



Kyrathaba Rising

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Book One of the Kyrathaba Chronicles

by William Bryan Miller

Crocus Books

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my wonderful wife, Susan (love you, honey!) Susan was patient with me throughout the process of this novel's birth. It helped that my time at the desktop PC usually coincided with her television time, and that she was weighed down with our Boston Terrier, which habitually makes her nest on Susan's lap, demanding her attention.

I'd also like to dedicate this book to my friends 4wd and Perry Mowbray, fellow members of the DonationCoder website forum. Their help was absolutely invaluable in ridding the rough draft of typos and awkward phrasing. Thanks, guys!

- William Bryan Miller

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“Don't wake me for the end of the world unless it has very good special effects.”
Roger Zelazny

Prologue

"My name is Sethra Slatten. I'm twenty-three. When The Attack happened I was a lad of sixteen. I'm one of the few survivors of that Tuesday's viral, and then nuclear, holocaust that swept the globe on June 6th, 2276.

Am I one of the fortunate, to have survived? Often, I feel that I am. But not always, and less and less as more of us die.

I live in subterranean compound A-3. We call it that because 'A-3' is painted on every wall and chamber of this godforsaken man-made cave system. We feel certain there must be other compounds, but how many? And where are they located? Nobody knows: at least, nobody here admits such knowledge. I feel certain this dearth of information was intentional, to help protect each cell of survivors from the aliens. The expense and the time it must have taken to prepare this place! These places. These underground redoubts. And to keep the knowledge of them from those whose apparent mission was to cleanse this planet of its infestation of humans.

Perhaps to the aliens, The Attack was nothing more significant than a pest control workman going door to door as he sprays an entire apartment building for vermin. Perhaps. One thing is certain: unless the aliens have evolved into pure energy, or they have metabolisms much more resistant to radiation than are ours, they won't be landing on Earth any decade soon, even if the rumors are true that they are still in orbit.

Today is Thursday, June 7, 2283. As I record this, I have lived 260 meters beneath the charbroiled surface of good old planet Earth for 2,558 days, 10 hours, 8 minutes and counting, according to my implant. I know my implanted computer is accurate, because it is self-contained and shielded, and was therefore not connected to the Worldnet in the days leading up to The Attack. So I've no concern that it may have been infected.

We estimate that perhaps as much as one-fourth of the world's population was slain when an alien computer virus struck our global communications net, chewing through peoples' implant firewalls and antivirus executables like they were some poorly written twenty-first century anti-malware program. How could an electronic virus scramble the minds and slay the bodies of the Connected? Certainly, this is still beyond our own technology. But, after all, as a race we have been -- in the most literal sense -- cyborgs for the better part of the past fifty years. And the line between electronic device and human organism becomes further blurred with each passing generation. The aliens were able to leverage this. 'The only real protection is disconnection.' Experts have told us that for years. I guess more people should've listened.

The bodies of the Connected lay wherever they happened to have fallen when the virus struck: in bed; slumped at a terminal; on the operating table, split open down the middle; face-down in a bowl of soup; couples grotesquely entwined in their interrupted passion, naked limbs clenched in rigor mortis; people slumped forward on their toilets, sightless eyes forevermore staring at that roll of toilet paper that will never again be needed, as their own crap dries and flakes from their"

Sethra snorted and rolled his eyes, grinning. "Delete all text following when the virus struck. Period." The activated implant program edited the recording, and Sethra took a few moments to collect his thoughts. That was becoming harder to do, the more hair he lost to the Sickness, the more frequently his nose bled, the more difficult concentration became. "Resume dictation." He scratched his nose and yawned.

The speaker next to his cot beeped twice. Sethra rolled over onto his right side, facing where his cot abutted a wall, and stared at the speaker embedded there. "Dictation stop. Save and exit." He pushed the white button next to the speaker. "Sethra Slatten A-3 2445. Go ahead." A slightly tinny male voice responded, "Is this a ... bad time?" The tone of voice identified the caller to Sethra, and he chuckled at what the slight pause implied. Currently, he had no visitor of the opposite sex in his cubicle. For the nonce. He grinned.

He sat up and swung his legs around, stood up and pulled out the two chairs from his small table. "Not at all, Byron. Door, open to admit guest." The door pneumatically retracted. Byron entered and said, "Door, close behind guest," then stepped further into the cubicle and took the proffered chair. He was dressed in coveralls made of red neoprene. Sethra took a carafe from its heating socket and filled two plastic cups with a steaming red liquid that the Compounders called Urea Tea, or sometimes just UT. It was a play on words, as beverages now were mostly, if not entirely, composed of water recycled from the compound's waste management units. It was flavorful enough, a bit like hot apple cider. Sethra made it a deliberate practice to not think about the beverage's origins.

Byron took a sip of his drink, then set the cup down gently, eying Sethra. "I have it," he said.

Sethra felt his heartbeat quicken. "Do you, now?" He took a long sip of his drink before looking back at his friend. "You're quite sure? Have you tested it?"

"Not fully, but it's the genuine article alright." He hesitated, glanced around the small living space. "You're certain that your cubicle is secure?"

"As sure as I can be, Byron. I've exercised some precautions of my own. I'm confident enough to say that this is the safest place in the compound for this discussion. Anywhere else could be bugged. I trust that my cubicle is clean."

Byron nodded. If Sethra was confident, then he was as well. Sethra was extremely competent. He slid his right hand into the chest pocket of his coveralls, and withdrew a small crystalline rectangle with the approximate dimensions of a matchbox. He lay it gently on the table between them. Sethra instantly recognized the data storage device. He managed to suppress the desire to ask Byron how and where he'd come across it. Byron wouldn't answer anyway: where Sethra's specialties were electronics and computer programming, his roboticist friend's flair was for, how did he put it? *Acquisition and reallocation of materials*.

Byron grinned, fingering the data chip. "This is, or was, QuarkCorp's latest derivative of the line of holographic storage blocks that have been evolving since the days of InPhase in the early twenty-first century." He gave the small object a twirl. "3.9 million bits per data page, and 2,048 pages in total. Sixteen tracks of overlapping books, each written at a track pitch of 700 microns for reading by a 407 nanometer laser. This little baby is undoubtedly one of the few of its kind left in the world now," he said, eyes flicking upward, indicating the nuclear wasteland that was now the planet's surface.

"I'm impressed," Sethra admitted. "I thought I was the tech guru around here. Somebody's been doing some research."

"Nah," said Byron. "I just have a good memory. Those specs are the first gleanable bits of data on the chip. I was able to read at least that much, and get the size of the chip's contents."

Sethra picked up the data chip and held it up to the light, studying it a few moments. He handed the crystal back to Byron. "Never thought I'd see that again." He took another sip of his steaming red beverage. He puffed out his cheeks for a few seconds, then exhaled and leaned forward intently. "They were pretty harsh when they found that data chip in my possession on the Day of Sequestration," he ruefully recalled. "*Not program-approved. Could be infected.*" Did I ever tell you that they gave me three days in Solitary Confinement?" His face reddened at the memory, and he stared at the tabletop for several moments before continuing.

"I figured they'd have destroyed it, or at least erased it and put it to use for some other storage purpose," he mused, and then was lost in thought for several long seconds. "The hardware we've got down here is, as you might expect, even better than what I programmed on at MIT, before The Attack." Suddenly he shot Byron a grin. "I hope they haven't erased the chip's data, and replaced it with a big image of them giving me the collective finger..."

Byron snorted reflexively at the mental image this conjured, and Sethra barked laughter giddily. Time was short, and they really couldn't afford this indulgence, but in contemplating his coming death in recent weeks, Sethra had come to believe that perhaps they couldn't afford not to enjoy such moments. Gradually, they reined in their mutual mirth, and forced their minds back to the matter at hand. Byron observed Sethra, who sighed and drummed fingers on the table for a few moments, then pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and continued, "If we could get access to the Core, I'm sure I could squeeze the reader laser's shutter speed to around 1.05 milliseconds, which will translate to a data transfer rate of roughly 100 to 110 megabytes per second. That's mega-bytes, not -bits, mind you."

Byron whistled appreciatively. "It will *need* to be that fast for what you have in mind. This data module is almost chock-full. That's about all I could tell with my equipment, without risking damaging its contents. We're talking almost half an Exabyte of data on this thing."

"Then they *haven't* compromised it!" Sethra said excitedly, rising to his feet. "The last backup my team and I made took sixteen hours and was around 506 Petabytes in size. Mind you, that was using the entire South Lab's massively parallel computing matrix." He grunted in remembrance, and sat back down. "We could barely obtain permission for that much computing time on the matrix, even given the nature of our work. But it'd have taken over a century otherwise, and I don't like waiting that long for a backup to finish." He brought cup to lips again, totally deadpan, watching Byron over the rim of the container. But the humor was lost on Byron, whose mind had obviously drifted. *So, maybe he's not lost quite as much hair yet as I have, but his own concentration is suffering, just like mine and everyone else's* thought Sethra.

Byron angled his left arm and glanced at his wrist chronometer. Jerking to his feet, he spewed a stream of expletives. Sethra didn't immediately glean the cause, and looked on in bemusement.

"I gotta go, like, right now, man, or I'm gonna be late for observation detail. Frackin' crap!" he exclaimed, as if his former crude verbal catharsis had not sufficiently conveyed his dismay. "Thanks for the 'UT', buddy." He set his cup on the table, then slid the data chip across the table. "You keep that damned safe, S-man. We'll talk later. Door, open for guest to exit."

Sethra Slatten watched his friend Byron Milner leave. It was several seconds before he had the presence of mind to say, "Door, close and lock."

Chapter 1

2283-06-09T09:34-5:00

Meeting Chamber 3, Core Section

Sethra sat in the midst of over seven dozen Blues, so called because of the color of their neoprene coveralls, blue denoting the science staff in A-3. At the lectern, Jim Mephord droned on about some data they'd received overnight by tight beam from one of the hidden scanner droids near Moonbase #2.

