

Chapter 1 - Martin's Prep Work

Martin Lomb worked feverishly, feeling like he was running out of time. That wasn't really his name anymore, it was Martin CS41658; at least they let him keep the Martin. Switching the tool at the end of his serpentine arm, he stole a nervous glance at the clock that read 5:15 a.m.

"I have to get this done by seven or I'll never do it," he said as he wiped at the sweat on his upper lip. Another shock went through the wires leading to the electrodes in his head as he winced. He took a deep breath and paused to let the pain die down to a dull ache.

"Okay, time to pop another one," he thought as he grimaced and reached for the bottle of black market painkillers that was nearly empty.

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He finished the bypass, looping the circuit, and hoped that the central processor wouldn't see the tampering until it was too late. Slowly replacing the panel, he glanced at the clock again.

"Five forty-five, just a couple more things to do."

With a nervous smile, he changed to a ratchet tool and wriggled his legless torso beneath the jacked-up body of the little mobile unit. The sleek metal yoke grafted onto his neck and shoulders made moving in the confined space difficult. As he suspected, this was going to be the hardest part. The homemade tools that his benefactor had provided were not a perfect fit. With a little patience he was able to drop the transaxle, gaining him access to the hydra gear assembly. He changed the ratios then added the locking device. This would cancel the braking action and prevent the transmission from down shifting once it reached the desired speed. Next, he opened a flap on the side of the chassis and located the oblong module buried deep inside. He had been told that this little device regulated his shielding. He didn't know if it was true but he hoped it was. He pulled the booster out of his bag and held it up, examining it closely.

"Doesn't look like much," he said, turning it over and watching the blinking red lights as they tracked along the bottom. The three coupling wires were crudely fashioned and looked as though they would collapse under the level of energy that would course through them. Martin wasn't an engineer so he had to trust the word of his patron. If he said it would get him through the field, he had to believe it.

Finishing the modifications, he wriggled out and checked the clock again as perspiration streamed down the back of his bald head.

"6:25," he said with a smile, blowing out an exhausted sigh. "I even have time for a little entertainment."

Attaching his hand prosthesis, he tossed the tools into a bag, slid over to the closet and tucked them into the back behind the generator. Knuckle-walking on his polyurethane hands, he moved over to the aquarium. He shook food into the water and watched the fish immediately change direction and suck up the flakes as they descended slowly in the tank.

"I do miss the ocean," he said as he smiled sadly and tapped the side of the aquarium. "I want to feel the sand and surf one more time before I go."

Reluctantly he shook off the thought, moved over to the CD shelf and took down several of his favorites. Slowly thumbing through them, he smiled as he thought of the pleasures stored on the little discs.

"Of everything in this miserable fucking world, I'll miss these little beauties the most." He held up one of the shiny, 3½-inch discs and smiled as he remembered what was on it. "Yes, I'll miss you the most." He tore open the blister pack of synthetic adrenaline and popped the CD into the player.

He moved over to the battered easy chair that sat wedged in the corner. It was conveniently located between the stand that held his remote controls, the liquor cabinet and the bookshelves. For so many years this had been his routine, doing patrols of the City during the day and playing his pornographic, holographic CDs at night. Some evenings he read and was surprised how much he enjoyed it. Before his sentence he hardly ever read, thought it was for faggots. With little else to do after his shift, he took up reading and now completed three or four books a month. He preferred historical fiction because the stories would carry him away to a time before the City, or the Midway or CyberSentries. Until now, books and drugs had been enough to blunt the reality of his life. Reading gave him a destination and the drugs helped his imagination book passage but now, neither was sufficient to keep him here.

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The Criminal Internment, Treatment and Imprisonment (CITI) area known colloquially as the City existed long before Sentries. In those days the wall was the only barrier between the Residents and the outside world. It stood 80 feet high and ran along the land-based side of the City with a high-voltage fence along the coast. The wall was based on an arcane security system and, like that system, was vulnerable to failure. Though the wall was adequate, it could still be breached because, even

the most irresponsible guards were still hard to come by. Ridiculously high pay was not even enough to entice a comfortable and well-paid society to flock to those positions. In the end, Security had only two dozens guards to cover three shifts and a 30 mile perimeter. At first, modifications were made to the wall; the addition of Teflon to the surface and curved blades to the top, but the Residents were persistent. Nothing seemed to be foolproof and something had to be done. That something was the brainchild of the research division of ESI, Electronic Security Initiatives. They proposed a fleet of tactically adaptable cyborg sentries that would constantly patrol the City. The Sentries would maintain order but be remotely monitored and ultimately controlled by Security on the outside.

The painful creation process and often-fatal results made volunteers hard to find and ESI insisted on the lightning-quick adaptability of a human brain. It was generally thought that the best volunteer for something dangerous was someone facing death. With that in mind, using violators facing the death penalty became the obvious solution to the volunteer problem. No matter how poor the choice, for them it was better than the alternative. With everything in place the Sentry program was under way and they quickly turned out an initial fleet of 8. Once they surmounted the physical, psychological and emotional

obstacles of creating the cyborgs; the program went smoothly and worked out exactly as they had planned. Perhaps, because of the process, all Sentries developed a ruthless, almost psychotic personality that they used to keep the Residents in line. As dangerous as the Sentries were, ESI's technology allowed Security to handily control them. Even after the introduction of the new repulsor fields; the Sentries were still the primary method used to control the population.

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Long ago, when Martin was first presented with the proposition of becoming a Sentry, he felt he was the luckiest violator on earth. Since his crime had been the multiple murder of a storeowner and three clerks, his future was four shots in the back of the head while in the embrace of an Executor. Instead, he would be alive even though he was going into the City. Though sentenced to the City, he was not going in as one of those pathetic, frightened creatures that spent everyday scrambling for survival. No, he was going to be one of the most powerful people in the City and provided food and his own quarters; the choice was obvious. Obvious then, but he wondered if it would be so obvious with hindsight. He was one of the last original Sentries. In total, they numbered close to 16 with life spans that had been adjusted to over 100 years. After the first 8 or so died during the perfecting of the process, subsequent

ones survived and performed flawlessly. Physical mechanics, however, were the least of a Sentry's worries. Eventually the conditions in the City, realizing what they had become and would always be, as well as the monotony of their routine sent most Sentries over the emotional edge. They either became ruthlessly sadistic; engaging in Resident torture and killing sprees, or committed suicide by charging the fence. Until now, Martin had done neither and guessed that was because he had the diversion of books.

Although he was unimpressed by it, Martin had a certain standing among the denizens of the City, the other Sentries and even his creators at ESI. Well over 100 years old, no other Sentry had survived as long as he and maintained their psychological balance. He felt it was time to pass the torch.

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Picking up the remote, he plugged the adapter into the sensory module in his side and waited for the program to start. Every Sentry felt a debt of gratitude to the benefactor who had provided them with the adapters. The diversion of sensory-adapted pornography was more than enough compensation for the little favors he asked. The first image had not even appeared when the phantom erections began. Intellectually he knew there was nothing 'down there' but, even so, the sensations seemed as real and as pleasurable as they had always been. They began as a

tingling while his body adjusted to the impulses it was being fed. He blinked quickly as his eyes fought against being fooled into seeing what wasn't there. Very quickly, his body succumbed and the experience began.

