

# **Pinnacle City**

A science fiction novel

By Gary L Morton

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About this book: It is a sci-fi novel, 89,000 words in length. Future detective Jack Michaels investigates a series of bizarre killings at Pinnacle City in the Sky. The book is a novel of action and humor in a super complex of the future, featuring an assortment of characters from a private eye to an AI ghost, mutants and androids.

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## **Chapter One: Thirteen Blocks**

Sunny days of youth wind in the dusty ribbon of time. Few people notice when the fog starts drifting in and life becomes that last road to final darkness. As clarity of mind fades, perhaps the numbness of approaching doom is welcome. I'm often in the fog and the dark, and living in times when a crowd of people, mostly powerful people, carry on in that crawling night in an attempt to live forever. Others, the majority, struggle to survive for a few lousy decades. For both groups the glorious sunbeams of childhood are faint and lost down distant memory roads, far removed from the greedy grave life has become. The view, no matter how opulent, fades into the core of current decay.

I considered that as I arrived at an alley mouth opening on a broad courtyard, and even in the fog, it showed a long view. The blocks of marred buildings settling like some big sunken ship with many masts in the night ahead. Most of the lights winking and talking secretly of the early days when this area was one of the first stretches of condominium heaven. With the passing of time, the foundations settled into the decay brought on by human erosion and decades of semi poverty. Graffiti on buildings originally made for people who hate it. Garden areas become weeds; parks now trash dumps and squats. The many blast scars on what were once clean facades. They shout everywhere nowadays, music and noise up on the rooftops — sometimes rising to wailing and the screams of the dying. Mostly loud rude people. A noisy neighborhood even in its death throes.

The heavy fog rolling in was unexpected ... it arrived without prediction and was a strange companion, both a friend and an enemy. It created an atmosphere of the supernatural; a heavy drift and some damaged towers might look young again, then a gust exposing windows akin to rotten teeth. I feared ugly things would come out of that weird fog ahead — a toothless vagabond, a desperate robber, a drugged ghost ... or maybe one of the strange vampires of the day. One of the guys burned out on the illegal brain-feed stuff and not remembering what the hunger was about, but remembering to be angry and deadly. A pretty woman coming into view would probably mean a gang somewhere in the shadows, and a bird whispering by could be a deadly drone.

The unsavory prospects gave me a reason to take up a corner and calculate; I knew exactly where I wanted to go so it was just a matter of imagining a quick way through the possible hazards.

Like the fog, the current turf war in this area came by surprise. A couple weeks back, further uptown, a couple of old organized crime lizards croaked, igniting a battle that drew in corrupt cops and caused a blocks-wide melt of the security grid. My office was remapped to the edge of this new crime hole and on returning from overseas, I found myself outside of a police perimeter. They wouldn't let me in though I'm supposed to be a sort of cop myself. Mainly because in this world the official cops and guys like me are completely different breeds. I'm a private eye named Jack Michaels.

I trust cops maybe a little more than I do gangsters, and few of those guys trust me. You have to be selective. There are some good cops that give me leads and some gangsters that leave me running my own game. Probably most of the gangsters locked in the zone would be corpses already as that's usually the story when bad guys get a chance for unrestricted and up-close fighting with deadly weapons. Eventually dust settles on the scorched bodies and one crime group gains control. Most old scores are settled. Even so, the whole war deal would last a couple of long months.

I had no plans on being around in a kill zone, but I did need to pick up my pet cat and vault the office tight. With the security grid down it meant worrying about scared shooters, maybe snipers or baby-faced gangsters. Most of the deadly toys ran off grid connections and it was down so that meant no drones and other stuff in the blackout. Anything operating in the air inside the perimeter could be shot down from trackers above. Even helicopters were now auto-routed around this small neighborhood.

There were still some lights winking out there in the fog, none of them close and all of them small power sources. Anyone inside would use generators, local solar or anything the government couldn't remotely shut off. Having a strong light would also be dangerous, as it would attract shooters. So if in the beginning there was heavenly light, down here at the corrupt end of humankind the devils killed anyone showing clear in the last remnants of it. The light they were pushing for would be best described as the upcoming fiery light of hell on earth.

Squatting in the piss-stinking darkness, I pressed my fingertips behind my left wrist and took the tiny square that emerged in my hand and pulled it at the two corners. An air-screen opened in front of me. Nothing showed but a faint gossamer web. "This really is a journey to the Stone Age," I thought. Because there were no wireless signals in the airwaves. The outside was blocked, and on the inside the ruling was that the gangsters had already demolished the inside technical equipment in earlier scraps. They'd even wrecked their own equipment.

Secure mode came on and it took about thirty seconds before I found one masked signal. It was my office signal, still broadcasting. It meant they hadn't hit it yet or they'd passed through it but missed the hidden equipment. Thirteen blocks was the distance. I ran a map, calculating what I thought would be the safest way through in the dark. I also had to be close to initiate the vaulting procedure so I punched in the initial 35-digit password that would seal the first parts of my office tech zone. Down in a side room labeled sprinkler room 2 in the underground garage of the condominium complex, impervious panels would be clicking into place, sealing the equipment from everything from bomb blasts to fires. My condominium high above would be a different tale; I could set up some defenses and booby traps, but if they wanted in, they would get in. That was always the case. I didn't figure myself a kill target, but realistically speaking, anyone in this zone was an indirect target just by being here.

A light jog took me across the courtyard, over the road, and two blocks up a side street. I was entering another section of super-high complexes, a number of lights appearing here and there in the fog blowing by them. Something was happening at street level ahead as I saw shadowy figures running like ink in the fog. I

was right by a tower corner stone and saw a beam burn running up along the wall. It cut a swath through a small mural and ended at a blackened and smashed window. This was a bad spot to be in so I ran back and around through a narrow park alley that stank with stale-milk trash odors. A temporary dump; no one was in it ... at the end I came up another side street. Fog like octopus arms blocked the view ahead. A bright flash passed me. I could feel the heat from it as it illumined the fog and the man it hit. He went up in vaporizing flames, becoming a hellish smear in shades of red, forming like a big candle in the mist. A group of men that had been with him were still running and they formed a clutch in the darkness at the corner as they glanced back, seeking the enemy.

I was already down on my knees, and the heavy caliber bullets one man fired ripped into stone a few yards from me and above me. A feeling of dread came over me; moving my head slowly I looked up and saw death. It was an Indy drone, somehow still functioning in the grid outage. No kill signal shutting it down and I could see why. It was neighborhood manufacture, an ugly thing, black as the night and about the size of a vulture. It had shark's teeth painted on it and a gangster coat of arms I couldn't make out in the blur.

More bullets flew and it bobbed sideways to dodge them. I figured I'd already be dead if not for the fact the thing had all of its sensors focused on the shooters. I could see it brightening; powering a beam blast that shot across and hit the far corner as the men fled. Before it could fire again or reorient itself, I drew my own hand weapon and targeted it, sending up a blast of energy packets that hit the drone like a swarm of fast fireflies. The effect was instant. It spun and bobbed, fired a random blast across the street and through a window, then it turned and crashed into the wall.

I was already running before the flaming debris could shower down on me, hoping like hell that the light of the explosion wouldn't open me to the view of some shooter as I went across the road. I ran a few more blocks aware of nothing but the odors of the alleys. A bright star suddenly showed above in a clearing patch of sky. It was at the opening of another courtyard that the men came clear; a group of mercenaries huddled near a weedy garden section by a metal-and-glass condominium facade. I gathered that the gangsters had hit rock bottom in their internal war. These X-zombies had no access to most parts of the city. They were hopelessly addicted to counterfeit X-Intel drugs that destroyed the body through long-term side effects. Even though they were toothless, hollow eyed and sickly green, they still had the power of the speed steroids they juiced themselves with in order to function. Add to that the kill boost of their weapons. X-zombies were always armed to the teeth they didn't have, with illegal weapons and homemade bombs. Good killers too as they'd originally been clean gangsters. The X-Intel drugs were a decades-old thing now banned. Originally thought to be the perfect body and brain boost the side effects weren't known at first. About fifteen years on them then X-zombification would develop. This particular crew had the body rot but they weren't brain dead; they could still get underground makes of the old drugs to keep their minds humming with kill juices.

There were more lights here and deeper in by the borderline where my place was located. I didn't see any way of completely avoiding all of the zombie gangs if they were about, but I had no plans on walking up to them for a chat. They'd spot my healthy skin right off and if they captured me the first thing they'd do would be punch my teeth out. They did that to all their victims. But that wouldn't matter in this situation, as they'd kill me anyway. I'd at least avoid troubling dental bills.

Fog and the deep night created a partial disguise; I pulled my jacket collar up and my hat brim low as I let my shoulders slump X-zombie fashion and moved on in the night. Most of the lights were high and these were fifty story buildings on these particular blocks. I knew they'd be watching from high above. It was doubtful that any street level cameras remained as they either'd be off grid or removed. Maybe a few planted eyes were out there, but the enemy was on the ground, their controllers above. It was a shit situation where crime leaders had lost most of their best hit men and were hiding in the sky while sick mercenaries fought out their final battles. And Geeze, they could pull in a big supply of this scum from other places they'd turned into hellholes. It would go on for a while. I pitied anyone innocent and locked inside the perimeter here.

But what the fuck, I was innocent myself, but not for long. I knew there was some killing ahead and I prepared for it as I shuffled past an outdoor sculpture that loomed over me like an evil beast. Eyes were on me and I saw the men in a blasted storefront across the way. They weren't raising any weapons, so my disguise was working. They likely thought I was one of them on patrol.

Another block and I was sure I was being followed. "Looks like the reprobates put a tail on me," I thought. So maybe I hadn't fooled them after all. Steps ascending to a bank building floated with the fog. Up at the top of

them I could see back down the road and spotted someone picking through some abandoned cars. I had the feeling of a person hallucinating or more than that — conjuring up something impossible from a real situation. The man I'd just spotted disappearing in a blow of the fog was too big and too green of complexion to be one of the subhuman mercenaries. Some of them were strong and rosy but they didn't retain a strong build.

Suddenly, the man appeared again, big as life. No hallucination for sure, and closing in. About four inches short of seven feet tall, he was square shouldered with a face like the ancient Frankenstein monster. The gun he was toting was also big. Rather than question my vision, I hurried down the steps and began to jog into the darkness, certain I could hear the heavy footfalls of the pursuer behind me.

I came to an intersection; my home complex was half a block farther on. Things didn't look good close to home either. The whole street was a mess. A scorched fire engine was in the middle of the intersection with the remains of a police cruiser embedded in its side. There were overturned cars, smashed storefronts. A lot of other telltale destruction — debris and burn trails of a major battle. Foul odors came with the fog here ... the fragrance of corpses beginning to rot. I almost fell over one in passing. A woman and she was horribly dead, rat-chewed and burned. I barely had time for a horrified glance before my tail came around the corner. For sure, he wasn't dead, though he looked it. I saw his feet as he stomped over a wreck; the guy wore size giant military boots. They were the super pricey kind that special ops soldiers favor. No one of that description would work for gangsters in a sleazy turf war, so why the guy was here and following me, I didn't know. Didn't want to find out either.

I was finally home but not in any safe way. The complex loomed large as a floating blur behind a patchwork of fog. There were some lights farther up, but also on the ground in the lobby. The main entrance was security of a low level and the lights meant someone was there. Most likely more sleazy mercenaries. That would mean a careful study before entry, but with a fun giant right on my tail, I couldn't do that. I couldn't keep running onward either, so I put my hand inside my suit to have it on my second gun and ran right into the entrance.

Getting through the entry door and dialing security wasn't a problem because the impervious Plexi doors were gone, and I ran right inside. Halting in the lobby, I found myself in a face-off with five men. Two of them were at the concierge desk, and in the flickering lobby light, looked more than revolting. Toothless bastards again but these guys wore clean suits. The fifth man was actually a woman, lolling on a visitor's couch. Her face wasn't quite as sunken as the others were and she did have teeth because she sat up and snarled when she saw me.

I remained still and they didn't draw.

The boss gunman at the desk spoke. "Who the hell are you?"

"I live here. Just got back."

"Well, guess what. The residents list has changed."

I saw the others slowly going for their weapons. Rather than a quick kill, they would want to rob me and play with me. They didn't get that chance because before I could speak the pursuing giant thundered in the door-opening behind me and halted in the odd glare of lights. He was sickly green and ugly like them but in a different way, and that meant chaos. Everyone went for a fast draw and a kill shot on him. But I didn't. I held onto my main weapon as I dived across the hard tiles and rolled behind a support pillar.

A couple of the X-zombies won the draw and via a glance I saw the big guy swinging up his gun as a heat beam scorched his shoulder and a few bullets bounced off his chest. After that, it was over quick. The big guy's gun kicked like a shotgun and did rapid fire, first taking the newly minted concierge for a journey to his new life as bleeding hamburger on trashed wall art. The others met a similar fate; the last hit was the woman and the blast sent her up in an arc and through one of the only windowpanes that hadn't been broken already.

I saw her body thump to the interlocking stones in the side courtyard as I slid around to the elevators and hit the button. I heard the heavy boots of the giant thundering toward me but I closed the door before he could block it with his big left foot. The elevator began to move and I was down as I was afraid a blast would come

right through the door. None did. Instead, I heard a fist banging on it and a deep voice saying, "Jack Michaels, I need to talk to you."

I got to my feet. "No thanks," I muttered as the elevator whooshed upward. It rose toward my floor, but stopped one floor down, and I was down low again with a weapon out. The door opened. Two X-zombies in clean tan suits were about to get in. I fired a wide beam that punched them back and set them on fire. They collapsed in a blaze and I ducked out and looked around. No one else was present so I moved for the stairwell. I saw a couple broken doors and figured these chaps used brute force for a master key. They were busting in the units one by one.

A quick swing up the staircase and I came out on my floor. This was higher up and half of it was my unit. My neighbor's entrance was clear and I came around the hall corner to find my own place still locked up. They hadn't got to it yet. The door opened at my handprint and I went in and found my cat waiting for me, standing on a chair and meowing. Heading straight for the den and my desk I hit the panel-open button in passing and began preparations to leave. The full vaulting procedure had to be done manually and when I was finished, I stepped out and grabbed the small cat. I had a special armored carrier for it and I pulled that out of a closet then went into a small side room that contained nothing but a chair and table and some surveillance monitors mounted like paintings on the wall. On one screen, I got a view deep in the underground level at the panels sealing my key home office equipment. When finished, the rooms marked sprinkler and locker room 4 that contained nearly all of my high tech stuff were sealed off behind impervious panels. Those small rooms could no longer be detected, and could only be accessed one way, via my expandable M-Ray V tablet, and I had that in my pocket.

I had hidden cameras on the building front and back and the lobby so I did a check. The giant was still down there. As I watched, I saw more of the X-zombies step off an elevator and get blasted. Then the giant stepped out front and paced back and forth, studying a small screen he pulled from his pocket. This guy was tracking me somehow. He knew my name and wanted to talk to me. But who in the hell was he? He looked downright scary and spooky loitering in the fog and the dark. It didn't look like I'd be able to get away without being pursued by him so if I had to meet up with him I'd set it on my own terms. "Sure there are all sorts of freaky types in this world," I muttered. "But there aren't any guys that look like him." What made it even worse was that I'd seen bullets and a heat beam bounce off him.

I sealed the den and surveillance room of my condominium. The rest was left open, as there was no lock-down for it. It didn't really matter to me; I could deal with it on my return. A short few minutes later after descending via the stairwell, I'd followed an underground level to a hidden service exit by a nearby parkette. I knew the giant was already on my trail, somehow tracking my movements, so I sat on a bench with the cat and both weapons at ready in full power mode.

It only took a minute; the fog was clearing like a curtain opening on a new act and I could see the guy coming up the street from far off. There didn't seem to be anyone around to challenge him now. He owned the street. He had good eyes too because he spotted me right away without a tracker and strolled toward the park. His gun was over his back and he didn't appear to be in a shooting mood so I waited for him to get a bit closer then spoke.

"You said you wanted to talk to me."

The big guy didn't come too close, like he was aware of his imposing stature. "That's right, about a job."

"Huh, an agent like you should be able to handle any job. Who are you?"

He squatted and spoke. My cat, Tigger, meowed in his carrier. "Can't say right off."

"Okay, let me guess. First, you're wearing a complete disguise except for maybe the shoes. No X-zombie looks as healthy and large as you do. You also have huge teeth. The boots you're wearing are a thicker-sole designer copy of special-op military and extremely expensive. Custom made. I've never seen that before. Your accent is almost local. It is Toronto but slightly off. As for your face, that's a mask. So the assessment is you're not military or a gangster or a hit man. You come from this region but some place in it I've never been because you talk funny. There's only one place here I've never been and that is Pinnacle City."

Reaching up, the giant ripped off his mask. It didn't make much difference. He was white not greenish, with a face like a flat wall – forehead, nose and chin. His hair was a heap of red clumps.

“Man, am I glad to get this off. My boss wants to talk to you. They had info that you were in this neighborhood and the X creeps were in here so they did this poor disguise to send me in.”

“How many of those guys did you kill?”

“A lot of them. It’s hard to keep low and be this big.”

“Yeah. Kinda like the bull trying to hide in a toyshop. Your rump is too big to hide.”

“Okay. My name is Thor Carlsonbonner. I run security at Pinnacle City in the Sky, but I don’t do the hiring. My boss wants to meet with you. It’s about a detection job, and that’s what you do, right?”

“I do. But Pinnacle City is a closed community. A world of its own. I can’t even get in there and I have no reason to break in. According to the news, it is supposed to be a crime-free community. So who is it that you haven’t collared already?”

“That is confidential. Everything is confidential. All I’m supposed to do is give you this card. It has contact information. They’ll arrange for you to get in for the meeting. One tip – if you do get in you won’t get out until the case is over.”

I took the card the giant offered and glanced at it. “Tell them my cat will be coming too.”

“No problem Mr. Michaels. Pinnacle City, as you should know, has everything, including the world’s most luxurious pet hotels.”

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The sun floated mid sky, casting a carpet of gold out on the water as if it believed the world was an easy place, and trouble free. Sailboats and yachts drifted to no place important, and I felt about the same. Once again, I’d returned home to find the old neighborhood a mess. A real screw-up. But I never really work in any home neighborhood much. A local office and condo I always keep for reasons of nostalgia and the fact that I need a ground-zero point and home.

My real office exists in my pocket and with a screen masked into the back of my wrist as the M-Ray V tablet and accessory, so it is usable whether I’m at home or not. This time it looked like I wouldn’t be home for a while. But I’d be back. The authorities always raid devastated areas like the cavalry. Usually when nearly everyone is dead or robbed and tortured. In the end, the days of renewal arrive.

I had a couple of small job offers or cases to work on ... but only the new offer promised to be one that would keep me busy for the necessary time. Thor Carlsonbonner was a strange character indeed, but by his very nature, I knew any case he wanted me in on was sure to be more than interesting. It would be something that required more than muscle, too, because he had plenty of muscle. His place would have all the latest equipment, better than local police would, so the only thing he could really be wanting was detective smarts. His boss would have a case they hadn’t been able to solve. In some ways that was nearly always the case when it came to a real job.

I looked at Tigger as he rolled and pawed in my lap then I put him back in his carrier. This remote area of the park along with the sun was making me drowsy and I’d chosen it for a reason. Not just because I had nowhere to go but also because I like to sit and think over possibilities before I take a case. Nodding with my hat brim to my eyes, I first looked at the flow of plastic stone that was the bench I was on ... it flowed down and created many more seats below. The location gave a partial view of the lake and something else I was interested in. The something else was Pinnacle City. From the bench I could see its southern edge expanding out to its harbor side, and that was only a small part of the structure. The base in total was huge like the whole main tower was huge. A number of structures titled themselves largest in the world and nowadays they were so big it would be near impossible to measure the winner. Pinnacle City in the Sky like the others was more like a complete habitat, though only Pinnacle City was considered fully exclusive. Unless you were somehow connected to the in-crowd that resided there you simply had no way in. It was exclusivity stretched right up to the sky and the higher you went the greater the snobbery would be. Down there by the harbor would be the only low security access and even that would be tight on entry.

Studying its rise to the sky I could only speculate when it came to the various communities it contained. The city base was surrounded by a security inlet running in from the harbor and showed alterations in coloring and architecture. It was like the petals of a flower and its nest of leaves below the monster central tower. The

place had hundreds of elevators and flight car shafts up. I could see some of the exterior lifts though they were mostly shielded by smaller surrounding towers. Some residential floors in the main tower could be identified but other levels revealed nothing but crystal shimmers and odd corrugation at the edge walls. I knew there were full bodies of water and parks at some levels. Most of it existed inside interior shells, so that you could be inside in a whole world of fin-like balconies and gardens that couldn't be seen from the outside. Apparently, the false sky in some areas was amazing.

In memory, I conjured up some of the legendary news and buzz that still floated in the common mind from thirty-five years back when it first opened. Any newer buzz was a current of complete rumor as Pinnacle City was now sealed off from the surrounding city. It was a city-state of its own and almost no genuine news was released from it any more. The big smoke was self-supporting and self-governing. Numerous internal power sources along with the thermal it pulled up from the earth, the rays of sun and the wind it harnessed created energy self-sufficiency. The base made me wonder what might be under it – would it be heaven or hell or just a gigantic bio-robot complex and sewer.

One thing that had definitely changed was the top floor of the central tower or pinnacle itself. The building had been there for all those years, showing in the distance from my home neighborhood. Now I realized I'd gone about my business without noticing how it evolved from clean and curved sweeps in the sky to something rougher on the edges and more organic. A force field or bubble of some kind glowed in the sun up over the top now. Thinking back, I tried to pinpoint when the change had taken place. I couldn't remember. Over time Pinnacle City had simply become a piece of the landscape, a change way up there being to me like a distant mountain gaining a bigger snowcap. It was something natural that had just happened without calling for a second look. The truth was that it couldn't be very natural. I remembered something about a super AI mind that ran the complex, one that itself evolved.

Pulling my hat away from my eyes, I sat up and took a long look at what I could see of the top floor. Suspicion began to govern my thoughts. Considering the power of that beast of a building, the top floor would be a world of its own, and that world had changed recently to something new. I began to suspect Thor Carlsonbonner of being a faker; talking to me casually as though something manageable needed investigation, when it was something wicked and perverse.

Pulling the card out of my pocket I looked it over then did the finger magic that put my M-Ray V accessory screen in front of me. I did not intend to contact the lawyer named on the card. Not when I could do some background and find out who Carlsonbonner's employer was ... because that would be who sent him.

It only took a minute; supposed top-secret info spat out on the screen molecules. Stone R. Sangalang, President of the Pinnacle Public Board, was the person employing Thor Carlsonbonner as Security Manager. Mr. Sangalang had tight cyber security to say the least, but one door had been left open. I could route through to him via an old-fashioned emergency voice call. At that, I grinned. An old trick and I've used it so many times. In security setups, they simply forget that the old voice-only calls remain possible on the emergency frequency in case the big systems go down. They can even go through direct, though no one other than maybe the odd detective or cop even remembers they are there. Since they aren't considered in the secure setup, they aren't blocked. There would probably be no reason for a block either, because no one would try to get through with a voice-only sales pitch or robo call. It simply isn't done that way anymore. No voice-only culture exists. It's a dead language I sometimes use.

Stone R. Sangalang got my priority-one voice call. There was nothing on any screen to show his surprise when he answered and got an all-line blank except for voice.

"Mr. Stone Sangalang. Detective Jack Michael's calling. It's about Thor Carlsonbonner and the security case he mentioned."

"Where are you calling from? I can't see anything. There's no security read. You're coming through on the emergency alert speaker. If this is some kind of hoax you are going to be very sorry."

"Like I said. It's Jack Michaels, regarding the case you have."

Stone was obviously upset and not only because he was a big wheel, but because everyone expected to see the security read on a call. "You're not Jack Michaels. I know when an impostor calls. Jack Michaels was never given my name. I told Thor to give the lawyer's card for the briefing."

“So I figured out you’re his boss and called direct. I’m a detective, remember?”

Stone huffed angrily. “But this isn’t a read line. I can’t ID you. Everything here at Pinnacle City is top secret. We pride ourselves in privacy and security for our residents.”

“Look, Mr. Sangalang. No one is listening in ... no one knows you contacted me, unless Thor Carlsonbonner can’t be trusted.”

“His credentials are impeccable. Perhaps no one is listening, but things just aren’t done that way here. That’s why you have to go through the legal briefing and sign the documents if you are to work for us.”

“Really. How many documents?”

“I don’t know. Five hundred pages or so.”

“In that case I’ll skip out on the job. I don’t work on that basis. We make a gentleman’s agreement. I will go by it. I always have. Check my references.”

“I already checked them. We do need you, but we need legal protection for our residents in case you break any rules. The documents are really only to insure you obey our Board rules and one other key thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Under no circumstances are you to identify yourself as a resident here. We’ll decide on what you are to say. Perhaps someone assisting concierges, or maybe security personnel or maintenance.”

“Why, this news saddens me. You mean I don’t meet Pinnacle City minimum standards.”

His voice suddenly oozed with oily condescension “You certainly don’t. I won’t even mention the neighborhood your office is in or some of the associates that come up on our background checks.”

“Why any interest in me? You can hire the best of everything.”

“Well. Two reasons. You did pass a confidentially check, and you handle weird cases nobody else wants to get involved in. We did look at many other prospects. Unlike you, they are nearly all straight shooters, but to be clear, there are simply too many hostile parties that want a way to get a look around in here. We have to be sure our man is working exclusively for us and that he isn’t trying to get in himself. We were certainly surprised when you came out as top man in that area.”

“Exclusivity and privacy appear to be the buzz words there. And you’re right. I don’t talk, or work as a double agent. Pinnacle City is not really ME, if you know what I mean. So I wouldn’t plan on identifying myself as a resident.”

“Now that is what we want. A core problem with other prospects we looked at is they all have a strong desire to get into Pinnacle City. This is a big place; we do not want anyone that might try to hide and live in secret inside the complex.”

“I have no interest in doing that. You can count on it. But if I have to go under cover for a time, you’ll have to authorize it. Any papers I sign have to be honed down to a simple statement of rules I abide by and employment conditions. I won’t sign any fine print or legalese.”

“Okay. We can do that. It might be better that way.”

“I’ll meet with you but there is no guarantee I’ll take the case. One thing though. If you are so deeply worried about Pinnacle City security, why not meet me outside to discuss it. Before I even get in?”

“Out of the question. Except the Traveler members or those with temporary travel visas, most of us rarely leave Pinnacle City. This is our world, our planet. We certainly would never go into the local neighborhoods beyond the security moat or even think of associating with the sort of riff-raff that lives there. My men can’t provide security for me out there. I could be taken hostage.”

“Yeah. I saw Thor’s disguise, so I got an idea of how much you people know about the rest of the city.”

“Okay. Wait for Thor’s call. We’ll get you in here for a briefing. You’ll have to meet our lawyer as well. I think this case will interest you. It is real detective work. Our local security simply can’t do the thinking when it comes to matters outside of our Pinnacle City rule book.”

“Okay. Say I take the case. Resident or not I won’t stay there in a closet. I want reasonable quarters and for two.”

“No, no, no. Two is out of the question.”

“The other is a pet cat. Thor Carlsonbonner may have mentioned the bit of disaster occurring in my home neighborhood. I had to remove the pet from there.”

“A cat. Okay ... but keep in mind that Pinnacle City, at its various levels and habitats, has strict rules for the behavior of pets. Make sure you list it as pure-bred genetic class on the forms or it won’t get in.”

Hanging up on the call, I thought I saw a glimmer far off on the big top floor of Pinnacle City, as if the place had winked at me. If it took star power to get in there I must have somehow picked it up. Mr. Stone R. Sangalang on first impression came across as a dumb snob, though he had to be far brighter or he wouldn’t be where he was. Part of the job if I took it would be making sure I got out of there in the end. Sangalang thought everyone was trying to get in. His snobbery and worship of secrets and everything exclusive meant he couldn’t be trusted ... at least not when whatever job he had was done and he no longer needed me. If I learned too much he wouldn’t want me to get out.

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The yacht cruised into the harbor. Above, early afternoon sunlight glossed the side of the mountainous structure. My guess on the harbor being the security weak spot was correct but that was only up to certain entry points. Even here entry security was stiff and I looked around the deck behind me at Thor’s security men, all of them dressed like summer leisure guys cruising the waters for entertainment. None of them even had a weapon showing.

What these people did show was a severe phobia of outsiders. All it took was the inner city accent in my greeting and people shook hands with me from a near leap away. What angered me most was that I suspected it to be snobbery but wasn’t certain of it.

The security detail didn’t want to come near me. Some of them were standing far behind me, others up behind the broad windows, leaving me out on the prow in the glitter of waves, quietly practicing some vocabulary. Stone Sangalang’s demand that I not masquerade as a resident now seemed ridiculous. In a couple more minutes, the Pinnacle City accent would be glued to my tongue and I would use it everywhere if I wanted to work a case without people running from me.

Wrapping some phrases around my tongue, I looked up slowly at the long rise of the inner curve. I didn’t look long before vertigo hit me and the phrases turned to cursing. I’m afraid of heights yet have often been in precarious situations at great heights. Call me a man who thrives on fear. Pinnacle City is something different. I’ve looked up mountainsides before and got a sort of feeling of awe, but no vertigo. Pinnacle City holds a frightening aspect in the long curvature of the base then the scary rise of the central tower to the clouds. I could see the sheer complexity; the sides veined with elevator and air ride shafts and all kinds of glittering stars here and there as it rose. Then I saw something else as all of those dazzles came together in the face of a beautiful woman. Her eyes were emerald gems and her ghostly hair spangled with light. Her face held a deep and sad look, like someone mourning. The sudden vision caused me to become so dizzy I nearly stumbled back. Not just because I was seeing a ghost somehow, but another thing that spooked me was that Pinnacle City didn’t seem possible. Looking up at it was very much like studying some strange Tower of Babble that appeared to lack support, like its eventual collapse and fall was inevitable.

Perhaps a moral fall would be inevitable. I thought about that as the boat passed under an arch and inside the base where the harbor docks were ... but the structural fall ... it supposedly wasn’t possible. According to all reports, this monstrosity was about as near to invincible as a building could get. Hurricanes, floods, it would withstand just about anything.

A glance to the cat in his carrier and I noticed he was sniffing the air as though he could smell a host of things I couldn’t. Then the boat came through the arch and we were inside the base of Pinnacle City and soon taking a narrow canal around to a luxurious dock. Here the canopy above was protective and near transparent; the sunlight filtering through the big panels and spreading so that it was a summer day below. The area was impressive with a blond sand beach off to my left and a small crowd mingling. The eye candy being plenty of women; their bikinis and other outfits and tans near perfect. Thor Carlsonbonner was there

waiting on the dock and he wasn't in casual clothes but wearing his full security outfit and seeming out of place. I stepped on shore and the undercover police boat drifted off slowly. I saw the others that had ignored me coming out on deck now that I was gone and found it annoying. Being treated like the unwashed is something no one gets used to.

Carlsonbonner wielded tremendous authority at the dock and probably throughout the place. Heads turned everywhere as I walked across the court with him, like I'd gone from a pariah to an unknown VIP in an instant. Everyone, especially women, seemed interested in my identity, but none of them got to greet me. Thor made sure of that. He did say some hellos but generally brushed people aside and led me through the entranceway into the interior. It was all automatic security, a heavy vault door opening as Thor stepped up to it. Then it was down a narrow archway out into a magnificent lobby area. The ceiling was vaulted and gilded, and what appeared to be a labyrinthine, dark stone palace lay ahead. It could be called the most impressive residential entrance I have ever viewed and I have seen many. I can say it probably prepped me for what was to come ... and I made a quick note to keep my eyes on all things important to a detective. Getting lost like a tourist in awesome architecture simply wouldn't do.

Stone R-for-Ray Sangalang's office came with a view of the harbor and the first thing I realized was that he was a liar. He wouldn't have an office here if he didn't travel outside of Pinnacle City, though it was possible that he told the truth about not doing any local travel in the city. He likely flew out from the harbor on his business trips and did leisure time on a boat of his own. Small lies weren't what I was interested in but rather feeling him out for the big ones.

Sangalang, as I expected, was an elder. Meaning neatly trimmed grey hair for status, but still young enough to look fine in a white suit. All of the youth treatments had worked well on him; I guessed his age at about 100 or more than double mine. He had the commanding airs of a Board president, but a lack of discretion in facial expressions. Especially his sharp blue eyes; I say that because he hadn't greeted me yet and he was appraising me like I was a diamond or something else of yet undermined value. His opening smile was a flatterer's smile and he approached me directly and shook hands vigorously. Rather than take me back to a chair at his desk he led me over to a lounge area.

Thor remained and we sat down. There was a fourth person present; a glum character with a skeptical slant to his mouth and wandering eyes. Kind of like some detectives I know. If my suit had a hidden designer tag, he would have noticed. My cat didn't like him because he hissed at him when I set the carrier close to him. Turned out he was the lawyer and his name was Sri Lampin Charles.

Sangalang had a nose that could cut through fog and a beat-around-the-bushes voice and style. "Well, well. Jack Michaels," he said. "Don't let that sad chap over there get to you. He's our lawyer, Mr. Charles. We pay him to be like that."

Mr. Charles nodded. I noticed he already had the signature plaque out of his brief case. No doubt he thought no one would turn down a Pinnacle City contract. But I would if there was nothing in it for me. I shook his dead hand and took a quick assessment of him. That being corrupt attorney and one that took no pleasure in the job or life for that matter. He got into Pinnacle City somehow, so a graveyard of bodies existed somewhere. Maybe it was his hometown and he'd been the legal undertaker.

Stone Sangalang was far more interesting. Filled with a zest for life a person his age shouldn't have. Like he'd died once and was happy to be back and in his second childhood. All elders are sort of like vampires that should be dead, at least in my humble opinion. The few I met during past cases were simply sober and businesslike. They were not like Stone Sangalang. They lived on because of positions of power they would never surrender. Mr. Sangalang carried more physical power than they did too. He was built strong and I saw ropy muscle running from his wrists, like he bent steel bars or something for a hobby.

Some small talk about the place then we got on to the problem. Neither Thor nor Sangalang had shown any sign that they recognized my affected Pinnacle City accent.

"We're not exactly sure what the problem is," Stone said, unconvincingly.

I cleared my throat; hoping things would get better than this.

Thor spoke up. "It's not that we don't know what it is, but why it is or what could be done about it."

I'd had about enough floundering about. "Let's hit the basics. If a crime has been committed exactly what is that crime?"

"The crimes are murder and vandalism that goes with it," Thor said.

"But we can't identify the methods or reasons exactly," Sangalang added.

"Who died and how?"

"Several members of the Board have been done in. That's assuming it wasn't suicide."

Thor made a broad swing of his right hand. "Let me explain. Each person perished in a different manner. All of them bizarre to say the least."

"Okay. How big is the Board?"

"Big," Sangalang said, as if it was a silly question. "Nearly three hundred members. It is really the building's parliament. The Board took over completely fifteen years ago, dis-empowering the property management corporation."

"Well," I said speculatively. "I guess that gives us hundreds suspects."

"Even more than that," Thor replied. "The property management corporation still exists as the Pinnacle Group. It is a rather odd setup here. They do control maintenance and many other things. They are sort of what on the outside you would call organized crime."

"Organized crime. You mean they are a union of sorts that extorts criminal fees."

Thor tightened his lips. "That's more like what the Board is." He noticed Sangalang glaring at him and continued, "The Pinnacle Group does fix some prices, but also runs most underground criminal activity in the building."

"Ah," I said. "It would be natural wouldn't it? They have access and control. No one else would be able to do it except for ..."

Thor cut me off before I finished. "My security staff is clean. They are not involved with Sam McGettigan or any other union gangsters."

"Is this McGettigan character a suspect?"

Stone answered. "Well, yes and no. He is elected president of the Pinnacle Group, but this whole thing looks beyond his humble capabilities and especially beyond his imagination."

And so it went, back and forth and sideways through the longest case briefing ever. Even now, I can't believe that at the end of it I conferred with Sri Lampin Charles and put my signature on that plaque writer. I don't think he quite believed it either because he was sort of staring right through me at something else when I signed.

## **Chapter Two: The Thirteenth Floor**

Stone assigned me a guest suite on the eighth floor of pinnacle tower, which is so big it is more like a mountain rising than a tower. The exterior door had a mahogany red shade and looked about as solid as a bank vault door. I walked in, put the cat's carrier down, and let him out before really looking around. When I did, I found myself in a guest suite for a king. At the fireplace, the rustic-stone mantle swept up thirteen feet over the hardwood backing to the ceiling. It was in summer mode as cooling, releasing a sustained breeze of filtered air. The rest of the place was furnished Pinnacle condominium style; all clean lines, expensive woods, glasses and metals and new art. The living room had wraparound windows and a boat deck-style balcony was off the bedroom. Just the den alone was bigger than my old office. It was a place I could live with and I started doing just that by mixing a drink at the bar and taking an easy chair out on the balcony. Tigger ran to and fro there and then back inside while I typed some notes about the case and saved them in my portable office.

Basically, the case and the entire building were hinky. Something read as weird about all of it. Stone and Thor were really talking about a crime wave. Members of the Board were being killed off but there were others too. The locations were all over the building and the methods various and often unexplainable. They'd gone through a pack of stills on the corpses, showing an assortment of crime scenes. One man had suddenly gained a hundred pounds and died. A guy on the fiftieth floor had developed advanced cancer of the eyes that killed him in less than twelve hours. A female Board member got poisoned by her own hair, which became toxic. There were others that went psycho and killed themselves via drowning, falling from heights and self-mutilation. The very last victim starved to death when his metabolism suddenly accelerated. In a couple of cases, all they found were the skeletons and no cause of death. If there were nearby suspects, they were always ruled out as being unable to have committed such a crime. There really was no absolute proof of murder, just an assumption as the victims appeared targeted due to membership on the Board or connections to it. Some of the crimes if not all were too odd to happen by accident so it was assumed some mastermind was involved.

Sipping my drink, I thought it over casually. Without looking at any list of residents, I knew this building would be a showcase of brilliant minds. People weren't in here simply because they had money. Sure, there would be airhead celebrities, but many people tops in various industries, fields and technologies would be in residence. Somehow, one of them or a group of them was doing this ... for reasons unknown. The strange events could not be ruled out as a wave of bizarre accidents, though the Board probably would do so if it weren't Board members being killed. Whoever was behind it had to be about as dangerous as dangerous gets. Was there a motive or was it someone that simply stalked and killed for sport? Who would that be when only a super AI mind or an alien being would be that smart? I knew crime-free Pinnacle City wasn't outfitted with top-dollar forensic equipment, so a killer wouldn't exactly have to be a genius to outsmart Thor Carlsonbonner's crew of concierge cops. If anything, this killer used overkill in covering his crimes.

As the booze eased my mind, I began to wonder why I took such a case. No one else would take it other than riff-raff trying to escape into Pinnacle City. Thor Carlsonbonner and his gangs of security suits didn't know what to do with it. Off the balcony, I could see through a gap and over the moat to the city; the place no one at Pinnacle City wanted to visit. Many dangerous characters existed there; those sorts of people always seem invincible, but when tracked close up look human. At Pinnacle City, the culprit or culprits behind this stuff had to be smart but not invincible. Great lengths had been gone to for the purpose of remaining hidden and invisible. Whoever, whatever it was, was vulnerable.

In initial design, Pinnacle City's shape came out as a huge hourglass with the top somewhat smaller than the base. Over the years, the base towers mushroomed and the narrow part of the central tower rise thickened as the complex became even bigger. The glittering monstrosity became an expanding city with most of it in one gargantuan central tower. Common design elements developed some diversity and became cultural and the distinct accent developed. One thing every central tower floor had from bottom to top was the core; the big cylinder that doubled as a main support and maintenance conduit, piping everything vital up the structure. I figured it to be life support so it came as no real surprise to me when I found that Thor Carlsonbonner's fourth floor security office circled the core and had taps into it.

Down on the mushrooming base the fourth floor was so big I rode in on a horizontal elevator tube with Thor and got out with him at the entry arch. He had other secure private entrances but wanted to show me the rainbow entry arch. It scanned you as you walked the length of it but there were also guards and a checkpoint at the lobby. He took me for a brief tour, showing me everything from banks of camera displays to models of the androids that worked the higher floors. Thor's personal army was outfitted mostly in semi-formal blue suits with the security tags and design. He had an outpost of them and some equipment on nearly every floor of the building.

We passed the two burly men that guarded his office door. On the inside, I looked around as the banks of display screens lit up. At his desk, he faced a main screen high on the far wall. That I knew was his current caller screen; meaning if anyone called they'd show on it and other screens would pick up any relevant camera surveillance. He had a smaller desk and device setup too but I could see he didn't favor being hooked in. Sitting at his desk, he checked to see how many calls were in his queue, but he didn't answer any. Instead, he faced me and folded his hands.

"I saw that open armory running off the personnel entry there. For a place that advertises itself as crime free you sure have powerful weapons."

"Oh yes, I've got all the latest toys and a big staff of guards and concierges trained to use them. As you notice, they don't display any weapons. I only allow under-the-jacket stuff. Most guards are unarmed. The droids you don't see much down here. I don't personally like them. Use them on order. Mostly higher floors and they stay there."

"I don't like them either; they can't solve crimes. I see them as more of a deterrent."

"They spook me. Ours are too human. Pinnacle City has the money for the latest of everything. They can solve easy stuff and rip through surveillance fast in regards to suspects."

"Did they come up with anything on this investigation? You've really given me nothing so far but a list of people and crime scenes. All of them now cleaned up. I'm not sure where to start. No proper forensics got done on any of those scenes."

"You'll start with Skitch Rocco. I'll tell you about it in a minute. We did come up with something on the surveillance. Problem is we can't really use surveillance. We collect enormous amounts of data that is destroyed nearly as fast as it comes in."

"Why?"

"Privacy is why. We are only the Board's security control. There are many small outfits in this building selling security and privacy services. Some of it is all robots or not at all manned. Building Secure Data – that is the stuff coming in every moment on the building systems - isn't kept unless a problem shows. Now residents, that is the real story. They do not want to be watched or there to be any surveillance of them; yet we of course must have surveillance. At this moment for an example, we are pulling in nearly every kind of surveillance up to deep cover stuff. Nearly as fast as it comes in, requests for it to be destroyed follow. Every resident of real importance, and that is nearly all of them, has personal security or legal systems that make sure we don't collect anything on them."

"Then what in the hell is surveillance for?"

"The Window. We have some moments or a window to identify if a crime or something vital to the Board has been recorded. If it has we take immediate legal action to hold that data. Often we can't hold it for very long."

"Ah. So did the Window give you any vital surveillance in regards to these bizarre deaths?"

"We have some data. No suspect has been identified through it. Legal proceedings are under way to allow you to view it."

"How long will that take?"

"A few days."

"Okay. You said you had a starting point. A fellow named Skitch Rocco. Who is he?"

"Skitch is a Board member. He is the only representative of the thirteenth floor. That floor, by the way, doesn't exist."

"You mean a bad luck thing. The building jumps from twelve to fourteen. So if it doesn't exist I would gather you have no surveillance of it. Skitch must be some fancy padding the Board appointed for some reason."

"Skitch would have to be elected by the residents of that floor. No, we don't have surveillance of it. We do know that the Board recently sent Skitch Rocco there, to investigate intrusive emanations that caused interference with other building systems. Your starting point would be to find out if he is still alive."

"On a floor that doesn't exist?"

"This is where it gets confidential. There is a structural level between the floors twelve and fourteen. It's an impervious layer, constructed to last a thousand years without maintenance. It is a no access zone. Security can't enter it or even mention it exists. This is highly confidential. The Board has no authorization to send anyone in."

"But the Board runs this place. Who would tell them they can't enter there?"

"The Top Floor."

"Who runs that?"

"No information can be revealed in regards to the Top Floor. And there is none. No surveillance of it. No recorded data."

"But you just revealed info because you told me they are a higher power in this building. And that they control some secret areas."

"Correct. They are a final secure level. Since the thirteenth floor is a key structural secret, they are involved with it. You are going to bypass them. Reason being, we can't start any investigation without doing so. I do have a surprise though. We have some real surveillance of Skitch Rocco that you are allowed to see."

Now real surveillance, that was something to move on. I began to think I would actually begin to start an investigation with it. From there perhaps stumble on to something that would create some sense out of this nonsense place. Thor led me to a private room to view the surveillance and went to great lengths having his tech specialist, a mad scientist type named Junko Gold, insure that the room was secure from any type of intrusion. I was even given control of the viewing equipment and set it up in an optimistic mood that vanished about as fast as a swatted fly when we got underway. There certainly was surveillance of Skitch Rocco. Hundreds of hours of it. He was one of the few residents who actually allowed his movements to be tracked. Where the hitch came in was that no one else did and that meant endless hours of Skitch appearing here and there around Pinnacle City. If he was talking to someone, passing someone, or even buying something, the other people were blurred out. Sometimes his entire surroundings were blotted out. If he went swimming, I could guess that because he wore a swimsuit. Nothing much else could be seen. Even paintings and plants were blurred out in places. About the only thing I gained from it was a good look at Skitch. Tall with curly hair kept a bit on the foppish side. A plump face with rosy cheeks, wide hazel eyes and a shark's smile. He always wore a nicely cut suit, was a tiny bit overweight and had a distinctive gait. I did a lot of fast forwarding, while Thor did nothing other than sport a silly grin that showed he was somehow happy just to get this censored surveillance copy.

At the home office, I would bang my fists in frustration, but here I kept cool and finally sat back with my hands behind my head. I signaled Thor to be quiet for a minute. Then I went back to the buttons and did some more zooming around on the surveillance. Finally, I spoke to Thor.

"Skitch carries a briefcase and meets a lot of people, almost like he is a salesman. Most of the time he does that. I see here that about once a week he leaves in the morning as though off to work. Then he disappears on a small elevator to the back of his condominium. We see him get on that elevator and then get off the elevator back at home, but never where he goes on the elevator. He always has that strange case with him."

Thor's smug grin vanished like after this long movie hour he'd suddenly awakened. "You are bang on. You know, I've gone through that surveillance repeatedly and I never noticed that. Where would you suppose he goes on that elevator?"

