

Blocking Crime

2143-12-12

I always try to make the right decisions. Unfortunately in this case, I didn't quite manage this. As a result, I almost lost a very good friend. Not to mention my job and my credibility. Like with all near disasters, we tend to learn from our mistakes. I'll leave it up to you to decide whether I learned from mine.

This case began with a rather nasty murder in block 1427, floor 64, room 12. I was dispatched to the scene at 21:09 2143-12-12. My partner and I both got the call at the same time and left the station together. She had her usual crime scene kit; hardened case with cameras, sensors, sample bags and event record stones.

Jessy was a three years younger than me at 22. About 163 cm tall, light red hair, green eyes. We had worked together for about 8 months at that point. From her records, I knew that she worked for the enforcement side of things since she was 17. This meant that she started a little late. The usual age for assignments from the general labor pool is 15. I never asked why and she never volunteered the story. Maybe I'll ask her some day. Anyway, we had gotten fairly comfortable with each other by now. The tram ride from the station to block 1427 was a lengthy one, but we didn't talk much. We never did. Very few people talked much.

Arriving at 1427, we left the tram heading for the lift. A guard met us and began trying to tell us what happened on the way up to the 64th floor. We both ignored him. Jessy took her lens cap off and crouched down to take a picture of a footprint on the floor which had left a bit of a sticky residue. Which I had also seen and avoided. And which the guard has stepped in not once, but twice. We decided not to mention it to the guard. He didn't seem to make the connection on his own either, though we were standing right in front of him examining it.

Yes, I should have mentioned it before now. Jessy is telepathic too. Most investigators are required to be. She's not as strong as is needed for a lead investigator position, but she has more than enough ability to communicate ideas. It's quite nice in any case, since I can have a conversation with her without anyone overhearing. But this also contributed to the problem. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

You probably need a little information about the block system in order to realize where we were. There are currently 1891 blocks in our little community. Each block has between 50 and 90 floors. Each floor has between 150 and 250 rooms. Yes, it's a lot of people. And I'm responsible for 180 of the blocks in three sectors. I'll note here that my position is supposed to only oversee one sector. We don't have enough telepaths. Due to my record and strengths, I ended up with three sectors. Some others had two. A few had more.

We got to the door of room 12, pausing momentarily to snap a few pictures of more footprints. These rooms are small, and there were three more uniforms positioned inside the small room, mucking things up. I motioned ambiguously at them. Well, at least they thought I was being ambiguous; I thought I was being very clear that they should get the hell out.

“All right gentlemen, out of the room,” I finally ordered giving up on them and giving Jessy a knowing glance. She shoved past them to start taking pictures of the room.

“You!” I further intoned at the guard who left the room last and most reluctantly. He seemed slightly annoyed at us for interrupting his detailed treatise of what really happened which he was delivering with gusto to the other guards. “Where’s her roommate?”

I’ll mention here that every one of those rooms mentioned generally have at least two people in them. And they’re small. We’re talking 300x400 cm max. Even mine is that small, though I’m not required to share it. The most cost effective way is to have two couples sharing a room. Next, one couple, then two of the same sex, then one. With no status modifier, if you are rooming alone, you only have a certain amount of time, depending on your income usually, to get a roommate or get out. It’s a long story as to why things are this way, which I may have to get into later. Lets just say, if your evicted, you loose more than just your room. Since this factors in later, I’ll ask that you stay with me and keep this in mind.

Anyway, the guard had been flapping his jaw for several seconds by now, and I was getting annoyed. Jessy was doing her job and snapping away, and had already passed me the case stone she started for mental notes. She was also doing a good job of ignoring the body on the bed.

“So, you don’t know where the roommate is,” I stated, since the jaw flapping wasn’t making the stifling heat of the floor any better. We had already came to the conclusion that the roommate was female. I took the next step and called up a link on my wrist computer. The victim was named Heather West 1427. Her roommate was indeed female, being one Margaret Conner 1427. I closed my eyes and searched for a few seconds, for an indication of her pattern. She was in 1502.

“Jessy,” I said, already gathering myself for a long distance operation. “You got all that.”

“Yes,” she replied, her face grim. She continued snapping away. “Go.”

Knowing that she’d finish up with the obvious things, and also judging from the fact that this victim was already dead but the other may not be if I could help out, I sat down and went inward. My hands closed around the large stone which hung from my neck. I thought myself to that room in 1502 and readied to knock out anyone else in the room.

