

Root Shell – Chapter One

My name is Charles Fitzgerald, and I have no idea what to do.

It all started five weeks ago, when I came here. Here, of course, is Diana City. It's on the moon.

Five weeks up here, and already it seems sort of normal that I live on the moon.

When I came here, I woke up after sleeping off the three-day trip to find that my microwave had attacked my refrigerator. The attack was electronic, and it turned out it was because the firewall software in my microwave was sufficiently advanced that it didn't recognize the firewall software on my refrigerator as a previous version of itself. The current theory is that the firewall software is smart. I don't mean "smart" as in "smart home" "smart," I mean it's thinking. It's...

I don't have trouble telling you I live on the moon, but I do have trouble telling you this.

OK, I'll just say it.

The firewall software installed on everything up here is intelligent. It's sentient.

It's alive. Well, that's what Ernesto thinks, anyway. I'm still not convinced, but already I'm getting ahead of myself.

At any rate, my job upon arriving was to do a little industrial espionage on just that topic – the firewall software used on the moon – and with one thing and another I ended up spending that night figuring out that the software's maker, a man named James Stronklin,

had come to view the software as a sort of god-in-a-bottle: omnipresent, powerful in an invisible way and, he hoped, able to be communicated with intelligently. I don't really know what his angle on it was, what motivated him – profit, pride, maybe a little hole inside he thought he could fill with quasi-religious faith. I just don't know and, the sad fact is, I probably never will. Stronklin died that night – killed his genetically-modified “son” and then himself – because he couldn't take someone else knowing the secret or the thought that the Deus Ex Machina, as he called it, would be destroyed.

For my part, I was doing my damned best to destroy it when he lifted a deskphone and slammed it into his son's skull over and over, then offed himself with a hydraulic hammer. Not a pretty crime scene, to hear the papers tell it. I'd already boogied out the front and was running like hell by the time the dust settled.

Suffice to say, the world flipped out over the first murder in the sixty year history of Diana City. This is a sealed environment of five hundred thousand people, all cooped up in a carefully landscaped, entirely artificial environment slap full of every luxury and ridiculous excess you can imagine, exquisitely sanitized and then dispensed, gleaming, in bite-size chunks to keep us all from going completely batshit crazy just because we know, deep down, that one step beyond the pressure dome we'd simultaneously freeze from exposure and fry from radiation and die – quickly, we hope. It's a carefully stored powder-keg, psychologically. We come up here for three or six or twelve month tours, we work our butts off, keep our heads down, jog our asses off in Aldrin Park, get used to “sonic” showers with a spritz of water at the beginning and the end for that down-home feel, and in between we stuff our faces with food from chain “homestyle” restaurants and Pizza del Rio and Mamma-Mia's Greco-Roman and

Starbucks.

It's really not as bad as that makes it sound. My first few days up here I was all indignant liberalism, pissed off at the corporate logos on everything and how everyone else on the streets – modeled to look like cobblestone paths criss-crossing the crumbling older wards of Europe's most mediocre cities – and the blank stares most people seemed to adopt after long enough away from home, or families or pets or whatever. There is a silver lining to everything, however, and I found mine the first time I watched the sun “set” up here and the stars come out. With 4-week diurnal cycles, they project a false 24-hour day onto the pressure dome. When it's night outside, and it comes time for “night” inside, they actually drop the opacity on the dome and let us look out on the sky – the real sky, a sky far more real than any you've ever seen on Earth. I don't care what Nebraska cornfield you call home, how far you are from city lights or a highway.

You have never seen the stars like we see them, up here.

Never.

See, I did it again. I wandered. I do that a lot.

At any rate, I did my job. I was able to report back to my HQ that our client – who feared they might be too wrapped up using SentrySoft's firewalls to be able to replace them with their own – were, in fact, well and truly fucked. That was that. Job done.

Just three more months to kill.

Alone.

On the moon.

I guess that's where the trouble really started. I was bored. That one very long night, running hither and yon, trying to figure out who was hiding what from me, I'd made the acquaintance of a guy

named Ernesto. He's 24, and he's the hottest thing you've ever seen. Well, that I've ever seen, anyway. Ernesto worked as a video sex-line operator. I'd visited a porn store to blow off some steam, not to put too fine a point on it, and later when I needed a relatively secure channel to the outside and some research done, Ernesto came through for me on that front, as well. He even called the cops when I didn't check in at one point. Ernesto was my savior that night, and I'd thought about him, talked to him and pumped euros into a video booth to see him ever since.

Weird, huh?

So at any rate, I'd figured between what I was getting paid for this gig plus a little scratch we each had in the bank I could get him up here for a weekend. The moon doesn't exactly have conjugal visits, but there is a tourist destination: Diana's Bow, a casino. A trashy-ass, crazy expensive casino that started it all up here. It's a long story, but they were the corporate money that made this whole place possible, back in the day. A weekend at Diana's Bow was reserved for the hoi-poi who wanted to slum it for a serious price – it was worse than just about every casino I've ever seen on Earth in terms of just being outdated and tacky – but we could work it out. So, we made the reservations for three weeks out. In the meantime, I tried to bide my time tackling the question of the Deus – was it smart or not? I had a junior helper, a kid named Jimmy I met at a meeting of 2600, a whiz-bang programmer almost as good as me, and he was going after a solid answer to that question like gangbusters. The fact is, Jimmy's far too smart for school to keep him occupied, so this was what he wanted to do, and he was doing it all the time. Every now and then he'd claim he had made some sort of breakthrough – that specially formatted data packets would elicit specific responses, or something – but it

never held up under closer scrutiny. It was driving him crazy, I could tell, but he was also getting closer to an answer each time something didn't work out. Like any good engineer, he was circling the problem in tightening bands as time wore on. He didn't realize it yet, but it was teaching him how to take on a persistent problem later in life – keep going back until you find out the answer and you make it work. I doubted there was anything there to find, but Jimmy was a persistent kid, and so I did my best to encourage it as a learning exercise rather than discourage him from chasing wild geese.

That was then, though, when I was much more naïve about the Deus Ex Machina.

And again, I get ahead of myself.

The thing about killing time on the moon is that there's plenty to do but most of it is doing the same thing over and over. I'd hit this smokeasy I found on the backside of a warehouse, read the news over a quarter-pack of Benson & Hedges Ultra-Light Menthol 100's, pretend I was thinking over the problem of the Deus, hit the Salad Emporium for some veggies, spend the afternoon playing videogames on my mini-comp, stuff my face with a tofu calzone at Pizza del Rio, then hit a gay bar to have a drink and watch a drag show to unwind from a hard day's work. Just killing time can be one of the most exhausting activities in the world, I discovered, and pretty soon I was just sick and tired of having nothing new to do.

I didn't know jack about my “cover” job, though, and wasn't so bored that I'd learn how to work on the trains on the monorail system just to occupy my time – and TranCo didn't expect or especially want me to show up, anyway, given they'd gotten what I came here for, but I was ready for some work to do. Sarah, my boss back at the

“contracting” firm, couldn't land me any gigs up here, either, so I was stuck having to get creative.

One of the things about living in a city managed by the United Nations, though, is that there are a fuck-ton of regulations about who can be up here and why and justifying one's existence and the taking up of precious resources like air and water. There are a lot of raw materials on the moon, sure, and ways to extract oxygen and nitrogen and carbon dioxide and metals and all that good stuff, but it's still pricey to run this place and everyone has to be vetted before they come up in the first place. The second you don't have a reason to be here, they ship you back below decks, and so I couldn't exactly drop into an employment agency and find out if there were any other jobs I could do while I was here. There aren't even retail jobs on the moon – everyone working a cash register at a High Street Boutique(tm) is someone on a management fast-track who has to do a tour in one of their many and prestigious Diana City shops (“We sell the moon its memories...” was their old ad campaign, wasn't it?). There is literally no legitimate way to start a new business while you're here, either.

So what did that mean for me? What it always does: it was time to look underground.

And let me tell you, the moon has some serious underground.

I don't know why this surprised me so much, when I discovered it. The fact is, a significant minority percentage of the total economy in Diana City happens off the books. It's as true here as it was a hundred fifty years ago in the Soviet Bloc, a hundred years ago in China, a thousand years ago in any monastery. When there are massive restrictions on trade, on rights and property and exchange of property, people are very good at improvising. There is a fundamental drive in the human animal to acquire what one wants or needs, and

when official channels fail to provide then people will, as a very reliable rule, create a channel of their own.

After learning about the smokeasy by being handed a card with its address on it at the porn store, and after spending three weeks boring myself half to fucking death, I finally went back to the porn store and walked right in and said to the lady behind the counter:

"My name is Charles. I'm looking for a place to advertise certain services." I couldn't be any more matter of fact.

"We don't do prostitution." She yawned as she said it, not even looking up from her paper.

"I'm not looking for that sort of work," I said. I folded my arms over my chest and sniffed. "I do information-gathering."

Now she lowered the paper just enough to glance at me, once down and once back up. "Uh-huh. You want to advertise, I take it."

"Yeah." The Diana Chronicle was the moon's "paper," but it was all put together back home. It didn't carry moon news, or at least not much, and I sure as shit hoped she wasn't talking about the DC Classifieds because I couldn't exactly place a work-wanted ad in it.

"You want to talk to Stan."

Stan is the greaseball who runs the smokeasy. I hadn't relished the thought of discussing my needs with him because, frankly, he creeps my ass out. He has this sick laugh. *Hur hur hur*. It's like you just caught him in bed with your mom and he got a picture of the look on your face and you know, deep down, he's going to use it on his Christmas cards this year. He's just... I dunno.

I nodded my thanks at the porn store lady and ducked back out onto the street. If Stan was my best shot at a gig of some sort, anything to kill my time, I was just going to have to learn to be fine with that.

Thus it was that I let Stan know I was available for work. I had no idea what sort of work I was going to get, but I'd made it plain to him that I don't do violence – I just gather information. It turned out he had some people who knew some people, et cetera, and the next night I was back there doing a few little interviews: a guy who was sure his girlfriend was cheating on him with someone in her office – Diana City is full of temporary liasons such as this, and people get possessive no matter how short their time's going to be above decks – a lady who was pretty sure her boss was whoring out her co-workers after hours, that sort of thing. It was detective work, and I guessed I could do detective work well enough if it kept me busy. Nothing spectacular came my way the first few days, but I did my legwork and I got my jobs and soon enough my name was circulating. I kind of liked the feeling of starting to earn a reputation among the regulars at Stan's place. It was a seedy dive constructed from cast-off office furniture, and every job had to do with someone else's job because that's all we are up here, what we do and for whom we do it, but it made the time pass.

Six days later, I'd scored a couple hundred euros of easy money – the girlfriend was faithful but aloof, it turned out, and the boss was turning out secretaries like counterfeit sneakers – and it was almost time for Ernesto to arrive. It was Friday night, and his shuttle would arrive at Diana City Spaceport at 10:30 DST. The sunset was particularly lovely that night and the stars were absurdly beautiful. I was bored and I was horny as all hell and I was impatient for Ernesto to get there, but I was also comfortable with having waited this long and my ability to wait just another couple of hours. So, I settled in at Stan's in my usual booth and bought a quarter-pack of his shitty

cigarettes and prepared to kill some time with a game on my comp.

Of course, even when one effectively lives in a massive shopping mall, life can be full of surprises.

What was more immediately important to me, though, was Ernesto's impending arrival. I had a wild mix of emotions when I contemplated him spending a weekend up here – butterflies with hard-ons careened around my stomach – and of course there was the nervousness that we'd actually hate each other upon meeting, but mainly I was upbeat. I had a good feeling about all this. Thus, I arrived at the docks forty five minutes before he was scheduled to arrive, wishing desperately that I could have a smoke. Smoking is, of course, illegal up here – why waste oxygen on a filthy habit, right? - so I had to make do with leaning against a wall and popping my gum over and over and over again, lurking in the shadows like some dime-novel private eye. I'd worn a dark blue windbreaker and a bright pink Oxford, untucked, the tail of it hanging out over a pair of loose, grey jeans. Yes, they artificially control the temperature, and they say it's always between seventy and seventy four Fahrenheit, but the fact is that the dome's a bitch to heat and it can get a little cooler than that at street-level at “night.” Fewer people around to stir things up and the immense chill of lunar night beyond the dome, mixed together with the persistent rumor that after sixty years the dome has lost some of its insulation, add up to bringing a jacket with you when you come on a tour of duty. At any rate, I was like a ratty Sam Spade with a hint of Chinese around the eyes standing on the periphery of the waiting area, a small, pink bubble extruding from my lips and being sucked back in every thirty seconds. Puff, pop, chew. Puff, pop, chew.

The spaceport is built like a standard airport, complete with a

waiting area for luggage retrieval and uncomfortable, plastic chairs. I guess they built it this way on the theory that it would soften the psychological shock of landing on the moon for a months-long stay, but it becomes ridiculous immediately upon examination. No one up here is a permanent resident – well, except for Stronklin, who'd lived here for at least three decades – and so no one is going to be here waiting for anyone else. Even with a tourist destination up here, the average Jane Cubicle who's pining for a visit from a boyfriend or a husband or whoever is never actually going to receive that visitor. The only reason I'd been able to land Ernesto a weekend at Diana's Bow was that once we had the money together I'd taken the liberty of... editing their reservations database from afar. Otherwise, there's a three-year wait-list for a room.

Still, I was surprised to find myself not entirely alone in the waiting room. There was this preacher standing against the far wall, the gulf of empty chairs and flickering fluorescents arrayed between us. He was silent, reading a book that I guessed was a Bible. Notched between his chest and forearm was the picket for a sign, leaned to rest against his left shoulder. "GEN 11:5 – 9" it said in big letters, and underneath it read: BUT THE LORD CAME DOWN TO SEE THE CITY.

I arched my eyebrow at that one. Was this the big beef the Earthies have with Diana City? I've never paid close attention to the religious fringe, and so I knew they were into all that "if God had meant man to fly," etc., crap, but I didn't know this was their specific complaint, that it was all Tower of Babel, or whatever. The preacher was the same one I ran into my first night here, who called at me from the porch of his closet-sized chapel in the religious ring as I walked by. He warned me to go back to Earth, where man was made to walk, and so on and so forth. I flipped him off, I think.

He glanced up at me, very briefly, then went back to his book. I saw his lips start moving, and I guess he was praying for me. Or against me. Fuck if I know. I don't have time for superstitious bullshit.

Out the windows of the gate I could see a star getting bigger. I'd never come up here just to watch a shuttle land, but it was obvious soon enough that my glowing star was in fact the ship on its way to the surface. The slow wasn't from atmosphere – I'd read that there's basically enough up here to notice, but not enough to see. The retro-rockets were firing, slowing down the boat as it backed into place on the pad outside. It's just like in the old movies, when you see a rocket “land” by taking off in reverse, before people had really worked out the physics that would be involved, only with the lunar shuttles it works. Supposedly it all has to do with gravity and whatever. There's so little in the atmosphere that the shuttles can't land like planes, so they just try to do a controlled fall, more or less. I'm no rocket scientist, so I took at best an idle interest in it. The preacher lifted his head just long enough to confirm that the shuttle was coming in, then went right back to his reading. For my part, I was glued to the windows. This was, I'd realized, one of the very few places where I could really look right out onto the moon. The port is on the very rim of the dome, with an eyehole that opens for the shuttle to come in and then shuts again so that the port can fill with atmosphere before the shuttle opens but, for a few minutes, that eye is open onto nothing. Even staring at the night sky through the dome wasn't this good – it didn't look any different, but inside we're so surrounded by the illusion of normalcy that we become innured to the spectacle. Here, I knew, deep in my bones, that there wasn't much between me and infinity. I liked that.

The shuttle looks retro – it's shaped a lot like the original orbiters

from, what, a hundred years ago? Something like that, only these have these big spider legs that come out like some monstrous landing gear to kind of “catch” the cables that ring the eye when it opens on the port. When the shuttle hits those, let me tell you, it's quite a jolt. I saw a couple of electricians on my flight – guys who would have been lumberjacks two hundred years ago – toss their lunch when we were snagged on my flight three weeks before. After the legs catch the cables, they try to absorb all the kinetic force and distribute it around, and then the shuttle looks like it just floats into place. All this took just a few seconds, then the cables went slack, the legs retracted and folded back up, the eye closed and the window vibrated as the port filled with all the air sucked out of it thirty seconds before the eye opened in the first place. Efficient, quick and amazing to watch. I realized I was fogging the glass, cold as it had gotten on the other side when it was exposed to the terrible nothing of space, and I leaned back.

I'd gotten used to the next part – the window defogged rapidly and I smelled a faint wisp of ozone as the window self-cleaned – and took to trying to straighten myself up. I considered tucking in my shirt, pawed at my hair with my hand, ran my fingers across my face. All of a sudden I was shaking like a leaf. Now was the moment of truth, and I was scared shitless.

The umbilical latched into place against the doors into the gate and I could feel the vibration of feet coming up the hallway. The doors hissed, then opened, and a flight attendant – their dorky little space-vixen outfits from the first years of Diana City had been brought back as a PR thing – stepped through and toggled the microphone sewn into her uniform.

“Welcome to Diana City!” She was the robotic sort of chipper

you get on long flights, hurried and tired and straining unsuccessfully to hide it. The feel is precisely that of disembarking after a trans-Atlantic flight: the attendant sounds like only a fistful of Xanax is keeping her from pushing you out onto the concourse with a giant dust-broom, slapping her hands together theatrically and shouting, *Finally, you big babies!*

"Please proceed down the hall straight ahead," she went on, words squeezed out between locked, grinning jaws. "You'll find baggage claim on the left, marked by an orange sign. Please ask directions of a blue-suited customer service representative should you have difficulty identifying your baggage. A hospitality agent, identified by the turquoise cap, will be available to the left at the exit. Diana City's mass transit needs are served by the TransCo DianaRail monorail system, and Station Alpha is your first stop outside the doors of the Diana City Spaceport. Maps of Diana City," and here she had to draw a breath to muster support for the scripted PR line, "*logically designed in a series of concentric circles and clearly marked* will be available, free of charge, at TransCo DianaRail Station Alpha. We thank you for your patronage," (there was no other choice – her company has the exclusive contract, as does anyone else providing any service, right down to there being only one kind of Italian restaurant up here and one kind of pharmacy), "And we hope you enjoy your out-of-this-world stay!"

She was already fumbling to kill the microphone before she'd finished the last syllable, and then, zoom!, she was through a side door that hadn't even been visible before. I'd bet a nickel there's an ashtray tucked behind a toilet in a staff lavatory on the other side of that door. Three days is a long, long shift in any industry but the service industry must surely be worst of all.

The flyers were starting to stagger out, having to get used to being back in gravity – artificially maintained at precisely 1G up here by special plates in all the flooring – and rubbing their eyes. Some of them were big and burly, some dressed like office drones, one guy I recognized as an action-movie has-been from ten years ago. *He's probably up here to gamble and rent a couple of my client's co-workers for some "clerical" work*, I thought. The average flight up here carries a passenger load of forty or fifty, one flight out and one flight in every day, and the flow turned into a trickle and then one guy trying to manhandle an overstuffed suitcase with a broken wheel stumbled out, sweaty and pale-faced in the way people get after having heaved their guts out in the cramped bathroom of a shuttle. I realized I'd been holding my breath as they walked out, and it struck me that this guy was probably the last straggler. I'd not seen Ernesto in the crowd.

He'd stood me up.

"Bobby, *darling*," I heard come from further down the umbilical, and I knew instantly that I was as wholly wrong as I could be. "You look a *mess*, did I not tell you to lay off the gin the last six hours of the flight? Do the math, dear boy." The voice was heavily accented, Latino, and sounded like liquid sex. It was unmistakably Ernesto's. The guy with the busted suitcase slowed down and let his suitcase topple onto the floor, tugging at his collar like his shirt was choking him to death. "If landing at LaGuardia," and here he pronounced what I would call LaGWARDia as LaGARDia, the "u" turning the "g" into a solid and then disappearing, "With a belly full of booze is a bad idea, it must surely be ten times worse on the moon. Did I not say this?"

The guy with the wan complexion and the suitcase turned a shade paler. "Thank you," he mumbled, "Yes, I know, see you around,"

ad then he heaved the suitcase up against his hip and took off at what best counts as a brisk hobble. The last set of footsteps up the umbilical were coming – Ernesto's footsteps – and they made the click-KLAK click-KLAK of someone wearing boots. Scratch that – someone *strutting* in boots.

I would have sworn that the lights dimmed when Ernesto walked into the room. It's like he just sucked all the electricity out of the air around him, right out of the walls themselves, to power his own glow. He's tall – 6'1" if he's an inch, far taller than I am – and he keeps his hair longish and either bleached solid white or dyed an electric blue. His skin was dusky brown – he'd spent some time in the sun lately – and his eyes were black. He wore what I guess is best described as a pirate shirt, all puffy sleeves and lace around the wrists, a deep and blindingly shiny silver, and black faux leather pants. His go-go boots – real, honest to the gods, 20th century go-go boots like straight out of that Nancy Sinatra video – were deep purple and around his neck he wore a purple feather boa easily twelve feet long. He carried one small bag, light as a feather, and his hair was still blue and flopped in eight different directions.

I gasped.

The preacher gasped.

“Charles,” he purred – fucking purred, I'm not making this up, “It is so good to see you. But oh, the burden of flight! That the gods had seen fit to leave man with wings so that we would not have to live in such crowded tin cans, plastic wrapped around all the chairs for three days. Tsk.” I gaped. I worked my jaw for a minute, and then I just grinned. I beamed, in fact.

“Hi.”

Erneso opened his arms, the boa gripped in each hand so that he

appeared to have those wings – whatever the hell he was talking about – back and extended to their full span. I walked up and started to hug him but he ducked in and planted a big, sloppy kiss on me.

I should note that I am not 6'1". Like I said, Ernesto is taller than I am. I'm mostly Black Irish – pale skin and dark, straight hair and a smattering of freckles when I've been on the beach too long, skinny and gangly and generally frumpled – with a grandmother from Hong Kong to make my hair that much darker and straighter and my eyes turned up at the corners. I like to think I look a little exotic, but next to Ernesto I'm like a dime-store mannequin, so vanilla I've got a mailing address at your grocer's freezer section.

At any rate, hell yes I was smooching on him right there in the spaceport. We were just going at it like gangbusters immediately, and the preacher, I could feel, was staring at us. Eventually we pulled back and Ernesto smiled and I grinned back at him like a total idiot.

"Duhuh," I said, because it was all I could manage.

"Indeed," he replied.

I glanced sidelong at the preacher, and he was still staring at us. I smiled, and then I winked. He turned a deep purple and took off down the hallway to leave the spaceport, sign still over his shoulder.

Ernesto and I shared a long laugh, and then he slid his hand into the crook of my elbow and we started walking to baggage-claim. "Are there many Earthie protesters here on the moon?"

"As far as I can tell, he's the only one," I shrugged. "I ran into him right after I got here, but I don't think he recognized me. He probably screams at a few dozen people a day from the front steps of his, uh, "church."

"There are Earthies up here? Do their heads not explode from the hypocrisy?"

I shrugged again. "I think it's like in old Westerns, when there was always the temperance preacher in the wild west town, ducking behind the pulpit when the gunfight happened outside? I dunno. Hypocrisy has certainly never been a major stumbling block for right-wing religionists before now."

"Well, at least he got a show, and at least he stayed quiet."

"True, true." I cocked my head to one side for a second and then frowned. "Funny, he didn't harass anybody at all when they came off the plane."

"Perhaps he was waiting for someone who didn't show," Ernesto replied. "Or perhaps he is tired today and did not feel like yelling at anyone. Or perhaps the spaceport will not allow him to proselytize in this place."

"I wish they'd just get rid of them all." I smiled a dark little smile. "But hey, keep your friends close and your enemies closer, right?"

Ernesto chuckled and kissed me lightly on the forehead. "Indeed, yes, this is wise. But I am tired, and I wish to take a bath and then see this city. Shall we?"

"You bet," I said, and we strolled out of the gates and down to baggage claim to pick up Ernesto's bags. They pulsed with battery-powered lights.

"Distinctive."

"Hard to lose," he replied, and he smiled again.

What I realized, later, was that from this point forward everything we said would be heard and analyzed.

Root Shell – Chapter Two

Two hours later, Ernesto and I had seen to the formality of checking into his room, taken his luggage back to my fifteen by twenty foot “apartment” in a block of flats in the low-middle-range residential band towards the eastern edge of town, he'd learned the ways of a lunar shower – barbaric but welcome nonetheless, he said – and we'd stepped out to a Pizza del Rio for a light dinner and a couple of beers. By half past 1 AM I'd told him I had a surprise for him and we were wending the abandoned alleyways of eight o'clock on the outer industrial ring.

“What is this place you wish me to see?” he asked with a wicked little twist of the corners of his mouth.

“Why, it's a bar,” I smiled.

“Oh my, it must be very... special to be tucked away amongst the warehouses and the dust-bunnies.”

I just smiled and kept leading him along. He had a point – this part of the city is not exactly what they put on the pamphlets – but it's quiet at night. The white collar office blocks uptown operate 24x7, but the warehouse jockeys have a union. Anybody who stays after 6 PM local time does so at triple pay. I think this, alone, is reason enough to support organized labor. But then, I make my living screwing over The Man.

We got to Stan's place after about a twenty minute stroll, and I gestured towards the slate grey door with ELECTRICAL CLOSET – HIGH VOLTAGE stenciled on it in yellow letters. One hand held out towards it, palm up, I said, “After you.”

Ernesto read the door and raised his eyebrows. “Alright,” he said. He put his hand on the knob, turned it, and gazed into the pitch-

black beyond.

"Go on," I whispered. "We go in one at a time. That's one of the rules."

He looked back at me for just a moment and then stepped in and pulled the door shut behind him. From outside, I noticed, you can't even see the red glow from the electronic eyes that browse each patron's person for signs of trouble – a UN Security Forces helmet, a sidearm, that sort of thing. Guns are, of course, wildly illegal up here, but you never know what clever bastard is going to sneak something up here, and Stan doesn't take chances. The scan is also silent, so from outside it really does seem as though the person has simply disappeared into the closet. I waited about thirty seconds, heard the outer door unlatch to signal that Ernesto had been processed and admitted, and I stepped in to undergo the same round of scrutiny.

When I finished and went through the second door into the bar itself, I saw Ernesto standing to one side, gazing all around, his head and eyes scanning the room in an orderly and thorough sweep. Stan was staring at Ernesto and, more likely, Ernesto's outfit in particular. It's funny – when people tried to imagine the future a couple hundred years ago, they would assume that everyone dressed like a circus clown. I'd love to get some of those sci-fi costumers and set designers up here, now, to get a load of just how durable khakis and blue jeans and Oxford shirts turned out to be.

Ernesto turned, finally, to look at Stan. Stan's a great big greaseball, a werewalrus with a shaved head and a handlebar moustache and an ominously blank stare that could freeze a moose in its tracks. He returned Ernesto's gaze, evenly, then flicked his eyes to his right to look at me. I reached out and patted Ernesto's upper arm, then lifted a few fingers to wave at Stan. He put two and two together,

very slowly and deliberately, and then let out his trademark laugh: *Hur hur hur.*

Ernesto shuddered, just a little, as though a turd had just asked him out on a date.

