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STOCHASTI-CITY

The day before the city rioted was a day, for me, like any other. The day before Maggie pulled me deep into the shit.

I was up late that night, bouncing at ZaZa's, just barely covering my bus pass for the month. Same shit, different day.

I had this funny feeling that I'd be moving on soon, which I did every couple years, as a shrimp of a man stared up at me and asked, "What are you looking at?" And I thought, there had to be somewhere more interesting to be than Detroit.

I'd gotten into a rut here.

The shrimp pushed at me. Spoiling for a fight.

I've found that the trick to bouncing, just as much as standing around and looking perpetually annoyed, was negotiation. Not negotiation as in the I'm-going-to-give-you-something-for-something-you-agree-to-do-for-me kind, but the sort of negotiation where you agree not to stave in some drunk bastard's skull in exchange for his leaving the club.

And although that doesn't sound like negotiation, with a drunk it really is. Because it takes a lot of circuitous explanation, leading, and alternate phrasing to make them realize they're in for a load of shit.

"Stop. Breaking. The pool cues." I used a calm, patient tone. It was, after all, a calm and reasonable request. Even if it wasn't a request, really.

"What are you going to do about it?"

Even with all the negotiation, however, you also end up negotiating how much shit they might be in.

It was a Monday night. Usually a slow night. No jumping DJ using their antique original iPods lacquered in sparkling silver to run the floor. No girl's night. No happy hour. No nothing.

Just the regulars, quietly slinking their way towards an easier form of despair, hunched over the hump of the stained wood surface at the bar. Huddled against each

other, backs turned to the expanse of empty, unlit dance floor.

Just the core regulars, and this belligerent asshole who was up in my face.

“You going to do anything about it?” he repeated.

He must have thought he wasn’t three inches shorter than me. Or that he wasn’t fifty pounds lighter. This little one had something to prove.

Screw it. I grabbed the yappy guy’s hand before he even realized it and twisted him around in front of me. He struggled a bit, so I half-nelsoned him quick, then marched him right past the bar. Several customers turned to watch, beers raised in a mocking half salute, as I gently shoved the shrimp out the doors.

He tried to turn around and come back in, so I sucker-punched him.

As he sagged to the dirty concrete, I grabbed his collar and threw him against the brick facade of the club, ZaZa’s neon sign blinking and fitzing in front of us. Both of us looked eerie orange, then green.

“Come back in, I break something,” I said, and left him there with one more good shove.

He got it. Negotiations finished.

Back inside the gloom the new bartender, Maggie, looked up from setting a beer mug down in front of an old man with a long, white beard. “Want me to call the Eddies?” She was probably too young to be pulling bar duty. But she was good at listening to wasted customers. She was also pretty enough to pull the extra tips she needed, and surprisingly tough. The electrified deterrent clothes she wore were remarkably effective too. I’d seen patrons writhing on the floor after a butt pinch. Now they kept clear of her like cows from an electric fence.

“Nah.” I leaned against the bar on my elbows. “If he’s got an issue with me now, imagine what he’ll be like when he wakes up with a bill after spending a night in the drunk tank. Last thing he needs is a lien on his house or something stupid. Call a cab. And where the hell is Lawrence?”

“Still running late.” Maggie tapped the phone in her ear. I noticed she had a bit of a bruise under her right eye, covered with makeup. I wondered what from. Asshole boyfriend? Did she like her men wild and dangerous? It was certainly none of my business.

She cocked her head. “Want me to call him again?”

“Forget it.” I’d have to sleep in the storage room until morning. The last bus would be leaving downtown Detroit any second. “I’ll hit the cot tonight.” Besides, it’d save me some money.

Whoever the pipsqueak drunk was, he was lucky. He was a downtowner, could get home on a cab, without spending a good portion of his day’s wages. He could afford to get drunk.

“That’s three times this week. Go take a nap. When Lawrence gets here, I’ll drop you off.”

“Maggie…”

“Reg, I insist.”

No one called me Reg. Except her. I’m Reginald. Reginald Stratton. But she could get away with Reg.

It was the cheerfulness, I guessed.

Maggie let her car drive us there with abandon, setting the vehicle’s profile to aggressive and letting it weave in and out of traffic as it whined its way on. From the somewhat revised downtown, then on past the decaying warehouses and skyscrapers of the heydays, and from there into the sudden change of the nice suburbs. The ones within a short, very short, driving distance.

I didn’t live there, though: I lived in the decay of the Wilds.

The further into the Wilds you got, the longer it took to drive, the more gas it cost. Out where battery cars like Maggie’s and bikes couldn’t easily get to, the rougher it got. And that’s where I lived.

It began with the abandoned tract houses. Many just slumped over, windows shattered, roofs failed or riddled with pigeons and shit. I grew up somewhere like this, a dead end an hour and a half away from any major urban center.

A safe place, a protected space, to raise your little ones. Or so we thought back then. All the while burning your way via car to and from work. Back then. Now those artificial greens and wooden houses were abandoned, for the most part, given away for the land to reclaim as its own.

At the very edge of the Wilds I had Maggie pull over into the driveway. I pulled out a hundred, but she shook her head. “Let’s take a look.”

She followed me in. I wasn't sure what this was about, but then, Maggie was the one who got to call me Reg.

"Welcome to Casa Stratton." I waved my hand at the three acres of vegetable gardens and the large greenhouse I'd built out of windows reclaimed from houses further into the Wilds.

"It's a fucking mansion," Maggie declared.

"House belonged to some formerly rich family, once upon a time. All the stone and brickwork stopped it from getting burned up for steam engines or winter heating."

"And you own it?"

I shook my head. "Course not." No one owned them. That would have meant paying taxes. These were abandoned, but couldn't be purchased because no one would claim them, as that would result in having to owe backtaxes, with interest, for decades. All these buildings floated in limbo, just like the outer skyscrapers: the Slumps. Perfectly good real estate not truly owned by anyone, and thus unable to be renovated.

I knew a lot of people who'd give their right nut to live in the close-by skyscrapers. Instead they were guarded by private security, or even on contract by Edgewater. The owners kept them from being reclaimed, but you couldn't trace who they were. They were waiting for the good times to come back.

Who wouldn't kill to live closer to the urban hub? Let the megacorp farms deliver food into where you all were easily gathered? No more gardening for myself, no more hour-long commutes and most of my month's take going into transportation costs.

"Looks nice, though," Maggie said. "You got an extra room, I'll move in. But don't get excited, this is simple business."

"Leaving him?"

Maggie looked confused, then touched the bruise under her eye and laughed. "You think it's a guy? No, it was a lot of guys. Eddies."

"What'd you do to piss the Eddies off?"

"Hiding out up in a penthouse in the Slumps. They found me."

"Ah. So you want to couch surf me?"

“In exchange for half the cost your bus pass, my car’s cheap to run.” She charged up the car at work, some sort of agreement with the owners. “Plus, buses are getting less and less regular. Could all quit soon enough.”

Halving my transportation costs. Sounded harmless enough.

I agreed and showed her a spare room. There were seven. No real trouble, other than having a pretty roommate who was entirely uninterested in me.

Welcome to poverty homesteading, I thought. But it beat getting flushed out of the city by Edgewater. I’d made the same mistake Maggie had when I first arrived downtown, seeing an empty skyscraper as an opportunity. Fortunately I’d had enough on me to pay the Edgewater holding fee and get loose.

Every once in a while, I wondered what happened to the homeless the Eddies rounded up who couldn’t pay.

Later in the night, once Maggie was fast asleep, I padded out into the backyard and off into the Wilds. Survival training-wise, flitting my way through forest and suburban ruins.

My bolthole was about two miles from my house, next to an old oak tree. Buried near a massive root, I had my whole stake in a lockbox.

Sure, currency could devalue, but that hit everyone equally. With cash in hand and hidden, no hacker, frauder, lawyer, Edgewater flunky—or government—could get at my savings.

Good luck finding this out in the Wilds.

Maggie, on the way in the next morning, talked about the various cities she’d bartended her way through. Living out of the back of her car, charging up and moving on. She’d seen the East Coast, she told me. Now she was moving on through the Midwest, although she wasn’t sure how the car would do in open spaces. She was thinking about saving up for an ox. Or maybe a donkey. To pull it when power ran out, or when she couldn’t get gas to fill the generator in the back of the car.

“Driving by day, sleeping under the stars, seeing something new every day. I don’t want to ever give it up,” she said.

I lay slumped against the passenger window in my usual morning stupor, watching the dirty sidewalks slip past. Lotta trash was building up. Every-other-week pickups.

But there was something new. Something I should have noticed on the bus rides in,

but was too busy balancing in the aisle to see out the window and notice: people milled around the sidewalks.

I would have said they were homeless, but they didn't look garden variety. They were all clean-shaven, well clothed. A variety of hairstyles: punk to stiff to end-overs. A lot of them wore gray suits, others loose ponchos.

They all sat along the street, watching traffic and life pass by. Some waved as we passed. One crouched next to a large plastic cube that was folding itself up, deflating from where it was hooked to the side of the street. Some sort of mobile tent.

Most of them bunched up near the disused skyscrapers of the outer ring. As we hit downtown they thinned out. But we passed one last pair, sitting on folding chairs, fruit drinks in hand with little umbrellas perched off to the side.

