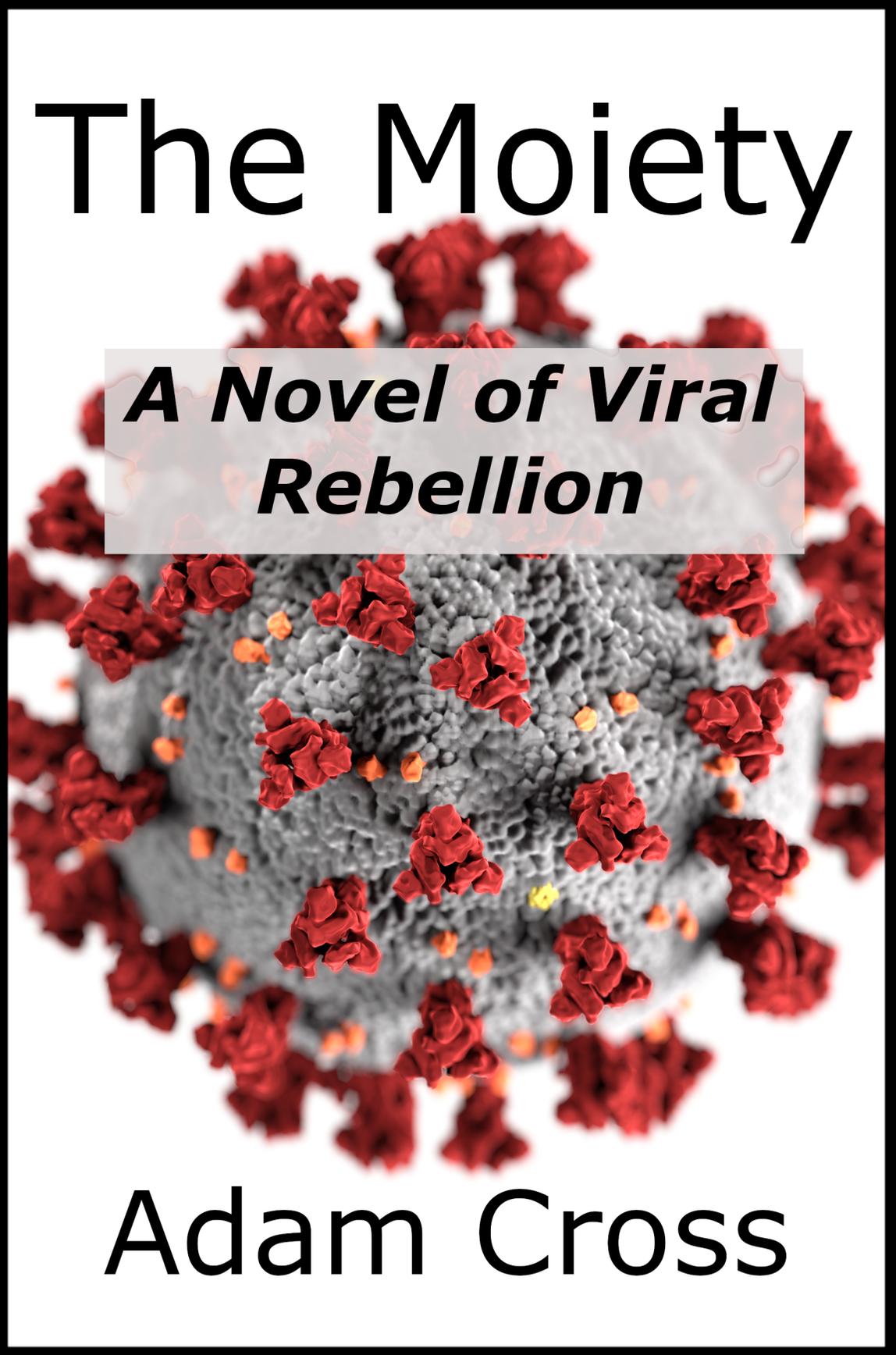


The Moiety

A 3D rendering of a virus particle, likely a coronavirus, shown in a perspective view. The central part is a grey, textured sphere representing the capsid, surrounded by numerous red, crumpled protein spikes (spikes) that give it a crown-like appearance. The background is white.

***A Novel of Viral
Rebellion***

Adam Cross

The Moiety

A Story of Viral Rebellion

Adam Cross

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/themoiety>

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*Dedicated to my mother, without whose help this book would not
have been possible.*

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Part One

Patty the Prostitute

Today, Shem would meet a potential new Hawk—no doubt some arrogant, very strong, brilliant young man or woman. They were almost always arrogant at first. If the potential was made of the right rough stone, Shem would sculpt a warrior. The arrogance faded. It was hard to be so arrogant when surrounded by other men just as strong and smart. With the right training, they got tougher and *leaner*. The leanness—that was a quality of mind more than body.

The School often asked him to make these initial assessments himself. Shem took the duty and the honor of deciding on these potential recruits because he enjoyed it. Though he had taught Hawks, he had never been a student of the school himself. The Commonwealth had trained him, and he took some pleasure in that.

He was traveling to Fidel to meet the potential. Shem had propped up an entire side business as an executive consultant to explain his frequent travels. He was always “booked 13 months in advance” if a real customer came calling.

“See my secretary,” he would say, and pass the man or woman a card. Then he would beg off for time, always in a hurry someplace.

Shem didn’t advertise it, but it had become known that he marked the cards in some hidden way if he wanted his secretary to let the person have an appointment with him. Most received unmarked cards and were politely declined. “I’m sorry. Mr. Anconia simply cannot make time for everyone who comes to call.”

Shem didn’t know much about the new potential yet. Patty would have the file. Shem *should* have had the file days ago, but there had been delays. Shem silently cursed Mark’s convoluted method of transferring information only through short-range, person-to-person contact. But he understood the purpose. Or, rather, he trusted Mark’s judgment.

The potential recruit on Fidel would know almost nothing until

he (or she) met with Shem. Most likely, someone had told the potential he was interviewing for a job, which was true enough. A Hawk-of-the-Crest never had to worry about money again, largely thanks to the Anconia trust.

Fortunately, numerous citizens throughout the Commonwealth were secretly sympathetic to the Moiety even though they were not members themselves. These could be valuable information sources. Such an informant knew somebody who *might* be a rebel, with a wink and a nod. A certain kind of person enjoyed this feeling of being in on something clandestine without taking any real risk. Some *risk*, Shem thought. *Indeed, some.*

The handlers would work such informants, and one of the essential services these informants offered was simple observations. Even though officially there was no Moiety hierarchy and no “up” direction, in reality this information flowed up to Patty.

“I know a solid kid,” one of them might tell the Moiety handler. “An interested person might want to consider him for the kinda work where you need a strong man.” Sometimes that kind of observation made its way to Shem’s desk, but Patty weeded out many of them.

It was 6 AM when Shem arrived at the Kampion train station. He would depart to Junction in two hours. In between, he had business with Patty. Then the train to Junction typically took five hours.

From Junction, he would transfer to a smaller train going to Fidel. Getting from Kampion to Fidel would take all day.

The Kampion train station alone was as big as the entire city of Fidel. Shem guessed there were perhaps fifty thousand people inside the station *at this moment*. Most of them were walking in seemingly random directions at a swift pace, most with bags. It reminded Shem of Brownian motion, the random movements and collisions of particles at a microscopic level. If the materialists were right, life was just an accident that arose out of that randomness, an emergent phenomenon. The commotion created a loud, ambient white noise that covered almost everything. Here and there a bad

wheel squeaked, a woman's heels slapped the floor too loudly.

If not for the omnipresent clocks, it would be impossible to tell what time it was in the station. The lighting, crowds, and noise all looked and sounded like this at all hours of the day, every day and night. The nearest window was nowhere in sight, obscured by the many people walking all around him.

Many of these people would be on the Kampion-Junction line with Shem. It was a gigantic line. Junction was a hub of the train company, Allied Trans-Colonial. Junction connected to hundreds of other worlds. The Kampion-Junction line was one of three of the most important lines for traveling off-world from Earth.

To maintain all propriety, Shem Anconia took no special privileges. He went through the security checkpoint like anyone else. It moved faster than he expected. Shem had some time.

He was standing in line to buy a coffee when he saw Patty. She was about 15 paces away, walking slower than most people as if she had nowhere to go, and she carried no luggage, just a purse. She wore a vague, sexually suggestive smile aimed at no one. It was a smile that could cross cultural and language barriers. A visitor could do business with Patty without knowing *Common*, the lingua franca of the Commonwealth.

Patty noticed Shem, and he caught her eyes for a moment, but her action was perfectly subtle, perfectly ordinary on the surface. Patty threw her eyes up to one corner, just the eyes alone, without moving her head. It looked as if she were remembering something. She didn't offer any more acknowledgment than that.

Patty was beautiful in a low-class kind of way. She dressed too provocatively for train travel. Her shirt accentuated her breasts too much for something worn before 10 AM. That was just another part of the no-time of train travel. Travelers didn't care what time it was.

Train station executives viewed prostitutes as an allied trade. They were good for business among traveling executives. The train station only asked for a house percentage on any goods or services rendered, and they took care that all laws were satisfied.

Patty had been around the Kamption train station for at least a decade. Patty's story was that her Johns liked to meet her on trains and in train stations. The security officers all knew her, and if she greased the right palms, she could pass freely on any train so long as she didn't exit the trains on the other side.

People all thought they knew exactly what Patty was doing, and that was what made Patty so useful, at least when she first joined. No one had expected her to be a strategic genius. Patty had learned to manipulate people sometime along the way, long before she had anything to do with the Moiety. She let people think they understood her motives when it suited her. That left them all the more confused when she made a move. She wanted them confused even when she had nothing in particular to gain from it. She didn't like people to think they *knew* her.

Patty really had been a prostitute before she joined. But, in a short time, the Moiety's flexibility had allowed her to prove her value. She still charged a fee for her time in cash on the spot, but her hourly fee had doubled three times since those early days, and now she kept her pants on or not as she wished.

Shem and Patty both traveled frequently, and they passed by each other, often at the Kamption train station and on trains to Junction. But they were not supposed to know each other. They were just strangers who happened to see each other as they went about their separate but intersecting lives. Each was the kind of person one might nod to just because the two of them happen to see each other so often, but with neither of them acting as if they had any desire to be friends.

Mark had programmed the computer to intelligently avoid the sort of clustering that might make members of the Moiety start to look like a social *set* or *clique* to outside observers. They were all aware the Commonwealth had eyes too. Most of the time, Patty and Shem had no reason to talk, so they just went their own ways. Mark's Moiety software had decided it would not be a good idea for the two of them to become direct links. Thus, for all outsiders Shem and Patty didn't know each other or have any desire to know

each other.

Also, Patty and Shem genuinely *didn't* have any desire to be friends. That helped. When possible, tell the truth. It's easier.

Shem and Patty knew *about* each other because sometimes they had a *need* to know about each other. But many of the people walking around Shem might be members of the Moiety. Shem would never know—not unless later he needed to know. They arranged it like that on purpose.

After seeing Patty, Shem decided he didn't want coffee after all. He glanced at his watch and left the line as if deciding he was too pressed for time to wait for coffee, then he started walking purposefully toward a gate. After a moment, he turned around, took an indirect route, and sat at a bar instead, looking for all the world like any other man just waiting for his train to start boarding.

Train station bars operated all day and night, every day. It was always travel o' clock.

There were a few people seated at the bar already. People who ordinarily would never drink alcohol early in the day often drank early in train stations because they would be traveling all day. It made no difference. They had no plans to work or catch up on reading today.

Shem ordered a beer.

He sipped the beer and stared ahead for a time. The seat next to him was empty, and nobody bothered him. Every other man sitting at the bar was doing the same thing: just drinking silently and staring blankly, waiting. The ambient noise was rather too loud for conversation anyway.

It was perhaps five minutes later when Patty took the seat beside him.

"Hello, handsome," she said to him with a smile. Her tone was inviting, and it was exactly right for a tradeswoman such as herself, but it wasn't genuine, and it wasn't *really* for him. It was meant for anyone who might hear.

Shem turned halfway toward her and smiled a meaningless smile. He gave her a nod of acknowledgment that to an onlooker

would appear to say, “no, thank you.”

“The usual,” she said to the bartender. She looked back at Shem and tossed her hair.

The bartender nodded.

Shem had never been personally attracted to Patty, but he understood why many men were. Patty was past her prime, but she would still do a brisk business if she had any desire or need to keep it up. For all Shem knew, Patty still worked her trade, either to maintain her cover or just because she wanted to. Shem did not make any effort to follow the details of Patty’s life. But he doubted she did much of her old job anymore these days. Patty stayed busy with Moiety business.

