

Freeflow Incident: Part One – Sea of Blood

Day Three: August 17, 2110

I still don't know what to make of this nightmare. As I mentioned when it first arrived, it came in small clumps of red and brown material, rolling and bouncing seemingly at random, viciously attacking any moving life form, finding easy pickings from the survivors of the impact as they tried to flee from Ground Zero.

But then it kept coming, in increasingly larger waves, growing larger with each kill, and being reinforced. As I look back on it, I'm beginning to think that whatever this thing proves to be, that it has at least a marginal intelligence... as the more I pick my memory, the more I realize how it initially chose the plumpest and largest of victims first, and not moving onto pets or other animals until after all of the larger creatures had been consumed.

Now, it looks like an ocean of partially congealed blood underneath me, seemingly inert, pulsating as it continues to flow off onto the horizon. I can only wonder how long it will be before my presence is found. Perhaps being consumed by whatever this thing is would be the preferable way to meet my end. The water I stashed is almost gone, and I can't get more since the janitor closed the water main two days ago to prevent this red flood from coming up through the pipes.

My food is gone and the campus commons is in another building, cut off from me by at least two hundred meters of the grotesque slime that now covers the ground almost as far as I can see. As a matter of fact, I haven't eaten since yesterday. I know some might say that's nothing, and I suppose they'd be right... but for a man who had never been fifteen minutes from sustenance all his life, to go nearly eighteen hours without it is a bit of a shock.

But it's not the lack of necessities that has kept me awake with cold sweats. The quiet is what is scaring me the most. At least during the first three days, I could hear the occasional screams as the red mass found another straggler. It makes me realize how terribly wrong I was whenever I thought of silence.

Gone are the days of the peaceful courtyard in the center of the campus as what I thought to be peace and quiet. There was so much sound there that I never even bothered to know. Birds chirping, maybe a squirrel clambering up a tree; white noise that our brain naturally blocks out in order for us to function with any degree of an attention span.

But this dead... empty... nothingness... it gnaws at my sanity, but without the swiftness of the red/brown tide outside this building. At times, I found myself tapping the keys of my portable, even as I waited for the battery to recharge, just for the benefit of the sound it made. I didn't dare do anything louder out of fear that perhaps the all-devouring mass might have hearing to go along with its wholly voracious appetite.

The only reason I haven't hurled myself to my death is because of my desire for people to know what I have seen here... but even that desire is running out as I can tell the generators of the

building are finally starting to die. They were only meant to operate for 28 hours, as I believe the janitor told me, and even with running on minimal drain, I'm amazed they've lasted this long.

In truth, I expected to have been rescued by now. I wonder now how many rescue attempts have been thwarted by this faceless foe... but at the same time, I also wonder how that's possible. We supposedly were the most sophisticated and intelligent creatures on this planet, and perhaps in the galaxy. Surely this... flood... couldn't be stymieing all our efforts. What could possibly be going on?

I just got the low battery warning. I suppose I should pray that the generators have enough juice for another charge or two... but I'm beginning to ponder what the point of that would be.

Evan closed the datapad warily, and leaned back against the side wall of the desk behind him... he suspected this latest posting, like the last thirty-four, hadn't made it past his pad. The posts he had placed in the first few hours of the attack had generated swarms of replies, queries, and well-wishes... since then, nothing.

It could mean anything. The government could have placed all communications on blackout so that the channels would be clear for their efforts. This... stuff... could have somehow shut down the communications systems as well, for all he knew. Hell, as far as he could prove, he could even be the last damn person alive on Earth.

He reached for the water bottle on the desk, and was rather dismayed to see how little was left, barely enough for one swallow. He had tried to ration the water available since the flood had taken over the lower floors, and had started to infect the water supply, prompting the janitor to in essence commit suicide in order to cut off the water main.

And so, he was alone. Well, he supposed that wasn't entirely true; but he might as well be. His eyes quickly scanned the depressing empty classroom, the desks still neatly in order as if nothing was at all out of place... like potentially the end of the world going on outside.

Flipping open his datapad once more, and activating the wireless voice transmission software, he quickly made certain his voice was properly being picked up, then confirmed that the destination of the transmission was still receiving. Wireless peer to peer transmissions were still working, as they didn't require any long range satellite, but that was hardly an effective means to communicate with the outside world.

“Hey... Stacie... you there?”

A three second pause precluded a terse, annoyed, woman's voice. “Don't waste power, Evan. I'm trying to work here; unlike certain others.”

“It's not my fault I've been blacked out!” He said defensively... then with a worried lilt asked, “What's the flood level at?”

There was a moment's silence again. "It's five feet above my floor level. The seals in the lab are still holding, and at least the flood level does not seem to be growing at the rate it was earlier. I do believe it's finally outstripped its sustenance."

"That's good... right?"

"It's not receding, either." Stacie corrected. "It's in equilibrium, and there's no telling how long it will be able to maintain that balance. I don't know if I'll... be able to wait it out. My water is nearly gone... and my food rations were used up yesterday."

Evan took another glance at his nearly empty water bottle, and the completely empty pack at his side. "Yeah... same here. Guess these emergency routines weren't up to snuff after all."

"They rarely are." Stacie replied, "Now... shut down and conserve power. There's no telling how much longer it'll hold, and I need all I can get."

With that, the communication cut off, and a second later, Evan again clapped the panels of his datapad closed. Even if doing nothing bored the living hell out of him, he knew that the work Stacie was doing served a far greater purpose than mindlessly taking notes no one would see. Though he wasn't sure how anyone was going to see her work in the end, at least if by chance someone did come across her analysis of the sickly blood-like flood through the city, it would help a lot more than "no food, no water, I'm going to die here."

Five minutes of counting the perforations on the ceiling tiles later, Evan had what amounted to a minor epiphany. He wasn't sure what was worse, that it took him five minutes to make that realization, or that something so simple could be considered an epiphany. It was rather depressing that he had become so used to having electronic devices at his beck and call that something so basic and tradition would be overlooked for any period of time.

Then again, perhaps he wasn't the only one to have such dismissal of the simpler things in life, as the desk in the classroom he had appropriated didn't have even a single sheet of paper in any of its drawers. He had to cross the room towards the supply closet to find something that did the trick, a pad of blank progress reports. Fortunately, the far side was unprinted, and gave him something to work with.

Which brought up dilemma number two; finding something to write with...

Evan needed to cross the hall in order to locate such a utensil, a pen in the lecture hall at the center of the floor, wedged into the top groove of the professor's podium... barely used, overlooked and forgotten about by numerous educators and even janitors judging by the thin layer of dust upon it.

On his way back to the classroom he had appropriated, his eyes locked on the stairwell leading to the lower floor. Warily, he approached the staircase, shadows cast from the railing and overhead due to the failure of the lighting on the floor below. Even then, he could see the sanguine

invader dimly. It certainly was not nearly as energetic and churning as it had been when it first flushed through. Had he been this close to the goo even yesterday, he would have been dead twenty seconds ago. It knew he was there, he could see a bulge start to form and slowly lurch in his direction, but it didn't have the energy to support its own weight, slapping back to the surface with a fleshy sound.

He broke himself free from the hypnotic trance he was under, forcing himself back to his "base of operations" as he so lovingly called it. Deciding quickly that taking his normal spot on the floor in front of the desk wouldn't be terribly conducive to manual writing, he took up a spot at the desk itself. Looking out the panoramic window towards the bloody horizon again to collect his thoughts, he took pen to paper literally for the first time since secondary school.

That I am here, writing this, on paper, is evidence in itself of the failures of human knowledge. For weeks, the news reports and conferences from the scientific community told us they knew the meteor was coming. They told us that all calculations projected it was of soft composition and that it would fall with relative harmlessness several hundred miles off the coast. There would be some damage and fallout, they claimed, but it would not hamper our way of life considerably or even for any prolonged period.

Then again, perhaps I am presuming too much when I assume that the impact and this life consuming flood are connected in any way beyond timing. Isn't that one of humankind's oldest horror stories; a monster from the depths of our world awakened and coming to the surface to feed? This could merely be a perfect storm of events that converged in a remarkable coincidence.

Evan dropped the pen and shook his right hand swiftly to work out the cramps that were rapidly forming. Pretty pathetic, really; two paragraphs and his wrist and other joints were already sore from the strain. If he lived through this, he'd have to promise himself more time to manual labor like this... it was a bit of an indignity that a senior year journalist could barely scribble a hundred words before having to take a break.

Ruefully smiling, he noted that the sun was starting to creep into the window from above. Within a couple hours, night would fall, ending another day.

Perhaps that was the way to go about surviving; one day at a time... don't look too far ahead; focus on the now. Tomorrow morning, he'd try scavenging around this floor. The faculty lounge might have things to eat, for example... and it's not like Security was going to arrest him if he raided in there. That was the ticket... amazing how going unplugged for such a short time really opened up the thought process.

He closed his eyes, and for the first time in three days, felt that maybe things were going to be all right.

Evan must have fallen asleep without planning to, because his next coherent thought was processing the fact that his data pad was beeping with a communication request, and his second

coherent thought was that it was now the dead of night. “Hello?” He mumbled... he had never been one to wake quickly.

“Evan... thank God you’re alive.”

His third coherent thought, in retrospect, should have come far sooner than that moment.

“Stacie?”

“Who else was it going to be?” She asked, and he could almost see her rolling her eyes at him, like she always did when she felt he was having one of his “not exactly a biochemist like her” moments.

“Right... of course... so why are you contacting me? I thought you needed to preserve power.”

Evan could hear Stacie’s resigned sigh. “I’ve completed my analysis. I’m sending the report to your datapad.”

“Why? I won’t be able to make any sense out of it!”

“I know that, but the information I’ve uncovered has to be preserved, somehow. People have to know what this is.”

That didn’t help much. “Why? What is it?”

“As far as you are concerned, it doesn’t matter, understand? The less you know... the safer you’ll be.”

“What? You’re not making sense, Stacie. Safe from what?”

“You’re not a bio-chem major. You don’t understand the rumors... the talk... the less than upright practices that go on in this industry, and I don’t have time to explain them. All I can tell you is that there are people who will likely go to great lengths to make sure no one finds out anything about the nature of this flood that hit us. If they suspect you have information about it, they will kill you to get it back.”

“Why... me?”

“Because you’re likely the only one in this entire damn region that has a chance to survive!” She shouted. “My work here is done... I’m... going to open the doors and let the flood take me.”

“What! No!”

“What else should I do, Evan? I’m out of water, I have no food, and knowing what I know of this flood, it’s not going to abate any time soon. Should I sit here and suffer of dehydration? Much more merciful to be consumed by this thing.”

Evan grabbed the sides of the datapad as if he were grabbing the woman's shoulders, and gave it a shake. "No! Don't give up. Don't leave me here alone! I'll find a way to get water to you... or at least some fluids. There has to be something up here."

"Even if there is, how on earth would you get it to me? The bio-chem labs are sealed on all sides by vacuum pressed and magnetically sealed foot thick layers of titanium and lead. You'd need a seriously violent explosion to make any sort of route to me."

"Then I'll find something that explodes!" Evan protested frantically. "I can't do this alone Stacie... I need you to be strong for me. I'll find a way to get you out of there... somehow."

"Evan... I don't know..."

His ears were then perked by sound from outside the building... a loud rumbling followed by the telltale boom of supersonic flight... the sounds of military grade air fighters.

He dashed to the window, his hopes flaring bright, looking to the south and sure enough was able to catch the triangular bright blue trails from pulse engine propulsion, an unmistakable trait of the atmospheric fighters used by the United World Government Military.

He dashed back to his discarded datapad, and shouted, "Stacie! Stacie! Are you still there?"

"Yes..." She mumbled. "I heard something from your end; what was it?"

"Fighters from the UWGM!" Evan replied, near delirious with relief and excitement. "We're going to be alright!"

That was when the first explosions and plumes of brilliant light rocked the building, shattering several panes of the window pointing towards downtown. Aghast, Evan walked to the edge to the now exposed outside world. It was astonishingly windy, likely a combination of the height of the building as well as truly turbulent weather.

From that vantage point, Evan was treated to a very clear view of the fighters strafing over the city, dropping their heavy, and likely nuclear, payload onto the blood-like flood below. His elation turned quickly to horror as he identified the plume from the explosions. Even a "simple journalist" like himself had been raised on the horror stories of nuclear warfare that had been a clear and barely suppressed danger for nearly two centuries. He knew how a neutron bomb explosion looked.

That horror became increasingly acute as the fighters continued their bombing run; this time even closer. One bomb fell past his vision two blocks away, and he followed the trail dumbly down and to the south, where it struck the flood and exploded, the shockwave and free neutrons flashing out with the speed of light and ripping all organic materials to its component sub-atomic particles.

Part Two: The Reluctant Eye

July 8th, 2110

The land has turned red, covered in blood. It lives and thinks. It is pitiless and it has no master. We called it into being. What does that say of us? It will swallow us whole... our grand achievement. It covers us all and spares not its makers.

How much longer do we have before the world turns red? How much longer before we face our rebirth?

Do we make plans for the future or prepare now for the change?

How do you prepare when blood becomes the enemy?

That which giveth can also taketh away.

Never before have my visions frightened me. They have always been more distant and upon awaking I can usually solve their puzzling meanings. But this; this is fear and terror and on an almost global scale. Something is coming and I feel it but what it is exactly I can't say. All I know is to prepare, but how?

Every text says that blood is the life giver and cannot take it away. Those who have died in battle will tell you very differently. Often the earth soaks up the blood of the honored dead and stands silent guard to the sacrifice as the eons melt together. The blood lost to us feeds us. It becomes a part of what ever it is that comes next. As it will be with this but first as always we will find terror. Loss confusion and pain will bring on for us this new day. It is the circle and however this mess is caused the circle must always be kept with reverence and respect.

What is left to us is to be true to who we are. Regardless of how long we have left it is important to be exactly who and what we where meant to be so that if the River Styx comes for us with this next change we can meet it knowing we lived honestly and to our best ability.

It floods the streets... it takes and consumes all life. Confusion will be the king of the land; righteous anger it's son. But what we wrought... our hands... they are stained..... no... I can't do this... I can't see this...

Don't make me see...

“Sylvia is in no condition for any questions... I'm not sure what you can get from her.”

Sylvia Green turned her eyes up towards the door to her ward, seeing two shadows through the shaded window. One them was the ward doctor, judging from his almost too serene and peaceful voice. The second identified himself quickly enough, and it was not a voice she wanted to hear.

“It’s of vital importance. I have to try.” This voice was much more stern and demanding; it would require answers, answers that Sylvia did not want to remember long enough to give.

“I’ll give you five minutes.” The doctor agreed reluctantly, “I’ll decide further from there, understand?”

“Perfectly. Thank you.”

The door slid open slowly, trying not to spook Sylvia, no doubt. “Miss Green, there’s someone here to see you.” The doctor said happily, causing the woman to snort derisively and turn her head. “This is Inspector Reiss. Do you remember him?”

Sylvia sighed. “Yes.” She answered after some silence.

“Well then, why don’t you come out and say hello. He just wants to ask you a couple questions. I’ll stay right here, if you want to stop at any time, just say so, okay?”

Sylvia nodded gingerly. Ever since the news had reported an “attack” on the Los Angeles Province, she had known this visit was coming. She had dreaded this moment, and what would be asked of her; to remember the moment that shattered her mind. With arms that felt like jelly, Sylvia green grabbed the guide rims of her wheelchair, and pushed herself forward of the closet in which she had tucked herself away, and out into room of her ward.

“Hello, Douglas.” She mumbled forlornly.

Inspector Douglas Reiss shook his head in pity. “Syl, what are you doing here?”

She dropped her head, “I belong here.”

Sylvia felt the determined, tense hands of the inspector drop onto the armrests of her wheelchair before she saw them. “No, you don’t. As different as you make yourself out to be, there’s not an insane bone in your body.”

“You’re probably the only person who thinks so.” She said glumly.

Douglas tried to look into her eyes, and she turned her head away in what probably appeared to be shame. In truth, she never liked looking people in the eyes. She always saw things within the eyes of others, many of which she never wanted to see.

“Yes, well I know better.” He answered. Undaunted, she felt his right hand move off it’s place on her armrest, and a rustling sound from the pack he often slung under one shoulder. A thin fake leather notepad was slid into her vision. “Care to tell me about this?”

“It’s my journal.” Sylvia answered simply.

Douglas nodded, “Yeah, the journal you give me every time you claim to have a vision.”

The wheelchair bound woman sighed. Not many people gave much validity to her future sight. To be honest, it wasn't like she had such prophecies often... not like the charlatans who flood late night television with whatever lame brained "reading" technique they claimed to have mastered. Her fates dropped her unceremoniously in the most dire and depraved places of the human spirit, often with no reference to guide her or any clues as to location, persons involved, or time.

Which was where Inspector Douglas Reiss fit in; their relationship was definitely unconventional, and he often attributed the crimes he solved with Sylvia's help as his "intuition" guiding him to put the pieces together. She rather preferred that, to be fair. Her gift had earned her nothing but derision most of her life; the less people knew about it the better as far as she was concerned.

"I'm rather interested in the last vision you had."

"Of course you are." Sylvia grumbled, and she shuddered at the memory.

"I had been trying to get a hold of you for the last week, but you had vanished off the face of the earth. Been pretty hard to find you, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you didn't want to be found."

Sylvia grunted. "Imagine that."

The doctor began to interject, sensing that his patient was starting to become agitated.

"Inspector, may I request..."

"No, you can't." Douglas answered sternly, never turning his penetrating gaze off of her. He was intentionally trying to intimidate her; not that it was terribly hard. His next words were for her. "You stopped recording your vision, and I want to know why."

"Please..." Sylvia pleaded, her eyes almost immediately bursting into tears. "Don't make me remember..."

"I have to know, Syl!" Douglas insisted sternly. "I have to know what you saw. The story the Premier's office is feeding us doesn't add up somehow."

"I... can't... don't make me..."

Douglas grabbed Sylvia's shoulders, and gave her a good shake. Seeing this, the doctor became more insistent in his protests. "Inspector, this is enough! I will not have you browbeating my patient!"

Said doctor found himself staring down the barrel of Douglas's sidearm. "You will stay out of this for three more minutes."

“Where... security was supposed to check any and all weapons at the desk...” The medical professional stammered.

“Yeah, well, I can be pretty damn sneaky when I want to.” The governmental inspector answered with a snarky grin. “Now, let me explain something about this woman real quick. She likes people to think she’s weak willed or insane so that they don’t question her. I’m not hurting her. I’m not going to hurt her or break her mind.”

“You sound so damn certain!” Sylvia snarled in retort. “You have no idea what I’ve seen! You have no idea what we’ve done to ourselves! And you want me to try and relive it! Asshole!”

Douglas yanked out his portable phone, and with a press of a button, it flipped open. Tapping on the touch sensitive screen, it lit up the holographic display, replaying a news report that must have been pre-recorded to come up with such impeccable timing.

“We are looking at the aftermath here in the city of Los Angeles in the North American Continental Region.” The well trained female anchorwoman’s voice narrated, “Five days ago, the meteor Volstock-22-AAE made earth impact roughly fifty kilometers north of the city. We now know that the meteor contained a biological weapon that covered the city in a red viral flood, killing an estimated one hundred million people, and displacing an equal number from their homes. Initial investigation suspect the Ceti people of the system bearing the same name. Considering relations between the Ceti and the Unified World Government, mostly concerning the abundant dense metal fuel on their homeworld, conflict had seemed likely for some time. Norman Fenicois, Director of Planetary Defense of the UWG, had this to say...”

The inspector slapped his phone shut, and grabbed Sylvia’s chin, forcing her to look at him. “Now, the average Neanderthal in this great world of ours might buy that, but I know that a culture like the Ceti wouldn’t have the means to produce a biological weapon of that virulence, much less hide it undetected within a seemingly normal celestial body. My suspicion is that whatever that thing was, it was cooked up right here on this pebble of ours. And I think you saw that too.”

The tears started to flow down her cheeks, the nightmarish vision culling up from the corners of her mind that she had banished it to. “Syl... I can’t do anything to stop what is coming unless I know what I’m looking for. I think you know what it is. I know it might be horrific... in fact, I’m sure it is. From what you’ve told me about your gift, that night you had this vision felt like you had died a hundred million times. But I need you to help me... I need to know what you saw. I need you to be brave one more time.”

Her jaw began to tremble... she could now smell the blood... both from the victims and the flood that consumed them. She could see the unnatural slithering as it spread in size and direction, seeking new victims. Instinctively, her body coiled in on itself as she fought to keep the past out of her mind.

“Syl... come back to me.” Douglas’s voice snapped her out of her trance, blinking rapidly to clear out the tears and reprocess her surroundings.

She gulped, and tried to wheel herself back. Douglas let go of the chair, and she spun about to her dresser. In the bottom shelf was the companion notebook to the one her inspector friend carried.

“I... managed to get some of it down. I hope it’s enough.” She said, handing the smaller item to the inspector. “Please, let it be enough. I can’t go there again.”

Inspector Douglas Reiss opened the journal, and took in the words that Sylvia could, to her despair, recite by memory.

Now I’m in a hall. The hallway was long and dark. It was badly lit by emergency generated lights. It was as if the place was locked down, no one in and no one out, but I was there. Some lab and you could tell by the smell the smell of chemicals and alcohol that could almost remind you of a hospital except that this place was too sterile and neat even for a hospital.

I wandered through offices and looked in wastebaskets and on cluttered desk tops. I have no idea as to what I was supposed to see or more importantly why the Fates thought I should see it. I’m just a temp clerk at a doctor’s office.

That’s the joke of my gift. I’m taken where ever the Fates want me to go, even if I’d be totally out of place. Nothing needs to make sense to me I just record what I see and feel without judgment.

And what I’m recording... oh God... what have we done?

Why have the Fates taken me here?

They’re dead... they’re all dead... I’m watching the living being consumed by a puddle of blood, spilling from a broken canister. No... why are the Fates making me see this? The canister... it has a name on it... Freeflow... Project Freeflow.

No... I don’t want to see anymore... but I can’t stop. I watch the flesh stripped away by the blood, the bones melting, feeding this thinking blood, making it grow ever larger. It splits apart to claim more victims, consuming everything living and leaving nothing behind.

What is this future? Is this what we are condemned to? No... I don’t care anymore. You can’t make me relive this... I’ll burn my entire journal before I make anyone see...

I’m so scared. Freeflow... it’s coming. Freeflow is about to be unleashed.

God save me... God save us all...

“Freeflow, you say?” Douglas asked, and when Sylvia nodded, he asked again, “Did you have any clue where this was?”

She shook her head. “No. I went from the streets to the hall in my vision. I... I... was woken from the fear far too soon, I think. I... I... if I have the vision again...”

Douglas’s left hand descended onto her shoulder. “No, you’ve done enough. It’s a start, and that’s what I needed. Thank you.” He then rubbed her head playfully, and extended to his full height.

“You really need to find a new place, Syl.” He said, flipping a lazy salute in her direction. “Your neighbor’s decorating habits really don’t reflect well on you. All that rubber...”

He nodded to the doctor then as if nothing had been the slightest bit amiss, left room and closed the door behind him.

The doctor gestured nervously between Sylvia and the door. “I’m going to go and make sure he leaves without further incident. You know how to get in touch with an orderly at any time...”

And then, Sylvia Green was left alone in room twelve of the second ward of the City of Philadelphia Home for the Mentally Needy.

Alone with the memories of what she had seen and what was yet to still happen.

Part Three: So that Others May Live

August 12, 2110

To Whom It May Concern:

I am contacting you in regards to your findings involving the potential Earth impact of near-Earth celestial body Volstock-22-AAE.

In your official press release at 1900 ZULU of the 11th of August, you note that Volstock-22-AAE was on a collision course with Earth, but that the object was one hundred and twenty meters in size, and would likely burn up completely in the atmosphere. Even if it did survive atmospheric entry, the meteorite would then merely impact with “relatively insignificant consequences” over thirty kilometers off the coast, in the Pacific Ocean.

Even if the calculations of the Planetary Space and Aeronautics Council were correct, Volstock-22-AAE would still likely impact the Earth at a size of thirty to forty meters and deliver an explosive force relative to a small nuclear weapon. This impact would at least create a tsunami that would demolish the Los Angeles Provincial coastline, and at least a pre-emptive evacuation of those areas would be in order.

Nonetheless, that matter is irrelevant, since the observations and calculations of Volstock-22-AAE, both of the asteroid itself and its projected path, are tragically wrong.

Firstly, it appears that the PSAC made the assumption that the asteroid was of a carbonaceous composition; not necessarily a faulty presumption, as roughly 75% of such asteroids are of that composition. But Volstock-22-AAE is not one of them. My analysis has discovered that this asteroid is actually a carbonaceous shell mostly surrounding a dense metallic iron/nickel core.

This core of Volstock-22-AAE will not burn and disintegrate like its shell will. It will plummet largely unaffected, protected from the initial breakup by its carbonaceous shell. Its greater density also will change its projected impact path.

In this case, the denser core of the asteroid possesses a greater terminal velocity, and will take a shorter arc to the surface of the Earth. In this case, my calculations place the likely point of impact fifty one kilometers north from the mean center of the Los Angeles Metropolis.

Fortunately, the region I have pinpointed is remarkably uninhabited, and the impact would affect very few lives immediately beyond a cessation of most creature comforts. It would be tragic and chaotic, certainly, but the number of lives lost with proper action could be reduced to near nil.

Thus, the human toll doesn't concern me that greatly. What does concern me is a place less than ten kilometers from the impact point; BioMiracle Labs.

I know personally some of the top secret projects BioMiracle is undertaking, due to a former employee that I do not wish to identify. While the laboratories would likely withstand the blast, I can only shudder to think what the earthquake that would be a result of the impact (that I estimate to be at 6.1 on the Richter Scale) would do to the delicate experiments performed in those labs... I mean not to sound menacing or vague, but I have been made aware of a handful of projects within that compound that could potentially be more dangerous than the asteroid.

Decisive action must be taken while we have time. I am attaching critical notes and a full report of my findings with this message. The PSAC can check them if they wish, but the longer we wait means the harder it will be to take corrective measures.

Sincerely,

*Shoji Haruhara
Professor of Astronomy, UGLA*

Shoji took a deep, sorrowed breath as he remembered that communication he sent to PSAC, and the dismissal it had received; the first of many sins of omission the government had committed both before and after the impact event.

He had been right about BioMiracle. Something had been unleashed in the aftermath of the Volstock meteor's collision with the earth; and now he was watching the company covering its tracks.

"This would be a lot easier to do at some point other than the dead of night, you know that, right?" Danny Brassler, his friend and the former employee of BioMiracle Shoji had referred to in the missive he had just recalled.

Shoji was currently fifteen miles southwest of the city of Los Angeles, so close to the coastline that he could see the pristine, near untouched beachfront from his position. He said near untouched, for just like the forestland that had lead through the Northern Los Angeles Province Wilderness and Wildlife Reserve, it had been stripped near to the bone by whatever abortion of science BioMiracle had created.

But this flow of extinction was different, and he suspected he knew how.

"I suspect your former bosses would not approve of our studies." Shoji reminded. "So we have to be somewhat discreet."

"Yeah, I know... and you're right, this infection is considerably younger than the first." Danny declared. He had been analyzing some of the residue with his personal analysis kit, kneeling down and gathering samples of the brown, gel-like remains. "But I'm afraid I can't confirm BioMiracle's hand in this. It was either a new project or one beyond my security clearance, because I've never seen anything like it."

"Oh, it is... it has to be." Shoji said with grim determination.

“But I don’t get it... why would BioMiracle be starting a second infection; and why here?”

“They know Government Inspectors will start nosing around soon. They are artificially shifting the origin point of the infection, moving it to coincide with Ground Zero of the impact site rather than centering directly over BioMiracle Labs.”

“And since they have the say as to when it will be ‘safe’ for inspectors to begin their work, they can let the secondary infection decay to the point where the time difference will be indiscernible.” Danny added knowingly.

“Which is why we’re here... to collect necessary data on this secondary infection and provide it to said investigators if they demonstrate the government is actually interested in uncovering the truth of the matter.”

Danny turned his head up from his equipment, and asked, “You think they wouldn’t be?”