"Listen," Maggie said. "You still hurting for cash?"

"Yeah." Two men in blue pinstripes leaned against a corner, talking into earpieces. I'd done a tour. These guys were doing recon. I'd have bet the day's tips on it.

What the hell was going on out in the Slumps? I needed to pay more attention to the news, because whatever it was, the Eddies would be on to it soon. If there was going to be any trouble anywhere downtown I wanted to know about it before it reached me.

"I wasn't just trying to sleep in that sky scraper the other night for no reason. There's a guy, paid me a week's worth to try and shelter in the Slumps for a night," Maggie said. "I'd run out, couldn't afford the hotel I was in anymore."

"Creepy?"

"Turk work. Anonymous. Some piece of software's my second boss. I found the job on a list. Looking for people in Detroit to do stuff around the city. Random shit. Day one, I delivered a package lying out on a counter in a hotel to a bike courier ten blocks away. Then a couple days later I had to walk up to the top of some old carpark and toss some paperballs over the side. Weird stuff. Random. Paid well. Last night it was good pay to see how long I could stay in a Slump building. Some other guy, a lawyer, turking out himself probably, came and bailed me out from the Eddies. As promised, if I got caught."

"Job listing still up?" I asked.

"Nah. But whoever's running this is offering me a bonus to refer people verbally." Maggie handed me a piece of paper with an email address of random numbers on it. One time encryption, no doubt.

“A week’s worth?” Pay like this, and with the money Maggie was saving me, I might be able to think about a place in the city. I could ditch the house in the Wilds after Maggie inevitably moved on.

“Week,” she confirmed.

“That’s worth a bruised eye,” I said.

“Damn straight.”

Plus, it sounded harmless enough.

I don’t know why it’s called turking. Taking a complicated task and putting it up online, divvying up the parts of a task between multiple people and paying for the results, that had been going on a long time.

Say you needed someone to find a certain face in a crowd, if you were an Edgewater investigator. You could upload the photo of the perp you were hunting, and then upload pictures of crowds you suspected the person was in.

Then you put the task up online and paid whoever turned in a result. Saved you time, someone else did the idiot work, and you got to focus on higher level stuff.

But it went further than that. Suppose you had a package in Los Angeles that needed to get to New York. When I was a kid you’d go to a centralized post office, pay for stamps, and it would be taken on a special van at a certain time of day along a series of routes to an airplane, across the country with a bunch of other packages to a distribution center, and then onto more vans, to finally end up at in New York. And most of all that was run by that one company.

Today you turked the package out. Left it at a street corner with a price embedded on the package’s tag. Someone going in the right direction would snag it and get the credit or partial credit for taking it as close to the goal as they could get it.

But other things were also turked out. Insidious things. And you’d never know. All you were being asked to do was walk a package a couple miles from one place to another. What was in the package? None of your business. And if you opened it the tag could snag a picture of you or pass on the information you used to agree to grab the package to the owner.

No sense doing that.

So there was also no sense in wondering what I was complicit in when I pinged the

email on the piece of paper Maggie'd given me, and got back a set of simple instructions. I was to stand on the corner not too far from an Edgewater depot, and when they left their compound, text a certain number.

Simple enough. And with good pay. I'd make what I made in three or four night's bartending to do this.

Someone really wanted to know what Edgewater's comings and going were. Not really harmless anymore. But still potentially lucrative.

I left work early for my street turk assignment, walking my way over to the location. I stood in the hot night, wind kicking faded pieces of litter past me. Dirt flicked up, grit stinging my eyes, and the nighttime rush of the city flowed by. I had staked out a spot on the street near an alley where part of a brick wall collapsed in. No one could walk up behind me, and I had the shadows to lurk in.

Trails of brake lights burned on the back of my retinas as cars whined past. Some even thundered past. Uncollected trash out on the sidewalk smelled rich, making the thermos of coffee I had clipped to my belt seem unappetizing.

The Edgewater compound broke into a flurry of activity as a large armored van full of men in riot gear rolled on out, a siren burping out a staccato series of wails and screeches.

I texted.

Over the next eight hours I texted three more times as the streets fell into their late night rhythm of random cars, distant sirens, and the occasional cat fight that broke out near any given garbage can.

Simple enough.

When dawn broke over the skyline I had an hour left. I was that much closer to leaving the Wilds. And it was then I heard the click of a safety catch being released in the alley behind me.

Impossible, but there it was.

I had the lid cup of the thermos filled with coffee. I slowly raised both hands, the thermos cup lid hanging off my pinkie.

The Eddies must have spotted me.

"On the ground," spat the voice behind me. I followed the order.

Once I kissed the pavement, he zip-tied my hands behind me. I heard an engine gun up loudly as a vehicle whipped around the street corner. I was wrenched up to standing and tossed into the back of the armored personnel carrier that I had watched roar out of their compound all night.

After Sudan, I'd been offered a job as an Eddie in Cleveland. By then, I'd put in enough time kicking down doors and trying to figure out if the grey-green blob inside your night vision goggles was going to shoot you or run screaming.

In the dim light inside they shoved me up against a metal bench. Five men in full urban combat garb stared at me. With gray fatigues and night vision goggles, they were also fully kitted out to climb buildings, blow out doors, and rush in with a shoot-first-ask-questions-later sort of look to them.

"Good morning," said the nearest Eddie. "What have we here?"

"He was staking us out," said the one who'd snuck up on me.

"You staking us out, you little concrete bunny?" The nearest Eddie, a pale-looking thin dude with a sour smell leaned in. "You related to those fuckers that've been setting off little bombs and running for it, just to get us to run around all night? You getting off on wasting our time?"

Nothing I said would be helpful, but if I remained quiet, that was a problem too. They had me here in the armored carrier because they could rough me up some before getting back to the compound. They were having a long night, and now they had a target.

Straight truth was the easiest course. No running around. "I'm not sure what you're talking about," I said. "But maybe. I got paid a good bit. Street turking. Just to stand there and text a number if you guys ran out in a hurry. I bartend at ZaZa's, usually, but I'm out in the Wilds. They offered me good money to stand here. Bus fare's are tight: you know the drill."

The nearby Eddie still looked keyed up to cause me some pain, but the Eddie standing in silhouette at the entrance to the carrier nodded. "Makes sense. Turk out the stake out, just like the guy last night. We'll bust you, they'll have a turked out lawyer ready and waiting. They have other turks watching this scene, if last night was any indication."

"Fuckers," the sour-smelling Eddie said.

"Take this joker to a cell and wait for bail, charge the max for loitering," the Eddie

outside said. He sounded in-charge and on-top. “Might as well see some good green for our trouble.”

“Shit.” Sour-smelling Eddie spat something nasty and brown at my feet. “Sure about that?”

“Dee and me will take patrol, see if we can flush out the other turks.” This Eddie looked young, and tired. He rubbed his face. Maybe he’d commanded a squad overseas, enough savvy to get noticed and promoted to running things when he got back.

Now he probably sensed something was in the air, something that didn’t bode well for the Eddies.

Outside Eddie shut the doors and slapped them, and the carrier lurched into gear. Sour-smelling Eddie smiled at me.

I didn’t like him. Some people enjoyed their jobs way too much.

This punk was probably some kid from the Midwest, one of those who seemed to think that everyone non-white was to blame for everything that was wrong with the country since any of the various crises had hit. He took some relish in policing the city, putting certain people in their place.

Probably had a no-immigration bumper sticker on an electric pickup cart that he drove to the compound. Even though it was mostly Canada and the Europeans trying to keep us contained in our own borders these days.

He volunteered to steer me to my cell, and followed me in. I turned to face him. “Can I help—”

He hit me hard in the stomach, but I’d already tensed and let my torso move with the blow. Still hurt. All this bus riding and gardening didn’t exactly keep me in peak shape. I needed to remember to work a bit harder on that. I was a bouncer, after all.

Back a few steps, and I was ready for the next, but someone smacked the windows with the palm of their hand. “Hey! Gary. Knock that shit out.”

The Community Management Officer of the station stood outside. CMO S. Whatten, the patch on his chest indicated. Unlike all the other head-shaved urban commandos I’d run into tonight, Whatten had a business cut going. Middle-management kind of look. A suit.

But you could see in his posture he was command through and through. Probably

served in the same fields as me. Been given a pat on the back, a gas bonus, and taken private work on his return.

Whatten shook his head. “Gary, you lose your cut.”

“What?” Gary looked genuinely shocked. “I helped pull this one in.”

“He’s got a lawyer outside. If you kept going they wouldn’t be paying us permanent bail, idiot, they’d be getting a force-and-violence payout from us.” Whatten shoved Gary back. “Keep it up, Gary, keep it up and I’ll happily toss your ass out of the dorm and let you walk to work every day. See how long you last on your own two feet.” A known Edgewater walking out and around. He’d get knifed in the back before long unless he was very quick on his toes. Gary didn’t strike me as quick on his toes.

Gary swallowed, and with a glance back at me left the room.

But this wasn’t over. Whatten stood in the middle of the door, looking me over. “You don’t have any property to post a lien against. Got a lawyer outside. Got no money our computer can find. But no record.”

