

QUINN'S DEAL

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Quinn awoke; and he found a robotic arm positioned over him, literally in his face. He blinked several times, and pried open his lips. (His mouth was dry and grotty, his tongue thick and furry.) He twisted his head, and saw at once from its cosmetic design that it was a med-bot. He cleared his throat and worked at getting his saliva flowing. To make the robot understand him, he'd have to speak clearly. ? Where am I?? he said. He was dismayed to hear the words come out like mush. ? And what am I doing here??

? L. Quinn, you are sufficiently recovered to be discharged,? the med-bot said in the tone of robot speech designated ? friendly informational.? The tone struck Quinn as infuriatingly, inappropriately casual.

? Discharged from what?? Quinn said, a little more clearly. A motor somewhere on the robot whined, and a thinner, shorter limb, which Quinn only now noticed, retracted from his forearm. The sudden lifting of pressure and the sensation of air brushing his skin made Quinn feel exposed and shivery. He realized that his shirt had been removed. He struggled into a sitting position and glanced down at his arm. The skin, he saw, had been bruised.

? This is the Indigent ER Unit,? the robot said. One of its arms forked over his stinky, sweaty tee-shirt. ? Your condition is stable. You cannot stay here.?

Quinn pulled on the shirt. ER unit. Med-bot. Yeah, it was coming back to him. He'd been feeling under the weather all day, and by six, when he clocked out, really, really sick. He'd been drinking water like crazy, because of what he'd figured was a bladder infection. Then, jumping down out of the back of Eddie's van, he'd been hit with dizziness, cold sweats and bad shakes. Got so convinced he was going to vomit, he'd dropped to his knees to do it, right there on the site. And everything had gone black...

Quinn slid off the table, then-seeing stars-clutched at it. Man, he felt wrung out. Like he'd been doing Santa Clara for a week without coming down.

? Take the the printout, L. Quinn,? the robot said.

Quinn looked at the thing and saw a narrow strip of flimsy spooling out of one of several different-sized slots that slashed the matte black finish of its ? chest.? Quinn had to work with robots; and because of the work he did with them, he felt suspicious of what this one was up to. And so his mouth and eyes scrunched as he tore the printout out of the slot, as though doing so was causing him pain.

The narrow strip of flimsy was about as crude as printouts got. *L. Quinn. Male. Uninsured. Age: 36. Admitted by Seattle Downtown Merchants' Authority to ER Unit 04.10.37; 18:23:44, condition diabetic coma. Diagnosis: Diabetes Mellitus. Rx: Insulin pump or gene therapy.* And that was it.

? Follow the orange stripe on the floor to the Bursar's Office,? the med-bot said.

Quinn felt a plunging sensation in his belly. He looked from the limp strip of printout dangling from his fingers to the med-bot. *Bursar's Office. Jesus!* What was he going to do? Diabetes was one of those

things you had to deal with, or it killed you! Oh man, and on \$9000 a year max (when he was getting work every day and weekends, which he hadn't been, at least not for all of January and most of February)...

? Follow the orange stripe, L. Quinn,? the med-bot said. Quinn stared down at the floor. There were four different stripes that began just this side of the opaque plastic curtain drawn over the cubicle's threshold. Red, green, blue and orange. Orange, he guessed, was for money. Or lack thereof. *Ain't no free lunches in this country man. Like the man always says, entitlements are un-american, and almost came close to wrecking the country when people thought they had 'em.* Quinn started walking.

* * *

Quinn walked the orange line past the drab olive curtain into the corridor, and then right. They'd just have to take it out of his pay, a little bit at a time, he thought. Which would make things really tight. Room and board just about ate everything he made. And cable fees. And god knew he couldn't live without VR on Saturdays. Shit. The only solution would be to move somewhere cheaper. Courtney gave him such a good deal for what he paid her, it would be a maximum blow to his Quality of Life, for sure.

As Quinn walked, he saw both solid doors and more curtains, always the same plastic in the same drab olive, lining both sides of the corridor. The sound of someone shrieking grew louder and louder; he wondered that any human would ever choose to work in such a place, with such animal-like sounds that kept on, not like on the hospital shows on cable, where they were used for dramatic effect. It made him weaker, just hearing that inhuman screaming, but instead of pausing to get his strength, he walked faster, to get away from it. *Diabetes.* The truth was, his condition might be ? stable,? but his head was pounding, and his throat so parched he couldn't stop coughing to try to kill the tickle there.

The orange line took him through an intersection, where he saw a door marked MEN. Quinn shoved it open and blinked at the sudden sick glare. It was empty. Above the sink was posted the usual sign warning that the water was not potable. Squinting, Quinn found the video camera in a cage suspended in the corner a couple of feet below the ceiling. *Got the right john alright, the one for the ? public."* He stood at the urinal, unzipped, and only a few seconds into the itchy, burning passage of piss forgot, in the relief to his bladder, the camera. Feeling marginally better, Quinn followed the orange line right, through the intersection, and down another long corridor (marked at intervals, he saw, with robot locator chips, which he assumed he just hadn't been alert enough to spot in the other corridor).

A closed, slate gray steel door with **Bursar's Office** stenciled on it, where the orange line terminated, lay at the very end. The automated teller in the wall to the right of the steel door greeted Quinn. ? Welcome to the Bursar's Office. Please insert your Public Identity Card in the intake slot, magnetic strip down.? Hearing footsteps, Quinn glanced over his shoulder. Another traveler along the orange line, he presumed. Quinn swallowed and pulled his wallet out of his back pocket. *This is probably the worst place to pass out, if you're going to. Even if it's just an ordinary faint, they'd probably charge just for taking your pulse.* His sweaty fingers trembled so badly that it took him three tries to get the intake to accept the card.

? L. Quinn, you have incurred charges of \$625.95. According to the data on your personal identity card, you have no medical insurance. Therefore you will please authorize the debiting of that amount from your First Interstate account by pressing the red button marked AUTHORIZATION and placing your palm on the palm reader plate.?

Quinn broke into a cold sweat; he felt so nauseated he thought he might vomit. (Just like he had only seconds before he'd passed out.) ? Uh look,? he said. ? I, well, I can't do that. I can't authorize the

debit. There's not much more than that in my account right now. And my pay period has about three weeks to run yet. ? Quinn grew painfully conscious of the woman behind him, waiting to use the teller. He *hated* having to conduct his business in front of other people.

? L. Quinn, please stand by. A manager will be out shortly, to assist you.? The teller beeped and his plastic card popped through the outtake slot.

Quinn stood away from the machine to let the woman behind him take her turn. ? Welcome to the Bursar's Office,? the teller at once began its spiel. Quinn glanced around. The Bursar's Office did not, of course, provide chairs for people who had need to wait. He was dead, zombie-tired. No way was he going to go on standing, for all that the teller had used the word ? shortly.? He dropped to the floor and propped his back against the rough, cinder-block wall (painted, of course, a screamingly impatient orange). As far as he knew, only Harborview had an indigent ER unit. That must be where he was. In which case he'd have to catch two buses to get home. Man. He was always zombie-tired at the end of a long day's work. But he couldn't remember ever feeling *this* tired (except, of course, when coming down off Santa Clara, which he hadn't done for five years at least).

Quinn waited for most of an hour. Again and again he opened the little strip of paper he kept folded in a tiny square and read the verdict. *Diagnosis: Diabetes Mellitus. Rx: Insulin pump or gene therapy.* Several times he considered setting out in search of a vending machine so he could get some water, but each time decided he didn't want to risk missing being called. As he waited, a steady trickle of people came to use the automated teller-to be taken to the cleaners, Quinn thought-but to his surprise, none of them required the ? assistance? of a manager. They all either had insurance or (apparently) no problem paying the sums demanded. *Assistance, right. They figure they need a human to really turn the screws, the way a robot isn't slick enough to do. Pay now, or we'll go to court, which will mean paying two or three times as much by the time we're done with you.* And of course they had to be careful what things they programmed a robot to say. Though you couldn't hold a human responsible for saying certain things if the human claimed they were ? slips? or whatever, everything a robot said could (if one had the resources, which people generally did not) be held up to scrutiny. Lies used in deal-making constituted fraud-if the liar were caught.

The trick, Quinn thought, was spotting the lies as they were mixed in with the truth. He wasn't on familiar turf here. He was going to have to operate on guesswork and instinct. *They wouldn't lie about the diabetes. I mean, I have the flimsy. They surely wouldn't lie about that, man, would they?*

His grandmother, he suddenly remembered, had had diabetes. That was the whole point of the scene in the VA hospital, the whole point of his Uncle Kenny going to jail afterwards ... Diabetes, he thought, had a good chance of being in his genes.

When the steel door opened, a robot hovered on the threshold and called Quinn's name. Quinn got to his feet, but had to stand against the wall for a few seconds, until the blackness and stars had receded. Then he followed the robot into a little reception area smelling of old, burnt coffee. ? Mr Penneman,? it said, ? will see you now.?

Quinn glanced around, found the closed, pebbled-glass door stenciled **Philip Penneman, Ph.D.** , and walked on wobbly legs to it. He flashed on the scene-of which he had seen a CNN tape-of his uncle holding the grenade in the VA operating room, and saying over and over and over like a mantra, *She was a Gulf War vet, for goddsake. It's her right, not a privilege, man.* Of course no one could get into any hospital these days without first being thoroughly searched for weapons. Even the smallest clinic was practically a fortress. The insurance companies had seen to that.

Philip Penneman, Ph.D. turned out to be a little blond man, probably in his late twenties, a regular

exemplar of the style his Ivy League generation had made known as ? The Preppy Look,? which they had managed to take with them, after graduation, into the corporate workplace. His blond hair was worn in the usual preppy style-tight short ? tuffy? curls adorning the crown, stubble on the sides and back, with long tuffy-curl sideburns. He sported the usual sorts of preppy jewelry, too-a rhinestone (or diamond) stud in one nostril, several elaborately worked gold and sapphire earrings dangling from both lobes, and more than half a dozen stoneless lacy gold filigree bands on his fingers. And-absolutely de rigueur for the preppy look-he wore the usual array of cosmetics: eye-shadow-an iridescent taupe, in this case-over not only his eyelids, but in the hollow under his eyes; shiny pink lip gloss; and matching pink polish on his delicately manicured fingernails.

The man flashed a big white toothy smile. ? So sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Quinn,? he said in an ugly, scratchy voice. (No future media star *here*.) ? We had to run your specs through the computer, to see what sort of assistance, if any, might be available to you.? He waved his pretty pink nail-tipped hand ever so languidly at the gray vinyl chair positioned to face the desk. ? Please, do sit down.?