Sethra mentally tuned out of the meeting, as he frequently did, and accessed his implant. The vibrations of his subvocalized words were transmitted through the bones of his face, where they were picked up, filtered, and recorded by his implant.

"Personal log, open. Use default 348-bit symmetric key encryption. Open log page last accessed June 7, 2283, and append. Day 2,560 in Compound A-3. Blue team vote to be called..."

The woman sitting next to Sethra glanced at him momentarily, before turning her attention back to the Administrator. Subvocalizing was common in meetings such as this. Everyone was implanted, and the polite assumption was that anyone subvocalizing while someone was speaking aloud was making a note related to the speaker's topic.

Sethra added to his log, "Sitting through another of Mephord's lame-ass meetings. Covered so far: enzymatically improving our waste conversion infrastructure, and recalibrating our Geiger counters as an 'accuracy check'. You *think*, Jim? *Something's* sure as hell making everyone sick! Let's see: nosebleeds, nausea, hair loss, miscarriages, concentration difficulty. Wait for it ... radiation poisoning!"

The holographic projection switched once again as the speaker clicked a small control. Sethra sat up straighter. "Log program: save and pause." The projection showed a detailed 3D schematic of the entire compound, and Sethra was again reminded of its staggering size. The Administrator was using a laser pointer to indicate a section of long tunnel, located some two kilometers from their present position, and maybe a couple of dozen meters deeper.

Sethra dismissed the white noise he often used to help him concentrate when subvocalizing, and tuned back into the Administrator in the middle of a sentence: "now, is the vote on whether to dig deeper and migrate." Jim Mephord paused, and surveyed the science staff. He was a heavy man in his late fifties, maybe 170 centimeters tall and massing 114 kilograms. He had bulldog jowls, and a military style flat-top haircut. As usual, he wore the gold-sashed white coveralls of an Administrator.

"After all," Mephord continued, "we've already recalibrated the Geiger counters twice, as well as added two newly produced detectors into our array, and we continue to consistently show radiation levels well above those that are safe for humans." Sethra applauded Mephord's grasp of the obvious. He studied their leader closely. *The old man isn't looking so hot himself* Sethra decided. Sallow-faced, he appeared to now be noticeably thinner than he had just six months ago.

"We have the equipment and manpower, still, to accomplish another lengthy drilling.

Seismology and Deep Drilling's Dr. Jaimie Ericson, A-3 Designee 0112, has approved her team's final report on Main Channel Two. We could get another two hundred meters' depth before ever having to fire up a borer. And it is believed that the original architects began Main Channel Two with the intention of eventually carving a tunnel all the way to the floor of the Atlantic, where they would construct seafloor habitation domes almost three kilometers below the surface."

Murmuring swept over those gathered, as the Administrator had anticipated, and he waited several long moments, then added, "It is the consensus that even if we made it only as far as another five hundred meters below our current depth, we'd drop our radiation exposure to eleven percent of its current value, putting us well back inside the green zone. As discussed previously, we'd use Engineering and Materials personnel to shore up the tunnel as we descended, placing watertight bulkheads with manual overrides every hundred meters. The sickest would be moved first, of course, and--"

"The sickest will be dead before you can even get the boring machines fueled and their teams assembled!" Eddie Hasser said, stridently, standing in the midst of a few fellow Medicals. "I beg pardon, Administrator, for speaking out of turn. Will you briefly yield the floor to me?" Mephord grudgingly did so with a wave of his hand, and Eddie plunged on, "Eddie Hasser, Chief of Medical, Designee A-3 4252. If we had initiated *Project Deep Survival* three years, or even two years ago, it might have been our best hope against our current predicament. We'd have done well to hedge our bets in that way. But we didn't. Now, there are far too many of us sick to make such a massive undertaking feasible. Total population is down from 4,932 at First Census on Day 26 (July 1, 2276 AD), to 808 souls as of 43rd Census, two days ago! And Administrator, a goodly fraction of the remaining survivors are either children, or personnel without the requisite skills to help in such a venture. Of those who do have the skills," he looked around the room at balding men and women in blue coveralls and jumpsuits, "most of those are quite ill and wouldn't have the stamina for this endeavor. And that's the unpleasant but honest professional opinion of your Chief of Medical!"

Hasser glared around at his fellow Medicals in the room, square jaw clenched, sweat beading his forehead even though all environmental controls were functioning optimally.

"We've already lost three personnel this morning. From 811 to 808," he snapped his fingers loudly, "just like that. And we'll lose that number or more again before sleep-cycle. I'm telling you, your plan is too little, and much too late. It'd take months to accomplish it, and in six months from today, we'll have less than four hundred surviving adults to run our existing infrastructure. If those surviving four hundred don't include the best of our medical staff, then I'd give us no more than nine months from today before we're dead in the water, maybe a couple or three dozen unlucky ones still clinging to life, but unable to help themselves or anyone else! I relinquish the floor!" Hasser proclaimed roughly, and sat down heavily.

Sethra silently applauded Dr. Eddie Hasser's honest and, to his mind, much more accurate assessment of the situation. He saved the man's brief speech in a subdirectory labeled 'Hasser' in his implant's storage.

Administrator Mephord was trying to regain lost morale, to judge by the measured platitudes with which he was now peppering his speech. He understood the good doctor's concerns, oh yes indeed! And Designee 4252 had very eloquently expressed the fears and frustrations of every surviving member of A-3, undoubtedly. But it was at just such moments as these, when the goal seemed impossible, that humanity had always

triumphed, drawing upon a deeply hidden well of inner strength...

Sethra tuned out once more, and subvocalized, "Resume dictation. Dr. Hasser has his head on straight, and the Administrator has his head in the clouds, perhaps saying hello to the aliens, if they're still up there, and politely and charmingly asking for their help in Project Deep Survival." Sethra grinned and glanced around the circular, twenty meter diameter chamber, trying to gauge the emotional temperature of the group as a whole. Lots of crossed arms. Even more glazed expressions, though that could be the Sickness, of course.

"Like the Reds and Greens, the Blues will, as a group, accede to Mephord's suggested course of action," he subvocalized. "I'd call the vote at about eighty percent Mephord, twenty Hasser." He sighed and let his gaze take in the chamber's industrial-grade plastcrete walls and flooring, the diamond-fiber steel trusses supporting the ceiling. The oversized data flat screen monitors mounted high up, one in each quadrant along the curving wall. They displayed diagrams of the whole compound: camera views of designated locations at five-second intervals; environmental readouts; the status of the main fusion reactor; recent deaths. He focused on the display of recent deaths. What he saw there made him immediately leave the meeting. He could feel Administrator Jim Mephord's eyes on his back as he hastily exited.

Veronee Houston stood on an alumino ceramal catwalk high above the large sewage treatment pools. More precisely, she perched precariously on its waist high guardrail, contemplating plummeting headfirst into the pool of chemicals and waste materials twenty meters directly below her. The tank was twenty meters in circumference, but less than two meters deep. She didn't expect to resurface after such a dive.

Her wrist chronometer vibrated, indicating an incoming communication request. She refused to acknowledge the hail, but somehow a voice issued from her wrist chronometer's speaker anyway. It was difficult but possible to make it out over the background noise of all the machinery in this vast sublevel chamber. "I swear if you jump, I'll show the video to the entire compound, so help me God," came Sethra's voice. Veronee sobbed, and her face crumpled into a complex expression of humor, irony, and sorrow. Her head sagged forward, chin on breast. Tears coursed down her ebony cheeks, and her left hand tightened on the stanchion with which she maintained her delicate balance. "Dammit, Sethra! What the hell are you remote-monitoring in here for?"

"Ease down off that railing and I'll answer that question," urged Sethra. "Or, if you insist on jumping, not only will I follow through on my threat to share the video, but I'll personally kick your ass after Medical gets done saving it." Sethra's voice broke just discernibly on the last three words. The slender, athletic black woman laugh-cried and returned, carefully, to the catwalk. Her tiny intracranial speaker beeped. "No more talk on wristband." Veronee switched to implant, and made sure to use the special encryption key her boyfriend had given her. Sethra spoke over their implants' connection, "I'm sorry, Ver, for what happened, so damned sorry. He was my son, too. It was the radiation. Nobody's been able to carry to term in the past few months. It's not your fault."

Veronee sobbed, "He was my one bright spot in all this! The one thing that kept me emotionally above water during the bouts of sickness. We'd just reached five months, Sethra! His heartbeat was fine!" she cried. "All his other vitals were within tolerances just last week!"

There was a pause, then Sethra answered, voice raw, "I'm grieving too, Ver. And we're both gonna hurt, and hopefully go on hurting for a long time, if my theory holds true, and the four of us can make this work. Veronee, we need you too much for you to go swimming around in sewage. Meet me and Byron in Rec-Area #2 in fifteen minutes, okay? Promise me." She leaned on the rail, drained both emotionally and physically. Then, weakly: "I promise, baby."

The meeting chamber had almost emptied. Sethra would have been gratified to know that his projected vote outcome was highly accurate. Of the eighty-eight Blues who'd voted (he'd forfeited his vote by leaving the meeting prematurely), seventy-three had ratified the Administrator's wish to implement Dr. Ericson's *Project Deep Survival*. Eddie Hasser stood facing Jim Mephord on the plastcrete floor before the lectern. They were engrossed in what they had come to call their 'post-meeting therapy session'.

The Administrator shook his head sadly in agreement with Eddie. "I know you're right, Ed. But you know that we cannot afford not to go forward with this plan, however hopeless it may be, or we are going to be dealing with riot conditions. As long as there is even a sliver of a chance that some of us may survive to go on to produce children, then we have to fan that dwindling flame of hope. We'll have to reassign all droids from nonessential Core duties, to help shore up our weakened human work contingent."

Eddie nodded. He understood the psychology of managing large groups of people, and couldn't imagine the results of a full-scale panic, were it allowed to take form.

"I understand, Jim. I guess my medical training just got the best of me earlier. I know in my bones that we're not gonna make it. Maybe as a species, yes. Perhaps those in other compounds are doing better. But A-3 is doomed. You know it. I know it. Why the frack didn't they connect up the shelter sites, and provide us maps? Or at the very least provide communications among the compounds?"

