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Sample Chapter for
"Scrambled Eggs & Toast"
by
Damien Keith

Martin Lomb worked feverishly, feeling like he was running out of time. His name wasn't really Martin Lomb anymore, it was Martin CS41658, but at least they let him keep the 'Martin.' Switching the tool at the end of his pneumatic arm, he stole a nervous glance at the clock that read 5:15 a.m. Wiping at the sweat on his upper lip, he returned to his work with a single thought, "I have to get this done by seven or I'll never do it." Another warning shock went through the wires leading to the electrodes in his head as he winced and continued. Taking a deep breath, he paused to let the intense pain die down to a dull ache. "Time to pop another one," he said, grimacing as he reached for the bottle of black market painkillers that was nearly empty.

He finished the bypass, looping the circuit, and hoped that the central processor wouldn't see the tampering until it was too late. Slowly replacing the panel, he glanced at the clock again. "5:45, just a couple more things to do." With a nervous smile, he changed to a ratchet tool and wriggled his legless torso beneath the jacked-up body of the little mobile unit. The sleek metal shoulder pads and collar grafted onto his shoulders made moving in the confined space difficult. As he thought, this was going to be the hardest part. The homemade tools that he gave him were not a perfect fit, but with a little patience he was able to drop the transaxle, gaining him access to the spider-gear assembly. He changed the gear ratio then added the locking device that would cancel the braking action and prevent the transmission from down

shifting once it reached the desired speed. Next, he opened a flap on the side of the chassis and located the oblong module buried deep inside. He had been told that this little device regulated his shielding. He didn't know if it was true but he hoped it was. He pulled the 'booster' out of his bag and held it up, examining it closely.

"Doesn't look like much," he said, turning it over and watching the blinking red lights as they tracked along the bottom. The three coupling wires were crudely fashioned and looked as though they would collapse beneath the level of energy that would course through them. Martin wasn't an engineer so he had to trust the word of his benefactor. If he said it would get him through the field, he had to believe it.

Finishing the modifications, he wriggled out and checked the clock again as perspiration streamed down the back of his bald head.

"6:25," he said with a smile, blowing out a sigh of relief. "I even have time for a little relaxation." Attaching his hand prosthesis, he tossed the tools into a bag, slid over to the closet and tucked them into the back behind the generator. Knuckle-walking on his polyurethane hands, he moved over to the aquarium. Shaking the food into the water, he watched the fish immediately change direction and suck up the flakes as they descended slowly in the tank.

"I do miss the ocean," he thought as he smiled sadly and tapped the side of the aquarium. "I want to feel the sand and surf one more time before I go." Reluctantly he shook off the thought, moved over to the CD shelf and took down two or three of his favorites. Thumbing through them slowly he smiled as he thought of the pleasures stored on the little discs.

"Of everything in this miserable, fucking world," he said, tearing open the blister pack of synthetic adrenaline and popping the CD into the player. "I'll miss these little beauties the most." He held up one of the shiny, 3½-inch discs and smiled as he remembered what was on it. "Yes, I'll miss you the most."

He went over to the battered easy chair, which sat wedged in the corner next to the stand that held his remotes, the liquor cabinet and the bookshelves. For so many years this had been his routine; doing patrols of the 'City' in the daytime and playing his pornographic, holographic CDs at night. Some evenings he would read however, and he was surprised how much he enjoyed it. Before his sentence he hardly ever read; thought it was for faggots but with little else to do after his shift he took up reading and now completed three or four books a month. He preferred historical fiction because the stories would carry him away to a time before the City, or the Midway or CyberSentrys. Until now, books and the drugs had been enough. Reading gave him a destination and the drugs helped his imagination book passage but now neither was sufficient to keep him here.