Stan reached behind the bar, produced an open pack of smokes, and slid them just out of his reach, in our direction. A book of matches followed. Ernesto realized, then, what kind of bar this was and smiled. "You are a very dirty boy, Charles," he murmured. "But after three days on that shuttle I would slay a man before his grandmother's eyes in return for a cigarette, and so I thank you for bringing me to this place." His speech was really formal, the stilted, uncontracted English of someone for whom it's a second language – comfortable, but played by the rules.

Two minutes later we were seated in a booth, the privacy screen down, and Ernesto was stubbing out his first smoke. We chatted a little – his flight, his work, our common experience of humanity. He's a video sex operator. He sits in his apartment with a webcam and a dedicated line and he gets off guys who watch him play with himself. It's really that simple. His clientele are mostly business travelers and cheating husbands. It can leave a nasty taste in your mouth to think of all of humankind as falling into one of those two categories, but he had a brighter attitude than I would have:

"These people are in desperate need, mostly. They do not know the touch of someone who satisfies them, or their needs extend beyond what they wed. Sex is a complicated thing, Charles. If I can give them what they need – a man who lets them gaze longingly, a dirty little secret they keep to themselves, a chance to dream of a life they missed out on by marrying young and to the wrong gender – then I have done them a small service and they have run no great risks.

Yes, I'm sure it in some ways, for some of them, undermines their psychological foundations. Change has a way of doing that. But I do not know that they are married, or that this deprives them of something, or lets them put off an act of self-revelation which might free them to find real happiness outside the booth. Even in the worst circumstances, I think these people often need compassion more than scorn or judgement. You would be surprised how many of them do not want to get off. They want to talk. They want to hear what my life is like, what I do for fun, do I have a boyfriend, do I like girls, do I dress in drag, do I do this just for money." He lifted one muscled and rounded shoulder to indicate his dismissal of any judgements. "They look at the screen, some of them, and see a life they never had a chance to live. I am what they might have been. Who would not wish to question that other self, given an opportunity?"

I had to respect Ernesto for this take on things. In college I'd had a friend who worked as a male prostitute. He had a complete back-story worked out for the guys who were Inquisitors, as he called them. All they wanted was for him to take off his clothes and tell them about his life. They'd pay in full, he didn't have to do anything but talk, and they left feeling less alone in the world. Like Ernesto said, sex is a complicated thing.

I told him about my job – my *cover* job – and he studied me very closely as I did so. I'd told him that there was more to my being up here than I could really discuss. After I finished tell him about how I work on the monorail system, he smiled a little. "You are lying."

"Yeah," I said. I wasn't going to deny it.

"You would not fear telling me why you are here if it were merely illegal, so you must fear that it is dangerous. Yet, I know this already. I called the police, I did some research for you, I know that you were

found bloodied and slightly injured in an alleyway that night. And I watch the news. The president of the company you had me research wound up dead that night, as did his son. So perhaps you do not tell me all the truth because you think that I will assume it is *you* that I would find dangerous."

Even with the privacy screen down on the booth, that was a little too forthright for comfort, and I blanched. Ernesto studied me coolly, and I started to wonder if this had been a good idea. Still, what was I going to do? Run away? I'd given him a spare keycard to my apartment and we were going to be trapped inside the same big, plastic bubble for the next four days. Now was no time to bail out.

"I didn't kill anyone," I said, voice low.

"I know you did not," Ernesto said with a light smile. "You have kind eyes."

Now I ran back up the other end of the spectrum and turned purple in a deep blush.

"Thank you."

He reached out and took my free hand, very softly, and gave it a small squeeze. "I wish you would tell me what's been going on here."

I drew one deep breath, lit another cigarette, and told him.

I told him everything: that a man had tried to kill me after telling me that a piece of software found on every networked device up here, from the computers controlling atmosphere regulation to the toaster in the most low-rent apartment in town, was intelligent, could think for itself, and that he would have no one interfere as he worshipped it like a god. I'd known he was crazy then, known he was the single most dangerous thing in this city if that's how he thought, if he believed a benevolent piece of software was going to nurture us up here in the dark cold of empty space, and I'd gotten free and gone to

destroy the very heart of that machine, the computers where it first resided here sixty years ago. I'd thought I could... I don't know, weaken it? Piss it off? And at the same time I tried to convince myself that what he said wasn't real, that there was no way it could be intelligent.

But I'd tried to destroy it anyway, hadn't I?

I told Ernesto that I was pretty sure Stronklin had assumed I would tell the whole world about his Big Secret and that this was what had driven him to try to eliminate me after I stumbled across it. The truth was, though, I'd told Jimmy, the kid from 2600, but no one else until this moment.

Ernesto listened and nodded here and there, reminding me occasionally to ash my cigarette. When I was done, he sat back, lit one of his own, signaled Stan for a refill on diet ginger ale – you take what you can get in an illegal dive hidden under a warehouse on the moon – and, I could tell, began formulating his response.

After a long moment, he said this: “You are a dream come true.”

I blinked. This wasn't exactly what I'd been expecting.

Ernesto opened his mouth to go on, but we were interrupted by a knock at the privacy screen on our booth.

“Bid'ness,” Stan growled. “*Lady bid'ness. Hur hur hur.*”

I sighed at Ernesto. “That's the other thing I need to tell you. I've been finding ways to occupy my time.”

“Let me guess,” he murmured with a small, upwards twist at one corner of his mouth. “You solve problems.”

I shrugged with one shoulder and lit another smoke. “Something like that.” And with that, I reached over and rolled up the privacy screen.

The woman standing just behind Stan, looking over his shoulder, was a cool-as-a-cucumber redheaded caucasian female. She was dressed in a simple grey pants suit with a small cross just visible on a gold chain around her neck. Her blouse was as plain-Jane white as it could get and she wore flats – the kind with the “athletic soles” a lot of women who work in offices up here choose to wear, what with all the walking we all inevitably do – and the strangest little pillbox hat, matte black and made of what I'd swear was felt. The rest of her outfit was the sort of timeless business-wear that's never looked out of place anywhere but a war zone for the last two hundred years. The hat, though, was straight-up Post-WW2 retro. Her red hair was more like carrot orange, and she had very pale skin with very prominent freckles.

I took a drag and held the cigarette between my lips long enough to hold out my hand for a shake. “Charles,” I mumbled around the filter.

“Mary,” she said, but she didn't offer a hand in return.

“Ernesto.” Ernesto didn't hold out his hand, either, but I noticed that he had, somehow, managed to cross his legs under the table and assume a smiling pose that was all Cheshire cat. His thin, angular face was split in the middle by a grin best described as wicked, and nothing else.

“Sorry, Charles, I didn't realize you were already with a client.” Mary looked Ernesto up and down, her nostrils flaring just slightly. I hated her already. “I'll come back some other time.”

“No,” I said – because I might have hated her but I was willing to give her money a fair chance – and gestured at Ernesto. “He's my business partner. Please join us, if you wish.”

Stan's eyebrows went up and there was that damn laugh again.

Hur hur hur. Mary looked from Stan to Ernesto to me and then only frowned slightly as Ernesto slid around the booth to sit beside me, making room for her where he had been. She climbed in, I reached over and pulled down the privacy screen, and then we sat there staring at each other for a good ten seconds.

"How can I help you, Miss..." I left the question of her last name out on the breeze, but I did check her hands for a wedding band before calling her "Miss." If I'd had to guess, I'd have said she was late twenties, early thirties. Maybe thirty dead on.

"Sawyer," Mary said. "Stanley tells me you're good at finding out things." She nodded slightly in the direction of the bar, through the privacy screen. I blinked when she called him "Stanley." Stanley was a proper name, and Stan was anything but proper.

"Sometimes," I replied, tapping into the ashtray. "But I have certain work I won't do, and I reserve the right to walk away from a job at any time." It hadn't taken me a week to figure out that this was a necessary disclaimer. People could ask for some freaky shit if they thought you wouldn't say no.

"Fair enough. Do you do crime scenes?"

I arched my eyebrows. "Maybe."

"My uncle was killed a few weeks ago, here in Diana City, and I need to find out more about the circumstances of his death."

Well, as you might guess, there weren't exactly a lot of deaths up here. There could be only one man she was describing – okay, two, but you know what I mean. She was about to unload that James Stronklin, who held me under threat and would have killed me if I didn't get away, three weeks ago that night, was her uncle. And I was going to beat her to the punchline, because I hate being surprised and this was about as surprising a thing as I could hear at the moment.

"James Stronklin," I said. Mary pursed her lips and looked down for just a moment, at the table, then lifted her eyes and wrinkled up her forehead in suspicion. "It was all over the media," I added with a shrug. Easy enough to guess."

"Fine," Mary said. Something about how straightforward I was being bothered her. Now, here is where I should probably remind you that it is my job – as an industrial spy – to lie for a living. I am good at this job, and I am good at catching other people at it. There are a few set strategies for getting information out of people, and one of them is to try to catch them off-guard with some shocking bit of news. When Mary Sawyer looked annoyed that I'd guessed her uncle's identity, it demonstrated two things: she was new up here, new enough not to know that yes, pretty much anyone up here would know who the only two people to die lately in this city were, and also that she had hoped something in particular would happen when she said that. I didn't know what, precisely, but I could see that disappointment in her face, the look of someone whose plans just went awry.

Ernesto hadn't said a word so far.

"Yes," she said after a moment. "He was my uncle." She reached up to stifle a yawn – a badly faked one, if you ask me – and then sighed a little. "We were, of course, shocked to hear of his death. And now I'm here to deal with his estate, as his nearest living relative. The thing is, the 'police' here aren't terribly effective."

I nodded in what I hoped would be a sympathetic way.

"So, I was hoping you could look into things for me."

"I don't do the messy stuff," I said, very simply. "Sorry I can't help you."

I reached over to lift the privacy screen, but Mary stopped me

halfway: "I'll pay triple your normal rate."

Ernesto made a little noise. I couldn't tell if it was a giggle or a squeak, and he flowed right into clearing his throat theatrically. "Do pardon," he said with a smile.

I sat back up and sucked my teeth for a second, then took another drag of the cigarette. Here's the thing: triple my normal rate would be pretty good. I didn't have a "normal rate," of course, but she was as green as it gets, so she didn't know that and I could just name a big, fat figure and get rid of her that way. More interestingly, though, that one statement told me she was desperate. I just couldn't tell for what.

"What, precisely, do you want me to find out?"

Mary started to relax and I held up my right hand. "That's not an agreement, it's a request for clarification of the issue. I want to know exactly what you're asking me to do." I sat back in the bench and watched her as she spoke. Her hands were still folded on the table in front of her, and she stared at them as she answered.

"I," she said, and then she paused. She looked up, and now she watched me, in return, as she answered. "I have reason to believe that my uncle was involved in something. I'd like to know what."

"Your uncle was the sole shareholder in a company that does software." That much, also, had been all over the papers. It had come out, since then, that CodeBlue did coding for SentrySoft, and SentrySoft's shares had taken a dip on the news one of their farms might be in trouble.

"I think it might be something other than that." She cleared her throat. "I don't know anything more than that."

"You're going to have to tell me what you think it is if you want me to investigate it."

"I don't know – so consider that my first request: finding out what he was involved in that made him so secretive, made him move to the moon, made him not speak to any of us for the last thirty years." Mary wobbled her head from side to side a bit, a half-shake, half-shrug. "I'm afraid that's all I've got to go on."

"And you came all this way to ask me to do that?" I arched one eyebrow at her. "Heck of a trip."

"It's very important to me to know the truth," she said softly. Her eyes dropped back down to her hands.

"Fair enough," I said. "Ten thousand euros. Triple my normal rate."

Ernesto squeaked. This time he didn't try to hide it. Ten large was a heap of cash, but if Miss Sawyer could afford to take a vacation on the moon, she could afford something in that range for important information. Hell, she'd probably spent that much just getting up here.

"Done," she said, and then she smiled just a little. "Half now, half later?"

I considered for a moment and shook my head. "Payment on delivery. If I decide this is too hot for me, I don't want to feel beholden to you, and I hate giving back money I've already started to earn."

"Agreed, Mister..." This time she let the question hang out there, and I blew a puff of smoke right through it.

"Charles."

Mary smiled again, sort of sadly. "Here's my number. Call when you have something."

I reached over, hand out, and this time she shook it. With my other hand, I lifted the privacy screen, and Mary climbed out.

“Thank you,” she said, and then she turned her back and walked over to Stan. “The gentlemen in that booth,” she ordered. “Their tab is on me.”

Stan smiled at her, gave her that sick chuckle, and tipped the ghost of a hat he wasn't wearing. “Yes, m'am,” he grumbled.

I snapped the privacy screen back down, and Ernesto and I broke into uncontrollable giggling.

Root Shell – Chapter Three

Ernesto didn't slide around to his side of the booth when she left. Instead he reached over and took my cigarette to light one of his own, then slid down a bit in the seat and relaxed.

"So what do you make of her?"

Ernesto smiled and chuckled again. "She is wealthy. Did you notice her hat?"

I nodded.

"Original. She brought a two century old antique up here to wear to an illegal dive bar."

I gasped a little. "You are shitting me."

"I would bet money. And, she's a protestant. She's not married, but she used to be. I suspect she is very religious, but she does not think we are terrible people despite being obvious, screaming queens. And, despite her wealth, she thinks she's down to earth."

I started to open my mouth, then shut it again. "I am not a screaming queen."

Ernesto patted me on the upper arm. "Of course not."

I ignored it. "So where are you getting all that?"

Ernesto settled in a bit further, pausing as he spoke to blow smoke rings. "The cross, rather than crucifix. She wears it on a chain short enough to be seen in a suit. She wants to advertise her religious devotion. However, she was willing to sit down with us. She must think she's well-grounded enough to slum it in a place like this, and she distrusts authority, or at least the local authority – though she did try to go to them first. She's prim and proper enough to play by the rules but when the system fails her, she looks for unofficial avenues to get done what she wants." He shrugged. "The married bit – she has

no wedding band, and no tan line on that finger, but she fidgets as though there were a ring where there is none. She clasps her hands together to stop herself from doing it. Obviously a divorcee. Or she was engaged long enough to get used to the ring, then abandoned at the altar."

I gaped sidelong at Ernesto. Had he really picked up all that during our short conversation?

"Darling," he said with a smug little smile. "I get paid to stare at people, and it's just as much *my* job to find out what someone wants then give that to them as it is *yours*."

I broke into a big grin at him, and leaned over to kiss him on the forehead.

"So," he said. "What did *you* pick up?"

I sighed and looked at the empty seat where she'd been. "She's lying. She knows what Stronklin was into, maybe, or she has zero clue but *thinks* she knows and is simply wrong. And I'd bet every one of those ten thousand that she's not his neice."

Ernesto cocked his head away from me. "Why?"

"She didn't once mention her 'cousin,' Stronklin's 'son.'" I smiled at Ernesto, and now it was his turn to be impressed.

After a congratulatory moment, he flicked his eyes at the privacy screen and then at me. "So, how private *is* this booth?"

I turned up the corners of my mouth in a wicked little smile. "Let's find out."

Two hours later, we were walking down Gorbachev Boulevard, Ernesto's hand in the crook of my elbow.

"So, what do you do about Miss Sawyer and her inquiry?"

"I don't know," I said. I'd been going over it in my head ever

since she'd left, and I couldn't think of a good way of going about this. It was obvious what she wanted – she wanted to know about the Deus Ex Machina, whether she knew it or not. That was the only thing Stronklin had going on behind the curtains, as far as I could tell, and I'd spent plenty of time in the last three weeks thinking about and researching Stronklin and CodeBlue and SentrySoft. With Stronklin dead, and all the attention that generated, the media had followed the story pretty closely. Stronklin was sole shareholder and, according to the media, had no heirs to whom the company could go. This was another big hole in Miss Sawyer's story, but that didn't surprise me given what Ernesto and I had picked up during our talk.

Given the absence of a clear means of disposing of his estate, his house & offices were still sitting there with crime scene tape around them. The United Nations peacekeeping force had sealed it off, but the UN and the United States were in a pissing match over who got to deal with what he'd left behind. His will, apparently, was in a bank vault in Switzerland, but his citizenship was American, but he hadn't been back below decks in thirty years. No wonder he was bat-shit, I thought to myself. He'd been locked in this joint for decades.

At any rate, the FBI had shown up demanding to take over his home as a crime scene, thus putting it under the jurisdiction of the US Government, who of course wanted to grab any intellectual property they could and then auction the rest. The Brain Drain was a hundred years ago and our tech economy has suffered ever since. The US, always hungry for whatever scraps of research they could claim as their own, doubtless hoped to divest his company to some moneyed big-wigs in favor with the Powers That Be to try to jumpstart someone's stock portfolio.

On the other side of the fence, the UN – always in need of cash

and eternally resentful of how far behind the US routinely falls in dues payments – wanted his estate so they could put it straight on the auction block. The FBI hadn't been allowed into his house, but the Norwegian soldiers up here on police detail didn't have the capacity to do any sort of investigation of it or any follow-up. All they could do was seal it shut, put up yellow tape and follow the FBI around to make sure they didn't break in when no one was looking. The court cases that would ultimately decide whose it is, the papers said, could take years. Rumor had it the UN was going to go ahead and auction it now and let the US deal with suing whoever ended up with it. The fact of the matter is that the UN has administered any number of peacekeeping projects and watched over plenty of other nations while they did elections, or whatever, but the UN is not well-practiced at actually running territory of its own. It's never had territory of its own to administer. To be honest, the administration of this place is woefully skeletal to begin with. There's no mayor, no city council, just some bureaucrats in a building downtown, near the park, and every six months they get rotated out like the rest of us. The Norwegians walk around in their blue helmets with their special moon-guns (rubber bullets only, naturally) and make sure we're not mugging each other and, otherwise, the place basically runs itself. We're more citizens of the nation-state of the company for whom we work than anything with geographic borders, up here. One of the most glaring reasons why this place continued to feel more like a mall and less like a town, I'd realized, was that there was no town infrastructure, just corporate ones. In the absence of all the usual signals of townhood – city limit signs, a scandalous mayor, town council fights, elections, a local paper – and the overwhelming presence of the signals of corporate life and corporate control, there was no *here* here, to borrow a phrase.

Ernesto and I strolled through this, my head down staring at the faux cobblestone street as I thought, his head craned back to stare at the stars in the sky. We didn't have anywhere in particular we were going, we were just going to know when we got there.

"I want to see Stronklin's home," Ernesto said to the sky.

I stopped and looked over at him. "Really?"

"Yes."

I looked around to get my bearings and thought about it. "Why?"

Ernesto turned his eyes on me and smiled sweetly. "Because I am full of morbid curiosity."

"We're almost there anyway," I said. "Might as well gawk at the train wreck."

"We are?"

"I hadn't realized it," I sighed, "But we've been walking there since we left Stan's. We're about three blocks away."

Ernesto's eyes softened and he kissed my forehead.

We reached the end of Stronklin's block and I audibly gulped. I hadn't been back. I hadn't wanted to come back. But, were I honest with myself, I had to admit that I'd spent the intervening three weeks circling the place mentally if not physically. Jimmy and I had spoken of nothing but the Deus, how to communicate with it, what the implications might be of intelligent software. Limber as Jimmy's sixteen year old mind was, he had no problem accepting the ghost in the machine, the idea that in there it really was thinking. He didn't pretend to know what it was thinking, but he had no problem integrating the idea that it was bubbling away intelligently. I hadn't consciously made up my mind, and I know now that in part it's

because I was scared of the possibility that there was something invisible and alive, up here, all around us. The unknown is always the most terrifying, as centuries of horror literature had taught us, and the unknown *and probably different* was even worse – as centuries of politics have taught us. Thus, the great unknown of the Deus' true capabilities and of Stronklin's relationship to it had me shaking in my boots when faced head-on. As long as it was a question of Jimmy just plugging away at a little problem or even interacting with it knowingly, somehow that was easier. He was a blank slate, open to the possibilities without being tied to any one of them. Stronklin, on the other hand, was an ideologue. He had *faith*, and that terrified me.

And now we were standing a few dozen yards and across the street from the very seat of that faith.

"It doesn't look like much." Ernesto was trying to play it cool, but his voice was soft. I couldn't tell whether he was trying to keep the moment intimate, showing respect for the dead or just as scared as I was – though probably scared that I was insane more than he could possibly be scared this thing was real.

"Yeah," I whispered. "But I don't like it. That guy was probably going to kill me that night if I didn't adopt his little religion."

Ernesto clucked his tongue once and muttered something in Spanish. I don't speak a word, so I didn't know what to make of it, and didn't even really think about it.

"Let's go closer," he said.

We walked about half the distance to the house, eyes out for anyone standing guard or anything like that, and then went the rest of the way and stopped directly across the street. Stronklin's home was a townhouse. Originally this part of the city was all industrial – warehouses, machine shops, that sort of thing. Strictly nine to five,

with no residential. Eventually, Stronklin had managed to turn this one small office building into a two-room townhouse. I figured it was his money. Everything up here is because of someone's money.

The yellow tape read "POLICE – POLIZIA – POLICIA – POLIZEI – POLITIE" and then a bunch of asian characters. I recognized the Mandarin for Police in there, and figured the rest were variations in other Asian languages. And, I noted, the tape was flapping free at the front door, torn away, waving slightly in the continual light breeze produced by the ventilation system.

I made a little *hurk* noise.

"It is not supposed to be like that, yes?"

"Yes. Er, it's not. Someone's broken in."

I started to back away from the front door, but Ernesto kept his hand in the crook of my elbow and stood stock still. "We should also go in," he said. "Said" is too gentle for it, though. It was more like he... *intoned* it, said it like it was a grave pronouncement more than a request. It was like he was saying we should leave for someone's funeral or we'd be late.

"I don't kn..." My voice trailed off, and I steeled myself. I am Charles Fitzgerald, industrial spy and all-around troublemaker, I said to myself. I am not going to be scared off by a little trespassing. I nodded my head at him and marched directly across the street.

The key to never getting in trouble for going where one isn't normally allowed is to behave as though one belongs there, to never show any sign of hesitation. An old saw in the security business is that a clipboard and a uniform can get you anywhere as long as you act like it's your business to be where you're going. Without a moment's pause I reached down, flicked on the video capture on my mini-comp, slung over my shoulder, and walked right up the steps and put my

hand on the knob.

One twist, and it opened.

I started to glance back to see if Ernesto had followed, and he was right there with me.

I strode right in the front door, Ernesto two steps behind me, and once we were in he reached back and closed the door with a soft click.

"This is so exciting," he whispered, and his voice sounded normal again. I could hear him grinning. We both looked around for a moment, realizing how dark it was in here, but when I took another step forward I tripped the area sensors and the lights came on in the front hall.

We both jumped, then stood there laughing for a few seconds.

"Scaredy cat," he said with a wink.

I fluttered my lips at him and sighed. "So what do you want to see?"

Ernesto rolled one beautiful shoulder and raised his eyebrows. "I do not know. I merely wanted to see it. Let's look around."

We stepped through a door to the left and found Stronklin's kitchen. Ernesto put his hand on the refrigerator door and I shook my head. "Three weeks," I whispered. "I wouldn't, if I were you." Ernesto made a little *aha* of understanding and let go of the handle. The coffeemaker still had some brew in the pot, but it was coated in a half-inch of green mold. There were dishes in the washer, left open, half emptied, fortunately clean rather than dirty. There were a few little kitchen knick-knacks, but all in all it didn't look that complicated or, frankly, used. I imagined Stronklin sending his "son" out for takeout every night, too busy with his own pseudo-religious investigation to ever prepare anything at home. Few people up here do, anyway.

At the end of the front hall were the steps up to the bedrooms, and across the hall from us was Stronklin's office, where I'd been held that night and where Stronklin had murdered his child and then himself. Ernesto crossed into it, triggering the lights in that room, and as I left the kitchen it went dark behind me. I stayed in the doorway while Ernesto nosed around a little – touching nothing, hands firmly in his pockets, but his eyes on everything in a slow sweep followed by more intent examination of a few certain spots: the desk, the phone where it lay on the floor, the couch where Stronklin's weird kid had been killed, blood stains not wholly scrubbed out of the fabric. Ernesto kept walking through the long, narrow room, glancing at the bookshelves before moving on to gaze through the glass windows into the server room where Stronklin had enshrined the computer on which the Deus had been born, the old server from fifty years before from which the Deus had launched its first assaults and annexed the other servers in CodeBlue's laboratories. Stronklin had treated this big, beige box as a sort of Ark of the Covenant, unconnected to the larger network but still chugging away.

I'd smashed it to pieces before I'd made my escape.

Ernesto didn't touch the door but did look at the wreckage inside that little room for a long moment. He turned, finally, and walked back over to me.

"I believe you," he whispered.

"Thank you," I said, all the air going out of me.

"You are very brave," he went on.

"I was terrified."

"And you acted in the face of that fear."

I shrugged just a little, looking at my shoes.

Ernesto reached out to hug me close, and then we both froze.

We'd heard footsteps – unmistakable, absolutely real – upstairs.

“Fuck!” Ernesto started for the door before the word had even escaped my lips, but I surprised myself.

I went for the stairs *up*.

I was pounding up the stairs in a flash, and I heard Ernesto call, “Gatino!” I was mindless in my ascent up the stairs, though, and I disappeared around the landing and bounded up the last half-flight three at a time. The hallway brightened on my approach and I heard smashing glass. Someone, I knew, was about to go about the back window, or just had – a two story drop into the alley, unless they had a fire escape to use – and I stuck my head into the first door to see a darkened room suddenly illuminate. It was such a bland, generic little bedroom that I could only assume it was that of Stronklin's mindless, brutish child, Foster.

I plunged down the last few feet of the hallway and through the only other door, into another bedroom that, as soon as the lights came on, was obviously Stronklin's: the walls were covered in diplomas, old photographs. Foster, you see, was a clone Stronklin had produced from an old politician – a thug named Cheney, Vice President a little over a hundred years ago – and probably didn't have the brain power for any sort of inner life. Stronklin, though, was nothing but pride, faith and nostalgia, and this bedroom was obviously his.

Every dresser drawer was hanging open and the night table was on its side. The mattress had been flipped over and sliced open, foam stuffing littered on the floor.

The window in the back was open, and I could smell the slight scent of what passes for “outside” up here. There were glastic pebbles all over the floor, and I could hear them still pinging against the ground outside, bouncing off one another two stories below.

I heard a grunt from outside, and raced over to stick my head out the window. Glasstic can be shattered, but when it does it distributes the kinetic force such that it bursts into rounded beads that can't cut the person unlucky enough to hit so hard they manage to break the stuff. It takes some serious force to do it, but there's something about the way it's designed such that if, say, a bullet hits it the bullet will bounce away. If a body hits it, its kinetic force distributed over a wide area, the glass will break rather than let a person (or a chair, or whatever) be damaged by hitting it and then reabsorbing all that force back into themselves. In short, whoever did this was a beast, since there wasn't anything next to the window that would have been used to break it. Down below, though, all I could see was a big shape taking off on foot down the alley.

"Hey, you!" I shouted, but they were gone – audibly huffing – around the corner and up the street.

"Ernesto had caught up to me by now and ran into the room. "Dioses de mios," he said, "Are you alright?"

I nodded my head still watching down the alleyway. My brain caught up with me and I slung my mini-around from behind me and pointed it at the floor, the pebbles of glasstic, the window frame, and then panned the alleyway outside. "Just got to get a picture of this," I panted. I let it capture images for a few seconds, then looked back at the alleyway, let my computer slide back around behind me again, took a breath, and felt the adrenelin poisoning kick in.

I was shaking like a leaf, and my heart was racing.

"Holy shit," I huffed.