Shoji sighed in disgust. “Perhaps, perhaps not. BioMiracle has invested billions upon billions of dollars in the United World Government. They even have their own lobby within the legislative halls separate from the pharmaceutical and research lobby. I have no doubt there are several legislators who would be feel inclined to protect the company, and would use their pull to try and keep any crime under wraps. We shall see.”

Danny then stood, closed up his briefcase and the analysis gear inside, and said, “So, you think we should move on?”

“Yes.” Shoji nodded, “The more we have, the better our case is.”

He took the lead again, Danny right behind, as their boot and sterile cover clad feet squished through the slimy remains of what had been lust forestry. In a way, he felt responsible for this.

“Sho, can I ask you something?” Danny queried.

“Of course.”

Danny shrugged, “See, I know why I’m here. It makes sense why I’d be curious about what the hell my old bosses are doing. But you’ve been the one really all gung-ho here. What’s your angle?”

The slight Asian man exhaled flatly. “I... it’s my responsibility. Over a billion people died because of me.”

“Buddy, I know you’re a smart fellow... but that has to be the dumbest thing I ever heard.”

Shoji shook his head defiantly. “I noted that the celestial body was of a different composition than the PSAC assumed. I had correctly plotted its trajectory, and informed the council of my findings. They ignored me.”

“And that is your fault... how?”

“Because I didn’t follow up. I didn’t insist they look at their numbers. I haughtily decided that I’d let it blow up in their face, and so I did nothing further.”

“There’s no way you could have known that whatever busted loose from BioMiracle would cause this much damage, Sho.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Shoji retorted with a hiss. “It was my academic duty to make sure my findings were confirmed. Most of the deaths I suspect were people too close to Ground Zero when whatever this was flourished. We could have evacuated the nearby areas... the human death toll would have been much lower, they would have had more time to react.”

“You’re assuming the PSAC was ever going to listen to you.” Danny countered. “You did your job.”

“Yes, and now I am doing this one. I won’t let any data go unchecked and ignored this time. Of that I assure you.”

“It’s a shame that there’s nothing I can really discern out of this residue.” Danny said with a dismayed shake of his head. “It’s clearly viral, but the genetic code appears to degrade into this goop very quickly upon ‘death’. They couldn’t have started this secondary infection much more than 24 hours ago, and it’s already decomposed beyond gene analysis.”

“The perfect killer, isn’t it?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny that BioMiracle Labs has done research and development in biological agents for use by military industry.” Danny sang sweetly in a very poor impersonation of the Public Relations agent he used to work with.

Shoji chortled then quickly hushed his friend, pointing further down the direction they were headed. He had heard talking outside of the dialogue between himself and Danny, and figured there would be only one other entity that would have any other business around this area.

Once again, his instincts were correct, A large hazardous materials van was parked with its lights on, casting illumination on a segment of the ground, assisted by floodlights slowly scanning across the desolate surface for the benefit of seven people in bulky protective gear.

“Okay, I suddenly feel a little underdressed for this task.” Danny noted ruefully, and Shoji hastily shushed him with a finger.

The words from the crew floated across the distance. “Man, I can’t believe we have to survey every damn inch of this area. There’s gotta be what? A hundred square miles to cover?”

“And this macrovirus is voracious. We have to make sure it’s good and dead understand?” Another ordered. “You do your job, the other teams will do theirs. No slacking. Do I need to remind you how dangerous this is?”

“No, sir.”

“Good. Then get to work.”

Danny started tapping Shoji on the back repeatedly, and taking the cue, he backed away to follow his friend.

“This is not good.” Danny hissed. “If they are scanning the whole damn area, they’re going to know someone was drawing data as well.”

Shoji took a deep breath. “So you are saying we leave?”

Danny shook his head, “I’m saying we’re screwed. This analysis gear I have... it’s not exactly *mine*. I... didn’t exactly return it when I was let go.”

“And that means...”

“It will be pretty obvious if they come across our samples that it was done unauthorized with BioMiracle gear. I can’t imagine there would be too many options for them to consider before they come knocking on my door.”

Shoji’s brain stopped cold. That would most definitely be a problem... unless...

“Give me your datapad.” Shoji ordered.

“Why? What are you doing?”

“No time to explain, give it to me.”

Danny complied reluctantly, and Shoji immediately popped out the memory chip, sliding it into the secondary memory slot on his unit. “What are you doing?” Danny insisted.

“I’m copying your research data onto my datapad.” Shoji answered, then popped out Danny’s chip once completed. “Keep this chip on your person; do not put it back in your datapad for any reason. This will be the sole surviving copy of the data we have collected. We cannot risk it being connected to anything and possibly being traced if BioMiracle or the World Government decides to put you under surveillance. I’m not sure where you can hide it, but put it somewhere that you and only you would be able to get to it.”

“That doesn’t entirely answer my question.” Danny replied.

“Leave your analysis kit here with me, and get out of the area as quickly as you can, and for the love of whatever god you believe in, don’t get caught.”

“Why? What are you going to do?”

“I am going to stay here... and let them find me.”

“Are you insane?” Danny hissed. “These fellows probably have orders to kill on sight!”

“I know, which is why you can’t be anywhere nearby when I’m discovered.” Shoji explained. “One of us has to get caught so that the other can get away.”

“Then let it be me! I’m the former employee, they’ll never suspect you then.”

“Ah, that is going to be the beauty of the plan, my friend.” Shoji said, his voice cunning. “I have a history of speaking out against BioMiracle. The idea of me doing this alone will seem so bizarre that it would have to be precisely that. A truth is stranger than fiction sort of thing. If you do exactly as I say, keep your nose clean, they will find nothing to connect you to our work. Besides, you know this information better than I. You will be able to explain it to investigators better than I ever could.”

“And you still feel responsible for this mess.” Danny finished what Shoji would have preferred to leave unsaid.

The Asian man shrugged, “Perhaps it’s a throwback of my old ancestral culture. Let this be my seppuku, Danny. This was my idea, my plan. This is my moment; yours will come.”

Danny ran his hand through his hair, self-preservation warring with his own honor... but the former eventually won out. “Fine.” He spat, stuffing his memory chip into his inner jacket pocket. “I hope you don’t regret this.”

“I doubt I’ll have much time to.” Shoji said in parting as Danny made his leave.

Shoji knew he had at least one more thing to do before he could deem his ruse complete. He flipped open his datapad once more, and composed one final message to his dear friend;

Danny, I am sorry for what I must do. If you are looking for your kit, I took it last night... I couldn't shake the feeling that your bosses are involved in what happened, and I decided to do whatever it took to prove it.

I just found out I'm not alone out here. BioMiracle crews are here and they will soon know I was gathering data. I know it's risky, and I do not mean to cause you more trouble than what you will probably receive... but I am sending you what data I have gathered. It's the only chance I have that what I have uncovered will make it out intact.

I have no intention of being taken alive. I will not be used in the machinations of a cold-hearted corporation. Goodbye, my friend.

With that, he hit send, and hoped that would be enough misdirection to keep anyone from thinking that there was more to what had occurred. It was close enough to the truth, really... and the expressed desire to have himself killed would work to his advantage, keeping the fact that he had no earthly idea how any of the equipment in his possession or the data uncovered worked.

And with that, he marched out towards the team he saw earlier. Once they were in his sight, he dropped Danny's briefcase, and charged with an angry yell towards the lights ahead.

As he had expected and hoped, he hadn't even gotten four strides in before he felt the momentarily sizzle of high yield energy weapons followed by the blackness of death.

Part Four: The Silent Whistle

August 16, 2110

From: Nancy Ilvanus; DPS, DPR and DCE

To: Nathan Myers; CEO

Mr. Myers;

I can't think of any other way to say this, sir, but the situation on the Los Angeles province of North America has simply become too much for us to handle.

I can understand the reasons to request the Planetary Government for a communications blackout last evening at 2300 ZULU. We needed to make sure the sensitive materials and research we were doing was secure, and allowing freelance communication could expose many top secret projects we were contracted for.

I can even understand the unwillingness to request planetary assistance when it was determined that the macrovirus of Project Freeflow had been released during the impact. The geneticists told us about the expansion threshold of the macrovirus, and how it would outstrip itself, basically eating itself to extinction, well before it could cause any serious damage.

What I can't understand is why we're still in blackout, and still not requesting planetary aid.

Simply put, sir, our gene cookers were wrong. Vitaly wrong. They told us the macrovirus was designed only to attack animal life... instead it's been ravenously devouring anything in its path, plant or animal. It was supposed to die out long before reaching any significant human inhabitation. Instead, it has now engulfed nearly all of Los Angeles city proper, covering over one hundred square kilometers, and continuing to grow even as I type this.

Do you understand, sir? That is thirty times larger than its expansion threshold was supposed to be. Ask the geneticists now... they'll tell you they no longer have any idea when it will stop expanding... or even if it's going to stop at all. Each hour the macrovirus goes unchecked more people could likely die, people out in the open trying to evacuate from the meteor impact.

I honestly don't know who is advising you through this crisis, but you need to stop listening to that person. It has already led to an estimated three million dead, and millions more could follow if we don't contain the Freeflow macrovirus with all due haste.

This requires dropping the communications blackout immediately, letting evacuees know what is coming so that they can move out of the macrovirus's ever expanding range. This also means declaring this emergency to the proper local and planetary authorities, a full disclosure of what they can expect to encounter, and our full cooperation in containing and eventually eradicating this menace.

In addition, it is likely there are thousands of survivors in the downtown of Los Angeles City, people who need full government mobilization in order to rescue. This is about more than covering our profit margins. We are playing with human lives that still have a chance to be preserved.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to act quickly. With the chaos stemming from the impact, there's no telling how many more people are still in danger.

Sincerely,

Nancy Ilvanus

Her inbox showed no reply to her entreaty she had sent three days ago. Her cynical side told her that she shouldn't be surprised by this; she had been promoted to Director of Public Services to begin with merely to appease the feminist pressure that was challenging them within the United World Government, and then was promptly given increasing "responsibilities" as director of Public Relations and then Corporate Ethics.

In reality, Myers hadn't listened to any of the three executives before, and even less when she had assumed those positions. To this day, after centuries of fighting the "glass ceiling", high corporate was still a man's world.

Yet, despite those things, she had somewhat figured that a death toll approaching one hundred million would encourage action beyond keeping everything hush-hush and hoping it goes away. She knew the UWG was involved in a minor scale, but in a military presence; disaster relief and other civilian assistance was being kept at bay due to the "sensitivity" of BioMiracle's top-secret weapons department.

Her people in Public Services suggested to her that there were people still alive before the neutron barrage the military used to "kill" the macrovirus... mobilizing, in true government "effectiveness", nearly a full day after Freeflow had finally reached the point where it didn't have sufficient sustenance to grow further. But hey... after so many needless deaths, what was another thousand or so, right?

But at the same time... she couldn't pretend she was innocent, either. She knew of Project Freeflow; she had been one of the driving proponents for the project. To go even further, she had been one of the executives who had negotiated the R&D funding from the UWGM, and put the human face on the projects in order to sell it to BioMiracle's Board of Trustees.

It had honestly been some of her finest work, she admitted ruefully. Every single old man in the board meeting had known Freeflow was a military project first, foremost, and above all. By the time they had left, she had convinced them the auxiliary benefits from the research would be the next breakthrough in medical science. Non-invasive gene-therapy, developed from the patient's own DNA, so that the chances of rejection would be so close to nil that it might as well be zero. The most stubborn of diseases, resilient despite all of humankind's advancements, could potentially be snuffed out by the discoveries that would be an offshoot of this ambitious project.

She hadn't been lying, exactly. All of those things *could* have come out of the Freeflow research. At least, that was how she rationalized it.

That was supposed to be her shining moment; the point where she demonstrated that she could be "one of the guys." Instead, she saw just how ruthless the leaders in the company could be, like Mr. Samuel Cahill.

It was during that presentation and negotiation that she realized where the true power in the corporation laid. Cahill wasn't an official member of the executive board; in fact, he had started as a simple consultant, a laid off executive from Dynasty Chemical. From there, he became the leader of BioMiracle's lobbying efforts in the UWG, and eventually earned himself the ear of Chairman Myers as the CEO's primary advisor.

His connections within the government made getting the taxpayer funding easy enough; and then with that in hand was able to convince Myers that he had spearheaded the entire deal, successfully minimizing Nancy's efforts, making her appear as nothing more than a pretty face they used to rope and dope the Trustees.

And so her big moment turned into nothing; quickly discarded back into her "there but not really there" role, mostly forgotten, and her work largely ignored by the big money power brokers within the company. Cahill really ran this company... she figured, and had to admit he had it cold. If things went wrong, he could distance himself easy from the executive decisions, but when they went right, he was in the middle to reap the benefits.

Had she been able to establish herself... maybe she would be the one calling the shots; and it certainly wouldn't have ended like this...

She dropped her on her desk. Who was she fooling? Certainly not herself. Had she been in Cahill's shoes, had she been "the man", she'd be just as dogged and determined to maintain what had been built, even if it meant a disaster like this one here.

Did that make her a better person if she admitted to that?

And did that mean her sudden burst of conscience was merely bitterness and jealousy?

And what did it mean that she was doing nothing of value, having an internal debate as to her humanity while millions were dead?

Her personal communicator beeped twice in a sharp trill that shattered her silent meditation. Reluctantly, she opened the phone, and held it in front of her. "Ilvanus. What is it?"

"Nancy? It's Ami."

Nancy could see that. Ami's face had popped up holographically from the transmitter. "Hi. I believe I set my profile to 'Do Not Disturb'."

“Yes... but you also said call you if there’s any news. I think you should turn on the news right now.”

Sensing that Ami wasn’t going to do something that made sense, like explaining what was going on so that she didn’t have to access the local news feed, Nancy turned to her computer, and routed the projection to the hologram projection screen on the north wall.

It displayed aerial images of the Los Angeles downtown; which showed a frightening lack of damage to the city infrastructure. What damage was visible most likely would be attributed the impacts of the neutron bombs from the military barrage. Freeflow itself had done little structural damage to the city; it had merely consumed all life.

“As reported earlier, these are the first views that have been released of the city of Los Angeles within the province of the same name.” The male anchor voiced over. “The sight is eerie... a city of over twelve million, reduced to a ghost town within days. And this, is only a fraction of the attack. We have reports of thousands of square miles, stripped to nothing like flesh off a bone. The nearby wilderness and wildlife reserve is effectively gone, is that correct? A heinous, unprovoked attack; an act of terrorism on a scale never before seen... never before *imagined*, I would say.”

Nancy eyes narrowed in confusion. Attack? Terrorism? Where were they getting *that* garbage?

“Once again, this is the scene from Los Angeles City, where government disaster crews have finally contained the biological agent released by what we informed were Ceti terrorists protesting negotiations for Earth’s interest in the heavy metal fields of their homeworld.”

“*What?*” Nancy exclaimed. “How on Earth would they have gotten that idea...” Her voice turned into a hiss as she answered her own question. “Cahill...”

“Director of Planetary Defense Norman Fenicois has called a press conference set to start any minute... and in fact I am being told it is starting now. We now switch you to the United World Government Capitol Complex in New York City at this time.”

The scene shifted to the well decorated former military admiral, decked out in his finest uniform dress whites. To the masses, he was considered an intelligent, firm, yet compassionate man; with the undying respect of the military complex and the civilian sector. Nancy figured she was one of a small handful of people who knew of his connections with the military industry and biochemical lobby; most notably, a man named Samuel Cahill.

“Ladies and gentlemen, revered leaders, I have the unfortunate displeasure to inform you that on August 15, 2110, at approximately 0930 World Standardized Time, the earth was struck by the celestial body Volstock 22-AAE. What we were not aware of was that the asteroid was in fact a carefully disguised biological weapon. Intelligence has confirmed this was the work of Ceti terrorists that work under the organizational name, Hands of Balance.”

“Hands of Balance seek what they deem ‘pure worlds’, ‘untainted’ by ‘dirty technology’ and ‘wasteful practices that damage the delicate sanctity of the Ceti homeworld.’ The Earth, and specifically humankind, has become the target of their idealistic crusade.”

“The Department of Planetary Defense has deemed this a gregarious overreaction and unprovoked attack against the people of Earth, and has pushed forward a measure to the voting house of the United World Government to issue an immediate state of emergency and a declaration of war. More information will be provided when it is made available, and I will be taking no questions at this time. Thank you.”

The newsroom then cut back in, “Once again, that was Norman Fenicois, Director of Planetary Defense, informing us that we were indeed attacked by a terrorist Ceti group named the ‘Hands of Balance.’ He informed us that motions were being pushed through the government house to initiate war proceedings, and we will be sure to inform you of the results of those measures as they become available...”

Nancy ended the feed, and slumped back into her chair, flabbergasted. It wasn’t until she heard Ami’s voice beckoning that she realized she hadn’t even disconnected from the call.

“Nancy? Are you alright?”

She turned her attention back to the caller, and gave a wan smile. “I’ll be fine. Listen, I have a little bit of work to do. I’ll call you back sometime tomorrow, okay?”

“Ummm... okay?”

Nancy hung up, and quickly dialed another number. Cahill wasn’t the only one with less than peaceful connections. In fact, this is probably the one area where Nancy could be even more ruthless than good ol’ Sammy.

“Hello?” A groggy face and equally half-awake voice answered.

“Vio, have you been watching the news?”

“Kinda... sorta. Something about a war goin’ on?” Violet Marks, black market smuggler and part time weapons dealer, mumbled.

“Yeah. They’re going after the Ceti. But here’s the problem, Vio... the Ceti didn’t do it. We did it to ourselves. On top of that, the Ceti aren’t exactly what you call the most technologically advanced people. They’ll be largely defenseless... it’ll be another mindless slaughter.”

“Okay... whuddya expect me to do about it?”

Nancy started tapping on her computer as she explained. “I’m allocating you all of my funds. Every last mark I have. It’s all yours to outfit however you want, and ship it off to whatever Ceti group will take them.”

“Nancy, you’re a rich girl, I’m sure... but I can guarantee you that you won’t be able to match the UWGM’s funding.”

“I know that, Vio. But I can at least give them something to help them. I owe them that much. It’ll give them some chance outside of getting absolutely rolled over.”

“Aight... it’s your coin.” The smuggler said with a dismissive shrug. “Anything else?”

“No. That will do it.”

Violet paused momentarily. “Wait a sec... you’re givin’ me *everything*? Wouldn’t that make you kinda, you know, broke?”

“I won’t be needing money, Vio.” Nancy answered grimly, and terminated the call.

She ignored the call back, and eventually shut off her communications entirely. No doubt Violet would contact emergency response, but they would be far too late. Her fate was sealed, really. BioMiracle wouldn’t let her live at this point, if she wasn’t already a target to silence already. She had just one more thing to do, and then it wouldn’t matter.

She also had one old friend currently working as a government investigator. He probably wasn’t the one investigating the attack (he’d have far too much honor and decency to fall in line with the terrorist attack garbage), but he’d be trustworthy with the information she had to present.

Dear Dougie,

By the time you read this, I will likely already be dead. I have the inkling that you don’t buy this terrorist story the UWG is throwing out. You’d be right. I wish I could tell you more, but even with my message security, I can’t be sure this will be intercepted, and I don’t want to tip off their search any more than I already am.

I’m sure you can at least get a hint as to what to look for just from the knowledge I am contacting you with this. Do the best you can with it. Millions, if not billions, more lives are counting on someone uncovering the truth.

Your buddy,

Nannie

With the message sent, there was only one more thing on Nancy’s final “To Do” list. Ironically, it was the man she had just contacted who convinced her to purchase the low energy discharge pistol she now pulled out of the bottom shelf of her desk, for self defense purposes. While not particularly deadly as modern weapons go, it could still be fatal if used properly (or improperly, she supposed).

It would get the job done. She wasn't going to let Cahill have the pleasure of having her killed. She knew that it would piss him off to be denied that pleasure; and at that point, after all that had happened, her failings and shortcomings, and the blood already on her hands; she was going to take any small victory she could get.

With that, she put the barrel of the pistol to her head, felt the hum of the conductor coils whirl as it charged with alarming quickness, then after a second's hesitation, pulled the trigger.

Part Five: Trumpets for Conflict

Humans have this quaint notion that my people have thirty words for the earth that gives us life, and no words for war. In fact, we have several. Our civilizations are not very different in that regard. We have conflict and aggression, defense and combat. Our history is paved in blood and bones just as human history is.

We have had skirmishes over resources. We have had battles over territory. We have launched into deadly combat over ill stated words. We have had wars that were short lived. We have had wars that have lasted decades. We have had minor conflicts in which mere handfuls have died and barely altered the course of small tribes. We have had wars that have left generations crippled and covered our world.

I fear for my people because of that aggression, and I fear for the humans that come thinking it is not in our nature. We have barely tolerated human presence as it is... have resisted their efforts to expand their resource gathering... and now it is said we will soon be faced with the full might of their military machine.

This will not end well for either side. We are not helpless, we are not powerless. For all the technology and weapons and money, we have ingenuity, passion, cleverness, guile, and the innate desire, tenacity, and determination to defend what is ours. The humans who come expecting an easy victory against an unsophisticated foe will most certainly be victorious, but with cost.

War... combat... they appeal to the animal natures of otherwise successful civilization; it draws the inner animal within us all, the urge for self-preservation at any and all cost; the beast that lays within us all. The most fearsome beast is one defending its home. Not much less fearsome is the beast that has been attacked and wounded. Both will converge on the land of my people, of my ancestors from before our concept of time began.

I do not know why the people of Earth think that we were responsible for the attack on their home. We believe in maintaining the balance of all things, even the life of those that abuse the land and the cradle of their existence. This attack wounded all the things we seek to preserve. They are striking out blindly, looking for shadows hiding in wait, specters that don't exist.

But I know there is no reasoning at this time. That is not a human failing; that is a failing of all living things. When harmed, the instinct is either to fight or flee. When you are strong, fighting is the more compelling option, and there is no doubt the humans are strong.

They will come. We will meet them. The humans will likely think they will win. But there is one universal truth of war.

There is no winner; merely someone who loses less.

And my people have little to lose.

“Venerated Ambassador? There are men from the United World Government who wishes to speak to you.”

Ambassador Shamaj turned swiftly from his missive of warning he was penning towards the sound of the interruption. The Ceti Ambassador had two personal assistants, one Ceti, one human, for the sake of relations and to hopefully educate more people that co-existence and cooperation were indeed possible between two very drastically different cultures.

This one happened to be his human assistant, a rather pleasant female barely into maturity named Iria. She was in her final year of higher law education, and the Ambassador liked to think that her experiences as an intern working under him had been as informative as they were occasionally... adventurous.

“Am I meet them in the hall, or are they coming in?” Shamaj asked. Normally, when UWG officials came to the Ceti Embassy, there was a meeting hall they would use that was deemed “neutral” territory. However, with the current situation as it was forming, normal procedures might not necessarily follow.

“They wish to meet you here, Sir Ambassador.”

The ambassador paused, processing that change. “I suppose I really don’t have much choice but to permit it, don’t I?”

Iria shrugged, “Legally, you do. The embassy is technically Ceti authority. Realistically... no, you really don’t.”

“Well then, let’s not waste their time or ours, and send them up.”

Iria bowed, and disappeared from the office, his hearing picking up the sounds of her heels as they clicked down the thick oak steps to the lower floor. He put away the paper he can been writing on in the top left drawer, and slid his pen into the groove at the base of the desktop.

The contingent from the United World Government was all male, all imposing, all in black suits, and all business, five in total. Shamaj recognized two of them; he had frequent contact with them both, liaisons with the government that continued to negotiate allowances for humans to mine and otherwise acquire the heavy metals that were the lifeblood of their energy supply. They were also identical twins, which had made things quite hilarious initially as Shamaj had tried to discern who was who (compounded even further by the fact that like most interspecies contact, *every* human looked alike to him), until he finally picked up the subtle clues that distinguished them.

The other three were heavily geared up in weapons and communication equipment; likely security in case the Ceti embassy decided to be “aggressive.” Shamaj expected they would be considerably less conversational and less social than the pair they were escorting.

“Lionel, Andrew; I wish I could say we were meeting under better circumstances.” Shamaj said amiably. “Please, sit.”

In disturbing mirror imaged unison, both diplomats pulled out two of the chairs across the desk, and performed the same swift maneuvers to take their seats.

“As you know, the voting house approved measures to proceed with a state of war against the Ceti homeworld.” Lionel began.

“Yes, I know.” Shamaj answered coolly. “Seems a little extreme in order to locate and bring to justice a ‘terrorist group’, especially one that would have been completely incapable of administering an attack such as the one on the Los Angeles province.”

“Our evidence suggests otherwise.” Andrew replied. “And without a central government for us to negotiate with, and that most of the Ceti tribes are being uncooperative, we were left with no option but to go to war.”

“Yes, I’m sure.”

Lionel glanced over at his partner nervously. “Once the Hands of Balance have been brought to justice, we shall establish a centralized government that will hopefully prevent such extreme measures in the future.”

“Under human control, of course.”

“Initially, yes.” Andrew added. This was often how they worked, each one finishing the other’s sentence, or picking up where they left off. Shamaj found it amusing most of the time. “The hope is once a state of peace has been restored, we can start phasing in Ceti leadership to assume control.”

“Phasing in... naturally.” Shamaj muttered, more to himself than anyone else. Diplomatic speak for ‘We will control all aspects of the government until political pressure forces our hand or it is no longer economically feasible.’ With a grated tone, the ambassador added, “And I assume now you will have to expedite plans for mining expansion.”

For the first time since he had met the pair, the twins looked nervous, and Andrew broke their pattern by speaking next. “Yes, naturally, a centralized government will require building an infrastructure that currently isn’t there; transportation to get all the representatives together, maintenance of a capitol complex, as well as trade resources to fuel economic growth. All of these take energy, and not surprisingly, it coincides rather well with the only tradeable goods of any value to Earth at the moment.”

“Well, I was meaning to write this to you...” Shamaj began, “But since you are here, I might as well say it now, albeit less articulately than I had written. I would strongly recommend not putting so much time and effort into planning the stages of victory after any wartime efforts. The

tribes of the Ceti will not go gently into that good night... I do believe that is the turn of phrase I am looking for, correct?"

"I see you've become quite familiar with human literature." Lionel noted. "Well, then I suppose you won't be too distraught by the rest of the news we have to relay."

"Oh?" Shamaj queried.

"Perhaps you were expecting that we came to inform you that you would be deported back to the Ceti homeworld." Andrew explained. "However, the Department of Planetary Defense, has decided... considering your connections to the tribe currently believed to harbor the leadership of the Hands of Balance... that it would not be prudent to send you back to your people."

"So, I am being taken into custody?"

Both twins shook their heads, and Lionel denied, "No, merely being placed under house arrest. The embassy will remain Ceti land, you will remain in your station. However, you will not be permitted any communication with the Ceti homeworld without permission of the Department of Planetary Defense. A liaison will be sent within the next forty-eight hours that you can get all approval for your actions through."

"I see..."

Lionel and Andrew looked at each other nervously, then shifted so they could catch their security in their peripheral vision. Andrew then queried, "Gentlemen, can you give us a few minutes alone? I can assure you the ambassador here means us no harm."

Security was initially reluctant, but conceded when Lionel repeated the request. Once the twins thought all was clear, they got right to heart of the matter.

"This is ridiculous. I know it. Andrew knows it. You know it." Lionel said; his voice radiating apology. "The Hands of Balance might be against everything human, but they didn't do this, no matter what the evidence might say."

"But just as I can't convince the tribes of my people anything when they've set their mind, you are equally powerless to do your job when the UWG has decided everything beforehand." Shamaj noted. Contrary to popular belief, ambassadors and diplomats knew quite well the only power they had was what their respective governments deemed inconsequential.

"Makes you wonder what our jobs are really for, huh?" Andrew quipped.

"Someone needs to pretend they care about peaceful resolutions."

Andrew then leaned in as Lionel continued talking, but Lionel might as well have been talking gibberish, as he wasn't meant to say anything of consequence. "There is an investigator for the UWG trying to sort out this entire mess. He needs time, however. If there is *any* way you can

convince your people to... keep their heads down for now, hopefully he can break this wall down before too many living beings on both sides are killed.”