They couldn’t find my money because I took it out and buried it deep in the Wilds, in the backyards woods. “You going to knock me around and tell me to keep more pocket change on me, so that next time you won’t feel like you wasted your effort?”

“No,” Whatten sighed. “Not going to waste the effort. Not going to drill through a thick grunt’s skull like yours.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, plus, I don’t take orders any more.”

“Fair enough.” But Whatten still hadn’t moved. “You don’t know what the hell you were doing out there…”

“You know how it works,” I said. This was leading to something else, though.

“I’ve seen enough turked out armies in my time,” Whatten said. “I look young, but I paid out hard. I’ve seen the ghosts merging in on you, kids with fireworks, others with guns, others with cameras waiting for you to make the inevitable mistake.”

Whatten said ghosts. And he looked haunted, his wide eyes flicked back to memories of battles past.

The warlords would hand out cellphones like candy to the kids. Promise them gas or food to carry out errands. And individually, not much was going on. But as a whole, a vast and complicated and decentralized attack, they could bring armies down to their

knees before anyone knew what had happened.

I could see Whatten opening fire on some starving teenager with a toy gun, while the cameras relayed the horrible results live to some hungry, waiting news service. Then after the cameras shut off, the kids with the real guns, who looked just like the others, moved in to attack.

“You know something big is moving,” Whatten said. “People staking us out, street turkers all over the place, setting up things. Waiting. Out there. You know what the revised articles of engagement are, Reginald?”

“Yeah, I know them.” It’s why I wouldn’t ever become a damned Eddie. Or any domestic boot-stomping yahoo.

All you did for a turked army was to put a brick down by the side of a road. And maybe all it took was some few hundred other bricks placed to create a roadblock. Individually, you could claim you were just making a buck.

But that still made you an enemy combatant. Which meant you were no longer a citizen. You didn’t belong to another country, either. There were no rules about what they could do to you then. You simply didn’t exist as far as the rule of law was concerned.

“At some point,” Whatten told me, “us Eddies’ll get attacked here. And we don’t stay Eddies when it turns into a war. When the National’s get mobilized, we’re a subdivision of the army. Then people like Gary, and the real commandos, they’ll come in shooting, kicking in your teeth, and really showing you some pain.”

I shrugged. “You know of another way I can cover my transportation? Some place to stay here in town?”

Whatten crossed his arms over his chest. “So for that you’re dumb enough to work for some turker you don’t even know? The people you’re turking for don’t even have reputation points. You have no idea what the big scheme is? I’ve seen you around, down at ZaZa’s. You’re no tool.”

“Heirarchy of needs, CMO. Give the indigenous infrastructure, they don’t have to depend on desperate moves.” That was a barb that dug deep. Whatten had commanded. No doubt he’d heard that phrase often enough. He’d have taught it to.

Get dropped into some third world situation where they had nothing. No matter the reason, you soon found out that whoever hated your ass could drum up eager waves of hungry soldiers throwing themselves against you.

There was always some rhetoric. But when you dug deep, it always came down to the simple fact that the ready-to-die simply had nothing to lose. They'd sign up and take the math. If enough of them attacked, maybe they'd live. Maybe they'd get something out of it. Save their family, get something to eat, live, whatever.

Now give them something to lose, then those waves thinned out. Infrastructure. Running water. Food. Medical assistance. Homes. Roads and travel. The most devastating tools of war.

But in a world where even the first world nations struggled to provide transportation, water and safety, well, domestic shitstorms started to look like foreign ones. What you never thought you'd see anywhere but abroad, that came home with you.

Whether the starving and displaced were in Africa, or sitting around a dike that had burst somewhere in a coast here, the pressures were the same. Particularly once the domestic dike had been broken over and over again, where citizens realized that it wasn't just a one-off, weather had changed, and the government didn't have much to help them with.

That's when your thin line of civilization faded.

Welcome home, Whatten, and by the way, you never left the front line, I thought to myself.

He got it. He stepped aside to let me walk past and down the corridor. At the other end a gray-suited man with a briefcase waited for me. My mysterious lawyer, and fellow turker.

I was pushing up a good defense for Whatten. The truth was… I was getting nervous. I didn't know what the hell I was getting myself into.

And maybe it was time to get myself out.

The lawyer asked me to keep my mouth shut until well clear of the compound: sign this, initial here, don't worry about that. Quick, assured, and efficient. I was buzzed through the thick bomb-proof doors in no time.

He had a bike outside, an old and well-traveled carbon-fiber Schwinn with a gps in the handle and a heavy saddle on the back. He wheeled it alongside me. "Your fine has been covered. Your night's work is done," he said. "Thank you."

I'd checked my account on my phone, but didn't see the rest of my night's pay. I mentioned it.

The lawyer looked over at me and sighed. “It’s in the fine print. The cost of springing you is far more than your payoff, so you get nothing as a result of getting arrested by this Edgewater franchise. You’re getting a good deal, trust me.”

I never took too well to getting pissed on and being told to like it. “I’m not a fine print kind of man.”

Had they paid me after a successful mission, where the Eddies wouldn’t have had anything to take from me, I would have been up for the night. Now all I had to show for the night’s efforts was the down payment on this little affair and some very sore ribs.

“But the contract remains what it is, Mr. Stratton. Can’t wriggle out these things, you know.”

I licked my lips. “I’m pretty good at not getting noticed. How’d they spot me to round me up?”

The lawyer mounted his bike. “I don’t know, Mr. Stratton. Like you, I was just called in to take care of this. I’m just a turker, making some side money.” He picked up speed, pulling away from me. “You know how it works. I don’t know who you are, or what you were doing. None of my business. I was just here to pay your fine and get you on your way.”

He left me there on the quiet rundown streets. I flipped through my phone’s address book and emailed the turker email address I’d gotten the job through, but it bounced back.

Annoyed, I started a quick jog after the lawyer, sucking air shallowly thanks to the bruised ribs. The money was a magnet, dangling just out of reach.

Turker or not, someone was going to pay me the other damn half of what I was owed.

Three miles later second thoughts occurred as I clutched my ribs, struggling to keep up with the lawyer’s leisurely pace.

In the early morning dawn, peeking over sullied and coal-stained brick, more and more people were filling the streets I was huffing my way through. Again, an odd and silent community of well-off homeless standing near their collapsible mobile structures. I smelled eggs and sausage sizzling: my mouth watered and my stomach twisted at the smell of food, not a good sign after all the jogging.

The great old Ambassador bridge loomed over the buildings, the gaping bombed ruins of the roadway overhead thrumming in the wind. Thank you Canadian Air Force for

that one…

I turned a corner and into a scene that, for a moment, didn't make any sense. The parking lots and gardens of this area were overrun with massive tents, large RV-type vehicles with masts and lean looking roadboats, and tens of thousands of people.

Some sort of instant mid-West Burning Man festival, it seemed.

The lawyer disappeared into the center of the mass of people, and three very burly bikers stepped forward. Dark shades already on in the morning sun, their leather jackets festooned tiny tags and symbols.

"Where's your ID?" the first asked, long beard whipping about as a dust devil passed by, fluttering tent flaps and flags on poles all around. Roadboat rigging twanged a chorus.

"I must have left it somewhere," I said, calmly walking toward them, trying to eyeball where the lawyer'd disappeared.

"Nice try. You can't." The nearest biker bodychecked me away. "Fucking footprinter."

My ribs flared pain hard enough to make me suck air in through my teeth.

"Listen." I held my hands up. That made it hurt more. "I'm not trying to cause any trouble. But I need to talk to someone…"

"You got trouble understanding?" The biker's tone was familiar. The sort of negotiating tone used to indicated he'd agree not to stave in my skull if I agreed to leave the camp.

I backed away.

"Get out, footprinter. Get out now."

I turned around, wincing. Back to the bar, then. Only this time I called for a cab.

But things didn't exactly get any better there. Lawrence sat on a chair inside the door, but a big closed sign he'd hand-lettered had been hung on the door.

"What the hell's going on?" I asked.

"Maggie went home. No bartender, no bar."

I blinked. She had no reason to be home… it made no sense. What could she be up to?

My stomach twisted. I still had a bus pass. I ran like hell in time to make the morning bus out to the Wilds.

Maggie's car wasn't at the house when I got there.

And the lockbox, two miles out in the depth of the Wilds, wasn't either.

I sat next to the empty dirt hole, my back against the root, and flung an acorn out into the bush. Cute little Maggie, the bartender too wispy to be in a brutal downtown. She was a nomad, stringing her way through the brutal and lawless Wilds of the continent. Maggie was probably tougher than me. Certainly smarter.

My savings had just been wiped out, and she probably had enough to make the next leg of her journeys.

It rained most of the way back. A dirty, whipping Detroit grimy sort of rain. I watched the remains of it congeal on the outside of the bus's windows as I was jerked back and forth between the quiet mass of commuters making their way in.

I recognized one of the guys several seats ahead of me. One of the squatters in the Wilds who'd given me advice on my garden. He had dog tags hanging off a necklace, something a lot of the reclamation groups off in the Wilds had. Little kudos for each other, signs that told each other where they stood in their own subworlds.