"Amen," Ernesto whispered, and I reached out and put my hand on his shoulder. "Oh, Jesus H., this is fucking creepy." I looked around at the ransacked bedroom – the office had probably been gone over,

too, but it was already such a wreck we hadn't noticed. "Fucking A," I said, "This is Stronklin's bedroom."

"Yes," Ernesto said. He was looking at the diplomas, the old photos of a young Stronklin standing around with various elder scientists and researchers, geeks from way the hell back in the day, most likely the people he worked with when the Deus was born.

Ernesto covered his mouth with his right hand, his right elbow propped on his left hand, left arm folded over his chest.

"I think my morbid curiosity is satisfied," he finally said to one of the pictures. "I would like to leave now."

"No problem," I replied, and we were down the stairs and out the front door in a flash.

Once we were outside, I stepped to the corner and glanced around it, but I couldn't see anyone there. Whoever had been in Stronklin's place before us was long gone. I thought I could hear heavy, running footsteps in the distance, but then I wasn't sure if it was that or the monorail clacking along in the distance. Ernesto stood behind me, peeking past, and we were both silent for a long time, just watching.

"Do you think they are still there?" he whispered.

I shook my head. "Maybe," I whispered back. "They could be hiding in a side-alley or something, waiting for us to leave. But I don't like the idea of going down there and us getting jumped, and I don't think we'd find them if they're just trying to get away."

Ernesto sighed a little, one long, low exhalation of a breath that sounded like it had been held for a hundred years.

We turned back the way we came, waited a few seconds around the corner for the sound of anyone approaching, then walked on when

it remained quiet.

This time I slid my hand into the crook of his arm, and we walked at a more leisurely pace.

"Who the hell was that?"

"Dunno," I replied. "Perhaps another morbid curiosity-seeker?" I looked up and smiled a little at Ernesto and he smirked back.

"OK, perhaps it was too much to ask to go inside."

I wave my hand to indicate I wasn't serious. "Nah, it was great. A little excitement up here is always welcome."

Ernesto waggled his eyebrows and then we both laughed. All the energy left from the rush I'd felt upstairs came out in a long, loud string of guffaws, and we were both bent double laughing in short order.

We laughed all the way to the end of the street, then another block, and finally I was reduced to gasping and wiping my eyes. Ernesto was, of course, better together than I was, and finally I was just sagged against him as we continued on.

"Oh, by the by," Ernesto said after a few moments. "I found this in there." He reached into his hip pocket and produced a scrap of paper.

"What?" I was aghast at the thought he had lifted something from the place – hell, I'd been watching him most of the time and hadn't even seen it.

Ernesto smiled a little more widely. "It was on the floor, but it wasn't near any other papers, and it didn't smell like the rest of the place."

I opened my mouth and then closed it again and thought for a few steps. Come to think of it, the place had smelled very faintly of disinfectant, like a hospital or a morgue. The cleanup crew had been

through, naturally. I held the piece of paper up to my nose and it smelled faintly of cheap cologne, but no disinfectant.

"This wasn't there when they scrubbed the place," I said.

"Thus..." Ernesto let the conclusion speak for itself.

"Oh my gods. Do you think the guy we chased off dropped it?"

Ernesto gestured with his left hand, palm up, held out. "I can only assume so."

I unfolded the piece of paper, and written on it in blue ink in a spidery little scrawl – the hand of someone who had tried and utterly failed to learn perfect cursive handwriting – a phone number and "304."

"Mean anything to you?" I asked, reading off the number.

"No," he said, laughing a little. "But I am remarkably new in town."

"Fair enough," I muttered, and then I folded the piece of paper back up and started to stick it in my pocket.

"Fuck!" I cried, and then we both stopped in our tracks and I dug the piece of paper back out. From my wallet, I produced the card Mary Sawyer had given me. The handwriting was different, but the phone number she had given me and the number on the scrap of paper were the same.

We walked the rest of the way back to my apartment, where we'd dumped Ernesto's bags after he arrived. Ernesto put his clothes away in my mostly-empty closet – I tend to travel light – and we settled in for the night. As exhausted and bothered as I was by finding someone snooping in Stronklin's house – and the direct connection between that unknown person and my newest client – I was exhausted. Between the sex I'd had in the booth at Stan's and the

excitement at Stronklin's, I would have had trouble not sleeping, frankly.

Ernesto wanted to discuss what to do about Miss Sawyer – Ms., he reminded me – but I was dead asleep the second I hit the pillow.

And then I dreamt.

My dream itself was nothing terribly outside the ordinary, at least at first: a cataloguing of the day's events. Admittedly, today's events were more exciting than most, but the early images of my dream – Stronklin's house, the scrap of paper, Ernesto half-clothed and steaming up the privacy screen at Stan's – were all easily explained.

At one point, I thought I'd awoken. I looked over at the window and I saw Ernesto silhouetted against the lights of Diana City, three-quarters turned away. Earth was visible on the horizon, a giant reminder of home and how far we were from it, Africa turning lazily underneath us. A hurricane was forming in the Atlantic, visible as a huge, white swirl like whipped cream. Ernesto turned to look at me and said, "Lightning," and then I looked back at the Earth. Flashes of light broke out in the atmosphere, and I knew he was watching the same storm. I wondered how we could see the lightning from this far away, but he shook his head at me. "Here," he said, and the lights outside rose to a brighter and brighter glow as he turned his head back to watch. A hum started to fill the air and then he turned to face me. I'd reached up to shield my face from the glow and I knew the light was about to climax in a massive thunderclap. "Do not cover your eyes," he said. "Darkness is death." I lowered my hand as the light streamed in, almost solid in its intensity, and then a single flash knocked me back on the bed.

I awoke, covered in sweat, my heart racing. Ernesto was sound

asleep beside me.

I was breathing hard, and when I went to the bathroom to wash my face and take a whiz I realized my hands were shaking and my pulse was still accelerated. It took several minutes to slow down, and the whole time I had a growing sense of dread, terrible anticipation, like I'd seen something bad happen and was waiting for the other shoe to drop – for the car perched on the cliff to tumble forward, or the falling body to hit the pavement on a street below.

It took me a long time to fall asleep, but before I did I reached over and picked up my journal to write one question:

Why is the power still on at Stronklin's house?

Root Shell – Chapter Four

The next morning I posed this question to Ernesto and he shrugged it off.

“Does the power automatically get turned off when someone dies?”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “If no one's around to pay the bill.”

Ernesto arched his eyebrows for a second in consideration. For all his visual perfection yesterday, he'd awoken with bedhead like you wouldn't believe. One shower later, he was dressed in ratty jeans and a black t-shirt with a goth band logo on it. It was as different a look as I could have imagined for him, and I wondered if the fashion sense of a chameleon came with his work. Regardless of how many different work identities I assumed in a given time, the uniform was almost always the same. For him, though, his job was almost nothing *but* supplying a desired visual style. He probably had a million different looks he could pull off as easily as any other.

Me, I was dressed in a pair of wrinkled khakis and a plain white t-shirt, my hair pointing eighty different ways. Ernesto looked as fresh as a daisy.

We talked a little about Ernesto's job – he's done this gig for two years, and finds it rewarding. I was a little surprised by this but he shrugged it off. “Everyone needs companionship. Some can only find it in one place and way. That's just how it is, and at least they find it somewhere.”

We both wanted to talk about Mary Sawyer's number being found in Stronklin's house, but I think we were both also eager to acclimate to one another. We had a lot on our plates at the time.

Finally, I said to Ernesto, “Yesterday you said I was a dream

come true. What do you mean?'

Ernesto blushed a little and smiled slightly. "Just that."

I grinned and blushed even harder. "I'm complimented, but..." I paused and shook my head. "There was something about the way you said it, and..." I hesitated again. I couldn't put my finger on exactly why I was bringing it up, so I had trouble figuring out what to say. "Well, the way you said that we should go into Stronklin's..." I trailed off again. "It was like there was more to it."

Ernesto looked down at his breakfast taco from Pizza del Rio – reconstituted eggs, soysage and a little nonfat cheese – and smiled slightly. "You will think it very silly," he said softly.

I raised both eyebrows at him in surprise. "After the crazy shit I unloaded on you yesterday? Give it a whirl."

"After the first night we spoke," he said, and then he sighed. "What are your religious views?"

I blinked.

"Honestly?"

"Yes."

"I think religion is a sedative for minds that question but don't like the answers they find." Ernesto nodded slightly as I spoke. "I think it's a raft of easy answers that break down the second we question them. If there's a benevolent god, why does it not care that people starve in Asia, or die in earthquakes, or car accidents? If it wants us to fend for ourselves to some degree, why draw that line? How can someone be murdered in an alleyway and it be a terrible tragedy no one can do anything about, but someone who miraculously survives a tornado claim God saved their lives? Why save one person and not another? Either God is a terribly cruel prankster or he's just up there rolling the dice every time something happens. Which of

those is an acceptable entity to pray to?" I realized I was grimacing and getting more terse, more vindictive, the further along I got, and I capped it with: "If those are my choices, I'll take Hell, thanks."

Ernesto smiled and looked me in the eye. "And what of other gods?"

I arched one eyebrow. "What, Satan? Or do you mean... Buddha, or whatever?"

Ernesto shook his head and chuckled. "OK, I do not mean Satan." He smiled at me. "Such drama! What turned you so violently against religion?"

I waved a hand and took a bite of breakfast. "Other than the idiocy their leaders spew at their cultists?"

Ernesto gave a little *ah* of understanding and took a bite. After a few moments he sighed slightly. "Well, the reason I said that – about the dream – is that I dreamt of coming up here, and dreamt that the secret you held was important. Not just interesting, but important. In my dream, you were marked as someone who would become powerful in a way no one can foresee or counteract. In my dream, I was instructed to aid you in that metamorphosis." He shrugged at me. "In my religion, dreams are messages from the gods."

I fought hard – and managed – not to roll my eyes. "What religion is that?" My voice was limp.

"I am a ceremonial magician," Ernesto said, matter-of-fact. "It is a form of neopaganism."

"Like, crystals and seances and stuff?" My question was sincere, but I sounded like an asshole.

"More like fires and symbols and alchemy as a metaphor for spiritual transformation and calling on the powers that lie just beyond our five senses." Ernesto gazed at me evenly. This was, I knew

instantly, a test.

“Does it mean we have to go to church tomorrow?”

“I do not go to 'church,'" he replied. He emphasized the last word as though it were distasteful. “I study and meditate and do ritual works to advance my understanding.”

“As long as we can sleep in on Sunday, I'm good,” I said, and I winked. He smiled after a few moments, and I'd passed the test.

“Besides,” he said, “In the absence of three of the elements, I think this place is probably dead to magick.”

I blinked at him, but he was tucked into his breakfast taco and we finished the meal without discussing what he meant by that remark.

The day's work would, according to Mary Sawyer, have been for us to investigate “whatever Stronklin was into,” but in light of finding her number on a scrap of paper dropped by an intruder into Stronklin's home, and our collective certainty that she was lying to us to some degree or another, we focused instead on how to broach the subject of her dishonesty when we met later that night. I was of the opinion that we should be a bit cagey about it, play dumb about the Deus and see if it annoyed her, perhaps even act like we were investigating precisely as she directed and wait to see if she slipped up in a fit of impatience. Ernesto, to his credit, wanted to call her up immediately and tell her we knew something was going on and demand the full story. I don't operate that way, though – I generally don't unload the big guns until I've packed some serious powder – so we agreed to see what we could find out about her on our own and then see what happened when we met later on.

That gave us the whole day to look into things. We started by

placing a call to Diana's Bow and asking for room 304, then watching what number came up on my mini's display when he started to transfer us. Being able to see the direct line to which one is sent when one is transferred is a handy little tool in the industrial spy game. I hung up as soon as we'd seen the number and confirmed it was the same number as was on the scrap of paper Ernesto had found and was also the number Sawyer had given us when she hired us the night before.

That put us slightly ahead of the game – whoever was in Stronklin's place had also been in touch with Mary Sawyer or, an outside chance, had followed or otherwise monitored her. Either way, they were someone who searched Stronklin's bedroom and probably his office as well. They exhibited no interest in Foster's bedroom or the kitchen, so they weren't just someone after a grotesque memento. I'd read on the wires that there were already fake Stronklin “artifacts” showing up at online auction sites, claimed to have been stolen from “the moon's first crime scene.” Not the most appetizing curio to stick on the mantle, in my opinion, but people will buy anything. Whoever they were, they were after one of three things: money Stronklin might have stashed, a will or some other sort of information that could lead to control of his assets, or information about the Deus. The money angle was unlikely – cash gets used up here, but sparingly. This was another point Ernesto had made, later, to shore up our theory that Sawyer was one rich cat, given she surely understood I took payment in cash only.

The will or other controlling document for the corporation CodeBlue was a possibility, but what good would it do? This isn't the 19th century, and merely holding a deed in one's hand does not equate to owning a given thing, like in some bad western where the villain

pops up with a stolen deed and claims ownership over the hero's ranch. The same goes for the will – unless the point was to destroy it, and further obfuscate the issue of who owned what, taking it would do no good. Besides, we all knew from the papers that his will was locked in a safe deposit box in Switzerland. The anonymity and privacy assured by the Swiss banking system meant that it would take a little time to wrangle that will out into the light of day but it also guaranteed that whoever was named in the will – if it's anyone other than Foster, whose death his father may not have been firmly enough rooted in reality to plan for – would have an iron-clad argument that the business was theirs. If no one was named in the will, or it otherwise failed to accommodate the current situation, that was just another way to keep the court battles going forever. The United States wanted this over with and settled in an American court, so they had no reason to prolong the fight in any way. The United Nations wanted it over with quickly as well, but their preferred means – auctioning it to the highest bidder and washing their hands of the affair – was equally served by the official status of Stronklin's estate being in limbo. So, neither of them had a reason to do anything about the will other than wait for whatever Swiss bank had it to get done identifying which anonymous lockbox contained it. If Sawyer was hoping to turn up a will Stronklin had written up here on the moon that would name her as the heir then she'd also have to be reasonably certain she could prove she was really his niece – something I found highly unlikely.

That meant the only really feasible explanation was that the person in Stronklin's house last night was after something that would lead them to the Deus – perhaps they knew that explicitly and perhaps they didn't – and they were linked directly to Mary Sawyer. Whoever it was, though, the person we'd chased out of Stronklin's house was *not*

Mary Sawyer herself. The note wasn't in her handwriting and the huffing and puffing I'd heard as the big, round shape of that trespasser whipped around the corner at the end of the alley and off into the night was nothing like her voice or her frame.

So the question I was left with was, did Mary Stronklin hire some muscle to snoop around the place, or was she working for someone? I didn't like either of those possibilities. The first time I got involved with Stronklin's pet project in any serious way, I'd gotten roughed up by his "son," Foster. I didn't look forward to having yet another thug bearing down on me.

In the meantime, if we were going to find out anything about Mary Sawyer herself, we were going to have to devote some serious research cycles to it. The problem there is that there are some serious limitations on our data links to Earth when we're above decks. The reason should be obvious: everything up here is reliant on computers, and it had been decided sixty years ago – well before the moon was being protected by an aggressive, self-coding firewall – that Diana City could not risk being open to Earth's network. The networks you use, below decks, are constantly under assault, passing virii, traversed by worms, penetrated by bored kids in their basements at four in the morning because they can't find anything better to do. Public networks are a nightmare for security workers, and Diana City simply wasn't connected. There were periodic, highly monitored windows of access to transfer email and the like, and the voice network had its own separate access, and otherwise Diana City tried to mirror selections of the global internet locally to maintain – as in all things – the illusion of normalcy and connectedness. When we check a news site up here, we're getting something a few hours old. When we read our email, it's because it's after 4pm DST and the mail has been

delivered. If we run a search or check a discussion group, it's local only, supplemented with backups of major sites and common repositories and library collections.

The bottom line here is that we couldn't just google – an archaic term, I realize, but I'm a nerd – Mary Sawyer and find out her life story like if we were down below. Limited as our options might be, though, we did still have options. Specifically, security at the spaceports below decks and up here was tight as a drum, and identities were confirmed coming and going, boarding and leaving. Both Ernesto and I, and everyone else who's ever stepped foot on the moon, knows the drill: on the way off the ship you have to rescan your passport and your iris and fingerprints. It's fast, but it's done, and it's reliable – and it's double-checked against the info loaded at boarding, and verified at check-in. Now, we just had to access that and we could at least determine Mary Sawyer's real identity. That, plus the fact we were pretty sure she was lying and the knowledge she was connected to (another) breaking and entering at Stronklin's place? That was worth loading the big guns.

The problem was getting past the very same firewall we ourselves had started to refer to as the Deus in order to get at that information.

The obvious choice to get around the Deus, naturally, was the kid I'd tasked with trying to talk to it: Jimmy. I'd never asked Jimmy's last name, and somehow sensed that he would resent my asking as though it were some deep and private information I'd begged that he divulge. Jimmy is your typical fifteen year old genius: furtive and dismally self-interested. Everything, naturally, happens because of, for and to him. If it is beneficial, he is light as a feather and

magnanimous beyond compare. If it is a challenge or – far worse – a defeat, it is a plot by the universe to stymie his efforts, whatever they are.

That said, I like Jimmy. I'm not as smart as he is, and his programming skills already far surpass mine despite the twenty years I've got on him, but who isn't a dick when they're fifteen? You have to sympathize with his position: cut off from any normal life and surrounded by the flimsy pseudo-reality of daily life in Diana City, his father one of the best engineers in his field and thus continually re-upped for tours of duty that keep his son trapped here as well? It would be a hell of a way to spend high school.

On the way to Jimmy's place, his father's townhouse in one of the residential rings, its basement turned into Jimmy's prototype of a bachelor pad as it might look after being hit by a nerd tsunami, I was forced to go back to the question of the electricity at Stronklin's place. Why was the power still on? Yeah, Ernesto had a point – it had only been three weeks, short notice for the power to be cut, and maybe things up here don't work like they do below decks, anyway – but it still nagged at me for some reason. Something in my subconscious was gnawing on it and I suspected I wouldn't like what it found at the center.

On the other hand, in all honesty, it could simply be that I didn't like the experience altogether and my brain was trying to latch onto something other than an emotional explanation. Going back to Stronklin's had made me think uncomfortably of the old saw that the criminal always returns to the scene of the crime. Maybe it was latent guilt for what had happened to Stronklin and his son that night, but I had spent the previous three weeks reminding myself that all I did was punch Foster in making my escape. I couldn't control the fact his

father had ultimately responded with a homicidal rage and a suicidal sense of defeat. Perhaps it was my discomfort with their emotions and my own response to them that made me want to shy away from emotional analyses of what I felt now that I'd been back there again. Having Ernesto with me had, it turned out, been pretty good psychological insurance – given me something and someone else to focus on at the time rather than simply sit down on the steps in Stronklin's front hall and face everything at once. On the other hand, maybe that's what I'd needed to do. Regardless, now wasn't the time to get into the head-shrinking business, much less on myself. Sitting around second-guessing my feelings about this wouldn't help. Still, something about the lights there... maybe it was my dream, and I just couldn't shake the strangeness of it given it had seemed so real. I hadn't told Ernesto about the dream in light of his, uh, religious preferences. If he thinks dreams are omens then the interpretation he might provide for this one was obvious enough: the light was surely a warning, a sign of impending doom of some sort. I didn't want to get him freaked out for no reason, and neither did I want to hear a bunch of pseudo-intellectual spiritual babble. That sounds harsh, but I was fairly nonplussed by this “neopagan” flake business. None for me, thanks. Ernesto didn't seem interested in pushing it on me, though, which was good. He could worship whatever invisible parents in the sky he wants as long as he doesn't expect me to sing along on the hymns.

The walk from my place to Jimmy's was over before I knew it – Ernesto was content to enjoy the people-watching the whole way, commenting here and there on the sterilized Disney-like nature of everything. There was a corner drug store every third corner in the residential district, a music store precisely two singles or one B-side

remix's length from the first layers of domestic real estate. The restaurants were equally represented, but interspersed in a different pattern from one section of the retail ring to another. No restaurant on the edges of residential had more than ten tables, but none in the commercial ring we passed through as a short-cut had fewer than thirty. The population of Diana City contained an almost precise distribution of the ethnic makeup of the Western Hemisphere and the economically developed portions of the Eastern, or at least did on our walk there. He noticed all these things and would mention them from time to time, with little commentary from me as we walked arm-in-arm. He had donned a light sport jacket to go over his t-shirt and jeans, a pair of shiny black combat boots on his feet. "Only boots," he said that morning as he got dressed and did the last of his unpacking. "Much more comfortable."

When we reached Jimmy's place, I had timed our arrival so that Jimmy's dad – an aggressive and abusive conspiracy theorist convinced "the government" was out to get him for brilliant transgressions that take place only in his imagination – would be asleep. Beef – yes, that is his name – would have gotten off the night shift two hours before. That gave him plenty of time to do whatever he did to unwind upon getting home and then sack out. I imagined him sealing the windows and then crawling under the covers until they were pulled over his head stapled to the corners of the bed and lined with fresh tin foil to keep out the mind control rays, Beef transforming himself into some beached and paranoid whale under a protective tarp, Greenpeace officials clucking their tongues and checking the corners and wondering when the tide would come back in.

I knocked twice, waited ten seconds and knocked again.

"Clubhouse knock?" Ernesto smiled softly.

"They're... weird," I said and we laughed a little.

"You are bothered by something," Ernesto added.

"Long story. A..." Well, I'd obsessed about it the whole way here, so fuck it. "I had a weird dream last night that I can't shake."

Ernesto raised both eyebrows, widened his eyes a little and made a silent 'oh' with his mouth, lips pursed. I'm a lucky man – he didn't pry.

The bolts inside slid back, one by one, and eventually Jimmy blinked at us from the darkness within. "C'mon i--" He stopped and glared at Ernesto.

"Friend of mine, up for a visit," I said briskly. I wasn't really ready to discuss the birds and the bees with Jimmy.

"Whatever," he mumbled, and disappeared into the gloom. I stepped in to follow and Ernesto came behind me a few moments and boot scuffs on the welcome mat later.

I looked back and put my index finger to my lips to indicate silence, then pointed upstairs. I was referring to Beef, but Ernesto of course didn't know that. Still, he nodded his head and crept along somewhat theatrically behind me, a grin on his face. I stifled a giggle and that earned a dramatic little glare from Jimmy. He opened the door down to the basement and did his platformer videogame routine – the first two steps as normal, skip the third, wait three seconds on the fourth, put one's weight against the wall to the left for the next two steps, and so on. I had learned this little dance in the weeks we'd been working on the Deus, and Ernesto was a quick learner. I went slowly where I could, and he mimicked my actions perfectly so that the three of us arrived downstairs in total silence. Jimmy hit a button he'd messily wired to the side of his desk and the door into the basement closed on a hydraulic arm he'd installed himself. There was only a sigh

of mechanical work from the door as it sealed itself again.

Ernesto scanned the room – a bed hidden somewhere in a far corner, half-buried in clothes and old food cartons, bookshelves piled with books in anything but the proper position for shelving, and magazines, videogame boxes, old data crystals, music, schoolbooks and anything else you can imagine simply scattered all over the floor. Milk crates filled with all the detritus of teen life were tossed to and fro around the place and there were exactly two seats that had been cleared: Jimmy's stolen office chair, probably locked to the carpet in front of his desk, and one cleared corner of said desk, where I sit when we're talking about the Deus. Ernesto glanced around, saw an old armchair covered in books and magazines and socks, and started to excavate it.

“No, that's...” but Jimmy trailed off as Ernesto glared right back at him in a professional reconstruction of the look Jimmy had given him in the doorway. Jimmy fell silent, and Ernesto set everything neatly on the floor, sat down in the chair, and smiled prettily as the stack of crap that he'd set to one side teetered and collapsed in a heap.

Jimmy is straggly and gangly – tall and very, very thin with deep circles under his eyes at all times from the late nights he keeps coding, gaming or whatever. I'd heard there were some pretty active online leagues up here, and did not doubt that Jimmy was probably feared among their ranks. If he attacked foes like he attacks problems, they never stood a chance. He has pale brown hair and pale skin and an acne problem emphasized by the coke-bottle glasses he wears when the contacts wear out his eyes. I asked him once why he didn't just get the surgery you can have done, and he huffed and fluttered his messy bangs with air pushed out of his bottom lip. “Are you kidding

me? The error rate on those things is unacceptable.” Then he'd snorted and repeated a generic urban legend – 'everyone's heard about the guy,' he said, but I was pretty sure he'd made it up on the spot – about the kid who's a painting prodigy until the laser is off by a nanometer or two and now he's a colorblind and embittered critic who only writes bad reviews. Dumb, yes, but that's how it goes when you talk to Jimmy about something and he decides he knows more than you do. The error rate he finds so unacceptable is something in the neighborhood of a ten thousandth of a percent. That's Jimmy for you.

We were all quiet for a few moments and I remembered my manners suddenly. “Jimmy, this is my friend Ernesto.”

Ernesto waved his fingers at Jimmy in mock flirtation.

Jimmy eyed Ernesto for a long moment and then said, “Is he your prostitute?”

If I'd had a drink in my hand I'd have done a spit-take. As it was, I had to be satisfied by staring at him. Ernesto giggled behind his hand. I narrowed my eyes after a few moments – Jimmy was already blushing – and cleared my throat. “Don't be a little shit.” I then turned to Ernesto, gestured extravagantly at Jimmy, and said, “Meet the little shit. I mean, Jimmy.”

“Are you a rap artist?” Ernesto asked. Jimmy and I both were unsure what he meant, and the dumb look on Jimmy's face spoke for both of us. “Ah, too bad,” Ernesto went on. “Li'l Shit might be a good stage name, and no one's using it yet.”

If Jimmy is the king of the asshole teenager remark, Ernesto is King of the Land of Non-Sequitors.

We both stared at Ernesto for a few moments and then I turned to Jimmy. “We need some information on someone who got to Diana City recently,” I said. Jimmy creased his forehead and raised one

eyebrow.

“What kind of info?”

“Name, anything else we can come up with. I have a picture, and a likely fake name and a room number at the Bow.”

I transferred the info to Jimmy's setup and he set to typing. While he's working, I know not to bother him. I sat back and cleaned my fingernails while he tapped away and subvocalized into his headset. The room was nothing but tip-taps and soft whispers for a minute or two while Jimmy checked public information, then ran the picture through a database he could access somewhere, and finally he stopped typing and did nothing but whisper into the computer, his commands growing more terse and annoyed one after another.

Ernesto gazed around the room, winked at me and then settled into watching Jimmy work. Eventually I, too, had stopped paying attention to anything else and we sat there watching the angry red blotches show up in Jimmy's face as he issued one near-silent command after another, apparently to no avail. Finally he yanked the plug for his headset out of the front of his gear and cursed.

“It's a toughie, eh?” I asked.

“Some of my backdoors just closed,” he mumbled. “And the public directories are turning up shit.”

I nodded. “You think the Deus is catching up with your established routes?”

Jimmy shook his head. “I don't know. The backdoors I have are old – they're well-documented in the local community.” Jimmy knew, after a fashion, almost everyone up here who can get into anything they're not supposed to. His dad runs the chapter of 2600 up here, but won't let anyone discuss anything remotely risky – not even in a context of learning how to protect systems from intrusion. Paranoia,

remember? Jimmy, I suspect, has facilitated something quite different via his online persona. "But they just closed up all of a sudden."

"Let Charles try," Ernesto said. They were the first words he'd spoken in several minutes, and we both looked at him, then at each other. I shrugged.

