

THE MALL – ANGELS AMONG Us

A slight bump, almost so imperceptible as to be nothing more than the brush of heavy fabric at her back. Janice turned partially to her right.

Was it merely an afterimage -- the haloed glow one sees after gazing at a bright light and then looking away? She could only guess. Perhaps it was simple imagination, but, briefly, her mind chronicled an iridescent shadow of, she imagined, a young man, nude but not obscenely so, hastening across the breadth of the mall behind her.

Her first thoughts were asexual. "Isn't he cold?" Then, "He must have walked here. He has no keys."

The absurdities hit her, and she laughed out loud.

A teen girl – a near-teen, rather – a few paces directly behind her and moving in the opposite direction, half-turned and sneered an angry scowl, then rapidly accelerated her retreat.

All others in the vicinity ignored her, looking at shop windows, at the floor a few feet in front of them, or to one side or the other. It was typical mall defensive behaviour.

Janice did a double take in the direction of the image that no longer was there, verifying its absence. She proceeded several steps further along her route, before the realization struck.

The pre-teen had not been walking past her just before Janice experienced the image and the slight jostle. The girl must have been following her, and then quickly rerouted.

Pickpockets! That would explain the bump, the fact that the girl was perturbed, and in a sudden hurry. It was the busy season in the mall, and Janice had heard stories on the news warning of thieves and shoplifters and the like.

My crystal! The female shopper plunged her hand into the tote hanging at her right side, slung over her shoulder. Not there! She dug frantically into the depths of the purse, not feeling the small bag, not hearing the crinkle of tissue wrap. That girl. She stole it! Janice frantically scanned the area, not sure whether she was seeking help or tracking the whereabouts of the juvenile thief.

Janice tore the purse off her shoulder, examining the contents as one would peer into a dark warren – with trepidation not at what she might find, but at what she most likely would not.

Moments earlier, after a half-day of careful search for the precise gift for her mother, she had found and purchased the singly most expensive gift she had ever acquired. A silhouetted angel, encased in crystal and formed of laser light, with a halo of miniature real diamonds that rotated in

unison with the figurine trapped within the glass. Impractical, yet perfect.

Her mother, who lay in St. Boniface Hospital, much closer to angels than to mundane life. Her mother, embracing death with enthusiasm, after so long embracing life with the same fervour. Her mother, forever calling on the strength of angels to guide her, guide her family, guide the world through every challenge. A woman of huge faith, and a mother who was going to be missed with every breath Janice would take.

The figurine was not priceless, or valuable by some standards, but was irreplaceable in Janice's view. It would be the last gift she would ever be able to hand to her mother, the last time she would see the gentle smile of appreciation, and hear the "It wasn't necessary, but I love it," that was her mom's trademark. And now it was stolen. By a thief who could not know its value, could not care about its heart. Janice verged on tears. She clawed at the purse, tempted to dump its contents on the mall tiling.

But, there it sat. The angel, still wrapped in soft tissue cloth and laying in the mangle of junk that filled her purse. Janice exhaled, paused for several moments, and moved on.

The eidetic image, too, moved away, content that he had interceded with precise timing to prevent the young loiterer from reaching into the woman's purse and snatching whatever fell into her fingers. A slight rustle of air, like the snow

swirling behind a highway truck, wrapped inwardly as he progressed to his next rendezvous. No one else noticed.

If it were not for the focus in the eyes of each one, the stream of regimented automatons could be mistaken for the march of the living dead. Each rounded the terminus of the alley, looped back without regard to left, right or rear and continued the driven pace, blindly yet single-mindedly retracing the direction from which he or she had evolved. The slight whoosh of advanced-engineered footwear provided the only clue of contemporaneous existence, as each footfall met tiled floor.

Early morning mall walkers, mid-aged to elderly, focused on the task of remaining a healthy force, signalled the pre-opening routine of the mall.

Unlike the post-opening creeping chaos, the hours prior to the unlocking of the doors of Columbia Shopping Centre possessed a rhythm, orchestrated by years of routine and careful scheduling by tenant stores, mall management, shippers and maintenance staff.

First, overnight cleaners carried out regular tasks, stripped tiles and refinished them, replaced damaged fixtures, washed floors, vacuumed, painted and repaired walls, replenished washroom supplies, and placed items back where they belonged. These were the drone

bees, maintaining the hive of activity for the coming light of day.

Hovering between and among the cleaners, after-hours security patrolled, placed among the drones to watch for predators and intruders, but barely focusing beyond their next few steps, or the screens on their cell phones, Blackberries and iPhones.

As the morning crept in, tradesmen buzzed their way into the conclaves, labyrinths and bowels of the building, armed with plumbing, electrical supplies, tools and ladders. In for a few hours, patch the problem, and retreat to the outer world. Soon, delivery drivers would ring their way into the plywood hallways between retailers, the pounding clack of forklift wheels mashing into the spaces between each tile as they dragged their cargoes to this store and that. Boxes piled themselves in front of stores whose employees were tardy, awaiting signatures on bills of lading. Lastly, the mall walkers infiltrated. Not truly a part of the mall inner workings, but invited in as beneficial parasites, the march of the minions provided a sample of the life that would invigorate the mall once the doors were officially unlocked. A few paced for their predetermined duration, then congregated in the mall food court for coffee and long conversations. Others rushed like wildebeest on migration, traversing each mall corridor with focused blindness. Others sauntered, conversing with a colleague or two.

None observed the world around them in their determination to walk in circles.

Faceless, headless and expressionless mannequins stared back at them as the walkers rushed past the store windows.

The mall doors would open momentarily. A few of the automatons gathered their coats, preparing to relinquish their position in the mall hierarchy for the day. Others, more dedicated, would continue until the crush of shoppers made their marches untenable.

Another naked translucent figure – this time of a child – postured adjacent to a bench that held an abandoned shopping bag and light jacket that smelled of moth balls and old people. No one saw, and no one approached the belongings with malicious intent.

The Sentinels were beginning the second shift of their day.

If walls could talk ... Deep inside Columbia Shopping Centre, the meeting convened. It was a typical morning congregation, the same 24 attendees, discussing the same agenda that had been discussed since the mall had been constructed. The same format, the same hierarchy of order, all unchanged in 41 years, with the exception of an the change of faces of those in attendance.

Yet, none of these diligent participants owned shares, operated a store or kiosk, or were employed in a management (or any) capacity by the mall organization. However, they owned their status by virtue of the archaic law of adverse possession. Undisputed tenants for the 41 years that the mall had operated, they were immovable from the complex, inseparable from the network of arteries and veins that were the hallways of the structure.

No one, other than these two dozen, and no more than 8,000,000 others across the globe, knew of their being, of their mandates, of their destinies. Certainly, no mortal within the mall knew, for certain, that they existed, let alone dwelled, within these walls.

Unique to this collection, the "board" consisted of child and parent, equals in this venture, separated only by rank of chairmanship or assigned role. The morning meeting was, in truth, a late-night meeting, somewhere between 2 a.m. and 4 a.m. daily. Even at this unworldly

hour, each member's attention riveted on the speaker of the moment. Each member deserved penultimate focus, as their entire existence depended upon dedication to task. Although each meeting was unremarkably identical to the previous, and each solution indelibly predictable, the faces in the mall would change, the loci would shift, the outcomes would always be in doubt, unless precision was exercised. Consequently, young and not so young remained intent.

Meetings began, not so much a call to order, but a call of dedication, with the reading of the Creed of the Council. It was a lengthy tome, requiring precisely 48 minutes to read the designated passages for the day. It was the order of business, the Rules of Order, the Code of Conduct. At the reading of the first word of the Creed, all conversation ceased, with every ear focused on the insights and direction provided by this immutable manuscript. It opened the gathering.

While meetings were unalterable, prior days' summaries varied ever so slightly. A recitation of the prior day's events, notification of anticipated activities or persons of whom to be aware, verification of the scheduled duties of each member within the gathering all constituted the regular agenda topics. There was no treasurer's report. Committee reports were concise, and not debated. It was a pedantic affair. The meeting

entered the phase where each reviewed the prior day's activities.

"And, Albanthener, why do you think that she sensed your presence?"

It was the crystal woman of whom they spoke.

"I cannot say. I did nothing out of the routine."

"Do not infer that I was accusing you of impropriety."

The manner of speech was a throwback to the more formal style of Victorian England, or early Parliamentary debate, in spite of the words emanating from a 30-something and a teen.

"The young female was sufficiently distant that she could not have caused the aural disruption."

"I have pondered this, young Albanthener, and I believe I have an answer."

Young Albanthener waited, deferential to the speaker, but not to the elder status.

"I have observed, on occasion, that some of the outsiders are developing an acuity toward more esoteric pursuits. They seem to be moving from blind religion to seeing devotion."

"Outsiders? In our sanctuary? Are we in danger?"

It was the only indication of emotion in a clinically sterile conversation, uttered by the young girl who had been guarding the shopper's jacket on the previous day. Her voice had the shiver of alarm within it.

"No, no. Not here. And not, I think, presenting any danger. I just make note of my observations."

Perhaps these humans are becoming, shall I dare say, more in touch with their humanity.

"You will take note, I urge, that the woman encountered by Albanthener did not really see him. Not in the pure sense of the word. She, more accurately, sensed him. I bring up this point, and this incident, only to illustrate the need for great caution.

"These people are developing technologies at a much faster pace than they did when our parents were Sentinels, when electric and mass transportation, and telecommunications were yet to be conceived. These people are exploring much more efficient ways to replace their own senses, their own voices, their own capacity to think, and even their own capacity to feel. Yet, I have thought much on it, and I am of the belief that they have, with their newly found freedom to be less human, endowed themselves with more time to explore, in a leisurely fashion, who they really are.

They do not seem to be doing so with any focus." There was a general nodding of heads in agreement.

"They do, nonetheless, seem to be able to relate to their emotions in a more rational and objective manner."

The incongruity of this statement was lost on the group. They, after all, interacted with their world in an emotional yet predictable manner. Therefore, it was only to be assumed that others,

not completely like them but of shared ancestry, would evolve a more methodical approach to sensitivities and emotions.

“I have observed that only a very minute number of them have evolved their beliefs in the correct manner. Perhaps not more than a handful in this whole city, this whole country, can see inside themselves, and, by doing so, see the world around them. Perhaps this young woman is one of that select few.”

The concept of a world outside their own was not unfamiliar, but it was unknown. These were the Sentinels, but Sentinels of and in their own enclave. Only the key one had seen the world beyond. In small part, that explained some of the deference directed to him as he managed the meeting.

The “key one.” Not the “Chosen One,” or the “Holy One,” or even the “Head of the Family.” He was no less and no more than each other, but endowed with a unique role. He was the bridge between inner and outer worlds. He was “Sentinel Ambassador.”

The topic of the young shopper was exhausted.

“Today, we will shift duties for some of you,” the key one continued. “I have discussed with your relevant group leaders who will be assigned to what duties, and we all concur. We now seek your input.”

As in all prior meetings, the new assignments were discussed, with specific reference to the

expectations and requirements unique to that day, or that season. As in all prior meetings, those impacted by the changes were asked for their opinions. As in all prior meetings, each member of the organization acquiesced to the changed roles. As in all prior meetings, raising of topics was followed by discussions of merits and drawbacks, with everyone giving equal voice to their opinions. In the end, as in all meetings, concurrence was reached on every topic.

The meeting drew to a close with well-wishes, smiles, embraces and pats on the back. They were, after all, an emotional family. The gathering then concluded with the ritual prayer.

Brecken only half-heartedly participated.

The key one adjourned the meeting. It had been a fruitful two hours. The others could partake of the dainties and beverages. He moved to the foyer and slid into his chosen wardrobe. After all, he would be venturing outside of the mall enclave and would need to be dressed to match the world around him. The other members of the family could continue to enjoy the luxury of nakedness. He lifted the glass case, and withdrew the tiny silvery-grey link. Hoisting it with great effort, he slid it into his left trousers pocket, feeling it weigh him down like a fattened wallet. It was, after all, constructed of pure lutetium, the heaviest of all rare earth metals.

The key one, after concluding the meeting, moved to the exit of the labyrinth common area,

sneaking a peek outside to ensure that no outsider was observing. Working his way down the secret alleyways to the general mall common area, he happened to pass a darkened mirrored window of a mall storefront. The image that stared back at him caused him, as it always did, to startle ever so briefly. He still was not accustomed to seeing himself through the other world's eyes, after three years as the key one.

He would soon be replaced as being obsolete. He knew that, and stiffened his resolve to make sure that he provided for his family as best he could, until that time arrived. He would then relinquish his

membership in the colony without protest, accept his demise in the outer world. It was for the greater good, he knew. He would also be soon seeing those ancestors for whom he sometimes longed.

The key one began his day of work among the humans in the outside world.

SENTINELS OF RIGHT

Mall opening was less than a few moments away. Corbin, along with each of his family, was aware that, within the ten minutes before or after opening, each employee of each kiosk, retail outlet and food court vendor would be preoccupied with opening rituals: folding of tarpaulins that covered kiosks, counting of cash drawers, arranging of opening displays, and so on. Each mall maintenance worker, too, would be breathing a sigh of relaxation or hasten his efforts, having completed, or failed to complete designated pre-opening duties. Delivery personnel would be migrating toward the loading docks, while mall walkers would be more concerned with concluding their ritual stroll than observing others. It was within that window of opportunity that the Sentinels safely could move into position, enter mainstream shopping areas, or relocate items of use to them for the day, with less concern for their movements being detected. The lecture that the key one had delivered regarding outsiders possessing powers to detect the Sentinels set each one on increased vigilance. More than the fear of actually being observed in their natural transparency was the danger of someone noticing a door opening on its

own, a mannequin being repositioned by itself, or a display being jostled accidentally.

While the Sentinels' evolution over the past 3,000 years had endowed them with certain unique properties and abilities, they continued to share the same physical definitions that their near-cousins, the humans possessed. They had mass, they took up space, they could not walk through walls, they could not levitate or float or transpose themselves into fantasy figures.

Evolution and lutetium had enabled them to develop very necessary and specific talents, but, otherwise, they remained human.

Adherence to the Creed had heightened the Sentinel sense of morality, of purpose. Focused on protecting humankind, focused on living within strict moral parameters, focused on dedication to community and common cause, they turned to the Creed for specific strength. It was more than a guide. It was a dictum of living. No one dared or wanted to challenge the rightness of the Creed of the Councils.

Sentinels, through eons of living righteously, had evolved a pureness of spirit that elevated them, in their hearts. They had developed a commitment to their cause that bound them to the earth around them, in every way. As protectors, they chose not to act godlike. It was the Creed of the Councils, handed down by the Council of the Pure that served as their spiritual strength. That, and a knowledge that they acted

rightly in their focus on watching over mankind. That singularity of purpose was the reason for their being.

Singularity of purpose, however, did not mandate singularity of function and mission. Wherever they were called to duty, the Sentinels altered their roles to suit the environment.

In the streets, they protected the weak, guided the lost, detected and deterred the bully, thief, rapist and mugger, while guiding the disoriented and aiding the ill. In the factory and office workplaces, they guided their charges away from temptation, interceded against fraud and larceny, and fought man's injustice against his brother. In the shopping centres and malls, Sentinels fought shoplifters, dishonest employees, purse snatchers and perverts. They were there, at all times, to protect their wards.

Corbin cautiously moved to the food court, his assignment this morning. He had reason to be enthused about this locale. He had failed to alert the colony to his secret: he, too, had been seen by an out-worlder. Indeed, not just an out-worlder, but a girl with whom he had conversed, who knew of him, seemingly intuitively. Neither was it an isolated encounter, since they had met on eight prior occasions over the past two months. And both had pledged to secrecy, knowing the risks that each was taking.

Corbin was torn. The thought that he could be putting his colony, or even his entire world at risk, plagued him. Since he was a small child, the colony had stressed how important it was that he abided by their doctrines, how failure to do so could be catastrophic, even fatal to them and their way of life.

He had watched out-world DVDs about the doomsday scenarios when two opposite worlds came into contact. From the original Superman movies, to made-for-television shows like Fringe, the outcome seemed pre-determined: annihilation. His own group leaders, ritually, drilled the younger members with the facts about their world, and its need for separation from the outer existence.

Indeed, the links that lay encased in glass in the anteroom foyer, one of which the key one had taken with him, were evidence of the precariousness with which the two spheres coexisted. Only the rarest of rare earth metals was sufficient to allow the most tenuous of bindings between the two worlds, and even then, the lutetium link required extreme protection to ensure that the bridge existed at any moment.

These links, or, more correctly, the individual links for the original Sentinel families, had been forged with the blood of each Sentinel and the blood of humankind as alloys, binding Sentinel to mankind irrevocably. With the birth of each member of this select family of families, a new

link was forged, employing that child's DNA in his or her unique link of the chain. The practice bound the Sentinels symbolically, metaphysically and physically to their human wards.

Corbin shivered at the thought of a loss of those entrusted, encased chain links. As he entered the food court, he gazed around the space, and experienced a wave of sympathy for those patrons there. They were oblivious to the risks, oblivious to the possibility that others could share their environment, oblivious to their own desperate need for protection and guidance from the Sentinels. Corbin almost felt condescending and superior. He quickly quelled that emotion, knowing that it weakened him, and lessened his moral fibre. It was an unworthy emotion that betrayed his distant connections to common humanity.

Yet, Corbin wrestled with the other emotion, fed by the thought of Kendra – his human friend. How could someone like her be as frail and needy as the colony claimed humans to be? If she were so dissimilar to the other females in his colony, how could she relate to him, and he to her? If she were such a danger, why was he so determined to place himself and his family at risk by conversing with her?

Corbin, in his youthful naïveté, never considered that it was his guileless nature that blinded him to the influences of the temptations he was feeling. His thoughts never followed the channels of

analysis that would have revealed to him how his society would want him to respond, in order to maintain the purity of existence that was the hallmark of the Sentinel world. Corbin was falling in love, and was blinded by it.

Fortunately, Kendra, too, was blinded, both physically and figuratively. Yes, she had seen Corbin. More precisely, she had sensed him, as blind people sometimes seem able to do. Had she been able to see as other humans do, she most likely would have turned away, embarrassed by his nakedness. Corbin, being a Sentinel, was unfamiliar with shame and its cousin, embarrassment.

Kendra would not be here just yet. Her university program kept her occupied on Wednesday mornings until 2 p.m. That was still four or five hours away. On such mornings, time dragged.

His tasks today were simple. Food court was one of the easiest assignments, watching for people who carelessly left belongings at their tables while they ordered their meals and snacks from the assorted kiosks. Although the abundance of people mingling in the space should have contributed to a great incidence of theft of belongings, the many eyes made thieves more wary. Even with a strong motivation to help themselves to others' belongings, the opportunity was significantly decreased.

On the other hand, there was an increased risk that Corbin did not want to contemplate: children.

Most of the shoppers kept tight rein on their offspring, since the Bulger incident in Britain, where a child was kidnapped right in the common area of a mall, under the unblinking eye of a security camera.

There were always a few, though, that worked under the delusion that “it can’t happen to us.” There were also those not-infrequent incidents where strong-willed toddlers made a break for freedom in the few seconds when a beleaguered mother turned her attentions to a second child. In the briefest of moments, offspring could disappear, be snatched, be injured. They were like miniature Houdinis or Knievels.

It was these incidents to which Corbin dedicated the majority of his attention. He could not imagine losing one of his family siblings in that manner. The colony had been wise to train him in the ways of diligence and the skills of observation.

He would do his duty well, secure in the knowledge that, with each pure moment of doing what was right and good, he was also climbing higher in his ultimate destiny. He, like the key one, embraced the day when he would meld with the outer world, in preparation for the moment when he would rejoin his elders and siblings of ages gone by.

Harry pondered the issue facing him. He, too, was an enforcer of right. Unlike Corbin, he was

paid by the city. The uniform declared his status. Clearly, he considered, there was something very unusual in this situation. Moments earlier, he had been directing the young man with the monk's smock to remove his hands from the pockets of the smock, and place them on the roof of the police car. Now, he was left holding what appeared to be nothing more than a cheap gray piece of a broken chain, but a fragment that seemed far too heavy for its size. And the young man had seemingly vanished into thin air. A brown wool smock lay in a heap. Yes, this was something he was not too crazy about reporting to his superiors.

The youth loitered nearby, waiting for his chance to pilfer the link back from the cop. He had only the briefest time – perhaps hours at most -- in which to do so, before the outer world irreversibly claimed his essence. He was anxious, but not afraid. The moment of opportunity would come, so long as this out-world cop did not perceive him, and so long as the cop did not leave, taking the link with him.

Harry shivered, feeling a presence that he could not explain. There was the briefest moment when he thought he saw a flash of light, then convinced himself that it was nothing more than the retinal bursts he sometimes experienced.

He rubbed his eyes to clear the impurity, and, in so doing, dropped the tiny grey piece in the dirt on the roadway.

The youth seized the opening, scuffing a layer of debris over the object. After a short search, Harry gave up. Harry was unsure what to do with the garment. He tossed it into his car.

The youth bent down, picked up the grey link, and immediately rejoined the outer world of visual being. If Harry had looked in the rear-view mirror of the police car, he would have been startled to see a nude youth standing on the roadside.

This Sentinel would have to locate some more clothes, and quickly.

In the food court, Corbin was having a very ordinary day, while he waited for a very extraordinary out-worlder.

In the anteroom, deep in the bowels of the shopping centre, a glass case held one too few links. No one noticed. No one suspected that one of their own chosen family could break the bond of loyalty and commitment to their colony code of ethics. They were, after all, pure.

Elsteth stretched, rolled over, opened one eye halfway. In this alley, you were wise to wake up slowly, carefully. Pretending to be mostly asleep provided you with the extra edge that may be needed if you were about to be jackbooted.

The jackboot brigade still patrolled the filthy litter inundating the laneways of the city. Carryovers

from the old England jackbooters who used their chainmail knee-highs to roust and rough up the gypsies and other vagabonds, today's jackbooters were nothing more than loose gangs of thugs nosing through the slums of the big cities, abusing, maiming and even killing the unfortunates that called cardboard city their home for the night.

Elsteth knew these low-life vultures. It was her job to do so.

Unlike Corbin and his family's cloistered mall existence, she was bound to the filth and poverty of Winnipeg – a captive of harsh winters, smelly summers and violence that permeated every moment of existence. A Sentinel, she never questioned her role, never looked jealously toward the security and warmth of interior colonies. In fact, she was one of the Foundation – Sentinels who maintained the origins of their creation, as protectors of the poor and vulnerable in each city of the world.

If she had been engrained with the capacity for envy, she would not have found it appropriate, given her circumstance. Envyng those with more would have meant she would naturally turn to those with less. Mumbai, Johannesburg, Rio – cities where there were even castes and hierarchies of the poor. Shamattawah, where natives lived and died in abject poverty, governed by intoxications, released by suicides. There

were tens of thousands of situations that offered less than that to which Elsteth had been bound.

The Foundation existed, not as part of a Sentinel hierarchy, but as a critical link to the roots and values of the Sentinel culture. It was known and respected throughout the Sentinel world, and it was to the Foundation that others turned for final sober thoughts during crises. It knew of the Sentinel roots, and maintained those traditions precisely.

The Sentinels had been borne of the need to intercede in the inhumanity and injustice that thrived during the days of the Roman Empire. Founded in the alleys and gutters of 10th century BC Rome, expanding to Constantinople, and flowing outward as the crushing need demanded, they were nothing greater than citizenry, banding together in vigilante action to protect their beloved Empire.

But the need grew, inexorably, relentlessly. The gutters of Rome, the alleyways of London, the streets of New Delhi, the wharfs of New York, the commons of Mexico City.

A changing world brought changing focus. The poorhouses and orphanages of England, the Christian residential schools, the subverted systems of Middle East nations. As citizenry became more exposed and vulnerable, and villains became emboldened, the need for the Sentinels had grown exponentially.

In the 1950s, the advent of shopping centres and malls meant that protection moved indoors, into a more focused flow. Evolution of community required evolution of the Sentinels.

In spite of dramatic alteration of demands, the colonies that spread to meet the needs remained true to their core values. The Foundation provided that historical bond.

Today, Elsteth was unaware of the pivotal role that her family would play in the transformation of the Sentinels. Today, Elsteth had awakened after an hour or so of rest. It was near noon, and she had spent the evening attending to her beloved human rejects in the back lanes and alleys that were her family's assigned territory.

There were marked differences, not only among the worlds of the various colonies, but among the evolutions and adaptations that they had undergone since the days of Rome.

Elsteth remained clothed, at all times. With harsh outdoor environments, these Founding Colonies had not encountered controlled temperatures. They did not have the luxury of private areas, secluded dwellings. They had to be ready, in an instant, to respond to emerging situations. All of these factors determined that the fabric of their lives included the fabrics of the gutters.

Unlike inside colonies, the Founders lived, every day, among the outer world. In order to maintain their exterior shells and facades, they had not developed the need to meld into invisibility

throughout their daily routines. While they, too, were bound to the Lutetium links, the links were not carried or woven into their shabby clothes. Being tied to the out-of-doors, these Sentinels unencumbered themselves from the links only when they moved into buildings to congregate with inner-worlders or to intercede against wrongdoing, in their guardianship roles. At these times, they, too, cloaked themselves in translucence.

Through necessity, the links were hidden safely away from thieving hands of the out-worlders, stitched within their worn clothing, and worn next to the flesh.

Like every indoor colony, Lutetium also marked the boundaries of their territory. Step beyond those limitations, and each Sentinel would forfeit the protections that the REM offered. Stay beyond those parameters without your individual link, and you would be absorbed, within hours, into the flesh and fabric of the outside world, until called to rejoin your elders. This was a strong motivator for each Sentinel to remain cloistered.

Like their inner-world colleagues, the Foundation structure permitted only one member of each colony to move to the other side. Jurisdictions and boundaries demanded respect for each other's authority. This formal structure served to protect the uniqueness of each family, to maintain the purity that personified each group.

Daily gatherings of each family drew these limitations, reminded members of their history, their duty, their destiny. It was time for Elsteth to convene the meeting.

The reading of the Creed of the Council preceded necessary business.

First necessary business was a summary of the prior day's activities. In the case of the Foundation, the vast majority of those activities occurred in the prowling hours, long after normal people had bedded down for the night. It was a time of high crime and low morals, of thievery and muggery, of assaults and killings. It was a time when people joined the animals in more base pursuits. It was the time and the action for which the Sentinels had prepared throughout the centuries.

While the Foundation colonies fought to minimize the damage wrought by the underworld of evil that humans enabled, it was a battle that could not be won each and every time. Losses were inevitable. The territory to be covered by these twenty-four was immense, the problems even more enormous. Three stabbings, one killing, five serious assaults and a few unremarkable fights had eluded the prevention of the Sentinels.

"We're in it deep." A particularly rough, clearly inebriated member rose, hesitantly, to speak his piece.

All faces turned respectfully to the 'rubby.

“Don’t know who. Ain’t no ‘un I seen before. But ‘boots busted him, and he slipped the noose. Looks like he must be from one of the colonies down the ‘I.’ Now I seen him, now he’s gone. But only saw ‘um wid his garb on.”

His piece expressed, the member nodded to his colleagues, and took his seat.

This breach of security and violation of protocol alarmed the group.

“Key one, may I speak?” Elsteth recognized the next member.

“Isn’t it just inner Sentinels who humanize when clothed?”

The drunk saw the veracity here.

“Yes, yes. I shudda knowed.”

“And aren’t they bound by the same rule that allows only one of us to migrate?”

Much agreed murmurs arose.

The key one tapped her forehead, thinking. It was a sign that the others were to wait for her response.

“Right on. I seen all inner key ones just last week at our gathering. Unless it’s a key one from another sect in the region. What doff did he carry?”

It was one of the many colloquialisms that this colony used to describe clothing. Far more rudimentary than inner colonies, yet lacking the precision of some of the formalized colonies on campus and college, outer families assumed much of the idioms and lazy manner employed

by those humans in their environment. They fell into roles most common in the streets and roadways – the drunks, the indolent, the damaged. The roles, the clothes, were all necessary affectations.

The clothing being described, but not recognized, the group turned to discussions of what may have driven this intrusion without warning. Such violations of territory and precedence were rare, in the extreme. Was there an imminent danger? Was this an indication of a new evolution of responsibility? Was this intrusion fuelled by a hot pursuit from one world to another? It would require careful evaluation and observation.

The family followed through on their regular, ritual meeting agenda, then prepared to begin the next part of their day.

NOW YOU SEE IT ...

A partial bare footprint in the garden dirt, directly underneath her daughter's window was all the evidence she could locate. But Carol knew there was more to it than that. The dog had been alarmed, and frightened. The only thing that had ever frightened Rogue was lightning. That, and the cat. The cat had been indoors, and there was no risk of a thunderstorm in late November in Winnipeg, so the frenzy that the oversized German shepherd clearly demonstrated caused her to think that there was more. Much more.

Should she call in the police? There was almost nothing to act upon, but she knew that Harry would be willing to listen, and do what he could, when he could. Her friendship with this throwback cop provided a cloak of safety for her. Still, he would likely be on duty. She would wait until the next day to bring her suspicions to him.

Carol photographed the imprint, and snapped a few digitals of the surrounding area, just in case. She returned indoors, locking the door and closing the drapery. Then she telephoned her daughter, who had stayed the night at a friend's place after an evening of socializing.

Whoever had been intruding on their privacy had been disappointed.

The shadows of the neighbour's bushes moved,

and another couple of indented footprints appeared. Retrieving the grey link, the naked figure slipped away, through the sidewalk gate and onto the roadway.

Harry's day was progressing predictably. Domestic dispute, couple of traffic stops, one shoplifter call, a couple of false alarms. A quiet afternoon, all in all. He didn't mind these long shifts, or the lack of any real excitement, except for the domestics.

Those always sent a feeling of trepidation through him. Sometimes, things ran smoothly. Sometimes, the battered spouse would attack, without provocation, as soon as the police intimated that they would be arresting the abuser. Seldom did the abuser put up much resistance, once the cops had entered the premises. Such was the way of a bully. Once they were face to face with force, bullies crumpled. It was the few moments when authorities were attempting to gain entry that were scary. But the victims -- now, they were unpredictable!

On the other hand, his partner almost seemed to savour the chance to work with domestics. He had a way, a gentle way of dealing with each party as an equal. His manner calmed even the most belligerent of combatants. Harry could not understand that tolerance, even though he considered himself to be compassionate.

"Jake, I've got to ask you something. Happened

this morning, before you came on shift.”

The city police had been experimenting with a new cross-scheduling process. During the morning hours, when fewer violent crimes were being reported, cruisers were dispatched with only one officer. Between noon and 2 p.m., those separate cruisers were routed into the station, new crews assigned, and the original solitary officers combined into a patrol team for the balance of their shifts.

Both Jake and Harry were on the last half of their split patrols.

Jake was an enigma. Mennonites formed a significant part of the cultural makeup in this city. But their beliefs disallowed them from serving in wars, and, for the most part, serving as police. A few had crossed the thin blue line to join with the regulars. Jake was one of them. He insisted, however, that he did not follow the Mennonite religion.

Jakob Rosenfeld. He could deny all he wanted, but Harry knew it was a Mennonite name. Many other families with similar German/Russian-sounding names lived in Winnipeg.

That smooth, calming nature. The passive expression. The forgiving nature. All were Mennonite traits. Okay, so many had moved to other churches, like the Alliances, the Springs, etc. Jake could be what he wanted to be. Harry was no dinosaur. Jake could be a woman if he wanted to. Harry knew and trusted this man.

That was all that counted.

“What do you know about monks, and monasteries, and so on?”

Jake smiled, gently. Stereotyped. Mennonite Jake would know about monks. Did Harry understand that there were no monks in the Mennonite faith? Was he aware that, in fact, many modern-day monks were not even Christian, but Buddhist? It mattered little.

“Not much.” Relatively speaking, that was true. He was a student of all religions. He loved to read about how others saw the world. But, he was no expert. That role was left to others, who dedicated their lives to ecclesiastical studies. Jake just loved to know about people – their heart and minds, in particular. By understanding a little about what made them tick, he could work a little magic when dealing with them. That made him a cop that others on the force envied, while some resented.

“Why?”

“I got a monk’s costume back in the station. A gift from a grateful young man that I helped out today.”

While Jake had a gift of understanding, Harry had a gift for diversion and deflection.

“Someone gave you a monk’s robe? Was he trying to convert you?”

“Not likely. He was doing a strip tease, I think. One minute, I was getting him to dust off the roof of my car. You know, ‘wax on, wax off.’ Karate

Kid stuff. 'Put your hands up there' kind of thing. Then, he wasn't there anymore."

"Ran?"

"No. Just wasn't there. His monk stuff was there, though. And next to it, this really odd, tiny little link. Too big to be from a necklace; much too small to be any kind of real chain. But heavy as hell for its size. Cheap looking, but solid."

Jake glanced, disbelieving, at his partner.

"Pile of clothes, piece of metal, kid disappears. I thought you didn't do drugs until lunch hour."

Harry was only slightly amused. The rarity with which Jake proffered a joke was a moment to savour. But Harry was in the midst of his story.

"I'm serious. This kid just wasn't there anymore. I can't for sure say that he disappeared, or that he didn't run away. But, damn it, he'd have had to have been faster than that Jamaican runner, Usain Bolt. But there was something about him that I can't quite put in its spot."

"A disappearing kid who wears monk's clothes? And you think there's something a LITTLE out of place here? And you said a link from a necklace that was so heavy that it gave you a hernia? Doesn't sound strange to me."

