

# Morden Wakes Up

It was just a bit past two in the morning. She just got finished telling me “I told you so.” In more words.

“Yeah,” I said in reply. “You’re a real Cassandra.”

“Does that mean you’ll never believe me, no matter how many times I’m right?”

“No, it means no matter how many times I do believe you, you’ll only remember the times I didn’t.”

.  
. .  
.

It all started when I got the call at half past eleven on a Tuesday morning. “Mister Morden,” the voice said, sounding like it had been sucking air through a filter since it was ten. “My name is Calhoun. I hear you’re good at dealing with people.”

“You heard wrong,” my own voice said, probably sounding like I had just swallowed a porcupine. “I’m good at observing people. It’s my partner who does the dealing.”

“Whatever the details are,” he replied quickly, “I am sure will be made apparent as they are appropriate to make apparent.”

It took me a second to untangle his odd statement. Any mind that could work linguistic loops like that was not one I wanted to send very much time talking with. “And who decides that, you or me?” I was already on guard; already sparring. It was like I had been talking with him for an hour already. This was where the conversation was going to go, so there was no point in delaying it.

“If the details are mine; I decide. If they are yours; you decide. Why are we talking about this? Is this how

you always deal with potential clients? Ah, but you did just tell me that it is your partner who does the dealing. Should I have called him?"

"Her," I said, knowing full well that he knew that my partner was a she. "Florence Point." He was feigning ignorance. Everything was a game to this one. I knew it as soon as he laid down that bullshit about me being good with people.

"Ah, so Doctor Point is a woman. Well then, perhaps I should speak with *her*?"

I yawned, a long cat-like yawn which I was sure gave him a clear mental image of a long furry beast arching up its back to twice its normal height. "She's not exactly sitting across the desk from me holding her hand out for the phone," was all I said. I figured he was old enough to remember the days when phones were objects that could be passed from person to person. This conversation was pointless. Why was he being so roundabout? He was stalling for some reason. He was trying to reason me out; that or giving me something to reason him out with. Did he want me to know the truth, or was this some show to mislead me? More importantly, why was my glass empty, and how could I survive the next minute of this wasn't corrected? I reached for the bottle on the shelf as I waited for his calculated reply.

"I can see you have a sense of humor." That was nonsense. If he has born witness to my sense of humor he'd have dropped the phone because he was laughing too hard; or to pick up a blunt object in order to bludgeon himself to death. "I think you and I will get along after all, Mister Morden." He has been planning to say that all along, but was probably hoping that there would have been a better lead-in to it rather than that B.S. about my sense of humor. I waited as he pronounced every syllable hoping that his next

sentence would have some relevance, and not be just some rhetoric designed to make me more amicable without knowing why. I was way, way too disconnected from the normal human thought process for that. “We should meet, along with your partner, and discuss this matter further. I think I can pay your rent for the rest of the year, if all goes well.”

“In that case, I had better find better digs. As long as you’re spouting vague promises I may as well take advantage of their full nebulous implications, eh?”

“I’ll see you at O’staf’s Burgers in two hours.”

I could tell from the start that this was going to be all about long pointless conversations designed to trick the listener into revealing something about his-or her character that could be used against them. Or maybe this guy was just as bad at dealing with people as I was. Either way, I had Flow on the line next and was yammering the spiel to her.

“He actually said that?” she said in the least deadpan tone she was ever known to make unless she was deliberately putting on a show. It was how I knew she was amused. Or irritated. With her it didn’t really make a difference, because she usually found her own irritation to be a source of amusement. She was, of course, talking about the part where Calhoun pretended to think she was a man.

“One of the problems of that whole Doctor thing,” I said, taking her infinitesimal display of emotion to be an invitation to tease. “Makes that glorious sex appeal you try so hard to manufacture all pointless.”

“No pun intended?” she asked, but completely dry that time. Figures she’d latch on to the unintentional wordplay and completely dodge my ribbing. But, that was how I knew she liked me. If it was anyone else she’d have played along. She didn’t like playing along. It was how she avoided actually bonding with anyone.

I met her on the way there. "A trench coat?" was all I said when she finally caught up with me. "This time of year?"

"Your comment about my glorious sex appeal cut me to the core. I figured I may as well go unisex today."

I wasn't going to look her up and down. I was walking too quickly down a busy sidewalk, and wasn't nearly cool enough to walk without watching where I was going without tripping or ramming into someone, so my reply had to go without the sight gag. "You really don't understand people, do you?"

Far sooner than I wanted but far later than my legs cared for I was sitting in a booth at the diner with Flow at my elbow. The waiter came up, spoke the only English words he probably knew, and she and I both replied, "Coffee."

A few silent seconds later and I was drinking the stuff. It was half as strong as I liked, and much too sour. This is why I hated places like this. On the other hand, the burgers would be to die for, if I hadn't already eaten two hours ago. Still, the smell of bacon from the kitchen was taking my mind off that burrito I had just crammed down.

"So if we're meeting him here, he knows what we look like, or you know what he looks like. I doubt the girl at the front is going to act as our liaison without prompting." She sounded annoyed. I probably interrupted her during an exciting date with a frog's brain she was dissecting.

"Fatso," I just said.

"What?"

"The name of this place. Ostaf. It's Fatso backwards."

She stared at me in silence for a moment before saying, "OK."

"I'd say he's about five-eleven, but thinks he's six-

two. Two sixty pounds, at least, with forty of that in his gut and twenty in his shoulders. He moves like he's used to having a gun in his pocket, but hasn't worn one for years. He's used to wearing sunglasses, but doesn't anymore so he squints all the time. Way too much hair gel."

"Did you get all of that from talking to him on the phone, or is he walking up to the table right now?"

"Neither. NotFlynn just sent an image to my mobile."

"Huh," she said as she craned her neck to see the photo glowing from the small display. "So he's important enough that NotFlynn could dig up an image of him just like that. This should be interesting."

"Haven't you ever egosurfed before, Flow? I bet I could call up a photo of you from the web, cold. Hell, I bet I could even find one of you in a bikini."

"That would be a neat trick, considering that I've never worn one."

"Don't be silly. Don't you know that these days photoshop comes with an automatic 'make into racy tabloid photo' filter? Came out back in '25. How do you think that industry survived the outlawing of paparazzi? These days all celebrity photos are complete digital fabs." These days all celebrities are complete digital fabs, I added silently to myself.

"And how do you know all of this? Considering a career change?"

And so it went on. We always had our best conversations when we were bored and had coffee. We were both on our second cup when he arrived. The photo was old. It looked more like fifty of the extra pounds were in his gut now, and there wasn't enough hair to gel anymore. If he ever got a new photo taken he definitely would want to use some type of filter. The 'take off twenty years and fifty pounds' one was especially overused.