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A young girl lay on the grooved, metal bed of an Executor, struggling against the steel bracelets that held her arms up and apart. She was a teenager, maybe 17, and a rare female Resident. Unfortunately, like all newbies, she had fallen victim to her inexperience in her new environment. Having no alliances and no place to hide, she was easily caught and tortured by the Executors that roamed the City.

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Initially, Executors were the conscious-less manifestation of the society's will. After witnessing a gruesome and protracted 8-person execution, the public soured on the practice of broadcasting capital punishment cases. The Executor program immediately went underground and the operation became shrouded in secrecy. Few people knew that the Executor program was still online, much less where it was being carried out. The new strategy worked well for everyone as; out of sight, out of mind was the public's attitude. For years, the process seemed flawless until a rogue program implanted by a distraught engineer gave the Executors a new objective. Rather than

benignly carry out society's executions, they emerged from hiding and ran rampant in the streets. For days they raped, beat and murdered anyone they found roaming the streets. Eventually, all of the Executors were immobilized, captured and mothballed. The hasty migration of the civic and business entities out of the City during its birth left the Executors quietly abandoned to their new home and new fate. Years later a lightening strike rebooted the Executors and re-awoke the Trojan. Like before, the Executors - now known simply as machines - emerged from their hidden complex and joined the mayhem in the City. With the emergence of the Midway and the televised carnage, the Executors returned to their prime-time viewing spot.

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The girl struggled in vain against the shackles, mindless of the blood that trickled from her cut and torn wrists. Her legs were also bound; shoulder-length apart, and the sight of her abject helplessness aroused him even more.

"Oh baby, don't fight it," he said as the mechanism drew her legs up and further apart.

She screamed and babbled hysterically as the red eye of the camera lens moved in for a close-up of her terror-stricken face.

"Oh yeah," he said huskily as another sensor moved along her body, passing the sensation on to his metal limbs. Another appendage tore at her shorts and blouse as the touch sensor

crept along her leg like a snake. The curved, padded attachment ran itself along her stomach and over her small breasts as he closed his eyes in ecstasy. Her scream drew his attention and he opened his eyes quickly in time to see her terrified expression. She watched, horrified, as a penile instrument slowly worked its way toward her, secreting lubricant. He sat up and focused his attention as the device entered her vaginally and began brutally pumping in and out.

"Ah, a virgin," he said as blood mixed with the whitish fluid. "Oh, but maybe not," he smiled as the flanged tip of the device began fanning out. Her screams were sensual music to him as the mechanism retracted. The girl was raised and laid spread-eagle on her stomach as she babbled incoherently.

"Oh God, oh God," she repeated quietly, in a semiconscious stupor, tears streaming down her face.

He was about to pop another pill when the low, methodical buzz of the duty alarm intruded on his fantasy.

"Damn, always at the good parts," he said as he reluctantly switched off the player, unplugged the adapter and stuck the pill back into the packet. He moved over to the mobile unit and pressed the button on the far wall. A panel door whisked open and the unit crept forward on a conveyor belt that was built into the floor. It stopped in a large room that looked like a garage where, suspended from the ceiling, hung a heavy metal

vest. Down the front two panels of the vest was an array of touch sensitive lights and recessed buttons that would be hidden once the vest initialized and the panels slid closed. Sockets, like those on his collar, stood out on either side of the vest ready to receive attachments. His duty alarm sounded again as he navigated himself onto a thin ramp that extended out from the front of the chassis. A pair of metal clamps descended, gently gripped his long, segmented arms at the shoulders and detached them. As his torso settled on the chassis, two robotic hooks lowered the vest around him and on to the chassis.

"Alright, alright," he said impatiently as the alarm sounded again. "I heard you the first time."

As the vest locked in place, he felt the slight buzz of electricity as the electrodes, where his arms and lower torso would be, aligned with the chassis and the vest. The clamps then attached a sturdier version of his segmented arms to the vest. He wiggled his polyurethane fingers to make certain the impulses were correct and balanced then smiled his satisfaction. Grabbing his visor, he switched it on and ran through the various modes. Infrared was fine, thermo and enhanced magnification looked good so he moved on to test his audio and the unit's reaction to cerebral commands. All checked out so he sent the reply to Security that he was online and ready for duty. The final preparation was the trauma-proof Plexiglas that slid up to cover

the exposed part of his chest and stomach. The grids in the visor clicked on as he reached over, deactivated and opened the garaged door. Steeling himself, he took a deep breath then slowly rolled down the ramp and out into the bright, morning sun.

Chapter 2 - Catch and Release

He cruised down Mount Vernon Street at roughly 10 miles per hour thinking how beautiful a day it was. His patrol area was roughly seven square miles and covered the sparsely populated territories. With the steady influx of Residents, that was becoming less the case. The abandoned zoo, the now relocated presidential library and the deserted marina were the largest part of his patrol. This far out from the center of the City there were still remnants of the past beauty that had existed here. Even so, the landscape was dotted with makeshift shacks and burnt out trashcans where newcomers huddled for warmth. The grass was overgrown and wild in some spots, with different varieties vying for survival. The region, though a meager compensation, was given to him as a reward for his longevity. Due to overcrowding in the heart of the City, his area was quickly increasing in population.

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Martin rounded a bend and looked to his left into a grove of spindly trees. It had drawn his attention because of the

heavy, three-wheeled tracks that led into it from the West. The tracks were clean as they entered the grove, but where they exited to the North they left dark, red-stained imprints in the flattened grass.

"Guess I should take a look," he thought, veering off the cracked main road and into the thick grass. "Definitely a machine," he said as a chill went through him. "Goddamn! Why did they have to dump those things in here? Wonder what kind of mess I'll find?" he thought as he entered the clearing and spotted a body lying face down in the grass. From a distance, he couldn't tell if it was male or female, but it was definitely dead.

"Yeah Security, machine got another one," he said apprehensively.

"Any ID?" a voice responded, sounding bored.

"Just a second," he replied, cold disgust going through him as he approached the body and flipped it over on its back. The dead, blank eyes stared up at him. The mouth was open; contorted in a silent scream, caked with dried blood and shredded inside. The blonde hair was also matted with blood and the top of the skull was crushed, probably from being inadvertently run over by the treads of the machine.

"Well," he said as the camera panned the stiff body, moving down from the head to the naked lower torso. "Looks like a boy, maybe 22 or so. Hold on a second and I'll scan for prints."

He lifted one of the pale blue hands, maneuvered himself around and placed the fingers on a smooth panel on the lower part of his right vest. The scanner buzzed and he immediately dropped the cold, stiff appendage, feeling a sense of repulsion as he backed away from the body.

"Typical stuff," he said panning the camera over the body again and sending back the pictures to Security. "Genitals and rectum have been severely traumatized, various cuts and abrasions over most of the body and the top of the skull has been crushed. If I had to, I'd say he died from either blood loss or the head trauma. I'd probably put my money on the head trauma."