The one thing Shem *did* find attractive about her was her voice. She had a natural, sultry contralto.

From the side of his vision, Shem could see a subtle halo illuminating Patty. The personal repo implanted in Shem’s brain tied directly into his vision. It allowed the computer to display images that overlaid his sight.

Most people in the Commonwealth had these repo devices implanted at an early age.

The halo around Patty meant that his repo was performing the typical computer handshake with Patty’s own repo. It was exchanging keys with Patty, via short-range radio signals, for mutual authentication. The authentication was something Mark had designed and insisted on. To anyone snooping on radio signals in the area, the signals would be indistinguishable from the background signals that supported the Public Net. Also, the signals were so weak they only worked in close person-to-person contact like this.

Shem reached into his jacket pocket to push a button on a small device.

One of Mark’s interns had invented a discreet portable device that made it difficult for other people nearby to overhear a conversation. It also quieted the ambient noise for the users, in a bubble around themselves. If caught with the device, one could always say

it was intended to help with concentration.

“We’re meeting someone,” Patty said to him.

Shem was concerned. That meant there was a change in plans. Shem didn’t like a change of plans.

Patty sipped her beer, looking unhurried. “Switch to radio.”

Shem had pre-programmed a hand-gesture to automate the switch to radio. He saw Patty do the same, a distinctive flourish. It was typical for people to program these kinds of shortcut commands into their personal repositories.

The two would still talk aloud, but the sounds would be transmitted over very low-power radio signals, the repo acting as a transceiver. It caught these signals. But instead of playing the signals over a speaker, it connected them directly to the auditory pathways of the brain. The way it worked, Shem and Patty quite literally had each other’s voices in their heads.

The technology was so skillfully done that one could even tell the direction the sound had come from, much like real hearing. This much was readily available technology. Mark had only made minor modifications for security, by his own estimation.

“Can you hear me?” Shem asked.

“Yeah, I got you,” Patty said.

The bar made an open rectangle, with the bartender in the middle. Soon, an elderly man sat across from Patty and Shem, some eight or ten feet away. That was near the edge of how far their radio signals would reach before they degraded to unreadable noise.

Patty made a hand signal. In this case it was nothing but a secret sign language. It told the man to turn on his radio receiver.

The man flipped on his radio device.

“You look ridiculous,” Patty said curtly. “Take off those god-damn glasses and act like a Judge.”

Shem knew the man as Judge Damien Walters. He was wearing dark sunglasses indoors and a large coat, like a particularly stupid spy in a movie. He was a Judge for the Commonwealth. On more than a few occasions, his power from the Bench had proved useful to the Moiety.

Patty was a direct link with the Judge in the social cohesion network Mark had invented. Patty and the Judge saw each other weekly. Many officers and guards of the Court knew that Walters habitually ordered the same prostitute, Patty, and met her in his chambers. They would not know her name, just her face and her breasts.

Everyone gave the Judge the social courtesy of ignoring this moral indiscretion. It did not interfere with his duty as Judge. Nobody at the courthouse cared about the Judge's private affairs one way or another. Even his wife Martha must have known, everyone would think. For some reason, she looked the other way. Each person privately thought it was none of his business.

The Judge and prostitute *did* go through the motions of pretending to keep their meetings secret for appearances. Even so, it was inevitable that some would see an unknown person going in and out of his chambers. The Judge *preferred* people to think he was hiring a prostitute rather than having improper *ex parte* discussions with lawyers involved in his cases. Or buying cocaine. Thus, he did request that Patty dress the part in a thinly veiled sort of way. Patty dressed the way she imagined a cheap hooker would think a classy woman dressed. Patty was skilled at that kind of meta-thinking. She could think about how a person might think a person might think.

There was no plan to have the Judge here today, which meant Patty was changing the play in motion. Shem knew that Mark wouldn't like that. Mark wasn't in charge any more than Patty was, but Shem trusted Mark not to do anything rash. *Patty?* Not so much.

"Walters, can you hear me through the radio?" Patty said, "And for god's sake, turn on your muting device too."

The Judge looked annoyed, but he glanced around and then took off his sunglasses and coat and draped them across the chair beside him. The bartender was hovering, so Walters said, "I have a soda water with fresh lime."

The bartender poured his drink right away and then disappeared. Judge Walters flipped on his own muting device and said,

“I hear ya.”

“You are an itinerant judge,” Patty said. “It’s perfectly natural that you should travel to hold court on other Colonies. There’s no need for you to dress up like a man buying dirty magazines.”

“Why did you want me here,” Walters said, trying to cover the motion of his lips with his glass of soda water. “You know I don’t like to meet outside my Chambers.”

“We’re here because I’m done with you,” Patty said, “and Shem is my witness of the change.”

She flashed Shem an apologetic eye.

The Judge pulled an old-fashioned paper file from his briefcase and made himself appear to be reading it.

“Done?” he said. “What do you mean?”

“I mean I don’t think seeing you is a good use of my precious time anymore,” Patty said.

Walters bristled with anger in his own dry and dusty way. “I am a Judge of the Commonwealth!”

Watching the Judge’s face, Shem could almost read his emotions. Walters’ face reddened, and he seemed on the verge of a threat. Then he faltered. He convinced himself that he could have some petty revenge if he wanted to. The thought alone seemed to be enough, though deep down he knew he could have no real revenge against Patty.

“Let’s not escalate the situation,” Patty said. She seemed to read his mind. “Shall we agree to that? I’m not alone here today.”

“What does that mean?” Shem asked.

As before, Patty addressed Shem without turning to him. “I like to have bodyguards when I conduct business. Find them if you can. A Hawk really shouldn’t have much trouble.” They aren’t quite as good as Hawks yet.

Shem had already picked them out of the croud before Patty mentioned them. He flicked his eyes toward all three.

One was a woman, some 20 paces away, standing with a rolling travel bag. It looked as if she had been walking somewhere, received a call, and stopped in place to take it. Except her eyes weren’t right.

The eyes never strayed very far from Patty. Her body language suggested an unchanging stream of “yes”, “no...” yes”, “no”. She had been there at least ten minutes. Shem had noticed she was there, but he had not known the woman was there for Patty. He had assumed she was a Commonwealth Eye. He would not make that mistake again. He made a mental note.

The woman knew she had been made, so she started walking now, no doubt to find a different vantage.

Shem wondered about Patty’s bodyguards. Were they loyal to the Moiety, or to Patty alone?

“But...” the Judge trailed off. Shem could tell that being dumped by a prostitute shook the old man to his core. “But...why now? Is this about the Dovesky case?”

“I haven’t tried to take you off the Jury Quorum,” Patty said, “if that’s your concern. I don’t think I could if I wanted to. You can give your rambling opinions all you want. Try to persuade the others that Dovesky is innocent if that’s how you feel about it. Hell, try to persuade me. I pride myself on not being a dry, brittle old stick.”

Shem wished he didn’t need to be present for this, but he understood why Patty had asked him to be here.

“We don’t have enough evidence to convict Dovesky,” Walters said.

“You get your vote, same as every other member,” Patty said.

They still had not really come to the heart of it.

“But...” the Judge said, “they listen to you. I’ve been sitting on the Bench for 30 years, but if *you* vote ‘guilty’, then a plurality goes with you. Are we just a mob? Is all of this nothing but mob rule?”

“Now we’re getting to it, right?” Patty said. “Is all democracy just mob rule?”

“It’s not about right,” Patty said. “It’s not about wrong. It’s about power.”

“If we are to do this,” Walters said. He lowered his voice to a comically soft and arch whisper, “if we are to collude against the Consul, then we must maintain some moral *rightness*. Otherwise, we are just...*traitors* and possibly co-conspirators in a murder... Is

that all we are?”

“You want to talk about ‘*rightness*’?” Patty said. “‘Morality’?”

“If anyone should understand rightness, it’s me,” the Judge said, now straightening his back indignantly.

He seemed to realize his body language was calling attention to him.

“I’ve seen 30 years of liars and murderers and rapists march through my courtroom. You wouldn’t understand what ‘rightness’ is. It’s too complex an idea. Men of letters and *law* have been grappling with it since the dawn of time. Not you, and not the Judge quorum either. This man *will die* because of you.”

Dovesky was accused of betraying The Moiety.

Patty’s eyes wandered aimlessly around the room as she thought. She said, “I did read your...*lengthy* opinion on the case in the Ledger.”

“And?” he said.

“And,” Patty went on, “it’s clear you look too much at the quality of the evidence and not enough at the evidence itself—though I grant both are important. Even so, for this case, you are on the jury, not the judge quorum. Four of our men are dead because of Dovesky. You *realize* you aren’t the judge, right? The purpose of a jury is to make determinations—”

“—of fact,” Walters interrupted.

“Talk to me again about morality. Or was it ‘rightness’? Where do you think we have gone wrong about Dovesky?”

“Bah!” Walters said. It seemed to bother him all the more that he couldn’t irritate Patty at all.

“We should never have started this ‘non-hierarchical’ nonsense in the first place,” he said. “What’s *right* is for men of reason to run things—not just a mob, and not just some...”

“Not a *woman*, you mean, having any influence?”

The Judge paused, his eyes full of hatred.

“It has nothing to do with you being a woman. I’ve met many fine women. I married one,” Walters said, “and I won’t have you putting *those words* in my mouth.”

Shem did not know Walters well, but he knew that Walters was used to people doing what he said. His Honor's orders from the Bench meant something. In The Moiety, he had not distinguished himself. People were not very impressed by his own self-published Law Review on the Ledger.

Judge Walters had gone to one of the most prestigious and expensive law schools in the Commonwealth. Presumably, his family must have money, but not like the Anconias. Shem would have seen Walters at certain balls and charity events if Walters' family was *that* rich.

Patty didn't have to worry about money anymore. But not too long ago she had really been a prostitute. Shem did not think prostitution was any woman's first choice. Shem made a mental note.

Shem wondered if money by itself was responsible for this divide. Could they be such different people now mostly because of having money or lacking it during their youths?

Walters continued, "It's about you being *low*, lacking *dignity* and *morality*. And that might cost Dovesky his life."

Patty sipped her beer. Somehow, her face maintained a calm, sphinx-like expressionlessness. Shem could tell the calmness was not fake. "You're just..." Walters said, "just..."

"I'm just a *whore*?" Patty said. She said it without venom or sarcasm. In Kampion, another woman might have been ashamed that she had to sell her body, but that woman had never been Patty Ahkiyes.

Shem thought at that moment the Judge really hadn't figured it out yet. He didn't see she wasn't a prostitute anymore. Even if they still met weekly, and even if they both kept their clothes on, somehow the old Judge still saw her as nothing but a whore.

"Ms. Ahkiyes," the Judge said. He mispronounced her name ever so slightly, and Shem could tell Patty was annoyed but she let it go. "That's a dirty trick. You're trying to distract from the real argument by making me sound like a bigoted old fool. Any first-year law student would see through that."

“It’s not hard to do in your case,” Patty said. “How about this then? I concede your premise. I know nothing about virtue or morality. Teach a *low*, aging woman some virtue so she can learn.”

There was not a hint of sarcasm or irony in her voice. The question was not rhetorical. She waited patiently for a genuine answer.

Shem tried not to look gripped by the exchange. He sipped his beer and appeared bored.

Shem glanced at the Judge, trying to look casual. The Judge looked nearly terrified. Just like that, he wasn’t arguing with an aging whore anymore. He was talking to Aristotle and finally beginning to understand who Patty was, a person much *more* than his intellectual match.

Somewhere along the way, perhaps back when he graduated first in his class in law school, he had convinced himself he was the smartest man in the room. That warm cozy feeling had never left him, even after he met Safaad Sert. Even after he met Mark Fisher. Damien Walters was a middling intelligence who, for a brief moment, had seen exactly what he was. Then the clouds returned.

“It’s a giant subject,” Walters said, trying to compose himself. “I can’t just tell you what *virtue* means. And besides, you aren’t really trying to learn. Despite your cunning mask you are still just trying to make me out the old fool.”

“Pick just one thing,” Patty said. “Tell me why you think I show a lack of morals or virtue on the Dovesky case.”

There was an uncomfortable silence as Patty patiently waited for Walters to compose his answer.

Shem didn’t love being a witness to this conversation, but it was one of Mark’s rules. Rather, it was a Moiety rule that Mark had invented. Even Mark hated to see it enforced, but the purpose of it was his much-vaunted social cohesion. Whenever there was a “strong disagreement” between two members likely to threaten the social cohesion of the Moiety, the members must talk in person, with a witness present. That was step one, and it was a good sign that Patty was following the law.

Especially in light of the bodyguards she travelled with now, evidently, it was good that Patty was still playing by this rule.