Without having to say anything Flow switched on her earpiece, and I did as well. *“Good thing you’re so skinny,”* I subvocalized to her, *“when he sits down he’s going to smash with this table. Why did we have to get a booth?”*

She gave no reaction to betray that she had heard me, but I had gotten far too used to using the earpieces to have any doubt that she did. Every sarcastic remark, every joke about his balding head would be heard loud and clear, while to him it would look and sound just like we were picking food out of our teeth with our tongues.

“So good of you to both come,” he said, with the same voice I had heard on the phone but with a completely different attitude. Either it was the diner setting, the promise of food, or the presence of a woman that changed his demeanor, or this was just another one of his games. I braced myself for the impact of the table against my ribs. Then I remembered another reason why I hated diners; I wanted a smoke.

*“Lay it on heavy,”* I told her silently. *“He’s caught off guard by you. He doesn’t expect to be treated well by a woman, so you can put him off his game.”*

*“Ask me to walk over hot coals, why don’t you?”* After she got done complaining, Flow smiled warmly and said, “Not at all, Mister Calhoun. I’m always excited to meet with new clients!”

“Oh, please Doctor Point, call me Martin. And must I remain so formal with you?”

She gave a musical laugh and said in her best sing-song voice, “Doctor Point isn’t formal, Marin, it’s flattering.”

*“Don’t overdo it. I think I just threw up a little.”*

*“Are you sure it’s not the coffee?”*

She sweet talked him and I kept my mouth shut, or at least, that’s what he would think. I never stopped feeding her information. She talked, I observed, and

what I observed I'd tell her; raw information, what he was thinking. I couldn't read his mind, but everything he did stood out to me like it was blared through a bullhorn. I noticed every twitch, every glance of his eye, every change in tone.

"I come to you on the behalf of an associate-friend of mine. He's in a bit of trouble you see, and we need a third party to quietly intervene and help him disappear."

"Associate-friend? He broke eye contact. He's gripping the pointer finger of his right hand with his thumb, tugging at it several times before letting go. He keeps glancing outside. As he said disappear he shifted uncontrollably."

She knew what to do with it. She couldn't see it herself – that much was lost to her, but she knew what it all *meant* – that much was lost to me, and how to react to it. How to measure him. How to figure him out. It was how we always worked with clients. It was how we always worked with enemies. People who were clever and knew about the latest gadgets would possibly figure out that we were communicating subvocally, but no-one knew about our particular talents and how we worked together.

"He goes by Willard. Perhaps you've heard of him? Back in the revolutionary days they would have called him first in line to be hanged! No-one knows who he is, except his closest friends of course, and he aims to keep it that way. There are those who don't like what he thinks or says. Those that would mean him harm. Well that's about to happen, but not if you can help me help him."

I relayed everything to her as I saw it, quickly, silently. I could subvocalized far faster than he could talk. *"Do we even need to go through this? Even I can tell this guy is lying his fat ass off."*

*"No, he's not lying his ass off, but he's misrepresenting his own position concerning what he's saying. I wouldn't be surprised if he was the one Willard needs protection from. How can he be that obvious? Does he think we're stupid?"*

*"No, he just doesn't know you're brilliant."*

*"Save it for the pillow-talk."*

*"Yes ma'am."*

"Well I am sure we can help, Martin. I can tell that his safety is very important to you," she said without skipping a beat. She was good at this; having two conversations at once. I was terrible at it. "Please, tell us what you need and we can begin at once."

The soft, motherly tone was alien to her lips. The look of empathy in her eyes was like a neurotoxin in my brain. Sometimes I could barely stand to watch her, the cold, stoic woman who only I could really get, put on her clown costume and do her little dance of make believe, behaving however she needed to in order to get the reaction we needed from whoever she was dancing for. If I hadn't known it was all a game I'd have run away screaming. When we weren't working on someone, when it was just me and her speaking one on one, the only reason I could deal with her at all were her subtleties. With everyone else it was like talking during a hail storm. I'd get lost in the torrents of nuance from their facial and body language, and render everything an overwhelming jumble. They'd be talking on and on and all I'd notice was how many times they tapped their finger or blinked. Oh, I could still carry on with the conversation. I could make sense of it eventually, but I was slow, and I tended to overanalyze. Interacting with her was, I assumed, something like how normal people interact with other normal people. She was still. Every action deliberate. She never fidgeted. Hardly ever blinked. Her fingers did nothing she didn't consciously

tell them to. Her eyes were steady and locked onto mine like nothing else in the room existed. Her speech was smooth and monotone, never betraying more than the slightest hint of meaning beyond the dictionary description of the words. She was normal to me. I *got* her.

Still, I guess I had my edge too. She could have two conversations at once, and I could pay attention to two people at once. Even as I reported every twitch and inflection of Calhoun, Flow herself was at the forefront of my mind. As I watched her it was like there were two people sitting on the booth beside me; the division between her true self and the person she was showing our client was that extreme. I guess I could pay attention to three people at once.

"It is very simple really," Calhoun said after rambling for a minute about political stuff that anyone who read the bullshit they plastered on the front page of every newsstand from here to Hoboken knew. "There is a data file behind held at the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue Icomde, under the strictest confidence, or so we thought, which contains the identity of Willard and enough information to track him down."

I relayed to her what I saw, and waited for her to reply, either to me or to him. I felt useless in a way; this guy had absolutely no control over the way his body acted out what he was really thinking; what he really wanted to say. But I had to remember that her knowledge was all theoretical and not practical. Sure, she knew what it all meant, but she wouldn't know it if she saw it. People were incomprehensible to her, like driving down the street and all of the sign posts were turned around so all you could see was blank metal. Sure, sometimes the shape of the sign helped, but if it was anything more complicated than stop or yield she didn't have a clue. But she was even more blank than

that to other people. It was almost impossible to tell if she was happy or sad, if she was surprised or bored, if she loved you or hated you. I could tell, but then again, I was nuts. So was she. We were both nuts.

"But someone there betrayed us. We already know who, and won't be taking any action against her, but the data must be removed and all trace of it expunged."

*"What does he know about us?"* The voice of NotFlynn buzzed in my ear out of nowhere. Of course he was listening in. He always listened in when we worked. Flow and I weren't the only ones analyzing him. NotFlynn was researching. Every scrap of information was a lead, and our man on the web wanted to know. He wasn't in this business because he really cared about our cases; he just wanted to know. If he could turn information into food he'd eat it a hundred times a day and never touch a scrap of meat or vegetable as long as he lived.

*"I doubt he knows about you,"* Flow subvocalized to him and then said, nearly cutting Calhoun off, "We're not hackers, Martin. We can't do that kind of work. Morden here is a consulting detective. We talk to people."

"That's what I need!" He said adamantly, or at least Flow told me it was adamant after I had explained the exact way the veins in his forehead popped out. "Someone to talk to people. Interview people at the Icomde without letting them know you are. Figure things out. Get the story about what happened. Find out where that file is. Once we get the details, my own hacker friends can to the rest."

*"If I don't do it first,"* NotFlynn buzzed.