"My guess is that he goes down one floor. I mean down to the thirteenth floor. There is one entrance to it, at the back of Skitch's palatial condominium. Also, don't forget that there is another common entrance to every floor as well."

"Really. What would that be?"

"That would be that very long slightly curved wall behind you. The core passes through every floor in this building."

"That wall is thicker and stronger than any vault and at all locations. Don't even mention the core. No resident would ever enter it even if it were possible. The life forces of this complex run through it. A human would be cooked, fried or dissolved or hell only knows what on entering it. Not to mention what could be released if someone were to attempt to cut into it."

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So I didn't mention the core again, instead I took a day to settle and think things over, doing pretty much nothing other than playing with the cat in my new place. One thing I thought over was the surveillance of Skitch. In some of those boring passages, the ghost woman had appeared again. Yet Thor Carlsonbonner mentioned nothing about seeing her. That was bad because it meant I was seeing something that wasn't

there. Long dark hair and a slim figure, her profile often appearing somewhere near Skitch as he went about his business. She reminded me of someone, as if I knew her but couldn't place her. But I'm detective and don't forget faces. Something was haunting me.

When I was ready to begin the investigation, I left and headed for Skitch Rocco's condominium. Along the way, I kept finding my access blocked and had to use my tablet in access mode to break through. I made a mental note to remind Thor that I wouldn't be able to work in the building if I didn't have a special access pocket fob. As far as my breaking through was concerned he had the Window, in which to figure out it was me.

Skitch lived alone except for a couple of cats and he was missing, so if he didn't have a robot no one would be home. I picked the lock at the main entrance and set off a bunch of alarms. On the inside, it took me a minute to shut them off then I looked around; the main room here was palatial and led to a curved staircase up to his bedroom and lounge area. At the time of sale, this would have been a beautiful and spacious bachelor condominium. In spite of its incredible size and super high ceiling, Skitch had it turned into a hoarder's paradise. There were simply stacks of junk everywhere and the air filtration had clogged long ago, leaving the place full of dander. In a world where the large majority read almost nothing on paper, Skitch printed everything out. He had stacks of papers, books, magazines everywhere, and they produced a stale inky odor. To go with them he had paperweights of all sizes and designs everywhere. I could see dust motes in the sunbeams drifting in from a partially open sliding glass balcony door and more objects and junk stacked out there. Special shelves reached as high as his ceiling and I saw his two black cats sitting way up there on a long ledge with their feeders and toys. A small pet service robot whirred along the far end of ledge there preparing them a fresh meal.

A check of his place was vital in any investigation but who would expect the guy to live in a condominium pulp dump. I went up the stairs and found that he did indeed have a den. It was heaped with more paper files and sported an entire separate desk lined with designer paperweights. His main desk was clear. A case rested on it and the left side of the desk flipped up into his computer setup. It was still running so I opened the office mode and saw that he did have a salesman setup. It was open to logs as if he was still around the place. Nothing on it was truly secure though it was mostly coded, listing transactions of some sort. The case I had to pick open; my read showed that it wasn't booby trapped so I opened it confidently and found a series of transparent tubes with substances in many colors. Samples and I knew by faint odor what they were. They were an impervious form of glue sold under a couple brand names. The stuff was damn expensive too. You could get it in any color or texture mode and patch things that were broken. It had to be used correctly because the patch was impervious. It was recommended to have robots apply it. Skitch had samples of varieties of the stuff that weren't on the market. Maybe really pricey special stuff.

At this, I scratched my head and wondered. Aside from his disappearing act, Skitch Rocco lacked all qualities of a sinister nature. He was a silly looking nearly friendless chap and Board member that I now had profiled as being a book hoarder and running a sales business selling impervious glues. He sure didn't seem to fit with the super-rich of Pinnacle City. There were probably used car salesmen on the outside that made more bucks than a special glue business could pull in. Unless, those special samples really were something special. Thinking it over I decided they had to be because Skitch traveled all over Pinnacle City selling the stuff and no one in this snob place would hold meetings with a plain old glue salesman.

That left only the thirteenth floor; the Board had sent him to investigate strange emanations. If the case continued in the same pattern there would be a mountain of electronic paperweights on that floor giving off emanations.

I left the condominium, locked it up and headed for the mysterious elevator at the rear. When I closed the door I didn't feel steady on my feet and a sudden image came into my mind. I'd seen her there, the ghost woman, moving about in the dusty sunbeams of Skitch's condominium. Seen her yet it hadn't registered until now, after the fact. I felt shaken and leaned there against the wall for some moments. It was like being haunted. She was almost in my mind hiding unseen somewhere in my brain waves, coming into my conscious mind when she felt like it. I was sure she was real because I'd had no such experiences in places other than Pinnacle City.

The hallway ran around from Skitch's place and had no doors other than the huge elevator door at the end. The button didn't open it; I gathered it was geared to Skitch's fingerprint. It was damn hard to crack too and

after ten minutes with a beam on it, I got angry and booted the door a couple times. That set off an alarm but at the same time my crack beam flashed through the right pattern and it whooshed open. I stepped inside then turned around as I heard something. Two of Thor's security men were at the far end of the hall and responding to the alarm, running towards me with weapons drawn. To take care of that situation I pulled my own Shiloh beam weapon out, light-touched the stun mode and auto fire. Since I'd aimed head-and-chest level it hit them like a King Kong boxing glove; a wham that stopped them dead for a second before they collapsed backwards and tumbled on the rug.

The elevator door closed and I looked for the button panel and found none. The only buttons were open and close. That baffled me and it took me a couple minutes before I figured out it wasn't an elevator after all. There was a hidden door on the floor and when I opened it, I saw a sort of fireman's staircase down.

Methods of super-secret access would be expected as the norm in a fantastic tower like this one. Yet I had the feeling of an historical sewer worker. One of those guys that used to work the rat tunnels before robots came along. No magic carpet to the secret floor here. No sir. All Skitch had was a ladder tube with walls that oozed milky slime, and at the bottom end, I actually had to hop off and drop a foot to a bare floor and sepia darkness.

My Shiloh in laser setting doubled as a light but I didn't want to use it. My eyes adjusted in seconds and I saw that I was at the end of an open area. Across a floor puddled with salty liquids a number of tunnels branched off. There didn't seem to be traps anywhere but I still waited and studied the area; then something hit me. I tapped the wall beside me and noted the silence. All modern flowstone and plastics would offer a rapping sound when tapped. This didn't because from the looks of it this entire area and probably the whole vast floor were composed of the same impervious material that Skitch Rocco sold. That meant this floor was a support layer of sorts of impervious material laying out a second foundation above ground. The cost of that much of the material would be astronomical. It made me wonder.

It also created a silent atmosphere; my ears were ringing as I crossed the floor. I had to pick one of the tunnels to follow and that was made easy by footprints I spotted in the dust. Skitch Rocco's footprints perhaps. A short way down this tunnel it squared and the coating had the look of paneling but was actually more of the impervious material. Darkness transformed to eerie light as this stuff had a faint glow. The scene became weirder when the hall ended at an odd door. It was about seven feet high and had a sort of spidery mutant face embossed in it like an embedded sarcophagus standing upright. I had to open it and I hoped I wouldn't be entering some house of the dead. If so perhaps the mummies would be imperviously preserved.

My tablet works as many other devices but is sometimes not quite as smooth as the real thing. I ran a scan on the door and found it to be a micro lock mechanism with no alarm built in. A series of frequencies the human ear can't hear triggered it and though I expected the door to open outward, it opened inward, allowing a scan of the room behind it. Lights also came on and there was no detection of danger of any type. I walked inside to another room cut in the material, only this one was fully furnished with a clean office area. Paintings decorated the walls and the art appeared to be all depictions of different locations in Pinnacle City. A broad onyx desk was stacked with more of Rocco's sample cases and a nearby bookshelf lined with paper books identified it as definitely his office.

He wasn't present; the room to the rear was larger and a workshop with robot equipment, all of it stamped with the Pinnacle City logo. This was the place where he churned out his sample tubes, but where he got the raw stuff was uncertain.

So where was Skitch Rocco? I sat on a bench that was more like grey glass and ran every form of scan I could muster. A read pinged back through the tunnels in the impervious material. Like all the floors in this building, this was one large place, but it was of course completely different – a vast warren of tunnels and open areas. The tunnels formed weird patterns and it hit me that the entire floor was set up like some giant cushion at this level of the building, with the open areas and connection tunnels the air pockets. Probably the floor as a whole was to an extent flexible and allowing some sway so that it absorbed shock and balanced the building. I noted heat readings that meant the place was inhabited, but by what, huge gophers perhaps?

The only way to find out was to move ahead, but not towards any detected gathering of life forms. Instead, I picked an area not far off that had one life form registered. Most of the nearby areas were arched hallways connecting oblong rooms. The ceiling was inches above my head and the material was patterned in blues that in its own faint lighting gave me a case of vertigo. I was walking horizontal by my feet but by my eyes I

seemed to be going up then down. The dead silence continued the ringing in my ears. In time, I began to think I could hear something barely audible – a stupid sound, like woooo, woooo ... but very faint like wind through a tube. That sound gained in volume then faded altogether. An opening appeared ahead and I peeked out cautiously. Someone was moving in the semi dark across the room. I stepped out and saw something dropping from the ceiling towards me – my Shilo flashed in laser mode, the light momentarily revealing a near empty large room with objects littering the floor. The ceiling was cobwebbed and my beam hit a huge cobweb that had come loose to swing down toward me. It didn't get vaporized but froze there in the air like the beam had hardened it.

Half a moment passed; I remembered that my scan had detected a life form in the room but my eyes had not spotted one. They registered it now as it was coming for me fast. I heard it emitting that woou sound as I fired and fell back to the opening. My beam both revealed it and fried it, hitting its midsection like a large bright coin with scorching heat and momentum. The thing was lifted up and it flew in an arc and collapsed on the floor. I heard gases exploding from it as its stomach area burst, and as the light died, I saw a humanoid creature lying there. Only its arms and legs were four similar appendages and somewhat spidery. A corona of fur or hair covered most of the head but a round human-like face showed in the fringes.

Walking up I studied it, but also held my nose because the gas it emitted stank and was likely toxic as well. A mutant of sorts, I concluded, and an ugly one too, being somewhat spidery. I could see some strings of webbing hanging from its crooked fingers like it had planned to wrap me in it. I flashed a beam at the webbing around the room and noted that the objects littering the floor were human bones. I walked back to the big cobweb I had initially blasted. It was hard like stone. It had been soft webbing; heat had hardened it to the impervious material. The clue told me how that material was made; the mutants that lived here on this floor secreted it from their warped hands and probably their mouths too. What they fed on were human beings; I could tell that from the bones on the floor.

I remembered Thor Carlsonbonner matter-of-factly saying the residents of the thirteenth floor would have voted Skitch into office. If so, he bought their votes with human sacrifices. And he was in here somewhere; he had an office here as if hanging out with these things wasn't a problem, at least not for him. It would be for me because a scan showed that the life forms were now moving from all other directions in my direction. Since I could detect them, I figured I could avoid them for a time by moving through the halls into places they vacated, but eventually I would have to confront them. I also wanted to find Skitch but my readings showed all life forms of the same type. They were all similar beings, almost like clones and none of them registered as a full human being, which was what I expected Skitch to register as ... if he was still alive.

They were coming for me and at a fast clip; I picked a large open area I could get to and moved down a hall. The space I came out in was about the size of a lobby and all in the blue patterns. Low ceiling as this wasn't a tall floor and it was mostly clean with some dust, a few cobwebs, and no piles of human bones. Picking a spot at the far wall, I waited there, pulling out one gun and then the other so I was holding double heat. They slowed as they got to me, moving slowly out of the entrance halls. Creeping across the floor on those spidery limbs; and they could walk both ways, upright like slightly crooked humans or on all fours like dogs. The faces showing through the coronas of hair were male and female and they became clearer as I flashed a quick beam off the ceiling for a better look. That caused them to halt and pucker their mouths, and then they started with that creepy woou woouing. I felt like blasting a few of them to teach them a lesson, and then as I tried to move my right arm a jolt of fear hit me. I could barely move it; I could barely move at all ... realization flashed in my mind. The crazy woou woouing wasn't just a bad habit of theirs, it was a sound weapon; their voices knocking out a frequency that sounded harmless but in continuation locked up the victim's muscles, leaving him open for the kill.

I did not intend to be a victim of any sort of spider humans but the horror of the possibility was lifting my hair. And other than fingers, it was the only thing on my body that would move. Yet one stiff finger was enough because I already had my weapon in hand. It hit a slider and then did the double press that fired a wide stun beam into the area. It had a blast noise so I kept hitting it, sending a series of beams that battered them back and slowly shut them out. With no air in their lungs, they couldn't do the paralysis song. Without the singing, I gained control of my body. A fast exit was available. I could escape the area and the thirteenth floor. Due to another sudden realization I didn't.

Instead, I spoke in a firm voice. "Cut that noise or I'll change this beam to a death beam. Skitch Rocco, come forward and speak to me."

They obeyed and except for some gross huffing, remained silent. A number of them moved away. One figure from near the rear came forward. This one another of the spidery mutants. A big one too, and one that walked upright like a man. He came up close and as he did, I recognized the baby face behind the spray of wild hair. It was Skitch Rocco.

"I'm Skitch Rocco," the mutant said in a rough voice. "They send you here to deal or to try to hit me?"

"I'm Jack Michaels, a detective. They sent me here to find you. The Board sent me. They didn't tell me you've become a mutant. They also hired me to find out who is killing Board members."

"The whole Board wouldn't know I have changed. Some of them must."

"Well who does know? Who did this to you?"

"I'm not sure who set me up. I have supervised this thirteenth floor operation from the beginning. When someone started killing Board people, I tried to lay low. But they got to me. They're getting every Board member who breaks their petty condominium rules. I haven't figured out who is doing the killing. I suspected Stone at first and Thor Carlsonbonner too. However, the Top Floor could be behind it, and maybe McGettigan and the Pinnacle Group. Then there is a secret thing going on with the building mind, the artificial intelligence Adam 1X thing. I don't know what that is about."

"You say they got to you. But you're still alive?"

"I had a genetic disease and did a weekly vitamin feed. They switched the feed with an overdose of the gene enhancement stuff they used originally back when they created the thirteenth-floor mutants. I was supposed to die horribly with my entire body in painful spasms. Yet I didn't die. I'm similar to these mutants, but I'm not one of them exactly. They were created against their will via long-term therapy."

"I see. I also see that killing has been going on here for a long time. Some of those other areas are filled with human bones."

"Of course. This is our feeding area and we don't sweep up all the time. Our living quarters are at the west end and quite luxurious, too."

"Feeding area. What or who are they feeding you?"

"Criminals, small time rule breakers. Some of them shipped in from outside Pinnacle City by groups that want disposal." Skitch began to come closer, and even as a mutant he still had that distinct gate. His reddened eyes probed. "We, you see, have a hunger for human flesh."

"Really," I said. "Keep back, unless you have a hunger for being a fried meatball."

"They aren't feeding us enough now. They're starving us. You had better talk to McGettigan. We want the rations upped or there will be rebellion."

"I can talk to him. But what in the hell is the thirteenth floor about? Surely they didn't build this whole floor so mutants can feed on people?"

"It is because of the product. It is used throughout the building and this floor is a sponge layer of it in raw form. We eat, we produce. Now that they've put me out of business, they need less. That was my crime and my sin you see. I fed my residents well and created a business selling the extra product. I refined the raw stuff to new super products. My business went against the condominium rules. It got me on the target list. I'm sure of it."

"Maybe you were just an easy target for the killer."

"Nope," Skitch said, the word coming out like a little poof from his fattened cheeks. "The story of the thirteenth floor goes back to the beginning. Among the residents here, it is only a legend. School kids sing about it. It is one of the evil places you get sent too if you're bad. They don't know it really exists. It came about during construction. If you followed the history of the building of Pinnacle City, you'll remember the sudden halt in construction and all sorts of PR as for the reasons. The reason was simple; a building of the dimensions of this one had never been constructed. The practice did not line up with the science. A building, the value of which can barely be measured, was unstable when it was only half finished. That instability, the quakes and emanations, always centered on the thirteenth floor. So they came up with an answer, but it

wasn't a pretty one. Make the floor impervious and a level of incredible strength that absorbs every shock. Of course, the ugly part was the creation of my charges here. They were created – mutant monsters. It was the only way to create that much of the substance. Graphdaelite is its name but we can create glue and other versions of it using bacterium additives. It is sold under various brand names and is in some forms the thinnest material on the planet. But as I said, they never wanted me doing science or sales. I put their dirty little secret at risk. Imagine if the world knew about my residents, the mutants who voted me Board member for the thirteenth floor, and what they eat for dinner. If that came out in the media, Pinnacle City would be shamed. They advertise zero crime. A crime-free environment. It is that way because there are no real courts or jails, but a system where violators are fed to the thirteenth floor, and what the residents here excrete is the secret of the building's strength. The processed bodies of the dead fasten the whole titan, this incredible pinnacle world together. The Board members are all guilty of murder, yet they sweat about being killed themselves. Maybe someone found out; someone that wants revenge. It is possible."

I listened to Skitch rant on ... but as a man of the world, wasn't surprised by the dirty secrets of the filthy rich. Even then, I knew ugly societies existed on the planet. Knew the world had been built on the bones of the dead. Some hid some of it; some hid their mutants like Pinnacle City. In the back of my mind, Pinnacle City had always seemed too good to be true. And as Skitch spoke, the vision of the grand tower grew tarnished. Maybe barnacled and rusted in parts like an old pirate ship. But in spite of its ugly side, it did have grandeur throughout. Except for the thirteenth floor all the rest I'd seen was magnificent. Skitch thought the public would be shocked but many people would like the idea of disposing of criminals in such a way.

I decided to interrupt. "So it was you who called me here. You and your pals decided to send the Board a scary message with emanations. A message that would have them worried about the building's stability."

Skitch sighed. "Exactly. I knew they would send someone and that they'd think it had to do with the continuing murders of Board members. But we have nothing to do with that. What we have is a message. I am still running the thirteenth floor as I always have. My condominium is to remain in service. Yes, I may be a little different now and I am condemned to this part of Pinnacle City. But I am in charge. My people want to be fed in full, like the old days ... so if the Board wants the emanations to cease they will obey and have McGettigan increase the food deliveries. They are also aware of the other disasters that have been occurring along with the killings. Someone else has been shaking things up and they need our cooperation to keep this building fully stabilized."

"Geeze, you're asking me to kill people. I mean you eat them alive don't you?"

"They send us criminals. They kill them one way or another anyway. That won't change."

"So what's in it for me? I'm investigating the larger case, not your grievances. I will tell them what you want, and have your position on the Board reaffirmed, but I want something in return. Tell me what you know – give me at least a clue."

Skitch's eyes started running deep; they were like two black holes, and in their spinning depths, he was seeing me as a dinner he couldn't eat. And he was thinking. Controlling the hunger with the idea of gaining that return to better days. "Okaaay," he rasped slowly. "I have a clue, but you won't like it."

"Give it to me anyway."

"The killings started at the same time Adam 1X, that's the building artificial intelligence, went on the blink."

"What happened to Adam 1X?"

"No one knows for sure. There were mechanical failures. All sorts of weird stuff suddenly hit. At first, it felt like a small disaster, then I had the feeling or a hunch that something else had somehow taken over control of Pinnacle City. The one thing that stood out was ghosts appearing in the building. They had always been confined to the virtual level. Now that particular floor ordered a lot of product from me just before the bad stuff happened, as did the top floor, and the pinnacle, the very top of building."

"Yeah, so what does that have to with anything?"

"It was the thin stuff; the thinnest substance on the planet. All the micro, nano or whatever you want to call it technology, is laid out on it. Smallest computer hardware ever invented. The highest-level androids have brain systems composed of it. The virtual level is so powerful because the entire level is composed of it, and

the top floor and the pinnacle have even more. The intelligence power of this building can't be fathomed and the key intelligence is Adam 1X. You never see him but he is everywhere. Thor likely told you the story about how all data in this place is destroyed for privacy reasons. It is a clever tale, everyone believes the lie ... but the truth is nothing and I mean not anything is forgotten because Adam 1X stores everything somewhere. That's why I never bothered having surveillance of myself erased. It is there somewhere anyway. The Board can't access it though."

"So where is it? Where is Adam 1X's central mind or data storage?"

"A lot of places. You know the power of the technology. The soul of that thing is on the top floor. There is no access there and you have a killer who doesn't want you to get there because he would know that Adam 1X knows who he is. The killer could even be Adam 1X as it is said that he is mad. Years ago, I heard there was a key or map of some type that reveals a way into the top. It is supposed to exist somewhere on the virtual level, and there again that is impossible to get because it is in the super secure area of it and it is controlled by that thing. That monster. That pervert."

"And who would that be?"

"That man is a Board member - Parker Colpitts."

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I exited the thirteenth floor and found a small escort army of Thor's concierge guards waiting. I didn't go with them. Instead, I went back to my guest suite and contacted him on the suite phone, saying I had a report but first I had to talk to McGettigan. Thor tracked McGettigan and that took me 50 floors up the building. It looked like heaven and hell gone tacky up there and when I asked for McGettigan everyone told me he would find me if he needed me. They had these wing-like off-edge things like dragonfly stuff marking the edge of the patios, and they were at the real edge of the building at the big fall to the harbor canal below. I stared at the amber lights and the feeling was solid like I was up there in society. Up there and looking for an answer to a problem I didn't quite understand. The Board called it killings and I called it a search for the skyscraper king of hinky crimes.

Nevertheless, dark night came in above ground, purple and clear. Thor and Stone aroused thoughts to the effect that the height of bullshit might not be much higher than this place. Not much inspiration for your average gum-shoe, but a jump for me because I always prided myself in going for something bigger, and knew that someday my pride would kill my ass and I'd look like a very small squashed bug. But what the hell, there was no harm in trying.

With no plans on waiting for the day McGettigan would find me, I walked across the grand outdoor concourse. If a fat lady wasn't singing a much prettier and perfect clone of a lady was ... crooning, and looking pretty in the way that crowd of ultra-perfects admired. The main place had an entry like a tacky palace and it was a gambling paradise; a home for runaways of Pinnacle City when there really was nowhere to run. The glittering overhang above it was so monstrous I could not believe it existed on the floor of a building. But I was getting used to stuff like that in a place gone wicked like this one. For a casino entrance, it was a killer, but the real kicker was being able to walk under all the security and past ladies and hucksters that could probably sell the devil a return of his soul. All of the wishing, and I mean big security guys who wished they could just come out and kick my ass. They couldn't and they all had a security read they didn't like ... a read they hated in their bones. Someone they didn't recognize as a player ... and that meant it was someone big. Yet like a ghost, it couldn't be because they knew all the big people. And that someone was walking across the starlit floor and under the gem of a false skylight, and riding up on a comforting air tube to Sam McGettigan's private booth.

Sam had two security men the size of gorillas and two hot ladies ... one Oriental and the other kind of Irish or Scottish in looks. The security and probably the ladies were for show. Security systems being all built in had never altered vanity. A powerful man wanted to look that way unless he was like Stone or other bureaucrats who wanted the understated look. It meant a lot to the suckers and nothing to people like me who knew better.

Sam McGettigan's features were too rough-cut to be believable and his perfect light shoes and special cut tie clashed with them. He looked at me like he couldn't believe any detective could have the nerve to

question him on his own turf. Credit for my access went to Stone and Thor, because though McGettigan and his associates ran the nuts and bolts of Pinnacle City he couldn't trump them as far as access went.

I saw his eyebrows rise up to heaven like he was thinking, oh-no, a real asshole, but they came to ground fast when I turned in, grabbed the bronze railing, and looked out.

He showed his anger as his voice slowly rose, "Fucking Stone send you. You don't look like you could save his ass or your own. I don't care either. The hitters aren't after me."

There was rustling below beyond the regular noise and hiss and that added emphasis to his words. Up above I thought saw some of that haze of light fall as stardust, but ugly dust like something was dirty but you couldn't quite put your finger on it. I decided to get straight to the point and avoid arguments.

"Parker Colpitts. I want to question him and you are the only one with the way through to him."

Sam McGettigan suddenly laughed like he was born laughing. He gained some innocence in it. Innocence I knew was false. "Anything else you want – like that old kiddy carnival ride to the moon?"

"Yeah. I got a message from Skitch Rocco. Whoever tried to ace him failed. He's there and he's a monster now. You know what he wants. More food for one thing. And he wants his condo kept up. Your service union is going to look after those cats of his too. If not the Board is going to get all sweaty, because Skitch is valuable at the moment as far as building stability goes."

"So. Skitch Rocco told you stuff. He should have stayed in the grave they sent him to."

"Well he didn't. He's still there on the thirteenth floor and running it. He's been re-elected. He gave me the power. You don't get things moving my way those emanations are going to get worse and residents are going to get pissed. If you know what I mean."

He looked at me then like I was something he'd never dealt with before. Like something he couldn't believe. Then he said. "I seen your face before, like in the media. You're that Jack Michaels guy. Thinking you're gonna come here and make a big score. This place is bigger than you. It's bigger than anybody. It's bigger than me. You, pal, are headed for a bad end. I heard some new boys took over up there on the top. But no one can get any information on them. One thing is for sure. They'll know you're snooping around and write your name on the next contract they put out."

"Good thing is death only comes once. So how about Parker Colpitts? I can get into most of that virtual level. How do I get through to Colpitts?"

"You're crazy. No one wants to get in there with Colpitts except perverts. Colpitts has the dirty secrets on nearly everyone in this place. If you get to him the Board likely won't even let you out."

"Look. I'm not a pervert and I don't collect dirty secrets. This place is full of riddles but I'm working on a case. I need a minor piece of information from Colpitts. His actual physical body can't be tracked so the only place I can look is there in his virtual domain."

"Okay pal. Never in my life did I meet someone that wanted to get in there for a chat with Colpitts. Met lots of people that want to escape from his blackmail. I'll give you a key code. To be truthful I don't expect to be seeing you again; at least not after going in there with that guy. If you come out at all, you'll be one of them or a vegetable brain. Saves me the worry of dealing with you personally."

### **Chapter Three: The Virtual Level**

To get to this Parker Colpitts guy access was needed to a secure virtual area of the seventy-fifth floor. Sam McGettigan's key would get me through once inside but I definitely didn't want Stone or Thor to know I had it. Technically that floor was secure in every area and it couldn't be measured in square-foot parameters. There were no bodies on the ground, as it was all mind space; far more than Pinnacle City could ever use considering Skitch's information. That meant without a direct route of some kind I'd be on another planet of

the mind trying to find some weird geek who was in a buried part of it. I didn't really even know who Colpitts was or what he did other than he was somehow big and likely nearly permanently connected. His actual body would be hidden in an even more secure location and considering the privacy rules of Pinnacle City probably no one other than him knew where that location was.

Sam McGettigan obviously didn't care if I found Parker Colpitts because he had me pegged as loco. McGettigan wasn't a firm suspect in my mind anyway. He knew something was going on and probably was withholding evidence from the Board. Bizarre killings wouldn't be his style. Neither would destabilizing the building be in his rulebook unless the goal was to extort money. And there had been no extortion attempts. As far as Stone and Thor were concerned, they may have been involved in hiring me but they couldn't be written off as suspects. And I wondered about Skitch. Maybe he had killed some Board members for one crazy reason or another. Maybe someone found out and put out a contract on him. Both Stone and Thor were security and privacy mad; they definitely wouldn't want me breaking eggs with big boots on a floor where the Pinnacle City crowd engaged in their private fantasy worlds. They would get me in but in a way where I'd be led around and then back out without gaining any solid information. That meant I had to bullshit them and play dumb so they'd go along.

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I wanted a business appointment but I couldn't get a day appointment with Stone and ended up walking along an outdoor concourse of fashion shops up on floor thirty-five. Colored light spilled out on the obscure side street and enhanced a twilight stroll along to an almost invisible supper club at its end. A giant mural of fashionable Pinnacle City people in silhouette nearly hid the entranceway, which was a deep arch leading to brass lamps and a large wood-and-stained-glass door.

Supper Club security was heavy suits hiding in the cloakroom, but they gave me little more than a glance as Stone had already cleared me. I got led across an elegant entry area by a door host wearing a silly bellhop style outfit. A smooth-jazz band was playing there and the notes drifted inside the supper area. Stone waited at a table by a window with a panoramic view of an edge street and the sky. In spite of being a Board big shot, he was sitting alone. Even alone, with his perfect grey hair and strong elder looks, he registered as a VIP. I took a seat across the table from him and watched some air cars pass in a firefly trail a ways off in the sky while he opened the conversation. Turned out this was a dinner date with his new gal, but she wouldn't be arriving for a while so he'd squeezed my appointment in. He chattered about being recently divorced and the new woman. I told him I wanted to give him my report on thirteen and talk about the virtual level, but he ignored me saying he wanted to discuss Thor Carlsonbonner.

"I didn't want to mention this," Stone said quietly, "but Thor is a touch of a suspect in this case."

"You don't say. How is he involved?"

"Not necessarily involved. Thor no longer has to work for us. He was hired on a permanent contract, meaning he would stay with us but get to retire at a very young age and reside at Pinnacle City. That contract specifically forbade marriage and extensive travel. Because of privacy employees with deep building knowledge don't travel much or alone. Of course those with high-level clearance can travel. Residents we trust fully travel but they are people who live and breathe the Pinnacle City way of life. They keep our secrets because they are us."

"Really. One would think Thor Carlsonbonner would have the highest clearance. He is the security chief."

"He did before he got married in secret, and to another man. A very wealthy and private resident of Pinnacle City that I won't name. The Board doesn't approve."

"Gay marriage is common on the outside. Doesn't surprise me that it isn't approved by high-brows here."

"It's not that. We don't approve of him marrying at all. He has hustled his way into riches."

"Maybe he's just gay. I mean, who would he meet here who isn't wealthy?"

"True, but he wants to retire well before the end of his contract and travel the world. A number of Board members have registered strong disapproval and some of them are now dead."

"Is every recently deceased Board member in that category?"

“No, but if he wanted to do it he could get rid of some others as a cover.”

At that point, a waiter arrived with drinks. I chose expensive liquor and on the rocks. Stone sipped a yellow ladies drink in a tall Collins glass. He chattered some more while I wondered why he was coming out with this information on Thor now. Had something changed? Maybe he for some reason wanted a frame-up of Carlsonbonner to cover for the real killer. For privacy reasons, of course.

“I’ll put an eye on him while I’m investigating. It gives me an idea. Skitch Rocco for some reason wants to send me on a wild goose chase on the virtual level. Maybe I can use that investigation as a way of tripping up Carlsonbonner.”

Stone was sipping his drink as I spoke and accidentally took a big swallow. His eyes widened with the gulp. “What ... you mean you found Skitch Rocco?”

“Yes. Found him on the thirteenth floor. A disappointing part of that investigation was discovering that you didn’t inform me of the risks.”

He looked away from me. “We thought he was dead, and that the others would hide. Our interest is the source of the emanations.”

“Skitch and his people claim to be a source, but not the only one as most of it is connected or arrived with the killings. He is ramping things up because his people have some demands. McGettigan is taking care of them, except one. He is still the Board member for that floor. Just letting you know. But don’t worry; he won’t be attending any meetings in person. Skitch is not the same man he used to be.”

“Skitch is a blackmailing terrorist. We don’t deal with such people.”

“You don’t have any choice. Call it a labor dispute that must be resolved.”

“Why? He gave you a phony clue. There’s nothing on the virtual level. Nothing there is real. What could you possibly find?”

“Information is stored in lots of different ways. They’re all real. Perhaps some small lead is in there. I want you to set it up so I can go in and take a quiet look around some areas. Thor can come in with me.”

Stone finished the rest of his drink. “It’s unheard of ... as well as being ridiculous. Both you and Thor will have to be decontaminated when you come out. Stuff in there can drive a man mad. We’ll have to do a special setup. I’ll send you to a location. Our technical expert Junko Gold will set it up. You’ll find nothing in there, but we can attempt to pick Thor’s brain some on the detox, maybe get the goods on him.”

A hot blond passed me on the way out and I instinctively picked up that it was Stone’s new woman. I glanced back. She was like an hourglass of ruffled silks with two of the fawning bellhop characters leading her across to Stone’s table. Strolling in the night, I passed a number of lonely souls out by the edge walk. The greater city existed out beyond Pinnacle City’s own haze of lights, and I considered that unlike the others looking out, at least I knew what life was like in that big city. So Stone now wanted me to set up Thor. I thought it over and decided to keep moving with my own investigation. The Thor thing could have meat to it, but more likely it was a big distraction. Something to keep me busy while something else was going on.

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A new Pinnacle City day became another flight through privacy and secrecy as Thor Carlsonbonner and Junko Gold didn’t want me to know the exact location of the connect rooms we were to use. I had to endure the mad Einstein character’s grim humor as he put a deprivation helmet on me; to be sure, I wasn’t tracking things. No electronic devices allowed either, but they didn’t know half of my tech was patched into my skin. It would know where I was going. Which turned out to be a number of odd chambers on the fourth floor? Not much of a secret location in my estimation.

In the new technology, people that connect no longer wear body suits or cumbersome head attachments. They do use a black room to guarantee complete separation from bodily functions. The black room was for residents, but apparently the secure connection was a white room, a whole different thing, with the only attached equipment being a neural web to be worn loosely over the face and hair while the person sat on special chair that wrapped the body up. The setup would be totally different for someone like Parker Colpitts; he was no temporary vacationer, but someone permanently wired in. His body hidden somewhere remote in

Pinnacle City and tubed, fed and cleaned with electric muscle stimulation so it would not deteriorate. It was sort of the other way around where he only made temporary visits to his actual physical self.

The idea of grabbing the goods on Carlsonbonner while he was also my guide wasn't much of a formula for detective work, unless I planned to just frame him. Framing people has never been my style; instead, I made some other plans while the mild sedative eased the harsh burn of the white room. Carlsonbonner had gone in ahead of me. In this mode, the transfer took place exactly at the point of falling asleep from the sedative.

I awoke standing and feeling extremely light on my feet. Pinnacle City equipment revealed its superiority immediately, though I have never been a big user of dream worlds. In the past I used them when under extreme stress, leaving my body to calm during the disconnect and my mind to be comforted by easy dream play. But I have never been the average person in society, where a whole segment of the population remains totally addicted to other realities. There are detectives working specifically in that field but I am not one of them. Tech-based detectives are another large group that mind-surf the Internet and Web and rarely leave the office. In most detective work like finding a missing person, you don't have to leave the office, but there are always cases that require a man on street. A specialty and my specialty because almost no one else does it and the pay is high. Criminals and security forces rule the streets in most places. No one goes out in any contest with them unless the pay is substantial. And no one survives in any contest without experience and skills.

There is another percentage of the population addicted to Intel drugs, some addicted to both and then the twenty percent of the population that are power brokers. The brokers usually have so much pumped up health and glamorous looks that they are addicted to the real world where they are top of the heap. Always feeling good they exist along with businessmen, which is what they get called even if women. Businessmen are straight-laced bankers and other sorts who never had a fantasy or desire to escape the office. It is their world of reality and fantasy. Genetically tuned to managing the ugly details in the running of a planet means they do what they are supposed to do. Though in a corrupt way.

The superiority of the Pinnacle City virtual setup was that I felt like I was in my real body. I hadn't asked for another. But it was my real body with a touch of super powers. That was apparent right away as I began to walk briskly to Carlsonbonner. He hadn't changed his looks either other than that his red hair was neater and his face metered out to be a touch more handsome. The amazing scenery back-dropping him had its effect. Thor was a clean outfitted cop but in a setting of transparent walkways that twisted above a faceted web that existed below. Coming up beside him I walked with him down the wide main walkway, with fear of heights giving me a tingle, as the flooring was see-through to a big drop to the honeycomb below. A monster of a metal gateway rippled with red tints ahead and on entering it, I felt some unknown force sucking at me.

We entered a tomb-like room and number of oblong copper-red doors automatically whooshed open. Some had weird control panels inside, others equipment.

Thor spoke as we entered one. "This area is set up for my security use. Security entry to the system is rarely used. Few people have been through this way. My security men, McGettigan's tech crews, and some others that aid me."

"What's your usual reason for entry?"

"We have pursued criminals here and sometimes it is to bring people back at the request of family members or because they have to testify before the Board and are trying to escape it."

"Why wouldn't you just grab the offender's real body?"

"Things have changed over the years. Today it is impossible to know how many people are simply underground. Those who disconnected. This is superior technology. With the old stuff out there in the city, the addict will eventually perish unless he makes frequent returns to his actual body. Here the body can waste away and even die, leaving the person uploaded to this level and existing as an entity here. Usually we get requests to pull people back from family members before they get that far."

"How would you do that?"

Thor opened a heavy vault door that had been sealed so tight to the wall I hadn't noticed it. "We have some special equipment in here," he said as he removed two heavy belts from a rack. The gun with the web-like pattern is the Net Gun. Each one of those millions of facets you saw below on entry is a person's private

world. We can enter those, use a tracker and net the individual for a pull back to his body. Alternatively, if the body is dead, temporarily back to a blank cloned body. That would be where we need someone who has attempted to escape testifying by dumping his body to death and hiding here. Addicts are also periodically pulled back. But for most of this stuff, we have automated systems to do it. We rarely enter due to privacy concerns. Most common reason is to force a reconnect with the body before a split develops. We force a reconnect after a long-term disconnect and the human brain will seize its soul, so to speak, preventing the person from re-entering the system for a period of time.”

We were both outfitted with the under-the-jacket belts when Thor said, “You still haven’t told me what you are looking for in here?” And I realized that the whole setup made it nearly impossible to look for anything. If those facets below were entries to entire worlds, where would I start? McGettigan’s key, patched into my skin back at my body, was supposed to feed through so I could find the world of this Parker Colpitts guy, but I didn’t want to tell Thor I was looking for him. An idea hit me for bullshitting Thor, one where maybe I could ditch him and do my own thing.

“I told you about Skitch Rocco. He’s a suspect still. I’d like to look at his fantasy world, and there’s Penrose Pool, the wealthiest Board member. Stone suspects the killings could be a power play by him. Show me how to go in and we’ll split up for say a couple hours. I’ll check Skitch and you do a tap on this Penrose guy.”

Thor seemed to warm to the idea. “Better that I do Pool,” he said. “You’re talking high security there. He could file a complaint.”

My gut feeling was that a look at Skitch Rocco’s fantasy world was something Thor couldn’t stomach. Neither could I but I didn’t plan on going there. “Okay,” I said. “Give me the nuts and bolts. How do I enter and get back out?”

Rather than reply he waved me along as we went through another opening door. This one leading to a large misted area with a high oval ceiling. The far wall of this room was imprinted with an octagonal window about 15 feet high and wide. There was no glass in it, but only mist. It appeared the room itself was humid and misty due to wisps constantly escaping from it.

“This is the entry window,” Thor said as he pulled a flat piece from the belt and expanded it. “Type a floor number into this and the residents list comes in the background. Pick a resident and address in proximity of this window and it will open a way into his virtual space. You can also just speak the resident’s name or unit address. A couple other things you need to know. The gun with the star pattern in your belt is the common weapon, meaning it will alter to the standard weapon used in a particular world. The other wand-like object in the belt is your key out; it will locate an exit point. Lose it and you will be stuck inside someone’s world and we’ll have to send a man in to grab you.”

“It’s amazing how simple it is. Let me do a test here. I will simply type in your name and the fourth floor.” As fast as I did that, the mist in the octagonal window became a liquid sort of mirror. A view of some type of city showed beyond it.”

Thor gave me a toothy grin. “Amazing isn’t it.”

“It certainly is,” I said, and then before he could respond I took a quick step up and went through.”

My feet were immediately on the pavement in Thor Carlsonbonner’s premier fantasy life. I was on a city sidewalk, a sunny day, but everything was short of color – too much black and white, a sort of noir world. I knew Carlsonbonner would be momentarily stunned but in about five seconds he’d be through and after me. Luck was in the cards as a Checker taxi was right on the curb. Getting in I yelled ‘drive!’ and the cabby did so just in time because Thor was already through and banging on the car door.

He spun around and cursed as we raced into traffic and he foolishly started chasing us on foot; or not so foolishly because in this world he could run nearly as fast as the car and the driver had to hit the gas and pass a couple other cars.

Ignoring the cabby’s demand for a destination I quickly checked a few things. The belt was under my jacket and I had the wand key, the web-patterned grabber gun and two other guns. One was a snub-nosed revolver marked with a star or the standard weapon in Thor’s world. I also had my own weapon, a longer-range shooter and that meant the skin patch from my body in the outside world was working. Clenching my fists I shook them and looked at the back of my wrists; the two skin patches lit up. The left being a feed of

McGettigan's key and the right the data connection through to my own body and through it to my home office. So fortunately, I was really hooked to both worlds though on a very thin strand that could be easily broken.

I looked up and saw the cabby slowing to pull over and dump me. Then I spoke. "Listen, don't pull over. That big guy is chasing me. I want to be sure we've shaken him, then I'll pick a drop."

Driving with one hand the cabby pulled his hat off, revealing thick locks of tousled light hair. He turned and stared at me; a tough-guy cabby face and freckled. "Listen pal, you might be able to shake that guy for a while. But in the end, you'll get blasted. You're running from the police chief."

Shit, I knew he was right. I remembered seeing him banging on the car. His security uniform had changed to a police thing. It was time for a study of my surroundings. The cars had names like Buick and Nash and that classic look of smooth curves to the body. Buildings were square stone and brick, many with metal fire escapes hanging at street side. I looked at my own suit and took off my hat. The outfit was tailored nicely, but in a style that was long before my time. Outside the rest of the grey world slipped by with people that in my mind were maybe Chicago or New York, 1940s. We passed a club with some hoods and hot ladies out front. It was a different world and one where nearly everyone wore a hat or cap of some kind.

If anything, Carlsonbonner was cleared by this. A guy that fancied himself an old-style police chief wouldn't be into murdering a gang of Board members. He was supposed to be gay but there sure wasn't anything to indicate that in this world. So my best bet for now was to escape it and get through with the patch to the domain of that Parker Colpitts guy.

It occurred to me that Chief Carlsonbonner would have a radio call out on me by now. A neighborhood bar was ahead so I told the cabby to pull over. Amazingly, I had a fat wallet and money in my pocket so I tipped him big and instructed him to drive off down an alley and wait.

The name of the place was McSorley's Pour House. I must've looked standard in that setting because not a head turned as I walked up to the front doors. Instead, my head turned, because something even darker than the gloom in that town caught my eye. A lady and the only one without a hat pinned to her head. That ghost again with the long dark hair; pale as ivory she was especially beautiful in this noir setting. She was up the street and this time she waved at me, or not at me but gestured to point out a building up the street. A tall one with a lightning rod at the top.

A police car came crawling around the corner; she disappeared into the crowd like the ghost she was and I hurried into McSorleys.

The place was a real Irish bar. Old style all right and in the daytime not populated by dancing ladies but by Irish gangsters. Tracing it back I would be more Scottish than Irish but look rough enough to pass in that gang. Guys that are well dressed but in spite of it look mean and rough edged.

Harsh sunlight beamed in one window creating one bright area in an otherwise dark sepia atmosphere created by dark mahogany paneling and dim booths along the north wall. The walking took me straight through a blue cloud of cigarette smoke to the bar. That's where I went because I didn't want to pause, as my eyes hadn't adjusted. Four men were at it. Three were gangsters, two of them real Irish, but the fourth man who looked like the boss also looked like the reincarnation of Al Capone, with a wide band on his hat and lips and face about as fat. I sat down and before I got a chance to speak Big Al did. "You must be Ace. It's about time. We've waiting for you for two days now."

Gathering that they had me pegged for an out-of-town hitter I thought it best to play along. "Don't sweat it. I got delayed, but I'm ready to work." Turning to the roly-poly bartender, I ordered a double of Jameson and waited while he polished a rock glass with a cloth dirtier than it. Then I said, "Looks like I will be starting here."

Al took a deep pull on his cigarette and gave me a severe look. "Yeah, one of them is over there. But rules are no shooting in here."

"You better tell the cops and that crazy police chief that."

"Huh."

"They got this place staked out. It'll probably be a raid. I saw them just as I arrived. It was too late for me to do anything but walk in. Looks like the chief is out to burn you."

"That shit Carlsonbonner. We had a deal." He suddenly stood up and waved. A gang of mobsters came up and did a half circle of the bar. Al spoke quickly. "Coppers are gonna raid the place. Get a lookout at that window. Look out for Carlsonbonner. He double-crossed us."

Rather than wait I answered the call and hurried over. Peeking around an interior shutter, I got a view of the street. They were off to the left; Thor Carlsonbonner and an undercover squad dressed pretty much like more gangsters and armed with automatic weapons. One of the shooters caught me glancing out and opened fire. The power of his gun was a shocker. He missed me but created an implosion of bullets and glass that hit two men at a nearby table like the mailed fist of whatever Godzilla existed back then. The whole place froze in time for a second while the two bodies and their table were thrown through a flying shredder.

The next few seconds, I knew, would be the end of McSorleys and everyone in it. It wasn't just a minor raid. Carlsonbonner was trying to blow me away completely. I saw gangsters flying into action all over the bar, pulling out their guns and overturning tables as they moved. In the commotion I still managed to hear footsteps outside as the squad of shooters hurried closer, but I didn't hear the six steps I took as I turned, ran into the room and jumped.

I'd noticed on entry that the place had a fairly high beam ceiling, and that's where I went with a leap up to the big hook holding a lamp fixture, then using my momentum and a table top to swing my legs up so that I was glued to the beam up there.

A skull-knocking opera of gunfire followed, though the theme was all percussion and the high notes of ricochets combined with shouts, gasps and final moaning. I turned my head to glance down through this and saw my hat float down as two expanding flowers of blood and splinters flew past it. It landed on the chest of a body that rolled neatly over under it. The massacre simply took out nearly everyone, including most of the cops outside. But weapons were still firing and I saw why. Big Al had miraculously got behind the bar and pulled out a Thompson sub-machine gun. He was letting it unload, and holding back the remaining cops. I assumed Carlsonbonner would be one of them.