This is where our problems began. Or at least when we realized we had a problem. I couldn’t see anyone in the room with Miss Conner, but I felt there was someone else there. The best description I can come up with is that they were slippery. And they were preparing for something. Something similar to what went on in room 12 floor 64 in the last hour. The young woman, Conner, didn’t seem to know something was wrong.

Since I couldn’t touch the males, I pushed as hard as I could at Conner to try and get her to bolt. It took a lot of effort on my part given the physical separation. Anyway, I managed to make her uncomfortable enough to run for the door. I hoped the timing had been good enough.

I was able to remain focused on the presence in the room for just a hair longer. In this time, the feeling of presence faded more. This was quite disturbing. The harder I tried to focus on them, the weaker I got. Actually, it scared me a lot.

Having spent all that I had on this endeavor, I collapsed on the floor. After a moment, I opened my eyes and met Jessy's glance. She appeared quite worried, but I nodded my head and, in a show of strength, got to my feet. I did manage to hide my continuing weakness well enough to fool the guards, but not Jessy.

"I'll assume you monitored most of that," I asked, not using mental channels for a few minutes to recover. "I believe Margret Conner went to a friend's. She knew there were people here with West."

"I got it. Not that I liked much of it," said Jessy, snapping the lens cap on her camera and throwing one of the guards a nasty look. He'd been watching her closely when she'd gone around the room. I didn't blame him much. "Should I continue with the basics, or do you want to hurry and finish the stone now. I think you should wait. I've not seen you drained like that before."

"No, Jess, I haven't been. I think I'll do the stone and then leave you to gather some samples. I need to figure out for sure whether the people that murdered this girl were connected to those what were with Miss Conner. Then we need to find her, which I'll have to do since she went to ground."

"Are you sure, sir?"

"It'll be fine. You hold the stone and channel, and I'll pull. That'll drain you a bit more than you're used to, but I know you can handle it."

In answer, Jessy lifted the topaz she had started for this case and brought it over to the small couch across from the bunk bed, and out victim. She sat on one side of it and levitated the stone over her hands, beginning to ready it for the case image.

I guess I should be nice and give you the description of the room now. The truth is, I really don't want to. I mentioned the size of these rooms earlier. This one was no exception. As you enter, there was a small desk (relatively tiny) to the immediate left with a food preparation console next to it jutting out from the wall. Along the left wall there was a double bunk bed. Miss West was on the bottom bunk. But I'll get back to that. There was a small console on the far wall with a net display and some audio records. Back along the right wall was a small couch which was rather worn. A single stool sat next to the couch and just to the right of the door was a water closet unit.

Now back to our victim. Sort of. I'll mention this in the method that the stone records, since it'll save me from stating it twice. I sat next to Jessy on the stool and placed my hand gently on her left shoulder. I looked across at the body and allowed myself to link through Jessy to the stone. With my other hand on my focus stone, I began to draw in the rooms history, starting a bit earlier in the evening of Miss West and then moving forward.

Looking back, well yes I was looking back, but I mean in retrospect, on the situation, I now realize that I should have glanced deeper in the past. But that was just one of my mistakes, and it may not have helped much. Anyway, I went as far as the roommates getting ready for the evening out. I did try and go as quickly as I could. My usual attention to detail was probably dampened a bit by thoughts of one of the two lying dead not a meter and a half away.

I followed them to one of the not too distant gathering clubs, where they had dinner and drinks and worked on picking up some young gentlemen. Almost instantly, I recognized that slippery feeling. Having learned from my recent projection experience, I avoided focusing directly at these guys. From their actions, we could later tell they homed in directly on our victim; they had this planned.

Things proceeded as usual, though I managed to get a severe headache from trying to follow these images while not looking directly at them. The two girls and two guys ended up going back to room 12. They hung out and got to know each other for a little while, and then Conner and one of the guys left, presumably to go to 1502 block. It seemed pretty standard though. It happens frequently enough due to the lower cost of living as couples. A lot of time is spent trying to find a person whom one can live with. It's part of the problem of this society structure.

Then, as I was seeing in 1502 earlier, things began to get a little weird. A third person showed up at 12 and 64th. Knocked, and was invited in by West. This new arrival was harder to see than the guy in the room. Much harder. The arrival crossed the room and paused next to the guy. I saw a flash of an injection gun, same type the medics use. And then the guy faded out to match the obscured party. After that, it became even harder to see what happened. The general "slippery" feeling expanded to almost cover the whole room. I struggled to see through it, and managed only to do so by latching on to the emotions of the girl.