Mark hated these meetings because he considered any open-air meeting of three or more members a security risk, but “social cohesion” was a higher priority.

“Well, Mr. Walters?” Patty said. “What’s really bothering you about this case?”

The Judge looked at Patty’s eyes in a moment when Patty was looking away. “It’s just that this is our first death penalty case,” he said.

“Treason is a capital offense,” Patty said. “I’m sure you know many states and peoples throughout history have agreed with that policy. Dovesky betrayed us to a foreign enemy. That’s treason.”

“But what gives us the right to decide?” Walters said. “To kill a man.”

“What gives any nation or state the right?” Patty said.

“We aren’t a nation,” Walters said. “For all practical purposes, we are just a...secret society.”

“What makes a nation?” Patty said.

Walters squinted.

“Don’t answer that,” Patty said. “It’s exactly the kind of question I don’t have time to think about. And, frankly, I don’t care. But I’m sure General Sert would love to talk to you about it for hours.” That was Safaad Sert she referred to.

“You want me to form a direct link with the General?” the Judge said.

“You have a problem with him?” Patty said.

“Of course not,” the old man said. “I just can’t think of any reason why the two of us might see each other regularly, or even know each other at all.”

Have a reason for meeting in plain sight was part of the Moiety’s cover. Each direct link between two members also required a cover story. In the case of Patty and the Judge, the story had been simple enough.

Patty considered for a moment and sipped her beer. “Is it legal in

the Commonwealth for a sitting judge to act as someone's lawyer?" Patty said.

"It's rare but legal," the Judge said, "yes."

"So do that," Patty said. "Be his lawyer."

"What would the case be?" Walters said.

"Do I have to figure out every detail for you?" Patty asked. "The point is simple: you and I are done; you talk to Sert now."

"You can go," Patty told the judge. "If it pleases the Court." It was clear that Patty was done talking to the judge now.

Walters looked startled and numb as he gathered his coat and walked away. Moments later, the bartender noticed the old man had left his sunglasses on the bar stool. He dropped them in a "lost-and-found" box and continued about his business.

Patty looked straight ahead at the bar. She said, "His name's Mauricio—the potential, I mean." Shem was glad to finally get down to the business he came for.

"And you think he's Hawk material? He's pretty far out of the way," Shem said.

"I try not to make judgment calls like that. To my eye, he seems like the kind you like. Not on the surface. He's scrawny. But underneath I think he's the kind you like," Patty said. "See for yourself."

Just then, a little circle entered Shem's vision in the upper right, with a ding sound only for Shem's ears, indicating he had received an incoming message. Patty had sent him the potential's file.

"Take a look at the file," Patty said. "I'll wait."

As always, the file had passed over short-range radio signals. Shem thought they could easily encrypt data and send it over the Public Net to each other. If they had done that, he could have had the file days ago. But everyone deferred to Mark's expertise on technical matters.

"*Everything* is hackable," Mark always insisted. "Never forget it. It's always just a matter of *time*, *expense*, and *risk*. Want to keep people from stealing your information? Make it an expensive job. Make it time-consuming. Make it risky. Also, if possible, don't even

let them know you are there in the first place.”

If anyone was willing to listen, Mark was always happy to explain his reasons. He could deliver a lengthy lecture on the technology, complete with impromptu sketches to illustrate his points. Shem and Patty, among others, just nodded and trusted Mark. General Sert often had questions and drew out more details.

The Moiety liked to pretend that they did not have labels, titles, or official positions of power. But however much they wanted to pretend, Mark was their Chief Technology Officer, in *fact*, even if not in *name*. That was clear enough.

Shem mused about Patty. What would they have called *Patty* in a more conventional, hierarchical organization? She was some kind of power broker and information broker. Maybe she would have been the Chief of Operations.

Shem opened the file on his repo. The personal repo displayed images in his vision. Shem looked at some pictures of the kid while he sipped his beer. The boy looked about 15 Earth years. He wasn't the usual type they sent to Shem. He wasn't thick-necked. He looked short and lean but thin. Shem wondered why Patty had endorsed the kid.

The file included some basic facts and observations. Mauricio was good at handball, a team sport. That was good. He had scored high on some university intelligence tests—not high as a future university professor, but higher than a typical athlete.

The file was thin. As Shem glanced through it, he didn't see anything that might explain why he should spend all day today traveling to visit this Mauricio. But assorted observations in a file were not the test anyway. *Shem* was the test.

“I don't get it,” Shem said. “Why this kid. He looks unremarkable.”

“Call it a hunch,” Patty said. “A hunch that two different people had, including myself and one of my handlers.”

“Have you seen him yourself?” Shem asked.

“No good reason to go all the way to Fidel,” Patty said. “But I have three handlers on the ground there feeding me information.”

The file noted some speeds for running over short distances. They were good.

Shem had heard an old saying once. Suppose two runners are trying out for a team, and the coach can only choose one. The runners finish with the same time, but one of them has terrible form. Which one should the coach choose for the team? The one with terrible form, of course. Because a coach can teach good form.

Shem could teach good form. And a kid this young would not have many bad habits yet.

“Mauricio DelGado,” Patty said. “He’s smart too.”

“What makes you think he would even *want* to work with us?” Shem said.

“He’s only loyal to his family, they tell me,” Patty said. “And the family’s poor. To him, this would be an opportunity of a lifetime. Otherwise, he becomes, I don’t know, a miner or whatever the local trade is, and he marries a local girl.”

She continued, “It’s hard to describe in a file, but my handlers all tell me this kid wants something more out of life than that. He doesn’t *want* to settle down and have the same life as all the other boys he grew up with.”

Shem nodded, half of his attention still on the file. One thing he had learned time and again was that *wanting it* was much more important in Hawk training than physical prowess. Based on his apparent age, they could afford to spend an entire year building up this boy’s physique. Shem was willing to trust Patty on this one at least until he met the kid.

“So you’ll go to meet him?” Patty said.

“I’ll go,” he said.

“Anything else I need to know?” Shem asked.

Patty took a final sip of her beer and left it unfinished without a word. She left money for the drink on the bar. He took that as a no.

Shem finished half of his beer, then left the other half and walked to his gate to wait for boarding.

Security started letting people board, a few hundred at a time.

When Shem's group was called for a first-class car, he boarded.

Alice the Archivist

No doubt there were thousands of people on the shuttle to Junction, but only about fifty people boarded the same first-class car as Shem. Inside, the car looked very much like a fine restaurant. A hostess just inside the door looked at Shem's boarding pass and waved him to a table, and he saw the matching number on a placard above the table.

The seats were arranged around tables as if one were having dinner with friends, except the seats were more comfortable than one would expect in a restaurant. They were designed for long trips. One could, of course, arrange to travel with companions and sit together. But one often shared a table with complete strangers.

It was socially acceptable—if not strongly *encouraged*—to travel the entire way without exchanging a single word with such strangers. A brief nod—*yes, I see that you are also a human being*—was quite enough conversation at the table. Each person busied himself reading, or watching a video program, or drinking. Shem had often observed that drinking was a favorite pastime of this set. Even so, one would at least *hold* a book or a tablet computer while she drank.

Shem sat at his assigned table and gave a tiny nod to the two already there—a frail, elderly woman, and a man dressed like a business executive. They both appeared to be just waiting for the train to depart, but one could never tell when the train started moving. Passengers would only know when the captain made a general announcement over the PA system.

Shem took a book from his bag. It was an old-fashioned book made of archival quality paper and signatures sewn with linen thread. It was covered in a synthetic, leather-like material. Shem had bought it from a dealer nearly a decade ago, and he recalled the man telling him that even some of the Archivists used his notebooks. The vendor seemed to take great pride in that, and Shem

supposed he could understand why.

It was Shem's book of things never to be forgotten: aphorisms, fables, even some scientific facts and ideas. He flipped through the book now. He had written everything in it by hand, and it was still more than half empty.

He noticed the woman passenger at the table glance at his book with curiosity.

Paper books were rare in general circles, mostly changed among collectors. It was quite rare to own a hand-made, archival quality journal such as this one.

"Young man," the woman said to him, "if I may ask...are you an Archivist?"

He shook his head, "No. Just a collector." He guessed that was true enough.

She smiled a meaningless smile at that and went back to waiting indifferently. He wondered what she would have said to an archivist.

During the following 20 minutes, the rest of the seats at the table were filled. An hour later, the captain announced through the overhead speakers that they were leaving for Junction on schedule. He anticipated no delays, he told them.

Sometime, perhaps an hour into the journey to Junction, Shem considered having another drink, and he glanced at the bar. A woman sitting there drew his attention. He could not see her face. She was sitting at an angle with mostly her back to him. The golden blond hair and the outline of her produced a biological response in him. She was slim but full in all the right places.

During the time Shem happened to be looking, a man approached her, and she immediately shot him down. She looked back at her tablet, apparently reading. She looked unattainable, but Shem had often succeeded with women.

Casually, Shem took his book and walked to the bar, where he sat one chair removed from the woman.

"Whiskey," he said. The bartender nodded without a word. Shem had noticed that people in server positions like this had

a talent for making themselves invisible, especially in first class. Moiety spy handlers often worked servers like this to get basic observations about a place and its people.

“May I buy you a drink?” he said to the woman.

“I’m having coffee,” she said. She glanced at Shem, and her eyes flickered over him like a shutter, appraising. “But I wouldn’t mind a distraction,” she said. She indicated the text displayed on the tablet computer, and put it down on the bar. With a gesture, she invited Shem to sit beside her.

“I’m Shem,” he said, and he took the invitation.

“Alice,” she said.

“Where are you headed?” Shem asked. Obviously, they were both going to Junction, but few people stayed long on Junction.

“Outcrop,” she said.

That was truly a surprise to him.

“Outcrop?” Shem said. “On the...”

“The Archivist colony, yes,” She said. “I’m a facade.”

That explained her bewitching beauty.

“You?” she said.

“Fidel,” he said.

“Oh,” she said, with a mask of distaste. “What’s in Fidel?”

“I do executive consulting,” he said.

“Oh!” Alice said, “Kind of like me then.”

“A different kind of consulting, but, yes, I guess you’re right.”

He sipped his whiskey.

“You know what facades do, then?” she said.

It was well known that the Archivist colony’s primary export was knowledge. Facades were their consultants. They traded in knowledge. As curators of existing knowledge on any subject, and as analysts of new knowledge, they were the best consultants in the known human worlds.

Archivists were also known to engage in strange, very long-term bets if they could find someone willing to take the action. The bet might be anything. It might be a bet that some sports team won 15 or more of the next 20 games they played. Often an Archivist

could find someone interested in taking the bet, usually a rich man of some notoriety who would bet an Archivist just for the sport and publicity of it.

It was also well known, however, that Archivists usually won these bets.

Archivists were uninhibited about sharing any knowledge they had to anyone for the right price, and somehow they seemed to know *everything*.

Well, that wasn't precisely true. Either they didn't know who all the members of the Moiety were or they weren't talking. But certainly they knew much of what happened among the human colonies.

"I've heard of what Facades do," Shem said. "But I have never met one."

Alice smiled. "It's true we don't get many off-world visitors in Outcrop," she said.

It was a comical understatement. The Neutrality Pact between the Archivists and the Commonwealth expressly forbade outsiders to enter the Archivist colony except by rare, special invitation.

"But you might have met one of us without even knowing it," she said.

"Well, yes," he said. "I suppose I don't know the back-story of every person I meet."

Alice chuckled lightly. "That's true, but it's not what I meant." She nodded her head in the direction of a man some 12 feet to the left of them and said, "Do you notice the physician pin?"

"I do now," shem said. The pin was a traditional symbol worn by physicians.

"Some of his classmates or people he did his residency with might have been Archivists," she said. "And he would never know."

"Oh," Shem mouthed the word but didn't say it.

"We *collect* knowledge," Alice said. "*All* knowledge. There is quite a lot of knowledge that you all store only inside your minds."

Shem found it odd that she said "you all" as if separating herself and Archivists from the rest of humanity.

Shem squinted, doubtful but quizzical. “I guess that’s true,” he said.

“Surgeries,” she said, “for example.”

Shem considered for a moment. “There are videos of surgeries, textbooks describing how to perform them, and scholarly articles describing new techniques surgeons have invented for special cases.”

“Do people learn to perform surgeries by watching those videos and reading those documents?” Alice said evenly. It was a rhetorical question. They both knew that people did not.

“No,” Shem said, introspectively. He realized she was right. “They learn by direct showing, from teacher to student.”

Alice smiled. “We call that kind of thing ‘*dark knowledge*’—knowledge that isn’t easy to directly access and teach someone. Mostly it means procedural expertise like performing a surgery.”