He waited as Security compiled the report, created the holographic images for the records then told him to wrap it up. Taking a small, electronic beacon from the side compartment of the unit, he pressed it into the ground beside the body, armed its defenses and quickly backed away.

"Look fellas, I'm outta here," he said as he turned and followed the trail back out onto the road. "You guys gonna send a cleanup unit for that right?"

"Yeah, yeah Martin it'll be there," the voice at the other end replied impatiently. "What's the matter, you got company coming?"

Martin didn't answer, only continued his patrol toward the library as he tried to forget the haunting stare in the boy's dead eyes.

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Periodically a shudder went through him as he remembered the feel of the stiff, lifeless hand so he adjusted the gauge to send calming endorphins into his brain. The library was to the right and up on the hill overlooking the bay. In its time, it was one of the most scenic spots in this part of the district. People had come from all over the country to see the sleek, new library with its life-size dioramas of presidential life. It also boasted holographic images of historical events and a recreation of the oval office. All that was past now, the weathered granite path now led to an edifice whose broken stained glass windows looked out over the bay as if trying to decide whether to jump.

Garbage and refuse littered the once manicured acreage that surrounded the marble structure while cardboard lean-tos made poor additions to the once grand old building. Martin could hear the echo of voices coming from inside and hurried to check it out. Generally, no one was up this early; he guessed they were newbies who had survived their first night in the City.

He slid back the cover on his wrist and pressed the red button that charged the Taser rods in his fingers. The mobile

unit switched to stealth mode as the engine now gave off only a barely perceptible whine. His floodlights clicked on, illuminating the darkened hall as he entered, and the voices were suddenly silent.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" he said as he approached several figures huddled in the southern corner of the hall around a burning trashcan.

His voice boomed in the cavernous room as he extended his arm and sparks leapt from the black, Taser hand.

The group turned and, when they saw him, scattered to the far end of the hall.

"What is that?" they murmured as his tracking spotlight blinded them, trapping some of them in the corner.

He smiled to himself as he approached slowly, visualizing what he must look like to a newcomer; eight feet of metal and blinding light. The group of four clustered together as some tried to bury themselves in the piles of trash that were scattered about. Others turned their faces to the wall and tried to shut out the apparition before them.

He circled around them, turned off the lights and deactivated the Taser.

"I am Sentry Martin," he said as he backed up to a less intimidating distance.

Two of them turned apprehensively, lowered their hands slowly and looked him over.

"What are you?" one of them asked finally, with the trace of an accent, as he stepped around the others to get a closer look.

"I told you," Martin answered as he backed off another step and into the sunlight that streamed through one of the broken windows. "I am a Sentry and this is my area; you look like newbies to me."

"Newbies?" the one with the accent repeated quizzically as he looked at the others. "What's a newbie?"

"You are," Martin replied, extending his arm and pointing as the group jumped back in unison. "When did you get in?"

"In where?" another asked with the same accent that he now pegged as British.

"In here, in the City," he said as his arms made a sweeping gesture. "Nobody can be as ignorant as you assholes and not be new to the City. Let's see," he said stroking his chin as he whirred silently, slowly around them. "You must've got in early this morning. My guess is they sent you through the north gate or this many of you wouldn't have made it this far." He stopped and studied each in turn. "You're not from here, the states, are you?" he asked with a wry smile. "Where you from?"

"Birmingham," the bolder one said as he pushed through the trash and approached Martin. "Birmingham in the UK. We came to the states together about three weeks ago, just to look around; we'd never been here."

"Well, what did four nice, English boys like you do to end up in a place like this?" Martin asked with a smile as he backed up against a wall, lifted his visor and folded his arms. "You say you never been to the states before huh? Well, you picked a real armpit of a place to end up fellas."

They were silent as Martin stared at them with an amused smile. The Brits stared back with frightened, curious looks, not sure if the thing before them was a friend or not.

"I have to wonder," Martin said finally as he maneuvered around them tapping his chin. "What nice, little English boys like you would do to get sent in here."

No one responded as Martin tapped his fingers on his chassis. The bold one walked away and leaned against the wall as the others stared at the floor.

"Oh come on now boys, we're all friends here," he said as he moved toward them. Still he received no answer so he extended his arm, preparing to grab the boy nearest the wall. "Well, I can find out easily enough," he said as the shiny, metallic arm snaked its way toward the boy who immediately went into

hysterics. "Oh, a fighter," he said as he clamped his hand over the boy's wrist. "I love it when they fight."

Everyone backed away as the boy fought and jerked like a fish on a line.

"No! No!" he screamed, biting and pounding on Martin's arm.

"Whoa, whoa," Martin said, reaching out his other arm to restrain the terrified boy. "Hey calm down kid, I just want to scan your prints."

The boy screamed and yelled incoherently; sobbing, biting, clawing and kicking as Martin turned to the others, who seemed petrified.

"You better talk to this kid, he's gonna hurt himself. All I want to do is scan his prints and bring up you guy's records."

"Please Guv, Davey's not ... right," the bold one finally said.

"What do you mean he's not right?" Martin asked as he continued to struggle with the boy.

"Last night me, Davey and our mate Micky was looking for food in the trees when this ... thing crashed through and killed Mick. Davey hasn't been the same since."

Martin looked at the boy who had spoken, then to Davey, who had stopped fighting and sat sobbing in a pool of his urine.

"Oh, so that was the meat," Martin said, releasing Davey's reddening wrist and backing up. "Boy, you fellas sure fell in it

up to your necks. So who are you?" Martin asked, pointing to the one who had been leaning against the wall.

"Terry," the man stammered back. "My name's Terry. Look Guvna," he continued, holding his hands out pleadingly. "Me and the lads was just out for a bit of fun. I don't even know why we're here."

"Terry?" Martin asked, gesturing toward the Englishman who responded with a nod. "Come over here."

Terry approached warily, looking to his friends for support, but none was forthcoming. He stopped and stood in front of the towering Sentry but refused to look directly at him.

"Terry, put your hand on that panel," Martin said, tapping the lower right side of his vest as he slid down the visor. "Just leave it there for a couple of minutes."

Terry reached out a trembling hand and laid it on the smooth, flat surface.

"Naughty boys," Martin said finally as Terry jerked his hand back and examined it closely. "Oh, you were very bad boys." Martin lifted the visor then waved Terry back to the group. "Grand theft of transport, burglary, entering the country illegally, resisting arrest; seems like you guys have been busy."

"Naw, it's not like that Guv," Terry began in their defense. "Yeah we did knick a transport and lifted a few bob

from a fueling station, but it was all just a bit of fun you know. Me and the lads didn't mean no harm."

"Well, I guess you boys don't follow the news," Martin said as an automated voice reminded him of the time. "Given the beating we've been taking in the press over there because of these places, I'm surprised you would do something this stupid once you got to the states. Hell, you're lucky they didn't throw you in here the minute you stepped off the boat. Well, you guys better get comfortable because you probably won't be leaving."

