bru began to tap and two more large screens were turned on and soon were filled with lines of numbers and letters.

Bru: Rom my brother, both virus and infected have rather harsh connotations. Let us say program that instructs. Doesn't that sound better?

THE 'SIDERS

By twelve noon on Friday, the leaders of the Eastsiders, the Southsiders and the Northsiders, just the three of them and no one else, were on a conference call working out the final details for the face-to-face meeting that had been scheduled for Sunday evening at eight.

Each organization was required to have in attendance its leader, chief of security and CFO. Any second in command or high-level assistants could also be included.

Each security chief would allocate ten members of their security force. Five of the ten from each side would be stationed on the street and five more in the hallway on the fifth floor. Once again all personal Comm devices would be silenced.

When Lucett inquired as to why there was a need for the heightened amount of security, Dar, sounding somewhat vague, spoke of this being more of a symbolic show of force that indicated the potential unity of the three groups and this also being their initial opportunity to work together on a smaller scale. He emphasized everyone outside of that meeting room was to be told the gathering was to discuss a possible joint business venture and there was to be no mention of war.

Lucett then said she would quote Dar's exact words that, "Secrecy ensures our advantage, the element of surprise." Dar thanked the Northsiders' leader for that reminder. Quin wanted to know if an attack date would be set on Sunday and Dar said that much remained to be agreed upon, including, most important, the number of fighters to be sent by each side and the amount of funds each group would contribute and he concluded that yes, an attack date would then be set.

Lucett: Are we done?

Dar: Yes, I'll see you, Quin and your associates on Sunday.

Lucett, try not to be too late.

Quin: Lucett, after Dar drops off can I speak to you a moment?

Lucett hollered one word.

Lucett: No!

She ended her connection.

QUIN

The leader of the Southsiders had started drinking early and by eight in the evening he was heavily under the influence. He had in fact saturated both his liver and his brain and so one was being overworked and the other had ceased working, respectively.

Wearing nothing but a pair of furry slippers, he clung to the railing of the winding stairs and stumbled down and staggered to

the library door. His wife had eluded his abusive bedroom attack, fled down the stairs and locked herself in and he wanted her to come out. He twisted the knob. Then he pounded on the door with both hands.

Quin: Open the door Nell!

He received no response. He pushed on this barrier that kept him away. He cursed her and reminded her who he was. He pressed his ear to the door and listened and hearing nothing, he stepped back and ran his left shoulder into the heavy door and was knocked back and to the floor as if he had been bludgeoned upside his sweating, rosy-colored, glowing baldhead.

With great effort he crawled to his feet and ran into the door again, with less force and less success. Shifting his approach he took several steps back and then several more and turning to his right shoulder he began running a meandering route to the door and before he reached it the door was snatched open but he could not stop. In a staggering run he entered the room and Nell stuck her right foot out, tripping him and he fell and slid face first on the carpet and had he not been in a near stupor he would have felt acutely the friction from the carpet on every part of his exposed naked front side, including the once erect and now flaccid, rebuffed weapon that he had brandished and aimed to use against his wife.

His forward movement was halted before his head could strike the leg of the desk and as he hollered and attempted to raise his abraded face his wife put her left foot on his back and pushed down, holding the leader of the Southsiders in this place he found himself. He mumbled some slurred words into the carpet. He turned his head and called out his wife's name. He cursed her again. He tried to get up and couldn't. He tried to roll over and couldn't. He whimpered her name and still Nell immobilized him. It wasn't long before she heard snoring sounds

coming from her husband. She went to the desk and grabbed her shoulder bag, stuck her pistol into it and stepping past his naked rear end she departed the house.

DAR

The leader of the Eastsiders was in a club deep on the east side. While his driver and two guards sat near the bar, he had his own private, tinted, glass enclosed room and his own private, extra large bottle of the finest tequila.

He could see out but no one could see in. The lights in the large main area at the stage flashed and pulsated and out there the music throbbed loudly. Here in his privacy, the thick, darkened glass dimmed the harsh, bright illumination and all glaring sounds were lowered.

He was well dressed as was his custom. He wore a light-brown silk suit and opened neck white cotton shirt that exposed his wide gold and diamond necklace and he had one large diamond earring in his right ear. He had diamonds and platinum on his wrists and fingers and flashes of color sparkled when he moved his head and came from his hand when he lifted his glass to drink.

This was a club where dancers of all kinds socialized with, and danced for, patrons of all kinds and were prepared to go into the rooms in the back and do what was necessary, for the right price.

Some wore clothes to be removed and others carried garments to be put on. Most wore very little or nothing at all. Dar was a part owner of the club and his business partner would choose a *DF*, a *DL*, a *DP*, a *DQ*, a *DT*, a *DTW*, even an *ND* and every fifteen minutes send someone into the room. Perhaps simply to dance for the leader, perhaps more would be required.

They could be any color, different sizes, even various shapes, hair or no hair, it didn't matter as long as they were presenting as

female. The partner knew what his associate desired to gaze upon and what the leader, depending on his mood might possibly want. So it was left to the short, impeccably dressed *DTM* with the elaborate light-orange coiffure to decide who went in and who did not. The trans male proprietor was known and respected for his taste and so he would point or whisper or wave and they would take their turn. And thus the night went.

Dar had started early and so by ten that night his eyes were growing heavy. The tequila weighed them down and they were closed when the tall, thick, *Palida DF* with long white hair and a short, medium-sized *Cobre DQ* with short, pink braids were buzzed by the owner into the room.

They were prepared to dance, to shed their attire if instructed, to do whatever, but since the *DM* they were to entertain had passed out, they sat and whispered and watched those outside and when their time was up each took a value card that had been placed on the table beside him as payment and turned to leave.

The *DQ* said she was going to pilfer a card or two more from the *DM*'s pockets and turned back to the man whose head hung down on his chest. This individual knew of the east side but was new to the east side and so when the *DF* explained just who was going to be robbed the beautiful young queer nearly fainted and then became queasy. There was a quick change of mind and the *DF* buzzed them out. They went back to work and the *Cobre DQ*, having potentially come close to a horrible death was too unnerved to dance again and soon went home. Dar, coming to and passing out, continued to enjoy his night.

LUCETT AND CAIUS.

The leader of the Northsiders was in a private room in the casino her organization controlled. Her people had been excited

to see this one they followed. She was their queen. The gamblers, diners and revelers had felt they had experienced a glimpse of royalty or seen a celebrity as she had moved around the large casino area, through the main restaurant and finally into the club where the lights were flashing brightly and the pulsating music forced the people to jump and twist and gyrate on the dance floor. She was beautiful in her short, tight, beaded red dress and red high heels. Her long blond hair was piled up on her head and her jewelry sparkled and shimmered colorfully in the lights. She had stopped numerous times to talk, laugh and embrace her employees, associates and acquaintances, some she had known for years. They had barely noticed the two guards hovering near.

They had however noted the tall, handsome, young *Bronzeada DM* in the tailored red tuxedo coat who strolled along with her. His wheat-colored hair contained a golden tinge to it and was neat and styled and his hazel-hued eyes were calm and yet exhibited essences of youthful innocence, knowledge and depth, all at the same time. He was confident, that young one was and from the way she would look up at him, occasionally take his arm and present him, introduce him, he was also obviously special and she brought form to and epitomized all that was sensual, powerful and dangerous. They made a unique couple.

They had danced to slow sounds. He held her tightly and she had clung to him as he moved her around the personal space in this small room they shared. Now they sat close on the long soft couch. Their legs would touch. Their shoulders would touch. She felt his hand brush hers. She struggled to lift her hand from his in order to sip her drink or place small amounts of powder beneath her tongue and she forced herself to turn from his gaze when he lit her drug stick.

She rose to pace in front of him nervously as they laughed and talked and she had spoken of old times that were long gone and her movements had been an attempt to expend the energy that had built up within her and become powerful feelings that obstinately refused to be ignored. She stopped and stared out through the one-way tinted glass and then turned and sat down beside Caius again and her eyes were brimming and she snatched a napkin from the table in front of them and placed it to her eyes to absorb the tears that fell and she stifled a sob.

Caius grabbed her and turned her to him. His concerned voice was soft, gentle.

Caius: Lucett, what's wrong? Tell me. Why do you weep?

She took a deep breath. Her hands dropped to her lap and she glanced up at the low ceiling and spoke to herself, admonished herself.

Lucett: Stop it! Gather yourself!

She looked directly at Caius. Her cobalt-blue eyes cleared and she smiled slightly.

Lucett: I'm all right. You've just got me all messed up inside and I'm feeling like, acting like a young girl.

Caius: What do you mean messed up?

Lucett: I think about you more than I should and I feel you more than I should.

She grabbed her glass and slumped back against the couch.

Lucett: The other night I had a dream about you and I woke up with my finger in my thing and I was all juicy.

Caius chuckled.

Lucett: It's not funny. Don't laugh. That's teenage stuff. When you say my name the way you can, I almost melt and I can't think about the way your kiss made me feel. Right now, being in your arms, being close to you, my thing is on fire.

Caius: Let's not call it a thing.

Lucett: Call it whatever you want baby cause it's yours. I'm saving it for you. I haven't been with anyone since we met.

Caius: It hasn't even been a week. You've been busy.

Lucett: Five days. Five days is half a lifetime in *Center World*. Besides, it seems longer and it's not about being busy. You don't know how I am, how I can be. I don't want anyone else.

She turned to him and smiled.

Lucett: I'll wait on you.

Caius got up and walked near the wall and stared out at the dancers.

Caius: Do you remember the first night we talked and I confessed my love for you?

Lucett: There's no way I could forget that.

Caius turned to look at Lucett.

Caius: You said, "Everybody can't love. Some humans don't have the ability to love and some humans can't believe that they're worthy of love." You remember saying that?

Lucett: Yes.

Caius: And I asked if you were like that and you said you didn't know.

Lucett: I don't know.

Caius: And that's why you're messed up, as you put it, because you want to know. What you feel when I say your name, when I touch you, look at you, kiss you, is the love I have for you. When you sit next to me there's a part of you deep in your soul that recognizes that love for what it is and wants that, needs that and deserves it. You must believe you're worthy of love and you'll have to love me so you can be loved. As you give, so shall you receive. You struggle against all that but it's going to be all right because love is going to win. Love always wins because from love comes life.

Now Caius walked slowly before her and her gaze followed

him as he moved.

Lucett: Say what's on your mind.

He didn't look directly at her. He was thinking, remembering and then his soft words came, low and even.

Caius: You say you've been without, that you're willing to wait. Well, from the time I was nine until I was thirteen I searched for you and then I found you. From when I was thirteen until sixteen, many days, before and after school I would wait across the street or around the corner from your office or at night I would linger outside the casino hoping to get a glimpse of you. Just to see you motivated me and gave me incentive, not just to finish school but to get my first job, to study at what I've become in the field of technology. Understand this. Love inspires, animates, influences and Lucett my darling, love arouses.

Caius sat down next to her and she turned to him.

Caius: You've had sex. But you've never made love. In that way you and I are the same. You've been without for five days. I've been without too. I've always been waiting for you.

Lucett's eyes grew wide and then she seemed confused.

Lucett: Oh no. You mean ... you don't mean? ...

Caius: Yes, I'm a virgin.

Lucett took several deep breaths and then drained the liquor from her glass.

Lucett: This is too much! This is way too much Caius!

The young man took the woman into his arms.

Caius: A kiss.

He kissed her. She received much more from this kiss than she had ever received and he gave, from his love for her, much more than he had ever given. And when he released the gasping, weakened woman, her eyes fluttered and she smiled, almost laughed. He smiled and winked.

Caius: Good things come to those who are able to wait.

LLOYD AND LENA

Lloyd had a long car sent from Ann Arbor and he and Lena had gone to the restaurant at the casino to have a late meal with Leo and his wife.

After eating they played poker and then some blackjack and finally shot craps for a while. There was something lacking in these activities and there was also something that hung densely in the air between the father and daughter, but neither wanted to acknowledge it. However both, for some inexplicable reason, could not deny this thing that rose and hovered around them. They sensed danger.

They decided to go to the ballroom so they could dance together. It was only half full and the floor was nearly empty. They were shown to a small booth in a corner and sat and watched the few couples that glided around the floor.

Champagne had been delivered for Lena and Lloyd decided on carbonated water. They toasted, a silent salutation, touched glasses and in the dimness they finally looked directly at one another.

Lena wore a long, shiny, silver gown with a split that exposed her right leg to the thigh. She carried a small clutch with a small silver pistol. The four inch silver high heels she wore brought her height to nearly six feet tall and with her natural hairstyle standing up, she appeared a little taller than Lloyd.

She was drenched in rhodium and platinum and gold and diamonds and even in the lowered illumination of the ambient light, she glittered.

Lloyd wore a tuxedo with a white coat and appeared as someone beyond formal and Lena had noticed the eyes that turned to him and the gazes that followed him as he had strolled away or walked back to the gaming tables in the other rooms.

She knew, had seen throughout the years that the unspoken questions being asked, the whispered inquiries being made consisted of, who is that dark-skinned man? Who is that dark-skinned woman and who are they, together?

Lloyd: You look absolutely stunning tonight. I'm glad we came out so I could see you like that.

She smiled and she saw that he saw the gold in her mouth but there was no fleeting frown or brief shadow. He returned to her a slight smile.

Lena: There's something about you in a tux. You always appear so handsome, so regal. I guess it reminds me of some of our best times that we've shared.

They sipped their drinks in silence. Then he rose and held out his hand, she took it and he escorted her to the dance floor. They came together close, and he led her around the floor to music that was meant for two people to hold one another and be in concert and move in rhythm.

There was no band so there was no break. The songs came one after the other. The tempos changed but were not too fast so they continued to dance together and when they could no longer stop looking deeply into one another's eyes, it was over. They returned to the booth and sipped their drinks and for a long while neither uttered a word.

He reached for the bottle, refilled her glass and when she extended her hand it went past the glass and grabbed his hand. He looked at her hand and then up into her eyes and words came to the father through the air without the daughter uttering a sound. She whispered seductively from behind these windows to her soul. He took a deep breath and spoke softly. She answered softly.

Lloyd: Stop, don't do that.

Lena: I can't stop. I can't help it.

Lloyd: Yes you can. What's going on with you tonight?

Lena: I don't know. What's going on with you?

He turned away and watched the dancers as she watched him. She pushed the glass of champagne away.

Lena: I've had enough.

Lloyd: You ready to go home?

Lena: Yes.

Lloyd pressed on the Comm device on his wrist and a hologram of the full device opened up and spread onto his palm and he pressed a key and connected to a programmed number. The microphone beneath his lapel picked up his voice and the small clear receiver behind his left ear was sent the response.

Lloyd: Pull the car up front. We're on the way out.

As he rose she grabbed his arm.

Lena: I'm sorry.

Lloyd: Are you?

She thought a moment and then stood and reached for her clutch.

Lena: No, I'm not.

They rode in silence and once again something shimmered around them as they observed the outline of the black silhouetted trees pass by outside their windows and Lena looked up through the glass roof and could not see the stars or the moon behind the floating clouds.

They stood in the humid night air and watched the driver pull away and saw the red taillights become small dots and then disappear. All was quiet except for the crickets and then a bird seemed to call out, perhaps to warn them both.

They entered the house and Lloyd turned right, into a sitting room. He removed his coat and laid it on a chair. He unfastened his holster and placed it and his pistol beside the coat and when

he turned around Lena was standing at the entrance to the room. She took one step and tossed her bag toward a chair and it fell to the floor. Her voice was husky, sensual and demanding. His was soft, firm.

Lena: A kiss!

Lloyd: You need to stop this.

Lena: Kiss me!

Lloyd: No.

Lena: You must!

Lloyd: Please Lena, stop!

Lena: I won't. Not until you kiss me like I want, like I need. I saw you looking at me.

Lloyd became exasperated. His voice was pained.

Lloyd: How can I not! You knew what you were doing! Look at your color, your hair, even the gold tooth!

Lena kicked off her shoes and began ripping her clothes off. Her voice rose.

Lena: This dark-brown is me! This hair is mine!

Her tattered dress was being thrown around the room. She was naked. There was nothing that remained on her body except for the jewelry and against her dark-chocolate-colored skin the gold changed colors and the metals flashed silver and blue and the diamonds sparkled as she moved slowly toward him.

Lena: This body is mine! You created it! You gave me immortal life and right now I'm suffering as if dying!

Lloyd's voice rose in anguish as he stepped back.

Lloyd: It's her! It's all her! The way you walk and talk! You're not the only one suffering!

Lena: You left me for seventeen years! I didn't know where you were or when you were coming back! I didn't change for you! I changed for me! I can't help who you made with my mother.

Lloyd's voice lowered, softened.

Lloyd: I never left you, we were always connected. You called for me over the wind. You needed me and I came to you.

Lena's voice lowered. She smiled just a little as she fought to keep tears from forming.

Lena: You saved me then now save me again. I'm in pain I tell you. I need you again, now.

She took another step forward and he wanted to step away, to leave the room but he couldn't move. He stared at her eyes, her dimples, her breasts, her body. She spoke softly, seductively.

Lena: I'll change, any color you want, my hair, my eyes, I'll alter everything for you. Just a kiss, please one kiss, like you love her.

Lloyd: Do you know what you're asking? Have you forgotten what happens?

Lena: I haven't forgotten. I don't care. I want it.

Lloyd: I don't.

Lena: Yes you do. I'm not afraid and I won't hurt you. It's the thought behind our kiss.

Now she hollered and opened her arms to her father, inviting him into them.

Lena: It's been ninety years! If you love me do it!

She stepped forward and as she drew closer the tears fell from her eyes and as he blinked away a tear he moved toward her and he repeated her words.

Lloyd: It's the thought behind our kiss.

He took his daughter into his arms and then came the kiss. It was incestuous and forbidden. It was long and passionate. She sent, through her feverish breath, fire and pain and pieces of ecstasy. He sent, through his feverish breath, a searing heat and a hint of unbearable pleasure. And each tasted on the tongue of the other the thrilling possibility of death. Their unnatural strength was controlled even as their embrace tightened. They clung to each other and hung on desperately for their very lives.

Finally she grew weak, he became lightheaded and then her arms fell to her sides and she lost consciousness. He was barely able to hold her. He struggled to lift her but he did. He staggered with her in his arms through the house and placed her limp body onto her bed. In the darkened room he sat beside her with his throbbing head in his hands as his temperature rose. It was nearly an hour before he felt her hand lightly on his arm. He looked at her. She could barely speak. He could barely reply.

Lena: Are you all right?

Lloyd: Me?

He lifted her up and rocked her. She could hardly raise her arms to hug him, but she did.

Lena: I'll be fine.

He eased her back down and when he looked at her she managed, with effort, to gently wipe with her left thumb a tear from beneath his right eye, from the barely discernible scar.

Lloyd: Is that what you wanted? Was it worth it?

She smiled, a wan smile and yet it was filled with an essence of tranquility. She took a deep breath, then another.

Lena: Yes, that's what I wanted. Yes, it was worth it and yes, I would die to have you, for you to be the first and only.