Before I fall down? And what would you do then, little man? Send for a cleaning-bot? Quinn sank into the chair. The tickle in his throat drove him into a deferred spasm of coughing. He glanced around. Fancy offices often had water dispensers. If this one did ... But Quinn saw only a lot of gray office furniture and silver-framed posters, proof, he supposed, of the occupant's chic. One of them featured a black and white photo of a beach strewn with an ugly clutter of washed-up junk, including a pair of mirror shades lying in the sand, reflecting back the agonized face of an obviously dead woman. (**CINDY SHERMAN, SEATTLE ART MUSEUM, AUGUST 5-31.**) Another, slightly more tasteful though in Quinn's opinion no less kinky poster showed what might or might not be a real live photo of a dancer (though if so, and not a computer simulation, he was one limber dude). (**JESSUP PERFORMS, VERVE PRODUCTIONS, JAN 9, 10, 13.**) Quinn recognized neither name. Though his gaze kept straying back to these posters throughout the interview, he figured a water dispenser would be a whole lot more desirable to have in one's office, and at least as high-status.

Penneman tapped a finger against the screen of his computer monitor. ? Now as it happens,? he said, ? I've got good news for you, Mr. Quinn.? He glanced at Quinn and frowned. ? Your data are current, I presume? You are still employed as an evacuation engineer??

? Yeah,? Quinn said cautiously. ? That's right.?

Penneman smiled again and nodded enthusiastically. ? Wonderful. The good news is that we have a situation in which a patron will pay not only your ER expenses, but for the modification of your genes to eliminate the diabetes.?

A new wave of nausea gripped Quinn's stomach. *A deal. Right. I've heard of those kinds of deals. Godawful drug trials, where they give you cancer in order to try to cure you.* Quinn said, ? Uh, look. All I want is to arrange to pay off what I owe the hospital in installments. Say fifty bucks a month? Something like that??

Penneman wagged his right index finger at Quinn. ? I don't think you understand, Mr. Quinn. An insulin pump, which you'll need if you don't get gene therapy, will cost you \$6000. Gene therapy for your condition will run you \$8000-10,000. Medication, on the other hand, which is far from satisfactory, will run you a minimum of \$400 a month. The fact is, diabetes is a serious condition. Your coma must surely have demonstrated at least that much to you. Mr. Quinn, this is not something you can put off, like getting your wisdom teeth removed, or cosmetic surgery, or a chip enhancement.?

The little bastard! Quinn wished he had the strength to lean over the desk, grab the guy by his big white ruffled collar, and smear his lip gloss all over his fucking punky little face. ? I understand all right,? he

said irritably. ? I only got two years of college, but I'm not totally ignorant. My point is that I'm not interested in swapping one disease for another.? He jerked his head towards the door. ? Life and health go cheap in places like this. You guys see somebody like me coming, and a little light in your head goes off, saying *hey, we've got a live one here, ready for whatever we've got to throw at him*. There are deals, and there are deals.? Quinn crossed his arms over his chest and sat up as erectly as his fatigue would allow. ? I don't have that great a job, maybe, but I'm no chump.?

Penneman's smile grew openly patronizing. ? This isn't a cable show, Mr. Quinn, but real life. I realize the entertainment industry have given us a bad rap. What you don't understand is that we do our best to match up patrons with clients, in order to serve our patients. If you'd allow me to explain just what the situation is...?

Quinn, utterly dogged, said, ? No drug trials, no experimental procedures, no disease.?

Penneman said, in a supposedly earnest tone, ? Agreed.? (Quinn knew, though, not to trust any move or tone coming out of Penneman now: not when they were explicitly down to dealing.) Penneman leaned forward and spoke in a soft, confidential tone. ? The situation is this. The patron would cover your expenses in exchange for having a very tiny chip implanted behind one of your eyes. That's all. You'd be covered for regular checkups with a neurosurgeon, to make sure everything stays in order. There's near-zero risk for complications. The patron gets to see what you see, and you get your genes cleaned of diabetes.? Penneman ran the tip of his tongue over his soft, smooth lips. ? Pretty neat deal, wouldn't you say?? (His smile was ever so gentle.)

Quinn tried to think. But he was so tired he couldn't make much sense of what such a deal would *mean*. He rubbed his eyes, as though it were literally a problem of *seeing* what the con was. ? The whole thing sounds damned kinky to me,? he said. ? Either that, or crooked. Like maybe somebody's using me to spy or something. Or for some kind of weird, bent voyeurism.?

Penneman leaned back in his high-backed padded chair. ? If it helps, I can tell you the reason the patron supplied on the Search form.? Tired as he was, Quinn caught the cagey wording. The medical aspects, he sensed, were totally aboveboard. It was the ? patron's? purposes that were in question. Again, Penneman tapped a fingernail against the screen, and read, ? Patron is a shut-in who does not get out. Patron believes that, seeing through the eye of an evacuation engineer, patron will see more of life than is otherwise possible.? Penneman held his hands palm down a few inches above his desk, and spread his fingers. (The gesture reminded Quinn of old movies in which bimbo receptionists, having nothing better to do, painted their nails and then held their fingers out to dry in exactly that way.)

When Quinn did not immediately respond, Penneman added, ? That sounds pretty square to me. You'd be performing a humanitarian service, with a great benefit to yourself. What I see in this situation, Mr. Quinn, is two potential Big Winners.?

A regular little huckster, Mr. Philip Penneman, Ph.D. But of course the point was to sell all the indigent persons passing through his office a deal they couldn't refuse, right? As far as he and the system he served were concerned, offering indigents such deals was an act of benevolence. No way could anyone complain about exploitation here-not unless they wanted to face a charge of fomenting class warfare.

Quinn just wanted to go home. ? Look, can I have a couple of days to think about it??

? A couple of days?? Penneman said, letting his voice squeak in total incredulity. ? I don't think you get it, man. This offer isn't going to be open for too long, especially to a person in your condition. Considering that you went into a diabetic coma this evening, you've got to bear in mind that putting off a yes-decision could be jeopardizing the very capacity the patron is interested in tapping. Capiisce, my

man??

The rush of rage that surged through Quinn brought on a major, full-body case of hot, seething sweats. For the first time he thought of Uncle Kenny and his hand grenade with actual wistfulness. Maybe the old guys were right, maybe he had missed living in the last good times, when men still had a chance to fight the system. Maybe the Age of the Deal wasn't better. He'd always hated hearing that riff the old guys were always getting into, disgusting, self-pitying laments for the old ? consumer society,? he'd always hated talk about how the younger generation shouldn't be making deals, but destroying their world with revolution, he especially got furious at the major jerks of the boomer and X generations telling his generation that they had nothing to lose but their so-called ? fucking chains, man.? Quinn's parents, in particular, ragged him every chance they got. They just couldn't forgive him for taking the Population Foundation's deal, trading his fertility for two years of college (and the decent job he'd been able to snag as a result). But then they had no sense of the deal, those old ones, still wrapped up in the idea that everything could be measured in money.

The deal. Right. Quinn might be pissed as hell at the preppy jerk sitting across the desk from him, but the deal was the issue, and nothing else. ? I don't like dealing without sleeping on it at least a night,? Quinn said. (As though, he thought, he'd be able to sleep, given all that was coming down.)

But Penneman stubbornly stuck; he would not be budged. (The advantage, after all, was his. And Quinn knew it.) After a few more minutes of sparring, Quinn yielded. ? All right,? he said. ? All right. Let's have a look at the contract.?

Penneman printed out the text and Quinn read it, holding the paper in his ever-trembling, sweaty fingers. *These guys are so damned clever. I'm backed into a corner, and this bastard knows it. Well, at least the damned thing will be non-obtrusive. I'll never know it's there, except when I remember the deal. Says here in black and white that if there's any sign of damage, it's to be removed and all the damage is to be repaired at the patron's expense. All I have to do is forget it's even there...*

Before Quinn left, Penneman set him up with weekend appointments in the hospital's gene therapy and cyber-impant departments. If everything went according to plan, he wouldn't miss so much as a day's work. ? It's a great deal,? Penneman said as he handed Quinn a voucher for a temporary supply of insulin patches from the hospital's pharmacy. ? You're a spectacularly lucky guy, you know??

Right. He was so lucky it took him an hour and a half of missed connections to get home. With luck like his, a guy could really go places.

* * *

By the time Quinn made it home-feeling the entire trip as though he were in danger of total collapse-he had worked out a necessity for secrecy. Ordinarily he spoke to Courtney Greenleaf without discretion or discrimination (except, of course, for those myriad minor-but self-revealing-sorts of things that one would never, in one's right mind, tell another soul). She was not only his house-mate and landlord, but his friend (and just about the only one at that). Courtney was the least judgmental person he'd ever met; and he'd never heard her telling him someone else's secrets. He thought of her, fondly and with a slight bit of condescension, as a ? saint"-meaning someone naively self-sacrificing and moral. And so all of the first bus home, and half of the second, Quinn imagined plopping himself down-late as it would be-on Courtney's old battered leather sofa and telling the astonishing tale of his evening's mishap, the reason for his having not come home directly after work (as he usually did). ? You wouldn't believe this guy,? he imagined himself telling her, while of course knowing she would know ? his type? well enough to make much explicit description unnecessary. But as the bus glided into the U District and stopped before University Hospital, it struck him like a blow in the gut that anyone who knew he was having a

spy-device implanted in his head would never feel safe around him again. Though they might not be thinking about it all the time, whenever they remembered they'd pull themselves up short, swamped with self-consciousness, wondering who might be watching them through Quinn's eye at that very moment.

And he lived in Courtney's *house*.

No. It might be dishonest of him, but no way could he tell people about that spy-eye. Anyway, he reasoned, it couldn't much matter since whoever was paying to have the thing implanted wouldn't know the identities of any of the persons he would be seeing. It wasn't like some secret police or intelligence agency would be using him. Even if the ? patron? hadn't been telling the truth about why he wanted the spy-eye, visuals were just not that good, especially compared to audio transmissions.

And he, Quinn, was just an ordinary kind of guy. He didn't know anyone important. He didn't work in ? sensitive? areas. And he suspected that the patron would soon become disappointed with the yield of the spy-eye, since in his work his visual input tended to be robots, empty buildings, and squatters. In his private life he mostly sat in front of the television or hung out with Courtney, who was no great shakes to look at for chrissakes.

Still, he got a major case of the guilts the second he fit his key into the back door. The spy-eye wasn't yet installed, and he felt as though he were sneaking an unwelcome intruder into Courtney's house. His guilt increased when he saw the note on the refrigerator, saying there was soup, and to help himself. Most of Courtney's soups were good, and he was famished, so he hauled the huge old stockpot out onto the table, ladled some lentil soup into a plastic container, and warmed it in the microwave.

Soon the kitchen was full of the fragrance of spices and vegetables. Courtney appeared just as the microwave beeped and said, ? There are cheese muffins in the basket, Quinn,? then busied herself filling the teakettle from the slow-as-molasses filtered faucet.