“Well,” Shem said. “What do Archivists do with this ‘dark knowledge’ that is any different from what the rest of us do? You said your people sent Archivists to schools to learn, possibly right beside others in class. So, how is that any different?”

Alice considered, evidently weighing precisely how to word her answer. “Let’s continue with the surgery example. In that case, we would send someone to medical school and fully train a surgeon in the traditional way. Then he would come home to us. We would reproduce the surgery—only in a case where it’s needed of course—in an operating room *inside* one of our recording studio.”

“So you take video,” Shem said flatly.

“Oh, yes,” Alice said, “but we take *holographic* video.”

“Holo-*graphic* video?” Shem said, stunned. “But how...?” He trailed off.

Alice shrugged. “I’m not familiar with the technology, but we do it all the time without hurting anybody,” she said.

Shem stared, considering. “So with this...holographic video,” he said, “you could watch the surgery from *any* angle, zoom in as much as you want, capture every tiny detail of everything.”

“That’s the idea,” Alice said. “In some cases, we also use

more traditional medical imaging techniques simultaneous with the surgery.”

Alice said, “I should hasten to add that our subjects of these surgeries volunteer to receive this kind of recording and scrutiny. They believe in what we do, in saving knowledge for posterity.”

“What do you do with all that data, after you have it? I admit I’m still a bit...awestruck,” Shem said.

“After that, we index it,” Alice said. “It’s not glamorous. It’s just data analysis, she said. But it is my specialty.”

Shem had only intended to pass some time talking with a pretty girl, but he was beginning to find this professionally fascinating.

“Humor me, would you?” he said. “Tell me what an Archivist means when she says ‘indexing’.”

“OK,” Alice said. “I’ll continue with the surgery knowledge example because dark knowledge is the most interesting thing to index.”

“We have tried to automate this process, using computer intelligences, but it just doesn’t work. It still requires a human Archivist like myself.”

Alice continued, “I study the holo-video of the surgery, and I interview the surgeon—over and over, back and forth. I ask the surgeon if she can draw any boundaries around discrete behaviors she is performing. The surgeon might say, ‘right there I’m tying a such-and-such knot’. Or, ‘right here, I’m making an incision along the such-and-such to access something’.”

“I’m boring you,” Alice said.

Shem sipped his whiskey. “We’re both on a train, and I’m talking to a pretty girl,” he said. “Plus, I like hearing about what excites people.”

She smiled at him this time. “Then I make clips of just these particular behavior segments that the surgeon identified, and I combine them with similar behavior segments from other surgeries. I *talk* with surgeons, and get them to compare and contrast the new data input with any existing holo-video we had.”

“A surgeon might say, ‘You have this all wrong. This procedure

is a brand new thing related to nothing in your database.' Or she might say, 'Someone drew a distinction here, but there really isn't one. That was just the surgeon's personal style. These are two videos of the same thing.'

"In this way, I can make surgical techniques *searchable*," Alice said. "And for future generations, we can archive all of this data so none of it ever has to be re-discovered. Not as long as the Archivist society exists."

"Can a person *learn* to perform surgeries from the archives your people keep?" Shem asked.

"That is a very good question," Alice said, and she laughed. "Let's call it 'Plan B' in case for some reason all the surgeons in the world die. I don't think any person in his right mind would volunteer for a surgery performed by someone trained that way unless all the traditionally trained surgeons were dead."

"That's grim," Shem said, but he laughed.

"So why do it?" Shem asked. "It sounds like a lot of trouble?"

"Not as much as you might think," Alice said. "We do need surgeons in Outcrop anyway, and some Commonwealth teaching hospitals have asked us for access to these recordings as a teaching aid for resident surgeons. We were willing to share our knowledge for the right price. Surgeons in training have told us how hugely beneficial our holographic videos are."

Alice continued, "It's not typically possible for an outsider to directly learn how to interface with our system. So the hospital would hire a Facade such as myself. That, in a nutshell, is what I do," she said.

"Oh!" Shem said. "You *do* work with surgeries. That wasn't just an example. You work with teaching hospitals?"

"The rich ones," she said.

"Can I have a Scotch?" Alice said to the bartender. He nodded silently.

"Tell me," she said, "What is your work like?"

"Well, I'm a psychologist by training. I have something of a knack for helping people fight their way out of their own problems,"

he said. "You might call it therapy. Or you might just say I'm a life coach."

He added, "Being a surgical 'index' as you put it, does that make you a walking encyclopedia on medicine?"

Alice said, "I've noticed something about knowledge that you probably know all about as a psychologist."

Shem nodded, inviting her to continue.

"Knowledge doesn't grow linearly. It grows fractally."

"Help me know what you mean by that," Shem said.

"Simply put, the way you 'learn' something is by making a connection between the new thing and something old that you already knew. Thus, it is *much* easier and faster to learn new things if you have a lot of old things that might connect to it."

"To the one who has much, more will be given," Shem said, quoting.

"Do you know who said that?"

"Isn't it just an old proverb?" Shem said. "Anyway, I think I agree with you. I wish I had known that when I was younger. But would it have mattered?"

"You can't hurry it," Alice said, and she sipped her Scotch. "You can learn a little bit every day, like an investment with compound interest, and after years of that you find that you are rich. But you can't fill up a bathtub in one quick spurt."

"To answer your question," Alice said, "I probably know more than anyone has ever known about surgery without actually being a surgeon."

She continued, "That compounding effect of knowledge is something that Archivists are aware of. We use it, we cultivate it. But it's quite another thing to look back over the last 15 years of your life and see the effects of it for yourself."

"Since you are a therapist," Alice said, "There's something I want to say."

Her face fell flat and somber.

Shem did not like this turn of the conversation.

“It’s just... I’ve been thinking of, maybe, going to a therapist. Are you any good?” She smiled, and with a joking tone she added, “Do be sure to give me an honest opinion of yourself.”

“I’m the best in Kampion. Nay, the entire Commonwealth,” Shem said. “May I ask what you...want a therapist for?”

“My grandmother died,” she said.

Now, he felt horrible for asking. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “You were close?”

“She raised me,” Alice said.

All Shem had wanted was to talk to a pretty girl, and suddenly he was working.

“Can I ask something a little strange?” Alice said.

“Well, I’m a therapist,” he said. “It would be unusual if you didn’t.”

“That’s just it,” she said. “There’s something about you, and I can’t tell what it is exactly, but you don’t seem like an ordinary therapist. Frankly, it’s the reason why I’m talking to you.”

It sounded like a pick-up line. But this woman definitely did not need a pick-up line. For a second he wondered if it was the book. If it was the simple fact that he was carrying an odd paper book.

“Oh.” He grinned. “You mean my charm and good looks. Yes, I get that a lot.”

She ignored his attempt at humor. “You’re a *Joker*,” she said. “That’s it, isn’t it.”

He sighed lightly. “We prefer the phrase ‘construct-aware,’” he said, but he didn’t really. It was just a matter of keeping up the forms. “How could you tell?”

“Then it’s true. That’s fascinating,” Alice said. “And I don’t think Archivists have captured the Joker surgery yet in our archives. It’s done so rarely.”

“Sorry I can’t help you there,” he said. He tapped his temple with his fingers and said, “Done and done. And I’m not a surgeon.”

“Would you consider seeing me? Professionally, I mean,” she said.

Something about this gave him pause. It seemed like an unnatural turn.

“Grief counseling isn’t really my specialty,” he said.

“But what if I *insist*. There’s just something about you. I think I could trust you, and I have to be able to trust my therapist. If you want, you could even ask me questions too. It could be as an even exchange. You’re my therapist. I’m your Archivist consultant. We could just...*have conversations*.”

“It would be, um...” she said, trailing off.

Shem waited.

She continued, “Don’t take this the wrong way, but it would be less...embarrassing for me if I could tell my family that I’m consulting for you. Instead of seeing you as a therapist.”

Shem wasn’t insulted. He wasn’t the kind of person who was insulted by such things.

The question he asked himself was, ‘*On what topic could I make use of an Archivist?*’

“I’m fascinated at the idea of consulting an Archivist,” Shem said. “But I don’t know how to use you. I don’t *need* an expert on surgery.”

“Surgery isn’t the only thing I know,” Alice said. “It’s more just a professional niche I fell into.”

“Then what *do* you know?”

“I’m something of a historian,” Alice said.

“Would you tell me about the Archivists?”

“I can tell you a little,” she said.

Shem thought of General Sert. Sert would tell him *any* connection with an Archivist was a valuable asset, even if she was potentially a spy. This had spy written all over it, but Sert had told him over and over that a spy for the other guy can be a valuable resource. Sert had quickly added that Shem should leave the spycraft to Sert and come straight to him when an opportunity arose.

What made this offer so tantalizing—the bait, if you will—was that as far as Shem knew, the Moiety had no liaison to the

Archivists. This was their first *in* with the powerful knowledge brokers. But there was no denying it begged some questions. *Why now? Why Alice? Why Shem?*

“But you’re saying you really would answer questions for me too?” Shem said.

“Absolutely,” she said. “Even exchange. Or I can pay you if you want.” She smiled. “The money isn’t important to me.”

“Me either,” Shem said.

Shem glanced at a timepiece and saw they still had hours before arrival at Junction. “Why are you going to Outcrop?” he asked.

“I just have to sign some papers to finalize selling a few properties my grandmother owned,” she said.

“How is it,” he said, “to sell them? Emotionally, I mean.”

“Well, I’m not selling our family’s main estate,” she said. “And I guess I’m just not the most sentimental kind of person. But Granny Emma did leave me some old journals that have been compelling reading, and a strange old trinket. It didn’t seem like her to hold on to trinkets.”

Shem noticed that Alice drank down the rest of the Scotch quickly, and she pointed at it for the bartender to pour her another. The bartender did so without a word.

“Can I ask a question about you?” she said.

“Sure,” he said.

“What did you want to be when you grew up?” she said. “Was it anything like what you are doing now?”

“I wanted to be a shaman.”

“A shaman?” she said, and her eyebrows popped. “Tell me what you thought a shaman was as a little boy.”

“Well,” Shem said. “My father was military my whole life. He died a while back, so I can relate to that actually.”

She nodded.

Shem continued, “but I wanted none of that. I wanted to dance around a fire, with a drumbeat and a silly mask, and I wanted to travel to the underworld.”

“Do you believe they really do that?” Alice said.

Shem thought it was strange how open to the idea she was. She said it with no judgment. He might say, yes, he believed they literally traveled to the underworld or, no, it was all just primitive fantasy. She would have accepted either answer with equal openness. He just knew it.

“I don’t know as much now as I did back then,” Shem said.

Alice smiled. “I know exactly what you mean,” she said. “And I think you sort of *did* become a shaman. A Joker is like a shaman.”

Shem stared ahead, processing that thought. Then, he spoke as if he just had to say something, “I tried the military thing for a while, because of my father. But he never tried to force it on me.”

“That’s so different from Archivists,” she said, and she sighed as one does when nothing can be done to help an enduring problem.

She said, “I *am* a copy of my mother, which is all the more important since she died early.”

Shem had figured that something must have happened to Alice’s mother and father, because her grandmother had raised her.

“Besides you, what do Archivist consultants do exactly?” Shem asked.

Alice continued, “We collect *all* kinds of knowledge. We keep it. We organize it. And we sell to anyone who wants to know.”

“So you’re spies for hire?”

“We stay out of politics as much as we can,” she said, “but that isn’t really what people hire us for anyway. We are humanity’s memory. Humankind had a rather short memory before us.”

“How long have Archivists been around?” Shem said.

“Depends how you define the beginning exactly,” she said. “We started as just a like-minded group of people on Earth. That was...” she smiled, “thousands of years ago. But we didn’t have our own colony then, or laws or anything firm holding us together. We only had a few guiding principles we held in common, the sacredness of knowledge.”

Shem hadn’t heard much of what she said after “*thousands of years*”. He said, “Back then, Samahdee was...”

“Not Samahdee,” she said. “Where it stands now, at that time,

there was a forest. And before the forest, many thousands of years ago, a different city.”

“It was called *Rome*,” she said. “When a civilization falls, some cities within it fall into ruin and become nothing but forests. Others adapt and survive. What do you think is the difference?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Shem said. “Do the Archivists know?”

“There are phrases like ‘adapt or perish’, but try to get someone to explain how to do *that* exactly. What I can tell you is that the Archivists have survived a long time.”

“What happened to your grandmother?”

“She was old, and she had a brain aneurysm. It was instantaneous,” Alice said.

She sipped deeply from her Scotch.

“Was she a Facade, like you?” Shem asked.

“She had been in her youth,” Alice said. “At a certain age, she decided to retire from that and become a monastic.”

