

1 PROLOGUE

It was a cold October day, much colder than 2038. In the greasy Manhattan dawn, the Proles trudged wearily to their work centers. With the first thin beams of early light, one could sense that the skyline might once have gleamed and shimmered in the red dawn. But few remembered those days before the Corporation had moved its offices out of the city. With the Entitled no longer needing to visit the downtown core, the New York Company declared the window and street cleaning positions redundant. Even the previous night's violent storm had not cleansed the filth from the buildings and streets.

There were a few older Proles, nearing their time, who remembered the City of their youth at the turn of the 21st century, and there were old pictures in the occasional book or magazine that was passed from hand to hand. But books of any kind were few and far between. Most had long since fed the fires of the four Rendering Plants in Central Park, when activity there was at its most feverish pitch. Now, only Plant #1 was still in operation.

And few dared talk about that distant time, when some said that people lived into their eighties and even nineties; when drugs were used to cure illness – not to simply keep one alive for another 8 hours; when people worked only thirty-five to forty hours a week, and had money left for

something called ‘vacations’; when people still voted for representatives to form a government. It was before the mysterious illness that killed all of the older people; before the anarchy; before The Corporation; before PreyTel!

The scream was abrupt and short, turning almost immediately to the frothy, bubbly sound of the melt death. The young man, who only seconds before had been walking hand in hand with the rather pretty young blonde woman, stared in horror at the sloughed-off flesh and protruding bones. Then, spinning abruptly, he stepped into the street. The Prole mover did not slow down.

On the other side of the street, a fleeting look of sympathy crossed the face of the older man. Poor devils. Wonder what drove her to chance it? The warning labels were clear enough. Everyone knew the potential consequences of using expired PreyTel. Why? Maybe a parent, or a child, in the Stock Room?

He averted his eyes, and continued down the block. Moments later, his eyes rolled skyward, and he slumped noiselessly to the sidewalk. The Proles reflexively detoured around the prostrate form and continued on their way.

Sitting at his bank of monitors on the third floor, North end, of Rendering Plant #1, the operator moused over the Wall Street video feed, clicked, entered the stats through his keyboard display, and then clicked the “talk” icon.

“Joe, Wall Street, just North of Barclay, West side, one Melt, one Bail. Yeah, and on the East Side, about a third of the way down the block, a Drop. Yeah, bit of a slow day in Sector 2, but not everywhere!”

“Yeah. You heard the radio chatter. Barry in Sector 13 figures there must be a counterfeiter working the area. Three hundred Drops since midnight. Might need some additional help. If you’re not full, maybe swing over and give him a hand. Won’t need to draw any of the poor buggers out of the Stock Room today. Lots to keep the lines going.”

2 JILL

Rand canceled the alarm on his PDA, staring briefly at the orange pill before popping it into his mouth and washing it down with the last swig of wine.

“Did you take yours already?”

“That was the last one.”

Rolling toward her, his face incredulous, he was barely able to croak, “What?”

Jill smiled faintly. “It was the last one,” she repeated matter-of-factly. “I thought I had packed more, but in the rush to beat the storm, I apparently didn’t. So let’s not waste my last one or two hours on earth with questions. It’s all on my

PDA, the whole sordid story, recorded while you were chopping wood. You can amuse yourself with it on your way down the mountain. Now just hold me.”

Outside the cabin, the wind was dying down, and the rain was reduced to a drizzle. The fire was crackling in the grate. Eight hours. He had eight hours, and for what? ...

It had been as expected. One second he was holding a beautiful girl, and the next a body. Even in this strange world of 2039, where instant death was the norm - and the much-preferred alternative - the shock and loss shook Rand to the core.

He had briefly considered following Jill’s path. It would be simple enough. Without any remaining PreyTel, all he had to do was to wait nine or ten hours, and he would simply stop living, just as Jill had done.

But death would have to wait. She had made him promise that. In the pre-dawn hours, he had placed her body in the old root cellar they had found last year, and hastily sealed the entrance. Buried. So he had broken yet another law, but at least her body was out of the reach of the Renderers.

Four and a half hours left. Not much time. And he would have to pull rank at the store, assuming he could find one open after the storm.

Jill's steady voice flowed from the PDA. So much he did not understand about the labs. In the six years that he had worked for TML, he certainly had come to realize that something was not right. But the information available to him was so limited, so 'controlled', that it was hard to put a finger on the problem. Questioning the methods or objectives was clearly frowned upon.

As one of the top IT techs, Jill had access to things even the top chemists and geneticists like Rand never saw. Yes, she was brilliant, but to evade detection for over a year? How had she managed, and moreover, how had she found the courage to do it? But then, she had had the courage to hand him the last PreyTel.

The tree loomed across his path in the morning mist. He slammed the reverse thrusters on, and the Air Cushion Vehicle slid to a precarious stop on the narrow mountain road.

Delays he didn't need. Rand checked his watch. Four hours to go. The tree was a good size, and he would not be able to move it without cutting it. Fortunately he had put the chain saw back in the cargo storage after cutting wood for their fire the previous night. There should be enough time.