Quinn grabbed a couple of muffins and considered what-if anything-he should say to explain his lateness. Courtney knew he didn't have a real social life. He did sometimes work this late, especially on Fridays, so he supposed he'd just let her assume that was what had happened.

Courtney thumped the kettle onto the burner. ? When I saw you were going to be late, I set your VCR to tape your faves,? she said.

Soup, sitcoms, the works. That was Courtney for you. (And she didn't even like sitcoms herself.) ? Oh, man, thanks, Court,? he said, shaking a few drops of hot sesame oil into the steaming bowl of soup. ? I mean, that's really, really cool. I do appreciate it.?

Courtney frowned. ? You look like you've been up three days and three nights. You must have had one hell of a shift.?

? I couldn't begin to tell you,? Quinn said with considerable discomfort. He glanced at Courtney, then quickly away. She'd been his baby-sitter when they were kids. And though she was about eight years older than he, had always seemed just a regular age, not that much older at all. But over the last year or so it had become painfully obvious just how old she was. She didn't wear cosmetics, and had had no free-radical cleanouts, nor any cosmetic surgery, either. As a result, her face looked ... puffy, or something. In strong light it drove him crazy. It seemed that right before his very eyes she was joining the old people, sliding into that big, ever-growing generation of has-beens.

Though of course she owned that house, her great aunt (an old-time feminist who'd never married) had willed it to her, and she had a job that wasn't likely to be yanked out from under her, so getting old wasn't going to be the totally dire problem for her it was for most people.

Quinn snarfed down the soup and muffins in front of the television, and drank down an entire liter bottle of water. Somehow, though he really really really wanted to be distracted, the sitcoms just didn't catch on. Instead he kept thinking about the med-bot, and the preppy, and the deal he'd made with the preppy, and the fact that there was no single person in the world he felt he could tell the horror to.

It was like a lump inside him, undigested. It was like a terrible guilty secret. It was like trading a deadly disease for another, less socially acceptable (but nonlethal) one. He imagined himself wearing a bell, like a leper of old, to warn everyone around him that they weren't safe in his presence.

L. Quinn, spy-eye. Or cat's paw. Or just plain pimp for a voyeur.

* * *

The implantation of the spy-eye took less than two hours. Mostly it was boring. The medical ? team? (one med-bot plus the ? supervisory tech? whose presence was required by hospital regs) told Quinn nothing, answered none of his requests for specific information about the procedure; clearly it considered nothing but streamlined efficiency of any importance whatsoever. Quinn suspected that the med-bot was not programmed to take substantive questions, and that the supervisory tech was probably just a warm human body without real knowledge of what the med-bot was doing and so could not answer questions. ? You signed the informed-consent agreement,? she said when he tried pressing her. ? If your questions come out of those kinds of concerns, that was the time to be asking them. If they come out of mere curiosity and boredom, then they're inappropriate.?

The deal was sealed, in other words, and getting medical info wasn't part of it. Quinn got the message, and settled down into the sensuwrap entertainment available during the first two-thirds of the procedure (obviously designed to keep him from worrying about what they were doing inside his head). The skydiving scenario successfully diverted him for almost half an hour, but when he smelled the strange vanilla-like odor tantalizingly familiar yet unnamable, he could not integrate it with the scenario, and so could not help wondering whether the smell was temporarily with him, or might become a permanent part of his consciousness, as a ? side-effect? of the implantation.

By the time the med-bot had finished messing with the inside of his head, the smell had gone away. The med-bot then put him through a series of tests requiring his conscious participation. His vision was the same as always. Quinn stood before the mirror and examined his reflection as he hadn't done since adolescence. ? Which eye is the spy-eye?? he asked anxiously, unable to see any difference in his appearance in the mirror, unable to feel any difference in his head or eyes.

The med-bot went into idle. Quinn had a brief fantasy of kicking it, of taking a hammer to it, but then thought of the kind of deal the hospital would extort from him if he did manage to damage it. The supervisory tech handed him a card. ? You can go now, Mr. Quinn,? she said. ? If you notice any distortion of your vision, or any other neurological symptoms, be sure to call that number for an appointment. Otherwise, we'll send you a reminder for a recall examination in six months. ? The tech opened the door, stepped out into the hall, and gesturing, added, ? You go right, and then take another right at the first intersection, and the main elevator will be right there.?

? Which eye has the implant?? Quinn said angrily. ? For godsake, it's *my eye*, lady, I have a right to know!?

The tech mustered a feeble, tepid smile that barely moved a muscle in her stiff, pasty pink face. ? I'm sure you do have a right to know, Mr. Quinn, but I don't have the answer, and since some of the procedures we do here are performed in test cases, which require that the participants be uncertain of just what was done, even if I did know, I wouldn't be permitted to tell you without prior authorization.?

Quinn would have charged straight down to the Bursar's Office to beard Penneman in his den, but he couldn't do that without missing the appointment that really mattered, in Gene Therapy. So he left the twelfth floor and went down to the ninth. The appointment was brief. All they did was take a lot of blood from him and tell him they'd be in touch as soon as they had done the analysis and were ready to make the repair. Quinn felt cheated, that the other side of the deal should pay off before his side. (But of course, Penneman had told him it would right up front.)

When Quinn left the elevator on the first floor, he found an orange line almost at once and followed it to the Bursar's Office. The teller had a line of about half-a-dozen people. While Quinn waited, he began to doubt that the teller would grant him access to the inner office just to have a question answered. Silently he phrased and rephrased sentences demanding that he be allowed to speak to Penneman. The teller was a machine; it would respond only to a limited number of key expressions. Perhaps he ought just to ask for human assistance, and then when the robot opened the steel door to admit him, simply make a break for Penneman's office?

After about fifteen minutes, Quinn got his turn. ? Welcome to the Bursar's Office. Please insert your Public Identity Card in the intake slot, magnetic strip down,? the teller said.

Quinn cleared his throat. ? I require human assistance,? he said.

? Please insert your Public Identity Card in the intake slot, magnetic strip down,? the teller repeated.

Quinn sighed. The damned thing was probably programmed to ignore comments made before plastic was inserted. That made sense. Quinn fed his card into the intake slot.

? L. Quinn, your account has a balance of zero.? The machine beeped; Quinn's plastic card popped back through the outtake slot.

Quinn slammed his fist against the teller. ? Shit!? he yelled.

The machine beeped again. It said, ? Please remove your plastic identity card from the outtake slot.?

Quinn snatched his card and went to stand against the wall. All right, he'd wait. Surely someone was going to need ? human assistance? sometime soon. The people queuing slid him uneasy looks. He could almost see them wondering if he was a mental case who'd somehow gotten past security into the hospital, demanding treatment or drugs or something...

Quinn waited fifteen minutes before he heard the teller instruct a woman to ? stand by, a manager will be out shortly to assist you.?

Quinn knew very well about the teller's loose use of ? shortly.? He settled down onto the linoleum for a long, uncomfortable wait. He knew he'd have to be ready to move when the steel door opened. *And then what? Alarm bells going off? Security arriving to drag me off to detention?* The very thought of being handled by security-bots chilled Quinn. Man, he hadn't gotten the gene repair yet. If they took him off to detention, he might never get it. The hospital wouldn't be required by the contract to see to it-only to provide it on its own terms. Man ... It wasn't like he had nothing to lose. Man, he could lose his *life*. Go into a diabetic coma in detention, and he'd be heading for that old lime-pit in no time. They only took people to the ER when they were cluttering up the streets.

After about ten minutes of scaring himself dry, Quinn left the hospital quietly-and quickly. He knew all about the techniques of security-bots; he knew all about their programming; and he knew all about the attitudes of those who deployed them. Clearly, trying to crash the Bursar's Office was not the way to go. He'd get hold of Penneman, no question, but just not in that way. *And then what?* Quinn's inner demon

queried. *You think he's going to know, right off the top of his head, or be willing to find out for you, and then tell you?*

God, he felt like a fool. A shrewder dealer would never have made the mistakes he'd made. And in Quinn's view, he had only himself to blame for making them.

* * *

Quinn spent the remainder of Saturday in a VR Parlor, participating in a multi-user fiction. The fiction was based on *Pride and Prejudice*, and Quinn was pleased to get to play his second choice of character, Jane Bennet (Bingley being his first). He remembered the spy-eye in his head only at the most tedious of moments. The persons playing Lady Catherine de Bourgh and Mr. Collins hammed it up so grotesquely that every scene featuring them inevitably put the rest of the players in danger of reacting out of character. Self-styled comics and hams always messed up fictions based on old novels. But most people liked the old novels for the fun of the scenery and costumes more than anything else. One's real life and the rest of the world did not-could not-exist in those settings. Quinn simply loved them.

On Sunday, Quinn didn't remember about the spy-eye until well into the afternoon. Just as he spent most of Saturdays playing in one or two multi-user fictions, so he spent Sundays at his terminal, logged on to catch up with his e-mail, and then to cyber-socialize, and maybe read some hard news (which he couldn't stomach during the work week), or fiction. It was the beeping of the diagnostic patch the pharmacy had given him, beeping that warned him it was time to apply a new insulin patch, that made him remember. He looked away from his computer screen, and glanced around the room, and suddenly had the strange sensation of someone else in the room with him, invisible to his sight, peering over his shoulder, seeing out of only one eye, but *seeing* Quinn's room, Quinn's *life*. It made him queasy, even a little dizzy, to see the room so strangely. It was as though it wasn't his room-simultaneous with his feeling utterly familiar and bored with it. It was like a strange experience of *déjà vu*. Only it was, of course, something else.

Quinn told himself he shouldn't be feeling anything. That it was a matter of his consciousness, nothing else. But a part of him began to doubt he had any reliable idea of exactly what that med-bot had been doing inside his head.

* * *

6:45 a.m. Monday, Quinn was already awake when the speakers on his console blared the workday baroque trumpet flourish (which though he had loved it when he selected it for the program, after a year's use made him curse now every time he heard it). ? Morning, Quinn, morning, it's your wake-up call, man, from your old buddy Matt Winger at your very own wake-up call KMIX, the station that gives you the music you want, when you want it, and only the best of the good news of the day! Are you up, Quinn? Give us a carriage return, man, and we'll be on our way into the best of Mondays!?

Oh the wonders of this wondrous age! Working drudges might not be able to afford to survive diabetes without cutting a down-and-dirty deal like the one Quinn had been lucky enough to be offered, but a personalized program from his FM station of choice was available to just about anybody able to afford legally sanctioned living accommodations. In a lean, mean competitive world, there were winners and losers, of course, and always far, far more of the latter than the former. There had to be some means of convincing drudges the struggle to stay employed was worth it. And in a rude, impersonal world, what better than a personalized FM service? If Quinn didn't like the style of the DJ, or the selection and phased mix of old classics (in Quinn's case a few bars of Bach here, a few of the Beatles there, some Beach Boys, Dolphy and Mozart, all delivering a whacking great beat) the man had only himself to blame. The defaults were all his choice.