“I’ll need a way to contact my people.” Shamaj said. “Preferably without having the Department of Planetary Defense screening my every communication.”

“Lionel is going to mistakenly leave his phone here. It has a one time use scrambler coded into the software. It’ll be good for one communication that can’t be traced and leaves no record. Lionel will come back around tomorrow, and you will of course be astonished that he left it here, and that you had no idea, otherwise you would have informed someone immediately. Understand?”

Shamaj nodded.

“Good. Now, I suggest you agree, reluctantly, with whatever my brother has been saying, and send us on our way.”

The Ceti ambassador then stood, and said coldly, “I cannot say I approve or agree with your take on your clout or precisely what you can do in this situation, but I have little say in the matter. Hopefully, the future will give us a more peaceable ground to continue this tit for tat. You know where the door is. I suggest you use it.”

Andrew nodded, “Yes, I hope it will.”

“Tis darkest before the dawn, my friend. Let’s pray the sun shines on as many people as possible when it happens.” Lionel added before they made prompt exit.

Shamaj looked across the desk to where Lionel had been sitting. Sure enough, tucked gently into the gap created by the cushions was a small metallic colored plastic rectangle. He plucked it out with two of the three fingers on his right hand, and flipped it open, his scaled digits gently running across the touch sensitive pad to activate it. Deciding a text message would take less time and be less suspicious than a voice communication, Shamaj went right to work.

My Grand Elder Majay,

I am well aware that there seems to be little light of hope remaining as the inevitable assault on our once grand home approaches. But I am here to assure you that it still gleams for us in the coming twilight. Even the humans themselves aren’t totally sold on the story that has been presented, but it will take time to peel aside the layers of treachery and deceit to expose the truth.

I beg of you to keep the resistance your tribes and your fellow elders are going to inevitably mount to a minimum. Do not surrender our allies, but do not throw the lives of your people away, and do all you can to make sure your contemporaries do the same. Minimizing the damage, both to the blessed world that gives us refuge in the cold universe and to the living who call it home, needs to be your primary objective.

There is little more I can do at this point. I know it will be difficult, and I'm sure our relationship has strained over time, distance, and my growing affection for this alien world I have lived on for the last fifteen of our years. But I need you to trust me; trust that no matter where I roam, what I have seen and experienced, the Ceti will always be my family and most beloved of kin. I would never do anything to mislead my family or lead them astray.

Your friend and brother,

Shamaj

He had just hit send on the message when a knock on his door startled him. He quickly tucked the phone deeper into the cushions of the chair before bidding the visitor enter. To his surprise, Ilia entered the office, and said matter of factly, "Karai has been located, and is being sent to the embassy immediately. Apparently, your aides are restricted to house arrest as everyone else."

"I'm surprised you are still here, to be honest." Shamaj said. "Once house arrest begins, no one, be they human or Ceti, will be allowed to leave."

"Why shouldn't I be? I rather like working for you, sir. You've taught me so much... it would feel wrong to abandon you at this time." Ilia declared. "I'm sure it doesn't console you much, but I am very glad you weren't deported."

Shamaj smiled, or as close to a smile as his more reptilian features could manage, as he sat back down in his chair, "To be honest, I am rather glad myself."

"Really, sir?"

"Indeed. As much as it might pain my kin; I have become rather endeared with this world your people have created. The innovation, the creativity, even if some among my kind would consider it an abomination; I find it truly exploring the gifts the greater power above us all gave every sentient being. The lights, sounds... the experiences... to have an adventure of a lifetime without ever leaving your bedroom, these are things the Ceti do not have, nor seem to want. I'm... not sure I could live such a simpler life again."

Ilia returned her mentor's smile. "It appears you are learning just as much from us as I am from you."

"That is the true spirit of diplomacy, young one." Shamaj noted sagely. "It wouldn't work if it was any other way."

Part Six: The Generational Rift

My old friend speaks of trust as if it is something that is in abundance or limitless supply. He truly is as detached as I had feared. The tribes barely trust each other at the best of times. How am I supposed to influence their decisions?

How to minimize the damage when any damage is too much to bear, I want to ask. While I am of the ambassador's mind, the Ceti way is not to control or influence. What each tribe seeks to do is their business. And the tribes are in this one case in unison. We will not suffer any further human presence.

Even then, within this own tribe, our venerable traditions of purity and union with the land maintained by the Hands of Balance have decided to escalate the unified voice of the tribes even further. Already, I hear the whispers; that stopping the humans' advance is not enough, what is required is to eject them entirely from our lands.

Our children, our grandchildren, the younger among our people; they lead the charge for resistance, for violence. They are filled with ideals, with a vision of a purer Ceti homeworld, free of the interference and taint of "dirty humans." They move harshly, brashly, lacking the same hindsight of history and realism that my generation and my children's generation hold.

Of course, this is hardly new. I remember being bold once, when I was a young male. I was a powerful buck; and I thought I was invincible then too. I remember also defying the tribe's elder at that time as well, when the humans first arrived, throwing out the diplomat who had come looking for the right to seek the heavy metals that their culture needed to maintain their standard of civilization, and threatening to kill him if he returned.

No reason or wisdom forged by years will sway the minds of the young unless they will it; and I do not see how I can. They have been the most stirred by the threat of coming armies; they have been the most moved to fulfill the ideals their elders claimed to champion during times of peace. They were raised on the tales of our own resistance, of our slightly exaggerated tales of "heroism", "valor", and "bravery" against the humans, and they now seek their own tales, their own legacy.

That is their right. That is the cleft between father and son. There is nothing I can do about this; it is a recurring theme likely before even time itself. I can only offer entreaties to the higher power that guides and watches us all to show some mercy to some of our babes as they walk into the valley of blood and death.

Tribal Elder Majay gently closed his journal, as it had seen many days, and the leather hide cover, crude glue binding, and weather stained rough paper was not likely to hold up under much more stress.

His granddaughter, Annishi, had left two days ago, alone and in the depths of the night. He sensed that whatever she was up to would likely run completely contrary to the appeals his brother had made.

Could he really blame her, though? How many times had he told her the story about how he had single-handedly forced out seven heavily armed humans from his grandfather's stead with nothing but his bare hands? In truth, it had been one unarmed surveyor who merely wanted to *look* to see if there was anything of value to them deep under the ground.

In retrospect, for all the spite and bile the Ceti had spit the human's way, humanity had actually shown incredible restraint, especially considering the power of their technology. They could have easily taken what they wanted. Their passivity and inclination towards peaceful negotiation lent him (and others of his day) to exaggerate their exploits. After all, if war hadn't happened then, it wasn't going to any time in the near future.

That just went to show that foolishness and hubris was not limited to early age. If youth was wasted on the young, then wisdom was wasted on the old. Inadvertently, the elder generations had created the very culture of derision and disrespect that would mangle the bodies and crush the spirit of the future ones.

He sighed as he realized he was thinking in circles. That did even less good than trying to influence the young ones into showing the restraint that his generation did not.

"Grandfather?" A young boy's voice asked. Majay looked up from his closed journal to see his youngest grandson, Jaju, looking up expectantly. The child was truly a young Ceti, barely into his tenth year... but of all his grandchildren, the gift of wisdom had shined brightest in this young lad. He had listened when all other children in his tribe, had pretended to. Jaju was even bright enough to see through the elaborations of the past for what they were; asking questions that were difficult and embarrassing to answer at the time; but now Majay was thankful for.

"Yes, child? What may I do for you today?"

Jaju looked around nervously, "I was told not to tattle, but I know where Annishi went. I think she's going to get into trouble."

Majay straightened, "You were wise and right to come to me, although I wish you had sooner."

"I couldn't... my brothers and sisters were always watching me. They'd beat me if I even so much as came near you."

That would explain why the youngest one hadn't so much as said "hello" or even been anywhere in sight the last pair of days. "At any rate... what has your big sister been up to?"

"Four nights ago, I heard her talking quietly in her room. I know I was told not to spy on people, but she was trying to be so quiet about it, I thought maybe her and Matei were planning another prank on someone."

Majay nodded. The two eldest grandchildren of the tribe had been notorious tricksters, but both had grown out of that nonsense for the most part.

“I slipped through the wall into the secret cubby you showed me when I was little... and was able to slip between the outer and inner walls to outside her room. She was talking to someone else, but I looked through the cracks in the wall, and didn’t see anybody. She was using a human ‘phone’ I think it’s called.”

“Yes. The humans use it to talk to people over very great distances. Our people see little use for such things... except our dear Annishi, it seems.”

“She was talking to a human, grandfather... I didn’t like the way she... I think it was a she, sounded. They were talking about some sort of gift from a very wealthy human who wanted to help us, and that the gift would arrive within the next two days or so. I think they were intentionally trying to hide what this gift was... but I believe that’s where Annishi went. To pick up this gift, whatever it is.”

Majay thought back to the communication he had received from Shamaj. It had said that many humans did not support the actions of their leaders. Could the division be so deep that they were openly willing to help the Ceti? And how would such help manifest? None of the answers struck Majay as particularly good ones.

“Do you know where they were supposed to meet?”

Jaju shook his head, “No, grandfather. Much of what was actually said was too quiet for me to understand. But I’m worried about what is taking so long.”

“She could be in trouble...” Majay noted, “Or she could be bringing home something quite large.”

He walked purposefully out of his stead, and towards the farmhands monitoring the fields on the other side of the family lands. “Haru!” He called out to his nephew and senior farmer among the tribe. “Did Annishi request to use one of your carts?”

“Why... yes... she did; our largest one, in fact. Came by four days or so ago, saying she needed to bring in a large amount of supplies for the tribe from the city. I didn’t think we’d need anything from... that place... but she insisted, and it didn’t seem right to deny her, considering she’s direct of your blood.”

Majay groaned in dismay. There was little telling what Annishi could be preparing, but he was fairly certain whatever it was would not quell the coming conflict. “Come, Jaju, there is nothing we can learn until your sister returns.”

As they made the slow walk back to the old Ceti’s stead, Juja asked a seemingly innocuous question that in reality was far more complex to answer. “Grandfather, why do so many Ceti hate humans so much?”

“The easy response is that they punish the land that gives us life.” Majay replied. “They rip ores from the earth’s bosom to make the metals for their buildings and ships. They bled its blood to fuel their early vehicles. And now they cut even deeper to find rare heavy metals that power their great space ships and their glowing cities.”

“But don’t we do the same sort of things? Our plows are made of metal we mined. We find oils nice for our lamps and furnaces.”

Majay nodded, “You’re right. We do. While we Ceti decry such actions from the bottoms of our lungs and shake our fist angrily towards Earth... that is not the true reason. The real reason is unnecessary haste for the sake of progress.”

Juja blinked; a hint that confirmed the elder’s fears that a child so young couldn’t quite grasp the concept. But the lad was intent on trying. “What do you mean, grandfather?”

“The humans... they have this concept of ‘the next big thing.’ They endlessly chase the next step of progression in everything they do, often without understanding the consequences or even exactly *what* they have built in the first place. It is like they are in a race... but there are no other competitors. Everything must be bigger, stronger, faster, better... even if what they already have is perfectly suitable for what they need. It’s all about progress at any cost. Even if it hurts them, even if it kills them, if it drives them to early death... it’s all worth it... because they’ll have ‘the next big thing’; of course, just in time for the next ‘next big thing’ to come along.”

Majay looked across to the lake that had provided his family with food and water for countless generations. Most humans on Earth could not have such a luxury; their waters polluted and much of the land unsuitable for crops, in their desire to achieve whatever it was they felt they absolutely had to have. “You see, my child; It’s not that humans are wasteful, or greedy... they have no appreciation for what they have; no appreciation for the world and the lives they live. They never allow themselves to relax, and be content with the world around them... because well, then someone else may come along and get the ‘next big thing’ bigger than their ‘next big thing’, and well... they just can’t have that, now can they?”

“What compels them in such a fashion, grandfather?” Juja queried. He seemed not nearly as lost as before.

The elder shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m not sure even a minority of humans know. It’s something they’ve pursued for so long... perhaps they just don’t know any other way to live.”

“Is that why my sister hates humans so much?”

“I doubt our dear Annishi has ever given much thought to her hatred. She learned it from her parents... who learned it from me. We merely behave in the way we have always known, because that is how we survived. It seems only copious amounts of free time allow such enlightenment and wisdom.” He then winked, and added, “Maybe that’s why we’re smarter than humans.”

Juja shook his head. “That was not a very funny joke.”

The elder sighed, and answered, “No, it rather wasn’t.”

At that point, the tribal property seemed to erupt in activity. His third nephew dashed past them on his way up the gravel and dirt road, bellowing, “Annishi has returned, and she brings something very big!”

They reached the center square just as Annishi came into view. She indeed had the largest cart the tribe had, being pulled by four of their Muldares, large beasts of burden that resembled a cross between an ox and an elephant. They were straining quite heavily, a likely combination of the weight they were pulling and the pace that Annishi was spurring them into.

She had barely even come to a stop in the center square (at this point, the near whole of the tribe had gathered), before Majay began to rebuke his granddaughter.

“Annishi! How could you mistreat our Muldares in such a way?” He accused, pointing to the exhausted animals. “And where have you been?”

The young female Ceti, for the first time Majay could remember, looked completely unrepentant before the chiding of the elder of the tribe. “It was a necessary evil, grandfather.” She nearly sang, hopping onto the back of the cart, uncaring that Majay had followed her at ground level. “And I went to the... city...” She said that last word with a spit, referring to the one heavily inhabited human styled settlement that had formed during the early years of inter-racial contact, “...to give us the means to fight the humans. You may wish to run and hide, but I will not.”

“The humans come in a force we cannot hope to resist this time!” Majay retorted angrily.

“Ah, but we will have something that they are not expecting. We will be ready, and they will die.” Annishi answered, grabbing a prying tool from one of the farmhands that had assembled in curiosity, and forcefully pulling the wooden top of one of a great number of crates that had been placed in the massive cart.

“What are you planning, girl?”

With a malicious smile, she reached into the crate. “This time...”

At that point, she re-emerged and straightened, holding a preposterously large bulk of polished onyx metal and plastic. Along the side of the main chamber blue LED lights flashed and flickered after Annishi primed the device, a number on a liquid crystal display increasing as it charged. Her hands gripped the unit by conveniently placed grips and handles, and a menacing serrated, perforated barrel pointed dangerously close to a group of Ceti near the back of the gathering.

Majay cringed as the fingers of Annishi’s right hand drifted a little too close to the hair trigger located at the joint between the rear handle and the main chamber. Not even a centimeter closer

and he would have been standing next to at least seventeen steaming plumes of vaporized Ceti from the high density plasma charge that would have burst at several times the speed of sound from the barrel.

“This time...” Annishi repeated, crowing in triumph, “We will strike the humans with their own weapons.”

Part Seven: Pre-emptive Strike

My beloved little Juja,

This is my time. This is my hell.

I heard those lyrics on some sort of playback machine the human who gave us the weapons we needed to fight had... it's a human tune, I know that much. For all the evil, machination, and reckless abuse that pale, leather skinned race subject every world they cross to... they have an artistic side that surprised me.

I would not have expected that. A race that seems to pay no attention to who or what they hurt, destroy, and cripple has such a remarkably good grasp on emotion and their inner feelings.

Ironic, that I draw inspiration from humans as I prepare for a glorious assault on their kind. For this is my time; my chance to add my story to the stories of my parents and grandparents, my opportunity to prove myself worthy of carrying the tribe through difficult times, capable of leading a people through the worst of circumstances.

My grandfather claims I don't understand, but I do. I know the humans are a powerful force. I know their armies could burn swaths across the planet. I know we cannot match their technology man to man. I know we cannot win a true, conventional war.

My plan is simple. It's been fought many times by smaller rebellious forces. It's not to overwhelm the enemy; but merely make the effort of victory not worth the cost. We can resist, we can pick our spots and strike, we can hit them where it really hurts them; their precious profits.

But this is also my hell. Nothing good ever comes from war. Many of my friends, my tribesmen, fellow Ceti, will be permanently scarred, injured, and many will even be killed. The dead will be my burden, the responsibility to the families of those who lost loved ones will fall upon my shoulders.

Even if everything I plan goes perfectly, it will be a tough road just to return to something resembling normal life. The humans will target our steads, our farms, they will raze our homes and destroy our food supply. They will poison our waters and harm our beloved planet near mortally. The cost of freedom, the price we will have to pay to keep the humans from destroying everything we love will be great.

Little brother; I know you've never really understood me. I know that you think like our grandfather; that I am being rash and foolish. But know that I do this for you, so that you don't have to live your life with the towering abominations of steel pumping the flesh and blood of our world away, so that you can be free of these leather skins lording over you and telling you what is good for your people. I do this for you, and the rest of the little Ceti who would otherwise never know how life was without the human heel on your neck.

Your sister,

Annishi

“Take this to the Majay Tribe quickly.” Annishi ordered the courier. “You can rejoin the rest of the squad after we’ve taken the mining grounds.”

Truth was, Notai was a little young to be engaging in this mission, and fully expected to have routed the entire human contingent within the processing facility long before he returned; but at the same time, she wanted everyone who joined her to feel like they were doing their part, the Ceti who were still a bit wee for combat wouldn’t be in two or three years time when the war would likely be at its worst.

“Annishi, the guard post should be switching soon.” Her appointed second in command, a robust male from the Carrini tribe said to her back as she watched the courier dash off through the night back towards her family stead. “We will need to get in position promptly.”

She whipped around, and sighed when she realized he already had camouflaged himself in the form fitting black night suit that was common for Ceti warriors during nighttime hunting. She was rather disappointed, since he was a rather well built male, and she found she liked admiring his physique; thick, hardened scales and powerful jaw, a firm hide that covered well toned, powerful musculature.

If he lived long enough to see the end of the war, Annishi could definitely see herself bringing him into Majay’s tribe... more accurately her future tribe. The males of her current tribe didn’t appeal to her, none of them were nearly the specimen that... damn it.

“Yes. Yes. Right... I’m sorry, you are...”

“Navid, of the Carrini tribe.”

“Right. Very good.” Annishi replied. At least she got his tribe right. With flanks like those, who needed to remember names anyway? She locked step behind her delectable second, and returned to the rest of her strike force.

They numbered twenty-five of the strongest, most durable Ceti Annishi could find between the five tribes in the surrounding area. They would form two teams; the first (that Annishi would command) would move in from the north and take the mining grounds, detonating the mine entrances to lock out reinforcements from humans working the late shift, and pushing forward towards the administrative building.

The second team (led by Navid) would go from the east into the refining facility, overwhelm the security station, and press through like a plunger, forcing the humans further and further back towards the shipping building.

Where the third team, coming from the south, would be waiting, creating a pincer of sorts on whatever resistance had survived. Once the humans there had been mopped up, the two groups would then rejoin the first as backup in case they were needed to help secure the administrative building.

Annishi figured it wouldn't take long at all to completely rout the humans. They were not expecting an attack, and security had always been very light to begin with; the rest of the humans were either unarmed, or not fully trained in combat.

The groups would move into position as the guard was changing; in the hopes that the humans wouldn't be quite as vigilant to movement on the perimeter at that time. The teams would then begin to move in during the next guard change two human hours later for the same reason.

Of course, Annishi quickly learned the meaning of an old Ceti proverb; "If you want to make the great watcher above laugh, make plans."

The spotlights that had been trained on the grounds suddenly whirred with the sound of a slightly out of tune machine, casting their bright illumination down onto the depression that the Ceti assault teams had ducked down in. Quickly ordering her followers flat against the ground, she followed suit, trying to stay out of sight at best, and at least hide their full numbers at worst.

"Alright. We know you're out there!" A human shouted, presumably a member of security. "We got you all on infrared! Come out with your hands up! Now!"

Annishi looked around her strike force, and smiled deviously. "Change of plans. Everyone attack when I begin firing."

Ten seconds of silence passed then the security guard called out again, "Last chance! Get your lizard hides out here!"

Annishi powered her heavy rifle to a full charge, hearing the hum increase in pitch until it was almost a wail. Once completed, she jumped to her feet, and took aim. "All you had to do was ask nicely." Then, the young Ceti woman pressed the trigger.

The kickback from the full charge ripping out the barrel nearly knocked her back onto her rump, and slightly altered her shot. Fortunately, with such a densely packed shell, close proved to be good enough, as when the charge made contact with the ground, everything within ten yards instantly superheated to roughly two thousand degrees, effectively obliterating the small detail that had formed at the entrance to the refinery.

The attack was then on, the entire force entering through the refinery on route to the administration building. Because of this, the pincer that Annishi had been planning to drop on the humans wound up getting dropped on them. Security from the mining grounds rushed in from the north, along with the security teams in the mines themselves that was initially intended to be sealed in.

Yet what could have been a disastrous turn of events turned out to be rather inconsequential. The humans prided themselves on factories and buildings that could largely run themselves. The total human presence that met them in the bowels of the refinery wasn't even half the entire Ceti presence. On top of that, either someone forgot to activate the automated security systems, or there was an error somewhere along the line, as the robotic weapons remained silent throughout the exchange.

That wasn't to say the Ceti didn't suffer casualties. Two of her team (one of them from her own tribe at that) stood too close together, and was vaporized by one well placed high density charge. The momentary waft of burnt flesh hit Annishi's nose, and she had to steel herself against vomiting, forcing back the loss of people who trusted her to lead them to victory. There would be time to mourn their loss when the mission was completed.

The Ceti also had the advantage of using their greater numbers to flank the resistance, sending a third of their team up onto the catwalks and using the higher ground to get better angles on the defenders. Once that secondary position was secure, the humans quickly were routed, five of them were killed, and the rest soon joined them as they tried to surrender. Annishi didn't particularly like that action, but she didn't have much of a choice; she didn't have the numbers or means to take prisoners. In addition, she had to send a message; humanity would not be allowed to thrive on the Ceti homeworld.

She regretted the decision even further once it became evident that the humans' stand at the refinery was largely all they had. The administration staff was unarmed, and there were only two guards. It was then, and only then, that Annishi felt a pang of guilt. The humans were lined up, forced to their knees, and executed grimly and swiftly.

Once again, she forced back her reservations. Victory had been secured, and she needed to project that confidence and triumph to the people who would follow her for the remainder of this bitter and violent campaign.

"My friends!" She called out, quickly getting the attention of the revelers. At least one of them had slipped a liquor bottle in with him or her, as she could smell the faint hint of alcohol. "Let's not lose sight of the greater goal. This is one small victory in a road that will be paved with many defeats. In fact, there will no doubt be moments where it will feel that we are doing nothing *but* losing. I need you to remember this moment, and others like these. Let them be the fuel that keeps us going through the hard years to come!"

A rowdy cheer rose in response to her address, then she grinned, and added, "Now, whoever has that bottle of spirits better start passing it around."

"Cheers for Elder Annishi!" Navid joked, but it appeared the rest of the crew took it at face value, and they were soon chanting it in refrain over and over.

She rather liked the sound of that; Elder Annishi. Granted, by the customs of the Ceti, she couldn't be considered an elder for at least fifty more years, and then it would require a majority support from the rest of the tribe for her to be confirmed as such.

But traditions were made to be changed, she decided. And there was no guarantee that in the war to come that many Ceti would live to see the elder age. Yes... Elder Annishi could be quite fitting... a general of the resistance movement, open to all Ceti regardless of tribe, with a common goal to outlast humanity for the sake of their world.

The bottle of spirits had barely made one more round before she heard the sound of a riding animal, and the courier she had sent shouting from a distance. He had clearly appropriated the creature in order to make quick time back to the site of the battle. Fortunately for her conscience, the Ceti had made quick work of the skirmish.

“He didn’t waste time, did he?” Annishi muttered more to herself than anyone else, and worked her way through the hall towards the exterior grounds. She made it to the exit just in time to hear the roar of an engine, and a human drop ship get close enough to the ground for a small unit of heavily geared specialists to hit the ground, roll, and pop up ready to fire; and they did so on the most obvious target.

Annishi cried out in terror, but was far too late to draw their attention as the human counter-assault team turned her courier into vapor, firing an unnecessary number of rounds at the defenseless Ceti. Only then, did they turn in her direction. She had to dive back into the building to keep from being ended herself; the space where she was becoming so blisteringly hot that it burned her right cheek painfully.

She took to a full sprint back to the rest of her team, “Out into the reception area, now! Take cover and spread out! We’ve got company and they mean business!”

They somewhat obeyed, but seven of them didn’t respond fast enough, gunned down the minute they tried to filter out of the office. Annishi could figure out where her new foes were coming from... she didn’t see anyone in the hall. Did the humans have technology that could make them invisible?

She dove behind the receptionist’s desk, to see that Navid had already taken refuge there. But before she could move to different cover, the entire reception area became awash in plasma fire.

Annishi couldn’t even manage to return fire... the heat, screams, and sounds the barrage paralyzed her. Over the din, she heard Navid ask, “Annishi, what do we...”

Then his head exploded from a charge that had managed to penetrate the desk without detonating... a timed charge, from what she could tell before the fireball seared her face, and caused her to fall out of her cover, screaming in pain.

And then all was silent. Able to ignore the agony to pull her hands from her face, she rolled onto her back. Above her were three figures, human she guessed, although she wouldn’t have known by the masks they wore... hideous bulbous things with thick black visors and a trio of circular mouth plates all in a row, probably air filters... these humans had likely just arrived on Ceti, and

hadn't received the inoculations that allowed them to breathe comfortably. She didn't remember exactly what it was that made it difficult for humans normally, and didn't care to figure out.

Not that she would have had the time. Her last coherent memory was the shoulder patch on the combat suit one of them wore, "Marine Force Recon, Special Ops Unit Alpha."

"I am sorry... my little brother... I was a fool..." She croaked in her native tongue.

Then she was executed just as the humans she assaulted had been.

Apparently, humans also believed in poetic justice.

Part Eight: Through the Eyes of a Child

Dear Journal,

I don't know what to do. I really don't. I'm being torn two ways, and I don't know which one is right. I'm not even sure my grandfather knows that he's doing the right thing, and if he doesn't know, how am I supposed to?

On one hand, I respect my grandfather greatly. He is wise and has seen so much. When he says something; I believe him. When he says the humans are too strong to trifle with, and that we should stay out of their way, I certainly do not know enough about humans to argue.

But I also respect and love my sister. Without her, I would have no way to record my thoughts. She was the one who took a trip to the city and traded some of her personal allowance to purchase this voice recorder from a human. My hands have gotten so crippled that I can't even hold a pen, much less write. It's clear she cares about me, and if she thinks attacking the humans will help keep me safe, I feel obligated to support her.

This wonderful machine I hold now only adds to my confusion. Both my grandfather and sister believe the humans are awful, terrible beings... but how can something so evil, create things so useful? What if the haste my grandfather chides humans for having is so they can create the best life possible for even the least blessed of their kind? I don't know if my grandfather or sister or even any of my tribesmen have really sought to explore the reasons for humanity being the way they are. I know my great uncle Shamaj lives with them, but my grandfather doesn't talk with him much anymore, and great uncle doesn't come home very much either. Perhaps great uncle likes it there more than he does here?

And why is the humans being here wrong? We aren't using the stuff they want to take, and they come here more now because they claim we attacked them. I don't think any in my tribe did, but there are many tribes among the Ceti. I know if one of them attacked us, grandfather would be taking every able-bodied male and female to retaliate and put the attackers in their place. Why should we expect humans to behave differently because they have many machines?

Why do we refuse to talk? Why do we refuse to listen? Maybe if we listened to why the humans think we did it, we could tell them how we couldn't or at least help them find the Ceti who did.

But I guess I shouldn't question either of my elders. I'm just a child. I don't know nearly the sorts of things my grandfather and sister know. Maybe I'll learn, and that will allow me to agree with one of them... but right now, all of this sounds pointless...

"Juja, who are you talking to?"

The Ceti boy nearly jumped, and discretely stopped recording, and slipped the device into one of his pockets. "Nobody..." He began as innocently as he could imagine. "I just talk like that to sort out my thoughts. I really don't have the luxury of writing them down after all."

He successfully managed to deflect the topic of conversation to whatever he might have been hiding to something much less comfortable for adults to breach, especially in the case of his mother.

“I know, little one.” Juja’s mother replied. “I know it’s difficult for you.”