Shem had occasionally wondered about that. He had no idea what a ‘*monastic*’ was, but he smiled. “If that’s common, it might explain why some people believe Archivists are immortal. They never see an old one.”

Alice laughed with mirth. “Immortal?”

“Well, you do keep to yourselves mostly. It tends to start rumors. Why *don’t* you let outsiders visit the Archivist homeworld?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Alice said, and she shrugged. “I just grew up there. I didn’t make the rules.”

“Fair enough,” Shem said. “But it’s not just that. Archivists never seem to talk about themselves.

“It’s not intentional,” she said. “Or I think it’s not. It’s just that we are observers—by training, by birth, by engineering. You’ve noticed I am a bit chatty, yes.”

“A little more than usual perhaps,” Shem said with a half-smile.

“I’m not a typical example of my breed,” she said, then she laughed at herself.

Her phrasing reminded Shem that he had wondered if they *bred* Archivist Facades—if that was how they were all so beautiful.

That was another part of the rumor about Archivists. They were beautiful, every one of them. Beautiful and ageless, or so they appeared. And to a certain kind of person with a contorted mind, that spelled witch.

Genetic engineering had come a long way, but it couldn't give people what they really wanted: beauty. Genetic technology had been around more than long enough for the general population to understand its limitations. However, people still thought they could game it somehow.

It was like playing a musical instrument. Anyone could play any note on a piano. A skilled pianist might be able to play any piece of music one puts in front of him. But how do you turn those notes into a beautiful piece of art? That was an act of artistic composition: possible, indeed. But just having a piano in front of you is not enough to get you there.

And yet, there were the Archivist Facades. The surest way to "engineer" beauty was still the old-fashioned way: to mate beautiful people together, just like humankind had bred dogs for thousands of years. People on Earth didn't do that, at least not often, and not intentionally. It did happen the ordinary way of course: beautiful people *like* other beautiful people.

"How have you been feeling about your grandmother?" he said.

Alice cast her eyes down. "There are things I want to talk with someone about, and the only person I can think of is her. I still see her in my dreams sometimes."

"Does she talk in your dreams?" Shem said.

"Sometimes, but never about anything important," Alice said. "And I'm not trying to say her spirit is visiting me or anything like that. They're just dreams."

Shem nodded.

"Sometimes in the dream, I see her, and I remember, 'you died!'. And then I realize I'm dreaming," Alice said.

"That's called a lucid dream," Shem said, "when you realize that you are dreaming inside the dream."

Alice nodded. "I had had lucid dreams a few times before, but

not often.”

“Does it bother you?” he asked.

“No. It’s just...just data,” Alice said. “I guess I think that *doctors* think like *Archivists* think—that you have to have all the *data* to make a good judgment.”

“That’s basically true,” he said. “You said there was some *thing* you wanted to talk to someone about, but you could only think of your grandmother as someone to talk to.”

Alice nodded.

“You don’t have friends?” Shem asked.

“Friends,” Alice said. “I don’t really know if I do or don’t. Even if I think I do, can I trust that I’m a reliable narrator of my own life?”

It was truly an odd thing to say. “Why do you think you might be an unreliable narrator?” he asked.

“Well,” she said, “what I think is just confabulation, isn’t it?”

He had seen this before. A patient learns a word, a kind of doctor’s word, and then tries to apply it to herself.

“What do you mean when you say ‘confabulation’?” he asked.

“Stuff happens, I look back at it after the fact, and my mind invents some story to make sense of it. Most of the time, I even believe my own story. Isn’t that confabulation?”

“That’s not what doctors usually mean by that word,” Shem said.

He continued, “There’s something called Baldwin-Turner syndrome. It usually results from severe alcohol abuse. These people...have trouble remembering events of their lives, and sometimes their minds make up a story to explain whatever they see around them in the present moment. They are not aware they are doing it. They believe the story. That is what we call *confabulation*.”

Shem considered, trying to think how to make that clearer. “The fact that you remember how you got here and how this conversation started implies you don’t have Baldwin-Turner.”

“Learn something new every day,” she said, and she sipped her Scotch. Shem thought she was being sarcastic in a very subtle way.

She looked down. "Do you know why they call this Scotch?" she asked.

"No," Shem said. He had never even considered the question before.

"There used to be a place called Scotland, and that's where they made this stuff."

"How long ago was that?" Shem asked.

Alice waved a hand absently. "It doesn't matter," she said. "Alcohol is one of every civilization's first inventions."

"Have you been drinking more since your grandmother passed?" Shem asked.

"Oh, definitely," Alice said.

Shem had not expected such a direct answer.

"I still don't think you get what I was saying about confabulation, though, doctor," she said.

"Oh?" he said.

"I know the word; I know how doctors use it. In the case of your man with Baldwin-Turner, the man just has no memory, right? So his brain makes up any story that can explain what he sees right in front of him."

Shem nodded. "Yes."

"What I'm saying is that people 'confabulate' even when they *do* have memory. Memory is just one of the things they have *at this moment* that they are trying to explain, along with all of the other experiences of this moment."

Shem thought for a moment, sipped from his whiskey. "We don't call that confabulation," he said finally.

"Why not?"

"Because that is healthy human functioning," he said. He shrugged. "One purpose of the ego is to tell the story of our lives to ourselves. People tend to tell themselves whatever story best explains things within the confines of what they already know and believe."

"Yes, exactly!" Alice said.

Shem was surprised by her response to what he considered an obvious observation.

“Is that a problem?” Shem asked.

“Only if you prefer to know the truth,” Alice said.

“In my experience,” Shem said, “when a patient talks about grand, philosophical problems with the nature of existence, what’s really bothering her is a pebble in her shoe.”

“I’m no exception, doc.”

Mark the Virologist

If there was any one person you could say “invented” the Moiety, it was Mark, or so Shem would say.

Mark entered Shem’s office in his customary way. He went straight to Shem’s small side-table bar and poured three fingers of Scotch neat before joining Shem. He immediately took a large draught as if it were water. Then he put it down, with some hesitation, on the small, circular table between the two chairs.

“Serious question,” Mark said. “Are two heads better than one? Sometimes I think people believe something just because they’ve heard it said so often.”

Shem pondered for a moment. Getting straight to the point without small talk was typical of Mark.

Immediately after Mark had sat down within range of Shem, the repo had started the pre-programmed computer “handshake”. This word *handshake* referred to an exchange of signals the computers sent back and forth to identify each other. It allowed the repos to identify trusted fellow members, independently of the user seeing and recognizing a person. A halo around Mark shimmered.

“Well, I can tell you that last thing is true,” Shem said. “Psychologists have done studies. People tend to think statements are true if they are familiar statements, true or not.”

“But two heads?” Mark said.

“I guess you have to define ‘better,’” Shem said.

“I don’t think there is just one good definition,” Mark said. “So let’s consider a handful of different ones.”

Shem nodded.

Mark said, “First, let’s say someone asks them a clear-cut reasoning problem that has a definite correct answer and at least one or many wrong answers.”

Shem said, “There have been experiments where a group of people worked on a problem with definite right and wrong answers.”

“And?” Mark said.

“They found that if one individual could figure out the correct answer, then he was usually able to convince the group,” Shem said.

“The correct answer,” Mark repeated. “Would you think that experiment applies when there is no clear-cut ‘correct’ answer?”

“If there is no ‘correct’ answer, then how do you qualify whether the group reached the right answer or not?” Shem asked.

“What if someone is wrong but just very confident?” Mark said. “Couldn’t he sway the group?”

“In individual cases,” Shem said, “that probably happens. But the statistics show that the person with the correct answer is *usually* also the most confident. Even if he’s not loud or arrogant. I interpret that to mean people can tell that he knows he is right. And that sways the group.”

“What if none of them can figure out the answer individually?”

Shem stared. It was a broad question.

Mark continued, “What if you give a group of people an intelligence test, same as the kind you might give an individual, to do it collectively. Do they do better or worse than individuals?”

“The answer to that is complicated,” Shem said. “It’s not a clear-cut matter of a group intelligence being a function of the individual intelligences. The intelligence of a group is a kind of *emergent phenomenon* that is difficult to predict from knowledge of the individuals.”

Mark sighed. “I get so sick of those-‘emergent phenomena’. It seems like *everything* interesting is something that emerges in poorly-understood ways from chaos.”

While they were talking, the halo around Mark had faded. The word “synced” had appeared over his head, and that had faded too.

“How do you feel about Dovesky?” Mark said.

Shem never quite got used to Mark’s changes of subject. He knew how it worked. In his mind, Mark would make three or ten logical steps that would make some kind of sense. He just wouldn’t mention them out loud. In this case he was fairly certain Mark had been talking about Dovesky the whole time.

“It...makes me sad,” Shem said. “But if he betrayed us, then we have to do something.”

“You believe he betrayed us,” Mark said.

“People are dead,” Shem said. “The jury quorum convicted. Is that why you were asking about two heads? You were thinking about the jury system? You *designed* that system.”

“This is the first capital case,” Mark said. I don’t like it. I don’t *like* it.”

Mark stared blankly, suddenly quiet for a moment. He said, “I don’t know why I don’t like it. The evidence is damning. I don’t make a habit of trusting gut reactions over facts.”

“Don’t you?” Shem said.

Mark looked at him sharply and then took another large draught of Scotch.

“You wrote most of the law,” Shem said. “You tell me. At this point, can you do anything other than carry out the sentence?”

“When I designed the legal system, I was thinking about law imitating technology in the same way they say ‘life imitates art,’” Mark said. “I... wasn’t really thinking about people and their lives. But what better option is there other than a jury if a decision *must* be made?”

“Computer-judge?” Shem said, and he smiled.

“Look at the new items on the Ledger,” Mark said.

Shem opened the Ledger and cast it onto a tablet viewer so it wasn’t blocking his view.

The Ledger served many functions within the Moiety. Most importantly, it was a private way to share information. One could add information to it but never alter what was already there.

Each person could choose one fake name for himself, a call sign, to use on the Ledger. General Sert had asked Mark once if the Ledger could be altered or if an author could forge someone else’s name or call sign.

Mark had squinted and answered, “It’s possible, but I’m more worried that tiny meteorites will selectively hit and kill each member of the Rebellion and nobody else.”

Sert had blinked a few times at that and then nodded silently. Mark never would have said it was impossible.

Shem had received numerous new updates to the Ledger from Mark. One of the messages near the top was marked urgent and important. Shem opened it.

It said simply, 'Rebels are moving on New Alsace,' followed by a date. Tomorrow's date. Signed, 'Serendipity'.

Serendipity was a call sign, a fake name. Shem didn't know Serendipity, didn't even know if Serendipity was a man or a woman. But based on past messages from her, Shem had learned that Serendipity provided useful and correct intelligence. She might be a military commander of one of the other Moiety cells, maybe someone in New Alsace.

Mark sometimes called those other groups within the Moiety "strains". The Moiety was designed as a globular, non-hierarchical, amorphous entity. Mark and Shem were mutually trusted "direct links". Such links were an important part of Mark's vision, what he called "social cohesion". But these lateral messages from unknown members, such as Serendipity, worked differently.

Mark had explained it to Shem years earlier.

"There's never going to be a tower someplace broadcasting the Rebel signal," Mark said. "Why?"

Mark was lecturing, and this was a rare occasion where Shem had asked him to. Shem needed to study this so he could make decisions about what his Hawks needed to know.

"Secrecy?" Shem said. "We can't just broadcast for the whole world to hear."

"Think more," Mark said.

Shem considered. "Well, then, choke points. If we depend on a tower, the enemy can just blow it up."

"Exactly right, youngling," Mark said. Shem wondered why Mark so often referred to their age difference. Mark was only ten or so years older.

Mark continued, "So how do we communicate information among ourselves in a way that has no choke points?"

"We *de-centralize*," Shem said. "I've heard you discuss that before. 'Mesh nets,' I think you said."

"Do you know what a mesh net *is*?" Mark said.

"Let's pretend I'm an eight-year-old," Shem said.

"So you're feeling ambitious then, eh?" Mark said. "Good. But I will try to keep it simple for you."

Mark continued, "A mesh net is, first of all, a *network*. That means it connects different things together. In this case, it's people. Our network will connect *people* together so they can communicate with each other in secret."

"The old-fashioned way was to have great big *hubs*. If Amy wanted to send a message to Bob, then Amy would send the message to the hub, and then the hub would send it on its way to Bob."

"What do you think might be bad about using a hub?" Mark asked.

Shem said, "Like I said, the enemy could just blow up the hub. Or they could try to embargo us."

"Good, good," Mark said. "Exactly. Centralization is bad for at least those two reasons."

Mark continued, "But let's say Amy doesn't send her messages to Bob using the hub. She has a different idea. Do you know that old saying that there are only six or seven degrees of separation between any two people?"