"Actually Ed, keeping the various compounds secret from one another shows a certain shrewdness. If one compound is discovered by an enemy force, and its designees interrogated, they can't compromise other compounds' integrity because they've no specific knowledge of them."

Jim said, smiling, "Remember, these deep-Earth compounds didn't originate from any altruistic motive on the part of our illustrious former Republic. Rather, they began as private ventures, initially for the ores and minerals, and of course deep oil. Thus, such compounds are scattered all over, geographically speaking, and when they were created there was no reason for them to be connected in terms of electronic communication. And certainly not by interconnecting tunnels. Imagine the expense of all that drilling!"

He moved toward one of the four-chair clusters of comfortable seating around the perimeter of the chamber. Both men eased into facing chairs. Aside from two androids, one standing guard at each egress from the chamber, they were alone.

Hasser tapped a touch panel on the small glass-topped table between them, and a steaming carafe with a stack of plastic cups rose from a sunken central section of the table. As both men helped themselves to refreshment, Mephord continued.

"The general consensus is that by the end of the first quarter of this century, we'd bled our natural resources dry, on land at least. There were still some productive rigs out in the Atlantic and Pacific. The NSA, and some private companies that were undoubtedly on friendly terms with the government, began to develop existing deep shafts into underground compounds, some of them extensive, for all the purposes we've always heard: dangerous biological research laboratories, caches of weapons and other survivalist material, bomb shelters, etc. Governments haven't changed much since the Middle Ages, Ed. They spew ninety-five percent intentional falsehood and four or more percent misinformation. Truth and crap are no doubt mixed in the historical record, like salt and pepper in a wind tunnel."

Eddie took up the story, for it was one they'd both gone over on other such occasions. "Androids were sufficiently advanced by then to handle the most dangerous aspects of construction in those subterranean compounds. Undoubtedly many such sites were secret, having been constructed at taxpayer expense so that the elite and politically connected would have shelter available in the case of a nuclear attack. Hell, the White House has had a small-scale version of such a bunker beneath it since the 1980s."

Mephord nodded. "Exactly. Such underground bunkers took full advantage of geothermal energy. The tapping of geothermal and wind tower energy was advanced enough and widespread enough that, in the U.S. at least, we were, for all intents and purposes, technically independent of non-renewables like oil and gas by 2215. Fifty years ago, our country alone was over fifty percent converted to geothermal sources, despite the hugely powerful lobbying interests of the oil and gas industry. And such geothermal energy is practically inexhaustible, coming as it does, ultimately, from the heat of the mantle. It's tappable down to depths much greater than those at which compounds such as these are built. Perhaps as deep as 10,000 meters. With the massive geothermal collection, distribution, and conversion system we have here, this compound could remain energy independent indefinitely." *Though it appears humanity may not survive to make use of it.*

"Right," said Hasser, after swallowing a sip of UT. "Thirty years ago I had a professor at Caltech who told us that the amount of geothermal energy around the globe that is within 10,000 meters of the surface is equal, on any given day, to the total energy our race has ever expended in the forms of oil and natural gas."

"I was talking to Mary Pilsner the other day. She says our geothermal system is 89% efficient, not that it needs to be since it draws its energy from an unending source. Furthermore, we have enough of that energy stored in our heavy-duty cells and banks of supercapacitors to run the compound for over a year. Damned shame previous generations didn't dig and build a site deeper than this."

"We're going to leave a lot of amazing tech behind. I know this may sound like a betrayal, Jim, but I hope the aliens are able to make use of some of this in the years to come, once the planet becomes habitable again."

Jim Mephord swallowed an anti-radiation tablet and chased it with a shot of UT, then chuckled. "Seriously, Ed? You *believe* that crap about aliens causing all this? This is the end result of global terrorism run amok, my friend, not some hostile alien species attacking us. Think about it: we've got bases on Io, Callisto, Mars, and Luna, as well as numerous layers of outwardly focused detectors orbiting all our planets, all the way out to Janus and even Pluto, constantly sending telemetry back to Earth. Do you *really* believe that some race of aliens was able to totally and completely surprise us?"

Ed shrugged. "That's what our government told us. There was actual footage of craft

coming into orbit, huge”

“Please,” interrupted Mephord. “Remember what I said earlier about what governments tell their people? Particularly ours? ‘...ninety-five percent intentional falsehood and four or more percent misinformation...’ And that’s probably being overly optimistic. No, you’re a scientist, Ed. Reason it out. Apply the Razor.”

Hasser scratched his goatee. “Ah yes, Occam’s Razor,” he mused. “It suggests that the simplest explanation is usually the correct explanation. Usually, Jim. Not always. Still, I suppose in the mass hysteria of the initial reports and the following emergency procedures dropping into place, there’d have been little time to forensically analyze the video we received of “The Attackers”. So you’re saying some group, or perhaps several allied groups, of terrorists caused the Collapse? They had the mojo to put together a computer virus that... no, I see where you’re going with this. If the report of aliens was false, perhaps there never was such a computer virus. Just the rumor of one, perhaps to explain the effect of some biological attack. Follow that up with well coordinated global nukes.”

Jim nodded and gave a cold smile. “Not easy to pull off, but it’s really only an order of magnitude or two more difficult than coordinating the terroristic airline collisions with the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11, 2001. But still far more likely than the converging chances that advanced aliens happen to come across our solar system, that they are deathly hostile rather than being interested in cultural exchange, and that even being hostile they choose to ruin the planet for perhaps decades rather than subjugate us. Or, if their numbers and armament weren’t sufficient for all-out subjugation of the natives, then why not kill off the most intelligent and technologically sophisticated species on the planet and then rape the globe for raw materials, or begin colonization?”

Mephord shook his head and grinned, “If these aliens were sophisticated enough to slay a quarter of the population with a long-range electronic virus, then there was no need for a nuclear strike. It’s all just a little too much to be believable, Ed.”

The shorter scientist leaned back in his comfortable chair and steepled his fingers, considering. “And the story of alien attack then becomes a cover story, a red herring so that, in the event the species survives, suspicions of the source of The Attack will be misdirected by decades of propagated falsehood and blind acceptance of that falsehood. If you’re right, Jim, then we deserve to die out as a species. Perhaps in eons to come, a more level-headed, sensible race will evolve to reclaim our wrecked heritage.”

“Well...” said Jim, “I dunno about that...”

Hasser said, “How do you explain the three kilometer diameter structure our surviving space and moon sensors report has continued to orbit us these past seven years?”

Mephord shrugged, “A derelict ship? A governmental lab? A section that was broken away from the International Space Station during the terrorist activity? I dunno.”

“Then why hasn’t its orbit decayed? Why hasn’t it crashed into the planet?” asked Hasser.

“Well, remember Ed, our data shows it’s in a very high orbit. It’s actually closer to Luna than Earth.”

Eddie Hasser sighed, “I suppose that’s true.”

“Damn straight,” said Mephord. “And you know what’s also true?” He arched his eyebrows.

“We’ve both got important work to do, and it ain’t gettin’ done with us sitting here on our wrinkled asses, old friend.” Both men chuckled.

Chapter 2

2283-06-09T010:06-5:00

Rec-Area #2

Rec-Area #2 was located in a relatively quiet, isolated part of the extensive compound, near Hydroponics, and adjacent to a set of rails leading into Tunnel Alpha, which connected this section of the compound to the Core. Above, and to either side of the rails, were catwalks along which Compounders could move on foot, though most preferred to wait for one of the motorized carts that ran the ovoid 3.2 kilometers of track connecting East Section and Core.

The Core was the central cluster of chambers that held, respectively, the main and backup fusion reactors, the central computers serving the entire compound, and the security area leading to the Shaft Security Tunnel. This tunnel led to the vertical shaft leading to the surface.

The recreation rooms weren't much in demand these days. Most of the Compounders felt too sick to engage in exercise on any of the machines in the gym section, though one or two people were currently in the lengthy pool. The swimmers were far enough away that the four people in the southwest corner of the large recreation area weren't concerned that they might be overheard.

Seated at a card table were Byron Milner and Eddie Hasser. Standing nearby, staring into an illuminated, beautifully decorated three hundred liter fish tank, were Sethra Slatten and Veronee Houston.

Veronee leaned forlornly against Sethra. Their backs were to the two men seated at the card table a few meters away. Sethra was rubbing Veronee's back in slow, soothing circles, as they watched a pair of tiny seahorses cavorting around and through the holes in a colony of coral. Zebrafish, some of them genetically modified glowers, darted to and fro. Crabs patrolled among the artificial seaweed, ornamental treasure chests, and diver's helmets that dotted the layer of colored rocks that covered the bottom of the tank. Their claws were prominently displayed. They reminded Sethra of the rifle-armed androids at various points in the A-3 compound.

Eddie was surreptitiously running his right hand over his blue neoprene coveralls. It might have looked lewd if it had been done three or four times faster, and if anyone were paying attention. Finally, satisfied, he slipped off a rather special ring and laid it on the table, then went over to a vending machine and used five credits on a deck of playing cards and a set of poker chips. Meanwhile, Byron put on the ring and began to emulate Eddie's actions of moments ago. By the time Eddie returned, Sethra and Veronee had taken seats at the card table, and Byron had finished his own self-inspection. "No bugs on me," he reported.

"Then we're all clean," said Sethra. Byron flicked the ring across to Sethra. "A handy device," the roboticist commented, as his friend put the ring back on his right hand. "We're also covered for general-area listening devices, thanks to Roomba VI." He meant the small robot at the far end of the rec-area that was busily polishing the tiled floor. It had an antenna and a beefed up battery not found in others of its type.

"It's projecting a hypersonic wave coupled with continuously and randomly generated low

intensity EM pulses.” Byron smiled slyly. “Plays havoc with area listening devices.”

Veronee took the deck of cards and began to shuffle. “Not that I think you guys are paranoid, but are we really certain the Administrator uses listening devices? I mean, here we are at the end of our racial rope, like rats trapped on a sinking ship, and yet someone’s worried about what other people are saying?”