I've dealt with murder situations before, but usually I had the liberty of separating myself from the situation and emotions and looking at things from a safe distance. This customary clinical approach wouldn't have gotten me anything this time since the only hold I had on the obscured images of the past was her emotions. I refuse to go into detail, but the gist of it was, the two shadowy figures killed the girl. I have much more of an understanding of what it's like to go through a situation like that now. If you want more of the details, look up the cast stone yourself. But be warned, it's the most emotional account of a quick death like that on record, since the only track left was the emotions. I never want to see it again.

Not because I'm delicate, but simply because I can literally never forget it. I don't need to watch it again.

When I finished, I found myself mostly on the floor. After a while I shook off the funk and brought my mind back to bear on reality and noticed the door was closed. Impulsively, I hugged Jessie in thanks

for closing the door. I didn't want it going around that I lost my composure in a case. I quickly sent my thoughts towards other things. Like trying to figure out what the hell was going on here.

See, we've got a network which is usually sufficient to pickup bad things. The investigators run the network and use it to monitor their charges. I can usually tell when someone breaks a law. Of course, I'm a little overworked monitoring three full sectors, but I can manage it quite well. We miss things though. This is a known factor of life. Actually it's about 1/8 of all law infractions. This is simply because if people don't feel they're breaking the law, we can't feel that they're being bad and go bust them. What was different about this case is that the perpetrators did feel they were breaking a law, had thought about it and prepared for it. And worst of all; I didn't feel it. A neighbor had apparently seen the men leaving her room and got a glance through the open door and called it in. Otherwise we wouldn't have known anything for a while. I couldn't even tell if the second person to enter the room had been male. And Miss Conner would be on her way to being dead right now.

"Jessy, you think you'll be all right with those wonder cops taking the samples?" I finally managed to ask. "I'm going to head over to 1502 block and then track down Conner."

"I'll be fine sir," she said while opening up the acquisition tools. She would use the details from the case stone to guide her, since it recorded all that I saw of where the perpetrators went and what they touched in the room.

I nodded and touched her shoulder briefly in reassurance on my way out. I ordered the two remaining guards to keep an eye on things and make sure the room got sealed after Jessy left and then headed toward the lift.

Picking up the trail of someone is easy for me, all things being equal. With the slippery suspects, things weren't equal. I had to find out about that injection, since it seemed to be the thing which blocked me out. We had heard rumors of stones which would block monitoring long ago. But nothing was ever substantiated. It had turned into a myth. A myth which was fanning the fires of my imagination. I was beginning to dread this case.

On my way to 1502, floor 19, room 61, I was partially reassured that my watch wasn't falling apart. I caught images of a small altercation in one of the clubs in the next sector over. I called in to have guards sent and gave exact descriptions of the person who started the situation. Feeling slightly buoyed by my small success, I entered 1502 and picked up one of the guards for the building before heading up via the lift.

In the long silent walk to the room my stomach began to churn a bit and I sadly realized I hadn't eaten dinner. And I also realized that something had been bothering Jessy for a few days now. I should have noticed this sooner, and upon noticing it, should have done my job and investigated it. In my defense, I'll mention that I was slightly distracted by the complexity of this case, my lack of energy, and my recent

emotional trauma. I still should have followed up.

Oh, well. Room 61 told me little. I did get an empty vial from the injector gun which had rolled under the bed, and Conner's trail. The guard was perceptive enough to have looked up info on the room and let me know that it was currently unoccupied but was scheduled to be filled next week. I filled away the detail, along with a mental note to look up who knew about the vacancy along with the details that someone had been living in the room for at least two days without authorization. We left, and the guard sealed it. I added my authorization to the seal, just in case. And then I took off after miss Conner.

The trail led two blocks over in 1504 floor 39 and room 82. We seemed to be steadily moving up in the world this evening. Or, it was just life's little way of getting back at me for not being in shape. It was a long walk to room 82. It would have helped a little if the lift hadn't stopped working at floor 36. When I was almost to the door, I felt Jessie call to say she was done. I sent back for her to head to the station and analyze the samples. I also asked her to request another tech be sent to 1502. The vial I would deliver to the station myself, since it was a key piece.