And he knew it.

As for the best of the good news of the day ... Once Quinn hit the carriage return on his keypad, his system-through the joyful wonders of fiber-optics-plugged into KMIX's system, and alternated news and weather and time-checks with Quinn's personalized mix of music. (Anything to get him out of bed and out the door, man.)

? The good news this Monday, April 13, is that Siemens International has taken over Gregory Genetech, meaning that anyone with shares in Siemens are big winners, folks! Sorry, Gregory Genetech shareholders, and the University of Washington Biology Department, its major subsidiary. But all you biology graduate students and post-docs out there, look on the bright side! If you can't cut the competition now, you'll be shaken out sooner than later, which means you'll still have a chance to start over!?

Quinn scrambled into his clothes and checked to make sure he still had the card of insulin patches tucked away in his wallet. He wondered: what field did Penneman have his Ph.D in? Business psychology? Administration? That kind of thing?

? The time is six fifty-nine,? Matt warned. ? Expect highs of between 80 and 85, and rain early this afternoon.? But as if to belie the forecast, some of Quinn's personalized mix came pouring out of the speakers, beginning with the first few bars of the Beatles' ? Here Comes the Sun.? And as he was supposed to, Quinn felt galvanized and ready to face the day.

It being Monday, Quinn caught the bus to Ballard on the corner of Forty-fifth and Wallingford. Just about everybody seated was either wearing earphones or reading. Quinn remembered that he needed to get hold of a copy of that book of Chekhov stories. He'd reserved a role in the one they were doing next Saturday night, though he'd just selected a name in the cast list at random, since he'd never read the story in his life.

Half a block from his stop on Market Quinn picked up a double tall latte (his usual form of breakfast). He shoved his respirator down around his mouth so he could sip the latte through the slit in the lid, and gazed into the windows he passed, appliances first, then a coffee shop (where most of the patrons were logged onto the super-glue bound terminals), then a funky old furniture and clothing store, then a jeweler's with night-empty shelves-and a security camera sweeping any and every passerby...

At the sight of the security camera, Quinn remembered what he'd-incredibly-forgotten: that he, L. Quinn, was a walking clandestine spy-eye. Even when he'd checked to see that he had insulin patches on him, even then he hadn't thought of it.

I could hire myself out as a mobile surveillance camera. Only of course I'd have to figure out the transmission code first, which might not be all that trivial a thing to do...

Monday mornings were 7:30 starts, but even so, Quinn was a few minutes early clocking in. As usual, Eddie, the site manager he usually worked under, had arrived before him. He was sitting on the edge of the conference table, looking over a file, when Quinn came into the briefing room. He stared a moment at Quinn, then got up and came over to him and slapped him on the back. ? Quinn, old guy, how you *feeling*, man? I tell you, when you keeled over, I thought you must be having a heart attack or something, even young as you are. You okay, man??

Quinn flushed. He hadn't considered what the crew must have thought, seeing him passed out like that, sick as a dog ... Suddenly he had to worry that McGuire, having been told, might have decided that a guy with such unreliable health was just too great a liability to keep on the payroll... ? Hey, I'm *fine*, Eddie, no problem, just a little blood sugar thing, got it taken care of, all under control now, nothing like a heart

attack, man, just this blood-sugar thing, you know??

Quinn supposed that calling diabetes a ? blood-sugar thing? wasn't, at least technically, a lie exactly. Vague to the point of disingenuousness, sure, but the problem was under control and would soon be nonexistent. He slid a glance at old Dickie Price, seated in the chair you'd swear had his name engraved on it, down at the foot of the table. Old Dickie was, of course, bent over his pocket-sized electronic solitaire game, seemingly oblivious to the world. Other than the insides of the robots McGuire paid him to keep in order, Old Dickie cared for little but his solitaire game.

Eddie slapped the table with the flat of his palm, in apparently unconscious imitation of his boss. ? Quinn, hey, I'm really really *glad* to hear that, you know? Because we've got this really big evacuation going this week, and keeping the pipeline open and the goodies flowing is in every way dependent on its going forward as planned.?

? Which evacuation is that?? Quinn asked, thinking that not even Eddie could describe the site they'd been working last week in such grandiose terms.

Eddie gestured Quinn to take a seat at the table. ? You'll be hearing all about it in just about two minutes, ? Eddie said. ? Mr. McGuire himself's going to be briefing us on this one.? Eddie pulled out the chair opposite Quinn's and fixed one of his socializing-with-the-kid looks on him. ? Good weekend, I hope??

Eddie knew he was single, knew he'd never have kids, knew he thought most women were too unattractive to go out with. (All that dead space, in their days, spent waiting on the repair of machinery or the say-so of some higher-up, gave Eddie plenty of opportunity to interrogate Quinn on his private life.) But because he knew these things, Eddie had some kind of attitude about Quinn's life, or life-style, something between romanticization and pity (depending, Quinn thought, on how Eddie was feeling about the respectable married paternal life at the moment). At any rate, Quinn's weekends were, for Eddie, the territory of The Alien. Quinn shrugged again, and said, ? Yeah, it was okay.?

? VR parlor on Saturday, I bet,? Eddie said.

Quinn shrugged. ? Yeah, it's, you know, what I like to do.?

Eddie hadn't been in a VR parlor since his son's birth. Parlor fees weren't stiff, and Eddie made a better wage than Quinn, but every cent Eddie and his wife made was needed for maintaining not only the child, but their respectability. And of course, since Eddie worked long hours weekdays, the weekends belonged to Family.

? What, you do one of those literary-type things again?? Eddie said.

Quinn tossed back the remains of his latte. ? Yeah. A Jane Austen novel. Which was pretty cool, actually. You wouldn't believe how elaborately they do the settings and clothes for some of those fictions. I mean, it's like being in a movie-the finished product, I mean, not like an actor would see it, but really slick.?

Eddie nodded. ? Way over my head, though. Haven't read one of those classics since I was in school.? He made one of those cute shooting-fingers at Quinn. ? Guy like you should of been to college, Quinn. If anybody's cut out for it, it's you, pal. You ought to think about going back, finding some kind of deal to finance you. Brains like you got.?

Quinn sighed. Some kind of deal, right. The kind a person would need like a hole in the head. Like a hole in the head? Shit. Wasn't that, really, what he'd gotten, with his gene repair deal? A hole in the head to stick in some kind of digital camera? So somebody could be looking at this very moment, at the big map

of Seattle on the wall facing, just as he was, focusing only as well as he focused, whichever eye it was—*probably the right, because that's my best eye, my strongest eye, the one that's dominant, if that little trick they taught us in 7th-grade Health Class was right, when you do the pointing thing, and then close each of your eyes to see which one stayed in line with the object you were pointing at*—focusing on Belltown, then Queen Anne Hill, then Magnolia, all those streets, and all those little colored flags pinned to sites of interest to McGuire Development, Inc. Old fashioned, to have a paper map with flags on it, as McGuire himself liked to say, but you could actually plant your fingertip right on the sucker, absolutely hands-on technology (ha ha ha—so everyone present always dutifully laughed at Mr. Daniel McGuire's so-clever pun).

? And how about you, Eddie. Did you have a good weekend?? Quinn asked politely.

Eddie launched into a tale of the two grandmothers' each going off to their fave weekend pursuits, and since it was not the hottest topic of interest for Quinn, he just zoned out during most of its narration. That Eddie, Quinn thought as he always did whenever he heard mention of Eddie's mother and mother-in-law both living in his house, was such a decent guy, a veritable sacrifice on the Altar of Family, a candidate for an early heart attack for sure! Quinn himself avoided going over to his parents' to the fullest extent possible. (Christmas he could not get out of, but he just sent cards with hearts and flowers on them for all the other occasions a filial response was required.) Quinn thought of the last time he'd allowed himself to be dragged to his parents house to ? celebrate? his own birthday. It had been his twenty-first, and his mother had been beside herself with excitement at giving him a videocassette of the ? *Beginning of your life*, son, now that you're mature enough to handle it!? And it had begun with tape of an ultrasound, of his days as a fetus (spliced with deliriously joyful shots of his mother in the full bloom of pregnancy), and had culminated in the last hour of labor and delivery-of him, the promising baby boy (who got himself sterilized right after passing that birthday, which had incidentally marked the arrival of the legal age of consent).

The door opened and slammed back against the wall. The McGuire Mob (as Quinn privately thought of them) made its usual noisy entrance, followed by the thin old guy known as ? Scavenger Jack.? The latter, Quinn deduced, was late again (no doubt hung-over), but could be sure that McGuire himself wouldn't bother to notice, since he liked to say that Jack was ? above rubies.? (Quinn wasn't sure what, exactly, it meant to be *above rubies*, but he suspected it was one of those phrases stolen from Shakespeare, with a context only college English Professors could be expected to know.)

McGuire slapped a big thick manila envelope down on the table and shoved it at Eddie. (Old Dickie quietly slipped his pocket reader into one of the pouches he carried on his belt.) ? The writs you need, from King County,? McGuire said. ? Three hundred four evictions; and only six of 'em have accepted our offer of free transport to Zion Camp.? McGuire perched on the table beside Quinn. ? So, kid, what's with this business of passing out on the site like that, hey??

Quinn swallowed and made himself look the big, hairy, healthy man in the eye. *Man, nobody wears gold chains anymore. Somebody ought to tell this joker...* ? A little blood sugar problem, Mr. McGuire. Taken care of, won't happen again.?

The man stared so hard at Quinn the latter had to glance aside, at McGuire Jr., to give himself a break. ? We've got a heavy week lined up, Quinn,? the man said. ? Need your full 150 percent.?

Quinn met the man's waiting gaze. ? I hear you, sir,? he said earnestly. ? I'm totally up for the work.?

McGuire nodded slowly. ? Yeah, good. Don't want any weak links in the chain. Could wreck my whole business.? He stared at his son. ? Just remember that, boy. One broken cog and the whole thing goes to hell. Keep the wheels greased, at all times. Plenty of fish in the sea these days, you can afford to be

picky. You hear??

Mac Jr. rolled his eyes. ? Yeah, Dad, I hear. Like for about the ten thousandth time.?

McGuire ignored that. *Must be in a good mood this morning.* He jerked his thumb at the manila envelope. ? The exact addresses are listed on the cover sheet inside, Eddie. It's a good section of that block on Summit East we bought up last summer. The evacuees should be pretty softened up, considering I had the power, gas and water cut off last Thursday.? *Great. Conditions will no doubt be unsanitary. My fave, absolutely.* ? Got a couple of buses scheduled for nine.? He sniffed. ? I figure we won't get any Silent Witnesses this morning, anyway, so if anyone's cooperative, you can let them move their things out. Everybody else, straight onto the bus, and dump their crap in the dumpster, as per the ordinance.? He rapped his knuckles on the table. ? Questions?? He was looking at Eddie, as though he knew Scav Jack and Quinn wouldn't have any.