“It isn’t that,” said Eddie. “I can assure you that Jim Mephord isn’t really the eavesdropping type, nor is he power-hungry. He’s actually a pretty decent sort, once you get to know him. But he follows protocol, which means he has his Chief of Security, and certain androids, constantly casting a wide electronic surveillance net throughout the compound. Rats in too close proximity to one another have been shown, in experiments, to become aggressive. He’s taking precautions to prevent a ‘poor outcome’.”

Veronee said, “We’re not really in that close proximity to one another anymore, now that the compound’s population is down to less than twenty percent of its capacity.”

Sethra, stacking poker chips of different denominations into piles, opined, “Because of the fact that everyone pretty much knows they’re dying and probably won’t be here this time next year, the what-the-frack factor has risen accordingly. We’re all on edge. People get that way when their safety is threatened, and knowing you’re dying certainly qualifies as a threat.”

Veronee passed the now shuffled deck of cards to Sethra, and he began dealing. He announced the game: “Texas Hold’em.” He dealt each of them two cards, face down, then tossed down five community cards faceup, and play proceeded, but only for the benefit of those monitoring the live feeds from the security cameras. They were here for clandestine discussion, not leisure.

2283-06-09T10:24-5:00

Main Security Hub

Michael Covington sat in his command chair in the security chamber of Core section, examining the bottom of his right shoe. He then dropped his right foot to the floor and pulled up his left shoe for inspection. Another pair of shoes nearly worn out. He was going through them at a rate of about one pair each month. He silently cursed the extra credit expenditure necessary to replace them.

Sighing, he returned his attention to his duties, eyes flicking among a dozen monitors held at an angle in a metal bracketed array above his workstation. In addition to the standard implant, he was outfitted with a sidearm, and a pair of neutralizer grenades, which hung from his belt opposite the gun’s holster.

Covington depressed a button on the communications console, “Chief of Security to Shaft Access Tunnel. Who’s on patrol there?” He could clearly see on Monitor 6 that it was Matteo Brummett. A few moments later came the reply, “Matteo Brummett, sir. Designation 1631. My shift began eight minutes ago. I relieved Roger Arnold, designation 3332, sir. He reported no contacts or anomalies on his watch, sir. And all is currently quiet

in the Tunnel.”

“Roger that,” replied Covington. He chimed Matteo’s implant and said, “How you holding up, Matt? I reviewed your latest medcheck this morning. Those nausea pills helping any?” He put a finely measured dose of compassion into his voice.

“Not much, sir... but I can handle anything that comes up. Matteo continued, “There is another anomaly to report, sir: video playback on my security console is missing footage from Shaft cams two and three, between 0121 and 0228 hours, sir. But Scan indicates no life forms in the shaft, currently, nor during that time span. And, the second security bulkhead’s computer reports that it’s been unopened since the last team from Environmental went in there three days ago to recalibrate a Geiger counter, sir. Roger didn’t mention it when we exchanged shifts. I don’t know if he missed it, or just failed to mention it.”

“Anomaly noted, Matt, and good work. I’ll get to the bottom of it before lunch. Stay alert. I expect no problems, but people are irritable and jumpy. Given that, and factor in that these anomalies suggest tampering. Makes me nervous. I’ll check back with you later. Chime me if you note any further irregularities.”

“Understood. Brummett, out.”

Covington glanced back up at the bank of monitors, then started reviewing the telemetry from the hundreds of listening devices he had throughout the compound, many in public areas, some in private cubicles. This was an essential part of maintaining security, but he found it insipid. For the next half hour, he skimmed audio from a dozen different devices. All were variations on one another: spats among lovers; bitching and griping about the day to day hassles of work, and its futility in light of everyone’s worsening health; tearful conversations bemoaning the loss of a loved one or friend; the centuries old ranting of the ‘working class’ about the ‘aristocracy’. *One wonders whether such a race should survive given this puling drivel.*

Then he noticed something odd: no telemetry at all from his listening device in Rec-Area #2 for the past, hmm, about eighteen minutes. He reached out and tapped a console to his right, then turned a knob to pan one of the recreational area’s security cameras. A couple taking it easy in the pool, a foursome at one table playing some kind of card game, one older guy wearing the green neoprene coveralls of Environmental and throwing darts. That good-looking redhead from Environmental, testing the pool water and adding some treatment chemicals. A cleaning robot polishing the floor. “Why the hell am I not getting any telemetry?” He adjusted the gain. No cigar. He had the listening device run a self-diagnostic. It reported functioning normally. He sighed. Nothing to be done about it right now. You didn’t exactly go in and do repair work on a secret listening device while eight people were in its vicinity.

He skipped ahead to one of his favorite devices, planted in the cubicle of Designee 2135, an unusually voluptuous Japanese woman named Shima Soki. She was one of his own past conquests, and on a lark he’d planted a device in her cubicle. During the act itself, no less. He felt justifiably proud of his ability to multi task. He’d since learned that she had no shortage of willing partners, all males. It pissed him off that she’d not made such contact with him in over a month. If it were symptoms of the Sickness, that would be one thing, but Chief Covington knew for a fact that Shima wasn’t sick. *Me’tinks little Shima is overdue for a security shakedown. He grinned.*

2283-06-09T10:27-5:00

Rec-Area #2

Discussion around the card table was not the garden variety chatter that generally seems to accompany group pastimes. Nearby, a woman finished sampling the water in the swimming pool and minutely adjusting its composition. She was merely carrying out one of her many duties as an Environmental tech, but her other purpose in being here at this particular time was to flank the group and provide interference if required. She and Byron had been serious now for close to a year, and recently Sethra had taken her fully into his confidence. So while the other four plotted, she kept a surreptitious eye on the man throwing darts, and the two people in the swimming pool.

“Okay, let’s summarize the situation in broad strokes,” said Eddie. “One: I’ve convinced the three of you that we’re all doomed to die over the next few months, not that it took much convincing. Two: somehow, our good friend Byron here was able to lay hands on a data chip that contains software about a century ahead of the most powerful commercially available total immersion games. The software not only creates a continuous reality for users to experience, but also facilitates the actual transfer of consciousness into the simulation. This has been shown to actually happen with chimps tested with the software under laboratory conditions. Sethra, your turn.”

Sethra pretended to make a bid, and tossed a couple of poker chips down. “I was lead author of the team at MIT that developed that software, just for the record. Four years in the making, with a team of fifteen of us. Hundreds of man-hours.” Having drawn appropriate attention to his accomplishment, he continued, “Three: Not only has Byron been able to use seemingly innocuous maintenance robots to protect our anonymity, but he’s equipped a special model conduit crawler unit to place passive-monitor interfaces in kilometers of conduit pipes, some as small as ten centimeters in diameter. So we’ll soon have access to all data flowing into and out of Core.” He nodded to Veronee.

She tossed down a chip, played a card. “Four: whereas it’s Sethra’s responsibility to get access to the main computer matrix and a laser reader, it’s mine to secure us a place somewhere in the compound that is large enough to house four total immersion pods. It must be tied into the entire facility’s computer infrastructure and power, but also have its own backup power via a mini fusion reactor. Failing that, we’ll need a large mobile capacitor with at least three days’ juice. The hidden space will require room for a medical robot and its console. I have succeeded in finding a small area beneath the central supercapacitor in Environmental Cavern E. It’s off the main route of crawl spaces used by you Reds,” she glanced at Byron. “It is actually just a chance occurrence of wasted space. Or maybe Engineering would call it a firebreak. Logs show it hasn’t been accessed since we were all sequestered here, years ago, and that means that it’s fallen out of the minds of the people here, even if it is listed somewhere on some schematic. There’s a narrow opening that is large enough to accommodate one immersion pod at a time, and it has its own local control panel for cameras, air, temp, etc. Here’s the most important part: the door is diamond-matrix ceramal, ten centimeters thick, with internal controls that could be

hacked to override those in Core, if that proves necessary. That means once we lock ourselves in, we're virtually impregnable." Everyone around the table smiled at this. "So, we get our equipment in there, set it all up, and once Sethra has managed to isolate a significant fraction of the compound's matrix computing power and storage, we plug in. Sethra makes doubly sure that what he's done cannot be traced."

Sethra arched an eyebrow and gave Veronee a wounded look. "*Please.*"

Byron leaned forward and made a show of counting his red chips. "Fifth, and finally: a heavy-duty construction robot, which I will have specially programmed with self-deleting instructions, comes along on our mark and plastcretes over the only entrance into our little area. Within two hours, that section of wall will be visually indistinguishable from the dozens of kilometers of plastcreted corridors throughout the entire facility. The ceramal bulkhead will be completely concealed. We will be, effectively, invisible."

Sethra added, "Timing is gonna be really critical, and there won't be much wiggle room for screw-ups. The security cameras along our intended route will have to be compromised ahead of time, and in such a way that their self-diagnostics won't start whining. We can't have any of them seem to have malfunctioned, even briefly, or we might as well wave a flag and say, 'Here we are!' Over the past three weeks, I've worked out triple-redundancy plans for power routing, matrix access, etc. Nothing will hinge on any single link in our chain of plans."

"The bottom line," said Eddie, "is that even if we blow this entirely and get put in confinement for questioning, we've not lost much. We're going to die in the coming weeks, regardless, so what do we have to lose by chancing this? And if our experiment fails, we won't know it: once the process of immersion starts, either Sethra's theory proves out, or else we just lose consciousness and never know it when we die. I'll have a med bot watching over us. It should be able to keep us physically stable until we're fully immersed."

He suddenly spread his cards and flipped them faceup one at a time, a big shit eating grin plastered to his face, then made a big show of scooping up everyone else's chips from the table. The other three showed suitably disgusted body language. Eddie asked, "Sethra, what's our time line?"

The young computer programmer and electronics expert began stacking his poker chips. "Three days, to the minute, my friends. Starting at 1115 hours today. From this moment forward, we don't meet together in public, except by happenstance, and we communicate only via our implants, using the symmetric encryption key I prepared for our mission. Do not deviate from this, for any reason."