They would be happy to welcome me into their little tribe, I had no doubt. I could teach self-defence in one of their creches. Sleep on recycled packing foam beds. Help out in their gardens. But I'd done the farmer boy routine. I'd joined the army to leave that. Not my talent, I'd found. I found my talent the day seven nomads descended on the farm I was working at.

I blinked at the dirty rain. Hadn't thought about that in too many years. The crack of a gun, the screams of wounded. All too easy. Shooting people, that is. Easier than deer, mostly. But it left you odd, somehow. A little less human each time, but with the knowledge that you could do it if your life was risked.

I thought about standing in front of the bar. Thought about all the work put into the brick house. Thought about each bill taken home, buried near the tree.

Maggie pulled one over on me, and I didn't hate her for it. Not a bit. I hated myself for falling into a routine, a sense of complacency and tired resignation. A miasma of life that had made it so easy for her to do this to me.

Things didn't come to people who waited for it. Who picked over the trash and hoped to find treasure. It came to those who grasped. But then I wondered if that was the

same attitude that had led the world to burning up its resources and leaving the dregs for us.

Lot of maybes and buzzing going around and around in the back of my head. I quashed it all. I'd made a decision. I wanted my damn money. After that, I'd figure out what I was taking into my own hands next.

I walked to the Edgewater compound and pounded on the gates until a dubious Whatten ambled out to regard me through the chicken-wired bars.

"What the hell do you want, Stratton?"

"The lawyer, who was he?"

Whatten's pitying look dripped scorn. "Come on, Stratton. We don't know the laywer's name. And don't play like you've never encountered one and don't know the routine."

I did know the routine. Since the laywer protection act, lawyers used public encryption keys, not names, to protect their identities. Too many of them found hanging from lamp posts by their necks.

"His key, give me his key." It could have been someone turked to represent the lawyer in real time, with an earpiece directing him what to say and when, or an apprentice lawyer turked out, or maybe the real lawyer.

Hard to tell these days. Risky profession.

"Expired. Stratton, what're you doing?"

"They owe me money. I want paid. I've seen him out by the bridge, hiding among some homeless camp. Who paid for my fine, maybe you know that?" They had to have something.

Whatten moved closer to the chicken-wire. He didn't touch it. Electrified. "You really want the lawyer that bad?"

I folded my arms and nodded.

"Okay," Whatten said. "We want him too. We want to know what the hell is going on. You get in there, you find him out, or anything out, we'll straight up pay you for the info."

They were that fucking desperate for any tidbit. Hiding here in their sandbagged fort. I felt a shiver move up my back. "I just want them to pay me up. Anything I find out,

I'll pass on."

Whatten bobbed his head a bit, considering whether to trust me. That little cloud of desperation hung over him.

He buckled. "I'll give you a car rental chit, straight cash bonus." He named a price.

Good price. These kids were scared. I took it. "What do you know?"

"Your fine, it was paid by Spaceship Detroit, a non profit."

Sounded odd. "Who they hell are they?"

Whatten didn't know.

"What do they do?"

Whatten, again, didn't know. But it was something. I turned my back on him.

Spaceship Detroit. They'd pay up. Or give me another job. I'd get roughed up for big money. But mainly, I could sense it out there. Something moving through city. Something big. And I wanted to rip a piece of it off for myself.

Whatten knew it was out there too. He wanted to figure out what it was. Bad enough to pay me to do it.

Things were perking up a bit.

The electric car the Eddies rented for me was fully charged, plugged into a public meter. It was a raked back egg-shaped affair, carbon-fiber and plastic windshield on three wheels. I swiped the chit Whatten gave me by the window; the car unlocked itself, and the doors swung up into the air.

I settled in, running my fingers over the wheel, adjusting the seat just so. Luxurious.

My father used to take us out for special family trips in his car, when the farm had mulched up enough biodiesel in the yardpits. Just like then, when the doors shut, it was only you inside. Like when you walked into your own house. The outside world seemed just that, outside. A barrier between you and everyone else.

It was like one of those animes where the hero puts on invincible, giant, techno-armor.

There was an appeal to this. I always found the electrics more fun than the combustion ones as well. Instant torque all the way down through to the wheels in an electric, no

hesitation.

I cruised around Detroit, slipping past the downtown section. It was a fortress, new and shiny buildings with their backs to the Slumps. The hardy core of a new Detroit, where people could live in walking distance to jobs and necessities. Where the city touched the river, and boats with massive parasails for mobility delivered their cargo along the docks.

I drove out into the Slumps, paralleling the river, aiming for the Bridge, with a stop near a park where a team of kids were playing baseball. One of the little-leaguers of some reclamation creche was happy to sell me a bat for cash before the coach and chaperones chased me off.

The expedition continued to the edge of the bridge, where I found an alley looking out at the main street across. Most of the homeless appeared to have left the sidewalks for the strange city, just evident in the distance under the ruins of the bridge. Things were pretty quiet, just the occasional person wandering down the road on whatever errand they were on.

I fished around inside my pockets and found a pair of painkillers, which I dry swallowed. Then it was the long wait.

Hunting was never for the impatient.

Or the hungry. Eventually, after several hours of seeing homeless wander by who weren’t the lawyer, I ventured out to look for somewhere to eat.

The alleyway my car was in sounded busy.

I paused after turning the corner. The car had been cut to shit, door panels slashed clean off, windows yanked free, and all of this left as quickly as I’d arrived.

Everyone had fled.

I got in the car, the door creaking sadly as it swung up, and sat. I shut the door, looking nervously around, and tapped the accelerator to get the hell out.

As the car lurched forward, three dozen well-dressed people of all ethnicities started running down the alleyway behind me from their hiding places. They wore suits, or cargo pants with ponchos. Ten of them carried sharp-looking axes, while the others had large bags, a couple of them had a sled dragged behind them.

This didn’t look good.

The car was in bad shape. It coughed to a gentle stop as some part fell off from underneath onto the road. A silent and expectant mob surrounded me as I got out of the car, the bat gripped in both hands. I would need to grab an ax as quickly as possible after the first couple swings, I reckoned. But the crowd moved back from me.

“We don’t want any trouble,” one of the axe-wielders said. “We just want your car.”

“Storing carbon producing energy in a battery still doesn’t change the impact of the original source of the energy!” someone shouted from the back of the crowd. “Damn footprinter.”

It was the second time I’d been called that.

“Shut up, Mary,” the axe-wielder said. “Sir, just step away from the car.”

“If you can’t see how to take care of your footprint, we’ll do it for you,” the woman shouted.

“Mary. Shut. Up.” The axe-wielder turned back. “You are not helping matters.”

I still stood there, bat in hand, keeping everyone at bay. “What do you want out of me?” I asked.

“Just your car,” the man said, exasperated.

“What the hell is going on?” I really wanted to know. I felt like I’d fallen down a hole into some alternate Detroit.

“We’re turning this area of Detroit into a car-free zone. We’re lead scavengers, looking to recycle any cars in our occupied territory into useful machines and produces. We have a reprap to repurpose the materials. That’s our job.”

I didn’t know what a reprap was. Some kind of three-D printer, I had to assume. But even though things were hard on cars these days, you couldn’t talk about turning Detroit into a car-free zone with a straight face. These guys were nomadic extremist nuts of some sort.

“But what’ll you do with the parts?” I asked. “What’s the point?”

The guy grinned. “Oh, we’ll put them to good use.” A pair from the crowd advanced on the back end of my car and smacked their axes into it.

“Hey!” I yelled, pointing my bat at them. But the moment was past. They’d written me off as a threat and began tearing into the car with gusto. So I grabbed the guy nearby

with the axe and twisted it free. His friends hardly even noticed, too caught up in their fervor of car destruction.

I dragged the man, wrapping his cloth poncho around his neck and arms in a knot he struggled against, down to a set of steps away from the destruction.

“What… the hell?” he gasped.

Dramatic, yes. And yet, it got the attention I wanted. Now I had an axe. And a bat.

I held the axe up and looked at it. “What’s your name?” I asked casually.

“Charlie.”

“Charlie. Pleased to meet you. I’m Reginald.” I loosened his poncho.

“That fascist bullshit doesn’t fly, dragging me off like that,” Charlie spat. Just like these other homeless, he was well washed, well shaved, with short cropped hair.

I squatted in front of him. “Charlie. I could care less. You chopped up the car I was renting. I have to think that violates my rental agreement. So you know who’s going to get flack for that? Me. That puts me in a bad mood. And I’m the guy with the bat.”

“And I’m the guy with some ten thousand other guys sitting just down the block,” Charlie said.

Fair enough.

I set the bat and axe down. “Okay.” I pulled a chocolate bar out of my pocket and unwrapped it. “Just, explain to me what’s going on.” I waved my hand out at the camp, and the people on the side of the street.

Charlie still sulked on the stairs. I tried again. “You’re all nomads, right, passing through Detroit?” Like Maggie, but in large tribes. Like locusts.

“Yeah, nomads. Low footprint nomads. We don’t stress out the environment. Take what we need into recycling. Recycle what we have. We’re here, but we’re not part of the city, not part of the resources being sucked.”

“So what are you doing with my car?”

“You ever ride a bike?” Charlie asked me.

“Yeah. When I was a kid.”