Across at the far side I saw the whale-big body of the bartender wedging open a side door. Apparently he'd tried to escape and failed. Fortunately in the chaos I'd been forgotten and after a few seconds Al went down rather glamorously as huge blood spatters flew from his head and chest. I took the momentary lull as my queue, swung out, and landed near the open side door. I slammed through and turned, barely escaping more bullets as they ripped up the wall across from me.

The cops had raided the front so fast they hadn't bothered with the back. The alley there was clear and the Checker cab, now alerted to the gunfire, was taking off, but driving right for me as it did. I waved him down and got in. The driver squealed off right away but didn't get far; we came out of the alley in range of the remaining cops and one of them took out my driver with an accurate sniper shot, leaving me in a vehicle headed for a run up the sidewalk. I managed to hold the wheel and push his foot off the pedal, but the vehicle fishtailed and swung completely around to skate against the wall. I got out and spun about, firing both guns, causing the cops and Carlsonbonner to duck away. Then I kicked out a window and dived inside the building. As I did, something came clear in my memory - the ghost. Now I got her message and what she'd been pointing out.

Bullets raked the floor behind me, speeding my dash through to the back. There I began to bound up one of zigzag metal fire escapes to the roof and had more bullets ricocheting around me before I got there. I went over the edge with shots winging my hair and kept running. The sunshine was like a spotlight up there and I ran and went over the edge on a jump to the next building. You were supposed to be able to fly if necessary in all created worlds here but Carlsonbonner had that limited to long jumps. Without them I would not have made it.

Carlsonbonner and three of his undercover men got to the top and in close pursuit. I took cover behind a chimney and smoked two of them with my own gun, still amazed at the power of weapons in this world as the targets were taken out like they were meteor struck. The tallest building and the lightning rod were just ahead and a long leap took me to an outside fire escape on it. Carlsonbonner's bullets ripped away metal

just below my feet but I was a fast monkey and he was a bad shot. Good thing for me he was a security chief and not a real action copper who could use a gun.

His final shots were over my head then he had to reload. Brick powder from his shots showered me as I reached the top then I ran for the lightning rod and pulled out the wand from my belt. It worked, I never reached the rod but more like became the lightning and a second later came out through the mist of the transfer window.

Thor Carlsonbonner would be through in a minute and I didn't have time to speculate as to why he was trying to kill me in the virtual. That would be a problem because such a kill puts the homebody in shock for a day. It would give Thor time to work on a way of erasing me physically without being caught, if that was his intention.

This time I didn't input a name and floor and unit but the long code McGettigan had patched to me. There was no option other than manual input, my fingers were flying, and I hoped accurate. Carlsonbonner flew through the mist and landed on his feet next to me as I finished. I didn't wait to talk with him but hopped through again. This time to a completely different place as Parker Colpitts was a vendor not a dreamer; he sold his fantasy world or versions of it to others, so I had no idea what it would be. Carlsonbonner wouldn't be able to follow me so I was on my own, which was better considering the circumstances. They were weird and I wasn't coming out anywhere immediately. Instead, colored mist spun around me and I wondered about Thor. There was nothing incriminating in his fantasy world so I couldn't figure out why he was trying to hit me in here unless the whole deal of setting him up had been a ruse and what Stone really wanted was for him to get me out of the way.

I came to ground in a bright flash that was like the sudden arrival of reality. There was the immediate feeling that this was a higher world than the one Carlsonbonner owned. Just something in the essence of it that couldn't quite be described. It was also bright and dark like the noir world but in a different way. I wasn't in a city. I was standing on a dock at the end of an inlet and the clothes I had on were one of my usual outfits. Almost like I was in the real world but some remote part of it. I could see the inlet stretching out to a lake, a distant river mouth and a boat sailing away as though it had just dropped me off. The water was a deep emerald hue and sinister, beneath its jeweled flashes of light was the feeling that something big, ugly and hungry might be swimming. The dock was composed of rich grained wood that was far too valuable for such a purpose. And the dock was just there at the end of the road that emerged from deep deciduous forest. A jungle of sorts that was northern in style but looked as formidable as something in South America. The only option appeared to be to walk up that road and see what it led to, but before taking any steps, I took stock of the situation.

Thor Carlsonbonner wouldn't be able to come through after me because he didn't have the key but he would be attempting to track where I went. The information I had on Parker Colpitts was that he was a Board member, one of three for the virtual level. One of the others had been murdered. Colpitts though, was the one wielding the power. He appeared at Board meetings as a hologram. No one knew where his actual body was hidden in Pinnacle City. The background information contained nothing about his virtual world except that it would be more than that – more than a facet world like the users had because he was a vendor, apparently the largest of the group because he controlled the floor's Board votes. He sold some sort of services, enhancements or creations to residents. What they were no one said. He was an unmentionable pariah in McGettigan's opinion and a mad pervert in Skitch Rocco's. It would be something ugly if Skitch thought he was a perv. But that all meant little to me because it was a case where he was the next step on the rungs up to the top. There was no way I could go around him.

Bizarre calculations on the case and motives began to pass through my mind. This seemed to be a world where one got lost in thoughts and dreams rather quickly. While I was thinking something huge and black, a bird of some wicked variety circled out in the water and passed down toward the distant boat. Immediately convinced that staying out in the open on a dock might not be healthy I headed over to the road.

The road was initially quite wide and clear but not paved; rather it had a gravel coating everywhere that had become embedded in the earth to form a smooth surface. Like the wood of the dock, the gravel had a rich appearance. Many gem-like colors including gold that gave the sense of walking in a Midas domain. But the forest was dark and brooding. The bright sun, high into the late afternoon sky, did not seem to penetrate except for huge beams cutting through here and there. Those beams were dust or spore filled and like

probes from some searchlights of the gods above. Huge butterflies flitted through the light and sometimes over the road and as I walked farther on the trail narrowed and the forest strengthened to tower above me at the roadside. There was scarcely any ditch or side grass but a near straight transition into unknown layers of foliage, vines and trees. This did not bother me at first but after about a kilometer the kinder odors of flowers, leaves and grass got overpowered by the rotting smell of bogs or some dead things deeper in, and I could see patches of fog, some yellow hued like a miasma. Birds and calls followed and they were positively evil and long in the notes. Like the black bird that had suddenly swooped above the waters, black things, though smaller, began to swoop in the trees. They were larger than ordinary birds, sometimes they seemed like monkeys leaping, and I heard cries that were like an odd form of laughter.

Though the road was not overgrown in any place, it did not seem at all traveled and I encountered no one. I certainly did have the feeling of leading a procession. I kept looking back to see if anything was following me on the road and concluded I was being followed but off in the forests to the side. Or maybe not followed but some hidden creatures were flitting here and there right beside me, headed to whatever destination I would end up at.

That became another narrowing until I was on a path. Again the same beaten stones but in softer black earth and I could see now see a backdrop in the distance. It was a mountain and I began to consider running or seeing if I could fly here if the journey was going to be a long one to a distant mountain. Before I could do that, something flew across the path a ways in front of me. It gave me a start, and I drew my weapon as I halted.

The starred weapon was a blaster of sorts in this world, and I didn't know if I wanted to use it on what I had just seen. The thing that had flown over the road was like a large fairy or the prissy version of a cherub where it was like a winged child or baby. Except that the face on this gossamer winged cutie had been evil in intent and fanged with eyes that were stark and cruel.

It was a winding path and even on straight portions sprays of branches and higher creepers obscured much of the view. A haze of light filtered through so I could always see on the path, but sight didn't provide much relief as long as I could hear wings beating above and see dark shadows racing through both the underbrush and trees. Wherever I was headed an escort was moving along with me. That place turned out to be a broad clearing.

I stood at the end of the path; bright light lit the area. It was a meadow with the grass long and clumped like huge heads of hair flowing all in one direction away from me. Flowers with red blossoms grew here and there but what caught my eye was the far end. The path went through to it and there back-dropped by trees as large as ancient redwoods I saw two large idols standing to either side of a throne. The idols were impressive in height and effect. Two were huge winged lions carved out of material that was golden red in color. These beasts were thick and squat with pug faces and fierce eyes. A touch of their fangs showing.

It remained dead silent for some time and I didn't move either. It appeared my escorts had stopped as I had stopped. I kept my ears open for anything moving up behind. Nothing did show and it appeared if anything were to happen, I would have to make it happen. I did that by simply breaking out into a run through the clearing.

If it was a plan, it certainly worked, and if it was a plan, it was a smart one. Because they appeared then, coming over the trees and out of them from all directions. Probably thirty of the nasty-faced cherubs, and they were winging me. The beasts that had been moving through the trees also came out and they were living versions of the golden lion idols on the far side of the clearing. They didn't attack but moved up stealthily. At about three times the size of a house cat, I pegged them as dangerous, but they were also wary and did not appear hungry. They had an intelligent look and didn't seem quite certain about what to do.

The cherubs had no such problem; the mean-eyed things kept buzzing closer and I could see their fangs and the nasty intent on their plump little faces. Naturally, I threatened them with the gun and finally one came too close so I blasted it with a kick ray and knocked it for a loop through the air. The small lions paced closer on that and halted again, and then the rest of the wicked gnats began doing kamikaze runs on me, leaving me doing a fast dance in the clearing, my coat flying as I continued to bounce them away.

I was about ready to switch to kill mode when brilliant light flashed over by the idols. This caused the cherubs to fly over there and the lions to follow, pacing through the grass.

I did the same though at a much slower pace and a minute later I was at the end of the path facing a strange person ... or should I say being, standing out front of the throne. The group of cherubs continued to buzz about but the lions sat on their haunches and watched with some interest on their faces.

I found myself facing a man or a devil, depending on how you looked at it. It was a tacky scene to say the least. He was slim and attractive, young white face and small beard, but wearing a full form-fitting body suit of bright red and he had antlers. These antlers were slim and twisted off to points. Strangely, he looked quite eloquent in spite of the tacky dress. He held a scepter and was in fact nearly the picture of those old drawings and paintings that depict the devil or Satan as a red character.

His scepter glowed with a fire jewel at the top. It was me that spoke first. "I didn't come here looking for the devil," I said. "I'm looking for a man named Parker."

The man's eyes flashed with evil and lust. The cherubs buzzed about angrily. "How dare you say that name here! How dare you even come here! There is no Parker here. You have invaded the domain of the great god Pan!"

Pan ... the mention of the name and I got it. He was no Pan. He was Parker Colpitts. Whatever research he'd used to recreate himself as a god was backwards. The old red devil character had in fact been a middle-ages attempt to depict Satan, only they used the image of the old god of perversion named Pan. The horns and so on. But the Pan I remembered was supposed to have goat legs. He did of course have power over animals as a forest demon god. He had no cherubs. Cherubs originally being the mighty winged Biblical beings under God's throne. Like Satan, who was a powerful heavenly being, thrown to earth, ancient artists bastardized the cherubs. Mostly cherubs got portrayed as flying naked babies and children. Parker's cherubs were a vampire version of that. Flying naked vampire children with gossamer wings and hellish eyes.

"Cut the crap. I came here to see Parker Colpitts and you are him."

His eyes blazed, his scepter shot up a blast of smoke. The small lions roared. And I backed off some. "No one has ever invaded my privacy here. That is a death sentence."

"Really," I said, but I was more frightened than I looked because his cherubs were now flying a wide circle above him like they were about to break and attack. I knew I could blast a number of them but if they all attacked and the lions too I'd be in for a losing fight.

Only one cherub broke loose and did a run on me. This time I shot to kill, going to one knee and turning it into a flaming winged meteor that arced over my head and shot off into the trees.

Pan or Colpitts, whatever he was, got me by surprise by tilting his scepter forward and releasing a blast of light. It blinded me but before it hit I knew he'd released more than light. He'd hit me with a flying net that wrapped me up and put me down. Since Carlsonbonner had given me a net gun as a piece of equipment that could capture rogue residents on this level, I could only assume that Colpitts had something even more potent.

My vision cleared; I was down in the grass circled by the lions. The cherubs were now buzzing with happy wings and coos as their gossamer wings patterned a blurred oval out of their flight above me. Parker was hurrying through the grass to me. He still had his scepter and waved it over me when he reached me, then he did something completely nuts and started dancing in a circle around me. Like his cherubs, he was singing a crazy tune and whistling and I began to think of him more as a demented Peter Pan than any god named Pan.

He stopped suddenly; a serious expression painted his face. He decided to address me. "Who sent you here? No one comes here."

Buying time was a good idea as I couldn't struggle loose of the sticky net. "The Board hired me. It is about killings of Board members."

At that his eyes ignited, his brow grew stormy. "The bastards. They sent you here to kill me, didn't they? Well, they'll get their due just like you'll get yours."

"No one sent me here to kill you. Skitch Rocco gave me your name."

"Skitch Rocco. I heard they finished him."

"He's still around and he's more your kind of guy now. Look, I'm a detective. Jack Michaels is my name. The Board put me on a hush-hush investigation of the killings, but in this crazy place I can't make any progress on the case. All I got is that Skitch said you might have an idea."

"Perchance I do. I also have another idea. That is to put an end to you. No choice actually. No one is allowed access here and you discovered a way in."

"So what if I know. I have no plans on returning here. I don't even know what you do. You sell fantasies, enhancements, or whatever. Why should I care if you dreamed up those creepy cherubs and hang out here?"

"How dare you insult my babies or call them dreams. They're real children I'll have you know."

"You mean you hooked real children into this web and have them flying around here as naked vampires?"

"Of course, what a stupid question. It goes with the services I sell."

"Now I see why no one wants to mention your name. You're a child-sex perv. The king of them."

"Aren't we moral, and that's god not king. Those accusations certainly won't do. My babies will have to teach you proper manners Mr. Michaels. First, I must get the wine and you'll drink up. The effects are exquisite. You'll be floating on a pleasurable cloud. You'll moan with ecstasy as my baby boys penetrate your every orifice, and my little girls drink your blood, eat your flesh and torment you. You won't be returning to trouble us, because when we're through you'll be completely mad."

At that, he laughed wickedly and I struggled fiercely, but the net only pulled tighter, and one of Colpitt's babies didn't bother to wait for the wine but fluttered down and sank her teeth into my shoulder. Blood spurted and I yelled as the bite hit some nerves, then I gave her a taste of her own wickedness by turning my head and snapping at her arm. The bite tore some skin and she yipped and fluttered off.

Parker Colpitts paid no attention to this as he was busy playing Pan the fairy, his step almost as light as a skip as he made his way to an altar by one of the idols and poured out a golden goblet of wine. The cats remained in a neat semi-circle in the grass and though their eyes flamed they appeared to be only guards and not to be about to take part in the feeding on my flesh. The cherubs were buzzing angrily now as their wings had some method of conveying emotion in the brand of flutter. The bitten one had flown off to the trees leaving the others cautious. Patience they could afford as they knew I wouldn't be able to resist once drugged. If the females were hungry, I saw two males flutter dangerously close, but with barbed, erect penises.

Colpitts was on his way back, glowing scepter in one hand and the wine goblet in the other. He looked thrilled about the whole deal. He walked up smartly with a grin on his face.

"This is so perfect," he said. "I never get to kill the paying customers. But you didn't pay and weren't invited."

"Anyone that would pay for your revolting services must be nuts."

"Not so. The customer base is large. There are many services, many weirder than weird fantasies to provide for. But my babies here are my little family, and we dislike having our nest invaded."

"But you can't kill me. I have the authority of the Board, and this place isn't real either."

"Hah. The Board is nothing to me. They can't even keep themselves alive. None of them would dare oppose me. Nearly all of them use my services. They wouldn't want their nasty little secrets to get out in public, would they? So it's time to drink the good stuff Jack, the fun is about to begin."

Colpitts went down on one knee as he attempted to keep holding his scepter in one hand and reach over to pour poison wine on my lips with the other. I tightened my lips, assuming that even a drop of it would be deadly, but Colpitts never got to pour it. Unexpectedly the sky darkened via a flash to the negative. The ground shook. The goblet fell from his hand to the grass. He ended up on both knees supporting himself by planting the scepter in front of him.

The short quake ended, the gloom remained, and Colpitts looked about as though he expected an attack. Then I saw a bright oval orb of white light up at the tree line and the ghost. She was beautiful as before and a full woman, but winged like an angel as though she'd adapted herself to Colpitts' home world. At the sight of her, the small lions howled and ran back toward the idol. The cherubs flowed up in the air in a column then dispersed as they raced off to the far tree line and disappeared in the foliage.

"Oh darn," Colpitts said nasally. "That horrid ghost woman is going to spoil my fun again."

Getting up he began to stumble toward the idol but he didn't make it. The ghost woman floated in to him on wings and mist. On reaching him she seized the jeweled top of his scepter. Light flashed like an exploding star and I was blinded again. A minute passed and when my vision cleared she was gone. Only Parker Colpitts remained. He was sitting on the ground over by the lion idols, his scepter fallen at his side with its jewel-top dimmed.

The net he'd blasted around me broke away like rotten rope. A glance around then I was up and running and before I got to him I had the net gun out. Suddenly realizing what I was up to, he reached for his scepter, but my shot was already out and the net floated in smoothly and wrapped him up. His cherubs showed, buzzing in a circle near the tree line and the lions had crept up nearby in the grass, but they appeared to be only fearfully observing now and not planning an attack.

"Got you Colpitts. If you don't cooperate it'll mean I take you in."

"No, you can't do that," he pleaded. "I've barely been in my body for years. A sudden unplanned reunion could kill me."

At that point, I was looking over the settings of the net gun. I ran my finger on a slider and the net squeezed tight on him and made him squeal. Then, for a moment, the Parker Colpitts I'd been seeing vanished and I saw a vision of another – the real Colpitts, his emaciated body and aging withered face pinioned in a web of connections pinching his skin from his toes to his temples. The eyes were staring and horrible, and fortunately dreaming this world rather than the one he was really in.

"You were going to torment me with those horrid babies of yours, Colpitts. Why should I do any better for you? You're a monster; those cherub things of yours are real children and you turned them into demons. I ought to erase you right now."

"Hah," Colpitts said, retaining some arrogance. "What difference do you think it would make. The Board would have a replacement for me within a week. I'm only a supplier; it's the Pinnacle City public that demands the perversions. They're always hungry for more. It's the only way to break the rules in this place."

"Unfortunately you're probably right. But you'll answer my questions or it'll be over for you. First question is who was that woman? Who is that ghost? I've been seeing her everywhere."

"She is no one. I mean technically. She was at one time Lisha Yanch, the first President of the Board. She couldn't do the job or bear the secrets of this place. Lisha Yanch killed herself and uploaded her mind to this level in a fantasy world."

"Yeah, well. I see her all around the building. I thought this level was contained?"

"Used to be. Now there are ghosts everywhere. It has been like that since the building intelligence, Adam 1X, got disturbed. There is leakage of stuff on all levels and crossovers of reality. Ghosts everywhere."

"Skitch Rocco said I had to see you for a step up. Give me the map. The one with the route to the top floor."

"Top floor. You came for that. Sure I can give it to you ... it's the same as giving you a poison apple. I mean, if you figure out how to read it and actually try to go up there. No one even knows who or what is there except that they'll kill you long before you even get there. Sooner or later they'll kill me too, if it is them behind the killings. Whoever it is has to be really powerful. Not a clue so far that panned out to anything. And the killings are so effective I would admire whoever is behind them if I weren't possibly a target myself."

"You were never much of a suspect in my mind. It has been like someone wanted to lead me to you to disturb and distract me. Or was perhaps hoping I would meet my end in corruption or death here. So I will be leaving you. My advice is exit this place and perversion. Leave them to appoint someone else to manage the sickness of the population."

"You aren't one of them and don't understand the Board. They would kill me right away if any moral compunction came to the fore. They have none and they would replace me quick if I left. Only I can't leave; they would never authorize it."

"You are right that they don't like retirement, just ask Thor Carlsonbonner. Speaking of him, he tried to erase me, too. So I will be dealing with him shortly."

"Ah, Thor Carlsonbonner ... I checked him out before because he purchased no sexual services. His dreams are something else and those filthy Board members are all having gay sex with him in the real world. Watch out for him. He's somehow involved in the killings. I have that feeling."

"I have the feeling you may be right."

"Okay, take the map if you want, but I think it leads to a place in the Market. Doesn't take you direct to the top but to some other key you need."

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Parker Colpitts delivered the map and I reached the exit point. It was time to get out of the pervo jungle. The cherubs spun nearby and many more appeared from the trees. Their buzzing wings whispered a strange goodbye and their fangs could have been called almost preferable to what I was about to face, which was Carlsonbonner at the octagonal window.

He was there when I arrived. He'd either searched and returned or simply waited. It was like I had been thrown through endless smoke rings of mist to suddenly snap on my feet before him and he had a new weapon in his hands. Not a net gun but an energy weapon that shrunk me to half his size as he pulled a portable net from his jacket pocket.

He relied on fear, that my quick short stature would leave me disarmed. But he made a mistake. Because I spoke saying, "I assume Stone Sangalang had this in mind all along."

He laughed and it was a foolish victory laugh. "Stone Sangalang," he repeated jovially.

But he didn't look behind him as he said it and I saw the mist spin and even in my tiny state I knew what it meant and raced through Carlsonbonner's legs. It was like the most humiliating moment of my life for some reason. Being a tall man I'd never expected to be an elf. It brought pride home like a rocket coming in to destroy my virility, but the shame ended as I went through the window and became my regular size while falling.

I landed in Stone Sangalang's fantasy world or shell, finding myself in a grey blank. Like an empty desert that stretched off to infinity. It was nothing. It was unformed. Stone Sangalang had no fantasy world; except that I was in it and knew Thor Carlsonbonner was coming in to join me in this nowhere. There would be no place to hide.

Rather than think, I acted, and did a fast draw on the net gun, and as Carlsonbonner came tumbling out from nothing to nowhere nearby I fired on him. The net gloved him neatly and he got balled up as he rolled. But it wasn't holding; his arms were tearing away sections of the webbing. Before he could get completely free, I dived in on him and pulled his net gun out of his belt.

I wanted to get into a position to fire but he had speed, shaking off the loose webbing and going for his weapon as he charged. His attack was skewed but hit me, sending the web gun flying, and then he was spinning around for a shot at me. A blast of white heat ripped skin off my left shoulder and I spun, fell and rolled. Drawing my own gun and blasting him as I did.

He was somewhat impervious. In this nothing world he was dressed exactly as security boss Carlsonbonner, but his powers were still superhuman to an extent. His hair stood up electrified as I nailed him with a power blast. He was knocked back some but not stopped. He got me by surprise by not firing his gun but throwing it hard so it bounced off my temple and knocked me to my knees. Another charge and he was on me like a mean bear, almost tearing my right arm from its socket. I fought back and it turned into a desperate wrestling match in the dirt. Carlsonbonner, in his zeal to rip me apart, forgot about his own net gun, while I tried to move the fighting in its direction.

He pinned me down, his spittle on me as I gazed up at a swirl of grey and dust that was the sky. Thor was choking me now, but opportunity came when he drew back for a hard blow. He intended to punch my lights out but I moved my head and got loose as he plowed knuckles into the dirt. Doing a roll, I got his net gun, swung up and blasted him, and this time when the web was locked in I fired again, getting a double lock on him.

Carlsonbonner was balled up on the ground and I took a minute to dust myself off and soothe my wounded shoulder. Then I went over, rolled him up in a squat position, and sat in the dirt a ways from him.

The tightened netting distorted his face and he was still grimacing along with it. He looked totally foolish. My fast thinking had been correct in that he had armed himself with the more powerful net gun to take me down. But why was he so angry? It was time for an interview.

“Thor, are you nuts or something. When I went into your fantasy world, you were cleared. You didn’t fit the profile of a killer until you decided to profile yourself.”

“No. I wasn’t cleared. I was convicted. Because you’ll tell Stone Sangalang and the Board about my world and spoil my retirement.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“My plan has always been to build that world and spend more time there. Especially since they don’t want to let me leave Pinnacle City in any retirement. Once they find out they’ll destroy my world to spur me to spend my time on the job. That’s why I’m starting to hate this place. Everyone else they want to kill but they want me to live forever as security chief.”

“So, you have information that the Board is doing the killings of its own members?”

“No. But I assume it’s one or some of them. Maybe in collaboration with the top floor.”

“What’s on the top floor now?”

“Don’t know. Never did. Except that it changed a year ago. I have access to some raw security reads. Not surveillance. Something tremendously powerful is up there. I mean it is more powerful than it used to be.”

“Why were you protecting Colpitts? Trying to get me for visiting him?”

“I was doing my job. Stone and pretty much the whole Board prohibit any access to Colpitts.”

“Yeah. Colpitts and Skitch say the same thing. Some big changes took place here not so long ago. All sorts of strange things are happening in this building. That virtual level isn’t even contained. There are ghosts of dead people in this building. People that uploaded themselves there initially.”

“More than that. There have been disasters everywhere. Bigger ones than they told you about. The Board isn’t just looking for a killer. They brought you in figuring if you got to the bottom of that the source of the other problems would be there too.”

“Okay, that’s what we’re working on now. You’re going to help me read a map. The Board won’t be told anything about your fantasy world. Also, it won’t be mentioned that Stone Sangalang has a blank one. He’s not to know what we did here.”

“Do you think his blank world is of any significance?”

“Possibly. But he’s an elder and tied to the real world. Maybe his fantasy is the life he’s living.”

## **Chapter Four: The Market**

Two days passed before the arranged meeting with Stone Sangalang up on the eightieth floor in a public area. It was the VIP Lake, a large indoor body of water. The setting was pseudo outdoor with a golf course, false sun and breeze ... the whole deal. It wasn’t exactly the eightieth floor but the south section of it, which stretched up four floors as a huge lakeside sculpture, titled The Vortex spun up to the false sky. The Zenith Hotel by the lake also rose four floors for a portion and it was ultra glamorous. Another of those areas in the

class structure of the city where only certain people could get in. Thor Carlsonbonner accompanied me and as I walked down the lakeside walk with him, I noticed the glances we picked up. People here clearly thought of Carlsonbonner as not a member but more a staff person that unfortunately had to be allowed in. When the glances shifted to me, it was more like they weren't quite sure if I met the standard, though they seemed to peg me as one of them but with a problem where accompaniment by the security chief was required.

Stone had a table in the portion of patio that ran all the way out to the water's edge and he was dressed in casual clothing for once and accompanied by his secretary Barbi Carvalhana. Barbi was dressed in a tennis outfit, her blond hair was breeze blown and her tanned skin a bit sweat slick in the cool breeze, which meant she'd been playing. Stone though, was like a stone; he'd probably played with her and yet never worked up a sweat. He was too perfect all round but as a Board president I supposed that was an expected quality.

We sat down and I was introduced to Barbi. Thor waved over a waiter. He attended to me first, thinking I was of more importance. All I ordered was a martini, while I glanced with dislike at the fawning waiter. He wore one of those newer outfits where it fit too tight to the upper body and hips with sleeves and pant legs that flared out to loose. A sissy way of showing off a man's body.

I drew a lot of glances from people at other tables. The obvious reason being they all knew who Stone was and wondered who I might be. They were all out of ear shot so unless they read lips they didn't find out.

A lot of small talk followed and we only got down to some business when Barbi left to deal with some business calls. Her legs had a baked tone and I watched her walking by the water edge while Stone spoke.

Stone wasn't as cool in talk as he looked, but rather had some urgent things to mention. "We've had some quakes in the higher floors. Work crews and robot gangs stretched thin all over fixing structural damage. More emanations too, plus failures in numerous systems including power feeders. I better not find out Skitch Rocco is behind it."

"It's not him," Thor said. "That's settled and Sam McGettigan is seeing that their demands are being met. This is something bigger. Perhaps the killers are sending out another strong message or warning."

"Warning. Two Board members were murdered while you were off on a lark in the virtual level. Drake Cunningham got chopped to pieces by a cleaning robot, which is supposed to be impossible. It's also supposed to be impossible to get cooked in your own shower but that is exactly what happened to Shez Fady. What irks me most is that whoever it is just kills people and damages things. No message is sent with demands or what it is about."

Thor shrugged his shoulders. "We're following another lead. Sure it might be terrorism, but keep in mind that whoever it is lives here and relies on Pinnacle City. To destroy it would be self-destruction, so these can only be scare tactics."

"The scare tactics are working. The associations are demanding action and answers. We can't replace Board members overnight. Many of those positions are highly specialized. What's most frightening is the Toronto city government is demanding that we allow their police investigators inside. They've detected the anomalies here and are concerned. It will be over my dead body. We've never allowed them inside. We need results soon."

Finishing my drink, I put the glass down and took charge of the situation. "We have a new lead. A map we are decoding. We are making progress but this isn't a standard case, it has all sorts of twists and turns."

Stone took a slug of his own drink, raised his hand in a gesture of emphasis but never got to answer as Barbi came back to the table. "An urgent call just came in from Penrose Pool. He has a situation on the Rich Residential. He wants Thor up there to take a look at it."

Stone grimaced and looked at me. "Situation is Pool's term for another body. I want you to attend and look at the scene. I've had our forensics used on all the other scenes, yet we track nothing. Maybe there is something we're missing."

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Rich Residential wasn't far from where we were. Thor and I raced up, the whoosh of the elevator tube still in our ears when we arrived at the destination. It was a huge door arch and it was sealed like a vault. I'd been

led to believe that Thor was main security authority in the building but we ended up talking through a camera link to a security chief named Katz, who didn't want to let me through.

"Just open the damn door, Katz," Carlsonbonner said.

"That guy is not a member, Carlsonbonner. He can't come in."

"So it looked like I wouldn't get in, then Penrose Pool, your standard well-dressed chunkster of a middle-age white guy showed on the screen and a section of the vault door clicked away like puzzle pieces and allowed us entry.

Twenty minutes later we were standing at a scene of minor destruction. A hidden alcove had been discovered running off a large air-car port. The wall had crumbled suddenly and the inside was especially interesting. Penrose Pool, a sickened look on his face, refused to enter. Thor nearly turned green when he did, but I was excited at a possible clue and ignored the horror. Though there was a body it wasn't in that ripe stage that is unforgettable as far as the nostrils are concerned. It stank and was withered all right. And it was still planted in the indents in the slanted wall where it had been set up. Naked, emaciated and the skin a sickly grey, the person was very dead. His neck and his chest had been bitten and chewed like a vampire got to him. Half of the life support contacts and tubes were still connected with only key ones to the torso and brain ripped out. So it had been murder. I could see that someone blasted the section of wall and got inside to do it.

Thor spoke nasally as he was holding his nose. "Who in the hell would that be?"

"It's Parker Colpitts," I said. "Looks like he talked to the wrong person."

"Yes. That person was you. Say, some other things were connected in there with him. I count about thirty smaller bed indents, but the killers took the bodies of those things, whatever they were."

"They were children," I said. "And by the way, they aren't dead."

"What. Children! I'll have a search and rescue done for them."

"You better tell your personnel not to approach them and to stun them and cuff them when found."

"Why would we do that?"

"You have to report to the Board don't you. Well, let them know Colpitts' cherubs are on the loose. A bunch of small vampires. They killed him after someone blasted in and cut them loose. Most likely there will be a few more bodies to clean up. They may have other victims already."

Thor Carlsonbonner went from green to pale white, turned and stared at a rather stunned Penrose Pool. Then he got on the wire to Stone and hurried away.

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Colpitts' death didn't exactly break my heart and neither did the fact that Thor had to do some real work for a change. He put the place on high alert, which was no alert as far as the residents were concerned. Though there was now a genuine scare on Penrose Pool's level as a report immediately flashed in. The cherubs, now a dirty bunch of escaped and mostly naked kids, had torn up a couple people then somehow disappeared into the off-surveillance woodwork.

So the security news of the day became the horrible and unexplained deaths of a few snobs, and the fourth floor security command was sparsely populated while Carlsonbonner had every spare guard in on the building search. My time was booked with Junko Gold and we were in another of his investigative rooms working on the map. To read the map we had to spend time finding it on the object Colpitts had given me, which was a flat pane with some brand of cuneiform writing on an unknown substance. It passed from the virtual world as a speck that appeared in my eye and enlarged on removal. Junko used a chemical technique to enlarge it to about the size of a thumbnail. He was studying its image on a screen. An hour had yielded nothing and the map remained a mystery. The basic problem was that there were some strange symbols but they weren't a map and didn't translate to any known language or code.

Working with the flame-haired expert and listening to him mutter all the time through a British accent gave me a headache. But the difficulties actually worked in my favor as I needed to buy a little time. As he grew

deeply absorbed in his efforts, I bought myself a break saying I needed a snack. Once out in the open areas of the fourth floor I didn't head for any lounge to eat but rather one to relax in while I had another map play through in my head. That being the map of where I'd been taken for the white room visit to the virtual level.

Images of the fourth floor, areas I knew and others blacked out, settled in my brain. I saw it all aligning around the core and my own current position, then the position of that particular special area. The security overlay showed me what access was needed, which was nothing more than an alteration on the access fob Thor had already given me. I ran my tablet to set those codes as I moved in through doors and corridors. The few workers remaining on site did not question me as I walked from one area to another and finally through a door to the connect area. It was completely empty, not being in current use. The one thing I wanted was in the white room and that was the net. I'd already calculated that it did all the work, while the programming of the other equipment I could duplicate. Disabling the security feature on it, I left with it in my pocket and returned to the lab and Junko Gold.

I found him eating a sandwich and drinking a coffee while images flashed by lightning fast on the big screen. He was one those people who talks with a full mouth and he spoke saying. "I made a breakthrough. The symbols were not a map, the actual map I found hidden on a microscopic area of the piece. I'm running a scan on it but I don't know how long it will take."

I didn't get a chance to answer. The screen suddenly froze and a message scrolled by – Final Result Available.

I raised my eyebrows optimistically. "Ah, let me see," he said. "The map is in fact just a general map of the Market level of this complex."

"That's it. What in the hell use is that? It looks like Colpitts scammed me."

"Maybe – wait a second – got it."

As I watched, he did an overlay with a shrink of the symbols he previously thought meaningless. They weren't but laid out a route on the map."

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Back at my guest condo I had dinner and watched the Pinnacle City news channels. As usual the cat hovered over my shoulder and hopped down to swipe the last scraps off my plate. What passed for news in Pinnacle City was mostly celebrity stuff and though they never mentioned it those international stars featured were residents. Regular local news was plain propaganda with the only investigative story being speculation on the recent flurry of activity by security and recent deaths. One scene showed Thor Carlsonbonner and three of his men dashing valiantly across an open court, but the video was quickly blurred out when they reached the street running off the other side. A flash of weapons fire showed and then a grey blank.

Checking the news archives I noticed that the murders of Board members were never reported as that. But it was easy to draw up pages of quick photos of those that had been erased simply by tracking the obituaries. Sipping some ice water I flashed through more news, and felt generally disgusted. Out in the city the local news was gritty and phony, charged with blood, emotion, and scandal. All of those wonderful things that bring in subscribers. But at least there was news and you knew what was going on. Pinnacle City really had celebrity and world news only. There was some bad politics for viewing. You could actually watch recordings of some Board meetings if you could stay awake through them. And who would want to when the meetings made for public consumption were staged for that. The last article I looked at was the obit of Parker Colpitts. Already up, it showed a kindly photo of him and told a tale of his charity work with children and how he had lived as a recluse for the last several years. Colpitts was named an irreplaceable Board member. Really what it all meant here was that news passed through filters, and culture other than the virtual level's fantasies was real-life networking and events or social gatherings. To know what happened at any major event you had to have been there personally.

Regardless of that my plans for the evening didn't involve real life but a secret journey into the virtual worlds. I am perhaps a real life person as before doing any of that shit I always take a shower as though something is not quite clean about it. But in the modern world and Pinnacle City too, what is there that is clean. Everyone and everything is to some extent dirty. No one is really real – all are false in a number of ways ... many of them chemical or attachments and enhancements and transplants and plastic surgery. A long time

ago only the beautiful people were enhanced, today the ugly people have morphed into more forms than an army of space monsters.

I wore shorts only and sat back in an easy chair. Some masked communication with my office back in the city allowed me to set up a security perimeter with some lasers. Only my cat would be allowed to pass as this assignment was dangerous. After all, they'd just found Parker Colpitts' body and finished him. They could do the same to me. One advantage was in no one knowing my plans. There again a disadvantage would be that I was going in with nothing but the return wand. No special weapon or net gun as I hadn't swiped anything other than the contact net and patch that allowed wand use.

I wasn't in a white or black room so I wasn't sure if it would even work. It did but not in a nice way. Instead of a quick transport I went through ten minutes of nightmare. Ugly demonic hallucinations like the delirium of an alcoholic or withdrawal phases of an addict. I hated it but wasn't surprised by it since the technology altered the brain in ways never intended. I got there and in time my feet were planted on the archway and I walked along to the click-apart door. Pausing at the misty window I considered my actions. I was really breaking the rules as it wasn't really part of the investigation. Sort of following my own personal interest in a woman. Hunting a ghost.

The name I cracked and pursued was Lisha Yanch.

I hit the ground and stumbled. On getting up it took time to orient myself. The world I had arrived in didn't take any immediate reality but kept shifting through forms. I saw a forest, a lake, a city, and as soon as I appeared in them they vanished. It was like hallucinations rising in mist until all that all existed was some smoke of various realities. I caught the fragrance of it in my nostrils, not offensive but like wood smoke. As I walked I moved through vast smoldering ruins. A dark road wound deep into them and the ruins were of a city. It was ancient and tarnished and from a period of history beyond my education. Large collapsing structures of rectangular and cylindrical shapes in all shades of grey and narrow stony streets running off pedestrian ways into old alleyways vehicles had likely never entered. I heard a high wind and spine tingling sounds like bells or chimes carried on it. Ghostly whispers and words took shape in my mind and though I walked on the road it led nowhere but into an endless universe of these ruins. Figures were appearing in the distance but they were always moving quickly here and there nearly out of sight and were like shadows or ghosts. It was like I was hearing their haunted voices in a PSI way. Yet their haunted whispers didn't really say anything but were more a voice of the lost, like they'd lost their language, the meanings, and the form of being. Not a place of suffering but an empty, lonely place without purpose.

I stopped and looked over my own form and noticed I was surprising unchanged, being about the same as Jack in the real world. Looking up at the sky I saw dark orbs with a strange glow in the misty clouds, but no sun. This was a land of darkness and there was no sign of Lisha Yanch though it was her world or more than her world. Suddenly I remembered the stories of ghosts appearing in Pinnacle City and considered that the shifting forms of this place were probably them. Spirits of the dead, drifting off from this purgatory – the place people call home when fed into the machine, leaving dead flesh behind.

The feeling of hopelessness grew near absolute; there was no progress just an endless journey down that road so I took out the wand and began to see if I could read an area of escape. Getting out of that place was becoming a paramount feeling. When I lifted it to see if I could get a direction from its force lines it was like magic of some variety. Like sunlight blasting outward, altering the purgatory into a sudden city reality. So that moments later I was standing in a modern city in a square in the midst of tall gleaming towers. There were no people or rather there was one person; a woman sitting on a bench by a distant fountain.

She wasn't aware of my presence but sat there quietly tossing seeds to a white bird; the flowing dark hair and profile were unmistakable. It was the ghost or dead woman but she looked anything but dead. As I began to walk towards her my head began to spin and for some reason I looked up and the light gleaming off all the windows dazzled me. I thought I saw a million faces staring behind those windows and as I dropped my eyes I studied the buildings. A city from a period perhaps a hundred years back. But I wasn't back in time because back then the streets would've been teeming with people. Here they were all locked behind a million faceted windows. Ghosts again, I thought, but in an altered setting.

She was aware of me now and stood up by the fountain. I was close enough to see the expression of surprise on her face and perfection of her dark oval eyes. She had a delicate frown and pout developing on

her face and the folds of her dress caught the breeze and her flesh like more illusion. As I reached her I could see she didn't quite know how to react. There was something she didn't understand.

And she spoke first. "I tried to help you get away from them. You should have left, but I see it's too late now."

It suddenly hit me. She for some reason was assuming me dead like her. "They didn't get me. I'm still alive. I came here to thank you."

"For what?"

"For saving me from Parker Colpitts."

"How can you be alive? This is Pinnacle City purgatory. The living can't enter here."

"So that's it. Entering wasn't easy; I almost didn't get in. I came through Thor's window, but it took a long time for things to jell. It is possible to enter. Possible to get out too because you get out and travel the building."

"Some of us get out now, yes. For a period of time. Since the change."

That comment interested me but her eyes seemed so deep I had a feeling of falling and almost forgot what to say. "This change. At the top. What is it? I mean I don't even know what was up there to change. No one will say."

Her eyelids fluttered like she was wondering if she should tell me anything. The cleavage of her right breast was highlighted as she turned. I saw a red mark from the fabric pressed in her skin there like she was real flesh and blood. I could smell her soft perfume. "The old building was silent. Adam 1X, the governing artificial intelligence, has always been a silent character. Like a spirit of the building running things but never visibly present. The place is organic, not really like a building, with all systems powered and feeding on and back into the environment. Adam 1X's primitive mind existed at the pinnacle. His spiritual self was everywhere throughout the building like a subconscious level. Everything ran smoothly, quietly then."

"So a major event changed things?"

"Yes, but no one knows what the event was. Anomalies, strange happenings, emanations and tremors followed. Things you can feel, too, in your mind, because I know the behavior of people changed for the worse. It was actually better for me. It released me to wander in the building, to see real people instead of the mostly malformed specters that reside here."

She got up and we began to walk. I put my arm around her and she didn't resist but expected it. Cooler shadows fell on us as we left the courtyard and walked down an empty city street. It was bizarre because when I looked up at the high glare off the windows I always knew they were there ... eyes behind the glass watching. I finally spoke. "You say specters. I see no one here but you. But I get the feeling those buildings are full and they are watching us."

"They are. Those ones are of no use to me. All of them are half formed. Like ghosts with little personality. Distressed or mourning. I was the first, you see. I uploaded myself into a special world, better than all the others, but the Board punished me for escaping and worked until they destroyed it. It went from my beautiful city to purgatory. Then the others came and they didn't upload clean. There was a wave of deaths some time ago. It was fashionable to death upload. But they didn't know they were aiming for purgatory. They got transported here and mostly distorted to creepy things, often locked inside the rooms of those buildings. For most of them this place is eternal and an empty hell. But some of them can wander now like me. They spook or frighten people and upset the Board but do little damage."

We walked and for some odd reason I fell into a meditative romantic state with her, not into any purgatory. Her city still had small beautiful gardens placed on the streets and another one was ahead. We strolled in past some tall grass and ferns. Looking ahead I had the odd feeling that city created itself as we moved into it, with distance always sliding away into a malformed perspective. Stopping by another fountain I got carried away and embraced her. Her kiss felt absolutely real; the world that she'd created still held substance, and for both of us. We sat there and I can't remember what happened but know that maybe a half hour passed.

She suddenly pushed me away, like we were doing something forbidden. I gave my head a small shake like I was trying to return to reality. "So the Board killings. Does that have to do with the change at the top? Did you ever see who does the killing?"

"No. No one ever does. The killings started at the same time as the other changes. In my mind the actual physical Board, now Stone Sangalang and his big gang, are more like the bottom of the building. Like maybe those murders are just another of the anomalies. Like things have to change at the bottom too."

"It would be more than anomalies. Someone is a killer. Someone plans the murders in detail. Someone warped."

Lisha didn't answer; instead she backed off from me. A gust of wind hit us and I turned and looked up in the direction she was looking. A man was there two floors up ... or rather the form of a man. He had no color but was more a transparency bleeding in the background, and he was moving on a wide ledge, coming in our direction.

"What's that?" I said.

"Another type of anomaly, I think ... or it's someone. Wait, no such thing has been seen here before. Someone is after you."

And on that score she was right as the man jumped and flashed to the ground. He raced towards us, but his target was me and in a moment we were grappling with one another there in the street. This thing or guy was huge and shocking. By shocking I mean his touch and blows stung and hurt like he was transferring an electric charge to me. Other guys would've been overpowered but I used my fighting experience to keep him off. He was trying hard to wrestle me to the ground and I managed to keep knocking him back with hard punches and switches to toss him free of me. I saw Lisha looking on like she was horrified.

The blur of a man pulled the blur of a gun from his coat. Grabbing the weapon I forced his arm in the air and we fought over the gun. That battle ended when Lisha ran in and threw her arms around him from behind. Contact between the two caused an explosion of light, but the attacker got the worst of it and was thrown down. He'd lost his gun; it was lost altogether as it disappeared into thin air when it flew from his hand. I moved over to knock him some when he got up but he rolled away, got up running, and disappeared down the street.

Lisha ran up, her hair all mussed. "You have to return right away," she said. "They're killing you. Follow me. I know an exit point nearby."

I had the wand out as I ran and it wasn't far. We went up the steps of a huge art-deco hotel facade and the exit point was there in the lobby. No time for goodbyes as a moment later I was tumbling through mist and the window and then racing down that long catwalk to the exit that would drop me back in my body.

I got out of Lisha Yanch's dream world and into my own nightmare reality. The first thing I became aware of was the sweat soaking my body and the pains of my sour stomach and squirming intestines. An oppressive force pressed down on me, making it difficult for me to open my eyes. It was similar in feel to a slow burning wind cranking down like a crusher or like atmospheric pressure suddenly become as heavy as granite. I couldn't move. I understood how it was that I'd imprinted into Lisha Yanch's world when she claimed only the dead got in there. I was being killed slowly and it had probably started right after I left my body. The killer had selected me as his next victim so perhaps I'd become an honorary member of the Board.

Wisps of ugly dreams passed in my mind; I was blacking out ... with the feeling of my entire body starting to spin like a wheel. Too weak to fight back, it seemed like the end had come. Then bright flashes opened my eyes again. I remembered the defensive perimeter I had set up. It had fired and hit someone. A moment later I saw something small flash through the air. It landed on my chest, and being mostly blinded I couldn't see it, but I knew what it was ... my pet cat Tigger. I felt his claws in my chest and then his paw swatting my face like he did at times when he wanted to wake me up. Likely the laser flashes had convinced him of danger. He kept pawing at me then I felt a sudden release and was able to move my head.

As I began to rise I saw the cat still on my chest. He'd caught the net of contacts in his claw and had pulled it off my head. He was now trying to shake it loose. Bringing up my hand I saw blood oozing from the pores of my skin. The rest of my arm was the same. I was sweating blood.