Hyperbole was another rarity for Jake.

"Laugh. Laugh. But I need to know how that could happen. I'm not into Martians, or things from another world. I don't believe in ghosts. At least not all the time. And I do think that there is an explanation that I am missing."

Harry deserved some credit. Most other cops would not have dared admit that a suspect had escaped, let alone undressed, stripped off his jewellery and disappeared. However odd the situation sounded, Harry needed to figure it out. In that, he was obsessive. He was a cop.

"You know, Jake, it strikes me as being odd. Every time I take a statement from some victim of assault, or a purse snatching, or the like, and I ask them to describe the guy that did it, I always get something like 'Well, he had blue jeans, and a tee shirt,' or 'he had a red hat on,' or 'he was wearing a gorilla mask.' It's like, they only pay attention to the stuff that the suspect won't be wearing later. Why don't they notice a tattoo, or a birthmark, or funny-shaped ears. You know, stuff we could go on, that is a permanent part of the suspect."

"here I am, I notice that he's wearing a monk's outfit."

"Not wearing one," Jake interjected.

"Yeah, not wearing one. But there's something that I saw, but I can't put my finger on. I'm no better than those victims on the street. Can't recall the right stuff."

"I'm watching for anyone religious, right now," Jake prodded.

As they talked and drove, each took turns scanning the neighbourhood, listening to the dispatches. Both had the officer's eye. They were trained to notice, not the sameness of their

scenery, but the little differences that may be indicators of something gone wrong.

This was the south end, though. It was predictably safe, sufficiently distant from the downtown core of decay to smooth out the ridges and crevices of crime. Differences would be noticed.

"Where did this incident happen?"

"Kitson."

Close enough to the downtown area to offer a few clues as to its origin.

"Probably a stray from District 1."

That, Harry had assumed, was starkly obvious. But that still did not explain the mechanics of the experience. He was not content to let it go. He filed it for future consideration.

"Coffee? Let's go. Time for a wet one."

Jake notified dispatch, and they pulled into the McDonalds drive-thru.

Elsteth paused before she entered the high-rise office complex. She removed the link hidden in the thatch of matted hair next to her scalp, placed it in the receiving door area at the rear of the building, removed her clothes, and slipped past the security station undetected. Of course, two zebra, a giraffe and a Siberian tiger probably could have done so, as well.

Elsteth knew where to locate the key one. While many worked outside their boundaries at pedantic, wage-paying jobs, this enclave's key

one worked in one of the offices. In fact, owned one of the offices. As the senior partner in the second-largest law firm in the city. It was a distinct advantage, and a critical one for all of the Sentinels, to have overt access to the inner workings of human law. It was also to the distinct disadvantage of the key one, who was exposed to the guts and effluent of human behaviour. It took its toll on that Sentinel's mental wellbeing. Fortunately, Lyle Sarbit was not occupied with a client. As senior partner, he rarely was. He was overseer.

Elsteth moved past the receptionist, the wall of legal secretaries and collection of paralegals, directly into Lyle's office. None were aware.

"Hello to you," Sarbit called out, in quiet voice, as his colleague entered.

"I have stuff to throw your way." She was not graced in social niceties and soft speech.

"Got a problem, and need to know from you, and others."

By others, she meant other key ones.

She elaborated on the monk incident.

"You know who it was, what he was up to?"

Lyle, too, was concerned. As key one in the commercial complex, he guarded some of the most prestigious humans, but also played a pivotal role in pre-emptive protection. By knowing who was in trouble, who was causing trouble, and who was looking for protection against trouble, he could dispatch other

communes of Sentinels where they were needed. He was, by many measures, a link between the outer world vulnerables, the outer world piranhas and the Sentinels themselves.

But he, too, he assured Elsteth, did not know who had violated the code of conduct. He would make enquiries.

Elsteth thanked him, and departed.

“Look forward to seeing you at next gatherin’.”

“Yes, I, too.” Lyle watched her go, then dropped his link into a desk drawer, neatly piling his wardrobe on his desk. They were safe there, since no employee would dare to enter the office unannounced, and everyone believed that he would still be there.

He then left hurriedly through the side door, past the private washroom, and out into the waiting room. No one looked up as he exited. No one knew. Lyle had business at hand, and less than an hour to conclude it before he would pay the ultimate price for abandoning his link.

He had vital Sentinel business, and the future of his way of life may be at risk.

THE COUNCIL OF THE PURE

The weekly convening of the key ones within this region – The Council of the Citizenry -- played a vital part in many aspects of Sentinel life.

It was through these gatherings that information on activities was shared. At these meetings, review of customs and historic rituals was conducted. The upcoming graduations of younger Sentinels meant new opportunity for fresh energy, and a cleansing of older Sentinels from the mix. That warranted discussion. Regular interaction meant that faces remained familiar to each other.

At these sessions, as well, key ones were encouraged to cleanse themselves, by confessing to temptations that may have arisen in the prior week, transgressions that may have occurred by members of each enclave. Purification rituals would help to eliminate future issues, so each key one was open in his or her admissions.

Punishments meted out often meant elimination from the colonies, but that was accepted as part of the greater will. No one ever protested as his or her link was taken and tossed into the ever-burning flame controlled by the greater key one. No tear was shed, on either side, as the last moments of life were expended by the offender.

Each would move on to the proper place in the after-world. Regret or sorrow was unnecessary, as this was just one of the sacrifices essential to good order of the Sentinels.

The weekly meeting commenced according to tradition, with a reading of the Creed of the Councils, tenets to which the Sentinels had adhered for more than three thousand years.

These were not elaborate canons, but also were not whitewashed rules of behaviour. The Creed of the Councils put into script the values, goals and principles of the Guiding Life.

All in attendance knew the Creed intimately. Key ones were required to demonstrate rote memory of all of the scripts, and to be able to illustrate how they had put into practice the principles espoused in the Creed. Those key ones who failed in any aspect of practice were, without hesitation, reassigned to a new role within their colonies. All in attendance were key ones, with the exception of the Captain of the Council. His identity, colony of origin and alter-image in the outer world were unknown to all, with the exception of the few Guides, whose assignments within the Council required that they assume roles of direction for specific committees – standing and ad hoc -- within the Council.

Even the Captain, though, exercised no absolute power, either within the Council or in the Councils of the Communities, the Council of the Countries (a misnomer, since, in some instances, there

were several small countries represented at the Communities level), or the largest Council of Civil Direction (the global council of Sentinels). While all were pure, it was the Council of Civil Direction that had received the nickname, "Council of the Pure," because it was constituted of the purest of the pure.

Councils of the Communities, comprised of twenty-four captains from each regional council (plus one), met monthly, with precisely the same regimen and makeup as the regionals. As one would expect, the Council of the Countries was comprised of two dozen Communities representatives and one additional appointee. They met each season. Each year, the 25 members of the Council of Civil Direction congregated, with leaders of each Council of the Countries in attendance. There were twenty-four of these, as well, and the chosen Courier of the Council Creed.

At each meeting of each progressively expansive council, the same format, the same blueprint was followed.

At the weekly gathering of the Council of the Citizenry, Elsteth, Lyle, and all other key ones attended. Unknown to most, one was not who he purported to be. One, at least, had corrupt links to the outer world. He was the cancer.

Under bright sunlight, with temperatures near 5C, they came together under the covered barbeque area of the park. It was sufficiently cold that few

others were lingering in the meadow, woods and recreation areas that made up the city green space. However, it was close enough to tolerable that those joggers that passed by gave only the briefest of glances. Hardy Winnipeggers often did this sort of thing, and this appear to be nothing more than some church group or neighbourhood test of endurance by a couple of dozen 20- and 30-somethings. Not rowdy, not suspicious in any way.

The meetings rotated throughout the city and region, to avoid that type of concern.

Twenty-four was the magic number. 24 families in the region. Twenty-four members in each family. It was a tried-and-true formula that was immutable. Always branch off and begin a new colony when the critical mass was reached. Never let mass fall below twenty (and only for the very briefest of time!), to ensure stability. Maintain the average age, as closely as possible, at 24 years. There were good reasons for this. It was just that only a few of the 24 knew those reasons. They never thought to challenge that number. It worked, even though the world, and need for the Sentinels, was ever-growing. In time, they would need another layer of 24.

Currently, many of the Sentinels were underutilized, and could be involved in more specific colonies. However, until the critical need dictated that a new level was required, the Sentinels would remain structured as they had

been for the past six decades. This accelerated pace of expansion, though, posed some unique challenges. Natural offspring had been sufficient in the past, but evolution had changed reproductive patterns, and age culling had impacted on genetic familiarity. Human need was far outpacing human growth, with greater crime, greater focusing of crime and greater opportunity for crime demanding more of the attention of the Sentinels.

Progress had been made in effective utilization of the very young, who, until recently had not been included in the regular census. As of the current census, those under six had no status as Sentinels. They were not yet people. Those six and over were equals in all aspects, from work to decision-making. Fortunately, few decisions were ever made that impacted in a significant manner on the Sentinel society.

There were, as much as was possible, always six pre-people in each colony. As each pre-person reached adult status, one elder would become redundant.

The age of criteria had been reset on occasion. Reproductive age, for example, had been lowered from 18 to 12, which meant, in turn, that age of obsolescence could similarly be reduced. The age of obsolescence, though, had not followed the pattern of six. Instead, it had followed the pattern of four, as the number of infants had declined. In the future, that age of

obsolescence would need to rise, to account for the need for an exponential -fold increase in colonies as the next layer was added. This would pose immense challenges, and it concerned the councils greatly. It had been on every agenda for more than half a century.

Each time that a new level had been added, there had been the very predictable issue: with so many more colonies, there was a huge need for more population. That dilemma had been resolved by pre-planning, and maintaining the age of obsolescence at very near to the usual biological death rates.

The age of adulthood had started at 24, been reduced to eighteen, then twelve, then six, as populations neared colony quotas. The age of redundancy slowly fell after that, followed by a reduction in age of reproduction by six, then another six years. While it was biologically possible within the colonies for reproductive age to be dropped to six, this was not seen as desirable at this time. There would be other solutions to be explored.

For the past two years, Lyle had directed the weekly convention. His role was as secretary, but, as with all Councils, status was not considered. The Captains of every Council designated their secretaries to convene and conduct gatherings. The Captains were there to observe and report on the conduct of the meetings, agendas and issues, so that other

Councils could be informed. He, essentially, was a liaison. Following familiar processes, Lyle guided the meeting toward the most anticipated segment: a discussion about Harry the cop, the monk incident, and an ancillary discussion regarding the increase in the number of outer-world “visions” and sightings of the Sentinels.

Each of the key ones was provided with an opportunity to express his or her opinion, equally. Lyle’s role was limited. For the most part, the attendees self-governed. Moving from the speaker of the moment to the person sitting adjacent to that key one, the participants took a few moments to voice their position on the given topic. Lyle would then read out the next item on the agenda, and the process would begin again.

As much as possible, each meeting, at every level, ran similarly. Even the layout of the furnishings followed established design. Eight tables, with three seats at each, were arranged in an octagon, allowing almost every person in attendance to face, or at least observe every other person. At most, one person would not be visible to any other key one. In the centre of this near-circle sat Lyle Sarbit, rotating in his chair to face any individual in the circle with whom he needed to interact. In this manner, no one was higher or lower in the hierarchy than any other, including the captain.

None kept written records of the meeting, relying on the captain to remember, accurately, each

point and issue.

As a lawyer, Lyle was up to the task of acting as chair, in the stead of the captain.

Today's meeting, however, exceeded the usual two-hour allotment.

Elsteth began discussion on the feature topic.

"This jack--." She stopped, correcting herself.

"This cop. Does anyone know why he stopped the Sentinel? One of my family saw it all."

"Are we sure it was one of us?" Another key one spoke. Now that the more structured portion of the meeting was concluded, questions and answers did not have to follow sequentially around the circle.

"My member tells me that the person had a link. He hid it in the dirt."

"Link? A key one, then?" Lyle asked the obvious. "Anyone here involved in this matter?"

No one spoke in affirmation. The lack of admission was taken as proof that none of the key ones present had been the Sentinel stopped by the cop.

"Is it possible that a key one from another region is here on business?"

"I would have been made aware." Lyle was, as the secretary of order, the first Sentinel that any visitor was required to contact. Respect for each colony and region was important.

"Then, how could it have been a Sentinel?"

Each of the key ones seemed oblivious to the possibility that one of them, or one of their

families had broken protocol, or violated a tenet of the Creed of the Council. It was as unfathomable as the possibility that one had spoken a mistruth, or that one had been less than pure in any way.

While no one Sentinel could (or would) lay claim to any position of power or authority over the Sentinels, the Creed did govern them, as if by an unseen hand of authority. It was an immutable code. The Creed could not have been violated. Or could it have?

For several minutes, no one spoke. Each sought out and contemplated any possible alternative explanation. None were voiced.

Lyle attacked the dreaded concept.

“Could we have, for the first time in recorded history of our chapter, an unworthy one?”

Collectively, they gasped, both at Lyle’s boldness in challenging the veracity of any Sentinel and at the possibility that he may be correct.

“No!” A startling expression of emotion from the key one from Columbia Mall.

An unworthy one meant that every other member would be suspect, thus tainting every Sentinel by virtue of the failing of one other’s virtues.

“No. No. No,” the others began to cry out, chaotically.

It was several moments before Lyle rose from his chair. It was a subtle symbol of authority that had not been required since he had been appointed to his position. He had anticipated the denial,

had anticipated the resulting outcry, and had waited for the correct moment to intercede.

The group fell silent.

“I ask that each of you remember that there may be a reason for this breach, or a request by someone at our Council of the Communities for action by a Sentinel, and that it is for our own benefit that we may not have been informed.

The very possibility that there may not have been a violation or an unworthy one, however unlikely that possibility may have been, soothed those in attendance.

“We do need, though, to pay closer attention to this human cop. From reports that key one Elsteth Smith has provided over the past several days, it would seem that he is not entirely satisfied with what transpired. He is certain to search more thoroughly for an explanation than many others might.”

One other key one had first hand knowledge of Harry the cop’s actions and concerns. He had second hand knowledge of the situation. He had remained silent when the question was asked as to whether any key one had been involved. He remained silent now. One key one was not whom he appeared to be.

IN A SANTA MOOD

Today was the first of Harry's four days off. Being the second to last week of November, he opted to spend at least a part of it completing his most dreaded task – shopping. Partly due to his training, and partly due to his somewhat orderly character, he invariably chose to do the most odious tasks first. It was, for him, like Thanksgiving dinner. Eat the stuffing first, then the turkey, followed by the rolls, next the dessert and finally the vegetables.

Harry preferred to have the last taste in his mouth be the one that he enjoyed the most. He enjoyed his veggies. He also hated stuffing, but, because he hated to unnecessarily hurt his wife's feelings (and before that, his mother's, aunt's or grandmother's), he ate stuffing. Harry chose to have the most unpleasant taste pass his palate first.

Life was a dinner meal. Shopping tasted poorly. But Harry had other tasks that required that he visit the mall, as well.

First, he had to get his glasses adjusted. Fifty-one, with 28 years experience on the force. This year, he had hit the "Magic 80," meaning that, with his combined age and years on the job, he was eligible for retirement. Retirement was not in his plans. But 51 meant that his eyesight was

beginning to retire, even if he wasn't. Smack on the anniversary of his 28th year as a cop, he had acquired his first pair of prescription glasses. Tightening those damned hinges every two months was part of the ritual. Explaining to the optometrist why he needed to have his eyes re-tested so soon after purchasing the glasses was not.

Harry also had an appointment with a travel agent. 28 years was important, but 30 years with his wife was, by far, more significant. And Fiji beckoned to her, and, consequently, to him. Next February, he would extend his six-week leave, so that Dana could enjoy the full winter in a tropical climate. Somehow, he suspected she might just enjoy it.

Dana was not unlike him: compelled to pour every ounce of effort into her work when on duty, every ounce into the community when off. Her job as administrator of the city's largest hospital, and the research wing of the regional health authority, meant that she was giving herself 100% to others. Harry worked as diligently along side Dana during their off-hours as he did when working as a police officer.

This was the "turkey" portion of the shopping trip. Good for him, okay to consume, but, damn, he'd rather be working than sitting around on some island thousands of miles from his job!

Shopping completed his meal of rolls and dessert. He had left, just for himself, a most

pleasant helping of greens.

Harry was Santa. An afternoon dedicated to underprivileged children, it was a fundraiser to be attended by all the retail shop owners and anchor store managers, the mall administrative executives and a couple of dozen well-heeled outsiders.

To be held in an unrented retail space, with its windows covered by thick paper, its floor devoid of carpets and its walls a quilt of old nail holes, new patches, remnant slat wall and a couple of mirrors, it had been hastily adorned with a bleeding, thin layer of primer, a 2-inch trim of green painter's tape around the top of the walls, and an assortment of Christmas decorations. The floors had been powdered with fake snow and a good splashing of white paint, as well as a few clumps of matted cotton stuffing. It was as wintery as the mall staff had been able to make it. It was a graphic link to the stark and barren season that many in the city would be facing.

Harry jumped at the chance to play Santa for this cause. His wife, a volunteer at the food bank, had submitted his name, along with a glowing synopsis of his commitment to compassion and generosity in the city.

Harry, again in keeping with his orderly character, recognized the gig for what it was, rather than what it seemed to be. It was a chance to help, not a chance to celebrate Christmas. Truth be told, he didn't particularly like Christmas.

His dislike for Christmas had no origins in his upbringing, or in his beliefs. He was no religious person, to be sure, but many of his friends were. Of course, many of his friends were Muslim, and Jewish, and aboriginal with their traditional spiritual beliefs, and, yes, even Christian. But Harry disliked Christmas, because he was a good cop.

As much as Harry experienced a shiver of apprehension whenever he responded to a domestic dispute call, he shuddered even more as the Christmas season hit full steam.

Christmas, more so than any other time of year, seemed to highlight the differences among mankind, rather than the commonality that they should have been embracing.

First, all non-Christians felt the sting of being somehow different, and, by inference, less than those good Christians who celebrated. December was a time for the best Christians to show that they could even out-Christian fellow Christians.

December was a time for hypocrites, who fell over themselves attempting to do their one good deed of the year, so they could cheat, chisel and mistreat each other for the rest of the year.

Christmas was a time for selfishness. To hell with making a list! Just expect the moon. Dig out the books of indulgence – the flyers and catalogues that littered every mailbox, front step and sidewalk for eight long weeks.

All of those things Harry could have endured. They would have been endless helpings of stuffing. Except, he saw no veggies at the end. Where was the final payoff? Where was the commitment, on December 26, to ongoing goodwill, instead of 24-hour goodwill?

No, it was none of these courses of the Christmas public meal that really convinced Harry the cop that Christmas was the worst time of year. It was the calls for help. The domestic violence that hit ugly peaks, the robberies, the drunkenness that caused senseless deaths, the disparity between the haves and the have-nots, and the despair. He actually hated almost everything about Christmas. It was only Dana that kept him grounded.

Dana and Harry had never had children. They loved kids, loved being around them. But, their lives would have been poor suits of clothes for any offspring. Dana and Harry had committed to being a part of a bigger family – the city, and the extended family of society beyond. They loved kids too much to give them only a part of their lives.

Harry had jumped at the opportunity to be Santa, in spite of all his reasons for disliking the red-suited layabout.

First, he had exacted a pledge: no junk toys for the kids. No extravagant spending of the money on an elaborate Christmas dinner, which, by definition, would have excluded almost 50% of

the city's non-Christian population. No big media hype. Charity should be given quietly, and with honest intent. No false carolling, no lavish displays. He was the force behind the austere decorating strategy for the gathering.

Along with all the “No’s” that he had insisted upon, he had a few “Yeses” as well. First on the Santa list was his demand that the funds be used for only one purpose – an inclusive community resource for all the kids in the North End and impoverished core area. It was here where ethnic minorities (both immigrant and non-immigrant) seemed to land, where housing, services and rental costs were low, but risks, crime and dangers were high.

Second, Harry demanded that every outsider – from lawyer to politician to successful entrepreneur – that had been on Santa’s list to attend this soiree be required to commit a minimum of \$10,000 each to the cause. In order to do their one good deed of the year, many had even pledged well in excess of the minimum.

Thirdly, Harry the cop demanded that he be allowed to hand-pick his own legion of elves, and arrange for their costumes.

Because of Harry’s reputation in the community, because of his wife’s championing of his nomination as Santa, and, most critically, because they had no one else who would do it, the board of the Columbia Mall Christmas Retailers Charity Event acquiesced to all

demands.

Santa, intending to not waste excess time in the shopping centre during his day off, arrived dressed in the role he had selected, and in the company of his six elves. Santa wore a Grim Reaper costume. Elf One wore a patchwork drapery that looked like it suffered from some horrible, seeping pussy disease. Elf Two was dressed as a handgun. Elf Three was a rat. Elf Four was an overflowing garbage can. Elf Five was dressed as a small child, but ran alongside Elf Four, seemingly rummaging through his trash. Elf Six – all six feet six inches of him, was encased in an even larger coffin. These party-goers would learn what Christmas was really like in the core of Winnipeg.

Mall-goers could hardly have imagined that this was the beginning of, by far, the most successful fundraiser ever held in Columbia Mall. Indeed, a few parents regretted ever bringing their child to the mall that day to have their photos taken with the public mall Santa. The Grim Reaper and his mutant elves were not how they wanted their children to remember their visit to see Santa. No doubt, there would be a few complaints.

Harry, the Santa Cop, was not in a real ho-ho-hoing mood, until this job was done.

Harry's partner, Jake, had declined the invitation to be one of the elves. "That's not what Christmas is about, for me," he declared.

Harry had assumed that, because Jake was

Mennonite (Jake was not going to convince Harry that he wasn't), his partner preferred the religious experience. That was okay. Jake's choice.

Jake, though, did attend at the mall, and watched from the security of a mall retailer as the entourage passed by. He wanted to see precisely how this Santa parade would be received. Harry and the Elves did not see Jake. Jake made sure of it.

Harry stopped, as scheduled, at the optometrists first.

"These glasses are causing problems."

He was accustomed to the blinding reflections off of glass buildings in the city, or blurred images caused by a duplicate image being reflected off the hood of a car in bright sunlight. These were things that everyone experienced, regularly. They were like desert mirages, only within the city. But the images that he had been experiencing for at least the prior three months were unlike those.

"Every so often, I catch a reflection of someone in the edges of my glasses. It's damned annoying. Sometimes they are absolutely naked. Sometimes, they're dressed like bums. Sometimes, they look like they just stepped out of a Charles Dickens book. And if you try to tell me that it's not these bloody glasses causing the problem, then I'll need to find me a really good head doctor. So, fix these damn glasses!"

There was nothing the optometrist could do.

As Harry and his elves left the store, he thought he detected another nude figure – a young woman – slipping past him, as if in a hurry to be somewhere.

Harry gave his head a slight shake, knowing that the glasses were not to blame.

“At my age, it must be wishful thinking,” he said to himself, discarding the eidetic image that he had seen.

None of the elves had noticed.

The image, indeed, had been in a hurry to be somewhere. The food court, to be precise, was where she was headed.

In the past few weeks, Corbin had been acting rather strangely. The image – Faith was its name – made it her business to know what Corbin was doing, whenever he was doing it. After all, by decision of the colony, she was to be the chosen partner for Corbin.

And she could do far worse, in her opinion. He was unique, a special member of a family that stressed the equality of every person in the group. Corbin’s talents and his particularly empathic nature set him apart from all others, but, for a nineteen-year old female, it was his fashion-model good looks that set him aside.

The colony, a few years earlier, had established that there was a need to bring in new family members. Forty years of closed generation of new members (the colony did not see it as in-

breeding) did mean that some of the Sentinels' special talents were at risk for mutating out of the genetic makeup. Worse, some of the more human elements were susceptible to deletion from the Sentinel physiology. By bringing in new family members from other colonies, each family was able to rejuvenate that hereditary link. Faith was one such immigrant, having joined the family at the age of fourteen. It was well past breeding age, and well past adulthood.

From the day that the colony traded one of their own for Faith, the strategy was to partner her with Corbin.

The day that Faith had been traded was an emotional one for both families. There was much handshaking, one-handed hugging and slight shaking of heads while staring at the floor in front of them, as each family respectively transferred over one of their own to the other unit. They were, after all, an emotional species, that had to justify their emotions with logic.

Both Faith and Corbin were aware of the mating strategy. Corbin, though, had an obvious preference for other priorities. Even at the age of fourteen, he clearly was not prepared to accept the idea of mating. To avoid the possibility of refusal, and to ensure that all family members remained in concurrence on all topics, there was a tacit decision to delay partnering these two members prior to Corbin's readiness, or even broaching the subject with him. They had need

of his unique skills, in any event. Faith was not particularly pleased with this course of action.

The food court, today, bustled with activity. It had its peaks and valleys, with the 10:00 coffee rush, the 12-2 lunch trade, or the 3:00 pm. after-school and mid-afternoon shopping break being the peaks.

At these times, it was easy for Corbin to interact with Kendra, without the conversation being noticed.

Not long ago, Bluetooth technology put single earpieces into the ear of most people, as they conversed on their cellular phones. Blackberry applications allowed text messages to be sent and received by speaking into the phone, or by letting the phone translate text into voice. This phenomena created the illusion that people were talking to themselves, when, in fact, they were not. Except for a very few.

Kendra, for example, could be carrying on a conversation while she sat by herself in the food court, and no one would give her so much as a sideways glance. She had an added advantage, being blind. Human instinct was to assume that anyone with a difference or disability also had a mental issue. That meant that Kendra could either be talking to someone on her cell phone, or actually talking to herself. In either event, no one paid any heed.

In fact, she was doing neither.

While she sat, sipping her diet Pepsi, she

alternately talked and listened, like a bird tilting its head this way and that. No one watched, typically.

While she listened, the image that no one saw talked. While she talked, Corbin admired. No one saw.

"I see that you're worried about something. What is it?" she asked.

"It is nothing. There has been some talk in our family about outsiders that can see us. I don't think it's about you, though."

Kendra smiled. It struck her as funny that, of the nearly one million people in this city, and the billions around the earth, the Sentinels should be thinking that she – the blind one – would be a human that could see them. She could, of course.

First, she had only seen Corbin. She knew why that was. Love is not blind. It sees all, but forgets, forgives and ignores much.

Then, she began seeing others in the family. Having been blind since she was five, she could remember what people were supposed to look like, and she had always known them to be clothed. But, at five, she had no real sense of modesty, and so, when she noticed the occasional Sentinel, with no clothes, she was not embarrassed or startled.

The visions were unaware that she could see them, though, or they would have been more than self-conscious.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” she responded. “I’ve been having a hard time trying to understand this whole Sentinel thing. To me, it sounds a lot like some sort of fantasy novel. Surreal. But the more that I think about it, the more it seems more like everyone’s image of angels. I guess that’s the whole thing about the Sentinel idea.”

Corbin, inwardly, was thrilled that a human could actually see him. Particularly, this human. He loved that he was able to simply nod, and she recognized the gesture and its meaning.

“Yes, I see that. But I don’t understand why the Sentinels feel so threatened by humans being able to detect a few of you. Wouldn’t it be to your advantage to have good links to our side of the world, so that you could relate to us better? Even warn us when we’re in danger, and things like that?”

Corbin was unsure, but did see merit in it. “We just can’t take risks like that. Think of how people reacted to Orson Wells and his War of the Worlds skit. They panicked. Think of the way humans reacted to the possibility of UFOs. They wanted to blow them up, thinking they are being attacked. Even think of people here, that need to carry guns everywhere, to protect themselves against no one in particular. Don’t you think that they would be scared to death, and probably do something really stupid, without thinking?”

Kendra saw the point. “But those people who

can see you, isn't it possible that it's because they are more trusting, more open?"

"Yes. True. But it could also be because they have less going on their minds, because they don't do a lot of deep thinking. You know, it's easier to put water in an empty bottle, than to try to put some more in a full one."

"So I'm an empty bottle, am I?"

Corbin wished, before he had finished the last comment, that he had been more judicious in his choice of words. Damn that emotional Sentinel nature.

Kendra let him off the hook, with her laughter.

"If you could only see the look on your face!"

That loud laughter and the "see" comment got people looking, now.

Both Kendra and Corbin looked around. Corbin, because he was alarmed, Kendra because she saw Corbin looking.

Her blind eyes locked immediately on the only other person she could see: Faith, working her way toward them. Distant enough that she had not heard the laughter, she had not yet observed Corbin or her.

"Corbin. One of you!" Corbin noticed Faith, and subtly slipped into an empty chair at the next table, neither rising or turning. The slight movement of the chair went unnoticed by those people nearby, who were still staring at this clearly disturbed blind girl who was laughing, shouting, making strange comments. For the ten

or so seconds that their attentions had locked on her, Corbin was able to cover his tracks.

Faith, then, noticed Corbin, and Kendra. Kendra, who seemed to be the centre of attention of the humans, and Corbin, who was scouring the area, as he should have been.

Still, Faith was not satisfied that what she saw was what she really saw. She had suspicions.

“Faith, what are you doing here? You’re away from your post.”

He deftly turned the tables on this intruder.

“I was pursuing a shopper that I suspected.” It was a lie, unheard of in the family. Corbin thought it to be so, but ignored the violation. He also knew, instinctively, that she could not raise any concerns about his liaisons at the weekly meeting, because she would be required to justify her own misdeeds. She was as trapped by her own mistruths as he was by her suspicions. Both had to find new ways to achieve their ends – he to bond with Kendra and she to prevent that bonding.

“He’s gone now.” Faith turned to return to her station.

“She’s after you.” Kendra stated the obvious, at least to a woman.

“She’s more than that. The family, someday, is going to require that we mate.”

Kendra and Corbin discussed, at length, this concept. She, unable to fathom why he simply would not refuse, he unable to understand how

she could not see that it was impossible to break the Creed of the Council. The irony that he already was doing so was lost on both of them. Their talk turned to how to further their relationship.

In the back of his mind, he considered the links. Faith, convinced that Kendra could be the challenge to her rights, muttered to herself, "I've still got the edge on you, miss. I can find where you live..."

Harry had done his duty. The party had been a success. Most of the outsiders had done the equivalent of almost two good deeds, with their very generous donations to the cause. Even the retailers had stepped up with abundant generosity. The Grim Reaper had done well.

Harry decided to spend a little time looking around. His shopping was done, but that generous spirit translated into a calmness that he rarely felt in a shopping mall. As he exited the vacant retail space where the fundraiser had been held, he turned right, instead of left in the direction from which he had entered.

That turn was significant.

Many of these retailers boasted peculiar names. "Garage." "La Vie en Rose." "Puff 'n Stuff." "The 'hood."

"Cheesy," he thought, but effective. Then, a double take. "The 'hood?" He read the smaller subtitle beside the larger letters. "by Monk."

He stopped, directly in front of the entrance, his eyes riveted on the mannequin to the left of the doorway.

It was clothed in the exact monk's robe that his suspect earlier in the week had been wearing. The robe that he had tossed into the cruiser. Exactly the same. Even the same brown wool.

Aside from the peculiar fact that the plastic model bore a striking resemblance to a low-level thief that Harry had arrested several years ago, Harry focused on its clothing.

Harry moved inside. He was a fish out of water, in a store for teenagers that carried nothing but hoodies, popular with gang members and wannabees. No monks.

"Can I help you?"

"May I," Harry thought.

"That dummy, there." He pointed to the mannequin, but in the general direction of the cloister of kids searching a couple of the racks of hoodies. "There." He walked over to the statue for emphasis.

"That outfit. What is it about"

"Oh, that. Monk is the name of the guy that started this chain. I guess he thinks that having a monk in the front window is cute. Apparently he thinks we understand about monks. And 'hood. You know, 'neighbourhood?' Doesn't fit, I think."

"But the other one, on the other side of the door. It doesn't have the same clothes." He dug out his badge to add punch to his inferred question. A

few of the teenagers decided to leave.

“Hey, that’s weird. Last week, I think, or maybe this week. Somebody stole the costume after we were closed. The doors were locked, so some of us figured it was staff. We didn’t tell anyone. But our night girl, she said that she found a \$100 bill stuck between the model’s fingers. She even put the money in the till, she said, and I was over that night. That was odd, because she should have been over, not me. Manager asked if I forgot to ring up a sale, like she was accusing me or something.”

Harry had more information than he really wanted at that time. Too much knowledge could be dangerous. He wasn’t eager to get involved in internal honesty issues at this store. Let them be civil about it, he often thought. Petty theft clogs up the courts, and these things are better left handled civilly.

“Thanks, just wanted to know.” He knew, too, that the outfit no longer was “stolen.” It was paid in full. That also told him that the guy wearing it may not have been as much of a suspicious character as he had thought when he stopped him. Still, in the store after hours ... Possibly overnight mall staff.

He had noticed something else, as well. Something that he filed away, as, at this time at least, being just trivia that may be useful sometime.

The ‘hood was a full three feet less in depth than

the adjacent vacant space. Shouldn't all of these storefronts be the same depth?

It was merely an interesting observation for him. If the Sentinels could read minds, it would have been more than that. Someone was concerned about the space that they had expropriated for themselves in the bowels of the mall.

Harry had not progressed that far, yet, in his discoveries. There would be a time, soon, when that knowledge would be critical.

Harry continued on his way, observed by Jake, surreptitiously. This was a part of the games that some cops, with detective skills, liked to play.

Harry was almost out of the mall, when he passed Metalworx. The kiosk sold nothing but jewellery: costume, for the most part, with a lot of silver and what looked like pewter. Harry knew little about jewellery.