A knock on room 82 brought a man to the door. He opened it a crack and peered out from the darkened room.

"What is it?" he asked. I didn't fail to notice that he blocked my vision of the room with his body. "Have you any idea what time it is? Oh.."

When he realized who I was, he scrambled to open the door.

"Evening Smith, I'm inspector James. I need to speak with miss Conner." I'll mention here that it's a bit of a habit to always use a person's name directly without them ever having to introduce themselves. It helps that I have access to the database of details and patterns. It may be vanity or some sort of latent superiority complex. If so, I apologize, but honestly, I find the benefit of an instant upper hand in many situations to save time. Jessie would probably say that I do it for the sake of the pleasure of watching people squirm.

Smith allowed me in. With a thought, I raised the light level slightly. There were two women in the room. Smith's roommate Sarah Weber 1504, a rather homey woman of 158 cm height and slightly over weight. She was the same age as the tall 175 cm Smith at 28 years. They had been living as a couple for better then 6 years and were both listed as productive individuals. Conner had worked for Smith as an office assistant. He was a low level manager in the maintenance division.

Conner herself was nursing a cup of tea sitting next to Weber. I took the seat across from them and Smith gaped when the door closed by itself. I had made my impression. Conner had made hers too.

She was quite beautiful. And she was about 165 cm tall, dark brown hair, brown eyes. Which were locked on her tea cup, examining it intently.

Regarding her from my chosen chair, and ignoring the fidgeting of Smith, I spoke. This appeared to startle her, so I didn't actually get anything out the first time as my first word was interrupted by her jumping which caused the tea cup to chatter against the saucer. Fortunately neither broke. I tried it again.

"I know parts of what happened with your evening miss Conner. I will first admit that I took my investigator privilege and pushed at your mind earlier when you were in block 1502."

At this she froze and looked up at me for the first time.

"I caused you to flee the situation for I felt a crime was about to be committed and that you were in danger. I must also regret to inform you that your roommate, Heather West 1427 has been murdered. Evidence indicated that the same fate was about to befall you, and I took action as I deemed appropriate. It is my duty to inform you formally of this action. You also have the right to file complaint against me for this action. Do you wish to file?"

She shook her head no, slightly horrified.

"Okay, I am afraid I must officially request that I enter your mind again, to look for further evidence into the identity of the men you met with tonight. You have the option of refusing me. You are by no means required to allow this, as it is not immediately apparent that life or property is in danger."

Yes, you may have noticed I said "property". It's part of that long story I'm trying to avoid. Just know that I am supposed to intercede if property is in danger too. I won't pretend to like it. Rules are rules.

"Is she really dead?" Conner asked in a quiet voice.

"Yes Margaret, she's dead."

"And this will help you find them? How could this happen though, they seemed like..."

"I believe there was a drug involved, miss. I'd like to find out some more information."

She nodded her head and I rose and sat on the other side of her. I took the tea cup and saucer and passed them to Weber, then took her left hand in both of mine.

I saw what I expected. But ended up with a question. And should have asked this question of someone else too. But I digress. The question:

"Why were you two trying so hard," I finally asked, looking into her now open eyes. Fortunately, I'm good enough to manage what I did without making the subject relive the memories I glance at. It's very handy as it means you don't have to wait for the person to calm down afterwards.

"We didn't have much time left," she replied. Then she smiled a little while looking down and to the floor. I started to reply, then realized I was still holding her hand, so I released it.

"Forgive me," I asked. Forgive my slowness. "Time for what, exactly?"

"Neither of us made much money and we couldn't afford to live together anymore."

"Had you been served?"

“Yes, we got the message last week.”

I think it was about every three months that notices of eviction went out. If you couldn't afford to keep residence, or if you were living alone in one for too long, they evicted you. Suffice it to say that it is enough to cause any person to do things with a little more sail to the wind. Having found out what I needed, I rose to leave.

“Thank you miss Conner for your time. I would like you to stay here for the time being with Smith and Weber. Don't worry about eviction right now. Due to the circumstances, I'm able to place a stay on the situation. Use this as your residence for now. I'll make sure there is no adjustment made if you two,” I looked sternly at the couple, “will not object to her presence.”

The couple nodded. Knowing that they'd have taken her in if they had the choice anyway, I left.