"Very well Martin," Flow said after only a moment's hesitation. Even the hesitation was part of the show. "But do you really want to discuss the details here? And look, your burger has arrived."

Calhoun erupted into a display of delight as a steaming plate of stacked meat and bread was placed before him. I couldn't stand to watch people eat; not even Flow. There was something about the way their neck and cheeks deformed with every slosh of food matter shoveled into their folds of flesh that made me nauseous. I turned to look at Flow, thinking that excusing myself from this biological display would be forgivable.

*"I am almost convinced that he's the one that Willard needs to be afraid of,"* she said to me.

*"Almost? I thought it was pretty damning from the get-go. He wants Willard to disappear alright, but he's the one who will be deciding what that means, and it probably has something to do with moving his body parts as far away from one another as he can get them."*

*"This guy's a nobody,"* NotFlynn chimed in. *"He's got nothing on him. A middle man. He doesn't believe what he's saying because he's not stupid either, but he doesn't care. He's being paid to make sure you help whoever he's working for take this guy down."*

*"What do you know about Willard, NotFlynn?"* she asked.

*"I don't think his burger is big enough for me to tell you everything. I can fill you in later, but I can start by mentioning that he's recently gotten a few very powerful people believing that his ideas about the Poli-Sci Monopoly are their own ideas, and that's bad news for the P.S.M. It's one thing to convince people you're right; it's another to convince them that your ideas are the ones they came up with all by themselves. That's real power. I don't think it takes a magnanimous leap to say that whoever Calhoun is working for is tied up with the P.S.M."*

*"I say we take the job. We can make up our minds what to do with what the job gives us later."*

*"You can't turn Willard into the P.S.M!"* NotFlynn

shouted, though to anyone sitting two inches from my ear it may have sounded like rather quiet fly buzzing. *"Do you know what huge crime will be committed if that happens? I am not talking about murder! I am talking about the first amendment!"*

*"Settle down, NotFlynn. No-one reads that old document anymore. The P.S.M makes sure of that."* I studied Flow, half because I couldn't stand to watch this guy devour his lunch, and half because I wanted to know what she was thinking. She was worried. She didn't like working for this guy, or being caught up in things so damned political, but she knew that this was a big chance to do something actually important for a change. I didn't know how I knew all of that from looking at her; I just did. I wondered if she'd be able to get anything like that from looking at me. Yes, I got her, but I wasn't sure if she really 'got' me. Maybe she just kept me around because she needed someone who 'got' her. One sided relationships sucked.

Eventually he tried to talk while eating, which I found unbearable. Thankfully Flow knew it and didn't expect me to watch him. He had already dealt his hand anyway; there wasn't much more to be psychoanalyzed.

"We can play it by ear. I cannot expect specific results from you, because we are unsure what specific results are even possible. However, we will gauge your efforts and compensate you accordingly. Why, for even meeting with me I can promise you at least 250 ICs."

"Well that will hardly pay our rent for the rest of the year," I said, focusing my eyes some distance behind his head so I wouldn't actually have to see him, while still making it look like I was addressing him. "But two months isn't bad."

"Oh believe me that is the very barest, of bare minimum which you can expect. Shall we appoint a time tonight to reconvene, possibly remotely, and

discuss your findings for the day? Say, eight o'clock?"

I managed to fix my eyes on the rather pleasant shape of a waitresses' lower portion as she leaned over a table. Hind-ends didn't have much capacity for emoting, so they naturally had a calming effect on my senses. I let Flow answer.

"Yes Martin, that sounds very fine indeed."

She wrapped up the meeting, and then very skillfully convinced him that he was paying for our coffee without even asking, and got me out of there before I became a real basket case.

"Is this the Icomde?" I asked as we approached the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup>. A strange form of transparent extruded polymers and crystallized silicon – most folks called it glass – was perched precariously at the corner, like it was about ready to roll away into the street and float off into the sky at the same time. It was hard to tell where it actually touched ground, both because of the tree cover which still lined the front of the nearby terrace, and because of the way the form melted into obscurity the closer it got to the ground.

"I remember when this area looked like a slum," Flow mused.

"If that's so, then you're older than you look," I remarked dryly. "How is that anyway? You're not exactly a paragon of healthy lifestyle."

"It's because I never feel guilty about what I do to myself."

I was about to turn and head for the entrance, when I saw Flow take off in another direction. "What?" I said. "This isn't it?"

"It is. I need *good* coffee." Then I saw where she was going. I caught up.

"If you need good coffee we'll have to go to my place after this. The rat-piss they serve here is worse than the diner."

“I am certainly glad I am not you, Morden. You hate everything, and so you’re always miserable.”

“Well you’re not exactly miss I-love-sunshine either,” I said as I caught the door which she didn’t hold open for me. “Look, Icomde has a café too. That way you can enjoy your coffee and we can pretend like we’re working, right? You can interview the barista, or whatever the hell they call the person who makes the stuff.”

She stopped, looking longingly at the menu – which she had no doubt committed to memory ages ago – like a dope fiend craving her next fix. With a minimum of fuss I had her out the door again, following me back to the Icomde with a chip on her shoulder that could have sunk the Titanic.

“This way,” I said, leading her past those two iconic stone lions that had been standing for over a century in front of the old Astor library, which was now a Pages Museum. Books were illegal now – too hard to censor – but some places were still allowed to carry them, so long as they were in sealed glass boxes so that no one could ever actually see what was inside. They said that every word printed on every page in the entire place had been digitized and was now freely available to the entire world. I guess if you lie enough, openly enough, bald-faced enough, people stop caring.

I lead Flow around the dozens of seated bodies, reclined on steps where people just like them had reclined millions of times, heading towards the shaded area where the staggeringly contemporary intervened with the antiquated. Stuff changed, boy did it, but people, no. People never changed.

The way the Icomde dissolved in this direction made it difficult to understand where the terrace ended and the interior of the Icomde began; but it also made you not really care. It was also difficult to see where the

people who came here to be at the Icomde began and where the people who were just loitering on the terrace ended. Again, I didn't think it really mattered to anyone. The museum and the Icomde were both public institutions, and no one really cared if they invaded each other's space. Not yet, anyway. I was surprised breathing outdoors was still legal.

Here the sight and sounds, and *smells*, of people enjoying their lunches didn't faze me as much. I knew Flow was oblivious to almost all of it; she just wanted her damned coffee. Soon the light canopy of branches gave way to a semi-translucent covering as we approached the counter of the Icomde-run café. I wasn't sure why she took so long to look over the menu – it was exactly the same as the other place, and she always, always ordered the same thing. In a moment she would touch her mobile to the counter which would instantly transfer the credits, and they would pass her an intricately engineered, painstakingly designed, abhorrently organic coffee-derived beverage, the name of which could be no less than five words.