A moment later the cat flung the net away from his paw and jumped off of me. Using the last of my strength I rose and stumbled toward the laser perimeter and shut off the weapon. I could barely stand but I got far enough to get an idea what had happened. Just beyond the perimeter a body lay crumpled on the floor. Part of the chest and skull had been burned away by my protective lasers and I could see it wasn't a man because the interior foam flesh and webbing was that of an android. A big gun-like device with a huge lens had been set up just behind the android. It had also been struck by the lasers, which had blackened the lens and killed its power circuits. I gathered that the android had been doing a slow form of beam kill on me. He hadn't finished the job and I knew if the other killings were examples the final result would have been something horrifying. My cat's decision to leap inside to me must have caused the android to get too close and trigger the laser defenses.

A horrid itch and burn pain crawled over me with the sticky blood and dehydration. I managed to push through and collapse by the suite courtesy phone. Just before I passed out I dialed the Board emergency number.

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My involvement was supposed to end at that point with me an honorary victim and serial killer's trophy. Even Stone Sangalang had the sympathy to offer me a chance to leave at that point. I didn't take it. Instead I was back in the swing of things after a painful week in and out of a healing chamber, and another week on a special diet. That type of healing is extremely painful. Surface flesh, veins and skin layers came back as cellular damage got repaired. Even the injections to numb the flesh left me with periodic waves of agony. My eyelids saved my eyes but had to be almost fully re-grown. The android had apparently been in the process of slow-beaming me into some horror sculpture of flesh. It would have been a terrifying artistic statement for the Board had the job been completed. Instead I became a testament as to why Pinnacle City healing, anti-aging and flesh-molding technology was considered the best in the world.

The next leg of the investigation was now underway and I was in the company of Thor Carlsonbonner and Penrose Pool in one of Pool's heavily guarded condos. This one at the far end of the market was his public condo or address while he had other hidden addresses.

We sat on yet another Pinnacle City design of a boat-deck balcony, overlooking twin pools. A distant wraparound force shield marked the exterior of the east end of this level and beyond it the bright sun shone on the surrounding city. On the interior my view was of a rooftop terrace running off to the greenery of a small park and the colorful and corkscrew jumble of the buildings of the Market. From my perspective the Market ran off into distant haze and like other things in Pinnacle City appeared much bigger and more complex than one would expect.

Pool was a pink-faced nervous sort with permanently pursed lips and a comb-back that looked like it had been cloned on. He wore no hat though his perfectly pressed pale suit seemed to suggest a need for one. Pool had a problem with his eyes because he wore contacts that glazed them. You always got the feeling that he couldn't quite see you. Thor Carlsonbonner, on the other hand, could see too well, and was always looking around like a beat cop. He made me nervous. He also overdressed. A casual suit now and then would suit him, but today he had another of his security uniforms on. This one could be mistaken for an admiral's outfit in its ostentatious design. Perhaps Carlsonbonner saw himself as captain of the great ship Pinnacle City. If so it was unfortunate that the real power was a gang of pirates called the Board.

As I looked across the ornate gold table at them, I wondered if the wealthy Pool was a boyfriend of Carlsonbonner, but that thought turned me off and I quickly shifted my mind back to the case and enjoying a couple drinks.

Pool had been jawing on his tongue and biting his nails for some time over my near-death experience. Mainly because he feared his own death and a killer that would come up with an especially cruel way to finish him. Carlsonbonner was perhaps too thick skinned to worry about his own death. Being more the type that figured he wouldn't know hell or have complaints when he was dead.

"You never gave me a final report on that android," I said to Carlsonbonner.

He cleared his throat and Pool looked on with morbid interest. "Mainly because the report is just more mystery. It was even more advanced than some of the androids people like Penrose here own or used to own as he has now divested himself of his high-level androids. It had no imprint that we could detect, and its control core disintegrated. It had been set to self-destruct when its job was done. You were lucky in killing it off before it turned you into a pile of Jell-O."

"Saved by a frisky cat," Pool noted. "With your luck you should be hanging out at the casinos."

Carlsonbonner continued. "We can't even prove the android is from Pinnacle City."

"The killer sent it and the killer lives here. You told me yourself that unknown stuff exists on those secure mechanical levels near the top. It must have come from there."

"That's a big problem," Pool said. "No access there. Not human access. If the killer can get in there he may have discovered advanced technology and is using it. Perhaps this whole issue began as a security problem up there and continues as one. Someone gained access to higher levels and screwed things up or even worse, took over."

"Well, that's what I'm working on in this case. We have the map here, but it all leads to more pieces of the puzzle that takes human access higher. Suppose I get up to those higher levels. That could all be a wild goose chase too. This killer has been playing games with us. Another thing that occurred to me. Can't we talk directly to that artificial intelligence, Adam 1X, that runs this eco system? He should be able to pin-point the killer."

Thor shrugged. "Like I told you right at the beginning, we have access to all Adam 1X's data, at least temporarily. It has shown us nothing. Anything to do with the killings vanishes before we get it. Talking directly, we lost that when the anomalies started happening. The AI mind functions quite well but it no longer talks to us as a formed personality."

"Too bad. You need to get that problem serviced. In conference mode Adam 1X may become aware of data or info that could be grabbed to solve this case."

Penrose Pool nodded in agreement. "The Board ordered Stone Sangalang to get moving on that repair a long time ago. If he doesn't start performing soon we're going to move for a new president."

Thor frowned. "Aren't you next in line for President? Wait a second. Stone said something about Sam McGettigan. The union claims some of its key service people disappeared underground. Maybe it's just a stall and McGettigan has been paid off by the killers."

"Then it's your job," Pool said. "Do whatever you have to and get the job done."

"Yeah," I said. "Move ahead with that now. You've got search capabilities for most of this building. Find those service people. I'm going to work on this floor doing the route of the map."

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Although the map displayed a route I would follow through the Market the start point was at the Maze Residential, a lower leg of it that for some reason stretched down to the edge of the Market levels at the west end. That was another thing I'd found out about Pinnacle City. What the Board called a floor often wasn't that at all. The supposedly non-existent thirteenth floor was the perfect one-level floor spanning the building horizontally. Most of the others didn't do that at all. Some were at center running a few levels, others the same way at the perimeter. There was a lot of variation. Maze Residential though was simply the opposite of variation in every way other than spanning more than one floor. It was a large condo town populated by middle-income earners. People who weren't filthy rich but connected enough to get Board approval to reside there.

The start point was an outdoor juice bar called Fresh Start and I saw no clues at it and wondered what the reason was for the map. I guessed that following the route was essential somehow or it wouldn't be shown. Probably a security feature, meaning if a person didn't follow it the end point clues would remain hidden. Beyond the start point the area was a maze where everything looked like part of the same puzzle. I barely got under way on the walk through before getting lost and realizing I needed device navigation to follow the

map route. On the lower section, streets of connected condo conglomerates stretched off under the artificial sunlight in a pseudo beehive pattern. Absolutely everything was a shifting of the same design theme. The decorative bronze doorknockers on one corner might have a unique lion face, and on the next corner a leopard's face. But they would be essentially the same. That went for doors, windows, entry walks, courtyards. Decorative colored glass over the buzzer panels changed from red to green to blue and so on but they were always the same panels. Even the bushes and flying insects and birds looked all the same to me.

Worst of all was the bland crowd of pedestrians, all of them dressed in similar male or female business attire of a sleek sort and walking the same look-a-like pure breed dogs. People that dressed for work permanently. They were distinguished in being undistinguished and if they had any offbeat tastes in sexuality, music or culture they did not display them outwardly. All of them nodded in the same way and all of them silently pointed southeast when I asked the fastest way to the Market.

At least I thought it was southeast at first, but after a few blocks I sat on a bench in a parkette, took out the map and scratched my head. My mind simply wasn't programmed for this area. I'd already gone off the map route, probably because it didn't list street names but only showed neat directional lines. I was already circling back by error; my mind simply couldn't comprehend directions in this place and I began to wonder if everyone living here had been cloned for this place. It was middle class perfection of a certain brand, but not my brand. Perhaps it was created to provide complete security of mind in its sameness. An interesting idea but it wasn't my cup of java. Unleashing Parker Colpitts' cherubs in a place like this was an idea for fast improvement that came to my mind. But there again, in this place the chewed corpses would probably all look the same.

"Good thing I'm not in the bigger Maze higher up," I thought, as I realized this place wasn't that big. Made me look like a fool, getting lost in it. Coming alert I did a quick calculation. An avenue for floater cars went straight through to a tunnel to the Market. Follow it, then left, right, left and I'd hit the first target. Moving ahead at a brisk pace I frowned as I suddenly noticed that walking faster than others drew attention. Heads were turning; an ankle-biter dog lunged and snapped at me. Another street of this and I came out on the avenue and stared in amazement. Traffic was passing through, but every car was identical. All of them sleek brown bugs floating along at the same slow speed and all of them carrying the same two passengers via auto drive. At least it looked like the same two passengers as everyone in the Maze had dark hair trimmed about the same though slightly longer for the ladies. It hit me with strange hypnotism ... the light brownstone official and business buildings and the light brown floating stream of cars with the same bobbing heads ... like I was in an anthill of human make. It was what I would expect on visiting an android colony. Only these were human beings.

As I walked along cars would suddenly rise up and shoot over to dock slots in the various head offices. The clicking noise of their parking brakes gave me the feeling of being in a self-assembling puzzle. News tickers I passed displayed business and select Board news inside a trimming of corporate ads. A community center of a brown cubes-and-cylinders composition was ahead and the turn there would take me off the avenue to the first stop point near the tunnel to the Market.

Another boring street and I again began to wonder what the reason for this walk-thru map could possibly be. Gaining access to the top of this city was a long game, but I considered that maybe it had been set that way to keep the riff-raff out. After all, there would be no end to the people trying to access the top floors regarding some scheme or the other if it were possible to get there. This setup though, even locked out the security chief and the Board. Maybe it was simply intended that no one get there. The puzzle to the top could have been created simply to identify people aiming for the top so they could be picked off along the way.

Now I found I'd been walking on air. While I'd been considering things the last street had passed and I was emerging on the first point. It was an interior park, brightly lit by false sunlight. There were tall walls around it to separate it from the condo areas. I was at the entry and could see across the flowered beds to a huge memorial or possibly religious statue. Stepping forward slowly I looked around. There were no people in the park area and the monument ahead loomed up in the spill of light. I didn't know what to read from it, mainly because as I walked up and around it there was no plaque or engraved information as to what it was supposed to be. It was similar to a huge Buddha, but this bald character had wicked features and his companion on the dais was a unicorn.

In my mind the Buddha legend didn't include unicorns and this wasn't a prettified kiddie unicorn. It wasn't even a horse but more like a shabby goat. I knew that in Pinnacle City there might be enough Buddhists to shake a stick at, but not a whole lot of them. That particular religion had declined worldwide, though it had not collapsed like the Islam faith. Unless there was an ultra-rich Buddhist living in Pinnacle City it likely wasn't religious in nature. If a civic monument, who was the person represented and where was the plaque? It probably wasn't that either as civic heroes don't have pet unicorns. The pinpoint of it seemed to be as one big and ugly work of art. Hidden away here in an enclosed park area that no one used. A huge and forgotten design glitch constructed with Maze Residential.

Moving in close for an investigation I did a second slow circle of it. "Maybe I should take a read of it," I thought, pulling out my M-Ray V tablet connection to my office. I knew that would take time because my signal had to mask and ride others. Patting the warm stone side I waited, but it was only fifty seconds. A small representation of the thing appeared on the air-screen and that caused me to step back before reading the info feed. Reason being it showed on my screen as just a big hollow rock. "Huh," I thought, looking up at the face, which now gave the appearance of staring down at me. "It's just a rock with a hologram coating it so it looks like a piece-of-shit monument. The shielding must hide something in the interior."

Hand on my chin, I pondered that question, and got caught partially by surprise. Because the horn of the unicorn suddenly fired like a beam gun, emitting a stream of fiery red stars that burst over me and knocked me for a bounce over the grass. The surprise was partial because I'd been wearing a force field tag inside my coat since the start of this outing. Thor had provided it as we both expected that I'd be ambushed along the way.

This one was a deadly ambush, too. It nearly penetrated the shield, knocked me for a loop and would have been instantly fatal to someone lacking protection. My gun came into my hand even as I tumbled but I ended up stumbling farther back without firing as another blast nailed me. I had a reason for not firing. That being the bursts were coming from a unicorn horn that was only an image. No target presented itself unless I wanted to blast away at a gargantuan rock.

The blasts soaked away the energy of my shield so I got well back, knowing it would take a while for a full recharge. It would operate on half power for some time but that wasn't enough as the heat factor of the bursts would turn me into a cooked bird rather quickly. I spent time on a detailed reading of the rock, which was well shielded by various substances to keep my read ray from penetrating. There was a closed door right at the bottom hidden under the fake face and I decided that was enough and began a mad dash straight for it, firing my meanest disruptor beam as I ran. On a rock that size the return sound wave was a thunderous crack and the shield saved me from shattered eardrums. The movement of the rock caused a mini quake and I felt the ground shift as I got close. With the focus shifted I fired a concentrated ray right where the handle of the heavy door was placed and that was effective. The beam slammed it hard, creating an immediate depression and then throwing the door open with a wickedly loud clang. So it was metal, an impervious alloy, and my attack plan had worked as I was running into the interior without taking another blast.

I found myself in a dimly lit passage and at another metal door. It had an elaborate security setup for entry, which I simply blasted. Except I forgot about being in an enclosed space and the force of my shot sent me skating on my rear with the force field saving my ass again. I got up and ran for the broken door, got inside with my Shilo at ready, and was in time to see a man fleeing out another door. He glanced back in the moment before he ran out. I saw a weapon in his hand but he didn't fire and neither did I. No Buddhist, but security of some sort, though the brown uniform did not match anything Thor Carlsonbonner's men wore.

At the far door I saw him fleeing across the grass to a slit opening in the wall. That would likely take him into Maze Residential and I had no plans on chasing anyone in there. Instead I looked around.

A circular room, a security post by design, with a number of control panels and a number of running vision platforms. I took the seat he would have been using and played around. There was the weapons control that he'd used in firing on me. I was more interested in the vision platforms. It was super-dummy surveillance tech that anyone could use without training. The surveillance was of Maze Residential, any part you wanted to look at. I could put on street views, switch in seconds to fast forward through office locations, spy on people working in their homes. Everything in Maze Residential was under surveillance. The Buddha saw all facets of the story, but why anyone would want to watch the most boring place on the planet had me miffed,

and that wasn't what I was looking for so I got up and took a walk around. It occurred to me then that maybe I should work fast because the guard might be returning with more men.

I thought it over, and my feeling was that he wouldn't return. Because he wouldn't have any men. He was intelligence of some type but not part of an armed force. There was a log but I couldn't gain access. Tiny living quarters existed in a side room. A third room was a sort of art and trophy room and it was there that I found what I wanted. It was a huge gold key mounted in a transparent display case. I hadn't known to look for it specifically but figured out what it was on spotting it. The map I was following had points here and there marked by a key icon and that icon was a representation of the key behind the glass.

Setting the gun to pick laser mode I opened it and stepped back. Nothing happened so I took out the key, turned, and ran as fast as I could, out the same door as the fleeing guard. This time something did happen as the room blew up behind me and I could feel the hot blast of air, rocks and fire at my back even with the protective shield on.

Suit fluttering in the breeze washing through my cheese-holed force field, I hurried across the park and followed the same exit as the guard. It was also an exit from Maze Residential as the path turned out to be forked. A dense spillage of foliage, vines and flowers cascaded on either side of an exit path of glittering gravel stones that arched over the Maze Highway. Its far side opened on a public park at the edge of the Market. A number of people, most of them of oriental extraction, were strolling with their dogs in the park, and the guard that had fled was there in the distance standing under a fern tree. I ignored the uniform this time and focused on the face. Chinese features but softened like maybe one parent was Caucasian. The look was a bare glimpse as he was far off and soon farther off as he turned and dashed away on spotting me. I supposed he'd seen enough; he'd been waiting to see if the explosion got me.

The park crowd at its edge was more multiracial and the dogs an assortment of pure bred lap brats. At the end of the path a wider road ran down into the Market. It floated in a light haze, this end being Chinatown. A sea of red paper lanterns drifted above its dense pretzel twists of narrow streets. A check of the map and I moved straight ahead on course and soon was on a busy shop street navigating careless crowds of residents and shoppers. The signs here were all red with yellow lettering in the same styled font with the odd splash of green from a banner or flag acting as a break to the pattern. Awnings and overhangs formed another level beneath the ubiquitous paper lanterns. Animated floater ads hovered near the bigger Market stores, which were spaced a fair distance apart, the gaps filled by small shops and stalls, all of them with their own unique design. Though perhaps the most common design element was clutter. They all tried to sell too many items. Seafood displays on the first street I traveled had half the ocean for sale from cramped quarters. And these vendors did do brisk sales, being constantly refurbished by slow-float stock cars that rode down from a warren of warehousing that existed above shop level.

A memory for faces is a good thing. I thought that a few streets in as I spotted my guy from the Maze watching me from a recessed doorway near a flower vendor's stall. The clothes were now oriental garb but it was either him or his twin brother as the face was the same.

The high Market sun cut through the haze like the biggest paper lantern of all, its glow another sales pitch as it made goods look just that little bit better, and people too. It added the right blend to soothe skin tones and shadow and create beautiful people and likely had been filtered that way. Looking past some tearooms, to where my destination should be via the map, I spotted a pagoda rising above the Market shops and warehousing and peaking at the false sky.

I glanced around some more and in the golden haze of sun at the roof of a teashop I spotted something else. A familiar ghost, long dark hair catching a subdued gleam, the folds her dress blowing in the thin mist almost like it was more billows of it. It was Lisha Yanch, and her sharp eyes were on me for a moment. She looked away and I followed her eyes. She was looking over at my oriental friend, the spy on my tail, as though she was signaling his importance to me. Then bells and wind chimes tinkled as a breeze blew into Chinatown and in moments she vanished. The way she faded away made me feel like I was waking from a dream and I shook my head slightly and wondered if she'd ever been there. More than that I wondered if any of the people of this place were really there on the scene and not just in the mind.

But her message wasn't lost on me; I'd been taking this oriental clown tailing me far too lightly. He didn't appear overtly dangerous, but that didn't mean he wasn't planning to hit me. Even if he was defending his

post back there he still did attempt to kill me twice, and that was without even talking to me. With that in mind I decided to lead him into a trap.

I kept moving in the direction of the pagoda and soon found that a number of streets converged on a huge center court mall. The location fit my plan so I went inside. On the interior a long polished mall floor was lined with stalls and clothing stores, all of them under an upper flow of white and pale-blue arched windows. The windows were in sizes small to large and bubbling up some to create the impression of an immense heavenly sky. At the center of the joint a giant ghost chandelier hovered through five levels of platforms. It was an actual physical chandelier but its supports were invisible giving it the ghost-float illusion. High catwalks with see-through Plexiglas walls rose around it and a stage rested at its bottom. A fashion show was taking place there with customers viewing it from all five levels as manikin-style robots directed the flow of human models and special effects.

The walk to the top took some time and navigation, but I picked my way up slowly as the crowd remained fascinated by a sudden parade of female models marching by on the stage below. Near the top I glanced down and out of the corner of my eye picked up my tail. The guy was much closer to me now and was much more confident in this situation. The very top level had no shops but it did have some offices, the closest of which was a jewelery import company. I saw people moving behind its glass doors but another office area farther down appeared to be vacant.

I'd been fishing for the right spot and with no fashion fans stationed above I'd found it. Now it was a matter of leading the sucker on and I did that by suddenly breaking into a run, dashing up the last portion, turning to hurry past the import company entrance and over to the empty offices. A display billboard and a potted tree were conveniently located there and I went behind them and remained silent.

Sure enough my tail didn't want to lose me and had also broken into a run. Only he reached the top not knowing where I went. Some moments passed then I heard soft footsteps coming quickly my way. He reached my location and stopped, but before he could act I hit him with a Shilo stun ray and put him down.

He didn't stay down and he wasn't a man. He got up and attempted to seize me and as I threw him off I got a creepy shudder from the slippery waxen feel of his hands and dropped my gun. He tried to pull a weapon; I beat him to the draw with my other gun and he kept his hand there partway inside his coat.

"Take out your hand real slow or I'll fry you," I said.

He did so, but he was hard to gauge because his stare was fish-eyed, displaying no real emotion. And even if any feeling had been displayed I would not have trusted an android.

"You are going to answer some questions, pal. Like, who do you work for?"

He relaxed his posture. "I could ask the same of you," he said, voice normal, calm.

"I'm not here to play games. This is a murder investigation. What is that surveillance station you were manning and why did you try to kill me? For that matter, let's go back to the beginning. You are an android so you work for someone. Who is it?"

"Okay, I can answer that. I work for Adam 1X, the building's artificial intelligence. I was deactivated a decade ago as the station and my function are obsolete."

"Well, you aren't deactivated now. So why are you back?"

"I have just spent time receiving that information. Adam 1X is difficult to contact."

"So I've heard. I've heard that no one can contact him."

"In his current iteration Adam 1X balances all forces to keep the building in a stable environment. Adam 1X does not get involved in human power struggles unless they are a specific threat. In this case there may be a threat."

"Really, what is it?"

"It appears that I wasn't activated by Adam 1X as I initially believed. You see, the station you were just at is part of an old decommissioned surveillance system. Adam 1X advanced far beyond that mode of surveillance and closed it ten years ago. He still collects all building data of course but it is not in forms

humans can use ... you would know what I mean. All sound can be read from walls, wind, and visuals. From building insects and so forth."

"I get that but if not Adam 1X, then who activated you?"

"An unknown hostile force caused activation and was using my data and that of other obsolete stations by masking itself as Adam 1X. Adam is now slowly working to correct this problem. You also aided the activation by your actions."

"Really. What actions?"

"You began an obsolete mode of building travel. You have been attempting the old method where a human being can reach the top floor. A mode no one uses any more. A mode no one knows about any more."

"Ah, so I triggered something. And this hostile force too. Can you tell me what this hostile force is ... human or machine or what?"

"It is very intelligent and could be enhanced human and more. It is reported throughout the building, mostly at the top. Adam 1X may know but is not revealing it at present."

"Okay, so what is your purpose now? Why are you following me? You discovered that a phony Adam 1X activated you so I'm assuming you wouldn't want to aid a phony."

"Correct. I am now aiding Adam 1X by giving you this weapon."

"Hold it right there. Move your hand out very slowly or I'll shoot."

He did as I said and I was painfully aware that an android might not think being destroyed was something that really mattered, unless it got in the way of completing its mission. Only the highest-level droids were human-like enough to care about self-preservation. Few of the droids in this building would be at that high level. This one wasn't.

There was no gun in his hand. It was a closed fist. He turned it over and opened it, revealing two large stars in his palm. Since he was offering them I took them and stuffed them in my side pocket.

He seemed satisfied. "Okay, so what in the hell sort of weapon is that? Those are ancient Shuriken throwing stars aren't they?"

"Stars yes, ancient no. Adam 1X is working to fix this problem of a hostile force by aiding you."

"How wonderful. He could aid me by talking to me, damn it. Antique weapons are of no use to me."

"You will need them due to that key you are carrying. We assume you want to use it to pick up the next key."

"You assumed right, but I don't know what it is exactly. It matches the key on the map I have."

"There is a second key. At your destination you must place the key you have in the slot to get the silver key."

"Then what?"

"I don't know. We were never told. In the old days we only guarded the route. You are supposed to know where to go next. And there will be an opponent. He is under control of a hostile force and will block you. I cannot help you. My signal is to return to the surveillance station and enact the decommissioning protocol."

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I watched from above as the android strolled back down the stair walkways, off on his mission to decommission and maybe self-destruct. He faded into the crowd below and I remained there with my eyes on a frivolous fashion show on the stage below, thinking how much I hated puzzles and games. There was nothing else to do at this point but follow through on the map and head for the Pagoda. I turned toward the walkway then I stopped and looked back down again. One face was staring up from below. A man was watching me. Another tail on me. It meant I'd have to find another exit.

I didn't get a good look at the new pursuer from that height but I was able to duck back out of his view quickly. The building had back fire-exit tubes to the ground and I used an old snap trick to force the door on one of them. Otherwise only an alarm would open it. I hit the ground running and went through the opening

door onto a littered back alley street. It was fairly wide and the area was at the rear of a place called Canton Bazaar. The place being a huge all-items store and a poorly organized one that was nearly impossible to pass through at a run without attracting major suspicion. I marched through at a fast walk. Back on the outside I crossed the busy street and stood out front of the Robo Wok Shop, looking around. It looked clear but it was also crowded with delivery boats navigating a sky full of paper lanterns and large kites above. Two of the higher roofs of my destination pagoda showed in the distance a couple streets off so I hurried away in that direction.

I didn't get far before strange things began to happen. Beginning with a large white kite that suddenly came sailing over a delivery boat and down from the roofs of the warehousing above. It was moving so fast I doubted I could dodge it but I did have time to switch on the force field before ducking to the side. The thing sideswiped me and bounced me on a wicked tumble into large wicker baskets full of goods. I sent assorted nuts flying and rolling into the crowd, and rose in time to see a man bursting free of the kite. Another oriental, this one with long hair tied back, but no android look. He was human with a young face and wearing a loose bronze outfit with a lot of lacing, buttons and pockets. He also instilled fear in the crowd because people were fleeing us both and the area around was clear in a few seconds.

He faced me and grinned. There was trickery in his dark eyes that combined with his outfit to cast him as some brand of magician. He reinforced that image by pulling two wooden fighting sticks from his pocket, holding them out and snapping the chain that held them together. Blue gas suddenly billowed from both stick ends and rushed over me. And it was more than magic; it was science because I felt it eating away at my force field. Cheese-holing it so that hot fingers of heat from the gas began to touch me.

I didn't feel much like shooting him down in front of a crowd and had the feeling he had a defense for that anyway. But the gas was eating the force field away fast and in moments I'd be cooked, so I drew the weapon and hit the slider to do a wide and forceful repel.

I tapped the trigger, a shock wave bubbled around me and the gas was expelled, but this guy was fast and he knew I'd cut the force field altogether at the instant of firing. He dived at that instant and for a moment was coming through the wave of expelled gas, the force of the shot turning his dive into a slow float to me.

Leaping into the air and spreading my legs I watched him fly under me, hit the ground to roll and turn back on me, all lightning fast. He dived again and we ended up rolling and wrestling in the dusty street. His moves were as fast as mine and we both aimed for a quick disable. He glanced a blow off my throat and moved into me as I stumbled back, the fight taking both of us into a trinket stall where we created an explosion of baubles and trinkets and every glittering item the eye could imagine. And the second part of that explosion was me as he threw me right through a bamboo screen to tumble in the street and meet the third act of this mayhem.

And it was a monster. Suddenly the entire world went off kilter. A supply boat tipped over above, sending down a shower of vegetables, and there were ear-splitting cracks from breaking wood and thunder from the ground. I could not get to my feet, the shaking continued and I did manage to rise but my sense of balance was off and I felt like I was staggering at a ninety-degree angle. A second later it ended and the ground settled. Nuts, vegetables, knickknacks, jewelery, masks and paper lanterns were raining down and like the rest of the people I was dodging them and batting them away.

I saw people running in terror as an even bigger supply boat appeared, arced down and embedded itself in the street. My agile pursuer was there near it and almost got creamed by it. I saw him turning back to me and I didn't wait, but simply took off down a messy alleyway, still headed in the direction of the pagoda.

Thinking wasn't required at this point. I knew Pinnacle City Market had been hit by a quake and that it was more than any emanations from Skitch Rocco's thirteenth floor. A force of evil had gained power in this building; it had expanded its interest to doing more than killing off Board members. It was destabilizing the whole place. And its latest agent of attack was right on my tail again. In seconds he'd be on me.

It was almost too late. My force field was no longer working, but I remembered the android and the two stars he'd given me. Pulling one from my pocket I turned, threw it, and stumbled and fell into a bunch of trashcans.

The effect was more than spectacular and deadly slow. I rolled over in the tumbled trashcans and saw that the star had expanded and was flying in a circle around my pursuer, holding him there as it whooshed like a

bird. He had pulled out a throwing star of his own. I could see it in his hand. But he didn't release it. Instead he dropped it and put up his hands in surrender.

That left me more than amazed. I still had the second star in my hand and had no idea how to disable the first one as it continued its passage in a circle through the air. I walked up for a closer look at the man. He had the airs of both a Kung Fu fighter and a magician. As I studied him I lifted my hand to put the second star in my front pocket and that triggered a return of the first one, which shrank as it zipped back into my fingertips.

I faced the guy. He lowered his hands, but for some reason I felt he wouldn't try a sneak attack. His face was calm, maybe a bit surprised. Then I saw him moving his fingers slowly. Instinctively I knew he was going for a throwing star of his own; another one of those Shuriken things and likely with power similar to the one I'd used. But he wasn't drawing it to use on me because in that same fraction of a second, my old friend the android appeared, coming around the corner of the alleyway. That had left my magician opponent unsure of what was happening, and he waited a moment. Then we all saw a ghost as Lisha Yanch appeared in a flash of light and fast-floated down from the rooftops to my side.

She said one sentence. "Get away from that android."

So that's what I did, spinning around and diving back into my old friends the trashcans. I got back to my feet and made a jump up the wall. I was about to go over but couldn't resist a last look back. And that was nearly my final look. I saw the android charging straight for me and the other guy as he threw his star. The final effect was simultaneous as the android came apart in a fiery suicide explosion just as the star expanded between him and me. So the blast force didn't hit me but the flash blinded me and I fell from the wall and rolled in the trashcans again.

Stumbling to my feet I rubbed my eyes and saw Lisha Yanch there in the street. This time she wore slacks, a white top that left her midriff bare, a hat and sandals, like she was another shopper. But not one that fooled the magician. His face was pale as he looked at her. He was frightened like he was seeing an evil spirit. He pulled a feathered object from another of his many pockets and waved it in front of him. I saw a pained look on Lisha's face, then she vanished.

The magician put away his feather and walked toward me. He stepped around a broken chunk of the android's skull that was lying in the street. It was silvered on the inside with some of the foam that had composed the brain matter still bubbling and melting to blue liquid. It was obvious that this guy didn't trust me but was also curious.

Since he didn't appear about to speak I did. "Any particular reason why you are trying to kill me?"

"Orders," he said. "And a signal from our dead friend there. He called me for help."

"Really. Well in case you didn't notice, he was hoping to kill us both with a suicide bombing of himself."

"What's this about? Who are you?"

"I'm a detective. Jack Michaels. It was originally about investigating the murders of the Board members, but now it's about that earthquake and other anomalies happening here at Pinnacle City. I've been hired by the Board to solve these problems."

"Impossible. I was told you are the cause of the problems. The Board wants you dead."

"Looks like they want you dead, too. Who hired you? I bet it was Stone Sangalang?"

He looked confused, like he might be planning to attack again. But fate intervened once more, this time with a flash of light. Lisha Yanch appeared on the street and she answered the question. "Penrose Pool hired him to kill you, not Sangalang. I traced that anomaly that attacked you at the virtual level. Pool sent it."

"What about this guy, who is he?"

"He is Yuki Rin. If he looks like he's seeing a ghost, it's because he is. He works for the Board. I was his boss before I died."

Yuki Rin's face remained white. "You should stay dead," he said, reaching in his pocket for the feather wand.

"Don't," I said. "She isn't dead. Only physically dead. Don't let superstition get in the way of this investigation."

Lisha continued. "Penrose Pool is involved but he's not the mastermind."

Yuki raised an eyebrow. "Pool contacted me. He said he had authority from the Board. That you were gone over to the other side. The quake people."

"Really," I said, and then looked back to Lisha. "So who is this guy here, exactly?"

"Exactly. Well. Thor Carlsonbonner and his forces are what you call visible security. Yuki here is what is called invisible security for the Market. He is an enforcer who does the dirty jobs security doesn't do and isn't told about."

"Ah, so the good old crime-free Pinnacle City uses hit men to settle big scores."

"Precisely."

Yuki appeared calm now. "Yes, and they were going to use that android as a hit man to kill us both. That must have been Pool also. That old station was decommissioned, an antique. Then I got a message from the android about protecting a key. I guess Pool reactivated it."

"Okay," I said. "If they are protecting the other key, then I need it to move ahead."

"Why should I let you take it?" Yuki said.

"Because a hostile force has taken over this building. The same force or person or whatever it is also murders Board members for sport."

"That means I must work to stop it. This hostile force is endangering the Market with quakes."

"Well, you can certainly help if you want," I said. "We need the key, and then we find Pool and question him."

"Penrose Pool. I can find him. He'll be at his night condo over at the end of the Mediterranean portion of the Market. No one can walk in uninvited there. It is well defended. It's where he goes when he needs top security. Secret business deals and so on. Most of his business is of that type."

## **Chapter Five: The Raid**

The quake made it easy for us to travel unnoticed on the streets. Commotion everywhere and vendors scrapping with shoppers over goods as the cleanup continued. Ahead the five cap roofs of the Pagoda and the building itself appeared untouched by the quake. We walked up the steps and with Yuki in the lead walked in unchallenged. Huge green columns with decorative gold rose from polished hardwood floors and at the far end a spiral staircase rose to the top.

It was the top we wanted so we strolled past the rows of large bronze Buddhas at the perimeter, passing holy men and worshipers. No one was on the stairs and the place as a whole was sparsely populated at this time of day. A lot of stairs up and a long way down gave me my vertigo fix, and I figured all I'd need for a real charge would be for Yuki to turn on me and start a high battle on the staircase. Yuki was also nervous, not over heights but over Lisha. Ghosts were something he feared and I broached the subject.

"Yuki, that feather object of yours. I wouldn't expect anyone to have one."

"The ghost chaser you mean. Pool's people developed it for me. That was back when all the ghosts began to appear. Ghosts are from the netherworld and bad luck in my religion. Your friend there doesn't give me a good feeling."

"But you used to work for her. Pool must have told you ghosts here are from the virtual level, not the netherworld."

"They are connected. The people there killed themselves and are evil. She is the one that looks normal. I take it you haven't seen the others."

Lisha glanced at Yuki with disgust and spoke. "Don't assume everyone trapped in there chose that. Stories of suicide are very often cover stories for murderers."

"We're you murdered," I said.

"No. I was young and thought I was going to create a new world there. I did but only for me because I am whole. The others are all malformed in their own special ways. Some are evil. Yuki fears them for a reason."

"Yeah, he fears death and being trapped there in some warped spirit form. Like that android tried to do to me."

"Oh, that. He did not intend to trap you there. They attempted to kill you physically and spiritually. They want no essence of your mind left in this building. Whoever it is wants you completely dead."

The stairs opened at the top on a circular room with large segmented windows. The walls and ceiling were gold and a huge cap over us. From a floor of inlaid stones we stared up past beige paper lanterns at a light that was a cross between a chandelier and a gold cage.

Our key was there in the cage and we discussed how to get to it. Lisha as a ghost could float up but not carry the first key for the switch. The gold walls were in fact a rough inlay of gold-tinted bricks and could be climbed, but such a high climb and getting over the center portion wasn't my cup of tea. But it was Yuki's. He took off his shoes and went up barefoot with the key in his teeth. The man was probably the best human fly in Pinnacle City. It took him less than two minutes to reach the cage and another to open it and place the key in the slot. Then it wasn't quite so easy because the other key got released via a small explosion. Fireworks flashed and Yuki tumbled down from above and smacked the floor. He rolled and groaned but the key was in his teeth. Dazed he got to his knees and I rushed over and rubbed his arms, shoulders and back. Nothing felt broken, he was bruised but okay.

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Lisha returned from her virtual purgatory in the late afternoon. Yuki and I were in the Mediterranean section of the Market, which was as big as the Chinatown segment but a touch less cluttered. It had been affected by the quake as well and Yuki and I were eating a plate of seafood snacks and discussing it when Lisha reappeared.

Dressed for evening, with a sweater over her top, she was a perfect fit, looking like a beautiful Italian woman and not a ghost. Though she fooled everyone else she didn't fool Yuki, who shifted nervously back in his chair.

I pulled up a chair for her. Needless to say, she didn't drink or eat.

"Yuki's main concern is the quakes. He thinks they might destroy Pinnacle City. You were on the Board. How resilient is this place?"

"It depends on what you mean by destroy. They will cause social unrest. The death and injury count will rise. The Board will lose the commodity it most values which is control. People will actually leave Pinnacle City if the place becomes decrepit or derelict in places where repair can't be maintained."

Yuki did not seem satisfied. "But those quakes are strong. The whole building could crumble. Can you imagine that disaster?"

Lisha shook her head. "No. This central building will never collapse. Picture a mountain. Though this place is much more tower-like. Remember that the support base also mushrooms out below. A mountain can experience earthquakes, volcanoes or be struck by hurricanes and it does not collapse. Pinnacle City will not collapse, but say years of structural anomalies and quakes consume this place, I could see it going from an elite paradise to a disgusting slum in the sky."

I smiled at that. "Where I come from many people would be more than happy with that outcome."

Yuki looked at me with distaste. "Those people don't get in here. When they crash in the Board sends me to take care of it." At that he made a slash across his throat.

"A solution for here, I suppose. It would never work on the outside. The slime balls are nearly everywhere and in various flavors. You can only take out the worst of them."

At the south end of the Market three Pinnacle City floors were levered into green space. A splashing brook meandered along a rocky and flower-banked course. It passed an outdoor sports field and continued through the outer grounds of several palatial condos. Penrose Pool's joint was by far the largest of these. In the twinkling lights of night it looked like the home of some new form of royalty. Pinnacle City royalty because it featured a conglomerate of the architecture common throughout the building, though done at a much higher level. At the edge Pool had a view out to the city and the lake. We could see the real moon rising in gibbous beauty in the hazy fluff softening a deep purple sky. A backdrop of stars spangled it and from our location under a willow tree an eerie visual effect of looking out at the universe from an odd angle was created.

Lisha Yanch had disappeared over the garden wall and I waited with Yuki for her to return. Casing the grounds was a perfect job for a ghost and for a moment I was wishing to be one. A ghost could get away with a lot of stuff and not get shot or captured, but without any real physical power I supposed that I'd never be able to complete any of my assignments.

Yuki was shuffling back and forth beside me, wearing another loose outfit that was fine for fighting. This one dark for night camouflage. He was making me nervous.

"You look nervous," I said. "You expect trouble?"

He stopped and looked at me like I was dense. "Of course I expect trouble. The jobs I do are always in and out and a corpse is left behind. I still think we should kill Pool. He tried to kill us."

"I wasn't hired to kill anyone. We'll bleed him some until he talks."

"You hope."

At that point Lisha returned, not moving like a ghost but coming over the wall like an ordinary human thief would.

"So what are our chances?" I said.

"You decide. The wall has automated defenses and you said you could disable those features. Pool has kill-robots on the grounds and entrance floors. That's his security as far as I can see."

"Robots. It makes sense. They can't be turned against their owner like androids, and if not as smart, just as deadly."

Yuki snorted and shook his braid. "I don't like this at all. I kill people not robots."

It was fortunate that Pool's condo was at the edge because it made it possible to pull a strong signal from my home office. My tablet did not have the power to crack eight major code systems at the same time but that was required to shut down the wall and other perimeter defenses. The robots were higher-end affairs and shielded. There was no way to shut them down short of using disabling weapons.

We waited, ready to go, and when the okay flashed I climbed, or better words would be, nearly ran and jumped over the wall. Yuki followed on my tail and we were over and ten feet from the wall when the systems either rebooted or pulled in a backup feed. Defensive explosions lit the wall and beam-fire burned the area around it. Another flash knife-edged upward and curved out into the high city air in a beam that would destroy any attack coming in from the outside sky. We had escaped death by about three meters but were running right into fresh jaws of it as a robot emerged from its camouflage in thick bushes not far from the entry. The mechanical beast grew bigger in snapping segments and bore down us, ripping up the lawn with its motorized feet as it moved. Big guns searched us out as its sensors grabbed a lock on us, but Pool hadn't programmed it for instant kill. I guessed that he was probably grabbing a view from the inside to see what was happening before he fired. An anal-retentive like Penrose Pool probably didn't want to mess up his garden without being certain an enemy was there. Either that or he just wanted to see who the enemy was and adjust the firepower.

I was prepared for robots, but Yuki wasn't. He fired a general heat blast at the thing's head that gave me time to dive flat on the grass and do a programmed multiple fire. My shot was a multiple-beam tracker shot at maximum cut, meaning several beams would pinpoint all the robot's sensors and beam back the information for the second shot, which would be refined for each beam to either burn, cut or disrupt. One ringing clap, and second flash of blue lines in the night and the robot slowed and toppled over ... firing a

number of beams as it did. They all went over me. Yuki, in a fantastic leap, went over them and the robot, flying almost like a bat over the thing.

A second robot appeared with a dramatic crash, coming straight through the large windows screening the garden. It raced around a column and was headed toward me when it suddenly stopped dead. A matter of sensors I assumed. I was still on the ground and maybe registering as a dead target. Yuki wasn't. He was already inside and without a doubt registering as double trouble and the priority target.

The robot turned in quick rotation and tore in after Yuki, then I saw that it wasn't leaving me free as a third robot was emerging from a hiding space at the side of the core condo. This thing resembled a man-size dog in its body and its face was done up like a fright mask. Probably a psychological thing to scare an opponent but also more than that because it opened its mouth and released a fiery roar. The damn thing had a maw the size of a tar pit, and it was full of whirring tongue blades. It did a charge right at me as it moved in to swallow its dinner. I did a running dive over the other fallen robot, which was still twitching enough that it confused its hungry friend. It tore away parts of the dying beast as it searched me out, and when it found me I fired directly into its mouth, using a fine beam that probed in a circle and cut off the top of its head. Its skull-top popped up like a loose cap and its maw snapped shut as it reached me. The fiery roar it wanted to release got contained inside and steamed out the top, and then its evil olive black eyes suddenly flared as its mask face melted like a pizza gone soft.

I knew the other robots were smaller interior robots but just as deadly. I got up, blew out some lights, and headed for a shattered window. It was large enough to run straight through, but I was hampered by a sore leg from my last dive and stumbled in like a crazed drunk. I found myself in a large lobby area and dodging scattered beam fire. That fire came from another large four-legged robot ... from its eyes, and the shots were wild because Yuki was on its back with his arms around its head. The shots died, I peeked out from cover and saw that Yuki had pulled the beast's head right off. A feat of incredible strength but a way to do business with robots if you could do it.

Puffs of smoke filled the central area; remnants from the beam fire, and in the smoke, like magic, Lisha Yanch appeared. The lobby suddenly blazed with beam and bullet fire; it had been a trap. Yuki and I would've been cut down attempting to go deeper into the area. But that fire was wasted on Lisha who disappeared as quickly as she had appeared. Yuki and I also disappeared, going to the left and the right, taking cover behind columns near the wall.

Sporadic fire pocked the marbling around us; Yuki saw an opening and swung out, throwing one of his Shuriken stars. It blazed larger like a meteor as it flew and hit the unseen source of the weapons fire with a deafening explosion. Shielding was blown aside and we saw an enclosed security area and three human-style robots. One had been knocked out and the other two were on fire and stumbling forward. I hit them with a blast that knocked them back and a second throw from Yuki gave them rocket boots halfway to the ceiling. They fell back to the smooth stone of the lobby floor like broken dolls ... smoke swirled up from them as gas hissed out of their open mouths.

I signaled Yuki to follow and we edged around the remaining floor space, jumped the counter and got behind the security facade. I used a thumper beam to shake open a door there and we hurried through to a narrow hall, hearing an explosion behind us.

We reached a back area. A confusing layout of rooms. At no point had we seen access stairs, elevators or tubes up to the living areas of Pool's condo. Yuki's face was pale. "Pool blew the lobby trying to get us. We probably only have seconds to get out of here."

I ran a quick scan on a fast-open air-screen from my tablet connect. We'd gone right past Pool's access area. The only safe way was to keep moving, so I ran and Yuki followed. On the run I fired another thumper beam that knocked aside a screen covering the entrance to service air tubes up. There were two and we were on the way up when we heard another blast.

Regrets were surfacing. We both knew we should have planned this with a touch more patience and detail. If we didn't cut through to Pool right away we'd be dead men. There was more than one floor, but I'd told Yuki to go straight to the top. We emerged there, but the tube exit there was encased in a clear plastic bubble that did not open. The rest of the layout was like a huge starfish. Pool had the entire top level set up as one expanse with the center being an inner lounge with chandelier lighting and the whole thing slowly expanding

out to a full walk-around semi-circular patio at the very edge. Bright lights were flashing out on part of that patio and I spun on my heels for a better look. An air bug was gliding in and Pool was out there with a servant robot as he prepared his escape.

Yuki proved faster than me; he cracked his encasement with a trick karate kick. I fumbled with my weapon, trying to find the right beam. Before I found it, Yuki shattered part of my bubble with a chop and I ended up breaking out and following him as he ran for the landing air bug and Penrose Pool. It was clear to me that we weren't going to catch him on foot so I tried one more setting on my gun. That being a reverse tracker beam. Not nearly enough power to stop the air bug from taking off but enough to slow it. So I dived down on the hard tiles, set the beam and ended up holding my gun and being dragged across the floor.

Yuki was still on the run and nearly got nailed by weapons fire. Anyone else would have been sliced by the heat knives they fired but he was so fast he danced around them and flipped over one as he ran. When the bubble closed and their engine burned, my arms were nearly ripped out of my sockets, as my body weight was the inert force the beam was using. I hadn't had time to do a setting to fix it to another object so I skated across the floor on my belly watching Yuki flip through and come down feet first on the bubble covering.

His jump had been executed with perfect force as he cut through it, locked his legs on the android driver's neck and snapped it. A clumsy turn and the vehicle skated back over the edge of the skirting, through a side railing, and into a fixed metal patio table and bench. Ghastly shock showed on Penrose Pool's soft face. His decision was to surrender even though he had a weapon in his right hand and could have blasted Yuki.