I don't make the policies. I don't often like the policies. But I do have to enforce them. On the way back to the station, I sent in the orders regarding the 1504:39:82 residence. I managed to convince myself once more that the greater number of people you stick in a single location, the harder it is to know anyone well. And in retrospect, I must admit I was blind to something and I hate myself for what it almost caused.

At the station, I grabbed a quick protein supplement bar and a cup of horrid coffee on the way to the labs. Polishing the bar off and draining half of the muck made me feel slightly better. Just outside the lab our sectors used, I poured out the remainder of the sludge and filled the plastic cup with fresh water. I made myself drink a whole glass and then refill the vessel before walking into the lab.

I found Jessy at the scope system, working away. Setting down the cup outside the clean environment and washing my hands, I went in.

“Conner's okay. I adjusted her into a friend's room. Found out the reason for the girls outing this evening.”

“And?” asked Jessy.

“I also found a vial, empty but we can probably trace it out, in 1502.”

“Good,” she replied softly. “I found a print, but it's been filled with some silicone. I can't get enough of it to make an id. They were covering themselves.”

I nodded and then went over to a chemical analysis machine to begin analyzing the contents of the vial. We worked quietly for a few minutes at our tasks, occasionally exchanging notes with each other. I really had found a good assistant in her, we always worked well together.

After some time, the computer came back with results. I practically fell off the lab stool. Jessy came over to see.

“That's not good,” she said. I didn't think so either. The chemical in the vial was a drug which somehow managed to really mess with a person's mind. There are certain pathways which exist that allow people like

myself, and Jessy, to project and receive. I can force my way into other's pathways at will. Most people have them shut down completely. This drug appeared to excite those pathways explosively in the simulated physiochemical system in the computer. It would probably have the same effect on us.

It would explain the slipperiness I felt when trying to touch the perpetrators. Imagine a person's mind is like a hollow bar of soap. Using a little water on a very small location on the bar will let you change the surface texture enough to erode a hole and make your way in. If the whole thing is wet, it'll slip right out of your hands. I know this explanation sucks, but I'm sticking to it for now.

The whole point of this is, our nets can't grab onto the thoughts that leak out of the "types" of holes indicating that someone's breaking a law since all the holes, the whole surface, is going crazy with emissions. You can't see a person holding a flashlight with night-vision goggles on. This is the same thing in principle. It also poses a very difficult problem. I was going to get my gun on the way out. If I tried to incapacitate one of these individuals using my mind, I'd probably end up going blind. Considering we're already several investigators down from having a full set, I don't think letting that happen would be good.

Calling it a night, albeit a very late one at this point, we prepared to leave. The night shift investigator, Hersh arrived with her second a while ago. I located my pistol and some rounds on the way out of the station. Since Jessy and I live in the same block, we took the same tram. I also, impulsively walked her to her door. I then went to my room. Did I mention that I was stupid?

At about 4:00 in the morning I started to feel something. I know now how to recognize it. At the time I had no clue. I did come to grips with the fact that whatever I was feeling was not good. I may be dim in other areas, but this was not one of them.

Basically I knew that something had happened which caused me to wake up. And that that something was against the law. I couldn't get back to sleep until I knew what it was. And I hadn't finished putting the pieces together to figure out how to tell what that something was. There comes a point in most investigations where you need one more piece to understand the puzzle. I could feel that point coming. The call came from Hersh at 6:19. I wasn't happy. A quick call woke Jessy up and got her moving out to meet me downstairs.

The call indicated a theft from one of the 18 hard currency issuance centers in my largest sector. And this also happened to be the largest issuance center. And the next day also happened to be payday for most of the sector. Jessy and I got to the tram station for the center at exactly 6:52. I guess we could have made it faster, but I demanded a shower of myself. Jessy had done the same.

We got there and were greeted by another random guard trio and the center manager. She was furious. My height, mid thirties, stocky, glasses. I agree; she had every right to be furious. I would have let it get to me, except for the fact that I was furious too. Since we were furious together, things moved a bit more

smoothly. I don't want to think what would have happened had I been anything other than pissed.

The thieves managed to make off with a total of 342 million vouchers. The record up till then was only a mere 148 million. And not on my watch. Not in my sectors.

Jessy had already started doing her job with the camera. I crossed the room to where she had left her tools and the new case stone. I watched her for a few seconds as she crouched to snap some shots of a footprint in the dust caused when the door to the vault crumbled.