"What do you mean?" Terry asked naively as all the boys suddenly looked at Martin.

Martin turned to leave then yelled back, "According to your records, you're in here for the long haul."

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Martin rolled through the cracked, marble columns at the rear of the library and decided to take the scenic route to the Marina. As he monitored the fence for outages or breaches, he secretly wished the Englishmen well, but realistically knew that none would survive more than six months. Cresting the ridge overlooking the ocean, he wondered what the official word would be of their death, but discarded the thought since it didn't matter to him anyway. He paused at the bluff and stared down at the steel-gray water, trying to remember what it felt like to walk in the surf. He couldn't and the realization saddened him.

Too many years of living with metal and plastic had made him forget the feel of flesh and blood. He angrily turned from the scene secure in the belief that his suicide was right. As he continued toward the Marina he waited, with anticipation, for the click that would bring his release.

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His shift was nearly finished and his heart raced as he counted down the minutes in his head. The beams of his headlights bounced crazily off the worn pathway as he whizzed toward the bluff at forty miles an hour. His plan was to build up enough speed to crash through the fence and over the cliff when the mechanism kicked in. He could only hope that his armor would protect him from the lethal voltage. Afterwards, he planned to fall into the ocean and finally feel the water.

The path was bumpy at this speed and he had difficulty maintaining control, but he did and pushed the unit to its limit. He could see the fence silhouetted against the horizon as the buzz of electricity grew in his ears. The sensors in the fence picked up his proximity and an alarm sounded, signaling his chassis to brake. His modifications were successful and he felt no decrease in speed so he steered himself toward the farthest rise. Sliding his visor back, he jettisoned the panel that covered his chest and stomach. The fence grew before him as the sound of the alarm drowned out the buzzing in his ears.

"Finally free," he said as he hit the fence and the shock to his system was tremendous. All his on-board circuits shorted out except the fusion generator, which supplied energy to the transmission and life support. His body jerked and twitched in the metal vest as the electricity coursed through him. The unit was on the verge of shut down and his speed decreased as the transmission's gears went. His momentum, however, carried him through the fence and he was still alive. The edge of the cliff was only thirty feet away and he smiled as he struggled toward it. Suddenly there was a flash as a Repulsor field sprang up in front of him. His speed was still nearly thirty miles an hour so, when he hit the field, it threw him back with equal force. His shielding was gone so he could not protect his generators, which died in shower of sparks. He crashed, sideways, onto a rock that ripped open his abdomen and snapped off the locks that held him onto the chassis. Leaving a trail of intestines and synthetic blood, the serpentine arms of the dying cyborg pulled him toward the edge of the cliff. His progress slowed as the last erratic signals pulsed through his arms. He watched resignedly as they wriggled then laid still. He felt cold as his blood pooled beneath him and he stared up at the bright, full moon. His mind was blank, his eyes closed slowly and his heartbeat ceased, as the only sound was that of waves crashing on the rocks below.

Chapter 3 - Connie

Connecticut Crowley tossed his jacket onto the cloth footstool and leaned heavily against the door.

"Lights, low" he said, as he took off his sunglasses and blinked until his eyes adjusted. He shuffled over to the contoured lounge facing the window and sank into it. "Hell of a day," he thought as he exhaled deeply, slung his arm over his eyes and struggled to fall asleep. He became like this periodically; bone tired but not sleepy, and he hated it. In this state, he felt like a quadriplegic; an active mind but a completely unresponsive body. He laid there, his mind racing, thinking of some of the people he'd crossed paths with during his patrol of the suburbs.

"Two sides of the same coin," he thought, comparing tonight's calls to some of his forays into the City. "Sometimes I don't know which is worse."

Finally, he summoned the strength to sit up and looked around the spacious apartment that had become his sanctuary.

While most of the other Detectives had chosen to live in Leland, Whitechapel or even Broadmoor, he chose to live in New Garden. The seventy-story condominium overlooked the wall, the Midway and the Northern end of the City. New Garden was nice enough he supposed, as far as accommodations went, but it never lived up to the builder's expectations. After more than a decade, Crowley was the only tenant the building had ever seen.

"People don't mind taking their weekly excursions into the Midway but they don't want it in their back yard," he thought as he stood and walked slowly over to the picture window.

He stared down at the mile wide half circle of rundown tenements and makeshift restaurants that made up the Midway and shook his head.

"Entrepreneurial spirit," he said bitterly as he leaned against the warm window frame. "That vermin will do anything for a buck."

From his apartment on the forty-second floor, Crowley could see most of the Midway as it stretched off into the distance. As he studied the dilapidated terrain, a large, flashing red neon sign that read, "The NightOwl" drew his attention. This week it seemed to be the popular spot for the subs. They came to watch the large screen monitors that all the restaurants sported. That way the patrons could safely experience the circus that was the City.

Crowley had been to the NightOwl several times; it was part of his patrol when he went into the Midway. Lately it always seemed to be packed. Its recent success was due mainly to the satellite trajectories the owners had bought. They had paid a bundle but felt it was more than worth the cost and effort. Two days after the acquisition, their business tripled. The thing that made the NightOwl's show so special was that its satellites focused on the sector known as the "Business District".

Initially, the district was not very populated because of the mutated creatures that roamed the area. Crowley suspected that the creatures were created from living so long in chemical waste and sludge that they adapted. The toxins had been secretly buried there by the manufacturing businesses before the City came along. They were discretely left behind when the companies left. With the City filling up rapidly, Residents found lodging wherever they could, that now meant in the business district. With more people, came more attacks, the more attacks the better the show and, the better the business.

Crowley had never seen a live specimen of what lived in the district, but he did see a creature that had been killed when it hit a concussion mine trying to leave the district. It looked like a large flightless bat splayed out on the doctor's metal table. Crowley shivered slightly at the thought of the thing with its shriveled wings, taloned fingers and bulbous black

eyes. He wondered how many more of them might be roaming around the district. The mines were a halfhearted attempt to protect the Residents from the mutants. Unfortunately the mines killed as many Residents as mutants. He slid back the large, glass panel and leaned out into the coolness of the early morning air. Closing his eyes, he drank in the freshness. Suddenly a chorus of moans came from the direction of the NightOwl and Crowley wondered what they had just seen.

"People are strange," he thought as he swung around and sat on the windowsill, drawing up his legs and leaning his chin on his knees. "Most of the people in the NightOwl easily made more than he did. They lived in beautiful houses, some of which could arguably be called mansions, way out in the suburbs. Curiously, at least twice a week, they spend more than an hour making the trek to the Midway. They sit in a crowded box in broken down chairs, eating bad, overpriced food and glued to a monitor screen. To add to that, the screen continuously poured out images of rape, torture, murder and violence not half a mile from where they were sitting. "Nothing better to do with their money," he thought as he turned his attention from the restaurant and scanned the row of buildings to the East. The Brownstones, like the Midway, were halfway houses of sorts nestled behind a repulsor field. Pre-Residents as well as Residents who lived long enough to complete their time in the

City all passed through the holding area. After their release, Residents were housed for six months in the same facility. There they were evaluated, debriefed and a routine created for re-acclimating them to life outside the City. Only about a third ever made it outside the Midway, however. The trauma of living in the City, even for a month, generally left most completely isolated from the lifestyle that existed in the suburbs. Their only alternative was to try to establish a life in the Midway. Pre-Residents were also taken to the Brownstones where they would live for several weeks before finally being transferred into the City. Every year Crowley wagered there would be a huge population explosion in the Midway; each time he was wrong. It seemed the City took so many of the Residents that a steady balance was always maintained.