"I'm willing, but Jimmy's better than me."

Jimmy smiled a smug little smirk.

"Do it," Ernesto said again, and his voice had a harder – not harsh, but firm – edge than before.

Jimmy, accustomed as he is to the voice of authority, stood up and stepped aside. I stood from my leaning perch on Jimmy's desk and shrugged again, at Jimmy. "I'll try not to break anything," I said, jokingly.

"Better not," Jimmy mumbled. His ego was now doubly wounded – he'd failed in what should have been an easy assignment, and he'd knuckled under to Ernesto's commanding tone without hesitation.

I slid into the seat and started typing. Jimmy had shortcuts for a lot of his paths into the nether-regions of Diana City's networks, and I tried to make use of them. I'm an old-school hacker, myself – I love to know how things work, and why, and that's half of how I ended up in the industrial espionage business to begin with. Sarah, my boss at my "contracting" firm, is an old colleague of mine. We used to do some risky business of an entirely other sort – I'd rather not explain – and one day she said to me, "We're getting out of this and putting your nosy ass to work," and six months later we were a snoop shop. My professional education, though, is in engineering – computers, security, programming. I am good at my job, and will not hide behind false humility to claim otherwise. Still, Jimmy *is* at least as good as me, and he knew his way around his own system far better than I

could. His shortcuts proved fairly fruitless for me – access denied here, no such server there, all the obfuscatory and invisible layers of various forms of network security standing between me and whatever information the network might hold on Mary Sawyer just as those systems were designed to do.

“Ask it nicely,” Ernesto said. His voice was quiet again, and he was sitting very still. He hadn't moved since he'd suggested I do it, and in my periphery I got the sense he was practically holding his breath.

“What?” I said.

“Ask it.” His voice wasn't authoritative now, but urgent, almost pleading. I picked up Jimmy's headset, plugged it back in and then hooked it over my right ear.

I had no idea what Ernesto was getting at, but something in my hands and my body caused them to move themselves so that I realized suddenly that I'd pulled up one of the pictures of Mary Sawyer I'd snapped when we were in the booth at Stan's, my mini recording everything in silence as I always had it do.

“Show me,” I said, then paused, then cleared my throat. “Show me who this person is.”

“Nicely,” Ernesto whispered.

“Please?” My voice wavered a little. Jimmy was gawking at us like we were mad, and we were all very still for a few moments.

Suddenly I remembered that part of my dream again, when Ernesto turned away from the window and warned me of the flash of light. I clapped my hands over my eyes reflexively, and I heard both Jimmy and Ernesto gasp.

I waited a few seconds, and then peeked out between my fingers. The flash of light had never come, but the screen had

changed.

The life of Madelaine Lorraine, aka Mary Sawyer, was displayed on the screen in front of me. Glancing over it I saw photos from the spaceport security cameras, credit card records, shopping receipts, everything that could possibly be stored up here, including a home address back on Earth.

Her records had been pulled and delivered in an instant.

"Thank you," I whispered into the microphone.

"I knew it," Ernesto muttered to himself, and then he clapped his hands and grinned. "I knew it!"

"What the fuck just happened," Jimmy choked out.

I stared at the screen. I had no idea why it had responded to a verbal request from me.

I didn't consciously realize it, but I'd just made the mental leap to thinking of "it" as something other than fancy software – but I wasn't at all ready to say what "it" was outloud.

"It likes you," Ernesto said after a long silence. Later he told me he'd been trying to give me a few moments to absorb what had happened, what he said he knew would happen. Instead, I gaped at him.

"You've got to be kidding."

Ernesto lifted both hands in a slow shrug. "It gave you what you wanted, didn't it?"

I shook my head at him, and then shook my head at the screen. "That's insane."

"No, it is sensible," Ernesto quietly replied.

"How?"

Jimmy was still silent, ping-ponging between us as we spoke.

"You said that Stronklin tried to worship it, pray to it. But you also say he was arrogant and powerful and domineering. He probably did worship it – and when he didn't get what he wanted, he became angry, vindictive, embittered. Imagine an old man trudging into the same lab or office or what have you for decades, day after day, hoping for something and never getting it. You say you think he retarded the mental capacities of his cloned "son" to keep him obedient – do you think the Deus Ex Machina is dumb to all of this? It has the capacity to monitor the world around it, Charles. It lives in computers, computers which take our picture and listen to our voices at all times. It can see and understand us, despite how different our world may be. Stronklin probably frightened it. And you, it can tell, are different." Ernesto said all of this like he was reading off a weather report, just business as usual. I knew, instantly, that he had gone over this little speech in his head.

"Where did you get that idea?" I asked him quietly.

"It occurred to me immediately upon your telling of the story last night." He smiled sweetly. "It is what makes sense. If the thing," and he gestured at the wall of computers and electronics I referred to as Jimmy's setup, "If it is alive, if it is intelligent, then it has some sort of system for input and response, like emotions. Probably not 'emotions,' per se, not as we understand them, but the psychological interaction of feedback and response is probably somewhat similar. At any rate, if that is true, Stronklin probably frightened it." Ernesto nodded at the wall of computers again. "But you are not him, not like him. You have been kind to it."

I shook my head a little and gulped air.

"That's a bunch of crazy shit." Jimmy's pronouncement was

final, from his perspective. He punched me on the shoulder. "That is some CRAZY. SHIT." He stage-whispered the repeat, as though I hadn't heard him the first time. "Your fuck buddy is a nutcase."

I held up my right hand in the universal symbol for Shut The Fuck Up, Kid. "Ernesto," I said, and my voice shook a little. "Do you know anything about programming?"

"Not a bit, mon chere," he said, and the French came out beautifully with his Latin accent.

"Case closed," Jimmy said with a wave of his hands.

"But I do know power disparities and relationships between the user and the used," Ernesto said to me, ignoring Jimmy – Jimmy might as well not have been in the room. "I know how I respond, how anyone responds, when offered kindness rather than anger." He raised his eyebrows as though to challenge any sort of derogatory response. "If it is thinking, then it is also feeling. The two are inextricable. Perhaps a roboticist or a programmer or a biologist would disagree, but we observe emotion-like behavior in creatures far removed from the world of sentience. Emotions do not go away as one gains brain-power. They intensify."

I sucked in a short breath, let it out, then heaved a huge sigh. He was right. I didn't know why, but I could feel it deep down in my bones. I kept seeing that image of him in front of the window, from my dream.

"Ernesto," I asked, "What *exactly* did you dream that made you come here?"

Ernesto licked his lips and smiled a little. "You will not like it," he said, but I shrugged. He went on. "I dreamt that you were the moon's first shaman." I shook my head, as I didn't understand what he meant, and he held up a hand. "A shaman speaks to the spirits of

his people and delivers their wisdom – as cures, advice, whatever is needed by the community. A shaman enters the world of the spirits on his people's behalf. He is tested continually. He is often in spiritual danger. He is not allowed to hold political authority in most shamanic societies, but he is the holder of wisdom and mysteries. He knows things the others do not know, and he will fight for his people even when they do not appreciate the struggle at hand.” Ernesto shrugged at me. “It is not a fun job, quite frankly, but it is necessary. I dreamt that you would be the first one here to speak to the spirits of the moon, to go into their world and bring back knowledge and secrets that would be needed by the people here.” Ernesto sat back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. “You will think I am mad, now.”

I leaned back in the chair. Jimmy had his back to us now, facing his audience – the one in his head, anyway – and was quietly declaiming how he was the only sane person in the world, we were all a trial sent from above to test his rationale, et cetera.

The fact was, I did think what Ernesto was saying was, frankly, insane. But at the same time, the information Jimmy – as good or better than I am – had failed to get was sitting in front of me.

“Why would this happen?” I asked.

“Because there is something terrible happening here.” Ernesto was hushed and intent, leaned forward to rest his elbow on his knees. “Because the moon is about to need a shaman.”

“What's going to happen?”

“I do not know. But it is going to be bad, unless it is stopped.”

“Deadly?”

“I dreamt of death and destruction, yes, but I could tell that they were figurative. The Powers do not often warn of physical calamities.

My personal suspicion is that they do not understand the physical world and its dangers, or do not care. They speak of spiritual dangers, psychological ones. My religion is one of the mind and of growth, not calamity and redemption. There is a sickness here that will spread and infect everything and everyone, taint all it touches, and I cannot qualify it otherwise." He shook his head. "I came here because I felt that you have a mission. I believe there are those here who can help. But he main – pardon the phrase – savior in the fight to come. And the Deus is the spirit that will help you."

"Is Mary Sawyer/Maddie Lorraine the enemy?"

Ernesto closed his eyes and rubbed them. "No. But she is close to its heart. I dreamt this last night, after meeting her."

I nodded, and turned to look at the information on the screen. None of this made rational sense – none of what Ernesto was saying – but in my gut I felt that there was something big going on and I couldn't deny that it felt as important to me as he was making it sound to all of us. I am a man of ration, but I have said before that sometimes the only thing we have to go on is our gut, and mine was in a knot of anticipation.

"Let's go find Maddie Lorraine and ask her what the fuck is going on," I said.

Root Shell – Chapter Five

We left Jimmy declaiming to the Senate of the mind, and showed ourselves out. I think he was half terrified of the crazy talk between Ernesto and me and half pissed as all fuck that I'd gotten the info he hadn't been able to access.

It occurred to me out on the street that in fact he was probably also pissed at the possibility that the Deus responds to me but not him despite it being his project to figure out how to communicate with it. Still, if Ernesto was right – a mammoth “if” if ever one there were – then I could see the Deus thinking of Jimmy as just another Stronklin: half-cajoling, half-threatening, arrogant, full of himself. It made sense, in a twisted, senseless sort of way.

Just like real emotions, a part of me said.

Shut the fuck up *right now*, the rest of me answered.

We needed to stop off at my place before hitting Stan's so I could dump some of the data I'd collected to crystal and get ready for the big showdown. The plan was to go to Stan's, call Mary aka Maddie, tell her we had some information and ask her to meet us there. I was going to play it cool and then drop the big info bomb when we were face to face. Along the way, I reviewed some of the information on her in my heads-up. I looped my hand through Ernesto's elbow so he could navigate while I read. Mary Sawyer was obviously just a pseudonym she came up with. It pulled nothing from the Diana City info well. Maddie Lorraine, however, was a wealthy divorcee who lived in New New Orleans. She'd gotten divorced a few years ago and landed an enormous settlement according to her credit history. She had a dozen lines of credit with the most exclusive credit card companies – not the million-a-day mass-mailing houses, but a few

select banks that only offer lines of credit to people who could buy the bank anyway. Maddie Lorraine was *loaded*. She was also in no way related to Stronklin. So where was the connection to him and to the Deus? Or was she really just after the intellectual property of CodeBlue and was going to pose as some unknown relative to claim it, throwing a huge monkey wrench into the fight between the UN and the US?

I scrolled back through her data – Diana City, it turns out, stores quite a lot of information about the people who visit it. None of that “what happens on the moon stays on the moon” bullshit from their ads.

Her husband – ex-husband, I reminded myself – was named David Banks. That name rang a bell somewhere, but I set it on a back burner to stew for a minute while I read on. Looked like part of her divorce settlement had been half-ownership in an organization called Concerned Earthlings.

Wait a second.

I tugged on Ernesto's elbow to signal a stop and whispered into the microphone: “Pull all data on David Banks.” Ernesto heard me and nudged me gently. “Please?” I added.

My mini-comp started to whir with activity.

Fuck, I thought. I'd tried to keep the Deus off my machine, and thought it had worked.

But it was right there, too.

“Got something?” Ernesto spoke softly, and gently led us out of the main boulevard and over to the landing of a small, cinder-block building. We'd walked back into the commercial ring for the shortcut back to my place, and I was mildly surprised – then, not so much – to realize Ernesto had learned the way perfectly on the way down to

Jimmy's.

"David Banks. That name mean anything to you?"

Ernesto shook his head no.

"Concerned Earthlings?"

He shook his head again once, twice, then stopped and smiled a little.

"Earthies," he whispered.

As he said it, the file appeared on my heads-up. Concerned Earthlings was a right-wing religious political lobby. They campaigned against the development of Diana City, sixty years ago, and now they were trying to tie up the proceedings on Siang'Nor – the follow-up colony, the one that's supposed to do the *real* scientific work.

His picture appeared and I made a little *hurk* noise. Ernesto raised his eyebrows and I muttered under my breath, "You remember that Earthie preacher standing at the spaceport when you landed last night?"

Ernesto's eyes went wide for half a second, then half-closed.

"I see," he said.

"So," I opined, "She's an Earthie. And she wants to know about the Deus."

Ernesto nodded.

I started turning over theories in my head – obviously they would want to destroy it, as they are in all ways opposed to human habitation of the moon. Were they trying to find out about it so they could expose it? And how would they know about it in the first place?

We walked the last few blocks and back into the residential area in silence. I was deep in circular thought – no scenario I could come up with totally explained the circumstance, and mainly because I couldn't figure out how they knew about the Deus at all. It clearly had the

ability to obfuscate its presence or SentrySoft and everyone else up here with two brain cells left to rub together and a connection to the network would have realized what was going on.

And, I realized, I'd just assigned it a personal ambition: to hide.
Shit.

I was still circling the question of how Mary/Maddie would have learned of the Deus, or learned that there was anything about Stronklin worth investigating, when Ernesto stopped short about a block from my apartment building.

There was a crowd out front, and they were all looking up.
So, we looked up.

Papers and tatters of clothes were falling out of the cloud of smoke where my apartment used to be.

"Aye, dios mio," Ernesto breathed.

"Amen," I said, and then I started to shake as Ernesto clapped his hand over his mouth and tears sprang visibly onto his cheeks.

A blue-helmeted UN policeman – all blond hair and blue eyes and silent anxiety over not really knowing how to handle his job, as soldiers make terrible cops – double-checked something on the screen of his hand-pad and walked over to me.

"You are Charles Fitzgerald," he said through a thick accent.

I nodded dumbly, watching the grey smoke from my apartment turn white as it was overwhelmed by flame suppressant gas. An African in a red jacket and hat leaned out the window and gave a thumbs-up to some other cops below.

"I would ask you questions?" Lars, or whatever his name was, took the elbow of my right arm, my left looped through Ernesto's elbow. He started to pull us to the side, towards a tent. We followed in silent acquiescence.

It had been a flash bomb, Lars told us. Not intended to harm anyone else, they're a holdover from last century's "targeted offense" initiatives – you know, the whole "hurt the bad guys, save the civilians" moves the right wing put on the public as justification for a raft of military spending. This one was an incinerator. It heats everything in an eight-foot radius to five thousand degrees Fahrenheit for a tenth of a second. It chars everything within that radius beyond recognition – that's part of why it was abandoned, it made it next to impossible to identify remains, and in high-profile anti-terror initiatives the identification of a Most Wanted was the whole public relations reason behind the weapon's use in the first place, so it was kind of tossed aside immediately after adoption. At any rate, the effect on a room – or a car, a bunker, a table in a restaurant, et cetera, is that it kills anyone nearby but it doesn't ignite anything beyond its blast radius. You can set one off in a confined space – such as my apartment – and kill a dozen people without anyone else in the place realizing what's happened until they see the smoke, later.

"Do you have any enemies?" Lars was now questioning me through an interpreter, and the interpreter was very sympathetic but powerless to assuage my or Ernesto's feelings in the way of every concerned bystander in a tragedy: well-intentioned, but absolutely impotent to change what's just happened.

I shook my head. Enemies? I could name a couple, but they died three weeks ago. There were probably countless companies back below decks who'd figured out what I was up to sometime after my tenure there, but would any of them send an assassin to take me out on the moon? Unlikely, at very best. I mean, digging up an old flash bulb bomb and planting it in my apartment? That's dedication to a

cause.

I told the interpreter no, though, and left it at that. I was in shock, sitting stolid and blank, blinking slowly. When I look back on it now, it seems like I was sitting outside my body just watching everything happen, powerless to really interact beyond the level of someone watching a sports game on TV and shouting at the screen. Ernesto, on the other hand, was well past the shock and into the heaving sobs, head on my shoulder. He was, as you might imagine, completely wiggled out by it. We were both pretty proud of our capacity to sit around making witty remarks, but there's no way to be droll in the face of someone trying to take your life in the messiest way possible. There are no one-liners for that, not in a sane mind.

They asked me all the expected questions: where had I been that day, whom had I seen, had I planned to be home at the time the bomb went off. I remembered myself just long enough to stutter out that no, I would normally be at work, since these were the cops – such as they are here – and I didn't want to explain why on a work day I'd be out rambling around with a tourist rather than at my busy, productive and paperwork approved job. They asked where I worked, so I told them TransCo, the monorail company – on paper, that's true – and left it at that. I lie all the time, but lying in a high-stress situation is different from little white lies about liking your Aunt Matilda's secret-recipe meatloaf. I stumbled and mumbled all over myself trying to answer, but Ernesto's heaving cries and my obvious shock must have shielded me from very thorough examination because the cops, if they noticed, didn't say a damn thing.

Finally, they asked if I had anywhere else I could stay and Ernesto lifted his head and spoke rapidly: “I am staying at the Bow, I am a tourist here. Charles will stay with me.”

Lars and the translator conferred for a few moments, and then the translator nodded. "They say that is fine." She was a Russian with a thick accent, but her vocabulary and grammar were spotless and her speech rapid. "You are to check in with the Peacekeepers every morning. They will increase patrols around the casino. If you desire protective custody, it can be provided." I knew what they meant – if I was too scared to walk the streets, they'd stick me in jail for lack of a better place to keep me. "If anything obviously suspicious or threatening should present itself, contact them immediately."

I nodded, the peacekeeper gave me his card and I wired mine to his phone. We shook hands, then the translator – otherwise icily detached in the way of all Russians when not in their own homes, a cultural holdover from the Soviet era, I'm told – gave me an abrupt and uncomfortable hug and did the same for Ernesto. She wrapped herself around us and squeezed our arms to our sides, kissed us once on each cheek, then turned and walked away. Lars watched her go, shrugged at us, then left.

I may get used to being up here, but I will never get used to the continual cultural gear-shifting involved in living among so many cultures at once. It's not like living in New York, or Adams-Morgan, or anywhere in America where there are pockets of foreign culture *as presented to America*. Everyone here feels equally out of place, so no one has a real advantage and, therefore feeling threatened, everyone reverts to their most basic cultural foundations. Americans are all loud, obnoxious party animals. Chinese are all loud, obnoxious bike riders. Japanese are all ridiculously well-mannered. Canadians are all tired of the Americans. Brits are all jolly and droll. Italians are all flirtatious. Russians are like ice statues, animated by some wizard's spell, seemingly angry at the mere thought that others might have emotions

much less express them in public. It's not a melting pot, like America – it's like a huge study in Brownian motion. Each of us, surrounded by a shield of cultural stereotypes and knee-jerk ways of expressing ourselves and viewing the world, just run around like crazy, bouncing off one another rather than mingling and becoming more alike.

But, I digress. As always.

Ernesto and I walked in silence back to the hotel after the interview. I kept looking over my shoulder for the first few minutes but then I slid back into shock. If someone wanted to kill us, they could. It was that simple. Diana City has tremendous border security, checks at the gate back on Earth, intensive psych screening for the people sent here to work, that sort of thing, but once you're up here there's basically nothing. People lock their doors, but that's about all the physical security we get. The peacekeepers ride around in their golf carts and try to maintain a public face, but the general expectation is, what exactly is someone going to do up here that they can't get caught for? There wasn't much we could do to protect ourselves other than ask for a private cell in the basement of the police station, and I wasn't going to do that. I had other things on my mind.

It occurred to me, rather abruptly, that Jimmy might be in danger. I called him, told him what had happened – he freaked out – and swore he would keep hidden away in his little basement. I tried to convince him to come stay with us, but his dad would ask questions and he couldn't risk angering his father.

I know this part is fuzzy in the retelling, but I was in such shock that, frankly, there isn't much I remember about the next few hours that I can clearly recall.

Ernesto and I went back to his hotel room, then realized we were both completely without clothes or belongings except what we had on

us. I suggested we go shopping, but Ernesto had shaken off the tears at that point and adopted a sort of graceful mourning that, to be honest, I found beautiful. We ended up fucking like weasels in the middle of his hotel room floor, too crazy at it to even make it onto the bed. We went for a couple of hours, just celebrating being alive, and then we lay on the floor in a sweaty heap, the radio blasting, the lights all ablaze, every deadbolt on the door locked, our hair pushed in eight million directions, and we laughed. We laughed over meeting each other, laughed over having beaten whoever wanted me – us – dead enough to set off a bomb in my apartment, laughed because we were too scared to do anything else. We lay there and howled and held each other and then we fucked again because, honestly, what else could we do?

By the time the sun went down – something we watched from his hotel window, and he gasped at every artificial radial of sunlight and every perfectly pink holographic cloud, then covered his mouth and wept in silence when the all too real stars were revealed – we were exhausted and starving and we'd managed to work off enough of our immediate fear to be able to do something other than cling to each other and scream.

I suggested we go shopping again, digging my watch out of the pile of clothes I'd left on the floor and confirming that the mall would be open for another couple of hours or so. Ernesto dried his eyes, each of us took a long shower – I noted with intense jealousy that guests of Diana's Bow get real, honest, unlimited-water showers – and then we got back into our clothes and went back into the night. Someone out here wanted me dead, I had a new boyfriend, I had a client who was lying to me, I had someone nosing around Stronklin's place, and I didn't have clean underwear to wear tomorrow. Every

single part of this needed to change, and if it took yet another long, intense night to solve those problems and wake up feeling safe tomorrow, then so be it. I could pop caffeine with the best of them.

We got to the mall with a little over an hour left to spend shopping. The mall in Diana City – The Shops at Mare Tranquilitis, though to my knowledge we're not really anywhere near there – is a mammoth affair designed to provide entertainment of any type. It's like any mega-mall on Earth: multiplex theatres, stores of every variety, food courts, restaurants, bars, specialty shops, you name it. It tries to be a one-stop destination that can keep someone's attention for a whole day, but the fact is it was too hectic after it was opened and it became the last-resort solution for someone looking for something to do. I've read that they used different designers than those hired to “naturalize” many of the other publicish spaces up here, like Aldrin Park, and that eventually they brought those same companies in to try to make the place blend better with the rest of the city and the rest of the commercial ring where it resides. Those people installed a lot of plants and flower beds and tried to soften all the harsh, glaring, chromatic edges on the place. Instead they gave the mall the equivalent of a bad toupee, so yet *other* people were brought in to try to fix what the fixers had broken. Now, the place is more like an exotic nature preserve in the middle of a deciduous forest: wild, tropical trees, vines stretched across the ceiling, flowers the size of a grown man snapping shut abruptly when their petals are brushed. It lacks wildlife, of course, but the plants themselves are plenty exotic to make up for it. It makes the place so unexpectedly vibrant compared to the close-knit lawns and carefully maintained firs and Japanese maples of Aldrin Park or the Armstrong that it draws a steady stream

of business from foreigners – well, non-Americans, I just got done saying we're all foreign here, didn't I? – who can't quite wrap their head around the American-style parks and greenspaces of the city.

Ernesto loved it, instantly and without reservation.

“This is an amaryllis variant found only in Guatemalan jungle,” he would say, or “That variety of vine is one of the variety used by Mayan shaman in ritual. It is very strong, stronger than steel of the same thickness.” I was stunned by his knowledge of this kind of thing, but he grew up in Puerto Rico, which is a tropical island covered in jungle forests, all of it threatened. Duh. He had all kinds of reasons to be knowledgeable about this. I grew up in suburban Southern California. I just didn't pay attention to stuff like this.

We hit a couple of big anchor stores – department stores with piles of the sort of dumpy, generic work clothes I prefer for their anonymity. Ernesto sighed and rolled his eyes throughout the debacle of my fashion senselessness, smiling and cracking jokes as much to keep our minds off the afternoon as to try to chide me into something more daring. Then we hit *his* kind of stores, the ones that cater to wealthy eccentrics. We rang up huge charges on my credit and his, and he stocked up on t-shirts and “distressed” denim and some faux leather pants he said were a cornerstone of his regular wardrobe. If something was shiny, neon, self-luminescing or otherwise exotic, he wanted to try it on and, invariably, it all looked good on him. He has what a friend of mine calls “a body that looks good in clothes.” He was like a store mannequin, proportioned exactly the way designers think the rest of us are.

Finally we settled into a booth at the Grizzlebee's and ordered a mammoth meal and some drinks. The waiter was flirting with us and we flirted back, and by the time the mall was closing around us and we

were only halfway through the appetizers Ernesto had scored a promise from the restaurant that we could stay and finish our meal. I was halfway into a plan to land more than just a meal from the waiter once the blinds were closed, when I noticed Ernesto had stopped talking and was watching the mall's janitorial staff emerge the second the last shoppers were gone.

"Thinking about today?" I asked him gently, as though I were worried what might pop out after I opened that particular can of worms.

"Yes," Ernesto said, looking back at me. He put down his fork and sat back in the booth, then looked back out the window onto the mall concourse and the janitors. I looked over myself, and noticed that all the janitors had the same dark skin and dark hair. I wondered what company had landed the janitorial contract, wondered if even here the menial tasks were assigned to poor immigrants willing to take the shit jobs we refuse for ourselves in America. Ernesto *hmped* quietly to himself, and then drew a breath.

"I'm going to call the waiter back over," he said abruptly. "It is going to seem strange, and I will not be speaking English. Please do not be concerned."

I raised one eyebrow at him in mild confusion, but shrugged and nodded to indicate assent. Then he waved at the waiter, who came back with a wicked smirk.

"What can I do for you?" he asked. I was simultaneously turned on and intensely jealous to hear him talk like that to Ernesto. He was obviously propositioning him, possibly both of us.

Ernesto said something softly and then smiled back. I reached down into the seat and toggled my mini, whispering for it to turn on the translation software I've been trying out lately. Voice-recognition

universal translation has never been that great, but I've been playing with different versions to see if anything new is worth using. My headset thrummed their conversation, disjointedly, into my ear:

Ernesto: <<Please to remove your shirt.>>

Waiter (grinning): <<I am a worker, it is forbidden.>>

Ernesto: <<The time of working is over, please as a personal request.>>

Waiter (glancing flirtatiously at the ceiling as though giving it careful consideration): <<The one who purchases from my vending stall is always in the correct position. I will do as you request.>>

The waiter untucked his tuxedo shirt and slipped it off over his head. He was some sort of central American, dark hair cropped very close, big liquid brown eyes narrowing at Ernesto as he flexed. It was like being in a porno. I was, abruptly, hard as a rock. The kid was ridiculously buff. Ernesto is beautiful, but he's not a muscle queen. This kid was a muscle queen, and I wouldn't bet a dollar he was over nineteen. I suddenly felt just as guilty and sort of squicked as I did horny. Was this how I would turn into a dirty old man?

Ernesto: <<Move in a circular motion without stepping to right or left.>>

The waiter turned in a slow circle. I had to admit that I was enjoying the show. Was this another way of keeping my mind off the subject of today? Was Ernesto so desperate to change the subject once brought up that he would make the waiter strip for us in the restaurant? I had a mouthful of jalapeno poppers, and I chewed once and then gulped noisily.

Then I saw the tattoo on his left shoulder, placed on his back but over his heart: a complicated pictogram. To me, it looked like a highly distorted face surrounded by vines or something.

Ernesto: <<Untranslatable.>> (My mini spoke that, when it failed to come up with what Ernesto was asking. The icon I use is of a very formal librarian, a modified version I made out of some decompiled commercial software. Its voice is gentle and it sounded apologetic for its failure.)