"Yeah," Shem said. "Amy knows John, John knows Kim, Kim knows Rick, etc., until, after a few more jumps, you get to Bob."

"Good," Mark said. "So let's say Amy makes a few copies of her letter for Bob. And she gives a copy to each of several people she thinks might know someone close to Bob. She gives them instructions to do the same. 'Give it to someone who might know Bob,' she says. And it goes on that way. Each person makes copies and passes them along, like a chain letter."

Shem nodded. "Makes sense," he said.

“Will Bob get the message?” Mark said.

“Maybe,” Shem said, squinting. “But it seems unlikely. I don’t know how you could predict it or guarantee it.”

“Yes, I agree,” Mark said.

Shem said, “Ultimately, hundreds or even thousands of people might have that letter, and one of them *might* be Bob.”

Mark said, “Are you starting to see why I think so much about *biological* viruses?”

Shem nodded slowly. “A virus does all that *automatically*, and people don’t even know it’s happening.”

“They don’t even *know* it’s happening,” Mark repeated, adding emphasis. “And there are no choke points. When people fight a viral epidemic, they try to create choke points. But the most natural, most common occurrence is that viruses *spread*.”

Shem said. “There’s no Bob. A virus just wants to infect everyone it can, indiscriminately.”

Mark said, “What *about* that. Does that make it *more* or *less* likely that Bob gets the virus?”

Shem considered. “I would say the indiscriminate nature of the virus makes it *more* likely to reach Bob.”

“How could it be *more* likely?” Mark asked.

“Because people don’t have to *choose* to play a part in Amy’s game. They pass along the virus without having to *do* anything, whether they like it or not,” Shem said. “And they probably pass it to a lot more people versus copying a letter and passing it around.”

Shem continued, “So, how do we *use* this?”

“I write a computer virus that infects people’s personal repos,” Mark said. “The virus goes airborne. It travels over short-range radio signals. It will be invisible to the user. He will never know it’s there.”

“You can do that?” Shem said.

“Let’s imagine I can. I...think I can,” Mark said. “You’re the military expert. Talk to me, and let’s work out how to use this for the Rebellion.”

“What is the purpose of the original repo virus?” Shem said. “Is the virus a message, like Amy’s letter to Bob?”

“I think I have a better idea,” Mark said. “Instead of making a new virus for every letter, we make just *one* virus, the *Moiety* virus. Then *that* virus is programmed to pass along any message we want, from one infected person to every other infected person he comes into contact with.”

“OK,” Shem said. “Let’s say 75% of people are infected with the original *Moiety* virus. Amy wants to send a message to Bob saying ‘the enemy arrives at dawn’...”

Mark said, “She writes that message. Then every time she walks near someone carrying the *Moiety* virus, that person copies the message from her without even knowing it. It keeps going like that, from person to person, in the air. Just by their own random moving around, eventually, almost everybody with the *Moiety* virus also has Amy’s message.”

Shem said, “If an infected person just walked around a train station, he would infect thousands.”

“Yes!” Mark said.

Shem said, “Since Bob is a *member* of the *Moiety*, in his case the *Moiety* virus would alert him when he receives a new message?”

Mark nodded. “Sure, it could work that way.”

“Is there any downside?” Shem said.

“That...is a question I plan to mull for the next few weeks,” Mark said. “But one I can see right away is the one we already discussed: no matter how *probable* it is that Bob gets the message, it is not guaranteed.”

“Hit or miss communication in war is...not great,” Shem said.

“I’ve been thinking on that question for days,” Mark said. “Imagine a map with every card-carrying member of the Rebellion indicated by a dot. Now, if any two of those people see each other regularly, then we draw a line in between them.”

Shem nodded.

Mark continued, “I think what we get if we graph the Rebellion like this is little communities. We can’t know for sure, but there

might be some parts of the Rebellion that are completely cut off from other parts, having no points in common, no lines connecting them.”

“Is that bad?” Shem said. “Having different cells that don’t know about each other—that could be a good thing, couldn’t it?”

It seemed like a simple question to Shem, but it appeared to shift Mark’s perspective. He didn’t answer. He pondered quietly and stared vacantly.

Shem could tell he would not get an answer to that question right away.

“OK, I have an easier question. At least I think it’s easier,” Shem said.

Mark listened.

“How do we keep the enemy from intercepting and reading our messages? You must have a plan for that, right?”

“It is simple if Amy knows in advance that she wants Bob and only Bob to get her message. She can encrypt her message so that Bob has to use his private key to decrypt it, and all he has to do is keep his private key *private*.”

Mark paused, waiting.

Shem felt as if he had to say, “Yes, I’m following.” He added, “Is there a more difficult angle?”

Mark’s eyes floated around the room for a moment before landing on Shem again. “Is it possible to send a sort of blast message for everyone in our little gang but not for the enemy?”

“What’s the challenge there?” Shem said.

Mark said, “We could encrypt the message and use some kind of Moiety-wide key. Anyone with the key can read the message. But how do you decide who gets the key? And, which might be harder, how do you distribute it?”

Mark went on, “That’s a strategic question, not an engineering question. Or maybe it’s both. So you tell me, Shem. How do we choose who to trust? How do we give all of them keys without making a convenient master list of all the members of the Rebellion?”

Shem still didn't know all the details of how Moiety worked, but he knew that Mark had immersed himself in the study of biological virology for months.

"Advancing on New Alsace makes me nervous," Mark said.

It was unusual for Mark to comment on his own feelings, but Shem thought he understood.

"We are not ready for open war," Mark said.

"Maybe Serendipity's cell is?" Shem said.

"I doubt it," Mark said. "But there's nothing we can do to stop them. This is radical, and it's too soon."

"We could win," Shem said. "Sert tells me we're strong in New Alsace."

"Have you ever heard of the Strid?" Mark said. The question seemed to come from nowhere.

"No," Shem said. "What? The Strid?"

"It's a river," Mark said, "or a stream? Anyway, it's a flowing body of water. If you visit it at the right place along its length, it looks like a cute little creek. You could almost jump across it. It moves pretty fast, but it's still rather charming and non-threatening."

Shem nodded. He had known Mark long enough to humor his strange leaps in logic.

"Well," Mark said. "If you visit it a little way upstream, the Strid does not look like a little stream. It looks like a substantial river, about 30 feet across. How do you think that's possible?"

Shem furrowed his brow. "It...splits in two? Or some of the water spills into an underground reservoir?" he said.

"It does not," Mark said.

Shem said. "Is this a riddle? A metaphor?"

"No," Mark said. "It's a real river people have drowned in."

Shem pondered a moment. "If it was wide and now it's narrow, and it's the same amount of water, then... I don't know. Is it possible

that just the speed of the water explains it? I'm not a geologist. I'm out of my depth."

Mark laughed, and Shem didn't understand what was funny.

"Basically," Mark said, "the river turns *sideways*. What was width becomes depth."

Shem grew more alarmed over two or three seconds as he came to understand. "So, it looks like a narrow little creek, but it's..."

Mark finished for him, "...so deep many people have lost their lives in it, yes. If someone falls in that narrow little span of the Strid, it's like the Earth swallows him. He's never seen again."

Shem was troubled, and for a moment he struggled to find the words for what he wanted to say.

Finally, Shem said, "It's like there really are monsters in this world. They aren't living, *biological* monsters, the kind children imagine. But they're real anyway."

"What made you think of that out of...out of discussing New Alsace?" Shem asked.

"On the surface," Mark said, "if you don't think very hard about it, it looks like all the Strid is saying to us is, *don't be fooled by appearances*. But that's just too simple, isn't it? It's like the Strid itself tells you not to be taken in by such a silly, facile moral as that. The Strid eats people who are satisfied with facile explanations."

Shem had become a bit worried about Mark at this point. Shem thought the veil in Mark's mind between sanity and madness had been worn very thin in some places.

"What you have to realize about the Strid," Mark continued, "is that it is a natural occurrence that follows all the ordinary physical rules as we know them. But it's a death trap, just as surely as any trap conceived and built by man."

Shem stared at him. "What...does that mean for us?"

"There's some force," Mark said. "And it doesn't matter whether you think the force is God, or a pantheon of gods, or just randomness and chaos. It doesn't matter what story you tell yourself at night. Sometimes this *force* creates little machines out of molecules that are as complex as a ground car engine. Sometimes it makes

beautiful, horrifying death traps out of water and rock.”

“I still don’t follow,” Shem said. “What does the Strid have to do with what’s going on right now? Or with New Alsace?”

“Evidently,” Mark said, “tomorrow some cell of the Moieity plans to take New Alsace. That force—that God force, that chaos force—we might as well invite that force to a tea party just to see what it does. Power so *grand* is something any *sane* man approaches with terror.”

Shem just continued to stare, worried. One thing Shem knew was that his worry was transparent to Mark. Mark saw everything. Mark saw that Shem was worried that Mark had gone mad. And they both knew that, and both knew what they both knew, like two mirrors reflecting each other.

“Eventually, we want to take the colonies, don’t we?” Shem said. “The goal is to *win*, even if we are afraid.”

“Safaad would know what I mean,” Mark said, and with that, a touch of normalcy came back into his voice.

Shem knew he was right. General Safaad Sert would understand all this better than Shem did. Shem did not lie to himself about their relative mental prowess. And Sert was better at speaking in poetry.

“I could arrange to meet with Sert tonight if you want me to send him a message,” Shem said.

“He knows,” Mark said, almost dismissively. “I’m sure he knows. But, yes, meet with him. Tell him everything you know.”

Shem nodded.

Clemenceau the Chancellor

Shem had the news telecast playing while he tidied up his home for his daughter's visit. The news had been talking nonstop about New Alsace for two days. He had already heard most of what they said, and it was just the same bits repeated on a loop, but he kept an eye on it in case of any new developments.

The Commonwealth had been brutally shocked at the fall of New Alsace. They woke to the news two days ago as if out of nowhere, as if it all happened in a single day.

It had truly been a banner day for the Moiety. New Alsace was the first and so far the only Commonwealth colonial government to fall.

Since Shem was not involved in the New Alsace movement, he received his news of the inner events of the movement from the Ledger and from General Sert.

The average Commonwealth citizen had no idea of the constant small-scale warfare that had been ongoing for years. The Commonwealth Congress successfully kept almost all of it out of the press. When skirmishes occasionally made it into the news media, the Chancellor had been able to convince the public that these were "isolated acts of domestic terrorism"—most definitely not an ongoing assault from a single, organized entity.

The Commonwealth's official policy was that the Rebellion did not exist. They had had mixed success feeding the public that line. Almost everybody knew the Moiety was real. Or, rather, they knew that it was generally believed that the Moiety was real. But they also knew they were supposed to pretend they did not believe it was real.

The Moiety's military base on the ground in Alsace had fought for years using standard guerrilla techniques—hit and run, am-

bushes, stealing the armaments of the Commonwealth military and, most important, turning the locals. The Moiety had trained the soldiers who went to Alsace and then, in turn, those Moiety soldiers recruited and trained local men and women of age to fight, not for the Moiety, but for New Alsace. They could never have toppled the Commonwealth base on New Alsace without the support of the people.

It had certainly not been an overnight victory. They had been gaining momentum for at least seven years on the ground there before the successful putsch.

“New Alsace is known for its trained economists,” the newscaster said, “coming from the famous New Alsace School of Economics, as well as numerous retail goods.”

“Many have expressed concern about how the political upheaval might affect train schedules and trade routes.”

While Shem watched the news in shock, he realized that he had no doubt trained some of the Hawks who formed the early insurgency units on New Alsace. Hawks were individual warriors, yes, but perhaps most importantly each was trained to train others.

The newscaster said, “A business owner in Samahdee of Earth had this to say.”

The telecast cut to a short man standing in front of a boutique storefront. “Half of my business is imports from New Alsace,” he said, “And some of my best people commute from Alsace to work here in Samahdee three days a week. But I got people afraid to travel now.”

During the last seven years, the Moiety’s force on the ground in New Alsace had developed. At first a loosely knit collection of Hawks, eager local soldiers, and strategists executing guerrilla warfare, they had transformed themselves into a highly trained regular army complete with trained rank-and-file soldiers. Only such an army could deliver the death blow to the established Commonwealth colonial government, and only a standing regular army of patriotic New Alsace citizens would serve to protect the New Alsace Independent Parliament.

The newscaster continued, "Our correspondent spoke with Stephanie Pruitt, Chief Operations Officer of Allied Trans-Colonial, the largest train service in the Commonwealth, and the operator of the primary train lines between Earth ports and the New Alsace colony."

The program cut to a professional-looking woman in her 30s who spoke in a brisk, emotionless tone.