Everyone stood up and shook hands. There was a bit of backslapping, and a few jokes were traded, at a volume sufficient for the couple in the pool and the man throwing darts. Then, they dispersed.

That night Veronee stayed with Sethra in his cubicle. She was too weak from her recent miscarriage to couple, so Sethra held her tenderly, stroking her hair even long after his arm grew tired. She buried her face against his chest until she had cried herself to sleep. Sethra lay awake much longer, grieving their lost child silently. He let the tears come, in the concealing darkness.

Byron spent the night two kilometers away, with his lover, Zuzana Wesley, in another cavern filled with residential cubicles. His neoprene blues and her greens were in a tangled heap at the foot of the cot.

"Did you guys get some details worked out?" she asked sleepily.

"Yes," Byron replied. "We'll make our move soon. Be ready for Sethra's chime." Like his best friend, Byron remained awake until quite late. His preoccupation differed: they had four total immersion pods, and five conspirators. Though he was an excellent engineer, he could not make the calculations work. Before sleep took him, he resolved that he would not go without Zuzana.

2283-06-09T22:28-5:00

Shaft Access Tunnel

As Matteo Brummett, Designee 1631, of Core Security was about to come off his shift, Security Chief Michael Covington, Designee 0259, chimed his implant. "Brummett, it's about time for your relief to show, isn't it? Any more anomalies during your shift?"

The response was crisp, masking weariness. "No sir. It's been all quiet here since our last communication. My replacement is late, though, sir. I believe it's Shields."

"Good memory, Brummett. I wish all my men were that sharp. Shields is on his way. He just chimed from Sickbay. He's running about ten minutes late. In addition to an immune booster and an anti-nausea, he needed a tranquilizer. Apparently, it's been a particularly rough day for him. Poor bastard just lost his wife to the Sickness, and feels like crap himself. Let's hope the meds help. I normally wouldn't permit anyone on sedatives to work Security detail, but these aren't normal times, are they? Besides, he'll have the androids as backup."

"Sir, I volunteer to take Mark Shields, Designee 0093's shift. I'm tired, but I don't feel that bad. I'm officially requesting permission to"

"Negative, Brummett. I appreciate your spirit of generosity, but you need your own rest. He'll be along momentarily. While you're waiting, let me double-check those anomaly timespans you gave me this morning. You reported a discontinuity in the constant interval images for shaft cams two and three, and they both occurred during identical time spans. What were the time spans again?"

"Uh, yes sir, let me check my log." Frankly, he was a bit surprised the issue hadn't been addressed earlier in the day. "Here it is sir. Between 0121 and 0228 hours, today, sir."

"Acknowledged. I'll request two specialists from Science to figure out the problem. Sit tight son, I see Mark coming up the elevator from Sickbay now."

"Roger, sir. Brummett out."

Covington broke the connection. "Damn it!" he growled. He scrambled a signal to one of the two androids in the tunnel leading up to Brummett's post. "Unit A32N-6, this is Chief of Security Covington. Confirm by voice scan." He quickly received confirmation. "A32N-6, Security agent Matteo Brummett, Designee 1631, has tampered with the mixed hydroxide-phosphate-oxoanions radiation filters in the Shaft. I have video confirmation of his actions. Your instructions are to approach Brummett and crush his skull. Scan to ensure death has occurred. Then take his firearm and fire two rounds into your own chest. Return the firearm to his right hand. Then, erase these instructions and the past five minutes of your memory and overwrite until unrecoverable. Execute these commands in t-minus thirty seconds. Mark."

He received an acknowledgment signal from android A32N-6, in response to which he plugged a hacked security board into his console and flipped its switch, causing the security cameras in that tunnel to continue to increment their chronograph but to loop the past five seconds of video until he toggled again.

"Unit A32N-5, this is Chief of Security Covington. Confirm by voice scan." The second android's confirmation signal arrived. "A32N-5, on my mark, wait exactly seven minutes, then erase your memory of the eight minutes prior to that moment, and overwrite until unrecoverable. Mark." The second android unit sent acknowledgment.

Chief of Security Michael Covington, Designee 0259, was unable to see the drama unfolding in the security tunnel leading up to Brummett's post at the end of the Shaft Access Tunnel, due to the necessity of keeping the cameras in that tunnel looping. But his imagination painted the lurid event on the hungry canvas of his mind.

He sent a chime to the on-duty Medical personnel in Sickbay. "Is Shields resting peacefully?"

"Yes, sir, Chief. He'll get a good night's sleep."

"Good, he was in a shambles yesterday after his wife passed away. Sedating him was the least we could do. Keep me informed of his condition and give him my regards in the morning when he wakes. Tell him to take the day off and spend it with his daughter. That's even more important than his duties, right now."

"Acknowledged, Chief," said Jessica Goodrow, Designee 3025, the on-duty Sickbay tech, and she cut the connection. *What a great guy! And not bad looking, either.* Jessica pondered how she might engineer a social meet up with the Chief of Security.

Chapter 3

2283-06-11T08:50-5:00

Sethra's cubicle

Sethra was alone, and glad of it, because of what he'd just learned. He needed some time to process this information.

Veronee had gone on shift in Environmental. Per her most recent chime, she was busy overseeing the replacement of a biofilter in Tank 4 in Sewage.

Sethra had begun culling through the vast amounts of information he'd received from the interface splices that Byron's robot crawler had installed in kilometers of wiring within the conduit pipes that ran all over the compound. He now reclined on a tricornered pillow on his cot, lap terminal propped on his stomach.

His search algorithms were clever, and he had isolated lots of relevant information, the most shocking of which was the manner of Designee 1631's death, a little over thirty-four hours ago. Crushed skulls simply weren't causes of death, not in A-3, and not in any industry even before The Attack. Robot labor was used exclusively in high-risk construction work, and in other areas where the safety of humans couldn't be assured. In the years the A-3 community had been sequestered here, illness was the sole cause of death -- never accident.

Designee 1631 hadn't been in a construction accident, obviously. He'd been on-duty in the Shaft Security Access Tunnel when he was killed. The only thing that could have crushed his skull in that location was someone else working security, either human or android. He scrolled further down his lap terminal's screen and read:

Sethra pondered this. Why the hell would any human in the compound need to fire on an android? And that bit about the android engaging in sanctioned self-defense? Utter crap. Even if Brummett had snapped and had put the android in defense mode, it could have absorbed every round and probably still been functional. Even if not, easily repairable. It wasn't as if Brummett had been firing at it with a bazooka. Security androids, alone of all non-organics in the compound, were programmatically allowed to defend themselves, because of the nature of their duties. But only to the minimal extent necessary to *protect* human life.

He could find no video footage of the event, though he should have been able to do so. There were cameras in the Shaft Access Tunnel. He supposed it was remotely possible for two cameras to fail in the same general period of time, but he couldn't risk doing a remote diagnostic on the units. That would be detected. He had to assume that the camera units had been intentionally manipulated for the time it took for Matteo Brummett to be killed.

"It doesn't make sense, and when something doesn't make sense, I cry 'bullshit!'" He bet Security Chief Covington had gotten reamed by the Administrator. Jim Mephord was not Sethra's favorite person, but he was no idiot.

Sethra scrolled down further, and flagged a couple of items for follow-up scrutiny. Pausing, he let his mind turn the reported "facts" over and over again, examining them from different angles.

Epiphany struck, and Sethra sat bolt upright, dislodging his lap terminal. He barely reacted fast enough to keep it from sliding off his cot and crashing to the floor. "Son of a shit-pickin' finger-lickin' fracking alien!" He swung his legs and swiveled to sit up on his cot. The Shaft! A security guard responsible for guarding access to the Shaft had been deliberately killed. And, as everyone knew, the Shaft was the source of the radiation leakage from the surface that was making everyone sick. From his search algorithms, Sethra knew that Brummett had been assigned that particular guard post often in recent weeks. Parsing through posted duty rosters, he discovered that Brummett and two other men had been the only Security personnel posted in the Shaft Tunnel within the past six months. Unusual.

"Why not have a more standard rotation of personnel through there?" Sethra asked himself aloud. The Shaft was the most dangerous spot in the compound. The radiation levels near the Shaft were higher than anywhere else in A-3. So why have the same handful of Security personnel exposed to that so often? "Because something suspicious was going on? Somebody wanted to keep things manageable, have as few potential information leaks as possible?"

"OK buddy, how on Earth did you get your skull crushed?" He could not get that to wash: androids just didn't malfunction badly enough to kill somebody, not these days. Their programming was too refined. Sethra scoured the current database, and two others. No mention of android-caused deaths, by accident nor by intent, in the past seventy-five years. "No, you drew special attention to yourself, Matt. This was intentional."

He picked up his lap terminal from the cot and moved it to the table, slid into a chair and searched for the other android -- for they were always assigned in pairs -- was unable to produce audio or video for the killing, either. Sethra ticked off the unlikely coincidences on his fingers: camera #1 in the Security Tunnel malfunctions. Camera #2 likewise malfunctions, at the same time. A security android approaches Brummett in such a way as to provoke the man to fire upon it with his sidearm. This android's memory contains no record of these events. The second android also has several minutes of memory missing. Sethra decided the smell of bullshit had become overpowering.

"You poor bastard. You found out something you weren't supposed to know, or notice. Had to be permanently silenced. And it has to do with the Shaft."

2283-06-11T011:51-5:00

Dining Hall #1

Administrator Jim Mephord salted his sandwich, and continued, "None of it makes sense, Eddie. The story that I'm getting from Covington and the data I'm getting from the Security Control Center computers aren't adding up."

Eddie had received a most startling encrypted message on his implant earlier that morning, from Sethra, and so had a pretty good idea why things weren't adding up. Unfortunately, if Chief of Security Michael Covington was as dirty as Sethra surmised, then he had probably been wily enough to somehow place a bug on the Administrator, and that meant Eddie had to be very careful of what he said.

Eddie sighed. "I'm in total agreement, Jim. Makes no damned sense whatsoever."