"Hey, got to ask you something." He didn't bother with his badge. This was kind of an afterthought, anyway.

"What do you know about different metals."

The guy inside the kiosk stepped to Harry's side of the stand.

"Not a whole lot, other than the stuff I work with. I am really a jewellery maker, not a metallurgist."

He was neither defensive or sarcastic. He simply stated the obvious.

"What are you thinking about?"

In part, he thought that the guy might want some custom piece done up.

"I came across this part of a chain. You know, it was heavy as hell, but not much bigger than a large neck chain link. You know, almost the same size as those girly chains that guys use to fasten that huge wallet that sticks out of the ass pockets of their pants."

The kiosk owner liked the bluntness of this guy. He was a bit of a man, himself, but had to put on the gentle, effeminate airs when he dealt with most customers. It was like being an interior designer: people expected you to act flowery, so he did it, normally. The blunt talk was welcome.

"What colour?"

"Grey. Like a lot of your stuff, but not as shiny and more dirty looking. Something like a camping pot. Bit of a cheap look to it."

"Hey, we prefer 'inexpensive.' But not exactly like any of these colours?"

Harry felt he should apologize for inferring poor quality to this guy's work, but the guy was clearly having fun at Harry's expense, so he let it pass without apology.

"No, more grey. Looked like it should have fallen apart. But that one piece, it felt like it was about ten times heavier than it should have been, for its size."

"You know, I haven't a clue. But, wait, I'll see what I can dig up on the Internet." He turned to his computer. "We're all online in the mall, now."

"Damn," Harry thought. "Why didn't I think of the Net? Dumb ass."

Without much effort, they located the metal. Lutetium. Rare Earth Metal. Almost impossible to separate from other REMs. Used in magnetic memory bubbles. Used in polymerization.

It didn't help Harry much, other than to raise more questions than it answered. Why in hell, for example, was someone carrying a worthless link of chain that was almost impossible to make into a chain, anyway? And how did he get it, in the first place?

Harry left the mall. Jake had other business in the mall. He stayed.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Carol had not called Harry about the footprints that she had discovered in front of her daughter's bedroom window. She wished, now, that she had.

That morning, she had found more footprints. Dozens of them, all around the window, all of bare feet. She had also discovered that her garage door had been opened.

In part, that was her fault. She often did not remember to lock the side door. There seemed to be less need, since it was only four feet from the house side entrance, which was behind a latched gate.

The gate had not been opened. A footprint in the soft earth near the rear fence showed where the intruder had scaled the six-foot fence.

Even though it was late November, the temperature still hovered just over freezing during the day. The sun warmed the interior side of the fence during the afternoon, keeping the soil soft where the temperature was amplified by the dark fence colour and the bright sun. The same applied to the west side front of the house, on which wall her daughter's bedroom was located.

Carol examined the garage carefully, looking for evidence of the intrusion, being careful not to disrupt anything. Nothing was missing. The only

thing out of place was the paint scraper that doubled as a paint can opener. It was on the garage floor. Carol considered that it would have made a good pry bar to open a window.

She moved to her daughter's window, and tested it from the outside. It seemed locked, but, with an extra effort from Carol, it slid open. She returned inside, locking her daughter's window and closing the venetian blinds.

She would be certain to imprint on her daughter's mind the need for safety and security. Her child was nineteen, going to university and working part time. She was hardly a child, contemplating renting an apartment of her own. Throughout the day, Carol considered, alternatively, calling Harry, and then, calling her daughter.

By 3 p.m. she had done neither. It was her day off, but she was hardly relaxed. At 3:05, the decision became moot. She heard the plastic crack of the window frame in her daughter's room yielding to force. She heard the thud as someone, or something fell through the window opening into the room. Carol screamed and bolted, forgetting her cell phone and shoes.

Inside the room, the intruder discovered that he had miscalculated. No one was supposed to be home. It was not the girl's day off, or the mother's. He left as suddenly as he had entered. No one in the neighbourhood had noticed.

Carol wasted no time reaching a neighbour's house, and calling the police. The police wasted

no time arriving. They all wasted their time attempting to locate the suspect. The burglar was long gone.

When Carol called Harry's wife, Harry wasted no time responding that night. It was another reason why he and his wife had no children. Harry never declined to give up his free time to respond to others' needs.

What intrigued him the most were the marks of bare feet. That, and the paint scraper that was found replaced on its shelf, even though Carol had not picked it up. It was a detail that the patrol officers had overlooked.

Carol's daughter should have been home by now. She wasn't. Carol had called her throughout the day, anxious to verify her safety. Harry, too, called her place of work, identifying himself.

Yes, she had been at work. No, she wasn't there now. Her shift had finished at 8 p.m. It was now 9:15, shortly after closing. They were just balancing. No, she didn't know where Carol's daughter had gone.

Carol called the few friends of her daughter for whom she had telephone numbers. Sorry, can't help you.

Mom was now frantic. Harry, concerned, attempted to calm her. From experience, he knew that nineteen-year-olds often did not have a real sense of time. Nonetheless, knowing about the prior intrusion, the early morning visit, and

now the break-in, he considered that they may have a stalker on their hands. And stalkers often learned a lot about their victims before taking that next step that the burglar had taken.

He also thought of the bare feet. For some reason that he could not pinpoint, that fact had real relevance.

Carol's daughter, unaware of the break-in, returned home to discover Harry and Carol in her bedroom.

"You need to get an alarm system installed. Right away.", Harry stressed as he was wrapping up his visit to Carol's home.

"Or a dog?" Carol had brought a cat into the house, because she feared mice. Now, she thought of a dog, like in the kid's song about the old lady and the spider.

"Dog's okay. But alarms are cheaper in the long run"

"Won't the cat set the alarm off?"

"There are ways around that. But would you rather have a cat or a daughter?"

It was an unfair question. Carol would arrange for the installation tomorrow. Harry reminded her to lock all doors and windows that night, and he promised that he would see to having a car check up on her as often as the public's calls to the dispatcher allowed. It was the best he could do. Unlike on television shows, patrol sergeants had no power to order a cruiser to sit outside all night. Outside, the intruder had returned, invisible to the

people inside. He needed this one badly. The council needed new members, and she offered all the attributes that the families relied upon: compassion, forethought, ability to respond to crises without judgement or panic, and, most of all, ability to provide children. Humans bred at a later age than the Sentinels did. She would be a definite asset to the outreach breeding program that a select few Sentinels had embarked upon. He would be back, once the cop had left. He would use the key that he had located in the girl's jewellery box during the previous evening while she was at work, duplicated and returned during the break-in.

EVOLUTION

The Sentinels at Columbia Mall were just one of five in the city. Two others were located in the city's two other major malls, one in the major commercial tower and one patrolled the seedy streets of downtown. A sixth was needed to cover the alleys of the rough and violent north end, but it would have to wait until the next layer. In the meantime, Elsteth's family would expand their territory of protection, since they were the only outdoors colony.

That was part of the need for a breeding program. All across the globe, resources were now being stretched, using current regeneration resources. Demand was growing at an incredible rate, yet the Creed did not permit the growth of true Guardianship families beyond the 24-member parameters. Inside colonies often were underutilized, but the Creed demanded that the families adhere to the Principle of 24, so outdoors crimes could not be prevented as readily.

The breeding program had been underway in select cities for nearly five years. Four thousand six hundred thousand brood units, each producing four children per breeder, with from eight to twenty breeders in each unit meant that they could reach a litter of children totalling 350,000 every six years. The program needed to

be intensified. The demand was in the millions, and the goal was to reach that need within fifteen years. Currently, they had a mere 24 Brood units, spread across the globe. It had been successful, and was ready to be introduced on a greatly expanded scale.

A second phase of the program commenced. Current Sentinel females would be expected to breed, but instead of removing older members to compensate for the excess, the offspring would join the nursing stock in the breeder units. Only older males would become obsolete. By introducing female children that could breed at younger ages than the humans, reproduction would be expedited. By introducing new male children, in ten to twelve years, the intense reproductive pressure would be removed from the few Sentinels that oversaw the program, as well.

Phase Two would speed up the construction of the next layer by nearly a decade. This development ensured that the slow mutation from a patriarchal society to a matriarchal one would be hastened. Elsteth was only the second female to achieve key one status in this city.

One interesting concept had been proposed by a Sentinel in the inner circle of the program: she had seen a blind girl, who also seemed to be able to sense the presence of the Sentinels. Would the group consider including her in the breeders' program? In some instances, sight seemed to be

a hindrance. And then, perhaps, they might want to focus on other blind females, who offered the added advantage of not being able to identify any of Elsteth's group who may be called upon to participate in the management of the program.

The breeders program had begun, in fact, with outdoors Sentinels, who were more knowledgeable in the home lives of humans than those who were attached to office complexes and shopping centres. First, in the slums and ghettoes of large cities, then in the pastoral rural environments, where communes and other human breakaway sects thrived. The latter offered the protection of deflected suspicion regarding missing persons.

The possibility that the Sentinels were violating their own Creed in their eagerness to comply with the mandate that it stipulated did not enter their thoughts. They had evolved the capacity to adhere to their code without challenging it. It was the essence of faith to do so.

The Creed dictated that those that were to be worthy in the afterlife must commit themselves to doing good, to protecting others from harm, and to accepting for themselves responsibility without wavering. Failing, at any point, required that they begin their ascent again, from the start. Failing meant that every transgressor must confess to his failings publicly. None in the breeding program confessed to malicious intent. They were doing holy work.

The Council of the Creed had been borne of an intense need to protect those who were abused and misused by the Roman Empire. It was, in part, an underground network that strove to provide a level of equality that few recognized or sought after in that era. Secret by necessity, the Council evolved, steadily, finding that, as rapidly as it spread its wings to provide protection, new weeds of evil sprouted. In order to prevent the Council, itself, from falling victim to the temptations of greed, malice and torment, the Creed had been created.

At first, the only special talent that the Sentinels possessed was the talent for finding crises that required intervention. The attrition rate and loss of life among those dedicated persons was significant.

Who brought to them the lutetium was never revealed. But, with the introduction of the lutetium chains into the Celebration of the Creed ceremony, a marked change began to implant itself in the society.

That celebration had begun in a more primitive fashion, including such rituals as tossing the dust of lutetium fragments into the fires that burned during the evening meetings. As that dust exploded with a fury of sparks, Sentinels worshipped it as godly. The progression from “fire worship” to melting of the lutetium over a flame and inhaling its fumes corresponded to the beginning of the physical evolutions and

mutations experienced by the communes and colonies. Soon, lutetium became their symbolic, then physical bond.

The sequence of mutation was consistent and universal. First, the ability to “see” and to anticipate where they would be needed. This was the sixth sense of which so many spoke. Some called it a “possession.”

Then, as new generations gave birth, the Sentinel children displayed remarkable ability to emerge in any situation, unnoticed. It was as if they had become invisible, then reappeared. But this remarkable ability seemed to manifest itself only when the children were permitted to play with the chain links that each family unit placed in their worship areas. So long as the young held tightly to the pieces of chain, they could not be seen.

Next, each generation found that their chains were unneeded, so long as they remained within the confines of their own colony, but that, as soon as they exceeded the agreed upon territory for their unit, the chains were required to impart the cloak of translucence.

As time passed, those chains came to represent the family unit – twenty-four links, one for each family member.

Like a panda that can only survive on its special diet, the Sentinels gradually discovered that the links also imparted life or death, depending on whether the link was carried by the Sentinel once

he moved outside his protected zone. Initially a shield and a tool for the benefit of each member of the society, the lutetium had become, in part, its crutch. Lutetium now acted as a lifeline.

Lutetium, however, still provided protection. Even without the links, colony members could interact and see each other. Yet, out-worlders could not see them, unless the lutetium chin was in their possession.

This mutation meant that outdoors Sentinels needed to be clothed at all times, unless they wished to be unseen. They carried their lutetium with them only when they were required to leave their jurisdictions.

On the other hand, indoors Sentinels – the emerging majority – found clothes to be cumbersome and unnecessary. The invisibility that no clothes and no lutetium offered within their own confines provided the capacity to act and protect more readily.

Two distinct genetic branches had emerged. Neither was considered to be superior.

The emergence of indoor and outdoor Sentinels coincided with the advent of larger indoor facilities. First, the commons and complexes of London. Then the wharfs and warehouses of New York. The towers and multi-storey buildings of Chicago led into the high-rises of cities around the world, followed by mega-malls and shopping centres. The world was changing, and the Sentinels responded. They entered the world of

specialization, without relinquishing their commitment to their Creed.

As the world expanded, lines of communication frayed. Communication, though, required that oral records and key ones blessed with the gift of recall give way to written chronicles.

Key ones at the first and second levels of the Council sequestered themselves, gathering every morsel of information and historic knowledge that they deemed to be important. The written Creed emerged, fragment at a time, unflavoured by individual recollection or personal bias. It was, after all, written by all, so it could not be anything but correct and accurate.

Key to the Creed became the pivotal twenty-four. Since inception began with 24 members, and each was assigned as final arbitrator for one hour of each day, since twenty-four jurisdictions were established at the birth of the society, since the first expansion did not occur for twenty-four years, it was clear to all that their survival depended on the need to maintain, without fail, dedication to the Principle of 24.

As the world evolved more and more rapidly, so did the Sentinels. Again, lutetium was integral.

The world invented cosmetics. At first, they were nothing more than powders and crushed plants and minerals. Rouge, and dyes of various tints accented features, while powders adorned hairpieces and wigs.

The need for a more natural appearance, a more

youthful skin, more sexual alluring eyes, and so on required more sophisticated materials and compounds. The demand for petroleum for motorcars coincided with this increased demand. So was borne polymers and vinyls and latex and oil-based cosmetics.

Lutetium displayed its miraculous properties for the Sentinels, once again.

As time passed and indoor Sentinels saw little sun and only incandescent or poor fluorescent lighting, the melatonin in their skins became unnecessary. Yet, this lack of pigmentation meant that, in the outdoors world, they were startlingly pale. Makeup made up for this genetic mutation.

But, as a catalyst for polymers, lutetium bonded the makeup to the flesh of those indoor Sentinels who applied the petroleum-based chemicals. Each face assumed the appearance of the cosmetics applied, permanently.

Latex masks, popular by 1990 for Halloween costumes, soon entered the retail market, pursued by the elaborate latex makeup of actors and actresses. Yet, as soon as a Sentinel applied that mask while in possession of his lutetium link, the mask adhered. This mutation provided both alarm and excitement, as the realization of its full potential hit home. Sentinels could change their appearance, at will!

This adaptation, however, became irrelevant, as Sentinels adhered to their territories. It did,

however, provide a more sinister advantage. It would be used, prudently, wherever a human deviant had reached the stage of irrevocability, and had demonstrated a chronic danger to others. It would prove to be a weapon, as well as a tool.

Within the borders of the regional council, each colony adapted to its circumstance. It was left to the discretion of each family as to how that adaptation was best accomplished.

For instance, the Columbia Shopping Centre family had developed their own network, their own inner jurisdictions and their own living accommodations. Because of the variety of malls, commercial buildings and so on, no one model could be universally applied. This was one of the few concessions to individuality and contemporary circumstance.

Accommodations had evolved, as well.

This shopping centre had been constructed in the early 1970s, beginning as an area feature only. With the increased demand and the changing demographics in the region, it had expanded. By 1985, a major road artery connected east and west sides of the city, and the contemporary mall was conceived.

With its growth, the need for a dedicated colony had been established.

Incorporated into the shopping centre design was a web of hidden hallways that enabled deliveries to be made to individual tenants without

interruption to the common area flow of shoppers. As each retail space was leased, abandoned and released, the colony claimed its territories. During the late nights, rear walls were relocated, a few inches, then feet inward, diminishing the retail floor space. Sentinels with exclusive responsibility for the areas that encompassed the mall administrative offices surreptitiously modified blueprints and records to reflect the diminished space. Gradually, the family built and rebuilt its home, room by room, hallway by hallway.

Common rooms and dining rooms for the colony posed little problem. Due to the elaborate and complex demand for mechanical and electrical infrastructure, each mall required a comprehensive crawl space beneath the entire facility, built anywhere from 24 inches to 48 inches high (depending on code and soil requirements). Slowly, relentlessly, each family member took his turn at excavating dirt and debris from a 3,000 square foot space, spreading it over the entire range of the 85,000 square foot mall. Seven feet by 3,000 feet of mud, spread over 85,000 square feet raised the level of the grade by a mere 3 inches – insufficient for anyone to notice. Within that excavated space, a convivial sanctum for the twenty-four emerged.

As all Sentinels were required to adhere to the Creed, they were also required to “leave no mark” upon their environment. This, the key

ones explained, meant that they were compelled to replace the value of anything that they consumed. For the mall family, that meant that, whenever they used something from the mall for their personal benefit, it must be replaced or paid for.

The standard of “no mark” drove the requirement that one key one from each colony provide for that family. This dictum included the need to earn income to purchase or pay for food and other essentials. Only one Sentinel was assigned to this privileged position. Only one, consequently, needed to leave the confines of the family boundaries. Only one link needed to be missing from the colony array at any time.

Elsteth earned for her colony, Lyle for his. In the mall, Jakob had been designated as the key one. Jakob – or Jake, as Harry knew him.

ONE LITTLE OVERSIGHT

Harry was angry – no ,furious with himself. He was in no forgiving mood, for having failed his friend.

During the night, Carolyn had vanished. Doors and windows had been secured, and a cruiser had passed by the house on seven separate occasions. But, by 6:00 am., when Carol, acting on intuition, had awakened and entered her daughter's room, her daughter had been taken. Carol was frantic, blaming herself for failing to have the alarm system installed earlier.

There was little that could be used to lead detectives to the 19-year-old or her kidnapper that had been left behind. Strangely, in fact, the intruder had taken an assortment of clothing from Carolyn's closet and dresser, as if he/she were planning on making the girl a permanent guest. Intruders with more sinister intent were never concerned with the comfort of their victim. This one, though, did not seem bent on a sexual crime. The clothes were everyday wear.

That oddity, however, provided a solid link to numerous other open disappearance cases in the region. Over the past several years, a large number of girls, from 16 to 27, had been snatched. Some, at work. Some at home. Some on the street. There was no connection

there. But, for at least the past five years, many had been taken, along with a supply of their clothing.

None of the items had ever been discovered.

Harry had not been assigned to work on this project. As a duty cop, he was expected to focus on uniformed tasks, even though his reputation as an incredibly talented detective was well-known. Such was the nature of civic bureaucracy.

He was now on this case, whether his superiors formally directed it or not. Fortunately, he was summoned to the station within hours of the discovery. Harry officially was working on the problem of the missing women.

That was no consolation for what he saw as a screw-up. Harry took every mistake personally, and blamed himself if something was missed. That did not necessarily make him a good cop. It made him a pit bull.

Jake, Harry's partner, was not assigned to the missing girls file. That did not upset or concern him. Although he operated as a decent cop, he had no stomach for such crimes. If the truth be known, he had no stomach for any crime, given his makeup as a Sentinel. However, he found narcissistic crimes such as kidnapping to be particularly offensive.

If there was a reason for him to be upset with Harry's reassignment, it was that he could no longer monitor Harry freely. His partner had

become a bit of a problem for the Sentinels. His tenacious nature convinced Jakob that the cop he called “friend” would continue to explore and investigate the mysterious monk, would soon correlate him to some of the barefoot clues, and would follow that up by associating Harry’s “visions” with a real-world explanation. Jakob had work to do on that front.

Harry re-visited the most recent abduction scene. Carol was hysterical, as was to be expected.

This disappearance had happened, judging by the unused bed, prior to her turning in for the night. That meant that the predator probably had been in the vicinity while Harry was examining the footprints during the prior evening. The kidnapper was either extremely bold, or extremely adept at concealment.

Or both, Harry guessed.

“What was taken? I read that some of her clothing had disappeared.”

In fact, the report had itemized, as much as Carol could recall, what had been taken. The attending officers had also briefed Harry. He wanted to hear it first-hand.

“Mostly just regular everyday clothing. Jeans. I know, because I was with her when she bought them last week. A sweater that she always put on when she came home at night and sat around. Her favourite flannel PJs.—the ones with butterflies on them. And almost all her underwear drawer.”

Harry asked, anyway. "What about lingerie, fancy underthings, panties, silk or satin stuff?"

Sexual predators often displayed some of their inner dysfunctional fantasies, by "capturing" prize items of a sexual nature.

"No, no. The only nightie she owned was still in the closet. And the kind of stuff that girls wear to the bars, well, she had only a couple of those. They're still here."

In a small way, Harry had hoped that there may have been a "predator" link, like the army guy in Canada that had been invading homes of young girls and posing in their frillies. The lack of a sexual connection was not much comfort, since, of the thirty-three girls that had disappeared from this very city, only ten had been found. Every one of those had been sexually assaulted, and none of the ones who had had clothes taken from their rooms had been unearthed.

He shuddered internally at the poor choice of words that he had thought.

Of the 23, thirteen had been taken from their homes. Each had disappeared with some of their personal items. Of the remaining 10 who had been abducted on the street, five had had clothes taken from their rooms during a later break-in.

"Harry, what will happen to her?"

Harry didn't know. If he were to base his answer on typical abductions, he would not want to spell it out. But this situation? There was some, albeit slim, reason to hope that, sooner or later, the

girls would be located. Harry feared, though, that this twisted person or persons had other plans that most people could not fathom.

Harry was not unlike Jake. He found such crimes upsetting. The difference between them was that Harry was driven to act. He had not become a cop to sympathize. He had become a cop to solve.

His approach to investigating crimes deviated significantly from senior detectives. They looked at situations and hypothesized possibilities. Beat cops looked at possibilities and hypothesized solutions. One took a divergent view, the other a convergent view. Two unique perspectives, yet, good street cops were often “promoted” to detective, where they failed to meet their potential. New cops often selected “plain clothes” when presented with their one year of optional department service. Even when that cop shone as a detective, he would be returned to beat when his year was up. Harry just loved bureaucracy!

Harry was a great detective, if unorthodox. Yet, he had chosen to remain on the street, where he was able to develop more intimate relationships with the man on the street, and where he could see that he had a direct impact. That did not stop him, however, from sticking his friendly nose in colleagues’ cases when he had a line of investigation that he thought would work.

Harry worked on intuition. At least, he thought he

did. Right now, his intuition was failing him. “Too fresh. Too personal,” he considered. “Perhaps if I step back and pretend I have no personal connection.”

It was a strategy that was unlikely to work. He took everything personally when it came to challenges like this.

He chose to take his work home. Harry knew for a fact that almost every other good cop did so, as well. Contrary to rules, he often discussed details with his wife. Dana provided a different perspective, and a less involved insight.

He knew he was missing some very significant key. He would find it.

Faith lacked faith; at least, in the capacity of her family to bring in the blind girl, Kendra. In her capacity as one of the Brood Council in this region, she knew where they had failed, where they had succeeded.

Kendra needed to be captured. Only in small part, Faith convinced herself that her reasons were pure. Kendra was the ideal breeding female: blind, young, healthy, intelligent, and possessing a demonstrated ability to “see” what others could not. The genetics would line up perfectly with the direction that the Sentinels needed to follow.

Faith, along with twenty-three others, knew of the location of their genetic pool. This clandestine cartel required no key one, with all 24 working

under the direction of an unidentified member of the Council of the Communities.

Faith departed from the shopping centre, unnoticed by the other Sentinels on duty or those in the underground common room. Only one missing link would attest to her disappearance, if any dared to mistrust enough to check the display case holding the remaining links of the chain.

Jake dared.

He had other duties to attend to, though, having been granted the rest of the day off from his out-worlder job, due to Harry's reassignment. He needed to verify what he suspected – that the disappearing monk costume and the activities of his own family were connected.

Harry had picked Jake's brain regarding the mall store, The 'hood, and the young man who knew how to evaporate. It stressed Harry to admit that he was seeing ghosts, and stressed him even more that he had a connection between the two, but could not bind it together. Jake often offered insightful alternatives, particularly where it involved human behaviour. He had none as it pertained to this case.

Jake had wrapped up the paperwork that the two cops had set aside earlier, including reports to the prosecutor's office, daily log data and a few reports typed from their notes (that were supposed to have been done immediately). He had met with the duty sergeant to be informed of

the change in assignment, and then, because it was a slow day, instructed to head home. Consequently, he arrived at the mall two hours ahead of routine.

Faith left two hours before her key one was due to return. Predictability was a hallmark of smooth Sentinel operations. She would be safe from detection.

Jakob detected her. He would, however, approach her later. She was not barefoot. She was also not a guy. Faith was not Harry's man.

As key one, Jake also knew that, on occasion, the next layer of councils could and would use the services of a family member, for tasks that were not his to know. Jakob did not wish to question the purpose of other Council members for whom he was not responsible. The Creed should not be challenged. Any purpose with which Sentinels were associated were, by definition, of the highest moral order.

His primary concern was not in knowing the "why" of family members leaving the territory to which the colony was attached, but in preventing their identity, and even their existence, from being discovered by out-worlders. Sentinel success and survival depended upon maintaining their purity, and contamination that spread to the innards of the sect could bring moral harm.

Jake's strategy was to speak to each family member individually, warning them of the perils, and cautioning them against Harry. He brought

with him a photo of Harry and Dana, taken from Harry's locker and photocopied.

Yet, three years on the police force meant that Jake was adapting to the cop mentality and the cop priorities. He held back bits of knowledge regarding the monk situation, for example.

Harry had been his mentor for the entire three years, insisting that Jake remained paired with him.

Eighteen months into his career, Jake had been scheduled to be paired with a different partner than Harry. The philosophy behind the move was that long-term pairings sometimes led to deviation from the rules, and by re-assigning pairings periodically, new ideas and new "eyes" could be brought to a situation. But Harry had resisted the change, offering, instead, to have the two of them shifted to a new district within the city.

That option, to Harry's higher-ups, almost sounded like a subtle threat. Any of the district captains would gladly have snatched up the chance to have a career cop like Harry on their team.

While he was a determined cop, he had not so much as a single reprimand on his record. That was not to say he always played by the book, or was passive. It just meant that Harry never tried to "bail" on a teammate, or pass the blame. If anything, Harry took every issue personally, always blaming himself. He was the cop

everyone wanted alongside them, but no one wanted to be. His district captain relented, and let Jake and Harry remain teamed.

Harry had had his reasons. First, he liked Jake. Jakob, to Harry, was like looking in a funhouse mirror, and seeing a reflection that was precisely the mirror image of himself, inside and out. Harry never viewed Jake and him as alter-egos. For one thing, Jake, of all people, had even less of an ego than Harry. It was more that Jake filled the holes and gaps in Harry's outlook, opinions and ways of doing things. They were the perfect "good cop, bad cop" team, even though neither was bad.

Jake thought of all that had transpired in their working relationship, kept pure by not mixing their personal lives into the friendship. Now, Harry was gone, at least temporarily. Jake would make the best of it. From his perspective, Harry was not the enemy, yet he was also not a true friend. Jakob had secrets that he could never share with his partner. Secrets, in fact, that he must ensure remain secret from this diligent cop.

Jake actually found himself, though, missing his partner. There were times when he wanted to share the burden that he carried. He knew that, inside, Harry had only the best intentions – the same as the Sentinels. Perhaps he intended to stop crime as well as to punish the criminals, whereas Jake's sole objective was to prevent the act from happening in the first place. It was not

his position to judge. Harry, Jakob thought, sometimes confused “cop” with “god.”

The key one, right now, needed to bounce ideas off his partner. How should he react to Faith, for one. As good a cop as his partner was, Jake considered himself to be as good a Sentinel. Do not question the Creed. Be true to the letter and spirit of its words. That meant accepting that every other Sentinel was as focused on rightness as he was.

The Council of the Pure had not been self named. Actually, it had been coined by key ones from lesser layers of councils. Key ones were selected, at this final level, by peers, and remained in position indefinitely. Almost all had been in their positions for the entire lifespan of any of the families.

Jakob knew of no key ones within the final council, as each level carefully guarded its secrets from the layers that formed their base. But, because of the wisdom of their decisions and their proximity to the fundamental Creed of the Councils, their status as the purest of the pure was greatly enhanced. No one chose to question their decrees and interpretations.

Jake’s experience in the outside world, though, taught him that, at least among humans, even the mightiest makes mistakes. Presidents of the most powerful human nation on earth erred, as did dictators of tiny countries or committee chairs of the most populated nation. Some were

challenged successfully, others ruled with iron fists. All “screwed up” at one time or another.

Jakob was not ready to challenge his key ones. Not just yet. But, in the recesses of thought, he was beginning to contemplate that they could be wrong. Jakob needed to bounce issues off his partner; issues other than Faith. He needed to reach outside the Council of the Pure.

Jake needed to ask his partner, for instance, how you could intercede or change a behaviour in an equal, when that behaviour doesn’t conform to the group’s rules. He was not thinking of Harry as a non-conformist, even though Harry often was. He was thinking of Corbin, and his relationship with Kendra.

Yes, he knew. And yes, Corbin was his “family.” But family bonds did not exist as in human relations. After reaching the age of majority, all were equal. Corbin, like Faith, were his equals.

Jakob had seen enough of the outside world to know that the ligature that bound Faith to Corbin was broken beyond repair. Corbin’s character was mutating to match human emotional response. Faith would have to accept that the family would not enforce the marriage covenant for which she had been acquired.

But Jakob needed to move Corbin away from human/Sentinel intermixing. It would not be acceptable. He suspected that the disappearing monk was none other than Corbin.

Jakob also needed to understand the changes in

behaviour that he was seeing between families. Why was Lyle's colony, for instance, intruding into his territory with greater frequency than Jakob felt to be necessary?

In the past month, alone, he had specifically recognized Lyle on three occasions within the mall. If he had been seen here that frequently, how often had he been missed? As a senior partner and lawyer in the law firm in his own territorial building, he should not have needed to leave that jurisdiction, at all. As the unofficial chair of the Council of the Citizenry, Lyle would not normally have been called to duty outside his own territory. That role was simply a position within the weekly meeting.

Could the next levels of councils be assigning Lyle to a covert task that would impact on Jake's colony?

Once, when he had seen Lyle "on the outside", he had also detected Elsteth, apparently following Lyle. These issues concerned Jake.

Harry would have insight into why persons would fail to respect boundaries, Jakob thought. He was an expert on human behaviour.

Were these loyal Sentinels deviating from the Creed? Were they rebelling? These thoughts would never have crossed his mind before he became a key one and a cop. Now, was he, too, changing his way of viewing situations because of the corrupt influence of out-worlder thinking? It would be difficult to discuss this with Harry, but

he could find a discrete way to do so.

As he reflected on the best way to approach Harry without being forthright, Jakob realized that he, too, was developing a deviant and indirect approach to moral issues. In small measure, he would welcome the age of obsolescence. He would redouble his efforts to be a good Sentinel, and not doubt.

FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES

Lyle returned from his excursion just as Elsteth entered his office common room. It was her second visit to the office in three days, and would normally have been cause for concern by the key one, had he not known that she was relying on him to uncover the answers to her questions about the barefoot one.

Lyle had news. He had been monitoring the Columbia Mall earlier in the day, and had observed Faith departing the facility. Not Jakob, the key one, but Faith.

Elsteth was interested. Her first concern in approaching Lyle had been regarding the Sentinel in the monk robe. Then, Harry the cop's activities came into play. But now, her attention again returned to the apparently rogue Columbia Mall Sentinel. At least, it appeared, there was no intrusion from beyond the parameters of the city's Sentinel colonies.

"You got any idea where the girl might be going?"

"No, I did not have a chance to pursue her."

Even if he did have an idea, Lyle was not prepared to divulge too much unnecessary information. In part, that may have been due to his training as a lawyer.

"You know any good reason for her being outside?"

Again, “Not that I am aware of. That should be addressed directly to her.”

Since key ones were not endowed with additional power or influence as integral to their position, approaching Jakob would have not been beneficial. Only Faith could answer the question with certainty.

Lyle redirected the flow of the conversation.

“You’re on the street. What have you learned?”

It was Elsteth’s turn to hedge. “Nothin’. Not got nothin’ on the whole incident.”

Although the street talk was, in part, an affectation with Foundation Sentinels, the clipped manner often manifested itself in everyday conversations. Even though council meetings relied on precision and clarity of language, outside of the meetings, old habits came to the fore.

“But I’m gonna be digging into the cop, soon. He’s off the street for a bit. Got put on the missing women matter. You know, them one’s that’s been disappearing, along with their stuff. I got told from one of the tank boys.””

Lyle pushed for more.

Tank boys were regulars at the local shelter, or “drunk tank,” as it was casually called.

“Off the street? In the station, or out of uniform?”

There was a marked difference. Harry, as a detective, was the bane of many of Lyle’s criminal lawyers. He was exacting in his detailed testimonies, and, since he was loathe to lie or

even stretch the truth, Harry had earned a reputation as a formidable witness. He admitted to minor flaws readily, which made his overall depositions that much more credible.

"In plain clothes. Central district station."

Harry was someone to watch, already. Now, he had much more flexibility in his approach to crime-fighting.

"What are you planning to do with him?"

"This cop knows us on the street. He knows our faces. If he can see those of us not in the alleys, when we've gone spectral, then that means our cover is unsafe. Us Foundation ones, we cannot protect ourselves by wraithin'."

"Yes, yes." There was a slight note of impatience in his interjections.

"I gotta get into him, before he gets into us. I'm going to his station, going to check him out. I come to you to tell you. Come to you to let you know that I'm out of my dominion there. Closer to yours."