She sipped at a huge cup of brown gravy – she could consider the swill coffee if she wanted, even before we took our seats in the most remote corner of the area we could manage. It was a good vantage point to watch the people go in and out via the terrace opening, some just looking for a little mechanically assisted climate control, some only interested in the delicacies afforded by the counter, and maybe even one or two people who genuinely wanted to enrich themselves by this fountain of culture. Whatever. I watched Flow as she silently took her medicine; she could down caffeine all day and never get the jitters.

“Not much to this place,” I said, craning my neck to look at the wall of glass before me. The whole building was transparent, probably to keep it from obscuring the

view of the massive old neighboring relic, though there was certainly enough of that to go around without having to worry about this little building upstaging it. I could easily see three stories above me, filled with tables and desks and lounge chairs. Wherever someone came up to the glass wall, their face to us below, it dimmed slightly and a display came to life, seen in reverse from our point of view, with a cascade of interfaces that deformed and slid to and fro at the user's commands; fingertips hovering over the glossy surface. I figured that the day when they got the machines to respond reliably to proximity of touch rather than touch itself they finally became worthwhile. Otherwise they'd have to invest a small fortune in cleaning supplies. I was sure they still did; some people never quite got the hang of it, and smeared their greasy hands all over the displays. I could see a few tell-tale signs of this on some of the walls. No matter how advanced technology got, they still couldn't make *people* better.

That thought drew me back to the lounge chairs, oddly colorful and plush in their world of smooth glass and polished aluminum. The people in this place were like visitors in an alien realm, and those chairs were the liaisons. No matter how *sufficiently advanced*, to use the old euphemism, the interfaces got, a good old comfy chair was as hard to make *better* as people were.

Part of the upstairs area looked like a museum; desks and shelves lined with relics of past decades, absurdly primitive and yet even I wasn't young enough to not remember a time when it was *all we had*. I spotted a few antique LCD displays, so bulky and rigid, held aloft from the desktop by a plastic stalk, forever locked to one size, one shape, and the only way to make them transparent was with a trick where a camera was mounted on the back. I couldn't see them from here, but I assumed they even had keyboards attached to

them. Why anyone thought that simply modifying a typewriter into a computer input device was a good idea was beyond me. We may as well have been carving figures into clay tablets.

*"Most of it is underground. That's where the bulk of the terminals are. But humans still enjoy natural light for tasks which don't involve backlit displays."*

It took me a second to realize what NotFlynn was responding to, and then I remembered my throwaway comment a few seconds before I was lost to nostalgia. *"You say that as if you aren't one,"* I replied smugly.

*"What makes you think he is?"* Flow's sense of humor was unflappable.

A few more minutes slid by calmly without much change in activity inside. I let out a sigh of restrained impatience. "Ever been in one of these places before?" I asked Flow, speaking normally for a change.

"One of these places? I thought this was the only one," she said as soon as she could pry her thin unpainted lips away from the plastic lid. I could see the writing on the side of her cup from here: Made from 100% recycled material. Intended for single use only. Oh, the irony was suffocating.

*"Oh no, not at all!"* NotFlynn spoke up. *"This was the first one though, built back in 2010. But now there's dozens of them across the country. There's ten times that many in Japan."*

*"Are you always listening in, Flynn?"* I said with unhinged irritation.

*"I'm not Flynn! And you can disconnect me any time you want."* He hated, of course, when someone called him just Flynn, so I was happy to do so when it suited me. He never did tell us the story behind that handle.

*"Yeah, but don't you ever get bored of constantly eavesdropping on two nutcases?"*

Flow interrupted our unintended conversation with

an answer to my original question. "No, I've never been inside one. But I take it NotFlynn has?"

*"Only my local branch. I already have the floorplans of the NYC one though. It's—"*

*"Just feed us information as we need it. You know I can't memorize anything you say,"* I told him.

Apparently that was his cue to launch into a monologue. *"Here's what I find odd about this whole situation. So this Calhoun guy says that this Icomde has information on Willard. That's just bizarre. As much as it is to be venerated as a paradigm shift in public information access, it's still just a writing lab with a publishing center. Back in the old days that meant that they printed books, but now it just means they have a staff who help people get their work presentable for digital distribution, since all written communication has gone electronic and the Icomde is supporting that. Now, maybe Willard has friends here and he needed them to get in touch with him in the physical sense. But if that's so, why would he have a data file with the information that could kill him sitting around on the harddrive on a computer in a public writing lab? It makes no sense."*

*"No, you're right, it makes no sense."* Flow said in her usual bored tone. *"But something's going on here, and it suits us to figure it out, doesn't it?"*

For once the three of us were in agreement. *"NotFlynn, are you in any kind of communication with this Willard?"*

*"Oh, no way. He's way too paranoid for that. I'm just a hobbyist, remember? It was only an accident that I got mixed up with you detective sorts."*

I nodded. NotFlynn didn't like admitting when he couldn't do something, so I figured he was serious. *"Is there any conceivable reason why this Icomde would be involved?"*

*"I'll try to figure it out. I'll let you know if I think of*

*anything."*

*"We'll keep the channel open. But we're probably going to split up, so I hope you don't mind listening to two conversations at once."*

*"I don't have wacked out brains like you two, but I'll do my best."*

"Shall we get on with this?" I said, impatient.

"Mm," was all she replied as she tossed the still half full foam-plastic cup into the waste basket. Some things *never* change.

"You spent at least .5 IC on that drink, and you just throw it away half done?" I said in a scoff, more interested in taunting her illogical reliance on the beverages than her actual waste.

"If we had gone where I wanted, it would have been worth the .5, and I would have finished; but no, you wanted to go here, and so now it's your fault that twenty seven milliliters of coffee and soy product are now residents of the wastebasket." She stopped, and lowered one eyebrow just a tad. "And how did you know, anyway?"

"The level of exertion as you heaved the cup airborne. Way the cup arced through the air on its way to the basket. The distinct thud as it made contact with the plastic lining. All very tell-tale. But most of all I know how long it takes for you to drink a medium, and you finished exactly two minutes too early."

"The world is an open book to you, isn't it?"

"Yeah. And I know all of the nouns and verbs – too bad I'm lost on the grammar."

The entrance was worked into the edge of the old terrace brickwork, and was like a distant echo of the main entrance to the library that loomed over it. It was a curious gesture, striking me as both mocking and venerating at the same time. Going inside gave the odd sensation of being embraced by the ground while

translucent sheets of structure hovered effortlessly above us. As transparent as the building seemed from the outside, once inside I had a feeling of being wrapped in something dense and tangible, though I couldn't put my finger on where that was coming from. Maybe it was the cascade of images and information what flowed gently around the perimeter of the enclosure on those glass interfaces I had already seen from the outside.