“The doctor from the city says that there are humans with great learning in the city that could possibly cure this...” He paused to think of the words used to describe his condition, and was proud of himself when he remembered, “... cerebral palsy.”

The female Ceti sighed. “We’ve had this discussion before, Juja. We do not trust the humans, and we never will.”

“So, when are you going to decide I am worthless and have me drowned? That was also tradition, wasn’t it?”

Juja was referring to the tendency of Ceti tribes less than one hundred years ago that would either abandon or outright kill children with deformities or handicaps, as they would not be able to properly pull their weight in the tribe. It was a tradition that the Ceti abandoned after first contact with humans, mostly out of fear; as the mostly unknown alien race had found the practice barbaric and often intervened with marginal force to prevent such “mercy” from occurring.

“Your father and I have said no, and that is final. I will not have this discussion further with you.” His mother replied sternly. Juja had found that was often the tone she took when she realized she didn’t have a good answer and didn’t want to appear less intelligent than a mere child. “Besides, I am here to inform you that your grandfather wishes to speak to you, and he said it was rather urgent. Go.”

Juja rather wanted to keep pressing his mother, since he sensed he had her in a bit of a logical corner, but at the same time, knew she would eventually dismiss and ignore him. Besides, if his grandfather had truly asked for his presence, it must be for good reason, and respect for the tribal elder demanded a prompt response to the summons.

With a deferential nod to his mother, he sidestepped her, out of his room, took the walk to the front entrance of their stead quickly, and took as quick of a pace as he could without jogging towards the center of the tribal lands, where the elder’s stead was located.

During the walk, he couldn’t help but notice a disturbing lack of activity for this time of day. Normally, there’d be Ceti barging about in every direction to complete a long list of tasks set to them to finish before the evening meal and the end of the day. The few tribesmen who *were* milling about appeared frantic for an entirely different reason than usual. Juja sensed an atmosphere of dread and fear... the people were hunkering down in their steads, preparing for the worsts.

The stead defenders, the four strongest and fastest Ceti in the whole tribe, stood guard at the only entrance through the earthen and brick wall that ringed his grandfather’s home; and it was when

Juja began to put together what exactly the fear was. The defenders normally did not take their posts wearing anything outside their normal attire. Today, they were in their full armoring, the thick hide breastplates and helmets well polished, the spears, sharpened and weighted for combat rather than hunting at the ready on their shoulders

As he approached, they nonetheless bowed respectfully to the child, and parted two to a side in order for him to pass through unopposed. "I would hurry to the elder, young Juja. There is not much time."

He liked the defenders; they always treated him courteously and respectfully for as long as he could remember. While it was likely for the simple fact that he was, due to his bloodline, a direct descendant of the current elder, and a potential future elder himself; it amused him to think that they genuinely enjoyed his presence, however short it often was.

Unlike every other visit Juja could recall, his grandfather met him at the entrance to the stead, and quickly ushered him back out past the wall.

"Come quickly, child. I don't know how much time we have before... before you have to leave." Majay declared, attempting to sound bright and cheerful, but he overdid it. As if Juja didn't need any more clues as to what was going on.

"The humans are coming, aren't they?" He asked.

Majay slumped his shoulders in defeat. Unlike Juja's mother, his grandfather was much more willing to disclose information. "I believe so, yes."

"What happened to my sister?"

"Your sister... she led an attack on the mining grounds a half day's travel south of here. Apparently she had been making more connections with the surrounding tribes than even I had guessed. Twenty-five Ceti from six tribes. They attacked... and they were killed. It is only a matter of time before the humans follow the trail to us."

Juja shook his head, "No... that can't be true! There must be some mistake!"

"Your father was in the city just after dawn, child! He identified the body himself!" Majay insisted, shaking the younger Ceti roughly to emphasize the point. "Your sister, she was a member of a group of younger people who called themselves the Hands of Balance. Everyone knew who was in that cadre. They made very big talk about humans, and how it was a blight on the Ceti world. Now, the humans will come here, and you need to leave."

"But, grandfather... what about you?"

Majay smiled in acceptance. "I will stay here as the elder of the tribe. It is my duty to do so."

"But... you can't fight..."

“None of us can.” Majay acknowledged. “The humans are too strong. They have too many machines that are too good at killing. You already know this. I, and many others, am not staying here to win. We are staying to buy the rest of the tribe time to get to safe grounds.”

Juja then discovered they were at the western boundary of their tribal lands. He guessed every child was here, along with a healthy sample of adults. Near the end of the pack, he could see his mother along with his six brothers and sisters, all looking forlorn.

“Is father coming back here?” Juja asked.

“Any male or female with a family is leaving with you.” Majay answered. “Don’t worry, little one. Your father will join you... he might already be waiting at ancestral caves.”

“That’s where we are going?”

Majay nodded. “The hope is that it will keep you and the rest of the tribe out of sight... and that the humans will be content with whatever resistance we put up here.”

The elder of the tribe then reached into his jacket, and pulled a pair of objects, one book and one letter. “This, is a letter from your sister... she apparently penned it and had it sent to my door the night of the attack. I suspect you should read it when you have time.” He handed over the letter in question, still sealed, which implied Majay had not read it himself. “And this... is my journal.”

“Grandfather...” Juja sobbed, fighting back tears. “You... can’t give this to me...”

“I can, and I do.” Majay answered. “I trust this to you because I trust you with passing on my knowledge and wisdom. My story, for good or for ill, ends today. I no longer need it.”

He stood slowly, fighting the arthritic joints that developed over years of hard laboring and little rest. “Is that all of them?”

“Yes, father.” A male Ceti in the center of the mass, Juji’s oldest uncle Karo, declared.

“Then go. And make haste. It could take several hours of travel with no rest before you reach the caves, and that’s assuming your numbers and age doesn’t slow you down.”

Ceti in their region often took a pilgrimage to the ancestral caves once every five years. History claims it was from the depths that the Ceti people first emerged and evolved into the beings they were today. Juja had been there once, but he remembered little of the trip. If his grandfather was to be believed, he was going to learn about the caves very intimately by the time it was safe to return home... whatever was left of it.

It was a long trip across a rather expansive flatland, so there was little shade for the travelers. It was already rather warm, and was only going to get hotter as the day turned into noon and

afternoon. Juja hoped that there was enough water to at least make to a place they could re-supply... in the haste to get everyone together, he worried that they hadn't covered that detail well enough.

What he didn't realize until a half hour later was that their path followed a large, slowly flowing river that would provide ample moisture for even an army of full grown Ceti. With that concern abated, he tried to convince himself that the travel wouldn't be so bad. It was a lovely day, after all. It worked for a hour or so more, but try as he might, he couldn't forget who he and the rest of the group was leaving behind, especially considering he still clutched his grandfather's journal tightly to his chest.

He slowed down slightly as he looked back, then stopped in awestruck horror as the events unfolded before his eyes.

The sky over the stead seemed to split, a large circle ripping open, revealing the blackness of space. From that rift in the heavens, a bright beam of painfully blinding light shot down towards the ground, followed in its wake by a sizzling whistle and hiss. It wasn't even a blink of Juja's eye that the brilliant beam shot from sky to ground, igniting the entire stead and then some in a plume of white fire that extended almost to the now rapidly closing hole in the sky.

The explosion sent out a shockwave that outran even the sound it made, tossing the Ceti refugees like feathers in a wind, depositing them helter-skelter on the ground before the roar of its passing rushed by.

The entire stead... reduced to ash and fire and smoke... before anybody could have counted to two. Juja clambered up to his knees, ignoring the pain in his hands as he pushed his body off the ground. This was beyond his imagination. This was beyond his comprehension. When he had been told the humans were strong, it had never occurred to him to think of that power in terms of hand to hand combat, using their machines to break down walls, using their armors and weapons to be near indestructible and unbeatable.

But the humans clearly didn't need to bother themselves with such trivial methods. Not when they could wield the powers of the gods and deliver their judgment from the heavens. Weeping and gasps filled his hearing as the rest of his tribesman came to observe what had transpired.

That was why grandfather wanted everyone out of the tribal grounds. He knew... he knew what the humans could truly do.

"Quickly! We must hurry to the ancestral caves! The humans are already here!" His uncle Karo shouted, rousing the Majaya tribe refugees to action... far too late.

Roaring bellowed once more from the heavens and the Ceti survivors cowered in fear. They curled up into balls and somewhat preposterously covering their heads with their hands as if it would protect them from the light blasting down from space.

But even to Juja's untrained ears, this sounded different, and he raised his head over his huddled brethren, eyes to the sky to see seven metallic shapes, like floating blocks larger than a Ceti steed. From his vantage point underneath these objects, he could see each... thing with a triangular pattern of pulsing blue lights, each light creating a trail of pale blue rings that dissipated quickly into the air.

The flying blocks slowly touched earth, causing a great gale and a small storm of dirt and gravel to kick up into the refugees. Then as suddenly as they arrived, they went silent, but only for a long breath. At that point, doors seemed to magically appear within the sides of the objects, and the humans, armored in reflective black and carrying weapons like the ones Juja saw his sister hold rushed out. The human warriors formed a thin ring inside the makeshift ring created by the objects they arrived in, surrounding the refugees, training their weapons on the Ceti in warning.

Part Nine: Mutiny on the Plains

This was not what I signed up for when I joined the Corps. What exactly are we trying to secure here? The “warriors” or “terrorists” or whatever the UWGM is calling them at this moment in time were vaporized in the orbital barrage. The group we’re being sent down to wrangle are mostly kids, with some non-combat adults to supervise them.

On top of that, I’m not here to be a baby-sitter. A peace keeping task force could have kept these brats in line while we investigated the caves they were running for to see if there were more weapons like the ones they used against L.A.

And yes, I had heard the line that “anyone and everyone can be an enemy or a terrorist.” God damn, I don’t know how many times I had to sit through the “informational supplement videos” from historical places like Vietnam and Iraq while the invasion was prepped up. I don’t think the Ceti know they CAN hide soldiers within a civilian population... subterfuge has never struck me as their strong point from the briefings I have seen.

My training tells me not to question orders, but damned if I don’t like any of this. I’ve heard the whispers, I’ve heard the rumors. That we’re coming for the fissionable metals abundant on the Ceti homeworld, and that this “attack” is the excuse we’re using to take by force what we couldn’t purchase.

I’m not one to buy into conspiracy theories. I think it’s safe to assume some Ceti did indeed attack us. I just highly doubt it was a group of kids and young adults. The members of the Hands of Balance have already been identified by our intelligence. Half of them killed themselves already in that stupid attack on the New Arizona Refinery. Another fifteen of them stood out in the open as the barrage came down. The other half are programmed into the memory cube on my cybernetic systems, none of them are identified as being in the group were about to corral.

In case some “investigative journalist” hacks my grid, and downloads this, I want to make it clear; I’m no peacenik. I’m a soldier. I joined the Corps knowing there was a damn good chance I’d have to fight, and possibly die. War is my career. But I also believe war should be fought for good reason; killing for just cause.

I’m not sure what I am doing right at this very instant is either of those.

*I’m even more concerned for Don. I know he assured command and all of us that he was alright, and that he’d be a true professional like all Marines are trained to be, but I don’t think it’s **possible** to just turn off losing everything you cared for. His wife... his two kids... hell, even his damn dog... lived in L.A. during this current tour of duty. They were killed by the bio-weapon the Hands of Balance released. I’m not convinced Don will be able to distinguish a non-combatant from a terrorist. I’m not sure he won’t see one Ceti face and see it as any different from the murderers that killed his family. Hell, it’s hard enough telling one apart from another.*

I don't like this... I don't like what might happen... and I'm afraid of what I'll have to do when I'm ordered.

Captain Jonas Redding's recording was interrupted by the drop ship lurching to the port violently, and he turned his focus to the outside world just in time to catch the pilot informing the marines stationed in the hold that they were entering the upper atmosphere of the Ceti homeworld.

"One more check down, men!" His unit leader, Major Donnell Minor shouted over the increasing rattling and sounds from entry procedures. "Have all weapons charged and ready before those doors open. There's no telling just where or how we could be ambushed."

He was distracted from scoffing at the idea of an ambush by one of his unit mates calling out, "Sir yes sir, Minor Major!"

Normally, such an apparent sign of disrespect would be quickly admonished... but outside of a rueful shake of his head, the unit commander did nothing else. Jonas wasn't surprised at all by this... the men of this unit had known each other for years. They were like a second family, and that included all the teasing and pranks that came with such close relations.

Jonas, for example, had offered himself up for a second tour of duty after his first one expired last year to remain with the unit. He knew Lieutenant Benjamin had actually declined a promotion to unit second with another unit because he liked it here too much.

"One last check of your filters, make sure they are properly modifying the air you're gonna encounter on the surface. I swear, if anyone konks out, I'm going to have you reassigned to KP duty for a month, got it?"

The Ceti atmosphere was for the most part suitable for humans, with one small and unexpected flaw... the air on the Ceti homeworld actually had too high of a concentration of oxygen. Jonas hadn't even known such a thing as hyperoxia even existed until he was being briefed for this set of missions as the forward assault unit for the main invasion.

Too much oxygen ravaged the central nervous system, causing difficulty breathing, seizures, loss of consciousness, and even death if a person remained exposed too long. Humans who were assigned for long term assignment were given a series of gene injections that temporarily altered their physiology to allow them to live normally on the planet, but in the case of Jonas, the marines, and the rest of the military, such extremes were considered unnecessary, their combat suits were fitted with filters that artificially bled out excess oxygen.

More to appease Don than anything else, Jonas flipped open the panel on the inside of his wrist, confirmed that the combat suit had identified and acknowledge the filter was present and working, then attempted to twist the filters themselves tighter into the trio of receptacles located on the front of the facemask connected to his helmet. Satisfied with their status, he gave his commander thumbs up.

The jostling of entry steadily abated as the drop ship slowed itself during the descent. Gone were the days of space craft having to coast in on a wing and a prayer because the fuel necessary for a rocket assisted descent was far too expensive. Thanks to the pulse engine and the outrageous amounts of energy generated by anti-matter collisions, a descent that took hours a century ago now took mere minutes.

Sadly, anti-matter was still too new a development, too dangerous, and too expensive to use as the primary energy source of the human race at the time, thus the conspiracy theorists saying the war with the Ceti was to secure the fissionable heavy metals that were becoming increasingly less common on Earth.

“Touching ground in ten!” Major Don shouted, grabbing the leather hand loops above his head to brace himself in event of a less than four point landing. “Remember, hit the ground running and prepare for anything! It could get real hot down there real quick!”

Jonas rolled his eyes at that, fortunately hidden by his helmet, and gripped a hand loop above him a handful of seconds before he felt everything jerk to a stop. Faintly, he heard the drop ships from the rest of the unit land in something that resembled near unison, and he hopped to his feet even before his commander could urge, “Go! Go! Go!”

Not surprisingly, an ambush or hot zone didn’t materialize. In fact, he could see that several of his unit mates were a little startled that nothing did happen... they stood rather dumbly, weapons not even at the ready, looking stupidly towards the cowering mass of Ceti that had huddled in a tight cluster at the center of the containing ring the Marines had formed.

Even with the Marine’s superior technology, the numbers were *heavily* on the Ceti’s side. Had they wanted to, they could have forced their way past and probably had not lost that many. It reinforced Jonas’s opinion that the refugees were an non-issue, non-combatants caught in the middle of an oncoming invasion.

He was much more worried about Don, and it appeared his worries were not off base. Despite his face being fully masked, Jonas could see the major trembling, trying to fight back the emotions that were flooding through his mind.

“Sir... Donny...” He whispered after casually drifting his commanding officer’s way. “You all right in there?”

“I’m fine... Captain.” The major snarled. “I don’t like this... one of these lizards has to know something...”

The use of Jonas’s rank, and not his name, disconcerted him. It told Jonas that the major was disconnecting himself from those he considered friends, because he was about to do something he knew was wrong.

Don stepped forward, breaking the ring, and put his gun at the ready with a low charge. “Now, no one has to get hurt here...” He said, making Jonas hope that there was someone among the

refugees that spoke English. “We’ve got some investigators searching your hideaway, and we can’t let you lizards mucking things up. You can save all of us a lot of time and tell me where you’ve hidden the weapons you used to attack us.”

“We have no weapons!” One of them, a male Jonas guessed, replied with an angry shout, stepping to intercept the advancing marine. “Look at us, we are mostly women and children! What monsters would do such a thing.”

“The same monsters that turned L.A. into a ghost town!” Don answered, slapping the Ceti away with the butt of his rifle.

Jonas began to move to intervene when another Ceti, this one a child, jumped forward, kicking Don in the shins, spitting angrily in their native tongue. This drew the major’s attention, notably to the book the child was clutching to his chest.

“Whatcha got there, kid?” The major sneered, and tried to take the book. Not the least bit unexpected, the child refused, keeping a firm hold despite his obviously crippled hands, and shying away from the major.

“I said, give me the damn book!” Don shouted, training his weapon on the young Ceti boy.

The situation was spiraling rapidly out of control. Terrified or not, Jonas knew the Ceti would not suffer watching one of their children threatened and aimed at for very long. With their vastly superior numbers, Jonas and his fellow marines would not escape unscathed if a riot broke out. Even juvenile Ceti were amazingly strong; at these close quarters, the marines combat armoring would not hold up very long against the powerful jaws and razor sharp claws the lizard like species possessed. The Marines were in control simply out of intimidation... Don’s actions were rapidly compromising that singular advantage.

On top of that, Jonas did not want to be present for what would become his generation’s My Lai. The point of history was to learn from it... he only hoped his fellows felt the same way, because he was going to need their support for what he was about to do.

Jonas lifted his weapon and readied an uncharged shell. It wasn’t some sort of elaborate bluff... the shell itself had more than enough stopping power to puncture Don’s combat armor and deliver an instantaneously fatal blow, and there would be no plasma eruption that would harm anyone else.

“Stand down, sir!” Jonas ordered. Step one was complete... he got the major’s attention.

“Are you doing what I think you’re doing?” Don asked, Jonas could feel the major eyes turn his way, even though Don barely moved his head.

“I’m not going to let you do this, sir. Put down your weapon and fall back.”

“Insubordination is a hefty crime, Captain.”

“So is cold-blooded murder, sir.”

Don turned back to the Ceti child, who despite staring down the barrel of a Xincon 90 Military Grade Plasma Rifle, did not seem any more willing to part with his book than he was before.

Jonas clicked out the empty shell and loaded another into the chamber to again get his commanding officer’s attention. “Damn it, Don. I *will* blow you away where you stand. Don’t do this to me. Stand down! Now!”

This time, Major Donelll Minor turned his head completely in Jonas’s direction. A staring contest drug on for several seconds before the major declared, “Men, take Captain Redding into custody.”

This was where Jonas hoped his unit mates had the same grasp of the situation as he did.

And fortunately, his faith was not unrewarded. The members of Marine Force Recon, Special Ops Unit Alpha, brought their weapons to ready, but on their commanding officer.

“Put the weapon down, sir.” One of them, Lieutenant John Hardis announced flatly, likely trying to ignore just who he was pointing his weapon at.

Jonas offered a way out for his commander, his friend, and yes, his brother. “Come on man... we don’t have to go this way. You can just drop your weapon now... get in the dropship... we’ll just say something went wrong with your air filter. Hyperoxia does some funky things to your mind, after all. No one has to go to court martial... it can all just be an honest mistake; but you *have* to work with me here.”

Major Don began to waver. Reason started to win out once he realized he was on an island with his actions. He turned to the Ceti child, bravely still standing in the path of this questionably sane marine with a very big gun, and possibly entertained still going down his potentially violent path until several more warning clicks of shells being loaded jerked him back to some degree of sense.

“These... snakes... they killed my family, Jonas.” The major said with a cracking voice. “They took my babies, J...”

“I know man.” Jonas assured. “But that doesn’t give you the right to take someone else’s babies away.”

It was a painfully long fifteen seconds before Jonas finally felt the tension drop out of the air. Don slumped, dropped his support hand from his rifle, and tossed it towards Jonas with the other arm. Jonas carefully picked up the weapon, and slung it into the holster on his back. “Nate, Perry... take Don to his drop ship, and get back quickly.”

The two marines dutifully obeyed, graciously offering their arms to their commanding officer and led him towards the ring. As they passed Jonas, Nate reached around to Don's face mask, and pretended to tighten the leftmost filter. "Damn things never quite secure right, huh, J?"

Jonas couldn't help but laugh quickly, a laugh that quickly spread to the remaining marines. The dread and fear had even seemed to die down enough that a small smattering of Ceti shared the hissing chortle that was their kind's equivalent to laughter.

A tap on the thigh plates of his armor surprised him, and he looked down to see the child that Don had been accosting. While it's true that all Ceti looked for the most part alike to the average human, to see those saddened, sorrowed eyes of the Ceti boy... Jonas was certain he would never mistake this child for anyone else. The emotion played so clearly that it crossed racial boundaries... this little boy had also lost. What exactly, Jonas couldn't determine, but he knew grief.

"Thank... you..." The child stammered.

"You're welcome." Jonas tried to say warmly, but found his combat training didn't really prepare him to properly do so. Old soldiers used to tell him there would come a point where you wondered why the hell you were fighting; it was up to you to decide if the reason you reached was enough to continue.

Jonas had reached that point; and his answer was an emphatic 'I don't know.'

He took a steadying breath, and declared, "All right... now that the drama's over... let's let the investigators do their jobs. If what you all claim is true, you'll be clear and on your way soon enough."

He hoped that they were right... and that he was too.

Part Ten: Up in Smoke

Log Owner: Allen Troy

Date: September 9th, 2110

Re: Daily Report for BioMiracle Labs Demo Job

Finally got the okay from the UWG to proceed into the disaster area. Took two weeks. How long could it possibly take for the government to decide, "Yep, no more people alive!" I know BioMiracle was losing their minds over it. Kept telling us, "There is any number of potentially dangerous experiments that could be compromised the longer we wait." And we had to keep telling them there's nothing we could do. Of course, who got the yelling from both my bosses and the guys paying us? Me, of course. Like I could somehow wave my magic fingers and get clearance to go into a martial law zone. Yeah. I'll get right on that after I'm done conjuring the image of the Virgin Mary onto a loaf of bread in Mexicali.

So, now we're here, and guess what? Yep, we have to wait again! Guess BioMiracle suddenly realized they've got a bunch of junk in there that might survive a designed implosion, and even better, get this, might actually be **spread** by demo efforts. Jesus Christ, if I'm designing something potentially dangerous, I would think I would prevent it from being spread-able in a medium of considerable abundance like... well... **air**, for example. These clowns had been permitted into the disaster area almost from the beginning, and it just occurs to them **now** that they might have to take some extra measures. Holy hell.

If they really wanted this place cleaned out and good, they could have just told us. Ain't nothing I know that can survive a series of well placed anti-matter charges. Sure, it'd be expensive, but supposedly money was no object after all. It's too late now, of course, since I and my team are already set up and ready to go... but damn, a little communication could have gone a long way here.

On top of that, I wish to note the accommodations still suck ass. We're a good five miles from the lab site. That's great... when we're actually ready to bring the place down. But when I'm trying to plan where I'm going to set the charges, how much I'm gonna need, ya know, all the logistics, it's a little inconvenient. Oh, let's not forget that I can only do my analysis at certain times, I can't actually go in myself and get dimensions and structure data, oh, and the information about the labs from the blueprints I have "**may or may not** be accurate at this point in the complex's design." In other words, they're expecting me and my team to fly blind and leave nothing standing when we're done. Any other miracles you expect me to perform guys? Should I turn some water into wine for you? Or should I walk on it first?

I hope they're paying us the millions that are being rumored, because I am growing increasingly frustrated with the lack of professionalism, courtesy and general competence the buyers from BioMiracle are showing. How the hell did these guys pull in trillions of marks? Guess it helps to have the government showering you with money. I know if we ran so inefficiently and cluelessly, the entire company would have gone belly-up within six months.

At any rate, another day of nothing. Another wasted day I could have spent blowing something else up. Oh well.

With an angry slap, Allen closed his laptop, and leaned back in his hammock. Two weeks just to get in the area, and now three days more doing nothing but waiting. For a man who liked making things go away in a particularly explosive manner, he might as well be tortured.

He stared up at the tarp above him that was his tent. At least Southern California was warm and sunny enough. He wasn't languishing in some hellhole like the time he was asked to blow up an abandoned dam in Alaska. Had to hold off for seven days as winter approached as every environmentalist group on the planet that had wanted the damn dam *removed* then starting complaining about *how* it was going to be removed. Some people were *never* satisfied.

"Hot damn, Allen!" A voice exclaimed, repeating itself over and over, before Jimmy Carter (poor unfortunate fool) stuck his head through the front flap of the tent. "You ain't gonna believe this. We're cleared to move in!"

"You're shittin' me." Allen replied, sitting up. "That HazMat team finally did their damned job?"

"From what I'm told. Something about how the crew is just securing one last room, and by the time we get down there, they should be done."

Allen hopped completely off the hammock, and stretched out. "About damn time." After he finished stretching, and saw Jimmy still sitting there, added, "Well, whatcha waitin' for? Another damned invitation? Get the team to load up the gear and get the truck started."

He shook his head disapprovingly, and snatched up his ID tag, keys, and other assorted personal belongings, stuffing them into the pocket of his jeans, and ducked through the flap of the tent, opening out into a panorama of desolation.

Whatever exactly had been used in the attack on Southern California... it did one hell of a number on the area for miles. Even after nearly a month, there was so little in the way of regrowth. Even the grass seemed to be having a hard time getting a foothold, as what of it was growing was thin, brittle, sickly, and brown. Grass, of all things. The stuff that can grow *anywhere* from his experience. The biological agent responsible for this might as well have sucked the very life out of the ground. It damn near ate everything else... trees, animals, people... if it was organic, it was gobble up time.

Hell, he thought the Ceti were a rather primitive race. Humans hadn't even developed a weapon so selective yet so completely effective. Neutron bombs could be selective like that, but it still did some damage. Not this stuff. It stripped everything clean, the only damage to infrastructure was from the meteor impact and the following earthquakes. In the case of L.A., that was so little that save for the lack of people, you wouldn't think anything was amiss in the city.

"Hey, Allen! We're over here! Stop wastin' time!"

Allen yanked his head to the right, where Jimmy along with the other two members of the demo team, Hank and Trish (poor unfortunate fellow) were already in the truck, engine humming as if just waiting for the chance to be let free. Hank and Trish were in the cab section, eyes forward, likely looking for the easiest path towards the road, while Jimmy was in the bed, beckoning Allen to join him.

With a jog, and a quick plant on the rear bumper, Allen hopped over the gate, and situated himself on the wheel housing across from Jimmy. They were acting like little kids, all mischievousness and laughs.

Hey... they loved their jobs.

Even in the truck, the affected ground was slick enough to be a potential hazard considering the uneven terrain, thus it was a slow journey to the road, which was of course in pristine condition, with the notable exception that the bio-weapon had even eaten the latex paint used for the lane lines.

Up ahead, the one structure that rose above the ground for miles became visible. BioMiracle Labs had taken significant damage, due to its much closer proximity to Ground Zero of the impact; likely taking the brunt of the shockwave from the collision as well as significantly stronger crust movement.

As the truck chewed up distance over the empty asphalt, the extent of the damage became clearer. Nearly the entire west wing of the complex suffered complete structural failure, only parts of two exterior walls remained standing. The south side was also heavily damaged with only portions of the walls and ceiling were still intact, consistent with where the shockwave from the meteor would have struck from the west-southwest. Other damage, outside of a partial collapse of the north ceiling, was what Allen would consider superficial... then again, considering his line of work, "superficial" to him would probably be significantly different than "superficial" to someone else.

Now that the culmination of his job was finally approaching, and that he and his team could finally make some progress, his bitterness and frustration began to fade. He supposed, with all damage considered, why it would have taken BioMiracle's HazMat team some time to fully secure any potential nasties. They would have had to comb through all the rubble in addition to every still marginally stable area, and that could not have possibly been fast work with the level of thoroughness required of sensitive materials.

By the time the demo squad pulled to a stop in what had been the central parking lot of the labs, BioMiracle's HazMat team hadn't been completed as had been insinuated. However, considering some members of the crew were packing up their equipment, the estimation didn't appear to be that far off.