The City existed long before Sentries and, in those days, the wall was the only barrier between the Residents and the outside world. It stood 80 feet and ran along the land-based side of the City with a high-voltage fence along the coast. The wall was based on an arcane security system and, like that system was vulnerable to failure. Though the wall was adequate, it could still be breached because, even the most irresponsible guards were still hard to come by. High pay was not even enough to entice a comfortable and well-paid society to flock to those positions. In the end, Security had only two dozens guards to cover three shifts and a 30 mile perimeter. At first, modifications were made to the wall: the additions of Teflon to the surface as well as curved blades to the top, but the Residents were persistent. Nothing seemed to be foolproof and something had to be done. That something was the brainchild of the research division at ESI. They proposed a fleet of tactically adaptable cyborg sentries that would constantly patrol the City. The Sentries would maintain order but be remotely monitored and ultimately controlled by Security on the outside.

The creation process and the end result made volunteers hard to come by and ESI insisted on the lightning-quick adaptability of a human brain in a situation like the City. There is generally no more willing a volunteer for anything than someone facing death so using violators facing the death penalty was the obvious solution to the volunteer problem. No matter how poor the choice,

for them it was better than the alternative. With everything in place the Sentry program was under way and they quickly turned out an initial fleet of 8. Once they surmounted the physical, psychological and emotional obstacles of creating the cyborgs; the program went smoothly and worked out exactly as they had planned. The ruthless, almost psychotic nature of the Sentries kept most of the Residents in line and the technology allowed Security to control the Sentries. Eventually, even with the advent of the new repulsor fields the Sentries were still maintained as a backup control.

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Long ago, when Martin was first presented with the proposal to become a Sentry, he felt he was the luckiest violator on earth. Since his crime had been the multiple murder of a storeowner and three clerks, his future was four shots in the back of the head while in the embrace of an Executor. Now that had all changed. He would be alive and, even though he was going into the City, he was going in not as a Resident; one of those pathetic, frightened creatures that spent everyday scrambling for survival; but as someone special. He was going to be one of the most powerful people in the City, provided food and his own quarters; the choice was obvious. Obvious then, but he wondered if it would be so obvious now. He was one of the last original Sentries. In all they numbered close to 16 with life spans that had been adjusted to over 100 years. After the first 8 or so died

during the perfecting of the process, subsequent ones physically adapted. Physical mechanics, however, were the least of a Sentry's worries. Eventually the conditions in the City, realizing what they had become and would always be, as well as the monotony of their routine sent most Sentries over the emotional edge. They either became ruthlessly sadistic, going on Resident killing sprees, or committed suicide by charging the fence. Until now Martin had done either and guessed that was because he had the diversion of books.

Although he was unimpressed by it, he had a certain status among the denizens of the City, the other Sentries and even his creators at ESI. No other Sentry had survived as long as he and maintained their psychological balance, but now he felt it was time to pass the torch.

Picking up the remote, he plugged the adapter into the sensory module in his side and waited for the program to start. Every Sentry felt a debt of gratitude to the benefactor who had provided them with the adapters. The diversion of sensory-adapted pornography was more than enough recompense for the little favors he asked. The first image had not even appeared when the phantom erections began. Intellectually he knew there was nothing 'down there' but even so the sensations began as real and as pleasurable as they'd always been. They began as a tingling while his body adjusted to the impulses it was being fed. He blinked quickly as his eyes fought against being fooled into seeing what

wasn't really there. Shortly his body succumbed and the experience began.

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A young girl lay on the grooved, metal bed of an Executor, struggling against the steel bracelets that held her arms up and apart. She was a teenager, maybe 17, and a rare female resident. Unfortunately, like all newbies, she had fallen victim to her inexperience in her new environment. Having no alliances and no place to hide, she was easily caught and tortured by the Executors that roamed the city. Initially, on the matter of executions, Executors were the conscious-less manifestation of the public will. For years, the process seemed flawless until a rogue program implanted by a distraught engineer gave the Executors a new objective. Rather than benignly carry out society's executions, they wandered the City, unleashing their sadistic looped programming on whomever they could find. Whatever the case it didn't matter to Martin, she was his now.