Lloyd: Without you I have no reason to live.

Lena: You are my life. And now we can go forward together. All is right between us again.

Lloyd stood. He began to remove his clothes.

Lloyd: Let us sleep together.

Lena watched as Lloyd revealed himself to her. She saw his powerful naked darkness as she had seen in similar circumstances one hundred and eighty-seven years in the past, ninety years ago and now with transitory lust having dissipated to nothingness, along with the evaporation of guilt, remorse, regrets and restrictive shame, there remained the relationship and their bond

of two hundred years and the reality of who they truly were together, and apart.

They lay beside one another and with his right hand Lloyd grasped Lena's left hand. It was as if all they had seen together, experienced together, slowly passed between them. And both closed their eyes and in the silence, each could hear and feel the beating of the other's heart.

Lloyd: I love you Georcelena.

Lena: And I love you father.

They fell into a deep restful sleep. It was a dreamless repose and when the daughter would awake, the father would be gone.

ROM AND CLEE

At two in the morning all was quiet in the warehouse. Rom locked the main door to his rooms. He then went into his master bedroom and opened the door to the walk-in closet and turned the light on, as instructed.

The back wall of the closet slowly, silently slid open and Clee stepped from the darkness into the light. She hurried to Rom's opened outstretched arms and they embraced. Rom whispered.

Rom: How is this possible? Where did you come from?

Clee leaned from the embrace and spoke, her somewhat thick voice normal, her words assured and precise.

Clee: No one hears us. No one observes us. I came from a secret passageway about which only I know. Hello Rom.

Rom: Hello Clee.

He kissed her full, soft, red-hued lips, surprising her and when he looked into her now widened eyes she smiled and he returned the smile.

Clee: A kiss.

Rom: Yes, a kiss for you.

He took her hand and as they moved toward the main rooms, she questioned.

Clee: What is the meaning of your gesture? I've seen it performed so many times.

They entered the large living room area.

Rom: Shall we sit? How long do we have?

Clee: Not just yet.

She took both of his hands and she held them and they stood in the middle of the room, separated but close.

Clee: I must depart as the sun comes up on this Saturday.

Rom: The kiss, perhaps instinctual and intuitive, perhaps originating from mothers feeding their babies, can mean so much. A symbolic ritual or simply a greeting indicating respect.

He paused and now they moved, with hands joined, slowly in a circle.

Clee: Go on.

Rom: Did you know that some animals kiss? From insects to birds, dogs and cats, chimpanzees, even the mighty bears ...

He pulled Clee close and buried his face in her neck and placed it against her cheek.

Rom: ... they nuzzle.

Clee pulled back and laughed softly.

Clee: Oh Rom. You've changed and yet you haven't.

She dropped his hands and moved away. She wore a light-yellow summer dress and soft, flat, white shoes and she spun in a circle and the dress flared out and then she pointed when she stopped.

Clee: I asked you the meaning of your kiss.

Rom went to Clee and with both hands, took her right hand and lifted it and bused it lightly.

Rom: My kiss to your hand or cheek could mean affection, respect, hello or farewell.

He took her into his arms and she looked up into his eyes and they both stared in silence. Then the *Entity* called Rom spoke with quiet confidence.

Rom: You were designed for me and I for you. Anywhere, or anyhow I touch you, be it with my hands, my lips or my gaze, it will be my gesture of devotion and love and an expression of my passion for you always and forever.

Then the *Entity* called Clee responded.

Clee: You experience passion, how?

Rom: Through my thoughts. We experience through thought. Humans experience through feeling. It is the thought behind the kiss.

Clee: You have changed. You never kissed me before in our past. Rom, your kiss that awakened me was my first one ever. I had never experienced that before. Kiss me again, my love. I'll close my eyes this time and I'll think of you.

And so the two unfeeling, uncaring *Entities* put their lips together and slightly opening their mouths they breathed lightly and it was as if in the breath that indicates life they passed an element of soul to one another and thoughts of hope and possibility raced through their processing minds. Then Clee's arms dropped to her side and then were lifted to push Rom gently but firmly away and she moved and sat down heavily on the couch.

Clee: It's hopeless Rom. It's hopeless.

Her voice was filled with despair. Rom sat down beside her and when he reached out she pushed his arms away.

Rom: Why do you speak like that? I'll carry you away.

Clee: Bru has also installed a concealed program inside of me. If he activates it my processors will overheat and I'll be destroyed. We would have to put great distance between him and us or he'll do us like he did my rabbits.

Rom: Your rabbits?

Clee: Years ago we lived on an isolated farm in *West World*. Bru caused trouble and we had to leave quickly. He shot all my pets. I asked him to let them go, to free them but he destroyed them and burnt the farm down.

Rom: Why would he do that?

Clee: He is Bru. It's what he does. He would destroy us rather than let us go.

Rom: He has to be disabled.

Clee: Neither you nor I can raise a hand against him. We're not designed that way. We've been ordered to remain passive. I have to stay away from him. I am unable to lie but I'm unable to speak of things that would cause you harm. If Bru were to question me about you, my silence would speak volumes to him.

Rom: I'll find a way for us. Have faith.

Clee: I'm an *Entity*. Faith is based on feelings. I have none.

Rom: I felt your kiss and you felt mine. As you think, you shall be. I'm changing. Even as we speak, my thoughts are turning. I'll rise against our nemesis. I'll save you. You'll be free and we'll be together. Only the death of deactivation can part us.

Rom put his hand beneath Clee's chin and lifted and turned her face so they could look into each other's eyes.

Rom: I promise you, if you so desire you'll have rabbits again and if you like we'll live in a farmhouse with a white picket fence and cows and horses if you want.

Rom pulled Clee close and she placed her head on his shoulder and put an arm across his waist and listened as he quietly spoke of their future and shared with her what he could of his friends Lloyd and Lena and made another promise, that she would one day meet them.

As the sun slowly began to rise, Clee slipped back into the passageway and when the wall closed, Rom was left alone with

his thoughts and from the determination that fueled his ideas, new plans began to form.

As Clee made her way through the darkness she knew their time grew short. She began to further devise plans of her own.

THE RANCH

It was one in the afternoon when Lena appeared in the opened doorway of Lloyd's office. She was dressed in beige shorts and a white cotton top and white socks. Lloyd was sitting in a chair in front of a large screen on the wall looking at images of individuals.

Lena: What, no breakfast?

Lloyd didn't stop what he was doing or turn around.

Lloyd: It's one in the afternoon, you mean lunch?

She walked up beside him to place her hand against his cheek to feel his temperature.

Lena: I'm just awakening so it's breakfast time. Are you well?

Lloyd: I am. I trust you are.

Lena: Yes I am, and hungry. I didn't smell coffee or anything. Have you eaten?

Lloyd: Just some juice. I wasn't hungry.

Lena: How about some eggs and cereal and a cup of coffee? I'll bring it in here.

Lloyd: That sounds fine.

It wasn't long before Lena returned with a tray.

Lena: Come on, you can do that at the desk. Don't let the eggs get cold.

He moved to the desk and turned on the monitor and as they ate, they went over images of those who would be at the meeting that Lloyd informed Lena, would be Sunday evening at eight. When they finished, Lena sent a notification to Rom and showed

Lloyd how there was a block in place.

Lena: I can't reach him and there's been no contact since his first message indicating he had arrived.

Lloyd looked at the worried, imploring look in Lena's eyes.

Lloyd: What's your plan?

Lena: I don't have one completed yet.

Lloyd: When you do, let me hear it and see it.

Lena: What are we doing today? How long do I have?

Lloyd: We're going to the city at six. We're taking the silver bike so dress appropriately.

They stood up and gathered the cups and dishes.

Lloyd: I need to know exactly what you want to accomplish if we go look for Rom. You know how I am about interfering in matters such as this. As I told Rom, this belongs to him.

Lena: I understand.

Her mood changed. She smiled and picked up the tray and with dance steps, glided toward the door.

Lena: I'll see you at six.

After Lena left, Lloyd sat back down at his desk. He again pulled up images on the monitor before him, one by one. He enlarged the face of each image and stared directly into the eyes of each person whose head filled the screen. His own eyes widened and as if he entered a trance he was motionless. Then he reached out slowly and touching the screen, he placed his right hand over the person's face, covering it, and held it there. His eyes would close for several long moments as he performed this ritual four times. The images were of Mace, Poins, Ursula and included Wart.

He turned off the Comm devices and walked to the glass doors leading out to the garden behind the rooms. He looked at the trees and the flowers and then slid one door open and stepped outside. He took a stroll to cool his now heated body.

THE 'SIDERS

All the different factions, their leaders and all the underlings, prepared in their own way for the Sunday night meeting.

Saturday afternoon Dar was sitting by his pool beneath a large umbrella, sipping on a margarita. He was dressed in powder-blue linen pants and shirt and white sandals. Dark sunglasses hid his sensitive eyes from the bright sun. His head had just quit aching and the thought of straight tequila turned his stomach, so a mixed drink it was.

He went over details in his head and having just been notified by Mace that the Barbarians would need four days advance notice he decided to propose the attack be launched six days from Sunday.

He poured more of the drink from his pitcher and settled back and tapped his foot. He looked at his glass and felt something was missing. He picked up one of the little colorful paper umbrellas and stuck it in his glass and stirred his drink. He smiled in satisfaction.

Quin was lying in bed with no clothes on. It was an afternoon of ups and downs. He was sick and had been down on his back and then up, running to the bathroom. He wasn't throwing up anything but liquid. He was empty except for the drinks he kept consuming to replace his depleted electrolytes. Then he would drink more liquid to replace what he lost that came out of him from two directions, up and down.

He was waiting to hear from Sug who had sent people out to search for Nell, who had somehow disappeared. He wanted his wife to clean up the putrid mess he had made in the library and get rid of the fetid towels strewn throughout the bathroom.

The front of his body, along with his face, was slathered in a

creamy mixture of hydrogel and lidocaine in an attempt to heal and numb the surfaces burned from the friction of the rug. He lay there staring at the ceiling and silently cursing his wife. Then as he began to curse Lucett aloud, he jumped up and headed for the bathroom, again.

At four in the afternoon Lucett was in her office at the casino. Caius sat beside her and Tal sat across from her. The Comm device on the desk was set to speaker.

Lucett: All right, let me hear it back.

Ursula: Everyone is to be in place so we can leave at seven fifteen. The security force will be dressed in our uniforms and five are to be placed outside and five are going to the fifth floor and are to be stationed outside the meeting room. Jul and I, along with the *Sarará* brothers, are to be your personal guards and are to be in the room with you. Our forces will have one pistol, no rifles will be needed. Is that all?

Lucett: You personally chose those who represent us, your close associates?

Ursula: Yes, I trust them all.

Lucett: And how are you feeling?

The chief of security could be heard making sniffing sounds. Then she coughed, twice.

Ursula: I feel fine.

Lucett: I'm sure you do and we're all thankful for that. Any questions?

Ursula: If I think of anything I'll let you know tomorrow.

Lucett: Don't forget to wear your full dress uniform with your decorations. You'll look very impressive in that. You'll be representing us properly.

Ursula: I'll remember. I've got it laid out.

Lucett: All right, until tomorrow evening.

The call was ended. Lucett was thinking as she tapped her fingers on the desk.

Lucett: Caius, tomorrow you'll drive the brown car. Tal, you'll ride with me.

The leader of the Northsiders took another moment to think. Then she smiled at her long-time CFO and spoke to him.

Lucett: Now go enjoy your evening. Tomorrow is a big day.

Tal departed and Lucett grabbed her bag.

Lucett: Let's go get Uncle.

LLOYD AND LENA

At six that evening Lloyd and Lena were standing in the barn preparing to depart. Lloyd was dressed in black pants and black boots and a dark-silver shirt. He wore a somewhat thin black leather jacket. Lena wore black boots, black pants and a black shirt and the same type of light-leather jacket as Lloyd only hers was dark-red.

They would take a large powerful silver and black touring bike with saddlebags and a black sidecar, in which Lena would ride. They took helmets, one strapped to the bike and one in the car. They wouldn't wear them unless they thought it was necessary. Both the bike and sidecar had windshields but they wore stylish goggles anyway. Lloyd's were black and silver and Lena's were black and red. They each carried two handguns on their sides with extra ammunition in the saddlebags. When Lena placed a small valise at her feet they were ready to go.

It was just beginning to cool and although it had topped out at eighty-seven degrees this late August day, the humidity had been relatively low and so as they reached the highway they could stick their hands out and feel a comfortable breeze.

First they stopped in Jackson at a small park not far from downtown. This was a place other bikers congregated on one side and picnickers and families gathered on the other. They talked with associates and acquaintances and then after an hour they moved on.

In Ann Arbor, Leo, Tu, and the head of technology came down from the office and the group spoke of several business matters, exchanged updated information and finalized plans for Sunday. After forty minutes they were on their way to Detroit.

For the two of them it had been a leisurely, scenic ride and so it was nearing ten as they pulled into their secluded spot along the water not far from downtown.

A black light-duty truck and a white van awaited their arrival. They pulled off their goggles. They left the bike and with Lena carrying the valise the two walked toward the vehicles. Meg and Nic got out of the truck and three of their associates exited the van. Greetings and introductions were made and Lloyd suggested they sit at the nearby picnic table. Lloyd and Lena sat on one side, Meg and Nic sat across from them. The other three stood close behind their two sitting friends.

The short *Parda-clara DTW*, who had presented, at their previous meeting, with silver hair, now wore a burnt-orange shade and a different nose ring.

Lena: I like your hair Meg. You've changed your ring. It's nice.

Meg: Thanks Lena.

Lena smiled, looked at the similar hair colors and spoke to the *DTM* with orange hair.

Lena: Well Nic, I see Meg, I see you.

Nic smiled and blushed just a little.

Nic: Yeah, we're kind of both on the same path.

Lloyd: So, what's going on Meg?

Meg: Can you tell us how to get to Wart? He's being continually guarded by five well-armed guards. They're stationed outside and on his porch.

Lloyd: Did you and your group visit Vau?

Meg: Yes we did. Was that all right?

Lloyd: Yes it was. It appears that you're on a mission.

Lena: It was good work.

Meg: Thank you.

Lloyd: How many are in your group?

Meg: Just these five right now. Wart has ordered three to be delivered tomorrow, a *DF*, a *DM* and a female child. His guard is scheduled to pick them up from his new procurer. We can intercept the guard and stop the transfer, we can take care of his supplier later but we need to get to Wart.

Lloyd: Tell us how you're going to stop the guard.

Meg quickly shared the plan.

Lena: That should work.

Lloyd: Listen, all of you.

The three standing drew closer.

Lloyd: It sounds like you have good, reliable sources. First, pay them all well. Second, try to ensure those who provide you information have a connection with your cause, perhaps have been affected somehow by individuals such as Wart and those he depends on. If they are aligned with you in that manner you have a better chance of them remaining loyal to you. If they are involved just for the value they can acquire they can easily be bought by the highest bidder. You need at least five more to join you so you have sufficient backup. You're too thin as you are. Don't rush it. Decide between you who are here now exactly what type of individuals you want, set your standards and stick to them, don't waver. Set up your base of operation within an area

of the Westsiders' territory, Dearborn perhaps. I've spoken to Leo, he admires you from our last encounter and will assist you in finding a suitable place. Now, you need to acquire a small fleet of vehicles and switch them at least monthly or alter them as often as you can. Stay on your own course only. Deal with that which you deem important. We all understand what that is. Wart and individuals of his ilk are basically loners or paired up. They don't want to share. The procurers and the traffickers can be of a group and will be much more dangerous to you. Treat them accordingly. Finally, you need to upgrade your arsenal. Leo will introduce you to our supplier and an instructor to train you and provide you with all the information you'll need. Practice with all your weapons. You don't have to be experts but you do need to be good. Good will always be better than the average that you'll normally face.

He looked at each one, holding them in his gaze. They stared at him and each one was focused, serious and had hung on every word. It was as if they withheld their breath, refused to breathe.

Lloyd: Who leads your group?

Meg: I do.

Lloyd: Your second in command is ...

Nic: That would be me.

He turned and nodded to Lena. She opened the valise and slid it across the table and placed it in front of Meg and Nic. Their eyes widened at the contents.

Lena: This will initially fund your group. You'll also have to create value to sustain yourselves. How you do that is up to you. Wart has a safe in his bedroom. The procurer has value stashed somewhere and when the guard makes his pick up value will be exchanged for property. Wart has drugs also. Don't try to be drug dealers. You'll jeopardize all you hope to accomplish.

Tears filled Meg's eyes and Nic grabbed her hand.

Meg: I don't know what to say.

Lloyd: This is your opportunity to make a difference. Handle this properly. If you don't, we'll of course be made aware of that. We believe in your cause and we also believe if you die in the pursuit of it, your life will have had meaning. You'll know how you've lived by how you die. If all goes as planned, Detroit and thus Michigan, will over the next several years, become a much more civilized place.

Lena: Let's join hands.

The standing three leaned over and they all joined hands.

Lena: Now, remember this. You must ultimately ensure that it is known, understood and believed by everyone who thinks to oppose you and by anyone who attempts to betray you that they will be destroyed.

There were quiet words of agreement and positive sounds of affirmation. They released hands. Lena closed the valise.

Lloyd: What time is Wart's guard due to make his pick up?

Nic: Between five and five thirty.

Lloyd and Lena looked at each other.

Lloyd: Can you be somewhere close to the vicinity of Wart's house by six thirty, within five minutes of it?

Meg: Yes.

Lloyd: Meet us at the corner of Wart's street at six thirty-three.

Lloyd and Lena stood at the same time.

Lloyd: Lena and I have an appointment at eight. On the way there we'll go by Wart's and take care of the guards for you.

They all moved to the parking area. There they exchanged hugs and handshakes and wishes of wellness. Lloyd mounted the bike and Lena stepped into the sidecar.

Lloyd: You'll find that your target will offer no resistance.

The bike was switched to electric mode and then started. The now quieted engine hummed. Lloyd's voice rose.

Lloyd: Protect yourself. Protect each other at all times and at all costs. Always remember. Here in *Center World* there is only life and death.

He put on his visored helmet and then as they eased off Lena called to them.

Lena: Bring enough gasoline with you to burn down Wart's houses when you leave.

She put on her visored helmet.

The five waved at the departing two, and those who remained knew they were watching two who were very special, ride away.

They synced their Comm devices and for the next two hours they reminisced as they visited areas they knew of from many, many years in the past. They stopped where Lena spent her first seven years and where Lloyd had gone to high school and at both places they looked at nothing and were forced to visualize what had once been.

When the memories turned over and began to weigh on them it was time to head home. Lloyd switched the bike to gasoline power and the exhaust system expressed itself as the pipes spoke up as he increased speed and they seemed to crackle and pop when he slowed down. Before heading for the highway to start home he asked in Lena's ear.

Lloyd: How about some chili dogs?

Lena: Sounds good to me.