Eddie crossed his arms over his chest. ? Several, Mac. Number one: power. Any way we can get it turned back on? Robots have a hard time dealing with stairs. Always takes a lot longer if we don't have access to elevators.?

? Good point,? McGuire said. ? I'll see what I can do. In the meantime, work the ground floors, and be prepared to put up some ramps.?

? Question two: if the power's been off, how do you know there won't be any Silent Witnesses? That kind of action usually brings them out in full force.?

McGuire grinned. ? Because. Most of them are in jail this morning. And the rest are likely to stick with the Belltown site, which they're totally obsessed with.? The evacuations at that site had been full of struggle. Quinn was glad he hadn't drawn *that* assignment. Not only had there been technical difficulties, but quite a lot of publicity, and political wrangling besides.

McGuire's lawyers had been in and out of court for months because of it.

Eddie snatched up the manila envelope and swept Quinn and Scav Jack out with him to the van. Quinn felt a certain relief. Sometimes Eddie sent him with Dickie, who more or less acted as though Quinn were one of the robots. Even though Dickie demanded nothing (but passivity) from Quinn, something about Dickie's refusal of even the most minimal social relationship with him made him feel ... humiliated.

While Eddie drove, Quinn took the plans out of the envelope and looked over the layout of the six buildings to be evacuated. ? Lots of ground floor units,? he said. He glanced over his shoulder at Jack. ? Should be plenty to keep you busy.?

? I'll be doing the basements first, anyway, especially the laundry rooms,? Jack said.

The buildings must be the right age for copper fittings. That must be the reason McGuire had Jack on this job from Go. He must be expecting a lot of pre-demolition loot.

As Eddie pulled up and parked behind the construction dumpster marked McGuire Development, Inc., a pair of women jogged past, on the opposite-west-side of the street. Quinn, looking at the muscular stringiness of their pale, sun block-gelled arms, calves and thighs, wondered why even reasonably fit women (and they had to be, if they were jogging on the streets of Capitol Hill) never looked as good as even the most ordinary characters in any VR simulation, much less cable and film stars. When the women you saw on the street weren't fat, they were flat and knotty and gnarly. Women couldn't always have been this ugly, he thought, or the species would have died out.

They spent the first hour casing out the site, deciding where to start. ? You can see why the Chamber of Commerce is so eager to have these buildings cleared away,? Eddie said. He shook his head. ? These places should have been trashed ten or twenty years ago. It's a wonder the city didn't condemn them a long time ago.?

? So it's not McGuire that's behind the offer to pay their way to that place in Arizona?? Quinn said.

Eddie snorted. ? What does he care whether they go to shelters in Bellevue and Kirkland or out of state? It's all the same to *him*."

Still, McGuire didn't appreciate local publicity. And there was always the chance of that with evacuees who weren't sent out of state.

Though Quinn helped Dickie with the robots, the first pair of buses arrived well before they were ready to start. Quinn thought: *Not bad for a Monday morning*. But then, only a few minutes later, Eddie came over and said, ? Don't do anything until I call McGuire. Take a look across the street. We've got company.?

Quinn turned away from the robot he'd been debarking and glanced across the street. Despite McGuire's assurances, there were about twenty-five Silent Witnesses, spaced several feet apart, processing up the block and then back down, passing one another on the sidewalk, as plodding and heavy and inevitable as the track on a bulldozer. They were wrapped, of course, in black robes and scarves from head to toe; even their air filters were black.

? The question,? Eddie said, ? is do they have any cameras. That's really all that matters. What do we care if they sweat themselves stupid under their shrouds, and die of heat stroke. But about the camera thing-got to get some security over here, to take care of that possibility.?

Cameras. Of course that was always what McGuire cared about, not the actual Silent Witnesses themselves. *They can describe all they want, and denounce the evacuations, but when it comes right down to it, unless they've got pictures, the media won't touch the story*. ? Maybe if we just block their view, like with the placement of the buses and our own vehicles??

Eddie shrugged. ? Yeah, the way the buildings are set up, that'd probably work, especially with all the overgrown rhodies and laurels they let take over the whole fucking block. But I still got to call McGuire. He's gotta be told about this.?

Quinn nodded. But he couldn't stop thinking about how he was a camera and didn't know who the hell might be seeing what he was seeing, maybe even at that very second.

* * *

The building they chose to start with, a seedy, moss-blighted structure about sixty-five years old, had twenty small single-roomed efficiencies on the ground floor. (According to the specs, the ground floor had originally been a parking garage, presumably because of a building ordinance requiring off-street parking; but the owners at the time the city had been liberated from all zoning ordinances had converted the garage to living units.) When, flashlight in hand and a pair of robots in train, Quinn entered the pitch-black central hallway, though sweat was already soaking his hair and tee-shirt, he was glad to be dressed in full-body armor and tech-enhanced helmet. (In the early days of his career, Quinn had realized that one had a better chance of winning evacuees' cooperation by showing them a human face, and so had never bothered with the body armor, and had worn a headset and glasses for technical enhancement. His practice changed, though, when he heard that an evacuation engineer in Houston had been shot in the face by a seventy-five year old woman who decided she wanted to ? make a last stand.") There was

something eerie and stifling about this ground floor. Thoughts of old people pressed against the doors lining this hall, handguns at the ready, spooked him. And though the helmet automatically filtered the air he breathed, he could swear he could smell sewage and urine and feces.

Quinn stood before the cheap plywood door marked G-1 and consulted his heads-up display. Callaghan, Sherri M., was the name. He spoke into his headset and had it ring up the phone number listed.

? Hello?? a creaky old voice answered on the third ring.

Quinn drew a deep breath and launched into the spiel. ? Sherri Callaghan? This is the evacuation engineer for McGuire Development Inc. According to our records, you received an eviction notice on March 1, giving you thirty days to vacate the premises. Ms. Callaghan, that time is up. We're going to have to remove you from the unit if you don't voluntarily agree to vacate yourself at once. Your staying is not only criminal trespass, but an illegal taking of the property of McGuire Development ... Ms. Callaghan, are you there??

The creaky, cracking voice shrilled in his ear. ? I've paid my rent on time every month since I moved into this place ten years ago. You have no reason to evict me. This is my home! This is where I *live*. And I tell you, I'm not ready for one of those shelters, either. I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, thank you.?

? Ms. Callaghan, it's not a matter of paying the rent. The fact is, this building will be gone by next week. McGuire Development needs to tear it down along with quite a few others, so that it can make room for a golf course that will blend more naturally with hill. And so I'm afraid you *are* going to have to leave, Ms. Callaghan, today.?

? Fuck you, lackey!? the old voice said-and hung up.

Quinn sighed. It was to be expected, of course, because if she meant to go peacefully, the old bat would have been out of there already, especially once they shut off the water and power. God, those old hags were fighters. If all the evacuees were like her, the week was going to be hell.

Quinn ordered one of the robots forward and got it started battering the door. A single blow of its ram splintered the cheap old plywood; and in less than two minutes the robot had taken the door completely out. Quinn peered into the room, so dim and dingy. A scrawny old lady with a thousand wrinkles scoring her face and neck had taken a stand behind a much-patched vinyl recliner. In her fist quivered a triangular Sabatier knife. ? Come any closer, and I'll kill myself!? she screamed at him. ? I'm not going to any concentration camp! I worked my butt off, my whole life. I deserve to live out my old age in peace! I sure as *hell* didn't get to be this age just to be run out of my home by a human robot!?

Quinn blinked. They usually threatened him, not themselves. ? Lady,? he said. ? I'm just doing my job. I'm an ordinary human being like anyone else. The fact is, you're in violation of the law. I have a writ from the King County Sheriff's Office-?

The old woman cut him off. ? Nobody's ordinary anymore but us old people, who can remember what it was like when the world was run by human beings!? Her eyes, a pale watery blue, glittered with desperate rage. Her pasty pale cheeks, so wrinkled-and sprouted with long white hairs to boot-grew blotched, even as Quinn watched.

Quinn hated their scratchy, shrill voices, he hated the decrepitness of their skin, he hated the lumpiness of their posture. But he didn't want any of them dead on his account (and McGuire would be pissed as hell-at him, for having bungled), so he tongued the control that would seal off his air intake and said softly

into his helmet's mike, ? External speaker off; robot 2, tranquilize.?

The odorless, scentless gas worked on the evacuee before she even realized it had been released. The knife clattered to the floor only a half-second before she crumpled into a heap beside it. Ms. Callaghan, barely conscious, was carried by robot 2 out to the bus destined for the Bellevue Shelter for the Elderly. The Silent Witnesses saw the transfer, but Quinn no longer cared. The woman had made him realize-as usually happened, once he got down to work-that inside the body armor and helmet, he wasn't really anybody in particular. And there was something about dealing with a knife-wielding crazy that made him feel that the sooner these people were put somewhere safe, the better.

* * *

? Hey Eddie,? Quinn said when they were sitting in the back of the van sipping their Heinz Instant Lunch. ? You have old people living with you, maybe that gives you some insight into them you can share with me. Like, what is it about them, that when they get an eviction notice, they like pretend it's not going to happen, because they think it *shouldn't*, because they think that just because they once worked for a living they somehow deserve to live happily ever after, like they're some fucking prince or princess in a fairy tale? I mean, with buildings like this one, where everybody's well over seventy, you have to fucking drag them out kicking and screaming. But then take an ordinary building with ordinary tenants, and when *they* get an eviction notice for whatever reason, they usually do the sensible thing, which is to make arrangements to live somewhere else. Even when that means moving to the suburbs where all the old geezers hang out, which is no cheery prospect by anybody's standards.?

Eddie shook his head several times during Quinn's speech and interpolated ? I hear you, man,? and ? right about that? and other such demotics along the way. When Quinn finished, he said, giving Quinn the what-can-you-do hands-up-in-the-air gesture, ? It's totally a difference in attitude and perspective, man. You got to understand, the old people, they think the world owes them. You know what I mean? They're all just pissed as hell that now that they got no chips to deal, the world isn't just giving them for free, say for just having kept themselves alive for so many years. While the truth is, the world don't give a shit about them, now that they got nothing to offer in any kind of meaningful deal. And if you think about where they're coming from, you can understand it. Like they were told over and over and over in the formative years of their lives all that stuff about the American Dream, about college and marriage and three kids and two vehicles and a house in the suburbs, while they don't know nothing about dealing, Quinn, it's all just this stuff of having paid their dues, as they call it, by having kids-which those of us who do it now have to fucking pay through the nose for the privilege-and by holding jobs which they seem to think makes them something special, instead of realizing that they were just damned lucky to be around when there were so many jobs, just for the taking, man, and vehicles and clean water and all that. But no. They got to feel resentful, because this isn't the twentieth century anymore and they're not God's Gift to the World. See, it's a twentieth-century kind of thing, Quinn. And all this refusing to accept eviction notices, that's just a symptom of their denial.?