Unlike the interfaces upstairs, these were always on. I assumed that a lot of it was realtime "news" feeds, coming in from thousands of "reliable" sources across the planet. A few screens showed conversations however, scrolling chat logs, possibly informative debates or possibly mindless banter. Not all of it was text though. Dozens of the displays were animated, some showing video broadcasts, others animations, some music videos, and even a few sports broadcasts. I shifted my attention to the people around me. Some were sitting, others standing. Some were stationary, their gaze locked onto the displays, others were walking, browsing. A chance glance at a nearby sign informed me of how to connect the audio feeds directly to my earpiece, or how to download any of the broadcasts directly to my mobile. The former was free to guests. The later required member authorization.

I soon forgot my own contemplation as my gaze became fixed on an exhibition which took up the center of the ground floor. There was a glassed in area; probably sound insulated as I couldn't hear even a faint murmur of what was going on beyond, where a group of people seemed absolutely entranced by what one other was saying and showing them. The cascade behind him was interrupted by the flow, instead displaying various diagrams and depictions I couldn't even guess the nature of. From the way he was gesturing and moving around I could tell that he felt his entire livelihood was

on the line at this moment. I could only guess that he was presenting some invention to potential investors. Without thinking I checked my mobile for public broadcast bands, to see if I could listen in to what was so important to soundproof from everyone outside, but saw only locked frequencies. So we could look but not hear; fine, have it your way.

There was a desk nearby where a woman sat, and Flow was already over there talking with her as I took the place in. I shifted my attention to the conversation playing discretely in my ear, as I casually fixed my eyes upon the seated attendant.

“... oh not at all, you see, the Icomde isn’t just about news and writing; we support the visual and performing arts as well. Not only do we have our terminals equipped with high fidelity wacoms and wavetables, but we have actual physical facilities for painting and illustration, as well as recording equipment and environment. We even have practice rooms for people who have neighbors with delicate ears.”

“*Paradise, isn’t it?*” NotFlynn buzzed in my ear, interrupting the sales pitch.

“*Guess for an information addict like you,*” I subvocalized to him, and then, “*not to play captain dummy or anything, but what the heck is she talking about?*”

“*A wacom is an electronic interface for illustration. You can paint into the computer just as you would with a pen or a brush. A wavetable is a method of music composition using a library of pre-recorded note samples. I think it should be all anyone needs, but the Icomde tends to also bend over backwards to accommodate the old ways of doing things, for people who still think that they’re good for that kind of thing. They even keep a collection of DTEs upstairs.*”

I knew DTE – dead tree edition, affectionate slang for ‘a book’ among those who took part in that kind of black market. *“Flow, we just need some computer access. Don’t make her think that we’re ready to sign her into our wills.”*

She conveyed my thought to the clerk, as if it had been her own. The girl replied, “Oh yes, anyone may access our services on the sub-1 level. We actually offer most all amenities present in the design hubs on this floor, but it’s all individualized and not conducive to collaborative projects. For that, the design pits excel.”

“So if my friend and I want to work on something together, we have to rent a design pit?”

“No, not at all, but you’d have to work just as you would if you were using two separate terminals in separate rooms. The pits offer complete synergy of function.”

*“Morden?”* She buzzed in my ear. She couldn’t buy a toaster without my say-so in the matter.

*“What?”* I replied, as if I didn’t know what she was asking.

*“I thought you were listening. What kind of membership do we need?”*

*“We’re not here to design anything, Flow. The public terminals will be fine. You should know that.”*

*“As soon as you get tired of being in charge, let me know. I’ll be happy to make decisions then. But if that’s the case, you won’t get a say anymore.”* “I see. Thank you. We’ll just have the free membership then – for now.”

“Very well, I just need you to...” I stopped listening.

*“Flow, ask her if anyone in particular ever uses this place. Noteworthy people. Celebrities. Not movie stars or bullshit like that, but important figures in the media.”*

She asked, though she phrased it far more eloquently than I did. The girl at the counter seemed irritated at

the question, taking a 'why should that matter?' stance and fed Flow some line about various news anchors and journalists who have visited.

*"I am afraid she's not going to just come out and tell us if Willard has been here, Morden,"* Flow said to me even as the girl rattled off her recollections of people who she thought were noteworthy.

*"Right, but even that tells us something. Finish up and let's get to work."* She completed her transaction with the clerk and then turned to me, addressing me as if it was the first time we had spoken since she left to go to the counter.

*"Morden, mobile."*

I pulled the device from my pocket to see a message glowing on the display, asking for identity confirmation and acceptance of terms for membership in the Icomde. I glanced at the 'Yes' box and the retinal scan opened up all the access filters, allowing them access to my identity-packet, or IP. In theory, it was the IP of Willard that they had stashed away here.

Flow approached, putting away her own mobile as she did. "I think we can do everything we need on sub-1. Please, let's not go poking around on the top floor finger painters or wherever they keep all of the children who want to play at making music."

"Do you have that much contempt for people who prefer to still use physical objects?" I said in my best attempt to sound like I was teasing, even though I was actually annoyed. I knew she wouldn't be able to tell.

"It's wasteful. The chemicals used to physically create images on another physical material are noxious, and require ventilation that puts an undue strain on the environmental control systems of the building," she said, like something straight out of the PSM's manifesto.

"Maybe they, I don't know, open a window? Why else would they be on the top floor?"

“And the amount of materials per square foot needed for certifiably soundproof spaces needed for recording studios would make that floor cost more than two of the other floors combined.”

“Maybe that’s why they put it three levels underground? Come on Flow, stop being spiteful of the creatives.”

Her usual blank expression had a hint of frustration in it, but it only lasted for an instant. “Their private database now has our IPs.” *“Not Flynn,”* she continued, beginning to subvocalize, *“use our data as a signpost. If you can find it in their systems, it might lead you to Willard’s. With any luck you can detect it by remote and we won’t have to do any work ourselves.”*

*“Does this mean I get paid for the job instead of you?”*

*“You’ll get your cut,”* she said, before looking up and me to say, “Let’s go.”

We walked slowly down the sculpture of glass and aluminum that connected all six floors, finding ourselves in an open space with controlled lighting, a high ceiling, and a low murmur of activity throughout the sleek, polished scenery. The arrangement was similar to what I saw in the floors above, but much more densely packed, no orientation concerning the edges as they were merely blank walls, and many, many people busy at terminals. I tried not to be too nose-y as we crossed the floor to an uninhabited spot, but being nose-y is my job, so I couldn’t help but notice that there were almost no trends in activity.

Here the cascade which surrounded the perimeter was opaque – it had to be since we were underground, and it split off from the wall here and there to fold over into various shapes that eventually became places to sit and interact with the displays on a more ‘intimate’ level. I watched as a man sat down before a blank portion of the continuous surface, and interfaces sprang to life

both where the wall folded in to meet his fingers and at eye level. A few twists of his wrist later a series of images spilled out over his view, each one a blur of color until they came to be still. He was reading a comic book. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

*"Ah, here's something,"* NotFlynn said, *"A trail of breadcrumbs at least. Working, working."*

*"What kind of breadcrumbs?"* was my partner's reply.

*"Pumpernickel."*

No reaction, not even a twitch.