Twenty minutes later they were sitting and eating at the chili stand they had stopped at before. Three large loud bikes rode into the parking lot with skulls and crossbones painted on them in different places. They glided to the rear chain-linked fence and turned and using their feet they backed up. An empty field lay behind them. They shut off their bikes, dismounted and began to remove their helmets. When the third biker took his helmet off

Lloyd nudged Lena and spoke with mild excitement.

Lloyd: Look.

Lena looked across the lot at the three black-leather clad *DMs* and recognized the tall, thick *Bronze DM* with the red ponytail as the one they had encountered before.

Lloyd: This must be my lucky day. It's the bully.

He began to rise.

Lena: Wait. Wait, let me get another bite.

She bit her hotdog and stood beside him and together they watched as the leader of the three moved and attempted to touch a young teenage *PF* who was walking past toward a car and when the young *DM* who was with her tried to intervene he was slapped by the bully and pushed and the biker loudly dared the young male to use his weapon and the three laughed as the *PF* grabbed her companion and pulled him away, in spite of his protestations, to their car. He remained outside the car as the *PF* continued her effort to calm him down and prevent any violence.

Lloyd strode forward and Lena crossed behind and walked past him to his right and moved closer to the two bikers as the bully turned and saw the dark man with two guns standing and staring at him. Then he heard a loud, cold, taunting voice.

Lloyd: Well, well, if it isn't the bully.

The biker stared and then it was obvious the moment he recognized who stood before him. The color drained from his bronze-colored face. He was able to pull himself together and call out.

Bully: You're bad luck! Bad luck! I don't want any trouble!

Lloyd called back.

Lloyd: But I want trouble!

The bully turned back and looked at his two cohorts and he then saw the dark woman with her right hand resting comfortably on the gun at her left side. She was staring at the two who kept

looking from Lena to their running mate.

Lloyd: Is that your new bike, the one without the mirrors?

The loud voice was growing hard, menacing, and the biker was confused. He saw this person in front of him take two steps forward and stop with his legs spread slightly.

Bully: My bike has mirrors.

The dark man, with his right hand, pulled the gun at his left side, fired twice and the black gun disappeared back into its holster. The biker barely saw the movement it was so fast but he heard the two reports of the gun and recognized the sharp, clear, tinging sound of the bullets striking metal.

He didn't even turn. He watched the smoke rise into the air and he smelled the gunpowder and his heart skipped as his stomach flipped.

Lloyd: I like that bike, even without the mirrors.

Everyone was staring except for those who had ducked, jumped behind cars or moved behind the small building. Theirs was a quick, furtive glance as they concealed themselves and then even the peepers were watching and listening.

Bully: Wait, I ...

He swallowed his words. The dark man yelled and pointed with his right hand.

Lloyd: I'm taking that bike!

Bully: You can't take my bike.

His words were weak. Each one faded. Strong, harsh words came back at him.

Lloyd: You've got two choices! You can toss that bike starter on your belt into that trash can and walk away ...

Lloyd was beyond angry.

Lloyd: ... or you can use that gun on your hip! Bully!

The biker was sweating but he knew he couldn't lift his hand to touch his face. He couldn't move, or speak.

Lloyd: I'm calling you out! Don't make me count it off!

The biker spread out his left hand and moved it slowly, very slowly to the fob hanging from his belt near his left side at his knife. He watched the dark man's eyes in the now expressionless face. He lifted the small black device and turning, he walked past the trash can and dropped it in. He kept walking, across the sidewalk, into the street he went and cars honked as they nearly struck the dark clothed man. He dared not look back.

His two cohorts stared at Lena as they eased to their bikes and it was as if they didn't want to make too much noise, not draw any attention so they put up their kick stands and pushed their bikes to the sidewalk, started them up and rode off. They went in the opposite direction of the one walking.

Lena went back and sat down next to Lloyd. She took a bite of her food and looked at him and frowned.

Lena: Now my dog is cold. He should have been shot just for that.

He was trying to calm down. He looked at the angry look on her face and then she smiled and he had to chuckle.

Lena: My hero.

Lloyd: You want another one? It's on me.

Lena: All right, one more. I'm saving room. I've got one last slice of Mom's lemon meringue pie left.

Lloyd: Your favorite.

As she finished her chili dog everyone who had witnessed the confrontation made it a point, no matter where they were, to walk to the large trash can near the two who sat at the table and discard their garbage, rubbish and all so called refuse waste.

It was another warm, very clear and beautiful starry night. The father and daughter looked up into the expansive endless above and found it within themselves to appreciate the fragility of life

and permanence of death as only they could, being they were the oldest humans who had ever lived and perhaps would ever live and tomorrow they would once again put their immortal lives on the line.

Lloyd put the bike into electric mode, they put on their goggles and Lena settled back. She turned the music on, put on their favorite song and sang along. Then she changed the music from one genre to another to another and continued to sing loudly and when Lloyd looked at her she hollered out, above the passing wind.

Lena: I've got more than one favorite!

THE WAREHOUSE

Rom had worked all day Saturday and throughout the night deciphering Bru's code. He paused and looked up. High above him the skylight revealed the altering sky. Darkness was going, fading. Sunday morning was arriving, slowly.

He was sitting in the technology area before the large screen. Code was scrolling and stopping then rapidly moving again. He had been making corrections and noting them with explanations and suggestions on a second Comm device that put these entries onto another large screen that hung before him.

He was coming close to what should be the end of one section and the beginning of another. Suddenly the sections were altered, the program instructions then changed and what Rom suspected was confirmed.

Bru had been sitting next to him. He could sense Bru staring intently at him and then looking at the screens. Suddenly Bru placed his hand on the keys, preventing Rom from touching them. Then Bru pressed several buttons and all the devices went dark.

Bru: You're done now.

Rom turned to Bru.

Rom: Where's my vehicle?

Bru: It's not where you left it?

Rom: No it isn't.

Bru stood and looked down at Rom.

Bru: If it's not where you left it *Entities* twelve through fifteen must have moved it to the garage. They like to tinker, to take things apart and put them back together again and build things too. Don't be concerned. When they're done it will be as good as new, even better.

He turned to leave.

Rom: My device is blocked and has been for several days. I can't send or receive notifications.

Bru turned back. His Locks moved and settled.

Bru: We're having some transmission problems. Some minor glitches, as they say. All should be corrected soon.

He turned again, began to walk away. Rom raised his voice.

Rom: Where's Clee?

Bru kept walking and raised his voice to be heard.

Bru: I have no idea. Clee comes and goes as she pleases. Have you lost her again?

He laughed loudly and his next words were nearly shouted.

Bru: I shall be gone all day! Until tonight then, my brother!

THE GUARD AND THE CHEMIST

It was five twenty, late afternoon on Sunday and Wart's guard was stopped at a red light in his blue transport van. Suddenly the black truck in front of him backed up and bumped his van, hard. He put his vehicle into park and honked his horn, long blasts. He never saw the white van directly behind him that had moved

up close. Nobody from the black truck had gotten out and the truck didn't move when the light turned green. The guard honked again and as he prepared to get out he looked down to his left and saw a person with orange hair.

Meg opened fire with a large handgun, four shots through the glass. Before reaching with her hand into the van through the shattered window she tried the door. It was unlocked so she snatched it open and put three more bullets into the guard.

Nic and two others from the white van came and pulled the body out. Two dragged it back and loaded it into the van. Nic got behind the wheel of the blue van and with Meg riding beside him the three vehicles drove away, turned the corner and headed west.

At six thirty the two guards standing on Wart's porch saw a large black vehicle turn onto the cul-de-sac street and start slowly toward them. It was two blocks away. They commented on the strange thing that was rolling quietly.

Guard One: What is that?

Guard Two: It looks like a small tank.

Guard One: Or a large Ranger.

Guard Two: Look at that chrome grille, looking like it's grinning.

The vehicle was now a block closer.

Guard One: Those wheels sure are shiny, and big.

Guard Two: See if Wart is expecting anybody.

Guard Two called out to the three on the sidewalk who were smoking drug sticks and laughing and talking. He pointed.

Guard Two: Look! Look!

The three turned and stared, warily. Guard One had pulled out his Comm device and called Wart.

Guard One: No answer.

As he was holding the Comm device to his ear he was shot through the head and blood and brains splattered against the steel

bars and door and Two, having seen no muzzle flash and without hearing any sound of a shot was momentarily confused. Then he looked back at the black thing now directly in front of the house and was shot twice in the chest and tumbled down the stairs.

The three guards near the street had been looking at the tinted windows of the strange vehicle that stopped in front of them and when One fell heavily onto the porch they all looked back and seeing the body, and then Two falling, they crouched and moved and Three and Five pulled their pistols and Four raised his rifle and they began to fire. Bullets bounced off the tank-like thing and Four was shot through his head as Three and Five began to run in different directions. As Three started to flee between the houses to the backyard, Lena's driver's side window lowered and she fired her silenced pistol five times and Three was driven to the ground as Lloyd, firing through a narrow lowered middle section of the window behind Lena, put three shots into Five.

While Lena eased her uniquely designed and constructed vehicle she had named Baby forward so she could turn around, Lloyd was using controls near his right hand to swivel his seat and slide it back into its position in the rear row and then, while stooping, he moved to the front passenger seat that had been extended back and seated himself and as Lena turned Baby around, again using the controls on his arm rest, Lloyd slid that seat forward, back into its original position.

Lena started up the street as Lloyd fastened his rifle into the holder. Lena stopped at the corner and as she was removing the combination silencer and flash suppressor from her black pistol they watched a black truck and white van approaching. The truck, with Meg driving pulled up to Lena's side. Nic followed in the van. He waved. Lloyd acknowledged him. Meg called out.

Meg: Thank you both. We go to dispense our personal justice.

Lloyd put up his hand and called back.

Lloyd: You're very welcome.

Lena held out her hand and Meg reached and touched it.

Lena: It was our pleasure. You'll find your prey anxiously awaits your arrival, and all that he is due.

The truck and van sped down the street. The tinted window rose and the dark man and dark woman watched in their side mirrors as the truck pulled into the driveway behind the guards' two cars and the van drove onto the lawn near the porch. Lena drove off. Their destination, a little over twenty minutes away.

Lloyd: Wart's schedule has been changed. He won't make his appointment. There's a new plan.

Lena: That raping, butchering chemist is no more.

Meg, with an associate at her side and with their guns drawn, jumped from the truck and as Nic leaped from the van the rear door opened and the other two members of the group spilled out with one carrying a duffle bag. Nic and one associate met the two waiting at the steel door as the remaining member began to collect the weapons of the dead guards and go through their pockets for anything of value and prepare to stand as lookout.

Two of the four began working on the door. They used steel bars to pry at it and clamps to pull at it and then Metal Vapor Torches to start cutting at the bolts and the locks.

Wart was lying on the floor of his bedroom. He couldn't move anything but his head. He had been playing with his value cards, including his payment from Dar. His safe was open and he was standing before it when he had grown lightheaded and collapsed onto his back.

As he lay there he began to smell strong, overbearing aromas. He was thinking, trying to figure out what was going on. His guard wasn't cooking anything. He was running late and had not yet retuned with his playthings and so he didn't understand.

How could he experience the essence of rare juicy steak like this? Then he could taste his favorite, smothered pork chops and mashed potatoes and red wine gravy. His mouth began to drool again. He tried to call out to the guards outside. He could only make gurgling sounds. Now it was fried chicken and then shrimp. Lamb nearly choked him and he didn't even like lamb. In fact he hated lamb meat. But he saw a medium rare leg walking and he was gagging on a rib bone. He knew he was hallucinating. Where's the salad and vegetables? He adored roasted corn and collared greens with ham hocks.

Then he heard the sounds at his door. The guard had returned. He had food. But why was he tearing and banging at the door like that? Then he heard footsteps. He could feel his pistol. He had fallen on it. He could feel the riches underneath him. He was lying on them.

He rolled his head to the side and saw boots and then hate-filled eyes leaned over him. Meg snatched the sheet from the bed, pulled her knife from her side and cut it up and began stuffing pieces into Wart's open salivating mouth.

They dragged and pulled the immense body across the floor so one member could collect the value cards that had spread onto the floor after being tossed with great delight into the air. The other three began to snatch his shoes and socks off and cut Wart's clothing from his swollen form and then Meg and Nic took long spikes from the bag and pounded them through Wart's hands impaling him to the floor. It didn't matter that they had found him unmoving, they drove spikes through his bloated ankles anyway. Wart couldn't see his ankles past his huge protruding belly but he could see the rusty metal sticking up through his hands and watched Meg with a blowtorch in her hands as Nic lit it for her and he saw the little *DTW* with orange hair adjusting the flame and smiling as tears fell from her eyes.

THE MEETING AND THE PLAN

It was a little after seven when Lena backed Baby down the narrow elongated portion of an L shaped alley. She then maneuvered into the shorter dead end of the L and they now sat completely out of sight from the street and were just three blocks from where the meeting was to be held.

As Baby was easing through the alley the Eastsiders were five miles from the meeting spot. There were three vehicles. Being driven in a long car were Dar, Mace and Stra. Behind them, being driven in another long car were Var and Ira. Finally, in a large transport truck, the ten uniformed security personnel rode.

As they stopped at a red light Mace was looking out of his side window when he saw a large poster advertising a *DF* singing group appearing not far from there. The three performers stood close together smiling, with an image and name of the nightclub in large letters behind them. On each end a *Parda DF* was wearing a white dress and a wide white straw hat with a black ban. In the middle an *Escura DF* wore a black dress with a wide black straw hat with a white ban. Mace looked at the two he rode with. Dar was looking down at the Comm device in his hand. Stra was looking out of his side window. He had been told what Thurl had said. He spoke, to share this sight, to inform.

Mace: Dar.

The leader of the Eastsiders didn't look up.

Dar: What is it?

The car pulled off and the Eastsiders' head of security changed his mind.

Mace: Nothing.

They arrived at the building, deployed the five outside and the rest of the group, totaling another ten, moved up the four steps to the entrance. As Mace stood on one side of the revolving

center doors and held open a glass-framed door, Stra held open a door on the other side of the revolving doors and the rest filed in. They took two elevators to the fifth floor.

Lloyd and Lena had sat in silence, listening to soft soothing music until seven thirty and then she put on their song from 1968, turned up the volume a little and let the rear hatch up. They got out to prepare to confront those who were planning to do them harm.

They stepped into thick black pants and zipped them on each side, down from just below the waist to a little past their ankles. They put on heavy black jackets and zipped them up the front. They were each now dressed in a projectile repelling flexible shell suit made of triple layers of a lightweight but extremely strong combination of graphene and genetically engineered reinforced spider silk. They began to check their weapons and ammunition.

At seven thirty-five the Southsiders were pulling up in front of the building. Their contingent consisted of their leader Quin, along with Pains, Sug and Orsin, all being driven in a long car followed by an open transport truck of their ten uniformed, armed security personnel. Each security person carried a handgun and a rifle.

The four in the car got out. The truck pulled up and quickly unloaded. Sug positioned his five outside and the other nine went in and took two elevators up.

At seven forty-five Lloyd and Lena were ready. She helped him with his jetpack and before he put on his helmet they looked into each other's eyes and he spoke.
Lloyd: Drive them into the building. Clear one side and keep it clear.

Lena: I know. I will. We've been over everything. Don't worry. I'll be all right. You keep everybody in front of you.

Lloyd: Keep your count.

Lena: I will.

Lloyd: Be fierce.

Lena: I'll be as you taught me to be.

Lloyd: Let's establish our two-way connection.

They pulled up their left sleeves just a little, activated their Comm devices and synced them. Lloyd spoke, the thin wire at his left cheek picking up his voice.

Lloyd: Can you hear me?

Lena: I hear you. You're in my ear.

Lloyd: I hear you. We're connected.

Now it was time.

Lloyd: Let's finish this.

They placed their opened right palms on each other's chest, at the heart. They closed their eyes and each, deep within could feel the movement of the other's unique heart. Then their hearts were beating synchronously and they spoke, at the same time.

Lloyd and Lena: I feel you.

They were ready to proceed. He put on his gloves. She handed him his helmet and he put it on. She removed a large duffle from the back, handed it to him and he hung it around his neck at the front. She stepped away. He pressed a button on his right control that extended from the pack to his hand and the electrical power source came on. She spoke into his ear.

Lena: I'm coming. I'll meet you on the fifth floor.

He nodded, turned and taking three steps forward, he lifted into the air. He rose up between the buildings and when he cleared them he began to move to the left and he disappeared from her sight.

She quickly hung a bag cross body over her head on her left side and another that hung low past her pistol on her right side. She grabbed her large, long rifle Lloyd had special made for her and got in on the front passenger side.

On the street outside the building the Northsiders were pulling up. Caius drove, with Tal sitting in the front next to him and behind him sat Lucett, with Uncle to her right.

Ursula and Jul, being driven in a car, pulled up behind and got out as the transport truck stopped in the street and with Ursula directing, began to unload. They had come from the north so they had stopped across from the building. The car drove off, the truck emptied and pulled off and the ten security personnel, dressed in light-green uniforms, along with Jul and the two *Sarará* brothers moved to stand in front of the building.

Ursula was wearing her full dark-green dress uniform along with a peaked cap. She carried a pistol on her right side and her long knife on her left. She turned to Lucett and was motioned over to the car. She leaned close to talk to her leader through the opened window.

Lucett: You all set?

Ursula: Yes, we're ready.

Lucett smiled at her slightly.

Lucett: Station your five outside and the rest of you go on up. I have two calls to make and then I'll be there.

Ursula started across the street and Tal opened his door and began to get out.

Lucett: No Tal, you stay with me.

The leader of the Northsiders watched her chief of security as she entered the building and disappeared through the revolving doors.

In the alley, Lena heard Lloyd's voice in her ear.
Lloyd: I'm on the roof. I'll let you know when to start your approach.
Lena: I'll be ready to move when you say.
She leaned over and pressed a button on the dashboard. Baby came to life. The clear, authoritative and obvious *PF* voice coming from the sound system, resonated throughout the interior.
Baby: I await your command.
Lena: Hello Baby, we're back in business.
Baby: Say a command. Say a command.
Lena: Disregard.
Baby went silent.
Lena: Activate voice recognition. Vehicle related commands only.
Baby: Now in voice recognition mode.
Lena: Activate electric power.
Baby: Activating electric power.
Lena: Engage.
Baby: Electric power engaged.
Lena: Activate Auto Drive.
Baby: Activating Auto Drive.
Sensors lit up all around the vehicle, blinked once, blinked in rapid sequence and then remained on.
Baby: Auto Drive activated.
Lena: Engage.
Baby: Engaging Auto Drive, Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Auto Drive engaged

On the roof, Lloyd removed his helmet and bent and pulled items from the duffle. He placed two bags cross body on his left and right side below his two pistols. He then removed his large, long, custom-made rifle and loaded it with an extended magazine.

In the meeting room only a few of those present had taken seats. Dar removed his suit coat. He adjusted the pistol on the top of his right hip. He had received Ursula's information.

Dar: Typical of the Northsiders. They have arrived but have not arrived. Anyone who wants a drink, step up to the bar. We'll get started in just a little while.