He climbed down from the windowsill and walked over to the bookshelf that stretched the twenty-five foot length of the eastern wall. He was practically the only one left with printed books. E-books were the norm, leaving paper books increasingly hard to find. Thinking about the City and the Midway made him tense and a little depressed, so he scanned the shelf looking for something light to help him sleep. *Prom Night Promises*, *Summer for the Snowman*, *The Price of Tea in China*; none of them were light or possessed the anesthetizing quality he was looking for. He ran his fingers lazily along the leather spines,

undecided about what to choose. He was about to give up when he spotted the copy of *Beyond Good and Evil* his ex-wife had given him. He stopped, tapped the book thoughtfully and slowly pulled it down.

"God I haven't read this in ages," he said quietly as he carefully opened the first page. His eyes stopped, lingering on the writing on the inside cover; drinking in every perfect curve of the inscription as he touched it lightly, lovingly.

'To Connie, who has no preferences. To him everyone is the same, Love Samantha.' The meaning in the words still stung him after almost three years. His vision blurred, his eyes watering as he slid the book back onto the shelf and leaned against it.

"Sam, if I could change, I would," he'd said to her the night she left for the final time. "I just don't know how to be anything other than what I am."

"I know that Connie," she'd responded through her tears. "Maybe I'm being unfair in even asking you to. All I know is there are things I want, that I think everybody wants, and I don't think you can give them to me."

Crowley remembered how helpless he'd felt in those moments. How he'd struggled for words that would persuade her to stay, but knew even if he found them, she would leave eventually. She'd never wanted to live in New Garden. She hated the City and the Midway but felt she could wait for him to apply for a better

position. She hoped that, with his new position she would be taken away from that aspect of his work as well as the people who came with it. Unfortunately they ran out of time. Crowley became more attached to doing what he could to help the people in the Midway and the City. He renewed his contract as a Supervisor and left her to continue waiting. All that alone would have eventually ended their relationship, but taking in Loretta hastened it tremendously.

"I want a normal life," she would say repeatedly. "I want children, a house and friends Connie."

"Sam, we have friends," he would reply weakly, knowing it was a meager defense.

"Your police buddies, the trash from the Midway? I don't mean friends like that; I mean decent friends, regular friends, normal friends!"

"Samantha honey, I guess we just went in different directions," he said as he wiped at the tears on his cheeks. He walked over to the photograph that sat on the mantle of a fireplace that hadn't seen a fire since Samantha left. "Like you said sweetheart, nobody's fault, just different directions."

Crowley moved to the couch in the lounge pit, suddenly feeling as though a heavy blanket had fallen over his brain and his legs had turned to stone. He dropped on to the sofa, holding the picture of Samantha, and laid his head on the thick cushion.

"Different directions," he said again drowsily. "Sam honey, I don't even know which direction I'm going in anymore."

He was dozing on the sofa still clutching the photo, when the annoying trill of the phone intruded on his sleep.

"What? What?" he said groggily as he blindly reached for the phone, missed, and reached again. He sat up, rubbed at his eyes and tried to shake out the cobwebs as the voice in the receiver said his name.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, gathering himself and placing the receiver to his ear. "This better be real good," he mumbled angrily to whomever was on the other end.

"Connie, its Eddie," the voice replied furtively. "Did I wake you?"

"Of course not; at this time of the morning I was re-thatching the roof." He groaned and placed Samantha's photograph on the end table facing away from him.

"Sorry Connie, but I think you better get down here," Eddie said sincerely.

"Jesus Eddie, I just left there; give me a break!"

"Well, I think you really want to come down here, we got a guy in lock-up going nuts."

"C'mon Eddie, can't you guys do anything without me?" he said, rubbing at his eyes and falling back into the sofa. "Stun him and let him sleep it off, I'll see him later."

"We tried that, it just seemed to make it worse," Eddie said with growing impatience. "I really think you should see this guy."

Crowley growled, ran his fingers through his dark brown hair and surrendered grudgingly. "Okay Eddie, give me half an hour."

Chapter 4 - The Precinct

Crowley's craft whined to a halt and settled in front of the area "C" security station. He was still irritated at having to come back so soon, but curious about the guest who could shake off a stun. He adjusted his sunglasses, looked at himself in the mirror and reluctantly exited the craft.

"Hey Connie, long time no see," Aaron Bushnell the desk sergeant, said facetiously.

Crowley only smirked, shook his head and motioned to be buzzed in. "Hey Eddie," Crowley shouted as he stuck his head in Eddie Cochran's office and found it empty. "Christ," he muttered as he slapped the doorframe, turned and faced the squad room.

"Hey, anybody seen Eddie?"

Steven "Lightning" Lewis, who was a very good middleweight contender before boxing was outlawed, looked up from his report.

"The lockup Connie," he said, pointing with his stylus to the rear door.

Crowley tossed his jacket onto a chair, headed toward the door, then stopped and walked over to Lewis. "Hey Lightning, you

get anything on that Sentry; what was his name?" he said snapping his fingers.

"You mean the one that ran the fence six months ago?" Lewis asked, holding up the report and waving it in the air. "That was Martin CS41658."

"Oh yeah, real shame, an old timer," Crowley said sarcastically. "You got anything new on him?"

"Naw, all we got is the blood trail leading out toward the cliff so we figured he's feeding the fish," Lewis said, planting his feet on the sleek desktop.

"So what about the field?" Crowley asked pushing Lewis' feet off the desk and sitting down. "Obviously he hit the field and it threw him back onto the rock; what makes you think he made it through the field the second time?"

"Christ, I don't know Connie. All I know is, as much blood as we found at the scene, he must have died near there because there was no way he could have left. Naturally, there were a thousand Sentry tracks all over the scene but the sensors didn't pick up anyone else approaching."

Crowley looked at Lewis with disbelief as he slapped his palms on the edge of the desk. "There was a fifteen foot hole ripped through the fence Lightning, I don't think the sensors were working there, do you?"

Lewis put his feet back on the desk and leaned back in his chair. "Who do I look like Connie, Merlin? I been busting my ass for six months to find this damn thing and its vanished into thin air! You think you can do better," he yelled as he tossed the report into Crowley's lap, "Be my guest!"

"I guess I couldn't do any worse!" Crowley responded as he stood up, tossed the report back to Lewis and stormed toward the back door.

Crowley's finger stabbed repeatedly at the button that read, Press for Service, which was embedded in the counter. He snatched his gun from its shoulder holder and slammed it on the counter. He mashed the button again as he peered through the window.

"C'mon, c'mon!" Crowley said under his breath.