"Understood. I have no cover in that realm. I thank you, though, for your notice. You will keep me informed?"

Elsteth assured him that she would, then departed. Lyle exhaled slowly, watching her departure with some alacrity, and some trepidation. What would she exhume?

She was nothing more than an inconsequential dumpster-diver. Elsteth waited in the station's

trash & recycling area until Harry arrived at the station. Then, slipping out of her clothes, she cloaked herself in invisibility, and slipped in through the open garage door as he drove in.

On the street, she would have been just as imperceptible dressed as a vagabond. It was human nature to disregard the lowest of society.

It was a fact on which Harry sometimes played. When he intruded into the detective side of policing and needed to do some covert snooping, he would present himself as someone insignificant – a janitor, a dishwasher, a gas jockey – whoever seemed appropriately trivial in a given situation.

He had learned that, very often, business executives would openly discuss their white collar frauds, or guys would brag of extra-marital consequences, if the only person within earshot was of the lower caste. The assumption seemed to be that they wouldn't hear, or perhaps couldn't understand, anyway. It was not unlike the person who shouts to a blind person when repeating a question!

Elsteth needed to move quickly. Harry's car disappeared down the ramp, while she pursued it on foot. Waiting near the stairwell that she anticipated he would use, she followed him in quickly, so as not to alert him by her opening the door and closing it after he had entered.

While she was able to cloak her physical presence, she still had substance, and adhered

to the same principles of physics as any other live being. She took up space, she breathed, she ate, she weighed, she walked with footfall. She, though, was remarkably delicate on her feet, stepping lightly and quickly behind Harry as he climbed four flights, two steps at a time.

He reached an empty desk in the rear of the central station room, flicked on the computer monitor, and tapped in his password. Elsteth watched, and remembered.

He entered the word processing program (using a second password that Elsteth committed to memory), and, preset, the time and date embedded itself into his new document. Harry had built that feature into the program himself. It was one of the safeguards to help verify that he had not doctored any files after the fact.

Many other cops marvelled at, and adopted, the program. Some disliked and discarded it, for their own reasons.

Harry had taken two additional steps. Firstly, he had arranged to have a lawyer establish the primary password to his program. He was not the administrator; only the authorized user. Secondly, he had set up his files to automatically record keystrokes. For this program, he had kept the password to himself. Any intrusion into his databases would be detected.

This posed a problem for Elsteth who, at best, knew little about computers. She wanted access so that she could examine Harry's activities as

they related to the Sentinel visions. Just the same, she hung closely over his shoulder as he reviewed the day's work, and checked the prior day's keystroke record. No unauthorized entry was found.

"Concerned about lack of identified connection between on-street disappearances and residential incidents," he typed into his "Points, Case 10/11/26c" file.

He categorized his files with the date of initial activity by him, and, if he had been involved in more than one incident report during the day, suffixed them with a letter. The files could not quickly be cross-referenced with the formal file numbering employed by the police department: the last two digits of the year, the district (01 to 06) and then a file number that ascended throughout the year. That, in turn, correlated somewhat to any court docket files, that carried the court letters at the beginning of their file number, followed by a sequential numbering process throughout the year. It was a habit that Harry had developed, to help ensure accuracy, yet privacy. He rarely indexed names in the "Points" file, preferring to reference them by initials.

Harry used his "Points" file in the same manner as one would use a memo pad on a cellular phone. It was intended merely to trigger thought, not provide detail.

"Impression of bare feet," he typed.

Then it hit him. The same as his monk! The guy had no shoes. That was what he had noticed prior to stopping him. No shoes, in late November. That was odd, even for a monk.

Harry had smiled inwardly at that little bit of “profiling.” Profiling had been a bad word, since 9/11. It had existed, though, for centuries, in law enforcement, often under the name “prejudice.” He felt this type of profiling to be legitimate.

Harry had built his intuitive capacity on one guiding principle: Notice the differences. Racial profiling did not rely on differences. Rather, it relied on sameness. That would be the equivalent of finding all the straws in a haystack and setting them aside, in order to turn up the needle. Harry’s profiling operated in reverse manner. He would look for the differences in the haystack: a shiny piece, or a straw that responded to a magnet. He often wondered how someone could be so dumb as to look through an entire haystack, instead of passing a magnet over it.

The lack of shoes was an obvious deviation from the normal attire of anyone, even religious people, and, most particularly, in late November. The monk garb was interesting, but certainly no reason to apprehend someone.

Having made the obvious connection that had eluded him for days, Harry felt just a little smug.

He rolled back in his chair, unexpectedly, stretching his arms back over his head.

His chair wheel hit something, and, behind him, a second chair toppled. He hadn't rolled that far!

It was a familiar illusion, as if someone else had knocked over the chair. It was a misperception that people commonly experienced, like having put your keys on the table, then being unable to find them, only to re-discover them in that precise location after searching for ever for them.

"They weren't there before," you would tell yourself.

"That chair wasn't that close behind me," Harry told himself. Yet, his logic told him that it must have been, since he was the only one in the area.

It hadn't been that close, and he wasn't alone. Elsteth regained her feet, then bent down to squeeze the toes on her right foot where the chair wheel had crushed them. It was a risk she should not have taken, standing so close behind him.

But she now had additional information on what Harry knew. The bare foot issue had arisen again, but this time, not as part of his concern over the monk. She was unaware of his thoughts as he had typed, but had noted his elated response seconds after entering the data on the computer.

Harry didn't resume work on his computer for several minutes. He needed to piece together the connection, if any.

The monk's outfit, the bare feet, the mall

disappearance, the apparent abduction. The common elements Again, he played with his mental puzzle pieces, rearranging them. The mall. He would begin there, again. Elsteth slipped out with Harry as he left, none the wiser as to his intended course of action. She would access his files later. She picked up her clothes from the garbage bins.

Faith left the mall, intending to go directly to the warehouse, where the Breeders Council staged, before relocating their abductees. The warehouse was a crucial connection to the underground great room, where the girls were held.

Linked to the warehouse by an entrance beneath the loading dock, this cavern had served as a cold storage room for vegetables and the like, in the 1940s. It had been abandoned in the 1960s, and walled in as the warehouse had been constructed behind it, with the cinder block structure being used as a support for the loading dock platform. Now, the warehouse and outlying buildings were empty, victims of changing times and changing demographics.

In 2005, the property had been purchased by developers who submitted an application for rezoning as multi-family residential. Ironically, it now was being used for that purpose, but in a macabre modification of the original intent.

Lyle, one of the few key ones who had been re-appointed to consecutive three-year terms, had been the lawyer of record on the land acquisition. Faith entered the warehouse through the man-door, after stripping down in a storage shed nearby. The door was locked, but opened to the combination that she typed into the lock and bar. No one lived near here, and no Sentinel was responsible for this area. It was considered low-risk, except for the presence of drug users and

prostitutes. A few of the Sentinels involved in this project had been tempted to deter this activity, but admitted to themselves that they had greater issues with which to be concerned. Consequently, the vices continued unabated.

The interior was cavernous and dark – not a concern for a Sentinel accustomed to working in the unlit recesses of the mall, late at night.

Faith, until the recent reassignment of tasks at the Columbia Mall, had experienced some difficulty leaving the premises while she was to be on duty. Often, she had been compelled to fabricate a story to tell to some of the others, when she would surreptitiously sneak out of the sleeping rooms after her shift had finished. Alternatively, she would manage to blend in with shoppers as she left the area during her shift.

Faith's current mall assignment, however, took her to one of the anchor stores in the complex. It was a novel task for her, having been assigned for some time to the administrative offices, and then to the loading docks. Her shifts had varied from night, to evening to day.

Her current role as Sentinel of the primary tenant meant that she worked alone, essentially. There was no crossover with other zones, such as common areas and food court, or food court and washrooms, or east side and west side retailers. Only one Sentinel was assigned to the parking lot, and she had successfully avoided detection by that one.

She had found her reassignment unusual, too. Prior to her assignment to the administrative offices, she had been assigned to the women's departments of the other anchor tenant in the mall. Cosmetics and makeup, in particular, had held her fascination.

She had found that her several years as a protector against theft of the high-priced, but low valued fragrances and cosmetics was alluring. Faith had a unique talent within the colony, but one that hundreds of other Sentinels in shopping centre families around the world possessed. It was because of that talent that she had been selected by the Brood Council as an excellent candidate for guarding their innovative program. Her skill had been identified by a Brood Council guardian within her own family. It was that talent that was leading her into the warehouse site on this day.

Lutetium played a pivotal role in this mutated quality, as it did in many of the Sentinel sect evolutions. However, it was a latent talent, only exposed since the advent of makeup and masques. Petroleum-based cosmetics, in particular, responded well to Faith's touch. Simply by shaping and smoothing the various colours, oils and fillers on one's skin, she could integrate these image enhancers directly into the living flesh of humans.

Masks, long held to be only novelty toys for Halloween, had become sophisticated, almost

lifelike. With a simple touch, Faith could bond those masks permanently to a person's skin.

This Midas touch had been used only rarely, and only on the most decadent, incorrigible of villains encountered by the guardians of various malls and shopping centres. It was a weapon of last resort, and Faith used it discriminately.

When Faith entered the final area -- the brood room -- it was unguarded. **There** was no need for guards, since the cavernous quarters had been constructed within a labyrinth of passageways, each locked from the outside, connecting with the former cold storage room and, ultimately, monitored by a series of cctv cameras linked into a remote observation network via the Internet. That online security system was protected by a series of levels of safeguards that eliminated the risk of hacking.

The comforts of the brood room belied the Spartan foyer outside its door, the hollow, echoing passageways linking the anteroom, or the decaying, disgusting warehouse and cold storage area.

This carefully built facility offered many of the amenities of home. Extensive venting, utilizing passive solar air movement systems, meant that air was of the finest quality. A well, drilled some distance away, provided a water supply that was filtered, to ensure high quality. Lighting, provided by eco-friendly biofuels, wind turbines and photovoltaic systems, could be adjusted to

individual preferences, from full sun to muted light.

As the colony breeding population grew, the Sentinels constructed additional privacy areas, as well as elaborate recreation resources. All types of media provided the connection to the outside world, with DVDs, music, magazines (online and print), and other stimulations designed to ensure mental activity and acuity. What was missing was communication.

Had it not been for the dearth of freedom, this miniature community would have been idyllic. That, and the forced reproduction, of course. To the Sentinels, the program offered near-perfection. To the women held within, it was nothing more than a prison, or worse, a cow/calf feedlot.

Faith made no such judgements on the site or the program. It was a necessity, designed and implemented by those Sentinels closer to righteousness than she was. She could not second-guess the decision or the operation.

What Faith could do, however, was explore methods by which she could capitalize on the system, to her advantage. She did not see it in that light, though. She would use it to get back at Kendra, to have the Sentinels do her dirty work by forcing Kendra into the captive breeding program.

Kendra was not a rival to Faith. Kendra simply was standing in the way of what had been

ordained. Faith would not have conceded that she was jealous, acting selfishly or being devious. She was doing what was predetermined. The brood centre offered some potential for resolving the issue with Corbin and Kendra.

Although the communications link between the breeding program and the higher layers of the councils eluded Faith, she had garnered the favour of that key one who had recruited her for this undertaking. That meant that her comings and goings were of no concern to the other program key ones. She was using that to her advantage.

Faith was unseen by those captive young women in the common room. However, her approach had been anticipated, based on the noise made by the drawing of locks and bars. She peered through the observation eyehole, to make sure that none of those inside was attempting to push through when the door opened. No one was.

Several of the women, though, had massed some distance from the doorway. Prior experience had taught them that some eerie presence always entered the room, unseen by them, but capable of exerting great force on each that tried to escape.

Carefully, Faith closed the door behind her, pressing the one pad that locked the door. To leave, she would have to press, in sequence, the correct four parts of each of the six separate

pads that were needed to unlock the door from the inside. Each pad contained an array of 24 pressure points, unmarked. The possible permutations and combinations that would be needed to unlock the door, should any of the girls wish to do so, were virtually limitless. Every twenty-four days, that combination was reset. The 24-matrix had no basis in need. It had become almost a ritual to employ the sequence, whenever possible, for the Sentinels.

Once inside, Faith began the process of ensuring the health and safety of all present. To someone uninitiated in the brooding program, it would appear to be the same as checking the offspring in a puppy mill, or a hatchery. The Sentinels saw it as an act of compassion, keeping all of these humans healthy.

Faith had one other task, though. Using an untested experimental process, the Sentinels had been working at the conversion of one of the women, at wiping her memories, and at the planning for a physical makeover that would render her unrecognizable to her former human associates. Faith's role would be to utilize her skills with makeup to make that physical transformation permanent.

This program would allow the Sentinels to advance from a covert regeneration program into a more open effort, with the re-oriented breeders living and working in the public venue. It would allow the program to proceed at a much more

rapid pace, so that the Sentinels could provide the level of commitment to maintaining order that they desired. By maintaining a network of outpatients – or, more correctly, out-breeders – the Brood Sentinels would not violate the Principle of 24.

Faith's cosmetic makeover was not scheduled for another week, to allow time of the mental conversion of the candidate to be completed and verified as a success. Still, she needed to examine the subject and prepare her mix of polymers that would be affixed to the girl. Proper care was being exercised by all Brood Council members to ensure that their brood stock were in optimum physical condition.

Faith took note that Kendra still had not been added to the assortment of females. She would address that again, at the next gathering of the Breeding Council.

The facilities had recently been expanded, with sufficient room, now, for another 13 persons. Over the next few weeks, another annex would be completed, allowing for a complement of forty-eight mothers. The facility would be then partitioned into two wards.

In total, there were now thirty-seven offspring. In the nursery and play areas, the din was unrelenting. Faith was thankful to not yet be raising children of her own.

As she left, Faith entered the proper sequences of presses on the pressure points. Two of the

women huddled against the adjacent wall watched intently, as unseen fingers left depressions, briefly, on the pads.

Her duties completed, Faith made her way back to the Mall, via Kendra's home. To be sure that she was not noticed while trespassing, she removed her clothes once again, and stashed them along the rear wooden fence, next to the garage wall.

It was an act that the elderly neighbour across the back alley found to be very peculiar, even for the young people of today. She called her neighbour two doors down, who, after peering out the window and seeing nothing, advised the elderly friend that she should see an eye doctor. The first neighbour agreed that she should, but insisted that the young girl had been very real. Neither was willing to go outside and explore what the one woman insisted was a pile of woman's clothing on the ground, while the other was equally adamant that it was an old piece of carpet that she had seen there for weeks.

Faith, having no experience in the habits of the out-worlders, had never considered that someone might be minding other people's business. In the mall, every human ignored every other one, intentionally. She paused for several moments outside the blind girl's rear bedroom, watching to see if she had returned from the mall, or from the university.

Having monitored this young woman's patterns

for some time now, Faith could predict, with fair accuracy, when Kendra would return home. This data would be submitted to the next Council meeting.

Faith never considered that she might be leaving evidence of her presence. In the mall, footprints were not common, or important.

The elderly lady waited some time, peering through her rear window. Then, under the guise of taking her household trash to the alleyway, she left the house, and ambled toward where she had seen the stack of clothes.

Between the time that the senior had moved from the window to the back yard, Faith had dressed and departed. The old lady found nothing except for a few footprints in the soil. The disappearance of the clothes, or carpet, was evidence, she felt, that something odd was happening.

Within the confines of the warehouse women's jail, two women attempted to recreate the sequence of indentations that they had observed, hoping that they had missed none. The two, combined, could remember five. There was a possibility of one hundred and forty-four other depressions to be made, in a sequence that they did not know. If there was a "three attempts" lockout, their chances of selecting the correct point to press, in the precise sequence, were minimal. That was better than non-existent.

In the mall, Jake continued the process of

briefing each other family member, alerting them to Harry, and subtly observing for reactions to his discussion of unauthorized Sentinels being observed in the outer world.

On the street, Kendra neared her house. A presence lurked nearby, unseen by human eyes, undetected by curious pets.

Sequestered back in his food court, Corbin considered Jakob's warnings and admonishments. He thought of The 'hood, and he thought of Faith, whom he had observed passing along a corridor in the mall that ran perpendicular to the open area that was the food court. She was some distance away, and was unaware that, at that moment, few shoppers blocked the line of sight to the eating venue. He thought, as well, of subtle changes in her behaviour toward him, and of the near-miss a few days earlier, when he had been alerted by Kendra to Faith's approach.

BLIND LUCK

A sudden acceleration in disappearances meant a dramatic increase in resources dedicated to tracking the perpetrators of the crimes. Three disappearances in one evening, all blind females. This new turn of events turned the investigation from random abductions to meticulously planned kidnappings. To identify those people with sight limitations, ferret out where they lived, ascertain the most vulnerable moments in their routine and seize adult, healthy young women took planning, guile and some degree of force. How each woman had been oblivious to the danger was disconcerting, when “seeing” people were involved. Snatching blind persons entered the realm of revolting.

Harry began with the first victim’s family. Taken on the street, just a few paces from home, she had disappeared without a trace, even though neighbours a half-block away had seen her, spoken to her, seconds or minutes before her disappearance. Within that same time period, someone had taken clothing from her room.

The sniffer dogs tracked her scent from the rear door, out the rear gate, and down the alley for a short distance before the track faded. She never walked that route. Her trail approaching the house similarly ended less than four homes down

the street, rerouted into a yard across the street, and then vanished. Harry surmised that she had been dragged through the yard, while her clothes had been bagged and dragged from the house.

The second victim had also been taken away from home. Having been shopping with a friend during the evening, she had made her way home by herself, after enjoying a long conversation over coffee with her male friend. He had already been cleared as a suspect, having gone directly to work after the date. He had been seen leaving the café and getting into his car. Five minutes later, he was reporting for work, at a job exactly five minutes away from the eatery. The girl had lingered in the restaurant for another ten minutes before walking home on this clear, warm night at the very end of November.

Her trail ended less than two blocks from the coffee shop, four blocks from her home. Both her cane and her purse, untouched, were found within minutes by a passerby, who called police. This incident had occurred almost simultaneously with the first kidnapping. There was more than one person involved in this matter.

The third victim had been taken from her room. Another nineteen-year-old, she, too, had been shopping earlier in the evening, returning home by 8:00 pm., ate dinner, and went to bed around 10:00 pm. Harry found what may have been bare footprints in the garden near the front door, which the girl had failed to lock when she

returned home.

He marvelled how careless and cavalier even the most vulnerable could be about their security, in the midst of this outbreak of disappearances, while others panicked at hearing of the outbreak of the flu in a city two thousand miles away!

Other than the foot impressions, Harry had little on which to proceed. There was one other link that he wanted to explore. Two had been shopping during the evening prior to their disappearances. Where?

He would explore whether that connection offered a possible link among more of the victims. He would also see if he could correlate the bare feet to the Columbia Mall. His monk was now, at least, not eliminated as a suspect. He was glad to have kept the clothing in his possession. A thorough examination and DNA test would be requested.

The correlation, though, was tenuous, at best. Of the 26 cases still outstanding and framed within the context of the general circumstance of disappearance, all of whose bodies had not yet been found, only six had been shopping at Columbia Mall in the seven days prior to abduction. Of all the missing persons, only eleven had been shopping within the prior week, at any shopping centre. That was well within the statistical norm for the general population.

Three victims had worked in the high-rise commercial centre downtown. That was a bit of

an anomaly. Over two thousand people, mostly female, worked there. It was a bit of a hot spot for pretty, young women, attracting hordes of young men on warm summer days, and an abundance of them in the dead of winter.

Four were athletic people, jogging or walking when abducted. The remainder had little connection to any one venue.

God knew how many homeless women had also disappeared! The only solace was that few young, healthy and capable young females lived on the streets. Most were druggies, hookers, intellectually challenged, or otherwise worse for wear. But there was still the transient population of those street people, including sex trades, that moved from city to city, not appearing on that community's law enforcement radar for many months, or years.

Hookers and street people did not seem to be targeted more than the general population.

The three most recent abductees offered only modest hope for new leads in the investigation. Harry would devote as much time as possible to the cases. Unlike television, though, this real cop had other cases to work, other tasks that arose throughout the day, and he could not dedicate his entire working shift to these matters.

Corbin heard the news second-hand. Most of his information about the outside world came from eavesdropping on conversations between diners

in the food court. In the early morning, that channel of communication was particularly active, as seniors finished their mall walks and gathered for coffee.

As contemporary as the conversation topics were, they were heavily flavoured with the biases and experiences of the elderly. Every news item carried a commentary, and every topic included an ample supply of heresy, supposition, and misinterpretation.

By filtering the conversations, Corbin learned that three blind women had been kidnapped, with one of them being viciously assaulted and dragged off. He also learned that there had been many other attempted kidnappings that the police had ignored.

The third detail that all seemed to agree upon was that every one of those young girls had been seen in the Columbia Mall on the prior day. Every senior that inputted to the chitchat insisted that he or she had seen at least one of the girls yesterday, a couple of the gathering offering that they had seen two of them, and with a few declaring that they had seen all three. The claims proved the adage that the first liar never stands a chance.

Whether one or three had been in the shopping centre was, to Corbin, moot. There was only one that really mattered to him – Kendra.

Corbin could not leave his post. It was a dictum of the Creed. Unlike more senior Sentinels,

however, Corbin, although he adhered to the Creed, did occasionally have doubts as to whether its guidelines were intended to be absolute. Right now, he doubted.

The day was particularly long, as he fretted about Kendra, waiting, as sixty seconds ticked in each minute, sixty minutes in each hour, five hours of waiting. 18,000 seconds. Time dragged for Sentinels in the same manner that it did for humans who were in a panic.

3:00 pm. crept, then 3:30, followed by 4:30 and then 5:00 pm. with no Kendra. Kendra, he knew, had been one of the victims, and, as his duty ended, Corbin decided that he would, indeed, leave the confines of the family territory, regardless of the risks. He knew that others, too, would be coming and going as their engagements and assignments were completed. Many eyes would see him, several would know that he had been on duty, and would know that he had abandoned his post. Few would question, though. Corbin chose to neglect his duties, rather than neglect his friend.

Without regard for being detected, Corbin seized his link, threw on a few of the pieces of clothing that hung, largely unused, in the great room, and hastened out of the shopping centre. He neither knew where he was going, or what he would do on the outside. He only knew that Kendra was at risk, and that he must find her.

Jakob observed his departure, and pieced

together the reasons. He was not entirely unhappy with Corbin's decision. He was unhappy, though, at the circumstance which must have led to Corbin's decision to deviate from the Creed. The cop in him said "Go find her," the Sentinel in him said "Obey the Word," while the humanity in him said "Embrace love." Cop and humanity won.

The police officer at the desk received the information, carefully keyed in the data on the report, and summoned one of the uniforms from the back of the station.

The bland, unhurried manner with which he carried out this task was intentional, honed by years of practice. Regardless of the urgency of any situation, police, dispatchers and emergency workers were taught to never show panic or excitement in their initial contacts. Excitement would only breed alarm, and that panic made gathering basic information difficult. Even though he might have already summoned assistance or dispatched a response team, a dispatcher maintained that same even keel.

Many complainants or victims involved in critical situations would find themselves frustrated at this seeming lack of concern, while, in fact, the cop or medic was providing appropriate responses.

In this instance, there was not a need for instantaneous reaction. The female was providing vital information, though, and it was important that the police respond promptly. In

this matter, any lead may be critical.

The uniform appeared from behind the locked door to the side of the desk officer.

"James, this young lady has some information that may be significant. She reports that she was attacked by an assailant as she walked home last night, and can provide a description."

With his left hand, the young patrol officer held the door open for the girl, while simultaneously taking the report from the desk cop with his right hand.

"If you could come this way, please, miss ..."

He looked down at the sheet in his hand.

"Miss ..."

"Just Kendra," the girl interjected.

"Kendra," he repeated, and then, for the first time, noticed her cane.

He looked over to the desk officer quizzically.

"She said she saw what?"

"May be the one that's been grabbing the women."

Young James proceeded cautiously, sceptically. Blind, and could see? How blind? How rational? He was unsure if he was dealing with a flake, and oddity, or something more paranormal. It was not a case that tickled the fancy of a new recruit to the force, and he wondered if the duty sergeant wasn't having some fun at his expense. Even after Kendra had recounted her information, he was unsure of the status of this matter. Being a new, intense cop, he opted to accept her report

without challenging it too much. She seemed, after all, relatively sensible, even if the incident seemed incredibly bizarre.

A naked guy attempts to grab her, and is unfazed even when she screams. She is able to push him away, and he simply saunters off behind one of the houses on the street. The neighbour looking out the window saw her being tossed down, but told her that he saw no one else. She has a few scratches, but no injury. And the knapsack that she carried was taken by “no one,” and picked up by the neighbour in his back yard. Best for James to simply type the report and forward it to the officers assigned as primaries on the case. No commentary, no conversation or discussion with them; just forward the report.

“Thank you, Ms. Campbell. I mean, sorry... Kendra, for reporting this matter. There is a team of good officers looking into similar incidents, and I'll get this to them as quickly as I can.” He held up the report for emphasis, even though Kendra had assured him that she was totally blind.

“So, how do you explain that you saw this person?”

“I really don't know. I've seen a few others before. It just started a couple of months ago.”

She did not elaborate on the specifics, other than to say that she had seen one in the Columbia Mall. She neglected to include information on Corbin.

Kendra, upon leaving the station, hurried to the

shopping centre. This whole reporting thing had taken several hours – an amount of time that she had not anticipated. At the food court, she failed to find Corbin, and, after fifteen minutes of searching, she left. He would have given up waiting, she surmised. He had not. He would search all night, if he had to.

Harry received the report, passed on to him by the senior officer, early the following morning, along with a “here’s the Enquirer story of the day” comment.

Harry did not dismiss the information quite so lightly. Blind girl, same day, same area, same age range. More interesting was that “bare naked” meant bare feet, too. And then there was that frail connection to the Columbia Mall again. Harry would take a half hour or so to check out the location of the incident. For one thing, he needed to measure the size of any footprint he might find.

He thought to his own blurry “visions,” and wondered if there was a connection.

Later, he stopped by Kendra’s home, checked with her parents and obtained her cell phone number.

Yes, she could meet him in the food hall at Columbia. She was planning on being there, anyway, when she finished university for the day. Kendra considered that Corbin would be safely

invisible, and would be there to guide her through any confrontation that may arise. She was certain that the cops would be sceptical of her claim, anyway.

Harry considered that, by meeting her in the mall, it would provide some sort of psychological trigger that he may be able to use to his advantage. He also needed to spend some time there, anyway.

Corbin, exhausted from having searched all night, was mentally unable to perform his duties properly. He contemplated leaving his station, but considered it only briefly.

OUT OF BOUNDS

Lyle had been leaving the confines of his tower territory more frequently during the past week or so. Elsteth had noticed. Several of her family also had detected Lyle, sometimes in places that were quite curious. Shady areas, risky areas, high-crime areas.

Although a Foundation Sentinel, life on the street had not jaded her. Rather, it had heightened her awareness of human foibles and behaviours. While humans may impute impure motives to someone of lower class, simply because he or she was lower class, Elsteth's family had learned to read beyond the cover.

Fundamental attribution error, psychologists called it. The tendency to judge others' motives more harshly than our own. "First impressions" many called it. Only look at the first instance, the surface, of a situation, behaviour or person, and judge. Stereotyping, Primacy/Recency -- dozens of labels to rationalize away the reluctance to dig deeper into understanding.

Elsteth had developed a particularly sharp ability to cut beneath the outer layers.

Lyle's behaviour was curious. She had felt that on her first and second visits, and found herself looking for excuses to stop by and appraise him, more frequently.

“Not real good Sentinel behaviour,” she thought about her actions.

It was true, however. Lyle had found it necessary to visit areas that he had only talked about with his clients. Abandoned houses, loading docks late at night, warehouses, isolated diners, idling autos in shopping centre parking lots. It was where his contacts wanted to meet. It was where he needed to meet, since he had observed authorities covertly installing cameras in his building.

They may be investigating someone else, but cameras and microphones did not discriminate. They would pick up his conversations with his clients and contacts as readily as with anyone else. He was lucky that he had seen them enter the building, and knew where every device was located. But he did not know the range of their audio, and that lack of information required that he take precautions.

Lyle had reasons to be out of his assigned zone. As a key one, he needed, occasionally, to confer with other key ones in other territories. These occasions, though, were rare. Beyond that, his duties and freedoms were no more or less than any other Sentinel. But he had additional reasons.

Lyle, as a lawyer in his earlier years, often appeared in court. Lyle, as senior partner, however, seldom took on criminal matters these days, and, even rarer, was required in court.

That was the advantage of a key one in such a position.

Over the years, his client base had been a real mix. He had been given the odious task of defending criminals, when he first joined the firm, even though his area of specialty had been corporate law.

The Sentinels had made a grievous error in fabricating his CV when he applied at the firm. Records showed that he had had great success in getting select clients acquitted just after he left law school. He had a great fictitious record as a corporate lawyer, but nothing stellar. It was easier to create imaginary criminals than imaginary corporate giants. They could be verified.

So, in the early years, he had defended, successfully (from the firm's point of view), an array of well-heeled, truly guilty clients. Even though the Sentinels ultimately had been able to provide justice for their victims and penalty for the innocent criminals, he had been compelled to work inside the guts of the community of crime that the Sentinels were sworn to eradicate.

Now, with a library of contacts in the underworld and shadows of crime, Lyle had favours to call in. To call in those favours, he needed to meet with his people on their turf.

Today, he would meet three of them in the industrial property for which he had acted as counsel, and which had not been developed by

those owners. He would meet them at the brood program warehouse.

Faith had her reasons for being at the warehouse today, as well. It was time for the first conversion. Guided by her Brood Council peers, the first test subject had been selected earlier, and prepared for the physical makeover.

It would be a simple process, really. The girl had been well prepared. Eight days of intense psychological work had achieved its results: the girl had no recollection of her past, and had been successfully infused with her new identity.

The Sentinels had tested and retested. The young woman was not feigning her state. She truly had lost all sense of original self, truly believed that she was not Carolyn, but was Jessica Paige Orlon. She was not nineteen. She was twenty-two. She was not from Brandon. She was from Orillia. And so on. She had documents to prove her identity.

Stage Two was much more complex, yet well within Faith's expertise, and an integral part of the Sentinel secret to translucence, thanks to the lutetium links.

Lutetium provided the Sentinels with much more than their symbolic bond to the rest of humanity. It was more than a simple rare earth metal, as well. Only recently, humankind had discovered uses and applications for the element, and had learned how to segregate it from other REMs.

Ironically, this new-found skill bore primitive similarities to the powers that it imparted to the Sentinels.

In the 1980s, computer technology researchers had devised magnetic memory bubbles. Lutetium, it was discovered, provided that capacity to increase computer memory, using those MMBs. But the development of more effective, tinier, lighter memory systems thrust lutetium onto the back shelves. It simply was too costly to obtain, and not as good as newer memory chip technology.

Also in the 1980s, the petroleum industry found that lutetium was a significant tool and ingredient in “cracking” technologies and in polymerization. Polymers, aside from typical plastics development, were also integral to the cosmetic industry.

Immersion lithography was a phrase that very few people had heard of, or understood. Yet, using lutetium aluminum garnet, inventors had been able to develop refractive lenses that diverted light and imagery. This pedantic approach offered similarities to the capacity of Sentinels to cloak in invisibility.

It was, however, the second use that would be employed by Faith today – cosmetic transformation. The first – magnetic memory bubbles – had been essential to Jessica’s memory wiping, and had proven to be much more successful than human pioneering efforts at

the same technology.

Today, Carolyn would become, in all ways, Jessica. A new, permanent face, courtesy of Faith's skill at makeup application and the unique Sentinel ability to convert temporary features into permanent ones, new finger prints, thanks to polymers that would bind to her skin, different body contours provided by plastics that breathed and improved dental imprints and features that dense PVCs allowed. Not only would she be unable to recognize herself, only DNA testing would be able to identify her conclusively. To the world, she was someone else, who could provide long-term breeding capacity, and a solid, biological link between Sentinels and humanity. No surgery would be needed, and only a modicum of sedative. Faith was no doctor; just a mall rat skilled at applying makeup, with the Sentinel gift of making it permanent.

Lyle was not at the warehouse to visit the brood community. Consequently, he was alarmed to observe Faith entering one of the buildings. No Sentinel was scheduled to be here, and the property was unknown to Sentinels as a high-risk area. It had been vacant and abandoned for half a decade, was overgrown and badly dilapidated. Lyle's was not here because of an interest in the Brood Pool today. He was here to discuss matters of a more individual nature, with persons that could not, under any circumstance, be

construed as or confused with Sentinels. Any protection they offered was of a more ignoble nature. Lyle was here to conclude a deal.

Lyle did not wish to be seen by this particular Sentinel. He slipped away beside an outbuilding, waiting until she disappeared inside the warehouse.

Faith entered the cold storage area, proceeding through the series of three secured chambers, to the first anteroom next to the common area. She paused, waiting. Those inside would have heard her approach. This room was no larger than three meters by four meters, with nothing in it except for the few totes that had been used to transport food and other essentials to the captives, as well as one shelving unit with an assortment of linens and towels on it.

She drew the door closed behind her, allowing it to lock automatically. A simple keypad system, requiring a pass code, was all that secured it from the inside.

Next, she set the clothing that she wore on the shelf, placing her lutetium link next to it.

Watching, hidden behind the shelf and covered by the totes, a human female huddled.