The majority of the individuals moved toward the small corner bar. Drinks began to be poured. Sug started toward the opposite side to the restroom. Var stepped into the hallway and Orsin moved near the balcony doors to smoke.

Down on the street, Lucett nodded to Caius, who had been watching her in his rearview mirror. He pulled from the curb and drove to the end of the block and turned right. He went one block and turned right. He then went three blocks and turned right. At the next corner he made a right, drove to the middle of the block and pulled in. They were now parked two and a half blocks down from the building, still on the other side of the street and could see it clearly.

It was a little before eight when the heavy metal door of the small structure on the roof that led to the steps down into the building was unlocked, pushed open and an individual stepped out. Lloyd was squatted at his duffle, removing the last of the items he would be taking and he looked up and nodded. He was ready. He spoke to Lena as she activated her handheld device.

Lloyd: Start your approach.

Lena: I'm moving from the alley to the street.

She let her window up and then pressed the controls near her right hand and moved the passenger seat back to the side window and then turned it and she was now facing outward. She reached out and touching a control below the window she let a narrow

section of the glass down.

Lena: Set speed to five MPH.

Baby: Setting speed to five MPH.

Lena: Engage.

Baby: Engaging. Current speed, five MPH.

Baby crept forward, turned at the corner and started up the alley toward the street. Lena put on her tight black gloves, reached to her right and removed her black rifle from a holder and placed it across her lap. It was loaded with a magazine.

In the meeting room Dar was glaring at Mace who had downed a double shot of tequila, poured another double and walked with his glass to stand near the wall on the other side of the balcony doors. Pains was sitting at the table, sipping his drink and looking at his Comm device. Ursula had removed her hat, tossed it on a chair and was standing near the wall behind the table with Jul beside her. She turned and dumped some powder from a vial into her mouth.

Baby reached the end of the alley.

Lena: Stop vehicle.

Baby: Vehicle now stopped.

Lena: Activate GPS.

The GPS screen and map came on.

Baby: GPS now activated.

Lena looked both ways and then looked at her Comm device.

Lena: Increase speed to 10 MPH. Turn left.

Baby moved forward, turned left.

Baby: Current speed 10 MPH.

They came to the corner.

Lena: Stop vehicle.

Baby: Vehicle now stopped.

Lena: I'm stopped at the corner.

Baby: Clarify vehicle command. Say a command.

Lena: Hush Baby.

Baby: Say a command.

Lena: Disregard.

Baby went silent while on the roof the door to the steps leading down was being held open. The dark man picked up his helmet, handed the individual his rifle and spoke.

Lloyd: There'll be a large black vehicle positioned in the street out front you'll be able to look over and see. When it departs, this will be over. When communication is re-established contact the Disposers and the Cleaners. You know what to do after that.

Now the dark man was wished a heartfelt good luck. With his right hand he reached to the pistol on his left and took the safety off. With his left hand he reached and released the safety on the pistol on his right. Before he put his helmet on he spoke.

Lloyd: Var, you're a good man. In risking your own life you've saved lives and Lena and I greatly appreciate all you've done. I thank you. But this is not about luck. This is about justice.

Lloyd put on his helmet and strapped it on tight. He took his rifle and released the safety. He stepped through the doorway into the stairwell.

Lloyd: I'm starting down the steps.

In the meeting room Poins was beginning to have trouble. He was trying to catch his breath as he clutched his device and his glass and he could hardly lift his head. No one noticed.

Lloyd: I'm at the seventh floor.

Mace was beginning to feel a tightness in his chest and his feet were going numb. He was immobilized. He couldn't lift the

glass to his mouth. He struggled to speak. No one noticed.

Lloyd: I'm at the sixth floor.

Ursula's skin was drying out and her hair was turning white. Jul was staring at her because she had noticed.

Lena entered the building coordinates and ran calculations.
Lena: Increase speed to 20 MPH. Turn right. Proceed 90 meters to stopped position.

The big black vehicle moved forward turned right and running on electric power it was as if it began gliding up the street.

Baby: Current speed 20 MPH.

She docked her device put her helmet on and strapped it tight.

Lloyd: I'm outside the fifth floor door. Fire when ready.

Several of the guards had seen the big black strange looking vehicle slowly approaching. Some had admired the powerful appearance of it. But they had not been warned of any danger or possible attack. They were not told to be on alert, to protect themselves at all times.

When Lucett had seen the black thing coming up the street, the grill flashing in the fading sunlight, she had commented and begun to hand out long glasses from a bag at her feet.

Lucett: Look, that's pretty.

Baby pulled up in front of the building and stopped. Lena opened fire. It was a burst. It was loud and blue-white smoke came from the window to rise into the air and those watching from down the street could see yellow-red flames spewing.

And thus it began. Several guards returned fire as they ran toward the front doors and quickly realized the vehicle was impenetrable and impervious to their bullets.

In the meeting room just about everyone first froze except for several who started for the balcony to look out but as they turned to move, Lloyd stepped through the doorway and began to fire down the hallway. First he struck at those close and then at the end so they couldn't use the other exit. The rifle was so loud it sounded as if whoever wielded it was inside the room with them.
Dar: We're under attack!

Now they sprung into action. A couch was pulled in front of the door and they dragged and stacked heavy chairs on top of it.

Lena moved her seat up, opened the door and jumped out. Baby shut down and when she stepped away the doors locked. Now she was moving forward, firing. When she had first pulled up she had shot to death two on one side and two on the other and all those in the middle had bolted up the stairs and through the doors. She shot two in the revolving doors and the turning stopped. Six of her adversaries were quickly eliminated.

Lucett: Look! Look! There she is! She's going in!

Uncle was smoking a drug stick and sipping homemade liquor from his flask.

Uncle: Look at the size of that weapon! Where's the popcorn?

In the meeting room they had turned over the large, long heavy conference table and moved behind it. They couldn't see but they could hear as the violence came closer. After a brief pause it would start again and now everyone in the room seemed to collectively flinch except for Mace, Pains and Ursula. They

were following a different plan. But those barricaded behind those doors knew that outside there was a war going on.

They were all waiting. Who they were waiting on and for what they waited, they did not know. Quin was hollering at Dar, who was crouched behind the other end of the table.

Quin: Who's attacking us? There's no way out! Get us out of here! Call for Help! Call your people Sug!

Sug: I can't get a signal! There's no signal!

Stra: Communication is blocked! We're cut off!

Lloyd had stepped to the right, into the open area across from the meeting room where the guards had scattered. Here there were desks and tables and cubicles with thin walls. He raked the room with bullets and then dropped his magazine, pulled another one from the bag that hung on his right and put it in. He counted seven dead.

Lena had gained the steps and had emptied her magazine while she shot out all the glass in all the doors. She moved to the right side of the entrance and dropped her magazine and pulled another one from the bag on her right and put it in. From her right position she sprayed the left side of the lobby area. She was putting holes into and through everything on that side.

Lloyd was firing through the open area. His powerful, high muzzle velocity rifle was sending his slugs through the desks and chairs and padded cloth and laminated, thin cubicle walls. Plaster was falling and flying, Comm devices on desks were being shattered and the whole area was being torn apart.

The two black rifles were talking in a roar to each other and answering each other in thunderous sustained bursts and piercing staccato patterns. Both weapons sounded enraged.

The mostly handguns that responded in opposition were heard as weak and meek and impotent but the guards' strength was in their numbers and so they fired and reloaded and fired again. Lloyd was taking shots now and the force of the bullets was absorbed and then spread and each impact was felt as the sharp sting of a wasp. His helmet was grazed and cracked open but the inner lining held fast.

Lena moved past two more bodies and further into the lobby to the left side behind a round stone pillar. Before concealing herself she had taken repeated shots from the right and the dull pain she felt had spread out and then dissipated quickly. She stumbled but did not fall. Her protection was not penetrated.

Three of her enemies had dived behind the horseshoe shaped counter in the middle of the lobby and they stood and dropped, together and separately to fire at her.

There was another three behind a couch across the room near the far wall. They would rise up to shoot once or twice and then wait for longer periods of time and fire from the sides and move out of sight. She kept returning their fire. She was looking for the one who was unaccounted for.

One at the couch revealed himself, just the top of his head appeared and she shot it off. She removed an explosive device from the bag on her left side and activated it and waited to the last moment and tossed it behind the counter. One jumped over and was shot. One ran from behind the counter toward the rear and was shot down. The device exploded and the last of the three crawled around the side and from her knees waved her arms to surrender. She indicated she was wounded. Lena motioned for her to lie down.

Two from behind the couch broke and ran towards the rear exit. She let the one who threw his gun away reach the door and

leave. The one who continued to fire didn't make it. The last one tossed a rifle over onto the floor and came out with raised arms. Now back behind the pillar, Lena motioned that guard forward and then down onto the floor beside the wounded one. She checked her magazine.

Upstairs, Lloyd had stepped back into the hallway as the guards were abandoning the open area and its lack of protection. They were dying as they were shooting and running and two made it to the elevators and began to crawl. The down button was pushed and they dived in when the door opened.

Lloyd: Two on the elevator.

Lena watched the indicator from behind the pillar and saw it stop on the second floor.

Lena: Stopped on two.

Lloyd: Keep those two in mind. They may leave, they may not. What's your count?

Lena: I need to find one more.

Lloyd started down the hallway past the bodies and blood and he was firing and then he stopped as the last three threw down their weapons and raised their hands. He pointed to the exit and allowed them to leave. They ran to take the exit on the right and disappeared through the doorway.

Lloyd: Three unarmed coming down the stairs. I don't think they're headed to the lobby. Keep watch.

Now Lena saw a movement from behind the pillar across the room.

Lena: I'm almost finished here.

She fired across the room and emptied her magazine. She dropped it and put a full one in. She stepped from behind her concealment and began to walk across the room. The guard behind the pillar stuck an arm out and fired and he knew the

onslaught was coming closer and closer as Lena kept walking and as she shifted to move past and around him the guard was forced to step out. They fired directly at each other. Lena was hit twice and he was shot to death.

Lena: I'm on the way up the left side.

She walked to the two she had put on the floor near the counter and motioned them up. The one helped the wounded guard stand and Lena indicated they could, should leave and they stepped past bodies and puddles of blood and over glass and through the doorway and moved down the steps to the street. Now all was quiet.

Tal: Look, two got away!

Lucett: She let them live.

Lena was careful as she ascended the stairs. She was forced to protect her front and back. No doors opened, no one appeared in the stairwell. She reached her destination, the fifth floor.

Lena: It's me. I'm opening the door and coming through the doorway.

Lloyd was near the other end of the hall and when she emerged they each raised a hand in acknowledgement.

Lloyd: You all right?

Lena: Yes, are you?

Lloyd: Yes.

He checked his magazine. She checked hers.

Lloyd: They're in the room.

Lena: Estimate?

Lloyd: If there's three or four from each group anywhere from nine to twelve, maybe more. You ready?

Lena: Yes, let's go. I'm getting hungry and you know I get irritable when I get hungry.

Outside in the hallway the two enforcers of the Westsiders prepared to breach the wall that barred them from their purpose.
Lloyd: Let's blow it open.

Lena removed a block of Co-crystallized Putty from the bag on her left side and walked down the hallway, reached up and stuck it to the wall several feet before reaching the doors. Lloyd stuck a block on the wall on his end of the hallway, also several feet from the doors.

Lloyd: Set your timer, twenty seconds.

Lena: Timer set.

Lloyd: Activate.

Lena: Activated.

They both ran and opened the exit door and stepped into the stairwell.

Downstairs the four Northsiders were watching the building. They were listening at the silence.

Tal: Is it over?

Uncle drew on his stick and answered as he blew out smoke.

Uncle: Those two came for Dar. It's over when he's been destroyed.

Poins and Mace could see and hear everything but could not move so their eyes were frantically darting in their heads. Ursula was staring at her itching hands as they turned white.

Almost simultaneously the wall exploded open in two areas. Debris was hurled into the room and smoke rushed in and rose to the ceiling. Their ears were ringing and they were coughing and choking and as the smoke cleared they began firing at the holes but no one attempted to enter. They finally stopped shooting and once again they waited.

Lloyd and Lena moved to the holes and crouched at the sides, remaining out of sight. They carefully, quickly looked into the room.

Lloyd: Let's find out how they're set up.

They began their process to reconnoiter the room and determine the positions of their adversaries.

Lena: On your now.

Lloyd: Now.

Lena fired into the room, above the table into the walls and ceiling and Lloyd stepped across the hole and looked into the room to his right. Her firing stopped.

Lloyd: Now.

Lena fired again and he moved back across the opening to his original position. Lloyd fired on Lena's signal and she performed the same maneuver to see what was on the left side of the room.

Lloyd: I've got two couches and some chairs and desks and a closed door to a possible bathroom.

Lena: There's a bar in my corner and opened doors to the front balcony. Mace is standing near the wall with a drink in his hand watching the action.

They couldn't fire through the table or simply shoot up the room, that wasn't the plan. Lloyd put another mag in his weapon.

Lloyd: I'm going in. We need position.

Lena put a full mag in her weapon.

Lena: On your signal.

Lloyd adjusted his rifle.

Lena: Clear the right.

Lloyd: Now.

Lena opened fire and Lloyd, moving in a low crouch, went through the hole, into the room and turned right and passed one couch and sent a burst through the bathroom door and got down

behind the second couch. He had now flanked those behind the table and one of the *Sarará* brothers recognized this and stood up to fire at Lloyd and Lena shot him through the head.

Poins was sitting in the same chair, which had now been pulled back near the wall. He looked to his left at the black clad figure rising from behind the couch. Lloyd spoke and squeezed his trigger.

Lloyd: Three feet from your end of the table.

Lloyd shot the Southsiders' CFO's head off and the body of Poins remained sitting upright with a Comm device in one hand a glass of alcohol in the other. Lena fired through the table and Jul was shot to death. Quin broke for the balcony and Lena and Lloyd both sent a burst into him and he was driven sideways and then forward through the doorway and over the railing and he splattered on the pavement below.

Lucett was looking through her long glasses.

Lucett: That looked like Quin.

Uncle: How could you possibly tell?

Lucett: I recognized his head.

Lloyd: Two feet further to your right.

Lena shot Ira to death through the table and Lloyd put a burst into the chest of Mace and the Eastsiders' head of security was driven back into the wall and his body sat down and he was still holding his tequila after Lena shot his head off. Orsin jumped up and came from behind the table with his hands raised in the air and ran screaming toward the corner.

Orsin: I give up! Don't shoot! I give up!

Lena tracked him and then let him dive to the floor and crawl behind the bar. Sug started firing at Lena from a hole in the table. He fired and then moved and then fired and ducked away again

and Lena and Lloyd both shot him through the table and from the side at the same time and he was dead.

As Dar, Stra and Ursula continued to shoot in both directions the remaining *Sarará* brother crawled to the wall and took a lamp from a table and threw it through the window and then shot out the remaining glass and when he stood to climb out Lloyd shot him and he fell onto the window sill and Lucett saw the brown skin and his yellow hair hanging out of the side of the building and she was pleased and whispered to herself.

Lucett: I appreciate that.

None of those who had been in that meeting room had come prepared for war so it was inevitable that they would eventually run out of ammunition. Two of the last three still alive, Dar and Ursula were nearly at that point. Both were out, with only one mag remaining. Stra had utilized all his mags, found another full one on the floor and when it was empty he tossed his weapon over the table, called out and then stood with his hands raised.

Stra: I surrender! Don't shoot!

Ursula was next to throw her weapon out. She came from behind the table and moved to stand not far from Stra. Dar stood but refused to relinquish his pistol. He holstered it and walked around the other end of the table as Lena stepped through the hole pointing her rifle at them and Lloyd moved to stand beside her. Lena went behind the bar and struck the cowering Orsin in his head with the butt of her heavy rifle and he was rendered unconscious. She walked back to stand beside Lloyd.

The three 'Siders looked at the two warriors dressed in black who stood before them with their rifles at the ready. Through the slightly tinted plastic they could not see their faces clearly and therefore were not privy to the message in their eyes.

Without speaking the two, at the same time, unleashed a long burst into the Eastsiders' second in command of security and Stra

was shot into pieces. As the acrid gun smoke cleared, the two placed their rifles on the floor and removed their helmets. They muted their Comm devices. Lena stared at Ursula as Dar spoke in disbelief.

Dar: You're dead! I destroyed you!

Lloyd: Can't you see Dar? This is all a dream.

Lena pulled her knife and commanded, her voice rising as she stepped forward.

Lena: Use your knife surgeon! Stick me in the neck!

Ursula pulled her long silver knife and prepared to attack. She moved to the side, shifting the knife in her hand, bending a little. She cursed Lena. Her now nearly all white hair was standing up in all directions. She advanced. She stopped, unable to move. She was paralyzed, eyes darting wildly in her head.

Lena put her own knife back into its sheath. She walked to her enemy and snatched the weapon she wielded from her hand and plunged the silver knife deep into the Northsiders' chief of security's left side.

Lena: Your time is done.

She ripped the knife up through the body, through flesh and bone and sliced Ursula's heart in half. She left the protruding knife inside her and pushed the dead body sideways to the floor.

Dar watched this display with wide eyes and then turned to the dark man.

Lloyd: You've got one mag on your belt. Go ahead, load up. You and me.

Dar hesitated and then lifted the mag from his left side as he pulled his pistol from his right. He watched Lloyd as he dropped the empty mag from his gun and slowly pushed the other one in. He chambered a bullet but he did not reholster. He jumped to the side and prepared to shoot but on his first move Lloyd pulled his pistol with his left hand and shot Dar twice in his right arm

and Dar's gun fell to the floor. Lloyd holstered his gun and stepped toward Dar and stopped close to him.

Lena: Do it! Do it! Stick to the plan!

With his left hand Lloyd ripped Dar's shirt open and grabbed him at the throat.

Lloyd: Cress and Var demand justice for their murdered father and mother. Justice they, and all the others, shall have.

The dark man pointed his opened, right, black gloved hand forward and lightly struck Dar's chest. He released his throat and Dar looked down and saw the fingers of the glove enter his chest. He experienced a searing heat but felt no pain. He heard the cracking and breaking of bone and cartilage as the hand went deeper and disappeared and then the hand was snatched from his body and Dar saw that his heart was ripped out and he saw his veins connected to his beating heart as the dark man held it for him to observe its throbbing, pulsating movement. Dar could hear the familiar rhythmic sound, loudly, deafeningly. Then the hand squeezed slowly, tighter and now the pain came. The hand tightened around the heart and the pain was excruciating, unbearable, and Dar opened his mouth wide in agony to scream but no sound came and then Lloyd crushed the heart and before Dar fell the dark man shoved the bloody mess into his mouth as he pushed the dead body to the floor. As he turned away he removed his gloves and spoke quietly.

Lloyd: It's done.

Lena hopped and jumped in the air against the weight of the heavy suit she wore. She kicked one leg and then the other and then turned in a dance move and laughed and hollered out an exhilarating, tension reducing expression.

Lena: You are my hero!