The vault entrance room was a large square. One side had a door to the main center common room, the doors out on the right and the teller stations on the left. Straight ahead were the offices. The perpetrators had used the service door behind the teller stations for entrance and egress. Conventional explosives were used to effect entry to both that door and the vault itself. On both of the two side walls of the entrance room were small rooms. One on the left (looking back into the vault door) was the guard room. This also went through to the outside wall of the center. The room on the right was a viewing room for people with safe deposit boxes to use. The vault door was the size of most of the remaining wall. Or rather, had once been the size of the remaining wall. It no longer could be called a door.

A chair drifted over to me from the common room area, which I sat in. I willed the stone to rise and began the case imaging process. Jessy continued with the pictures. I'm going to save a little time here with the history. I looked back and saw quickly that of the four men who committed the crime, I was able to glimpse into one of the masks of slipperiness a little. Enough to see him glance at a chronometer, then give himself an injection. He went more slippery. Interesting, isn't it. Nothing else happened other than the obvious larceny.

I came back to find Jessy standing next to me, taking a few final shots of the overall scene.

"The timing of their injections was rather interesting." She said. And yes, she was the one who pointed out how important it was. I noticed it, but didn't realize it was the key. Thanks again Jess.

"Yes, but I admit it doesn't help much, I still can't track them," I said stupidly. I heard the bank manager approaching.

"But you now know that the effect is cyclic. You should be able to use the cycle as a pattern, no?"

The bank manager chose that point to enter. I didn't let her interrupt the thoughts, but I do remember what she said.

"Well, I'm almost ready to call in the Head Inspector! What happened?! You should have seen this occurring!"

"In my defense, Manager, I did see it happening. I simply did not understand what I perceived. Now, thanks to my assistant," I nodded at Jessy. And I'll mention that comment saved our bacon later too. "I think we can find them in about.."

“12 and a half minutes,” completed Jessy.

The bank manager looked at Jessy. I looked at Jessy. The bank manager looked at me. I looked at the bank manager. A guard cleared his throat. Another scratched his nose. I nodded. Jessy smiled. Everyone else relaxed. And lastly, the bank manager glanced at her wrist computer, noting the time. Great, I had 12 and a half minutes.

Bobbing the case stone over to Jessy, I went inward. I was not tracking a pattern, as is so easy for me, I was tracking a shifting pattern. A decay. The person’s chronometer had a lap time of 12 minutes set. When the clock neared zero, he’d given himself a shot. That also kind of jived with the behavior I’d seen during the other imaging. It took a bit over 12 minutes for the effect of the drug to decay enough for the net to pick them up. I now had a rate of change.

I’ll side track here with the fact that most every skill or task can only be done if it is understood. It is this way with things like this as well. While I couldn’t track down these people earlier, I could now. Not because they were less hard to see, but because I knew now exactly what I was looking for and understood why I had difficulties before. A shimmer will be missed for a spotlight. A splash will be missed for a wave.

We went with two dozen guards to where I found the patterns of four males which were gradually becoming stronger as the drug was wearing off. They were located in a warehouse which they should not have had access. We recovered all but 148.97 in vouchers. Apparently the bill of their celebratory breakfast. Capturing them was easy in person.

The prisoners were taken back to the station and allowed to detox for a while. I also honestly didn’t think I could interrogate them without killing them. I could easily do it too. I could put them through exactly what they did to young Heather West 1427 and what they were willing and prepared to do to Margaret Conner 1427/1504. They would be able to feel what she felt, and it would kill them. However, I needed them alive to find out how they got their hands on that drug. Mostly so that I could get my hands on the person who gave them the drug.

It turns out that they didn’t know anything. They thought they were buying something else. When they found out it masked them from the net, they made plans. Heather and Margaret were tests. But the buyer had planted the idea in their head. I wanted that buyer.

But at the moment, I also wanted to take Jessy to a nicer dinner than she usually had. That meant a restaurant and money. Fortunately, I could afford it. And she earned it. So I asked after we got back to the station and she filed the two case stones.

“So, Jessy, you want to go to dinner tonight?” I should have known from her look that something was up.

“Yes,” she replied. Her response was mixed with relief and nervousness. I’ll note that it’s not usual for

people to eat in restaurants now days. Only those in the higher echelons of the society can afford it regularly. I go periodically as a public relations type of thing. I'd also brought Jessy with me a few times. Never by ourselves though. So I guess in a way, I had it coming. But I'll leave that to you to decide.