Covington's a competent man. I'm sure he's working double-time to sort out the actual sequence of events. But it begs credulity that not only did both cameras in the tunnel fail to record Brummett's slaying, but neither android has audio or visual data for that time span. Someone had it in for Brummett, obviously." *You did, Covington, you piece of garbage!*

"Something stinks, no question," said Mephord around a bite of his sandwich. "Question is, how do I go about investigating this in the most thorough manner possible? I've got Covington and a couple of data recovery specialists on it. What more can I do?"

For starters, you can put Covington in a cell, and put someone who is farther above suspicion in charge of the investigation. "Well, this is just my opinion, Jim, but I think you should remove Covington from the investigation." *Careful Ed, old son. Tread carefully.* "He's got to be pretty shook up after losing one of his team, and as someone in a position of authority, you know how heavily responsibility lies on the shoulders of a leader. He needs a few days off, to rest, to gain perspective, to come to grips with what has happened. He surely feels like Brummett's death was his fault, personally." *Which it was.* "Give him a firm date for his return to duty, so he doesn't feel you've lost confidence in him." Eddie waited for Jim's reaction, and sipped water.

Jim finished chewing. "These pickles are fracking nasty. Yeah, we have to recycle, but these are undoubtedly vinegared turds from waste treatment." Both men gave a snort of laughter. Jim took another bite of his sandwich, then continued to speak with his mouth full of food, an uncouth habit Eddie had learned to overlook years ago.

"I've thought of taking Covington off it, believe me, Ed. But Covington wouldn't take it as a kindness. He's a prideful man. He'd definitely get his underwear all in a wad over it." Sometimes, Eddie wondered why Jim had been selected as Administrator of this compound. Some confluence of variables on personality and stress tests, no doubt. He was very good at the mundane everyday administration. He'd have made a superb office manager, probably a fine company CEO. Maybe Mephord was a decorated war hero, but Hassler didn't think he had the cahoneys for this sort of thing. This was a battlefield unfamiliar to Mephord, totally beyond his abilities. What A-3 needed was a leader who could actually think, not some military jarhead.

Eddie glanced at his wrist chronometer and wrinkled his brow in faux concern. "Look, I need to go. We're bringing a new matrix unit online in Sickbay, and I don't want those techies messing up my work area." Jim barked an appreciative laugh, and Eddie stood and leaned forward, hands gripping his side of the table. "Remember this, Jim. You're the Administrator. That means doing what's most effective. You can't always give people the kid-glove treatment. Put some people on this you trust. That'll lessen the chances of an ongoing cover-up, if there is one."

He took his leave, heading for a lift shaft. *Damn, Ed! You were being pretty politic right there until the end.* He sure as hell hoped that Jim Mephord wasn't bugged.

Byron Milner's cubicle

It had been a long day, made all the longer because Byron was worn out from his tryst with Zuzana Wesley the previous night. He was tired, and yet there had been a bounce in his step all day and a silly grin on his face. He wondered if Zuzana was experiencing something similar. Even the nausea hadn't seemed as bad today. And he couldn't remember having had any nosebleeds.

This euphoria reminded him of a song from late twentieth century songwriters Huey Lewis, Christopher John Hayes, and John Victor Colla called "Power of Love". He'd come across it in one of his many database scourings. He liked having music to listen to while he spent seemingly endless hours building or repairing robots, and programming their instructions. The power of love is a curious thing. Make a one man weep, make another man sing...

Smiling, he queued the song on his cubicle player, and listened to it as he began to work on a little personal project. Grinning at his mysterious request, Zuzana had supplied him with small amounts of a few chemicals. She'd laughed when he'd been evasive about his intended purpose for the chemicals. "You'll see..." had been all he would say.

Now, he sat alone at his table in his cubicle, with four small vials arrayed in a plastic rack before him. This was going to be tricky, but he felt confident he could make it work with minimal risk to himself, if he were careful. Accordingly, he donned safety goggles.

"Cubicle, reduce music volume by fifty percent." Yeah, that was better. He'd taken a stimulant tab half an hour earlier so he'd be mentally sharp. "Door, lock. Show cubicle status as unoccupied. Implant, refuse chimes from all personnel except those with override privilege.

Having done what he could to help himself focus, he reached for a small backpack he often wore to and from the lab. Usually, it contained things such as his lap monitor, lunch, a few anti-nausea and anti-radiation tablets, and maybe a few tools.

Currently, it contained a small triple coaxial plasma igniter and four small, tapering metallic power cells. He added the power cells to the rack that held the chemical vials and set the TCPI down to its left.

Next, he pulled from his satchel a Taser he'd acquired at considerable risk of discovery. He plugged in a soldering iron and set it carefully aside to begin heating, then took a set of folding hexagonal screwdrivers from his overalls chest pocket, and began disassembling the Taser. With the gun fully apart, he produced eight specially made tungsten components that he would need to properly modify the casing and triggering mechanism.

Seventy minutes later, Byron sighed and shrugged his aching shoulders. He took the now empty vials, the plastic rack, and a few other scraps from his project and put them in his cubicle's laser melting unit. This unit sorted its contents compartmentally to avoid any bad chemical reactions once they melted, and then converted each compartment's trash to liquid or gaseous form. That, in turn, was sorted by viscosity and boiling points elsewhere in the compound, for recycling purposes.

On the table before him, what had been a Taser was reassembled into something quite different. It didn't look any different on the outside, except for a small selector adjacent to the safety. What he had made was a multipurpose, though limited use, weapon that could

fire bursts of aluminum dust at hyper velocity, or a two-second sustained burst of high-intensity laser. He would need to be wearing special gloves if he were to use that setting, for the gun casing was not made to handle that kind of heat generation, and the whole gun would quickly melt and become useless.

He was taking a considerable risk, for A-3 protocol clearly prohibited personnel other than those assigned to Security from carrying firearms. But if he did need it and was lucky, he could stick to the aluminum dust, which would be highly effective at close range, and whisper quiet. He had enough dust and ample miniature power cells for eight shots.

He put the weapon in a secret pouch of his backpack, then sat back and sighed. "If we're really lucky, I won't have to use it at all."

2283-06-11T20:14-5:00

Sethra's Cubicle

With a heavily encrypted brief message, Sethra announced an impromptu meeting in his cubicle, sending the chime to Byron, Zuzana, Veronee and Eddie. By 2030 hours, they had all gathered.

Byron set a small Roomba robot in one corner of the room. It resembled the one that had been cleaning in Rec-Area #2 during their card game. He extended an antenna on its top surface, flicked a switch on the remote control fob and then pocketed it, satisfied with the steady green LED glow coming from an indicator light next to the antenna.

Sethra and Eddie shared their suspicions about Security Chief Michael Covington with the other three, who were equally shocked by the implications of the evidence highlighted by Sethra's data mining.

"Son of a bitch won't even submit to regular medical checkups, like the rest of us have to!" huffed Eddie. "And he seems a lot healthier than most of us, too. Add to that what we've learned regarding the almost certain foul play that was involved in Matteo Brummett's death, and we have ourselves a gen-yoo-wine bad guy."

"I had lunch with Mephord and convinced him to remove Covington from his post, at least for a few days. He didn't like it, but he did it. And I gather that the Chief was quite understanding and cooperative. But to me, that just makes him more suspect. If he were truly uninvolved in Brummett's death, why didn't he react as most people would: insulted, indignant, resistant?"

"Because," ventured Zuzana, "he believes he's covered his tracks thoroughly, and that there's nothing that a forensic investigation can discover that would implicate him."

Byron nodded agreement. "Yeah, Zuz is right. This guy, as Chief of Security, is one highly trained asshole. I understand he was Special Forces back before The Attack. Navy SEAL, I think. He probably feels that he has us far outclassed."

Sethra said, "Overconfidence can be a person's undoing. We're going on a little jaunt this evening, compadres. I've made up my mind to personally examine the supposedly failing Shaft cameras and run my own diagnostics on them." He indicated a heavy plastic tool case with a carrying handle lying on his cot.

Zuzana unzipped the heavy duffel bag she'd brought, and unloaded five radiation suits. "I borrowed these from an Environmental supply cache. Five suits won't be missed, especially since they're disposable. We'll be going into the Shaft itself, so we know we're going to be exposed to higher levels of radiation than down here. But with each suit's protection, and a megadose of anti-radiation meds, we'll be no worse for wear if we limit our exposure to under an hour." Dr. Hasser arched an eyebrow at this evaluation, but didn't comment.

Byron showed off his weapon, and explained its function, which drew whistles and utterances of genuine admiration from the other four, both for his ingenuity and his daring to create the device. "The gloves of the radiation suit should suffice to adequately protect my hand if I'm forced to use the laser setting which, I will add, can give a burst up to 1.8 seconds in duration, and can cut a hole through thirty centimeters of steel or twenty-three centimeters of ceramal alloy."

"Or separate a line of Security guards' torsos from their legs," added Sethra, grinning. "But no killing unless we are forced."

While Eddie gave everyone anti-radiation injections, Byron looked at his wrist chronograph and explained, "At 2100 hours, a large corridor polishing robot will appear to be cleaning this section of corridor. I've modified it by removing the motors that drive its brushes. There'll be room enough for us all inside, after squeezing through the maintenance hatch. It will then take us to an area of Engineering, Level D, where there is a Power Conduit Tunnel. Although very few people know this, it leads, roundabout, to the Shaft."

"I wondered about that," said Zuzana. "I thought the Security Access Tunnel was the only way to get into the Shaft." Byron nodded and grinned, "You're supposed to think that. Everyone is. I'm not even sure Administrator Mephord knows about this. I only know about this alternate route because I program maintenance robots to take that route to the Shaft for the typical stuff: structural integrity degradation checks, voltage spikes, seismic shifting... that sort of thing. Remember, protocol states we share such information on a need-to-know basis only..."

Zuzana beamed a smile at Byron. "You're one handy fella to have around."

"In any number of capacities," said Byron.