It took several minutes for Faith to mentally complete the head count. It took several more for her to fathom the implications. One was missing. A desperate search of all the living accommodations, the bathrooms, the dining areas, the bedrooms, the common rooms,

confirmed the shortage. She had no concept as to how to proceed, and it was beyond her authority to do so.

Faith only knew that there was a shortage, and that the shortage implied a great risk to the program. She must leave, and must report the matter to the key one in charge. Faith hurried to the anteroom, securing the common area door as she departed.

Next, she donned her clothes, picked up her link and, after entering the required pass code in the security system, hastened out the door.

The missing young lady watched, and memorized. She would have to wait until the next visit, and depart while the invisible ones were in the inner chamber. As to that peculiar piece of jewellery, she would contemplate what it might represent.

For today, Jessica, or Carolyn, would remain in limbo, physically in touch with her old self, mentally oblivious.

Lyle observed with interest as Faith burst from the building. He would investigate later. At this moment, the vehicle with the three men inside was approaching. They were not here to sell drugs, or buy sex. They were here to receive orders from Lyle –orders that would prove to be very lucrative, financially, for all the parties.

Lyle, the pure one, would provide valuable information on another foolproof appropriation.

He always knew where the weak spots were in these situations. Lyle was, indeed, the head of this effective assortment of felons, represented by the president of the Spirit Riders motorcycle gang, the Crypts puppet crew, and the newly formed Legion, so named because of their military-like enforcement skills. Lyle, the pure one, had represented each of these three, effectively, many years earlier, and while their debts were now being called in, they never considered them to be obligations. They were, after all, each profiting immensely, thanks to Lyle's expertise.

Lyle's information sources – other lawyers' confidential files – had uncovered the arrival of a shipment of precious and semi-precious metals, due to arrive in the city for evaluation later that week. He had been alerted to the shipment by the prospective purchasers of this unusual cargo, who were paying handsomely for its "re-appropriation."

While many lower caste thieves and burglars focused on diamonds & jewellery, gold & silver, or money & art as their targets, Lyle provided a more sophisticated approach to larceny. His specialty was rare earth metals, metals with a high resale value on the black market (including titanium and other refined or refinable minerals) and other cargoes with very sophisticated buyers. These items required a specialty clientele, but offered a premium price. They also were largely

untraceable, unidentifiable. While the markets largely were out-of-country nations and mercenaries, they were a stable client base, trustworthy, and beyond the reach of local authorities. Lyle had, to serve their demands, developed a specialized distribution network, and a one-of-a-kind base of thieves. He tolerated no deviation from his carefully planned sequence of acquisition-to-distribution events. It was the methodical Sentinel in him.

Lyle was not the only Sentinel to detect Faith's presence in the district. The only one of the three who had a natural ability to survive here, Elsteth had followed Lyle, intent on discovering his "outside" life.

She recognized only one of the three men in the vehicle, but that was sufficient to convince her that Lyle had gone rogue. The Crypts were regular visitors and residents in the alleys and dark recesses of her territory.

As Lyle concluded his business, the three departed, followed by Lyle. Elsteth remained, curious about that warehouse entrance, and undeterred by a simple lock. She would proceed as far into the project as she was able.

Unfortunately, it turned out that the outer lock was the only one that she could breach.

She was convinced that she heard voices emanating from within. They were not the voices of the calm, methodical Sentinels.

BRIDGING THE GAP

Elsteth had no idea as to how she was going to proceed, who she should tell, what she should do. She had mistrusted one of her own. That, in itself, would cause alarm within the council. She had covertly followed and spied upon the key one entrusted with coordinating this regional council. She had no concept of under what authority he may be operating, except to note that it, in itself, violated the Creed. She had no knowledge of who else within the sect may be involved, or similarly deviant.

There was no authority, no power to whom she could conclusively turn for help. Since all were equal, all were also equally hamstrung. This problem was one that Elsteth would have to deal with, on her own. At least for now. She had now violated two of the Sentinel principles. She had chosen to withhold information. Foundation council or no, she had moved beyond the ring of protection offered by the Creed and the sect. She was on her own, for the first time in her existence.

Harry had a similar problem. How could he present Kendra's tale as being credible? He believed much of what she had reported, since he had personal experience and cursory

evidence to corroborate it. Yet, the story was unfathomably strange.

Probably, the only cop who would hear him without laughing would be Jake. Largely, that was because Jake seldom laughed. But he also seldom criticized, and could keep his mouth shut when asked. He had tried to reach Jake, to have Jake sit in on the meeting with Kendra this afternoon, but was Jake was unavailable. After he met with Kendra, Harry would talk to Jake.

Harry's meeting was for 3:00 pm. He arrived at 2:00, wanting to look around, see if he could spot anyone or anything that aroused his suspicions. In the food court, more than 130 customers mingled, talked, laughed and interacted. Few fit the image that Harry had in mind. Of course, all of them were clothed.

After loitering and lingering over a burrito for twenty minutes, he opted to stroll through the mall. It was in the window of the La Senza outlet, partially papered on the inside with dark foil, that he caught a glimpse. The foil was intended to imply that there was something naughty or sensual hidden behind – a probable fact supported by the very sexy mannequins clothed in very provocative lingerie at the entrance. Harry was a man. He looked.

At the very second that he glanced at the window, he caught sight of the apparition behind him: the naked, hurrying figure of a young man. Turning quickly, he saw what he expected to see

– nothing. But that momentary hallucination convinced him. He was seeing things, but they were more than imaginary. Harry had crossed the threshold of believing.

He returned to the eating area, to await Kendra's arrival, armed with a more first-hand perspective on her story.

Kendra was on time. Harry recognized her immediately. It was not difficult, but he was taken with her genuine nature, the ease with which she discussed every detail of her experience, and the self-deprecating way she laughed at her "seeing" experience. Nonetheless, Harry was left with the impression that her story was incomplete.

He began the conversation by offering to get her a coffee.

"No thanks. It keeps me awake," she replied. Then she added, "On second thought, maybe. It also helps to help me see things more clearly."

She waited for his response. Was he going to be apologetic, or uncomfortable, or pretend that he didn't understand the comment?

He did none of the above. "I read in a blind study that coffee is good for mental acuity."

It was his turn to await her reaction. She merely laughed.

"You're not exactly stuffy and anal, are you?"

"Don't judge a book," he responded. Harry was adept at these preliminary games, and could adapt to almost any situation, in order to develop a bond with his interviewee.

Kendra could have retorted with a double entendre, but she had learned what she wanted to learn. This cop wasn't a by-the-book-at-all-costs cop, wasn't pompous, and wasn't prejudging her.

"Have you read the report that I made yesterday?"

Of course, he had more than read it. He filled her in on what he had uncovered, which wasn't a lot. There was no need for secrecy, so far.

The incident report was typically official and precise. I was hoping more for your feelings, impressions, and the like. You know, the kind of stuff you don't normally see in an incident report." That pun was unintended, and Kendra treated it as such.

"Most of what I experienced was about feelings. But what I saw, I saw."

Harry confirmed her history: blind at age six, no mental issues, solidly intellectual, quite stable and normal. Not a keen student of the news, so not fully familiar with the abductions.

He turned to more recent backgrounder.

"Have you experienced these kinds of images recently?"

He was cautious to not use the word "illusions," or "hallucinations" or words with similar meaning.

"What do you mean?"

That was a question that Harry read as a stalling tactic. It was a common idiom when people wanted to think about their responses.

“Well, just today, for example, I was sure that I had seen an image of a young man reflected in a store window in the mall, here. And it wasn’t the first time that I’ve seen such images. Of course, when I looked around, it wasn’t there anymore, but, sure as hell, I saw something. Not a trace image, or an afterimage, or even some eidetic image. A real reflection.”

Harry had researched such visual experiences, partly because of what he had seen, and partly in preparation for his interview with Kendra.

He shared his own experiences, because he knew that, frequently, persons are more apt to open up with secret information if you share a secret with them. And the level of their openness often matched your own. So Harry needed a large opening.

He elaborated on his experience with the monk, and the discovery of the missing robe from a Columbia mall display. He included details on the Santa charity event, for good measure. Then he brought up a childhood experience that he hoped would touch a nerve at this time of year.

“You know, when I was five or six, I don’t remember which, I still believed in Santa Claus. But I was getting to the age where I was determined to actually see this old guy.

“So, this particular Christmas night, I went to bed early, and was real quiet, so my parents would think I was sleeping. The whole time, I was staring hard out the window. It was one of those

Norman Rockwell moments (he was sure Kendra would have no idea who Norman Rockwell was), with the Jack Frost designs on the window and all.

"It's getting on past ten o'clock, over two hours past my bedtime, and I'm just about dead on my feet when my dad comes in.

"What you doing?' he asks.

"Waiting for Santa,' I replied.

"Well, if Santa sees you awake, you know he just passes by that house, and that kid gets nothing for Christmas.'

"I was not sure if I believed him, but then dad leans over to the window, scratches some of the frost away, and looks through the glass. Then he kinda jumps back with a startled look on his face.

"What's that?' he asks. 'Is that Santa out there?'

"I looked out through the window, and sure as hell, there was Santa just travelling along the rail line next to our yard, but with just four reindeer. I tell you, I have absolutely no doubt that I saw Santa. 100% positive. But I can tell you, 100% for sure, that I don't believe in Santa. Just the same, he was real. I'm wondering if maybe my visions today aren't something like that: wishful thinking."

His attempts at opening doors for Kendra met with some success.

"Yes, I have seen apparitions, or whatever you want to call them, once or twice. But nothing concrete."

Harry had the advantage here. He could tell she was being evasive in her response.

He was more surprised by what he saw in her: her eye movement. It was not his imagination. Kendra was looking around, even though he knew she could not see. That could mean only one thing: she was looking for someone, and probably someone that others could not see.

Part of Cop Harry said, "Be cautious. You don't know that she is not involved in this matter." That part, though, took a back seat to the more rational side of him.

"You look like you are expecting someone."

Kendra was looking, anxiously watching for Corbin's approach, so that she could somehow warn him off. If Harry had, indeed, seen the visions, he might be able to see Corbin.

"Not really. I am expecting a friend to meet me here later, though. Nothing special. I guess it's an old habit that hasn't disappeared since I lost my vision."

Corbin was not in attendance. It had been Corbin that Harry had seen, Corbin who had been monitoring Harry since he had left the food court earlier, and Corbin who waited impatiently in a nearby outlet, hoping that Harry would leave soon.

Harry learned very little from Kendra. However, he was convinced that she was convinced that she had seen her attacker. And he was certain that she was attacked. He was almost certain

that it had not been by a typically human assailant, either. Harry was becoming a believer in the otherworldly possibilities.

“Would you be prepared to work with me on these abduction cases? Would you be prepared to be my eyes, if what you say, and what you saw are real?”

“In what way?”

“I would have a hard time talking about this to other cops. You can understand that.”

“Yes, I’m sure you would be branded pretty quick.”

“Well, I can’t show you a sketch of what you have described, but, perhaps if we meet occasionally, here, we both might see the same ghost, and then I can work with that visual. That’s one way.”

“And another way?”

He dreaded broaching the topic, but he did.

“You can be a guinea pig. A decoy.”

“I already am. Remember, this thing knows I’m blind. He doesn’t know that I can see him. He’s going to try again, most likely, if he’s targeting blind people now.”

“I’ll need to watch you closely. I’ll need to keep track of you.”

Kendra saw the rub.

“Only when I’m on the street, or at home. My personal life is my personal life, and I’m not letting some spirit, some pervert, or even some cop take away my liberty.”

Harry had to agree. They would set up a

schedule, and he would stick to it. In the meantime, he would be waiting outside her place, all night. He was probably the only one who could see the illusion, other than her, anyway.

Harry wanted to check things out again in the mall. Just because. When he left Kendra in the mall, he felt the urge to double back after a brief walk-away, in order to see if she met up with someone. He resisted that cop urge. Instead, he moved toward one of the mall shops – a men's clothing store. He had need of some Bermuda shorts for the upcoming Fiji trip.

It was because of Dana that he had decided against shadowing Kendra. "It's young love," he had told himself when observing her anxiety and search for someone, during their meeting. And he had recalled, emotionally, his furtive, exciting, love-filled meetings with Dana when they were young. "Damn Christmas," he thought. "I'm getting emotional."

In the clothing store, Harry became more focused. In, find, buy. Not "In, look around, loiter, reconsider, visit another shop, search, return to first shop, try on, try on, try on, buy." Just "In, find, buy."

It was while checking out the rack of shorts that he had zeroed in on when he entered that Harry accidentally stepped back and bumped into the mannequin, knocking it over. He turned quickly to catch it before it hit the floor, but, oddly, it wobbled back, the head started to come loose

from the neck, and it righted itself. Not only did it right itself, but the loosened head slid back into place.

It was a horror-movie version of that frustrating last bowling pin that wobbled precariously, clearly ready to tumble, before righting itself. Except that this mannequin defied all laws of gravity and motion in the manner in which it recovered its balance. And that head ...

Harry did a double take. This mannequin certainly was more lifelike than most. And, if he was not mistaken, he had seen that face (with more blemishes, wrinkles and colour) in his library of felon photos. He was sure, but completely unsure, simultaneously.

The Sentinel who had prevented the mannequin from falling breathed a sigh of relief. It knew the secret.

The sexual pervert that had entered the mall, snatched the eight-year old girl and attempted to drag her into a supply hallway in the mall, had been dealt with, weeks earlier. He would enjoy the company of thousands of young people for an eternity. Unfortunately, in his new role as a well-preserved, albeit almost lifelike dummy, he would be unable to experience the physical thrills that he gained from abusing others.

Sentinel skill at makeup and makeovers sometimes served a sinister purpose, when the crime or criminal against whom the Sentinels defended posed too serious a threat be allowed

to escape their jurisdiction. Harry was right about the similarity to a felon's photo. But he would never have to apprehend that felon again.

Harry stopped by The 'hood one more time on his way out. Later, he would explain to his wife why he wanted to sit outside a young, pretty girl's bedroom window all night.

Also later that afternoon, Corbin warned the others in the Sentinels' common area of Harry, and what had transpired. In part, he relayed information on Harry's plans. Later that night, the mall colony met for its routine gathering and discussed, at length, what Corbin had observed, what Kendra had told him.

One of those at the meeting considered this a valuable warning. Kendra would be off-limits, at least until Harry was out of the way.

Harry had some more research to do before his official shift ended. He had an idea as to why both Kendra and he were "seeing things." He wanted to check that photo again, even though he knew that what he was thinking was physically impossible. And Dana may be able to help, as well. It was, for one thing, a question of biology, pharmacology and physiology. Her hospital background would provide technical insight.

CLUES

Harry's first stop was the station. He had to log his day's activity, update his notes, and conduct a little backgrounder.

He typed "eye lens" into his Google search first, then followed that series of searches with "eye defects" and concluded with "refractive imagery." He learned, at least, a little about the possibilities that he suspected. Still, his concepts seemed a little bizarre.

Harry closed out his session by updating his notes.

"K. seems genuine. Sees images. Probably not imagination. Similar description to images that I see."

Such a notation was dangerous, if his notes were subpoenaed. He left it, anyway.

"Images do not seem to pose danger, at this time," he continued.

"Barefoot impressions found at site of K. attempted abduction. Not discussed with team. Correlation only. Do not want to cause unwarranted pigeonholing."

His notes, on occasion, demonstrated his inner feelings, rather than thoughts.

As an afterthought, he dug out the digital photo that he had recalled. Elsteth recognized the face, from the gutters of her haunts.

Reading along over Harry's shoulder, she attempted to convince herself that he may be someone on the human side that she could trust. She was not to that point yet, however. But she was becoming less concerned about the risk that this man posed, as she shadowed him.

Harry's next stop was the toy store, and the electronics store. A few types of magnifying lens, a toy chemistry set, electrical supplies diodes, LEDs, resistors, circuit board and tools were on his shopping list. He spent the rest of the early evening at home, tinkering with his gadgets, trying to create a small refractory lens. Then made his way to Kendra's home, as promised.

Corbin was somewhat torn, like Elsteth. On one hand, he was grateful that Harry had promised to guard Kendra on the outside. However, he was also sceptical of Harry's capacity to protect against other Sentinels, that, for the most part, he could not see. At the same time, he was unready to allow himself to trust this human.

He had spent less than an hour or so in intimate conversation with Kendra.

She had committed to Harry that she would leave the shopping centre precisely at 6:30 pm – two and one half hours after their meeting had ended. Harry would follow her home, discreetly. At 9:00 pm. He would call her, verify that she was at home, and would spend that night outside her window.

Corbin began his own investigation, immediately following his tryst with Kendra. By discussing the situation with an array of family members, and presenting Harry as someone of concern, he hoped to lure whoever had been leaving the mall without notice into duplicating the act.

At the very least, Corbin wanted to gauge the reactions of each Sentinel. He noted, with some curiosity, that Faith was not present during the afternoon. He also noted that one male in the group seemed to react to Harry's discoveries. He had been on the overnight shift in the corridor where The 'hood was located, during the prior twenty-four day schedule.

Faith re-appeared later that night. Corbin opted to raise the issue again, at the nightly general meeting of the colony, rather than deal with her directly.

Elsteth knew she could not direct her concerns to Lyle any more. She knew, as well, that raising the matter at the Council weekly meeting would jeopardize her exploration of the whole warehouse district situation.

Rather, she would approach the topic more indirectly, through a discussion of having seen one of the Columbia Mall Sentinels in the streets. It was Elsteth's observation that Lyle had not been pleased to see Faith in the abandoned industrial area, and that neither knew of the

other's presence. That could play to Elsteth's advantage.

She would hold her opinions, observations and comments regarding Harry in reserve, for now.

The Foundation key one was unused to deception, to deviation from the Creed, and unfamiliar with suspicions about one of her own kind. But, if Lyle was involved with the human underworld – as he clearly appeared to be – he was no longer one of the Pure.

She had one other option, as well. She had the option of seeking out members of the next layer of Councils, of discussing her concerns with them. She thought she knew who to approach on this matter.

She would approach Jakob, the cop and key one of the Columbia Mall. While Elsteth had yet to fully understand the circumstances surrounding Faith, or the robed “monk” from the mall, it was her experience that the key ones of each family were not kept informed of other Councils' business, or the special assignments of Sentinels from that key one's colony. She, herself, had, on many occasions, discovered that one or another of her closely-knit family had surreptitiously carried out instructions from the Council of the Communities, and even from the Council of the Countries.

Jakob, to her, had always seemed to be an evenly balanced individual, even by Sentinel standards. He had seemed surprised, too, when

she had raised the matter of Harry and the monk initially at last week's Council meeting. She would ask him about the chain of communication between council levels. She would also bring up the issue of the monk, Kendra, the association between the Mall and the abductions, and even Faith. It was all or nothing.

Jakob had misgivings. To spy on his own colony? Yes, he had concerns about some of the comings and goings. But to violate the Creed? To challenge the movement of Sentinels who may be acting on Council of the Pure business? He had, he admitted, made some minor inquiries, but they were of an innocuous nature.

Jake had always been a dedicated Sentinel. His whole life. He was still a good cop, too.

It was Elsteth's conviction, and her comments about Harry being a potential ally that mollified him somewhat.

"Corbin has been diverging from the Creed, you know."

It was a ball that Jake tossed in the air, to see if Elsteth would catch it. Jake's soft spot told him that Corbin was in love, and love caused irrational acts to occur. He occasionally wished that he, too, had been allowed to fall in love. Not that he was displeased with the colony's choice of mate for him. Indeed, he may have even chosen her, himself, if permitted to do so. It was one of his rare selfish thoughts.

"This Corbin is not my concern. He is not the one who I saw, not the cop's monk, either. If he was, the cop would have known it when he saw your Corbin in the store window.

"This cop is good. But he also seems to be good-hearted. You work with him. You should know."

Jake was grateful that he was not being asked to betray his colony, his Creed and his cop partner, all at once.

"Harry has his flaws. But he is open and fair. He respects others and their beliefs. He's a cop because he wants to do good, not because he wants to play god."

"This girl. You think she is on an undertaking of the Council?"

"I had hoped it was so. Her behaviour, of late, is more self-regarding, I'm afraid. She has raised the issue of her partnering with Corbin on more than one occasion. Do you believe that she may be involved in the attack on the blind girl?"

"Involved? Perhaps, but not the one. It was a man. But what of her visit to the warehouse district? Could there be an explanation?"

"It's possible. Is there someone from your family that may have had reason to be there? Often, Council assigns several Sentinels to a task, to provide stability."

"Not from mine. She's a possible problem."

Elsteth attempted to discuss, further, Lyle's actions. Jake was not willing to judge him, or

speculate.

“You have been a key one for very nearly three years. You have learned of others, beyond what I have learned. You know of contacts in the greater Councils?”

Jakob did. He chose to provide her only with broad allusions to who those contacts might be. It would be Elsteth’s responsibility to determine, for certain, who those Sentinels may be.

In time, he told her, he may be willing to assist her in greater depth, if she could provide more concrete details and proof.

Elsteth was left to follow the clues, to make appropriate inquiries. The risks associated with those activities were hers to take. Jakob wished her well, and truly did hope that she was successful.

When Dana had agreed to chair the committee that would oversee receipt of the isotopes and REMs being acquired by the hospital’s research department, she had assumed it would be a rather innocuous event. There was little publicity surrounding the acquisition of this arsenal of weapons in the fight against illness.

Yet, it was more than valuable: it was invaluable. With uses from x-ray technology to tumour-fighting, the compounds and elements would save thousands of lives. On the flip side, many could also be used for more deviant, sinister purposes: killing machines, all. Biological and

chemical terrorism was a real threat.

Dana considered the security of this shipment to be more than routine. There was a variety of issues to address in the handling of the many metals being received, with some destined for redistribution, and others for research.

Erbium, holmium and neodymium were scheduled for shipment the following day to a manufacturer for use in some laser equipment. By partnering with the hospital research wing, they were able to benefit from reduced costs.

Cerium, gadolinium, erbium and dysprosium would also be used by the hospital in their fight against cancer, MRI equipment and some of their diagnostics.

The lutetium, though, was their most valuable purchase.

The hospital initially had decided that minimal security was needed. A handful of security guards, representatives from the Disease Control Centre, and proper handling and storage safeguards would be all that was required. Hazardous Materials & Storage Guidelines required Material Safety Data Sheets, which were already prepared. Security was focused more on product contamination and danger to its handlers than it was on security from theft.

Lyle's crew had counted on this indolence. The theft was scheduled for later that evening, after the bulk of the staff had gone home.

Entrance to the building was simple. Posing as

basic security guards, Lyle's enforcers had replaced the regular uniformed staff, by force.

Entrance to the environmentally controlled room and its individual cells posed only a slightly greater problem. The Crypts knew force quite well. With no alarm system in place, other than air quality meters, prying the door open had taken seconds.

This entry had been delayed by only a couple of minutes, as an overzealous cleaner had shown the audacity to challenge their right to be there. His body would be discovered in the soiled linens bin the next day. The laundry would be slightly more soiled than usual, though, as the blood from the four slashes of a hunting knife had left a bit of a mess.

Next, Lyle's brigands secured the metals and isotopes, with little regard for their own health and safety. Lyle had intentionally neglected to inform them of the risks, and the four burglars would pay the price with their lives soon enough. Lyle had little use for the criminal types. They only served his needs.

The theft had gone off relatively smoothly. Only one casualty, which meant nothing. Minimal risk of being identified, as the cameras had been catalogued, located and disabled by the guards. Except for the hidden cameras that Harry had advised Dana to install in the environmentally secure storage room.

Dana had, at the last minute, acquiesced to her

husband's wishes, and had agreed to let him personally install the cctv system in the storage room. It could be monitored remotely. Yet, just to be sure, Dana decided to check up on the metals entrusted to her, personally.

There were, in the array, a few materials of a more hazardous nature, volatile when exposed to air. She needed to check on those. She would verify, as well, that the camera system was working properly. It was after hours, but, as administrator, she had access to a remote entrance, away from the security desk. It was near her assigned parking spot. Thank heaven for perks, she thought.

Dana would first check the cameras, next, the office where the computer that was recording them was located, and then the storage rooms themselves.

It was the camera in the entrance to the storage rooms that recorded Dana interrupting the intruders as they prepared to leave. It was that camera tape that Harry would uncover, and be doomed to review, over and over, as his wife's throat was viciously slashed, and her body thrown in a heap against one of the research tables, dead and devoid of blood. He would identify and pursue her killers.

Lyle received his precious cargo from one of the bikers, who had been outfitted with protective clothing and mask. Lyle was not present,

insomuch as the biker could tell. He had been instructed to leave the containers, and he did as instructed, having already been paid handsomely for his efforts.

Lyle had scheduled this cohort's execution for the next day. The protective clothing was merely a ruse to pacify the criminal.

LIFE AND LIBERTY TAKEN

Elsteth made her decision. While she could not bring herself to fully trust the human cop, she was certain that he would act on any tips that he received, and that he would act discretely. In any event, what normally happened in the industrial area was of human, not Sentinel concern, by decision of the Council, years ago. Its judgment was that the abandoned buildings posed less of a threat to peace and good behaviour than other areas of the city. Sentinel resources already were spread too thinly in this territory.

Rather than return to the station, she chose to contact Harry in the parkade. It would be cloak-and-dagger stuff, complete with a message left under the windshield wiper of his car.

“Redwood Warehouse. Bare footprints. Check loading dock,” was all that the note said. The cop would be able to figure it out.

She had not said that she had found bare foot prints. She merely drew Harry’s fascination with them into consideration. There might very well be footprints, even though Faith had been completely clothed. So Elsteth had not lied. That would be contrary to the Creed. She had merely allowed the cop’s mind to divert in that direction. Elsteth had no intention of waiting to see Harry’s reaction to the note. She did not feel particularly

comfortable in the confines of the underground parkade. She was Foundation: an outdoors Sentinel.

Faith had relayed her information about the missing brood girl to the key one in charge of the program. He had responded with predictable alarm.

They would deal with it at the next emergency meeting of the program members. He would arrange that meeting for two hours before the weekly meeting, scheduled the next day. It was an unfathomable display of impromptu decision-making, which told Faith that her concerns were being taken seriously.

She was asked to return to the warehouse to verify her observations. She did so reluctantly, but pleased with her position of responsibility and, dare she think, power.

Elsteth's next stop was the warehouse, as well. It would be some time before Harry read the note, responded, arrived at the location. She wanted to be in position to monitor the events, and to verify her suppositions.

Faith arrived as soon as she was able, having to fabricate a reason to abandon her Columbia Mall post. She entered the first set of doors with some trepidation, unsure as to whether she should expect to find even more of the brood missing. Would she be held accountable? That concept, while not reasonable within the confines of her

own family, was entirely possible within the Brood Council. It operated under different criteria than that which guided the colony. It was necessary to ensure the success of the program. That concept had been explained to her thoroughly, when she had been recruited for the task.

Although the program had been initiated for the sake and success of the Sentinel society and the wellbeing of its wards, the humans, it needed to forego some of the more stringent rules that guided their moral direction. The end would justify the means.

She worked her way through the cold storage room, down the hallways, to the second set of doors. These doors were secured slightly better than the first set, with a hasp and pin lock on both sides. She took the key, which worked both locks, with her into the second chamber, hanging it on a pin near the entrance.

Next, she navigated the hallways and tunnels to the third room, opening it with a lock from the outside, and securing it by keypad on the inside. Her eyes did not unveil the girl cowering beneath the stack of empty containers.

Faith entered the great room, after allowing ample time for those inside to cower and retreat from the doorway. Careful to set the locks on this door, she disrobed and moved deep into the recesses of the structure, examining the nurseries, private rooms, main rooms and common rooms thoroughly. Her count still came

up short.

In the third room, desperate fingers pressed the sequence of key presses that the girl had observed two days earlier. The door unlocked.

The terrified girl rattled her way through the maze of halls and corridors, at last finding room two, and the key hanging on the nail. It would be mere moments, now, before she was free. That is, if she were able to unravel the maze of corridors and the last of the locks.

Faith, on the other hand, had by now discovered that it was she who was trapped, imprisoned in the third chamber by a simple key lock on the other side of the door. All the key presses on the pad would not assist her now. She could only hope to find the link of lutetium that she had left in the pocket of her skirt, laying on the depleted totes.

Elsteth observed from a safe distance, and wondered why Faith had not come back outside.

Harry had other details to which to attend. He was already racing to the scene when he noticed, for the first time, the paper under his wiper. At the precise moment that he decided to retrieve it as soon as he was stopped, the note broke free, and was lost to the streets.

The call had come late that evening. His shift just concluded, he was on his way home, from where he would proceed to Kendra's home again. While the call had not specified the

names or any identity of the persons found in the building, Harry knew the address. He knew, too, that Dana was not answering either the home phone or her cell phone. He was horrified by the possibilities.

The dispatcher had not assigned Harry to the call. Harry was on temporary assignment to the abductions, even though that was not his exclusive responsibility. In Winnipeg, police resources were stretched to a thin film. There was no capacity to allow officers to be dedicated to merely one case, regardless of the priority of those matters, unless they were of an urgent nature. This case had been languishing for five years, only growing in the number of victims, rather than the number of clues and tips. Harry had at least two other cases to work.

Nonetheless, he was heading to the scene, and not one of his superiors would dare refuse him that right.

By the time he would arrive, other detectives would be on site, securing it. Harry would assist, but not be assigned to investigate, due to his close relationship to one of the victims. Regardless, Harry would investigate.

In spite of urgings from fellow officers to hold back, Harry barged through the barricaded crime scene. As gruesome as the scene may be, he needed to be by his wife's side. No blockade or army of well-intentioned officers would hold him back.

It was only when a fellow cop pointed out to him that his presence would jeopardize the integrity of evidence gathered that Harry agreed to wait until Dana's body was brought out by the ambulance attendants. He wanted to see his wife, but, now, he knew he wanted to see his wife's murderers caught and dealt with.

The CCTV recordings, made on Dana's office computer would be evidence, too. As frantic as he was, Harry knew he must follow process here, if he wished the videos to be available. He first called the two detectives assigned to this case, advising them of the videos, and providing them with the password necessary to view them live.

The web recordings had been recorded on a dedicated hard drive, and were to loop every 30 hours. If nothing had transpired within that time frame, the automatic loop would record over the worthless data, and begin the process again. There would be no useless video on this loop.

Harry insisted that he wanted to be there when the two cops first viewed the incident. In deference to his grief and his position of respect on the force, they agreed.

Viewing his wife's murder for the first time sucked the heart out of him. Seeing her approach the room, unsuspecting, he stifled a cry of warning. It would be useless. Observing her open the door, and detecting the alarm and fright on her face ripped at his guts. But, as her throat was

slit, and the knife withdrew and was plunged into her abdomen, her ribs, her arm raised defensively, her back as she turned and fell, a boiling rage grew in him. He watched helplessly, watched her life flow onto the tiled floor, watched the criminals kick at her to roll her out of the way, as if she were a sack of garbage. He raged inside, knowing that when he found them, he would kill them in revenge.

As he watched for the third, fourth and fifth time, his fury did not diminish. It grew. Yet, with each passing excruciating second, he focused, more and more. On mannerisms, on posture, on the way the murderers moved, on any mark, blemish or tattoo. Harry would uncover them, if they were not already in the police CPIC. He would find, and dismember them.

His colleagues already were making progress. Two of the three persons in the video were known to police. They had each served time, for minor offences. On parole, they had met their obligations to report regularly. There was no reason to suspect that they would not do so, or that they would flee the city. After all, they had disabled all the cameras in the hospital office area, so far as they knew.

Police already were securing addresses for each of the two suspects. It was essential, their lieutenant advised them, that the two be apprehended before Harry was aware. At least for the next few days, his interjection in this

matter would be detrimental to the case. All of the officers wanted a conviction, largely because of Harry. They excluded him from the inner circle for his own benefit.

Both suspects were apprehended within hours and without incident. Both refused to cooperate. Both insisted that Lyle Sarbit would be their lawyer. He was known to all cops, and they did not welcome him. The senior partner in the second largest law firm in the city. The two must have connections.

Elsteth was bitterly disappointed. Harry the cop had not showed up, contrary to her faith in him. It would be at the next family meeting that she would learn the reason.

In the first room from the cold storage area, the captive had been stymied in her attempt to break free of the entrapment.

At the meeting of the Brood Council, Faith's failure to attend was the focus. Never before had any Sentinel failed to meet his obligations to the Council. The concern over the miscount of brood women received less attention. Faith had shown herself to be unreliable. Was she also mistaken about the count? The next scheduled visit to the Program site would be in five days and twelve hours. The next scheduled admission to the population would be that evening: one blind girl

and a twenty-two year old transient.

The Council discussed, for some time, whether allowing the population of human breeders to exceed the Principle of 24 quota would be a violation of the Creed. They decided that it was not.

IN DEATH WE FIND

STRENGTH

It was the equal of the funeral of any police officer. Out of respect for Harry, nearly every off-duty police officer was in attendance, along with scores of the volunteer community of which Dana had been a key part, and as many again of private citizens – friends and family, strangers and well-wishers. It was a testament to the esteem in which Dana and Harry were held. It did little to console Harry. Dana was gone, and he had not prevented it. Nor could he have.

Jake was there, too. Never one to get involved in the personal lives of fellow officers, he respected Harry too much to fail to attend. He had been insistent at the station: I am going. That was very unlike Jake.

Elsbeth attended, discretely and at a distance. Several of her family were there, having been alerted to the possibility that Sentinels may have been involved in the burglary and death.