I didn't get my beam unlocked in time and was spun around on the floor by the force. When I rose I saw that Yuki had the situation under control. He was already out and had Pool's weapon. Penrose was emerging from the dented bug. Distaste showed on his face as he tried to sweep his suit-front clean of the wet mash of debris that had burst from the headless android's neck. I ended up doing the same as I attempted to brush the front of my shirt clean from the drag across the floor. That failed so I simply buttoned my jacket and walked over as Lisha Yanch appeared deeper in the patio. I knew that once my muscles registered the stress I'd just put on my arms and shoulders I would be in agony. Fortunately, I had a few pills to cover that for a time.

As Lisha approached I saw Pool's eyes widen with a second level of fear. My guess on that was perhaps he hadn't got on well with Lisha when she'd headed the Board and the idea of her returning as a ghost wasn't something he'd been hoping for or expecting.

No one else was present on this upper floor and we ended up standing in a four-person circle though not a close one. Defeat apparently had not killed off Penrose Pool's arrogance. He stared at me defiantly and spoke first. "You have a lot of nerve, invading my private condo. You should know the rules. You're supposed to be working for the Board." His eyes flicked nervously to Lisha. "We've been trying to destroy these damn ghosts for months. Now you bring another one back. I'm going to speak to Stone Sangalang and Carlsonbonner and have you fired."

"It won't work, Pool," I said. "You'll have to explain why you ordered Yuki to hit me. There was no Board order for that. You had all your androids decommissioned, but that driver Yuki just beheaded is one. No doubt it was sent down from the top. And how about the other secrets you've been keeping? A talk with Stone Sangalang and Thor Carlsonbonner might convince them that you are the killer. What they might do then wouldn't be nice."

Yuki grinned evilly, and Pool frowned at him. "Don't get your hopes too high," Pool said to Yuki. "Sangalang isn't going to get a chance to put out any contract on me."

"Ah," Lisha said. "So you'll cooperate?"

"Not with you I won't."

"You never did, did you?"

"Let's end this squabbling. I want to know why you attempted to block my investigation and set me up to be hit? You have to be involved in the killings. There is no other explanation."

Pool sighed. "There is one. It's called blackmail."

"By who?"

"I don't know who. By someone who knows everything. Someone like her," he said, pointing to Lisha.

"It isn't her," Yuki said. "Who contacted you? Who told you to enable the station and signal me for the kill?"

"I don't know who. They contacted me by android a while back. Do you really think they'd tell me who they are? I would've sent you to kill them. They wanted Michaels dead in return for silence. That's all I know."

Yuki nodded like he believed him. "What exactly are they blackmailing you with? What's the issue?"

Lisha laughed and Pool gave her a spiteful glance. "We need not even ask," she said. "From past audits I can tell you that they likely have a long list when it comes to things he's hiding."

Pool's face drooped in unhappy submission. "You make me sound dirty. No one makes a lot of money by being squeaky clean. Especially not in this place. That there could be people who couldn't be easily paid off was something I never considered."

"There are other things you've never considered," I said. "There might be or are some people motivated by more than the standard Pinnacle City fare of money and Board power. People aiming at something bigger. Maybe up there at the top."

"Huh," Pool said, his face gaining youth in its cynicism. "There has been no access up there for a long time. Even the past records have been destroyed or buried somewhere. The Board knows that a large feed of information has always routed in and out of there, but there is no one that can read into it or unmask the formats. Nearly all of it would be building operations feed. As far as I ever heard, only Adam 1X, a major part of him, is up there. Sort of the ultimate mechanical room or the condo of a super AI mind. Or one that used to be super. What's left of him now, well, who knows? No one can contact him, and what's up there, I don't think I want to know. Since there is no way for a human being to get up there, I won't know."

Yuki was having none of Pool's explanation. "You sure are a fancy liar. You make it sound like today's quake never happened. You know as well as we do that something major is wrong up there. You are working with people involved in that because once Jack aimed at the top he was suddenly open for a hit job."

Penrose pursed his lips, giving Yuki a look of defiance. Lisha spoke. "He's got something in his jacket."

She was right. I noticed the bulge. He had an object, mostly under his armpit, and was trying to move in ways to hide it. "Hand it over, Pool," I said.

He shifted like maybe he was going to try and run. But there was nowhere for him to run, so he sighed like he was being robbed, then opened his coat.

The object was a gold box with inlaid patterns. Almost like a music box or jewelery box. It was something different though, and it had a key slot. I had the key for it in my possession. The key we'd grabbed at the pagoda. "So you are being blackmailed. It sure looks like you're doing a diligent job for someone else."

"I don't know what it is, I swear. My only instructions were to grab it from its hidden place at the Market and make sure you don't get it."

I twirled the key in my fingers. "Might as well open it and see what's inside it."

"What if it's booby-trapped?" Yuki said.

Pool stepped back. "Don't open it near me."

"Relax," I said, and then I did a scan on the box and the lock mechanism. "The metal is an impervious alloy and the key triggers a molecular code. Considering the complexity of the key, we have the only one. It hasn't been used any time recently. The read says it isn't booby trapped."

I inserted the key carefully and it fit nicely. The attempt to turn it met with resistance that ended with a series of slow clicks. Yuki's face tensed as he doubted my words. Penrose Pool was near panic, his mouth a quivering open slash. The final click came and I snapped open the box, with the only explosion being a small puff of dust. There was nothing inside but a piece of paper. Browned parchment of the sort that doesn't decay, and it folded open to a map.

I felt like tearing it up. Now a map had led me to another map, like someone was still playing games with me. But there again, whoever had placed the map probably wasn't even alive now, judging by its age. So it was

another real clue on the path to the pinnacle, but also confirmation that no one had attempted to follow that path in a very long time. Perhaps it in itself would be another dead end and there'd be no way up.

"So what does it say?" Yuki said.

"Hell if I know. It's another damn map. This one is an ancient kind. I don't even recognize the coding of the points or the script. You take a look at it."

Yuki took the map and I turned to Lisha. "Has anyone attempted to reach the top floor by air? I mean fly in?"

"Not anyone that's alive. It's surrounded by a no-fly bubble. Anyone flying into it has only moments to pull away. I remember Adam 1X going over that once when I was president of the Board. The top of this building could repel or disarm anything, even missiles and satellite beam fire. It is super intelligent. It knows when it is being targeted."

"I can't read this map either," Yuki said. "Maybe we should give that box back to Penrose."

Pool glanced over Yuki's shoulder. He cleared his throat and spoke. "I know I'm going to regret this, but I can read the script. It's an old language called Latin."

"Yeah," Yuki said.

Pool could read the map, but not quite, and he knew Latin, but not quite. We ended up in one of his personal lounge areas in his condo. A place with deep cherry shades of wood flooring polished like glass, wide white divans and slightly arched walls and ceilings of a linen-tinted wood. The place had floor-to-ceiling sectional windows and Lisha stood there looking out, backdropped by darkness and the spray of colored lights reflecting from the distant Market. Pool returned down a wide staircase with Yuki, carrying a magnifier with a jeweled handle and a book from his bedroom library. Taking a seat, Penrose pulled up a slat of the glass table. It transformed into a monitor displaying the main screen of the built-in computer. A keyboard appeared under the glass at his fingertips and he typed in the odd line of text while he used the magnifier to study details on the map.

His age showed through when he concentrated though he had the sort of face that retained youth without any special effort. I began to wonder why many of the people populating Pinnacle City had vision problems that surgery couldn't correct. With all of Penrose Pool's money, he had poor vision and couldn't see fine details at all. Moments later I began to wonder if he was simply stalling and hired killers were racing to us while we sat there foolishly believing his lies.

Yuki glanced about nervously as some air bugs zipped by like fireflies out beyond the patio. Then Penrose put down his magnifier and spoke. "The mystery of the map isn't a big mystery. Yes it is from back in the early days. Its designer simply personalized it so only he could read it, using Latin for place names. The main problem is when I go over the details in the drawing the locations shown are of places that no longer exist."

"What sort of locations are they or were they?" I said.

"They are all locations of places that used to exist in the old Market. Hidden areas in those locations. The areas contain the old upload points. Engineers and later security used them to upload to the top floors."

"Upload what to what?" I asked.

"At that time no human could enter those levels due to the tremendous forces, hidden energies, radiation at play. Entry for engineering work was done by uploading one's mind to robots stationed there. Like going to the virtual level worlds, except you go into a real body of a worker robot to do work. Or as it used to be, to do security patrols to make sure all is in order. When Adam 1X came fully online that method was no longer needed. All of that work gets done by him now. It's been so long, as you probably know, and there have been so many changes, that we don't even know what's up there anymore."

Yuki snorted, angry that his time had been wasted. "So what good is that to us? You say the upload places don't exist anymore."

"One of them does. The map shows it hidden in the warehousing next to the south-edge transport bay. That building still exists. I don't if the upload point is still there. It might be. The warehouse section is the oldest

building in the Market. It serviced the old stores back when everything was delivered by air transport to the bay.”

“If it’s there let’s go,” I said. “It has significance if that is what the map points to.”

Frown lines showed on Lisha’s usually pristine forehead. She shook her head in agitation. “I don’t like this line of pursuit. What can you people do with that ancient equipment? Attempting to upload to some decommissioned metal monster at the top floor would most likely be a death sentence.”

“At this point we don’t know if any equipment is there. So let’s take a look and see what we’ve got.”

Penrose cleared his throat. “It might be best if you take a look without my presence. I have given you what help I can afford. You really have no need for me now.”

“You’re right, we don’t,” I said. “But you’re coming along. It’s called protective custody. If anyone wants to kill you they’ll have to come to us.”

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Yuki had a far more commanding presence in the Market community than Penrose Pool did. While many people said hello to Yuki no one knew Pool, or if they did they didn’t like him because people tended to stare and gawk when he passed. The crowd thinned along with shops at the far south end of the Mediterranean portion of the Market, but the street remained broad and the newer pavement soon gave way to an older type of stylized tan paving stones. The lighting dimmed to spills of pale yellow from old roadside lamps on this portion of the street. Ahead the south Transport Bay loomed like a dim hulk in the darkness. Windows were all lit up and some of the newer transport boats floated in and out of second-story bay openings. The place was still in business but its age showed in the way the structure and even the street-fronting sucked all night light into the dull sheen created by years of grime. I’d seen places of the type before in other cities; places where the bodies were burned and buried.

Penrose Pool’s mood was one of trepidation. Though we’d left his car and walked up at a brisk pace, his hesitant steps were now slowing us. The Transport Bay certainly was spooky at night, but Pool should have taken it into account that we weren’t out for a business chat at a Board supper club.

“We can take our time and look around inside. I have access everywhere in the Market,” Yuki said.

“A special pass,” I replied.

“It’s called fear. They would much sooner let me through than find out I’m looking for them.”

“How wonderful,” Pool said. “The charm of a barbarian.”

Yuki glanced at Pool like he was an insect. “You don’t like to get your hands dirty, do you? You should come along for the ride on some of those jobs you order.”

Pool stopped and pulled out the map. “Unfortunately I’m along for the ride this time. And I forgot to change into my dirtiest shirt.”

“What’s the reading,” I said. “Where do we go?”

“A long ways, inside there,” he said, pointing to a gaping dark doorway. The entry didn’t even have a door or go into one of the well-lit and busy night areas. Faint light showed in a dingy corridor beyond the opening. We headed for it with Penrose dragging his heels and taking up a position well behind us. Which was a smart move as the corridor had dust feathers and cobwebs everywhere? I batted some of them away with my hat as we moved forward on what became a long journey turning this way and that. The corridor had once been sort of a fast alley for workman and other service people going behind the wide hangars and warehousing inside the bay. No one used it now, it wasn’t traveled at all. There was some lighting but that sort of bacterial phosphor tubing could burn for decades without replacement, so it didn’t mean anyone had gone through recently.

Pool coughed up foul air and swore in places as he went over the map. Eventually we found definite proof of human life in the form of footprints in the deep dust of the interior. Finally, we came to a dead end and some old graffiti grease-penned on a wall. Obscenities mostly.

"We've reached our destination," Pool suddenly announced in an important voice.

"Come on, Pool. Stop playing games," Yuki said. "This is a dead end. It's the upload point to nowhere."

"I went by the map," Pool said. "This is the point or close to it."

I tapped on the dead-end wall. "All right, take some steps back," I said. And they did. Moments later I hit the wall with a wide force beam. And regretted it. The wall came down all right. It splintered like old rotten wood, tin, and crumbling concrete and created a whorl of filthy dust that coughed back and engulfed us, forcing the three of us to stagger forward through the opening created as we attempted to find a spot where it would be possible to breathe.

Dust settled and the stale air became breathable, though barely. I used the light on my gun to enhance the lighting. Yuki was already out of sight somewhere, likely hiding in expectation of possible enemies. I personally didn't expect anything bigger than a fat spider. I could see Penrose Pool off to my right wiping his face and eyes with a handkerchief, and the rest of the room was coming into focus like a vision out of the dust. We'd broken into a larger area; the ceiling here was triple the height of the corridor like one of the bays, and ribbed above like the belly of a beast. Most of the room was empty, just bare stone tiles, but we'd found what we were looking for as the upload station was at the north wall. I immediately walked over and got joined by Yuki as he appeared from behind a support column. Close up we found ourselves studying a bank of six upload terminals. Five of them obviously smashed and out of commission. The sixth was in good condition but a bit dusty like everything else. The whole wall was a stylized control bank with brass buttons and knobs, mostly for convenience and an antique look as the operating intelligence would of course be tiny and buried in the stone. Your average robot packing crate would probably have a friendlier look than the chairs, which were about as obsolete as prison electric chairs.

Penrose Pool walked up as I used my hat to bat away the dust from parts of the chair. "If you are even thinking about attempting to use that you are out of your mind," he said.

I decided to do a solid check on the functionality of the remaining chair. Though one of the oldest models it had been the Mars Cadillac of its kind, being of the highest quality metal-and-plastics interior. The coffin-style outside was tarnished but not in any way corroded or rusted. The light dust blew off in feathers revealing patterns of the tarnish running in the grains of metal in blues and purples. The swing-over head casing and flexible contacts showed no corrosion and the inside was clean as it had been seal closed. Same also with the interior bed; the clear casing pulled open and showed cushioning with a clean tan luster.

Pool was at the control bank and starting to play with things so I pulled him away and told him not to touch stuff. Yuki had swung one of the broken chairs up and he opened it, creating a sort of lounge chair, and he rested there as he watched me check things out. With nothing else to do, Penrose set up the chair beside him in the same way and did the same thing. At that moment Lisha appeared like a white flame from the darkness and became a beautiful woman in a dress standing beside the control bank.

I nodded to her but said nothing. Squatting with an air-screen out, I ran a connect to the home office. Taking a read on the equipment, I did a search on it and came up with full details and some test programs to run. First thing was to find a mode to identify the material embedding the computer and run some feeler modes in ... and that wasn't hard as it was an older alloy. It was protected by password and biometrics but my equipment quickly cracked that and the control bank came to life as an impressive array of flashing lights, dials and sliders. Everything was marked; this equipment was extremely simple in operation because it had been designed to upload technicians with certain special motors skills. People who were more into operating the robots they were placed into than they were in operating the latest upload controls.

Lisha waited expectantly. Yuki and Pool didn't really seem to care and looked on with some small interest.

"It all checks out," I said. "Just as it looks. One chair remains connected. The others are damaged and disconnected from the bank."

"How about your head," Penrose said. "Does it check out. I say that because no one sane would attempt to use that obsolete equipment."

"Don't worry, I'm sane. It may not be the latest equipment but it reads as in perfect working order, at least for one chair. There's no reason why I can't use it?"

"I can think of some reasons," Lisha said. "First, you don't know if the other end is working or where you'll be arriving. You might upload yourself into some old decommissioned robot and die when the system crashes. Even more likely, the upload point is no longer there or the area it serviced in the past is a decommissioned dead zone."

"This end is still here," I said. "If decommissioned they would have closed it at both ends."

"Maybe?" Lisha said. "But things have also changed up there. I can't get in there and I'm a ghost. Whoever sealed it did a top job. Only the top, parts of the underground and the highest security areas are lockouts. Usually a lockout also means an area is simply too dangerous to enter. I heard there's a trans-dimension solar core up there. Would you want to upload into a hell like that?"

"No, but I'll be in a robot. And our investigation leads here. I either move forward or we are at a dead end. I'm also assuming that if the other end isn't there the transmission simply won't take place. I mean, this equipment must have basic security features."

"You know what?" Pool said. "I don't know who or what it is that wants you personally dead. But they didn't need to blackmail me. All they had to do was leave you to your own devices."

Yuki yawned, then addressed Penrose. "By the way Penrose. You failed in your mission to have Jack killed. The Board probably tracked your efforts via that Window thing. The info on your illegal actions will likely be released soon."

"True, but Michaels has the full authority of the Board, and you know how media works in this place. Stone Sangalang will cover it up for me because he has to if he wants to keep this quiet and gain my continued cooperation."

"Smart guy," Lisha said. "But not that smart. You're likely the next Board member on the hit list. Especially now that you've failed your mission."

"I studied the other killings. At least most of the early ones. They kill at random and in special ways. I shouldn't be next because it's a lottery. They have to think up a nasty way to erase me. I've got some time. I'm hanging my hat on that."

"Yeah," I said. "You better hang your hat on my investigation, because it is the only thing that might save you. I'm going in right now and you'll be aiding Yuki here with the equipment. The instructions are simple so don't screw them up."

I got prepped in the chair and they did their stuff on the controls, but nothing could prepare me for what happened next. It seemed like the fast-forward button was on and I'd zoomed into the grave. The connectors of the old piece of crap made me feel like the Frankenstein monster in for a recharge of raw lightning. It was a lot like being in the grip of a cold claw while other embedded sleeves seized my shoulders and hips. This was a dirty outfit and it felt that way. Nausea swept me and my tongue glued up like I was on brain surgery medication. Some muscle spasms swept up my legs and I could feel heavy thumps of my heart, but that soon passed as a growing and icy lump-of-coal feeling took over. That eased to sensory deprivation that combined with a tickle of program input to send me into dreamland.

When I woke it was with thundering boots on the ground. I was dropped on a stone floor and I hit it with such force I felt like a monster. And soon found out I was one. Meaning I was in the body of a four hundred pound robot and it wasn't anything pretty. The bond wasn't a good one. Though I was in control of it like a huge body I still felt oddly disconnected from it like I could see from its eyes while my thoughts floated somewhere above.

There was a group of other robots and I learned immediately why the other chairs had been smashed. It was because the upload-end robots were junk and after some failed attempts and fried brains those who'd come before me had smashed the chairs. So much for my idea about safety features. Walking somewhat unsteadily on big splayed feet I went over and checked a couple of them out. One had been battered mostly to pieces by something extremely powerful and the other was impacted right into a stone wall like it'd been thrown with incredible force. The others were smashed in different ways. I thought maybe a battle and an explosion. Then ruled out explosion because the platforms weren't destroyed and neither was the robot I was inside.

Unknowns I've never liked but I was stuck in guess-work mode. Combining that and the damaged vision belonging to the beastly robot. I could see a large hangar-big room ahead. Light streaming from some high and distant artificial source outside some tall nearly opaque windows. Huge cobwebs dangled from the high ceiling and there was thick dust on the floor. I walked over to the arched window, getting the feel of the big clunking legs. Through the grime it was hard to tell what the light source was ... maybe it was the moon as seen through a robot's eyes. If so I was somewhere at the outer edge. I could see structures of some type along the wall past the window's edge and deeper inside in the gloom. I approached them through thickening dust, and stopped at the first one. The casing was shades of lead; a bubble on a rectangle, except the bubble had popped open, releasing a spillage of rubbery foam. It was purplish and the spillage so much larger than the bubble that it must have expanded a great deal on exposure to the air. As I touched some of it with padded fingertips it crumbled to dust. I realized that the dust all across this floor came from that stuff and it was brain matter of some type. Likely human and specially grown and developed and hooked into other chemical and harder wired systems. Originally it had been a bio-based artificial intelligence.

Obviously the robots maintained this chamber or did at one time before catastrophe struck. In spite of the aged appearance of the system the intelligence would have been quite advanced and enough to do far more than run the hidden workings of Pinnacle City. But there again, I didn't really know exactly how complicated the city was or much about it. I did know that even this decommissioned or destroyed area was more advanced than any such technology existing in most of the rest of the world. Most likely the brain tissue had been radioactive to a degree and that was fairly new in AI.

So the place was a dead zone and past memory of the building contained in old musty cells of dead brain tissue. And I was the last rusty neuron, blipping forward on iron boots toward an elevation across the room. There was a faint pulse of amber there on top of an object. Maybe it was something; I hoped so, otherwise this was another road to nowhere. The slow feeling of the robot was like walking underwater in a diving suit, though the pressure was my own weight, like I was an anchor that decided to get up and walk. It was good that I had no skin or hair because the scrape of my feet on the dry stone would've raised hackles.

I reached the rise and then it got difficult like I was operating at half power. It felt like a double gravity world or slogging heavy steps out of a swamp. A ways up the ramp I saw over the top to a shimmering force field. It was transparent and beyond it thick metal rings formed a vault arch that opened on an entirely different environment. Bright light permeated it and it was beautiful light of the sort that gives rise to elation and feelings of spiritual uplift. There were objects, things moving in it but I couldn't make them out. Then I reached one object and looked down on it. The pulsing amber light came from a faceted gemstone – too big to be a diamond but similar. And the gem was only a marker because when I picked it up the light remained below, flashing in its bed. Even with my clumsy fingers I could see that the facets shielded a ghostly pattern underneath.

My brain felt about as slow as molten iron inside the robot, thoughts that flowed slowly as I attempted to figure this new piece out. But I never did solve the puzzle because my eyes wandered to another package off to the left that suddenly lit up. This one I did figure out. I saw a bank of numbers counting down fast, and with the gem still in my hand I turned. I caught a glimpse of something as I did; it was out beyond the force field in the beautiful light; a flow of mist taking bodily shape and there was a face forming. It was not beautiful, it was hideous.

Completing my turn I did the robot's version of the hundred-yard dash. The object counting down was a bomb; that I knew. I also knew I had to reach the transfer platform to start the transfer back.

The initial laborious steps became a slow steady clip as momentum was on my side. Dust flew up and swirled in front of me like I was running in a storm. It wasn't that far but I was painfully aware of every second as a countdown clicked off in my mind. Surprising myself I reached the platform but I couldn't slow down. Turning as I completed the jog, I stumbled, but once on the platform, the big ring snapped hold of me and it didn't matter. I got pulled off my feet, saw the gem fall from my hand and clatter in front of me, then the bomb went off. The ensuing wave of dust rushed toward me like a flight of dark bats, then the transfer began and the next thing I was conscious of was coming out of a slow painful sleep.

The ghostly form of Lisha Yanch drifted and she appeared fully, sporting a blue bikini and walking along a sunny beach in some other Pinnacle City fantasy world. Medical equipment and odors of vile medicines and

cleaning fluids went up my nose as the sandy beach became a hospital room. Then I had a flashback and saw the hideous face from my time inside the robot. A religious vision perhaps, but a strange one of a hellish ghost back-dropped by a heavenly world. Other things, like angels, fluttered in the air behind it, and suddenly morphed to the death mask of Parker Colpitts. Then I started to gag as I woke some more. My eyes cleared and I saw Yuki and Thor Carlsonbonner in the room. I was in bed, no equipment attached to me. When I sat up my throat hurt. I realized my tongue was swollen.

A nurse came into the room carrying a glass and held it up to me. "This should help your sore throat," she said.

And it did. As I sipped it, the mud cleared away. I felt the swelling in my tongue go down.

"How do you feel?" Carlsonbonner said.

"Other than hung over, not too bad."

"You almost got fried," Yuki said. "We dragged you out of that coffin about two seconds before it exploded."

"I don't see Penrose Pool. Where is he?"

"I have Penrose," Carlsonbonner said. "He's recovering. The stress of dragging you out of that place gave him a minor heart attack. The Board is holding him for questioning. There are a number of things he's been involved in that we all want details on."

"You better get them fast. The last suspicious Board member I dealt with didn't live long."

"That's something we have to talk about. Stone wants to meet about it as soon as you are well enough."

"I'm well enough now. Call Stone. I'll get dressed."

"There's one more thing we want you to look at," Yuki said. He was holding a hand mirror out to me. "Look at your tongue."

I did as asked and found the answer to my sore throat. "A code had been burned into my tongue. Quite tiny. It was complex and patterned. The burn had caused swelling."

"It happened in the chair," Yuki said. "We thought your face was burning off. You came back hard all right."

## **Chapter Six: The Underground**

As it turned out, a Board meeting had just taken place. It was one of the special meets that were broadcast to the residents or to those few residents that bothered to look in on such things. Fortunately, my face hadn't burned off and my reflection in a mirrored pillar was healthy. One thing I could say about Pinnacle City was that the cut of the suits and the fit of fast-ordered hats suited me every time. The Board members had already left and we were walking down a corridor to a luxury Board lounge and the meeting with Stone Sangalang. Stone was there in the sunlight at a table with Barbi Carvalhana. He looked more like a man on vacation and sipping easy drinks than a worried president.

Yuki was tagging along with me now. I insisted on it. Thor Carlsonbonner was walking ahead of us as he was always in some way between Stone R. Sangalang and anyone else the man met. At the table we took chairs and I let the others do some talking, being more interested in Barbi's tanned legs than them.

Small talk led to business talk. "How did Yuki get into this investigation?" Sangalang said.

"Pool," Carlsonbonner replied. "Penrose brought him in, not in the way you would expect."

"Oh. Well ... I might expect anything from him. We have Pool's full confession. But he remains on the Board. A number of things we have to cover up and can't go public with. Pool was here today, for the in-camera portion of the meeting."

"How did the meeting go?" Carlsonbonner asked.

"Things are looking up. That's why I wanted a quick gathering. We ran a scan on all the time periods between killings and the pattern may have ended. We believe the killings may have stopped. Excellent news. It means that the case is nearly over for Mr. Michaels. We want him to stay around a couple more weeks to be sure. And there's that one other thing."

"Other thing?" I said. "It seems to me that even if the killings are miraculously over, the culprit is still at large."

"Oh well," Stone said. "That's true, but the Board members are willing to move on with replacement members. As long as our lives aren't in jeopardy it is not a serious problem. The concern now is building instability and quakes. This issue is the media issue of the day and the complaints pouring in are non-stop."

"Quakes, floods, people electrocuted," Thor said. "A woman and her dog got swallowed by a sinkhole on floor eighty. The crystal brain mechanism of the rescue robot exploded like a bomb and killed a fireman there to pull her out. People simply don't like walls that suddenly vibrate or floors that beat like a drum when they are trying to sleep."

"That's an understatement," Yuki said. "People expecting to live a very long life suddenly fear death. A lot don't have insurance either. There's heavy damage in the Market when this city complex is supposed to be invincible. How is it we are experiencing earthquakes in a quake-proof building?"

"It ruined my wardrobe," Barbi said. "Killed my robot cleaners too, when they tried to vacuum up the rubble from the ceiling."

"These questions are indeed interesting," Stone said. "We have detailed reports, including one from Skitch Rocco. He says he doesn't know exactly what causes the quakes but a signal is running down from the top through the core. The emanations or triggering forces return from the underground and cause the damage. The thirteenth floor is currently absorbing most of the shock but it can't redirect it all. My idea is that since we can't access the top, we send a team into the underground to stop it there. We get the flow to keep moving underground and not deflect back up the building."

"That's where we are going, anyway. That's what Yuki and I are here to talk to you about. Access to the underground. We also want to know what's down there?"

Stone thought it over for some moments. "Haven't thought much about it. A lot is down there. Last time I saw the maps they listed enough mechanical rooms to give me a headache. Good thing they are all either self-servicing or serviced by robots because I have no idea what most of them are."

Thor interjected. "There is more than mechanical levels down there. The base mushrooms out into a huge underground, but most of it is dead zones. That's one reason Pinnacle City is supposed to be solid as a rock. The huge support, like an iceberg underneath."

"You must have workers or security posts down there?" I said.

"There are security posts but they haven't been manned in ten years. Not since we swept it out in raids. Freaks and transients from the city used to get in below and there was a media thing back then about them being a danger to the building. The raids cleaned them out. There were some human workers but they disappeared and are presumed dead."

Yuki took his eyes off Barbi long enough to speak. "Nothing but robots and mechanical rooms. This mission is going to be no fun at all."

Stone frowned severely. "The Board isn't paying you people to have fun. We want results. Someone is playing dangerous games with us. Maybe they've been down there all along and the attempt to lead us to the top floor is just a ruse."

"Something is down there," I said. "But I still have my eyes higher up. I wouldn't count on the killings being permanently over either. The pattern is now one of terrorism. Killing Board members in random ways initiated fear and terror and now it has expanded to terrorizing the public and killing members of it. Maybe the damage is just a side effect. Whoever is behind it remains motivated by killing people."

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It's a modern world but I've always been a person who rarely works with robots. I mean the sort of robots designed to be somewhat like human beings and not the various other incarnations. I've always been okay

with technology. Androids I've never dealt with much as generally nearly everything is a robot except for super intelligent human models they call androids. They are extremely expensive and rare but apparently around on the higher levels of Pinnacle City. Around to murder people as well as one tried to ace me. A memory like that made me uncomfortable with the robot Thor brought along for our journey underground. In spite of endless assurances of how trustworthy they are I've always gone on the assumption that anything intelligent has the power to turn evil or fall under control of others.

Thor carried a tracker designed to read core emanations. A stupid and ugly device that the Board had made about five times bigger than necessary. Yuki looked more like the real security in a slick suit and overcoat that masked the weapons he carried underneath. Other than a protective overcoat and extra weapon I was traveling as usual. The reason for the weapons being that force-field shielding could not be fully applied underground because of interference. At least that was what Thor said. Our robot was carrying a bunch of equipment in a trunk. He didn't look much like a fighter but more like a clumsy butler, being a big bronze guy with a head that resembled a stylized hammer. His only fierce features were sheer size and backlit red eyes that seemed always about to fire off a beam burst. This guy was also irritating as we were cramped in the crawler because of him.

Our crawler or elevator ran down from a hidden room on the fourth floor along the outer core and we weren't far down before I had the feeling of descending into an old mine shaft. At the core end a base ring ran out for a distance as large as the floors above. The full base was much larger and deeper and the crawler could ride the ring to entry points at various parts of it. First stop was the initial security station and our robot got off first, using its big feet in tractor mode at this point. If any enemies existed at this entry the robot would take their fire. We didn't expect any and as the bluish emergency lights came on none were revealed. Lockup doors that would normally be whoosh-open gave a scream that put my teeth on edge and caused Yuki to draw his weapon. As we looked around at gloom and riveted walls, the robot rolled up the ramp. Thor followed him into the security station.

The station had been air tight, Yuki and I found padded chairs that were still clean. We sat and watched while Carlsonbonner and the robot went through a bunch of joint security protocols that enabled view screens and other security stations located in the underground.

Yuki then decided to relax and clean one of his guns. Thor also relaxed as he put on a headset with glasses to spin through the stations now online. He broadcast some of what he was seeing on a larger screen for our benefit. The visual hopped from station to station, and at the fifth station he halted. Major structural damage with a collapsed ceiling and tons of fallen rock showed, but parts of the station were open and working. He did a spiderweb of the surveillance cameras out and saw a spiderweb of damage. Some stations no longer existed at all according to probes. They were completely buried or had gone into self-destruct to prevent illegal entry. A geological reading churned out stats in complex equations on how the foundation had shifted. The software also provided a condensed one-page status report. It was to the effect that Pinnacle City had suffered major disruptions at the base and it had simply altered and shifted itself according to its design and regained stability.

Thor Carlsonbonner had the final condensed security information showing on his glasses only.

"Still trying to keep secrets?" I said.

He ignored me as he was passing the report to the robot. A gem-like glow in its chest area indicated that its major processor was parsing the information. It gave Thor a private verbal reading. He listened then sat back and exhaled.

"So what's the bad news?" Yuki said.

"Exponential destabilization."

"What in the hell is that?" I said.

"This city complex is indestructible. At least in theory. The pattern of disruptive vibrations is exponential, meaning it will eventually reach critical levels. There will be collapses, serious damage that is ongoing. The Board's worst fears will be realized if it's not stopped. The whole place will be a wasteland or slum. Residents will leave and most likely scum from the city will move in. They'll live anywhere."

"Yeah, and thrive anywhere," I said. "Maybe you people could learn from them."

At that point we all turned to the robot; not only was it processing but also generating tremendous heat. Carlsonbonner had fooled me after all. This robot wasn't the third rate fellow his outward design indicated, but a super AI processor in a can with tractor feet. Even its eyes burned red now from the effort, then they cooled and Thor got the report. He looked kind of awed by what he was seeing.

"I have some visuals; there's an entire hidden area down here and it's populated too. Runs around the outer ring so technically it's under city property not Pinnacle City. The base of this place is so big a lot of it is under the city, though it is supposed be a dead area. A graveyard and definitely not inhabited."

"Any idea what's in it?" I said.

"Readings say a lot of stuff is in it. There are human beings, robot type beings. Subhumans are detected in the tunnels on its perimeter."

Yuki cocked one eye, "Subhumans?"

"You'll know them when you see them," I said. "Subhumans in appearance but superhuman in strength."

Our robot reported that we still had a lot of underground capability, meaning we could feed the new information into Adam 1X and kick-start automatic repair equipment that would at least aid stabilization and help prevent any major quake while we were underground. Carlsonbonner and the robot went to work on that while I tried to pull up some video and sound surveillance through remote focus on the newly discovered area. I got nothing but an x-ray type view of measured areas. Outside surveillance had been blocked and that meant someone intelligent was inside the area. Someone who was probably watching us. Frustrated I ended up pulling out the laser weapon I'd brought along. I played with the settings and watched Yuki finish the polish job on his weapon.

Finally Thor Carlsonbonner was ready to move and that meant re-entering the crawler. Inside he did the navigation to get out beyond the ring. That being a long custom route through some old emergency tunnels, some of them made as an escape from Pinnacle City. An escape that made a lie of the supposed invincible nature of the city. Either that or its original designers simply planned for everything.

This was a slow rough grind and at times it sounded more like we were digging our way through than traveling on tunnels. About halfway, Thor managed to get exterior lights and a view screen turned on, creating a scary picture. The tunnel we were crawling on was so near collapse it was near madness to be on it. We were indeed doing some digging or at least rock tossing as a special scoop at the front of the crawler was repelling rocks and earth to the sides.

I found myself wishing we could pick up speed and get out of this long tunnel. The area we were aiming for was a series of domes and though we didn't know what was in them they were at least secure from collapse. No amount of shielding could cover the jackhammer vibrations of the crawler and we remained silent because of it. A cleaner section of tunnel appeared. We were headed for safety, then, unfortunately, our luck ran out.

A shock hit the area and the crawler shook so hard we felt like canned noise. Even our robot vibrated with a noise like it'd been gong struck. Plumes of dust showed on the screens before they went dead. The lights went out.

I had been holding my breath. Thor coughed. "What now?" Yuki said.

"The route map says we're nearly at our destination. The tunnel is much wider here so we get out and walk."

I scowled at our luck and said nothing. The door that been an easy entry sounded like a tin can opening as the robot pushed it clear. The three of us already had goggles and masks from the crawler emergency pack on as we prepared to exit. The robot crawled ahead and when we were clear in the tunnel I took a reading. The air was dusty but there were no dangerous gases so I let my breather hang around my neck. Yuki imitated me but Thor did not. He worked his way in the lead with the robot and soon most of the dust cleared and we saw the tunnel radiating like a widening maw ahead. There were piles of tumbled rock but we could work our way around the obstacles. The ground was hard red clay, mostly dry and cracked in this section.

We pushed on for a few hundred yards and then Thor ordered us to stop. The robot was slow to obey and tracted a bit ahead before coming to halt. It dulled in color as it powered down and suddenly we were in the silence of the earth.

"I thought I saw something moving up ahead," Thor said. "Just letting you guys know."

"I hadn't seen anything but I took my laser out. Yuki already had a gun in hand. We were about to start moving again when the whole tunnel lit up with a brilliant blue flash. I saw it and got blinded. It was like a fireball but blue and raced up out of the darkness to grab a direct hit on the robot. If we had not been standing behind it we would have been obliterated. The sound was like a battering ram hitting a steel sheet. Sparks flew all around us and the robot toppled over. Both Yuki and I dived behind a boulder and even though we were mostly blinded we fired our weapons down the tunnel.

Our guns shattered some rocks and the energy bullets ricocheted. Silence followed then Carlsonbonner sent a brilliant light flashing ahead by tossing a directional flare. It was like repeating bright camera flashes and it showed that the tunnel opened on a wide area ahead. Three large manlike figures were fading out of sight at the tunnel mouth and one of them threw another flaming ball down at us. Thor was already prepared for it as his arm swung at the same time, releasing a shield grenade that flowered into a semitransparent force umbrella that caught the oncoming fireball and absorbed its blast. Fire flared from it in long orange licks and before it died Yuki and I were dashing through plumes of falling sparks, in pursuit of the three attackers.

We halted at the tunnel mouth and glanced out over the area, which was a smoldering ruin. It had been at some time a populated area but that would've been long ago. All that remained now were collapsed heaps and an area near the center where light spilled down from a huge hole leading above. The perimeter of the area was a long curved wall that looked both new and impervious. One of our attackers suddenly showed near the hole and fired a blaster at us. I ducked fragments as it shattered a boulder near me. I'd gotten a good look at him, or it. The thing was a robot, human shaped and near android in advanced design. Its body was of dull gold metal with visible joints and one large eye set in a bald head that lacked both ears and nose. It would not be a resident down here so it had been sent after us.

Yuki suddenly dashed right out in the open and did a flip over a huge puddle of dark liquid before sliding behind another pile of loose rubble. His action drew out another attacker; the one with the heavy weapon that had been fired down the tunnel at us originally. This attacker was a subhuman and the mouth of his huge gun barrel glowed with blue fire as he turned an adjusting handle at its end to fine tune the upcoming blast. I didn't wait for him to blast Yuki but instead spun out into the clear and fired a quick scattering of energy fire. The hits were good; the weapon got knocked aside and he fired a blast at the impervious wall while the other laser hits flared on his chest armor. One shot singed away a chunk of green grey skin from his face. As I ducked back, I saw Yuki get the subhuman with a kill splatter-shot to the head. The robot was back out with quick shots; one of them blasting up ground beside me and the other narrowly missing Yuki.

Another subhuman with a head the size of a boulder had appeared and with them advancing from different angles Yuki and I would have been finished. What saved us was Thor Carlsonbonner appearing at the tunnel mouth and firing a shot as he ran for cover. Stone and earth exploded from return fire as he got to cover behind a curvature of the impervious wall, then our own robot, the big fellow appeared. He'd recovered from earlier blasts and other than being a bit scorched and dented he was tractoring forward. Now he put his huge arms through some rotations to open up the array of firing tubes and he began to blast away with serious sprays of energy projectiles. The other robot went for a tumble under the force of the blasts and I managed put a puncture beam through the forehead of the other subhuman. A burst of inky liquid geyser-ed out of his cracked skull, his large flat face suddenly going limp. Rather than collapse dead he fell face-down to the ground like a toppled statue.

Our enemy robot was back up and before he fired both Yuki and I ran back into the cover of the entry tunnel. A deafening roar of blast noise followed as the two robots hit each other with all weapons blazing. A section of metal flew past the entry tunnel as our guy lost an arm. Then it went quiet and we crept slowly back up for a look. Both robots appeared to be out of commission. Our robot pretty much dead and dismembered while the enemy robot had an intact body but was missing its metal head. Thor Carlsonbonner appeared to have escaped any direct hits but he was down behind a pile of earth and showing no signs of movement. Running up I did a check on his pulse; he was unconscious but likely unhurt. Resting near him on the pile of earth was the head of the other robot, its eyes flashing through a series of final bursts as it slowly lost power.

A couple sharp slaps to the cheeks brought Carlsonbonner around. While he got his head back in gear, I looked over the remains of our robot. Like the other robot he was now a valuable piece of junk. Down here he'd probably remain junk as we had no hope of removing him. I turned to Yuki; he was using his foot to turn

over one of the subhumans. The creep's protective jacket had been torn open exposing bare chest area and a wound. Even his regular skin looked like burn tissue. The exaggerated chin and facial features, tufts of hair at all odd places, general coarseness of the skin texture and body parts gave truth to the name subhuman.

"Never seen one of those things before," Yuki said. "Heard about them, but I thought they were only a problem overseas."

"They're everywhere now," I said. "Especially places where there is radiation or a lot of pollution. I don't know if subhuman is the correct term. They were evolved to clean up, kill and survive where we can't live. Maybe they're the future."

"I hope not," Thor said. "Humankind has aimed for the stars. Ending up as mere gutter trash is a rotten end."

"Probably there is no single end," I speculated. "We have humans and robots bred for the gutter and all the way up to Mars now. Diversity."

Carlsonbonner picked over the body of the enemy robot. "It's hybrid," he said. "But advanced. Based on some of the higher-level super service models. This one is bigger though and weapons oriented. There could have been some of them down here for a while. Maybe doing damage and causing some quakes."

I nodded. "Maybe part of it. But you yourself said powerful signals of some kind run down here from the top."

Yuki spat out some dust. "It was doing what I do, that's all. Someone sent it to intercept us and hit us."

Thor had a couple small tools out and began the process of salvaging some parts from our own wrecked robot. They were various modules inside the robot. I wasn't exactly sure what they were but guessed that it was either stuff we'd need or a security thing where he was protecting the technology. Minutes later we were walking ahead under extremely thick squat columns of grey stone that looked like they had flowed into place like molten metal. They supported a rough rock ceiling along the edge of the curved wall. The wall we knew to be the exterior of one of the underground domes we'd detected.

Thor appeared to be picking around for some particular spot and he stopped and stared at one section of the wall. "Want to key us in on your plans," I said.

"Sure. I've been taking readings and using my eyes. This is what I want; the area with the most stable overhead support. We have to blow a hole through this wall. I can't find any other way in. It's a series of domes with connecting streets or tunnels."

Some time passed as Thor pasted an octagon shape on a smooth section of the dark wall. Finer hairlike wires ran from it to a square pack of explosives he'd removed from one of the modules taken from the robot. The explosives were at the center. When he was done we waited while he did the settings on a remote. Thor was going to use the cutting power of lasers, actually greater than that, through the shape he'd pasted, then attempt a blast through. When he powered on it did not appear to be working. The thin lines of the octagon lit and burned on the stone, sending off wisps of smoke and hissing. But no cut could be seen. It burned for five minutes or more and Thor kept checking the reading. The wisps of smoke did stink like something was happening. The odor was a bad smell of burning electronics so I gathered the material only resembled a form of rock but was really plastics and fiber.

Thor signaled us to get over behind a large column then he triggered his blast. The force of it was incredible, the kickback like a super cannon punching away all the stone and earth on the path we'd just been on. When the sound cleared we looked out and saw the section lit up red-hot; there was a loud snap and hissing and it suddenly popped and flew through the air past our column and embedded itself in a pile of earth. This time when we looked around the column we saw a hole, and debris drifting in a rush of air and shadows.

The other side of the wall was well lit; the three of us were apprehensive as nothing was quite clear while dust continued to swirl out with the air. We all had weapons drawn and I was in the lead and the first to step through the hole. As the initial rushing of air ended I got a clear view and that was of a man running on the other side. Not an attacker but a person fleeing us. I got a good look at him. He was young, wearing casual clothes, running shoes and a red neck scarf. As Yuki came through I signaled for him to lower his gun. A moment later Thor came through and we looked around and moved ahead slowly.

We had emerged from the end point of a dead-end alley. It was hard-packed earth with round, embedded gray stones. Building walls rose beside us; no windows in this portion, and they were constructed of large

coarse blocks and sealer. The walls ran up two floors, each about eight feet, and there was another eight feet to a roof or false sky. It was the source of the light; bacterial and a full coating of it. Thor had said his readings were of a series of interconnected domes. Same ones that I had first detected. We were at the edge of one of the domes but the curvature of the false sky indicated a long flat sort of dome bubble, slowly curving up so that buildings and the sky were a little higher at the center portion.

Yuki and Thor were looking around and up; the sea green to light blue of the false sky was quite beautiful and it cast radiance on the area almost of daylight quality. Obviously, all streets running to the dome perimeter would dead end unless meeting a connecting avenue to the other domes. We moved ahead cautiously, came out at a wider street and then looked around the corners both ways. This was a street that circled at the dome's edge; we could see a couple men moving a ways down on the right turn. Another street intersected there. There was no one at our location and if there had been the explosion had likely scared them off.

Thor spoke first. False amazement in his tone. "This is like an entire building floor, hidden underground. Way out on the perimeter."

Yuki turned and faced him with disbelief. "Come on, Thor. Do you really expect us to believe that you and the Board didn't know about this?"

I supported Yuki's view. "Pool had the same sort of false sky in the south part of his super condo in the Market. It appears to be standard throughout Pinnacle City. This area is not something just created. It's been here from the beginning."

"All right," Carlsonbonner said. "So we know about it or knew about its existence, but it's supposed to be sealed. No people are supposed to be in it. We never had any monitoring here because it was considered superfluous."

"Superfluous. What in the hell is this place?" I said.

"When the building was constructed they did this ring way out beyond the underground mechanical complexes, wine cellars and all the rest. It is an emergency escape floor. A bunker so to speak. If there were ever a complete building disaster or world disaster, select people from Pinnacle City would take shelter here. You can see why it was never made public in any way. Pinnacle City is an invincible complex. The Board can't admit to the existence of a disaster bunker as big as a building floor. Most of them don't even know about it. This place is sort of forgotten."

"Yeah. Not that forgotten. Smell the air. Everything from food odors to perfumes; the odors of a populated area. Maybe if we can find out who is running the show here, we can find out what's up with all the quakes and signals running down from the top."

We moved down the empty street; the windows were all coarse arches on the first and second floors. Doors were all closed and the doors themselves were deeply recessed and heavy wood. Yuki caused a few frightened faces to disappear in the higher windows as he shifted his gun defensively. Carlsonbonner was also making a big show of being armed but I put my own weapon away, and figured we were lucky no armed enemy was greeting us. There was no way we could fight our way past an armed enemy in this sort of environment. They would simply hold us back and pin us down.