Eddie's analysis impressed the hell out of Quinn. On reflection, he supposed it was probably a good thing the old people had their attitude. He'd probably be out of a job if they didn't.

* * *

The afternoon dragged miserably. The power, needed to make evacuation of the upper stories at all possible, had not yet returned. Since it had become painfully clear that every evacuation would be a struggle of will and effort against what Quinn named (to Eddie) ? elderly lunacy and recalcitrance,? no one had any illusion that they'd finish the ground floor by quitting time. The temperature climbed into the mid-eighties, which made the body armor intolerable. And at around four, a thin mist appeared in the air, making it muggy rather than cool. Still, the Silent Witnesses persisted in their funereal marching. Quinn

grew more and more irritable. It got so bad that he had a hard time restraining himself from shouting at the old people-or even hitting and kicking them. (He kept thinking that they deserved abuse, for so pointlessly making his life so miserable.)

He didn't believe things could get worse.

But at a little past four-thirty, Quinn got the fright of his life. He was in the long dark central hallway of the ground floor, giving his spiel over the phone. Suddenly, a round of gunfire shattered the silence, deafening him. Incredulous, he looked around-and saw, in the illumination from the headlight in his helmet, that the battering robot, standing in the hall only a few feet from him, had just had a good chunk of its body blown away. Because it was dark and because he had been occupied with giving the spiel, he had no idea where the assault had come from. (Later, he decided it must have been from the stairwell.) He only knew that he had to get the hell out of there before the next burst got *him*. Wanting to run (though his legs were violently shaking and weak), he instead dropped to his knees and crawled the entire length of the hall to the heavy, old-fashioned fire door leading to the tiny foyer. When he got to the door, he realized that the gunfire could, possibly, have come from behind it. (Or, he realized, from behind any of the doors of the units not yet evacuated...)

? Quinn, what the hell's going on in there?? Eddie's voice came through the helmet's interior speaker. ? Did I just hear gunfire? And if so, do you know anything about it??

? Somebody just shot up Robot Number One!? Quinn said hoarsely. ? Eddie, can you see into the foyer? Is it safe for me to exit through that door??

? I'm *in* the foyer, Quinn.?

Quinn hauled open the door and crawled out into the light. ? Oh man, you'd better call the law,? Quinn said, and noted that everything was shaking-his knees and legs, his belly, his voice...

? Gotta call McGuire,? Eddie said. ? And let *him* decide whether to call the law.?

Quinn gaped at him. They had some maniac running around this building with a shotgun, and Eddie wasn't sure they should call the cops?

Dickie, who'd probably been busy with solitaire in the back of his truck, charged in. ? My robots! I've got to get my robots!?

Eddie grabbed Dickie. ? Hey, man, cool it. The robots can wait. You don't want to get yourself killed, do you??

As Eddie had guessed, McGuire absolutely vetoed calling the cops. If the cops came, the media people would come. And the last thing McGuire wanted was the media's attention on the evacuations of Summit Avenue East. ? So what the fuck are we supposed to do?? Quinn said angrily. They had taken shelter in the back of the van, fearful that the person with the shotgun might decide to play sniper from an upper story.

? He's sending a couple of security guards over,? Eddie said. ? He said that if we're careful, this nut with the gun shouldn't be any problem.?

? Hell, Eddie, these old people, they're crazy about guns! For all we know, the guy who shot up the robots is only one of a whole gang that's decided to make a fucking bloody last stand, like in one of those old movies!?

Eddie nodded thoughtfully. ? Could be. But McGuire's line is that it's just some old gaga singleton. All we

got to do is find the guy, and we're safe.?

Quinn laughed incredulously. ? Right. Well I tell you what, Eddie. Mr. McGuire's security guards can do that. I don't got no deal covering high hazard situations. Mr. McGuire don't pay me for that. And I'm not trained in security techniques, you know??

Though he made a sympathetic face, Eddie shook his head. ? I know it looks bad, Quinn. But consider this: if you let Mr. McGuire down, even though on some theoretical ground you may be right, the fact is-and remember, I know him a whole hell of a lot better than you-the true godhonest fact of the matter is he'll just hire the next person on the list of people wanting to work for him.?

Quinn knew Eddie was right. McGuire had the advantage in their deal. And whoever had a big advantage, generally called the tune. That was life.

* * *

Quinn rode the Number 14 bus downtown in such a zoned-out, numb daze that only the sight of a bookstore reminded him that he had to pick up a copy of the Chekhov story. So though a bus to Wallingford pulled in just as he got off the Number 14, he walked away from it and went into the little shop on Fourth Avenue he usually patronized.

Quinn was feeling bad. Quinn was feeling guilty. Quinn was feeling angry. Quinn needed to forget the remark he'd made to Eddie at around 5:30, he needed to forget the look Eddie had given him when he'd made it. *You know, Eddie, it would serve them right if we just told these jerks we're burning the buildings to the ground whether they leave or not, and then just do it.*

Since Chekhov wasn't a big seller, the bookstore had to download the publisher's DVI file and print a copy of *Three Years*. Quinn browsed through the fast-sellers while he waited. But he flinched when he saw, in the Number Six spot on the rack, *How to Manage a Comfortable Old Age on a Shrinking Pension*. Of course. The biggest market for books was in the over-60 category. *No wonder they think it's their world. No wonder they think they're so fucking important.* Quinn told himself he'd better not talk for even a second to Courtney. She was always going on about ? the old dears,? and would be shocked at his anger at not only the people he was evacuating, but at the elderly as a whole. Bad enough the way she was always saying she didn't understand the ? meanness and selfishness? of ? people these days.? Bad enough that she (gently) disapproved of his job. He doubted he could keep his mouth shut for even a minute tonight.

She'd probably sympathize with the nut with the shotgun!

But Quinn knew: it was better to think about all that then to think about how McGuire would fire him if he didn't continue with the evacuations on schedule.

* * *

Quinn sacrificed three of his sitcom faves that evening to read *Three Years*, but even so didn't get far. It helped that a description of his character, Nina, and her childhood, came early in the story, but it was so crammed full of background and descriptions that Quinn kept nodding off. The story, he knew, would make a good multi-user fiction precisely because of all that background-there'd be all sorts of ? insets? and flashbacks embedded in the main narrative stream-but it was hard-going, trying to read. He hadn't thought Chekhov would be so *difficult*. It was the Russian name of the author, more than anything, that had drawn him to sign up for it. Every time he reserved a role in a new fiction, he thought of the first fiction he'd been in-six months' worth of Saturdays- *War and Peace*, which had virtually taken over his existence for that entire half year, and had left him bereft and empty when it had finally ended. He'd

played only a minor role, the Princess Marya, wife of Prince Andrei, but he'd been on hand for all of it, his presence blocked out in scenes in which his character did not appear. For six months he had been caught up in a vast network of relationships, richer than anything he had ever known. The characters had been so fully real to him that the people around him-Courtney and Eddie, for instance-seemed flat caricatures of human beings. And the settings in those Russian novels! So exotic and elaborate and beautiful ... It was as though one actually were a Russian aristocrat!

Nothing, Quinn suspected, would ever match up to *War and Peace*. And yet, he hoped...

Finally, Quinn gave up his effort to read and decided that he'd have his KMIX program wake him an hour early, so he could do some reading then. At registration the moderator had stressed that it was essential participants read the story at least once beforehand.

Though the stresses and irritations of the day had totally wiped him out, instead of dropping quickly into sleep, Quinn hovered for a long time in an unpleasant hypnagogic twilight. Images of gnarled old hands clutching canes and knives and shotguns pressed redly against his eyelids. When he did sleep, he dreamed that he got up out of bed and took a Night Owl bus over to the site, where he set fires in the basement of every building scheduled for evacuation. Then, instead of getting the hell away from there, he crouched behind a laurel bush on the opposite side of the street and watched the flames spread upward, and old people come creeping out, dragging themselves step by step with their walkers and canes and crutches. When the first fire trucks arrived, his grandmother was suddenly there, pointing (with a cane!) at the laurel shielding Quinn. ? The drone who did this is there, hiding like the coward he is. Drone, drone, you'd murder your own grandmother for a VR session!?

Quinn woke in a sweat, and wished he had some Valium. *Like being in a fucking horror movie, man.* It was only midnight. He groped through the orange crate he kept his underwear in, and found the card of sleeping dots that he'd been hoarding for just this kind of night. He stuck one on his neck, then lay back down and closed his eyes. Dots left you feeling like shit the entire day after, but they worked fast.

* * *

When Quinn arrived at the site in the morning he found not only McGuire there, but a group of spooky-looking men McGuire referred to as his ? own private SWAT team.? They all looked like marines-young, scalped, dressed in fatigues and weighted down with a variety of weapons and communication gear. Quinn whispered to Eddie, ? Pretty damned scary, man.? The sight of these commandos gave him misgivings, sure. How could blood not be spilled, with these guys running amok? And yet, he was glad he wasn't going to be expected to handle the situation all by himself. That feeling in his head, he thought, that was the hangover from the sleeping dot. Sense of unreality, like everything was totally random. But that other thing, overlaying it, was that spanking feeling, that he got in his face (which could, he thought, also be the sleeping dot), the feeling of crying (even though he wasn't), of angry parents and punishment, a really really *empty* feeling...

? What we're going to do, see,? McGuire said to Quinn, Eddie and Dickie, ? is we're going to call all the rest of the people in that building and give them the spiel, and warn them in clear, stark terms that if they don't get their asses out now, while they have the chance, things could get ugly, because of that joker with the shotgun.? McGuire pointed to each of them in turn. ? Now I want all three of you to get on the phones and just do them all, bing bing bing.?

Dickie of course protested-he wasn't hired to ? deal with the public,? he was just a ? robot man,? but McGuire wasn't impressed, and since Dickie was already pretty upset about losing one of his ? boys? to the shotgun, he capitulated without much of a struggle.

While they were inside the van doing the phoning, the commandos got themselves ? in position,? as McGuire called it. Quinn was on his third call when he heard McGuire's voice swearing in three different languages loud enough for the whole neighborhood to hear. So Quinn wasn't surprised when McGuire stuck his head through the driver's window and said, ? The fucking Silents are here, and they've got a fucking media team with them!?

Quinn's gaze met Eddie's. Cameras. The Silent Witnesses must have parlayed the sound of gunfire into some media interest. Quinn whispered to Eddie, ? We should of laid off for a day or two, and waited until the media decided that the Silents had made it all up.? It wasn't as though they didn't have other sites they could be working on.