"Alright, looks like we're a wee bit early." Allen declared, hopping out of the truck bed. "But we should be able to start analyzing the exterior." Hearing his three teammates groan, he said,

“Yeah, I know... but when we took these original numbers, we were being hassled, rushed, and otherwise distracted. I want to get them one more time and make sure we did it right.”

They parted ways, notebooks and tools in hand, towards each of the walls they examined roughly a week ago. As Allen stepped forward to handle the west side, he looked back towards the haphazard base of operations for the HazMat team. Something seemed off about it, but he couldn't quite put his finger on what. Dismissing the thoughts, he turned to his work.

It was fortunate that he did decide to recheck his data. The portions of the west wall still upright had crumbled considerably, and to blow with the initial numbers would have led to an imbalanced implosion which would likely have left significant remains. They were looking to reduce this place to a fine powder after all; it all had to be near perfect.

Of course, with each adjustment he made, that meant it altered the other numbers he had collected. Precision demolitions were a lot like a stack of falling dominoes. If you wanted a specific pattern or result, altering one domino in the chain would likewise alter how the others fell, possibly in a way you didn't want unless you adjusted the others to compensate. It was long, boring work... but the boom was always there at the end.

“Allen, you about done?” Jimmy's voice came up over his two way.

“Yeah, had to modify my solution. The west exterior is coming down hard.”

“Aight. To let you know, I guess we can start setting up on the interior. The HazMat is just taking one final run-through.”

“Okay, you go ahead and crunch the numbers inside. Have Hank and Trish begin planting charges for what we've determined outside. I should have my solution done before they get to the point where we'd have to change anything.”

Fortunately, each wing behaved much like their own building, so Allen didn't think his data would alter the positioning of the explosives in the other wings. The only thing it might affect would be the central building... and that required a lot of inside work that Allen knew was wrong initially.

Allen plugged in his new set of data into his datapad, and within seconds, he had his new arrangement and explosive solution. From there, it was a walk back to the truck to collect the hydrogen explosives.

To think there was a time that people feared nuclear power, Allen amused himself with the thought as he set the small charges, a disk barely larger and heavier than a Frisbee, into the places his solution assigned. Nations used to stockpile enough weapons to irradiate the world several times over... citizens in counties for decades fought the transition from dirty fuels like coal and oil to nuclear energy... it all seemed so silly now, considering he was carrying around what amounted to small-scale cold fusion reactions underneath his arm without fear.

The array was set, and he retreated back to the truck. Hank and Trish arrived seconds later, reporting that they had finished the solutions on the other wings. All that was left was for Jimmy to report that the interior of the central building was assessed, and to set the charges there as well.

Such word came ten minutes later, as well as news that the HazMat team was officially finished with their duties. Grabbing the last two packs of hydrogen charges, all three of them nearly sprinted to the complex... the sooner they finished meant the sooner something went up in smoke.

Yet they had one more surprise for them as they prepared to retreat to their designated safe zone. Waiting at the truck was presumably one of the HazMat team they had been waiting for to finish. He shook Allen's hand firmly, and said, "Thank ya for waitin' ... I know you all had been itchin' to get in there."

"Not a problem." Allen dismissed, his initial suspicions bubbling back up to the top of his mind as he regarded the BioMiracle employee in front of him. Either the fellow had gotten out of his containment uniform and was cleared to mingle with the world at large again in record time, or he hadn't been prepped for sensitive materials handling at all. Allen was inclined to believe the latter. Not the mention the guy didn't exactly sound... smart enough... to be trusted as a member of a HazMat team... BioMiracle was many things; incompetent, unorganized, perhaps even a bit unethical, but Allen couldn't imagine they were dumb enough to put someone so... simple... on a team responsible for handling dangerous materials.

"Well, none the matter. Thank you anyway. Be seein' ya around."

Allen paused momentarily before deciding he had better things to do than worry about BioMiracle and their assignment process. "Alright folks, let's get to the safe zone. Double time."

It was on the way back to their base of operations that it all finally came together in Allen's mind. What he had thought odd about the HazMat operations; there wasn't any gear there consistent with hazardous removal... it was all cleaning supplies. BioMiracle hadn't been securing anything in their labs... they had been destroying evidence that they weren't certain would be eradicated in the demo job... but why? What was in there that they wanted to make sure was gone for good?

He never got an opportunity to ask that question to anyone else, either. To his credit, he wasn't looking at the road ahead, but even if he had been... hydrogen charges were rather difficult to see if you weren't actively looking for them, especially when they happen to be a color that blends in well with asphalt.

The truck was incinerated by white hot nuclear fire just as the remains of BioMiracle Labs went up in a similar and much larger plume of fusing hydrogen.

Part Eleven: The Dutiful Assistant

June 16, 2110

I hate disorder. I know that seems like such a silly thing to say... but I do. If I'm feeling like there is nothing short of order to my days I just lose it. I need order and so I'm one of the women you meet in your life that exists for organizational products and freak out when they can't be found. A change in the organization products I love also sends me almost to the mad house. I know I look insane to everyone else when I lose it over a little thing but some stuff I just can't help.

As much as I'm teased for my "addiction" to organization it's what got me where I am today. I started with BioMiracle as a temp. I was brought in to cover the front desk while the company's regular secretary was on sick leave. And my need to be neat and prepared got me noticed by a terribly disorganized district rep named Clark. He asked the company to hire me as his personal assistant even before my temp contract was up. "Abby, you're going to save me I can just feel it." he'd say.

And I did. And I saved each and every boss I had with them until I was noticed by the president of the company. And that is where I am now. I'm the assisted to the big boss. Mr. Myers is such a nice man, and quite well organized himself. He understands the value of organization... and he appreciates my ability for it.

I see everything he does, and he trusts me enough to make responsible for keeping a file on it all. That's how I know about Freeflow. I've read two geneticists' complaints so far; grouching and grumbling about the project, how it's a killer just waiting to be unleashed.

They claim that the Freeflow macrovirus on two separate occasions went amuck, and destroyed the host sample bodies used in testing, and that it could feasibly continue spreading if given enough material to consume. They claim that in order to prevent similar attacks, they would need to remove the inherent aggressiveness of the planned mutated cells... and since the aggressiveness is vital for the macrovirus to be at all effective, the project in and of itself is inherently flawed. They are beginning to run a conspiracy theory that we're not building the next generation in live-saving techniques, but merely creating another weapon.

I don't believe it. I've seen the project data. Imagine a world without pain. Freeflow can consume cancer cells that even modern science can't reach. It could possibly be used to alter damaged DNA. And on top of all that, there's no fear of rejection, as the macrovirus is built right from the patient's own blood cells.

How can anyone be against such miraculous progress?

Everything will be fine... this nonsense is being spread by all those disorganized liberal chaos groups that want to destroy anything civilized, and it's disgusting that some people within our own company are starting to believe it.

Nothing will go wrong. I'm certain of it.

Dee Summers quickly selected “Delete File” and then deleted the entire section before she got distracted by another one of her personal logs. She had a task to do, and a very limited amount of time to do it in.

She received a call from Mr. Myers that a government investigator was on his way to Portland, to collect potential information from the corporate headquarters, and that he was counting on her to make sure any and all sensitive and potentially incriminatory data was disposed of. Dee had agreed to the task readily.

Those short sighted government hounds didn’t understand how important the work BioMiracle did was. They didn’t understand that sometimes, bad things happen, and despite those circumstances, a greater good must be pursued. BioMiracle was on the verge of changing the world for the better... of unlocking the greatest secrets of the human body and how it worked.

This is how progress has worked... mankind’s greatest discoveries have often emerged from some of their largest atrocities. The nuclear power that the planet now used to support its grand civilization was initially cooked up and applied to kill over a hundred thousand people in one blow. The Nazis methods of horrific experimentation, largely considered monstrous, led to great advancements in treatment of diseases such as malaria, or how to counteract the effect of poisons. The treatment of hypothermia remains nearly completely derived from the forced experimentation of those in their concentration camps.

Perhaps Freeflow did indeed go haywire and is responsible for all the deaths in the Los Angeles Province. What are several million lives to the opportunity to end all sickness, to end all disease, perhaps even to end death itself? Isn’t such a noble destination worth whatever cost? Dee sure as hell believed so... she knew Mr. Myers believed so... it was all those damn tunnel-vision inflicted stupid people who can’t see the forest for the trees, the moron majority, which would dismiss paradise because things are a little unpleasant now.

This meant she and Mr. Myers would have to save humanity from itself.

Dumping the data from her personal computer was just the beginning. She logged into the corporate network, used the root administrator password and user information that Mr. Myers had provided for her. She purged the network of all users (remembering to disconnect her phone line so as not to be interrupted by the surge of calls she would get asking for the number to Tech Support), froze all data, and began the process of completely purging any and all data stored on the internet database. Such drastic measures were necessary to ensure that no potential seeds were available for someone like an investigator to worm a path through seemingly innocuous links to reach BioMiracle’s top secret projects.

While that would stymie anyone who tried to access Project Freeflow through the corporate network, there was still a matter of the physical drives located within the offices that had to be dealt with... otherwise there would be nothing preventing the government from taking the drives themselves and ripping the information they were looking for out of them.

She left Mr. Myer's office space, and towards the elevator at the other end of the floor. Taking the elevator six floors down, she found herself on the Tech Support level. One would think that the techies would do the job if Mr. Myers asked them, but Dee didn't think they could be trusted. Short sighted idiots were abound, and Mr. Myers eventually agreed.

"Ms. Summers?" The tech at the front desk asked as she came in. "Myers has apparently shut down, frozen, and is currently deleting the entire network. I've got about a hundred calls already from employees, wondering what the hell is going on."

"I cannot say..." She paused to read the nameplate on the desk of the on-duty tech. "Roger... Mr. Myers has simply told me that you are all to vacate the floor. Some sort of worm got into our systems, and he's told me I have to wipe everything clean."

"That's a little drastic, don't you think? And why you?"

"It's not my place to question why, it's my place to do." Dee snarled. "Now you can either let me do it, or I shall have to inform Mr. Myers that you are not cooperating with his orders. You and all the tech personnel are to leave the floor immediately."

"And do what?"

"I don't know!" She groused with a shrug. "Go home, go on lunch, go on a trip to Puget Sound and take a flying leap. If you have to have something to do, I suppose you could call Jeremiah over in personnel and tell him you want whatever menial task is on his itinerary. All I care about is that you all are off this floor pronto. Leave your computers, leave everything."

Roger narrowed his eyes, she could tell he suspected something, but she also knew he was powerless to defy her. "Fine." He spat, and tapped the intercom unit that would transmit his voice to all the techies on the floor and even in the building. "We've been given an early leave tonight, folks. We're to leave all our information here and call it a day."

In a slow trickle, the employees of the floor filtered out towards the elevator, dutifully dropping off all company owned items at the front desk and passing through the detector before being allowed to leave the floor. Three of them feigned ignorance when they were caught trying to slip potentially sensitive information out, but whether they were telling the truth or not concerned Dee little. All that mattered was that it all stayed where she could have it disposed of.

Once the floor was secured, she went into the drive housing station itself... a lattice of hard drives stacked to the ceiling in columns... tens of columns that barely allowed enough space to walk between.

Just inside the right of the door was the service cubby where all the tools of the trade were kept, sterilized and never allowed to leave the housing station to keep them as untainted as possible from dust, electric charges, and the like. The item she was looking for was an innocent enough looking object... a black box with a small dish on one end that looked something like a camera. This ion projector shot out a wide cone of sub-atomic particles that disrupted and realigned the

molecular storage found within the hard drives, much like what happened a century ago when a magnet would be taken across the antiquated magnetic storage of the drives in that era.

Dee methodically moved through the rows, blasting each column from top to bottom with the ion projector, and analyzing the display readouts on each column to confirmed that all the drives within had been wiped clean. It took far longer to do than she had anticipated... perhaps she should have trusted one of the techies to stick around long enough to assist her in retrospect, but what was done was done.

She dashed across the floor, taking the stairs in hopes of speeding up the trip back up to the top floor. She received a text message that the investigator had just arrived in Portland, and would likely be at BioMiracle itself within a half hour. That meant she didn't have much time.

Dee was exhausted by the time she made it to the top floor, but there was no time for rest. In the janitor's closet, she found a large metal wastebasket, normally reserved for collecting all the garbage on the floor at night for disposal, but would serve her purposes nicely enough. She wheeled it out to the balcony of Mr. Myers' office, and left it there while she collected the rest of what she needed to take care of.

The rest in question was every paper file in every executive office on the floor. She made a hefty bit of noise acquiring said files, literally ripping out every drawer, dumping them out on the floor, gathering them up and sprinting towards the trash can, dropping them all inside, and repeating the process with the next office... eight in all.

She glanced up at the clock in Mr. Myer's office as she had saved emptying out his cabinets for last. Ten minutes estimated until the investigator's arrival... it was going to be close.

Fortunately for her, Mr. Myer's had a fondness for cigars... which meant he always had to have a lighter on hand. Also fortunately, he had a bit of an issue with his memory pertaining to small things like lighters. Therefore one drawer of his desk was filled with a box of simple plastic lighters, mostly full at the moment.

Truth be told, it wasn't so much the lighters themselves that interested her... but the fluid inside them. One by one, she cracked open the plastic on the edge of the trash can, pouring the small reservoirs onto the compiled files and folders. She found herself going into a repetition haze, cracking open the lighters like a sort of zombie, barely conscious of what she was doing... until she almost smacked open the last remaining lighter in the pack.

She heaved a sigh of relief that she had stopped herself in time. That would have been absolutely disastrous. Again another glance at the clock, and an acknowledgement that time was rapidly running out. She flicked the switch of the last lighter, and nearly screamed when it was huffed out by the winds blowing across the balcony.

Taking care to use her body and one hand to block out the turbulence, Dee tried again, only to realize she wouldn't be able to simply toss the lighter in, as the flame would go out before reaching the liquid primed paper.

The third time was the charm. Using her body to block the wind, and one rolled up sheet taken from inside the barrel, she managed to get a quickly burning starter fire, which she swiftly tossed into the trash can a fraction of a second after it kissed her fingers with its hot touch.

Sucking on her slightly scalded digits, she watched in satisfaction as the contents of the can ignited near spontaneously, the flames dancing over the edge of the barrel, and releasing a torrent of black smoke into the air, where it was snatched by the winds and dispersed into the atmosphere.

By the time the elevator opened once more, and the investigator stepped out to confront her, the job had been done. There was no way he or anyone would be able to salvage any useful information from BioMiracle.

He seemed to sense this, as his voice took on a resigned air. "I'm Douglas Reiss of the Unified World Government Investigative Bureau. Turn around, and put your hands on your head. You're under arrest."

She complied smugly, knowing victory even as it seemed like she had been beaten. She felt her wrists enclosed in plastic zip cuffs, and yanked behind her back as she crowed, "You're too late, Investigator. Your short-sightedness won't be able to stop the future of humanity any longer."

Part Twelve: Taken to the Cleaners

November 30, 2110

My name is Nick Jackson. I am a janitor for BioMiracle. I clean up what the cleaning service won't touch. Don't really know why we have a cleaning service. It isn't like we don't go into each set of offices almost every night to fix up something that needs it. We go every where that the fancy cleaning crew does and we're faster and can do more. Why you need to set's of people to do one job I don't know. Maybe if the company stopped spending money on stuff we already have they could find money to put in our health insurance.

One day a few months back I went in to make sure the labs looked ok. It's important, after all, that the docs who work here come into a clean and orderly place to work. How else do you expect them to find ways to help the sick and disabled? If you can't find what you're looking for then how can you build the next great life saving machine? I really respect the docs who work here they keep us all so healthy. It's good to come to work and know your part of something bigger.

Anyway back to a few months ago. I was called in early; which the company don't like to do. They called me in because one of the biggest rules in the health and safety handbook was ignored. The other company was supposed to be taking care of the labs and such that night, but they didn't show, so we were needed to clean up in their place.

The labs looked awful... there was this weird brown slime all over the place. God knows what it was. All I know is that we were supposed to clean it. It took us three hours just to clean the main branch halls. It got worse until we got to Lab 12. We aren't normally allowed down in those sublevel labs, but we were given special clearance for the cleanup.

It looked like someone had set a bomb off in the lab. It was easily the worst part of the whole building. That brown slime was everywhere. It took the rest of the day just to straighten up that lab. The worst part was how the slime hid things like broken glass... I guess one of the canisters in the center shattered. Three of our team were shuttled off to the hospital because of cuts... I guess the company wanted to make sure that whatever this gunk was wasn't harmful.

I filed a report about it just like it says to do in the handbook. I did it all like it said to do in the handbook I swear. But we still all got laid off my entire team. Don't know why; everybody else came into work that night and we was all told to leave that we was fired. I'm a good worker madam I am. I don't know why I got fired.

And I don't know nothing about the dead demo workers. Last I saw them was to thank them for their patience, and they were all alive at the time. I saw the explosion, but I figured that it was part of their plan. They were the bomb experts, not me. I just figured they knew what they were doing. I don't know nothing about anything. I did my job, I did it well, and was fired for it. That's all.

Nick jumped as Investigator Reiss slammed his fist down on the table in front of him after the clerk read back the transcript of the statement Nick had given. “You sure that’s what you want to stick with, Mr. Jackson?” The investigator snarled angrily.

“Yessir.” Nick answered. He wanted to cry... but knew that wouldn’t be very manly.

“Are you absolutely certain, buddy?” Reiss hissed into Nick’s ear. “Because here’s how I see it right now... I’ve got you for obstructing justice and tampering with a potential investigation scene. And considering that you were the last one to see four other people alive, you’re suspect number one on four counts of premeditated homicide. You’d be looking at life imprisonment a couple times over, I suspect.”

“I swear, sir... I don’t know nothing!” Nick insisted. “I’m a cleaner. That’s all I did.”

“Awfully nice to be able to just say, ‘they know what they’re doin’, ‘ain’t got nothin’ to do with me’...” The investigator continued to press. “Guess what, pal... there’s such a thing as crimes of omission. There is no way in *hell*...” Reiss slamming his fist again to emphasize the word, “... that you just ‘didn’t think’ anything was amiss. Come on, do you take me for a fool?”

“No, sir. Honest I don’t.”

“Then how the hell do you expect me to believe that you didn’t think twice about cleaning a building they were going to *blow up* the minute you left?”

Nick shrugged. “It was BioMiracle property. They told me to clean it. I did. I’m not paid to ask questions. I figured they knew what they were doing better than me.”

There was a knock on the interrogation room door, and one of Reiss’s associates opened it just enough to stick his head through. “Inspector Reiss, I need to borrow you for a moment.”

“I suggest you really start thinking about some better answers for when I get back.” He snarled, pointing a threatening finger at Nick before he slipped out the door and slammed it shut.

Despite this; Nick had one remarkable ability he didn’t like people to know about... he heard things very, very well. He spent most of his life listening, since the world had convinced him he was too dumb to express himself, and therefore should probably not talk more than absolutely necessary.

In this case, he could hear what was being said outside the door... helped by the fact that both men were speaking normally rather than in the hushed tones that one would take if they are trying to keep from being listened in on.

“How’s it going in there?” The unidentified man asked.

Reiss sounded frustrated. “Nowhere. I’m starting to think the fellow really *is* denser than a gold brick. I figured he was playing dumb... but the more I try to pry out of him, the only conclusion I can reach is that he really is that stupid.”

At one time, Nick might have thought this sort of gossip to be insulting, but he was used to it by now. Everyone considered him to be not that bright, and maybe he wasn’t. Maybe he should have asked the questions Reiss thought he should have... but that wasn’t the way he was raised. He had been taught to keep his head down, shut up, and do as he was told. People couldn’t prove you were dumb if you didn’t put yourself in the position to be made a fool of.

His mother always liked to say, “Better for everyone to think you’re an idiot, than to open your mouth and remove all doubt.”

Reiss spoke again, “How about you? Any luck with Ms. Summers?”

The unknown investigator laughed bitterly. “I don’t think I’ll be getting anything useful out of that bitch with anything short of water-boarding, and maybe not even then. The woman is almost indoctrinated to the line she’s been fed to the point of disconnect with reality. This is like cult indoctrination like loyalty. I’ve never seen anything like this in a corporate setting... she’s completely useless.”

Reiss sighed.

But then his companion’s voice perked up. “But we do have some good news. We got a tip on Danny Brassier’s whereabouts.”

Nick recognized that name. What happened to Danny? Danny had been one of the few people that had been truly nice to him; Danny never assumed Nick was too stupid to do things or understand things... even if on many occasions he was. Nick hoped nothing had happened to Danny... he liked Danny.

“Where is he?” Reiss asked hastily.

“Flagstaff, Arizona. Local cops there saw him at a convenience store about a mile outside town, and by chance happened to be looking up his Wanted for Questioning file. They phoned it into us about fifteen minutes ago.”

“About time something went our way. Alright, wrap up your questioning with our little ‘Ms. Kasabian’ over there, and get ready for a field trip. We’ll hook up with local forces and bring in Brassier for some questioning.”

“Righto.”

The door to the interview room opened again, and Inspector Reiss re-entered. “Well, looks like this is your lucky day, pal. I got to get out of town immediately, and I don’t see what else can be gained from you.”

Nick nonetheless, wanted to know about his 'friend' of sorts. "What happened to Danny? Is he in trouble?"

"Danny?" Reiss asked, incredulous, looking between Nick and the door, "How do you about Brasser?" Then, an accusing finger flipped up towards the doorway, "You heard us talking outside, didn't you?"

Nick realized that he had revealed his secret ability, and twiddled his thumbs. "I've always been good at hearing things... why, at the last cleaning job, I heard the new guy talking on the phone when he said he took care of... everything..."

Nick's eyes went wide as his words dropped off, his mind finally making a connection that chilled him. Reiss whipped around a chair, and sat backwards on it with his arms on the back support. "What new guy? Describe him."

Nick rifled through his memory, finding that he had a very vivid image of the man. In retrospect, the guy had seemed off... he seemed a little too smart to be a janitor. On top of that, he had a really creepy vibe to him, a feeling that Nick couldn't place until just now.

"He was about... five-nine, five-ten... maybe. Black, oiled back hair, and a scruffy cheek to cheek mustache." Nick rubbed his fingers over his upper lip for effect. "He looked Hispanic, but I don't think he was, if you know what I mean."

Reiss's eyes darkened. "No, I don't know what you mean. Tell me."

"Well, he didn't sound Hispanic. He sounded like he came from further north. And his eyes... they were a very bright green. Don't know too many Latin people with that eye color, do you?"

The inspector's tone took on that knowing hint, like he already guessed the answer to his next question. "You overheard him say something... what?"

"He... was talking to someone over the phone, I think. He said, "Kilroy was here... everything's been taken care of."

Reiss hopped to his feet, and ripped the door outside open. With a bellow that rung Nick's ears, the investigator shouted, "Tucker! Get Flagstaff on the phone! Tell them to move and bring Brasser into custody *now!*"

A fainter voice replied, "What? Why? You'd be giving local first crack at him."

"Diego Maxwell killed the demo team, and we can't risk that BioMiracle didn't hire him to find and eliminate Brasser as well. We need to get Brasser secure as soon as possible!"

At that point, the other investigator, now finally identified, lost any protest, "Understood. I take you still want the first flight out to Flagstaff though, right?"

“Of course!” Reiss answered. “Hop to it!”

Finally, the inspector turned back to Nick, and pointed warningly. “Buddy, you just saved yourself from a life sentence. When I get back, I expect you to stay out of trouble, got me?”

Nick nodded. He would have agreed to commit murder himself if it got him out of the station.

“Good... have the clerk write up your release papers, and hand them into the officer at the front desk.” With that, Reiss jogged out the door without any further parting.

Part Thirteen: Unravelling a Tangled Web

Statement of: Daniel Brassler

Date: November 30, 2110

Observed by: Douglas Reiss, United World Government Investigative Bureau.

I had nothing to do with what Shoji Haruhara was trying to accomplish in a martial law zone. I don't even know what he was trying to do. I not even certain he could even use the kit he took from me to find out anything.

I had seen him the night before he disappeared, during which he took the analysis kit I received from BioMiracle while I was an employee. My last communication with him was a text message, but there wasn't anything attached to it. I suspect his findings were seized by the government when it was filtered before it was sent to me.

I was in Flagstaff because I wanted to get out of the area. While I suppose I was hiding, it wasn't from authorities. I have been getting hounded by the news media since rumors that BioMiracle was somehow involved with the bio-weapon that wiped out most of the Los Angeles Province; apparently trying to get analysis and inside information from a former biologist in the company was the hot ticket.

I have nothing to provide you at this time. If and when I ever do, the bureau will be the first place I contact.

Danny felt rather guilty that he was hanging his late friend out to dry like this; putting all the blame for what was likely several charges of tampering, trespassing, and maybe worse, all on the grave of a man who couldn't defend himself.

But this was what Shoji had told him to do... keep the data they had uncovered safe at any and all cost until he found someone to trust the information with. At that moment, he wasn't sure if this Douglas Reiss character was that person.

“Ya know... this is the second time today I got an ‘I dunno anything’ piece of garbage from someone I was questioning.” Reiss groused. “The first fellow had the excuse that he had a barely functioning cerebrum. Now, I doubt that you can claim that... since you're a smart guy and all. So let's you and I try this again.”

Danny had to admit, this fellow was persistent. But if Reiss was expecting to intimidate something out of him, the investigator had another thing coming. Danny witnessed firsthand the lengths some people would go through to protect the truth. He had to be ready and willing to do the same.

Now... that side... he highly doubted Reiss would go to such an extent; but if the investigator was in the pocket of BioMiracle, then Danny couldn't entirely dismiss the possibility. People associated with the company have been turning up dead over the last couple months... either dismissed as accidents or suicide.

“I don’t see why you’re bothering.” Danny said coolly. “You don’t have me for anything.”

“Oh, I don’t?” The investigator snarled. “Yeah... maybe you’re right. But I still have a few questions, things that don’t quite add up.”

“See... here’s problem number one with your story.” Reiss declared, “Nothing from your message was filtered. Astonishingly enough, the government doesn’t scan through texts and conversations because it’s kinda against the law, ya know?” He waved his hands at the sides of his head. “I know in your conspiracy riddled brain that’s hard to believe, but it’s the truth. There are so many watchdogs eyeing us like hawks for that sort of crap that it couldn’t happen even if I or someone in government wanted to.”

“Ya wanna know how I know this?” Reiss asked rhetorically, “Because I’ve been called the carpet myself for things these ‘freedom of information’ activists were certain I could have only gotten through improper means.”

“So this means one of two things;” The investigator concluded, “Either one; there was nothing attached to that file to begin with, or two; you’re lying to me. If it’s the first option, I’m curious why Mr. Haruhara would say he was attaching something to the message to begin with.”

“He was a conspiracy freak. It could have been done to throw off people like you.” Danny noted. This wasn’t untrue, even if it did cast in old friend in a bit of an unsavory light.

“You’re not going to cooperate with me at all, are you?” Reiss noted sarcastically.

“I don’t see why I should.”

The investigator nearly threw himself across the table, his nose mere inches from touching Danny’s. “You don’t see why you should? Alright... fine.”

He pulled away, and put his hand on the door leading out of the interview room. “You’re right, I got nothing on you. I suppose I could let you walk out this door right now. But once I do that, there’s nothing keeping the likes of Diego Maxwell from taking you out.”

Diego Maxwell? The “Bad Doctor”? Danny had heard of the fellow, hired gun... assassin... thief... if it was illegal, he’d do it. But what did that have to do with anything.

“Oh? You didn’t know?” Reiss taunted. “Turns out we have witnesses that put him at the scene of four demo men who got vaporized. He managed to find his way on a BioMiracle janitor crew. Now how do you think he managed that?”

Danny could put two and two together. BioMiracle hired him.

“Yeah... your old bosses were willing to blow four contracted people straight off this mortal coil for something they *might* have seen inside their labs. How far would they go if they thought you might have information against them?”

Reiss opened the door a crack and continued, “Yeah, I can let you go... and there’s no telling what will happen. I can help you here, but you have to help me. If I was looking to take whatever you have to protect some grand conspiracy, I wouldn’t have brought you in today. I would have called up Mr. Maxwell and told him where you ran off to, if he didn’t know already.”