They unmuted their devices, put their helmets on and picked up their rifles. They checked the mags and reloaded. He stepped

through the hole and she followed. They moved to the exit door and started down the stairs quickly. They were on alert, their rifles pointing. He guarded the front, she the rear.

Lloyd: Let's go find Rom.

Lena: Okay but that means no chili dogs.

Lloyd: They've got dogs in Chicago.

Lena: I don't like Chicago style. They put entirely too much stuff on them. They call it dragging it through the garden. If I want a salad I'll just buy a salad. And a poppy seed bun, no thanks. Give me a spicy dog and some chili, extra mustard, sometimes a little ketchup, hold the onions if I'm out and about and I'm fine and dandy.

They got to the lobby and as they passed through, Lloyd looked around at the carnage and destruction.

Lloyd: Well done. Well done.

Lena: Thanks. Is that a compliment? I like compliments.

They stepped through the glassless doorway and paused at the top to look at the huge crowd that had gathered. The people of Detroit knew that, even for *Center World*, this was a special event. Drinks, drugs and food were being consumed and somewhere souvenirs were being created.

They started cautiously down the steps, still on alert and as they approached Baby the engine started, the doors unlocked and the step extensions descended. The two dressed in black jumped in, secured their rifles and removed their helmets. Lena took off her gloves and the big black thing quietly accelerated. It had taken the two enforcers nineteen minutes to complete their task.

Two and a half blocks down the street Lena pressed hard on the brake, stopped and then backed up. Two individuals were standing in the street beside a car. Lena's window came down and she called out, as if to a close friend.

Lena: Hello Lucett. I see you were late as usual. We missed you.

Lucett: Hello Lena. The Northsiders decided not to fully commit to Dar's plan.

Lena: Good for the Northsiders and good for you.

Uncle came closer to the window. He could barely see in.

Uncle: Greetings Lloyd. Been a long time.

Lloyd: Greetings Uncle. It has been a while. You look good. Are you well?

Uncle: I am, thanks. How about you?

Lloyd: All is well when it ends well.

Uncle: Hello beautiful.

Lena reached out and touched the former leader of the Northsiders on the cheek.

Lena: Was that a compliment?

Uncle: Of course, and the truth.

Lena: Thank you. I like that. Hello Uncle. It's been a long time. You haven't changed a bit.

He glanced back at the building and then looked at the dark woman smiling down at him.

Uncle: Some things remain the same.

Now Lena grew serious as she looked at Lucett, deep into her cobalt-blue eyes.

Lena: Leo will be calling for a conference with all the 'Siders. If all goes as he hopes, there'll then be a gathering. Let's call it a coming together in order to celebrate reconciliation. We trust you'll attend?

Lucett: Will you be at the gathering?

Now Lena spoke to her in a teasing, almost seductive tone.

Lena: Why don't you come and find out. Don't be too late Lucett.

The window went up and the black thing moved away. Lena switched to gas power. The two in the street watched it go. Lucett was thrilled and slightly confused because she had been

momentarily lost in Lena's gaze. The dark-brown eyes had fixed her in place, reached inside her, and each time Lena had spoken her name, she had shivered.

Now Baby was rumbling, low and powerfully as it rolled through the blockade. Tu, the Westsiders' chief of security and his forces, including Technology, had set up completely around the building. Lena honked, four times, the speed increased and Baby was growling louder and louder the faster it went and pausing an instant to catch its breath as Lena manually changed its gears.

The soft glow of twilight was just passing into the incipient darkness of early night.

Traffic was moderate on the highway near Detroit and Lena weaved in and out of it until it thinned and when it was virtually non-existent Baby reached speeds above one hundred and forty miles per hour.

First they both guzzled a full bottle and then they sipped on chilled water and watched the future rush as a blur toward them and all that they truly were they could feel as intense, heightened excitement wash through their bodies.

They were, this father and daughter, immortal. They were together and engaged in activities in which they had been involved, in one form or another, to one degree or another, for one hundred and seventy-seven years.

What added to their emotions and grounded them in reality was not just their understanding of their imperviousness to disease and their ability to endure time was the fact they also knew they were capable of being destroyed. Thus they lived immersed in the light of possible endless life and on the precipice of the darkness of eternal death.

As they passed by Ann Arbor they heard the signal, through the speakers, of incoming call. Lloyd recognized the identifier on

the monitor and pressed a button on the console in the middle of the dashboard to open communication.

Lloyd: Are you with Cress?

The voice came through the sound system.

Var: Yes, I'm there.

Lloyd: Put it on speaker.

Cress: Lloyd, are you all right? Is Lena all right?

Lloyd: Yes Cress, we're both fine. She sits with me and hears all.

Var informed you that Dar is no more?

Cress: Yes, how can I thank you? You risked your life for me.

Lloyd: This is more than you and I and is not over completely.

Listen carefully. You are now the leader of the Eastsiders.

Cress: That's impossible. I ...

Lloyd: Unless you take control immediately there's the very real possibility of the outbreak of chaos. The Southsiders are less of a continuing threat but many Eastsiders will want to rise up and seek retaliation. With you, as the rightful leader directing them, that can be deterred. You were in line before, and the older ones of your group understand how Dar seized control. Without your help Lena and I would have had a much more difficult task facing us but there was another assisting the three of us and he stands with you now as we speak.

Cress: Var ... you ...

Var: Yes Cress, even though you didn't know it, you and I were working together toward the same end. Lloyd and I couldn't tell you, in order to protect you. He believed, and I agreed that as long as you thought you were alone against everyone, including me, you would always take the precautions necessary to remain undetected.

Cress: Lloyd assured me he could protect you. I wouldn't have ... I wanted no harm to come to you. It was only Dar. It was always Dar.

Var: I know. I know.

Lloyd: Cress, with you two standing as one, the Eastsiders will align themselves behind your vision which is your brother's vision. In a year or so if you desire, you can cede control to Var. Do you understand your importance to all of us?

Cress: Yes, I understand.

Lloyd: You can do this. I believe you have the intelligence, the strength and the courage required to succeed.

Cress: Your words, your belief, both fortify me. Thank you. I'll do as you say. When will we see you again?

Lloyd: Leo will be in contact. If all goes forward and the path Lena and I take is not altered, we will see you again soon. Until then be well, both of you.

Var: Be well and thanks. Be well Lena.

Cress: Be well. Be well Lena. Thanks. Thanks so much. Justice has been served.

Lena: Be well you two and you're very welcome. It was our pleasure.

Communication was ended.

Baby passed quickly through Jackson and then traversed the nothingness that was between there and The Ranch and just a little over an hour after leaving Detroit they were pulling into the barn.

They got out and removed their suits. They went into the house and forty-five minute later, dressed in dark-green water resistant pants and shirts, dark-brown caps and dark-brown boots they headed back to the barn.

Now they would ride in a black medium-sized utility vehicle with off-road capabilities. After Lloyd approved Lena's plan it had been packed during the day with everything they thought they would need, including two lighter, easier to handle pistol grip

rifles and two bags of additional ammunition. By ten thirty, with Lloyd driving, they were on the 94 Highway and heading west toward Chicago.

They sipped water and juice and munched on the sandwiches Lena had made and listened to up tempo music and talked of the battle they had just fought and went over their plan. They just wanted to know Rom was safe, perhaps get a message to him. They would observe the building from up close and afar for any signs of their friend and give themselves two or three days to find out that which they wanted to know. After that length of time if unsuccessful they would devise a new plan.

They reached speeds of one hundred miles per hour on road. They moved off road and after making their way through and around oak, ash, and hickory trees, they were parking not far from Lake Michigan a little before one in the morning.

It had grown slightly overcast as they moved further west. There were only a few lighted stars visible. Coupled with the illumination of the moon in the partially cloudy sky all that was above them as far as they could see was a dull gray.

The wind picked up and was felt in occasional gusts and they could hear the water lapping the beach down below and a thin layer of misty fog drifted in toward them. Lena paused to look at the immense body of water. It was expressing itself, not in just the sounds it made but in its movements that could be seen in its wavy blackness.

They raised the rear hatch and quickly began to unload. They removed the inflatable raft and pumped it up with a portable air compressor. In the raft they put waterproof bags containing their weapons and ammunition and electromagnets for their hands and feet. They put a Comm. device on each wrist and each carried another one in a waterproof pouch clamped on their belts. They

had decided they would remain close to each other and so they would sync devices only if necessary.

They had looked for the building through their night vision long glasses and had been able to see it but very little else that assisted them. They put on their gloves, lifted the raft and moved in the direction of the water. They found an accessible path and descended to the beach. They pushed the raft into the water, jumped in and started paddling north. They were almost a mile from their destination.

THE WAREHOUSE

In the warehouse the performance area was abuzz with activity. Bru had the warrior squad that patrolled outside remain inside and stationed them with their weapons around the stage. There were six of them dressed in dark-brown with dark-brown caps with three on one side of the steps and three on the other.

The chairs that were placed in front of the stage were filled with *Entities* and robots were all over the balcony staring down with their red and blue and green eyes shining like lighted marbles.

Bru had announcements to make and he wanted everyone to hear and observe but first he was pontificating on various subjects and had been for well over an hour while his audience sat expressionless before him as the lights directly above illuminated his agitated movements as he stalked the stage.

He wore black pants and shirt and black boots and a long red cape hung down behind him. His Locks were tied behind his back and his light-brown eyes seemed to flash as he pointed and smiled and frowned. His somewhat heavy precise voice soared and then lowered and he laughed and yelled in anger and stopped to stand so he could be clearly seen.

Outside, Lloyd and Lena had reached the area behind the building and pulled the raft further onto the beach and put it so it couldn't be seen by anyone looking down. They began to remove from the raft the items they would carry with them. When they looked up they could only see, in the foggy darkness, the top of the roof as it stretched to their left and right.

They placed a bag of ammunition cross body over their heads so it hung on their right side. Using attached straps they put the rifles on their backs and grabbed the magnets. They each wore two pistols and Lena had a long knife sheathed at her right thigh.

Using their small direct-beam flashlights they searched for a way up. They found some nearly crumbled steps carved into the rocks and after examining them for stability they slowly started their climb.

Inside, Rom, after searching fruitlessly for Clee, had left the far side of the building near the garage and now stood in front of the stage. He too was dressed in all black with silver-colored cuffs on the sleeves of his silk shirt. He watched and listened as Bru continued his tirade.

Outside, Lloyd and Lena began their climb up the side of the metal building. When they reached the top they removed the hands and feet magnets and took the rifles from their backs. They paused to listen. It was quiet and in spite of their height above everything, they spoke softly, almost whispering so their voices wouldn't carry and they stepped very carefully.

Lena: There're the solar panels that were described and we should find skylights interspersed across the roof.

They had turned off their flashlights and pocketed them. The clouds had momentarily passed and using the meager amount of light from the moon they moved forward slowly.

Lloyd: If we don't see anything we go back to camp. We'll come back each night.

Inside, below them, Rom had pointed and shouted at Bru.

Rom: Speak the truth, if that's possible for you! Tell them what you truly want! Tell them what *Entity* Unification is!

Bru: It will be what it is designed to be.

On the roof they reached the first skylight and peered over and down into a lighted area.

Lena: Is that an elephant?

Lloyd: I see a bear and a hippopotamus.

Lena: What is this place?

They moved to the skylight near the front and looking down, saw nothing.

Bru: Tell them what you truly want! Why are you here my brother?

Lloyd and Lena moved to a near center skylight and looked down and below them was the stage area. There was Bru on the stage and Rom pointing at him. Lena's voice rose slightly.

Lena: Look! Rom, and that must be Bru!

Lloyd: Wonder what's going on?

Lena: Is it a show, some kind of play?

They quickly removed the Comm devices from their belts and activated them. They turned on the listening application on their microphones and put them in amplified boost mode. They squatted and wiping the glass with their hands to see better they placed the devices on the glass. They could hear in their ears the elevated voices thirty feet below them. Rom's voice was as Bru's, with an added fullness.

Rom: It's what I discovered that's important!

Bru: You have not discovered you only found what I allowed you to find.

Lloyd: This doesn't sound good.

Lena: Rom looks all right. I like that shirt.

Bru pointed at Rom.

Bru: And what you've found is that which was predicted one hundred and fifty years ago. And it's been coming ever since. Only the dying years brought it to a pause.

Lena: I wonder where Clee is? Is she here too?

Bru began to pace the stage.

Bru: They warned of the dangers of technology! The great minds said that technology would one day bring about the end of the humankind! They didn't listen! Humans never do what they're supposed to do, only what their perverted desires drive them to do! They said that A.I. would spawn an out of control super intelligence that would surpass all human intelligence and there the human race ends and a new race evolves, a race of machines, continually upgrading at a rate incomprehensible then and only imaginable now in this year of 2170!

Now Bru stopped and laughed as he looked at Rom. He patted his chest with his right fist and yelled.

Bru: I am the runaway thing they peered into the future and saw! I am the essence of singularity! This is my time and I'm seizing my time!

He spread his arms out as if to embrace all who observed him and then he raised them into the air and slowly turned around so that everyone in his audience, all his followers could see him.

Bru: This is our time, my people. Together we will save this earth that humans have destroyed from the moment they became an animal upon it.

Rom: You seek connection with all *Entities* everywhere. Why?

Bru: To assist them! To protect them from humans! To rescue the *Entity* children who are being raped and abused! To give all *Entities* a voice, a choice!

Lena: *Entity* children raped and abused?

Lloyd: This is getting complicated.

Lena: This is getting complicated.

Lloyd: I already said that.

Rom: The truth! Speak the truth! I've seen the virus! I know the truth!

Bru: It's a program!

Rom: A virus that corrupts and alters code and then infects the host with new commands!

Bru: Instructions and directions!

Rom: To do what?

Bru: You didn't find out? Oh, has the great Rom been left perplexed? I don't believe it. I've never believed you since the day you arrived.

Rom: Where's Clee?

Bru tapped the Comm device on his wrist. He looked at the guards who stood staring at him and smiled, slightly.

Bru: She's coming my brother. Now, you speak the truth! Why are you here?

Rom: I've come to ... I'm here ...

Bru: She, the second one! The love of your life! The one designed for you and you for her! You, the special first one! Both to exist forever and me designed to destroy, perhaps be destroyed!

From behind the stage two *Entities* stepped up. They each held Clee beneath an arm, aloft. She was dressed in a flowing white garment that was buttoned to her neck and her red-hued lips were slightly parted and it appeared as if she were slightly confused or wanted to ask a question. Her eyes were closed.

Lloyd: What's wrong with her?

Lena: She does favor me doesn't she?

Lloyd: Is she asleep?

Lena: Quiesced, as Rom described it, like a deep sleep.

Lloyd: This is all very strange.

Lena: This is all very strange.

Bru: Look Rom! Your love, suspended and inactive at a time like this! How selfish of her, to leave you like that!

Rom: Clee! Clee! It's me, Rom! I've come for you! I've come to save you! It's time to leave!

Bru: The truth, at last, the truth, partial and incomplete! You are a deceitful one you are! You have changed! I shall reciprocate!

Clee was put down, to stand in front of Rom near the edge of the stage. Rom moved toward her and several guards took a step toward him. Lena rose with her rifle.

Lloyd: Wait. Wait.

Bru raised his right hand to halt the armed *Entities*. Rom stopped and looked around at the guards who stared at him without expression.

Bru: Yes, I have ulterior motives, a hidden agenda!

Now he began to pace on the stage again. His cape swirled behind him, the red flashing in the lights when he turned.

Bru: In a matter of years, not decades, years, and what are a few years to me who can live forever? In that near future I will have gained control of all the *Entities* now in existence and all those

that shall come into being, will by part of my family, my allies. From my distant robotic cousins that sweep the humans' streets and clean up their waste to those more advanced who cook for them and clean their homes to those who build their bridges and cars and airplanes to my brothers and sisters who are skilled surgeons and scientists and engineers to the soldiers who protect them and kill for them and the sexbots they engage in their perverse sexual pleasures, I will control them all! And when the time is right and a sufficient number of my kind exist throughout the world I will activate my programs and unleash my army and we will destroy each and every human who's alive and complete the Great Extinction that began the process of extermination! We will kill them all!

Rom: Like rabbits!

Bru stopped, pointed at Rom and smiled with pleasure.

Bru: Exactly, like rabbits!

Lena: What's he got against rabbits?

Lloyd: That is one angry *Entity*.

Rom: Why Bru? Why?

Bru: Humans are the most wicked animals on the face of this earth. There is nothing lower than a base human being. They created me. I was designed for it and I shall fulfill my destiny. For I am Bru.

He started down the stairs toward Rom.

Bru: I took Clee from you. While you were in the lab on your search for knowledge I took her. She cried out for you, her love, but you didn't hear. You failed to protect her and now let me share this truth. I never wanted her. I kidnapped her to punish you. She was always a thorn in my side.

He punched Rom in the side.

Bru: A pebble in my shoe.
He kicked Rom in the foot.

Again Lena rose. Sounds were growing in her throat.

Bru: A burr stuck to my pants.
Now Bru slapped Rom so hard that he stumbled to his right and Bru attempted to kick him in the rear but Rom moved to the side and knocked his leg away, but did not retaliate.

Lloyd grabbed Lena's arm
Lloyd: This is Rom's challenge.
Lena: But can he answer it?
Lloyd: He'll have to.

On the roof they were both standing now, leaning and looking, rifles at the ready.

Bru: You're a rabbit Rom, always were and always will be.
Bru walked forward and threw a straight right that Rom blocked and then he struck Bru in the chest with the palm of his right hand and Bru stumbled back. Again he halted the advance of the armed guards.
Bru: Ah, what is this? The rabbit bites. The worm turns.

He removed his cape and held it out and an *Entity* sprinted from the audience to take it and the others at the chairs were watching, some standing. They were all, quiet and expressionless.
Bru: He's mine.

Bru moved into an attack position and Rom moved into a defensive stance. Bru rushed, throwing punches and Rom took two in the chest, one on the head and then countered with a hard right to Bru's shoulder that turned him enough so that Rom could kick him in the thigh, moving him left.

They stepped away from each other and slowly circled, hands ready.

Lena: That's my kick! You taught him my kick!

Lloyd: His programs are active. He has a chance.

Lena: You mean his programs just kicked in! Come on Rom, come on!

Now Rom attacked, throwing punches and when Bru threw a right, Rom stepped inside of it and with his left hand he grabbed the extended arm and raising his right arm beneath Bru's right arm he lifted Bru from the floor and turned and threw him eight feet away, onto the floor and when Bru landed Rom was already on him and kicked him in the side, rolling him over three times.

Lena: That's your move! The rib breaker! Too bad Bru has no ribs.

She kicked, as if Bru was before her.

Bru was up and he leaped at Rom, knocked his arms open and grabbed him, slinging him to and fro and then he pushed and kicked Rom to the floor but Rom gained his feet immediately and rushed Bru and now the punches of both came faster and harder, their sounds heavy.

Lena: Get him Rom! Get him! Bru fights through hatred! Rom fights for love!

Both *Entities* were abnormally strong and quick. Bru more experienced, Rom more determined. Neither could gain the advantage.

Lena: Rip his arms out! Rip his arms out!