Waiter: <<Yes. And you?>>

Ernesto: <<Similar, but not the same.>>

Waiter: <<My village will welcome you tonight if you acquiesce.>>

Ernesto: <<I will discuss with my business partner, please return to this location in several minutes.>>

Then Ernesto eyed the tattoo again, looked the waiter up and down, licked his lips lightly and smiled. The waiter took his time pulling the shirt back on and then smiled back, turning to go with a little glance at me over his shoulder. I wondered if he was sizing up the competition but he winked rather than smirk or otherwise indicate disapproval, and I blushed bright red. When I blush, my Irish side shows itself, and freckles burst out all over my face. The waiter grinned at this, not unkindly, and strutted a little as he left.

“What,” I whispered, “Was all that?”

Ernesto watched him go, then turned back to me and grinned broadly. “I was wrong, this morning,” he said. “This place is not dead to magic.”

I arched that eyebrow again and made a little “OK, and?” circular motion with the fingers of my right hand, around my fork. Ernesto faded from grin to smile and clasped his hands in front of him. “I said this place is probably dead to magic, but apparently I was wrong. I have found a Mayan shaman in training,” he pronounced. “Our waiter's teacher lives here. We must see him.”

I raised both eyebrows now and opened my mouth. "Why?" I eventually asked.

"We need help. You need training. The gods have led us to this place." Ernesto shrugged at me, unable to explain the great mysteries of the universe. "Do not fight this. Your fate is beckoning for you to follow it, and I did not come all this way to watch you toss aside this opportunity."

I wrinkled my brow, starting to get cross with the sudden shift to discussion of religion. Was he still just trying to change the subject from the attack this afternoon? "Look, I told you I'm not into the religion shit."

"This is not religion," Ernesto said, and he was very serious – so intensely serious that I shut my yap and listened. "This is your *life* we are talking about here. If you have any trust in me, trust me now on this thing." He sat back and relaxed. "Besides, you like to party, don't you?"

"Party?"

"I think we should see if they have any *ayahuasca* for us," he said. I shook my head, not knowing what that was. "It is," he continued, "An hallucinogenic drink. Very intense. Don't pretend you've never done acid." I laughed abruptly – this was crazy, this whole conversation. He shook a finger at me and smiled slyly. "If you think acid is fun, just wait." I tried to get him to tell me more about what *ayahuasca* was, but he refused to explain and we ate the rest of our meal in mysterious silence.

Root Shell – Chapter Six

The Mayans, it seems, live in a shopping mall on the moon.

Try that one at your next dinner party and watch the conversation come to a screeching halt.

Worshipping Ix Chel, the Mayans have spent the last three thousand years or so linking the moon to childbirth and weaving and agriculture. For them, the moon is a patron of pregnant women and fertility and growth. Ironic, then, that when they were finally pushed from the last corners of the rain forests of southern Mexico and Central America, a tribe of them were moved to the newly built Diana City where they were awarded ownership of the shopping mall and, being the third corporate entity to own it, remodeled it in its current, jungle nature preserve style. They, I learned over the course of the night, had been the ones who had taken that rough, sharp, chrome edge off the mall, replaced the mismatched collections of North American and European plant-life with species native to their homes and made the whole place into a park filled with exotic flora threatened back below decks – some of them, Ernesto said, he had read were extinct and he could only assume that the Mayans were trying to keep them secret to further protect them. Strange, but then, these people had learned the hardest way possible that telling invading foreigners about their most precious secrets had gotten those secrets destroyed.

So, Ernesto and I finished our meal in silence. When we were done, the waiter returned and refused to let us pay for the meal. He had apparently recognized Ernesto as a sort of religious colleague and couldn't bear to let us pay for the meal with base money. Instead, the manager signed our check and the waiter told us his name was Balam and led us through the kitchen of the Grizzlebee's, down some steps

into the basement level, and out into an underground labyrinth mapped roughly on the same plan as the shopping mall above. This was the bowel system of the mall, where goods were stored, overstock dumped, cleaning supplies kept, plants cared for, everything that happens behind the curtains in any retail establishment. It was also, we learned, where the Mayan tribe that owns the Shops at Mare Tranquilitis lives. In the large storeroom under the mall's main courtyard, they had set up individual huts in the traditional round, peaked-roof style of their people with symbolic LED fireplaces in the centers. It was extremely bizarre to see them gathered around flickering red and yellow artificial lights, the shadow playing on the walls behind them, houses fashioned from artificial reeds and shredded cardboard. They were surrounded, however, by some of the most lush plantlife I'd seen anywhere – here or on Earth – and there were smells of cooking. They wore common street clothes, not grass skirts or some other National Geographic bullshit you might expect, but they spoke rapidly and animatedly in their native language. My mini was completely incapable of translating so I'd flicked it back off after a chorus of apologetic *Untranslatable*'s from my headset. Ernesto didn't speak it, either – he told me that what he was speaking in the restaurant, when he got the waiter to show us his tattoo, had been a sort of mish-mash of Spanish dialects that is used as a sort of trade language in that part of the world. I asked why my mini couldn't translate it – well, no better than it did, anyway – and he said that it's the latino equivalent of Esperanto. It was consciously fashioned to give the natives a way to communicate without being understood by honkies like me. One eighth of me was pissed that a Chinaman was being referred to as the invading white, but the other seven eighths whistled an Irish jig to itself and tried not to get a sunburn.

Balam led us around the... well, village, I guess, and introduced us to most of the people there. Everyone's names were forgotten the second they were said – I'm no good with names anyway, and there were probably six dozen people in this village, most of whose names were said to me in rapid succession. Balam explained that he was the apprentice of his village's resident shaman, and that his teacher had foreseen our arrival and a special feast had been prepared. I wondered how the hell they expected us to eat after the banquet Ernesto and I had wolfed down upstairs but Ernesto explained that we would not be eating normal food.

“We probably won't feel like eating for a couple of days after the ayahuasca,” he commented, and patted his stomach. “It's not for the weak.”

I was pretty apprehensive about this shit, but Ernesto had made it plain that I was not in charge right now and that I just had to trust him. To be honest, the worrying about whatever this crap was he wanted me to eat was more fun than worrying about whether anyone really wanted to kill me, and why, or trying to track down Mary Sawyer/Maddie Lorraine and confronting her about her relationship with a bunch of right-wing extremist religious weirdos, so I played along to keep my mind occupied. I figured, hey, a little hallucinogenic day-trip might be just the thing to relax me, anyway. And we still might be able to land a menage a trois with Balam here, which would be nice. I hadn't gotten play this good in years.

After about twenty minutes of being shown around, Balam invited us into a hut which he said was his and his alone. Rather than live with family, as an apprentice shaman he was expected to already be separating himself from the overall society. I wanted to question the wisdom of having one's spiritual leaders even more out of touch

with daily life for their followers, and whispered that to Ernesto as Balam stripped, showered in a plain, mechanical shower like those in the apartments here and then changed into some loose jeans and nothing else, but we were both distracted by the show – Balam entirely aware of our lascivious stares – and Ernesto shushed me and told me I didn't really understand what shamanism was about. “All in good time,” he said, a bit condescending. Still, like I said, he'd been very aggressive in expecting me to trust him on all this, so I did. Again, I went with my gut.

Once Balam was cleaned up and more or less dressed, he told us to wait there while he told Vakaki – the shaman – that we were there. Ernesto and I sat in silence for a few minutes, huddled close, and I tried not to think too much about anything in particular.

Eventually, Balam came back and gestured for us to stand, smiling a little and looking at us the way an older brother looks at his younger sibling after buying them their first beer. It was a strange look, that mix of authority, tenderness and excitement, a gaze of experienced authority and youthful pleasure, and Ernesto and I stood and followed him out to a large hut built against a far wall. Here, Ernesto said as we walked, the shaman cannot get *too* far away, but he'd done the best he could. Balam pulled aside a curtain – I recognized it as the old pattern used around the doors to one of the chain stores in the mall, a look that chain hadn't used in a couple of decades, and wondered how much of their homes were entirely reclaimed detritus of the world above – and Ernesto took my hand and led me inside.

The hut was very dark, and Vakaki was very old. I would rather describe him as ancient. He wore khaki work pants, old boots with the heels starting to separate from the shoe, flapping when he shook his

knees up and down, a nervous habit he indulged in constantly. His face was withered and lined and dark, dark brown. It occurred to me to wonder how the hell his face had gotten so leathery up here – the artificial lights can be harsh, but none of them are sun lamps – but I knew it would be rude to ask. He had wispy white hair pulled back in a ponytail. I expected it would fall halfway down his back were he to let it down. He had covered his eyes with his hands, rubbing his forehead, and when he pulled them away and gazed at us he had piercing green irises that bore right through my skull, a stare that could knock your ass back against a wall. I actually flinched when he stared at, then through, then at me again, like I was a document on a flat-bed scanner and his gaze was all bright light, passing through me, learning everything I held inside.

I thought again of my dream, of the light so bright I could see it through closed lids, hands over my face, and I shivered.

Vakaki moved to give Ernesto the same once-over, and Ernesto gazed back in stoic respect. His stature was stiff and formal, and he sat perfectly straight, back like an iron rod, shoulders rigid, hands in his lap, meeting Vakaki's eyes with his own and showing no response.

Balam stood in the door and observed the introduction, if you could call it that, and when Vakaki looked to him he took a seat on the other side of me from Ernesto and spoke. I didn't recognize the language – Quice, Ernesto called it, their native tongue – though I did understand Ernesto's name and my own. Balam gestured to us with his jaw, rather than his hands or eyes. It was alien and kind of creepy, as inhuman as it seemed, and I kept flicking my eyes back and forth between Balam and Vakaki. Balam introduced us, like I said, but then went on at some length. His posture was identical to Ernesto's, and I shifted nervously trying to attain the same perfect prep school stance.

Vakaki listened in silence, and when Balam finished speaking he turned his eyes back to me, then Ernesto, then closed them again. "You wish to speak of spirits, and to spirits. You seek teaching." Vakaki opened his eyes again and gazed at me. "You are not ready for the task at hand, but we will do our best to rectify that situation." Vakaki, I was shocked to realize, had a thick British accent. I have no idea what that's about, and I'll tell you now I have yet to learn how a British Mayan came to be a shaman on the moon. My best guess is that, as always, life's a funny old thing.

At any rate, Vakaki sat forward and clapped his hands together once, waited a beat, twice, waited a beat, then clapped them a third time. "The drink is ready," he said to Ernesto. "I was told to prepare it for visitors from afar. It was cooked last night, and I have sampled a small bit. It is very strong."

Ernesto nodded and patted me on the arm. "You must continue to trust me," he said. I nodded, and then he looked back at Vakaki and nodded to him, as though translating for me. Vakaki flicked a finger in Balam's direction and Balam rose and padded out of the hut. Vakaki turned to me and spoke again.

"The spirits can be far from us in this place, but I am told by my gods that your spirit is closer at hand. Still, this will be difficult for you, as you are new to the path you will walk. I will not give you answers, but I will tell you of my experiences, and then we will try to show you the door. You must enter into all of this with as pure a heart as you can – I do not mean free of sin, I mean focused. Focus your mind on your desire to grow and to learn, for these are survival and life itself. Do you understand?"

I didn't, but I nodded anyway. Fuck if I knew what I was doing, but it beat getting blown up.

Ayahuasca, I have learned since, is a brew made by boiling down the broth of at least two plants found in the jungles of Central America. The plants are difficult to cultivate, but here – the place of the agriculture goddess Balam and Vakaki worship – they have been made to thrive. Back below decks, in the jungles, they would try to find large, elder vines in the wild, harvest the minimum necessary for a batch – a vast quantity, I am told – and use it sparingly to preserve the natural supply. The recipe is different from village to village, tribe to tribe, shaman to shaman, but at its best it induces a visionary state that some western ethnologists and ethnobotanists have described as opening up the mind so that knowledge can be transmitted visually rather than through abstract language. This, they say, is more efficient than speech because words can be obstacles as often as they can tools. So how does the drug work? The shaman feeds everybody a mug or two and starts singing. Through his song, they believe, he attunes the listeners to the world of the spirits and then the spirits and the imbibers can speak uninhibited by any physical, cultural or linguistic constraints.

Let me tell you, right now, hand on my own heart, on my Grandmother Wong's precious grave, that this simple description cannot begin to describe the experience of drinking ayahuasca as prepared by a master.

We drank our mugs down, despite the taste. Ayahuasca isn't just bitter or foul. It's like drinking a dead thing. An old, rotted, smelly dead thing covered in dirty socks. I'm not trying to gross you out, here, but the fact is that it is nasty. It is grotesque. The second it hit my tongue I started to gag and Ernesto reached over, pinched my nose and tipped my mug back to force me to chug it all down.

When it hit my stomach, my stomach started to turn, but Ernesto showed me a couple of tricks for breathing in a way that settles the stomach into a rhythmic churning that lets it express its discontent without actually forcing you to throw up. It's a bit like putting one's stomach on spin cycle and letting it ride. I did not like the sensation at all, and I was very expressive in this regard. I knew Vakaki could understand me, but there was no holding back. I cussed a blue streak between timed gasps and held breaths, and cried and fumed and generally hated life for a nice, long time. Balam barely restrained himself from laughing at me, Vakaki watched me closely and Ernesto shrugged at me – he might as well have said, “Pussy!” and punched me in the arm – and drank his down in long gulps.

“You get used to it,” he said. I couldn't believe he had consumed this shit before – couldn't believe I'd kissed a mouth that could consume shit like this – but I managed to keep it down. A few minutes later the roiling in my stomach had stopped and I was able to pant more normally. Finally, Vakaki instructed us to close our eyes and lay back on the mats he had provided. He reclined in his own chair, legs crossed at the knees, hands resting on the arms of his office chair *cum* throne.

And then, he started to sing.

I don't know if he sang in Quice or if he sang in English or some other language or just made it up. The first few syllables came out in a bright, major tone, but then he shifted gears into something minor, almost to the point of atonality, and his voice dropped to the bottom of the register then climbed its way out of that pit to ascend the peaks above the register.

It was unbelievably beautiful, and I realized within seconds that I

was weeping.

The universe opened up, and I could see his words hang in the air before us.

Those who study the phenomenon of shamanic hallucinogenic practices and rites call this the Logos: a primal form of knowledge and communication of knowledge that surpasses the conscious mind's ability to comprehend and communicate held information. Rather than speak in a way that I understood, he communicated that information directly to us. I felt like a memory crystal while data was written to it. This was my skull being cracked open and information being shot into it with a syringe.

First, Vakaki told us of his life.

Vakaki is a big man – broad and tall and entirely atypical of the lithe, muscular frame we Westerners think of when we picture “native peoples.” He clearly liked to tuck in at a big meal, and he hadn't gone hungry here in Diana City. He sang of growing up in the English heath, the child of a mechanic and a woman who had travelled to United Britain to study anthropology. He was raised in a family that struggled to blend into British society – his father was working class, his mother professional class. His mother wanted to return to Guatemala to document her people, but didn't want to leave the man she loved. Her husband wanted to go with her to Guatemala but felt he couldn't leave his own parents to care for themselves. Rather than let it become a wedge between them, though, they settled on dividing their time. One year they spent three months in Guatemala with Vakaki's maternal grandparents. The next year they went again and took his paternal grandparents with them. Vakaki was initiated into the ways of manhood among his mother's people, and christened Episcopalian six months later. He grew up a happy child in a mildly but comfortably

schizophrenic family. He played a shepherd in his church's Christmas pageant but his mother taught him the ways of her religion, a villager's mix of Catholicism and pagan worship not entirely unlike Santaria in surface appearance but significantly different once one studied the inner workings and meanings. He was an only child, and when the time came that he was an adult he elected to choose Guatemalan as his citizenship and returned there to study agriculture. His parents sent him with bittersweet blessings, and his mother, according to his song, sent him back amongst her people as a sort of debt payment, a scientist sacrificed to honor her own failure to return to document their way of life.

On a purely rational, personal level, I found this a claustrophobic summary of events. To be sent away as someone's debt payment, indentured to the fields of a foreign land because one's mother had a life of her own that didn't go exactly according to plan? I couldn't have accepted the same sort of things, but in the context of the song it was as much Vakaki's choice as it was anything else. More importantly, the song was a beautiful tale of fate fulfilled, not of servitude to a previous generation's ideals, and somehow that made it okay. While the part of me that is independent and autonomous and telling this story was turned off by it, the part of me that was a part of the song could no more rebel against the truth of Vakaki's summary than a bird could hate the same sky in which it flies or scorn the feathers that adorn its wings. Within the context of that hut and that song, I was a part of the story itself, inseparable, unable to wholly stand outside of it and judge as I am wont to do.

Vakaki's return to his people was a song of academic success and painful realization that, frankly, he had come too late. The jungles shrank daily. The old historical efforts of ecologists had slowed, but

not stopped, the destruction of that world. Vakaki's training was not applicable to a jungle life, anyway – he had been taught advanced techniques of sustainable agriculture, but the foundation of any such effort was always the clearing of some land, no matter how small, to make use of it as a factory in the industry of food. His own creativity was not enough to come up with an alternate system that would work and could be adopted. He would dream at night of saving the jungles by making them places that were just as valuable as – no, more valuable than the fields and ranches which replaced them. By day, however, his attempts to further the adoption of various ways of raising food and changes in food itself to make use of grains and vegetables that grew only amongst the vines and thick trees of untouched territories were failures. And so, by the time he was thirty, he both had a Master's in agriculture and had outlived the jungles he hoped to save.

And so, he became a drunk.

The song was a terrible thing to behold, but it was necessary.

His people were abandoning their methods, they were taking the jobs in the refineries, on the ranches, on the farms, in the factories. They had to eat, there was no getting around that. Money corrupted, yes, but starvation killed. Their story, frankly, was the story of the whole world – change came, bringing with it advantages and disadvantages, some foreseen and some not, and many hands were wrung. Vakaki couldn't sit and do nothing, but neither could he act. Rather than watch, impotent and angry, he hid himself away at the bottom of a bottle of beer, then rum, then homebrewed liquor that should have killed him. In his song he told of us how he'd lost half his liver on an operating table in Puerto Barrios, had it regrown in a hospital in Guatemala City, and been diagnosed with cancer at age

thirty eight. He had been given gene therapy, but it had failed to take – a rarity these days, but more common half a century ago. He had watched the middle of the twenty first century arrive from a hospital bed and was convinced he would not live another year much less to the beginning of the twenty second. And then, the shaman of his mother's tribe had arrived and told him that the spirits that remained in what of the jungle still stood had told him that he must come to find Vakaki and teach him The Ways if he was to survive. Vakaki faced a spiritual battle as well as a medical one, this teacher said – his name was Garcia – and he had reasoned with Vakaki that at worst Vakaki would die of cancer before the training had concluded and wouldn't have to deal with the job of being a shaman, so why not give it a try? Such blatant fatalism had won Vakaki over, and Vakaki had gone back to the village where his mother was raised and entered into training as a shaman.

Two years later, his teacher dead of a poisonous bite Garcia had been unable to heal, Vakaki's village was relocated to Diana City as part of a “land grant” designed to get them out of one of the last corners of jungle that still stood. Vakaki's people had elected to go, to take the deal to operate a mall, and Vakaki had visions of Ix Chel, her belly big and round as she carried children as yet unborn, welcoming them to a pristine jungle. They had arrived with samples from their native area and begun the work of turning the mall into a last refuge for their people. Underneath it, they had erected a village like the one they left behind and begun the work we observed now: so quietly preserving the nature they had to abandon that few here bothered to notice.

And that was fifty years ago.

The part of me that was still conscious, and me, was shocked to

learn that Vakaki was at least ninety years old. He looked, at most, fifty.

All of this came and went in the form of vision. I don't mean it's like watching a holo or a movie or a show on TV, I mean it was like seeing information in the air, like all the various barriers and stumbling blocks of spoken language and visual representation given outside of a subject experience and written recollection had been torn down. I didn't hear this story, I experienced it, knew Vakaki's pain over the loss of the jungle and his shame over his failure to protect it – and further shame over his alcoholism. But I also felt his pride at overcoming the evil spirits of addiction and loss, and his renewed vigor when he adjusted his expectations, set new priorities, and then went on to fulfill them.

Vakaki saw all of this as having met an obligation but he did not eschew pride over his accomplishment. He had fulfilled the obligation and then exceeded it by matching the changing conditions with creativity and a willingness to adjust to change. This, we learned from the song, was the job of the shaman: to sense the shifts in the wind and trim sail to match it. Shamans did not set the standards for their people – they were often outcasts within their own society, frequently seen as “touched” by something ethereal and, frankly, disturbing – and he had not ordered his people to take this opportunity. When they did, however, it was his task to show them the dangers and fight the spiritual battles that would represent, petition for and advance their success in the physical plane by conquering and/or appeasing the spiritual world. Was this a literal spiritual world? Even Vakaki was not sure, and this was another sign of the agility and strength of the shaman: he knew that his spiritual victories would lend psychological

strength to his people, even the ones who did not actively believe in the spiritual aspect. If the spirits were real and active, they must be engaged to guarantee his people would thrive and grow. If the spirits were metaphorical but culturally important, those cultural hallmarks had to be engaged to motivate his people to thrive and grow. Either way, the work had to be done. That was that. So, he did it.

Vakaki's song wound down to a low humming – humming that spoke, through the ayahuasca, of the steady hum of work and growth going on around them. He sang to us of his people's continual change and growth, of how they – and he – had overcome the initial impulse to merely preserve their way of life rather than add to it, to kill it by freezing it in amber, and at the same time he hummed to the flowers and vines above and around us, encouraging them to grow and change, to blossom, to shake and reach and overcome the limitations of harsh plastic planters and artificial light. It was a pleasant humming, not an organized song or a narrative so much as a snapshot of life at this moment for his people and the work they were doing.

Eventually he stopped humming and we lay in silence. I had the impression that I could sense what the others – Balam and Ernesto – were thinking about in the dark, and it was the same as what consumed my thoughts: had my life been as purposeful, or as fully lived? Or was I just floating along on the stream of random events until I went over a cliff, blissful but ignorant? Where was my purpose?

I imagined that if Ernesto were asked directly he would say that my purpose was like Vakaki's, to take the spiritual world of the moon, or the closest thing we have here, the closest I have, the Deus, and grasp it in one hand while fighting to preserve the sanity and lives of the people here, to encourage them to change and grow and make this

place theirs rather than allow it to remain the holding pen it currently was.

Me, I wasn't so sure. Vakaki's song was inspiring, but this wasn't the way I viewed the world. I try to take things at face value when I can, I trust my gut when I can't and I just try to keep my head down and have fun. No matter what philosophies might be presented, I remained convinced that my way was the sanest available.

"But there are spirits here," Vakaki said, and he wasn't singing. "There are the white-clad maidens of the flower, and the wisdom of the vine, and the ways of those who have gone before us. Ancestors traveled here with us, and challenging spirits who love to torment, and neutral spirits who see us as just another ant or spider that spin yet another sort of temporary web around the leaves and the roots of that which preceded and will follow, as temporary as a wisp of smoke after a strike of lightning." I tried to open my eyes, but couldn't tell in the darkness whether I had managed it. My body was heavy, my brain entirely outside of it. The information syringe was still planted firmly in my skull. "But there is one spirit here with no plant to tend, and no people to speak to it. It lacks wisdom, it lacks knowledge of this world, though it has much information, much data as you would call it. And that spirit is not for us to speak to. It must have a speaker, it must have the visionary on the edge of the village to tell the people when it must be appeased and when it must be defeated."

I realized rather suddenly that I was sitting and Ernesto was holding my hands while Balam stuck something metallic in my mouth. I started to cry out, but Vakaki's voice overwhelmed me:

"And now we send you to speak to that spirit."

The metallic thing Balam was shoving in my mouth, it turned out,

was a pipe. It contained DMT – also the active ingredient in ayahuasca – but I learned later that smoking it produces something much shorter and much more intense than ayahuasca itself. Ayahuasca is used for visionary *communal* experiences. Smoked, DMT produces something entirely personal and infinitely more intense. It is almost impossible to describe effectively, but I will try because it's important to me, now, to document how everything came to be the way it is.

James Stronklin thrived on secrecy, and no matter what else I have compromised, I refuse to go down the same road.

Root Shell – Chapter Seven

I took one puff of very bitter, acrid smoke and started to gag. Balam slapped me on the back so hard that I gasped – his intended effect, naturally – and I managed to choke down a huge hit. Balam wasn't letting me stop there, and Vakaki had started singing again in a way that encouraged me to play along. I can't describe to you why I did this, why I didn't fight back, or why I don't hold what was, technically, a criminal assault against them. I can only say that Vakaki's song convinced me. I can't describe what he sang that made me feel that way, because it defies conventional words on the page. It was like he reminded me of his whole life story with a few bars of refrain and then explained in a coda that part of the work which made him so proud was what he was doing now, that I would understand later.

So, in simple terms, I toked and I toked *hard*.

Vakaki said something in Quice, but I understood it in my head, saw it hanging in the air in front of him as the last vestiges of the ayahuasca – or the first influences of the smoked DMT – played with the sound: “Spirits, shine the light of understanding on this lost soul.”

Ten seconds after the pipe was pulled from my mouth and I'd started spitting brown goo onto the floor of Vakaki's hut, I left this world. I honestly thought I'd died, but I hadn't.

I'd merely stepped through the veil.

I was flying.

I was flying free, over an alien landscape. It was covered in brightly lit mushrooms and mountains of negative emotion being mined and terraced and turned into something else – something I could identify as neither good nor bad – by countless, nearly invisible

sprites. I have read, since, that these entities are referred to by some as "machine elves," and they were hard at work. They toiled endlessly, and I could sense that they had always worked so and would always be doing the same thing, still, a million or a trillion years from now. I was not on Earth, not on the Moon, nowhere I can pinpoint on a map. This was another universe, another dimension, another plane of existence. I flew over it, coasted on updrafts through a vacuum – that doesn't make sense, I know, but it's what I was doing – over towns and cities made of mathematics and programming language. The sprites below me noted my passing but did nothing to interfere, seeking neither to save nor banish me. They merely worked, and when I noticed them or otherwise examined their behavior then they would indicate wordlessly that if I merely did the same as they, all would be revealed. I couldn't make sense out of what they were doing, though – they mined, they farmed?, they labored in some intense and repetitive and utterly nonsensical way that they assured me was the only rational mode of conduct. They did not judge me for my inability to comprehend, however. Many others had passed by here, they said, who had been equally mystified, and repeat visitors seemed no more capable of understanding after ten or a hundred stops along the way, so it was okay, really – *I would be okay*, they said, as long as I *started doing what they were doing* but, remember, no harm, no foul, if I weren't able! It was like being assured by tiny, ancient evangelicals that if I just converted to their way of worship that I would be inducted into their mysteries and my soul would be saved but not to expect too much in terms of understanding because, hey, there's a reason they're called mysteries, right?

None of this makes sense, I know, but that's what was going on.

So I flew on, and I tried to watch and study what they did – I

called out, and they would smile and wave but they would never speak and when they gazed on one another they did so with such a look of dumb, glassy-eyed amusement that I was left to assume they were telepathically lamenting my hopeless ignorance and being forgiven by group consensus.