? Mr. McGuire,? Eddie said respectfully. McGuire had already turned away from the window, but at Eddie's words came back. ? I earnestly recommend that you not have the boys get rough with the media. It'd only get them really interested, and then we'd never have them off our backs.?

? Yeah, yeah. And the prudent thing to do would be to back off, let things cool down,? McGuire said. (Quinn sighed with relief.) ? But hell, if I do that, these people will *really* dig in, especially the ones in the other five buildings, thinking they can buffalo us with a little gunfire. So I guess I'm not going to call the boys off.? He nodded at them. ? Keep on with the phoning, and when you're done, get into your heavy armor. We're going to fucking storm the dump.?

Quinn gulped water, and gabbled the spiel to anyone who didn't hang up as soon as he said he was from McGuire Development Inc. Somebody could get killed, he thought. It was that kind of unreal situation. And it could be anybody, the evacuees, the commandos-even him.

Quinn had never liked guns, not even in VR scenarios. Murder mysteries were okay, since they always ended up solved and with the violence under control. And the cannon had been okay in *War and Peace*, a controlled, aesthetic image of war, not an acting out of violence.

But this situation, this ? war,? was fucking out of control, man.

* * *

When everything was ? set,? one of the commando-types took up a bullhorn and announced in an all-but-official police style that the evacuees had one last chance to come out before force was used to ? secure? the building. Scav Jack wandered up (late clocking in, as usual) and looked with bemusement at Quinn, Dickie and Eddie, all in heavy armor. ? So they're really going to do it, hunh,? he said.

Quinn was watching the foyer, but Eddie elbowed him and said ? Look up there, on the fourth floor. Think it washes?? A broom handle had been thrust out the window; white underwear dangled from the end.

? Oh, hey,? Dickie said, ? they're coming out.?

Quinn looked back at the foyer. Sure enough, a woman with cropped gray hair was staggering out the door, dragging three suitcases and a big translucent trash bag through which Quinn could see photo albums, computer disks and an accordin-fold ergonomic keyboard. A cellular phone had been crammed into one jacket pocket, and a cat could be seen peeping out of the other. She looked in pretty good shape, for an old person, Quinn thought. Her taste in dress, though, he judged dreadful: she wore blue jeans, an ancient, patched tweed jacket and a knee-length faded black turtleneck shirt, which hung about five inches below the hem of the jacket. And she had on Addidas shoes, which since the company had been subsumed in 2020 by Le AeroDynamique, must be at least seventeen years old. When she cleared the threshold, she stopped, and stared first at the group in body armor by the van, and then at the

commandos. ? There are more coming behind me,? she called out in a strong, powerful voice, ? but they're slow. And there are three people in wheel chairs on the third and fourth floors who can't get down because you people have shut off the electricity.?

? And your name is?? McGuire said (gesturing behind his back at Eddie).

The woman glared at McGuire. ? Goldmark. Myra Goldmark. And I'll tell you this, you would have had more people leave of their own accord yesterday if you hadn't turned the power off.?

? You know who shot up our robot, and almost killed our evacuation engineer, Ms. Goldmark?? McGuire said.

Goldmark's pale thin lips pressed tightly together; Quinn had the impression she was struggling to suppress a smile (or laugh). ? No idea. No idea at all. But there is one thing I am going to tell you. I've been living in this building since 1990. Which means I've shelled out in excess of \$188,000 in rent, cumulatively, to live here. So I think it's the fucking limit of cheek for you to tell me about 'taking,' mister. ?

As Goldmark spoke, another old person appeared in the foyer, moving slowly, slowly, so very, very slowly, seriously hunched over, dragging himself along by a walker to which had been tied a variety of possessions. McGuire turned around and grinned at Eddie. ? Looks like there's not going to be a show, after all. It's unconditional surrender, as far as I can see. We'll send the boys in when everyone's come out who's willing and able, and then have them check out the building and get those wheelchair people down.? He rubbed the back of his neck. ? Media won't stick around for all that. No hot action, no interest. The Silents are out of luck-again.?

Whoever had fired the gun had apparently shot his or her wad. The evacuation went smoothly, and put McGuire in such a good mood that he ordered Quinn to help some of the evacuees get second loads of their possessions to take on the bus with them. Later, when Scav Jack was combing through the units for materials that could be sold, he found a cache of firearms, which he itemized for Eddie and Quinn as ? An Uzi, one M16, two Colt .45s, one Beretta, and four hand grenades.? It was the Uzi, he said, that had destroyed the robot.

* * *

Quinn hated the Chekhov. It might have a simple theme-wealthy man falls in love with poor, beautiful young woman trapped in her father's house, marries her though she doesn't love him, then falls out of love with her while she falls in love with him-but Quinn never felt he understood what was going on. The other players clearly did. About halfway through the fiction, he realized he had made a mistake. Playing a thin fragile woman dying of cancer, dressed in beautiful negligees, never quite made up for the disappointment. And though usually-filled with intense, beautiful images from the fiction-he had the pleasure of masturbating Saturday night and intermittently throughout Sunday, he only beat off once from this fiction, and that desultorily on Saturday night, by separating the physical image of Julia from the character. After the unpleasantness and anxiety of a bad, bad week, he felt almost bitter about the disappointment, as though he'd been misled.

He did have one gratified thought, though: the person who'd put the chip in his head would be getting even less out of it than he had. But while that thought gave him a certain sense of grim satisfaction, another thought followed, that (briefly) disturbed him: Why would anyone choose to look out through another-very ordinary-person's eyes when if you're that wealthy to begin with you could spend every waking hour doing VR?

Quinn registered for another fiction he was sure he'd like (he'd played in a fragment of the same fiction a

few years back)-one that would last for months. Anthony Trollope's Palliser series had many, many characters, and not only was fairly easy reading, but had been done years back on video. It might not be as wonderful as *War and Peace* had been-but then again, it might be even better! The role he had signed up for was Dolly Longstaff, a rather steady presence throughout the novels. (Quinn found the male costumes so rich and elegant that in this case he was quite happy to take a male role.)

The very first Saturday they started the Trollope fiction Quinn received his gene therapy treatment. Knowing that he'd soon be freed from the insulin patches, Quinn decided he really didn't mind having the chip in his brain, after all. If anyone had known-Eddie, McGuire, or Courtney-it would have been a different story. But though it occasionally made him feel like he was in a movie, or an invisible witness of VR scenes in which he wasn't playing, mostly he forgot it was even there. Life wasn't great, but submersion in Trollope rendered everything else mere trivial interruption.

* * *

So Quinn's life was again okay, yeah. But a couple of months later, it slid into real nightmare. He came home one night, tired, irritable, ready for a few hours of Trollope video. (He'd all but given up his fave sitcoms, which simply couldn't compete with obsession.) When Courtney appeared while he was nuking some soup and bread in the kitchen, he assumed it was to exchange the usual civilities. But after greeting him, she said-looking terribly grave-that she needed to talk seriously with him after he'd eaten. And then she disappeared back into her part of the house.

Quinn could hardly eat. All he could think was that she had somehow found out about the chip in his head. He couldn't think of any other thing he might have done to make her look at him like that. He hadn't let garbage accumulate in his room since the first month he'd lived in her house. He wiped his piss off the toilet twice a week. And he always remembered to clean the lint filter on the dryer. Had he somehow slipped without realizing it?

He knocked on the living-room door and went in. Courtney was curled up in one of her large overstuffed chairs so old the velvet was worn to the nap in many places. She smiled briefly at him, put aside her book, and invited him to sit. The old leather couch was so lumpy Quinn didn't really enjoy occupying it, but it was the only thing that would position him properly for a chat. ? I guess I must have somehow screwed up, for you to be looking like that,? he said.

Courtney's lips tightened in obvious annoyance. ? No, of course not. It's not that at all,? she said. She sighed. ? It's just that ... Well, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to pay more per month. I don't see any way out of it.?

Quinn felt sick. He knew she charged him barely enough to cover his share of the utilities, services and insurance, much less food. But he really couldn't afford more than he was paying already.

When Quinn didn't say anything, Courtney went on, ? The Wallingford Security Association has raised its rates. I need to come up with another thousand a year for them.? She shrugged. ? Well, it's not a negotiable fee. You know how risky it is not to subscribe to their services.?

Yeah. Quinn knew. You lost the sign saying you were under their protection, and everyone knew that if they broke into your place, nobody'd stop them from doing it, even if somebody saw it happen, or saw someone actually carrying off your stuff. And there'd be nobody to come to your rescue if you were home during a break-in, or had another security emergency...

? A thousand,? Quinn said bleakly. A thousand a year would mean he'd have to give up his VR sessions, cable, his lattes and lunch! He couldn't do it!

? I'm sorry,? Courtney said. ? I've been balancing pretty carefully, so I don't really have a margin for the extra expense.?

And if Quinn couldn't pay it, she'd get somebody else who could. ? Yeah, you've been giving me a really generous deal, and you know I appreciate that, Court,? Quinn said.

Courtney looked embarrassed. Of course most people would say that the deal she gave him was stupid, was in fact charity, which in a certain sense it was. She hadn't had a boarder before him, but when she'd run into him in the old neighborhood, when she was visiting her parents, who lived next door to his, her old baby-sitter's heart had kicked in when she'd learned he was living in a tent in his parent's backyard, and she'd just swept him up and taken care of him, as if he were still ten years old instead of twenty-six. He'd always supposed it was because she felt that inheriting the house from her aunt was a windfall, especially when her family was so pissed at her for her politics (as well as for selling her ovaries-and the eggs inside them-to pay for a full college education).

It was a blow, all right. And though it wasn't her problem, Courtney said that if he couldn't manage it she'd help him find a new place-a room on Beacon Hill, probably-with the latest data Plymouth had for doing their referrals. Quinn said he'd think about it, and talk to his boss, see if he couldn't get a raise (something he had no intention of doing, since it would be just like McGuire to fire him for even asking).

* * *

Since childhood, Quinn had thought of himself as unlucky. For that reason, Quinn felt totally unsurprised and fatalistic when McGuire arrived on the site the next morning and pulled Quinn aside to talk to him. *I'm getting canned. I just know it. What other reason would he have for coming out here specially to talk to me. It sure isn't to tell me what a fine job I've been doing and how he appreciates me so much he's going to give me a raise.*

? I'll come straight to the point, Quinn,? McGuire said brusquely. ? Let me say first of all that this is no reflection on your work, which has been competent and conscientious, if, shall we say, uninspired.?

Uninspired? What the fucking hell does that mean?