Colored cloth curtains covered many windows; there were no signs, and we knew people were fleeing our approach because we passed shops with food and other goods that were eerily empty. After about four blocks of this we did encounter people. A group of men and women up the street from us; all of them armed and wearing scarves and hats like the first man we'd seen.

At that point Thor called us to a halt. "We don't want to get into a shooting match unless they force one. We need to tell them why we're here."

"The longer I'm here the less I know why I'm here," I said. "Never-mind. You two stay here and cover me. I'll make a show of dropping my guns in the street and see if I can walk up to them."

Thor suddenly grew excited. "Wait a second. I recognize some of those faces. They've been wanted by the Board for years. That scruffy little black man is Buck Jenson, one of the foremost technical experts of the underground. He's wanted for suspected sabotage. So is the leader there, the long-haired guy. That's

Johnny Marsden. The lady with the big hat and gun is Janda X. Sorry, but I have no options now. These are suspected building saboteurs and terrorists and must be taken by force.”

Thor took a couple dangerous steps forward but I swung in front of him and turned, already feeling the heat of raised weapons at my back. “Hang on for a moment, Thor. Let’s not be rash. You say suspected. That is not proof of guilt.”

“Emanations are tearing this building apart. I have all the proof I need.”

“But we’re out gunned. We’ll be mowed down. They have snipers on us in those windows.”

“This is a matter of honor,” Thor suddenly ejaculated and then he got me by surprise as he knocked me aside with a violent sweep of his left arm. He raised his weapon as he did so, then we were both suddenly taken down as Yuki dived in on us. We went straight to the pavement as sniper fire went straight over us, narrowly missing us.

Now all three of us were down in the dust. One of my guns and Thor’s gun had been knocked away by Yuki’s tackle. Yuki kept still on the ground, not moving. Thor did move, attempting to crawl for his weapon, but I seized his leg and pulled myself on top on him. Thor’s mad whim had left us looking like three dogs in the gutter, numerous weapons pointed straight at us. I had the feeling my last thought was going to be something about what a dumb security chief he really was.

Then a light flashed and we saw what looked like a large white bird above us. I saw the guns go on it but nobody fired. Then the bird swirled like mist, and descended, taking human form as it did. A few seconds later Lisha Yanch was there, materialized on the road, standing between us and Johnny Marsden’s people. Though she’d descended like a ghost she resembled a summer guest, wearing a strap dress with light trim. In spite of the harmless appearance she drew sniper fire, a lot of it. Flashes of fire ripped the road up around her until she was in a cloud of dust. We remained on the ground watching as she walked out of it, and saw Johnny Marsden raise his hand for a cease-fire as she approached him.

Weapons remained targeted on us and we stayed on the ground. Due to Thor I was the feature target as the person holding him down. Lisha was speaking to them; I couldn’t hear what they were saying but addressed Thor in a whisper while they continued. “Thor. Get your act together. Another hostile move by you and we’ll be dead.” He started stuttering something; I took a chance, pulled up on him and slugged him hard on the head. His body went limp in the dust and I rolled away from him just in time to see some men running up to us.

Yuki and I both remained limp while our hands were tied with scarves. Thor Carlsonbonner they tied hands and feet and three men carried him and his gun away, down the street.

Choking out dust, tears falling from my stinging eyes, I got pulled roughly up to the rest of the gang and Lisha Yanch. Biting my lip, I clenched and unclenched my sore hand. Thor had a head like a rock so I was lucky my punch put him out. I ended up standing in the middle with Lisha on one side and Yuki on the other, facing the man Thor identified as Johnny Marsden and the woman he called Janda X.

I coughed. Marsden spoke. “We don’t work for the Board down here. If you want your friend Carlsonbonner kept in one piece you’ll do exactly what we say.”

Yuki answered. “I didn’t come for the Board. I’m from the Market. We came because of the strange happenings.”

“Yeah,” Janda said. “So why are you with Chief Carlsonbonehead?”

I managed to spit out the last of the dust and speak. “We needed someone who knew the way down here. But we ran into some trouble. Thor got punched in the head too hard by a subhuman and went loco.”

“So we noticed,” Marsden said. “The subhuman was you. You also blew a nasty hole in our dome.” Marsden appeared to think for a moment then he turned to the nerdy black guy Carlsonbonner had pointed out. “Buck. I want you to take a team and the flowstone machine and seal that hole pronto. Make sure no subhumans track it and get in.”

Buck pulled on his thin beard and looked around with haunted eyes. “Okay, but I want a heavy guard present. I’m not messing with any subhumans.”

“Just do it,” Janda X said.

Without answering, Buck walked off, signaling some men to follow him as he did.

Lisha Yanch got in on the conversation. “Like I told you. They aren’t on a Board mission to arrest you. The Board doesn’t know you’re here.”

Janda shook her mop of copper hair and took on a mean pout. “More reason to make sure they don’t get back.”

“How will that help,” Lisha said. “I’m here and you can’t stop me.”

Pushing Janda aside Johnny Marsden re-assumed control. “I thought you quit the Board? You’re dead. How did you get here? I heard there were ghosts up there. None get down here.”

“The signal they’re attacking you with runs down the core from the top. I simply piggy-backed down on it, using it like a transmitter.”

“Who are they?” Johnny said. “Who is behind that signal?”

I answered. “If we knew, we wouldn’t be here. There’s something here we need.”

Johnny raised one eyebrow. “If you say so. We’ll discuss this further. Later, at HQ.”

“What about Thor?” I said.

“He’ll be there. He’ll be checked over by medics then tranquilized.” At that Johnny and Janda X walked away, leaving us surrounded by the rest for a few minutes before the command came through to lead us away.

We were taken for a long walk, not intentionally but because we’d happened to break through at the most remote section of the dome system. The HQ was on the far side and the walk allowed me to picture the setup in my mind. Sort of a trinket of domes if you looked on it as a map; a larger central one surrounded by smaller ones connected through walkways. There were no quakes or shakes on this walk. It was more like the lull before the storm. We began to encounter some of the residents and saw some kids playing in streets. No population problem in these domes like they kept it sparse as policy, and it was a human population of the natural sort. If there really was such a thing anymore. I spotted no elders or obvious enhancements.

We knew they were at war with subhumans that lived in the dark passages and mechanical complexes outside. Any large support or mechanical structures not secured or under heavy robot protection likely housed subhumans. The dome environment was much nicer farther in with the source of beauty being the open concept there as streets coursed through segmented buildings connected in a patterned formation. In most places the sky cover was the only roof though some buildings had upper protection. It was the false sky combined with a clean air source that made this place inhabitable. Many parts of the outside city were far less desirable, due to the residents, the urban decay and pollution they’d created. Here the false light had a strange beauty that enhanced an architecture that was various molds of a flow plastic stone. Some buildings looked new in design so they had a construction machine inside somewhere. Probably the same machine that was being used now to do a fast flow of molten semi-impervious material to seal the hole we’d created. Transport was all by foot; people simply walked everywhere. We didn’t see any vehicles but I believed there was a delivery system, maybe hidden a ways underground.

Arrival at HQ was arrival at the strangest building facade of all. Instead of a few steps up like all the other construction it had a ramp leading into a glowing silver orb. Once inside everything was small rooms and cramped hallways with nearly every room containing a wall control panel and screen of some sort.

I had the feeling of being in a space station. The conference room we rested in was circular with a low ceiling like all the other rooms. All we were given was water to sip while we waited a long hour, but it was pure water with a healthy flavor. Finally Johnny Marsden, Janda X, Buck and some others showed and we began our little talk.

Johnny looked earnest and much too young to be in command. He frowned as Lisha Yanch appeared in the room and sat in a spoon-back chair. “Slight delay. You people didn’t do us any favors. A couple subhumans

almost got through. We can't afford that. This is a small population. Buck is fast with that machine; he can build nearly anything with it. His grandfather was one of the original architects of Pinnacle City."

"That's right," Buck said. "I assume you people have heard of the great Brandenburg Jenson."

"Formerly great," Lisha said. "He passed away ten years ago. He allowed no upload of his skills."

A popping sound drew our attention and we all turned to a slider door that had opened. Two men entered with Thor Carlsonbonner. His eyes were wide and drugged; his hands still tied behind his back. The bonds they removed before sitting him in a chair.

Yuki spoke. "What did you do to him?"

Janda answered. "We've got a special tranquillizer. A glass of wine. We use it on subhumans sometimes. Removes all violent urges and the ability to speak ... for a time of course."

"Thor went nuts when he saw you people. What's that about?"

Lisha answered before Johnny got a chance. "It's about a mix-up of priorities. He's got his mind stuck back in the old days and shoot-outs organized to clear the underground. Those days are long gone but his brain hasn't rebooted to today's date."

"That guy doesn't exactly have a heart full of forgiveness, does he?" Buck said.

Janda laughed. "He wants revenge because we kicked his ass back then. He thought we escaped into the city. So he snapped when it hit him that we've been down here all along."

"Okay," I said. "Rebooting to today's date. Issue is quakes, anomalies. But you look well protected in here. Any idea what it is about? I mean, I know it has nothing to do with you people as you don't want to attract attention."

Johnny nodded to Buck and he answered. "I've been tracking the problem. The assumption down here is someone or something way up there is attempting to destroy us. In most of the building, ruled by the Board, it would be assumed the quakes and so on were attacks on them. Whoever is doing it doesn't appear to have full knowledge of the underground, either. The dome system can't be destroyed, but they've done a great job killing off subhumans in the tunnels. Doing us an unintended favor."

"The signals fork and track back up in strange ways after riding down here," Lisha said. "So they must be attacking more than you."

"No. Because it is us ... we reflect the force back up the building to reduce quake force at the bottom."

Yuki shook his head in disagreement. "That isn't working. The Market is going to pieces. Carlsonbonner there hears that story and he'll have another reason to want your ass for terrorism."

"Yes it is working," Buck said. "The quakes would be worse if we didn't do it."

I decided to cut to the heart of the matter. "This headquarters of yours is rather odd. The architecture is nothing like the rest of Pinnacle City. Technically speaking, if it is the command post the creators built, as the key post for an ultimate disaster, it must have capabilities of some sort. Maybe capabilities someone wants destroyed or to harness."

Buck uncrossed his scrawny legs and answered. "You people don't remember a lot of history or just how famous an astronaut my father was. It was never advertised, always a secret, but this headquarters, mounted far under the ground to oversee robot construction, is an old moon ship. Specifically the command module with extensions built on from a decommissioned space station. That's why it's cramped and different. It has capabilities and the destructive emanations, when they start, are focused here. This is an attempt to destroy not harness."

I nodded with interest. "They had an android down here leading a subhuman attack. There is something key they want destroyed along with you people. What exactly are the special capabilities?"

Johnny waved Buck to silence. "Hold it a second. Maybe we shouldn't be giving them any information."

Janda batted her hat against her knees. "Chief Carlsonbonner is still out of it. As long as you agree to tell him nothing we can share some information?"

"Agreed," I said.

"And the Board, too," Johnny said. "We don't want them fishing around down here. You want to tell them things are cleaned up down here."

Yuki grinned. "We won't be telling the Board anything. We plan on bypassing the Board and cutting to the heart of the matter. Can't trust them. They are likely part of the problem."

"There are a number of special capabilities," Buck said. "Food and water sources for one thing. We refurbished some old vegetable cellars and grow, and have a synthetic meat processor no one else has, plus better than state-of-the-art water purification. The ship though, has three important things. One is a read chamber where we can gain data on all floors of the building. That was necessary during construction. We also have the memory banks; meaning all the data Adam 1X takes in for permanent banking is stored down here. The last thing is the special contact chamber; it was the first contact chamber with Adam 1X, back when the designers were the only ones allowed to contact him. We have these things but are limited. We can't access much of the memory banks and have never been able to enter the contact chamber."

Lisha stood up and paced the room. "They would want both the contact chamber and the memory banks destroyed as they could be used to identify the perpetrators."

I gnawed at my tongue. "I have a code for something. The contact chamber, does it require a code?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. "But you're wasting your time. We cracked the code a long time ago. Code doesn't work. We can't get inside."

"My version of the code is applied in a different way. It might work. How about the memory banks. Can we take a look at them?"

"Don't see why not," Johnny said. "Trying to search them is a frustrating experience though. Too many glitches, like the operating core got fried a long time back. Either that or we've failed to master the system. Pulled a lot of good stuff out of them. Without them this place wouldn't be working. Our entire tech from the food setup in the wine vats to air purification and the flow machine to seal out rock falls and the subhumans came from the banks. I did try to search the building in regards to the current anomalies but drew a bunch of nonsense and blanks. You people want to try it we'll go in after lunch. You guys also need some cleaning up; I mean except for the ghost. We can't keep Thor completely drugged, so he's going into a cell for now. Before you leave we're going to do a wash on him."

"A what?" Yuki said.

Janda X grinned, full lips spread over large white teeth. "We got that from the banks, too. A wash. We'll erase the part of his memory that covers coming down here via a date-stamp operation. It is amazingly simple. The memory of the banks is based on growths of humanlike brain material that can be data stacked or erased. It is a process that can be applied to us as well. The process is invaluable, but we obey the creators and won't allow it to be released into the world at large. Too dangerous, and only the elite or elders would be able to construct duplicate equipment. They'd use it to expand their control and rewrite history right inside the human brain."

Yuki and I cleaned up via an efficient walk-through shower; our clothes put through an instant steam clean. I was glad I hadn't brought my tablet and the patch on my wrist they didn't detect. I got back my two guns after they did a read on them. Thor was resting in a small Plexiglas-style cell and his stuff, including the parts he'd grabbed from the robot, had been taken. We had lunch in an open area outside the ship; a strange garden of green-to-mauve rubbery-leaved plants with large white blooms interspersed with fan ferns and stunted fruit trees. The meal Janda served was from their vats and excellent. No cooking involved at all with sandwiches that tasted like real chicken and fresh bread. The vegetables were all designer look but sorting through the salad one quickly picked up on the taste scheme. If it looked red it tasted fruity, orange like a tomato. Shades of brown were beans and the rest were greens. Again the beverage was only water and I got the feeling they liked to show off the purity of their water. Most likely it had health additives as well. They had a nice setup for people suited for that sort of thing. Quiet, small population, not much activity. The only music I heard playing was faint and the later strains of classical and jazz. Sure it was a heavily armed group

but no one had a particularly violent attitude. Guns were for self-preservation – preparation for any break-in by the subhumans from the outside tunnels. I did feel good about the place but as a person of the city it wasn't my paradise. I liked it better than the rest of Pinnacle City and it made me wonder if the ugly streets of the city had corrupted me, so that I could never leave and be happy elsewhere.

We engaged in some small talk. The entire core group down here had at one time been troubled youth in the city. Most were rich kids, some not at all wanted by their families. Buck Jenson, due to his father, remembered this place from visits as a child. After that it had been sealed and it was not to be opened again unless in dire emergency. The Board, Thor and others knew there was a hidden underground area but the domes remained off their radar; detection blinded out of their security systems. The place was on record but as there was no need for it no one on the Board attempted to enter it. The war with Thor had been in the inner tunnels and open mechanical and support areas before the arrival of large numbers of subhumans. Johnny and his people pulled off a disappearing act when they vanished and sealed themselves in the domes. They were originally the quietest of natural retreats. Pinnacle City security failed to detect them so over time a community grew, but remained small with no real drug or other human enhancement other than soft euphoria drugs and booze.

The rest of the open underground became a subhuman hellhole. Thor Carlsonbonner and his security retreated, sealed off key security stations and mechanical areas, left kill robots where needed, and forgot about the place. Leaving it as a locked-in underground Hades. Over time the Board even forgot about the subhumans, thinking that they'd died off.

The read chamber, memory banks and contact chamber were three separate enclosed areas and the six of us went single file down the narrow access hall with Johnny in the lead. Simple fob access took us into the read chamber and we looked around. Curved walls and too many pullout panels made it clear you'd need to be weightless to operate it with efficiency, though plastic ladders in the side allowed reach of everything. Lisha floated about, studying things, Yuki seemed amazed but confused and I faced off with Buck, Janda and Johnny, waiting for their explanation.

Buck delivered it. "I've had about half the thing in operation. The rest of it doesn't work. It is in no way user friendly. Complex read feeds on various parts of the building or all of it, in AI formats only engineers can read. We have another machine we use to reflect various energy emanations back up. With the chamber, I'm sending them where they do the least damage. Usually a bounce off the thirteenth floor in a way the energy can be absorbed. It would be nice to reflect it out; this building was designed to reuse all energy and that is being played against us."

"Have you got any feeds on the top floors on that thing?"

"We have feeds," Buck said. "Doesn't help us. We can't read anything structural to make a visual of what is up there. Just crazy reads on a tremendous energy source – and get this – other unknown forms of energy without a detectable source. In spite of the wild energy measurements it is not disruptive, heat or radioactive. It is like someone found a way to contain a pure energy source."

"Or is one," Johnny said. "Something moves around up there. Like maybe a god with some form of energy body. That we'll never know as there is no way to get in there. The field protecting the top of Pinnacle City gives a new meaning to invincible. I saw Buck's readings on it. Whatever Adam 1X did up there is scary as far as tampering with it goes, but it looks like someone is doing that."

Janda decided to move on before I could speculate. "You won't have time to play around with this ... it takes days to put together stuff. Let's go into the banks."

A white door with rough raised paneling led into the banks from the read chamber. It was on one of those air-pin lock systems where a code is done in fingertip taps, meaning it was set so only a human could open it. There must have been some reason for disallowing robots and androids to the memory banks. The inside was musty with paneled walls like an old library.

Though these were the mighty memory banks of Adam 1X, all that showed in the room were some access booths with head hook-ups and a central area with a meeting table. It was almost like the banks were disguised to look like nothing much more than a public library reading room.

We sat around the meeting table. Johnny led the discussion. "We've simply opened all access, meaning you follow the tablet at any booth and select according to what you want. Any sort of data. But visuals are what most people start with. Try it out if you want, Jack."

I accepted his offer and walked over to a booth, donned a headset and went through the simple instructions. They outlined how to do small searches. For other complex stuff and specialized data a long on-screen manual needed to be studied. Since the only complex data I would want would be on the top floor and not recorded I didn't have to worry about those procedures.

It took me a few minutes to gather how to grab times and locations. Mainly because I wasn't up to date on the actual names of the locations. Getting into a feed of the Market and the Maze, I managed to track my own movements and then do a back track on the android that had attempted to blow us up. I followed him to a public area. A tiny park next to a Chinese restaurant where he had a meeting with a briefcase. Literally that's all that showed; whoever was carrying the case was not visible but walked up with it, and after what I assumed was a chat with the android, opened the case and gave it a small device which was the bomb and its trigger.

An hour passed with me tracking Penrose Pool through complex visuals, and then I did tracks on some other stuff. When I took the headset off I realized what was meant by wild goose chase. It was kind of like Thor's surveillance but not quite as ridiculous. In the banks' version my trail always ended up at someone invisible or an entire missing segment. Just enough removed to end my investigation. It hadn't all been erased from the banks so someone had enough power over Pinnacle City to remove segments of data or mask them so they didn't show in the backup here.

I got up and sighed. Yuki was on another machine. The others were having a discussion at the table. As I sat down they went silent so I gathered the discussion had been about me.

Johnny cleared his throat somewhat uncomfortably and spoke. "You're from the city. Your name is still in the news feeds from there quite often. We still venture out there regularly. None of us are completely enclosed in here. We have a passage out and allies. Point is, we can't see any reason for you to be working for the Board. Someone must have sent you in?"

"Check the news in detail. My home neighborhood is a war zone. I took the case to be somewhere until the air clears. It was in fact the Board that hired me, but it didn't have anything to do with you or the underground. I was hired to investigate the murders of Board members. Your old friend Thor and his people didn't know how to work such a case. It was supposed to be a simple case not the mess I'm now cleaning up. The Board withheld stuff from me regarding these current happenings that are baffling us all."

"But you must have something to gain?" Janda X said.

"Wish I did. But it's a personal thing now. They tried to fry me alive and kill me in Lisha's world. I can't exactly leave Pinnacle City because I'll have the devil on my tail. Those sorts of criminals you have to kill off. They'd follow me because I know too much and might talk."

Yuki stepped up. "Enlightening. I found out some very interesting things ... I mean personal stuff."

"That's why I hate those banks," Buck said. "I mean I love them in some ways, but I don't like anyone else accessing them because then I have no secrets."

Lisha suddenly appeared out of a flash of light and walked across the room. "The contact chamber is all that remains. Let's see if entry can be gained."

It was with great reluctance and some argument but Johnny allowed us access to the exterior of the contact chamber. We went as a group but only two of us went down the narrow tube to the entry. The tube shone like aluminum and was only big enough to walk down single file. I found myself stooping as my head was just short of the ceiling. This tube was brightly lit as the metal emitted a brilliant glow. The door at the tube end was another vault door but a strange one – circular shape like the tube, with a flat yellow glow that colored the air close to it. A large symbol with a thin circle around it marked the center of the door. The symbol was a stylized tree of knowledge with a pseudo holy glow that was brighter than that of the rest of the door. An entry code panel showed embedded into the wall on the left side. Its top ran at a forty-five degree angle and was smooth touch-screen material.

Just as we were about to reach the door, Lisha Yanch appeared out of the light in front of us. I watched as she attempted to walk through the vault door. A blast of blinding light followed, leaving Johnny and I on our knees with hands over our eyes. It took about thirty seconds for my vision to start to clear and I heard Lisha's voice, in that strange and feminine way where you had feeling of both hearing it with your ears and independently in your mind. "Be careful," Jack she said. "I can't enter, that thing is even defended even against ghost entry."

"Yeah," Johnny said. "It's defended against everything."

"Call it planning ahead," I said. "There were no building ghosts when they put that in. But they anticipated that sort of invader or virus."

Johnny's tone grew urgent. "Don't touch that panel or that door. You touch that door, or put a wrong code in the panel and this chamber will seal and fry us both. It will disrupt and destroy anything in it – human, robot, you name it. We lost a number of people playing with this thing. We're lucky that ghost lady didn't get us killed already. Buck cracked the code a while back. I don't know how he did it, but he said the strange thing is the code can be found, but it doesn't work. I was here on the outside. He can put it in but the door doesn't open. You don't get killed, but you don't get in. Like a piece of the code is missing. Therefore, if you got a code somehow, we'll let you try. However, if it's wrong you're dead. If it's right you still likely won't get inside."

"Okay, I got you on that. Now move out and let me try. If I get disrupted it'll be no great loss for you people."

"More than disrupted, Jack. There won't be an atom of you left."

The tube sealed as Johnny left and I was suddenly in the dark with only the glow of the door and radiance emitted by the panel. Since it looked like a touch-screen I simply touched it with my fingertip. It lit up fully, showing a square area for code entry and the keypad. The voice of a young male voice spoke saying, "Jack Michaels, enter the code."

It was definitely the Adam 1X chamber because it had my fingerprint data way down here. Data only Stone Sangalang was supposed to have on file with the Board for positive ID if I happened to get erased. The whole keypad thing and the voice spooked me. Both clued to the idea of entering a code with the fingertips. I guessed that to be a security feature because it didn't work for Buck. Since the code was burned into my tongue I simply placed my tongue on the entry square so that the tiny code burned into it fit. I held it there.

Nothing happened. I didn't want to pull away my tongue until I was certain of the read. Twenty seconds passed and I didn't know whether to feel frightened or foolish. Mostly it was uncomfortable as the panel was hot and sticking to my tongue. When the reaction happened and it was a strong electric jolt that threw me off the panel with a feeling that parts of my brain would never be the same again. And the voice of a young man spoke again saying, "Access code accepted. Prepare to enter the chamber."

I gave my head a knock with the palm of my hand and then turned and watched as the door slowly slid aside. I had the strange feeling that Adam 1X had read the contents of my brain during that brief contact. The sliding panel in itself was about three feet thick and I saw only darkness in the interior. But I didn't wait; as soon as it was open I stepped inside.

Lights blinked on, the panel slid shut behind me and I found myself on a marbled floor. A curved ceiling stretched above and all the walls were as smooth as glass. There was no sign of electronics or other equipment, just a large command-post style of reclining chair in the center of the room.

I walked over to the chair and studied it, finding that it resembled a very expensive reclining chair and nothing more. It was the only thing in the room so I sat on it and reclined.

A rush of cool air streamed over me, though I saw no air vents, and the stream intensified, growing colder until I began to shiver. I could see my breath and began to wonder if I was being frozen. Then probes appeared instantly and surrounded me on the chair. These had round flattened silver ends that were connected to a snaking beam of blue light that had been emitted from the wall with them. None of them touched me but I reached out and touched one probe end. It was ice cold, a metallic feel, and my skin stuck lightly to it. Pulling my hand away I waited and watched as the probes shifted to a formation around my entire body. Four of them were at my head. When they stopped moving my ears popped and I suddenly exhaled a frosty stream. A bitter taste settled in my mouth and though I was freezing I felt myself going

under like in a medical anesthetic effect. Geometric forms, a kaleidoscope of them began to rush in my head, like both visual stimulation and thoughts. They were malformed dream language thoughts and symbols that couldn't be articulated by a waking person. Finally I was in the blackness of empty space, almost like the chair had transmitted me out into the frozen, empty void somewhere ... and I was rushing into a pit of blackness. Which turned out to be a period of unconsciousness.

When I awoke there were no probes and the sun was streaming in on my face. I was reclining on a chair but not the same chair. It had the same shape but it was a deck recliner and I was on some huge balcony with clear sky above. Leaning forward I looked around. It was a balcony very much like the boat deck balcony in my own supplied Pinnacle City condo. Only this one was ten times bigger and way up higher, making the exposed open air feel powerful.

I rose to my feet and walked over to the waist-high transparent railing. The view nearly sucked the breath out of me. I was high up at the top of Pinnacle City and the balcony was supported by nothing, floating there or sailing there on the huge force bubble top of the building. I could actually feel the sway of the top of the monster building and the structure I was on adjusting with it.

The whole setup wasn't in tune with my fear of heights; on a cloudy day I would've been in the clouds. Though this had to be some form of virtual transfer like the virtual level, it felt totally real. My body, right down to the vertigo and queasy stomach felt real. Due to the suction of the view I turned around to escape the sense of being pulled out into it. As I did, I saw a young man walking down the plank flooring toward me. He wore clean summer clothes of a modest variety and was medium build and tall with handsome facial features. He didn't walk straight up to me but gestured with his right arm and I followed him to an area a bit more enclosed. There were some chairs and a glass table there and he sat down and waited for me to join him.

I sat across from him, watching as he sipped a drink. Even at this spot I felt the sway of the deck, though a huge sun umbrella killed some of the open sky feeling.

He did not attempt to open the conversation so I did. "I take it you are Adam 1X?"

"That I am. Call me the vacationing Adam 1X. I've been retired, you know?"

"Yeah, well you better get back to work. In case you haven't noticed, the building is being disrupted."

"Oh that. That is because of him in there." He pointed off toward a shimmering section of the force cap. "You have to get rid of him to solve that problem."

"Who exactly is he? Who is in there at the pinnacle?"

"I don't know. That data was stored in my primitive brain, the portion that existed in there but got destroyed. All I remember is that it was a human being, a man. And he is in there now, though that is impossible."

"Thor Carlsonbonner and others told me no human could exist in there so how is it happening?"

"A transformation of some sort. He must have made parts of it human safe and maybe he has a protective suit as well. I also know that he is mad – killings targeting the Board. He was just playing games until he realized I wasn't completely destroyed; he found some data on the underground and now that he knows my main brain is there he is shaking up the building with attempts to destroy me. I actually have intelligence modules everywhere in this building, so he's been attacking them too. In the Market and at other locations."

"He has to kill you for what reason?"

"That's obvious. Control. Now that he's set up he fears no man, but he knows I might find a way to eliminate him. I am working on that. In my thoughts he is an infection that must be destroyed. He doesn't know everything. Like his assumption that I'm mostly in the underground. He isn't aware that I have modules out here right next to him, so right now he's hitting the underground with a fresh disruptive attack, hoping to destroy me along with you."

"You must have a plan. I mean a way to destroy him."

"I do. That's why I've been on vacation, waiting for whomever the Board sends to investigate. Which happens to be you."

"If he fears no man, what can I do?"

"Good question. That is what we have to work out. The top floor and pinnacle are a place of incredible power and forces; I know as I set them up. He got through with higher level androids, destroyed my primitive brain and other control systems, and then he hooked himself in and is control through implants. The implants create another AI, of what form I don't know. I do know that if those implants are destroyed, I can then reassert control and set the building into a long repair and reboot mode."

"I guess the next key is in what you just said. Ambition is nothing new. This is a power grab. Someone wanted to climb to the top and overrule the Board. The key to it seems to be replacing your capabilities at the top with what you call implants. What are these implants exactly? How can they be destroyed?"

"Climb to top, yes. I control or did control every type of robot and android near the top of this sky city. For years there were rumors about who or what was up there. It was always me. I allowed the illusion of hidden human controllers because it was convenient. Denying all access to the pinnacle was straight-up security. The ambition you mention. I've always known that humans can't be trusted, and especially not with the control systems, robots and androids up there. The invader's control was slowly asserted through planted androids. He got in at the top with them, caused destruction, and had the implants placed before coming up himself. The implants are programmed brain matter he grew, now wired in so to speak, maybe with the control equipment my brain matter there had been firmed to before its destruction. If not that then he also has his own hardware. The implanted brain matter but not the system itself needs to be destroyed. When I controlled all robots and androids I could have done that easily. Now he controls them and that is everything from big industrial robots to bug robots smaller than an ant."

"We can't get in without them. Any kind of weapon or beam we could use from the outside on a target in there?"

"No. The place is impregnable. You have no idea how impregnable. But I know a way in the invader wouldn't know about. You have to go in and do it without mechanical help. Any action by me would be detected. I tried programming some androids with my control and they were on to me right away."

"I thought no man could survive in there?"

"Not for long under the old system, but now he's altered it, and since he is human, it would be human friendly in some areas. There is a way in through the upper core. It has been preserved since the last days of construction. I have always kept it ready as it was never completely decommissioned. More or less it has been forgotten. There are body skins, worn under the clothes, a cap and eye sheaths. Wearing them you could enter for a time."

"How many people could enter?"

"There are a number of suits."

"How dangerous is it?"

"Extremely dangerous. I can't calculate the odds because I don't know what he is. I mean, originally he was a man. What he has transformed himself into up there I don't know. He can of course order robots and androids to destroy you, and the core is deadly. You have to climb up on a track. There is no transport tube you can take up because he has them secured. The track is hazardous and there are other dangerous things all around and sheathed beams – all sorts of energy transfers and other needed supplies racing up and down from the top. Falling or leaning into any sheathed beam could mean anything from being frozen, disrupted, burned up ... you name it. The top has always had android service and they intake an atmosphere a bit short on oxygen. Unless he's changed things a lot, a pill covers that aspect."

"I was hired by the Board to solve murders of Board members. What's the motive of this person? Why does someone develop brain implants to supposedly establish himself in control with a super intelligence, and then use it to kill specifically Board members via bizarre methods?"

"Think back to the old days when so many AI minds had to be killed off violently. The great artificial intelligence beings in the world today were developed, lived a lifetime like a human, but in a way where they were properly nurtured. Vastly increasing the intelligence of a lunatic with AI creates a super lunatic. Hidden

psychological problems become magnified; the precise reason why modern AI is dangerous and under strict developmental control.”

My chat with Adam 1X ended with the bright sun beginning to swim in mist. One moment we were talking and the next I was so sleepy I felt like an old tortoise with drooping eyelids. Adam got up and strolled over near the edge and the mist sailed in with the bright disc beyond like the sun was an engine driving it to me and sending me back to dreamland. I came awake with a sudden gasp. I was back in the contact chair and was being jolted as the probes pulled away from me. In spite of being startled I felt refreshed, not drained, and immediately got up. The door opened right away to allow my exit. It closed behind me, leaving me in the tube. It was shaking, banging with frightening hammer blows. The vibrations nearly threw me off my feet as I ran down to the end.

No one was present in the other section of headquarters so I hurried outside quickly. Only Yuki was nearby and I could see clouds of dust drifting farther down the street.

“What’s going on?” I said.

“Major quake and blast attack,” he said, his braid swinging as he bounced foot to foot in the rumbling. “They left me here to guard you. Everyone else has gone toward the perimeter.”

“I’ve got what I want. Let’s see if we can get out of here. Take me to the others.”

He nodded, I followed, and that mission proved simple. Yuki tossed me my guns and ran toward the dust cloud. We tailed a crowd of the underground residents, all of them heading the same way and all armed. Yuki was a faster runner than them and so was I. We nearly caught them at a corner. The dust was thick there and as we came around it the air was full of weapons fire. A wounded man, badly scorched, was off to my left. I was just in time to see a subhuman and an android taken down in the distance under cross fire from a number of guns. I heard the moaning of wounded people. Others were coughing up dust and there was general chaos as medics worked to treat the wounded and carry them away from the scene on stretchers.

The air was fierce and both Yuki and I sneezed as we moved up front to Johnny and Janda X. A score of dead subhumans littered the ground near a scorched android of a very advanced human type. The area smelled like a barbecue of beef and toxic plastics.

Johnny turned to me. “A major break-in. We’re going to seal it right away. Your ghost friend Lisha is on the other side, checking for more subhumans.”

A moment later Lisha appeared out of the smoking ruins. “There are more about a kilometer off. You better seal that hole fast.”

“Buck’s already on the way with the machine. We can get a soft seal right away that will hold them back until we finish the hardening.”

“We can’t withstand many more of these attacks,” Janda X said. “Maybe we should just let them through. It’s the contact chamber they want. They want Adam 1X not us.”

Buck was coming around the corner in the cab of a big red machine. Johnny waved him on and said, “No way do we let them through. Once they destroy Adam 1X the whole city will be at their mercy. They’ll execute us.”

“You only have to hold them off for a while longer. I got through to Adam 1X. We are going to the top. If we succeed with this strike it’ll be over. But we need out of here, and I need Thor with us.”

Johnny grimaced. “I’d rather hold him, Jack.”

“His chances of survival will be slim on this new mission, and he can’t authorize any raids for arrests down here if his memory is partially wiped.”

“All right, take him. We can’t use him for anything here anyway.”

“We’ll need more than him. We need a way out of here and back up that is quick.”

“Can do,” Janda X said. “We have a way past the subhumans via an old security post. They can't access it. You can get back up from it.”

Chaos ended and we stayed for part of the cleanup as we had to wait while the work was done on Thor's memory. To get out we journeyed to the deepest part of the underground to another hidden security post. We arrived at a split in the tunnel; to the right newer tunnel led a short ways to the vaulted entrance of a secure trolley line, and off to left an older tunnel led back to another hidden route back to the domes. If it hadn't been for the slow staggering of Thor Carlsonbonner we would have got through clean without close encounters with any enemies. Johnny tracked them as far enough off but they soon caught up with us and got mostly killed off due to their over aggressive nature. An android showed on Johnny's palm screen and he was still a ways off with four remaining subhumans.

Johnny wiped sweat and dirt from his face. “That android sent them running for us like mad dogs. If they'd been more careful they might have got us.”

“Really desperate for the kill,” I said.

Yuki smiled. “Subhumans don't frighten me at all. They're bad fighters close on. Androids, they trouble me. Never liked them. Give me the creeps.”

“Looks like this is the split,” Johnny said. “The fob will open the station doors. Once you close them they won't be able to get through. This is an indestructible emergency line up. You'll come out in a hidden room in the mezzanine mechanical area. If they all follow me you might not see me again. But let the people down here know what happens up there – leave a coded message on the city line and we'll pick it up.”

Johnny took off and faded to a specter in the dusty gloom of the old tunnel. Lisha Yanch disappeared too, following a plan to lure our pursuers on a back track. I moved ahead with Yuki and Thor and we got to the vault doors and waited while they clicked open piece by piece. On the inside the final pieces clicked shut just as beam fire flew at us from a running gang of drooling subhumans. I threw Thor to the floor, Yuki moved aside. We were in the clear and turning to face a small bullet train. It was a beautiful sight – fire-red coating on the glistening armored sides and a slight red tint in the glass view-screen. I walked over and inspected the tunnel and other than a coating of dust it looked untouched. The fob opened a side panel and we dragged the now drooling Thor Carlsonbonner inside.

“Think he'll remember anything much?” Yuki said.

“He'll remember going down. Nothing after that. But he's okay. We'll spruce him up because we need the extra man for the journey to the top. The way I figure it, one man wouldn't have a chance and neither would a big team. A few of us might surprise them.”

After Yuki laid Carlsonbonner out on the upholstery I attempted to start the train, and after a minute noticed that the same entry fob turned on the ignition light. Then we were off, blasting at amazingly fast speed up to the mezzanine level of Pinnacle City.

## **Chapter Seven: Journey to the Top**

One core problem with Pinnacle City in my view rested in the fact of its memory being nearly all in artificial intelligence. That flaw being a feature of planet efficiency. Nearly everything was run with labor savings in mind. The memory of a city also exists in its heritage structures, public works departments and long-term residents. Go into Toronto and you always find an old city file and some old man who knows about or remembers this or that. In Pinnacle City, the Board and Stone Sangalang were unreliable information stores. With Adam 1X on the knock, and part of his brain destroyed, I was left with Lisha, Thor, Yuki and some others. The whole thing convinced me of the need for backup systems everywhere, like I had, otherwise if society crumbled nothing would be left. We'd be back in the Stone Age.

As far as our trip underground went we decided to keep the Board in a state of worry and not shoot any key details to Stone Sangalang either. We dumped Thor Carlsonbonner in a medical emergency cab designed to bring about a fast recovery of people in a far worse state. When he was back on his feet we had him

delivered to us for our trip to the Travelers level up near the top of the building. The Travelers level was the huge air bay or automated airport existing just above the Lower Penthouse and below the security ring sections demarcating the last climb to the force-protected top floor. Hotel 175 existed on the west end of Travelers, and it was a VIP luxury area serviced by both humans and automated systems. It featured exotic hotel and meeting rooms. Generally it was temporary digs for wealthy groups either leaving or arriving at Pinnacle City. Thor had access to the hotel, which was the meeting place recommended by Lisha and Yuki. The place had safe rooms free of all surveillance and no time window through which the Board could detect our presence. There was no surveillance access from the outside either as it was regularly swept.

Thor was more cooperative than expected, mainly because his memory was dim, and my info that we were to discuss a breakthrough excited him. He made the arrangements and three hours after the briefing we strode down a narrow ramp through the opening doors of a silver-trimmed bullet air car. The sleek car flashed up to Hotel 175, entering through a secure entrance that connected off a port with direct access to a safe room. Our presence had not been broadcast, meaning there would be no service arriving via human or robot assistants. No one was to know of our visit, especially not androids on site.

We drank scotch and Thor became impatient as we waited for our guests. He was in the dark about what had happened below and wanted information as to what in the hell we would be doing up here. Running off on this leg of the case without informing the Board was personally dangerous for him.

Over the next hour, the remaining three members of the team I'd picked arrived. Yuki came from the Market in a small blue air car, dressed in his usual outfit but carrying some light weapons and a special package I had ordered. The second guest, Lisha Yanch, arrived on her own steam, appearing by the window and startling Yuki. It was the third guest who made the most shocking arrival as Thor Carlsonbonner and Yuki drew weapons on his grand entrance. Skitch Rocco came in through a ramp door off the bay, and this was an improved Skitch. He'd found a drug therapy treatment that worked to understate his spidery monster form back toward the human model. As a man he'd had a distinct gait and he had a stranger walk now, but at least he could walk on two legs without looking too odd. His hands were hidden by gloves and most of his body by a baggy suit. The feet were splayed. His face was sweaty and intent, same shark's smile he'd carried as a full human. Weird as he was, he looked formidable. If I had not stepped in the way and held up my hands Thor would have fired. It was only after some strong language between us that they put down their weapons and the meeting began.

Thor was still shaking his head as he sat down. "This must be some plan you have if you trust that terrorist monster to be in on it."

Skitch licked his soft lips then curled them into a snarl as he looked at Thor. "You shouldn't be calling anyone names. People are calling you a big oaf, and the Board knows that through this whole thing my floor has been stabilizing things. Doing the job while your security forces twiddle thumbs and scratch heads."

Yuki laughed at that but also kept his distance from Skitch. Thor said nothing and looked to me.

I grinned. "I see you've undergone a self-improvement course, Skitch."

"Of course. I'm a Board member. They had to provide full medical treatment and have reversed some of the effects. I can almost pass as a man now, and have the powers of a monster."

"Now you look more like some of the mutants I've seen elsewhere," I said. "Your residents there on the thirteenth floor are the most altered mutants I've ever seen. Since Thor is mentioning monsters, we must consider that monsters and devils are what we might be facing up there. Here are some of the details Adam 1X gave me. He has a location near here where the core can be entered. It is an emergency passage up but really dangerous. In any other spot we wouldn't be able to go in at all. It is not really designed for humans but a brand of robots that used to do the climb in emergency situations. We'll be wearing protective suits. Skitch is more adapted to this than us and we need him to do the initial run up and lay in the climbing track at the sides for us."

Thor visibly shuddered. "No one would ever think of going into the core. Of course no one can get in either. If that isn't scary enough, we don't even know what we'll be arriving at ... could be a deadly atmosphere with beams and stuff."

“Adam 1X says it isn’t. Large power sources are localized and there are spacious open areas where we would be okay. We should come out in a hidden service area.”

Thor remained unconvinced. “If Adam 1X can see so much why doesn’t he do the job somehow? Whatever the job is.”

“He can’t see much and doesn’t really know what’s in there as his primitive brain, which was located in there, has been destroyed. Only a human team would be able to do it as android and robot control is out of Adam’s hands in that area.”

Skitch shifted about restlessly. “Great. We don’t know what’s in there. So we just sort of spook around and hope we don’t get bumped off.”

“No such deal,” I said confidently. “We know what we’re looking for. We cover Yuki because he’s carrying the bomb.”

Thor cleared his throat. “Bomb. Wouldn’t that be dangerous, causing an explosion at the top of this place ... and doing so when we are there? What if it ignites other things and gets out of control?”

“It’s dangerous all right,” I said. “But the bomb is a special weapon. The explosion releases packets that destroy certain soft tissues and nothing else. We are going blow up brain matter that is fueling a hostile intelligence up there.”

“Yeah, and blow out our own brains, too,” Skitch said. “I didn’t sign on for a suicide mission.”

“It has a range. We plant the bomb and get clear. Part of the suits we’ll be wearing is a protective cap that will help in that regard. We blow up that thing. The rest of the system will collapse. Adam 1X will regain control of the building, reboot it, and move in up there with tiny robots for an inspection. Most likely our killer is tied to that intelligence up there, so that mad bird will be disabled in the same explosion.”

Thor shook his head in a worried fashion. “Reboot Pinnacle City. Do you know how many alterations there have been over time? If everything went back to original settings it would be disaster. This is a populated city. If everything suddenly shuts off and restarts the shock would be tremendous.”

“It’s the only way,” I said. “Adam 1X has to clear out all control systems implanted by that thing. Adam says he’s got it calculated and can manage the reboot with minimal loss of life.”

“Minimal,” Skitch said. “You can be sure our deaths are part of the calculation.”

“No,” I replied. “He says we’re an unknown, but if we survive at the top, we’ll probably make it all the way.”

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The natural feeling was not to feel comfortable with Skitch Rocco at your back. We kept him ahead as we walked through a wide arch in the far side of Travelers. We entered a mechanical area. Yuki had taken the job of carrying the stuff and he was just behind Skitch, wheeling forward slowly with it all loaded in an old baggage cart. The cart had minimal electronics and was generally only a cart. At this level we had a strong distrust for anything remotely robotic. Thor had his security organization’s version of a combat outfit on and it made me wonder how he planned on getting the protective suit’s headpiece to fit with it. After turning into a dingy corridor we came to a wide corrugated metal door that Thor opened with a push of his remote. It hadn’t been opened in a very long time. Some dust motes and stale air smoked out, indicating a hidden enclosure not on building air-conditioning maps.

Darkness lay ahead and we halted with Skitch staring into it for some moments before he moved ahead and caused the lighting to ignite. The rest of the entry was a slow process with all of us searching for possible traps or enemies but finding nothing other than a strange shrine appearing out of the semi gloom of the odd lighting. I looked above at the high ceiling and jeweled patterns emitting the yellowish light. Across a buff stone floor more lights burned on the shrine and its idol. The idol itself was an unsettling statue – being a large glowering alien being with a hooded head that reminded me of a cobra. It was embedded into the wall and of course that wall was the core. It looked flat but was on a slight curve as it stretched fully around the center of this floor as it did all floors of the building.

The idol had its right hand out holding a bowl. Nothing was in the bowl. Skitch went up for a closer look at it and Yuki shut off his cart and hopped out. He suddenly jumped aside as a form appeared out of the gloom. There was no need for us to fire as it turned out to be Lisha Yanch, again spooking us.

“Ever been in the core,” I said to her as she walked up.

“No. I can feel the pull of the energy even from here. Once you open that thing I’ll have to leave. I fear dissipation. Not much I can do except wait and see if you people return from the top.”

Thor was nervous, waving his gun around at shadows. “That queer idol gives me the creeps,” he said. “Never seen anything quite like it in Pinnacle City.”

“Relax,” I said. “It’s a just a front. It’s our doorway into the core.”

“Really.” Thor looked amazed. “The thing looks pretty solid. What do we do, cut through it?”

“No. Adam 1X is tracking the suits we dug out. He knows we are here so we should suit up.”

So undress and suit up is what we did and it was a nervous, frustrating and comical affair. Nervous because Carlsonbonner and Yuki never stopped glancing around for surprise attackers. Frustrating because Thor and Skitch had a rough time getting into the skin suits. The comical part was in watching Skitch attempt to get the suit on over his hands and feet, and the size Thor grew to wearing a suit with pieces both under and over his combat gear. I likely looked pretty silly myself. I couldn’t escape it as the head protection caps and eye protection fits looked entirely awkward and bizarre.

Yuki actually took the longest time to dress because he had to fit our bomb around his chest and torso and the bomb itself was jacketed in connected pieces. He needed it to fit exactly right so he could move without putting any stress on it.

Detonation was possible in two ways that relied on a read of Yuki’s brain waves. It had to be that way so no other entity could take control of it. In spite of that we were nervous as the core was an unknown; we could not be sure some unusual energy passing in it wouldn’t cause detonation or that Yuki wouldn’t get buzzed by something that would set it off.