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The girl struggled in vain against the shackles, mindless of the blood that trickled from her cut and torn wrists. Her legs were also bound; shoulder-length apart and the sight of her abject helplessness aroused him even more.

"Oh baby, don't fight it," he said as the mechanism drew her legs up and further apart.

She screamed and babbled hysterically as the red eye of the camera lens moved in for a close-up of her terror-stricken face.

"Oh yeah," he said huskily as another sensor moved along her body, passing the sensation on to his metal limbs. Another appendage tore at her shorts and blouse as the touch sensor crept along her leg like a snake, making its way up her nude body. The curved, padded appendage ran itself along her stomach and over her small breasts as he closed his eyes in ecstasy. Her scream drew his attention and he opened his eyes quickly in time to see her terrified expression. She watched, horrified, as a penile instrument worked its way slowly toward her, secreting lubricant. He sat up and focused his attention as the device entered her vaginally and began brutally pumping in and out.

"Ah, a virgin," he said as blood mixed with the whitish fluid. "Oh, but maybe not," he smiled as the flanged tip of the device began fanning out. Her screams were sensual music to him as the mechanism retracted. The girl was raised and laid, spread-eagle, on her stomach as she babbled incoherently.

"Oh God, oh God," she repeated quietly, in a semi-conscious stupor, tears streaming down her cheeks.

He was about to pop another pill when the low, methodical buzz of the duty alarm intruded on his fantasy. "Damn, always at the good parts," he said as he reluctantly switched off the player, unplugged the adapter and stuck the pill back into the packet. He moved over to the mobile unit and pressed the button

on the far wall. A panel door whisked open quietly and the unit crept forward on a conveyor belt that was built into the floor. It stopped in a large room that looked like a garage where, suspended from the ceiling, hung a heavy metal vest. Down the front two panels of the vest was an array of gauges and switches that would be hidden once the vest was activated and the panels flipped down. On either side of the vest sockets, like those on his collar, stood out at the shoulders to receive attachments. His duty alarm sounded again as he navigated himself onto a thin ramp that extended out from the front of the chassis. A pair of metal clamps descended, gently gripped his pneumatic arms at the shoulders and detached them. As his weight settled, the ramp bearing him slid back as two robotic hooks lowered the vest on to the chassis.

"Alright, alright," he said impatiently to the alarm. "I heard you the first time."

The vest locked in place as the shelf slid him back into it. He felt the slight buzz of electricity as the electrodes, where his arms and lower torso would be, aligned with the chassis and the vest. The clamps then attached a sturdier version of his pneumatic arms to the vest. He wiggled his polyurethane fingers to make certain the impulses were correct and balanced then smiled his satisfaction. Grabbing the polymer helmet and visor, he switched them on and ran through the different visual modes. Infrared was fine, thermo and enhanced magnification looked good

so he moved on to test audio and the unit's reaction to cerebral commands. All checked out so he sent the reply to Security that he was online and ready for duty. The final preparation was the trauma-proof Plexiglas that slid down to cover the exposed part of his chest and stomach. The grids in the visor clicked on as he reached over, deactivated and opened the garaged door. Steeling himself, he took a deep breath then slowly rolled down the ramp and out into the bright, morning sunlight.

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He cruised down Mount Vernon Street at roughly 10 miles per hour thinking to himself how beautiful a day it was. His patrol area was approximately 7 square miles and covered mostly the sparsely populated territories. With the steady influx of Residents, that was becoming less the case. The abandoned zoo, the now relocated presidential library and the deserted marina were the largest part of his patrol. This far out from the center of the City there were still remnants of the past beauty that had existed here. Even so, the landscape was dotted with makeshift shacks and burnt out trashcans where newcomers huddled for warmth. The grass was overgrown and wild in some spots, with different varieties vying for dominance. The region was given to him as a reward for his longevity, but there was increasingly more activity due to the limited living space in the most populous parts of the City.