McGuire gave Quinn a hard, man-to-man look. ? The fact is, since Winn Construction won that suit, the going price of evacuation engineers has been plummeting.? Quinn had only the vaguest notion of what McGuire was talking about. Could that be the case in which the relatives of some people holding out past their eviction notices sued some company for blowing up the building while their relatives were still in it? McGuire jerked his bristly chin at Quinn. ? Another fact is that my overheads recently shot up. Not only did I have to replace that robot that got killed by that sniper on Summit Avenue East, but I've decided to bite the bullet and purchase a crane. Mostly because I'm sick to death of paying an arm and a leg to lease the fuckers. So. What that adds up to, kid, is that I'm going to have to cut your pay by about a hundred bucks a month. Sorry.?

Quinn knew when he was beaten. He watched McGuire walk away without uttering one word of argument. If it were true that some people were dispensing with evacuation engineers altogether, any trouble from his and McGuire might decide to do the same.

* * *

What a disaster! Without any warning whatsoever, L. Quinn had arrived at one of those points in an individual's life that demands serious thinking. Though he had so far managed to escape taking his own decisions too seriously (taking oneself ? seriously,? in Quinn's mind, was either psychotic or egotistical, since he had no doubt that in the greater scheme of things how people lived did not matter all that much

anyway), when his very ability to ? get by? was threatened, he knew he had reached bedrock. The biggest decision of his life-giving up his fertility for some college-hadn't taken him much thought at all, since he'd known that without college the possibility of raising a child wasn't viable, and that since the US military had refused him, there was no other way to get any college. And once having made the decision, he simply hadn't thought about it again.

He did some calculating. And he realized that even if his parents would be willing to have him sleeping in their backyard in a tent again, the numbers didn't add up. The commute from Kirkland was simply too expensive (not to mention time-consuming), and with the new cut to his pay was out of the question (even if he gave up his KMIX program and cable and Internet subscriptions). (Giving up his Saturday VR sessions was unthinkable; they were all that made life tolerable.) He also knew that because Courtney gave him such a great deal, moving elsewhere wouldn't just mean moving into a place less comfortable; no, it would probably mean moving into a place where you'd always be having to watch your back, where your room would be broken into while you were out at work every few days or so, and where the insects and rodents ruled supreme. For impoverished loners like him, without buddies he could join forces and pool resources with, the alternatives were bleak.

He had a good a deal with Courtney. A *really* good deal. He'd probably never made a better deal in his life. What he had to do was to preserve that deal. To do that, he needed to make another deal ... with someone else. Another deal that would compensate him for his losses. Which meant that all he had to do-the only thinking that he considered was really required of him-was to develop that deal. There are always deals waiting to be made. Now that his genes were fixed, he had a whole, sound body (minus viable gametes). That was the most obvious area for deal-making. All he had to do was decide what-if anything-he could afford (and stand) to give up...

* * *

Quinn had done bone marrow donations in the past to get himself through tight times. (The first time he had done it to pay for on-line library services required for his courses.) Though he knew well it was painful, it paid better than all but the most drastic sorts of donations. The main catch-besides the pain-was that (a) he'd have to take time off from work (and the fact was, McGuire had a tendency to fire people who got sick); and (b) it might take a while, once his name was put on the register, to get matched. There were other sorts of clinical-type possibilities, but he didn't really like any of them. Drug trials-which usually involved contracting a horrible disease-he ruled out from the top. Physical experiments could involve artificial task-prosthetics as well as neurological tinkering; both tended to change your body and your life, and the latter your mind as well. Similarly, psychological experiments tended to be highly invasive (especially since one generally had to be implanted with spy chips), and their terms largely kept a secret from their subjects.

Bone marrow donations had no lasting effects...

Quinn had nearly made his decision-having done almost no thinking at all-when he had a brainstorm. Of course, he thought. It was obvious. And it would be absolutely painless and cost him very little trouble at all. What he liked best about it, though, was that it showed he *deserved* to survive, that he was indeed exceptionally shrewd and clever.

* * *

Quinn implemented his plan with little trouble. First he bought an eyepatch, and then he started wearing it. One day he wore it over his right eye, the next day he wore it over his left. Though the patch was an inconvenience and irritation and forced him to be more cautious in trusting his depth perception, it didn't really impede his vision to any practical degree. He told everyone who asked he was doing it on a bet.

He didn't wear it to McGuire's offices on Monday mornings, of course, but he wore it almost all the rest of the time.

After two days of wearing the patch over alternating eyes, Quinn made a large sign which he propped against the wall opposite his mattress. He also printed the words of the sign on a scrap of paper he kept in his pocket and often pulled out to stare at. And then, after a week of wearing the patch, Quinn decided to wear it always over the right eye, except when doing VR sessions-or when staring at the poster or the paper he kept in his pocket.

In the meantime, he assured Courtney she could count on his being able to come up with the extra cash. He didn't tell her, but he muttered a dozen times a day to himself, "My ship's coming in, my ship's coming in, any day now my ship's coming in." He didn't know the source or context of that phrase, but like most VR fiction addicts, he thought that picking up such useful tags just proved that such fictions weren't at all "trashy" as certain types of people liked to claim.

Three weeks and two days after Quinn began wearing the patch, the "patron" who was using Quinn as a camera phoned him. Since the evening Quinn had agreed to the deal, he had pictured the "patron" as a rich old white guy, bored with VR, bored with cable, bored with the finest amenities of life, contracting for cheap thrills with a variety of individuals able to present him with samples of life totally different from his own. But when the call came, and the face on the monitor stared out at him, he didn't at first take in that *this* was the patron he had to deal with. The patron was not male; the patron was not old; the patron was not white; and the patron, though clearly at least affluent, was probably not fabulously wealthy. (Though you never could tell.) And of course-as he had expected-the patron was not pleased to be speaking with him. "So," she said, her voice as frosty as her eyes, "you said you wanted to talk to me. So talk."

Quinn swallowed, and glanced away from the screen. He had fantasized this conversation dozens of times. But he couldn't remember his opening lines! He said, "Well, uh," and stopped to clear his throat. He sat up straighter and tried to make his face and voice aggressive (asking himself, silently: *Who does this woman think she is, anyway?*). "Are you the person who made the deal to get that chip put in my head?"

The woman crossed her arms over her chest. Her shirt was quite elegant: an olive silk with plain white collar and cuffs. Quinn just loved fine clothes. No one he knew personally-except in VR-ever wore them. "Yes. Is there a problem? If so, you should call the number of the neurological specialist that should have been given to you at the time of the implant."

Quinn wondered if maybe she was somebody's assistant. That would explain it. The assistant of some rich old geezer, who wouldn't bother dealing with this kind of nuisance himself ... He said, "No, it's not that. I've got another kind of problem, which you don't really need to know about. But it's a problem that's going to lose me my housing arrangements, and maybe even my job." (That was stretching it, of course, though if he had to move too far away, he wouldn't be able to afford to keep working for McGuire, and if he did bone marrow donations, he'd likely be fired.) Quinn grinned for the camera. "Unless I get some help, that is."

"It would certainly be unfortunate if you lost your job," the woman said. "But I don't understand what that has to do with your blocking your eyesight."

Quinn drew a deep breath, and let loose with it. "What it has to do with, is though it's a pain in the butt to be wearing a patch like that, I can do it, see, and get by, if I have to. Now when I made that deal with you, or with whoever you represent, I made the deal to get the chip implanted. There wasn't any deal about my having to use that eye, or anything like that."

The woman's expression was so constant that Quinn felt as though he were talking to a robot. ? Ah. So you want to make *another* deal, a deal in which you agree not to obstruct your own vision.?

? Yeah. Exactly.?

? Well? What terms are you asking??

Quinn licked his lips. He absolutely had to have a minimum of a thousand a year. But, on the other hand, he knew it was all too possible that whoever was using him for a camera might get tired of his pictures after just a few months. (People's lives, he knew-his own, at least-were, in the raw, just plain dull.) ? Five thousand, flat one-time fee,? Quinn said hoarsely. ? That's what I gotta have.?

The woman continued to stare at him. Quinn fully expected her to bargain him down, and prepared himself for a battle. (He absolutely, positively, would not agree to anything less than three thousand, he told himself.) After a few seconds, though, she agreed to his terms-but said she wanted him to sign a contract assuring her that he wouldn't default on his side of the deal. She said she'd call back in an hour with the name of a notary to whom she would fax a copy of the contract. On signing, the money would be transferred to his bank account electronically.

Quinn was ecstatic. He'd never made a better deal in his life.

* * *

After work the next day, Quinn went to the designated notary, conveniently located three blocks from his transfer point. Quinn read the brief text of the contract, and signed it. The notary completed the electronic transfer which had been initiated by the other party, then gave him a signed and countersigned copy of the contract as well as a receipt for the transfer. Easy-peasy, Quinn thought happily. Five thousand dollars, imagine that!

When he boarded the bus to Wallingford, he was lucky enough to get a seat straight off. He unfolded the receipt to look again at it's nice round figure. And then he unfolded the contract and reread its text. Such a deal! Suddenly curious, and thinking he might learn something, he looked at the name of the person who had countersigned. Jacquelyn S. James, Ph.D., for the Gutwirth Institute of Social Research.

Quinn's pleasure wavered. Something wasn't right! What the fuck was the Gutwirth Institute of Social Research?

When Quinn got home he brushed past Courtney's greeting (and interest in his having shed the eyepatch) and logged onto his Internet account. First he did a search for the Gutwirth Institute of Social Research. *Denver, Colorado. Specializes in documenting current social conditions and collecting oral histories, primarily from the indigent and the aged. Associates tend to be historians, documentary film makers, political scientists, and philosophers specializing in ethical issues.* Quinn felt sick. What had he gotten himself involved with? He skimmed over the data tree, and clicked on Associates. He ran down the list of names until he came to James's, and clicked on it. *Born, Jan 9, 2007, New York, NY. B.A. in history, Cornell University, 2025. M.A. in film arts, U.C.L.A., 2027. Ph.D. in Political Science, Harvard University, 2030. Assistant Professor of Political Science, University of Chicago, 2030-2034. Associate of the Gutwirth Institute, 2034-. Current project: Compiling an archive of documentary evidence of systematic depopulation and demographically-determined holocaust , for evaluation and use in the future, after the restoration to society at large of a general sense of moral sanity.*

Quinn logged off and prepared for a solid evening spent watching Trollope videos. If he understood the import of what he had found on the Internet-and perhaps we should assume he had only an inkling-no

doubt he did not care to think about it. He dismissed his patron, Jacquelyn S. James, as an ideologue, a whiner or an extremist-using him for her own, twisted, nihilist ends. It didn't matter, he assured himself. He had *solved* his problem, he had proven he had what it took to create and make a deal on his own terms. All that mattered was that McGuire never find out that he, Quinn, had a Silent Witness implanted in his head, endlessly transmitting all that Quinn's eye beheld. All that really mattered was that he had made a deal favorable to himself. He knew his priorities.

For he was, L. Quinn, a true child of his age.

THE END

Seattle, WA, May 1995