A stout, middle-aged balding man rounded the corner of one of the numerous slotted shelves that populated the room opposite the glass. He stopped, stared dispassionately at Crowley for a moment then pressed a spot on his side of the counter.

"Did I wake you Curley?" Crowley asked sarcastically.

A metal drawer slid out from beneath the counter on Crowley side of the glass. He dropped in his gun and moved to the metal door that hummed to signal that its inner field was still active. Curley watched the diagram of the room that appeared in the center of the window. A red line tracked the weapon's

journey then stopped and highlighted slot 46 shelf 12. An automated voice from somewhere in the room announced that the weapon has been secured. Crowley shook his head impatiently and stared at the ceiling.

"Jesus Curley, c'mon and open the fuckin' door!"

Curley slid back a small panel in the counter with his middle finger and pressed the recessed button.

"Yes your Majesty," Curley said as he made a clumsy, subservient gesture then rolled his eyes.

"Asshole!" Crowley muttered as he drummed his fingers on the door.

The humming ceased and there was a quiet click as the door slipped open about an inch and Crowley pushed his way through.

"Glad to see someone take a bit of pride in their work!" he said as he headed toward the lockup.

Crowley turned into the hall that led to the cells and stopped in front of a brightly lit panel on the wall. The panel displayed a schematic of the cellblock with a yellow square depicting each cell. Inside one of the yellow squares were three green dots that represented each person in the cell. Beneath the square was written the prisoner's name. Of the three dots in the square on the far end, one of the dots was not moving. Crowley tapped the square with the dots and it immediately zoomed to a video image of the occupants in the cell. The image was a bird's

eye view of the cell with Eddie Cochran leaning against one of the padded walls while a man in a white coat bent over another man. The third man was lying on the bed in a confinement collar, his face obscured by the shoulder of the man in the coat. Crowley tapped the video screen and the yellow square returned as he walked quickly toward the cell.

"Long night," he said to himself as he stopped and opened the transparent, trauma-proof door. "Looks like it'll be a long day."

"Connie, this is Doctor Haskell," Eddie said, gesturing toward the man in the coat. "Print records tell us the hamburger on the cot's some defrocked programmer named Hansen Keel."

Crowley walked over to the man on the cot, looked down at him and grimaced at what he saw. Someone or something had shredded the man's face, or at least what he thought was a man. The eyes were gouged out and the nose looked as though it had been smashed repeatedly. Blood streamed from his ears and made large, dark red stains on the cot. His cheeks bore deep, crisscrossed gashes that looked as though they had been made by a wild animal.

"Jesus, what happened to him?" Crowley asked, taking off his sunglasses and leaning in for a closer look. "Looks like he fell in a meat grinder."

"I want to show you something," Haskell said, ignoring Crowley's question as he rolled up the man's pants leg. "I'll think you'll find this interesting."

Crowley and Cochran moved closer as the doctor gingerly lifted the leg and signaled for silence. Haskell bent down just inches from the pale, hairy leg then shouted, "Sir!"

A large gash immediately snaked up the leg, spewing blood, as the man jerked his leg away and writhed in pain.

"What the hell's going on here, Doc?" Crowley asked, grabbing the doctor by the shoulder and lifting him up. "Is this guy human, a clone, a mutant, what?" Crowley stared at the large purpling wound, at a loss to understand what happened. "Has he got some weird virus or something; is he sick?"

"I really don't know Detective," Haskell said thoughtfully, scratching his chin and walking out of the room. "Although, I don't believe he's infected with anything contagious."

Once they were in the hall, Crowley stopped and leaned against the wall.

"So what tore him up like that?" he asked, throwing a nervous glance back into the room. "An animal or something?"

"What? Oh no, the head trauma and facial mutilation he did himself," the doctor replied as he pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"You've got to be kidding me," Crowley said, leaning his head against the wall and staring at the ceiling. "Why would anyone do that to themselves; are you sure?"

"Oh quite sure," Haskell said, putting on his glasses and staring into the cell. "We found blood and tissue under the nails of both hands and the marks consistently bear it out. We can only assume," Haskell continued, as he walked back into the room and stared down at the man who moaned painfully in an unconscious stupor. "We can only assume that some of the other damage, like the nose," he said pointing at the torn, flat feature, "Was done by a weapon or tool of some sort. But wielded by him mind you," Haskell added holding up an admonishing finger.

Crowley nodded then walked over to Eddie. "Why didn't you take this guy to a hospital?" he asked as he put on his sunglasses and focused his attention on Eddie.

"I wanted you to see him first," Eddie said nonchalantly.

"Eddie, this guy could die; I could have seen him at the hospital!"

"Hey, I didn't see you falling all over yourself to get him to one! Besides, its protocol Connie, remember?" He continued as he eyed Crowley closely. "What's the matter, you starting to get sentimental again? "

Crowley scowled, turned and left the room. As he walked down the hall, the doctor stopped him.

"Will you be moving him to a hospital shortly?" he asked authoritatively, as he continued to stand unmoving before Crowley.

"Yeah, that's where I was going before you stopped me for this little chat," Crowley said, pushing past the doctor and heading for the telephone at the end of the hall. He had phoned for a transport and was walking back toward the cell when the doctor brushed past him angrily and left through the squad room door.

"What's eating him now?" Crowley asked as he entered the cell.

Eddie didn't answer, only jerked his head toward the prisoner who now lay lifeless on the cot, his mouth painfully contorted in silent agony.

"Guess it's a moot point now, eh Connie." Eddie said with a smirk. "Guess we'll never know why he did it."

"No, I guess not," Crowley replied as he shot Eddie a look of disgust and left the room shaking his head.

#

"Give me some privacy," Crowley said as the large window that looked out onto the squad room quickly frosted to opacity.

"Oh brother," he sighed as he sank into the large, soft leather chair, pulled off his glasses and rubbed at his tired eyes. He stared blankly at the walls of his office, feeling confused and weary. His gaze shifted to the dozens of citations and awards that hung on the wall and grimaced, feeling now that they were meager reward for his efforts. "Nobody's fault but mine," he said as he shifted his attention to the display built into the desktop.

He stared at the monitor screen, which displayed his itinerary and messages through the tinted, blotter-sized Plexiglas on his desk. "Eye level," he said, reaching for his stylus as the thin screen slid out through a slot that opened in the upper part of his mahogany desk and positioned itself at eye level. "Couple of inches closer," he said sliding back the slim, mahogany lid that covered a 10" X 12" tablet. "I really need to set the preferences on this desk," he said, shifting around in his chair so he could sight the monitor comfortably. "This ritual is becoming a pain in the ass. "Hanson Keel," he said as the name typed itself into the record search field. "Let's see who you were."

The record flashed on the screen as a narrative voice read along. The report began with the standard information - height, weight, birthplace, birthday and a brief history. "Your basic society drone," Crowley said as he listened to the computer's

recitation then finally interrupted it. "Uh, can we skip to the good stuff, like his police record and psych report?"