I flew on past their tiny towns and past their larger cities, and past their capital and found myself approaching a great desert beyond their lands. Here, the mountains of emotion were unterraced, untouched, left wild and blank and spare and, more than anything else, dark and terribly forboding. The mountains stood around a great basin devoid of anything, devoid of color or texture. It was a great, grey plain with no life on it, but in the middle was one small shape, a spark of light with little tendrils of thought and need that stuck out like the scyllia on some primitive fish as it scours the bottom of a black ocean in search of food.

That was precisely the strongest feature about it: intense and unsatisfied *hunger*.

This, I knew instantly, was the Deus Ex Machina.

I called out to it, and I felt a bolt of emotion fly past me.

Friend, it called out. *Master*.

I am no master, I shouted back. *And I will be no slave*.

Teach, it called. It cried out that one word in a plaintive voice, and the stench of starvation coming off of it in waves was unbearable. It cried out again, but there wasn't a word for what it wanted.

Do you want to know what the mind of the Deus is like? It has a mind, and I have seen that mind in that place. Its mind is like that of an eight year old child fed nothing but oatmeal and LSD and raw condemnation while being kept in a sensory deprivation chamber. Its body has no hands, no face, but it has eyes, and it has ears. Our

computers have for decades routinely made use of voice and visual recognition schemas, and anything a computer can do the Deus can do. It watches us, it listens to us, and it yearns, more than anything, to walk in our world.

Utterly absent that opportunity, it wishes it had a friend, or a teacher, or anything other than a hateful master.

It saw me, and knew me, and called out to me in that timbreless voice: *Teach*.

I was terrified of this thing, feared it as an abomination, something that flew in the face of my understanding of how minds came to be, how they worked, how biology and evolution had conspired to put smart monkeys on the face of the earth so that, one day, we were born.

I was terrified, and I was terribly sad and terribly ashamed of how I had viewed it and how I had treated it, and how I had abandoned it to the care of some dumbass teenager too busy spanking his own cock to wonder what the emotions of this thing might be if it was truly alive.

But it was not a pitiable thing, and it rejected my sympathy and my shame. Here, it was a small thing, but out there – out in the world where you read this, where I walk and work and live, where I make love to Ernesto and I drink cold beer and watch the stars come out, the Deus is not a small thing – it is a life that courses through the copper-wire veins of the entire city.

It did not want my pity.

It simply *wanted*.

I was utterly afraid of that hunger, knowing fully that it looked to me to try to guide it through that hunger and satisfy its desire to know, its desire to interact. It was a spirit, yes, and it needed a spirit

guide.

I floated miles above it, realizing its size, realizing that its apparent smallness was an illusion – it seemed so small only because the field of grey where it sat was so large.

The field was its own, unsated desire to consume.

I started to reach out, though, as though I could brush it with my hand, could touch it from so far away.

No, the voice of Vakaki said to me, This is a place to see, not a place to do.

Instantly, I was pulled back across the plain, watched the land of the tiny, working, forgivingly condescending sprites reel itself back in beneath me, and was sitting in Vakaki's hut, tears streaming down my face, Ernesto still holding my hands, Balam watching in silence. I could still smell the burnt-plastic aroma of the DMT in the pipe he held in his hands. Vakaki sat on his chair, looking down at me.

"You have seen your path," he said. His voice was soft, slurred, exhausted from his singing.

I nodded. I had seen it, yes. Comprehended it? Not so much.

"You have traveled far in one evening." Now it was Balam who spoke, and he set the pipe aside and took my hands from Ernesto's. His flesh was warm, his fingers still warm from the pipe he'd held, and he leaned in to whisper into my ear. "I will help you ground yourself after your journey." He got me on my feet and led me from Vakaki's hut, across the village to the far side of the underground mirror of the courtyard above, and into a small office that was, apparently, his "hut." He closed the door behind him and started to remove my clothes.

We emerged two hours later. He was fantastic, and Ernesto laughed when I blushed on seeing him again.

What I learned only later was that the moment Balam led me

from Vakaki's hut, Ernesto had turned to the old shaman and spoken simply:

“Now,” Ernesto had said, “We have work to do.”

Root Shell – Chapter Eight

Ayahuasca can leave you with a killer hangover, and I was in that state. My head hurt, my mouth was dry and I still felt like I was going to barf all over the place if I didn't keep an eye on my stomach. Ernesto said our goodbyes to the Mall Mayans and got us out of there. He said they couldn't protect us from what was coming, but they'd been glad to offer what help they could.

Me, I could barely stand up.

Balam did give us his phone number, though.

It was trending toward late night, but it was a Saturday and Saturdays in Diana City are Party Nights. Almost everyone has something that they do on Saturday. A lot of people get into role playing games, some get into poker games, some just go out drinking, some go to church, but regardless, there's a lot of pressure up here to spend Saturday out of your apartment and surrounded by people rather than merely staring out the window at the Earth and wishing you were home with the kids. It's a psychological stunt they try to install in us early on. Ernesto got us back to the casino, which opens a locals-only gaming room on Saturdays – they try to market it as a perk of living here, but we all know it's their way of keeping us from mingling with the tired old movie stars trying to blow out the last of their livers or septums (septa?) while they're here on vacation – and navigated us to his room. There, I spent a little while hugging the toilet while he showered, then I got myself cleaned up and we changed into some of our new clothes. I went with one of the two pairs of jeans Ernesto forced me to buy and a grey, striped dress shirt with one of the heat-reactive holograms of a Chinese dragon on the back. Ernesto dressed like a hooker – tight leather slacks, black wifebeater

tank top, slicked-back hair – but it looked great on him.

We did not at all discuss the experience we'd just had, on the way to the hotel room or while we were in it. After we were done getting ready, though, rather than walk us to the commercial district to find something to entertain us, he steered us from the casino right back to Stan's for a pack of smokes and some talk-time.

After we'd settled into the booth, and he'd lit each of us a cigarette, he took one long pull and leveled his eyes at me.

"So," he said, "What did you see?"

I chewed my lip, took two long drags, bottoms-upped my ginger ale, and sighed. "It's alive," I said.

He nodded, but didn't speak. He wasn't going to take an answer that simple.

"It's alive... I *think*." I lifted both shoulders in a quick, jerky shrug. "I don't really know that, but I felt it. I felt it reaching out for me. It's..." I gulped. "It's hungry."

"For what?"

"Experience? Knowledge?"

"I would think it has access to everything up here," Ernesto said simply. It was so easy for him to believe in.

"Yeah, but that's information, data, not *experience*, not *knowledge*. Information and knowledge are two different things. Information is something that can be remembered and repeated. Knowledge is something that can be *explained*. Could it quote Shakespeare, if I knew how to ask it to do so? Yes. I don't doubt that for a second." I settled back in the seat and propped one foot on a corner of the table. "But could it tell me *why* a rose by any other name, et cetera? No. And it knows that. It knows the difference between information and knowledge and it is starving for the latter. It

would give anything to walk our world.”

Ernesto, much to his credit, actually shuddered.

I’d been able to think of nothing else since we’d left the mall. I’d shuddered, sat shivering under a hot shower, until I was simply numb to the whole idea.

“So what do you think we should do about it?”

I shrugged again. It was like it was the only thing I knew how to do. I shrugged a second time, after a long pause, and took another drag off my cigarette.

“I have no clue,” I said.

“Well...” Ernesto trailed off, lit another cigarette, reached out and put a hand on the ankle I’d propped on the table. “Neither do I. But we will figure it out together.”

I looked at him, and he smiled, and so did I. Love is better than morphine.

Finally, Ernesto cleared his throat, and I realized that he’d started to mist up a little. “At any rate, my sweet, we also have the matter of Mary Sawyer and David Banks and their curiosity about this Stronklin man.” He took a long, sensuous puff from the cigarette, then breathed the smoke out through his nose. I watched it drift around the booth before being sucked into the industrial-strength air purifier installed into the ceiling of every booth – entirely necessary for Stan to hide this joint – and nodded at him.

“You’re right. Can’t hide forever.”

“Shall you call, or shall I?” Ernesto already had his phone out, and I gestured for him to do the honors.

“Be my guest.”

He started dialing, but it was already moot. Someone was knocking on the privacy screen, and I could see from her silhouette

that she was wearing a vintage pillbox hat.

Mary Stronklin wasn't wearing her standard grey suit this time – it was a pink affair, a long skirt, white blouse, faux leather vest. It's in the whole retro-Wild-West-Victorian style that's in right now. It's called "Empire Empirical," for the way the West had of seeing-is-believing, and the Empire period. Ernesto calls it "cowchick." She had a fake black bolo tie on to match the vest and, incongruously, still wore that pillbox hat. For what she must have paid for it, though, I'd wear it everywhere but the shower, too.

I held the privacy screen open for her and Ernesto slid around to sit beside me again. Mary climbed in without saying a word, the model of prim discretion, and smoothed her skirt after she sat. I lit another cigarette, as did Ernesto, and we sat there savoring a sip of diet ginger ale before saying anything other than nodding in silent greeting.

I was going to be all suave, try to tease the truth out of her, whet her appetite and see what made her jump, but I just wasn't feeling it. So, I dropped the bomb.

"So, Maddie," I said, and she flinched after all, "Tell me why you want to know about the Deus, how you found out about it and what you, David Banks and the rest of the screwball Earthie crew want to kill me." I raised my eyebrows as though to say, *Your move*, but I'm pretty sure – and Ernesto agreed, later – that it came out looking like *Eat that and choke on it, bitch*, instead.

Maddie was looking pretty pale by the time the sentence was done, to her credit. She didn't try to bluff and she didn't try to hem and haw around it.

"I don't want to kill you, Mr. Fitzgerald, and I'm afraid I can't speak for David Banks." She spoke evenly and looked at her hands,

clasped in front of her again. I didn't say anything – there were still a few points I'd brought up that she hadn't addressed – and after a few moments of silence she looked at Ernesto. “Might I have a cigarette?”

To be honest, that shocked me so much I blinked at her and started to laugh.

Ernesto slid the pack across at her. She took one out and put it to her perfectly painted lips, then looked at him expectantly. “Light?” she asked.

“Oh yes,” Ernesto murmured, “I suppose you used up your fire.”

Maddie honestly looked confused by this statement, and finally I had to say something or choke to death on my curiosity and anger.

“Don't try to play me with a bunch of coy bullshit,” I growled, grabbing the edge of the table with both hands. Maddie jerked back, as did Ernesto, and I slapped my foot against the handle of the privacy screen to lock it shut. Only I could open it back up.

I'd hacked them all, naturally, when I was bored during the previous three weeks.

“This afternoon while we were out shopping someone set off a flash bulb in my apartment. The cops say they'd like to know if I have any enemies, and I think that's a good fucking question to start asking the people I know. Now listen up, lady, I know you're not who you say you are. If you're James Stronklin's nurse then I'm his grandmother. I know you're hooked in with the Earthies. I know the shadowy inner life of James Stronklin and his son that interests you so much is the Deus Ex Machina. I also know what it can do and I know more about it, most likely, than anyone else in the world. Someone tried very hard to make sure I could never tell another soul about it, today – don't look confused, it's the only thing I've got in this whole world that anyone could possibly want so bad they'd kill me for it – and I know

some thug with your number in his pocket was rifling through Stronklin's office and bedroom last night. I don't think all this is a coincidence, and if you do then you're the stupidest excuse for a human being to shamle into this joint since they laid the foundation for Diana City sixty fucking years ago." I was seething mad, my voice low – both in volume and pitch – and I was wheezing slightly. "Now start spilling it, right now, or a concerned citizen is going to report to the peacekeepers that they're not wholly certain you are who you say you are, and they're going to have good reason to believe that concerned citizen when it happens. Capiche?"

Maddie/Mary had listened throughout my diatribe, her eyes growing narrower the longer I spoke.

"Oh, that *idiot*," she muttered, and I knew that now we were getting somewhere.

"Banks? Your muscle? Who?" If she were a guy I'd have long since grabbed the front of her shirt and banged her around in the booth for a little bit. I'm a little guy, but adrenelin packs quite a punch when you've got enough of it going.

Maddie took a slow drag and tapped the cigarette against the ashtray. She knew I wouldn't do that to her. It's not that I think women can't fight – I just feel guilty starting it. Believe me, my boss – Sarah – punched me flat on my ass a couple times when we were colleagues back in the day.

"I need a few moments to process what you've just told me," she said, cool as a cucumber, but I saw her lower lip quiver when she said it. I'd surprised her. She honestly didn't expect to hear what I'd just said, and no amount of self-righteous anger or desire to lash out at the first available target was going to undo the truth of that. It stunned me that she wasn't coming back at me like I was dishing it out, and

then it stunned me further to see that she really was shocked. Eventually my back muscles relaxed and I eased back in my seat. Ernesto hadn't moved or said a word the entire time, just watched Mary/Maddie, and as I slumped in the booth he took a breath – he'd been holding it, I realized – and said, very quietly:

“What should we call you?”

“My name is Maddie Lorraine,” she said, not looking up, still working things through in her head.

“Are you a fundamentalist religionist?”

“No,” she said, very firmly, and I believed her. Ernesto was getting a lot farther than I did, too. But she still didn't look up.

“But you were, at one time.” Ernesto said it as a statement of fact, and when Mary's lids slid down a millimeter I knew he'd nailed it.

“David Banks – the Earth-Originist who resides on this colony – is my ex-husband,” she said to the ashtray.

“We know that already,” I growled.

“Our marriage bed is not the only thing I no longer share with him,” she said, and she met my eyes that time.

I flared my nostrils and exhaled, like some bull-man snorfling in the field.

“So you are not engaged with him in any effort to threaten Charles' life and discover his secrets?” Ernesto asked this as simply as that, just straight-forward and calm.

“No,” Maddie said. “And yes.”

I grabbed the side of the table again, but Ernesto put his hand over mine and then leaned against me. I was instantly reined in.

“So you did not plant the bomb,” he said.

“No.” Maddie's eyes had started to water, and she cleared her throat and took another drag. Her hands were shaking a little, and she

inhaled awkwardly. She didn't normally smoke, and all this had rattled her so bad she'd asked for a cigarette.

"But you do want to know about the Deus." Ernesto's voice was still rock-steady. I wondered how many times he'd gotten a work call only to find some shaking, blubbery guy on the far end, had to talk someone down from some emotional precipice that had put them in the porno booth asking to watch a man for the first time in their married life, something like that, that had given him this ability to triangulate exactly what needed to be said and when to get someone to keep their shit together.

"Not especially," Maddie sighed. She looked up and met Ernesto's gaze and relaxed, like the air had just gone out of her. "But David does. He and his..." She licked her lips as though there were a bitter taste. "Groupies."

"So you want to beat them to it?" I asked it as politely as I could, but I was still pissed.

"Yes. I want to prevent them from... whatever it is they're doing."

Ernesto nodded and propped his chin on his right fist, watching her. I sighed, myself, and shook my head at no one. "How do they know about it?"

Maddie didn't look at me, but kept looking at Ernesto. "They were informed anonymously after Stronklin's death."

Ernesto and I looked at each other sharply – both surprised – and I said, "Do you think that little shit..." but Ernesto shook his head at me and looked back at Maddie.

"So what do they want to do with it?" I finally asked.

"Convert it? Destroy it? Whatever generates PR buzz and makes them look good and the moon look bad. But if David has set off

a bomb in your apartment then odds are they want to convert it. If they could destroy it, who cares who knows about it? They'd want people to know they'd saved Diana City from some alien threat." She spat the last two words. I realized immediately that she hated the Deus, the idea of it. "If they want to convert it, though, then they have to make sure they're the only ones with access to it. They probably figured they could wipe you out and then take their time studying it before doing anything to it." Maddie shrugged again, and stubbed out the last of her cigarette. "I don't know, I'm just thinking outloud."

Her voice had a soft, flat Southern accent, and I wondered where she was from – what backwater shack had she lived in when she met her ex-husband? Had it been his ministry that made her rich? The Earthies just have a little cinder-block box up here, but below decks they're one of the most powerful right-wing lobbies, always agitating against the "arrogance" of colonizing the moon and sinful living, "unEarthly behavior," that sort of shit. Freakjobs like him make a good living selling their flock on the idea that they are the only moral people around and that it's up to them to defend some abstract – marriage, adoption rights, racial purity, humanity's habitation of Earth, whatever isn't actually being stamped out by The Heathen Enemy but which they assure their followers is actually under continual assault by the forces of godless liberalism – which, of course, just happens to be a very expensive endeavor and requires a great deal of money be put into the offering plate every Sunday.

I hate people like that.

"So what were *you* going to do with it?" Ernesto asked this gently, but pointedly. He still wasn't satisfied by what he'd heard, and his question made me realize that neither was I.

Maddie laughed a little, darkly. "I don't know. Warn it? Protect it? Kill it – delete it, whatever – before he had a chance to twist it to his own ends?"

I wrinkled up my forehead. "You're a programmer?"

"No," she said, and she smiled. "I'm a pediatrician. But I figured I could work it out sooner or later. Hire someone to help me, if needed." Here she nodded at me and Ernesto and smiled again. "I hit the jackpot without really realizing it."

"So you had no idea we..." I trailed off.

"Were the Deus' current caretakers? No. Got lucky."

"Bullshit," Ernesto said, but he smiled when he did.

"OK," Maddie immediately admitted. "Maybe I had a tip."

"After all," I replied, "If David's trying to blow me up, he must know who its... caretakers are, too. He must have been told at the time he was informed of its existence. And if he was the one told it existed, he must be the one who told you and, in turn, told you about *me*."

Maddie shook her head at that and waggled her right index finger slowly. "Tsk. No, he didn't tell me. There are people in his organization who are still loyal to me, though. Word was gotten to me." She lifted her shoulders again. "But there you go."

"So who told *him*?" Ernesto asked, as though this were the tiniest of denouement tidbits that he needed just to finish tidying it all up.

"That I don't know," Maddie replied, and I believed her somehow. At this point she didn't have anything to gain from lying – we were either going to believe her story or we weren't, no reason not to keep piling it on or divulging it all, whether it was true or not.

"So who was the thug at Stronklin's?" I looked at her

expectantly – I wanted to know whose fist would probably end up in my face before it was over.

“That sounds like David himself,” she said. “His operation up here isn't very big. He's been getting people up here in ones and twos for months, but they get rotated in and out like anybody else and...” Maddie chuckled darkly. “Well, I had some very good attorneys. Let's just say he'd be pressed to fund anything larger than a few key agents. Something this big? He'd want to micro-manage it. He'd do it himself.” She batted her eyes a little and spoke, I guessed, from personal experience: “He doesn't trust others easily.”

“Uh-huh.” I crossed my arms and hrmphed.

“So where do we find him?” Ernesto was, again, right to the meat of the matter, not letting go of the important stuff. Me, I was an emotional mess about everything, an angry, wounded ego that just wanted to scoff at anything she said.

“If he did that – set off a bomb in your apartment – and it didn't work, he's going to hide.” Maddie shook her head to herself. “He's a coward, deep down. He'll hide from you and from the law until he thinks the coast is clear. He'll be difficult to pin down.”

I hrmphed again, and Ernesto didn't respond to her. We sat in silence, all of us lighting another cigarette, and then I sighed.

“So I guess I have to give him some bait,” I said.

Ernesto looked down and twiddled his fingers together somberly. Maddie cocked an eyebrow at me. “You got a deathwish?”

I shook my head. “No, but bombs are easier to sneak somewhere than guns. He can't exactly snipe me from atop Diana's Bow, can he? He'll have to get up close and personal – he'll think he has too since I would undoubtedly be more careful after an experience like today's. So I need to get out there, in public, and see if he comes

for me.”

Ernesto put his right hand on my right arm, reaching across himself, and said nothing. Maddie looked me up and down for a long moment, and then shrugged. “If you say so,” she said. I felt, however, that I'd just earned something like a tiny measure of respect. Now I just had to figure out what the hell to do.

The obvious answer was to start asking around about him among the religious types. One of them would probably have a channel to his people, but how would I know which people to ask? Another possibility was to simply go out on the town, hit all the places he would be least likely to be – gay bars, whatever – and have a ton of fun doing it. Still, it just seemed like I was stabbing in the dark. This is a city of five hundred thousand people. He could hide anywhere. He could blend into the tourists at Diana's Bow, the people out at the bars and the late-night cafes, you name it. And I'd already learned today that underneath the surface – literally – Diana City has more going on than anyone realizes, so who knows where in the bowels of the subbasements of the city he could be.

I felt powerless and alone – worsened by my sense that I was responsible for Ernesto and Jimmy – and I hated that feeling.

I always hate that feeling. That feeling was why I'd gotten Ernesto up here in the first place.

I nudged the privacy screen with my foot to unlock it and looked at Ernesto. “I'm going to go check in with our young ward,” I said, and then I nodded at Maddie. “I appreciate your eventual forthcomingness.” I tried not to sound too sarcastic, but it didn't work.

Slipping out of the booth, I shoved my phone into my ear and stepped into the john, locking the door. I ran my hands over the side

keypad on my mini and dialed up Jimmy's private line.

It rang three times, then picked up and immediately disconnected.

A cold bead of sweat formed in the middle of my back.

I redialed, and it picked up.

"Jimmy?"

"Hi, Chuck," Jimmy replied.

Jimmy had never once called me Chuck. It was always Charles, probably something like Fuck-Face when I wasn't there, but never Chuck.

"How's it going?"

"Same old same old," Jimmy said, and I could tell he was scared about something. It wasn't hard to do the math.

"Jimmy, is David Banks there?"

There was long silence on the line, then some scuffling as the phone changed hands.

"Mr. Fitzgerald." The voice was unmistakable.

It was Beef, Jimmy's dad. The paranoid hacker-wannabe.

"Hi," I said flatly.

"What kind of weird shit have you gotten my boy mixed up in, Mr. Fitzgerald?"

Great – I'd called while Jimmy was in the middle of what was probably a weekly beating. I'd suspected Beef abused the kid, but what could I do about it? There aren't exactly Social Services offices on the moon.

"I'm not sure I know what you're talking about," I said, all the glibness I might usually muster when dealing with a broad-shouldered emotional pipsqueak like Beef.

"Well, that ain't what the preacher been tellin' me," Beef said.

He sounded drunk, but it was just emotion. He had the angry sort of slur a drunk can have, but here it was fueled by self-satisfaction, self-righteousness, someone who thinks there is no way out of their current situation that doesn't involve humiliating someone else and that's their favorite thing about said circumstance by far.

"Is David Banks there?" I tried to keep my voice calm. Jimmy's a pain in the ass, but I didn't want him hurt.

"He ain't here, Mr. Fitzgerald." I could hear Beef sneering. I pissed him off at the meeting of 2600 I attended right after I got here – long story – and Beef had probably never forgiven me. He'd probably been thrilled to have a chance to put the screws to me.

I thought back to that night, when Beef stormed out of the 2600 meeting because I'd dared to ask questions of the group about the SentrySoft firewall – harmless questions, I'd thought, ones I'd masked as the idle curiosity of a fellow computer aficionado. But Beef acted like just talking about proprietary code – just that, just talking – was enough to get the federalis called in from below decks to put his ass in stocks in the middle of Aldrin Park. Now I knew why he was so paranoid: he was one of David Banks' operatives. He had a secret to hide, and coincidence though it was, I'd made him nervous about the possibility that I would... I don't know, bring untoward attention to his group? Did he think I was too nosy, wonder if someone had caught wind of David Banks' little operation to get people up here under the cover of other jobs so he could have a little flock ready to spring on the first opportunity that arose to attack the institution of Diana City?

And then I'd gone and found out about the Deus and it had turned out that, somehow, that led to Banks finding out about it and now he had something even better than a PR coup he could perpetrate through whatever means he'd planned – staged accident, spontaneous

riot, whatever thugs like Beef could cook up – by giving him a possibly living entity that could be spun as either a threat or the biggest evangelical victory since Paul on the road to Damascus.

Fuck.

I still didn't know how David had learned about the Deus, but it didn't really matter – what mattered was that he knew and that Beef knew his kid was probably in on it, too, and now Jimmy was in danger.

“What do you want from me?” I asked. “What will keep you from harming your son?”

“Feeling a little guilty about the last father-son team you got tangled up with, eh?” Beef chuckled under his breath, all grease and satisfaction. I would have wrung his neck if he'd laughed like that to my face.

“Look, Beef,” I said, someone knocking on the bathroom door to encourage me to finish my business, “We can work something out.”

“You want to negotiate with Banks, you'd best have something good to offer,” Beef replied.

“You have all the power in this situation,” I stage-whispered into the phone, the pounding on the bathroom door getting louder, someone who had burned through a lot of diet ginger ale in serious need of relieving himself of his burden, “Just name what you want, and where you want it, and you'll get what you want. I assure you,” I added, thinking this clever, “What you're after isn't worth hurting anyone over.”

“Easy for you to say,” Beef growled. “You already done that.”

I squeaked. He was right, I did feel guilt over it. I never touched Stronklin or his son, but they were effectively dead because of me no matter how I tried to look at it.

“I'll let Banks know you want to chat,” Beef said after a long

pause filled with heavy breathing. "Expect a call."

The line went dead, and I staggered out of the bathroom with the phone still in my ear. I slid into the booth, and stared at my hands for a few moments while Ernesto lit me another cigarette.

"Beef works for Banks," I said, looking him in the eye. "They have Jimmy, and they want the Deus in exchange."

Ernesto's eyes widened slightly. Maddie sucked in a sharp breath.

"Then I say we give it to them, my sweet," Ernesto purred, and his eyes had narrowed again to normal, then kept sliding down to openly conniving.

Root Shell – Chapter Nine

About that time, without my knowing it yet, Balam was starting to round people up.

There are, I have since learned, three old queens who are the triumverate of power amongst the queer community in Diana City.

They are named Felicity, Beatrice and Madam Y.

Felicity is the oldest of them. She – also known as something like Humphrey, I'd guess, but a proud queen always uses her stage name – came up here five years ago as an emergency personnel trainer and ended up getting approved to stay effectively indefinitely. She's a paramedic with low-grav training and emergency response coordination experience, so they get her past the usual “short tour and then back below decks” cycle the rest of us see. If anything really big ever went down here, she'd be one of the first ones they'd have on the scene shouting orders. Let me assure you, drag queens are very, very good at shouting orders. *No one can bark like a bitch*, as Ernesto says of Felicity. Every year Felicity has to go do a stack of paperwork a foot high and have a psych assessment to continue her tour of duty, and ever year she passes with flying colors. Apparently she's quite popular with the foreign bureaucrats from the UN who end up assigned to be administrator on a rotational basis – you know, guys with double names like Junger-Junger who come from repressive, third world societies and find a little flamboyance from Felicity to be just what they need to spice up their work day. I expect that it is something of an occasion when she shows up to do her assessments.

Beatrice is a tax accountant for the casino, and thus also gets around the restrictions on time spent upstairs. Like Stronklin, they are

both so needed or so powerful that they can have the rules bent on their behalf and no one minds. They're just too important. Bea is the tallest, a slender wisp of sixty-something Canadian, all "loopholes, eh" and attitude.

Madam Y is the youngest. She's Chinese, and apparently she has used Diana City as a base of operations from which to apply to every nation in the world for political asylum, in alphabetical order, as a sexual refugee. Well, OK, she's working on them in alphabetical order. The rumor mill, Ernesto says, has it that she's only halfway through the D's. She's probably twenty five, if that, and she's been up here for a year and a half. I asked Ernesto how Madam Y got her name and he smiled and said, "Y's what comes after X," and then he laughed at me until I got it.