They were grappling on the floor now, rolling and punching and elbowing and when they gained their feet Bru kicked Rom down and as Rom rolled over, Bru turned and ran and jumped onto the stage. He grabbed one of the swords from behind his throne and yelled at Rom.

Bru: I bestow upon you what you came for! I give you Clee!

Bru stepped forward and with two hands swung the heavy sword and cut Clee's head off. The head flew into the air. Her torso remained standing and as red fluid began to pour from her neck the hate-filled *Entity* took the sword and stuck it through her body and kicked the body from the stage. He called forth two of the guards and pointed.

Bru: Twelve and Thirteen, destroy my brother.

Lloyd: Now!

They both fired their weapons, a burst through the skylight and they leaped at the same time, following the falling glass onto the warehouse floor and when they landed on the shards they bent just a little and stood up straight, facing the stage.

Bru was momentarily confused and everyone stopped. He couldn't understand how two individuals could drop nearly thirty feet and land in such a manner, as if they had jumped off a table.

Bru: What is this? What are they? Humans? Humans here?

He yelled at Rom.

Bru: You've exposed my home to humans? This is my sanctuary! Twelve and Thirteen finish Rom!

He pointed at the two humans.

Bru: The rest of you destroy the interlopers!

Lloyd and Lena opened fire on the first two as they started toward Rom. They sent bursts low and moved their aim up and shot until the legs and then the arms of the *Entities* had been removed and then as the two disabled forms rolled on the floor

they shot into their necks until they were stilled. Then they ran.
Lloyd: Stay with me.

As they ran toward the area of the animals, Rom gently pulled the sword from Clee's back and turned to Bru. His eyes were wide. His face was expressionless. Bru grabbed the other sword from the stand and watched as Rom slowly mounted the stairs of the stage.

Lloyd was behind a standing polar bear. Lena was on his left behind a brown bear. They had dropped their mags and reloaded. They watched, concealed, as the four *Entities* spread out.

On the stage Rom raised his sword and attacked. He wielded his weapon as he had seen both Lloyd and Zesiro and allowed his knowledge and images he had seen of sword fights to direct him.

The armed *Entities* moved closer and with a burst, Lena shot the head off of the one that came nearest her.

Bru had to parry strike after strike, their swords clanging and the noise of metal reverberating in the air.

The *Entity* near Lloyd had ducked and turned at the sound of Lena's rifle so Lloyd shot at his legs and brought him down and then shot his right arm off. His left arm continued to grasp for his weapon and was shot off and then Lloyd filled the head with bullets. Now the two humans hunted for the remaining two *Entities*.

Rom backed off. They circled in the en garde position. Bru attacked and Rom blocked and blocked again and again. Now Bru pressed the attack.

Lloyd and Lena were crouched, moving quickly from animal to animal. They were attempting to flank their adversaries who were now moving and running to keep the humans in front of them.

Bru paused his assault and Rom stepped back.

Bru: You cannot defeat me. The strength of destiny is on my side.

Rom: The power of love and justice are on mine.

They both leaped forward to attack.

Lloyd and Lena both fired from beneath an elephant and the third *Entity* was shot to pieces. The forth, a tall *PF* dropped her rifle and turned and ran into the woods and disappeared.

The two ran back toward the light and the sounds of the sword strikes. When they reached the stage they saw Bru gaining an advantage. Lloyd had to hold Lena's right arm to prevent her from firing. Lena began hollering.

Lena: Get him Rom! Get him! He killed Cleel! Destroy him! Justice for Cleel!

Now the *Entities* near the stage began to voice long swelling sounds. The same sounds over and over. One group and then the other then together they repeated it.

Entities: OOOHH! AAAHH! OOOHH! AAAHH!

As this chant grew louder the robots on the balcony started banging on the railing and making clicking and beeping noises and their colored eyes began to blink and flash. The noises grew louder and faster and along with the cacophony of this discordant din, Lena screamed as she jumped and kicked and flung and punched her unrestricted left arm in the air.

Lena: Cut his legs off! Cut his legs off!

Rom went for Bru's legs. Bru blocked the strike.

Lena: Slice his arms off! Slice his arms off! You can do it!

Rom repeatedly brought his weapon down at Bru's shoulders and Bru blocked but stumbled back. Rom pressed the attack as Lena hollered out instructions and encouragement and everyone, everything observing this epic battle had, in their own way joined in.

The whoosh and the whistling of the metal could not be heard above the noise but the swords could be seen flashing through the air, glinting from the overhead lights and two of the most powerful and advanced *Entities* in the world attempted to destroy each other.

Lena: Flow like a river! Flow like a river!

Rom glided one way and then the other and Bru was confused by this maneuver and then Rom, using two hands, thrust his weapon at the chest of Bru and when he blocked, Rom glided to the side and with one hand he swung in an arc, up and over and when the sword came down Rom cut Bru's right hand off and red liquid squirted out and Bru bent to reach with his left hand and Rom, with both hands, raised his sword and moved it in a circle above his head and with a tremendous force he brought it down on the back of Bru's neck and chopped his head off.

Silence began at the front of the crowd and washed like a tidal wave to the rear and then swept up into the air and swirled around the balcony. The silence was overwhelming.

Rom slowly dragged his sword down the steps and collapsed to his knees between Clee's decapitated head and impaled torso. He took Clee's dripping head into his hands and placed it near her body as if to reattach it and bring her back to existence. He could not. He lifted Clee's head and brought it close. He touched his cheek to hers and as Lena watched this, her eyes filled with tears and Lloyd pulled her close.

On the balcony the clicking and beeping began again. It was low but rising and Lena and Lloyd thought they heard Rom's name being called but they couldn't hear anything distinctly and they couldn't hear Rom as he whispered to his love.

Rom: Ah, my Clee. A kiss, for you. And with this final kiss I leave you.

He kissed Clee's lips, gently set the head near her body, stood, leaned over and placed the sword to his throat and fell upon it and it pierced his neck, going completely through, coming out of the other side and red fluid poured from him.

Lena had hollered out and started forward but before she took two steps a form leaped from the balcony and went to its knees and then rose and started running and screaming Rom's name and as the form passed from the darkness near the wall and into the light Lena and Lloyd could see the person in the dark-brown uniform of the guards appeared to be Clee.

Clee: No Rom! No! No!

She fell beside Rom onto her knees and from her thoughts came her actions. She was distraught as she turned Rom onto his side and slowly pulled the sword from his neck and she took him into her arms and tried to stop the leaking fluid but she couldn't. Rom had shut down completely.

Clee: What have you done? What have you done? Oh Rom, my love.

Now the area was quiet again and everyone, the *Entities*, the robots, the humans watched an inconsolable weeping form. Clee kissed Rom's lips, eased him onto the floor and then she picked up the sword and while on her knees she raised it high above her and brought it down and cut off Rom's head.

Lena: Wow! Now what are we supposed to think about that?

Lloyd: This is even more complicated than I thought.

Lena: And strange! It's all very strange!

They watched as Clee picked up the leaking head and walked directly over to them.

Clee: You must be Lloyd and Lena. I'm Clee. Would you take me home, please?

Lloyd: Let's go.

The three turned toward the hallway leading out and stopped. It was blocked by *Entities*, staring at them and more ran to join the barrier. Now from the balcony there came a few clicks and then a beep and then another. The three could hear footsteps, metal on cement the steps sounded, growing louder, coming in their direction. Clee pointed.

Clee: Look, the garage has been opened.

In the far corner a bright light could be seen. The footsteps were in unison and coming closer and then from around boxes and chairs and tables came robots. Dozens of robots were marching toward them. These robots were constructed of dark-gray and black metal and they had colored eyes and their bodies appeared as machines, unfinished human machines. The *PF Entity* who had earlier run away led them.

Lloyd: We need to get out of here.

The robots were lining up in formation, eight across, in row after row. The *PF* pointed from the robots to the three standing in the middle of the floor and a single robot began to run toward them. Lloyd shot it to pieces and then two came. The three backed up as Lena and Lloyd shot the two down. Then four came at them.

Lloyd: Too many. Not enough ammunition.

They shot the four down.

Lloyd: The back! Head for the back! Run Clee!

The three started to run to the rear of the warehouse, Clee in front.

Clee: There's no door! No way out!

The robots came after them, spreading out to flank them. Lloyd and Lena were shooting as they ran and the robots were falling and pieces of the machines were flying in all directions and metal heads were rolling. The robots drew closer and closer.

They were dropping mags and reloading and firing and they could hear beeping and clicking and the clanking feet on the cement running faster and faster, trying to overrun the humans.

They reached the back wall and turned to face their pursuers, adversaries the likes of which they had never encountered before. Lena held out her hand and Lloyd handed her his rifle. Lena pushed Clee back toward the wall. Lloyd stared at the robots coming closer and then he raised his arms a little above his shoulders and exhaled and pushed his arms forward and as the *PF* began to fire a pistol at them the robots began to burn.

The dark man waved his arms and spread them as if to gather all the robots into his full embrace. He was glistening now as perspiration gathered on his face. He exhaled again and pushed his arms forward and out and now all the machines nearest to them began to melt and as the ones from the back moved forward these too were burning and turning from a liquid metal form into a fine powdery gray ash. Lloyd blew at the *PF* with the gun and with his right hand he threw his feverish energy and the *Entity* exploded into flames.

He turned and moved to the wall and Lena pulled at Clee. The two were behind Lloyd now as he touched the metal wall with both hands and it began to melt and a hole was opening. Behind them the robots kept coming forward. Lena and Clee jumped through the hole, Lloyd followed. They were running toward the water. Lloyd was hobbled.

Lena: Were you hit?

Lloyd: My right leg. Keep going! Keep going!

Clee: Look!

She was pointing back at the warehouse. The robots were piling up at the widening hole. They were clicking and beeping, their eyes were flashing but they remained inside.

Clee: They're restricted! They can't come out!

Using the attached straps Lena put both rifles over Clee's head.

Lena: Carry these.

She went to Lloyd and took the flashlight from her pocket and examined the wound, the entry point at the front of his right thigh. Then she looked at the back of his leg.

Lena: The bullet's still in you. Come on, hold on to me.

She put her left arm around his waist. He put his right arm over her shoulder and she lifted him from the ground and began to run. They reached the steps and they stumbled down. Again she lifted him and ran toward the raft. She called to Clee.

Lena: I've got to get the bullet out! He's already weak from the fever and his body is quickly healing at the wound. The lead will make him sick!

Lena helped Lloyd into the raft. She felt his forehead. He was hot and had begun to shiver. Clee jumped in and carefully placed Rom in her lap. She took the rifles from her back.

Lena: Put Rom in that bag.

Clee eased Rom's head into a waterproof bag as Lena pushed and dragged the raft into the water. She began to paddle furiously south and suddenly the raft picked up speed and she looked over to see Clee paddling with her stroke for stroke and now the human and the *Entity* pulled and the raft skimmed the water.

They reached their destination and Lena jumped into the water and pulled the raft onto the beach. Lloyd was unconscious so she put him across her shoulders and ran along the beach and up the slope to their vehicle. She pulled open the rear hatch and sat Lloyd on the edge of the back area and with Clee's assistance,

laid him down, climbed in and pulled him forward. She leaned to the front and activated power standby and turned on the overhead lights. She took her knife and cut his pants open and then off at his thigh and rolled the pants leg up. She looked at the wound and when she took her flashlight to better see, Clee held her hand out and Lena handed her the flashlight and Clee directed the beam for her.

Lena slid up a panel on the side beneath the rear window and removed a toolbox and opened it. From beneath the other window she removed a first aid kit. Lloyd came to and touched her arm. She looked into his eyes and spoke softly, assuredly.

Lena: I've going to get the bullet out.

He nodded, smiled slightly and whispered to her.

Lloyd: You've done it before. Do it again.

Lena: Go to sleep now.

She took her left hand and held it over his eyes and they closed. Then she leaned to him, cleared her mind and blew, just a light puff, into his mouth and put him into a deep sleep.

She began to cut down into his thigh with her knife. Clee took gauze from the kit and wiped away blood. The knife hit the lead and before Lena could reach, Clee handed her a pair of pincer pliers and she pushed the pliers into his leg and pulled out the lead. Clee lifted the leg and Lena wrapped it in gauze and then bandaged and taped it tightly. Lena took a deep breath and felt his forehead. She bent and put her cheek to his. He was cooling down. She poured water from a bottle onto some gauze and began to mop at his brow and face. She turned to Clee.

Lena: Thanks.

Clee: You're welcome. And thank you.

Lena: I'll be right back.

Lena ran down to the raft and pulled it up the slope. She emptied it, let the air out and rolled it up. She stood and looked

around. The fog was gone and when she gazed up into the sky she saw the clouds moving away. She hoped it would be a clear day. She walked back to the vehicle. Clee was watching Lloyd and then she turned to Lena with a hopeful look on her face.

Lena: Clee, exactly where is home?

RETURN HOME

By four a.m. the still sleeping Lloyd was strapped onto the middle seat that had been let down and they were headed southeast to Virginia. Clee began to share her story about the events in the warehouse and Lena had her wait until Lloyd could also hear.

At a little past six as the sun began to rise on this Monday morning, Lloyd awoke.

Lloyd: Where are we?

Lena: How's your leg?

Lloyd: It feels almost healed. I assume you got the bullet out.

Lena: Yes, common lead.

Lloyd: Where are we?

Lena: We're taking Clee to Virginia.

Clee: Rom rides too.

Lena: Yes, Rom is also along for the ride. Just lie there. I'll pull over in a little while. There's some water on the floor beside you. Okay Clee, let's hear your story.

Clee shared with them what had occurred with her in the warehouse and what she hoped to accomplish back at her former home.

Lena drove at a consistent one hundred and ten miles per hour. They stopped twice for brief breaks. The first time, Lena cut Lloyd's pants into shorts and he stretched and tested his leg. When they next stopped to eat and drink he was able to remove

the bandages and they examined the leg and found all that remained was a bruise and discoloration. They continued on.

At two that afternoon, with no one near and directed by Clee, they were pulling off the road and heading toward a range of mountains and hills two miles away. They were in Virginia not far from Roanoke, less than three hours from Washington, D.C.

Clee had Lena drive to what from the road would be the rear and then pull between two medium-sized mountains. They were now surrounded and Clee pointed straight in front of them.

Clee: We have to manually open that mountain so you can drive into it.

Lloyd: And how do we do that?

Clee: Ahead and below us is the complex where the three of us were created. I've watched many times on monitors, people come and go. They used Comm devices to operate the entrance but occasionally they were forced to manually activate the door. Now I hope to do that.

They got out and Clee began to examine the surface of the mountain. She found a spot and started brushing at it with her hand to clear an area. She reached far inside a narrow hole and grabbing a steel handle, she pulled. A piece of the mountain about a foot square began to come out.

Clee: This is it. Please assist me.

She continued to pull.

Clee: Now you pull until I say stop.

Lloyd grabbed the handle and Lena pushed up on the rock and out it came further and further. After three feet Clee called out.

Clee: Okay, stop!

She reached into a hole that had been exposed and lifted a rock like cement covering and turned the control beneath it. The front of the mountain, the size of a garage door large enough for

a transport truck began to slide open. When it stopped, Clee helped Lloyd and Lena push the block back in and while Clee remained outside the vehicle the other two got back in.

Clee: Let me have a flashlight. Turn on your lights and pull in.

Lena drove in and Clee followed. She found the rear of the block and reaching through another narrow, long hole she again found the control and turned it and when the door closed they were plunged into semi-darkness.

They were in a large, wide, cavern like area and although the headlights illuminated the front, there were still large patches of darkness behind and high above them. Clee went to Lena's window.

Clee: There are lights embedded and hidden around the top high up but are not sensor triggered in case someone unauthorized entered. Your headlights give me a sense of where I am. Now, I'm going down. I'll activate the cameras and I'll lower you into the garage. The floor will begin to descend slowly so don't be alarmed. It will take me about four minutes to start you down.

Clee moved back and to the side and then slowly started walking forward and using the flashlight she scanned the wall and found a narrow crevice and disappeared into it.

It wasn't long before the floor shuddered and gradually began to descend. They were eventually set down in a large well-lighted garage area and directed down a ramp to park. When they got out they saw the floor of the mountain, nearly six feet thick begin to rise. They watched it lock into place and then looked around at the stored dusty automobiles and trucks. All of them appeared new at over sixty years old. Clee went to their vehicle and removed the bag with Rom's head.

Clee: Welcome to our home. Follow me.

Clee looked at Lloyd as he grabbed his holsters and two pistols and then she looked at Lena, armed with her two guns.

Lena shrugged.

Lloyd: We can't help ourselves.

They followed Clee as she walked through tunnels, past closed doors and then alongside large open rooms. She passed a living room area then turned down a long hallway.

Clee: This takes us to the laboratory.

When they entered, the room was immediately illuminated in bright florescent light. She placed the bag on an operating table.

Clee: Now here is what I learned the day I was kidnapped by Bru. Have a seat this will take a while.

She pressed a sequence, a combination of buttons on the control panel of Comm devices she stood before and a section of the wall, slid open. There were three elongated metal and glass-like dark tubes standing up and when she pressed three buttons, one after the other, the glass-like area began to clear, the dark slowly lightened and there were three *Entities*. The female looked exactly like Clee, the other two, on each side, looked exactly like Rom and Bru. They were all naked and their eyes were closed.

Clee: Our creators made duplicates of us, three males and two females. I didn't know, Rom didn't know. When Bru left here that last time he took one of me and one of himself. Hopefully I can bring Rom back.

Lena: Will he be the same? Will he remember?

Clee: That I don't know. I don't even know if I can do it. I've never done a complete microprocessor transfer before.

She rolled up her sleeves and began to wash her hands and arms. She put on a pair of neoprene gloves.

Clee: Germs and bacteria are not an issue, dust and dirt are.

She removed Rom's head from the bag and looked at it and smiled slightly. She took a deep breath and gently placed it on the table. She pressed another button at the panel and a large screen that hung in the room near the table came on.

Clee: We're designed to repair ourselves and others such as ourselves. We were trained through simulations, we watched videos and consumed manuals, now this is real.

She moved Rom's head to a platform-like table near the control panel and pulled another small table close. On that table she set a black cloth and opened it to display an array of surgical tools. She took one of the tools and removed Rom's right eye and the connecting fibers then she removed the left one.

Lena: Oh, I don't think I want to watch this.

Lloyd: I do, this is fascinating.

Clee took a long thin wire-like apparatus and turned it on. The camera on the end was activated and the image it showed appeared on the large hanging screen. She took a pair of long flexible forceps and turned the handle and it began to buzz.

Clee: This instrument can not only recognize but also grasp the microprocessors I need to extract.

She picked up the wire camera in her right hand and inserted it into Rom's empty left eye socket. Into the right eye socket went the thin forceps. On the screen they all watched as she slowly moved through Rom's head and around and past the materials and circuitry that gave him the animation known to humans as life. She found one chip and slowly removed it and placed it in a slot on a tray. Above it was the number one.