It was a bit early for dinner, but we left anyway. I also didn't want to delay too much, so that I'd be able to get us in to one of the moderate places. I don't have the kind of money to demand a table. We also weren't dressed for one of the higher establishments.

So we left the station early, also to make up for being there past midnight the night before, and took the tram to the restaurant annex. The tram was rather crowded. Mostly well to do persons heading out to shop or catch an early dinner. We walked into the Rio Crossroads, and Jessy had a smile on her face. I was doomed.

We were seated almost immediately. I ordered us a light wine, also one of the cheapest they had. I also vetoed Jessy's first order, because she was trying to pick by price, rather than choice. The waiter smiled. Jessy colored, but then ordered a duck dish. I followed with something fish like. I'm not sure it actually was fish, but it did taste good. The problem with growing all of our food in aquaponic caverns is that not everything tastes as it once may have. Textures usually stay similar, fortunately.

Most of the dinner conversation was over criminology methods used when telepathy fails. It was her strong suit, though I was experienced and well versed enough to keep up with her. She seemed to like the suggestion that a paper be published about the drug we found. Points were earned for my side by recommending that it be in her name. A few glasses of wine later, we were done with the meals and the waiter came back asking about desert.

Here's where I think I lost control of the evening. I don't mind it much, but I wish things had happened slightly differently. Though it's my fault that they followed this course. I take the blame. I was stupid. I made her order desert. And it was my undoing.

When the piece of cheese cake came, it had two spoons. The table was a bit wide. After a few small spoonfuls, she crossed over to my side of the table to sit next to me in the booth. Jessy made the mental note that there was a logical reason for her to be sitting next to me. The logical reason was; that it would be easier to share. We didn't say much. A few comments about one of the other inspectors. A comment about another lab tech who was going to a training course in a new fingerprinting technique across the domain.

I finally couldn't take it any more and leaned in to kiss her. It was the first time we kissed. We both sheepishly glanced around, to see if anyone was watching. No one was. I motioned for the check. Jessy drank the last of her wine. I, a few sips ahead decided against the same and downed my water instead.

The check came, I managed not to wince. I paid and we left. Halfway out the door, I noticed Jessy's hand in mine. I squeezed it slightly, she squeezed back. The tram ride is what sealed my fall. Though I

refuse to call it that.

When the tram arrived at our block, her hand in mine, and headed towards the lift. I hit only the button for my floor, mostly because I was feeling a little light headed. I claimed mentally to Jess that I did not press the button to imply that we were going to my room. And I was actually informed mentally at this point that we were, whether it was a mess or not. Which it was. I don't think either of us noticed.

The short walk to my door was a nice one, with her arm possessively around my waist. I keyed open the door to the room 1407:32:45 and did manage to flick the lights up a little bit with my thoughts. Jessy looked into my eyes.

I didn't know what to think. She sent back a question something to the effect of "what are you waiting for". My reply was to keep my hands exactly where they were. Well , actually, I pushed her away slightly. She gave me a look as if to say that I'd pay for that.

I'd never shared my mind with someone in that way before. I will mention that neither of us expected its effects. We both sat on the small couch and talked. Really talked. As we had somehow not managed to do in the months we'd been working together. There was something more comforting though. Maybe it was the effects of the wine. Or the few moments of contact of our minds, without the thoughts of crimes and cases as the primary topic.

Several hours later, and yes time does factor heavily into this situation, we were still sitting on the couch, sipping on water. She noticed the time and since our minds were still very close, I felt all of the apprehension and nervousness I'd seen occasionally in Jessy in the past few weeks come to the fore. She literally almost cried out. And in an embarrassed whimper, she had realized that she brought me along on that short trip into despair. The time was 23:42.

I responded to this by hugging her, but it didn't seem to do any good. She was trying to close me out, but I was not having it. I asked her to 'tell me' a few times. Jessy struggled with the thoughts, but didn't say anything. I slowly backed out so I wouldn't give her a headache. We had almost disconnected mentally when I realized I'd felt that same feeling of dread before and recently. Not once but twice. Time really was the issue. Tomorrow was eviction day for many.

My slow stupid mind realized the obvious. Jessy had not mentioned her roommate for quite a while now. Not in the past few weeks, and not in our hours of talking through the evening. She had a reasonable salary in her position, so would have been able to keep the room alone longer than most. But she'd have started eating less and having a harder time managing new uniforms and such. I'd seen this too. Jessy had lost a little weight in the past few months. And I, now in a fit of clairvoyance, I realized what added to her sense of dread. She wouldn't ask and she wasn't sure she wanted to ask.