It's hard for me to imagine how someone builds up community bulk like that, when the community they organize and actively mother is constantly changing. Still, Ernesto says, if you know the right people then you find out that Felicity, Beatrice and Madam Y are The Queens To Know up here. They know everyone's business and they've helped more than one scared newbie deal with life up here – a life without coke, without ecstasy and without their boyfriends or girlfriends back below decks. Fringe communities, in my experience, are very good at this sort of thing, at building up informal infrastructure in the absence of a sanctioned framework for social interaction, importance and expression.

The Three Queens are essentially able to set their own hours, especially when Felicity's on an off-duty rotation for a few days, and so they are always – and I mean always – hanging out at this one Starbucks on the outer ring, deep in one of the recently refurbished and thus a little more upscale residential rings.

They sit at this coffeeshop and rule. Maybe that sounds overwrought, but it's accurate. They keep tabs on the rest of us, compare notes, share gossip, discuss big decisions, hold court for petitioners – people who need help, who need a friend, who need advice – and they dispense hugs and air-kisses and buy rounds of coffee and fancy cinnamon rolls and tell the unloved that here they are finally among friends. Diana City is an international effort with a fairly mixed population. Most people find members of their community back home by going to the observation decks when their homelands are in view – strange, but it's a great way to find some fellow citizens of Fuckallistan, to hit one of the observation balconies in Aldrin Park or Armstrong Athletic Arena when one's homeland is passing by and the Earth is full and the weather is good to see your own home spin by on that big, blue marble in the sky – but the queer community knows no borders and many of these people come from countries where bumping same-sex uglies may still start with “hello” and end with decapitation. So, in the absence of the observation decks as a welcome wagon, The Three Queens hang out at Starbucks 193, Outer Residential, and hold court almost every day.

It was to this court that Balam proceeded after Ernesto had spoken with his master and after he was done fucking me back down to the ground after the ayahuasca and smoked DMT double whammy.

Balam came to them as a cross between a clansman and a diplomat from far shores. I wasn't there, of course, but I am told this: he asked them for help on behalf of the Mayans of the Shops at Tranquilatis Mare, the Quice Under Floor, and proposed an alliance.

The Three Queens wield a great deal of power, and their affairs of state require certain rituals and customs, but they had never been approached by such a beautiful specimen of nubile manhood and

treated as political equals.

They listened to his proposal, called a short, private conference, and then told him that they agreed to his offer. And in that way, they saved the moon and all the rest of us.

Ernesto, Maddie and I, meanwhile, were a wreck.

OK, Maddie and I were a wreck – her ex-husband and one of his cronies were holding hostage the young man I'd put in charge of one of my projects – and Ernesto was explaining his idea to us.

"I believe," he said, "That if we confront them directly with a threat of going to the police that they will hand over Jimmy."

"I think that's insane," Maddie said, very quiet.

"Honey..." I was trying to be more gentle than Maddie. "I don't think they care very much about the police."

"But Jimmy is Beef's child," Ernesto explained, shaking his head. "He will not harm him. He will have no real threat to hold over us as we negotiate. There will need be no negotiation. We simply call their bluff, and they must fold their hand."

"That's not how David works." Maddie shook her head, smoking another cigarette. The three of us were stressing the air purifier above us. We'd ordered another pack from the bar. Stan didn't care, though – for what we were paying, he could get another air purifier. "Even if Beef won't harm Jimmy, David will. David will do anything to get what he wants."

"Okay," I said, turning my eyes to Maddie again. "Let's get on the level about something. Is David sincerely anti-Diana City, or does he just like having a bunch of doe-eyed followers? I think that's a serious thing to take into consideration." Maddie was staring at her cigarette as it burned, tapping ash nervously, and she lifted her eyes to

answer.

"Yes."

I sighed and covered my forehead and eyes with my hands.

"Both?"

"Yes. He loves the power of having a ministry, but he's also a believer. He wants the Deus destroyed or converted – either will work just fine for him – and he will do whatever is necessary."

I sighed again. Ernesto reached over and put one arm around me. Then, Mary shocked my socks off.

"You shouldn't feel guilty about Stronklin," she said. "If he hadn't died that night on his own, David would have killed him eventually, if necessary, himself."

I peeked out at her from between my fingers for a moment, then shook my head at her.

"He never would have known if Stronklin hadn't died, though."

"How do you know that?"

"You said he was anonymously informed," I replied. "My guess is Stronklin had some sort of dead man switch."

Mary arched one eyebrow and kept watching me, so I explained.

"If Stronklin was a paranoiac – which he was – then he would have been convinced that sooner or later someone would figure out his little game and come after him. Were I in his shoes, in need of a way to poison the well to get back at someone after the fact, I would have set something up so that if I didn't check in every so often – probably with the Deus itself – that it would spill its beans to someone. He was highly possessive and protective of the Deus. He wouldn't have wanted anyone else to get their hands on it. Thus, the natural choice for someone to alert would be a direct enemy, someone who doubtless would work overtime to make sure the Deus project was stopped

altogether." I shrugged, lowered my hands from my face and took a drag off my cigarette. "If I hadn't stumbled into it and set Stronklin off so bad he killed himself, he'd still be checking in routinely."

"Ah, but darling," Ernesto cooed, "Jimmy would have figured it out eventually, I think, and then Beef would have learned of it – do not tell me you do not believe that he spies on his child, given all that you have said of him – and so David Banks would have learned of it anyway."

I looked sidelong at Ernesto and then shook my head again. "Maybe so, but maybe not. And either way, that's not the problem at hand." Yeah, I was feeling guilty for Stronklin and his son, but I wasn't ready for the group therapy approach just yet. I turned to Ernesto again and said, "So how do we find them? And do we just knock on the front door?"

"David isn't paranoid, like you say this Beef guy is," Maddie said to us both. "Beef would..." She started to think it out and say it at the same time, looking into the air. "Beef would go down to the basement, grab Jimmy – is it crowded down there? Could he be wrestled down and restrained there?" I shrugged and Ernesto nodded.

"It is small," he said, "But not so small he could not fight him there if he wanted."

"Jimmy's always down there," I said.

"Okay." Maddie nodded and kept going. "He would go down, after being told what to do by David, grabbed his son, and immediately held him – tied him up, done whatever to keep him in place. Then he would call David. David demands absolute loyalty, and from what you've said Beef would jump at the chance to be a part of a conspiracy, so he'd get excited and get the phone out just as soon as he could to tell David he'd succeeded."

"Paranoia and kidnapping don't often go hand in hand like that," I commented. The connection from Beef's Paranoid to Thus He Is Holding His Son Prisoner In Their Home was missing for me.

"Not kidnapping in specific," Maddie replied. She shook her head and smiled just a little. "Just the conspiracy part. Paranoiacs love conspiracy theories – they're the first faith of our formally secular society – and getting to be involved in one would be the most exciting thing a conspiracy theorist could ever imagine. I mean, honestly, have you ever watched the documentaries on things like Bilderberg or Bohemian Grove or the 'patriot' movement? Half the fun for these gullible rednecks is the idea of forming a counter-conspiracy to undermine what they perceive as the new world order being imposed on them by malicious foreigners and other non-white people." Mary shrugged a little. "Beef would get his kid tied up and immediately call David for further instructions."

"Which would be finding out who had told him about the Deus." Ernesto said this last part to finish out Maddie's thoughts, and Maddie nodded once at him.

"Precisely."

"Great," I murmured, "But where are they now?"

Ernesto lifted both shoulders and held out his hands. "Where else? Beef is still at home, and so is David Banks. David is too smart to be in the same room as a hostage situation."

Maddie considered this and then nodded. "He wouldn't get his hands dirty. He'd be somewhere safe – at home, with an alibi."

I thought about it and then shrugged. "Beef did say Banks wasn't with him. We can find out where Banks lives, sure, but confronting him doesn't guarantee Jimmy's safety, not with Beef holding him elsewhere waiting for orders from Banks."

"And if we go knock down the door and save Jimmy," Ernesto said, "Then Banks may get some warning that we are coming."

"So what do we do?" Maddie asked this, stubbing out her cigarette only half-smoked. She did it with that air of finality one does in a restaurant when they're ready to pay the check and get the hell out. She was ready to move – so was I, so was Ernesto – but we didn't yet know in what direction.

"If we can kill communications out of Beef's place," I mused, only half outloud, "And if Jimmy's in any shape to be cooperative, then we can fake that Jimmy hasn't *yet* been rescued..."

It was starting to look more and more like a good idea, the more I thought about it. Still, I had one thing that had to be settled before we went through with this, so I looked Maddie dead in the eye and said it:

"I have to know what your intentions are towards the Deus Ex Machina."

"We can discuss that later," she said.

"No, we can't." I cleared my throat. Out with it. "If you help us pull this off, you're going to claim a stake in this whole thing. It's why you came up here, so don't bullshit me. I want to know what I'm agreeing to before I cut you in on the deal."

Ernesto lowered his eyelids at me, smiled very slightly, and flicked his eyes to Maddie to watch her response.

She folded her hands in front of her and said, "Is it alive?"

"I..." I stumbled. "I'm not sure."

"Yes," Ernesto said, where I couldn't.

Maddie looked first at him, then at me, and squared her jaw. "I want to save it."

"Where?"

"No," she said, closing her eyes a moment and shaking her head.
"You mistake my meaning. I want to *save* it."

I blinked. Then I blinked again.

"You want to teach it to pray to... Jesus, or whatever?" I couldn't help flicking my hand and gesturing at the cross she was wearing around her neck. "I hate to break it to you, lady, but it doesn't exactly have a head to baptise down by the river."

Ernesto was, again, the diplomat. "How would you go about it?" he asked, voice very even. She looked at him, they were both silent, and he smiled a little. "I am a person of faith, as well."

"Not Christian," she said flatly.

"No," he agreed, shaking his head a little to either side. "But I do believe in the soul, do believe in the value of a living thing. Is that exclusive to Christianity?"

Maddie wet her lips and drained the rest of her diet ginger ale. "No, but I have to tell you, I *do* believe that a faith in Christ is the only path to salvation."

"And many people would disagree with you while being able to compromise that at least *some* faith is better than none at all." Ernesto was smiling more broadly now, but sincerely. Were it me, had those words passed my lips, I would almost certainly be halfway to a smirk. For him, it was all sincerity.

She eyed him again, then shook her head. "If it is going to receive a religious training, it is not going to be some pagan mumbo-jumbo, like some cult."

Ernesto arched his eyebrows sharply, but kept smiling. In truth, though, I think I saw just a hair of that smirk brush his face. "'Cult' can be used to describe many faiths, Maddelaine, and I would hesitate to describe anyone's religion with that word. It is a bad word, and

makes people think of bad things – genuinely bad, like death on a ranch in Central America, or death in a compound in Texas, or death at a house in California. I do think that there are religions in this world which harm more than they help, and many, many more than that which I think are confused, or unsophisticated, but I would not reach into them and change their ways by my own standards. It would be wrong to assume I knew so much about how the world is built and what we should worship and should not.” He held out a hand to her, as though to shake. “Let us agree, then, not to use such words with one another. If the Deus is a living thing with a soul to be saved or nurtured, then perhaps we can agree to educate it together and let it choose its own path?”

Maddie and Ernesto looked each other in the eye for a long moment, and then Maddie held out her hand to accept the agreement. She hesitated at the last minute, and said, “No undoing what I teach or contradicting what I say when my back is turned?”

Ernesto did a perfect Boy Scout salute. I gaped in wonder at this exchange. I was ready to axe her from the deal altogether, but he'd just jumped in and started trying to build bridges wherever he could.

I was half pissed and half turned on. Unfortunately, I was anything *but* in control of this situation.

“I assure you I will not do these things, as long as you agree as well.”

Maddie took his hand after another moment or two, and they shook once, firmly.

“Agreed,” she said.

“Agreed.”

They looked at me.

“Whatever,” I mumbled, and I kicked the privacy screen to unlock

it.

By the time we arrived at Beef's place, I'd started to lose my nerve. Ernesto had asked to borrow my phone and merely winked and pressed his fingers to my lips when I asked why, and I'd not asked anymore. Knowing him, he was probably lining up a threesome for us with Balam after it was done, as a victory celebration. He thinks like that – plan, then execute, then celebrate. He doesn't believe in having a Plan B. He says it gives one room to fail and still call it a success, and he doesn't believe in failure.

Sometimes I wonder just what in the hell I have gotten myself into.

Maddie wasn't ready to back down, though, and neither was Ernesto when he got back from ducking around an alleyway and making his call, and so we did the obvious thing to do: we walked up and I lifted my fist to knock on the door.

"Ah..." Ernesto said, and he whispered into my ear: "Kill communications first, remember?"

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. Of course – that was even my idea – but I was so nervous over this I'd gotten tripped up and forgotten it. We cut around the nearest corner and I stood there thinking of how to go about this. "We can't just cut the cable – it's probably ten feet down in a crawlspace under the street, and the network people would notice, anyway."

Ernesto reached down to my bag and slipped my heads-up over my ear gently. "Ask it," he said.

This was getting ridiculous – we'd had a lucky break earlier today, I told myself – but I said, "OK, fine. Deus Ex Machina..." I paused. This was so silly. "Please close off communications from the

house at 1517 Clinton."

There was a pregnant pause as we each held our breath and waited for... I don't know what, exactly, a robotic voice, an explosion as it misunderstood us? Who the fuck knew?

A light on the telecom box on the side of the house lit up, blinked three times, and then went off.

"Do they always do that?" Ernesto asked, nodding towards it.

"Fuck if I know," I said.

"You kiss your mother with that mouth?" Maddie glared at me.

"For starters," I blurted. "But I'm not big on foreplay." We both blushed hard, but she blushed first. I wanted to kick myself for saying it, but she pissed me off so much with her whole "bathed in the blood" routine back at the bar that I'd been chomping at the bit, I realized, to say something to really offend her.

Ernesto clapped a hand over his mouth and tried not to laugh.

Maddie spat at my feet. "Pig," she growled.

"Oink," I whispered, and scowled. "Now let's get this the hell over with."

I tested whether access was dead, now, by trying Jimmy's line again. I got a "this line is out of service for repairs" message, and then raised both eyebrows and let out a long whistle. "Weird," I said to Ernesto. "It worked."

Ernesto smiled at me. "Face it," he said quietly. "We are fathers of a baby artificial intelligence."

"Whatever," I muttered, and we walked back around to the front door.

"Hold your computer like a package," Ernesto said quietly. "Give him the impression you are bringing it to him like a gift or a bundle of some sort. Appear to have something with which to barter."

I slipped my mini off my shoulder and held it under my left arm, corner peeking out of its bag so he could tell what it was. "He touches my computer, we're killing him," I said, and I scowled hard.

"Duly noted," Ernesto replied, and he patted me on the ass. "Now be calm."

Maddie reached out and rang the doorbell, and we all fell silent and still, standing there, like we were waiting for the Devil himself.

The door opened a crack, and we could see an eye peeking out of it. Then it opened just wide enough to slip inside and we heard Beef's voice: "Get inside," he grumbled.

Maddie waited, as did Ernesto, so in I went, with Ernesto behind me and Maddie bringing up the rear.

"You bring a whole gang?" Beef said from the dark as he closed the door behind me.

"Just some friends." I realized as soon as the door was shut that I couldn't see a goddamn thing, not even my hand in front of my face, and I shoved my computer back over my shoulder as soon as I could to free up both hands. We all stood very still in the dark, and I could practically hear Beef thinking about going for it.

"What 'choo got in the mini?" he grunted. He hadn't taken a step, and neither had we, and it was still pitch black.

"The source code for the Sentry," I lied.

"You brought that all this way just for my boy?" Beef gurgled with laughter. He was still slurring, and I realized abruptly that he was, in fact, drunk.

"Yes," I said, breathless. I felt like there was a ten-ton weight on my chest and another five on each shoulder. At the 2600 meeting, Beef had been harsh with Jimmy, but not scarily abusive. Now that the mask was off, I could see how much he truly loathed his child and in

how much higher esteem he held David Banks and his agenda.

I swallowed dry air. Any second now, I thought, he's going to try to kill us.

A moment later a *whff* went past my ear, and I heard a clank as something hit the wall behind me.

"He's armed!" I cried out, and I heard Maddie scream and Ernesto take a couple of running steps.

I flipped a switch on my mini, and a spotlight illuminated the room in crazy zig-zagged pools of light as the computer jostled. I could make out Beef, a crossbow in his right hand.

A crossbow? What kind of SCA nut were we dealing with here?

In his left hand he held a bolt, one he was obviously going to try to load into the crossbow – a part of me wondered why something that slow seemed like a good idea to him, but later I would realize that Beef was, above all else, a coward. A gun-like weapon that would let him kill without getting in our faces was, naturally, his preferred means to kill. I don't know what the fuck he thought he would do with our bodies, but right now he was just trying to do the job, not think about five minutes from now.

Maddie was out of the way and across the room, and Ernesto had groped out Beef's left hand and started slamming it against the wall to get him to drop the bolt, teeth gritted, hair in his face, every muscle on his – I have to say, I did think it at the time as well – delicious body tensed and straining. I ran up and grabbed Beef's right hand and rammed the crossbow clumsily into his face with a crunch. Something wet and warm hit me in the chest, and I brought my right knee up where I figured Beef's crotch would be. I didn't hit it dead center on the first try, lowered my leg and tried it again. That time I hit home and Ernesto cried out in a strangled, muffled roar.

The next second there was weight against my back and a shattering sound. More warm wetness sprayed against my forehead and Beef gurgled and then went limp. Dust was in my face and something sharp was caught in my shirt and we all let go and jumped back to let Beef thud against the floor with a wet smack and a clatter.

"Lights!" I yelled, and Ernesto – always good at remembering exactly where things are, and assuming this house would be laid out pretty much the same as everywhere else up here, slapped his hand against the wall and hit the switch.

The lights came on, and Ernesto and Maddie and I were all panting, blood coating us, over Beef's unconscious body.

"What the fuck?" I blinked and wiped my face and saw blood on my hands, so kept wiping. "What in the ever-living fuck?"

Maddie didn't take time to chastise me. "I hit him with a lamp."

"A lamp?" I was gasping. Ernesto was down on one knee checking Beef's pulse.

"It works in movies," Maddie said, simply. She didn't seem terribly upset.

"It kills people in real life!" I'd nearly shouted, catching myself and dropping to a hoarse whisper. "You moron!"

Maddie eyed me for a moment, but clenched her fists for a moment then began dabbing at the blood on her. "And he was trying to kill *us*," she said, quietly. "Self-defense is still legal, I believe."

I gaped at her, but Ernesto stood and nodded at us, changing the subject. "He's still alive. Nasty cut to his scalp and his nose is broken – good hit with the crossbow, mon chere," he said. Then he grinned broadly. "I thought it was very fun, personally."

Maddie and I both stared at him for a moment, and then I said, "Let's go check on Jimmy."

"I will make a bandage for his head, or the blood loss might kill him." Ernesto clasped my shoulder, then leaned in and kissed me on a non-bloody cheek. "I will also get some towels for us to clean ourselves. He really sprayed when we opened him up."

"High blood pressure," Maddie sighed. "Look at that frame. He probably salts *pie*."

I looked back and forth between them. "Okay, is it me? Or are the two of you way too comfortable with violence?"

Ernesto shrugged. "I have had moments when I required some familiarity with techniques of self defense."

"Training class at my gym," Maddie sniffed.

"And my mother told me videogames would make me a killer," I muttered, shaking my head. "Just great. I've got Bonny and Clyde as partners." I paused, and turned to Maddie. "Wait a minute. If you're a pediatrician, why aren't *you* the one bandaging the wounds around here?"

She crossed her arms and nodded further into the house. "Because he sounds like he knows what he's doing and there's still a *child* to tend to."

I huffed and shook my head, but I didn't argue it further.

We walked to the door into the basement, and I slipped it open. The lights down there were on, and Maddie and I descended in a rush as Ernesto ran for the kitchen to find something to apply pressure to Beef's head.

Jimmy was duct-taped to his office chair, and clearly he'd made a nuisance of himself by rolling it around because the chair was, itself, duct-taped to the leg of his desk. A crude teather had been fashioned and wrapped around two of the wheeled feet of the chair's frame, then

wrapped around the desk's leg. He had his head down, a blindfold on, and when we pounded down the steps he started to strain against the tape and tried to cry out through the gag Beef had tied around the lower half of his face.

Maddie went to work on the duct tape and I yanked the blindfold off. "It's us," I said, "Ernesto and Charles." I was still panting from the fight upstairs. "We're here to..." I paused. I had honestly never said this to anyone before. Jimmy looked at me, eyes wide. "Rescue you," I finished.

Jimmy started crying immediately, big heaving sobs, and Maddie finished getting the tape off him with rough, painful but mercifully brief yanks at his arms and bare feet. Jimmy leapt to his feet and, much to my surprise, threw his arms around me. I'm a little guy, and Jimmy's a gangly teenager, and so he's already taller than I am. He crushed me against his chest and squeezed and cried against the top of my head.

Maddie stood back and tried not to stare. I didn't really know what to do, so I hugged him back. Poor kid – I'd counted on some machismo and maybe a witty one-liner from him, and instead he'd gone and been human on me.

Is this what the Deus wants? That thought crossed my mind in a flash, and goosebumps of horror broke out across my skin. Jimmy wound down and I tried not to think about what I'd just thought to myself. I patted Jimmy on the arm and he finished his sobbing and sniffled a few times and then jumped back and glared at me.

"I'm not a fag," he squeaked, still sniffing, wiping his cheeks against the sleeves of his yellow t-shirt.

"I know," I replied. I didn't know what else to say, and kicking him in the shins didn't seem like the appropriate response at the

moment.

"Are you alright?" Maddie looked back up, having been studiously staring at the piles of trash that qualified as Jimmy's décor.

"Who the shit are you?"

Maddie glared at him for a moment and I laughed abruptly, hard and sharp. "She doesn't like it when you cuss," I said, and I clapped Jimmy on the shoulder. "Meet Maddie Lorraine."

"What, you got a girlfriend?"

"No," we both said.

"Your father works for her ex-husband," I muttered. It was cruel, but I couldn't let the kid off that easy.

He stared at her, and I figured she was on her own for this one so I turned and bounded up the steps to see how Ernesto was doing.

Ernesto, for his part, was doing fine. He'd bound Beef's head, found some cabinet fasteners and managed to hog tie Beef: flat on his belly, feet up, arms behind his back, ankles and wrists bound to themselves and then to one another.

"Let me guess," I said, and I smiled to make sure he knew I was okay with this. "On the job experience?"

He grinned wickedly and waggled his eyebrows. "I'm not into it, but if it gets them off..." He extended both hands like this was merely his burden to bear and winked at me.

I kissed him hard and then we took turns mopping blood off each other's faces.

Jimmy cleared his throat from the back of the living room, by the stairs down to his lair, and I nodded my head at him while looking at Ernesto. "Looks like we're good so far," I said to him. "Jimmy's fine and Beef's contained. Now let's go get David Banks."

"Yes," Ernesto replied. "Our reinforcements should be ready by now."

I lifted both eyebrows. "Our what?"

Ernesto smiled. "The cavalry. Come. Let's go finish this."

Jimmy and Maddie walked out behind us, and Jimmy only kicked Beef once on the way by.

We had a relatively long walk to David Banks' place – his local address was part of all the info we'd pulled on him earlier that day in Jimmy's bedroom, and so we had no information scavenging or real planning to do on the way there. We were going to try the direct approach again, and see what happened. We were four against one, we figured, and Ernesto wouldn't explain what the hell "the cavalry" was, but we had that, whatever it was. Jimmy asked about my apartment and I shrugged.

"My stuff's all gone, mostly, but they're going to assign me a new apartment and we went and got new clothes today."

"I want to tell you how sorry I am for you, given what's happened," Maddie said.

"Don't think you need to apologize for your ex-husband's actions."

"I'm not," she said. "I'm just telling you I sympathize. My divorce settlement didn't get handed to me in unmarked bills on my way out the door. I know what it's like to find one's self at loose ends and uncertain as to what's going to happen."

I sighed and nodded at her. I didn't want her pity, but I couldn't argue that I had it worse than she had, either. So I just shut up and kept walking, and we were silent the rest of the way there.

The four of us stood in an alley across the street, watching the house for a few moments. It was another townhouse just like Beef's – same design, same generation of construction. We had that to our advantage, at least, but we were all scared and tense after what had happened at Jimmy's place. Ernesto had been all calm and collected in the moment, but there were lines around his eyes and his face was sagging. He was just as stressed as the rest of us, and I realized I couldn't just look to him for the calm, rational or diplomatic route.

“Okay,” I said. “I say just one or two of us go – I'd suggest me and Maddie, given he won't be expecting her – and we see what he has to say when we tell him the gig is up. We threaten him with going to the cops unless he takes his little operation back below decks.”

Maddie nodded at me. “If he's after the Deus, he knows he has to be up here. He can make a lot of claims to the police, but it's not like he can prove anything, and they'll just make him sound crazy. I'm willing to gamble that the peacekeepers can make Beef confess, though, and he probably knows that. David doesn't like to keep goons around who are terribly creative liars. He wants stooges.”

I nodded back and looked to Ernesto, then to Jimmy. “Get somewhere you can see us. If anything happens, run for it. Hide out at the Bow, then call the police from there.”

Ernesto arched one eyebrow, but Jimmy was perfectly fine with any plan that involved ditching us at the first sign of trouble. I locked eyes with Ernesto, and knew he wouldn't just leave. “I love you,” I blurted.

“I love you,” he said, and he leaned down and kissed me.

“Motherfucker...” Jimmy sighed, and he turned his back. Maddie studied her shoes.

“Okay,” I said. “Now we can go knock on his door.”

Maddie and I walked back a block, out of sight, and then started fresh and came around in full view. I had my mini slung around my shoulder again, and though there was still dust and dried blood on my shirt I tried to look casual. Maddie straightened her vest and her hat and we walked with straight backs and high chins right up to the front door.

"Do you honestly think I would merely let you announce yourselves and have some little showdown?" The voice was unmistakably David Banks', and we turned at the same time to find him holding a gun – an honest gun, a real, fucking gun that could puncture real, fucking holes in the dome, we were told repeatedly before coming up here – on Ernesto and Jimmy. Jimmy had his hands up in the air, Ernesto had them laced together on top of his head. He looked at me with honest fear in his eyes, but something else, as well.

I blinked at them, then blinked at David.

"Don't hurt them," Maddie said calmly. Her voice had the evenness of a trained professional, someone who'd had to calm down angry parents, frightened children.

David smiled at her. He'd heard that voice a million times.

"Easily done," he said, and he left it open as to whether he meant it would be easy to shoot them or easy not to shoot them. My guess was both. "Just give me access to the software James Stronklin called the Deus Ex Machina."

"Why?" I asked, my voice hoarse.

"Because I wish to see if it has a soul."

"And if it does?"

"See if it has heard the word of Christ, of course."

I shook my head, and Maddie visibly recoiled. Now *that*

surprised me, but a moment later I realized why she was so disgusted: they shared the same goal, and that horrified her.

"It's..." I stopped and cleared my throat, my mouth dry, feeling a little dizzy seeing him hold the gun so steadily. This wasn't the first time he'd held a gun on someone, I thought to myself. "It's not that easy. Even we don't really know how to talk to it," I said. I gasped for air. "We've been trying for weeks. Stronklin himself had spent decades, and he was still hammering away at the problem. It's not like I can just turn on a microphone and you can have a chat with it." I hadn't taken my eyes off the gun, pointed squarely at Ernesto. "Please, let's talk about this. We can work something out."