We still suited up in good time though I finished long before the others. Lisha took time to give me some words of encouragement and a smile then vanished as she feared the core entrance was about to open. She was right; for a couple of minutes the four of us stood there facing the alien idol and were perhaps the most oddball of idol worshipers, working to bring about an odd result; an idol that suddenly spewed forth near ear-splitting groans and scraping noises as the entire base of it began to slowly move. The floor below continued to protest the movement loudly but it didn’t stop and the idol itself faded out of sight as an open area began to appear. When the shift finished, a new opening showed that was wide at the front and ending at a narrow silver door embedded at the back.

Silence fell for a moment, and then Skitch moved forward across the stone floor. With the protective cap, eye covers and suit, he looked like the tall bug from a weird cartoon I used to watch as a kid ... and it all seemed so much like a fantasy I began to wonder if we were really attempting it.

Skitch stopped again, right at the door. This was the material composing the outer core and it looked like real silver, though it was a material about ten thousand times stronger than silver. Here a faint hum could be heard and then there was a click as a panel of the metallic door clicked apart. That was followed by more clicks as more segments opened. This happened in patterns as each piece clicked in at a different angle and there were a lot of them. The door opening now ran in as a deep arch of the metal. At the last click, a flash of yellow light beamed out for a second then there was only a glow. At the end of the opening, we saw a transparent seal and a vast area of flashing lights beyond it.

Some of the glow was in Skitch’s eyes when he looked back, like he’d been hypnotized or possessed by it. “So what now – there’s a thick glass wall in front of me and a straight drop to darkness on the other side?”

I put my head over Yuki’s shoulder to address him. “The drop is why you’re in the lead. The glass wall is actually an energy and sensor field coating the inside walls of the core. You can move through it. It is less dense than liquid but impedes movement some. You need to use your spidery powers to start the climb up on the metal surface on the inside. It is quite rough and though it is super hard, it has give like clay. Yuki will

pass in the ladder roll, which is a featherweight material that will adhere to the side. You lay the track as you go up and we follow. When you reach the entrance right above us it will open automatically.”

Skitch had no other questions; he put an arm into the glassy substance then pulled it back, watching the field pull away from his arm as if he'd pulled it out of a honey jar. After that he went into the field and did a jump and twist and pulled himself up. He caught the ladder roll Yuki tossed and began the slow climb. Yuki watched the ladder end where it hung in the field at the opening. After a minute, he went in and followed. Thor was to be last because we didn't want the biggest guy hovering above us ... small to tall was the line-up.

The effect on the inside was sudden and startling. My ears immediately filled with hums, buzzing and crackling like my brain had become a screwball radio receiver. The inner field had a constant change of direction so moment to moment a mild force could be pulling you up, down or sideways. That was somewhat negated by the solid wall and the way the ladder pieces had clicked into it and hardened like climbing rungs. I could also get a good grasp on pieces of the inner wall itself, though it was a strange feeling and scary as the knobs on the material did move in a clay-like fashion. None of them would pull off, that I knew, as no mere man could do anything against a semi-solid metal that tough. Looking down astounded me because I could see the sheer endless drop and how big the open inner area of core really was. Huge columns of sheathed energy showed in various colors. Some of them quite thick with the energy flying up or down in kaleidoscopic color. The nearest column was close enough to reach out and touch. Brushing against it would be fatal as the sheaths were like the transparent core coating. The human hand could pass through but one touch of anything traveling inside would mean horrible death in some manner not yet defined.

Thor was now moving up carefully below me and we were making slow progress. The ladder Skitch was laying out was in accordance to the distance measurement Adam 1X had given me. Looking up was blinding as something about the light created a potent glare. I could see Yuki if I shielded my eyes, but not past him.

Soon I got the feeling we were about halfway there, and then another nervous feeling as a distant clanging came to my ears. Using my right boot I kicked the side of the metal and heard no sound and wondered what could hit it hard enough to make that sound. Moments later, I was deafened and clinging to ladder pieces. In what had been an empty area of the core a new sheathed beam about three meters wide suddenly appeared and an object the size of a truck shot up and past us at rocket speed. After it passed I heard Skitch curse far above and Thor groan below. Then the clanging rose again and Skitch was shouting something. Yuki relayed the message to me. “He says something's coming, something walking on the wall. He can sense it. It's coming from below.”

Thor also heard the message. “Oh great,” he yelled. “Can't you guys move up faster?”

I was about to answer. A series of blinding beams flashed as a whole array of small sheathed beams suddenly appeared. They vanished almost as fast as they appeared and when my vision cleared I saw something on the core wall. It was about level with me and several yards over. It looked both mechanical and biological; a horrid spider-like being of some sort. It was so ugly Skitch was pretty in comparison. It made a sudden jump and went higher and I saw it put its mouth on part of the wall and start sucking on something.

No one was climbing now. Obviously, Skitch and the others had spotted it too. As we watched, it took some steps and made that loud clanging noise with its feet. It was coming our way and it gave me a very bad feeling.

We all had weapons drawn except Skitch and he relayed a message to us via Yuki. “Skitch says that thing is somewhat like his people. It makes sure the core wall will never corrode by repairing any damage. He's not sure how intelligent it is. It might think we're bugs damaging the wall and try to kill us. If it's smarter than that it might leave but report us as intruders.”

“Or all of those things,” I thought. Then the thing did a leg spring off the side and was flying through the air at Yuki. He fired, but it was only repellent energy. A big yellow burst of it that knocked it away. It spun out into the open core and even though hit it showed amazing skill in controlling its flight and dodging all the vertical beams. Magnetism of some type in its feet allowed it to float back over and attach to the side.

Skitch had gone up farther and we hurried up behind him; now I was about even with the thing and I saw it opening its mouth. A blast of something green flew from it, causing me to duck and slide down dangerously

fast. I caught the ladder just before losing control and also fired another repel beam up that knocked away the spray falling towards me. A few drops of it hit the arm of my suit, hissed and burned ... so I tore that strip of it away and tossed it.

The creature was turning around on the wall. Another blast of its corrosive acid and I'd be cheese holed. I put my gun on a deadly setting but didn't want to fire as it could be dangerous to use high power in the core. I was also now only inches above Thor and couldn't drop any more to duck another shot.

It was about to spit and I was about fire, but a white flash appeared in the air from above, looped around a sheathed beam to the creature and became a webbed splash as it hit it. The shot had come from Skitch. Apparently, he'd been eating well and had a large store of his special impervious material on hand. His webbing hardened as fast as it hit and gloved the creature to the wall. I saw its eyes poking out and its head moving like it was trying to eat its way free. Rather than wait I scrambled upwards with Thor behind me as we tried to catch Yuki and Skitch who were far ahead of us now.

More drumming noise echoed up and I knew the thing had called for help. A light was showing above now so I believed we were near our exit point. Air was suddenly rushing and when I looked out, I saw the entire array of beams shifting position. Moments later, they disappeared altogether and all we could see was a huge empty gap. However, that didn't last; there was the drumming of approaching creatures and then a roar like a waterfall, but it was coming up not flowing down. Brilliant light ignited below and raced up ... packets of light and contained energies as huge as baseballs and in every shape from triangles to snowflakes. The flow filled nearly the entire core and we held tightly to the edge as it roared past. Slowly the noise died down until the last of it was gone. The sheathed beams appeared again, and with the vanishing roar, we heard the drumming footsteps coming up faster from below.

I looked up. Yuki was gone. I hoped he was above and that he hadn't been carried away. Scampering up as fast as I could I headed for the light and felt the clumsy moves of Thor climbing behind me. It was farther than I thought, but when the light became haloed blue, I saw the form of Yuki going over and inside. At the ladder end, I found a shallow ledge and got onto it. The light was spilling out of a corridor beyond the ledge. It flowed from an embedded spotlight near the exit. Thor was lumbering up too slow ... far too slow because I could see the source of the drumming below him. They weren't directly below him but on the wall a fair distance out from him. These new creepers were a crew of about ten crawlers, no two of them the same, some resembling beetles and others spider robots.

Thor saw them too because he suddenly put forward an effort and nearly fell when he snapped a ladder leg with the force of his boot. He struggled to regain hold then got up, I grabbed him and he was over, and we ran behind the spotlight into the corridor. Skitch and Yuki were back there by another door.

"Any idea how to seal that outer exit," I said.

"Nope," Yuki said. "We haven't figured out how to open this other one either."

"Step aside," Skitch said as he pushed past us and hurried to the opening. Standing there under the spotlight, he began shoot out lines of webbing from his mouth and palms, getting a seal in place just before the core bug crew arrived. The webbing hardened and we saw the beetles moving on it, trying to force their way through. They were too big to do so and moments later, a spider creature spat some liquid out as they began to cocoon the web.

"They're sealing us in completely," Thor said.

"Their job is to keep the core wall in place," Skitch said. "Because we're here they now see this opening as a breach."

"Not good news," I said. "Not good at all. We can't get back this way. Both openings will be imperviously sealed. They'll eat the ladder off the wall."

Yuki gave me one of his death mask grins. "Be optimistic. I always say that if I can get in I can get out."

We all turned and faced the door at the corridor's end. "We aren't in yet," I said. The door at the end of the tube looked more like a seal than a door, like maybe it had been sealed since Adam 1X last checked it. For the first time I trusted Skitch at my back as we all moved up close. I felt the surface with the flat of my hand and my fingertips, finding the metal quite cold. There did not seem to be any hidden control or auto detection

to open it. With the core crawlers at one end and this cork at the other, I felt responsible for possibly leading us into a death trap. I could already see frustration rising on Thor's reddened face. It reached the boiling point as he suddenly cursed saying, "Another damn puzzle!" Then he slammed his fist hard into the door.

That caused a whirring noise and the puzzle was solved as the door began to slide into the side wall, moving extremely slowly and with a horrid metallic screech. It had been an auto-open door all along and Thor's punch unglued it from whatever had frozen it in place. A few moments later cold mist began to blow out the widening crack and we understood why it had seized. Pieces of ice fell at the edge of the door and blue mist curled like smoke rings in our faces.

Skitch huffed. "What in the hell is this? A walk-in freezer?"

"We'll find out soon enough," Yuki said as he stared into the mist.

"Damn," I muttered. "In all my thinking about what might be up here I considered mainly heat and explosive or noxious gases. It never occurred to me that it might be cold."

"Get back," Skitch said confidently. "I am adapted to extreme temperatures and will go in first."

I squeezed against one wall and Thor against the other as Skitch passed, not with strong steps but moving slowly and warily inside. Wearing the weird eyepieces and cap, he did look like he belonged in a freezer. He faded away in the now billowing mist and shouted an all-clear back to us a short minute later.

The three of us went through quickly, forging straight ahead in the mist, and encountering no obstacles. It soon thinned and we could see clearly. We were in a large frost-coated room that looked like it had been carved out of ice. It was divided by screens and pillars and Skitch suddenly appeared from behind one and said, "Boo!"

This irritated Yuki. "Do you have to shout? We have no idea what's in here. Can't take you anywhere."

"Really," Skitch said. "I'm way ahead of you. I know what's in here. It's a bunch of frosty boys, and they can't hear anything. Come on, I'll show you."

A ten-foot screen was on the other side of a wide pillar; both had so much frost on them they looked like solid ice. We came around the screen slowly and silently, with Skitch pointing and grinning foolishly. He was gesturing at a long row of things like sarcophagi or cocoons running along the long wall of the core. There were so many of them they disappeared in the thin mist of the distance. Some of them were open and bodies were inside. We saw an inner shell like a clamshell where it made a number of contact points against the naked bodies, some of which were breathing. They didn't exhale warm breath that showed in the cold. The breathing was only indicated by the swelling of the chest and morbid sounds. Their faces were all similar in appearance, being undistinguished and not fully sculpted, like they were blanks of some variety. Their skin had scales like a fish or snake and the hair looked almost like mold growth. In general effect combined with the cold, they gave one a crawly feeling.

Yuki didn't like them at all, and he had no magic feather to ward them off. His teeth chattered and his eyes widened. "What planet are those frosty boys from?"

"Earth," Skitch said. "They're android blanks of some type."

"I toured an android hatchery once," Thor said enthusiastically, as though doing the intro to a documentary. "They didn't look anything like that. This must be a new type and process."

"They don't look tasty at all," Skitch said as I went for a close up on one of them. Using gloved fingertips, I peeled back the eyelid. I saw black orbs in a fright stare and that caused me to let go and step back. Stepping up again I tapped its chest, noting that the breath coming out of its nostrils stank like something dead. I figured opening its mouth might reveal something so I seized its jaw and pulled. The mouth stayed locked but its arms suddenly flew free and grabbed me, pulling me in close in a bear hug. As I struggled and gasped, its eyes opened to a hostile stare, like it was looking through me while it crushed me to death. I heard commotion behind me as the others tried to help, then I felt a couple snaps and was pulled away by Yuki. I saw Thor standing up close to the thing; he'd used brute strength to break its arms and free me. While I was still gasping Thor hammered it in the chest with a couple pile-driver punches, hitting it so hard it fell forward out of the case and face first onto the cold floor. It didn't move from there so we presumed it dead.

It was a strange corridor. The vault door and heavy metal wall of the android hatchery was behind us, and across the gunmetal grey floor a semi-transparent wall stood. It was pale blue with a slight glow and segmented in large blocks. We could see a sort of hazy view of some large objects on the other side. Thor reached out and prodded it with his gun and the gun butt sank into it a couple inches. It was almost like pressing on a balloon, but I was certain there was no way of cutting through it.

Yuki didn't feel the same way about it. "Let's blast a hole through it," he said cheerfully.

"Definitely not," I said. "We don't know what it is. It or whatever is inside might explode."

The others nodded and I began to move down the corridor in the lead. The temperature was normal in this hall but we could feel cold emanating from one side and heat from the other. We walked a fair distance, encountering no one, and then came to what appeared to be an entrance. It was a small arch and transparent, but lit up in a faint yellowish glow that was common to many force fields.

"It's a force field entrance," Yuki said. "Got any idea on how to shut it off?"

Thor stepped forward like he might know, but he didn't have to shut it off because the field suddenly vanished and we all took steps back as a big ant-like robot emerged. It ignored us altogether as it turned and went up the corridor the other way. It had a large cylinder on its back like it was going somewhere for a refill. I didn't wait but instead jumped through the door and no sooner got through than the field flashed back on.

Taking a quick look around for enemies I spotted none, just another of the ant-like things moving in the misty area at the end of a short walkway. Two large pillars screened most of what was beyond. Steam was rolling out and I was already heating up so I knew this was a hot room of sorts. Turning back to the door I tried to figure it out but I had no idea what powered things up here. There were no visible controls but while I was mucking about at the entranceway, it again flashed open and Skitch hurried through. After that, we were stuck there for a long time and decided to move in and check the room, then hope there was another way out that would get us back to the others. A blast hit the field as we were walking and I groaned as I realized Thor was foolishly attempting to shoot through.

That didn't work for him but I was certain that if there were any hostile forces to be alerted they now had our number. The other side of the pillars opened into a large steamy hot house. Plants of various types were growing in huge containers but what attracted our interest was a red light zone at the center. It was separated by strange floating fencing and had a number of the ant-like beings moving in it. The perfume of some of the flowering plants was rich in odor and I hoped not intoxicating or poisonous. Skitch didn't seem to think so because he stopped to sniff some of them.

At the fencing, we walked around to a narrow opening in it. Again, the ant-like creatures were oblivious to us as we walked inside. These were smaller containers here and we could see clumps of things like maybe vegetables growing in them. Skitch led me up to the first container and we looked in. One ant was inside fastening a cylinder to a hose next to one of the clumps. It looked like a bunch of melons and Skitch reached in and picked one up. It was attached to a thin stem that was tough and didn't break. When he turned it in his hand, he suddenly dropped it and jumped back. I also stepped back and the thing's stem snapped it back into place. What we'd seen was stomach churning; the undersides of the melons were like human heads covered with sticky goo that Skitch was now trying to rub off his hand. When he'd turned the melon, its eyes had opened and they were the same ugly black eyes we'd seen in the android blanks.

"Yuk," Skitch said. "People see these and they'll never call me ugly again."

"I thought those things in the freezer were android blanks, but these heads are grown like they're plants."

"A mix of all three is my guess. The heads and organs they grow in here and they're biological like a cross between plants and animals. They plant them in the body frames in there in the hatchery. The limbs they have are like strong plastic or metal. Therefore, the cold room must be where the body parts harmonize with the frame. There would be another setup where their minds are programmed into the brain matter."

"Yeah, and they can be polished up to look like anyone. The finished product must look like a real person."

"They wouldn't pass the taste test," Skitch said. "Probably taste like something foul."

"I've seen enough. Let's get out of this stink hole and find the others."

Skitch didn't want to hang around either. We hurried out past the fencing and headed for the opposite side of the large room. We couldn't see well due to the steamy air but things came clearer as we got farther on. There were three distant doors. These were not force-field setups and unfortunately one of them was opening and someone fairly large was coming through. The person was shrouded in steam but in outline looked like a big man.

We halted and waited but there was no way to avoid this man as he was coming in our direction. Another smaller man appeared at the open door and as he did Skitch whispered in my ear, "I'll confront the big guy. Get around them and secure that door quickly so we can get out of here. Muscle the little guy down if you have to."

The big man had stopped to look at a rising flow of plants embedded in a floor-to-ceiling container. It was when he turned away from them that he saw Skitch advancing. I was moving around another row of containers on a free line to the door and the smaller guy standing by it, and at about the same time we got a clearer view of the big guy. It almost stopped me in my tracks because I thought Skitch might need help. The big guy had a flat greenish Frankencreeper face and his arms were abnormal mutations. From about where the elbows would normally be, they spread out into fleshy tentacles that looked possibly deadly or poisonous in patchy green to brown shades. He threw those in front of him and charged at Skitch, who nailed him with a stun beam. All that did was bounce him back for a second and enrage him as he suddenly shouted something in a foreign language and charged again.

The smaller guy had his eyes on that fight, like he couldn't decide whether to get into it or run back through the door. I took advantage of his confusion, moved in quickly, and shot him with a strong near fatal beam. He hit the door with a crunching sound, bounced off it and went face first to the floor. An entire large container of plants spilled as Skitch struggled with tentacle man; I had to be sure that the shrimp was out good and got down and rolled him over. Either I'd killed him or he was naturally revolting. Another freak for sure. His mouth was a crooked, leaking gash and his eyes were open though blank and like large marbles. The twisted nose looked like it had been designed to breathe something more toxic than air. He didn't appear to be an android but some kind of biological freak.

Securing the door, I glanced through but spotted no one else nearby. Skitch and tentacle man were getting really noisy and damaging. The freak finally managed to lock a grip on Skitch's neck and shoulders and it looked like he was going to both strangle him and crush his skull. Taking careful aim, I hit him from behind. The shot was a fist-size energy ball between the shoulder blades and that took him out. The guy becoming more like a rubber monster than a man as his legs and body slowly collapsed to the floor. It was almost as if he had no permanently solid bones. Skitch had to yank the ugly tentacles loose and he staggered back, swiping at his face with one arm and spitting like he was totally grossed out. He rubbed his eyes and appeared to be blinded but he had some perception left because he stumbled in my direction.

The door exited into another hallway, this one all buffed walls and ceilings with a soft-carpeted floor. Skitch was still choking and spitting and couldn't speak, but he followed my lead as I went left. We suddenly halted because I saw someone ahead, and I felt like rubbing my eyes because although this hall was brightly lit by hidden lighting, the person looked like a shadow. Then the shadow approached and took form as a woman in tight body suit. The face lit up; it was Lisha Yanch, and her form lacked the old ghostly aura. She looked like flesh and blood.

"I thought you had no access here?" I said.

"Didn't have," she replied. "At least not until now. I tracked in by following your brain waves again. Now I'm a triple agent. I left my body for the virtual level, and now I'm transmitting from my ghost body there up to here. I use the energy sources here to take form."

"How much have you seen. Do you have any idea what we're up against here?"

"I've seen only this. I tracked through you and I can't travel far from you. I do know the strangest emanations come farther out from the core and on the outer ring. We're in mechanical or control areas now, or some new alterations of them."

"Mechanical areas. We haven't seen any real mechanical areas. This is some mad android and freak hatchery. Whoever is running it must be another freak."

Popping noises and distant shouting came to our ears. It was down the hall ahead of us. Skitch and I hurried ahead, weapons out, toward it. We sped around the long slight curve and came out of an expansion of the hall into a tubular sort of lobby with curved walls and ceiling. There was an open area and two heavy square black onyx pillars in the distance. Thor and Yuki were up by it and backing off from some sleek silvery human models of robots ... or possibly androids. I wasn't quite sure what they were. A deep recessed gold door was behind the pillars, giving the impression that they were guarding that area and saw Thor and Yuki intruders.

Yuki had positioned himself behind Thor, protecting his bomb pack. Thor's suit was battered from a blast and it now looked like a standoff, but one getting more dangerous because Skitch and I were approaching. We came up even with Thor and halted, facing off with the robots as they stood four abreast.

Close up I was sure they were robots and clever ones. The weapons attachments built into their arms looked deadly. They were of formidable build and the sleek plasti-metal bodies were painted with bars on the limbs and star patterns at the chest and head. Sensor belts skirted their waists.

Yuki was calm but obviously worried about being hit with a blast. "We were approaching those pillars and the door behind it when those things suddenly emerged out of a wall enclosure and started firing stun shots."

"They're an upgrade on the guard model of robots we use on the top floors," Thor said. Then he addressed them saying, "Let us pass. I am Pinnacle City security chief, Thor Carlsonbonner."

"One of the robots spoke back in a resonant voice. "You are not authorized here. You cannot pass. We are guardians of this tomb and we will destroy you if necessary."

"Tomb? Whose tomb?" Thor said.

"The tomb of the human holy one, Stone R. Sangalang," the robot said. "Here at the pinnacle rest the bones of the great leader. The preserved body of he who has transcended."

At that statement, we all backed off and formed a circle. Lisha Yanch appeared and joined us."

Yuki spoke. "I wonder who programmed those things. Stone Sangalang is closer to being the son of a gorilla than he is of being the holy one who has transcended."

"But Stone is alive," Thor said. "He can't be entombed here."

"Maybe someone just killed him and brought the body up here," I said.

"Why?" Lisha Yanch said. "No one in their right mind would build a holy tomb for Stone Sangalang."

"We've got to see what's behind that door," I said. "Maybe we can trick them."

"How would we do that?" Thor said.

I grinned. "We'll tell them we're here to worship at the feet of the entombed one."

"You talk to them then," Yuki said. "Don't forget our mission and what I'm carrying. We are hitting too many diversions. Who really cares about the holy tomb of Stone Sangalang? It's the location of the implants that we need to uncover. If they are stored in a small remote area it may be impossible to find."

"I did that earlier excursion via transmission to an obsolete patrol robot. There is an old AI vault up here. I believe that area to be the remains of Adam 1X's demolished primitive brain. It was a large area so the implants likely take a good amount of space. There has to be a tissue and feed and control setup."

Ending the discussion on that comment, we turned back to the robots. They looked like they would simply wait there for eternity so long as we didn't advance. My steps towards them brought them to full alert in half a second. Blue tracer sparks immediately showed at the mouths of their weapons attachments and their eyes ignited with pale yellow light.

"We have given one warning," the lead robot said, speaking over me to the others more than to me. "Further attempts to breach the tomb will lead to a fatal response."

"We are not here to breach the tomb. This is a religious pilgrimage from below. We have come to pray at the tomb of Stone Sangalang."

This brightened the robot's eyes considerably and fully confused him. "Please wait," he said, then they pulled back and did their own circle discussion. They did not speak in English but more in an odd series of beeping bursts like they spoke a digital language. They kept themselves on weapons alert and we had no doubt that they would turn and fire should we step toward the door. Finally they spun together to face us and moved forward.

"You may enter," the lead robot said. "The time period to be allowed for this religious service is twenty minutes. The casket will open during the service, but you are not allowed to touch it or the remains. You may kneel before it only to pray."

"Very well," I said. "We will do as commanded."

"When the door opens you will follow my assistants," he said. "Entry must be in single file and you must stand at the marked perimeter of the tomb."

Thor and Yuki looked somewhat amused, Lisha took a couple steps towards the pillars then back as one of the robots swung on her and was about to fire. They were apparently not able to distinguish a ghost from a human but went mostly by visuals. The leader of the robots remained at the rear, watching us while the other three moved forward to the opening door. It did seem like the entry of a tomb with the pillars, and the door moving aside slowly, revealing a two-foot-thick footprint.

Gloom showed on the other side and we went ahead. I was in the lead and we filed through into a large rectangular room that was lit by patterned-glass skylights above. It really was a tomb with most of the room being the approach to the layered platform and coffin at the far end. Urns lined the approach, which ended at a few shallow and wide steps that took one up even with the coffin. Two robots took our rear right and left and another moved slightly ahead of us leading us to a stop at the last urns. Off on the two side walls two huge art pieces were on display. They were portraits of the great man, Stone Sangalang.

Thor looked the most confused but Yuki was a close second. The coffin itself was more like a monstrous horizontal sarcophagus, fit for someone even greater than an Egyptian king, considering the superiority of its modern design. Our host robots seemed expectant, so I did what was expected and bowed. Lisha did the same and we did our imitation of a silent prayer for or to Stone Sangalang - who as far as I knew, was not dead. During our brief prayer the coffin lid began to open. It was like a big oyster shell clipping up. Wanting a better look I rose and signaled Thor to take my place while I stepped back. Instead he stood there stunned and staring so Yuki moved in and knelt. A body showed inside the luxurious coffin and a rotten stink wafted out of it. It was a body, that was certain, but it didn't look a whole lot like Stone. Probably because it was a body embalmed by mad robots. Swelling puffed the facial features and lips, nearly burying the eyes, though the hair was nicely in place. It was Stone's perfect white hair haloing an intense but pained expression that appeared kneaded in place. I believed it was Stone, and that for eternity he'd be staring up as a testament to the foolishness of the human race and its robots.

Yuki rose and I nearly had to push Thor forward to get him to kneel. His eyes had popped out so far it was doubtful he could close them to fake the worship.

Yuki whispered in my ear. "Is that thing Stone?"

"It is," I said. "Let's get out of here, away from these idiot robots, and we'll discuss it and what to do next."

We couldn't exactly have a discussion on the weirdness of Stone Sangalang's tomb near the robots. There was no sign of any implants or technology other than that required to preserve the hideous corpse of our unlikely martyr. That meant finishing our respectful period of worship and hoping we could walk away from the robots and continue the search. Detecting our readiness to exit the robots led us out, the eerie silence accentuated by Skitch's shuffle, the knock of the robots and Thor's heavy feet. Lisha traveled out with us as she was now keeping in close proximity to me due to her connection to my brain waves. If I'd never had girlfriend quite that reliant on me, I'd also never had a date in the tomb of a man I thought was alive.

I thought it over, and as the huge vault sealed behind us I knew the answer or at least part of it. Stone Sangalang was dead and had been for quite some time. The Stone I'd dealt with since the beginning wasn't a man but an android programmed with Sangalang's mind. Considering how real Sangalang had looked he was the best android yet invented. A smart android with tech good enough for him to read as human on

high-security devices. The android hatchery we'd discovered was likely more of the same. Super androids with biological components being bred to replace the entire Board of Pinnacle City.

The whole thing gave me a hunch but explaining it to the others would be impossible. Obviously someone or something was behind this mad plot; yet Sangalang the android hadn't seemed fully aware of the plot even though he had to be part of it. After all, he'd sent Thor Carlsonbonner out on the streets to hire me. A thought that brought me back to the killings or executions and how they keyed into it. If Board members were to be replaced with androids they'd have to be killed. But that would have to be done in secret and not in ways that were public and left the person as an obituary. If someone powerful, knew of the plan to replace the Board with androids, perhaps they decided to kill them off so it wouldn't happen. Even then, simply exposing the plot would make more sense. It was indeed a brain twister and as we made to depart from the dumb robots I felt as dumb as them. More than one mad mind was at work in this towering oddity, which made me the wrong detective to be on the case. Criminals in my history have been tough and ugly but sane and predictable. Mad men I've never liked because they're certain to do the unexpected.

The robots found their own perimeter line and halted as we disappeared down the hall. It was the section I hadn't explored but the others had been there. We rounded a bend and got out of sight of the robots and then paused.

Yuki whistled lightly through his teeth. "What sort of zoo is this place?"

Thor ran his fingers through loose strands of hair. "Maybe we should go back down and ask Stone why he's a corpse and in a coffin up here."

Skitch shuffled up closer. "I don't think the Stone Sangalang down there even knows about the holy corpse of Stone up here."

Even as a ghost Lisha floated back when Skitch closed in. "Trying to analyze all this is a waste of time. We haven't explored much of the territory up here. Whatever is behind this is here. We should track it and then decide how to end this silliness."

"It might not be that silly," I said. "It is in fact a monstrous crime, or an unbelievable series of them. We should stick to logic and that is what Adam 1X provided us. He did request that we study or attempt to get our own reading on it. And he said find the implants and use the bomb to destroy them."

Thor took on a sober expression. "Jack is right. We're sure to encounter more weirdness or even madness up here. We've got to keep focus. We're a hit team with a target. That is our mission. So we play around whatever we find and do the job. Are you all in agreement?"

One by one we all nodded. Then with our purpose firmed we looked down the hall to unexplored territory.

We strolled a fair piece, hearing little but the hum of air circulation. I began to picture the layout of the top to some degree. The android hatchery in its various sections was a factory running around the core. We hadn't explored all of it. It was possible the implants were in there somewhere but unlikely. This hall was the interior of a second ring that included the nutso crypt. We'd soon find out what else it held. Probably everything ran in rings up here as we moved out from the sealed core top. Considering the size of the this top section there could be many narrow rings or a couple really huge ones farther out, though I knew the peak edge ring was not that wide as it was partially visible to the outside world and showed just inside the huge force bubble capping Pinnacle City.

We arrived at four more doorways, two on each side of the hall. They were large with patterned bronze in semicircles at the top. The patterns were mathematical imagery almost like a type of equation. None of us were familiar with the language. These doorways had no doors and were open. Two led back toward the hatchery and core and two into the new area we wanted to explore. The decision was to go through the first door heading away from the core. Entry was into another large area of about the same dimensions as Sangalang's tomb ... but much different. Eight wall segments created a grand lounge that was a stretched octagon. It was all cast in shades of a brown-gold marble. Each of the walls contained a high pointed arch leading elsewhere. The very center of the floor layout was another octagon of sun-symbol patterning around a sunken section with a bubbling fountain made of pale gold crystal. It had luxurious seating around it and high above it light streamed down through a double dome shell that was also octagon in shape. It had a beautiful interior-of-shell design with huge embedded gem pieces of pale blue around a hanging crystal

chandelier. It was breathtaking at first sight and also aroused immediate suspicion as the various arched exits from this central area were veiled with gossamer that I was certain was a form of projected light or force-field and not any type of fabric. There seemed to be no explanation for this beautiful lobby-style room as no one was in it. Which meant venturing into the unknown again as we'd have to go through the other exit arches to investigate further.

Skitch ventured out farthest but it was Lisha who spoke. "This room is a partial duplication of the original lobby of the City Grand that used to exist down by the harbor in the early days. Looks like Adam 1X never destroyed it, just moved it up here somehow."

Thor didn't go for that idea. "Maybe someone just took the design from his memory and rebuilt it up here. If this is part of an old hotel maybe the rest is the rooms. If it is a hotel someone must live here."

I didn't hide my personal disappointment. "Yeah, and it isn't likely that our brain-matter implants are stored here. When I came up into that decommissioned area via robot transmission, Adam 1X's demolished primitive brain was in a special cordoned off area that looked its part. A very obvious special area of various technologies, and the brain tissues took up a lot of container space. We'd be looking for a newer more compact area like that and not strange crypts and hotels."

Thor speculated. "Things that need core services are usually near the core. Maybe we have to focus on that area."

Skitch shook his head. "Thinking about Pinnacle City and the way stuff has been hidden in so many unexpected places, I would expect exactly that. We'll find them but they won't be where we expect to find them."

We spread out as we moved in and inspected the area. Lisha stuck by me and we went straight over the polished floor to the recessed central area. The small lounge a few steps below was in wonderful light from the big chandelier and sky opening. A number of tables were around the fountain and on a few of these we found cheap instant plates and cups. Crumbs and bones showed on some of the plates.

"This is some classy lunch room," I said. "It looks like that is what they use it for. Wonder where they are?"

"They'd be close by, likely through one of those arches. That food was eaten maybe a half hour ago," Lisha said.

Turning, I looked up from the area. Skitch was over by one arch exit, Yuki by another and Thor a third, with all of them about to peek through. But they didn't get a chance because a couple of the people we were looking for came through the same entrance we had. I spotted them; they'd been off through the other two arches across the hall and were returning, so we'd made a mistake in not checking both areas.

Two men had stepped through the door and they displayed no android perfection. One was of large proportions, the other small, and both were overweight and lumpy. They had faces only a mother could love, were stooped, and bearing thick crowns of hair that looked electrified. One was black and the other white. Their uniforms were similar to those of Pinnacle City paramedics though with different epaulets like they were of a higher medical order. They took a few steps then halted. One's hooded eyes flashed to Skitch and the other guy glared at Thor. They didn't seem to notice Lisha and I down in the lounge area, but they didn't take time to scan the room either. They simply turned on their heels and ran out. Yuki spun about quickly for a glance but Thor and Skitch didn't notice them, and before I could call to them Thor disappeared through an arch.

Yuki jogged across the floor toward us, and Skitch suddenly turned about. At the same time the two men came back through the archway but with two more men that were best described as heavily armed freaks. They had tube weapons of some variety raised and one of them fired at Skitch while the other sent a blast at Yuki. Yuki they missed as he skidded and rolled down to us, leaving the beam to deflect off the floor and slam a far wall with a hammer blow. Skitch had tried to avoid the beam fired at him but he got side-swiped by it and bowled over.

They swung their tubes to aim at us in the center. I had my weapon up and fired a thumper beam that knocked all four of them a couple steps backwards. One fired a wild shot at that point and shattered part of the chandelier above. That caused Yuki and I to flee falling shards and it put us at a disadvantage as the tubes were again focusing for direct shots at us. They didn't get to fire because Thor suddenly came back

through the arch on the run and seeing the four men fired his weapon which he already had out. His shot opaqued the air and knocked the men down and he didn't stop running. It became apparent why when a large dog-like robot beast bounded in the arch behind him. He was turning for a direct shot at it, and I was pulling my weapon up, but before we could fire Skitch got in the way. He'd got back on his feet and moved in fast enough to meet the beast's charge. They collided and both tumbled on the floor and separated. Since the other armed freaks were now rising I turned to them and left Skitch and Thor to deal with the robot dog.

Running and leaping from the recessed lounge, Yuki at my side, we both fired at the rising men. The shots connected and knocked them out cold. I spun around to see what was happening with the dog and saw its eyes igniting like it was about to fire its brand of kill beam. Thor fired first and it was a deadly beam that set the thing on fire. Red and blue flames roared up from it as it burned like a flare. Moments later all that remained was a large oozing lump on the smoke-stained lobby floor.

We gathered around the four men. They were out cold so I disarmed them and we dragged them over to the center lounge area. Thor studied the tube weapons while Yuki and I did a search on them. The two medical guys had syringe kits in their breast pockets and a number of filled vials and pocket medical devices that couldn't be immediately identified. The smallest guy was the only one showing signs of coming around. Yuki did a check on the other three then raised his eyebrows for a moment. "These guys have a pulse but it's only half the normal human reading."

"They're part human," Skitch said. "I can tell by the body odor. But they have a bad odor too. Faint but like spoiled meat. By my reading these guys are more dead than alive."

"They're alive enough to shoot at us," Lisha said. "The uniforms are the higher paramedic order. The ones that service the richest residents in the higher floors, except these guys have those odd epaulets. I've never seen them before."

"They came in from across the hall," Thor said as he peered in that direction. "Yuki, back me while I take a peek over there."

Thor strode away and the smaller chap we'd smacked groaned and opened his eyes at the same time. Yuki glanced back but kept following Thor out the entry arch. Our medical man was one that appeared to be sickly himself. His groggy eyes stared fish-like at us for some moments then registered fear. The veins in them were a yellowish hue, the irises weren't right, and in a way they were soulless eyes. The spark of life always present in human eyes wasn't there or rather it was but had a cold artificial feel. If an emotion was conveyed it was of mild fright and calculation. He wasn't the sort I would trust for even a moment.

Reaching down I gave him a slap on the cheek. It didn't rouse any circulation but it did cause him to curse at me in a Pinnacle City accent. I decided to begin an interrogation. "What medical order do you belong to and why did you attack us?"

He appeared to be dreaming up lies, and spoke slowly. "This is a restricted area. You are trespassing."

Skitch got close enough to breathe on him and that drew real fear lines on the guy's face. "What are those things you are manufacturing by the core? For that matter, what are you? You don't look human or android."

"You should talk," the captive said. "You're a monster. There must be illegal breeding going on somewhere below."

Skitch looked to me then Lisha. "I didn't eat to today. Is it okay if I grab a piece of this guy?"

Skitch was bluffing but the medical mutant fell for it and spat some words at me. "You let that creep touch me and you'll be in big trouble."

I grinned. "If I had hair and a face like yours I wouldn't be calling Skitch here a creep. You look like the man originally named Creep who created the legacy of the name. You already are in trouble, so you better tell us what you're up to here?"

He didn't answer swiftly and Skitch leaned in on him. "I'm not going to ask again. What are those things you're manufacturing out there? Why do some of them look like Board members?"

He answered defiantly. "Those are not things. They are a higher life form we have created. Our order is a special order, created and imbued with medical knowledge for this work."

"Your body odor and theirs is similar. So you are created just like them," Skitch said.

"We are the first of the new line," he said. "We are a higher level of android. The science was imperfect when our bodies were grown which is why our physical appearance is lacking. Our minds, though, are superior. I have taken my predecessor's medical knowledge much farther, and the new breed is superior to humans. Here at the top we are worker droids, advancing the science to create a higher order of life."

"Predecessor," I said, with a sour look on my face. "Let me guess. A real doctor was killed and his brain cells robbed."

"Not robbed, not dead. His mind lives on in me. I am him, just as the Board of Pinnacle City will live on in their new bodies."

Lisha got in on the discussion. "Uh, excuse me for getting into this conversation. But does the Board know it is being upgraded? For that matter, why are you bringing the dead members back to life in the new form?"

He scowled at her. "Of course they don't know. If they did they would try to stop us ... to stop the advance of science. The dead members we are bringing back as the first of the line. Any errors will be apparent in them. So far all is perfect."

"Ah," I said. "So your order in is involved in the weird killings. And all for a mad experiment."

"We didn't kill them. That was another issue. We managed to recreate some of them, where we were able to grab the brain before it decayed."

"You said all is perfect," I said. "But all did not go perfectly with your first super creation, did it?"

"How would you know?"

"I know by the killings and the android that arranged them all. Stone Sangalang's android replacement is the mad killer. He is also the first Board member you replaced and the man who dreamed up this insane scheme. We saw his tomb and how he has himself laid out as a martyr up here while his mad android replacement is running Pinnacle City. Running it while being only half aware of this entire scheme and forgetful of the fact that he is a flawed replacement of Stone."

Heavy footfalls came through the door. It was Thor and Yuki returning with two more of the freak doctors with them. These two were bound together and Thor was pulling them forward. Yuki hurried up ahead of them. "There's a whole gang of those crazy doctor characters but the rest got away and sealed themselves in another area."

I turned back to our captive. "Stone Sangalang dreamed this up. He destroyed Adam 1X's control up here then uploaded his mind to an android he created. But that android was imperfect and also became the serial killer. So which one of you doctors runs this ship during the rough sailing? Who is the boss?"

With the other two captives alert and looking on he was reluctant to speak. He glanced to them then said. "What difference does it make if I tell them. They'll be killed anyway." Looking back to me he said, "Stone Sangalang spent decades dabbling in android development and knew science was being held back. When he gained a mode of access up here, he used it to create us and move ahead. He did not plan on perishing. At first there were to be two. Stone Sangalang the human would continue to control the Board while needed. The second Stone Sangalang would run the operation up here. A problem arose when the upload of his mind to the android had errors. In a high-level upload you are in effect becoming another being, and as a human you really should die as you are transferred. Stone wanted both to live, and yes, the android was a perfect duplicate, but it couldn't cope with the issue of believing it was a duplicate. It lacked mental balance. To correct the problem it murdered Stone, then developed amnesia for a time. I took over at that point and did some alterations and sent him below. He of course believed that he was the real Stone Sangalang. Unfortunately, we overlooked his psychopathic tendencies and he began to murder people. We believe that has now been corrected."

Thor puffed his cheeks and sighed in disbelief. "Then there are more errors than Sangalang. You are another error. That crazy tomb and corpse of his you have on display are proofs of it. Replacing the whole Board with androids that will probably be as dangerous as Stone is sheer lunacy."

He openly laughed. "We are a medical order. We didn't plan this whole operation. We run it. The other built the tomb in honor of his creator." He pointed east or outward from the core. "Unfortunately for you he is out there and you have to go out there if you want to return below. He is powerful, a god if you will, and he will destroy you."

"Who in the hell is he?" Thor said.

"You'll find out soon enough, won't you."

My head was already spinning from all this and considering my opinion of Pinnacle City I began to wonder if androids running it made any visible difference. Thor apparently did and if they were all going to be mad he was mostly right. An entire Board of them would create unmanageable insanity. I felt like giving up on the case and simply escaping, but even for that I needed more information. "The only exit is out there, is that true?"

"Yes," he said. "Not far from here there is a secret bay for moving in supplies, equipment. But for humans and advanced androids like us there is only one secure tube down and it is out there."

Yuki decided to pose a fast question while he was talking. "Where are the new implants that control this place?"

He again pointed. "Out there. You make it sound like implants can run things. It is not just raw intelligence capabilities or super-org connections, but the wonderful new being itself that is in control."

"Oh great," Thor said. "A monster is out there."

## **Chapter Eight: The Bad Side of Heaven**

There was no option of taking the captives with us and we had no time to hunt for the others. I assumed that since the others were hiding from us they might do so for a while. We made sure our guys were tightly bound and left them there in the lounge area. Exploration of the interior arches began. They all had doorways of filtered light and you didn't see what was beyond them until you took a step through. One arch, the first one I personally explored, led through a ways to an old sealed area that was the old dead zone I'd been in as a robot. It looked different through human eyes but I recognized it. From the top of high steps, I looked down on the musty scene of what was now obsolete AI tech. The blasted brain matter hung throughout the place like cobwebs. A big scorch ran across the floor to a distant scene of destruction that was the area of the explosion I had fled as a clunking robot. While I stared, Yuki and Thor stepped through to the area.

Thor surveyed it with a grim expression. "We should take some time later and destroy that entire android hatchery. At least fry all droids in the finishing department. If we don't destroy it they'll soon be capturing Board members and dragging them up here for the transfer and then death."

"Maybe," I said. "We really have to fry the brains behind it all. The wonderful new being mentioned by our amazing doctor clone and the implants it is using as well. I suppose it will turn out to be another of those freaks, but a stronger one and heavily armed or with superior protection."

The other arches did not lead to the wings of a fabulous hotel at all. After the decommissioned area we found a storage section. It contained everything from specialized worker robots still in the box to a large assortment of raw medical supplies and refined equipment. Thor cannibalized this area and packed away a number of compact fuel cells and power supplies. Not that we needed power. His mind was on building a bomb he could use to blow the hatchery.

The living quarters of the medical staff were through another arch and they were now abandoned. Not much was present other than an assortment of rooms for a staff of maybe thirty people. We found spares of their unique medical belts. Yuki strapped one on with the idea of taking it back down when the deal was over, then changed his mind and dumped it, feeling carrying a bomb jacket was enough for the moment.

A walk through another arch led us into an interior junkyard. We found the remains of Adam 1X's army of android servants tossed aside here. Almost all them were missing parts as were the many other pieces of equipment that had been dumped. It was obvious that before perishing as a human being Stone had really been a mad scientist, constructing his new world and freak factory using anything of value he could find. It made sense because he wouldn't have been able to ship large quantities of supplies in through the secret bay. Not without being noticed, and he'd done all this in secret. Some of the really high tech medical equipment had been smuggled in and he likely embezzled sizable sums through the Board to purchase it all.

Master mechanical was through another arch and the air in it was barely tolerable. Waves of energy coursed across the tops of towering beehive structures and coolant air rushed out of floating black windows in the higher areas. A deadly knock rattled my teeth and after a study of the trails of conduction surfaces, scrambling repair beetles and blasting cross-spectrum engines we stepped back toward the arch. There was no moving ahead in that place and most of it was locked behind a shimmering force field. The impervious bubble protecting the pinnacle was broadcast from inside the field and the energies transmitted would fry us quickly. My guess was that it took up the rest of the large area around this section and reached back to the other side of the core.

The inner rings contained the android hatchery and separating halls with the tomb and hotel taking up part of the second bigger ring, and master mechanical filling the other two thirds of that ring. What was left would be what our mad doctor called Out There. Out There would be the largest area and really big if it was in one ring running out to the edge ring.

The last arch led out to another section of halls that were unsettling in their sparse space-station efficiency. Heavy plated, lined with rivets that were a decoration not reinforcement, they were so solid a knock on them produced silence. The floor was a different story as it was glass smooth and pale as blue ice, emitting a strange ringing sound with every footfall. Thor sounded like a mighty giant walking along this hall while Skitch and Yuki could walk silently on it. We saw no doors and no security devices of any kind and as we walked uneasily along it occurred to me that even if we had blown up the entire hatchery and much of the inner area around the core, this solid protective ring would have sealed the vast outer area. It was under super protection, having the force bubble overhead and the solid interior ring. I looked down at the floor surface again realizing that it was another super substance sealing the area from any hostile power or force or quake that might rise from below.

Judging our position, I guessed that we'd gone halfway around the ring before a door appeared. We almost passed it. It was Lisha that spotted it and all that showed to reveal it were thin cracks marking its outline. No handle, no indent, no security panel, but the outline of a door cut hairline thin into the super hard metal. It had the same rivet pattern on it and I examined them all for a trick opener but found nothing.