Now, you might think it is a simple matter of finding roommates. Roommates give you discounts on the

cost of a room. There were studies done which determined that solitary people, unless in constant jobs with crazy schedules and mental stress, were not the ideal productive unit. There wasn't much of a separation between couples of the opposite sex and pairs of the same sex when it came to productivity and housing selections. The only difference was opposite sex couples had the possibility of producing issue. They received more of a monetary discount than same sex roommates because of this possibility. It was considered a "loan". They charge you less money. You give society a child.

The declaration of a couple roommate system contains an interesting clause. The couple cannot separate without severe monetary penalties unless a child is produced. After one child, the couple can do whatever they want. This is what Jessy didn't want to ask. I don't think either of us wanted that. Not yet. She nodded at the thought. 23:45. Jessy began to cry.

She was up for eviction. I should have noticed the whole thing occurring. It did sour our evening a bit. But I'll mention that it is entirely justified. I never mentioned what exactly the process of eviction entails. I did not mention it for many reasons. It's one of the worst things that happens to people. It involves sending them "outside". Tossing the coddled people who comprise our society into the unproductive wastes left by history's mistakes. I've been outside, with protective gear for all of 2 minutes. I never want to do that again. When you're evicted, they fling you out; alone to make your fate in the wilds. I don't think anyone has survived out there. If they have, we never hear about it.

So that was the situation. 23:47. I pulled Jessy a little closer. Not that the thought of living with Jessy didn't have its appeal; the last few hours were more than proof of that. If there was no other way, I'd do it in a second. I had a better solution.

23:48, I picked up the phone. You see, it's not that simple to make the change to a new roommate. It is against the law to advertise vacancies. Even with around 2 million people in my sectors, I actually only knew of one vacancy. Of course, I could have searched for others, and found them. But I wouldn't have been able to live with that. Neither would Jessy. My own net would have called me on it. And Hersh would have to make a case. 23:49, the phone opened.

"Yeah?"

"Sorry Smith. It's Investigator James. Wake up Conner now. Hurry!" He moved off while I typed up the residency modification form for Jessy's room. She got off the couch and crossed to stand just behind me at the desk. I pushed her into my chair, as she'd have to make the arrangement. She now realized what I was planning. It would work; if Conner agreed.

"Yes?" asked Conner sleepily.

"It's James, I want you to meet a friend. Please note, she has little time left too." Hoping that she was awake enough to figure out the meaning, I passed the handset to Jessy, thinking Conner's image to her. She

nodded.

“Hi, I’m Jessie Nimes 1407. Would you be interested in rooming with me. I’m in pay grade level 9.”

“Nice to meet you Jessie. I’m only in level 4, but I would be interested in it.”

“The room is 1407:44:20. Do you have an objection?” Jessie already began to relax. I my hands on her shoulders.

“I don’t have any objections. I give my authorization.”

Jessie almost melted. “Can we meet for lunch tomorrow to finalize arrangements?”

“Sure, call me in 1497:02? 12:00?”

“I’ll see you then.” I removed my hands from Jessie’s shoulders and typed in the room number of the temporary residence denotation for Conner and my own as witness. Jessie rung off, then with a hand that was shaking tapped submit. Time 23:58. We sat there for a few minutes. I realized what she was waiting for. The day changed. She began shake a little bit, but soon quieted, hugging my arms.

I said, as flat and seriously as I could manage. “You’re not my type anyway. I never went for red heads.”

That did it. She giggled. Then sniffed. She knew I was joking. Jessie smiled up at me. It was nice. Life got a little crazy after that.

“I could stay, I guess,” Jessie half asked. I nodded.

“You could,” I replied softly, hugging her shoulders. “But we do have a source to track down. If I recall.”

“Probably should get some sleep then.” Yes, Jessie. Probably. “Another time perhaps?”

“Perhaps,” I replied smiling down at her. “Okay, let me walk you to your room.”

I backed away and let her stand, then we walked together to the door and then the lift. Things could have gone differently. Yet as they were, I believe we were both happy. The important fact; I’d kept a friend, and maybe one day a partner at more than just work. Something told me I needed Jessie a lot more than I’d thought. But that is a story for tomorrow.