As soon as NotFlynn was satisfied with the lack or reaction, he gave a real answer. *"Usage statistics. Login data. Stored keystrokes."*

*"They'd keep that kind of data onhand?"* I asked, a little baffled that they'd log keystrokes. *"Is that even legal?"* Of course the term wasn't even accurate anymore, since it referred to the now scarcely used input devices of old, but the term stuck even when you were talking about a simple log of every input command of any type the user committed to action. In another ten years no one would even remember where the saying came from. Sort of like how people would "dial" on a phone. I wasn't even sure where that one came from.

*"It's legal if the PSM says it is,"* was NotFlynn's reply.

*"Will you cut with the conspiracy theory crap?"* NotFlynn may have thought that Flow was irritated, but that was her teasing voice.

Ignoring it, NotFlynn continued, *"Hey, do you guys want to be full members for a day?"*

*"What have you got?"*

*"There's this old promotional thing in their system from around this time last year. Noone at the desk could trigger it, but with a few illegitimately gained permission I can tag both of your accounts, so that one of the design*

*pits downstairs will recognize your IDs and think that it's your turn to use it for this hour."*

*"Won't that get us kicked out?"* Flow was a pillar of optimism.

*"Nah, it will look like a computer glitch. Just play dumb. But as long as you act like you're doing exactly what you should be, no one will question you. That's my motto!"*

We turned around and went back to the stair. The floor below was similar, but much more organized and had a hush about it. It seemed counterintuitive at first since this was supposed to be the collaborative area with 'design pits' but then I realized that the same soundproofing I had seen upstairs with the presentation must be at work. The floor was divided into partitions of various shape and size, some of which were opaque to eye level and some of which carried on up to the ceiling. I then realized that privacy glass was at work here, and that the users within could no doubt set the opacity of their enclosure. They could probably see out just fine.

I didn't know where I was going, but I kept moving. Right on cue, NotFlynn buzzed in my ear, *"Take this one. It won't be occupied for another four hours."*

I touched the swivel panel and it gave way effortlessly. I held it open to allow Flow passage and then spun it shut just as gently. I saw that where my hand was touching it a glowing display had revealed itself, resembling a slider. I pushed it upwards, and a message appeared showing that the privacy glass was now set to full. I could have also told it to make the opacity two way, but I left it in a state where we could observe what was going on outside by standing up.

Flow sat. As soon as she sat various welcome messages appeared on the surface before her, as well as directions of use. She pulled out her mobile and set it

right on the surface, the part that curved forward and a keypad would appear if needed. An outline appeared in a pale blue and various applications began to sprout from it like vines. For an instant I wondered what it would be like to spend time with a woman who was thrilled by pretty things, as I watched Flow sit there with no discernable interest in the artistic electronic nature scene the display was setting up. I didn't think about it for very long.

I went to sit down next to her. Similarly the display lit up as soon as weight was applied to the chair. "So," I said watching the presentation, "What's so synergistic about these pits?"

Without speaking she raised her hand to the display before her, and gave one window a gently tap with his fingers, hovering a centimeter above the surface. As if it were spring-loaded, it flew across the seamless gap between her space and mine and slowed to a halt right in front of me. "Ah," was all I could come up with. "That's easier."

Then I saw what the window was. NotFlynn's usual animated avatar – a lizard man with a Mohawk of colorful feathers, was peering at me in profile. "Hi NotFlynn."

He didn't exchange pleasantries. I couldn't help but laugh as the lizard man began to speak in NotFlynn's voice. "He's been here. In this building. I found access to their security video logs. I think I can... let me see. Decrypting, decrypting..."

"How many laws are you breaking, NotFlynn?" she said in the same tone.

"Laws that are worth a damn? Zero!"

"You don't get to decide that."

"Turn me in then."

I leaned back in my chair to see what some people were doing to one side of the room. There was a row of

big displays, each six feet tall and about eight feet wide, arranged in aisles. Each one was a touch screen, and generated a view of a bookshelf. It was like some type of bizarre legacy support for people who couldn't get over their nostalgia for DTEs. Hopefully it didn't also simulate the smell of mold. The people using them were scrolling along the shelves, zooming in and out, tapping books and having a virtual representation pull free from the shelf and spread open before them, where they could leaf through the pages or send it back to its place, only to push the image of the bookshelf around some more until they came to an edge and a menu popped up allowing them to choose a new section. Novel. I thought I saw a few of these on the upper floors too, but no one was using them, and there weren't as many.

I indulged my curiosity and stood up. Anyone who didn't have their privacy screen up wanted to be observed, anyway. There was a group of three in the pit beside me. It looked like they were pretty well entrenched. It was impossible to see where one workspace began and the other ended. One beyond was much simpler, and a rather impressive sight; I recognized their work, they were editing a waveform, but the display had completely wrapped around the perimeter of the workspace, meaning they were surrounded in 340 degrees – a gap for the door – with the waveform and accompanying manipulable notes. From the look of the two men, or boys, working on it I imagined they had just been downstairs playing and recording the song, and were now tweaking it.

My survey was cut short by NotFlynn. "Whoa, okay, this is messed up," he said in a sudden bout of panic so congealed it almost dripped out of my earpiece and down my neck. I sat back down at once and observed the reptilian cartoon, now positioned halfway between

Flow and I. "I found the video logs alright, and it's like they meant it this way. Guess how many security vid logs are there in the database? There's like eighty of them."

"So?" Flow said, playing stupid for my benefit, maybe.

"So - there should be more like eight *thousand* of them. And I checked a few others - they're completely random. Real security logs should be mind numbingly organized or they'd be useless. They just put enough in here so that any noob who looked in the folder would go, oh hey, de't'deet! Look a bunch of security logs! There aren't enough in here to even be for a full day!"

"Actually eighty for a building this size would be around two days, fifteen hours-"

"Whatever. Look, here's the best part. The operating system records all sorts of timestamps on the files. Date accessed, acquired, completed, received, processed, authenticated, authorized, imported, exported, yadda yadda, but guess what - for video files only 'date created' is displayed at the standard observation level, and that is set to be two days ago. All of the other timestamps? Totally out of whack. This file's been bouncing around from place to place for weeks, if not longer. I wouldn't be surprised if the whole thing is just a c&p job."

"Can someone alter timestaps?"

"Of course they can alter timestamps! I could crack open the file right now and change them all! Oh, read only? Read-only my ass! Files haven't been read-only since the old days when we kept information stored on little bits of reflective foil on fragile plastic wafers!"

"So what does the video file show? Willard breaking in and abusing the computers? Are they trying to frame him?"

"No, worse than that. They show him meeting with

the Icomde's vice-chairperson!"

"How is that... oh."

"They're not after Willard at all. They're after the Icomde. If they show that he's in cahoots with the higher-ups of this place, then whatever they pin on him they can also pin on Icomde, and you can bet they have much deeper pockets for a settlement."