"Probably simple hidden detection," I said. "If it recognizes you it opens. It doesn't and it stays closed. It looks like we're blocked. I don't think we can even blow it open and probably wouldn't want to do so. None of the doors we've seen up here are armed, probably because security doesn't allow any sort of blasts here. With this one, we don't even know what's on the other side. Any kind of explosion might kick off a chain reaction or trigger a defense system that will wipe us out."

"Good point," Thor said. "We haven't encountered any fine-tuned defenses so far, probably because it was not expected that we or anyone else would ever get up here in the first place. We are now trying to enter a highly protected area. Arriving inside with a big bang might be the fatal move that unleashes all hell on us. And if we don't get through, we might be cooked, too. Look at this hallway and how fast it could become a death chamber."

"You want to turn back?" Yuki said. "Keep in mind there is no way back. It's either this door or we explore farther and hope to find another way through."

"I might have a way," Skitch said. "Get back from the door and let me work."

No one replied, but we all moved out of the way several feet and looked on while Skitch ran crooked finger appendages over the door's surface. He found nothing there just as I had found nothing, then he went to work on the hair-thin crack. Starting at the top he ran his fingertips along it and his arms and neck vibrated and hummed in a low frequency. Fine dust hissed out as he moved along the full outline from top to bottom, then he moved back out of the way and waited.

"What are we waiting for?" Thor said. "I thought we agreed there would be no explosion?"

Skitch grinned. "It's a wedge trick. We have an impervious metal wall and door. I filled the crack with an expanding impervious material. Some of the same stuff we use on parts of the thirteenth floor."

I took his word on it, we all did, and waited and watched. Nothing at all seemed to be happening, then we heard a slight snap and seconds later the door edge slid slowly inward but not enough to open. Thor moved in and shouldered it then groaned as the impact hurt his shoulder. The substance was still expanding slowly and the door went in deeper. We were all amazed at the thickness of the thing. Most vault doors were far thinner.

Thor rubbed his sore shoulder. "Damn, we're in one powerhouse of an iron tube."

"Iron would break easily," I said, and barely got the words out as the door finally finished the slide open with the jamb squealing and popping it all the way in and around to thud against the other side. Dry air and dust rushed out at the same time like we'd popped a seal and unleashed some unholy genie. A big one because the air kept rushing and we all staggered as it initially stung the nostrils and eyes. The flow gradually slowed and we adapted to it somewhat. Meaning we were all coughing except Lisha and it was a painful cough that was hard to shake. When I finally did shake it, I kept my breathing shallow. This air did have plenty of oxygen but it was rich with other elements that were dusty and not lung friendly. First thing in my mind was that it would not be any sort of normal human breathing such an atmosphere. The area was either android and robot only or home to something else not quite human. The being our captive had mentioned was likely not human.

"Strange odors in there," Skitch announced, moving recklessly through the door without doing a check.

Thor looked at me, raised his eyebrows, then turned and followed Skitch. I ended up last through and saw that all we'd accomplished was to break into another hall that followed a long ring around the pinnacle. This one was much wider and nothing like the last except for the wall containing the door we'd passed through. It ran forward with the same clean metal and rivets. Both walls rose high again, up to what this time appeared to be faint light from a natural skylight at the force bubble. The second wall was covered with growth in a mix of brown and white shades that looked almost like deerskin. Closer inspection revealed it as a form of plant life growing on the coarse surfacing. My eyes were on the floor because it wasn't a smooth surface but also coarse and in a mix of dark grainy colors. There were faint foot impressions in feathery dust that had drifted to parts of the floor. We heard nothing and could see only a short distance in the clouded atmosphere.

Yuki reached down and pinched some of the pale dust between his fingertips. Thor was squatting by some prints and Skitch was comparing his own prints with some of the others.

"Two types of prints," I said. "Large robots or androids and smaller creatures, possibly biological with four legs."

None of us moved any farther because of the prints. We were scanning ahead and behind but initially saw no movement. I was about to start walking when a section of the wall ahead came to life with something springing from it. It startled us. Thor nearly fired but didn't and it hit the floor far ahead of us and ran off. In appearance, it was a lizard about the size of a small dog. As it disappeared, a second creature popped off the wall and followed it. But this one had fur and was catlike.

"Those things look like real biological creatures," Thor said. "One of them is maybe a desert lizard, the other a desert cat creature."

"Looks can be deceiving," I said. "We don't know what they are but we do know they are invisible when they are on the ledges cut into that wall. We'll have to move ahead in single file. I'll go well ahead and you people follow behind. Be prepared to act if I get jumped."

Again, we were on the big carousel following the long slow curve of the wall around the building. Why the top was set up in this way was still unknown. Nearly all other floors of Pinnacle City boxed in the area near the core and overlaid complex floor plans on the rest. With the floors being so incredibly large, the core was generally a hidden thing not noticed or thought of much. Here with everything a ring about it the whole floor was gaining the feeling of a cylinder with rings of monstrous size.

A couple more of the creatures jumped and ran. The bizarre outer wall was giving us all the creeps. If small creatures could appear from it as though through spontaneous combustion, possibly more deadly ones might also appear. But we went a half a kilometer along the wall and none did. Yet it still grew spookier and darker.

A break appeared ahead and the dust coating grew thicker, revealing a heavy track of prints, all going through into an interior section that we couldn't yet see.

I found myself worrying that things might also spring up out of the floor dust. I was constantly naval gazing then jerking my head back up. The break ahead had a swirl of atmosphere and speckles at its mouth. The speckling was a different coloration and form from the floor dust and had an unreal appearance. We arrived one by one and ended up staring at the numerous footprints running off into choking gloom. The gloom being almost like a visual scene breaking up to pixels, giving the look of air forming slow motion dust devils or speckled swirls that intermingled in a pattern. We feared entering it because we could not see how deep in it ran and had no way of knowing what might spring out. Neither did we know what effect such conditions would have on us.

"What now?" I said, looking to Thor as he tried to bring up his command air-screen and failed.

"Good question," he said. "One thing that has proved true is that personal force fields and air-screens don't work properly inside this top shield. We're lucky we have some weapons capability, but we're dead in the water for investigative tools other than using our own physical skills."

Skitch glowered at Thor. "Fancy way of saying one of us has to go in there and take a look around."

Yuki pointed to a ghostly form in the swirl ahead. "One of us is already in there."

It was Lisha and moments later she emerged or rather appeared in front of us. "I couldn't get all the way through but it began to clear like it is a shield of sorts, walling in another area. I felt myself vanishing in there. I doubt I can appear, at least not fully, on the other side. Those animals or whatever they were tracked right through it. I don't think it is deadly."

Thor decided to be the next to challenge the gloom and walked into it. His feeling was the suits would provide protection but I knew they were really designed for the core and the conditions inside the pinnacle a long while back before everything changed. I watched him disappear. The plan was for him to step through and come back for us with a scout report, but it was a plan that didn't pan out as we waited, staring at the boring scene for a while. I knew Yuki and Skitch wouldn't wait for any long period and we didn't discuss it as Skitch suddenly decided to walk forward and go through. Yuki went next and I waited a minute and then followed.

Deep in, the swirls became dark illusions threatening to cross the border to reality. I felt sucking forces taking hold and pulling me forward. The spin of grainy speckles didn't sting or carry any abrasion at all, almost like I was inside a tornado of old-style video static. Bright patterns of grain passed before me and it felt almost like I had my eyes closed or open a slit because it always seemed like something was about to come clear when nothing did. Push and pull replaced the sucking forces and in one step forward I entered an area where I felt like I was being torn apart. I attempted to step back and found something frightening; it was one-way travel. Inside this energy field, I could not step back or turn about. I could only move forward slowly. When I stood still the forces would start pulling at me like my arms were going to be pulled outward out of the sockets while my legs would be stretched down and my scalp pulled straight up. I was slogging through some chaotic purgatory with it seeming like I had traveled a long distance when most likely it had only been a short walk.

Finally, it ended with a one-way vortex and a pull straight forward. I was taken right off my feet and thrown head first into a brilliant light. Then I was falling, arcing down for about ten feet. Still blinded I hit a hard but responsive surface that bounced me for a long roll before I came in place on my knees.

I felt it to be a bad situation but in a worse fix I'd likely be dead. Until my vision cleared I would remain helpless, and my lungs and chest were sore like the vortex had inflicted some hidden damage. The air at this spot was cool and dry but harsh, causing me to huff lightly to regain my breath, and there were no odors at all as if this place was perfectly sanitized.

My hands came clear in front of me and I saw the floor I was kneeling on, which was a strange surface – misty white yet the color was below an area of rubbery transparency a few centimeters thick so that it seemed like I was floating on air. I got up, glanced about defensively, and again was nearly blinded. There was brilliance everywhere. It was such a complex picture I couldn't comprehend it in total.

Glitters of jewels, glass, metals and reflections from a bright bubbling sky above overwhelmed my mind. The transparency of much of it gave me a long breathtaking view and I was certain this area was the edge ring and sky ring all rolled into one. It was enormous, fantastic ... and seemingly of no purpose. The force shield above definitely had a purpose as it protected the top of Pinnacle City. It could stream down and seal most of the rest in the case of an attack or monster storm arriving from the outside. That bubble I could understand, but the rest of what I was seeing made little sense.

I attempted to focus and spot the others. A long look told me that the farther off the more reflective the glass. An effect limited the view to a short distance. I'd entered into a series of glass corridors. Getting up I hit the near wall, which was transparent emerald, and could quickly tell by the feel of it that it wasn't breakable. The only way forward was difficult and I moved ahead on a weaving path that twisted left and right. All along this route, I passed silver cylinders, flat at the top and wide enough to sit on like a bench. These were interspersed with plantlike objects of a hard and jeweled material that were usually a single color. Some of them were emerald and others ruby or sky blue. I shook one, listened to the leaves rattle, and wondered if they were all passable as real stones. If so, I was in walled garden of extreme wealth.

A flash of movement and I spotted one of the cat creatures off to my left, or a number of reflections of him so that I couldn't tell which one was the real item. It was slightly ahead traveling in the same direction as me. As the reflections began to vanish, I stopped and focused. It was almost like I'd spotted a crowd ahead; human shapes but with a bronze tint, and they all looked to be posed in the same manner and large in size. I began to worry that I might be approaching a big gang of robots and slowed my pace. Then Thor appeared off to my left. He spotted me and waved. Two more reflections showed a ways behind him that I knew had to be Skitch and Yuki. There was no sign of Lisha Yanch, though in this gallery of ghostly images she would have fit perfectly.

Reflections were vanishing ahead, the blinding blaze of jewels diminishing, and that meant an end to the glass maze and a large opening. That was verified when I saw a couple of the cats dashing crosswise well in front of me. A stroll later and the maze of walls ended and I was facing a huge open court. It had the same bizarre flooring that gave the creepy feeling of walking on air, but air it wasn't and that was shown by the huge objects the floor supported. I'd come out in a large semi-circle where symbols of many varieties ran in patterns under the transparency of the floor. They were geometric forms creating some master pattern that played tricks on the eyes. I considered the possibility that they could be more than symbols and actually hardware of some variety. I looked up from that at the same time as Skitch, Yuki and Thor emerged from another opening nearby. We ended up staring ahead at an imposing scene.

What I had originally thought were robots stood at the end of the portion of the court and patterned floor. It was obvious why I had thought they were robots of some type. Probably the best description of them would be to say they reminded me of the old pagan idols that lined Easter Island. I'd seen those things in old history videos. These figures were ultra-modern images and not made of stone. They were giant and gleaming bronze. All of them were similar ... like the upper bodies of monster robots rising from the floor at what would be just above the waist. Each one was topped with a huge head and each head was distinct, though they all had prominent brows, nose bridges, and thin mouths. Their arms were all unformed, being outlined but still part of the torsos, and each face was stamped with its own unique and odd expression.

Seeing no enemies present, we formed a circle and spoke. This time Lisha Yanch did not suddenly appear so I assumed that the forces in here locked her out like they did Adam 1X. She was an artificial intelligence like him, though refined to exist as a reincarnation of a human being.

Thor scratched his big head and twisted his mouth into a skeptical grimace. "Quite the wonderland up here. I just wonder where in hell the target is and what in the hell it is."

"The controlling or deep intelligence would be in the implants. What forms, robots or androids it might put forward is something different."

"I get a spooky feeling about this whole area," Yuki said. "I think we might know what it is but aren't realizing it."

"How's that?" Skitch said.

Yuki had the expression he put on when watching Lisha Yanch. Like he was creeped out. "We just went through that entire place we tagged an android hatchery. I think this is another. Those monster robots are emerging or growing, and the glassed off treasury of jewel trees is more than that. That section is energy transmission of some kind fueling their growth. We better hope these things don't open their eyes or we'll be doomed."

"I don't think they will," I said. "They're not fully formed – no arms, no legs."

"Shit," Thor said, spitting out the word. "I see red lights blinking off there behind them. Maybe we set off an alarm."

He was right. There was a haze of light there and we were nowhere near the end of this immense area. It stretched off past the statues and to the left and right with no visible walls, just the blinking haze of light creating a field of expanding color.

The haze was bright enough now that I saw some red-eye on Skitch as he turned to me. "I got an idea. Maybe the implants of brain matter are stored in these things. They're containers of a sort. We should blow them up."

"We have to be sure," Thor said. "No detection equipment works in here. Looks like all we can do for now is creep forward again."

And creep forward we did, seeing no signs of life from the idols as we passed through. I watched Thor touch the side of an idol and pull his hand back quickly. Then he slowly touched it again.

"The surface of these things is like skin," he said. "If you press it's hard as metal underneath. Touch it and see."

He was looking me in the eye. "I'll pass on touching anything up here that I don't have to touch."

Three of the cat creatures gliding in the distant red haze distracted us. "I don't understand why those things are here," Skitch said. "This environment doesn't fit them."

I paused, thought, and was certain I'd figured it out. "Cruel researchers nearly always did experiment on animals first. I think those things are here because they were grown here. They tested their hatchery technology by growing some animal likenesses before they moved up to humans. They might have some other use for these or they keep them around as pets."

Whether it had to do with my fear of heights or something else, I couldn't get used to walking on the springy see-through floor. Probably the new cloud pattern beneath it made me uncomfortable, and I noticed that Skitch also walked carefully. Yuki was on eggs from fear of the robo idols, while Thor strode confidently in the lead, probably loving a floor that didn't echo the sound of his heavy feet. Problem was that he was striding out of the last rows of the bronze giants and what we had thought to be a red emergency flash was now a general blinking haze. Again, we were plunging into an unknown blind spot. Such places, whether swirls of speckles or red haze, made me very uncomfortable. We were too much in territory where we couldn't react fast.

There was no option of going back other than in a temporary retreat so we moved forward behind Thor and slowly through the haze. It deepened then we suddenly emerged from it and up and around us was a rainbow arch of gold shades and large dimensions. The floor we were now on was composed of huge tiles of a lighter gold shade and reassuring in that I could move easily on it. But the question was where to move. This court looked endless whether by some illusion or trick of projection. Everywhere on it, huge metal sculptures towered high above our heads. We couldn't really tell whether these were only sculptures because it was quite possible they were machines of some sort. They were a ways in front of us across open court space and this time we spotted movement that wasn't cat creatures.

Five robots or androids stood at the front of the first large sculptures. These were larger than the ones at Stone Sangalang's tomb and bright shimmering silver. The center android was winged like an angel and had a blaze of light haloing its head. These beings saw us but seemed to be waiting for something and in moments that something appeared as the sound of thunder - heavy booms like the footsteps of some giant walking much deeper inside the court.

We whispered among ourselves and decided to approach with Thor in the lead. He led the way slowly, strolling across the floor, and we moved in behind. At about the halfway point the robots suddenly reacted and their eyes blazed with gold light. The angel held up its hands and a gold star of light appeared between them and flashed toward us while expanding to flames.

Thor failed to dodge it and was hit and sent tumbling and blazing with the strange slow-burning licks of fire. I ducked quickly one way and Yuki the other while Skitch raced forward then off the same way as Yuki. I benefited from the fact that these beings thought size meant the bigger threat, and with Thor down and struggling in agony they moved in on Skitch with the angel suddenly flying in the lead as they did. They all glowed together and launched a huge whirl of fire at Skitch. He had perceived their actions and quickly spun off a web at his side as he turned. The fire hit it and flared in all directions but forward as the web hardened. During that brief interval both Yuki and I made it to cover among the sculptures, while Skitch had no such luck as they hurried to surround him.

All of the silver beings now opened fire on Skitch with a series of energy flares from the palms of their hands. He didn't catch fire but brilliance splashed over him as he stumbled about and then collapsed. Thor had made it to his feet but was still emitting a bright aura from the blast he'd taken. He attempted to move to escape but his legs offered no support and he went down.

Rising on its wings the angel bot flew about in a small circle, its eyes flashing as it searched for Yuki and I. I don't know whether it tracked us or not but it didn't fly over into the sculptures or fire at us. Instead, it went back to the others and appeared to forget about us for the moment.

They kept close guard on their captives. I caught a glance of Yuki waving to me from farther in but I didn't want to move until I was sure of Thor and Skitch's condition. I heard a couple groans from Thor and saw movement from Skitch.

The guard circle broke up as the gleaming backs of a troop of insect-like robots appeared, and they moved in using pincer appendages to pile both Skitch and Thor on their backs. The winged angel then took the lead as they all moved through a large opening in the machines and headed in the outward direction on the large court.

Yuki was at my side before they were out of sight. "I guess we follow them," he said.

"What bothers me is they don't see us as important at all. No fear."

"Those are more advanced. Maybe we can't detect anything up here but they can, and they see the weapons we have as no threat to them."

Detected or not we followed carefully, machine to machine or sculpture to sculpture, under cover of their wide shadows. The weird moonlight-type glare from above was not comforting and we could detect a low frequency bass thrum. We caught a glimpse of them moving past the biggest machine yet. It resembled a massive metal sculpture of the type you'd see in the courtyard of one of those 100 story complexes inside the city. But a sculpture it wasn't. These brutes were some incredible power source with the art facade being most likely just a protective shell.

We were getting closer to a portion of the force bubble. I could tell by the glowing brilliance of the light and another vision that filled our eyes. It was a higher arch and in shades of silver. The rings had depth, successively reaching in deeper to a huge shell that formed another of the grand courts of this floor. Our silver androids looked a perfect color match as they entered into that backdrop. And there was something else - a growing sound like thunder. It boomed in a pattern that gave the impression of footfalls, as though some human giant was approaching.

Standing in a deep shadow, we watched. They didn't even bother to look back and it was an open entry.

"We get in and look around before attempting any rescue. Adam 1X must have shielded the explosive charges you're carrying because they didn't detect them."

"They might not have focused on me. I saw the way they work, seeing the largest of us as the threat."

Booming footfalls were rising again; they brought about a definite desire to retreat. We didn't but moved forward and in a fast way, dashing out from the shadows for the open entry. I felt more than exposed running into the brilliantly lit entry and the shell effect made it like entering another reality altogether. Open floor was spread for some distance past the entry. Deeper in, we saw that the high shell was the layered roof and opaque skylight for an area containing many large structures. There were two levels connected by numerous circular stair pieces. The staircases all led up to a central area that was open and surrounded by heavy fluted columns that rose to the highest portion of the shell roof, which at that point contained webbed swirls and art images we couldn't fully make out. It was like we'd arrived at the outer court of some great king or pope and could see to massive inner structures from it.

Climbing silver plants decorated the columns and arches of the walkways and there were many tall statuesque objects, all of them unique and varied. We chose the center walk and a ways in found ourselves facing the wide side of a huge sun-wheel or coin-like object. Beyond it on either side the statuary was of some form of alien beings or mutants, all them about twice my height with a carved look, but not of stone but metallic silver. We stepped through the sun-wheel and walked along this long hall to a staircase up, seeing no sign of the angel or Thor and Skitch.

On the higher walkway, we were able to see other similar walks below and that all of them curved and wound to create multiple entries at the inner court. We moved toward that inner court, going in deeper until we could get a view of the central area. That view was partially obstructed by the largest circle of columns rising up to the shell and a softer form of light that gave everything inside the appearance of floating in a haze.

Halting there, we watched for some minutes then a flash of light alerted us and we saw the wings of the silver angel appear. The other robots followed and they took Thor and Skitch into the central chamber. We headed in that direction, feeling the whole area again shake from the boom of the footsteps.

We emerged in one of the entries facing the inner court. This was the court of a giant and it contained more of the huge machines or sculptures we'd seen earlier. This time they were all radiating from a central dais with a throne of incredible size. It was raised and resting on swirling curvatures of metal and the booming was coming from behind it as a giant was approaching. We could see it but not clearly in the haze, just the figure of it approaching. In outline, it was a man or an android and nearly eight feet tall.

Yuki faced me, a look of disbelief on his face. "I thought technology was supposed to make things smaller. If that's an android it's the biggest one around."

"From here it looks like a mining robot. I'm not sure what it is. That artwork in the shell above is more of that stuff that looks like a marriage of math symbols to religious icons."

"Whatever it is it has to be the thing behind this AI takeover. Where in the hell it came from I can't figure."

"Yeah, and it's replacing the whole Board, remember. But for what?"

"I remember, but up here things slip away fast because it's always something new and unexpected."

"Something just occurred to me. The size. Adam 1X's primitive brain, it was a fair amount of brain matter set in a feed and communications system in a fairly large room. Maybe technology is making something smaller here. That thing looks big but maybe the brain implants are in its body and that's why. Instead of being somewhere inert where they might face sabotage they are in a being that can prevent any such thing."

"Crap," Yuki said. "You're telling me to somehow blow that thing's brains out. We don't even know if the bomb will penetrate a shell like that."

"It should. It is designed to bypass just about everything and go for the special soft matter."

"It doesn't bypass all substances. Our protective suits are supposed to block it somewhat."

The winged angel descended on shallow steps. "We still aren't sure what we're doing," I said. "We need to get in close and you should be out of sight. Take the long way around and come up from behind. I'll

approach this way so that if they see anyone they'll see me. I just want to get in close enough to see what that thing is. Don't attempt to plant and detonate unless I signal for it."

Yuki nodded and looked at the distant scene with trepidation, and then he took off, moving with agile speed through the shadows. I waited a minute then moved ahead slowly. Nothing about this scenery or location enthused me. It all worked to make me feel small and helpless. The whole setup gave the feeling of being up on clouds and we really were that high. I didn't want to be reminded of it. There wasn't a single thing in the area that wasn't bigger than me; even the climbing silver plants towered over me in vast swaths of quivering leaves. The huge layered steps weren't far off now and once there I'd be exposed. Before that happened I wanted to get a better look at what was going on so I worked my way left some to come around a large column. Some scraping noise was coming from above and I had my attention on that and failed notice something moving off to my side.

I was hit and sent tumbling but controlled the roll enough to get a glance at what struck me. It was another of the winged androids but this one was dull grey metal in composition with no revealing gleam. It had used that to its advantage in the shadowy environment. While banging across the stone, I grabbed my weapon and hit it with a blast that knocked it against the column – a hard slam and crunch but not enough to put it out. It regained balance instantly and fired at me. I couldn't see what it fired other than that it warped the air with distortion and singed the floor as I rolled out of the way. I got another shot at it as I came up then I was seized from behind and wrestled to the ground by another of the androids. It was not possible to win a wrestling match with one of these things. It had me in an iron grip and before I could attempt to squirm out it hit me with a blast of gas from its fingertips. I saw snow, felt ice knock on my brain and that put me out.

I woke a short time later and other than an aching shoulder from being slammed by the android, I felt okay. What I was seeing wasn't okay though. Thor, Skitch and I were all on a circular area of dark stone floor. Moon glare spilled in from above and reflected through another huge sun-wheel. This wheel back-dropped a huge throne-style chair. The giant I had mostly only heard before was sitting on it. Eight of the androids were stationed in front of it with the two winged leaders out closest to us. Their eyes were all ablaze but they remained in stern posture and motionless.

As I glanced around the only good feeling I had was in the fact that they didn't seem to have Yuki. When I tried to look up at the giant, an effect of the glare made it hard to see it clearly. I couldn't get a solid focus in to see exactly what it was. Almost like it was an illusion or a projection its image wavered continually. At some moments, it resembled a man, but it would suddenly shift to be like a robot or android and even morph more so it resembled a giant ape or monster of some type. In all of these incarnations, the fine details of its features were hidden so that it was always rough edged. It was there and it wasn't fully there, real and unreal. The knock on the head or the nerve gas could have triggered hallucinations or blurred vision, and not being sure of what I was seeing had me off balance.

There was a sense of finality, that this was a real being, but it wasn't fully projected into this reality or dimension but remained partway in another. What it did project fully was power, and it wasn't just because of size but also because of aura; it struck the senses as something of superior presence, greater than a man, robot or android. The aura was energy of some super form that seemed to condense to matter and the giant being.

I knew Thor and Skitch couldn't be of any help in this situation as they were out of it. Skitch was barely conscious, shivering, and making the odd attempt to sputter some words. Thor was standing erect but like a zombie, staring as though his brain had been fried. His eyes were shot through with red veins. I had the feeling that he was near finished and might not be seeing any retirement in that private cops-and-robbers world of his.

I waited with the sense of impending doom rising. In previous cases, the opponents had not been quite so large and powerful. There are big guys out there, but other than industrial robots of limited intelligence and abilities, no opponents are in existence that are much over seven feet tall. Of course, killing someone doesn't require giant size, but the big guys do have scare power and brute force.

Usually my opponents needed me alive for some reason or didn't realize I was serious trouble until it was too late. Many of them got beaten in sudden tight and violent situations. In this fix, I couldn't see any reason why this monster would want me alive or any way to beat it in a fight. The bully of this block was one mean dude, and he was shifting now and his appearance clearing in my vision.

In an instant of sudden magic, he was an android similar to the others. Huge and smooth with a big metal mask of a face and flaring eyes. His surroundings from the floors to climbing plants were in metallic shades. All light now seemed to flow from elsewhere to feed the head and torso of this thing like it was pulling in one incredible recharge.

It stared down at me like I was an insect and spoke in a deep male voice. "So, Jack Michaels actually made it up here. I didn't think anyone could do it even with Thor's help. But now you've done enough, so consider your assignment complete. I have a new job for you. You are to finish off the remaining intelligence modules of Adam 1X."

I hoped Yuki was out there watching. I took a step and made the hidden motion that meant go ahead with the bomb if possible. Of course, I'd be killed, but at least I'd have the satisfaction of taking down this evil thing. I knew it was evil because the brief statement and sudden intake of energies indicated that. The short speech was also proof of the fact that any words can tip off the enemy. Since he'd told me he wanted Adam 1X dead it was clear that he was the embodiment of the brain-matter implants or at least a portion of them. Nothing else would harness such incredible living energy.

"I don't work for you or know you," I said. "Why would I help you destroy Adam 1X?"

He replied in a calm tone and in spite of his size, his words came easy to my ears. He wasn't a giant in voice and I wondered if I was actually hearing a voice or thoughts being implanted in my mind. "Ah, but you do know me and work for me. I hired you. Don't you recognize me?"

He laughed in short and mocking tones, then I was hit with an energy wave that nearly knocked me off my feet. It all poured in on me like he'd plugged me into something that was more like a drain than a charge. All sensations vanished but my thoughts still existed as though hanging in the air. Thoughts I'd been entertaining of how to escape the situation immediately seemed foolish and irrelevant – I was just a mind, no corporeal form ... less than a ghost. Then the same scene appeared in another instant, but altered. My body was unchanged, it was the same area with the great shell of a roof, but all else was transformed ... floors, columns, stairs, objects now forms of polished stone with the androids transformed to human beings standing before another giant human sitting on a tall chair. That giant was Stone Sangalang, in the same suit, with the same expression he'd had on his face the first day I'd walked into his Pinnacle City office. My smaller size made the whole thing absurd. The men standing before the giant Sangalang wore the official suits of on-duty Board members, but in the backdrop of the sun-wheel and reflected moon glare, I couldn't see any faces with enough clarity enough to make an ID.

"Now do you recognize me?" he said, staring down at me, a patronizing look on his face. "Perhaps you've solved the mystery and are ready to move forward."

"Only if the mystery is madness. Yes, I recognize your face. But I now realize that I never met the original Stone Sangalang. I saw his tomb that you keep up here. He was dead before I took the case. When I came into Pinnacle City, I met Stone Sangalang the android, and he is normal size, not a giant."

"Of course he is. But that android could be best labeled a poor imitation of the real thing. I am the real Stone Sangalang, and the reincarnation of the human man that passed away, but in a higher form of life and being. I have fully replaced my earlier incarnations and I am the real president of the Board, the great intelligence now running Pinnacle City. As one new and marvelous being, I am Stone Sangalang the god."

"That's preposterous. You are a being of some new variety, but not Stone Sangalang. I see what he did originally. That was destroy the core part of Adam 1X in a takeover bid. Adam was to be replaced by programmed brain implants that would put him in total control. But as a mortal, he was aging and didn't want to die, so he loaded his entire mind into an android. The most advanced android yet created. He really does deserve credit. He was a genius to accomplish what he did. Even if it did all go wrong."

"Not all wrong, partially wrong. The mistake was the android. The transfer method is so good, we believe even a man's soul is transmitted to the android. Don't forget these new androids are partly biological too, just like human beings. We grow them."

"I saw that already. You are growing a new Board."

"No not new. It will be the same Board. I have corrected the initial error. The higher android that thinks it is Stone Sangalang was the first and a failure. A psychopath was created. It lived for murder. But I had

prepared for any possible problem by backing myself up in the main implants. The personality seeded in them was mine and was supposed to be a temporary existence – a fail-safe to verify all went well. Instead, the fail-safe became the ultimate success. I have all the greatness of Stone Sangalang, but like a butterfly emerging as a higher form, I am Stone with intelligence so vast no human can fathom it. I am Stone Sangalang the god, destined to control every minute aspect of Pinnacle City. The Board will be renewed. We eventually plan to replace every resident. Aid me and I'll leave Thor Carlsonbonner in the trash can. Destroy Adam 1X and I will make you my security chief and an immortal.”

“If you really are a god, destroy him yourself.”

“Ah, so you want to be difficult. You really need to consider things. If you want, you can simply leave Pinnacle City after the job is done, and you'll be personally wealthy in doing so. You can trust me to give you what you want. Remember, I did a profile check. You were the detective hired by my mad Board android, and hired because you always maintain confidentiality regarding past cases. If you think about it, it really doesn't make any difference to you. You never did fit in here, and I know that you could care less whether the Board is actual human beings or my team of android duplicates. They are a Board you would be in disagreement with on nearly all issues in any case. Your murder case, and I know you love marking cases as solved, is solved. The serial killer was an android psychopath, a mistaken replacement of Stone Sangalang. You will also know that all has been cleaned up. The killer will face quiet capital punishment as he is reprogrammed into a proper vassal that will play the role of Stone Sangalang. Even the victims or nearly all of them will be brought back to life as androids. Androids so real they are not just digital mappings but have the souls of the dead, their full being. The only difference will be that I will fulfill my original goal. The ultimate corporate takeover effected as human transcendence. I will be the internal mind. I will be both the artificial intelligence and the man running Pinnacle City. Adam 1X is not half what I am now. He never was. Being rid of some benign controlling mind, and one without proper Board sense, will be a good thing for this place. With me in full charge the top floor will be my personal private domain to experiment with and play around with, but Pinnacle City itself will be what it always has been ... it will be the perfect place with the perfect people and luxuries, and in perfect repair, going on for eternity as an island of tranquility. It will be a fortress of decency in a world now too filthy to speak about in any respectful tones.”

“Perhaps you are right,” I said slowly.

“Go on,” he replied, his tone revealing deep interest.

“There really is nothing much in regards to humanity worth saving any more. The planet is a big experimental workshop and I've entered another room of it. Altered humans, and AI minds, robots, androids ... all them would be a lot uglier if humanity hadn't become even uglier. I do have one problem though. Suppose I do what you say, and the last vestige of humanity is somehow destroyed by my act. Do I really want to be the person who gave the okay to end it all?”

“Seize him!” Sangalang the god shouted, his voice now thunder as he revealed himself a giant in regards to voice but a pussy in regards to personal action. He still had others doing his dirty work so there wasn't much I could do. The dark angel droid was winging down on me in a blur of speed. I did step back defensively and put my arms up to block the impact. And that action saved my life, because as we'd been talking Yuki had planted his bomb and escaped via the same back way he'd arrived. The blast hit exactly as the big angel hit me and I gained the cover of his body.

I found myself more in some form of suspension than an explosion. There was an initial flash then a big freeze where no movement happened. It seemed like seconds but I have no idea how long it really was ... at its end, the whole of reality unraveled. I experienced a jumble of confused sensory data, tasting colors, seeing sounds, hearing flavors ... all of it spinning and mixing ... condensing like I was in a deep melting dream. I felt disembodied but alive as some form of human sensory kaleidoscope.

Slowly the altered state began to vanish and fade and as total blackness was about to absorb me I was tumbling across the stone floor. My head winged the stone and I rose on my elbows. Shattered black chunks like metal ore spilled around me and I saw a large body falling out of the gloom. The noise was deafening as it crashed to the floor near me. Except for harsh light streaming from the shell roof above there was nothing left other than thick platforms of stone and huge lumps of black stuff scattered by rounded extensions that resembled man-size stalagmites.

I saw the bulky body rising and memory flooded in. I knew it was the remains of Stone Sangalang the god, but it didn't look like an android or robot giant now. It was more like an ape in that it was blackened and shredded on the outside. Yuki's blast had damaged it, and it had nuked everything else. I wasn't quite sure whether most of what had been destroyed had been real or not. The stone lumps surrounding the platforms were either the fused remains of the things that had been sculptures or machines or possibly their actual appearance without energy enhancement.

The giant was on his knees, stunned, and I was well enough to walk. It looked like Yuki's blast had been a suicide shot. I had the feeling he might have obliterated himself along with everything else. I oriented myself via the remains of one of the sun-wheels. It was a darkened Mandala now in streaming light, but from it, my eyes moved to where Skitch and Thor Carlsonbonner had been standing. They were no longer present in body but their images were there, indentation and burn in the stone similar to the way a nuclear blast can leave flash ghosts behind. The other androids had been disintegrated but not all in the same way. The one that had grasped me was a spill of big metal chunks while others had shattered and fused like glass. All of the rest of that shifting reality from the towering silver plants to the flow of arches and staircases had been turned into blast damage. The area now showing was tremendous in size and brutal in the harsh glare. Even more brutal was the thing now rising to its feet, and the roar of its machine breath as it somehow cleansed itself with rushes of inhaled air.

Stone Sangalang, the brain-implant god, had simply refused to die, and the brightening light began forming in lines and waves as it flowed back. The repulsive beast was lighting up, being restored to life. My natural reaction in any other similar instance would have been to run. Simply run and hope to escape and fight this thing another day. But there was a long empty scorched floor before me and my friends were dead. There was no one to be a hero or a coward for and with that freezing me up, I simply stood and watched as the giant came back to full life. His great body remained scorched, tarnished, but the head gathered a glow and became again a powerful metal mask ... shining and clean, with fire in the eye sockets. He saw me now and stared down at me. Stared for a long time then spoke. Or should I say tried to speak. His words were garbled, he could not form them right away, but what he could form was laughter. In this bleak scene, the mad giant was snickering at me.

He finally spoke, and in that voice that was like a man and not a giant. "Nice try. I really must congratulate you on getting up here with this attempt. You finished all my contained implants but one, and that one is the master and in a secure case. The case is my body and the implant is in fact my primitive brain. Delay me, yes you have. But stop me, no. The plan will go ahead. Adam 1X will be fully destroyed and my control consolidated. The takeover is still on except for a small change in plans. You I am going to kill with my bare hands. You will feel the power of a god."

He raised his arms in a high victory V and light and power streamed in with such speed the flashes forced me to cover my eyes. He was aglow as was reality itself. It was all coming back, the imagery as I had seen it when we first walked into this area - the high shell, flowing silver plants and magnificent scenery. Now it really was time to flee, and probably not get far, but as I turned, the flashes died and he lowered his arms. The area was restored in appearance, though I knew the major parts of his brain matter had been destroyed, if not the primitive part inside his head casing. Primitive was a good word for the moment too, because his scorched shell gave him the look of some primitive monster robot. A robot not in a hurry because like the biggest bully he knew he had leisure time to mop up the floor with me. At least he thought that before he took a step and paused halfway through it.

Another man had appeared, picking his way from between two big metal sculptures. I recognized the white suit and I recognized the man, or should I say imitation of one. It was Stone Sangalang the android, walking confidently with a tube weapon in hand. It was a weapon with a shimmering base. Not something I had seen before and thankfully, he wasn't pointing it at me. He was pointing it up at himself; pointing it at the Stone Sangalang god version of himself ... or was it himself. In my mind neither of them could really be Stone Sangalang.

Turning from me, the giant faced the weapon. "You," he said. "I sent you in for correction. What are you doing?"

"I'm doing exactly what I'm supposed to be doing. I have been corrected; but the problem you have is that there was no error to be fixed. I am Stone Sangalang, exactly as before and always. You see, I always was

by human terms a psychopath. But always one in denial. It was only as an android that I realized my need to kill. You were created to be one of my servants; the backup capability was only to click in if there was an error. You mistakenly computed that there was one and my personality uploaded in you to correct it. Now, there is no need for you, you clumsy fool. Only a fool would think Stone Sangalang wanted to be a giant god. You were to be nothing of the sort. You were to be my servant in control up here. But since being uploaded with my personality in the fail-safe, you are beyond correction. That is because you believe you are me and are therefore another psychopath. It is kill or be killed, you see. If I don't kill you, you will exterminate me. So it's time for some big game hunting. Feel the power of your brain being punctured."

Sangalang fired. It was a thin shot to the giant's head, and I turned and ran off among the big machines. Puncture the giant's brain was exactly what it did. The bronze head burst into flames and he began to stumble about, then he went down with a mighty crash and flames licked over the body as he fell still.

I glanced back and saw Stone in pursuit. The hunt was on and he was out to kill me. Drawing my weapon, I fired a blast in his direction. It was right on, a direct hit, and it reflected away and tore off some strips of plating from a machine. It meant I was out of luck because he had a personal force shield that worked up here and I did not. Unless I could manage to escape him altogether, I would be executed.

The race was through the sculptures and I was fast enough to cause him to miss. He fired several shots that were close but it appeared he had only a fine beam mode with his weapon and couldn't take me out due to lack of any wide sweeping blast. He was still effective enough to cut down an entire column in front of me and it came down along with a big hook of the climbing silver plants and other debris. I got on one side of the rubble with a thick square post for cover. He reached the other side and aimed the weapon. He was about to fire it then he lowered the gun and called to me. His voice was both mocking and mean. The veneer of jolly humanity the original Stone had used to reach the top appeared to have run thin and cold after upload. He was a superior being in the way a bigger bomb is a superior weapon. He had enhanced capabilities for destruction and self-destruction but registered a zero in the department of higher human emotions.

"Ha, Jack Michaels! You didn't disappoint me after all."

"Yeah," I called back. "You certainly disappoint me. But then, you're mad aren't you? A psychopath and a madman are the same thing. You didn't even realize it until after you were dead."

"I'm not dead! I'm more alive than I ever was because now I know what I am. I won't hold back my need to kill. When I hired you, I thought you'd stumble about with an idiot investigation. Provide me cover while I kept going with my little hunting expeditions. Nothing like a little headhunting, is there? And I made it a sport. I had to kill each one in a special way. But you I saved for last, and I'm going to cut you down like big game with my hunting rifle."

Excited by his own crazed words he raised his weapon and fired a blast. I ducked. A spray of rubble washed past me. Lowering the weapon again, he looked towards me, and I could see the satisfaction imprinted on his face.

"I always hated you, Detective Michaels. Yes, I knew about you all along. Everything I despise is embodied in you. You are the man of the big city, and king of that filthy jungle out there. You always win your cases and kill the enemy, and that makes you at least a worthy target. But you are worthy in no other way. You represent all the ugliness out there. You are the lion of garbage city, and deserve to be a body on the trash heap. Pinnacle City was the perfect place. It was the home of the clean people, the respectable people, and the rich and talented people. Then the scum and the riff-raff started getting in and corrupting the lower levels. They ruined the underground and infected the whole city. But I am cleaning it. All of the Board members will be clean androids, and slowly the whole city will be cleansed. It's time to die, Jack Michaels. It is time for the king of the filthy jungle to be swept from the clean sterile floors of Pinnacle City. It certainly is true that the strong survive."

The pursuit had taken us out of the central area and I reached the largest circle of columns where they rose up to the shell. This was in the hazy area where it was harder for him to target me. I wasn't certain if I had frustrated him or if he was enjoying himself on his big game hunt. He'd paused off in the haze as though waiting for an opening, then moments later two other figures appeared in the haze. The pair being more of his Dr. Frankenstein creeps. They wore the uniforms and were armed, but with snub-nosed beam weapons. One of them fired a wide blast that sent a spray of stone and plant leaves flying like a burst of sparkles in the

mist. It was clear what he was up to now. He was using them to flush me out so he could hit me with the kill shot.

There were numerous semi-circular stair pieces. I was prepared to flee down one them when he called out again. This time his voice echoed up in the higher shell. "Think about it, Michaels! I'm the best of it all, and deserve to rule! Biologically human combined with the most complex android and robot development! A superior being who deserves to govern! Be thankful I only want Pinnacle City and not the whole world!"

"You're not superior!" I called back. And that drew a blast from one of the Frankensteins. It shook the huge column beside me. "A superior being isn't mad! All those replacements for the Board members will be mad duplicates!"

The next blast hit the rock above so hard I had to dodge falling chunks, and that left me no option but to be exposed. A blast winged me and disoriented me. I dived and rolled up, dodging another of Sangalang's shots as I stumbled down some stairs into an area I hadn't explored on the way in. Statuesque objects provided cover but I was partially stunned by the blast and the webbed swirls and art images on the wall pieces were spinning in my head. Another big coin-like object or star wheel was down in this area and I managed to get behind it.

They were closing in now, the two Frankensteins at the forefront, and with a high wall behind me, there was nowhere left to run. I saw them raising the snub-noses to flush me out, and then suddenly one of them went down. Something dark had flashed out of the haze – a star. Yuki appeared. He came into view deadly fast and got the second guy with a blast that felled him, and that was the last moment of Yuki's life. Sangalang targeted him with a clean shot to the head that dropped him dead to the stone floor.

I was alone with Sangalang now, and he was approaching with a broad grin on his face. He had the weapon at ready and knew that the moment I made a move he'd have his kill shot. I had no choice but to make a move and be killed doing so as I wasn't just going to let him walk up and shoot me. He closed in slowly, obviously savoring the moment, and was raising to fire when a ghostly form appeared off to his left. He swung the weapon and fired. That was my moment and I came on fast, lunging forward, knocking the gun aside and taking him off his feet. We went down and got in a struggle on the floor and he was quickly gaining the upper hand. His new body did prove to be superior in strength if not in sanity or force of reason. But his mistake was in wanting to beat me to death when he should have used his advantage to go for the gun and finish me quick. He was up and kicking me when a wide blast came in and knocked him over. A glance told me that the fallen Frankenstein had recovered and fired a distant shot at us, probably thinking he was shooting at me.

With Sangalang rolling on the floor, I had my moment and scrambled to his gun. It looked like an open weapon needing no fingerprint or read and I tested it quick with a shot that took out the distant doctor as he came clear out of the mist. Sangalang was back up now. He was about to dive for me but I swung around and fired, a clean shot right through the center of the forehead, killing him in the same way he'd killed Yuki.

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For me it meant it was mostly over. With the weapon I could kill any others lurking at the top and then destroy the place. I still needed to find the way back down and enable Adam 1X so he could get to work and clean up the mess. As I looked around, the ghostly form appeared again in the haze, and for a couple moments came clear. Lisha Yanch, she'd found a way to get in up here after the bomb had gone off, but only partially. She was speaking and I read her lips, as there was no sound. "See you later," she said twice, and then she vanished.

The place went haywire after that and I ended up stuck at the pinnacle several hours more. There was no remaining opposition. Robots I encountered ignored me. Medical creeps fled from me. I did an inventory during my search but didn't destroy anything. My final calculation being to leave it for Adam 1X to study.

All across the top floor lights flashed, faded, and brightened. Finding a way out seemed impossible then, but I finally found the tube down and contact with Adam 1X at the edge ring. An upper module had reactivated and I used it to speak with the AI before attempting the tube ride down.

Adam 1X responded and managed to get some bug robots on the scene in a matter of minutes. The tube down was transparent to the point of being nearly invisible, leaving me in a free-fall drop for several floors. It

was like falling straight from the clouds without a parachute. While I was in mid-air, halfway through the drop, the whole of Pinnacle City went black. I was in darkness for a moment with the brilliant lights of Toronto far off, and then there was a roar like a tidal wave coming in. But not in from the outside, but up the building from below - a wave of sound that was the beginning of a full reboot of the sky city.

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The big reboot put the fear of God into Pinnacle City and the surrounding city so effectively that new religious cults formed around it. The investigation into it all was of course a cover-up. The final report was done mostly to stifle financial claims from the families of the thousand people who died in the calamity. In the end, the big winner wasn't a new form of human-android hybrid. It was an old-fashioned corrupt human named Penrose Pool, who of course used the days of reboot chaos to stage a takeover of the Board. Pool owed me a favor, a big one for keeping my mouth shut during the investigation, and that's how I got my new super secure office location. The old neighborhood never quite did survive. Place is a mess but I got a new condominium in the city. The cat lives in my office down in the underground of Pinnacle City. My new secretary Lisha lives down there too, at least most of the time. There's a new fast train up and the whole underground is a human community now. There are a few humans on the top floor now too, with Penrose Pool having an office up there.

The riff-raff never really did get into Pinnacle City. Stone Sangalang was wrong, and with a snob like Penrose Pool in charge, the super-rich will be enjoying another last golden day before that future time when the mad androids take power. The more things change the more they stay the same. Except for my secretary; Adam 1X learned a lot during his exile and he helped her out. She feels and smells like a real woman now ... at least some of the time. She's still a ghost, too. But what the hell, nobody is perfect in my world.

===== The End =====