Kendra was not there. Not that she did not want to be. Rather, she was fairly tied up. Literally. For the past three days, she had been restrained in the brood centre, unwilling to calm down.

Normally, that would have been Faith's responsibility. A little application of a few key

chemicals and pills, and the problem would resolve. But Faith had been dealt with three and one half days ago. Along with the young woman who had attempted to escape.

Only the human girl would require a funeral, if and when her body was discovered. Faith's fate had been consistent with Sentinel obsolescence. Merely remove her link from her, and let nature take its course. Within a half day, the lack of lutetium protection would release her to a painless evaporation.

The funeral for Dana had been scheduled for four days after her murder. First, there was the autopsy. Then there was the need to allow for the time constraints of the many people who were anxious to attend, but had scheduling conflicts. And there was the need to prepare everything perfectly. Harry did not procrastinate with anything. Four days was enough.

The four days between his wife's death and the funeral had been the most anguished moments of Harry's life.

Each evening, as darkness had enveloped the city, he had faced the dreadfulness of being alone. In the dark, any bond to the outside world dissolved, leaving him horribly and bitterly alone desolate. For all his physical and intellectual strength, Harry felt abandoned. None of the phone calls of compassion provided relief, or did any of the offers of support. Knowing that people cared, and feeling it, were miles apart. After the

first few hours of pain, Harry shut his cell phone and land line off.

He had never been a self-centred man. Others came first. Dana came first. Those in need came first. He and Dana had chosen to have no children, so that their ability to serve others would not be diminished.

Harry now knew selfishness. If he had been given the chance again, he would have had children, a family. In that way, he would have someone with whom to share his grief. But he was bitterly alone. It was that selfish thought that helped to snap him out of his malaise, and motivate him to get on with life. It had been almost four days. After the funeral, he would get on with living, but Dana would never be far from his heart, his inner selfish longing.

The funeral proceeded predictably. First, the church service, throughout which Harry failed to shed a tear. Then through the procession to the cemetery, where he held up remarkably well. Next, beyond the graveside, where he pretended to focus solemnly on the words of the priest (since Dana had been raised as a Catholic), while he savoured each snowflake of the season's first snow that now descended in regimented layers. Right up until the lowering of the casket.

Harry could not steel himself any longer. To see that cold, polished rectangle of impersonal, hardened wood, carrying the warmth of his mate

down, down, was more than even his determination could bear.

Harry wept. In front of strangers. In front of fellow cops. In front of friends and family. He cared nothing for that. He wept. He shook. Harry collapsed beside and over the mahogany coffin, hugging its shell, seeking the heart that was Dana's.

He found nothing there, on the outside. He felt her, instead, squeezing inside him, flowing from extremity to extremity. He closed his swollen eyes, and saw her kneeling beside him, promising to be with him. And, at that moment, Harry neither cared if he were dead or alive. He wanted that moment, that feeling, to cling to him. He needed the rest of the world to dissolve away, while he melded with Dana.

Slowly, painfully, the world found him. The touch of the priest, the hug of Dana's parents, the clasp and squeeze of the shoulders by fellow officers, the tears of those caught up in his grief falling on him, distinguishable from, yet part of the torrent of snow. The world drew him back, agonizingly.

Harry rose, hunched, and turned away. With each step from that gaping hole, his posture unfolded erect. It was time to find who, and deal with him. It was time to move past the death, to move past the two scum that languished, cockily, in holding cells. He put the cemetery behind him, holding tight to Dana, inside him and all around him.

He would not forget. But, to honour his beloved wife, he would uphold her standard of humanity. He would find those persons or that one animal that was responsible, and deal with them. Not in the manner that his head told him – frontier-style. But in the manner that civilized, caring people did – through the justice that was the law, regardless of how insufficient he felt it to be at that moment. Harry was ready to be a cop again, even if he was not yet over being human.

Elsteth, of all those in attendance, had the least to feel for the situation. She was a Sentinel, whose sole existence occurred in order to dispassionately protect those in need. The inner turmoil that she now felt was not something with which she was familiar, or something that she understood. This Foundation Sentinel was feeling, and feeling the discomfort of empathy.

Jake, though, was not feeling empathy. He was feeling the tremor of anger creeping over him. He did not like that Harry had been subjected to these travails. He liked Harry, even though that was a foreign reaction for many Sentinels. But few, whether Sentinel or human, ever lived up to the impossible standards set for them by others. Jake was showing frailties, for which he would do penance.

Jake also, however, recognize that there was more to this incident, this killing, than was seen on the surface. For one, Elsteth's presence suggested that her family had a connection to

this matter. Then, there was Lyle. No friend of law enforcement, he attended, too. Not in his role as lawyer, but invisible to human eyes. Something compelling had drawn him here.

That was a reality. Lyle was compelled to attend. He had not counted on the violence that had taken place within the laboratory. Death of a criminal was one thing, while the killing of a good human was quite another. Whether he liked it or not, Lyle's hand was in this matter. His Sentinel constitution superseded his newly acquired human greed. Lyle felt remorse. But he did not feel enough of it to accept his fate and punishment.

None of the bikers attended. Courage was not the strong suit of any of them, regardless of whether they wished to gloat at Harry's misery. He had never been their friend, and this death would certainly bring heat to them. Even in numbers, they consistently displayed their bully character, hiding from conflicts that they would lose.

Harry would be visiting them soon enough. If they chose to, they could express their sorrow at that time. It would be unlikely to be welcomed.

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

If Harry had missed three whole days of work, his fellow officers had not. Mostly, they were focused on retaliation, and on being there for him.

But the incident had taken on unforeseen dimensions, with the discovery that the theft had involved some extremely dangerous chemicals, and some extremely valuable ones. Of course, there were some isotopes that were of no use to anyone outside of the medical community. There were a few radioactive items, as well. Of particular concern was a container of a rare earth metal known as lutetium. Price was only one dimension in which it was valuable.

Lutetium was the densest known stable white material, which made it the ideal host for x-ray phosphors, according to Wikipedia. It had applications in treating neuroendocrine tumours. It had myriad other sophisticated uses, but few commercial ones. Because of this, theft of the primary metal in the arsenal of stolen elements and compounds did not seem to make sense. Yes, it would draw a high price, but only to an extremely select, extremely close-knit market of buyers.

Unusual to this larceny was the contradictory nature of its execution. Few knew of the arrival of the shipment, outside of the research team,

the police and the legal beagles assigned to arranging the purchase. The market for most of the materials was specialized. The organization of the burglary implied a focused operation, which also implied professionalism. The people carrying out the theft seemed to be nothing more than thugs, from the fake security to the actual burglars. No safety precautions had been taken, in spite of the risk of spontaneous explosion or fire and the long-term effect of radiation exposure to the compounds that had been taken from their protective casings. It smacked of a level of indifference to human risk but precise targeting of unique items.

Jake was conducting his own investigation, from the moment that he learned from fellow officers that lutetium was involved. He had a different angle, given his close affiliation with lutetium, and his close friendship with Harry.

Lyle, to him, was the key. It was not appropriate to mistrust someone within the Sentinel circle, but Jake always felt slightly ill at ease around Lyle. Until recently, he had attributed that sensation to Lyle's occupation, versus his own. Even though he knew that both were covers, he had never been able to shake the impression that there was more to Lyle than what he showed to the Council. Elsteth had her reasons for following up on this matter, too. The more she had seen of Harry, the more she was convinced that he could be a link to human interaction, and that he was to be

trusted. But that was the lesser of her reasons for being involved.

Elsteth needed to contact Harry, to resolve the matter at the warehouse. Again, she had seen inappropriate activities at the yard. More Sentinels, some of whom she knew, some of whom she did not. A young woman, struggling and resisting, dragged inside the cold storage entrance.

Another young woman, lifeless, dragged away, distant from the warehouse and dumped. No connection apparent to the industrial area, it would be days before her body provided even slight clues as to her identity or circumstance. And Faith. Merely escorted outside, stripped dispassionately of her clothes, and separated from the tiny bond to Sentinel life – her lutetium link. Faith would simply cease to be.

These matters needed to be addressed by Sentinels and cops both.

Elsteth had one very significant reason why she needed to deal with the warehouse area: Lyle. He had been seen again, meeting with a Sentinel that was unfamiliar to her. Lyle, passing a steel container that she knew contained the lutetium that had been stolen to that Sentinel. Lyle, in possession of the lifeblood of the Sentinels, that had spilled the lifeblood of a human. Lyle was, in her eyes, no longer a Sentinel. She would deal with him in their otherworld, but ensure that the human world had its opportunity to mete out

justice, too. There was, after all, a human/Sentinel connection involving at least three undesirable humans.

Harry, after disposing of the hottest part of his grief, was ready to work again. Objectively, if he had to do so.

His first issue was Kendra. Top of his files was the notification that she had disappeared, four nights ago. The night of his wife's murder. Harry's first responsibility was to her. Other, competent cops were diligently working on his, or more correctly, Dana's case. He would contribute to that investigation soon enough. His duty was to others.

Harry was unsure as to where he should begin. The mall seemed to be the major connection, more so now than ever before. While he felt immense guilt at having failed to stop her abduction, in this case there were exceptional extenuating circumstances.

The team that had been assigned to monitor her between 6:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m. had also been redirected that night, to, of all calls, his wife's murder. Harry was no fan of irony, and less of a fan of coincidence. Yet, there was not a shred of evidence that the two were linked. It was just life taking a kick at someone who was down. Life could be a bit of a bully, too.

Harry decided to begin with the officers assigned to Kendra's protection, rather than the mall or the duo who had responded to the call to report her

disappearance. His gut told him that he would hear the same old, same old from the responding team. Clothes taken, no one saw anything, and so on. There was no one in the Columbia Shopping Centre that he knew to contact. The officers outside her home may have more insight. In spite of the stereotype, the officers assigned to the surveillance were not able to immediately meet Harry at the donut shop. Two calls in the afternoon cue took priority. Harry had more than a couple of hours to kill, while they cleared their queue. In the time it took them to attend to the first two matters, another call was sure to come in. They would be assigned only to high priority calls, in order for the dispatcher to enable them to meet with their stricken fellow officer.

He chose to use his time to visit, first, Kendra's parents. She had been an independent daughter, determined to be on her own as soon as she left high school. Her father, in particular, blamed himself for allowing her to, and assisting her in, moving to her own small suite in a private residence. He should have protected her. Harry understood.

But he had to know, had she told them anything of her situation? Were there any friends that he should meet and talk to? What were her favourite clothes? Had she ever told them about her visions?

The last question perplexed them.

"What visions?"

Harry did not provide all the details. It would sound to them as if he were suggesting that Kendra had been hallucinating.

“Your daughter and I talked about how the eyes can play tricks on a person. She told me about how she lost her sight, and explained that she could not see, at all. Yet, she was able to see people, like I could, that no one else could see. Almost paranormal. I just wondered if that was something that had happened when she was at home.”

Her parents were unsure how to respond. No, she had not mentioned these things. But they were certain that there was nothing wrong with her.

“I wasn’t suggesting that. It was just that, I have heard of people that had premonitions of an event before it happened. Maybe, because she had heard a voice when the first attempt was made on her, she associated it with someone that she already knew, that sounded like the voice that she heard.”

Harry described the face that she had visualized. It matched no one in her past.

The visit to Kendra’s parents had been unproductive.

Harry stopped by the location where Kendra had been snatched. Neighbours had heard her screams, had seen her struggle. There had been a man, in blue jeans and light jacket. Others swore that they had seen no one around her,

while she screamed. The neighbours had seen the girl waving her cane, shouting “Tell Harry it’s him, Tell Harry it’s him.” That fact had been noted on the incident report, so it came as no shock to Harry. There would be no footprints or new evidence that he would find. The snow had seen to that.

Harry still had more than an hour to kill. The cruiser had been dispatched to a fourth call. Harry stopped by her apartment unit, and was let in by the landlord. Against the rules, she knew, but she didn’t care.

The police had been there, already, and combed through her stuff. But Harry was looking for something more, something that would tell him that her garments had been taken after the abduction and not before.

Kendra and he had hatched a bit of a plan. If the kidnappers were taking clothes that the victims indicated were their favourites, and if they were doing so after taking the captive to wherever they held the girls, she would signal Harry as best she could.

Depending on the clothing items she requested, they would be able to narrow down the search area a little. It also would tell Harry that she was okay, or, at least, was okay within a short time after the kidnapping. He was thankful that her concerned parents had helped her pick out her clothes, and had described what colour each piece was, so that she could coordinate. Harry

knew it was her mother, not her father that made these choices.

Harry was in luck. A red top, brown slacks, grey jacket and beaded slippers. According to their code, Kendra was telling him that the last location that she could pinpoint was quiet, smelling like old cement, off the main roads, and more than fifteen minutes from her abduction. It was a great visual, presented by a sightless victim.

It was time to rendezvous with the two on-duty cops. They had little more information than Harry had garnered already. He would strike it rich, however, shortly.

UNHOLY ALLIANCES

The Council of the Citizenry had met. The Council of the Communities had not yet scheduled an emergency gathering. Elsteth raised her concerns about the murder, about the abductions, about rebel Sentinels, and, specifically, about Lyle at the Citizenry meeting. She outlined what she had observed at the warehouse.

When she concluded, Lyle rose to speak.

"I am alarmed that one of our Foundation Sentinels would act in such a devious manner."

He chose to ignore the accusations against him, as he began. He instead, focused on Elsteth,

and her break from Creed direction and Council protocol. It was a good tactic. Deflect the attack, appear to be defending a principle upon which the listeners concurred.

“Elsteth Smith has admitted that she violated our Creed on numerous occasions. She has infringed on others’ jurisdictions. She has made contact with humans. She has challenged the integrity of several of you. She has implied that many others, possibly in this room, are conducting activities that undermine our existence. She has made inaccurate and false accusations. I ask for sanctions.”

It was a straight-forward counter-attack. All of what he said was true, with the exception of the last claim. However, if the group believed that the first five statements were true, then they were more likely to accept the last one as being true, as well. It was more than a lawyer’s tactic: it was a battlefield tactic. Would it work?

Elsteth did not possess the eloquence that Lyle possessed, or the years of experience. Vainly, she attempted to redirect the focus where it belonged.

The Council was single-minded. Process and procedure mattered. To violate those tenets of the code that she admitted to violating meant that she was impure. Could she justify that behaviour?

Elsteth could not.

A few in the room knew of the Brood Council.

The majority didn't, but that was irrelevant.

Elsteth mentally counted her foes. If only four or five knew, they could sway the group, since the group always sought consensus. They would debate until that consensus was reached. If it had only been Lyle, she would stand a fifty-fifty chance. But one other would tip the scales irrevocably against her. She had hoped, however, that Jake would speak in her defence. He did not, at that time.

Elsteth knew she stood no chance. But she had known that when she raised the matters before Council. It was not a factor in her decision to speak out. The only factor that mattered was that bringing these wrongdoings to light was the moral thing to do. Adhering to a Creed that professed morality but did not practice it at all times was immoral. So, Elsteth had entered the meeting without her essential link.

"Elsteth Smith, we request that you leave the room so that we can make a decision on this matter."

The captain of the key ones, formal to the end, signalled that the Council would debate her fate. It was strictly procedural. They would always agree.

“Key one, I ask that you deal first with my point of privilege. I ask that you conduct a vote on the merit of Sentinel Sarbit’s actions, prior to determining my fate.”

Each member of the Council graciously declined to do so. Lyle’s actions would not be challenged, since he had denied wrongdoing, and since no Sentinel would deceive the Council. She, on the other hand, had admitted to deviation.

“Would you please present your link to us before your exit?”

Elsteth declined. It was not on her person.

The Council was left to debate and decide on action, as Elsteth rose and left the room. No one followed, at that time.

Elsteth knew that her time in Council and her time as a Sentinel were at an end. Upon agreement, the Council would seek her out, and make her obsolete. Unless she could prevent it. Elsteth Smith now had only two recourses: act on her own, or seek an alliance with the human cop. In usual circles, the seed of doubt would have been planted. In the Council, the seed would not sprout. If Lyle had not admitted guilt, he could not be guilty. If no one had conceded to being involved in some sort of kidnap ring, no Sentinel must have been involved. The Council had more important matters to decide. They needed to understand how to expand, as the burgeoning

world population demanded. They needed to plan for the upcoming obsolescence of several of their group. They needed to discuss the difficulties that they were having in protecting the humans. They needed to read the Creed, and follow protocols. It had been the same for years, and would remain the same until consensus was reached on those topics, as well.

Elsteth's first stop upon leaving the meeting was to pick up her lutetium link. This was her lifeline, Harry was her link, now, too. She would focus on right, not right process.

Harry was not at his desk when Elsteth reported to the desk sergeant at Central District. He would, however, be in within five hours. Elsteth was a little early. It was only 2:00 a.m. She opted to wait.

Corbin had not opted to wait. Since learning of Kendra's disappearance, Corbin, too, had disappeared. Jakob failed to mention that fact at the Council gathering. He hoped for the best for Corbin, now that he had chosen his new direction.

It was not a common occurrence that Sentinels left their colony, or the sect. In Jakob's life, he had never seen it. He had heard of it, though. Sometimes, those who broke away were able to achieve remarkable things. But they had simply

become humans, and not sufficiently noteworthy in the eyes of the Council to be recognized as former Sentinels. They were anomalies, curiosities. Seldom were they sanctioned. Corbin may, or may not succeed. Jake hoped he would, at least, find Kendra, alive and well. Elsteth's points had struck a chord with Jakob. He wished that he could defy the consensus and side with her. Some of what she said coincided with what he had seen with his own eyes. But the process did not allow for dissention. Consensus or interminable discussion. He felt what he assumed was regret, as the Council voted to discontinue Elsteth Smith. However, Jake was not fully satisfied, or compliant. He had not been instructed, directly or otherwise, to assist in locating her, or to refrain from conducting his own analysis of the situations that had been raised. Jake, the cop, could start with the warehouse area. He would leave Corbin to his own strategies and efforts. Corbin had no idea where he should start. The nights were his friends, though, as he plied his way through the streets and buildings. While he sought out clues to Kendra's situation, he maintained vigilance. Being detected by cops might be dangerous. Being detected by other

Sentinels was more risky. Corbin took measures to blend in, starting with the wearing of shoes. Kendra had told him of other Sentinels that she had seen on the outside. Her failed abduction clearly was the work of Sentinels, for whatever reason. He had never challenged the power or rightness of his sect, or his family. However, regardless of their rightness or wrongness, being with Kendra was the only “rightness” that mattered. Corbin had crossed the colony line, irrevocably. Kendra would be his family, or he would have none.

6:00 am was an unreasonable time to begin work for most humans. Harry, then, was habitually unreasonable. Elsteth had not slept. This was her prime time. Few of her family needed more than a couple of hours of rest, on their worst days. When there was business to which to attend, no sleep was warranted. She had business.

Harry was not particularly surprised at the appearance of his “guest.” He had developed a rapport with the street people, and he knew Elsteth by name. She had never caused problems, and never seemed in need of assistance. Yet, she was a female, living in the alleys of the North End and downtown. He welcomed her, not suspecting why she had

called on him. Few street people were willing to enter the station, even on the coldest of nights. Harry had never seen her in the drunk tank, either. She had never been escorted to the local hospital for any reason, had never been asked to move or stay away from any building or venue. As far as official police records were concerned, she was invisible.

But Elsteth had a habit of being around people in need. He had observed her assisting others less fortunate (if that was possible). He had witnessed Elsteth stand up to street thugs, and chase them off.

He respected her gutsy nature, her gentle manner. And he was curious.

“What can I help you with?”

“I think I can help you.”

Harry was not the type of cop to look at those less fortunate as inferiors. He knew instinctively, not from street smarts, that everyone had something of value to contribute to life, if only one would stop to listen and learn.

“I am eager to hear. Where do you want to start?”

Harry offered her the obligatory coffee, soft drink or water. She passed on all but the water.

“Do you know the Redwood warehouse district?”
Harry did.

“Do you know of the lawyer, Lyle Sarbit?”

Harry wished he didn't.

"Do you know of....?"

She went on with her mini-interrogation, citing the Crypts, Spirit Riders bike gang, Legion enforcers. Harry knew of them all, and knew many of them individually. Two of them, he had a particular hate for, as they decayed in the lockup awaiting their hearings.

"Did you know that Lyle Sarbit met with Woluk, Prince and Pappa Haines, just before that robbery that went down. The one that your wife got killed in?"

Harry did not know that, but he was glad to now know.

"Did you know that Lyle Sarbit met someone that I know the next day, and gave to him some of the stuff from that theft?"

Elsteth was cautious to not bring up her familiarity with lutetium, or the Sentinels, just yet. She needed to ease this cop into the situation.

Harry was more than interested, but capable of patience. He knew there was more.

"Did you know, too, that there was noises from that old storage place a few days ago. People noises. Did you know that, on the night your Dana was killed, a blind girl was dragged in there? Did you know that there is a dead girl, in the dumpster about a mile distant from there, and that the dead girl came from that building?"

Harry needed to hasten this discussion. He led Elsteth through the details as quickly as possible,

and then summoned three people: his supervisor, his current partner, and Jake. Could they all meet at the warehouse?

For Jake, it was easy. He was already just arriving there, anyway.

Jakob believed. Unfortunately, it was no longer the infallibility of the Council in which he believed. Elsteth had spoken, at least, a partial truth, and that meant that Lyle had, at least, failed to tell the whole truth. The willing blindness of the Council would have been something that he would accept passively, were it not for his experience in the outside world. No one, no group was flawless. He had learned that and practised it in the outside world, but had not transferred that understanding to the Sentinels. He had, learned, however, that, regardless of the evil of any person, there was always an element of good inside. Occasionally, that good was buried so deep as to be undiscoverable. Jake believed, too, that he had a duty to explore these matters further.

He suspected that Lyle had not been completely forthcoming when the two discussed his presence near the Columbia Mall days earlier.

If Lyle had been deceitful, could he also be deceitful regarding his presence at the warehouse district?

Jake was familiar with the disappearances of the young girls. The story that Elsteth had related rang true, right down to the kidnapping of the

young blind girl on the night that his partner's wife had been killed. Elsteth had not simply fabricated a tale, but the council had been unwilling to consider obvious evidence that her tale had truth to it. "Wilful blindness," it was called.

Jake knew he should have passed his information on to his colleagues on the force. Except, how would he tell them that he had received this data? From a sect of invisible people, of which he was one? From a street person, who few held in any kind of regard? He convinced himself that he had to act alone and verify the claims that Elsteth had made, prior to reporting it to his superiors.

The warehouse district was desolate most nights. During the early morning it was barren and bleak. Not even the drunks, hookers or drug users were to be seen.

A very cursory evaluation, though, told Jake what he needed to know. Footprints, scuff marks, a packed path in the snow to the cold storage doors. And a new lock on the wood and steel doors. It was uninhabited in appearance, only.

He prepared to call in his findings, but was interrupted by the police dispatcher. Yes, he could be at the warehouse immediately.

When Harry and the other arrived, Jake was ready for them. Although a warrant was in the process of being prepared, the crew had arrived to secure the area.

The warrant, however, was redundant. The body of one of the captives had been located, as described. A fragment of the sweater that she wore still clung to the edge of the bumper pad on the loading platform, with drag marks leading back from the barred doors. There was an urgency, and, as the confirmation that the warrant had been approved came in, the officers on scene were already demolishing the door locks.

Jake knew, without seeing, that Elsteth had been truthful. He knew, as well, that his days as a Sentinel were over. He would tell any who would listen of the truth.

The process of entering the brood centre was laborious, nerve-wracking. Each person hurried, as best he could, while also taking painstaking precautions to not disrupt the potential evidence at the scene, and to ensure that the scene was secured and safe. Each corridor and room required careful advance scrutiny and documentation. To the best of every cop's knowledge, they were dealing with a cadre of abductors, all human. Elsteth had discretely withheld that vital element of the information, until she could assess Harry further.

There would, of course, be weapons, and possibly booby-traps set to ensnare trespassers. Camera surveillance was a distinct possibility, given the quantity of captives.

Harry, the senior cop and the one who had

received the tip, led the slow charge forward. Periodically, the team would stop and listen, then proceed.

In the third room, the care and precision became millstones. Beyond that door, the sound of new breeding recruits crying and wailing hit them. Yet, they must adhere to procedure.

This last lock posed a significant impediment. Much more complex than the rest, it was also, apparently, the last barrier to the people behind it. It was well beyond two hours since they had entered the labyrinth, and there would be at least another two hour delay as the crew awaited more efficient tools, standby emergency crews, protective garments and more comprehensive weaponry. There was no way of knowing what assault would greet them, or what risk the women were facing. Having disarmed and deceived the two cameras that they had uncovered, the police were relatively confident that they had not yet been detected.

Jake proceeded cautiously, too, but for other reasons. If there were Sentinels inside, they would not likely be detected by the police, but Jake would see them. He intended to deal with them as best he could. He thought it unlikely that there would be guards, however, as many would be on assigned duties within their families. Nonetheless, he had been unpleasantly surprised before by unpredictable sect members. He was rapidly becoming disillusioned with the Creed, the

Councils and the colonies.

LIBERATION

Having experienced the neglect and abandonment of the exterior of the premises, those police on site expected to see further degeneration and decay once they entered the captives' cells. What met their eyes was hardly what was anticipated.

Cowering against the far wall of the great room was the usual array of disoriented and frightened women, mostly new captives. But it was the excess that filled the void between the trembling females and the door to freedom that temporarily immobilized the group: near-opulence, surroundings that smacked more of the luxurious foyer of a five-star hotel than of a holding cell for thirty or so prisoners.

Extravagant lighting, swaying live plants, ornate décor, lavish furnishings – all designed to provide the utmost in comfort – created the illusion of an upscale holiday retreat. It belied the reality: it was a holding cell, and nothing more.

Yet, even with the presence of the police, the open doorway, the inviting avenues to freedom, none of the women moved to escape. Some were transfixed, still in shock at their abduction. These were the most recent abductees. Others lazed, dispassionately, having yielded to the learned helplessness of their predicament. Some

clearly had decided to accept this prison as home.

Nowhere was there evidence of the captors, or of forcible confinement beyond the locked doors. Jakob observed no Sentinels. Elsteth had been required to remain outside as the cops entered. She had not, and stood to one side, translucent, as Jake the cop purposely ignored her.

The first of the prisoners to react was Kendra, having recognized Jake for what he was, and having heard Harry's voice. She merely smiled, and nodded, to both. Harry took this as recognition of him, and approached.

Kendra, feisty and belligerent, quickly explained how she had been brought here, the backgrounds of the fellow abductees with whom she had spoken, the intent of the program, and, as much as she knew, the actions and movements of the Sentinels involved.

On the outside, one other Sentinel had arrived, unnoticed. He paused only momentarily, before hastening away. He had a report to make, and he needed to find the Brood Council key one. An emergency meeting would be called, well before scheduled time. This was that much of a crisis.

Corbin had been on the outside for three days, now. He was confused, disoriented. Having only travelled once beyond his preordained boundaries, he was unable to fathom the complexities of transportation, street routes,

communications or housing. He was on the outside, but as isolated from contact with Kendra as he had been in the mall the day before he liberated himself.

Not only was he disoriented, but cold. His entire twenty years had been spent in the warm confines of the mall – temperature controlled, free from the icy stabs of wind – a snowless and rainless fortress. On the outside, the snow bit at his feet, the wind sliced at his skin, the bright glare of reflected sunlight scratched his eyes. Yet, he continued to search, not knowing where he was, or where he was going.

On the fourth day, he could go no further without resting. Dressed in only the light jacket, jeans and shoes that he had taken from the colony, his body relinquished to the weather.

For the entire four days on the street, he had spent only infrequent moments inside stores and office buildings, catching brief wisps of warmth before continuing on. He had not slept, or rested. He had not taken the time, either, to thank the founding Sentinels, pay tribute to the guidance of the Creed, or give homage to the family. He had abandoned that life, and the feeling of warmth and calm that it provided.

As a Sentinel, he had duties and responsibilities, albeit agreed upon by him. As a Sentinel, he had the shelter of a protective environment. As a Sentinel, he had the security of knowing he belonged. And, as a Sentinel, he had a direction

and purpose, established for him long before his birth. All of that bestowed a comfort and warmth that allowed him freedom from worry or anguish. In his life in the family, Corbin had been free from impactful decisions. These were made by the Creed, guided by the family. He had been free from the turmoil of inner confusion and conflict, with his life moulded from the template that the Creed prescribed. That, too, provided security and comfortable cosiness.

On the outside, it was bitterly cold. It was bitterly cold inside Corbin, as well, as the anxiety over Kendra's wellbeing gnawed at him and the unease of unfamiliarity pulsed throughout his body. But he was tired. Incredibly tired. The fatigue of the continual adrenalin rush, the continuous exertion, and endless battle against the cold ate his strength. Corbin needed to rest.

It was nearly midday. The sun was bright, but, in this northern climate in early winter, that equated with cold. Yet, it was also Sunday, Stores would not open until noon, and offices were shut for the weekend. The pre-Christmas extended hours of service would begin the next day. But, for now, Corbin needed to stop.

He could have moved on, found an open shopping centre, loitered in an open convenience store. It was just that he was also frightened. In the malls, he may be targeted by other Sentinels who might have been alerted to his defection. In the convenience stores, clerks would summon

police, ask him to move on.

Corbin felt the warmth of exhaustion and hypothermia crawl through his body, starting at his feet and fingers, slowly rolling upward and inward toward his core. He needed to rest. He needed to sleep. Corbin curled up, fetally, on the bench of a bus shelter. He would rest only minutes, and then carry on his search for Kendra. He rested, and slept.

The first cruiser to pass the shelter arrived less than one half hour after Corbin curled up. The officers attempted to rouse Corbin without success. Within six minutes, the First Responders would arrive. Within nine minutes, Corbin was bundled into the ambulance, and was on his way to the nearest hospital.

The rescue of the twenty-nine captives and their children took more than seven hours. Not one seemed to be in poor health. In fact, the doctors at the three hospitals, where they were taken for observation and treatment, remarked at how well they seemed to be, physically. It was small wonder, given the care with which the Sentinels had provided for them while in seclusion. These were, after all, the future of the Sentinel sect. Mental condition would be another issue, with long-term care itemized as essential.

Kendra and seven of the other most recent abductees required a little more care. Having had little time to acclimatize to the new

environment provided for them by the invisible ones, they had seen no benefit from the cautious health care provided by their abductors. For the most part, the emphasis in health care focused on their psychological well-being, and their shock at being kidnapped.

Kendra was taken, along with nine others, to the Grace Hospital, the unit best equipped to handle mental trauma. It was, unfortunately, the weekend, when demand in the Emergency unit peaked and available beds were at a premium.

On-call staff were summoned to deal with this unfolding crisis. Because of the profile of this police operation, the former captives were documented as rapidly as possible, and hastened off to semi-private areas, to avoid the scrutiny and intrusive prodding of the media. In the emergency area waiting area, it was chaotic.

In the hallway, Corbin lay on a stretcher, cared for occasionally by staff who monitored his core temperature as frequently as possible, and who paid close attention to the loose wrappings on his extremities, intended to allow him to recover slowly and methodically. He had not awakened since he had curled up on the bus shelter bench.

Kendra was led down the hallway, to the room that awaited her group. As she passed by one cot, she halted.

“Corbin? Corbin? Corbin, it’s me!”

The nurse accompanying her gently clasped her elbow.

“It’s all right, miss. It’s ok. I know that it must have been a real strain on you. Come with me, and we’ll look after you.”

Tears ran down the staffer’s cheeks, imagining the horrors to which this young blind girl must have been subjected by her jailers.

Tears ran down Kendra’s cheeks, as she fought to break free and remain with the comatose Corbin.

“Corbin, Corbin. Wait for me.”

Another staffer moved to assist the nurse who struggled with this obviously delusional girl.

“Come, come. It’s ok. Come.” Kendra was led away.

Jake needed to talk to Harry. He wanted to talk to Elsteth. He had to deal with Lyle.

Lyle, though, had other issues with which to deal. He had a case to prepare for the defence of his two clients. Although he would rather have left them to rot, for self-preservation purposes, he needed to free them. On a murder charge, that may be unlikely. On the other hand, if Lyle were invisible, he could enter the prison, sabotage their meals, and ensure that they were permanently liberated from this world. Lyle would then have no one in custody who could link him to the thefts.

He would take care of that matter before he concluded his arrangements with the Sentinels who had purchased the lutetium. He found it

ironic that the pure ones would involve themselves in such a theft, regardless of the value of the REM to the sect. Why had they not merely taken it covertly? Why had they not turned to more formal channels of communication with him, through the Councils? Of course, these Sentinels must have their reasons.

Now, those same Sentinels wanted to meet with him, “to discuss related matters,” they had said. Lyle headed toward the Central District detention centre, where his two cohorts were being held.

Jakob was unaware of Lyle’s situation, as he signed off shift and headed to Lyle’s office complex. Although it was after hours, the doors were always unlocked, but manned by a staff of security guards. Weekends meant little to overwhelmed senior lawyers, greedy young lawyers and impatient clients. There generally was a steady stream of suited humans arriving at and departing the building.

Jake knew that Lyle would be there. He was not. None of the complex’s family was aware of his location. Jake left.

He would now pay a long (and long overdue) visit to Harry. He would visit Harry’s home, for the very first time. He would have to wait, though, until Harry finished his documentation of the incident that they had concluded this morning. Harry’s paperwork always took longer than the others. Particularly since he had insisted on

going to the Grace Hospital to attend to a few of the released victims.