“It’s a perfect technology. Ten to fifteen miles an hour for the energy required for a human to walk. And humans are good at walking,” Charlie said. “Evolutionarily, we’re designed to just walk and walk and walk all day long. Eat some calories and watch us go. But look at this shithole.”

He waved his hands around the street. “Not a bike friendly city?” I hazarded.

“Fuck no! We’re in the second century of having this perfect technology, but we kept focusing on something far less efficient. The streets aren’t bike friendly, the Wilds aren’t friendly, Detroit and a lot of these other Midwest cities are throwing money at electric cars and power plants that run on coal, thinking that if they can just swap things out, life can run right back on the course it did.

“Meanwhile, people run in gyms or just get fat because they keep using the lazy technology. At ten miles an hour, man, you can live within 15 miles of your workplace and still get in.”

He had more, a complete rant, but I help up a hand. “My car, though.”

Charlie looked back at me. “People don’t make voluntary changes, they just float downstream. Even when there’s a freaking waterfall at the end.”

“So you’re going to make people swim upstream?”

“No.” Charlie laughed. “We’re going to blow the river up. The car makers, their ghosts are still playing with the city. We’re going to make it carless. Whether they like it or not.”

I picked up the bat. Edgewater was dealing with eco-terrorists.

The last thing I wanted to do was get between the Eddies and these guys. Things got ugly when you were dealing with people who’d already thought the world was ended, thanks to people like the Eddies. No amount of lost love between authorities and anarchists.

But I still wanted paid. And their little tent city under the bridge hid the lawyer.

I cradled my bat in my arms and left Charlie on the steps. Around me people were dragging the remains of my rental off down the street in what seemed like thirty different directions for scrap. Or recycling. Or to whatever a reprap was.

I promised myself that I’d be out of the city before the crazy shit started happening. But as I came out of the old, soot-stained brick buildings and looked out at the empty

pavement and weeds in front of me, I wondered if I'd made an empty promise:

The entire tent city had disappeared.

A single, distant figure stood alone in the urban emptiness, as if waiting just for me.

I recognized the lawyer. Even in this distance.

The lawyer waited by his bike, both hands holding his briefcase in front of his waist. "Mr. Stratton, you are a very persistent man."

I swung my bat up over my back, letting it hang loose, gripped by my right hand. I wasn't giving him a hand to shake. "Where'd they all go?"

"Staying in one place invites complacency, and authoritarian response. Takes time to muster the resources to evict a group of our size."

"But there were thousands of people here, with tents, and avenues between the tents," I protested. "They can't just evaporate in a morning when my back's turned."

"And yet they did."

I stood in the concrete emptiness, forced to concede his point. "A well ordered army, then."

The lawyer smiled. "Now, Mr. Stratton, you're getting to the meat of it. Are you intrigued?"

"I want the rest of the money."

"I know. You willing to follow this all the way, then?"

I wasn't sure what he was getting at. But I nodded assent. "I want paid."

The lawyer leaned in with a tiny black wand, which he waved over my body. Around my collar it beeped, and the lawyer flicked a switch. A tiny mote on my collar smoldered, then puffed smoke.

"Now that the Eddies can't follow you, I have a request," the lawyer said. He produced a dark blue hood.

I stared at the cloth. "You want me to wear that? You think the Eddies can't just patch into a satellite and find where your mob took off to?"

The lawyer sighed. “Granted. But where in the camp you are will be secret.”

“Yeah, okay.” Here we go. I pulled the hood on. “But I’m keeping the bat,” I said, my voice muffled.

“Whatever you want, Mr. Stratton.” The lawyer sounded bored. He pushed me forward. “There’s a sidecar on my bike, please get in it.”

Why hadn’t he had me sit first before putting the hood on? To mess with my head? “So are you a part of all this, or are you just a turking lawyer?”

I could feel him climbing onto his bike. We jerked into motion. “I’m a part of the project.”

“To destroy the auto-oriented world of Detroit?”

“Among other things, Mr. Stratton. The world cannot continue on its current path.” The lawyer was huffing as he pedaled, getting us up to a quick clip. “We have returned almost to the time of city-states, like the Greeks. Each of these cities has a different past, and set of traditions and patterns set into its habits. Some of these habits have a fundamental impact, however, on citizens elsewhere. If you dump some form of pollution into the air from a smokestack somewhere, and people are effected hundreds of miles away, shouldn’t they have some sort of say? It used to be there were country-wide principals and guidance, but in this day and age it’s city to city.

“Now, some of us don’t have allegiances to any one place. Particularly those of us old enough to remember nationalism. You know what I’m talking about Stratton, you fought for country, once, not city.”

“Didn’t do much for me,” I muttered. But I remember the days when bunting hung from porches and second floor windows.

“We have no allegiance to country, city, or company. We’re neo-tribalists at best, but even then, not forming around any constitution or hierarchal structure. We’re per-project affiliations, with reputation economics as our bond. Some of us switch from one project to another, others are committed to the larger plan of trying to create substantial memetic change to our urban environments.”

“Like getting rid of cars.”

“That’s a sub-project, one that many have coalesced around. Some of the more enthusiastic, like those who recycled your car. Yes. But the energy use and issues of transportation are realistically a small segment of the greater issue of creating a city, or environment, that is carbon neutral and thus, sustainable. We’re talking about the

long term survival of the human species, Mr. Stratton, not just whether you recycle plastic and go to work in the approved transportational manner."

"I've been hearing doom and gloom for a long time," I grunted. "The end of the world's always just around the fucking corner."

"And you think it won't come?" The lawyer zigged through streets. Some alleys, too, I could tell by the echoes of our voices. "You think civilizations haven't collapsed? Someone or something else will come along. They'll name some streets after us, maybe create a museum. We still find ancient cities by satellite, after the jungle or desert has long since overrun them. Why'd they die off? Overuse of the soil, or whatever, or just plain bad planning when it came to picking neighbors. But the point is, their world ended. You can nuke a patch of ground, and the radiation will kill everything. Years later, nature comes back. Generations later, some parts of it are livable. Still doesn't mean setting a nuclear bomb off in the middle of your living room's a good idea."

"Sounds like a lot of drama."

"We're sitting on an edge, Mr. Stratton. You've seen it all change in your life. The young around us, they've only known the slipping and scrabbling, watching energy prices spiral out of control. They're content to root around in their parent's and grandparent's trash to look for whatever they can recover. But you know better. You can feel it, that your life straddled the point where we hit the apex, and then started sliding. Remember when we used to make things."

I remembered the long factory lines, the smokestacks belching. The rows of gleaming product, sitting perched over enticing price tags, all packaged in sexy gleaming plastics. They made so much you just tossed it all when you were done, because they'd make more.

We descended a ramp of some sort, and the world grew dark outside. The lawyer slowly came to a stop, and reached over to remove my hood.

"Don't ask where you are," he said. "I'm a delivery man, of sorts. Now that I'm here I can't leave, but you may have to and you can't know where this is. Most of the people in here don't know where here is. Keeps it safe."

I clambered out into the barely lit dimness of an industrial warehouse, the windows all blacked out. As my eyes adjusted, I realized it was entirely empty.

Until the doors swung open. People wearing large datagoggles over their eyes walked in. None of them could see where they were, or what was in front of them. But they marched like robots, following invisible lines of information.

More came in, carrying chairs, some with desks, that they sat at predetermined points. They swarmed around each other like ants, following some larger pattern of commands. Maybe hundreds of them had already swarmed in through the room, and most had left.

Large industrial worklights lit up the inside of the warehouse, and an entire command center's worth of monitors had been strapped to a large metal trunk at the center, which had been quickly bolted onto the concrete floor. Thick fiber optics ran all over the warehouse, terminating in a large trunk of bound cables that ran to a dish pointed out of one of the windows that had been pulled open.

The entire process had taken five very surreal minutes.

The crowds evaporated, leaving ten individuals behind. One of them sat in a complex wheelchair that folded around him and held him up at eye-level. It whirred and balanced, and trailed cables behind it.

Inside the wheelchair, the gray-skinned man moved closer to me. He had sunken eyesockets, lids stitched closed, and plastic-looking cheekbones. One missing arm, plugged into a socket on the chair. No legs, unless they were hidden in its depths.

One ear was missing as well, replaced by a metallic ovoid with three blue lights steadily shining.

"Mr. Stratton, I'm afraid we've been recruiting you," the man said, slowing in front of me. The wheelchair raised a bit higher so his face was level with mine. A small pair of cameras on his shoulder adjusted their focus with a faint whirr.

"Someone tipped off the Eddies that I was watching them. And someone didn't pay the other half of what I was expecting." For some reason, I'd been allowed to keep the bat. But bashing on a man with no legs, one arm, and no eyes was not going to be part of today's equation.

"Guilty as charged. Mr. Stratton, we're looking for a leader, someone who knows the area, and someone who has a good sense of the Edgewater contractors here. There are a number of candidates, but you're a service man with a record, and a good idea of what we'll be facing."

"Listen…" I wasn't sure how to ask after his name, so I floundered for a second.

"My tag is MockTurtle, the community moderator for this project." MockTurtle. A little bit of this, and a little bit of that. A risible name for a man who was about as much machine. He saw my amusement through his camera and nodded. "Yes. I do find some

humor in my situation. The alternative was despair."