"NotFlynn, I am surprised at you," Flow spoke up, surprising me. "I doubt they're after a settlement at all. Whoever isn't after Willard isn't after cash for slander. They want him silenced for good. They'll want the same for places like this who let people like him thrive."

"So what do we do?" I asked.

Flow answered. "We bail out. This whole job stinks. It's like a double or a triple setup. We're private contractors. It's in our contract that we can end the contract for any reason. We only forfeit pay." As usual Flow was taking the responsible attitude. It's too hot. Don't touch it. Don't get drawn in.

"I think we should dig deeper." I said, turning to look at her for the first time since we sat down. "Let's get ourselves a new client. State the case to the director of the Icomde here and see if he won't let us take it up for him. He's got a lot to lose. Chances are he doesn't even know what's going on. He may not be able to pay as well as Calhoun, but you know me. I'd always rather work for the good guys."

Always the skeptic, Flow answered, "How do we know these are the good guys? How do we know that by bringing down the Icomde, whoever hired us isn't doing everyone a favor?"

And NotFlynn answered for me. "We only know what they let us know, Flow. That's how it will always be. We'll look back on this and all sources will point to us making the wrong choice. That's why we have to depend on what's in our own heads to make up our

minds, and not what's force-fed into our brains whenever we connect to the local channels. Back in the old days everyone believed what was so because some guy in a robe told them that's what God said. Well now we've got some guy in a suit saying the same thing, but now it's what Science says. We traded one tyrant for another, but this new tyrant changes his tune whichever way the wind blows. Well I don't blow in the wind, and neither do you."

"Ah, you always present such lofty ideals. Are you trying to impress me, NotFlynn, or did Willard connect to our private net and you're trying to impress him?" She said sarcastically.

NotFlynn piped in with his usual impeccable logic. "Come on. Do you possibly expect me to believe that the guy in the burger joint was the good guy? He was ugly. Good guys are never ugly. They're pretty, like you and me, Flow!"

I answered for him. "You have no idea what she looks like, Not Flynn. And you should know, I am the one that's pretty."

"Charming," she said, finally turning to look at me.

"Don't be obtuse, Morden. Like you said yourself in the diner, it'd take me ten seconds in an image search to track down a picture of our lovely Florence Point – in a bikini no less!"

I winked at Flow. Knowing NotFlynn, he had taken my hint and fired up photoshop on the spot. "Alright NotFlynn, what's the director's name? Connect me to him right now." One of the benefits of having a personal techie on a private line was never having to dial a phone. Dial – there was that word again. Where did it come from? What did an ancient device for telling time have to do with communications?

"Miss Alleture, and dialing."

Dial a phone. Dial tones. The sound of ringing at the

other end. Antiques. What did the sound even mean? It was just the noise you heard before the person you're calling hits the accept button, or let's their line of sight pass over the accept box, or mutters it, or even thinks it; depending on how wired they were.

"NYC Icomde, Lacy Alleture speaking."

I could talk to people more easily if I couldn't see them. But I could hear it in her voice. She wanted to sound cheerful; this person calling could be a new member, or a perspective member. Maybe it was the press wanting to do a story about how successful this place was. But it wasn't anyone she knew. She would have the call ID'd at once, and we weren't willing to pay the fee to keep our IDs totally invisible. Besides, no one picked up ID-less calls. There was uncertainty in her voice; she was worried about something.

"Lacy, this is Isacc Morden, Pl." Flow taught me to always use a person's first name if they gave it. People like the sound of their first name. "I am sorry to spring something so urgent in front of you so abruptly, but I have a hard time with not getting to the point. Some unknown person or organization means ill against this institution, and I've pretty much decided to defect to your side. What do you say?"

She was silent. Flabbergasted probably. Flow was probably angry at me for not being more delicate, and NotFlynn for not being more covert. I would have been angry with him for being too secretive and with Flow for sugar-coating everything.

"You're a... private eye?" She was worried. Scared maybe. She also suddenly sounded much younger. I caught her off guard alright, and then probably sucker punched her. But it would be for the better. She'd be used to just getting things straight from me from now on. Flow could sugar coat and NotFlynn could obscure later.

“Yes. That’s what PI stands for. Though, it’s kind of funny since there’s no I in eye, but there is one in investigator, which is what PI really stands for.”

I gave her a moment to see if she was going to have anything else to say. She did. “What are... what are you talking about? Means ill to us... what’s going on?”

“We should meet face to face and talk about it.” I didn’t want to tell her it was so I could observe her and feed Flow information and let Flow handle her delicately. I think my blunt nature was too much for her.

“Oh, okay... my office is... well you know how to find...?”

“I think I can find your office, if you’re in it. We’re on sub-2. I’ll be there in a moment.” I closed the connection.

“Isaac Morden, Private Investigator, Hero of the Ages, Frightener of Children,” Flow said in her usual deadpan.

“Hey, how was I supposed to know? And what’s that got to do anything? I doubt she’s a day older than NotFlynn.”

“No way man, I’ve got ten years on her at least. And I am no social giant, but even I know that’s not how you talk to a girl.”

“Right, you guys can finish roasting me when we’ve saved the world again, okay?”

NotFlynn’s image vanished from the display, and then the whole thing went dark. We let ourselves out, and then oriented. The staff offices were at the far wall of this floor, where we would find Miss Child Director.

I could see her get up as she saw us approach. It must have been Flow’s trenchcoat. Everyone knew that PIs wore those. “Hi, come in,” she said as she opened the glass door.

The name Lacy would have fit the panicking girl I

heard at the other end of the line, but not this woman, even though the voice was the same. She had her totally black hair tied up tightly behind her head, and small wireframe glasses set in front of her slightly Asian eyes. She sat at a desk that was as sleek and minimalist as everything else in the building, though her figure was anything but minimalist. The desktop was animated with a blue sky and light clouds slowly moving across it; which told me just a little about her personality. “I usually think up a whole script of what to say beforehand, but I’m afraid you’ve got me on this one. Can you tell me again, more slowly, what’s going on, and how I can help?”

“We’re not here looking for your help. We’re here to help you. Though we’ll need your help if we’re to help you, of course.”

“Morden, let me,” Flow said, using her, ‘I am talking in front of another female’ voice, which was much different than the one she used with Calhoun. She explained to her the situation with Calhoun and Willard, and then had NotFlynn bring up what he found in their systems on her terminal. We even watched the video NotFlynn found. Throughout all of this, she was mostly silent as we told her of the admittedly very brief happenings of the day. She didn’t even seem worried or alarmed that NotFlynn was able to hack them so easily. But then, she spoke.”

“I am not sure how good this guy who isn’t Flynn is supposed to be, but I’m told it should be very hard to break into our systems. And they are organized nothing like these. It’s not just the folder with the video logs that are fake... everything in here is. It’s sort of like the file structure we have here, but it looks like what the free users see. The actual file structure is much different. It was designed to fool *you*, or people like you, and I guess it didn’t work.”