Lyle completed his mission at the jail cells. Two thugs would not require a trial.

He was now destined to meet with his buyers, at the railway stockyards. He wondered why they had refused to meet at the warehouse, as they had done on prior occasions.

“Key one,” began the first of the four Sentinels who greeted him. “we have an issue that needs to be addressed.”

“You need something else done? Was the shipment incorrect?”

“No. No. That shipment was fine. No, we do not require anything else to be confiscated. This shipment will do. But we need to conclude our final matter with you.”

“If I may ask, to what purpose will you put the lutetium?”

All of the sect had their allotments of lutetium. According to Lyle’s calculations, no more would be needed until the sect expanded to another layer. As far as he was aware, such a growth was not yet planned. But Lyle was not privy to higher Council decisions. It was the lawyer in him that inquired.

“Let us just say that it is needed. That is all that you need to know.”

Lyle agreed. It was not his role to challenge the Creed, or Councils beyond his territory.

“We have a problem that has arisen, a problem of which, outside our Council group, you are the only Sentinel aware.”

“What problem is that?”

“You have been involved, we are dismayed to tell you, in an incident that will require that we arrange for your obsolescence. We request that you provide us with your link, please.”

The Sentinel who spoke held out the palm of his hand, while two others moved forward toward him.

“You have done well, and now it is your time.”

Lyle was, in no way, ready for obsolescence. He enjoyed the trappings of human opulence. He had become quite accustomed to the favours that money purchased, and the comforts that he had been able to squirrel away outside the bounds of his office territory. He needed to live longer, much longer.

Lyle ran.

CONFESSIONS

Harry was unsure if was willing to discuss what he was learning from Elsteth with other officers. He was doubly uncertain, given that he probably would have to disclose that he was seeing “ghosts,” as well. Even having Kendra to support his claims would be small solace, since she would be seen as a former captive under psychological stress.

Jake, at this point, was unwilling to come “out of the closet,” but, instead, offered to work with Harry, as needed.

Elsteth had limited credibility. Sure, she could prove who she claimed to be, but what purpose would be served by doing so? Such a disclosure would be met by disbelief from many, scepticism from some, hostility from a few, and panic from most.

Kendra had told Harry about Corbin, and the hesitant Sentinel had reluctantly agreed to speak to the cop. Corbin offered little in the way of an avenue out of this conundrum.

Lyle Sarbit complicated their dilemma.

Lyle had arrived at the station as Jake and Harry were cross-checking their notes, and compiling their reports independently (as Harry always demanded). He clearly was terrified. There had been no hesitation on his part, once he realized

the crisis that he was facing within his own sect. Philosophical principle meant nothing when it was stacked against survival.

Lyle approached Jakob, who referred him to Harry. The three met, with Elsteth sitting in, discretely, insofar as the rest of the station could tell. He was ready to sacrifice the Sentinels in exchange for safeguarding his security.

The first, most pressing matter for Harry was not Lyle's safety. It was Sarbit's involvement in the Brood Council project.

He led off with questions that pre-supposed Lyle's culpability.

"Why were you kidnapping these girls?"

Harry knew, by now, the purpose of the program. The young mothers had made that abundantly clear. He could not fathom, however, why they Sentinels would want to breed these young girls like cattle.

"I wasn't. I don't know what that's about. I just know what I have heard on the news."

The rapid-fire responses had an air of legitimacy.

"We know you were involved with the warehouse site. We know that you acted as the lawyer for the owners. We just have not been able to track them down."

Lyle knew. The owners each had a reason to remain hidden. But, so far as he knew, none of the "front men" were Sentinels, or had any association with them. At least, he thought he had known, until he had been confronted by

members of the Brood Council hours earlier.

“I was just their legal counsel. I was at the warehouse because it was a nice quiet place. I had people to meet.”

He was willing to talk, but he was beginning to doubt the capacity of the cops to protect him. Sentinels had a way of infiltrating even the most secure venues. Yet, Jake was but one. He needed Jake’s eyes, and the cops’ force. He could not meet Elsteth’s eyes.

There was a certain irony, in that he had caused the banishment from Council and condemnation of Elsteth, and it was her actions that now bound him to the same fate.

Harry disbelieved. Lyle, most certainly, had been involved. But as they traded defensive and offensive thrusts, he began to be swayed by Lyle’s story.

Lyle had not been involved, directly. Instead, he had been recruited by the Sentinels, and offered a chance to make a significant amount of money, in exchange for undertaking one solitary burglary. These Sentinels had done their homework, and were quite familiar with Lyle’s human sideline, and skill at finding the right people to do the right job, beyond the law. They knew of his weakness: love of luxury.

Lyle wanted to maintain the illusion that he was a dedicated Sentinel, and had agreed to assist them. Yes, he knew that lutetium was involved, and yes, he suspected that it had more than

monetary value to his new clients. But money was money. He asked no questions.

Although Harry was relatively convinced, this revelation only made things more difficult. Not only was he dealing with a gang of very focused criminals, but he was dealing with an other-worldly gang. Most disturbingly, he was dealing with the being that had caused the death of his wife of over thirty years. It certainly was beyond his prior experiences as a cop!

The purpose of the kidnappings was not yet fully clear, but it had become clear that Lyle was not involved directly in the abductions. This posed a whole host of problems. Harry's heart wanted him to attack, apprehend and punish Lyle for Dana's death. Harry's head wanted him to use Lyle, manipulate him as he had manipulated others, in his human and in his Sentinel form, and toss him, once manipulated, back into the hands of the Sentinels that Lyle feared. Harry's instinct told him he had to work with this creature, in order to solve the kidnapping case and the murder case, as well as bring some justice for the former slaves of the rogue Sentinels. Harry needed more information.

Jakob wanted information, as well. He wanted to know why Lyle had demonstrated such an interest in his Columbia Mall. What connection did he have?

Lyle's explanation was simple. When he had been approached by the Sentinels to undertake

the theft, he had needed to evaluate the environment where the metals and compounds would be held. In spite of his army of underworld connections, none could be relied upon to be able to scout the hospital settings, without risk of detection. His solution was simple: he would use one of his family. Without explaining to this young man why he was being recruited, Lyle arranged for him to tour the hospital – dressed as a religious monk.

Lyle understood human foibles and failures. They would not challenge a man of faith in a hospital. There were too many ill and dying people who needed solace.

Lyle had searched the malls for a store that sold such outfits, and paid one of his Crypt connections to obtain the costume from The 'hood. At first, the girl working the store on that evening shift had been reluctant.

"It's not for sale," she had claimed. "It's just there for decoration."

But Lyle understood her, as well. When the young hoodlum had returned without the coveted clothing, Lyle had taken him back to the mall, where the girl was offered \$100 for the outfit, without a receipt. She had grabbed at the chance.

"My guy actually paid for it," Lyle laughed. "She must have stolen the money."

Jakob was un-amused by this twist. It meant that one of his family had failed to prevent the girl

from completing this act of dishonesty.

Harry was not amused, either. Yes, he had been able to track down the source of the monk's outfit worn by the young man. He was happy to not have been imagining. Yet, Lyle had taken an enormous risk, by confessing to Harry his involvement in the theft. That meant that he was responsible, ultimately, for Dana's death. And now, Lyle seemed at ease, guilt-free. Harry needed to move past that, at least for the time being. Lyle would be dealt with, later.

Lyle's choice had been made out of self-preservation. In Canada, the death penalty was not a possibility. He also knew Harry, and knew his reputation as a good, ethical cop and person. Harry and Jakob offered him the only real hopes of safety.

There were decisions to be made now. Jake needed to decide as to whether he would risk the safety of Guardianship or become part of the greater globe. He chose to side with Harry.

Elsteth needed to decide as to whether she should trust Lyle. She did not.

Harry had already decided: this was not something that he could entrust with the rest of the force, just yet. Protocol was less important than protecting those that had trusted him. The risk of having Lyle escape was minimal. Lyle needed both Jake and him. As much as he hated Lyle at this moment, Lyle was Harry's link to those invisible people who were involved in the

kidnapping plot. He would be the only one who could identify each of them. Lyle needed Harry, but Harry also needed Lyle, right now.

PREPARING FOR WAR

Jake and Harry had already talked, at length, prior to Lyle's intrusion. It was a discussion that both found awkward. But Harry, at least, was beginning to come to grips with the reality that the situation in which he found himself was unreal.

Jake was a "ghost." Kendra and Corbin were secret lovers. (Talk about a mixed-marriage!) There were five families – 120 spirits – walking around the city at any time. Elsteth was under a death warrant, as was Lyle, and that warrant was being executed by those ethereal people.

These spectres could only be seen when they had a specific link of lutetium on their persons. He had never heard of lutetium! The lutetium also provided protection for each territorial boundary. Take that lutetium away and each spirit would die. This was more than unearthly!

Now, as to Kendra and himself. They supposedly had a unique ability to see some of the phantoms, but not all of them. Why that was so, he did not yet know, and had not been told. But his research had led him to the possibility that each of them had developed some sort of immersion lithography lens capabilities as their eyes failed. That did not explain the selective nature of their viewings.

In spite of the less-than-holy interactions that he had had with the Sentinels, their existence, even their capacity to be invisible, was, in large part due to the purity of their lives, values, beliefs and practices.

Now, he was going to face (if that word even applied here) the entire collection of invisible people in the city, with only three wholesome wraiths and a felon ghost as allies. Was he nuts? The real problem was that Harry had no clue as to how deeply involved he now was, or what legions he would face.

The Brood Council Sentinels had been unprepared for Lyle's escape. Had he been human, they would have understood his frailty. But refusal to relinquish his link – that was unheard of in their realm. It was some time before they comprehended what had transpired. It was a full twenty-four hours before they had communicated with the rest of the Council, and had made a decision. They would track him down, and render him redundant. And then they would proceed to rectify the problem of the escapees. Reinforcements would arrive within the day.

These Sentinels were entering uncharted territory. Neither having the sanction of all layers of Councils or the official endorsement of the Courier of the Creed from the Council of the Pure, they had embarked on an innovative quest to resolve the matter of expansion of the sect.

For decades, Councils had been gridlocked by the inability to agree upon a formula and technique for expansion. The Rule of 24 held them firmly. The reluctance to employ techniques that required interference and interaction with humans held them back. Moral purity held them back.

Bold and daring Sentinels secretly had proposed a solution, clandestinely, a full decade earlier. Across the globe, feelers were proffered, in an effort to identify those Sentinels with the courage to move forward, to take pioneering steps to ensure the survival of the pure, the Sentinels, the ordained ones.

Slowly, a network of trusted, committed pure Sentinels had been located. Six continents, each with four Brood Councils, were established. The Rule of 24.

If the program proved that the concept would work, then these forward-thinking Sentinels would present their results to influential key ones, and the survival of the sect would be ensured when all others embraced the program. If, somehow, the Councils failed to see the genius of the idea, then these integral innovators would be the beginning of a new era of purity.

The twenty-four breeding programs had succeeded. Until now. That problem would be resolved. Five hundred and seventy-six fervent pure ones would soon face this disruption directly. 576 warriors, if necessary.

Harry's team was outnumbered, out-manoeuvred and out-weaponed. None except Lyle, had any concept of who any of the Council may be, and he was not to be fully trusted. None had any way of anticipating the horde of combatants that they would soon not face. None had any method to distinguish the good from the bad. That is, except, possibly, for Kendra and Harry, themselves.

Three of the five city families were accounted for, with Lyle, Jakob and Elsteth. They could identify each of the other twenty-three in their colony (21 in Jakob's, with the loss of Faith and the conversion of Corbin). Lyle, Jake and Elsteth could identify the other two key ones. Lyle could identify the four Brood Sentinels. Kendra could identify one other: her kidnapper. That left more than 20 unknowns in the city alone, and hundreds more in the immediate area. That number caused stress for the four Sentinels in the group. It was not a multiple of 24. For a different reason, those odds caused stress for Harry.

He needed to understand the terms of engagement, needed to learn more about his opponents. Up until now, the Sentinels had the distinct advantage. They were fully aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their nemesis. Harry knew almost nothing about them.

He needed background, history, how they operated, how they thought, what their

motivations may be, what they would be capable of when challenged, and, mostly, what their limitations were.

Jake would be of value here.

“Why do you think that Kendra and I are able to see some of you, when other people can’t?”

“I have been thinking about that. When I first learned that a few humans could see us in our natural state, I thought that it was just an oddity. You know, an aberration. But then I noticed that the humans that could see us were the ones that seemed to be closer to us. That is, more pure, more fair and untainted in the way they handled things.

Harry was tempted to respond regarding the so-called purity of the Sentinels that he had learned about, but he refrained,

“So there are more than just the two of us that can see you?”

“Actually, every day, there seem to be more and more. We have discussed this at length in our weekly and daily meetings. Some of us have suggested that, because some of you are less involved in human interaction, your minds are reverting to a more natural state. When there is less to interfere with what you call “sixth sense,” you are more able to access that original ability.

The problem that a few of us recognized was that it should have been the more indolent humans, the ones that spent their time with gadgets and tricks like texting on cell phones, and Twitter and

other ways of communication without interaction. It was even suggested that the more simple-minded should be able to see us.

In fact, some of those who have mental conditions that isolate them from everyday human interaction have always been able to see and hear us. It's just that you humans choose to interpret that as a weak mind, or delusions, when they actually are more in touch with reality than most of you."

"So, to be a little more brief, what are you saying?"

Jake smiled. That was an uncommon reaction from a rather expressionless partner.

"You see us for two reasons. You allow yourself to see the good in others, and we happen to have more of that than most people."

He held up his hand to prevent Harry from making a flippant retort.

"More of it. I have learned that we have quite a number of flaws, as well."

"And Number 2?"

Physiological. You have the added advantage over others. You are becoming blind to human foibles. Indeed, your eyes have deteriorated to the point where they see the world differently than other people's."

"I thought so," declared Harry. "Physiological. There had to be an explanation that I could relate to. I checked it out on the 'Net. Our eye lens are different from others!"

Jake smiled, more broadly.

"If that's the explanation that you prefer."

"Can we find more of the humans that see you guys? How many more in this city, for example."

"It's never about numbers, Harry. Remember your very human expression? Right makes might. We have that strength."

That cliché did not reassure the sceptical cop.

Elsteth approached the problem from a different angle.

"Maybe we should look at what makes us different from you. You know how to deal with people in your work. But you seem to be able to understand their position, no matter how extreme it may be."

"Empathy?"

"Yes. I think that your ability to empathize with people, regardless of their status, makes you a stronger cop. Even a stronger human. If you can try to understand us, maybe that will give you an edge. Because I've got to say, we have done a poor job of understanding you."

Corbin spoke up, then.

"All our family seems to want to do is protect you. Like you aren't capable of making your own decisions. But each one of us, as soon as we have been designated as adults, is responsible for doing the right thing."

He had not thought out that position fully. It was typical of younger people, and the irony of his statement was lost on him.

"We aren't given choice," Elsteth continued. "None of us choose. Jakob showed me that, when he couldn't bring himself to violate the Creed, no matter how wrong it was."

Jake flushed.

"There is a difference between sympathy and empathy. There's a big difference between doing what is right and doing what you are told is right."

Harry hadn't been briefed on the Council meetings yet, so the undertones of Elsteth's comments were lost on him.

"I think I know what you are saying. It's an old human expression. You've got to walk a mile in their shoes."

Kendra spoke up. "I think, Harry, they've been around here a lot longer than us. They probably have heard that expression."

Harry laughed heartily at his own oversight.

"We're going to need to figure out the vulnerable points of these Sentinels that did the kidnapping. You four are going to have to give me a crash course on Sentinel lore."

Lyle was unsure that he wanted to expose his underthroat. It was one thing to have to turn to humans for help. It was quite another to render himself helpless. He had not spoken up deliberately. He wanted to hedge his bets.

"There are others here who may be more capable of providing that information," he said.

Elsteth, being a Foundation Sentinel, had been steeped in the rites and traditions of the sect.

She had been expected to maintain and pass on this knowledge. She now was passing it on to an outsider.

For the next four hours, the six of them discussed various aspects of Sentinel tenets and principles. Harry learned of the commitment to providing safe haven for their human counterparts, dating back to the Roman Empire. He learned how, at the creation of the sect, the Sentinels were simply humans, who set up their own underground counterculture, in order to thwart the overbearing autocracy of the Roman elite.

As each generation passed, the initial concept of Guardianship altered, adapted to suit the circumstances and events of the time. But, as greater numbers made management of the group more difficult, and as different interpretations of the principles of the Sentinels arose, a need to provide clear, concrete direction, unassailable and unyielding to individual alteration became clear. This became the genesis of the Creed of the Council.

While history was important, Harry wanted to zero in on behaviours and motivations. For that, he would turn to both Elsteth and Corbin. He needed to understand the differences in the way Sentinels reacted compared to the way humans responded. For this he would need Jake's advice. Lastly, he needed to understand what would drive a Sentinel, committed to purity and righteousness, to succumb to base actions and

deviance. On deviance, Lyle was the authority. Harry hated Lyle. There was no reason to deny it, even to himself. This was a Sentinel sworn to do what was right, and he had violated the sanctity of the Creed. This was a lawyer, bound to defend the law, and he had crossed it undeniably. This was a man sworn to defend those in need of his help, and he had placed them at risk, sacrificed their lives, for his own gain. Above all, this was an animal that had, without conscience, allowed the killings of innocents. He was the garbage that had killed Harry's wife.

But Harry had a duty. He would put biases aside. He started with Lyle.

"I need to clear up something before we begin to work together, here. I need you to know that, the moment that we no longer require your assistance, you will be turned over to the force, to be dealt with by our law. I need you to know that, personally, I will be making a point of following your case, and seeing that proper justice is handed out. I don't like you, on a variety of fronts. But I need you at this moment. Is that clear?"

It was, indelibly.

"You are intimately aware of the law. You know it will not be lenient in this matter. Expect to spend the rest of your days in a cell."

Elsteth offered her input.

"I will provide all of the information that these

humans will need to deal with you, and to hold you. I will make sure that all the Sentinel secrets will be available to this cop, to carry out what he needs to do to you.”

She turned to Harry.

“I suggest that you take steps now to make sure that Lyle does not discard the link, and make his escape at a time that suits him.”

It was a crucial point. So long as Lyle kept his link, he was visible. Once he removed it from his person, he would meld into the surroundings, so far as Harry and the other officers could have seen. If Lyle were able to hide that link in the process, he would be able to survive, once he had retrieved it.

But Lyle also knew he would be pursued, located and terminated by the Brood Council if he returned to their world. Should Harry complete his task, he would be forever held in an intolerably common prison. Should any of his felon friends discover his treachery, he would be abused and probably killed by them.

Lyle chose his only viable option. He tossed his link forcefully at the blind Kendra, knowing that each Sentinel and Harry would react predictably. They would try to catch it in flight before she was injured. Their focus redirected, Lyle made his final escape. He would be obsolete within hours. He had no need for or intention of retrieving his link.

Harry, though, saw the link for what it was: a clue

to Sentinel physiology that may later become vital. He held it as evidence.

He next turned back to Jake. This was the partner that he thought that he knew. Jake, or Jakob, was still the same person, with the same value system. His moral sense seemed only slightly tarnished. But he had a secret life. If Jakob had been gay, and had “come out of the closet,” Harry would not have so much as blinked. One’s sexual orientation was not what a good cop partner relied upon. It was the integrity, the unflinching dedication to standing up for what was right. Jake still demonstrated much of those qualities, but he had failed, initially, to step forward and stand by Elsteth. Yet, he had just confessed to that weakness, and seemed prepared to make amends. Harry was ready to allow that Jake was merely being human.

However, it seemed odd that Harry was asking Jake – the most pastel shade of personality colour – for his take on the most extreme shade of personality colour. Jake’s insight into human behaviour, though, might serve well.

“I believe that you do not have a malicious bone in your body.”

He stopped, then asked, as an aside, “You do have bones in your body don’t you?”

It was an attempt at levity that was well received. The remaining Sentinels smiled. Harry took that as outrageous mirth at his joke from this expressionless crew. Kendra laughed loudly and

energetically.

“But I have worked with you for years, and fought to keep you as my partner, mostly because of your sense of humanity, and your compassion. This is no slight on Ms. Smith, here, but I think you may have the greatest ability to understand what may have caused the Brood Sentinels to begin this program of breeding. Why would they cross that line, or are they acting on some higher direction?”

“We Sentinels learn, from an early age, that the Creed is ultimate. It is not an authority. It is merely that, out of respect for generation after generation of learning, we acknowledge that our ancestors were endowed with the gift of being able to assemble all the wisdom of righteousness that we would ever need. These Brood Sentinels, they would have acted, at least initially, out of a firm belief that they were doing what the Creed required.”

“So, you don’t think it was some rebel group, looking to set up a new band, or something like that.”

“No, not at the outset. Most likely not ever. I have seen, but have chosen to overlook, frequent individual behaviours that were well intended. We have been taught that we should assume positive intent where it comes to Sentinel behaviour.”

“That’s a little hypocritical, isn’t it? The first thing you look at with humans is our dishonest

behaviour.”

“That’s different.” Jake paused. “Well, maybe it isn’t different. Yes, it’s hypocritical. But if any of us were to challenge the rightness of our Creed, it could lead to deviancies and misbehaviours for personal gain.”

He looked over to Corbin at that moment, locking eyes with him. Corbin looked down, then away.

“Perhaps, we should have allowed for a little individuality, in hindsight.”

Corbin flushed, raised his head slightly to Jake, then bowed it ever so minimally, as if to thank his key one.

“But these villains, they would not have started out as a group of thugs, so they must have come together in a common cause. Say, the need to find new blood.”

“But Lyle...” Harry left the question incomplete, its intent clear.

“Lyle acted individually. And maybe, at the outset, he had the best intentions. But, he was asked to associate with the lowest of low -- your criminal types. That is a contagion against which the Sentinels have insulated themselves for hundreds of years. With the exception of the Foundation.”

He acknowledged Elsteth, then, as an aside, he directed to her, “I am sorry. I sincerely am.”

Then he continued.

“The Sentinels who were involved would have been prompted by a greater purpose. We have,

for example, been talking about the need to expand our families. It is an immense hurdle to overcome. We have been discussing it for years, without success. Perhaps these few made the choice to solve the problem without consensus.”

“Is that likely?”

“Likely? No. I would think that there may be others involved, others that have greater sway. Perhaps others at the Council of the Communities.”

This new avenue required that Jake elaborate on the structure of the Councils. He did so, at length. The day moved forward, hour by hour. But Harry needed to know before he decided how to act. It was another strength of his character.

The revelation that the Sentinels in the breeding program may have had direction from outside was his greatest worry. It was one thing to tangle with a half-dozen opponents that you could not see, but quite another to have thousands of them coming at you from all directions.

Having exhausted his questions for Jake, Harry turned his inquisition toward Elsteth. Until he could figure out how Corbin could be utilized, he would not interrogate him. Harry was taking charge, and the Sentinels, unused to authority, willingly acquiesced.

“You are the expert in your history, correct?”

He didn’t wait for her to answer, having already been advised that this was the case.

“So what is the purpose of these levels of

authority?

Elsteth pointed out that there were no levels, or authority. They were layers, with each having a different physical jurisdiction.

“So, that means that all you have is an Amway structure of anarchy?”

Elsteth didn’t understand the analogy.

“It’s not anarchy. It actually has worked well, mostly”

“Until you need a fast decision, or clear thinking.”

In the recesses of his mind, he had determined that Dana had been killed because no Sentinel had the temerity to form an opinion or speak up. Without the need to expand their population, and without the willingness to decide on a process to achieve that, some rebel Sentinels had taken matters into their own hands. There was an element of bitterness in his voice, momentarily.

“These layers, then, serve to do what?”

“They allow us to grow, to deal with a changing world of humans and a changing world of need for our help in a methodical manner.”

That word, “methodical,” caught Harry’s attention.

“Then, there must be a methodical way to deal with those of you who do not stay within guidelines.”

“There has never been a punishment, as such. Those that deviate are sent to the outside world – to your world – and asked to give up their links.”

“Have any refused?”

“Not so much refused. They have been

persuaded. If they do not give up their link, they would not be able to enter into the realm of the afterlife.”

“You mean, heaven?”

“Sort of. It is a little like your stores. You have bargain stores, discount stores, mainstream stores, upscale stores. Better stuff in each store as you move along. For us, it’s like that. How much good you do determines where you will spend the afterlife. How bad you do, too.”

“So no one wants to go to hell, so they give up life. Sounds a little strange.”

“You don’t believe in the afterlife?”

“What I believe is not important, but no.” Thoughts of Dana hit him. He added, “until recently.”

“But isn’t that the same thing that you do to the old people in your religion?”

“It is not religion. It is a way of doing things.”

Harry reflected. “I knew a guy once, into far-east philosophy. Told me that we are not human doings. We are human beings.”

The analogy was lost on Elsteth, too. Corbin understood, but remained silent.

Harry thought for a while, before asking his next question.

“If no one questions decisions, and no one has authority, then everything needs to operate in a very regimented way.”

“Yes. We have a way of doing things, and to maintain good order, everyone follows the guide.

It means we all work for the same good reason.”

It hit Harry that, if things were as predictable as they seemed, the discipline could be an advantage for his team.

Elsteth obliged Harry by providing in-depth detail on the regularity of meetings and their agendas, the need for consensus, the scheduling of other Councils, the links between the various layers through select key ones being designated to the next layer of the sect.

As they talked about the makeup of the Sentinels, Harry began to calculate. If the society expanded as the need dictated, and if there had been an urgent need to discuss that expansion, then the solution of breeding new members probably was not directed from above. And, if it was not directed from above, then it was just as likely to spontaneously occur to other divisions of this group, or, more perilously, among other factions. That meant that this group probably was coordinating with others. It was an avenue he needed to examine.

“Next order of business. Who knows anything about chemistry? Who knows about lutetium?”

The answer was, no one. Kendra offered to study up.

The Brood Council had met. There were four decisions made. First, they would begin the process of reclaiming their young. Second, they would seek out Lyle and deal with him. Third,

they would meet with the other Brood Council key ones, along with all members of this classified faction in an unprecedented open forum. No consensus. Decisions were vital, and urgent. Lastly, they would take care of this troublesome cop.

In the meantime, the Council of the Communities had convened, ahead of schedule. The consensus was that they would request a special meeting of the Council of the Countries. There was an urgency to their actions, and all present agreed that the Creed did not specifically deny them the opportunity or right to meet in addition to the regular monthly meeting.

THE FIRST ASSAULT

Jake led the first charge. He called for, insisted on and entered the Council of the Communities emergency meeting without his precious link, but with his valued partner. It was a pre-emptive strike that took every key one present by surprise. Such a breach of protocol had never before occurred. Such a violation of the “segregation” concept was tantamount to rebellion. Jake insisted. Harry remained, holding Lyle’s link.

“I am going to be heard. This is not up for vote,” Jake insisted. “My partner is here for three reasons. He is my partner. He holds Sentinel Sarbit’s link, entitling him to Lyle’s spot at the table. We are at war.”

There were some quiet rumblings, but all others remained silent, as Harry spelled out what had transpired.

He summed up his dissertation.

“These Sentinels who perpetrated this horrible series of violent actions against us humans, they will be held accountable. They will be brought to justice. Yours or ours. Preferably ours. It is not up for debate whether they did this crime. They did. I am sure that at least a few of them are present in this gathering. I have one woman – a victim of these assaults -- available to identify

them. She will.”

Kendra, indeed, was outside the chamber, waiting to examine each Sentinel as he departed. Elsteth, under condemnation, waited, as well, hidden. She would follow the first one identified by Kendra. Corbin would follow the second, Jake, the third, if necessary. Kendra, by vote of the group, was directed to stay back, in case one of the Brood Sentinels identified her, and turned pursuer into prey.

Harry concluded.

“We need you to find and identify those responsible. If you are also responsible, or if you participated in any way, our law will hold you accountable. And we have ways.” He waved his lutetium link for emphasis. “Understood?”

Without waiting for a formal reply, Harry indicated to Jake that it was time for them to leave. They had to be prepared for the end of the meeting, regardless of how long it took or what decision was rendered.

Jakob and Harry rejoined the others, and immediately moved into their respective positions to intercept and follow the assigned targets. Kendra took her strategic position where the other members of her group could see her, but so that she could not be seen by those leaving the meeting.

It was a full two hours before it adjourned. They had re-commenced the gathering, in accordance with the protocols that they had followed for

centuries. That delay convinced the three rebels that there would be no vote in their favour.

Twenty had departed before Kendra signalled to Elsteth. Twenty-two and twenty-three also were assigned to the group: first Corbin and then Jake. Last to leave was the key one who had captained the meeting. Kendra shook her head. He was not one of them.

Harry made an executive decision. Before the Sentinel disappeared around the corner, Harry attached his hand firmly on the key one's shoulder.

"In the real world," he thought, "this would be an assault. First, you signal that the suspect is under arrest, then grab him."

"What the hell," he told himself, "this is about as far from the real world as I'm going to get."

"Hey, bud. I need to talk to you."

The look of alarm on the Sentinel's face revealed that he had never been accosted before, and had no idea how he should respond.

"You need to answer a question or two for me."

Kendra heard, but did not see the two. Her visions were not infallible.

"So what the hell did you goofs decide?"

Harry chose to be a little vulgar, a little sacrilegious, in case it might upset this ghost, and open him up a bit.

"The vote was that we accept that there was activity, inconsistent with Sentinel principles, which had not been processed through any of

us.”

“Inconsistent? Bloody hell! How the goddam have you angels managed to survive so bloody long, when you can’t see the reality staring back at you?”

It was more than “inconsistent.” Harry wanted to give this guy a vigorous shake.

“None of us in the council had any involvement. We polled each Sentinel present, and the response was negative.”

“Damn, I wish our judges had thought of that! Just ask the damn criminals, ‘Did you commit that crime?’ and if they say ‘No,’ then, hell, there was no crime committed. Boy would that clear up crime in our world. Wish we had thought of that!” The sarcasm dripped from his words. The key one seemed oblivious.

“We will watch for signs, and will deal with our own accordingly. The activity is not acceptable. We are not to interact with humans.”

“You’ll deal with it your way, only if I don’t get to deal with it ours, first. Don’t stand in my way, or there’ll be some inconsistent behaviour that you haven’t anticipated.”

“We’ve been students of human behaviour almost as far back as your own history of civilization takes you. We know how you will respond. Remember, Mr. Police Officer, our duty is to prevent harmful behaviour by humans on each other.”

Harry had nothing more that he wanted to ask, or

say. Rigid or right, or both, the inability of these Sentinels to evolve into individual thought, to see the world through others' eyes, or to acknowledge that, by insisting on protecting humans from themselves that they were actually impeding humans, amazed him.

He released his left hand grip on the Sentinel as he plucked Lyle's link out of his right hand pocket, waving it in the air. Nothing else need be said, as he walked away.

One Sentinel had remained behind, and had covertly passed behind Harry and the key one as they interacted. She chose to follow Jake, who pursued another Sentinel.

Half a block beyond the meeting area, Jake apprehended his target, securing the Sentinel's right hand, by the thumb, swinging him inward toward Jake in a dance-like move, and grabbing the suspect's left hand with his right.

The thumb hold, as innocuous as it seemed, was a paralyzing hold, giving the recipient the choice of losing his thumb, or yielding. The swing inward was a little risky, allowing the suspect a very brief window of opportunity to attack with his free left hand. Seldom did any have sufficiently fast reflexes. By grabbing the left hand with his right, Jake also had his strength against most people's weakness. It also allowed Jake to use his knee to check for the bulge of a lutetium link.

In the real world, it would have been to check for a weapon.

Jake then completed the dance move, completing the circle by swinging the Sentinel another 90 degrees, so that Jake's left arm was around the suspect's neck and Jake was behind him. He now released the guy's left hand and reached into the pocket containing the link.

"You've got about six hours of life, as you know it, left. You're mine, you bastard."

The cop (and a little human) was exposing itself. The Sentinel, alarmed at the manhandling, was, nonetheless, unperturbed by the threat.

"You're going to pay for what you did to those young women."

The Sentinel smiled. "Yes, I will. I know my reward awaits me in the afterlife."

Jake knew the doctrine. He had adhered, dogmatically, to the Creed for thirty-some years. Only in the past few days had he come to realize that it was fallible.

"It will be a long time before you get to enjoy that. Once we tattoo this link into you and lock you up, you'll be enjoying human hospitality in prison for a few decades."

That prospect had not entered into the Sentinel's thinking until now. He reacted by struggling violently to wrench himself free.

Jake knew that he had erred. The Brood captor would have little regard for keeping his thumb intact, if it meant he could join his ancestors in

honour. He released the thumb, dropped his knee into the Sentinel's gut, and snapped his cuffs on the suspect's wrists. Invisible or no, the detainee was now secured.

In his determination to lock up this lawbreaker, Jake let the link fall to the ground, knowing that he could recover it momentarily. Or, so he thought.

In the shadows, the last Sentinel made his move, grabbing the link and escaping.

"That is one that will not rise in the hierarchy of the afterlife," the shadow considered. It was, in his eyes, the worst punishment that could be inflicted on a Sentinel. Any others guilty of this violation of the Creed would be similarly punished.

One of the few kidnappers had been dealt with. Jake knew that there were at least twenty-three others. He hoped that he and Harry's group could identify them, before those Sentinel rebels identified Harry and the crew.

Before the end of the day, two others would be apprehended. By the next morning, both had been freed by persons unknown. Jake, Harry, Elsteth, Corbin and Kendra knew. Those two had been freed, in more ways than one.