"One moment Connecticut," the computer responded with irritating congeniality as Crowley wondered why the programmers continued to try to give these machines personality. The screen scrolled down rapidly and the computer renewed its narration as Crowley turned and stared out the window. Again, it was standard until it reached the job history. Keel had been an engineer with a relatively promising future but his laziness and impatience got the better of him. According to the report, Keel had 'borrowed' another engineer's design and sold it for big money. Crowley didn't know the particulars but he knew it meant Keel had broken a cardinal rule; don't rip off other people's designs. An engineer's design was more important to him than a family name and most people seemed to respect that except Keel. The money he had made from the sale of the design lasted him about five years. However, his resulting excommunication from the Engineer's Guild meant his career was over. He floated like a ghost looking for anything in the field of technology but came up dry; nobody would touch him. Once Keel had worked for some of the top engineering firms designing cutting-edge technology, now he was relegated to doing repairs and wiring on systems in the midway.

The next part of the report caught Crowley's attention. It appeared Keel had begun hanging out with a different crowd, shunning the petty hoodlums for a more upscale criminal element.

"Hmm, Lexington Doyle and 'Peter Gunn' Lucas; why would these guys want to hang around with a loser like you Keel?" Crowley gazed at the rainbow in the mist of Ketcham Falls as he tapped his bottom lip.

"Well, why wonder when I can go to the source," he said, spinning around, picking up the telephone and dialing Doyle's number.

#

Lexington Doyle was responsible for the black market electronics that flowed into the City. He'd been operating out of the Midway for nearly twelve years behind some of the clubs he owned. Because the electronics were downright primitive and harmless, Crowley ignored his operation.

#

As Crowley waited, the monitor flashed twice then a message from the medical examiner popped up on the screen. "Read along," blinked lazily next to it and he tapped no. The message was the examiner's summary of the physical injuries to Hanson Keel. The report also included speculation on their causes. Crowley was absorbed in the reading of the blood work when a gravely voiced character growled a hello into the other end of the phone.

"Talk to me, I ain't got all day," the voice said as Crowley paused the screen.

"Hey Lex, what's new?" Crowley asked casually, smiling to himself.

"Whose this?" Doyle asked suspiciously.

"It's Connie; long time no see," Crowley responded amiably.

"Yeah Crowley, what do you want," Doyle asked impatiently as Crowley studied the report pensively.

"Well, I tell you Lex, I'm gonna be in the Midway tonight and thought I'd stop by for a visit; what do you say?"

"Mighty nice of you Crowley," Doyle said nervously, "but umm, I ain't gonna be in the Midway tonight."

"No?" Crowley responded, feigning surprise. "How can you keep track of your interests if you don't go where the action is?"

"Look Crowley, you got something to say, spit it out otherwise quit wasting my time."

"You're right Lex, you're a busy man," Crowley said, smiling as he rubbed at his forehead. "I'd appreciate it if you could spare me a little time for a ... talk."

"A talk?" Doyle responded suspiciously. "What we got to talk about? Look Crowley buzz off!"

"Aw man Lex, you really seem to be in a bad mood. You got something on your mind; conscience bothering you maybe?"

There was a long pause as Crowley stared back out the window at the falls.

"Yeah, I think you got something on your mind and you really want to talk about it. Well, I'll tell you what Lex, why don't you and me get together tomorrow night so you can get it off your chest. Yeah, I think you'll feel a lot better."

"Look Crowley, I told you we got nothing to talk about and I got better things to do with my time!"

"Hmm, let me ask you something Lex," Crowley said stroking his chin thoughtfully. "With all the hoopla over this missing Sentry, what do you think of us shutting down all black market activity in the City? In the public interest of course and uh, only for a few months you understand, but uh ... what do you think?"

There was a long pause and Crowley smiled as Doyle finally asked resignedly, "So where do you want to meet?"

"I don't know, how about some place friendly like, maybe, the Ramrod? Yeah, good atmosphere, quiet surroundings; let's make it the Ramrod tomorrow around seven. What do you say Lex?"

"Alright, the Ramrod tomorrow at seven," Doyle said curtly, his disdain for Crowley's chosen spot evident in his voice.

"Anything else?"

"Naw, have a nice day," Crowley responded with a smile.

"Okay, now let's see what Peter's up to," he said as he turned back to the report.

#

Peter 'Gun' Lucas was a former porn star turned porn distributor whose goods also included drugs. He primarily dealt in synthetics but, occasionally, he would grow sentimental and bring in some coke or heroin. Logically, Crowley assumed he was the one behind the whistlestick trade. Like Doyle, Peter was another who had three or four Midway clubs that earned him a tidy living.

Finally someone picked up the other end and the deafening noise of a partying crowd poured through the receiver.

"Yeah, hello," a voice said, sounding either very drunk or very high. "Hey I'm talking here!"

Crowley winced and held the receiver away from his ear. "This Peter?" he yelled irritably into the receiver as the voice tried to hush the crowd. Crowley rapped the phone heavily on the desk twice, then yelled, "Hello, hello!"

"Hey, you crazy?" the voice responded as the noise in the background subsided. "You could have busted my eardrum!"

"You're lucky I don't bust your skull" Crowley said angrily.

"Hey, who is this?" Peter asked furtively as Crowley leaned back in his chair.

"It's Crowley Peter," he said flatly; "you been staying out of trouble?"

"Sure Crowley, sure; what do you mean?" Peter asked, his voice suddenly serious with a hint of fear.

"What do I mean?" Crowley repeated, taking perverse pleasure in hearing Peter squirm. "I mean it sounds like you got a rowdy crowd there man. You guys could be drinking alcohol and using drugs," Crowley said, smiling to himself. He visualized Peter stashing things in his pockets, or covering them with anything handy, as though Crowley could see them through the receiver.

"Crowley, I'm on the straight and narrow man, you won't get any trouble from me." He finished in a whine that made Crowley's skin crawl.

Crowley rolled his eyes and got down to business. "Relax Peter, I'm not calling to roust you; this is a social call. I'm gonna be in the Midway tonight and want to stop by and uh ... chat."

"About what?" Peter stammered.

"Little of this, little of that," Crowley said with a shrug as he checked the clock on the wall. "Why don't you just meet me at the NightOwl tonight at eight." He hung up and turned his attention back to the screen. The monitor displayed detailed

pictures of Keel's destroyed head and face with explanatory text below each image.

"Christ he was torn up," Crowley said to himself as he browsed the pictures. "Why the hell would he do that to himself?"

He scrolled down to the section that addressed the wound that Crowley had seen appear on the leg. As he read the paragraphs about biological hypersensitivity caused by unexplained neurological conditions, it was clear the doctors had no idea what they were dealing with. He'd learned from experience that, the more they riddled their reports with medical phraseology, the less they really knew. He continued to scroll through the endless pages of documents and slowly realized that this was medical Swiss cheese and he would learn nothing substantive from it. He did, however, find several conclusions by the physicians helpful. One was that it wasn't a contagion that caused Keel's madness. Another was that, besides the wound raised by the doctor's scream, there were similar ones on other parts of his body.