“Doesn’t need to work on us,” I said. “Just on whoever’ll be doing the damning. And even if it does go to court, you know how braindead juries are. Everyone on there is exactly the kind of person who was too stupid to get out of it. They won’t even know what you’re talking about if you try to explain it away with technical jargon.”

“But I don’t see why this is worth anything. I’ve read Willard’s editorials and essays. He’s interesting, but hardly... I mean, why would it matter if he was seen talking to anyone in our upper management?”

“Pin the tail on the donkey. It will mean whatever they want it to mean. Any link, however tenuous, is all people like *them* need. They’ll twist it to mean whatever they want and then pat themselves on the back. I’ve seen it happen so many times. The question is not why anymore, or even what they plan to do. The question is how to get you out of the targeting recital.”

She shut the display off. “I don’t see what the point is. If it is like you say, and they want to shut us down, what can we do? I mean, they’ll find a way. It may take them ten years, but they’ll find a way.”

NotFlynn spoke up, but this time Lacy could hear him too, as he was broadcasting out of her terminal speakers too. “They’ve got the media corporations in their pocket. They’ve got the publishing houses too. And the universities... good God do they have the universities. Control the information and you control the people. Well, this is the only source of information that they don’t control yet. Sure, they’ll never be able to control the entire ‘net. But they don’t need to. It’s a net, it’s scattered, diffused. But in Icomde it’s taken a shape, it’s an institution people can get behind, and that means it’s something they want to control. Last millennium it was Jerusalem you had to control. Now it’s the mobile inside everyone’s pocket.”

She gave a fatalistic half-smile. "I see you guys have a Willard fan on your hands," she said. "That's one of his favorite quotes."

"Really?" NotFlynn said, a feign of surprise in his voice. "Maybe I should sue – he had to have stolen that from me!"

Flow and I sort of faded into the background at that point. NotFlynn's reptilian avatar appeared on Lacy's desk and the two began a very involved conversation on all things Willard. She was bluffing when she said she thought his work was 'interesting'. What she meant was 'I'm obsessed with it.' And it seemed to me that NotFlynn was quickly becoming obsessed with her. Flow eventually turned to give me a look which I knew to mean 'and we're here... why?' but I just smiled and kept listening.

By that point she had the vice-chairperson and the national director on the line, who was out of town on extended leave and had left Lacy pretty much permanently in charge. The NYC branch was the headquarters branch, but it seemed that this guy was going all over the country getting new Icomdes set up.

They were doing their best to, to be blunt about it, make it seem like Flow and I were crazy. I felt like my head was going to explode, but at least at the end of the conversation, everyone seemed pretty sure that the worst they could do was bring up a frivolous lawsuit against them. I tried to pipe in a few times, but this wasn't detective work anymore. It was pretty clear that this was NotFlynn's game now, and it had been from the start.

Ever so discreetly, I thumbed my mobile to disconnect NotFlynn so only Flow could hear me. "So how are we going to deal with Calhoun?" I asked subvocally.

*"Do you want him to pay our rent for the rest of the*

year?" was her reply.

*"I guess we give him exactly what he wants. If his people planted this here, then it would be pointless for us to not present it to him on a silver platter. If we don't do it someone else will, and then someone else will be involved."*

I still wasn't sure. Still, the fact was that they, being whoever Calhoun worked for, were testing the waters, but they'd find piranhas. It was naive of three of us – and even Calhoun, to believe that the Icomde would be so susceptible to this kind of thing. They built their entire concept around deflecting the attacks of those who would shut them down or control the flow of information. I just wasn't optimistic about it. But then, I never was.

.  
. .  
.

The digital display on the wall flicked to 1:59 am. I started at it with restless eyes. We had met with Calhoun alright, and gave him exactly what he wanted. We told NotFlynn and the Icomde people, of course what we were doing, and they agreed with our logic. But it was in their court now. Well, theirs and NotFlynn's anyway. I spent some time today wondering if this meant he'd suddenly become scarce, if he'd become Icomde's man on the web rather than ours. But that wasn't the only thing that had been on my mind.

"Flow," I said into the darkness with my head propped up against my folded arms behind it.

I heard her stir nearby, and mutter a "hrm?"

"What if going to the Incomde Director was exactly what Calhoun wanted us to do?"

I heard her shuffle around to prop herself up, and let out the faintest of sighs. She always got emotional when she was sleeping. "Why, to make sure I didn't get

any sleep?"

I ignored her comment. "What if it's a decoy. A red herring. A..."

"Are you looking for another analogy? May I suggest a moose call?"

"What if Willard was working for Them all along? What if his job was to create a caricature of the type of person they are afraid of, so that he can be shown to be a villain? I mean, we couldn't see his face in the video... what if..."

"Wait, what did you say?"

I blinked and looked over at her, barely making out the shape of her thin pointy nose in the darkness. "We couldn't see Willard's face in the video."

"Why did NotFlynn tell us that it was Willard in the video? How did he know it was him? Noone knows what Willard looks like."

My brain did a summersault. "Maybe that was the filename? I don't know."

"The NotFlynn I know isn't that careless. And for that matter, he doesn't make things this personal. He seemed awfully close to this."

"Are you suggesting that..."

"We trust him, and we have very little reason to. But we both do because he 'seems right' and we both see ourselves as such perfect judges of character. But we've never even seen His face."

"This is crazy, Flow. Are we supposed to get paranoid about NotFlynn now too? Is he in on all of this?"

"Maybe he planted those videos there, right then, right as he was entering the systems. What if he is part of all of this. Why else would They come to us. This could have been in the works for years."

"Or not. Maybe they came to NotFlynn recently and..."

“Or maybe NotFlynn works for Willard and this is part of his plan to bring THEM down. They go after him, he lets them think they’ve got him, but is really drawing them into a trap.”

“What reason do we have to believe that NotFlynn isn’t Willard himself?”

“It would make sense. If he’s not Flynn, he has to be *someone*.”

I unfolded my arms and let my head fall back on the pillow. “I am not going to be able to sleep tonight, now.”

“No, neither am I.”

“Damn you,” I said, turning to look at her once more.

“We’ll find out later,” was her usual reply to me telling her to go to hell.

“We shouldn’t have gotten involved. Should have pulled out when we had the chance.”

“Wouldn’t have mattered. NotFlynn still tipped his hand.”

“Yeah, but still. Maybe I’d have fallen asleep tonight before I figured it out.”

“You figured it out? I thought that was me?” I could usually tell when she was being funny.

“I would have figured it out sooner if we hadn’t spent all of that time talking with the Icomde people. If you had just listened to me, we’d have gotten to the heart of the matter instead of running in circles.”

“Yeah, you’re a real Cassandra.”

“Does that mean you’ll never believe me, no matter how many times I’m right?”

“No, it means no matter how many times I do believe you, you’ll only remember the times I didn’t.”