"Okay Mr. Turtle. The lawyer pitched me hard on your cause." I looked around the warehouse. "I'm not interested. If people want to bike and walk the town, that's their thing. I'm not getting involved in some riot."

The wheelchair backed away. "We're not, as such, asking you to volunteer. We're willing to pay for your services. And settle up on what you think we still owe you."

Now we were talking. "I'm listening."

"An apartment in downtown Detroit. Maybe even continuing work as security for it."

"A lease? How long, and how much?"

The ruin of a man in front of me chuckled. "You're not paying close enough attention, Mr. Stratton. See, at first we weren't sure who we'd pick, or hire, to run the street side of this project. But then you showed up, turking for us. It was a sign. Who better to run this than someone like you, down on your luck and needing the help? When you started snooping around, well, we had to bring you in. We're offering you an apartment. A whole apartment."

I stared. Like I said, there were some that would give their left nut for downtown space. I included myself in that list.

"So you're going to riot, to turn this into a car-free city. And you need my help." Too good to be true, it all was. And if there was one thing I learned in life, it was a little suspicion. "No way a downtown apartment's worth it for my help. You've already got an army, well trained, you showed it off when you set all this up in here a few minutes ago."

MockTurtle spread his one arm. I recognized what those scars came from: a landmine. Boston, or DC? I wondered. "You're right. It's not just the cars. That's a diversion. An important issue, yes. But we're involved in some urban renewal as well."

Which is where the apartment offer came from. They'd paid Maggie to try and overnight, I remembered. I could put a few things together. "You going to try to occupy the Slumps, are you?" All these nomads, they were going to settle in, reclaim some of these buildings. I could have laughed.

"Not really, Mr. Stratton. It's more complicated than that. We make no guarantees, but I will put a good faith payment up in escrow right… now. Consider it a down payment on the apartment. We need a dedicated team of protestors to keep the Edgewater contractors busy, but the protest cannot get to the size that the military is

called in. You have to both keep the protest in line, and keep it out of the Edgewater's reach. It'll be a delicate balance. If it works, and if our project works in the meantime, you'll have an apartment of your own.

"If the project fails, you're one of several people offered large cash payouts for your services on the ground, rather than volunteering your time. You will still get an equivalent pay. We are fair people, we depend on our word and reputations."

Down the rabbit hole, off to meet the mock turtle, and now to engage in even more silliness. But these mad hatters were certainly offering cold cash. I checked my phone, and the bank confirmed an escrow offer.

"The Edgewater guys, we're hands off them, right?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm your guy."

MockTurtle smiled. "Welcome aboard, Colonel Stratton."

I cringed. "That's why you came to me?"

"Of course. Welcome to Starship Detroit."

"You have a silly name," I said.

"You might not think so when we're done," said the strange man in the wheelchair.

I was in the heart of the sleeping dragon I'd sensed curled up in the darkness, the thing that CMO S. Whatten feared.

I was deep into the crazy shit.

Whatten, in his permanently wrinkle-free working suit, looked surprised. "Didn't think you'd show back up."

"Didn't think I'd be back." I handed him a receipt. "I refunded your payment. There'll be a claim on the car. It was wrecked."

Whatten took a sip of coffee, and looked down the street at the pair of men who'd biked me over to the compound. "Stratton. Colonel. I'm considering calling in reinforcements, or at least talking to the Edgewater board. I'm guessing that there are thousands of these people lurking around the city."

“I think you’re overestimating,” I replied. He wasn’t. He was way, way underestimating.

“We tried to get satellite pictures of their camp from the other night, but someone has blocked it. A clever trick. I don’t know the size of my enemy, or their nature. And now they have a known counter turk-army specialist. You spent years taking down networked insurgencies, Stratton. Overseas. Now, if I didn’t know better, you seem to be working for one.”

I leaned forward, until my face was just an inch from the chicken-wire and bars. “They are eco-freaks, Whatten. They applied for a protest license.”

“No one gets that anymore.” The right to assemble and protest had long since been finessed into oblivion. Didn’t stop them from happening, just meant you had no right to do it.

“I know. So they’re going to go ahead with it anyway.”

“And we’ll have to stop it. I’ll need reinforcements. Tell me why I shouldn’t bump this up?”

“A gentlemen’s agreement,” I said. “I promise that the protest will not exceed a given number. How many can the local Eddies and their compounds handle?”

Whatten chuckled. “I tell you that and you deploy a larger number and I’m up the creek.” He sipped from his mug.

“Whatten, I shit you not, I’m trying to do you a favor. These are people who’re going to do this one way or another, but they’re scared of you. Remember fighting for country, the way things used to be? That’s what they’re after. The right to express dissatisfaction without getting a skull cracked. They hired me to keep it civil, keep things from getting crazy, because I have that expertise. Now, I could hire toughs to keep a barrier going between us, could get snipers up in the roofs, could make for some real ugly back and forths, but I just want to make an easy buck. We keep it small, balanced, and you get to round up some easy fines. They get to make their point. I get to make some serious cash from these hippies. One grunt to another, Whatten, let’s make this easy.”

I watched the gears turn. “You really think this’ll go down that easy?”

“Do you want the board staring down too close into your operation? You want them calling in military? National coverage of the event? Serious battle?”

Whatten looked off in the distance. “Some of my men are a bit jumpy right now.”

“Control them. Offer them bonuses for a calm day of rounding up these guys. Tell them chaos is not welcome. Tell them anything you want, but tell me what your threshold is for kicking the protest upstairs.”

“I see more than three hundred people, I’m calling in reinforcements,” Whatten said.

“I’ll keep it to half that.”

“Half that?” Whatten looked incredulous. “It’s not going to be a protest, it’ll be a lunch date with a bad ending.”

“Half. Thank you, Whatten.”

“Call me Samuel. If it goes the way you say, I’ll even shake your hand when it's all done. But Stratton… fellow grunt or not, we’re going to round people up. And if it gets big, it’s going to hit the fan. It isn’t just my men who’re jumpy. I’m getting it too. I’ll make the call the second it looks odd.”

“I know.” I handed Samuel Whatten my phone number. “We’ll keep in touch. Keep the lines open. The air clear. Just in case.”

I walked back down the street, blinking in the morning sun. Charlie, the axe-wielding bike enthusiast, waited for me.

“So?”

“The Eddies can handle a hundred protestors.”

“Damn it.” Charlie hit his bike handles in frustration. “There is no way we can shut Detroit down with a hundred protestors.”

I smiled. “We have an hour to do it, and then we have to keep doing it for twenty four hours. Come on Charlie, don’t you believe in the vision enough to trust me?”

He just stared at me.

I laughed. “We’ll need far more than a hundred people. We’ll need thousands and thousands.”

“But we’re trying to avoid getting the military to come out after us,” Charlie said.

“No more than a hundred can gather and protest. But the rest of the city is still a tool, Charlie. They still have eyes.”

Charlie was frustrated that the citizens of the city wouldn't work to change their paradigms. But they would.

You just had to turk them out in just the right way.

Detroit. Late morning. The first dry run I chose was near Grand Circus Park, a big intersection near a rundown, gothic-looking church. A set of roads ran a semi-circle around a portion of the intersection as well.

I sat, cross-legged, on top of a large stone block, in front of which was a statue of a sitting man.

It looked like Charlie's wet dream. One hundred bikes converged from four different directions. MockTurtle had given me a list of thousands of possibles, and I'd chosen the fittest, with the fastest bikes.

Speed would be an essential part of this equation.

A small smile quirked the side of my mouth, seeing the four sets of twenty five bikers stream in at full tilt, pedaling away. They all braked to a sudden stop at the center of the intersection.

Now the chaos came. Cars with green lights braked, confused at the sudden clutter as the bikes made a barricade around the square of the intersection.

Waiting in electric utility vans was my support crew. I picked up my phone and selected the mailing list. "Roll out," I typed.

Fifty men leapt out from the backs. My heavies. Anyone with a self-defence or military background. They lugged plastic cones, and began placing them around the edge of the bicycle barricade.

I slipped on a pair of shades and let them talk to my phone, I needed more screen real estate. Because now, things would get tricky. The more practical drivers, realizing something was afoot and not wanting to get caught up in the middle of some riot or demonstration, managed to start turning their cars around.

Finally, the signs went up declaring the area a car free zone. I could see Charlie standing with a bullhorn. Behold the rhetoric. Burn the gas-using relics of a failed era. Embrace the pedal-powered and walkable future.

All around the city I'd deployed bikes, messengers, and paid turks to call in the location of the Eddies. Small flags started popping up in my vision, a map of Detroit

via my heads-up-display glasses. Scrambling Eddies.

“Security out, ten to stay,” I sent. And the heavies melted back into the vans, which pealed off, a handful remaining to the sides.

The Eddies were ripping up Washington Boulevard toward us. When they crossed Michigan Avenue I tapped in the scatter signal. Just as abruptly as they’d appeared, the protestors scrambled onto their bikes and took off in every direction, leaving only the stalled and snarled traffic, the cones, and the signs.

I hopped off the public art and strolled down into the park near the empty fountain, then turned back to watch as the Eddies waded into the mess we’d created. Angry drivers, confused Eddies, not sure if it wasn’t the drivers somehow involved. Some of them were. Paid to have trouble turning around, that was.