Sethra's cubicle

Sethra entered the necessary command on his lap terminal, sending a fairly mild surge through the circuits on which this corridor's lighting depended. "The corridor outside my door is dark now. It'll stay that way for a little over five minutes, while Engineering runs remote diagnostics to see if it was caused by a momentary power surge, or if there was a major blow, and the distinct possibility of a fire hazard. When the diagnostic comes back okay, some lazy bum in Engineering will reset the board remotely, turning the corridor lighting back on, rather than take the time to come investigate personally."

"Nice," said Byron. "We're all just a bunch of lazy bums in Engineering."

Sethra grinned, then added, "While we have darkness, the large floor polishing robot will arrive, and we'll clamber aboard unseen by corridor cameras which, for some strange reason, aren't equipped with the typical IR and UV detectors..."

"Compliments of yours truly, six months ago," added Byron.

A little less than three minutes later, Sethra said, "Door, open. Close and lock when room occupants have exited." The door swished aside, and the five bumbled their way forward in darkness, then clumsily boarded the large robotic vehicle. Once the vehicle's maintenance hatch closed, the unit accelerated smoothly down the corridor.

"The ride to our drop-off point outside the Power Conduit Tunnel should take about sixteen minutes," Byron reported. They could vaguely see one another in the light spill from the internal electronics. Byron placed his weapon in a Velcro chest pouch on his radiation suit, where he would have easy access to it.

Sethra rode squatting, right hand holding onto a heavy aluminum bracket, his case of tools propped between his knees. "Good times," he said, grinning at his co-conspirators. "Good times."

2283-06-11T21:07-5:00

Shima Soki's Cubicle

Michael Covington ground himself into Shima Soki remorselessly. As usual, they were on a blanket on the floor of her cubicle. She'd never understood why he preferred that over the cot, but the sex was of such a caliber that she wasn't about to complain. Covington

took pleasure in her fear of losing control in the throes of passion. His psionic aptitude was such that he could easily detect the film of fear that rode the cresting of her pleasure. He wondered if she knew that about herself.

His back bled from where her fingernails unconsciously raked him, but it would heal within the hour. When he had spent himself, he rolled off of her, and she placed a hand on his hairy chest in light postcoital contact, her heavy breathing sounding in the darkened room.

"Dearest Shima," he spoke into the darkness, turning onto his side and caressing a nipple. "It has been too long. Do, please, ensure that you arrange time for me more frequently. It would be a shame if I suddenly could no longer find the special medication that is helping you resist the radiation..."

He felt her stiffen, and he shuddered in pleasure as he drank in her fear. He caressed her cheek softly. "I must leave you now. I have some unusual work that requires my attention. I'll expect you to chime me sometime in, shall we say, the next two or three days?"

Chapter 4

2283-06-11T22:13-5:00

The Shaft

The Shaft was awe inspiring in its size and complexity. Sethra and the others stood on a heavy-gauge aluminum catwalk that ran the Shaft's circumference. "From where we're standing," said Byron, "it drops another sixty meters, and ascends another two hundred."

The Shaft was easily twenty meters in diameter. Its sides were slick with moisture, and the unmistakable marks left by a huge Japanese borer machine grooved the walls in a spiral pattern that reminded Byron of the helix of stripes going up a barber's pole.

A column ran up the Shaft's center. "That's the Infrastructure Pole," Byron said, indicating the massive pillar. "Two meters in diameter, it's made of the same sort of composite developed by scientists in New Zealand. The same material that comprises earthquake resistant buildings around the world. Tremendously strong, but also flexible, up to a point."

"Dare I ask what's supporting the Infrastructure Pole?" Sethra asked.

Byron grinned. "Certainly. Beyond the base of the Shaft, the Infrastructure Pole continues another eighty meters into the bedrock. It's quite well-anchored. Trust me, it will be here for millennia after we're gone."

"What's that?" asked Veronee, pointing a flashlight at a pod-like structure clinging to the Shaft along a grooved track.

"Personnel transport," said Eddie. "You may not recall, but those pods are what lowered us into A-3 years ago. If we walk further around the catwalk, you'll see others like it. Each can hold a dozen passengers. They're controlled by the compound's computer system."

"Probably wouldn't function now, though," Sethra voiced. "Too much radiation exposure, for far too long. Probably fried the onboard circuitry."

"Actually, they *should* still be operational," said Byron. "Any lazy bum of an Engineer," he glanced at Sethra and winked, "could tell you that there are no onboard electronics. Just safety harnesses for the passengers. There is a mechanical means of detecting uncontrolled descent velocity, which would activate nozzles to spray an impact-absorption foam throughout the cabin. It's possible that even if one of these things went into freefall, its passengers would survive the impact."

"How ... reassuring," said Zuzana.

They began walking slowly around the catwalk in a clockwise direction, until they came to a right angled intersection with a narrower catwalk that had a high guardrail. Although each of them had his or her suit's helmet light on, Byron shone a much more powerful handheld flashlight down the connecting catwalk, which was only wide enough for single-file passage. The fact that the mesh of the catwalk was not finely woven did little to help diminish Sethra's awareness of the precipitous drop into the darkness far below. It's nearer end was heavily bolted to the two-meter wide circular catwalk that ran the entirety of the Shaft's perimeter, while its far end was secured to the Infrastructure Pole.

"Let me guess," said Sethra. "In order to get to the supposedly glitched cameras, we're going to have to cross that?"

Byron answered, "Yep. And climb a considerable distance."

Sethra's expression hardened. "Damn. I hadn't thought that through. Ver, you're in no condition for climbing, baby." She looked at him and nodded agreement. Byron nodded his head slightly, indicating to them that he understood.

The roboticist angled his beam to illuminate a ladder that ran up the side of the Infrastructure Pole. It was protectively encircled by a heavy-gauge aluminum lattice.

"Everyone familiar with the principle of Three Point Control when climbing a ladder?" As it turned out, nobody was. Apparently, that was another bit of minutia with which only lazy bum Engineers were familiar.

He quickly went over the concept. "You wanna keep three of your four limbs in contact with ladder rungs at all times. You'll have to consciously focus to do this, because the natural inclination is to ascend faster, to get the climb over with. But that is only Two Point Control and much more likely to get you killed."

"I'm feeling better and better about this climb the longer you talk," said Eddie.

"It's actually not too dangerous, if you make sure to use the climbing method I've described. The topside of each rung is grooved and coated with friction material, and our suits' gloves are also rough-palmed for gripping. Don't grab the sides of the ladder, nor should you trust in the surrounding lattice. Only use the ladder rungs themselves for support."

"I'll wait here, and keep watch," said Veronee. "We could certainly use a lookout next to the Power Conduit Tunnel, though the chance of anyone else physically entering the Shaft and challenging us is remote."

"I'll stay here with her," volunteered Eddie. He patted the medical kit on his belt. "If she's feeling faint or weak, a doctor should be at her side. Besides, I don't particularly relish the idea of the climb myself. You two younger men are stronger and spryer."

"Fair enough," said Sethra. "Byron and I are the ones whose expertise will be particularly needed up above. But we could use an extra pair of hands, ears, and eyes. Zuzana?"

"Are you kidding? I'm a fantastic climber. I could pull myself up that ladder with my arms alone. Let's get this done, and get out of here ASAP. This place gives me the creeps."

"Not only that, but we need to keep our exposure time as short as possible," Eddie added.

2283-06-11T22:31-5:00

Michael Covington's Cubicle

Michael Covington stood naked in his own cubicle, observing the Shaft's intruders via his lap terminal. He'd restored the Shaft's cameras to proper functioning upon learning that

Administrator Mephord intended to remove him from his post. It had been a small matter to hack the main Security Computer to allow him this remote access, even though he was officially relieved of duty. “Temporarily, only” he said, mimicking Mephord’s voice. He grinned derisively. Mephord was a fool! The Administrator had only succeeded in freeing his hands to deal with the meddlesome group he now watched on his lap terminal.

He had identified each of the eight people who had been in Rec-Area #2 at the time, using multiple security cameras and facial recognition software. Viewing their profiles on his lap terminal, he’d quickly eliminated six of those eight personnel as possible sources of tampering with his listening device. But two of the four who’d been seated playing cards had the technical knowledge and expertise to engage in surveillance-counteracting tactics: Slatten and Milner. “And the diagnostic was correct: the listening device was functioning just fine. They were simply emanating EM interference, somehow. Clever. I don’t like clever enemies.”

He shut off his lap terminal. “Door, lock. Record messages from any visitors.” Covington arched his back, fingers splayed with the mixed pain and ecstasy that this transformation always brought, then deformed into a puddle of complex organic ooze. In this form, it slithered into the ventilation shaft that served all the cubicles in this residential section. It headed for an intersection in the ventilation system that it knew led to a particular power conduit corridor in Engineering, Level D. *Never waste a day off work* it thought gleefully, surging forward.

2283-06-11T22:36-5:00

The Shaft, 135 meters elevation

Sethra, Byron and Zuzana now stood on a circular platform of heavy-gauge aluminum mesh flooring that surrounded the Infrastructure Pole. The platform almost completely filled the Shaft’s diameter at this particular elevation, except for a few lift-away sections spaced evenly around the perimeter, used for lowering or raising materials by winch. Several two-meter diameter stacks of metal discs surrounded the axis. Each stood roughly a meter from the Infrastructure Pole.

“What are these?” asked Zuzana. She stooped next to one and played her flashlight upon it. The individual two-meter diameter metallic discs were about two millimeters in thickness, and separated from one another by a gap just barely discernible to the human eye. “These look almost like some of the heat dissipation units we use in the sewage plant. Bet they’re damned heavy.”

“One hundred fifty kilograms. Each of these is an anti-radiation unit,” Byron replied. “The individual thin metallic layers are coated with a mixture of hydroxide-phosphate-oxoanions. That’s tech-speak for radiation-absorbing material. By having hundreds of broad area but ultraslim plates in each stack, we get a huge surface area to which radioactive particles can adhere and be neutralized.

“The problem,” he said, moving over to Zuzana and shining his more powerful halogen flashlight onto the surfaces she was observing, “is that these units obviously have not

been serviced: they require routine cleansing and reapplication of the absorption coating. See how dry the metallic plates are? They should appear glossy, almost oily.”