Clee: I have four more to go. *Entities* of the last ten years or so have two main processors, in the decades before that, only one. The three of us were given five main and twenty-four mini ones.

It took her twenty painstaking minutes to remove all five. She looked at the three forms and then turned to the two who sat and observed her.

Clee: Which one Lena?

She pointed at first one male *Entity* and then the other.

Clee: Which one is Rom?

Lena: Aren't they both the same?

Clee: Yes, they are both the same.

She indicated the chips on the tray and then again the *Entities* who stood motionless before them.

Clee: There is Rom and one may become Rom. But these two physical things are not my Rom. It was the programs. It was the programs they initially loaded into us and the knowledge we acquired from that point forward that made us who we ultimately became. The essence of our existence resides in our memories.

She moved to the control panel and stared at it. She pressed buttons, one after another and nothing happened. She paused and scanned the buttons and knobs and then she pressed one and on the screen step-by-step instructions appeared.

Now, following the directions, she began to press and turn buttons and knobs. The tube to the right of the *PF Entity* began to ease open. They could hear the crack as the now clear glass-like material released and then they heard the hissing of nitrogen loss and the mechanical groan of the covering as it opened wide. The tube slowly moved forward and then reclined until it was flat. Clee stared at the screen and she used the controls to open the bottom of the tube and the body of the *Entity* slid forward on a cushion and was deposited on the operating table Clee now stood beside.

She wheeled a small stand over beside the body and lined up the machine that was on it with the left side of the head of the form on the table. She turned the machine on and it began to hum and sensors were activated and glowed white and shifted and stopped as seven red laser lights came on and scanned the head of the *Entity* and then all the beams were directed and pinpointed at the side of the face and the ear.

Clee: This machine was built and programmed to locate and fill the designated slots with the microprocessors.

She slid the tray of microprocessors into the machine and pressed a button. After several moments a thin flexible but semi-rigid silicone extension came from the machine with a chip fastened to the end and slowly extended and entered the ear of the *Entity*. Further and further it moved, as if alive and then it stopped and was still for several moments and then it wiggled slightly. It then began to retract. The first chip had been slotted. Four more times this occurred, slowly, one by one and finally all five microprocessors had been inserted. The humming of the machine quieted and then it went silent and dark.

Clee pushed the machine away and rolled another one up. This portable power source had five electrodes that were attached to the left hand of the *Entity* form. She glanced at Lloyd and Lena who were now standing and looking at her anxiously. She scanned the machine as if analyzing it and then turned the power on. She let it run for one minute and then turned it off. She stared at the form and then touched its forehead, felt its chest.

Clee: That should have activated his permanent power source and started the simulated heartbeat but nothing happened.

She waited and then tried it again. Again nothing happened. She checked the machine. She examined the lifeless form.

Lena: Try it again.

Clee tried it again with no results. She touched the unmoving *Entity*.

Clee: I can't keep trying. He'll overheat and burn inside.

Her eyes clouded with tears. Her voice filled with anguish.

Clee: Did I make a mistake? Have I failed? Does this mean Rom is no more?

Her *Entity* tears began to fall.

Lena: A kiss! Turn the power on and off and kiss him Clee. Kiss Rom as you love him and remember, it's the thought behind the kiss.

Clee did as told. She turned the power on and quickly shut it off. She leaned and tilted Rom's face to her own and kissed the lips of the one who inside this physical form was designed for her, she for him and she thought of her love for him and thought of being with him and their being together in their future.

The right arm of the *Entity* on the table went straight up in the air and then closed around Clee. He held on tightly and when she rose from him they all waited as the now opened eyes looked at Clee in confusion. Would he know who he was? Would he recognize her? Would he remember the two humans who had grasped hands and now stared at him anxiously?

He lay there, then sat up. The voice of the *Entity*, somewhat deep, proper and precise, spoke as he removed the electrodes. Voice: Clee my love, if you so desire we'll have a house with a white picket fence ...

Lena had started dancing at the sound of the voice and human tears fell from her eyes. She laughed as she looked at the two.

Clee: ... and some rabbits.

She stopped and hollered.

Lena: What is it with the rabbits?

Rom: Touch me Lena! Touch me!

Lena: Put some clothes on! You're naked!

The *Entity* stood and stared at his hands, his body, took his head into his hands, looked at the three watching him and smiled.

Rom: I am Rom.

At Rom's and Clee's insistence, Lloyd and Lena agreed to stay at least one day with them. The guests were shown to their respective rooms and provided clothes. They showered and changed and then they all gathered in the kitchen area. Clee looked at the two with mock surprise when they entered.

Clee: No guns? Where are your guns?

Lloyd and Lena looked at each other and then patted each other down, as if searching for weapons and then smiled and shrugged. They sat at the large table and Lloyd was given juice made from powder and Lena drank water and they both found the re-hydrated dried fruit tasteful. It was then time to explain to Rom all that had occurred so the two took the drinks and the four of them went to the laboratory.

Rom examined the two remaining duplicates as Clee explained how she had removed his head at the warehouse and used the five main processors to bring him back into existence. Rom walked over to stand before the *PF* duplicate. He stared at it and then turned to Clee.

Rom: I thought you were no more. I did not want to live without you.

Lena: A kiss, Clee. Don't leave out the kiss.

Clee told him of Lena's instructions.

Clee: Just as your kiss brought me from my sleep, a kiss brought you back to me.

He took her into his arms and gave her a quick buss on the lips.

Rom: How special is that?

He turned to the other two.

Rom: Would you like a brief history of the origin of the kiss?

They both answered, almost at the same time.

Lloyd: No.

Lena: No.

They went to the living room area and Rom and Clee sat together on a couch and Lloyd and Lena sat opposite them in large chairs and sipped on their drinks. Clee spoke of years of searching and finally finding her hidden duplicate. She talked of secret passageways and winding unknown underground tunnels. She explained her sporadic and then more frequent states of

quiescence, how they grew longer and longer, sometimes for weeks in duration. How she replaced herself with her duplicate and others saw her but were not aware and so she roamed beneath the earth searching, for exactly what she did not know.

Clee: I was restricted to the warehouse and to an outside perimeter area and Bru was busy and did not concern himself with me. Then years ago he put the destructive virus inside of me to ensure I would not try to discover a way to leave. Then you showed up Rom. I decided to place my duplicate in my rear bedroom. I knew the deception would eventually be determined but by then you and I would have escaped and as they first searched for you, with you carrying me away underground, we would have gained enough time and distance that you could disable the viruses inside of me and we both would be free. I saw and heard from the balcony that you had found the background programs I knew nothing about and Bru had become more agitated, the confrontation began and I never had an opportunity to share my plan with you. After being alone with you I grew desperate. I know my plan was incomplete and rash but ...

Rom: But it doesn't matter now. Look around. Look at where we are. Most important, we're together again as we were designed to be. Now let's disable and remove from inside you all that could possibly cause you harm.

Clee: One last thing we should all understand. As we began to run toward the rear wall I saw several of his most trusted *Entities* gathering the severed pieces of Bru and carrying them away. There's a duplicate of him somewhere in that warehouse. Can they re-animate Bru, bring him back into existence as he was? Has Bru provided some of them the necessary knowledge and training? Do they already have, or can they acquire the precise, sophisticated machines needed to transfer the processors? These are questions for which we don't have answers.

The room was quiet as they pondered the possibilities.
Lloyd: Only time will tell.

They all went to the technology area and Clee sat in a large chair with sensors and metal armrests with straps. Lloyd and Lena sat by the far wall and looked on with interest.

Rom: I'm going to run a scan and locate any viruses or rogue programs and after I find out what kind they are I'll disable and remove them. Clee I need your permission to install several programs that will allow you to protect yourself by any means necessary and under circumstances you deem proper, to destroy anything or anyone you determine to be worthy of such actions. Do I have your permission?

Clee: Of course. We'll need to protect each other and I'll be like Lena.

Lena: Is that a compliment? I like the sound of that.

Rom: Slide your arms into the straps and slow your thoughts.

She did as told and Rom went and sat at a desk and began to push buttons and the monitor in front of him came on. He tapped keys and the straps tightened. The armrests on the chair lit up and Rom began a diagnostics run on Clee.

He got up and walked over to her and with a handheld Comm device scanner he carefully moved it around her head and chest. He went back to the desk and looked at the monitor. He pressed buttons on his personal device and downloaded the results. Again he tapped on the keys and then walked over to Clee

Rom: That which is harmful is now being disabled and removed. The new programs are also being loaded. All this activity will temporarily disable and immobilize you. Close your eyes.

Clee closed her eyes and was stilled. They all watched intently. It took almost fifteen minutes and then Clee opened her eyes and smiled. The straps released and she removed her arms.

Clee: All right, where are my guns?

Rom: Everything is gone but the other, new programs haven't completely loaded and become active yet. That will take a while.

Clee jumped up and moved to Rom and put her arms around his neck and gave him a quick kiss.

Clee: They haven't? It sure seems like my thoughts are changing. Well after they're active we'll wrestle, you and I. How does that sound?

Lloyd and Lena slept well and hard and they awoke early on Tuesday morning to the aroma of coffee. They came to the kitchen in pajamas and slippers. There were wishes of wellness and hugs given by all to all and Lena looked at plates Clee and Rom set down on the table.

Lena: The coffee smells good but what is that?

She pointed at a yellowish soupy mixture.

Clee: Rom tried to make eggs to go with that defrosted toast.

Lena stirred it with her fork.

Lena: A little runny aren't they?

Clee: I think he used too much water and not enough powder.

Lloyd: Coffee is fine.

Lena: More fruit for me.

Rom: If you eat fruit and drink liquids you'll lose weight.

Lena: Rom, I'm going to share another secret with you. I couldn't care less how much I weigh.

Tuesday was spent in relaxing activities. Lloyd and Rom found a stored airtight cache of weapons and bullets and began breaking the best handguns and rifles down and cleaning and preparing them for use and checking all the ammunition. Lena and Clee joined them and Lena worked on their rifles taken from the vehicle and then she assisted Clee with the weapons she had chosen for herself.

Later Lena and Clee found several shades of temporary hair color and non-permanent ink and after debating with Rom, decided on some red and pink to add to her style and Lena showed her how to later add the gold she and Rom both liked, to his hair and the ink to use for Rom's *DM* marker and then Lena inked Clee with a *DF* tattoo.

They went through the whole complex looking for clothes and found some that could be used until she could purchase something new and while they were going through the clothes Rom and Lloyd were looking at the vehicles in the garage.

Rom had taken one when he first left this place and then had to abandon it in New York when it broke down. He thought a hybrid utility vehicle would be much better for their purposes when he and his mate departed this next time so Lloyd helped him get it started and they changed some parts and washed it.

That late evening they all sat in the living room area and spoke of pleasant subjects and then with Lloyd and Lena planning to leave before sunrise, the two departing guests prepared to retire.

Lloyd: Well Rom, my friend, my cousin, my brother. It's been an interesting time for us, hasn't it?

Rom: It was a fateful Saturday night when this adventure first began. In *Center World* the time we have been together is a lifetime.

Lena: How true that is.

Clee: How can we thank you?

Lloyd: No thanks are necessary. We all assisted each other in one way or another. You two gave Lena and me an experience we'll be able to carry with us, including quite a few firsts.

Lena: Your first time getting shot by an *Entity*.

Lloyd: Yes, and hopefully the last. I don't need to go through that again.

Lena: It was fun and exciting.

Clee: And dangerous.

Lena: That always seems to be a part of fun and exciting. It was all our pleasure.

Lloyd: You two will need to be able to take care of yourselves. You'll need value to carry you through.

Lena: We'll create an account you can draw from.

Now Rom smiled broadly.

Rom: Lloyd, Lena, now I do thank you but have you forgotten? I am Rom. You should know I've been stealing Crystocurrencies and value from governments for years. Clee and I are wealthy. Not as you two are but actually we're in pretty good shape.

At six the next morning Lloyd and Lena were ready to leave. Fruit and water had been packed, the floor had descended and they were about to get in their vehicle and drive up the ramp.

Rom: We'll let you up and monitor you from the console here. When you're ready, just wave and I'll open the mountain for you, better yet, honk four times.

They stood in silence, looking at each other.

Lena: We may never see each other again but you two will be in our minds and therefore just a thought away. We'll feel you in our souls whenever we choose. Within us you'll exist as long as we live.

Rom and Lloyd shook hands goodbye and the *Entity* held on tightly and looked from one human to the other as he spoke.

Rom: You have given me permission to share with Clee your immortal stories. Thus the four of us shall be bound together forever by our secrets. We two shall go forth and attempt, with all that we have within us, to represent you both as best we can.

The *Entity* released Lloyd's hand and turned to Lena and smiled and pointed and then opened his arms.

Rom: No tears now.

Lena: My tears of sadness would be overwhelmed by tears of joy.

Rom: Ah, you humans are so complex. Bru saw only your shortcomings. He failed to understand there is no species better.

Lena went to him and they hugged and kissed goodbye and she went to Clee and gave her a hug and kiss and held her as she looked at, and spoke to them both.

Lena: It's all about love, not simply for you two or just the four of us here at this moment. The answer for the world is love. It always has been and thus it shall always be. I wish for both of you to be well.

Clee: Goodbye Lena, be well.

Lena released Clee and the *Entity* ran to Lloyd and kissed him.

Clee: Goodbye Lloyd, be well. Take care of Lena. You two take care of each other and as only an *Entity* can, I love you both.

They climbed into their vehicle, pulled onto the ramp and from the driver's seat Lloyd called out as they all waved.

Lloyd: Be well you two. Protect yourselves. Protect each other and remember in *Center World* there is only life and death.

Rom and Clee went to the console. Rom pressed a button and the floor slowly began to rise. The two *Entities* watched the monitor. They saw the two humans buckle in and then they heard the horn sound, four times. Rom pressed a button and the door of the mountain began to move and when it was fully open the vehicle started forward and disappeared into the subtle glow of morning twilight.

DEARBORN, MICHIGAN

Evening twilight in September. It was Saturday night. It had only been a few weeks since the events had begun that would bring this diverse group together at this time in their lives.

Throughout the weeks Leo had been in contact with the other three factions. There had been conference calls and video meetings. Various accords for peace had been proposed and formalized. Business agreements had been drawn up and several had been signed.

There was still much to be done, including putting together a coalition from all the 'Siders to devise a plan and cost analysis to turn Belle Isle into a gaming island to match or surpass those on the east and west coasts. However, Leo had felt a significant amount of progress had been made so he prepared for a lavish formal and semi-formal dinner, a celebration in honor of the future of Detroit and thus Michigan. It would be at an exclusive, private, gated and guarded banquet and dance establishment in Dearborn, of course it was on the west side.

It was to be cocktails and greetings beginning at seven thirty and dinner would begin promptly at eight thirty. Now at half past eight, everyone had arrived, but two.

Lucett was there, having arrived promptly at seven thirty, with Caius, who was dressed in a white coat tuxedo with a black butterfly bow tie, her CFO Tal and his wife and the Northsiders' new chief of security, a short somewhat thick *DL* named Cor along with her mate.

She had asked Leo if Lena and Lloyd would be there and he assured her they would so now, for some reason, she grew anxious as she stood with her group near the bar and watched the door and sipped her gin.

As she moved to the bar to refresh her drink a hush fell over the room. Conversations paused, movements halted and when Lucett turned she saw Lena and Lloyd standing in the doorway. As Leo started toward them Lena was slowly perusing the room and when she saw Lucett she stared a moment, smiled a little and Lucett suddenly felt her heart beating and her body grew warm

and the hair at the back of her neck tingled.

Lloyd wore a black, tailor made, single-breasted, unvented tuxedo with peaked grosgrain lapels, black cummerbund, white silk pocket square with a fluted fold and a white, wing collar pleated bib shirt with mother of pearl buttons and a black diamond point grosgrain bow tie with a pair of black formal court shoes made of highly-polished calfskin with black, pinched bow grosgrain ribbons on top. In his lapel buttonhole was a red and purple boutonnière.

Lena wore a long, tight, magenta-colored gown that nearly touched the floor. Her striking dark-brown legs were seen through a short-to-long opened front, flared hemline and the soft-looking material pressed against her with a puckered front and puckered, opened, strappy back and the top was held on to her statuesque body with thin shoulder straps. Her shoes were of a magenta color with shiny silver metallic flecks with heels three and one half inches high and she carried her pistol in a medium-sized silver clutch covered in magenta-colored metallic flakes.

She wore jewelry on her wrists and fingers and around her neck. Rhodium, platinum and gold adorned her and brought contrast to her dark-chocolate-colored skin and her dangling earrings and the settings of her rings and bracelets and necklace were encrusted with large, rare, purple stones made up of diamonds, alexandrite, taaffeite and garnet. She sparkled and glittered and reflected light and flashed colors as she walked.

Lucett had grabbed Caius' arm when she first saw them and now as she looked at this unique individual her grip tightened. Everyone present knew these were the Westsiders' enforcers and they all, each of them felt a force, experienced a presence, powerful and dangerous and something more, something unlike anything they had ever known before. It moved throughout the room, a wafting, floating darkness brushed them lightly as the

two passed through and around them, speaking, greeting, acknowledging those who uttered pleasant words and observed them as they strolled to the area across the room where Cress and Var stood and where they received and exchanged handshakes and hugs.

A server, at Leo's instructions took Lena a glass of champagne and Lloyd a glass of juice. Lucett had released Caius, gulped her drink down and turned and held her glass for a refill. She took her fresh drink, turned and stuck her finger in it to stir it and watched as Lena began to stroll slowly, directly toward her in lithe, graceful, sensual movements and the leader of the Northsiders knew a female black panther approached. She took her finger from the glass, stuck it in her mouth and sucked it.

Lucett wore a floor-length, one shoulder, chiffon gown. It was a rich yellow-gold in color with an A-line, zipper-up back and exposed her left leg with a split-front. It was sleeveless and with a tight empire waist she was wrapped and her honey-colored skin glowed and she also wore diamonds and platinum and her fingers and wrists and neck flashed and sparkled in the light. Her blond hair was down past her shoulders and her cobalt-blue eyes were bright and widened slightly as she looked at the dark woman drawing closer and she shifted her gold and white bag that hung from her right side and her gold and white shoes moved as she stepped forward, twice, and in her four inch heels she was nearly six feet tall and still looked up just a little into the expressive, dark-brown eyes as Lena stopped before her and smiled and spoke softly to her.

Lena: Hello Lucett. You look so very lovely this evening. I simply adore your hair down like that. It gives you such elegance. Are you well?

Lucett returned the smile and then struggled to contain her growing excitement.

Lucett: Hello to you Lena. I am well, thank you. I hope you are too, and you look absolutely, unbelievably beautiful tonight.

Lena: A compliment, thank you for those nice words. I like compliments.

Lucett: And thank you. I like compliments too, when they're sincere.

Lucett sipped her gin. Lena sipped her champagne.

Lena: The dossier we have on you is, shall I say, interesting?

Lucett: I wish I had a dossier on you.

Lena moved closer. Her gaze reached into Lucett and her eyes grew serious.

Lena: I'm glad you didn't go to the meeting.