He read the report of the incident that preceded Keel being brought in and found that it was initially reported as a suicide attempt. Upon further observation it was noted that his actions were more purposeful. He seemed to be caught up in a kind of

madness not unlike a wolf who chews off its leg to free itself from a trap.

“But what kind of trap did Keel feel he was in?” Crowley wondered aloud as he closed down the report and decided to go home, grab a nap and prepare for the Midway.

Chapter 5 - The Midway

Crowley wasn't exactly a gun nut but he did love his weapons. He stood before the Plexiglas case with his hands on his hips as he pondered his choices.

"Don't want to cause a scene," he said as he took down the ion rifle and checked its status. "Naw, not for Peter," he said as he replaced the firearm. "No, think I'll make due with the old Schreck," he said as he pulled the dull, black gun from his shoulder holster and ejected the clip. "Yeah, if I can't handle Peter with my Schreck I got no business in the business. On the other hand," he continued as he reinserted the clip, holstered the gun and took another smaller Schreck from the case. "Better safe than sorry," he said as he tucked it into the small holster on his belt behind his back. Satisfied that he was ready, he grabbed his coat and headed for the Midway.

#

The square was hot, loud and crowded as Crowley adjusted the light intensity on his sunglasses and stepped from the alley. Small streams of urine ran down broken, dirty streets and

a shiver of loathing ran through him as he scanned the faces staring up at the monitors. Some were mesmerized; perversely transfixed, while other faces were blank, numb and disbelieving at the horrors they were witnessing.

"Awww look at that!" a brunette teenager squealed excitedly as the girl with him turned away with a sad, pained expression.

"Man, this stuff can't be real," the boy continued, ignoring the girl.

Crowley pushed by the couple and made his way toward the street on the opposite side of the square, flinching whenever he made contact with one of the Midway's patrons.

Hot, sweating bodies pressed against him as the pungent odor of whistleticks mixed with perfume and aftershave polluted by alcohol-soaked perspiration. The NightOwl was only five blocks away but it still took Crowley almost twenty minutes to get to the fork in the square that told him it was just up the hill.

"Business in the Midway grows like a cancer," he thought as he noticed that now all the windows on the third floor of the old warehouses glowed with occupancy. Eight months ago he would have bet anything that no one would move into the abandoned stone structures on the east side of Oakham Square; he would have lost. The fact that the ground under the buildings had shifted so badly that the third and fourth floors had cracked

were no deterrent to the Midway's entrepreneurial spirit. Leaking walls and the lack of plumbing seemed to draw no more than a shrug from the prospective investors. Afterward they scurried back to their office parks in the suburbs, dreaming of major profits while trying to portray it as a loss. There was another little detail of the east area property that Crowley thought would put a stake through its heart. It was that its underground storage vaults were being used as leech pits by all the other structures in the general vicinity. This resulted in a persistent, putrid smell that hung over the block like a pall until septic drones gave them their weekly purged. Apparently, it was something the patrons got used to.

One of the institutions, probably The Dive, started playing music that blared through the loudspeakers and went through Crowley's head like a nail. It was high decibel hypermetal, the current musical rage. It blasted out of the 50 amp speakers machinegun-like, setting a beat for the crowd's spastic movements. Crowley was buzzed from the whistlestick smoke that hung in the air and off balance by the broken, sloping street. He continued to struggle through the crowd unaware of the bouncing, ghost-white person that danced toward him through the horde. He finally stumbled to the sidewalk and clung to the door of a wedge-shaped, five-story building at the intersection of the square. Turning and looking up the hill, he breathed a sigh

of relief when saw that the crowd was sparser there. He guessed it was probably because most of them were too drunk to try to make the climb. Silhouettes stood in front of the squares of light that dotted the ground level and light poured out of a doorway halfway up the hill. A small crowd lingered in front of the building, laughing drunkenly and taking deep drags off their whistlesticks. A neon sign hung above the doorway beaming out the name, NightOwl, in phosphorescent orange.

"It's no wonder I hate this fucking place," Crowley said shaking his head as he wiped at the sweat on his upper lip. He took a deep breath and started to climb. He had only taken a few steps when a sleek, ivory hand with ruby red nails grabbed him by the shoulder and spun him around.

"Hey Connie," a husky androgynous voice said as the ivory hands pulled his head forward toward blood red lips.

"What the, ..." Crowley began, but was cut off by the lips closing over his and the probing tongue that sensuously danced with his. The petite body, clad in a short patent leather skirt, backed him against the building then slowly moved her groin against him.

Crowley grabbed the strong, slender shoulders and gently pushed them back, breaking the kiss and causing the person to moan in disappointment.

"Lori, I keep telling you you're too good for me," he said, wiping the lipstick onto his sleeve and adjusting his sunglasses. "Maybe you should think about giving up."

"Not while there's life in this body," she said sounding very drunk and very high. "Besides, I think you're about to crack."

He smiled, reached out and touched the soft cheek of her white, oval face. Wiping off some of the thick powder and foundation that covered it, he rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger and showed it to her. "Lori, you wear too much makeup. Don't you know that the best guys go for the natural look?"

Her dark glassy eyes looked away from him sadly as she pulled at the long, dark, thick strands of hair that hung down past her shoulders. Whether out of nervous habit or self-consciousness, she pulled the strands around so that they almost obscured her face. In the shadows and darkness of the poorly lit street, all Crowley could see was the ghostly white hand that raked methodically through the dark lion's mane.

"Aw Lori," Crowley said as he gently moved her hand from her hair, then moved the hair from her face. "You're thinking with that old outcast mentality; when are you gonna let that go?"

He turned her face slowly to the light and realized just how young she was. Dark, sad, child-like eyes stared back at him from under the chocolate mascara. Her round heavily rouged cheeks always made her look to him like a little girl playing dress up. He kissed her cheek gently and she smiled sadly back at him, both remembering the past that bound them.

"I really should keep closer contact with her," Crowley thought sadly as he turned from the sight of Loretta's dancing form. A pang of guilt hit him as he remembered his promise to the eight-year-old Loretta. He'd promised that he would always take care of her but in the end it was a promise that he never truly kept. He took another deep breath, shaking the image of Loretta out of his head, and started up the hill. Halfway to the NightOwl his thighs began to throb, so he maneuvered to a doorway and leaned against the cold, rough stone.

"Peter, you better not blow me any shit tonight man, I'm really not in the mood."

He was about to step out of the doorway when something heavy fell against his leg.

Spinning around, Crowley snatched his gun from his holster and sidestepped onto the sidewalk. He pointed his gun downward, putting enough pressure on the trigger to activate the sight-light. As the light slashed through the darkness, it illuminated the striped green shirt of a semi-conscious young man. Crowley

kicked out with his leg and the figure fell against the wall groaning.

"Beautiful sound," the preppy-looking blonde boy muttered. "Like water," he said with slurred laughter. "Feels like water."

Crowley smirked in disgust and slid the gun back into its holster. As an afterthought he checked the one hidden behind his back. Glancing quickly at the illuminated face of his watch, he saw that it was nearly eight.

"Don't want to keep my guest waiting," he said as he straightened his coat and glasses and continued up the hill.