There was a small part of me inside chuckling. Being on the other side, there was a sort of beauty to this creative destruction. I’d always suspected.

Twenty Edgewater contractors, in full company uniform, were a bit frustrated.

I called a randomly selected heavy. “Atwater and Bates. Start forming it up.” It was close to the tunnel into Canada, enough to really freak the Eddies out. The fleeing bicyclists would find warehouses, shops, and eateries to duck into. Beta group was activated and ready to go.

An electric waited for me at the far end of the park. Hopefully Charlie and his pals would leave this one alone long enough for me to get through the day.

After swinging around the effects of jammed traffic, I headed for a view of the next mess. I found a spot a block away from the intersection and parked the car. Lit up my heads up display glasses. The Eddies were chasing bicyclists. They’d captured a few, given the ten SOS flags I saw. Time to send in the lawyers for them.

“Atwater and Bates, go,” I ordered via my phone. The bicycles kicked into gear, and my heavies moved onto the scene to stand ready with cones and signs once more.

Since the turn of the century, mobile networked insurgencies had been upsetting the balance of force in urban environments for First World militaries. Infrastructure, I imagined scolding Whatton. Infrastructure.

As laws ate away at the rights to demonstrate, free-form riots had begun to grow, imitating the guerilla tactics abroad. Standing still for a protest didn’t make any sense. Not when rioters would get classified as non-state terrorist entities when rounded up.

The trick was to control your membership. No violence. Which was hard to do when real insurgents waited in the wings to join protests as a cover for whatever they had in mind. And when the Edgewater types paid turks to bring violence to a protest, so that they could shut it down and levy massive fines for pure profit, one had to be quick on their feet.

Damn quick.

Even as my protestors set up, I saw Eddie flags popping up on my HUD map. They were reforming, dropping their chases and coming my way. Samuel Whatten was smart. Eyes on the ground reported a detachment of fifteen Eddies regrouping at Grand Circus Park.

“Security out,” I ordered. And then, as the Eddies approached, I ordered half the protestors to evaporate ahead of the brunt.

The remaining fifty scattered tire-piercing jax with bluetooth signals giving up information about the negative effects of personal transportation as practiced by the city currently. I was sure the driving public would be thrilled with that.

But the message delivered was this: today, any cars in the area defined by the river and Interstates 375, 75, and the Lodge Freeway, would be harassed. Charlie shouted it. Agents delivered messages to blogs, podcast hosts, old media outlets, and placed battery powered projectors on overpasses all around this section of Detroit we’d staked out for the protest.

Here be no cars welcome.

Of course, we couldn’t shut down every street leading in. But if we caused enough trouble, and spread the word, enough people would get the idea and stay away because they didn’t want to get caught up in an Edgewater round up and riot.

The effect would be the same. And I had a few specific goals up my sleeve.

I ordered protestors to pedal out. We had more non-critical intersections to demonstrate at. A few hackers under our pay tapping into Eddie radio chatter reported that the order was going out for all the compounds around Detroit to contribute extra contractors. All Detroit Eddies were getting yanked out of bed, no matter their shift. Riot gear was being passed out.

Things were getting warm.

I yanked Charlie off the streets and had him chauffeur me around in my electric car. Things were getting so complex I couldn’t drive and coordinate at the same time.

Enough people had heard his talking points and been briefed. They were handed loudspeakers and told to carry on the crusade.

Plus, making pedal-powered Charlie drive me around appealed to me on a deep level.

“Spaceship Detroit,” I asked him. “What do you know?”

“It’s the higher level project,” he said, from the front seat. He was doing his best to follow my orders, but not chat too much. Driving me around really had irked him.

It cheered me up.

“Urban renewal.” I knew I was running a big diversion, and I wondered if true-believers like Charlie knew they were just turking out.

It was like one of those games-with-a-purpose you could play online. You thought you were taking over the world in a digital simulation, but instead you were helping develop an algorithm for bottle packing computers based on your reactions to certain variables.

I had to admit, I was enjoying myself a hell of a lot more than I was working as a bouncer just a few nights ago.

“It’s noon,” Charlie said.

“I know.”

“So…”

“Give it a few minutes,” I said. We passed by a series of office buildings. I could see faces in windows looking out. Word of a potential riot had gotten around. People were checking the streets before leaving for lunch.

We continued driving. As I drew more and more people into downtown, I wondered what would be happening in the Slumps.

Spaceship Detroit, huh?

I just hoped it wouldn’t be a massive piece of multiplayer performance art, or something stupid. Maybe some of the rhetoric had stuck on me. It would, if people flung it at you long enough.

I would love a walking city, like those European ones, where they’d eased into post-auto societies due to their medieval city layouts and historically high gas prices.

I’d visited them, on my way to the trouble spots.

A city where I didn’t have to scrounge out in the Wilds, where the Slumps were utilized, and where it felt like there was action, and hope. I liked the sound of that.

“They’re coming out now,” Charlie said. He was right. The lunch crowds were starting to form.

“Okay. Lunch time madness,” I ordered via my phone.

Groups of twenty-five, in five different packs, descended outside popular restaurants, blocking off the roads to them with demonstrations. Again, jax, signs, and cones to muddy everything up.

Charlie’s acolytes preached their slogans, and people did their best to get away from the traffic snarls. The Eddies, now out patrolling in full force and having gotten a sense for the area we’d staked out, descended quickly. They’d spread out in a rough net, and were using their own information to quickly rally to a point.

Turks with live cams gave me feeds of each demonstration, as well as streaming it live to anyone who really cared. Already some people in the city were honking horns whenever they saw a pack of bicyclists going by. Drivers, sympathetic to the cause.

Funny.

In the middle of protest number three, my heavies dragged out a bicyclist from the middle of the group. Discreet, quick, they tossed him into the back of a van, and my phone rang.

“He didn’t have an ID,” they reported. Each official protestor had a small RFID tag that responded to a challenge/response query that the support team could broadcast via their phones.

“Try and work out who he’s getting paid by,” I said.

“He doesn’t know. Just turking it,” was the response.

“The Eddies are thinking quick. Take him out into the Slumps and dump him off.”

Lunch had been successful. Late and annoyed business people, traffic tied up in all five locations. And we still were keeping just ahead of the increasingly frustrated Eddies. A few of the protestors captured since the first demonstration had been shoved around a bit. But it was still civil.

“Lunch is over. Afternoon delight begins.” I smiled.

For the next four hours we just kept shifting the fun around the city, frustrating the traffic and the Eddies. Eating into rush hour traffic as everyone left just added to it. Drivers jumped at every little glitter on the road, imagining tire-piercing jax waiting for them. Outraged bicyclists not associated with the riots were getting arrested throughout the city as they tried to get to buses or home.

The temporary protests appeared, vanished, appeared, vanished, constantly moving about. At this point some of them were riding in the vans, getting dropped off in locations faster than they could bike to. And to be honest, there were closer to five hundred bicyclists working for me, hidden all throughout downtown.

Even though the Eddies now had extras coming in from the Slumps and the Wilds, I was prepared to keep this up all through the night. Then MockTurtle called.

“We have a problem,” he said softly.

Outside, the sun was dipping over the skyline, the buildings throwing their long shadows down the streets. “What kind of problem?”

“Edgewater is advancing on the project. They’re liable to misinterpret what’s going on.”

“Well, what is going on?”

“Come and see.”

And the directions to one of the skyscrapers in the Slumps popped up on my phone.

As we drove deep into the Slumps I realized why Edgewater might get nervous. As night fell, thousands of people were crawling out of nooks and crannies. The streets were filling. People were working on portable machine shops, or turning out parts via automated stamping machines. Others ran up and down the street with carts toward the center of all the activity.

Spaceship Detroit. The skyscraper loomed over this section of the Slumps, where the buildings made perhaps fifteen stories at best.

Massive solar panels had already been mounted to the upper deck and outside the windows, jutting from the building like leaves from a demented, scrap metal tree. Charlie swore and stopped the car, and I got out.

Dump trucks of soil lined the block, the air hazy with dust as they offloaded dirt onto

conveyor belts leading into the building. Vacuum hoses and other contraptions moved the dirt elsewhere.

And everywhere, a swarm of humanity worked furiously.

MockTurtle wove his way through the sidewalk, his people—blinded by their visors and tasks—magically moving aside at the last second, a sea of humanity parting for him in his wheelchair.

“Welcome to the single most coordinated sudden attack of urban renewal ever witnessed,” he proclaimed. “Two hundred thousand souls, dedicated to turning this building into a sustainable structure.”

My knees were weak. “The Eddies are going to call in the military.”

“Since dawn we’ve been quietly working on the infrastructure of the building inside, doing as much prep as we could. Parts have been manufactured off-site for months now. We’ve all been rehearsing on 3-d models in massive multiplayer online simulations for a year, since we identified the target. It’s going to take eight more hours to get the soil in and then finish the interior modifications once that’s in place for the full occupation.”

“But what is it?” Why did they need soil?

“People have been taking over unused buildings and repurposing them in decayed areas for as long as we’ve had cities. But what is the point in taking over structures like this, if we don’t have any new paradigms to offer?” MockTurtle led me back toward the building. Inside the giant lobby people were working on a series of ponds. Sprinklers up over my head briefly went through a testing cycle, dropping mist into the air.