Danny had to admit the investigator was putting up a pretty strong argument. His resolve to be willing to die for the “cause” was suddenly not nearly as firm as it had been just five minutes ago. “You’re... you promise you’re not part of ‘them’?”

Reiss shook his head. “People need to read fewer intrigue novels. I want to get the people responsible for killing over a billion people in the Los Angeles Province, and god knows how many Ceti who have been killed in a bogus war concocted from completely fabricated evidence. Right now, the big prime suspect is BioMiracle. If you have something that can help me confirm it, I want it, and I want it now. Will you, for the love of *God*, work with me on this?”

Danny pursed his lips, and slowly nodded in resignation.

“About damn time *someone* did!” Reiss snarled in relief, taking a seat again across from Danny. “Okay, first question... you were there with Haruhara when he collected this information, weren’t you?”

“As I told you, Shoji wouldn’t have known the receptor of a bio analysis kit from his asshole.” Danny answered. “I was the one that took and processed the readings.”

“And Haruhara sent you a file with the data on it to make it look like you weren’t there at all.”

“Actually, the file he sent me was basically nonsense. Pure garbage... like data taken by a person who had no idea in hell what he was doing. He... sacrificed himself so that I could get out alive.” Danny choked up when he remembered that particular moment. “We were on the verge of being discovered by other BioMiracle teams that were monitoring the secondary infection they started. He told me to leave and...”

Reiss reared back. “Wait... a secondary infection?”

Danny nodded, “That’s what Shoji and I were examining. BioMiracle came through shortly after the initial infection, and started a secondary one, carefully calculated and controlled. I later determined that it was done to push the epicenter of the infection away from its true origin, and towards Ground Zero of the impact crater.”

“To support the ‘bioweapon from space’ explanation.” Reiss muttered. “So... if the data Haruhara gave you was nonsense, I assume you kept the real data?”

“Yes, sir.” He gestured to the table, flipping his hand to inform the investigator that he wanted some space on the table. When Reiss complied, Danny pulled off his right shoe, and slammed the heel on the tabletop. It popped off on the first strike, and Reiss couldn’t fight back a smile as Danny picked out a data card from the hollowed out section of the heel, and handed it over to the investigator.

“You *do* realize that would have been an effective hiding place for about, oh... five seconds if someone had actually been looking for it?” Reiss said in amusement as he then handed the card over to the nearest officer. “Get it to the crime lab and verified as soon as possible.” He ordered, then turned back to Danny.

“I had to put it somewhere...” He replied with a shrug.

“While the crime lab breaks that down, why don’t you just tell me what all is on there and what it means? Save me some time waiting.”

“As I said earlier, but to be more specific, BioMiracle started a controlled secondary infection, using the same bio agent as the first, starting roughly sixteen miles due south of Los Angeles and extending about fourteen miles southwest of the city all the way down to the coastline. It had the effect of pushing the estimated origin point of the bio agent’s release approximately that same distance towards the south-southwest, creating a faux origin point with such precision that it calculated to within fifteen yards of Ground Zero for Volstock 22-AAE’s crater center.”

“Let me take a wild stab at what is fifteen miles north-northeast of the impact crater...” Reiss mused rhetorically.

“You guessed it... the Los Angeles Laboratory for BioMiracle Corporation... a facility that coincidentally enough got reduced to nuclear ash just a few days before.”

“So you’d be willing to testify that the information on that card is legit, you took it yourself, and that the bio agent was truly dispersed from those labs? Do you know what that bio-agent was?”

Danny shook his head. “That I do not. It could have been a project I didn’t have clearance for, of which there were many, I may add; or it was a project they took on after I was terminated. I will say this, not that you probably don’t already know, the majority of BioMiracle’s business is in military contracts... very little is for public research, no matter what their Public Relations Department would like people to believe. During my employment, there was no fewer than fifteen concurrent military related projects and programs being developed in the facility I worked in, all of which I had no knowledge of beyond rudimentary ‘yeah, it’s happening’. Any one of them could have been the ‘smoking gun’ here, and that’s not even taking into account what they signed up for in the last two years, or whatever they might have transferred in from one of the twenty-three other labs BioMiracle owns worldwide.”

He scratched the top of his head bashfully before finishing, “I guess what I’m trying to say is... good luck finding it.”

“I have had maybe one lucky break so far on this case.” Reiss admitted ruefully. “I’m not going to start counting on it now. But if I can get just a few more pieces of the puzzle from people like you... that should be all I need.”

Part Fourteen: The Watcher

Remember this date, villains. Remember the first day of December. It marks the beginning; the beginning of your end.

I am the Watcher. There is nowhere I can't be. There is nothing I can't see. There is nothing I can't hear.

I watched your sins against the world, and stood silent. I watched you try to destroy the links to the tragedy, and stood silent. I've watched you try and end lives, I've watched you blame a world of innocents for your failings, greed, and lies; and stood silent.

But my silence was not apathy. Oh no, my silence was to set the stage for your exposure, to set the snare that would cast the purifying light of truth into the darkness of your treachery and deceit. To act quickly would have given you the chance to control the damage; just as you did with anyone who might have come close to the truth.

But much like trying to grasp water... the more you tightened your bloated, corrupt fist the more that slipped through your fingers, and soon, you will open that fist to realize you have nothing... that everything you tried to hide has come to light.

It is a perfect storm of events that I was waiting for, a sequence such as this. The pieces are converging, and are simply awaiting the injection that will start the reaction... the final piece that will put everything together and bring your walls crashing down. I see it all, and now I foresee your end.

Did you think that in this day and age of information; where anything can be had for a price, where no barricade is impassable with enough skill, that you could hide forever? That you could somehow emerge from this event unscathed and not held accountable? That you would not have to face and answer to those you hurt? That you would not have to pay for the dead and grieving?

Maybe you thought all your precious connections, money, and power would be the impenetrable barricade that would protect you. If so, for all your obvious knowledge and strength, were fools that ignored the lessons of history. There is always someone who will challenge... someone who will find the cracks in the wall... or, like Odysseus in ancient lore, someone who will set the trap that takes advantage of your arrogance and strength.

You are my Troy. I found the weakness in your fortress; I went in the room and took what I needed before you even thought to close the door. I have everything you tried to hide. I know what you did; and soon, the rest of the world will know as well.

For I am the Watcher, and nothing escapes my sight.

Fred Nathan hit "send", and with that, The Watcher's latest exploits would expand like a virus through the worldwide Internet. He always felt rather silly writing up the grandiose and archaic

language his alter ego did... but that was his motif, it was his hook. It's what made the Watcher who he was.

Fred liked to think of himself as a cyberspace superhero; one of many personal watchdog and whistleblowers that sometimes would... bend the law... to keep special interest groups and private companies in check.

One company in particular, had grown infamous in the hacker watchdog circles; BioMiracle Corporation. With its heavy military funding, highly screened employment practices, and deeply guarded facilities and networks, BioMiracle had such a thick smokescreen that inclined many hackers to assume there was a fire.

Like most corporations with military and government support, BioMiracle had been an extremely tough nut to crack. Attempting to hack into their network required a delicate balance of caution and aggression. Too cautious and a hacker never gets through; too aggressive, and the hacker is in danger of being identified, located, and arrested.

Fred himself had only slipped through once, and knowing the rarity of such an occurrence, started copying data from all over the network. He had no idea what he had gathered until after he had retreated from BioMiracle's secured space and started looking it over.

He had uncovered seven different projects for biological weapons being contracted from the UWGM... all of them were sinister in nature; one was a project for a flesh eating bacteria that could survive nuclear heat, the theory being that it could cause secondary devastation for a nuclear attack. Another truly heinous one was a injection for soldiers that would turn their tissue toxic... the practical purpose being to create intentional prisoners of war, in which the captured soldiers would become human bio bombs.

Odd and curious that the one project he had uncovered would be the one that caused all the damage.

Project Freeflow. It had seemed rather tame at first, the experimentation with a new type of biological material known as a macrovirus; a manner of lifeform that behaved like a virus on a much larger scale, existing outside a host body for a prolonged period of time. At the time he had uncovered it, it had barely been a twitter on his radar... as it appeared to him to likely have a much greater medical use than wartime. Even the progress reports from BioMiracle reflected his assessment. They had determined its use as a weapon to be limited at best.

Then over a month ago; the unthinkable happened, and Fred knew exactly what it was the day they showed the first news reports. Freeflow had exceeded expectations in a most disastrous manner. He was sure BioMiracle saw it as a pleasant surprise. The larger a company got, the more detached it became from the public it served.

Nonetheless, he held back... partially because he did not want to be the one to serve notice as to the truth. People would start asking questions as to how he learned about it; and that would

likely not end well for him. The lives were already lost... he felt little desire to ruin his needlessly.

It had been harder for him to hold back when the war started... but he was able to rationalize that the environment wasn't ready. The UGM had quite deftly turned the ire of the public on the Ceti; who did not help themselves by lashing out and attacking a human mining facility. At that point, it became easier for Fred to decide they brought it upon themselves.

He wasn't afraid to admit he was a coward, contrary to the bold, faux poetic hero that he painted himself to be on the Internet. He lived a comfortable life, with a wife and two young children that would likely be greatly hurt if he got exposed and punished for what he did on the side.

And so, he waited, every late night surveying the world at large. He eventually learned that at least some portion of the UWG wasn't impressed with BioMiracle's money, and had issued their own special investigator, a rather bulldoggish individual by the name of Douglas Reiss.

Once it became clear that Investigator Reiss was truly hellbent on unraveling the case rather than merely give the appearance of proper detective work, Fred felt comfortable to start pulling some of the strings together.

He had known for some time about the Danny Brassler connection. He had been worried he hadn't been the only one keeping close tabs on the former BioMiracle scientist, but if someone else was, they didn't act on the information. When Brassler had finally flushed himself out, it hadn't been terribly difficult to splice in the bulletin that he was being sought into the Flagstaff Police news cycle on the occasions Brassler came out for air.

But the biggest secrets were yet to come. He got reports from some of his fellow hacker sources that there was an out of place drain on the regional power supply stemming from a very secluded portion of the Los Angeles Province that had escaped the Freeflow disaster. On a gamble, he sent out his feelers to see if this mysterious person was keeping track of the news... and discovered that perhaps the "no survivors" claim by the media at large was slightly premature.

It had been tricky spurring her to movement without alerting any less than savory types that might think she posed a threat. For three days, he dropped Investigator Reiss's name into the news ticker feeds region-wide with requests for any and all information. It had been a dangerous move, with the fingerprints of hacking all over it had someone with enough authority made the call to staunch his efforts... but fortunately by the time the media finally stomped his infiltration flat, the power usage grid showed that his quarry had indeed made her move. With knowledge of her identity, it was child's play to follow her movements, and confirm that she was indeed heading to Arizona.

Which brought him to the final piece he had to play; the information he had uncovered about Project Freeflow. This was actually the easy part of it all; make himself out to be a current employee with a pang of conscience, using the heaviest security message in order to give Investigator Reiss all he knew about the project that he felt was responsible for the Los Angeles Province catastrophe.

Fred peeked into the bedroom to confirm his wife was asleep, and took a seat in front of his computer to compose his message. He slowly cracked his knuckles, rolled his head to loosen up, and got to work.

He composed the text into a word processor that he would then paste into his electronic messaging service. This way, it was highly unlikely anyone who was scrying the Internet for any information on Freeflow would be able to log his typing.

To Inspector Reiss;

I deeply regret not coming forward with this information sooner. I was scared that if I was discovered that something unfortunate would happen to me. But I can't keep quiet any longer.

I am a biological technician working for BioMiracle, I understand you are looking for the true cause of the tragedy in the Los Angeles Province a month ago, and I believe I have insight you will find vital.

Enclosed to this message is the report on a project I had been working on in cooperation with the United World Government Military. It was titled Project Freeflow... and I believe based on what I know of this project and what we all had seen a month ago, that what was unleashed in Los Angeles was more than likely the Freeflow macrovirus itself.

I am sorry I cannot provide anything else, nor would I be willing to come forward to testify. There are too many dangerous people I'm crossing just sending this message. Anything more I do might as well be signing my death certificate.

Naturally, he left the message unsigned to complete the ruse of a panicking employee without the nerve to stand up for himself. Now to get to the tough part of the job.

First order of business before he actually sent the vital message was to splice himself into another messaging service so that his communication couldn't be traced to him. Conventional wisdom stated current tracking programs could only follow twenty-eight redirects before the process of sending a text message was complete. For safety's sake, Fred never ran fewer than forty, even more so when transferring sensitive information, such as what he had on Project Freeflow.

He wove through various protocol like he was knitting a pattern, creating layer upon layer of smokescreens to prevent being identified. By the time he was done fifteen minutes later, he had created a buffer of sixty separate protocols that he would feed his message through, each one behaving as if it was the origin sender.

With that, he felt he had shielded himself sufficiently, he pasted the message from his word processor to the messaging service, and sent it as quickly as his fingers could enter the hot-keyed command.

He was about to consider it all a day's work well done when he got a surprising, anonymous instant message pop to life in the center of his projection display. Fortunately, he disabled automatic voice playback every night so as not to wake his wife, because the abrupt noise that message might have stirred her and led her to ask what he was still doing up at this time of night.

➤ *I assume I am talking to the Watcher?*

Fred leaned back in his chair nervously. This was not good... how could someone have traced him to his home computer?

➤ *Don't worry, I'm not here to report you or harm you or coerce you. In fact, I admire you. I suspect you were the one who infiltrated BioMiracle's military secured network half a year ago, correct?*

Fred didn't respond. He certainly knew better than to admit to *anything*, no matter how "admiring" the person on the other side was.

➤ *I don't expect you to answer that question. You don't need to. I am actually here to help you. There is one piece of information that you are missing for you to complete the puzzle, a piece the puppets you so nicely strung up will need to complete your trap.*

This made Fred lean forward a little, even though he remained reluctant to respond in any way. What could this unknown messenger mean?

➤ *It would be wise to sit on this for a couple days, as your puppets won't understand the use of it until they actually try what you are setting them up to do. When they reach the point where they will inevitably get stuck, arrange for them to pay a visit to Rebecca Aston of White Peak, California. Address of 337 Laredo Lane.*

Finally, Fred thought it prudent to reply.

➤ ***And why is this woman important?***

➤ *Now you're asking me to give up more information than I prudently can. As I said, I like you. I'm giving you this information merely out of that respect. If you ever find yourself looking for employment, I could always use people of your talents. I'll call you.*

And as abruptly as the messenger had appeared, he had vanished. Fred examined his automatic trace protocol, but found the trail was too long and had gone cold before it could finish its work. Truth be told, the mysterious fellow's advice was largely unnecessary, as Fred fully intended to wait for about that long to determine just who this woman was and what she had to do with unlocking the Freeflow menace to the eyes of the world.

But that was for another night. He had to work in the morning, and sleep deprivation never did good things for his productivity.

Part Fifteen: The Pieces of the Puzzle

*Progress Report for Douglas Reiss
December 1, 2110*

I figure this is as good a time as any to compile all my evidence, both conclusive and circumstantial, to give myself, and my superiors, a good overview of what has been determined so far during this investigation.

*Firstly, and the impetus for the investigation, is the implausibility that an alien force, especially the Ceti, would have the means and desire to attack the people of Earth in such a fashion. The lack of technological sophistication and the most definite lack of any signs of a biological weapons program on the Ceti homeworld of **any** scale (much less the enormous size in both manpower and funding that would have been required to prepare such an attack) confirms, in my mind at least, that we are dealing with a home grown element.*

The primary suspect in a domestic source of the biological agent has emerged as BioMiracle Corporation; who up until the date of the attack had a fully functional and operating research laboratory within the Los Angeles Province.

A company that has gone to extraordinary efforts to eliminate their presence in the region, as well as any and all information they have had in regards to the confirmed weapons program they are contracted to the United World Government Military.

Their weapons laboratory was destroyed; but on top of that, was cleaned mere moments before it was imploded into dust and ash. The demolitions team hired to do the implosion was then conveniently killed due to what has been deemed an accident at the same time.

I wish to make it a matter of record that I find Investigator Studdard's conclusions into the deaths of the demolitions team to be severely lacking, and request that I be given the opportunity to examine the evidence at a later date.

An attempt to secure information from BioMiracle's corporate headquarters in Portland found that Dee Summers, administrative assistant to CEO Nathan Myers, had managed to erase the entire corporate network, ionize every physical hard drive in the building, as well as burn every physical document every executive had. BioMiracle claims that Summers acted of her own accord; and she confirms this statement, but considering Summer's near fanatical devotion to her employer, as well as the means she would have had to secure in order to complete such a total purge of information, lead me to believe she acted with the full knowledge and support of BioMiracle's executives.

Due to this stonewalling and malicious destruction on behalf of BioMiracle, I would like to revisit the Nancy Ilvanus case that was deemed a suicide. With the lengths that BioMiracle has gone to protect their interests, I cannot completely rule out a malicious element to this case as well. My suspicion is aided by the inference of a witness that BioMiracle has hired Diego

Maxwell to assist them covering their tracks. I believe a revisiting of the case could potentially prove fruitful.

Finally, over the last day and a half, concrete evidence in this case has begun to form. Once the connection between Shoji Haruhara and Daniel Brassler was confirmed, Dr. Brassler was located, and he has admitted to being present with Haruhara. The data he presented, verified to be as authentic, and demonstrates that someone (presumably BioMiracle) started a secondary infection of the bio agent to alter statistics analysis of where the infection originated. The altered analysis pinned the epicenter at the impact site, where as Brassler's information changes the epicenter to the Los Angeles Province research laboratories of BioMiracle.

In addition, an anonymous informant (presumably an employee of BioMiracle judging from the tone of the message), has given us detailed documentation of a Project Freeflow; a military contracted biological weapon known as a macrovirus, which according to the documents we now have in our possession would have a behavior identical to what the agent that devastated the Los Angeles Province displayed.

I wish to wait at least one more week before I submit my final report to the Special Prosecutor. I suspect there is still more information out there that will make the case more concrete. I just need time to find it.

Douglas Reiss, Special Investigator for the United World Government Investigation Bureau.

Doug really didn't like the passive tone he had to use. To him, there was no longer any doubt in his mind. He had known what he was looking for, thanks to Sylvia, and when the insider documents came in three hours ago bearing the name Project Freeflow, he knew the culprit for this heinous assault on humanity had been found.

The problem was nailing BioMiracle with that truth in a court of law.

During his training days, he had been taught to not lose sight of the greater goal; to bring the parties responsible to justice. Sometimes you had to let a more severe charge go that might not prove to have enough evidence in order to solidify the evidence of a lesser charge that did present enough for the prosecutor.

In this case, he had a case for obstruction of justice cold. He could submit that now, and let the Special Prosecutor try and beat out the truth from them. But this wasn't any normal case. He was reluctant to say "good enough" to begin with, and this case with all that was at stake, all the lives that were already lost, and with the war it spawned there were likely going to be more lost... he couldn't let it go.

An obstruction conviction doesn't absolve the Ceti, for example. It doesn't prove they were innocent. It doesn't tell the families of the dead, "These are the bad guys." Doug had to prove BioMiracle created Freeflow.

He just didn't know how.

The military wasn't being cooperative in helping make the link, having refused his third appeal for information on the grounds of Top Secret status. Doug hadn't been surprised by this. The Director of Planetary Defense, Norman Fenicois, had a long standing relationship with one of Nathan Myers' prized consultants and lobbyists, Mr. Samuel Cahill. The special interests involved made it impossible for Doug to pry anything out of the jaws of the beast. Considering what was at stake, the military might even be worried they'd be pursued for legal action as well if the truth were to emerge.

Doug had to admit they'd probably be right, if that was their line of thinking.

If Nannie was still alive, he might have had that avenue to pursue... but her oh so convenient death closed that road as well. He had to admit a personal desire to reopen that case... he didn't want to believe she had killed herself, not when she must have known how useful she could have been.

He needed more. All that he could prove right now, by the high standards of the law, was that BioMiracle was working on a project that was similar to what attacked the Los Angeles Province, and that BioMiracle promptly erased everything they could connecting themselves to that project. On a matter of inference, it was damning, but he knew better than to trust a court of law with anything regarding inference. They needed every step detailed, every link made, or a sound defense lawyer would find that one vague connection and hammer it until the jury found it to be truth.

He needed the "smoking gun" if you will. He needed the Freeflow agent itself... then they could make the connection that yes, this is the stuff that killed so many and started this damned war. The only question was how to get it.

The documents from the anonymous source, while detailing what exactly Freeflow was, didn't give any directions as to how the macrovirus was engineered, and at this moment, all of the doctors who were listed in the project were either dead, nowhere to be found, or refusing to cooperate on grounds of Top Secret status.

To be perfectly honest, his request for an extra week wasn't to get any new information, it was to try and get the information he had to fit.

He then heard Tucker rap on the office door he had appropriated the Flagstaff field off of the Bureau. Gesturing for his partner to come in, Doug rubbed his temples, praying to a God he wasn't certain he terribly believed in much any more, that there wasn't more bad news.

"Please tell me you have something good to say." Doug groaned. "Even if it's a lie, I just need to hear you say you have good news."

"I have some good news, yes." Tucker answered.

"Okay... now you can tell me if you really mean that or are lying."

“I really mean it, honest.” Tucker confirmed with a chortle. “We have a young woman... a Miss Stacie Glous, that just arrived. From our bio on her, she was a bio-med student at the University of Greater Los Angeles, and says she has information you might find useful.”

“Alright, I’ll be right out.” Doug stood, and straightened his dress shirt as Tucker went back to the front of the office to no doubt inform their newest guess of his impending arrival.

At the office reception area, stood this waif of a woman who, to be perfectly blunt, looked like hell. Her hair, while clean, was frazzled in all directions, and she had a rather sickly thin appearance that looked like she hadn’t been eating very well.

Sensing Doug’s appraisal, Stacie said, “I’ve... been trying to keep a very low profile.”

He had to laugh at that. “I hope to God you were successful.”

“I wasn’t killed before I got here.”

He nodded in acceptance. “Point to you.” He turned to the officers working the front desk, and said, “Head down to the sandwich shop down the road, and pick up some food for this girl. She looks like she could use it.” Then with a thought, he dove into his wallet and came out with his government issued currency card. “While you’re at it, get lunch for the office. The guys could probably use a treat.”

Finally back to Stacie, he asked, “Anything in particular you’d like?”

She shook her head, “Right now, I’d eat anything you put out in front of me.”

“Fair enough. While these gentlemen get together their orders, we can have a talk, shall we?” He opened the gate, and escorted Stacie back towards his office, Tucker taking up the rear.

Once situated, Doug sat down at his desk, and motioned for Stacie to take a seat on the other side as Tucker assumed the remaining chair. “As you might have already been informed, I am Investigator Reiss, and this is my partner, Investigator Tucker. Now I understand you have some information for us.”

Stacie nodded in confirmation. “I... was there, when the bio-agent attacked. I was one of the survivors of those first few days.”

Doug frantically gestured to his partner to make sure this was being recorded. “The world is under the impression there were no survivors.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Stacie answered, “I myself would have been killed by the neutron bomb barrage had I not been shielded in the sealed laboratory of the Kenseth Sciences Building on the UGLA campus. It was during that time between the attack and the military retribution that I was able to perform some considerable study of the biological agent in question.”

“To what extent?” Doug asked.

“I have been following the story as much as I could from my hiding place.” Stacie continued. “Granted, I might not have all the details, but from what I can discern, you still need to connect this agent to BioMiracle, correct?”

Doug blinked. “How do you know this?”

Now it was Stacie’s turn to relay surprise. “It... it was on the news. There was report about it five nights ago. It’s why I decided to come out of hiding...”

Doug turned his head to Tucker. “Did you release a report to the press?”

Tucker shook his head. “No sir.”

“Did anyone *else* release a report?”

“No sir.”

“After we’re done here, I’m going to have you start questioning the staff both here at the Flagstaff office and the office in San Francisco. I think we might have a leak somewhere.”

When Tucker nodded in consent, Doug again focused on Stacie. “I apologize, Miss Glous. You heard this report, and came here. Why?”

“Because with the findings I have made, given enough time, I believe I can replicate the biological agent in question.”

That statement was like music to Doug’s ears. “You’re certain about this?”

“Any further information you might have found would of course be helpful, but even without it, I had managed to break down the agent into its components. It wouldn’t be terribly difficult to reverse the process and build the components into the agent.”

It was everything Doug could do not to jump out of his seat and holler in joy. Instead, he maintained his impeccably smooth demeanor and said, “I am going to need you to recount everything that has happened to you for matter of record to Investigator Tucker here... be as detailed as you can from what you were doing before and after attack, what you did after the barrage, and what led you here. After that, I suspect I can manage to arrange for you to attempt to back up your boast.”

“Dr. Brassler is still in the area as well.” Tucker noted. “While he didn’t work on Freeflow itself, he would likely have insight as to the sort of materials and systems the company used. It could be some assistance for Miss Glous.”

“Yeah, give him a call after you take Miss Glous’ statement.” Doug ordered. “Meanwhile, I am going to call around and see if any area universities or companies have any currently unused lab space we can appropriate.”

Part Sixteen: Creating Your Worst Enemy

Progress Report: Stacie Glous

December 5, 2110

Viable progress in replicating the Freeflow macrovirus has turned out to be more difficult than I expected.

The process itself does not seem to be flawed, nor is my analysis of the macrovirus itself. Re-engineering of human blood cells, which I had determined was the base element in which the Freeflow macrovirus was derived, was correct, as was the gene sequencing changes that turned it from a stable cell to a viral agent driven to consume enough genetic material to feed its rapid growth rate.

Every blood sample I and Dr. Brassler have taken has created a viral agent of the proper composition... but nothing nearly as virulent as the macrovirus that pillaged my home and killed nearly everyone I know. The macroviruses so far created in this lab have been more... selective... in what it consumes, sometimes passing up nearer sustenance to select nourishment from sources farther away. All samples also pass up any non-human material, refusing to consume it even if it means the sample dies.

This was not the behavior of the macrovirus I had witnessed rampage through Los Angeles. Fortunately for us, there are several avenues of opportunity to explore that could explain this difference in behavior. There is a possibility that radiation from the meteor impact altered the gene sequence of the samples within the BioMiracle labs, for example. There is also the possibility that there is some undocumented process or component that I did not see in my initial analysis.

Unfortunately, we don't have much time for such experiments. I will begin with the radiation theory in computerized simulations this afternoon, as Dr. Brassler is already examining potential component changes that could explain the differences we've observed.

Hopefully, with luck, we'll have something more tangible by the deadline Inspector Reiss set for his final report, but I'm growing increasingly convinced that we will not have such success.

Stacie sent along the progress report, and sent it to Investigator Reiss's message box. She couldn't help but feel she was letting him down... letting Evan down... letting everyone down.

What was she missing here? What was the missing element that turned this marginally dangerous agent into a ruthless weapon of murder?

"Penny for your thoughts?" Brassler asked whimsically; a rather amusing expression considering the penny hadn't been used for currency in nearly fifty years.

"Tell me you've had more luck than I've had." Stacie almost pleaded, rubbing her eyes and looking away from the display of her computer.

“I’ve had more luck than you’ve had.”

“Do you mean that?”

“No.”

“Damn it.” Stacie grumbled, closing her messenger service, and opening up the holographic simulation program. The DNA helix for the Freeflow macrovirus as she had analyzed it over three months ago, then compared it to the closest sample that her and Dr. Brassler had managed to construct in that time. The differences were minimal, but it was within those small acid differences that the killer within resided.

Stacie supposed they could simply copy the differences into the current sample, but that unfortunately would not suffice the burden of proof; that it was possible to construct the macrovirus from the ground up using the information they had gathered from BioMiracle documents, and if not, to demonstrate how it could have become that way.

She had fought exploring external reasons for the voraciousness of the macrovirus; as that would give BioMiracle the ability to dismiss culpability; after all, the virus was controllable until an “Act of God” altered it, and it seemed like if mere unlucky chance had caused the viciousness to emerge that the entire case was rather pointless.

“The macrovirus hasn’t showed any great proclivity to mutate, has it?” Stacie queried, as that was one of the component changes Dr. Brassler had been investigating.