It took a good hour to cut the main branches and trunk. Throwing the chain saw into the back of the ACV, he put his foot to the remaining piece of tree trunk and rolled it over

the bank. Only another two miles to go to the main road, then about fifteen miles to the small town nestled into the New Hampshire Mountains – well, pretty much a ghost town by this point, but there was a PushPills.

Every town had a PushPills, no matter how small. After all, PushPills was the biggest single division inside the Corporation, after Security, which meant tens of millions of locations in every corner of the Globe.

The Prole who operated the local store would not give him any trouble. After all, Rand wore the uniform of a Technical Two, which was enough to instill sufficient respect and fear in any Prole, so Rand did not expect an issue using Jill's card. He understood now why Jill had been so insistent.

The computer tracking would be able to identify that she had been outside the Zone, but it was rather late for Security to do much about that, he thought grimly.

Damn that storm. They had planned everything so carefully, but had not counted on the severe weather. Not that severe weather was at all unusual for this time of year. But there were so many other slips that could have tripped them up. They should have been back at their respective labs, Jill yesterday morning and Rand early today.

It was already 7A.M. Unlike the Proles, who worked twelve-hour shifts, Technicals were required to work only ten hours a day, and even had two days off each week.

As a Technical-2, Rand could flex his time to accumulate up to two additional days a month. Jill had outranked him, and being a Technical-1 had banked 3 days. That had ensured their absences would be staggered, and would not trigger a probe. Being late, even after such a violent storm, would raise some eyebrows.

The anti-fraternizing rules between Technicals and even Proles working in different labs were strictly enforced. No one knew exactly what happened if you were caught, except that violators just suddenly disappeared.

He thought back on the revelations that had poured from Jill's PDA. Not much wonder Security spent so much time making sure workers in different labs did not have an opportunity to compare notes. "Need to know basis." Yeah, right.

The vaguely obscene flesh-colored "P" loomed above the dingy building, as his ACV navigated the last bend into town. Two hours to spare. He gripped the wheel tightly and closed his eyes. Could he steel himself to do it? Could he pull it off? First he had to buy his life back for another few days. He slipped the PDA into the under-seat compartment, snapped the lock, and headed into the dreary store.

3 The CEO

Irub started in annoyance. Rolling off the writhing form below him, and pushing her roughly away, he clutched a robe and grabbed the cell.

“What now? Yeah? How the hell would heroin end up in a batch of PreyTel? Well find out, and find out fast! This could cost us big time. Yeah. Who else could it be but the Jaguar? No one else on Earth would even think about trying to cross me! Did you get a chemical signature? Well do it, and get that bastard on the link! We need to have a little talk, and fast.”

Slumping into a chair, he cast his eyes around the room. The walls were papered with colorful old money, bills from Ghana, Egypt, Morocco and South Africa. Places that had long since disappeared from the map, replaced with the single continent of Pair-dis. He smirked at his cleverness with words. Pair-dis all right! And fewer than six years to snag the whole lot!

A whimper from the pile of old crumpled bills behind him jolted him back to the present. “Boss, please, I need”

“Shut up you stupid slut! You bore me!”

He had to think. What the hell was the Jaguar up to?

Heaving himself to his feet, he headed for the door, ignoring the snuffling noises behind him.

The guard snapped to attention.

“Is the chopper bringing a replacement from PTL today?”

“Yes Boss. Should be in shortly after noon.”

“Good. Dump that simpering bitch over the side. The sharks can have the leftovers.”

The guard nodded. Stepping into the elevator, Irub faintly heard the brief scream and splash. Bimbos, they are all bimbos, even when they have an IQ of 143. Damn, she reminded him of Carla. That was it. Same bronzed skin, big boobs, long legs, and sleek black hair. Just a spot older - maybe twenty, twenty-one. He didn't want to think about Carla. He had to get on top of this threat to the Corporation.

Reaching the upper deck, he glanced briefly at the naked flailing arms of the black-haired girl as she fell further back in the wake; then flicked his communicator.

“Sam, Goldero. ... Yeah, a full bottle!”

Sam. He enjoyed his little re-name game with the staff and crew. He could be waited on by the greatest capitalists of history. “Sam” had started it all. He had set the ball in motion.

The Proles should have seen it coming, but they were too stupid. Too busy being entertained. First the importing, then the outsourcing, and then wars to drive up the debt. Take control of the water and the food supply. It had become easier and easier to control them – even before PreyTel.

His father had been in the thick of it, had drilled the methods into him for the first thirteen years of his life – use their greed, their gullibility, and their fear to feed your power. And it had worked. It had not taken long to have everyone in the school under his thumb, or under his bum as the case might be.

Carla, seven years his junior, had spoiled things. She deserved what she got, he thought bitterly. He fingered the solid gold replica hydraulic fitting on the chain around his neck. No one ever asked about it now. Not after word got out about what happened to those who did. Damn. Where the hell was Sam with that bottle?

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