The five began the day with a brief, informal meeting of their own. A new strategy needed to be fleshed out.

Jake's report on his apprehension and escape provided food for thought.

"Whenever God closes a door..." Kendra began. She let the phrase hang, knowing that Harry would understand, and not considering that the others may not.

"Yes, precisely," responded Harry.

The Sentinels in the troop waited, knowing that Harry would speak for them. They were not yet free of the confines of group thinking.

"The key, I think, are those links of yours. Tell me again what they symbolize."

Jake elaborated. "It is not so much the symbolism. Although, the emblematic connection between humanity and the Sentinels is important. It has become as essential to our being as food to all of us. You know how, when a new Sentinel is born, a little blood is drawn, mixed with our supply of human blood, and melded with what you may know as octreotate, and then it's made into one of these links." He took his own out, for emphasis.

"Over a couple of centuries, the lutetium became more than symbolic. It appeared to actually become as critical to us as oxygen."

Harry cupped his chin in his palm, thinking.

"I guess one thing that kind of didn't come up is how lutetium works for our territories. We make up a lutetium aluminum garnet compound, and, when a new territory is set up or an old one expanded, twenty-four pieces of lutetium mercury are placed discretely along the perimeter of the zone. So long as we remain in our zone, we

don't need to carry our links. Because it does not contain our DNA, we remain invisible, and yet protected, within that area. As soon as we step out of the region, we are at risk, and need our links on us. But those links keep us visible, and, therefore, more vulnerable. Got it?"

Harry nodded, still thinking. Kendra's window-and-door allegory still tickled at him, and somehow meshed with this information on the Sentinel source of strength. But a reliance on a source of strength always meant that there was a corresponding vulnerability.

He thought of the gangs and bikers with whom he dealt. Their strength was their gang, itself. But that reliance on numbers also exposed them to risk of betrayal, and weakness if they could be segregated from that gang.

"Jake, do you think..." Then he stopped.

"No, Kendra. Do you think..." He trailed off, and stopped.

Elsteth stepped in. "Our Iutetium. You're thinking how you can turn it against the other Sentinels, aren't you?"

Harry nodded, then started again.

"Kendra, do you think that you are able to see these guys here just because your eye lens have adapted, the same way mine are? Or do you think there is more to it than that?"

"Harry, I can't see all of them. I thought it was because I was only seeing the real pure ones. You know, the moral, honest ones. But I did see

all of the kidnappers. So I don't know."

Corbin answered her question before Harry was bale to proceed. "Every one of those creeps actually believed that what they were doing was right. So, in their minds, they were very pure. You didn't see Lyle, did you?"

Kendra agreed. Harry interjected.

"And Jake, do you think that the lutetium combined with that other stuff -- whatever you called it -- is the reason for your powers? You said that there is another compound around each of your territories that still gives you power."

"The lutetium links have our DNA. I think they give us the ability to live, as separate persons. Lutetium, itself, keeps us alive. The lutetium aluminum garnet just allows us to remain hidden to human eyes. It seems to deflect light, somehow. Lutetium not made into the aluminum garnet mix must be in contact with us, for us to be translucent. That's why we are still visible when it is held only in our pockets, or purses."

Elteth was the first to recognize the significance.

"So, Harry, that's it! If we could make lutetium a part of Sentinel physiology, there would be no way of disappearing. Then humans and Sentinels would be on equal footing, again. Do you have an idea as to how we can attach the lutetium permanently to our brethren?"

It was the first time she had made an inference to inequality. She, too, was becoming more human.

"You got it. We got it. Yes, I think I know how."

Harry knew how they would have to proceed, and they must do it without delay. They needed to do it, as well, without detection. One Sentinel had been eavesdropping, unknown to the group. Brecken would alert his pod. It was now his, not Jake's.

The key one from the Council of the Communities had made contact with the key one from the Council of the Countries. "Would it be possible to arrange a special meeting of the Council?"

This flagrant deviation from established practice was spreading like a contagion. Ad hoc meetings, non-formatted agendas, challenges to the protocols of the Creed. Where would it end? The meeting was set.

Set, too, was the second frantic gathering of the local Brood Council remnants. There needed to be a special dispensation from the Central Council of Breeders. Revenge – a human frailty – was being taken against the local Brood Sentinels. Assistance, quick and effective, was needed.

Kendra had been good at her word. Her research had uncovered information on how to make lutetium ions using nothing more than a little watered-down sulphuric acid and a gram or so of lutetium. It was a very malleable, yet tough, metal, it turned out.

"Think of lutetium ions in the same way as that

ionizing air purifier that you have running in your police station,” she pointed out.

The purifier analogy provided the key that the group needed to begin their battle.

THRUST ...

Jake and Harry began work on the plan of attack. Jake, now feeling more sure of himself and of his moral position, worked to disrupt his sect, while Harry worked to resolve his smaller circle of issues – the kidnapping of young women, and the forced subjugation of them. It had dawned on him, but not captured his entire focus, that he would be dealing with matters on a much more global scale very soon.

Elsteth and Corbin had been assigned to monitor the activities of the various colonies in the region. They were up to the task.

How Harry was to obtain lutetium was an issue. Lyle had not disclosed where the stolen minerals were being held, so it would be up to the two other Sentinels to locate it.

Both Jake and Harry remained focused on two tasks: confirming that their amateur chemist formula would be effective, and researching what Harry feared: that the kidnappings were not a localized event.

Jake’s task was akin to the evil Dr. Jekyll

experimenting on himself. They still had one link of a former Sentinel in their possession. It would be more than enough.

But was Jakob ready for this immense leap, both of faith and physiology? He had to choose. Would he be willing to remain human for the balance of his natural life? He considered that, to humans, the Sentinel method of birth to obsolescence was far from natural, anyway.

Jake made the choice easily. He would act as guinea pig.

Sulphuric acid was not difficult to obtain. A few hundred grams would be all that was needed. It was a common acid, used in cleaning and etching. He set about setting his makeshift lab – Harry's house – to prepare for the experiment.

"It's no-going-back time, Jake. Are you sure you are up to it?"

Jake had carefully contemplated the morality of it. This was not imposed morality. It was a free choice, made after considering all the ramifications, and the ethics involved. Jake verified that he was ready.

Lutetium in dilute sulphuric acid. It was as easy as making tea. But it was the resulting gaseous output that posed the risk. If it worked as anticipated, Jake would be locked into humanity. The lutetium ions would bind to his chromosomes, irrevocably. Unable to become invisible again, he would be almost useless in dealing surreptitiously with his kin. Humans

would be his kin. That choice, too, had been made.

He shaved a less than a millimetre or so off his link, letting it fall into the vaporizer chamber that held nothing but water. He took one deep breath, paused, and felt the tears forming in his eyes. Then, he closed his eyes, and used the eyedropper to drop twenty drops of acid into the lutetium/water blend. If he needed to, he would stir the mix.

Jake held his face over the spigot of the vaporizer, inhaling one deep breath after another. Harry watched, with a mixture of concern and admiration for his partner's courage.

The link fell from Jake's fingers. He looked up at Harry. Harry glanced around, as if trying to find his partner. He waved his arms in front of him, in a motion that said, "I can't see you." Harry stepped forward in Jake's direction, still holding out his arms, then, with a quick stab of his fingers, Harry poked his friend in the gut. And not so lightly as to be accused of being effeminate.

"Oh, there you are."

"Bastard," Jake laughed. He was already showing humanity.

The two chuckled for a few moments.

"So it works, eh?"

The results were bittersweet. It meant the probable end of three thousand years of tradition, and the assimilation of an entire culture. The

Sentinels would possibly be nothing more than dedicated humans. But, at the same time, the potential for benefit for both the sect and the human population outweighed that loss.

“My results are good and bad, too.” Harry was offering a little bit of consolation, knowing what Jake must be feeling.

“There are at least three other abduction situations that are too similar to ours, here in Canada and the US. And it looks like something’s been going on down under, too. I think we’ve stuck our feet in something unpleasant, and it’s not one little cow pie. It’s a whole damn shit pile.”

So that was it. They were up against more than they could handle. The time had arrived when Harry would have to involve more of the police force and/or a good army of private citizens. This would be, to quote Saddam Hussein, the mother of all battles.

But Harry intended, first, to deal with those who had caused his wife’s death. He would keep that little bit of the fight to himself. And to do that, he needed to move fast. The bureaucracy that would be involved in the upcoming war would start in a cumbersome, foot-dragging manner, and Harry did not want to wait.

“Jake, we have a bit of a problem that I overlooked.”

Harry explained how, at least until Corbin and Elsteth returned, they had no way of

demonstrating the capacity of the Sentinels to vanish.

“What am I going to say to the lieutenant? ‘I have seen these people who are invisible.’ And he is going to say, ‘so show me these invisible people.’ The whole while he is laughing at that absurdity.

“So I’m going to prove it to him. I’m going to say, ‘Well, here’s Jake. He’s one of them, and he used to be invisible, but now he can’t do it. He’s my proof.”

Jake chuckled at Harry’s dilemma.

“I’m sorry, Jake. My ass just can’t take being tossed onto the sidewalk. I’ll have to tell him after you and I take care of our side of the business. You okay with that?”

Jake was.

Elsteth and Corbin returned, without full success. They had not been able to locate the lutetium stash. They had, however, tracked down a couple of other Sentinels, from the local families, that may have had involvement in the Brood Council. Elsteth provided the information on her entire family, Jake & Corbin on theirs, and Elsteth had been able to round up the identities of most of the members of Lyle’s colony.

Fortunately, there would be more than enough lutetium in Jake’s, Elsteth’s, Corbin’s and the dead Sentinel’s links to take care of business in the city, and probably another dozen denizens of Sentinels. Because the only effect of the lithium

ions was to adhere to the chromosomes of the Sentinels receiving it and render them permanently visible, none of the group felt a sense of immorality.

Jake prepared the batch of acid and water for their first stop. It would be his own territory, a zone that he knew intimately.

Brecken awaited Jakob's arrival. He knew there was a plan, but he had no clue what it may be. He only knew that Jakob, Elsteth and Corbin would be involved. The colony already knew of Harry.

Kendra would need to step up.

The first to arrive at the mall was Harry. He had not anticipated Brecken's skulduggery, but had assumed that there may be Brood Sentinels in this organization that the group had not yet identified. If that was so, those villains would most certainly respond to a visit from any of Harry, Elsteth, Jake or Corbin with an aggressive defence. So it would be best to present a flagrant frontal attack, a few flank approaches, and the true rear thrust.

Harry proceeded directly through the mall, knowing that he would draw attention, but was unlikely to draw an overt assault. It would be too public.

He could detect only one Sentinel vision, but felt that there must be more.

Elsteth and Jakob approached, but did not enter the mall. Their presence served as a threat,

drawing other Sentinel resources to them. Between the two, they identified seven Sentinels awaiting their entrance. The two needed to keep these Columbia Mall members of the family inside the building.

Corbin did not enter the area. He would be held in reserve, awaiting any that fled. Brecken was the one that Corbin apprehended. Corbin did not think any others had left.

Kendra, meanwhile, made her way into the mall, looking markedly different in her new male attire. Still blind, but not the blind one that had made up part of the cop's entourage. At least, not in the eyes of the mall colony.

She approached one of the doors leading into the hallways from the loading dock. According to Jake and Corbin, it was in this location that the HVAC systems were centralized. She held in her toolbox three vials of dilute sulphuric acid, and the shavings from the dead Sentinel's link.

No one challenged the rationale behind a blind repairman entering this restricted area. No one asked for her identification, although one maintenance staffer did hold a door open for her. Thank goodness for political correctness, she thought.

Reaching the huge fans that formed the core of the heating system, she set down her toolbox, removing the three vials and combining them into a larger canister, connected to a hose. She withdrew the lutetium shavings, dropped them

into the canister as well, and quickly screwed the lid on it. Then, Kendra felt around to locate the bleed nipple on one of the compressors, and screwed the end of the hose from the canister onto this nipple. As a last step, she squeezed the trigger on the canister to release the gas into the refrigerant.

A Sentinel watched her, hidden behind the masses of equipment in the room. He wanted to make sure that this tradesman stole nothing while unattended.

Kendra rose, withdrew a pair of small bolt cutters from the toolbox, and cut one of the thin lines on the compressor. Gas hissed out, mingling with the air being drawn in by the fans. The Sentinel jumped forward, pushing Kendra aside as soon as she committed this vandalism.

It was too late. Lithium ions were already infiltrating the mall atmosphere.

No one was the wiser, except for the family members, who, in odd places throughout the mall, began appearing to the shoppers, in the nude. There was mild panic, by the shoppers startled by this exhibitionism, the security guards caught unawares, and the Sentinels rushing for cover.

Like roaches scurrying from the light, the colony members scattered.

Mission accomplished. Harry and his crew left the building. Those sect members could be dealt with individually, at a later date. To the best of

Harry's knowledge, none had committed a crime. It would be a while before he would know the specific identity of those Sentinels responsible for his wife's death. In the meantime, there were other families to "out."

... AND COUNTERTHRUST

The Brood Sentinels were not going to be dealt with easily. They had a mission, and it was going to be completed. The immediate hurdle, though, needed to be dealt with. That hurdle had just gotten a lot higher, with the discovery that well over eighty percent of the members of the five colonies within the city had been dealt a dangerous blow. Fortunately, the Brood Sentinels had been in transit when the attacks on the families had occurred. The only apparent casualty had been Brecken. He still was missing. The Council opted to abandon protocol. They had been founded to resolve the concern over the need to expand their horizons and multiply their population. Now they were facing a threat to that population from the very source that they were sworn to protect. But, so far, only a handful of humans and traitors were involved. If the Council acted quickly, they could eradicate that threat, and proceed with their breeding program. Just in this day, it was reported by one of the Council, four of the breeders and children had been located, and plans were in the works to recover them. Just in the past few hours, the cop's home had been pinpointed. It was, they were certain, where the group met. The cop would not be expecting them to counter

attack. It was not in Sentinel nature to do so, and, consequently, they assumed Harry's group would not prepare for that counteroffensive. That would provide the edge to these rebels. They would turn the tables, using the same sulphuric acid on the five that Harry and those four had used in their attack on the colonies.

At the conclusion of this meeting, one would volunteer to sabotage Harry's house, inserting the acid wherever it might do the most damage.

By targeting Harry, the Brood Council hoped to force police, already zealously pursuing Dana's killers, to apply even greater resources to identifying the attackers on Harry's home. That would provide the luxury of time for these special Sentinels to determine a solid defensive strategy to deal with the lithium bombardments.

The Brood gathering was brief. They were all of one mind. Eliminate Harry, Elsteth, Jakob, Corbin and the blind girl. She would not be good breeding stock, anyway, with her penchant for rebellion and nonconformity.

Return fire was now being directed at the five renegades from at least two directions. The Brood Council, by targeting the recovery of the breeding women, would force the police to direct a large number of resources toward protecting the remaining former breeders.

The Sentinel who had been chosen to take care of the cop eagerly embraced the chance to be recognized as the one who had eliminated the

threat to the colonies. He approached Harry's house, knowing that he would not be anticipated, and not be seen.

Unfortunately, Harry was a tactical cop. He had already made sure that his camera security system was recording. And, as an extra precaution, he had also added his own few grams of sulphuric acid blend to his humidifier. The Sentinel paid the price.

Around the region, outed Sentinels, and those who had escaped the wrath of the lithium, met where they could. Some wanted to retaliate. Some wanted the fight to be contained to Harry and his followers before it spread to a greater number of the out-worlders. Some wanted to discuss the matter further. Some wanted to offer a truce, and, specifically, to deal with the rebel Brood Sentinels that had precipitated the problem.

Meetings were chaotic, uncharacteristic. Consensus was impossible. But forward-looking Sentinels prevailed, and majority decisions were reached.

They first chose to pass the dilemma on to the Council of the Communities, who passed it on to the Council of the Countries. The Council of the Pure would not yet be addressed.

The first course of action would be to make a show of dealing with the Brood Sentinels, who appeared to have acted without specific direction

from other Councils. Already, a few had been identified. They would be turned over to the human cop. He had already demonstrated that he would not permit the Sentinel justice to apply. Then, they would deal with Harry, himself, before he was able to involve other forces. Dealing with Harry meant dealing with the other four. Only the most brazen of Sentinels would accept responsibility for countermeasures.

The Council of the Countries reacted with unaccustomed haste. They needed to, since information had been received that a select few human authorities were planning attacks on their bastions.

Within the Council of the Countries, select Brood Sentinels, anonymous to the rest of the key ones, compiled essential counterintelligence, preparing for their next aggressive pre-emptive hit on those who dared to interfere with the Sentinel future. Their responses were more comprehensive: a very forceful, very public mass attack. It would refocus their enemies. Breeder cells quickly were re-located to more secure areas, or fortified additionally where they stood.

Across the globe, force and counterforce was being mobilized.

Harry had been quite selective in his disclosures. Should he chose to go public, universal panic may ensue. Should he choose the incorrect channels of authority within the force, gridlock

and bureaucratic juggling may derail the urgency of the response. Should he choose to involve other levels of security, such as local spy networks, an all-out attack may destroy thousands of guiltless Sentinels. It was an immense balancing act.

He finally selected a course of action. More correctly, he selected a couple.

Harry decided that it was time that Santa rode again, since it was so close to Christmas. Six elves plus himself. Harry enjoyed the irony of the Principle of 24 being employed against the Sentinels. He needed, first, to convince his trusted elves of the existence and scope of the Sentinel sect. That would pose little problem, given his first-hand evidence: Elsteth and Corbin, plus convert Jakob.

The group had concurred with Harry on one vital point: the paramount concern was to rescue the abducted females in every jurisdiction. Bringing the Brood Sentinels to justice would take second spot.

The first task would be to notify all of the areas across six continents where he had identified abduction patterns similar to those in Winnipeg. One other, for instance, had been identified in Canada, two in the USA, and one in England and two more in mainland Europe. He was sure that, eventually, twenty-four would be uncovered. If nothing else, he had learned that these Sentinels were predictable.

Each of his elves was assigned the task of searching out those kidnap centres, and notifying local authorities of what they had uncovered. Patterns, if Harry guessed correctly, would be remarkably similar. Neglected and abandoned suburban industrial areas would be prime real estate in which to secret the victims. Patterns of purchase of alternative energy systems. Patterns of new food or clothing bulk purchases. Patterns relating to the demographics of those people who had disappeared. Predictability and consistency made for easy identification of the template used. Early in the recovery process, Harry had been alerted to a distinctive anomaly regarding the warehouse where this city's victims had been detained. While Harry had focused on Lyle Sarbit's probable involvement in the kidnappings, Jake had uncovered a startling fact.

Lyle had, indeed, not been involved. His role as counsel for the buyers of the industrial/warehouse park, though, had been deliberate. Twenty-four shareholders formed the corporation that had acquired the property. Those shareholders were international in makeup, coming from a variety of countries. They had used human representatives to complete the purchase.

If farmland had been involved in the purchase, or a viable contemporary business, or if the property had been of a sizeable value, that sale may have been subject to scrutiny under local ownership

guidelines and laws. It had not. The choice had been strategic. It was a deliberate effort to thwart the law and avoid scrutiny.

Jake hypothesized that, in all likelihood, the same two dozen corporate partners would be identified in purchases in other countries and continents, making similar acquisitions. Just look for those buyers, correlate them to warehouse-type purchases where the property had not been developed, and you would have pinpointed the prime locale for hiding of the breeding females.

Jake was right on target. Within 24 hours, five of the seventeen other brood colonies had been raided. Four raids resulted in successful recovery of dozens of women. One had recently been vacated.

It would be several days before another four colonies were identified, with the contingent raids. Of 22 located brood centres, eighteen would produce the desired result of rescuing the women inside.

While the rescue operations were being planned, coordinated and carried out, Harry proceeded with the second course of action.

By now, the element of surprise that had been successfully capitalized upon during the city raids was no longer an option. Communication between colonies and councils would be swift, even if reaction lagged. Therefore, using local ventilation systems to disperse the lutetium ions would be ineffective.

Lutetium had shown to have no adverse effects on humans, even if it had irrevocably altered the genetic balance of the Sentinels. One day of exposure versus the 3,000 years that had been experienced by the Sentinels was a necessary trade-off, in order to launch the offensive against the sect.

It was Elsteth who suggested the water supply.

“Every colony operates in densely populated areas, because that is where the greatest concentration of crime occurs. And every high-population area relies on a central water supply. Even in India and other regions of Asia and Africa, river and lake water supplies these cities. If we can use that method for hitting the families that have established there, we can deal with almost all of them in very short order.”

Even though Harry considered himself to be open-minded, he was amazed that a street person would know such things. He chastised himself, almost as soon as the stereotypical response formulated in his mind, for being so myopic. And the solution was so simple.

One, they needed a broadly based carrier for dispersing the lutetium ions. Since movement by focused air systems was out, that left only food and water. Food-borne solutions would take an extremely long time. Therefore, water was the only option.

Two, they needed a carrier that was suited for lutetium ion distribution. Lutetium was quite

electropositive and reacted slowly with cold water and quite quickly with hot water to form lutetium hydroxide. In drinking water, it would be readily absorbed by the body. In hot water, it would vaporize easily and disperse in the air. In either event, it would distribute effectively and comprehensively.

Three, they needed to access distribution networks with little risk of detection. Simply drop lithium dust or fine particles into reservoirs, streams or water sources such as lakes, and, within days, it would find its way into homes and public places, and, from there, into the bodies of everyone who consumed water. That is, everyone.

There remained, though, just one problem; a big one. The supply of lutetium. And the one source of lutetium that had been received at the hospital was secured somewhere by the rebel Sentinels. They needed to tap into that stockpile, or another source. It would be sufficient to treat half of the entire North American water system. The rest would have to be found elsewhere.

While the entire Brood Council dominion numbered a mere 600 Sentinels, their reach exceeded 14,000. As sizeable as that army of revolutionaries may have seemed, the sheer extent of the Sentinel sect dwarfed it, at nearly 9,000,000 members. That imbalance concerned Jake and his associates, immensely. How could they justify disrupting that many of their former

Sentinel families, in order to interject themselves against an insurgency of 14,000?

It was Corbin who provided the logic.

“We aren’t destroying 9,000,000 lives. Any one of us, or all, can choose to remain loyal to our values, even if we cannot count on being cloaked in invisibility. And, if we believe in what we do, shouldn’t we be willing to be seen doing it? Doesn’t the lawbreaker want to hide what he does? I think it makes us more human, but it also makes us more accountable. I have to make a choice, and I have to accept that it was my own choice. We are simply keeping those of us who want to hide from responsibility from doing so.”

It was an intriguing speech, given that mere weeks earlier, no Sentinel would have spoken of deviating from the Creed as every other Sentinel saw it, let alone talk about choice and individual accountability. But it was enough to convince the other two Sentinels, Kendra and Harry that they were doing what they found to be morally right.

The Brood Council – all 550 plus of them, were mobilizing. Swift action was essential, and the time for adherence to long-held traditions was over. Survival was at stake. It was obvious that they were under attack, that their culture was being bombarded, and that their existence was being challenged. Whether it was by a handful of humans or an entire population was irrelevant.

To prevent annihilation, aggressive action was required.

The Brood Sentinels had long made the choice between complete adherence to the Creed, or reshaping of the civilization which they had determined to protect. With that choice came the tacit decision to step beyond the Creed's dictum of morality. Dogma would be a luxury.

In the end, the Creed established that the Sentinels' sole reason for existence was to protect the human race from self-emulation and ethical decay.

Sometimes, it was essential to tear down, before one could build up. Corruption had flourished to the point where these Sentinels felt no compunction against tearing down what was decadent, in order to rebuild it in its righteous capacity. To do that, the Brood Council had determined that the breeding program was the only solution, both for the survival of the Sentinel sect, and for its capacity to protect their wards – the humans.

The Brood Council members knew, in their hearts, that they were doing the right thing. They must destroy those that sought to destroy them. But, in the course of destroying their enemies, there would be casualties.

The Brood Sentinels had been aware that select humans were able to perceive them, even when cloaked in translucence. Rapid research had found that humans who perceived illusions often

had psychotic episodes, suffered from schizophrenia or had other such disorders. At the same time, it was widely known, in human and Sentinel circles, that many of the human criminal element suffered from myriad manifestations of impulse control disorders. Therein was a commonality that opened up an opportunity for attack by the Brood rebels.

Of course, the first concern was to immobilize those that were threatening the survival of the breeding program. Human medicine provided the answer, in the form of serotonin uptake inhibitor drugs, such as phenyl group medication such as Citalopram. A sedative, it would reach into the enemy system, rendering those with a penchant for violent and aggressive behaviour more placid. For those humans who experienced visions of the Sentinels, the antipsychotic, neuroleptic drug phenothiazine would quell those episodes. Over the half dozen years of the Breeding Program, both medications had been utilized to calm breeding stock.

This solution appeared ideal. A corollary effect of inundating the cities, where opponents dwelled, with these compounds would be to reduce, in a huge way, the criminal acts of other residents, and thus assist the Sentinels in fulfilling their historic mandate. This option had, until now, been unavailable to the sect, because of restrictions on interceding or interacting with the Sentinel wards.

How to disperse the compounds, in sufficient quantities, presented a challenge. But, given that, at least one of the drugs was soluble in acetic acid, and that acetic acid blended well with water, the perfect solution would be to inject the two drug families, en masse, into city water supplies.

Because of the quantity of medicines required, wholesale dumping into reservoirs was not an option, since such activities most likely would be detected immediately and responsive action taken. The Sentinels could not risk losing the window of opportunity that existed with the surprise factor.

In order to ensure comprehensive and effective delivery of the suppressants into each home and business in a given city, they would have to be delivered by infusing them directly into supply lines. These supply lines often ran dozens or even hundreds of miles from the source supply of water, through desolate or remote regions. They must tap into those aqueducts where they could.

A new mannequin had been discovered by mall security, standing alone at the entrance to the Columbia Shopping Centre. If it were not for the fact that it had no eyes and no arms, it would have been the precise replica of Lyle Sarbit. It was a clear warning to those rebels that might want to confront the Brood Council.

The two combatants headed on a collision

course, unaware of the others' intent.

THE WAR BEGINS

Harry's strategy again involved his elves. Each had been convinced that he was not suffering from some sort of mental disorder, and, in fact, accepted that the Sentinels existed, had been integral in the kidnappings, and posed a critical threat. They further agreed that the plan to use lutetium posed little risk to humans, and little health risk to any species closely related to humans.

The hospital worker in the group – a colleague of Dana's – was the key to accessing the needed supply of the rare earth metal. A simple, yet workable plan to secure the vital tool was devised. By arranging for a replacement for the materials that had been previously shipped and stolen, and then arranging for two of the three cops in the elf brigade to be the couriers, a new supply, much smaller than the original, was sourced. It would be sufficient for no more than forty water supplies.

Two of the elves also had pilot's licences. Thanks to 9/11, every police force had been provided with information on "vulnerable" facilities, which included water reservoirs. Almost without exception or impediment, the crew was able to establish and prioritize their targets.

Still, they faced huge odds: eleven combatants

against thousands. It would be too risky to involve the public, at this point.

Unknown to Harry and the three wraiths, a fourth invisible force had been part of their strategizing for some time. On direction of the majority of the Council of Civil Direction, a trusted one from that Council had infiltrated. It was a triumph that had been duplicated within the Brood Council, and made possible through a combination of technology and evolution.

Quite simply, the purest of the Sentinels, comprising the Council of the Pure, had risen to their level of influence, not through political machinations, but by integrity. They were the future of the sect, having achieved an echelon through dedication to rightness, regardless of origin, influence or dogma. They were destined to be the ancestors of the ethereal existence of the human race. And now, before their time, they had become the keys to survival, of both species. It was right to step in to the chaos that was about to unfold.

The Council of the Pure – morally uncorrupted – had never been seen, even by other Sentinels. The simple fact was that they were invisible. Pure. Pure of heart, pure of mind, pure of energy. And, for the first time in their collective experiences, they were confronted with decisions of morality that would test them severely. They were to decide the fate of Sentinel continuation

and the future of humanity, simultaneously.

The Brood Council Sentinels acted as one. There was a desperate need for more recruits to assist in the upcoming battle. To ensure compliance, each Sentinel met with his or her Council, explaining how these humans were about to destroy the secrecy and lift the veils of their being for the world to see. The Sentinels elaborated on how this exposure would virtually incapacitate them, in their efforts to covertly protect their human charges. In the end, every Council of the Communities on which the 570 plus Sentinels sat agreed, by consensus, that they needed to respond, forcefully. 14,000 Sentinels mobilized. In addition, nearly 318,000 more, from the Council of the Countries, concurred. It was a massive response, to eradicate the threat posed by the eleven.

Harry, Elsteth, Corbin, Kendra and Jake, along with the elves, migrated to their targets that evening, hoping to elude any Sentinels who may have escaped the effects of the lutetium ion bombardment within their colonies, as well as any mercenary Sentinels recruited from outlying families and Councils.

It would be a quick strike, involving minimal risk of detection. In order to cross their own security screening barriers, however, seven of them needed to pass through the border checkpoints by land. In this way, airport and seaport metal

screening devices would not be alerted. Once safely through the checkpoints, they would fly to their first designated destination, deposit their vials of lutetium hydroxide into the water systems, and move onto their next stop.

Without travel documents or passports, Elsteth, Jakob and Corbin would take care of Canadian targets.

One of the elves became the first casualty, intercepted by a Sentinel working at the customs entry point on the unarmed border. He was armed.

Harry, too, fell victim to the most pedantic of impediments: a blizzard that closed the only interstate highway available to him. Consequently, eight targets would not be reached.

It was the border patrol that alerted other Sentinels. The elf had been searched by customs officers, and was found to be smuggling an unidentified container of what appeared to be a biological agent. Homeland Security assumed control of the situation. The guard, though, did not need to await lab tests. He knew, immediately, what it was. His colleagues in the sect soon would, as well.

Later that day, the elf mysteriously vanished from custody, assisted by a person or persons unknown (and unseen).

Harry languished at the truck stop immediately

south of the international border.

The Brood Council was on the move. Once their mission was accomplished, controlling their human charges would be simplified. They were doing what they knew to be the right, and righteous, thing.

One by one, though, Sentinels across the globe were being summoned to emergency meetings of all levels of the Councils: Councils of the Citizenry, Council of the Communities, Councils of the Countries. All would attend, or risk being ostracized from their colonies. Even the Brood Council Sentinels complied.

A universal strategy, on direction from the Council of the Pure, would be presented, they were informed.

In all, twenty-five members of the Council of the Countries and the Councils of the Communities did not attend. They, the trusted Sentinels appointed by the Council of the Pure, had other matters to which they attended. The Courier of the Council Creed led the process.

It was, then, a startling and unforeseen event that unfolded for Harry.

Out of the snow, a naked being approached. But it was more than a naked being. It was a being of no substance, yet a being of substantial

radiance. At first, Harry was convinced that he was experiencing his own demise, and that a mythical angel of light was coming for him.

Rather, the perceived angel reached out, opened the locked car door, and rested a warm palm on Harry's shoulder.

"Come, we have work to do."

And Harry was transported beyond the blizzard that had been his millstone.

Nine others yielded to similar unearthly experiences that evening. The eleven were alone no longer. The Council of the Pure had decided, chosen, and acted.

THE END (AS IT WAS)

There still was a logistical issue. How does a society go about assimilating 8,000,000 new citizens, each without identity or assets?

Of course, once respective trusted government contacts were informed and understood the situation, the secret of the millions was safe, at least in the short term.

But 8,000,000 Sentinels, less the nearly 400,000 who had not demonstrated sufficient purity of morals, would continue pursuing their purpose in life, without the benefit of translucence. The Council of the Pure had seen to that, as they guided Harry and the other nine through the evening of the great battle, covertly dispersing their lutetium bombs wherever Councils met.

As the Council of the Pure had decided, nearly unanimously, it was the right and ethical thing to do.

Membership in the Sentinel sect took an initial beating. Over half of the “outed” wraiths, granted the freedom to choose, opted for an earthly existence. Mostly, it was the younger members. But, in the next few months, a surprising turn of events occurred. As awareness of their existence became public, hordes of new, human recruits stepped forward to offer themselves, in

any capacity, as servants of goodness. Many were deemed unsuitable, with self-interest their prime objective. The majority vote of the restructured and newly chartered Sentinel organization determined admittance or rejection. The Council of the Pure was pleased at this revitalized interest in morality, and encouraged every member to look into their hearts, and make a free choice.

In the end, though, Harry, Kendra, Corbin and Elsteth chose to remain as they now were: earthly creatures. As Jakob returned to his origins, he wept openly and unashamedly, torn between his commitment to his faith and his fondness for human bonds of friendship. The five would work well together in the future, he assured them.

“Six,” Kendra corrected him, as she and Corbin beamed. Corbin rubbed her belly for luck.

EPILOGUE

There was still the matter of making whole the victims of the Mengele-like breeding program. There was nothing in the Creed of the Council, the Principles of the Guiding Life, or the Sentinel history that would assist in choosing the proper recourse. The Council of the Pure had no solutions that they could offer to Harry. It would be the human process of trial and error that would eventually make them whole.

In the meantime, numerous children of these women had begun demonstrating unique characteristics. Pure, untroubled children, they demonstrated, universally, an uncanny ability to see through the grey confusion of any situation, and uncover solutions that were collectively embraced. These were the next generation of human angels.

They also possessed an eerie capacity, kept hidden from authorities, to see visions. Only the twenty-five of the Pure understood, and they remained silent.