“Not terribly... I mean, it possesses the ability to mutate, like all viruses, but a virus that mutates too quickly or uncontrollably makes for a very unsuitable biological weapon. It would turn on its masters far too easily, and potentially mutate beyond the counter-measures the users would have enacted.” Brassler shook his head, “Besides, the mutations I observed were very small, and were more induced by the differences in blood samples we used than anything that would change the functionality of the agent.”

“Of course... it can’t be that easy...” Stacie grouched.

“I still say we shouldn’t dismiss the possibility that the blood itself is the cause for the differences.”

“There are thirty-six different blood type groupings that the BioResearch Council recognizes... and up to seventeen still pending approval.” Stacie retorted even though she was near certain that Dr. Brassler knew that as well. “And that’s not including the various syndromes and disorders that occur in human blood cells. The possible number of permutations in that case is so immense, there is no way we could test them all. We’d be better off picking random numbers out of a hat and expecting to win the lottery.”

“And simulating different radiation patterns from infinite angles and exposures looking to find a potential match isn’t?” The former BioMiracle tech noted. “We agreed not to pursue these ‘Act of God’ options, remember?”

Stacie acknowledged the point, “I am trying to find a solution with what we have available to us. Perhaps we identify a blood pattern that would create the macrovirus. A lot of good that would do us if we don’t have a sample of that pattern on hand. A radiation theory can be tested and applied right now.”

Brasser put his hands on her shoulders in attempt to calm her. “You are determined to find an answer before Reiss’ deadline, aren’t you? Why are you doing this to yourself? You’re starting to lose sight of the goal.”

“Evan deserves an answer... he deserves to have this brought to light... even if BioMiracle isn’t fully to blame.”

“Who’s Evan? A boyfriend of yours?”

Stacie couldn’t help but laugh at that thought. “No... well, I guess maybe he could have been... eventually. But... he was someone I’ve known for a long time, since secondary school, actually. He was going to be a journalist. He... survived the initial attack like I did. He...” She choked up momentarily remembering. “He... grabbed me and pretty much carried me to safety that day. I was so intent on trying to secure a sample I never realized it was surrounding me.”

“What happened to him?”

“He died, presumably in the neutron bomb barrage. His last words to me were that he heard UWGM fighters.” She paused before admitting. “I... had planned and expected him to be the one to survive. I told him to go to the upper floors and keep safe. I was going to let the macrovirus into the lab once I finished the analysis. He told me to ‘be strong’ and not give up. So... I can’t. I have to keep going. I need to find out how this happened.”

“A powerful driving force, to be sure.”

Stacie’s narrowed her gaze. “Alright then, what about you? You practically volunteered to assist me.”

Dr. Brasser shrugged dismissively. “What? It’s not enough that I wanted to help?”

“It’s not like you’re lacking enthusiam to find a solution, mister.”

“I ran away while my best friend sacrificed himself.” He admitted solemnly. “He gave me all the information we had gathered, and said my moment would come. His was the first of many lives BioMiracle took after the tragedy. That’s not something they do if they think they were just an unfortunate victim of circumstance. No, this agent has done exactly what it was designed to

do... the only mistake is that somehow, BioMiracle let it get loose. I'm here to prove that. This is my moment; this is my part to play. So... how about we focus on actually doing it?"

"Right..." Stacie agreed tiredly. "So, you're sure we want to push the blood type angle?"

"It's the only one that makes sense to me." Brassler explained. "I mean, we could look at mutation angles for the rest of our allotted time, but I just don't see how this agent, along with the circumstances of events, supports that conclusion."

As intelligent and a bright student Stacie was, she also knew there came a time to yield to the knowledge of experience. Dr. Brassler had spent several years working professionally, and while that wasn't always surefire evidence of competence, it was a sign he knew what he was doing as well.

"Alright then, good doctor, what would you recommend we do to proceed?"

"If I had to wager a guess, I'd look into rare blood conditions or disorders. Generally, the engineering of a biological weapon enhances certain properties that already exist, rather than injecting a completely new one. Less time and more importantly, less money needed."

"Okay, that only narrows it down to roughly ten thousand such blood disorders in the Physician's Desk Reference." Stacie grumbled moodily.

"Of course, most of them probably wouldn't suit." Dr. Brassler noted obviously. Leaning over Stacie's shoulder, he pushed the DNA strands she was looking at into the background, and opened up an electronic version of the reference in question. "For example, we are looking for some sort of aggressive disorder; like an autoimmune or hypersensitivity. Something that demonstrates a strong, perhaps potentially fatal reaction or rejection to whatever stimuli triggers it. The more violent the reaction, and more broad the stimuli, the better for our search."

Getting into the spirit of the search, Stacie added, "We'll also have to look for suitable subjects in this area. We won't have time to traipse halfway around the world to try and get permission to draw blood."

"Correct." Brassler acknowledged. He 'split' the reference, and said, "You take this half, and I'll start searching through this one. I suspect will find several suitable maladies that we can then start cross searching with residents within a certain radius. It's still a long shot, but it's the best shot we have."

There was a bell that signified someone outside the lab door requesting entrance. Stacie nodded for Dr. Brassler to answer, and dutifully he complied, opening the door for Investigator Tucker.

"Well, folks, I know you're having some difficulties with this bug you're trying to concoct, and fortunately, it looks like we might have a lead for you." Tucker announced, causing Stacie to straighten in her seat.

“Well, then spit it out rather than wasting time.” She snapped, perhaps unnecessarily.

Tucker didn't seem bothered to his credit, expecting a certain degree of stress and frustration. “Our source within BioMiracle has come through for us again, it seems. He, or she I suppose, has given us a name that he apparently found in some old records pertaining to experiments on human blood done by BioMiracle five years ago just as Freeflow would have been starting.”

“What is this person's importance?” Stacie asked, forcing herself to sound more personable.

Tucker reached into the breast pocket on the left side of his shirt. Apparently, the explanation he was given was too complicated for him to commit to memory. “Rebecca Aston of White Peak, California; was summoned to BioMiracle's Research Labs fifteen times in regards to experiments with human blood... supposedly well compensated for each summons... ah yes, this is probably what will get your attention. She has been diagnosed with a rare autoimmune disease called Stafford's Syndrome; a mutation of the patient's white blood cells that cause it to react violently to any foreign DNA that is introduced to the system, even from other people with that condition.”

Stacie looked at Dr. Brassler, noting that he had done the same to her, both reaching the same epiphany as the other. That was exactly the sort of behavior that they would be looking to modify, and fit all the other parameters they had set in their search as well.

“While the trip through history is all well and good.” Brassler said, “We'd more appreciate assurances that your team is doing all you can to acquire this said person.”

“Already done.” Tucker replied, but at that point, the hint of cheer he had died away, “And that's why I was sent to get you. Aston was just admitted to the Northern Mountain Community Hospital in Sacramento, California for what appears to be severe carbon monoxide poisoning. She might not have much longer to live, so we don't have much time for one or both of you to get over there, secure enough samples, and get to work pretty much on site.”

Part Seventeen: The Fine Line

Back in my academy days I was told a rather pessimistic axiom; there's a fine line between defending the law and breaking it. The only difference between a criminal and a cop is a badge.

There is an element of truth to this; police, detectives, investigators... we all have bent the rules to nail the bad guy on occasion. Some do it more than others. Doug does it a hell of a lot more than me. I think. Or I like to think. Hell, I don't know anymore.

*All I know is that we've bent a lot of rules to get to where we are, and it looks like we're going to bend a few more. Our "anonymous source" could very well be a hacker that acquired his information through illegitimate means. Or using scientists not under the employ of the Bureau to try and **recreate** the Freeflow macrovirus because to actually try this through official channels would be deemed unethical and a gross misuse of resources.*

And to top it all off... we are going to try and steal someone's blood, someone who is likely going to die before the next morning.

See, under normal circumstances, in order to draw a sample of a person's DNA, be it hair, saliva, blood, semen, whatever, you need their consent to do so. Considering Mrs. Aston is comatose, and will likely never regain consciousness, much less within the next day and a half, consent to take her blood isn't going to come from her.

Now, we could still secure consent from the person with her power of attorney, that being her husband, but we have not been able to contact him. As far as we can tell, he is in flight from the Beijing Province, rushing home to be at his wife's side, and as such, remains unable to be contacted save an emergency, of which we do not qualify apparently.

Through it all, we maintain our innocence by using external resources. Glous and Brasser... well, they recreated the macrovirus. We got our information from a source that refuses to be identified. Our process was perfectly legit; we can allow the senate panel to determine whether or not the conclusions are accurate.

And such is the game; criminals break the law, enforcers bend the law to defend it. How screwed up is that? We defend the law by stretching it to the point where it no longer really serves to hold any standard at all.

A fine line... sometimes I wonder where it is after it's so often blurred... or even if it's there at all... or even if it was ever there in the first place.

Investigator Craig Tucker felt the car lurch to a stop, indicating that they had reached their destination, and so he slapped shut his journal, and joined the rest of the group as they hastily filtered out of the vehicle, and dashed towards the hospital entrance. They must have looked impossibly silly to passersby, and Tucker felt that it was probably unnecessary as well... he was getting fed constant updates to her condition, and she was still holding stable; as stable as one can be in critical condition at any rate.

Fortunately for some semblance of appearance, the team slowed to a walk once the doors slid open into the reception area. Tucker instinctively straightened his suit jacket, before they reached the orderly in charge, hidden behind several panels of ballistic plastic. There was a time he wondered what sort of sick, depraved mind would seek to cause violence at a hospital... then he joined the police force.

“Good evening miss, I am Investigator Douglas Reiss with the UWG Investigative Bureau, and these are my colleagues Inspector Christopher Tucker, along with Agents Stacie Glous and Daniel Brassler.” Doug declared, showing his credentials and motioning for the rest of the team to do the same.

Ah yes, another one of the many bent rules. Impersonating an officer of the law was a felony, in purely technical terms, and Tucker somewhat doubted that the “field conscriptions” Doug administered in the car on the way to the hospital really suited the spirit of the law.

“We are looking for the doctor in charge of the care of one of your patients, a Mrs. Rebecca Aston.” Doug continued. “We would like to ask him a few questions.”

“She, Investigator.” The orderly noted, “The case was transferred to Dr. Kathleen Smith.”

“Very well.” Doug replied, nonplussed. “We shall speak with her.”

The orderly tapped the intercom unit, and paged the doctor in question. “Dr. Smith, you have IB officers that would like to speak with you.” She then held her right hand up to her ear, and said next, “The doctor is currently in examination. She will be available in fifteen minutes.”

“We’ll meet her outside Aston’s room.” Doug declared, “You have that room number, correct, Tucker?”

“Yes, sir.” Tucker answered. Yet another bent rule; and the orderly knew it.

“Sir, I can’t allow you up to...”

Doug winked, “Don’t worry, we’ll be good.” And pushed through the doors leading to the hospital proper, waving off the alarm that started buzzing quietly, flashing his credentials to the security that arrived, who then stopped short, uncertain how to proceed.

The alarm was cut off, presumably by the orderly, who looked back towards the group with a miffed scowl.

“Classy there, Doug.” Tucker noted grimly.

“My hope is that we can secure a couple blood samples before the doctor can free the time to see us.”

“Of course, leaving out exactly how we procured said samples.”

Doug raised his right hand solemnly. “We came to this hospital to examine a possible link in several attacks. We did nothing else untoward, and apologize that we came across as bullish. I was caught in the moment, and deeply regret any perceived lack of respect.”

Tucker might not be certain that he was more by the book than his partner, but he was certain that he was considerably less brazen about it. “Generally, we practice our apology statements *after* we’re done, and away from people who might hear it.”

“Aw, where’s your sense of fun, Tucker?” Doug teased, climbing into the elevator with his entourage in tow.

It was a short trip up to the ICU floor where Aston was located, and it appeared Doug’s plan went all for naught when they saw a red-haired woman in a doctor’s lab coat waiting outside Aston’s room.

“You could have waited downstairs.” The woman glowered, the nametag identifying her as Dr. Kathleen Smith.

“Thought we’d make it easy on you.” Doug said with an attempt at charm, something that was not terribly his forte. Not that the doctor would have been swayed even if he were.

“Fine, it’s easy. Now what do you want?”

“What’s her prognosis? Is it possible she’ll recover?”

As Doug began his questioning, Tucker called up the police report on the incident with his datapad, looking for updates. Both he and Doug agreed this was hardly an accident or an inconvenient failing of climate control systems.

Dr. Smith looked back towards the ward, letting her guard at the entryway soften. “Doesn’t look like it, honestly. We’re trying to keep her alive long enough for the husband to arrive and make the decision... but she was in a highly poisonous environment for at least seven hours before she was found. The CO level in her bloodstream was so high... I’m amazed she wasn’t found dead.”

At that point, Tucker found the updates he was looking for, quickly scanning it over, his lips pursed in recognition of the witness accounts. “Reiss, listen to this. Neighbors reported just before Mrs. Aston was found that she was visited by a climate technician that examined and repaired the system. They recount of a Hispanic looking man about five feet ten inches tall and thin build. One witness on the street walked past him and said, get this, the most beautiful green eyes.”

Doug and Tucker shared both a glance and the next word spoken. “Maxwell.”

Dr. Smith now showed nervousness. “And this means...?”

Doug became grimly serious. “Doctor, we believe Mrs. Aston was targeted by a hired assassin that’s trying to keep a potential crime and cover-up secret. We believe she was targeted because she possessed a rare blood type used to formulate a biological weapon recently used in the Los Angeles Province.”

“You’re talking about...” Dr. Smith’s voice died off, not wanting to give voice to the misinformation. “I thought the story was odd... and you think my patient has the key you’re looking for.”

“We only need a sample or two of her blood.” Stacie spoke up. “One for analysis, and one for testing.”

The doctor scanned the four now hopeful faces. “You know I can’t authorize that. Since the patient cannot give consent, that’s the authority of the person with power of attorney.”

Tucker had begun making the call before Doug could even ask. “Still no answer.” He then checked the flight reports, and said, “Still in flight. Estimated time of landing, one hour.”

Tucker could see the conflict in his partner. On one hand, every hour waiting was one hour wasted. On the other, he could tell the number of rule bending done already was wearing on him.

“Dr. Smith, is there lab space available? If we get authorization from the husband, Agent Brassler and I can probably do the analysis here.” Stacie queried, and to Doug added, “We can save the testing for when we get back to Arizona.”

That was what finally mollified the lead investigator. “If that’s okay with Dr. Smith, you can work on securing that while the rest of us wait.”

To that, Dr. Smith was inclined to accept. “I’ll pass the request on the administration, but I don’t see how they’ll have a complaint. There are several labs that are currently unused. I’ll have one of our lab techs escort you once confirmation is given.”

“And what about you?” Doug asked.

“I’m going to stay right here with my patient, unless you think I’d be dumb enough to trust her alone with you.” Dr. Smith retorted before getting on her phone to the hospital administration.

As the good doctor had predicted, the hospital brass didn’t offer any objection to assisting investigative work, considering the current lab availability and on the condition the hospital would be compensated for the use of the facilities. Now all that remained was securing the right to take Mrs. Aston’s blood samples.

An hour never seems like a terribly long stretch of time unless you’re a child, or you’re waiting for something. It gives you a lot of time to think; like for example, if your plans go up in smoke.

“Hey, Reiss... what are we going to do if the husband tells us to get lost?”

Doug seemed unperturbed by the scenario, even though Tucker knew the man’s mind was racing with all sorts of scenarios. “We’ll think of something. Without those samples, I don’t know how we can make the connection we need.”

It was the lady doctor, of all people, who proposed an alternate plan. “Gentlemen, if I may offer a suggestion. Presuming Mr. Aston tells you no, it wouldn’t be hard for me to take a couple additional samples for further examination of her CO levels. After that, the samples are technically hospital property. Perchance I discover I have, say... two that I didn’t use. I could then authorize their release as part of a pending investigation.”

Tucker and Doug looked at her, aghast with surprise at the unexpected proposal. Neither had expected the doctor who had been so by the book at that point to do such a complete turn-around.

“What?” She said devilishly, “You think you detective types are the only who bends the rules now and again?”

Tucker laughed for the first time in what felt like a week, and Doug soon joined him. “You could have said that sooner, you know?”

Dr. Smith shrugged. “I want to give this woman’s husband the chance to do the right thing. People normally do, you know. You probably don’t see it much since you deal every day with the people who *don’t*.”

It was another half hour before Mr. David Aston arrived, disheveled and as frantic as a man can be when running on likely no sleep and severe jet lag. Even with supersonic passenger travel, a trip across the world is daunting to all but the sternest of constitutions.

After waiting for roughly an hour, Doug and Tucker had no problems letting the man have a few minutes alone with his ailing wife. A member of the nursing staff momentarily stopped by to let him know that his children were apparently fine, hadn’t suffered any ill effects, and were staying at their grandparents for the time being.

The two investigators nodded in agreement, and decided to move, knocking on the open door to get the man’s attention, and began to introduce themselves and why they were here when he interrupted them.

“I know what you want.” He said gruffly, never taking his eyes off his wife. “The doctor informed me that you two wanted to walk to me and why.”

“Well, then we won’t waste your time with our explanation.” Doug replied, leaving the question intentionally unanswered.

“Rebecca was always in rather poor health. She be sick literally once a month, and couldn’t take anything for it because it wound up making her sicker. Been that way for years... thought I lost her when our daughter, our second child, was born. Thought I lost ‘em both. Guess our girl was a different blood type and as she developed, Becky started reacting to it. They had to force birth after eighteen weeks.” David said, choking up. “That’s when we learned she had this disorder.”

After a moment to regain his composure, he continued. “About three days after Mandy was born, these guys from BioMiracle show up. Say they’ve been working on treatments for autoimmune disorders like hers. They say when she’s recovered enough they’d like to see her to run some tests. Now... I knew the stories about these guys, and I didn’t like the idea... but Becky was all for it. At the very least, the money she got for her time allowed us to give the kids something nice for Christmas and birthdays and whatnot. You don’t make much money on a salesman’s salary, you know?”

“No, I can’t imagine so.” Doug said gently. For all the bullishness and aggression he could display with such passive ease, the man could also be very tender and understanding when compelled.

“So... you believe that BioMiracle used my wife’s blood to develop the monster that raped L.A., huh?” David asked. “And you also think that they tried to have her killed to keep her silent?”

“That’s our current theory. We can’t prove anything without some samples to analyze and see if indeed that’s the case.” Doug answered.

David again fell silent, tears slipping down his cheeks as he beheld his dying wife, as if watching her long enough would have the power to rouse to alertness and tell him what she wanted. Still never moving his eyes away from her, he nodded in acceptance. “Go ahead. Do what you need to do. The world needs to know, I need to know... for Becky’s sake.”

“We’ll have our agents come in, and get them out of your hair as quickly as we can.”

It was another wait while Stacie and Danny did their job. Dr. Smith (Kate, as she wanted to be called) stopped by as often as she could to see how things were going, and after a three hour period, they got their answer.

Stacie slipped out of the sealed bio lab, pulled off her cap, and all she had to do was nod solemnly to inform the investigators all they needed to know. They had found the source of the killer, and now it was a matter of putting it all together.

“Alright, have Dr. Brassier help you clean up the lab, and we’ll get back to Flagstaff with all haste. How long do you suspect it will take for you to construct the macrovirus?”

“Not long.” Stacie answered. “Barring any unforeseen issues, and presuming we work solidly through, I estimate having your macrovirus by morning.”

“Alright, let’s get things squared away fast. I want to be on route back within the hour. Move.” Doug was all business again, but Tucker had one detour he wanted to make.

“Doug, if I could... I’d like to inform Mr. Aston of what we’ve found.” He said somewhat timidly, knowing how Doug occasionally reacted to additions made to his plans.

Fortunately, the lead investigator was feeling cooperative. “Oh. Yeah, of course. Go for it.”

Tucker wasted no time in fears that Doug would suddenly change his mind. Alone, he made a bee-line for the elevator and up to the ICU floor.

David hadn’t seemed to move at all since Tucker had last left them... but the grieved man must have caught the investigator out of the corner of his eye, as he said before Tucker could even speak, “Mr. Tucker. Ya know, Chris is a good name. Dunno why you don’t use it.”

Tucker shrugged, “I just like being called Tucker.”

“I think I know why you’re here already, but go ahead and try to surprise me.”

The investigator tried not to sound a morose as he felt. “Our analysis and computer simulations made a match with your wife’s blood and the base component of the agent used in the tragedy. We can’t say with one-hundred percent certainty until we take it back and physically test it, but that’s how it looks.”

At last, David’s head moved, first down towards the edge of the bed his wife was laid out on, then finally up to Tucker, making eye contact for the first time with either investigator. “Get them.” The grieving husband ordered with moist eyes, “Just... get them and make them pay for what they did.”

“We will.” Tucker promised. “I wish you the best.”

As Tucker left the room to rejoin the rest of his team, he had to admit that sometimes, there was something to be said for playing it by the rules.

Part Eighteen: Vested Interests

As expected, the stocks in heavy metals continues their rise over the last two months, as investors continue to try and stake their claim in the extended mining operations opening on the Ceti homeworld as hostilities are waning and the war comes to a close.

The North American Mining Co-Op has posted its highest share in over twenty years, and the highest it has ever been under standardized currency, closing at 30.5 marks yesterday, with projections to raise even higher tomorrow. Pacific Metals also increased drastically in this period, their closing last evening at 23.15 marks, a full two hundred percent increase from this same time three months ago.

The transportation market has also grown substantially, a ripple effect of the boom in mining. The stock averages of the four major shipping lines have increased one hundred and six percent from last years trade averages. Interglobal Shipping and Freight has announced record profit margins this quarter, an estimated 300 billion marks, and that influx of wealth has served to increase their trade values even further.

This continued growth comes despite Occupation Prime Minister Yuri Ocho advising caution to miners and the companies that employ them; that while the majority of the Ceti resistance has been quelled, small pockets of guerilla and terrorist resistance still persist, especially in the outlying areas where UWGM forces have yet to completely secure, and where most of the unclaimed land for new mining operations resides.

But not all news is good. BioMiracle Corporation, once the leading biological research company, has taken another dip today amid rumors and speculation as to their actions before, during, and after the Los Angeles Province tragedy. Suspicion is that there is a governmental investigation ongoing into said actions, prompting BioMiracle CEO Nathan Myers to release a statement denying any wrongdoing, or any investigation into their actions. Nonetheless, their stock traded at 10.2 marks last evening, the lowest value since 2102.

Myers also rejected the rumor that BioMiracle executives are selling off their stakes in the company, claiming that the drop is coming from, and I quote, "People with little imagination and little sight for the future; easily scared by bogeymen under the bed."

I am Alexis Covington, and this has been Business Briefs, I'll be back at the top of the hour with all the latest breaking news in the business world. Good night for now.

Jamir Oden broke off the holo-feed in the center of his room, and turned back to his computer to confirm that the news was accurate, especially in the case of BioMiracle. Jamir had been assigned by Investigator Douglas Reiss to keep tabs on BioMiracle's books and trade movement. A sudden sell-off in the stakes of the executives would imply they were considering fleeing the planet out of fear of coming prosecution.

Of course, that was only if they were stupid, Jamir noted. It was just as easy nowadays to leave the planet a few minutes before the market opened for the day, *then* leave orders with either their

brokers or by computerized trader to have their stocks sold the instant trading began. They'd have their money within minutes, before anyone in the government could freeze the accounts, and have bundles of marks waiting for them on Centauri, for example, by the time the interstellar passenger cruiser had landed. He didn't say that to Reiss, of course. The way Jamir saw it, this was the easiest task he had ever been given.

Nonetheless, this slow bleed of BioMiracle made him wonder if the executives were all that smart after all. It at least bore another examination.

He had been following the dive in the company's investments for the last week, and it had been following the pattern Myers had suggested. The executives weren't bailing, it was mostly middle-level investors, people trying to establish themselves in the world of business and really couldn't afford to have their names tied to a company with a dwindling reputation and the stigma (real or imagined) of a governmental investigation.

Yet as he opened up their public books this time; he noticed a slightly different trend. The dip that occurred earlier today was caused by the power brokers; big time traders who often would buy and sell billions of marks worth of stocks a week; the sort of people who don't fold completely out of a company without good reason.

To Jamir, this would be like seeing a mile wide plume of smoke rising in a forest, and trying to convince people there wasn't a forest fire.

The initial thought from a layman would be that they finally sniffed confirmation of Reiss's investigation, but any broker worth their salt to be a power player would have known this at latest a month ago. The executives at BioMiracle certainly knew, and that information would have been passed on to the big timers.

And contrary to regulations and rules; insider trading, where brokers and investors make moves based on information not made public, happened all the time, and very little was ever done about it. No, this sell-off wasn't triggered by the investigation. There was definitely some insider trading going on here, but it wasn't due to Reiss.

His next step was to use his Bureau credentials to take a look see into the portfolios of each executive, looking for signs that they were looking to move their stakes in BioMiracle. He didn't expect to find anything, and he didn't. At this moment in time, every executive with BioMiracle was staying pat with their investments, but he supposed that could only mean they were waiting to make their move at the last minute like in the scenario he envisioned.

It was time to make a call, and find out the deal personally.

Jamir wasn't the average economic detective. His background came from the brokerage jungle... the only reason he really became one of the "good guys" was by cutting a deal to work for IB instead of serving prison time. He knew the tricks and had the connections to people who didn't always play by the same rulebook as everyone else. He also knew he hadn't cashed in nearly all the favors that were owed to him.

It took six rings before his quarry answered. Again, not surprising... she probably saw the name calling her, and hoped he'd give up. Wrong.

"What do you want, pig?" The woman on the other end snarled.

"Nice to hear from you too, Nikki." Jamir drawled. "Now, now... I'm not going to give you a hard time. I just want to ask you a little something you might know."

"One of these days... I'm going to say 'fuck you' and walk away."

"And one of those days, you'll be serving five to ten for brokering fraud." Jamir reminded. "You've still got, oh... twenty-three years before the statute of limitations falls off on that one."

"You're an asshole, Jamir."

"Such language from such a dignified young lady." He replied in mock derision. "Now, are you going to answer the question I have or do I have to drop off a certain little file with your name on it to IB's Fraud and Better Business Department?"

A groan on the other end signaled Nikki's surrender. "Fine... what is it?"

"The power players are starting to bail on BioMiracle. I know it ain't the investigation, but I'm not seeing any real pending movement from the execs just yet. Do you know if they're getting ready to bail?"

"Alright, lemme take a look around..." Nikki replied, and there was silence for a few moments while she accessed resources and people that Jamir, in his current position and surveillance, couldn't access without getting into big trouble. "The executives are keeping a low profile at the moment, they're trading insider info through their assistants and middle management from what I'm gathering."

Another period of silence, and the woman spoke again. "Looks like the main man they are speaking to is Sam Cahill; you might know him... former CEO of Dynasty Chemical. He's Myers' right hand man currently, and it looks like he's the one slipping the notice that things are about to get real bad."

"Now, was that hard?" Jamir asked.

"Go to hell." Nikki retorted. "But save it for after Christmas dinner. Mother will be furious if you're not there, and I just know it would somehow be my fault."

Jamir laughed. "Good night, Nikki. Get some sleep tonight for once." And then he hung up on his sister, and went back to work.

Looking over at his time display, he noted that there was one hour before the primary markets on this side of the world closed; and thusly if BioMiracle execs were going to make a move tonight, it was going to be soon.

But it also gave him some time to look through Cahill's portfolio, both to confirm Nikki's report, and see what else he had cooking in his pot. Cahill had become notorious for how he ended his run with Destiny Chemical; a convoluted sell-off scheme that netted him roughly forty million marks while the company he ran fell into bankruptcy. The man was a genius player of the business world, and Jamir had no doubt the fellow had something up his sleeve this time as well.

Cahill's portfolio contained several different names; most heavy investors have any number of aliases; it allows them to do things like investing in one company while working for a competitor, or take more risky ventures without directly sullyng your name if they crash.

However, in order to make the actual sale or purchase, you have to sign in agreement with your real name, usually kept confidential by whatever broker you used. This was where working with IB had its perks, as he could use his credentials to view these connections.

And that was where he found the connection he was looking for.