Ms. Pruitt said, "Trains to and from the New Alsace colony will continue as scheduled without interruption."

A news correspondent on scene with Ms. Pruitt said, "Has the Commonwealth Congress or the Chancellor made any special requests or demands as a result of the uprising?"

Ms. Pruitt said, "Allied Trans-Colonial does not exist at the pleasure of the Congress or Chancellor Clemenceau."

The news correspondent asked, "Has there been any violence at the train stations? Should people be afraid to travel?"

Ms. Pruitt said, "It has been business as usual at all New Alsace ports. I take our own trains myself, and I take no special privileges that are not afforded to all of our passengers. The new Prime Minister of New Alsace has assured us he has no interest in interfering in our business, and he has established a military guard at the ports for the duration, until such time as matters have become more stable and peaceful."

Shem noted that Pruitt called him the Prime Minister—not a traitor to the Commonwealth, not the "rebel leader". Just using the words, she was endorsing the legitimacy of the new, independent government on New Alsace. But the Commonwealth would almost certainly avoid an open confrontation with Allied Trans-Colonial.

The news correspondent pressed, "But has the Commonwealth asked you to discontinue any trains? Have they asked for any restrictions on trade? Any talk of embargo?"

Ms. Pruitt responded, "I will personally see to it that the trains continue on schedule. Allied Trans-Colonial will remain neutral in political affairs."

There's a woman who knows how to stay on message, Shem

thought. But she wasn't neutral, and for many practical purposes, Stephanie Pruitt was Allied Trans-Colonial, even more so than Shem, even though the Anconia family owned the majority of the train company.

Shem wondered about Pruitt. He did not know if she was a member of the Moiety or not. Patty would almost certainly know. But Patty wouldn't talk even if she did know—not just to satisfy Shem's idle curiosity.

Shem smiled briefly to himself at the thought of Patty meeting that polished businesswoman. He would love to be a fly on the wall in that room. No doubt they would find much in common. There was a reason why Patty had become such an important power broker in the Moiety.

The newscaster went on, "In a media conference yesterday morning, Chancellor Clemenceau had this to say."

The telecast cut to a recording of a man who appeared to be in his 70s. He wore what looked like clerical robes, and he stood behind a podium surrounded by reporters. Seven tall, muscular men in dark suits stood behind him. There were obvious bulges where firearms were concealed in those suits—but not really concealed. Everyone knew that everyone knew those bulges were firearms.

"Families squabble," Clemenceau said with a wry chuckle in his voice and a crinkle in his eyes. "There's no need for alarm. New Alsace is going through what you might call a...teenage rebellion, like a young person finding her way. The Commonwealth will give them time to experience the wide world, and we will wait with open arms for them to come back to us."

An unseen reporter on location shouted over the rabble, "Is it true that the rebels executed the Governor of New Alsace?"

Clemenceau's lips tightened as he made a face that looked like physical discomfort more than a response to the question.

He said, "Our sources tell us the dissenters dissolved the legitimate colonial government by force. It was an ugly thing. They stormed the Capitol building, and it is true that many of our own fled in fear for their lives. We have not yet accounted for all the

executives of the State.”

The reporters waiting, unusually quiet.

“But nobody was executed,” Clemenceau said. “That’s a nasty rumor. Governor Nimby is safe, but...at least for the moment he prefers to keep his location a secret. I quite understand, really. I intend to speak with him later today, in private, and together we will decide how to proceed from here. Governor Nimby is still the rightful and duly appointed Head of the State of New Alsace.”

Another reporter shouted then, “Does your Excellency intend to send peacekeepers to New Alsace?”

“I am confident we can resolve this dispute without resorting to violence,” the man said.

Then the Chancellor had put his hand up in a gesture indicating that he was not taking any more questions at this time, and he disappeared behind his entourage of bodyguards.

He looked like a friendly grandfather to his people. But whenever General Sert spoke of the old Chancellor, Shem did not like the look in the General’s eyes—something of awe and dread.

Samayah the Radical

Shem's daughter Samayah sent Shem a text message. She was outside his apartment on the street below. "Here," the message said, simply.

Shem switched off the news telecast and he looked out the window. Samayah's mother was dropping her off. He couldn't see Violet, Sam's mother. She had not gotten out of the car.

He hadn't seen Violet in over a year. That was usually just fine with him. He and Violet had finished saying everything they had to say to each other years ago. He had often thought about how surprising it was that someone as dynamic and changeful as Samayah could have come from Violet, a deputy comptroller for the City of Samahdee.

He supposed Violet felt the same way about him. She certainly made no offer even to say "hi" to him as she dropped off their daughter. That was how their relationship had ended. There was no dramatic fight. Not even any strong emotions really. Just gradually encroaching mutual boredom, like the tide coming in.

Dinner was something he and Samayah tried to do once a week, but they came closer to once every two weeks, especially now that Samayah was 17. He suspected she had been dating someone, but he tried to give her space and respect her privacy. He had found that getting along with his daughter worked a little like coaxing a small animal to come to you. Walking toward the animal didn't help. Big, sudden movements didn't help.

Samayah knocked at his door a few times quickly and then just continued in without waiting for him. She was carrying her school bag, which she quickly dumped by the door.

Her hair was a rich, dark brown, like Violet. It hung just above her shoulders, but now she had it pulled back in a ponytail except a few strands that hung around her face, framing it. She was pretty. Like any father, Shem worried about that. Her mother Violet had

been very pretty too when she was Samayah's age. She still was, of course, but it just didn't matter anymore now. Violet's beauty when she was young—that was why Samayah existed. Shem remember himself at that age.

The main problem with 17-year-olds, he thought, is that they genuinely, really believe they are adults. Shem remembered that about himself.

"Hi, Dad," Sam said. Shem had heard many stories of daughters pulling away from their fathers when they reached their teenage years. Somehow, that had never happened with Shem and Sam. She smiled when she saw him, and it lit her whole face with genuine delight.

Shem beamed at her. "Sam," he said, and he pulled her into a hug. She hugged him back.

"How have you been?" he said, still hugging her. He could tell she wanted it to be over, so he let go.

"I'm fine," she said. He intended to drag a lot more out of her than that, but they had all evening for that.

"Come. Sit," Shem said, and he sat on the sofa. She joined him.

"How are things with your mother?"

"Mom's fine," Samayah said. She walked to the kitchen, which was separated from the sitting room only by a bar. She poured herself a glass of water.

"How's school?" he asked.

"Same old thing," she said. "Headline: No big news in Samayah's life as of late."

She sat back on the sofa and put her feet up on the coffee table. "Do you wanna maybe talk about what the rest of the world is talking about?"

Shem had not spoken with Samayah since before the rebellion. He stared blankly at her, as if he didn't know what she was talking about.

"What the hell happened in New Alsace?" she said.

"I know!" Shem said, with a smirk in his eyes. "It's unbelievable."

“Please stop doing that,” she said.

“Doing what?”

“Pretending like you aren’t in the Moiety,” she said.

“You mean the rebels?” he said.

She sighed, exasperated. “Ok, yes. I mean the ‘rebels.’” She knew that he knew that the rebels called themselves the Moiety. And he knew she knew he knew.

This bit of feigning ignorance was a joke. But it was a layer of joke smeared over a genuine attempt to keep her out of Moiety affairs. Over the years, he had developed this way of talking with her, jokes within jokes, truths, half-truths and outright lies, all mixed together so it was impossible to tell the boundaries. It was all smoke and magician’s hand-waving to keep her from having any solid idea which parts were real, even when she had (correctly) become suspicious of his involvement a few years before.

“What have you heard about New Alsace?” he asked.

“Mostly just what they said on the news,” she said. “But a friend of mine at school got a video of a Hawk on New Alsace. He was there four days ago when the Moiety hit the Capitol—my friend, I mean. And I guess the Hawk too, of course.”

Shem kept himself from shooting Sam a piercing look at that. He understood there were reasons for his daughter to have suspicions about what he did in his spare time. That could hardly be avoided. The girl wasn’t stupid, and she knew Shem. She knew his politics. But she really shouldn’t have any idea of his specific connection to the Hawks.

“Why do you think it was a Hawk?” he said, trying to sound exactly the correct amount of curious for someone who was not involved.

“You know,” Sam said. “It’s the way they wear their hair, with those gold cords.”

He did know. Many of the Hawks had taken to wearing their hair just long enough to pull into a tight knot at the nape of the neck, tied with a gold cord.

“Plus, you know,” she said. “You can kinda tell a man like that

just by the way he stands.”

She puffed up her chest, imitating the straight-back look of a soldier.

Samayah made a gesture in the air, and her repo sent a copy of the video to Shem. He took a tablet computer from a bookcase and played the video on it. It was just a short clip of what looked like a street fight, taken in the moment by some onlooker. One could not really tell what was going on from the video. It was all shaky movement and noise and shouting, but in the middle of it, a big man was doing a lot of damage. It looked like four men were trying to subdue him and failing. When the man in the middle turned his back on the camera briefly one could clearly see the gold cord holding back his hair.

Shem sighed. He had tried to get them to stop wearing those damn gold cords during operations. Luckily, a lot of fakers had taken to the fashion just to impress women (and sometimes men, he supposed).

If a real Hawk paraded himself in public in that way, the Commonwealth would disappear him and hang him for treason before the day was over, unless they thought he had useful information. In that case, he might pray for an easy death. The Commonwealth knew that real Hawks weren't stupid enough to wear insignia in public. Young women who liked a man with big arms were often not so discerning.

Hawks-of-the-crest often did wear those gold cords during operations, against his objections. It had become a matter of street legend. Despite some mixed feelings on the subject, Shem liked the element of fear it created in the enemy. When the enemy suddenly saw five gold-cords arrayed in front of him, it drove some men near to wetting themselves. It was the only way the enemy might identify Hawks-of-the-crest as distinct from ordinary soldiers.

The Hawk combat uniform did not officially include any insignia of any kind that distinguished them from ordinary soldiers. In fact, no members of the Moiety military wore insignia of any kind. Not for rank or for division. If there was any need for him

to outfit himself for combat, the General himself wore a simple combat uniform just the same as a private. But Hawks were given latitude to groom themselves however they wanted. No buzz cuts were required. Shem had tried to convince General Sert to require the buzz cut uniformly, even for Hawks. The General had not been convinced so far. Sert had argued, and Shem admitted the truth of it, that small allowances like this were useful for morale, like the Crest. Sert was not convinced that the enemy had ever been able to identify a Hawk outside of an active operation in the field.

A Hawk earned his crest after completing the full training plus at least two years of active service with distinction. The crest was an endorsement symbol that appeared in the ledger beside anything a Hawk-of-the-crest wrote. In a conventional army, it might have been a hawk crest insignia worn on the breast. Even though the crest was not a physical object to be worn, people often spoke of “wearing” the crest.

Like the General, Shem had also found that symbols and tokens like the Hawk Crest could be real motivators. When a Hawk-of-the-crest spoke, people listened.

Shem himself had not entered the Hawk school as a trainee. He was a founder of the school, along with several other members of what was now the Trustee quorum. It had been the Commonwealth that trained Shem for special operations. On the books, Shem had been a “logistics consultant” for the Commonwealth armed forces, a job that required him to travel widely throughout the known worlds.

Since he had never actually gone through the Hawk training himself as a student, Shem had not considered it appropriate to take the crest for himself. Some years earlier, however, the Trustees had unanimously voted to award him the crest, except for Shem, abstaining. Thus Shem was named a fully qualified Hawk-of-the-crest.

Some time after that, when he met with the General, the older man had patted him hard on the back. They both understood that it was only a symbol and that for all practical purposes Shem had

been a Hawk for over 10 years. All the Hawks knew that. But Shem had appreciated the gesture. Not even the old General himself wore the Crest. Sert was certainly a warrior in his own way, but he was not a Hawk.

To Shem's knowledge, nobody yet had caught a real Hawk on video during an operation. Samayah's video concerned him a little.

"He can certainly fight well," Shem said. From the fighting style, Shem was sure this was a real Hawk, even though he could not recognize the man.

Each potential Hawk was a man or woman who individually had to be persuaded to join his or her enormous personal talents with the cause of the Moiety. As with Mauricio DelGado, it was often Patty who nominated such new potentials.

Shem made a gesture with his hand that caused his repo to flag the video clip for later consideration when he was in the company of the General. He might ask the General if he recognized the man.

Samayah furrowed her brow at him. "Anyway," she said, "I am thrilled about New Alsace. Do you think it's possible on Earth?"

It worried him deeply when she talked like this. "Sam," he said. "You are talking about treason. You realize that, right? Do you know what they do with traitors to the Commonwealth? Do you talk like this with your friends?"

"I'm not an idiot, Dad," she said.