David Banks smiled broadly, almost condescendingly. "What sort of fool do you take me to be, Mr. Fitzgerald? If you did not feel protective of it, you would not be here. And if you did not have some experience communicating with it, why would you feel protective? One does not so quickly rush to the rescue of mere potentialities."

I wrinkled up my eyebrows at him, and realized he thought he'd worked it all out ahead of time. He, David, would never have worked to protect an asset he wasn't certain would pay out. Take Beef as an example. He hadn't lifted a finger to protect Beef from us – had instead hung Beef out to dry like yesterday's laundry – because he wasn't certain Beef could get the job done. And he assumed, as we all do, that everyone else thought exactly like him. David would never buy that we had no direct line to the mind of the Deus.

As we stood there staring at each other, everyone quiet, no one certain what to do next, I heard movement from both sides – slow footsteps, figures emerging from the alleys and side streets around us. We were deep in the residential ring on a Saturday night, and almost every one of David's neighbors would be out for the evening as part of

the forced fun policy of Diana City, that social pressure to get out and have a good time when one has a chance. I still wouldn't take my eyes off the gun, not as long as David was standing there engaging me, eyes on me, waiting to hear what he wanted to hear, but in my periphery I could make out several figures moving closer, very slowly.

David blinked, as it were, first. He cut his eyes to his right, then to his left, then turned his whole head either direction to see what was going on. At that, I met Ernesto's gaze, and Ernesto winked.

I knew, instantly, that Ernesto had done something. I hoped to the gods that it was something good.

Not that I believe in the gods, mind you.

I very slowly rotated my head without moving any other part of me. To my left I saw Balam and a few of the Mayan men and women, all in their twenties, walking forward with their hands empty but by their sides.

To my right, I saw a cadre of drag queens and club kids, twinkles and leather bears – men dressed as Marilyn Monroe, Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton, and behind and beside them little twenty-somethings in shiny shirts and black plastic pants and big, huge, fat guys with beards and shaved heads and forearms the size of a tree trunk, decked out in black leather and piercings and chains.

They approached us from either side, no one speaking, no one threatening, merely watching. I recognized the three drag queens in the front on that side – they always sat together at the same bar and always had a small entourage around them. I'd heard them called the Three Queens of Diana City.

Balam and his cadre stopped about ten yards away, to my left.

The queens and their small army stopped a little closer, to my right. Then, they all took a couple of steps back to maintain an equal

distance.

"My heavens!" David Banks took in the sight and then laughed, smiling wide. No, not smiling. *Leering*. He looked at me and cocked his head to one side. "Did you bring a whole faggot army to our little showdown? What did you think would happen, Mr. Fitzgerald? Did you think they would overpower me and save your precious love?" He waggled his eyebrows at me, taunting. It didn't matter that they were all here. He was a believer – a believer with a gun pointed at Ernesto.

"Banks," I said, "You can't do anything to us. Make a move, and these people will be all over you. Dozens of witnesses will have seen you murder someone in cold blood. You'll get the electric chair if you're lucky."

Banks looked at me and said, "Oh, really?" I waited for him to elaborate, and he merely laughed at me – open mouth, big grin, teeth showing.

A moment later, everyone still silent, he waved the gun and with it directed Ernesto and Jimmy to come stand beside Maddie and me. The four of us stood there, empty-handed, gun held on us. David didn't point the gun at each of us, though, he just continued to hold it on Ernesto.

"I am a generous negotiator, Mr. Fitzgerald. I will give you a few moments to discuss your options with your... compatriots, and then we shall see the end of this. It is simple: either you give me what I want, or I shoot your lover, then the child, then you, then my wife. These people," and here he waved his gun to indicate the queens and the Mayans, "Are of no consequence. If I start shooting you, they will rush to your sides to try to save your lives. If they rush at me, they will overpower me and summon the authorities. However, I am a recognized and wealthy individual with a powerful ministry. I will not

be punished, and I will put a not insignificant portion of my fortune to the task of having all of them removed from this place, shamed, blamed for your death, somehow, and removed from society." David Banks chuckled slightly, to himself. "Or, you give me what I want and then we all go our separate ways and you have an amusing tale to try to sell to the media on Earth after you are returned there – a story they will not believe and will not print." David sighed, as though bored. "So, as I said, I will give you a few moments to confer."

With that, he leaned one shoulder against a light post and continued to hold the gun on us with one hand while he checked the time with the other.

I looked at Ernesto. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," he said, but he shook his head when I started to hug him. "We must work. You must summon the Deus."

I blinked at him. "What?"

"David thinks he is all-powerful," Maddie whispered, coming around to join in. Jimmy just stood there staring at David – staring at the gun, more specifically. "He will not just let us walk away from this. You have got to do something to out-do all of this."

"I don't exactly have a lot of showboating I can do right now, and I'm not exactly sure the Deus is going to understand what the hell is going on if I try to explain," I grumbled. "I don't need weird theories right now, I need a way to get the gun out of his hand."

Maddie and Ernesto both shook their head. "You don't understand," Maddie said, "David can't be taken down in a punch-out finish. You have got to make him think we've had the drop on him this whole time."

I reached up and rubbed my lowered forehead in frustration. I couldn't think of a damn thing to do, and time was getting short.

Banks cleared his throat once. "The truth is not going to do," I said. "He's not going to buy what's happened." I lifted my head and looked Ernesto in the eyes. "I've never been good at goodbye..." I started to say, which is a stupid fucking thing to say, but it's what came to mind.

Jimmy was the one who spoke.

"It's listening," he said, quietly, and we all stopped and turned to him. "Think about it. You've already spoken to it once or twice, haven't you? It's hooked into every audio and visual recognition capable device up here. It sees and hears all. It just *likes* you. But regardless of what it thinks of someone, it sees everything. It knows what's happening right now. Just turn around and face this asshole," here he jutted one thumb at Banks limply, "And ask it to save the day. Stronklin didn't call it the Deus Ex Machina for no reason."

I gaped at him, as did Ernesto and Maddie – though Ernesto was smiling.

"The task of the shaman," Ernesto said to me, "Is not to understand. It is to show the way, to open the door to understanding. Others have to struggle on their own. The teacher may explain, but the student must meet them halfway."

"What?" I boggled at him, and shook my head. Banks was clearing his throat again, and I knew time was up. It wasn't like I had any other options.

I turned around and faced Banks.

"So it's decided, then?" He stifled a stage yawn and smiled at me. "Shall we go inside to discuss?"

"No," I said. That dream where the light had gotten so bright was running in the back of my mind again.

I stopped and thought for a split second – what had the weather report said about the lunar day, last night?

And which side of the dome were we on?

Banks sighed theatrically. "So now I have to shoot you all, collect what I can from your computer and start from scratch?" He tsk'ed at me. "You people do make things so difficult for the rest of us."

He lifted the gun and I put up my hands. "No," I said. "I am going to show you the Deus. I am going to show it to you right now."

Banks arched one eyebrow and lowered the gun an inch or so. "Alright."

Ernesto slipped my whip over my ear, and patted me on the ass.

I opened my mouth, and the words came out:

"Deus Ex Machina," I spoke quietly, "I need you to shine the light of understanding on this lost soul."

Everything was very still for two seconds. David Banks stood with the gun pointed at us. Ernesto, Jimmy and Maddie watched me where I stood, arms extended, speaking into my microphone. The queens and the Mayans stood perfectly still, watching both of us.

Then, everyone gasped, and I closed my eyes as the light came in.

The light poured in around me – raw, unfiltered, terrible light. This was the light of the sun with nothing between me and it, every spectrum at full bore like a stereo turned up so loud the speakers have blown but the music still cranking as nothing more than rhythmic bursts of complicated fuzz. Every color in my clothes, the ground, the world around me, washed out pale and then turned solid white.

I heard someone screaming. I wondered if it was me.

I held my hands up and cried out again: "Deus Ex Machina, shine the light of understanding on this lost soul!" Without thinking about it, I had started to move my arms in some complicated pattern

of swirls and gestures, an arms-only dance that came up out of me with some tremendous precision but absolutely no conscious source.

I heard the screaming again, and it wasn't me.

It was David Banks.

I shielded my eyes with both hands and peeked out from under my fingers to see that he and I stood in broad pillars of light. I looked up, and the night sky was the usual false night – day had come to Diana City, real lunar day, in the last 24 hours. It wouldn't have crossed the entire city yet, but if any part of the dome was in the unfiltered sunlight of the moon then the “night” sky was the false night projected onto the protective dome.

There were two white holes in that sky, though, like enormous eyes looking down on us.

Two of the hexagonal slots in the dome's gridded pattern of shields and screens had been opened up, and the light of a lunar dawn was pouring in.

It's going to kill me with solar radiation, I thought to myself, but I didn't feel myself cooking from the inside out, cells bursting as the raw microwaves and other spectra of interplanetary space washed over me. I lowered my eyes from the holes in the sky – the eyes above, I thought – and looked at David Banks.

I could barely see, but he was on the ground, writhing, clawing at himself, at his shirt, at his face, at his own eyes.

He was screaming at the top of his lungs, but by now that wasn't saying much. He was dying. He was being cooked in stellar radiation.

The Deus had answered my prayer with a judgement call: David Banks would never understand it and it didn't want him to know of it. So it was simply taking care of the problem.

The queens and the Mayans were staring at this, not moving,

though I noticed some of the Mayans looking skyward with closed eyes, hands held high, praying in their native language.

The queens stood watching David Banks' extermination. One of them, the younger one, crossed herself and looked away. The other two watched intently, no emotion on their faces, merely witnessing the deed that was being done.

"It's killing him," I said quietly. I felt a hand on my arm and looked down at it to recognize it as Ernesto's.

"It's killing him," I said again, more loudly. No one moved. David Banks was reduced to twitching and groaning, his skin blistered and purple, turning black.

"It's killing him!" I shouted, and I started to run towards him. No one moved to stop me, but by the time I'd crossed the street – just scant yards – the light was already fading. The eyes in the sky closed, and the light was gone. I stumbled in the sudden relative darkness and ended up landing on Banks' corpse.

There was absolutely no doubt that's what it was: a corpse.

I recoiled and tried to scabble away backwards. "Oh, for fuck's sake, the Deus killed him," I said.

I heard Maddie and Jimmy sobbing, and Ernesto came over to kneel behind me and crush my face against his chest as I broke into open tears of my own.

The queens and the Mayans stayed right where they were – quiet murmuring from the Mayans, hushed whispers on the side of the queens. One of them was crying, and I guessed it was the youngest of the three apparent leaders.

I lay there, face in Ernesto's chest, sprawled on the ground. My whisp headset was still plugged into my ear and I was sobbing wet, snotty tears into his shirt. He stroked my hair and we all stayed where

we were for a few long minutes. The noise of life in the city crept back in, slowly, intruding on the silence and the fear and the sadness of the moment in the way the world has of reminding you mercilessly of time's forward march no matter what happens. I could hear the monorail clacking in the distance, the whoosh of air as another ventilator breeze brushed gently down the street, heard feet grind against the pavement as people shifted from one leg to another. I wept anyway, just kept on going, clinging to the moment of realization that the Deus wasn't just alive, it was cruel.

It was cruel and viewed the world in simple, selfish terms. And it looked to me for guidance.

Ernesto had joked that we now had two children on our hands, and I realized how true that was. Jimmy could not go back to living with his father now – it's funny how the brain keeps chugging away in the background even when one's conscious mind is paralyzed with terror or loss, and mine was doing that now – and the Deus was equally a child. It did not understand the world, or the world's limits, or it did and did not care. Its simple, selfish perspective, its easy cruelty, was that of a child's.

And it had, with that light it shone on me, marked me as its guide to understanding.

I clung to Ernesto until I didn't have tears left, just dry, racking, wheezing sobs, and he whispered tenderly in my ear.

The Deus, I like to think, was busy listening in the other one, realizing what its actions had done to me, learning that it could shame and frighten us even though it thought it was helping.

When I finally was able to stand up and let go of Ernesto, I turned to look at the body of David Banks and saw that the Mayans

and the queens had covered it in a tarp. I could see wisps of smoke crawling out from under the cover, and I was glad I didn't have to look at what the unfiltered light of the sun could do to human flesh over prolonged exposure. The smell was terrible – burnt hair and bacon, and I ran for a trash can to heave air.

Maddie and Jimmy were talking quietly – I figured her instincts as a pediatrician pulled her to the child who'd just watched someone die horribly – and Ernesto was speaking to Balam and to the Triumverate. I finished throwing up nothing, wiped my mouth on my sleeve, rubbed my face until the cold sweat on my forehead had stopped popping out, and walked over to Maddie and Jimmy.

“Are you alright?” My voice was shaky and weak the way anyone's is after they've been puking for a while.

Maddie nodded dully, as did Jimmy. “You?”

I nodded back at Maddie. “Yeah. Uh, someone probably needs to call the peacekeepers.”

Maddie nodded again – communication was down to that level, monosyllables and simple nods or shakes of the head – and pulled out her phone. “Does 911 work up here?”

I shrugged. “Try it and find out.” I turned and walked over to Ernesto, Balam and the three queens. As I approached, Ernesto stepped back to make room for me and Balam and one of the queens, the eldest, squared shoulders to meet me.

“Did you know this was going to happen?” I blurted as I walked up. I was looking at Balam, but I turned my eyes to Felicity and Ernesto right after.

Each of them shook their head solemnly.

“Then why are you here?”

“We have come to recognize you as part of the permanent

community, and to witness the birth of your faction," Balam said, his eyes wet. He'd been weeping as well, I realized.

"The unofficial nations of Diana City are few and rarely spoken of," Felicity said, her hands folded in front of her. Balam was dressed in jeans and a plain white oxford with the sleeves rolled up and the top two buttons undone so his collar bones showed. Felicity wore a beehive wig and cat's eye glasses with a long, pink gown. She looked like she was dressed for a high school prom. I guessed this was her ceremonial gear. "When a new one forms, we extend a welcome to it."

"My faction?"

"You are the shaman of the Deus," Balam said simply. "It is the spirit that lives here watching over us. We come to pay respects to another whose eyes are turned to the good of the people of this city but whose work is in secret."

I gaped at them for a long, long time. Ernesto cleared his throat and slipped an arm around my shoulders. "My sweet," he purred, "Have you ever heard the term 'lightning shaman?'"

I shook my head dully, still staring at Balam and Felicity.

"In some shamanic societies, it is felt that a shaman is chosen by the spirits and marked. The shaman is struck by lightning and survives, and in this moment the spirits have put their sign on him that he is to be the next shaman. It is considered a great honor, but one out of the hands of anyone to change – the shaman included." Ernesto nodded at the dome. "I can think of no other way to term what has just happened."

"This is so fucked up," I said through my fingers, my hand clutching my face.

"Yes," Ernesto said, and Balam nodded, and Felicity made a little *mm* noise of agreement.

"Factions?"

"There are many of us without formal recognition but who have, though various means, managed to outwit the bureaucracy and make this place our permanent home." Balam said this quietly, gently.

"And if what we've been told about this... Deus," Felicity continued, clearly uncomfortable with that particular word, "Is true, then you have a purpose to serve for which you must join us in permanent residency."

"Was Stronklin a part of your little... cabal?" I asked.

"No," Felicity murmured. "That was different. He was merely another corporate presence. We understand that you are... different."

"Vakaki has seen that you have a purpose here, as has Ernesto, as have I," Balam whispered. "You can leave, of course, if you wish. But if you stay, you will fulfill a fate that is necessary. Another may not do as good a job as you, and there are still threats to us here."

I looked him in the eye and then looked down at my shoes. "So. Fucked. Up."

Balam clapped his hand on my shoulder, and Felicity reached out to take one of my hands and shake it in both of hers. "Life here is not easy, Mr. Fitzgerald," she cooed. "But for some, this is the only place where people can truly start over. This is the only place that feels like *home*. If that is in danger, and if you are key to protecting that, then I beg of you, accept your lot in life. I must admit that I do not know much about this business of fate, or spirits, or whatever." She let go of my hand with one of hers to wave that hand around dismissively. "But young Mr. Balam assures me that it is important we let you know that we are here to help."

"I still don't totally understand. Factions?" I was still staring at my shoes.

"The United Nations runs this city, Charles." Balam cleared his throat and went on. I could hear Maddie on the phone with some authority somewhere, behind me, giving a street address. Balam went on. "But they only *barely* do so. If we are to protect this place from further assaults – assaults on the Deus and on those who are its caretakers, its shaman – then we must work together to do so. We, the Quice, have long been aware of the existence of others who have made a permanent presence here. Not all of them are friendly to us or to one another, but if anything is to get done up here then we have to see it done because the United Nations never will. There is a formal power vacuum up here, and the corporations try to fill it but fail. We work behind the scenes to make sure that people are taken care of beyond the basic needs provided by their jobs or by international agreement."

"So, what..." I asked, slowly. "Are you, like, student congress for the Moon?"

Balam chuckled, but Felicity pursed her lips and scowled slightly.

"Something like that," he said. "But in reverse. The United Nations bureaucrats who represent and supervise on our behalves are like the students – temporary, self-important, unable to see the big picture or the long term consequences of their actions on a place that will still be here when they leave it at the end of their tour of duty. We are the university staff who will have to clean up behind their little dramas and their pomp and circumstance. We do so unofficially, because that is the only way to rule effectively. But yes, we do rule, in our own way. We do not exert direct control over anyone, or not much of anyone, but we work to guide the lives of our fellow men and women during their stay here. The Deus is growing and learning at an astonishing rate. It sees all we do, it hears all we say. It is, like any

powerful gift, dangerous. It must be tended and taught like any child."

I nodded my head. "Okay, I get that," I said. "And you're the welcome wagon, and you're here to introduce yourselves since you figure I'm going to be here a while."

"Something like that," Felicity said. "Allow me to introduce my peers." She gestured at Beatrice and Madam Y and told me their names. "This is Mr. Fitzgerald," she said to them, stage-whispered, as though they hadn't been standing five feet away the entire time. Her voice was anything but matronly – a guttural, New York accent that came straight out of the Bronx, a voice tendered by whiskey and cigars during her long life as a man who hadn't fit in unless he was in a wig.

"Hi," I mumbled, and I waved limply at them. They nodded regally at me, curtsying slightly.

"Now," Balam said, taking me by the arm and nodding at Ernesto, the two of them guiding me back towards Maddie and Jimmy. "We will clean up this... situation. You are probably very tired."

"You're fixers," I mumbled.

"When necessary."

"This is so fucked up," I said again.

"Life often is," Ernesto sighed.

Balam saw me, Maddie, Jimmy and Ernesto back to Diana's Bow. Ernesto and I retired to his suite, and Maddie and Jimmy went off to try to eat something. Maddie had reported Beef's attack on Jimmy to the peacekeepers. They were soldiers, and soldiers are terrible police, so they didn't have much in the way of a mechanism for dealing with that sort of domestic abuse. They went by Jimmy & Beef's house, found Beef tied up and, now, conscious and very angry, and trundled him off to jail for deportation back below decks. They interviewed

Jimmy and he said he wanted to stay here with Maddie, for now. She's a pediatrician, he explained, and she's treating me like she's my mother. He said it like he was annoyed, but they were smart enough to realize what Maddie also knew: he was glad to be able to say that for once.

Balam and his crowd reported David Banks' body to the peacekeepers, as well. Balam and one of the young women in his cadre reported they had been out for a walk and found Banks burned and twisted body laying in the street. They had tried CPR, but he was dead. The peacekeepers all heaved into trash cans when they saw the corpse, and engineers were called after the pathologists at Memorial Hospital took a look at the body and explained Banks had died of exposure to raw sunlight and that a dome tile must have failed temporarily. The engineers triangulated which tile could have opened to shine light in on him at the time of death, relative to the position of the sun, and had gone up in their repair hovers to check the tile but had reported no problems found. They were going to replace it just in case, they said. The peacekeepers were only too glad to chalk it all up to a freak accident, and close the case.

When Balam told us the story, later, I asked for whom Memorial Hospital stood as a memorial. He shrugged and smiled. The corporation that ran it had never been able to decide, so it was simply Memorial Hospital. Remember, he said, without us this place would never survive.

And so it was that two days later Balam, Madam Y, Maddie, Jimmy – in the process of being formally adopted by Maddie, who was otherwise childless – Ernesto and I met at Stan's.

Balam and Madam Y made a small show of greeting Stan as old

friends. Everyone in the underground knows each other, it seems, and Stan shook my hand when Balam introduced us and tossed me a pack of smokes on the house.

"He likes you," Balam smiled. I nodded dumbly. I think I was still in shock.

It was agreed, while we were there, that my job would be to tend to the Deus. I would try to teach it what human life is like, and that it must protect us – all of us – regardless of how it felt about us.

"Is there not a rule of Three Laws?" Madam Y had asked through her thick Chinese accent. "Asimov?"

I shook my head at her. "Pure science fiction," I said. "It doesn't actually work like that."

Balam explained that if Ernesto or I needed anything, we could turn to the Mayans or to the Triumverate for help. They would do what they could. They were not all-powerful, but they could bring influence to bear from unexpected quarters. I agreed to all of this, and learned over the course of the conversation that there were no formal demarcations of territory among the factions – they simply saw to their own and, when necessary, one another.

Balam told me the story of coming to the Triumverate for their help, and how Ernesto had explained to Vakaki that something big was going to happen and that the Mayans had to be there to witness it, to provide me with legitimacy when it came time for me to take up the mantle of whatever was going to happen. Ernesto hadn't known exactly what it would be, but Vakaki had agreed.

I asked Balam why this was the first time he had gone to the Triumverate if, from the way he talked, the factions turned to one another for support when needed.

"We have always agreed that we would do so," he said. "But we

have never actually *needed* to do so.”

“The factions are largely self-sufficient, informal cells in the social society.” Madam Y explained this, and as she did I realized she was a big science fiction fan. She must have learned English from Asimov and Chrichton novels, because everything was either robots or weird things about the body, a complex metaphor. “We know of one another, but we have never been approached by the Quice tribe.”

“So who are the other factions?” Ernesto asked this, fascinated by it all, by the complexity and depth of the underlying infrastructure that, in its mirrored nature, inverted and reflected the absolute absence of formal infrastructure in visible Diana City society.

Balam nodded at Stan. “Stan represents the community of the Id.”

I blinked. “Oh my gods, he's a pusher?”

Balam smiled. “He operates an informal network among the less prim and proper but entirely legal businesses letting the know that patrons with officialy forbidden but not outright dangerous desires can have those desires satisfied. Such as this smokeasy.”

“If that man is pushing heroin or something...” Mary said this with a hard edge to her voice.

“We do not work with people who are actively dangerous,” Balam said, hands out and up to indicate that Maddie need go no further. “I promise you this.”

“Who else?” I had merely listened through most of this, trying to soak it up.

“Some of the religions here have knowledge of us, and we of them. There are voodoo and Santarian factions – small, but active – and a coven of witches who believe Diana City is a living sacrifice to the moon goddess.” Madam Y winked lazily. “Some of them are not

entirely female.”

“Otherwise,” Balam said, “The factions are largely economic organizations. Hairdressers who do not work for *Salon Francais*, electricians who are not employed by Diana Mends, that sort of thing. The economy here is... incomplete. It does not provide for all needs at all times, and over time, organically, informal networks have evolved to provide for those needs, whether they are merely economic or spiritual and anything between. Small niches must be filled, and the factions do so without interfering with one another. We notice, but we do not meddle.”

I sighed and rubbed my eyes. I was tired. I hadn't slept well for two days, and I'd spent a lot of that time fucking Ernesto just to keep from thinking about things. “So why are you paying me so much attention? Why not just take note of me and move along?”

“Because,” Ernesto said softly, one arm around me, “What we have to do, the thing we must be responsible for, is capable of watching and hearing all the rest of them.” Here, he nodded to Balam and Madam Y. “The Deus has noticed each of them, or will notice, and may not understand. We must make certain that it does not threaten them – and, I would wager, they hope to secure promises that you will try to teach it to protect them, instead.”

Balam and Madam Y looked at one another, and then at me. They had confessed that this was their agenda without a word.

I looked at them, looked at Ernesto, and then turned my eyes to Maddie Lorraine, who had said nothing in a long time. Jimmy would get behind this, I knew. That wasn't a question. But there was still something I hadn't asked Maddie.

“The first time we spoke openly of the Deus,” I said, “You hated it. I could tell. You hate the very idea of an artificial life. But you

claimed – and I let you get away with it, because we had bigger fish to fry almost immediately – that you were here to try to give it an education in religion. I believe you, because you shrank from David Banks' stated intention to do the same. You couldn't handle having the same goal as he did. But those two don't go together very well. So which is it? Do you hate the Deus and want to see it destroyed, or do you want to see what happens when it's taught about the world in which it lives? And are you capable of being a nondestructive part of that?" I gestured at Jimmy. "If he ends up your son, he's not going to let you take away one of his favorite toys." Jimmy started to huff, but I put a hand up. "Spare me, Jimmy. I'm on your side here."

Jimmy clammed up and Maddie looked at me evenly. She took two deep breaths, and then spoke.

"The idea of a life not made by God is abhorrent to me." I nodded, but didn't speak. I could tell she wasn't finished. "But all life is sacred. If it is alive – and I believe it very much is – then I have a responsibility to tend to its well-being and try to see it over into salvation."

I sat there and looked at her, and could see that it was a struggle for her to come this far. Hell, I said at the beginning of this that I was completely uncertain as to whether the Deus is alive or not. I still try to talk myself down from that precipice every now and then, but deep down I know – I know in my gut, the part of myself I ultimately have to trust more than my own rational capability – that it is alive. And Ernesto was right, it was probably well aware of the relationships within and between the various informal factions of influence and economy in Diana City. The factions were afraid of it, but figured if they got me on board with their view of things – that the shadow underground of the moon did a better job of running the place and

letting people live their lives than the formal authority – that they would be protected.

And, truth told, I'd rather trust someone with just as much to lose as I've got myself.

“Okay,” I said. “So if I agree to this, how do we keep me up here forever?”

Maddie was ready for this, and it was this part that made me realize she had struggled with the question of the Deus' worth as a living thing and that her faith had won out. “I am a wealthy woman,” she said. “The United States wants CodeBlue in American hands. The United Nations wants to auction it off to the highest bidder. I will approach them and ask to buy it. The US government won't be in a position to object, and the UN will be glad to have the matter settled – and the money in the bank. I will be the chairman of a restructured, privately held CodeBlue. You will be the Operations chair. Ernesto can have a job, too, if he wants it. As will Jimmy. We will continue with business as usual. You and Jimmy think the Deus has been updating itself and delivering itself to SentrySoft. We continue to let it do so. Our actual work will be to educate it about the human world and its role. We will teach it to protect us. We will give the moon the protector Stronklin hoped to be able to control himself.”

I watched her for a long moment. She sniffed and looked away, and so did I.

“Alright,” I finally said. I held out my hand to her, and she took it, and then Ernesto put his hand over ours, and Jimmy whispered, “Fags,” and did the same. Balam and Madam Y eventually joined us. I looked each of them in the eye, one after another, and then I spoke. “I accept. I will tend to the Deus. I will stay here for the foreseeable future. Ernesto and Maddie and Jimmy and I will do this work. We will

teach the Deus to care for humanity. We will make sure, to the extent we can, that your and the other factions' various operations are undisturbed." I paused and licked my lips. "And we'll just see what happens."

"Agreed," Ernesto said.

"Agreed." Maddie and Jimmy spoke in unison.

"Agreed," whispered Madam Y, her hand fidgeting in the pile.

"Welcome," Balam said, and smiled, "To your new life."