Sethra unlatched his tool case and opened it. He glanced up at the pair of cameras mounted on the Infrastructure Pole, then sorted through the tools in his kit. “Don’t you Reds send robots up here monthly to clean these units and reapply the absorber coating?”

“We do,” confirmed Byron. “And the procedure is always videoed by the robot crew. We’ve got gigabytes of such footage archived in Engineering. It didn’t make sense that these units had protected us for several years, then suddenly just weren’t functioning adequately. When the radiation in the compound began rising above acceptable limits, we decided to double-check, personally. We received approval from Administrator Mephord to send a team of humans up to have a look. Everything seemed in order. These units appeared to be functioning optimally. So at that time we could only assume that for some reason these units alone were no longer adequate to deal with the concentration of radiation in the Shaft.

“So, we built a second platform farther up the Shaft from here. That was about twenty months ago. Now, in addition to this anti-radiation platform, there’s another seventy-five meters above us, just fifty meters shy of the surface. It supports the same complement of anti-radiation units you see here.”

“And if we checked those units, we’d find the same thing we’re seeing here,” said Sethra. “They won’t have been properly maintained, despite what our robotic video logs tell us.”

Byron nodded. “We can’t go up there, of course, but I’m certain you’re exactly right.”

“How far are we above Veronee and Eddie?” asked Zuzana.

“Seventy-five meters,” said Byron, “the same distance as between this platform and the newer one above us. Our robots were programmed to construct and provide monthly maintenance of the uppermost anti-radiation platform. The concentration of radiation rises dramatically as you near the top of the Shaft. Not even radiation suits and meds can allow humans to survive in that environment.”

Sethra finished making faces at the cameras, gave them one final unmistakable hand gesture, and stepped down from the railing where he’d anchored himself to diagnose the videocorders. “These cameras are in perfect working order, which doesn’t surprise me.”

“Nor should it,” said Byron. “The same robots that service these anti-radiation units also perform diagnostics and maintenance on the cameras. There’s only one conclusion that we can draw from both my observations of these grills and your testing of the cameras.”

Sethra nodded, tightly. “Intentional neglect in the case of the anti-radiation units, and skilled manipulation in the case of the cameras. There’s no element of chance operating here. As we already suspected, the deaths of hundreds of A-3 personnel over the last two years was caused. Intentionally. My friends, there is a saboteur in A-3.”

2283-06-11T22:57-5:00

The Shaft, 60 meters elevation

“How long have they been *up* there?,” Veronee asked irritably.

Eddie glanced at his wrist chronometer, which was buckled on the sleeve of his radiation suit’s right arm, just above where it made an airtight seal with his gloves. “About thirty-nine minutes. They can’t be too far above us. I can catch their voices now and then.” He sighed impatiently. “They need to finish and get back down here in the next fifteen minutes. We need to get out of here, get hosed down, and get out of these itchy suits.”

“Yes, the suits are rather uncomfortable. It’s why I choose not to wear one...”

Both humans whirled at the sound of the voice behind them. Just inside the closed hatch separating the Shaft from the Power Conduit Tunnel, Security Chief Michael Covington stood. Well, Covington from the waist up, at least. Beneath his torso writhed scaled tentacles, each easily over four meters in length and thirty centimeters across where they met beneath his body’s central axis.

Eddie’s ears buzzed. Vision blurred. Head swam. Couldn’t breath, like something pressing on his chest. Hard to think. Faintly, he registered an inarticulate sound to his left, followed by a thud. Veronee had passed out. A distant corner of his mind, with the clinical detachment of a medical doctor, made its analysis: *probably the best thing for her*. His hindbrain screamed for him to flee, but his forebrain said ‘run where?’ and instead urged him to pass out. Eddie’s throat was parched. His tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. Again, in a detached corner of his mind, he recognized the symptoms of emotional shock. *You were wrong, Jim. There are aliens.*

2283-06-11T22:57-5:00

The Shaft, 135 meters elevation

“*Quiet! I heard something!*” Zuzana hissed at her two companions. Both men grew silent. Several seconds passed. Finally, Byron ventured, “Could have been settling of the”

“No!” Zuzana interjected. “Something’s wrong!” Sethra responded by turning a knob on his helmet. “I’ve tuned in to Veronee’s helmet cam. What the ... her helmet is canted at an odd angle, and turned toward the ladder. Shit! She’s down! She’s flat on her back”

“*Agggggghhhh.....*”

The pained, panicked groan of Dr. Eddie Hasser reached them from below, and Sethra and Byron switched to view his helmet telemetry. “Shit!” they screamed in unison. Sethra bolted for the ladder, but Byron shoved him out of the way. The engineer hit the ladder, wrapped bowed legs around it, and shot downward. Sethra stepped onto the ladder and looked down at Byron’s swiftly dwindling form. That’s not Three Point Control he thought.

Apparently, safety wasn't Byron Milner's chief concern at the moment. Sethra discovered it wasn't a priority for him either. Time to open a can o' whoop-ass! The programmer took the ladder two rungs at a time. Definitely not Three Point Control. Not even Two Point. Maybe one-and-a-half? He almost fell, which would have been disastrous for both himself and Byron, and -- had they known it -- for the future of humanity.

2283-06-11T22:58-5:00

The Shaft

60 meters elevation

The alien had stolen Michael Covington's identity several years ago. Now, it almost danced upon his tentacles, so pleasurable were the psychic emanations of terror pouring off of Dr. Eddie Hasser. Covington's visage leered from atop the monstrosity's trunk, "I'm disappointed in you, Eddie. Having me removed from my post. Tsk, tsk. Have I not performed my duties as Security Chief correctly and to my utmost abilities?" Veins pulsed in Covington's head, torso, and each massive tentacle. The alien snaked closer to Hasser, who had run out of breath, and was leaning forward, holding his gloved hands against the growing pain in his chest. The man's eyes bulged, and his mouth formed a helpless "O".

"Let's see if we can increase your terror without killing you," the creature crooned. Its head deformed and then quickly reformed into a bulbous, hooded thing that, as it turned out, Eddie Hasser's heart couldn't tolerate. The good doctor collapsed forward, helmeted head bouncing once on the aluminum mesh floor.

Byron was down the ladder and running blindly toward the alien monstrosity, but was easily scooped up by a tentacle and lifted into the air. Sethra made it down, and stepped away from the ladder, eyes wide, aghast at Byron's predicament. Then, shaking himself, he ran to Veronee, kneeling at her side, and peered through her helmet faceplate.

"What are you humans doing in the Shaft?" queried the alien conversationally. "Don't you know it's intensely radioactive in here?" It squeezed Byron harder, and popping sounds indicated ribs cracking. The roboticist shrieked. Finally, he managed to free his homemade weapon. He aimed carefully and squeezed off a shot of high-velocity aluminum dust particles at the tentacle holding him, about halfway between himself and the creature's center of mass. Alien flesh ripped and splattered, leaving a horrible wound in the gripping tentacle. The creature emitted an almost ultrasonic burst of pain-filled rage, then slapped the gun, as well as Byron's hope of survival, out of his hand with another tentacle.

"Miserable grubs! Insignificant playthings! We've had sleepers among you for years! Do you think this is the first planet whose fear and suffering we've feasted upon? Oh, I admit that I've enjoyed mimicking you, learning your quaint ways! But all that ends right now"

There was a deafening crash. The entire catwalk rang with the impact and dropped almost a third of a meter, canted at a shallow angle. Byron felt himself released and landed hard on his back. Pain slashed his side. Each breath was agony. He tried in vain to call out to his friend. A strong, unpleasant odor filled the air, then the metallic clattering of something bouncing across the floor. "Shit, hot, hot, hot!" It was Sethra's voice. Moments later, his friend's face hovered over his, concerned. "You Engineers. Even in a fight with an alien,

you're lazy bums. Oh, sorry about your gun. It melted when I took off Covington's head with the laser setting. Didn't think you'd mind..."

Byron lost consciousness, albeit with a faint smile on his lips.

He woke some uncertain time later, being carried by Zuzana and placed inside the modified floor scrubbing robot waiting in the Power Conduit Tunnel beyond the Shaft. Close behind them came Sethra and Ver. Veronee stumbled along, leaning on him heavily. It was a lengthy twenty-three minutes later that they arrived at their prepared spot beneath a supercapacitor in Environmental Cavern E. They weren't following their timetable anymore. One friend dead, another badly hurt. Sethra was unwilling to delay, in case Covington had a compatriot in the compound somewhere. Zuzana sealed the bulkhead herself. There seemed no question that she would be taking Eddie Hasser's place and going with them. Assuming this even worked, of course.

She helped the other woman and the two men into their immersion pods, then initiated the countdown and climbed into the fourth pod. Harnesses wrapped around each of the four. Femoral arteries were pierced with medical fluid-delivery mechanisms. Byron breathed a sigh of pure pleasure as a pain medication introduced itself formally to his ribs.

The medical robot stated, "I am medical bot M21-3. Remain still and use steady, smooth deep breaths, in through your mouth, out through your nose. Scanning. Byron Milner, Designee 1438, you have two cracked ribs, and a small puncture to your right lung. Veronee Houston, Designee 1515, you have advanced radiation-induced tumors and have recently suffered a miscarriage. Sethra Slatten, Designee 2445, you have a second-degree burn on your right hand. Zuzana Wesley, Designee 0183, your prostheses are functioning optimally."

Sethra hurriedly spoke up, "Let it ride for now, Veronee. I'll explain later. We won't begin immersion for another ten to fifteen minutes. I'd just like to say that whether or not this works, I'm proud to have known each of you."

"Even me, a lazy bum of an engineer?" Byron cracked. Then, more seriously: "What happened? What freed me from the alien? How did we manage to--"

"I lost my arms in the Gherlin Offensive of 2270," said Zuzana. "Turns out those robotic appendages are really handy, especially when one needs to push a radiation absorber off a platform to smash an alien." There was a stunned silence from the other three. The sounds of a construction robot spraying plastcrete over their bulkhead could vaguely be heard through the thick walls of the chamber.