Shem stared at her, waiting for a direct answer to his question.

"No!" she said. "I do not talk like this with my friends. At least not usually."

He shook his head, fear in his eyes.

Shem's apartment had the same security system as his office and Judge Walters' chambers. He was confident that nobody could eavesdrop on his conversation here with Samayah, and that was some small comfort. There was even a kind of scrambling field one of Mark's proteges had invented, something that made it impossible for a person's repo device (or any other device) to record audio or video. Shem did not know how it worked, but Mark trusted it, and Shem trusted Mark.

“OK, then,” Shem said. “Who do you talk to like this?”

“Just a friend,” she said. “Just one friend.”

“No, no, dear daughter,” Shem said. “You don’t get to be evasive and teenage about this. Treason is punishable by death. Or they will disappear you, and your death will look like a suicide, or a random homicide. People will think you died in a mugging, and that will be the story of you.”

For a moment, Samayah’s eyes glazed in a thousand yard stare. Then she shook her head. “I know that.”

“Look,” she continued. “There’s just this one girl I have been talking to about the rebellion. To everyone else I’m Miss Patriotism, but not too much. I’m just the right amount of patriotic and uninformed. I’m not even entirely convinced the Moiety is a real thing. I think it might just be an urban legend.”

“That’s...” she hesitated. “That’s my public persona.”

Despite his worry, Shem liked how well-crafted her answer was. “Who is this friend?” he asked. “Please tell me it’s not a boyfriend. I hope my daughter isn’t spilling everything she believes just because she’s infatuated with some dreamy boy.”

“My friend is a girl. She’s a student. She’s in my history class with me.”

“What’s her name?”

“Jenesa.”

“Last name?”

“Don’t know.”

“Why do you think you should be talking about treason with Jenesa No-Last-Name?” Shem asked.

Samayah hesitated and sipped her water. “I don’t talk about ‘treason’ with her,” she said.

“Then what do you talk about?”

“I try to feel her out,” Samayah said. “And I try to plant questions in her mind.”

“Plant questions?” Shem said. He knew exactly what she meant. Moiety propagandists used very similar language. But it was strange hearing it come from his daughter.

“She seems open-minded. We talked about New Alsace yesterday after class.”

“What did she have to say about it?”

Samayah squinted in thought. “Jenesa is unusual,” she said, “But I’m not sure how to explain it. She didn’t say much of anything about it.”

Shem was silent. He let her gather her thoughts. He went to a buffet table and poured himself a cup of coffee. “Coffee?” he asked.

She declined. He joined her again on the sofa.

Samayah continued, “Jenesa didn’t seem scared, or even surprised when we heard about New Alsace on the news. We were in class when the story came on the news. Professor Kim turned on the television, and we just watched a news cast about it for the rest of the class. Everyone was shocked, and we just watched. Even Professor Kim just watched.”

She continued, “Most people had this look in their eyes like they were watching the world burn. But Jenesa seemed totally calm. Well, I mean she kind of acted the same as the others, but I could tell it was an act.”

“You know her pretty well? You can read her emotions?” Shem asked.

Samayah considered the question, then nodded simply. “I could.”

She continued, “Do you think she might be a member of the Moiety? Maybe she already knew it was happening before it came out in the news?”

The thought had occurred to Shem, but the Moiety very rarely granted membership to minors. There was no way to know for sure if Jenesa was a member unless she identified herself using her private authentication key. Or if he knew someone who knew her. There was not any list of members, not anywhere.

Possibly this Jenesa was the daughter of a member who overheard more than she should. Certainly some members of the Moiety would have known the plans in detail before the putsch, but not many. Shem had not known the specifics or the dates. He had

known that Alsace was coming to fruition soon, and that was about all he had known until he received that final message from Serendipity.

“What did the two of you talk about afterward?” Shem asked.

“She asks questions,” Samayah said, thoughtfully. “She wanted to know how I felt about it. She’s a really good listener.” She shrugged. “But of course I didn’t have much of anything to say.”

Shem waited, hoping Samayah would start talking in specifics.

Samayah went on, “I told her that, in general, I’m in favor of independence, government by the people. Jenesa noticed that it wasn’t my usual stance, like what I usually say in class”

“Did she seem suspicious?” Shem asked.

“No. Just observant.”

“You said you supported the new Parliament on Alsace?” Shem asked.

“No,” she said. “Not in so many words. I was vague.”

Shem laughed at that. “You certainly can be vague,” he said. “But you did indicate how you felt, whether you said it outright or not? That you supported New Alsace forming their own independent government?”

“Yes,” she said. “That’s fair. A person might reasonably come to that conclusion based on what I said.”

He recognized that kind of lawyer talk as her mother’s influence.

She fell silent, but when she went on, she spoke quickly, “But me just sympathizing with the new Parliament isn’t a crime, is it?”

“No,” he said. “But it might draw unwanted attention on you.”

“On *you*?” she countered.

Serendipity had sent some summary details after the events.

It was never the Moiety’s goal to take New Alsace for themselves. They had helped to train and organize local citizens, patriots, so those men and women could step up and run the colony for themselves. Some had become soldiers. Some had naturally taken up leadership roles. Those of the latter group had formed the new ad hoc Parliament. Serendipity had assured everyone that they

intended to hold general elections as soon as the situation on the ground was stable.

Mark had been one of the original architects of the Moiety's system of governance, and New Alsace had taken much inspiration from the Moiety while maintaining its independence. They had borrowed many of Mark's original ideas, but overall they had decided on a semi-democratic parliamentary system, like many from Earth's history.

Many of the influential people on New Alsace would still remain active members of the Moiety, because of shared larger goals for the Commonwealth, but New Alsace was most certainly not simply an arm of the Moiety. Mark, Patty, and other influential members of the Moiety had seen to it that all members, especially soldiers, were clear on that goal. Such an independent power base might offer men, supplies, and other elements of alliance to the Moiety in their continued work. But it would be their own decision to make.

Samayah went on, "I asked her hypothetical questions. We have been getting to know each other over the last few months, and I wanted to know what side she was on. So I asked some general kinds of questions that might lead her to talk about the conflict."

"Well, which way did she seem to lean?"

"She was just as cagey as you are," Samayah said. "But I think I could work on her. I could turn her." She hesitated a moment before admitting, "I have been trying to turn her, subtly."

Shem looked down and rubbed between his eyebrows with his thumb, not knowing how to handle this.

"Why are you trying to turn people for the rebels?" Shem said.

"I may not be a card-carrying member of the Moiety," she said. She paused and looked at him pointedly. "But that doesn't mean I can't revolt in my own way. Grassroots movement, one person talking to another—that's how change happens. I learned about that reading Professor Kim's 'banned books'."

Professor Kim was a professor of history and politics at the University. Shem had heard about his "banned books". He kept

a locked cabinet in the history department's library, with several hundred books that had been publicly condemned by the Commonwealth Congress or their puppet academic institutions. Kim had a sign posted on the bookcase glass that read, "Beware these books. The Commonwealth Congress has warned that these books contain lies and misinformation, and other dangerous ideas. See Prof. Kim, office 207, for a list of approved books."

The key of the bookcase was always kept in a drawer of a small writing desk in the same room. Shem had no knowledge of whether Kim was a member of the Moiety or not. Kim had tenure at the university, and he was certainly bold, so bold Shem feared for his safety.

"Yesterday, Professor Kim told us in class that someone had stolen one of the banned books," Samayah said. "He said he was shocked and appalled, and the book would be replaced with another copy by the end of the week." She pointed vaguely toward her school bag by the door.

He had thought more than once about letting Samayah join the Moiety officially. At least the other members might teach her some discretion. He would like to introduce her to Mark. Then he thought again about Mark's night job. Maybe not Mark. Patty? Then he thought about Patty's night job.

Having Samayah continue acting as a free radical was proving nearly as dangerous, if not moreso, than if she actively joined the Moiety. He had almost convinced himself it was a good idea to introduce her to Patty. He could speak with Patty first, and see what she thought about it.

"Do you trust that girl, Jenesa?" It was an intuition. Something Samayah said made him uneasy about her, above and beyond the fact that Sam just shouldn't be talking at all.

"Trust is a strong word," Samayah said. "I will say she does not seem like the talkative kind. And she's smart, but not in a showy kind of way. In class, sometimes she talks about history like she was there; she has such detailed knowledge. It's strange. But when she realizes she's doing that, she shuts up real fast."

“Ah,” Shem said. “She’s an immortal, then. A vampire maybe?”
Actually a different thought had occurred to Shem, but he didn’t want to share it just yet. He wondered if the girl was an Archivist spy.

Samaya only shook her head at the silly idea.

“But really she doesn’t speak up much in class. She only talks if the professor calls on her. Then, when she does talk, she talks like someone who knows, not like someone who just read the assigned reading. But she gets things wrong sometimes.”

“Wrong how?” Shem asked. Of course a student would get things wrong. There was nothing noteworthy about that except for the fact that Sam had noted it. Something about it had seemed strange to Sam.

Samayah shrugged and hesitated. “I can’t think of any examples. I just mean, like, sometimes she’s dead wrong about some historical fact. It’s not that she doesn’t know the answer when Professor Kim asks her a question. Or, I mean, it’s not that she stumbles and waffles like someone who has no idea what the answer is. She speaks clearly and precisely, and says something totally wrong.”

“Nobody makes a big deal about it,” Samayah continued. “The professor just corrects her and moves on.” She looked sheepish. “I probably wouldn’t know when she’s wrong. It’s the professor who corrects her. Sometimes he points to a page in our textbook to illustrate his correction.”

Samayah sipped her water for a moment, and Shem was silent because he new she was debating with herself whether to tell him something more.

“It doesn’t make sense to me when she gets things wrong,” Samayah said. “She and I talk about the rebellion sometimes from a historical point of view.”

“What do you mean by a ‘historical’ point of view?” he asked.

“Like—not as if we are involved and living it. Just as if it were something we could read about as outsiders, like something in a history book about a long time ago. It’s something Professor Kim tries to teach us how to do. He says it’s not possible to be genuinely

neutral, but trying to be neutral can help one think clearer.”

Shem nodded. He agreed. “And?”

“Jenesa sees these parallels between the Rebellion and other events from history, and I mean distant history. She doesn’t go looking for it in books. She just has that information in her head, so it’s like when the professor talks about this stuff, the associations just come to her.”

“One time she just casually mentioned this group of people from the distant past called...’Jesuits’, I think. It was like a political party I think.”

Samayah had struggled to remember the name, and to pronounce it. It sounded foreign, but the name meant nothing to Shem. He had never heard of any political group by that name. He wondered just how “distant” in the past Samayah meant. To young people, the distant past was 20 years ago. He thought of asking General Sert next time he saw him.

Shem flicked his eyes and made some tiny hand gestures. In response, his repo transcribed the last few things Sam had said into text and flagged the note for later review.

“But she only talks like that with me, when we are alone.”

Samayah looked as if she thought she had been talking too much.

Shem squinted, considering. “Is she pretty?”

He could tell the question made Sam slightly uncomfortable. “Why does that matter?”

“Humor an old man,” Shem said.

“I can show you a photograph,” she said.

“You took pictures of her?” Shem asked.

Samayah shrugged. “I have my repo programmed to automatically take a photo every 5 seconds all the time.”

Her eyes glazed, and she made some gestures in the air like rifling through files in a file cabinet.

“Hey,” she said. “All the photos since I got here are just white fuzz.”

She added pointedly, “I wonder what that’s about.”

Then she made a gesture with one finger to pass it to Shem.

The photo appeared in Shem's vision, overlaying Samayah. He moved it from his ocular viewer onto his handheld tablet computer.

The girl was pretty in a nondescript, generic kind of way. She was not stunning like an Archivist facade.

"Do you think she's in the Moiety?" Samayah asked.

"No. You said you might be able to turn her for the Rebellion," Shem said. "Why?"

"She's so smart," Samayah said. "She would be valuable. She knows history. And you guys need new, young blood, don't you?"

There she went again, just casually talking as if Shem was an admitted member of the Moiety.

"But what makes you think she's not loyal to the Commonwealth?" Shem said, and he knew he was playing into the narrative too much.

"Well, that's what I was saying," Samayah said. "She sees too clearly to be 'loyal'. She gets this look in her eyes. You know, there are some students in our class who are vocal loyalists. They speak up, talk about the Moiety as dirty traitors who should all be hanged in the public square. Jenesa looks at them when they talk like that—but she doesn't say anything. And she doesn't look upset. She doesn't even look like she disagrees. She watches them. She just..."

Samayah trailed off, and Shem could tell she was searching for exactly the right word.

"She *appraises*," she said, finally. "That's the word. It's kind of the way you are looking at me right now."

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