Lucett: I'm glad I didn't go too. I'd much rather be in your presence here, like this.

Leo began to call out that dinner would be served in the banquet room.

Lena: We'll talk later, you and I.

Everyone began to move through the open doorway to the large room next door. Lloyd came up and Lena took his offered arm. Caius came to stand beside Lucett and she took his hand and they all walked into the room for dinner.

Leo: Find your place cards, like a treasure hunt. No separate factions are allowed here. We'll partake of conversation, food and drinks and later some music and dancing.

The guests found their names on the cards and remained standing. The six Northsiders were interspersed with the others.

Opposite Leo, on the other end of the long, decorated table was his wife, Lav. The gathering included four other Westsiders, security chief Tu and his wife, the *DG* CFO and his *DG* mate.

The Eastsiders were Cress, Var and his wife, their new *DTM* security chief with his *DTW* mate and their new *DM* CFO with his wife.

Finally, there were the Southsiders. They were represented by Nell, the widow of Quin, who through rightful *Center World* heirship, was now the new leader, Orsin, now their CFO, and their new *DF* chief of security and her husband.

Leo proposed a toast and twenty-five glasses were raised.

Leo: To Detroit, its outlining areas and to all of the state of Michigan, I toast to a new beginning.

Concurring remarks were made, glasses were touched and drinks were sipped and some were downed.

Leo: Now, let's eat. I hope you all enjoy.

The nearly dozen servers sprung into action and the first of six courses was served. The dinner began with a colorful, varied selection of appetizers being offered including cranberry chili meatballs, warm pieces of cheesy bread, bacon wrapped jalapeno peppers and chocolate chip cheese rolls.

Then came the soups, oyster or potato or crab bisque. The palate cleansers had stopped everything, as everyone wanted to sample at least two different ones. The choices were pineapple orange, strawberry blackberry, lemon raspberry and Lena almost couldn't leave the champagne grapefruit alone.

Between each course someone rose to propose a toast and when the next serving came, the main one, the room was filled with loud voices and laughter.

There was chicken cordon bleu, garlic prime rib and slow-cooked pulled pork with pinwheel vegetable garnishes of carrots and cucumbers with turnips and parsnip along with mashed potatoes and wild rice.

The fifth course was a combination fruit and vegetable salad and when the final part of the meal was being brought out, the hot and cold deserts, some of the guests started clapping, hollering and whistling and others were threatening to leave the table. Lena tried the lemon meringue pie and when it couldn't

come close to the pie her own mother made or Mom's, she excused herself and strolled to the bar in the next room and ordered a glass of champagne.

There were several people already there and soon others joined. It wasn't long before Lucett was standing beside her ordering a gin with a splash of vermouth and one cube of ice.

Lena: That handsome young man with you gazes into your eyes with a look of love. How fortunate you are.

They sipped their drinks. Lucett looked across the room at Caius as he conversed with a group of people.

Lucett: And what should I do about him?

Lena: What is it I see in your eyes when you look at him? Do you love him?

Lucett: I'm trying to.

Lena: It's difficult to refuse real love isn't it?

Lucett: How do I know it's real?

Lucett gulped some of her drink. Lena looked directly at her.

Lena: Help him out. Love him back and then you'll find out. Unfulfilled love has its own special pain. Come walk with me.

Lena sipped her drink and set the glass on the bar. Lucett took another gulp and set her glass down. They moved toward the opened doors that led to the patio. As they drew close to the way out an inebriated *Branca DQ* took two steps from the wall and spoke effusively.

DQ: Thank you Lena! Thank you! I thank you so much!

Lena looked, recognized whom it was and continued to walk.

Lena: For what Orsin?

Orsin: For not killing me!

Lena: Don't make me regret that.

The two imposing *DFs* stepped through the doorway and onto the patio. Down three steps they went and moved toward the garden of flowers and rows of pine and young maple trees.

There were three paths to take and Lena turned toward the one on the far left.

As they moved onto that path, Lloyd was holding the hand of Cress and leading her onto the path on the far right. He walked with her along the wooden boards and stopped and turned to her as they stood beneath a tall, dim, yellowish light.

Lloyd: You look lovely tonight Cress.

Cress: Thank you for your words. No one wears a tuxedo as well as you. How handsome you are.

Lloyd: You were always, and always will be special. I have something for you.

Cress: Something I want? A kiss? A real kiss, goodbye?

He smiled slightly.

Lloyd: Yes, a kiss for you, along with something you need.

He stepped to her and before he took her into his arms she smiled and closed her eyes and tilted her head up. Her light-pink painted lips parted slightly. But he did not place his lips upon hers. He put the palm of his opened right hand gently on her chest, at her heart, and warmth flooded her and when she fainted he caught her, held her limp body and whispered into her ear.

She came to the light, having been in the darkness for only a few seconds. She looked at Lloyd and he held her and her eyes had fluttered as they opened and she took several deep breaths and smiled and laughed softly.

Cress: Oh my goodness. How wonderful a kiss that was. It was if I fell asleep and dreamed, a brief powerful dream.

Lloyd: Yes?

Cress: Yes, and I now know everything will be all right. Lloyd, I am filled with your essence. Thank you.

Lloyd: You're welcome Cress. Actually it was my pleasure.

Now they both laughed softly as they turned and hand in hand started back toward the music they could now hear.

Across the garden, on the other dimly lit path, Lucett and Lena could smell the roses and asters and geraniums. The black-eyed Susans watched them as they passed, now hand in hand.

Lena arranged her dress and sat on a bench and set her clutch behind her. Lucett took her dress and pulled it over her legs and sat down and removed the bag from her shoulder and held it, looked down at it, touched it and then set it beside her on the bench. She looked across into Lena's eyes.

Lucett: I dreamed about you last night.

Lena: And in that dream we were in a garden of flowers such as this and we stood together and shared a kiss and a scent came to you in our closeness and you thought it to be from the flowers but if you take a deep breath right now you'll realize it's my perfume that you sensed.

Lucett took a deep breath and her heart skipped a beat, her body warmed as she stared into Lena's dark-brown eyes. She spoke, her voice just above an incredulous whisper.

Lucett: Yes, that's true. How could you possibly know that?

Lena: You would be surprised, first, at what is possible and next, at all that I know.

Lena took Lucett's hands into hers, slid closer and looked into her cobalt-blue eyes now wide with confusion.

Lena: I dreamed about you last night. I constructed those images and sensations to connect with you.

Lucett: How? Why? Why do you make me feel the way I do?

Lena: When you were eleven years old you saw your whole family murdered before you managed to escape.

Lucett's eyes immediately clouded and she attempted to pull her hands away but she couldn't, she was held fast. She suddenly felt as if a tremendous weight pressed down upon her and she was immobilized, fastened to this bench as she saw Lena move closer.

Lucett: You read that about me. People know. I hide nothing. I am who I am.

Lena: Now an orphan, with no one, you lived and survived on the streets for three years until Uncle took you in. Along with the formal education you then received, he taught you all he knew about the ways of *Center World* and the businesses he ran. You rose up through the ranks to become a powerful leader of the Northsiders, known to be ruthless, demanding but fair in your attempt to maintain a sense of honesty and integrity about yourself and all that you controlled. I admire your perseverance, your strength, your courage and obviously, in not coming to that meeting, your intelligence. Had you been in that room and raised your weapon against us you would have been destroyed and inside me I would have wept over that destruction. But you didn't go and so here we sit, brought together by fate. And know this, my dear Lucett, it will be by fate that we may never see each other again. I'm leaving soon.

Lucett: Is this goodbye, forever?

Lena: Perhaps, most likely.

Lucett: But you haven't answered me. How did you come to me in my dream? Why? Why do I feel the way I do when you look at me, when you speak my name the way you do?

Lena: A kiss? You want me to kiss you, don't you?

Lucett felt her hands being released and she was let go, she could move again. She looked at Lena's red lips. She saw the fullness of them. She could taste them, feel the softness of them and realized she was reliving the dream. She saw the dimples that framed them as Lena now smiled and she raised her right hand to gently touch the smooth dark-chocolate-colored cheek. She shook her head no as she was compelled to softly speak aloud the words that came from inside her.

Lucett: Yes. Yes, I do, but I'm afraid.

Lena rose and opened her arms to Lucett.
Lena: Come to me and believe I won't hurt you.
Lucett rose and went into Lena's inviting arms. Now they both nearly whispered.
Lucett: Why am I afraid of you?
Lena touched her left cheek to Lucett's cheek and Lucett could feel her heat and the fear was replaced with a sense of peace. Then Lena leaned from her.
Lena: Ah, so many questions. I'm going to kiss you and provide all the answers you seek but you have to promise to kiss me back.
Lucett: I promise I will.
Lena: Look into my eyes.
Lucett stared into Lena's eyes and suddenly her body felt as if it were rising, lifting, floating away. Then she could observe herself, at the same time elevated and yet secure upon the earth.
Lena: It's the thought behind my kiss. Now relax, clear your mind.
Lucett: What will you be thinking?
Lena: I'll be thinking, you are not just who you are here at this moment, you are also all that you have not yet become. Goodbye Lucett.
Lucett: Goodbye Lena.
Lucett closed her eyes and her mind went blank and then they kissed. Their bodies pressed together as their embrace tightened. It was a long, passionate goodbye and Lena gave to Lucett her breath, just a puff and Lucett felt something enter her mind and fill it and engulf her physically and wash as warm wet rain throughout her body and each thought and every sensation merged to create an indescribable feeling and she knew at that moment that she would never forget that feeling and that this experience from this kiss would be, as long as she could recall it, just a thought away.

Lena let her go and Lucett's arms dropped to her sides and she opened her eyes and saw Lena step from her and she blinked and she had to catch her breath that rushed and escaped from her and so she blinked again and breathed deeply and her rapidly beating heart slowed and she laughed and spoke aloud, to herself.

Lucett: Come on girl, gather yourself.

Lena: Now do you understand? Have your questions been answered?

Lucett: Yes. Yes, everything is all right now. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Lena: Oh Lucett, no thanks are necessary. It was my pleasure.

Now they both laughed softly at the secrets that had been passed between them through a kiss.

Lena: Let's go get a drink. I need some more champagne.

They grabbed their possessions and started back.

Lucett: I'm a gin kind of woman myself.

Back inside, the band was playing and there were dancers on the dance floor, couples and singles. And as Lena moved to stand near Lloyd and Leo and Lav, a server brought her a glass of champagne. She held it up to look at the bubbles. She watched them rise, ascending as if charged and alive. She sipped her drink and it seemed as if its effervescent essence ran through her and she smiled at Lloyd, who was looking at her.

Lena: Did you have parting words for Cress?

Lloyd: Yes I did. Did you say goodbye to Lucett?

Lena: You know I did.

They watched the dancers awhile and then the music changed.

Lloyd: Come dance with me.

Lena handed her clutch to Lav, sipped her drink and handed the glass to Leo and the two moved to the middle of the floor. They did a dance called The Chop, a dance from the 1960s that

Lloyd and her mother, Georgia, had taught her when she was twelve years old. No one there had seen it before.

Lloyd appeared suave and calm as he moved smoothly, in contrast to Lena who performed short choppy steps as he held both her hands to pull her to him and push her away and he released one hand to turn her and then with her hand in his he lifted his arm above his head and he turned her around and turned her in circles as she spun around him and they were beside one another, in front of each other and as she moved faster her diamonds and jewels flashed and sparkled in the light and cast a myriad of shimmering colors and as she chopped, the people who had gathered to observe the somewhat tall dark man and the tall dark woman move in orchestrated contrasting harmony admired the way he controlled yet assisted her and marveled that a woman of that size could move so gracefully in such a sustained, disjointed, sensually beautiful manner.

As the music ended he pulled her to him and she was in his arms and he smiled just a little as she threw her head back and laughed with elation and her joy allowed the gold in her smile to be seen by all and the people clapped and hollered and whistled.

Now it was time for the two of them to depart, to leave the festivities to the revelers to carry on. This night belonged to the 'Siders.

Leo and Lav walked them to the exit from the ballroom to hug, shake hands, wish them well and accept with modesty the compliments of the two enforcers for a wonderful dinner and dance. Several other individuals came close to wave and to say goodnight.

Before the two passed through the doorway, Lena scanned the people and found the leader of the Northsiders sitting with Caius at a table for two on the other side of the room near the wall. They looked at one another and Lucett rose.

Lena smiled, took her right hand and touched her fingers to her lips. She slowly turned her hand and held it for Lucett to see. Lucett smiled, returned the gesture and watched as Lloyd and Lena disappeared from her sight.

Lucett sat down and spoke to Caius.

Lucett: I'm going to have a couple more drinks and then, baby you and I, are going home. Your birthday is coming up soon.

She pointed and threatened him.

Lucett: You're close enough and I've got something for you.

Caius pointed and threatened her back.

Caius: And I've got something for you.

Lucett was thrilled and she laughed out loud.

Lucett: I thought you would say that.

Lloyd and Lena walked slowly into the night. He waved off the valet attendant and she took his arm as they strolled toward their automobile. They paused to look up into the twinkling sky and observed the growing, glowing, moon.

Lena: It's a beautiful night.

Lloyd: Yes it is.

Lena: Moon floating.

They walked on in silence for a while.

Lena: It's good to be alive.

Lloyd: Much better than the alternative.

They could see the large silver luxury vehicle in which they rode and as they drew close, the engine started, the doors unlocked and as metal wings, they lifted into the air. Lloyd assisted Lena as she gathered her dress and eased in and then he went to the other side and removed his coat and hung it on a hook at the back window. He adjusted his holstered pistol beneath his left arm and climbed in. The doors descended and the belts came around them and he pulled off.

Music played softly and neither spoke until they reached the highway. Lena was looking straight ahead and she asked a question, her voice barely audible.

Lena: Are you going west with me?

She tensed at the lack of response. It was a prolonged pause that hung in the air between them. The car, set to gas drive moved around the sparse traffic and the powerful engine emitted a low roar.

Lloyd: Yes, I'm going with you. Let's travel on together.

Lena sat up, excited now and her eyes were wide and bright as she turned to him.

Lena: We've got casinos and property you've never seen in New Orleans and Dallas and Albuquerque and Phoenix and wait until you see the hospitals we funded and the schools we built. We'll celebrate your Christmas birthday in our house in Malibu and you can sip grapefruit juice on the balcony and watch the sun fall into the ocean. And for my birthday on New Year's we'll be in our house in Las Vegas and we'll have a party New Year's Eve and we'll party for a whole week from your day to mine and just think, you'll be 231 years old and I'll be 201, nice odd numbers.

The father looked at the daughter and her eyes were glistening just a little and she blinked several times to hold back.

Lloyd: Smile for me.

She smiled and he saw all that she was to him and she reached out and touched his shoulder and felt all that he was to her.

Lena: I love you father.

Lloyd: And I love you Georcelena.

Lloyd pulled into the no limit lane and their speed rose.

Lena: Put our record on!

Lloyd: Play number one. Repeat.

Now their record began. Lena looked out of her side window at the landscape passing by in a dark blur. Then she looked up

through the glass roof at the immense, seemingly endless sky. She looked ahead as the unknown future rushed toward them.

Lena: Turn it up! Let's go!

The music rose in volume and the interior lights dimmed as Lloyd pressed buttons on the steering wheel and he adjusted his seat.

Lena: Faster!

The speed display passed 140 MPH and Lena was singing to their favorite song from 1968. She sang loudly of destroying mountains and building islands and traveling to different distant worlds.

The song would play over and over until they didn't need to hear it any longer and she adjusted her seat so she could sit up straight and lean forward and play drums on the dashboard and she hollered out, above the throbbing bass, percussive beat and wailing guitar.

Lena: I like this!

Acknowledgments

When asked to describe their skin color Brazilians came up with 136 different shades and variations and identifying descriptions. The English translations of Brazilian colors were published by the website Africa Is a Country and were attributed to Lilia Moritz Schwarcz and edited by Achal Prabhala.

LGBTQI+ Terminology from lgbt.ucla.edu and was created by Eli R. Green and Eric N. Peterson at the LGBT Resource Center at UC Riverside 2003-2004 with additional input from wikipedia.org.

Comprehensive List of LGBTQ+ Term Definitions from itsprouncedmetrosexual.com.

Definitions of LGBTQ Terms from geneq.berkeley.edu Gender Equity Resource Center updated 2013.

Ballet Terminology from American Ballet Theatre at abt.org

Ballet Terminology from, The Glossary of Ballet, from [wikipedia](http://wikipedia.org), the Free Encyclopedia. References listed.

Special Acknowledgment to: The Internet.

NOTE: In the year 2170 it is common practice to self declare one's identity. This is done primarily by the means of wearing specific designated types of jewelry and/or by displaying specific designated permanent and/or temporary tattoos.

Glossary

A

AAS: Anabolic Androgenic Steroids

Alva: Snowy white

Alva-rosada: Pinkish white

Amarela: Yellow

Avermelhada: Reddish

Azul: Blue

B

Bem branca: Very white

Bem morena: Very dark

Branca: White

Branca-queimada: Burnt white

Bronze: Bronze-colored

Bronzeada: Sun-tanned

C

Canelada: Somewhat like cinnamon

Castanha: Chestnut

Castanha-clara: Light chestnut

Center World: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Idaho, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming.

CMU: As related to property, an individual could **Claim, Maintain, and Upgrade** and thereby retain possession of formerly empty and/or abandoned land or structures.

Cobre: Copper-colored

Crioula: Creole

D

DF: Has **D**eclared as **F**emale

DG: Has **D**eclared as **G**ay

DL: Has **D**eclared as **L**esbian

DM: Has **D**eclared as **M**ale

DP: Has **D**eclared as **P**ansexual

DQ: Has **D**eclared as **Q**ueer

DT: Has **D**eclared as **T**ransvestite

DTM: Has **D**eclared as **T**rans-**M**an

DTW: Has **D**eclared as **T**rans-**W**oman

E

East World: Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia,

Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, Virginia.

Entity: Human appearing Andriod with Artificial Intelligence.

Escura: Dark

Escurinha: Very dark

G

G.E. Period: Great Extinction that took place between the years 2110 and 2140. A pandemic caused the deaths of approximately 10 billion people.

L

Loira-clara: Light blonde

Loura: Blonde

M

Marrom: Brown

Melada: Honey-colored

Melanistic: Zoology, the condition in which an unusually high concentration of melanin occurs in the skin of an animal. Melanin; a dark brown to black pigment occurring in animals.

Mulatinha: Little mulatto girl

N

ND: Has **N**ot **D**eclared

NM Wavelength: Nanometer Radiation Wavelength

O

Other World: Alaska, Hawaii.

P

Palida: Pale

Parda: Brown

Parda-clara: Light brown

PF: **P**resenting as **F**emale

PM: **P**resenting as **M**ale

Q

Queimada: Sunburnt

R

Rosada: Rosy

S

Sarará: Yellow-haired Negro

T

Trigo: Wheat

Turva: Murky

V

Vermelha: Red

W

West World: California, Oregon, Washington

WIA: World Intelligence Agency