My host continued. “It began in an online game that let people design homes. Many used it as a place to test how to make more efficient homes, or redesign existing homes in niches in cities. Eventually the designers realized we had the economy of a small country. And so they wondered how they could face some of these problems, of how to be responsible dwellers. Out of that grew a community plan to create an embassy to the world.”

We took a glass elevator up through the building’s levels: I was seeing apple and orange trees, rows of furrowed soil. I recognized all this. Farms. They were building farms. Like the skyscraper farms in New York. No need to worry about seasons. Much more efficient acreage. You could reuse the water as it filtered down via gravity.

“We used a squatter at first. That triggered a response from the Edgewater

contractors here to evict that person. They have a contract to protect this building. Our hackers were able to then follow the report that Edgewater delivered about the incident back through several shell companies to the actual owner of this building."

We'd passed twenty rows of farms and gardens. Now it turned into apartments and corridors.

"That information was made public, prompting liens and backtax collection actions against the owners which forced them into bankruptcy. Now we're claiming ownership, and offering to pay taxes and be good stewards. Under a subsidiary company based out of Turkey."

"Turkey?" I said. "Why Turkey?"

"We have allies at the top in America. Allies who want us to succeed, who played the simulations, who know what we planned. And from a simple financial point of view, if we own the building, we'll pay our taxes, raise the value of the building, and maybe even offer a plan to revitalize the Slumps. Since we put in a claim via a Turkish company to build an embassy, ostensibly for Turkey, we are technically on Turkish soil. They have a rule that says if you can erect a building in a night where the owner doesn't notice and try to stop it, then you can stay there.

"So we will be allowed to have this land if we can finish this project in one night. But the previous owners, under a reconstituted company, are counter-filing having the building taken away, and are trying to stop us by getting the Eddies over here, because we have no building permits and we're taking up the streets. It's all legal fictions and weirdness, but we need to stop the Eddies from coming over here."

He'd taken me to the top of the building, where a carefully landscaped set of gardens sat. With a waterfall trickling away already. I understood. Spaceship Detroit. A whole building that could sustain itself in all manners. This wasn't recycling our forefather's leftovers, or scrabbling about for what we could get today, this was its own direction. And it could be made right on the foundation of the existing.

"So how bad do you want that apartment? I could take you to see it, it's just under our feet. Recycled oak floors, two bedrooms…" I held up my hand to quiet him. We looked out over the twinkling skyline.

I'd had a feeling it would come to something like this. Riding the back of the tiger meant getting bashed up. It never came without consequences.

"I need three hundred very dedicated people," I said. "Not the cyclists. People ready to get hurt. Because the Eddies are not going to go easy."

“You can have thousands,” MockTurtle said.

I shook my head. “Any more than a few hundred is going to get the military involved. They’ll be able to meddle with the project, easily enough. We want just the Eddies to stay involved and away from here.”

“What are you going to do?”

I pointed off in the distance. “By the park, the Detroit Opera House. We take and hold it all night. It pushes over from nuisance into hostile, but with only three hundred of us, and them thinking it’s today’s protestors, they won’t escalate this into a major emergency. But get your lawyers ready.”

MockTurtle reached out with his good hand. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” I looked out over the city with a sinking feeling in my stomach.

Was it just about the apartment now? Or had I gotten sick of skulking about in the Wilds by myself? Or had a strong taste of MockTurtle’s kool aid gotten to me?

A little bit of all of the above, I figured.

We rushed the security guards quickly enough, and I set teams to boarding up the doors. Jax were scattered on the streets. Protest signs wavered on the walls outside, thanks to projectors dropped all over the street.

Charlie had stuck with me, and he looked at the team. “Not a lot of us here.”

“Enough are,” I said. “We have to hold out until we get the all clear from the Project or until we’re all rounded up.”

The Opera House was a recognizable building, a part of the history of the city. The Eddies would not ignore this. Sure enough, my phone finally buzzed. CMO S. Whatten. “Stratton? I’m getting reports you’re at the Opera House?”

“We’re barring ourselves in for the night.”

I could see on my heads-up glasses that the Eddies were starting to stream this way.

“You sure about this?” Whatten asked. “We were just about to get a temporary city ban on bikes and end the whole protest. You want to take it up to this?”

“It’s too late, Samuel,” I looked around at the project volunteers. “We’re here for the duration.”

The first Eddies were pulling up at the perimeter of our jax field.

But then, so were hundreds of people on bikes, and cars, and on foot, coming to see the latest star singer, sports player, or whoever they idolized. Thanks to personal interest profiles, and thousands of turkers working to invite them down to the Detroit Opera House for a special showing of… whatever it was their interests indicated they would come down to see for a free showing.

These people weren't working for anyone, or getting paid. They wouldn't be classified as part of the protest. But they were indirectly working for us.

The Eddies formed up, clearing away the jax. Their riot teams rolled up and out with battering rams to come in after us.

"Frustrated fans, execute," I ordered.

Outside, whisper campaigns started. The Eddies were here to take away the impromptu concerts being planned. They were here to ruin the fun.

Now, this was incitement. The project's lawyers were going to have to earn their money when I got bailed out later tonight. My streaming video didn't show who threw the first bottle. But when it broke on the pavement, the Eddies moved their focus from the Opera House to the massive crowd outside.

Charlie, sitting next to me in one of the balcony seats, swore. He was looking at the streams on a small pad in his hands.

Outside erupted.

It was clear enough these weren't anti-car protestors, the Eddies had a two front war on their hands now. It bought us until just past midnight, as the Eddies had their backs to us to deal with the frustrated and unruly crowds trying to get in.

"You don't have room in your cells for us," I told Whatten when he called me again. "Why bother now?"

"We'll make do," he hissed. He sounded tired. The friendliness I'd found in him earlier had been wrung out.

"We have no weapons. We're just trying to make a point."

"You've well made it all day, we're going to make a point as well."

By one in the morning they had the whole outside of the Opera House surrounded, and they'd started smashing in one of the doors.

"Get up here," I ordered, moving to the location. We pushed our way forward with planks, doing our best to keep it reinforced.

They fired tear gas in, noxious smoke roiling through at us. We had masks for it and kept on pushing back at the splintered planks we'd nailed up, our shoes slipping on broken glass.

"Eddies're in the back," Charlie reported. And we split our forces. But there were more Eddies. As each new breach appeared we split to deal with it.

At two in the morning I ordered the bulk of the project volunteers to fall back to the next floor. The volunteers at the doors faced the Eddies, who punched through and started dragging them away.

I left half of the remaining volunteers to hold upper floors, leaning against doors, or just forming human chains. The rest of us, a hundred now, took to the roof. Barricading anything we found on the way up there, we had fewer doors to defend.

"They only can land a handful at a time by helicopter," I told a nervous Charlie. "And unlike the military during a riot, they're not going to shoot us, because that won't turn them a profit, will it?"

The hundred of us on the roof saw dawn break, helicopters hovering around the edges of the building, Eddies camped outside with fellow project members zip tied to each other and sitting in one long line. When they finally got through, the Eddies kicked and beat us down. Making their point. But by then, we really didn't care, did we?

MockTurtle himself came to spring us. "Are you ready to see your apartment?" he asked.

But I found that I didn't want it.

"What's the next project?" I asked.

It was late in the morning, a year later.

I packed up my home, folding my tent back down. The skinnable walls faded, their pictures and vistas disappearing as I shut the tent off.

I packed into the trailer behind my bike, and as I locked it down the rest of the city around me started to wake up. The smell of fresh coffee wafted over the neighborhood

lines as slow wakers got stumbling. Fresh bread, airshipped in from a vertical farm in Columbus, or so everyone said, also filled the air. But I was in a hurry and decided to skip breakfast.

Everything folded up and away, with a quick double check to make sure the chalked-off area of my lot for the night was clean, and I was off. Friends from the last months of slow pedaling across the great American West waved at me as I cranked along through the streets of a tent city that had gone up overnight. Five thousand in this particular tribe.

I passed security along the edge and they let me pass. Then it was out along the back roads and trails with my electric-assist trike, the aerodynamic trailer behind me with all my belongings bumping along. I had found, over the last year, that I didn't need much. I'd even gotten rid of things as I'd moved my way West.

This last leg was easy, coming down out of the mountains. I passed a handful of other bicycles and small cars, a few gas-powered.

And there it was: Los Angeles.

I had two reasons for LA. For one, it was our next project. We had a new codename, didn't want the local Eddies to sniff us out ahead of time. We were trickling in a little bit at a time. Project Ceres had an ambitious hundred building goal, enough to completely feed the entire city, thus putting the project in the financial situation of becoming a major agribusiness and funding the formal creation of vertical farms anywhere it wanted. A different aim than the spaceship concept, but one I could still get behind.

We'd been perfecting our methods all throughout the center of the country, gaining recruits, resources, and abilities.

The second reason was Maggie.

She was out here in the city. With MockTurtle's resources, I'd found her.

I wanted to thank her.

It sounded ridiculous, but sometimes it took losing something important for you to shake yourself out of old habits and seek out something new. Something different.

Sometimes, something better.