Firstly, Cahill himself had purged himself of nearly all his BioMiracle stock two months ago. As he wasn't technically an executive of the company, it wouldn't have set off the news cycle, and no one would have given it much thought, as a lobbyist working with the government purging his stakes in a company being investigated wouldn't be completely unheard of.

But there was more, and when put into the prism of current events, created a devious, sinister, and downright morally bankrupt scheme that even Jamir wouldn't have thought Cahill, or anyone, was capable of.

On August 16, 2110, two days after the disaster in Los Angeles Province, Cahill (under the assumed name Heinz Thigpen) bought heavily into thirty-three small to middling mining companies, all of which benefited heavily from the new mining contracts opening on the Ceti homeworld over the last month or so. None of them were remotely strong (the highest closing the night yesterday at 7.35 marks), and none of his stakes were particularly high (the most he held in any one company was with Greektown Ventures at two hundred and thirty five shares, or a little over two percent of the company). Again, none of this would have set off any bells, it had all the signs of a small time trader taking a hunch.

Another alias had thrown his hat into freight shipping; again a bevy of small and middle sized companies, who like the mining industry, had seen massive jumps in their trade values with the war and expanded ventures on the Ceti homeworld. Like the mining investments, none of them were particularly stable... their inflated value merely a product of people all trying to hop on the next gravy train all at once. None of their business models or plans suggested long term growth. Anyone who had done their research (and Jamir had no doubt Cahill did his research) would have known that.

But the big news was that he sold all those interests and transferred all the profits to a bank on the neutral colony world of Centauri fifteen minutes ago, making a three *thousand* percent return on his investments; stakes that he knew would collapse as quickly as they had rose. All in all, Cahill had walked away with nearly one *billion* marks.

And then, the coup de grace. Ten minutes before the closing of the markets, every major executive of BioMiracle cashed out almost simultaneously. Jamir could almost hear the shock and awe from the brokers across the street from his apartment as financial advisors and media analysts tried to figure out what it all meant.

Jamir knew already... and was quick to grab his phone again and dial up the investigator leading the BioMiracle case. Reiss answered promptly, almost as if he was expecting the call.

Jamir didn't give Reiss the chance to say anything, instead jumping right to business frantically. "Doug, we've got movement. BioMiracle execs just sold out, but I think it's all a cover. Cahill's the mastermind, and I'm betting he's setting up his bosses to take the fall!"

Part Nineteen: The Man Pulling the Strings

August 15, 2110

From: Samuel Cahill

To: Norman Fenicois, Director of Planetary Defense

Norman, Planet Freeflow is an overwhelming success, even beyond what we had anticipated when the contract was granted.

And that is part of the problem.

As it stands, BioMiracle is in place to lose hundreds of billions of marks due to the destruction the Freeflow macrovirus has caused. The class-action lawsuit that would no doubt be filed by survivors or family of victims (which is anticipated to be an estimated 20 million if the virus continues to expand at this rate) could likely be even greater than that. There is no way BioMiracle would be able to sustain such losses and remain in operation. This in turn would cause the Planetary Council to lose an equal amount in lost investments of complete and incomplete projects.

We cannot allow this to be traced back to my company, and I have a plan in which to ensure that doesn't happen.

I am requesting a full communications blackout of the Los Angeles Province for at least five days. I trust fulfilling that request won't be much trouble. If the macrovirus doesn't show signs of slowing within that time, then we will move to contain the problem... which I am assured we can do with the assistance of Planetary Defense Units.

In those five days, no one can be allowed in or out of the Los Angeles Province, under the guise that your administration needs to gather information on what has happened. Too quick of a response to stem the threat would tip off far too many that we knew more than we were letting on. It would take us roughly that long to develop a countermeasure to a true biological attack, and thus why this particular timetable must be adhered to.

We must make this out to be a planned attack on Earth and its people by an outside force. We can thusly attribute the blackout and lack of quick response to the threat in that way.

I even know the "attacker" we should target. I understand that the United World Government has been hearing of violent rhetoric from a Ceti group known as the Hands of Balance, and that because of the traditions this group espouses, the Ceti have been very reluctant to allow us access to the raw materials abundant on their homeworld.

You need the heavy metals located on the Ceti homeworld, and we need somewhere to dump the blame from Project Freeflow. Thus, let's make the Ceti our scapegoat.

You just need to follow this plan of action to the letter when we come forward with what we've learned; the asteroid Volstock-22-AAE that collided with Earth yesterday provided masking for the Ceti interstellar warhead that struck the Los Angeles Province. The warhead's impact also came with an EMP shockwave that debilitated communications for maximum effectiveness of the warhead, allowing us incapable of giving sufficient warning while the biological agent within the warhead did its murderous work.

I'm not as versed in how military strategy works, nor do I have the contacts in Intelligence and the general military leadership you do, so I'll leave it to you as to how exactly you'll connect the dots between the attack and the Ceti.

I will be in New York Province in two days, and we can discuss the fine points of our next actions then. If everything works out as I suspect it will, we all will have exactly what we want and need by the end of the month.

Sincerely,

Samuel Cahill

Samuel smirked in fond remembrance of the work that started his finest scheme yet. How easy it had been to manipulate the simple puppets of the world to do his bidding, to let them set the table for the biggest single payday any man or woman had ever managed in the history of business. Much like the composer realizing he had just completed his masterwork, this was Samuel's finest hour, his great opus that he would never have any chance of matching. This was the way for a man to end his career, at the top.

Contrary to the simpletons that he "answered" to, he had seen this day coming. He knew this house of cards could not stand, and in fact was counting on it. People would, and since have, grown wise to the fact that the Ceti were not capable of such an attack, and would turn their suspicions to a domestic source.

And the people eventually found their mark quite accurately... although it had taken some help from Cahill himself to do so. He had to unravel the very web he had weaved just enough for someone to finally undo it completely. It was sad, to be honest. Everyone needed their hand held, it seemed.

But in reluctant defense of humanity; in a way, he had almost done his job *too* well. The measures he had taken to hide the truth at first had been so effective he had to intervene *again* to keep that truth from being buried forever.

Dee Summers had been astonishingly effective in wiping the data of Project Freeflow from any and all sites; he had anticipated in her mindless zeal to win Nathan Myer's approval that she would have made a mistake, instead that near rabid devotion actually caused her to be clinically thorough in disposing of any and all evidence. He had been fortunate that one rather ingenious hacker had managed to secure the pertinent information some time before.

Diego Maxwell also came to mind very quickly. The assassin's ingenuity, flawless execution, and quickness to act on the contracts given him had almost ruined everything. It had been a bit of blind luck (and a quick payment to arrange for prompt travel for Rebecca Aston's husband) that Mrs. Aston had lived long enough for the IB to collect the samples they needed to re-engineer the Freeflow macrovirus and prove conclusively that BioMiracle had been responsible for the deadly bio-weapon.

And now, it was time to finish his plans; which required him to shed the dead weight.

At one time, Nathan Myers was a strong willed, intelligent man with remarkable business sense and that ability to know how the world would turn three days before anyone else. That time was about thirty years ago. Now, Myers was showing the signs of age, fading memory, inability to maintain the strength to operate a company on a day to day basis... and the yes men that were the remainder of his executive board weren't much better, and didn't have the excuse of eighty-seven years of life.

After all, they trusted everything to him.

They had listened to him when he advised all of them to place all their assets into one account, as it would transfer easier and faster. They had allowed him to prepare that joint account as well, along with the ledger that notarized each executives share when they reached Centauri. Then, they allowed him to plan all the travel.

Centauri was the ideal destination for all white-collar criminals. It was at its core, a posh resort orbital station where the rich and powerful frequented on vacation, business trips, and even retirement. It had all the comforts of home, and a climate zone for whatever you fancied at the time.

But the best part of it; it had in essence bought itself neutrality status, and had no extradition treaties with Earth or any of its colony worlds.

Of course, that's assuming one *makes* it to Centauri... and Samuel had an inkling a few members of this party weren't going to.

"Gentlemen, your passage is clear, you don't even need to show your passports or tickets; VIP treatment the whole way. Nothing less for the best and brightest, as promised."

"What about you?" Myers asked.

"I had to take a different flight due to lack of seating on such short notice. Mine won't be quite as luxurious, but I think I shall cope." Cahill answered.

They were then interrupted by the "hostess" Samuel had hired to "escort" the BioMiracle executives. "Mr. Myers, you and your party are free to board. I suggest we move quickly. The flight is set to take off the moment you are all situated."

“Very well.” Myers replied, making a feeble gesture for his cronies to take the lead. “I shall meet you at the Azure Landing Cantina, Sam. And I will get you to try their fire grilled clams. To die for.”

Samuel laughed. “I suspect you will.”

Myers looked out the panoramic windows towards the outside, looking out towards the city of Seattle. “Into exile we go for our efforts to unlock the future.” He said glumly. “Perhaps one day, humanity will come to understand the sacrifice we made.”

Cahill laughed again, this time bitterly and to himself. Age had clearly created a pleasant altered reality in the old man’s mind. Sacrifice... ridiculous. He thought he was going to live a life of luxury for the rest of his days. How could anyone outside of the deluded think that was sacrifice?

“I hope they do, Nathan. I suggest you get going.”

“Right. Quite right, young man.” Myers announced, taking the arm of one of his corporate leeches. Samuel could even remember the guys name... or any of their names, for that matter. They weren’t worth learning.

“Right this way, Mr. Myers.” The hostess stated gently. “Gate Fourteen, right here.”

Samuel leaned back onto a central support of the terminal hall as the executives disappeared into the boarding tunnel and out of sight. He reached into his breast pocket, consulted his timepiece, then looked up at the flight display in the center of the hall.

Flight 226

Gate 14: Seattle, Pacific Province to New York, New England Province

Direct Route; Departure 2030 WST; no delays reported

Cahill chuckled to himself, consulted his timepiece again, and looked up to see the flight from Gate Fourteen slide into position on the runway. At that point, he flipped open his datapad, and sent his pre-composed letter of resignation, if you will.

My dear Nathan,

How do I best describe your foolishness? You sought some grand future, a way to stave off your own death. You feared your mortality, and you made many mistakes in seeking the means to thwart the reaper. One of those things was trusting me.

Did you honestly believe Freeflow was meant to be the new cure; the future of medicine? Did the desperation of your imminent final days really cause such blindness to the truth? When did you lose your edge? Your sight? Was it the same time you lost your mind?

There is no future. There is nothing more than money, and the pursuit of it. In your mad search for the future, you have lost yours, and gave it all to me.

Thank you, but I fear I won't be needing you anymore; shameful that the once great Nathan Myers was so easily taken for a ride.

Sincerely Yours,

Samuel Reginald Cahill

Before closing the datapad, he checked once more to confirm that the money in the Centauri account had full processed, and to his expectations, it had; all two and half trillion credits of it.

“Interstellar Flight I-7 is now boarding in Deep Space Gate B for Laurent Spaceport on Centauri. Please have your passports and tickets ready at the gate.” The melodic artificial voice of the public announcement service declared over the din of the terminal hall.

With a cheerful whistling tune, Samuel collected all his personal effects, grabbed his baggage claim check, and walked briskly towards the gate that would take him to paradise.

It was little trouble getting through gate security; and the flight attendant was equally helpful in pointing him towards his seat, a wonderful window view in the luxury section of the orbital shuttle that would be the first step to retirement. This was just the hop to the Transit Space Station in orbit above earth, where he would transfer to the deep space cruiser bound for Centauri. Part of Samuel's mind had to admit this level of luxuriance was a bit overboard for what amounted to a one hour hop... but what did it matter? He was the richest person in the known galaxy now.

“Mr. Cahill?” A male voice asked, drawing Samuel's attention. “We received a priority transmission from the United World Government Investigative Bureau ordering us to take you into custody.”

“Oh, have you?” Samuel drawled with unconcern, not even sparing a glance to the security guard. “That's unfortunate.”

“Yes, it is, isn't it?”

He slipped his hand into his breast pocket once more, and found his datapad. Tapping a few buttons, he said with mock resignation, “Shame that I never made my flight, isn't it?”

The guard had his own datapad in hand and was analyzing the transaction almost as soon as Cahill had made it. “Yes, quite shameful. I guess they won't have much luck finding you here, will they?”

“Do be sure to share it with the rest of your class.” Cahill noted. “They all deserve a perk for their hard work.”

“I’ll be sure to do so. Thank you, Mr. Cahill. Have a nice flight.” The security said with a tip of his cap, and left Samuel to his business.

Samuel tucked his hands behind his head, and nestled himself into the leather, down-filled reclining chair, and said to himself, “Yes, I suspect I will.”

Part Twenty: Damage Control

Ladies, Gentlemen, all freedom loving people of this Earth;

Our civilization has been dealt a crippling blow. I will not lie. We were maliciously struck, not from an enemy from beyond seeking our destruction, but from within; from a malign cancer we let linger far too long.

This cancer not only struck us, but sought for us to blame innocents to cover their diabolical schemes. We were tricked into engaging in the most regretful action that a civilized people can enact; open war with another civilized people. To my grief, I have learned one of my own trusted cabinet was privy and helped conjure this horrific deception, and to that extent, I have stripped Norman Fenicois of his position, and had him arrested for crimes against the state. To all justifiable ends, I intend to negotiate with Ceti leadership to have him tried and convicted by the statues of their people, as they were the ones to suffer most from his lies and treachery.

To the Ceti, who were grievously wronged beyond my, or anyone's ability to convey; there are no words that can dull the pain my government under my watch has caused. There is no restoration that will bring back the dead; no rebuilding that will fully recoup that which was lost. I can only offer my humblest apologies, and my solemnest vow that everything that can be done to give some semblance of closure and recovery to your people will be done.

Yes, my friends... we were dealt a crippling blow; but it was not a mortal one. In this; we can all draw lessons. I have sought to give you a government free from worry, free from concerns and distrust. In that, I have failed. Perhaps my promises were, as my old opponent put it, a fanciful dream without merit in reality. But I cannot allow myself to believe that. To do so would be to surrender to the cynicism of my forbearers.

I now know where my next opponent lies; not in the political arena, not in the Parliamentary Senate, but the bloated, burgeoning corporations that act and behave as if they are above the law; who to this day inch their tentacles into the lifeblood of our government and society. They seek nothing but money; they desire nothing but wealth, often with the acknowledged consequence of lives and everything we cherish.

BioMiracle Corporation, the sick purveyors of this tragedy that now extends to two planets; they gave us promises of a new future, of a new medicine that would change our lives; instead they gave us weapons of war, desolation, and death. And now, they shall suffer the full force of our righteous wrath. No expense will be spared, no extent of the law not taken, to deliver as just of retribution as our collective moral compass allows.

The cowards tried to flee their fate, tried to escape to where our hands could not reach. But they failed; just as they failed to keep their failings and deceit a secret. Now, they await our judgment, and for once, I cannot promise we will be merciful, nor should we.

With this bitter night, a new dawn seeks to rise. To those who seek to use us for their own material gain, I warn you now; there will no day or no night that I am not watching you. There

will be no shadows you can hide in; no precious loopholes to worm out of my clutches. You are here to serve the public good and with a service to promote life, liberty, and happiness, not the other way around. Just as I am an employee of the people, your business is allowed to thrive because of them. To those that hurt them or plan to hurt them; my retribution will be swift and decisive. On this day, the twenty third of December, you are all on notice.

I, nor anyone in this administration, can right the wrongs, or restore confidence in our process overnight. It will be a grand mountain to scale, but I have full faith in my ability, and the fine, capable people I have at my side, that we, as a unified people, will reach that summit, and the blessed horizon awaiting at those grand heights.

The day will come. On that, I issue my prayers.

The assembly burst into thunderous applause and approval, and Domingo Uchelli smiled gracefully, even as deep down, he was rather disappointed by his address. It wasn't one of his best, but the situation dictated something shorter and to the point.

With a final bow and wave, he retreated behind the curtain, and towards the temporary office he had appropriated for his address at The New Madison Garden. There was a lot of damage control to do, and no sense waiting to start.

His intern, a young man by the name of Harry Olivet; fresh and bold, seeking a place in the world of politics, was waiting the instant he appeared backstage, handing him a small leaf of papers.

"I have retrieved the final reports from both the Special Prosecutor and Lead Investigator to the BioMiracle case, as you requested." Harry said, evidently pleased with himself.

Not feeling inclined to shatter his good mood, Domingo swiftly took the bundle, and nodded in approval. "Good job, young man. Stick around, I might have something else for you to do in a few moments."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Secretary General."

Domingo never got tired of hearing that title. It was quite the rise from a boy from a rural, backwards farm town trying to eek out a living on the banks of Sicily... not that he didn't seek to remind people (especially likely voters) of that whenever it was prudent. He merely skimmed over the report, already having read it several times. He was looking for something, anything, he might have missed to encourage the people under him to act as ordered.

He had been sensing some reluctance from the Justice Department to proceed with the charges he had... requested... two days ago, and suspected he was going to have to become more forceful very soon.

He took a seat at his desk, that really was woefully inadequate if simply for the fact it wasn't his desk at the Capitol Building. It didn't have many of the creature comforts he had come to

expect, and everything he had was in a different place than he was used to... like his datapad, for one.

As he scrambled to find it, Harry spoke again, "Sir, Justice Director Chen called while you were preparing for your address, and I was told not to bother you, and take a message."

"Very well." Domingo retorted with a hint of irritation. "What is the message?"

"He wishes to reiterate his discomfort with proceeding with the charges of murder and treason for the people that have been arrested. He can promise conspiracy and obstruction, but feels that the most severe crimes could only rightfully be attributed to Mr. Cahill."

"Yes, he's made that quite clear already." Domingo growled in displeasure. "And I will tell him the same thing I've told him already; I don't care. The proceedings will continue with the charges I have ordered to be outlined."

Harry shuffled nervously, and Domingo could tell he had something he wanted to say, "Out with it, Olivet. Now, preferably, before I lose what little remains of my patience."

"Don't you think this is improper, sir?" The intern noted. "I understand you promised to punish the people responsible to the full extent of the law... but if Cahill was truly the primary offender..."

"Well, Cahill isn't here to be brought to justice, now is he?" Domingo snarled. The last thing he needed was to be reminded that the mastermind of the tragedy and cover-up was likely sipping gin and tonics on some artificial beach on Centauri.

"No, but I think that..."

"See, there is your problem, Olivet. You're not here to think. You're here to learn and observe. Now listen well, because I am about to share one of the most important lessons in politics you will ever be taught. In politics, it's not so important to get things done as it is to create the appearance that things are getting done. The people of Earth want blood, and rightfully so. It is my job to give them the fresh kills. No one I have charged is innocent; let's not forget that."

"But Nick Jackson was deemed barely capable..."

"Regardless of his intelligence, he should have known that he was acting improperly, and even presuming he didn't, he had ample time to report what he had done to the proper authorities. Ignorance to the law is no excuse."

"These people were only following orders, sir."

Domingo sighed. He hated Godwin's Law... because in some cases, the analogy was apt. "In 1945, a series of trials started in Nuremberg, Germany. The defendants often issued the rationale you just did. The tribunals found it to be an inadequate defense, a judgment that I agree with

with. The precedent to my decision was formed over a century and a half ago. My orders stand. Now, unless you wish to test my patience with you and waste my time further, you are excused. Leave me at once.”

Domingo finally located his datapad as Harry retreated from the office. With a narrowed scowl, the Secretary General composed what he would consider his final say on the topic. Any further resistance would be met with decisive action.

December 23, 2110

To: Yamata Chen, Director of Planetary Justice

From: Domingo Uchelli, Secretary General

It has come to my attention that many of your Justice Officers are taking offense to my initiative to proceed with arrests and prosecution of officials and employees of the now defunct BioMiracle corporation.

I understand that Samuel Cahill has been determined to be the primary, and possibly sole, proprietor of the Freeflow scheme, but let's not exonerate the men and women who empowered him to commit such crimes.

The people of Earth expect us to do something. They need us to bring down someone and restore faith in a government that turned a blind eye to this disaster for far too long. Without that faith, how can we plan to have their support for anything of great importance in the future?

While we do have four of the major players in the disaster under custody... it isn't enough. We need more to placate the general public.

Besides, it's not like the people we are now targeting are completely innocent. They all had their chance to come clean, yet stuck with Myers and his band of criminals. We have all of them for abetting a conspiracy at least, and I bet with a little bit of digging, we can find ways to connect them to aiding or even helping with the planning of the conspiracy.

Here's a dirty little secret about the role of government. We aren't here to change the world. We're here to make people think we can, so that they go out and do it themselves. We can't hope to bring true resolution to the BioMiracle conspiracy, or even any corporate mischief. But we can create an environment in which people feel they are safe from these mostly phantom menaces, and thus proceed to live life to its fullest for all involved.

If that requires a little legal maneuvering, then that's what needs to be done. If you and your officers aren't willing to assist me in this endeavor, I suspect I can find people who will. Besides, Mr. Chen; I can't help but note that you've held your post for twenty years now. It does seem curious that your office was painfully ineffective in finding the truth behind BioMiracle's conspiracy all this time.

Wouldn't it be terrible if people were to learn that you had been implicated by some of those currently in our custody? But, I'm sure it's not a concern... you're an upright, honest, individual, and I'm sure I'll have your office's full cooperation in our further actions.

Sincerely,

Domingo Uchelli

With the matter closed as far as Domingo was concerned, he decided he was tired of trying to work in this shell of an office. Placing a direct communication to his secretary, he ordered, "Have my driver pull to the VIP entrance of the Garden. I believe I shall be returning to my rightful office now. Have my staffers gather and clean up everything here."

"Yes, Secretary General. Is there anything else you require?" The always cooperative woman he had come to rely on confirmed then asked.

"In fact, yes... have a bottle of Sicily's Finest waiting for me when I get to my office. I do believe I have a 1984 in the cellar still. Fine year, 1984. Have one of my interns collect it for me, shall you?"

"Certainly, sir."

"That will be all, Iria." Domingo concluded, then stood from his chair, gathered his coat and hat, and prepared to make his leave. He finally felt a little bit of celebration was in order.

Part Twenty-One: The Hand of Justice Reaches in Long and Unusual Ways

People hear my name, and they cringe. They cower, and start jumping at shadows. Merely invoking the name "Diego Maxwell" makes the blood of lawmen and the law abiding citizen run cold.

Nevermind that it's not my real name. Nevermind that nine hundred ninety-nine people out of a thousand I meet in the day to day rat race that is humanity pass me by without even so much as a second glance; and the one out of every thousand that do merely do so to comment on my "beautiful eyes."

I am the classic case of the legend overshadowing the reality. I am no killer that creeps from the shadows, striking you down in front of an audience, proudly boasting that I am unstoppable before I make my escape. No, I am much more subtle than that. The challenge, the appeal to what I do isn't the kill... it's the way I do it. I love to be able to meet my quarry, face to face, and kill them without them ever knowing I was ever really there. As is often quoted, "It is not the destination, but the journey."

But now, I grow tired of the journey. The faces have begun to bore me. Lately, my victims have all looked more like sheep than men; blank faces as they devour whole whatever cover I give them, not even overlooking me, more as if staring off into space waiting for some great sign that they are allowed to think again. Some don't even look at me at all anymore. It's depressing and tiresome.

I have one last contact to fulfill... I suspect it has some promise. But even then, I know the promise will be fleeting. Men who truly see the world are growing more and more rare. We are a dying breed, on the verge of extinction. No sense fighting it.

Diego had kept this journal, written by hand on paper (a novelty at this day and age), for seventeen years. Each contract, each job, he noted them all, what he remembered the most about them in their final moments. Most were unwitting of their fate, reflecting the life and promise they felt was ahead, some were suspicious that something was soon to be amiss, and the dread those victims radiated like a fine wine to Diego's soul. Every emotion was like a different flavor, and each person had their own hint to these emotions, adding a near endless buffet of tastes for his metaphysical appetite.

But over the years, the entries grew leaner, and he supposed it wasn't all humanity's fault. Perhaps time had dulled his senses, he grew accustomed to the environment of the kill. Either way, his career had grown boring. This would be his last job.

"Pedro! The order for table eight is ready!" The manager ordered, shouting at Diego as he pointed to the platter on the counter. "Hop to it!"

Diego stealthily slipped his journal into the inside pocket of his vest. He had taken extra care with this job... planning it for three months due to the promise it had. The irony involved only added to this promise, for now the employer was the target.

Diego gathered up Samuel Cahill's order, and was rather disappointed. He had hoped a man of Cahill's tastes would have chosen something a bit more elegant than mere steak fajitas. Subtly, Diego added his special ingredient, a personal blend of Ceti viper poison and a hint of water hemlock. It was fast acting (fatal within five minutes) and had a nifty little visual effect too. Most importantly, it was very similar chemically to a toxin that Centauri raised steaks carried on an extremely rare basis. By the time it was determined this was an assassination, the trail would have gone cold.

"Here is your order, Mr. Cahill. I hope it meets with your approval."

Samuel was reading an electronic book, quite intently, it appeared, and thus, didn't spare a glance in the direction of his server. That didn't bother Diego terribly yet, and it actually benefited the assassin at the moment. Diego retreated from the table, and back towards the counter, smiling in victory as his quarry began munching down with surprising vigor.

Internally, Diego counted out a full minute then asked for the wine bottle that Cahill had ordered from. With the bottle in hand, Diego again approached Cahill's table. "Sir, would you care for a refill?"

"Yeah, sure." Cahill replied; eyes still down, focused single-mindedly on his reading material. The businessman hadn't even picked up his wineglass, merely gestured to it. Now, it started to get annoying.

"I am sorry sir if this sounds like an odd request." Diego began, faking nervousness. "But it is said in my family to see the eyes of a great man blesses them with a part of that great man's wisdom. I was wondering..."

"What cockamamie spiel are you spouting, you lowlife peon?" Cahill grumbled, but the suggestion did the trick, as Samuel turned to look at his server.

And then Samuel knew.

Diego could feel the weight of realization sink into the mind of Samuel Cahill, the loss and shock that the entire plan he had concocted, his clever manipulations, his grand scheme, had all been for naught, and that he stared now at death's door. The great fall from the heights of his own mind was as intoxicating to Diego as the wine Samuel had been drinking.

And then Diego knew.

The problem wasn't him. The luscious flavor of emotion was near overwhelming. This was what he was missing, and what he would never have again. Now was the time to withdraw.

"Have a pleasant evening, Mr. Cahill." Diego said in a conspiratorial whisper, and retreated swiftly from the table, past the counter, and into the employee break room. Before the manager could even ask what the hell Diego was doing, he had a bigger problem to address.

Cahill had jumped to his feet, knocking over his table in the process, clutching his throat and starting to spasm. A litany of gurgles prompted bubbles of sickly white foam to trickle out of his mouth as restaurant staff rushed to his aid far too late. Before Diego had internally counted out another minute, Samuel Cahill, the mastermind extraordinaire, collapsed against his upturned table, very much dead.

Pausing only to retrieve his journal from his vest pocket; Diego disposed of his uniform in the trash can and ripped off his false gene prints that had been affixed to his fingers. As if nothing at all was amiss, he crossed the street, and hopped onto the conveyor belt that led towards the trains at the center of the Hispanic Region of Centauri.

On the way, he retrieved his communicator, and tapped the lone number on its speed dial. He didn't allow the recipient to even offer greeting before he said. "Kilroy was here. It's been taken care of."

"Alright." The response was closely guarded. "When we get confirmation of Cahill's death, I'll pass along word to Uchelli, and he'll see to it that your file is... unfortunately lost."

"That will be splendid." Diego noted.

"So, you promise this is it?"

"Yes... I do believe so. There's simply nothing left for me."

"Well then, I do say you're in the best place possible to spend your retirement."

"Indeed I am." Diego agreed. "Goodbye forever, Investigator Reiss."

"Good riddance." The IB agent responded, and terminated the call.

Diego, nonplussed, returned his phone to his pocket. "That too." He flippantly muttered in agreement, and noting the smoothness of the ride, realized he had the perfect place to finish his journal.

With pen quickly in hand, Juan Ordonez made his final notes;

This is truly the best way it all could end. My last meal was of the highest quality; a truly rare species of man that at his last moments understood the painful truth that all must end, and sooner more often than later for those who are consumed by the deadliest of sins.

I have reached my destination at long last, and now, I can start a new journey... wherever that is, and wherever the road may go. Farewell, and God's speed, my old friend.