He rounded a bend and looked to his left into a grove of spindly trees. It had drawn his attention because of the heavy, three-wheeled tracks that led into it from the west. The tracks were clean as they entered the grove, but where they exited to the north they left dark, red-stained imprints in the flattened grass.

"Guess I should take a look," he thought, veering off the cracked main road and into the thick grass. "Definitely a machine," he said as a chill went through him and he signaled Security to reported his exact location. "Goddamn! Why did they have to dump those damn machines in here? Wonder what kinda mess I'll find?" he thought as he entered a clearing and spotted a bloodied mass lying face down in the grass. From a distance he couldn't tell if it was male or female, but it was definitely dead.

"Yeah Security," he said apprehensively. "Machine got another one."

"Any ID," a voice responded, sounding bored.

"Just a second," he replied, cold disgust going through him as he approached the body and flipped it over on its back. The dead, blank eyes stared up at him. The mouth was open; contorted in a silent scream, caked with dried blood and shredded inside. The blonde hair was also matted with blood and the top of the skull was crushed, probably from being inadvertently run over by one of the treads of the machine.

"Well," he said as the camera panned the rigored body, moving down from the head to the naked lower torso. "Looks like a boy, maybe 22 or so. Hold on a second and I'll scan for prints."

He lifted one of the pale blue hands, maneuvered himself around and placed the fingers on a smooth panel on the lower part of his right vest. The scanner buzzed and he immediately dropped the cold, stiff appendage, feeling a sense of repulsion as he moved away from the body.

"Typical stuff," he said panning the camera over the body and sending back the pictures to headquarters. "Genitals and rectum have been severely traumatized, various cuts and abrasions over most of the body and the top of the skull has been crushed. If I had to, I'd say he died from either blood loss or the head trauma. I'd probably put my money on the head trauma." He waited as headquarters compiled the report, created the holographic images for the records then told him to wrap it up. Taking a small, electronic beacon from the side compartment of the unit, he pressed it into the ground beside the body, armed its defenses and quickly backed away.

"Look fellas, I'm outta here," he said as he turned and followed the trail back out onto the road. "You guys gonna send a cleanup unit for that right?"

"Yeah, yeah Martin it'll be there," the voice at the other end replied impatiently. "What's the matter, you got company comin'?"

Martin didn't reply, only continued his patrol toward the library trying to forget the haunting stare in the boy's dead eyes.

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Periodically a shudder went through him as he remembered the feel of the stiff, lifeless hand so he adjusted the gauge to send calming endorphins into his brain. The library was to the right and up on the hill overlooking the bay. In its time it was one of the most scenic spots in this part of the district. People would come from all over the country to see the sleek, new library with its life-size dioramas of presidential life. It also boasted holographic images of historical events and a recreation of the oval office. All that was past now, the weathered granite path now led to an edifice whose broken stained glass windows looked out over the bay as if trying to decide whether or not to jump.

Garbage and refuse littered the once manicured acreage that surrounded the marble structure while cardboard lean-tos made poor additions to the once grand old building. Martin could hear the echo of voices coming from inside and hurried to check it out. Generally no one was up this early so he guessed it was newbies who had survived their first night in the City.

He slid back the cover on his wrist and pressed the red button that charged the taser rods in his fingers as he approached the entrance. The mobile unit switched to 'stealth mode' as the engine now gave off only an almost imperceptible

whine. His floodlights clicked on, illuminating the darkened hall as he entered, and the voices were suddenly quiet.

"Well, well," he said as he approached several figures huddled in the southern corner of the hall around a burning trashcan. "What do we have here?"

His voice boomed in the cavernous room as he extended his pneumatic arm and sparks leapt from the black, taser hand.

The people turned and, when they saw him, scattered to the far end of the hall.

"What is that?" they murmured as his tracking spotlight blinded them, trapping them in the corner.

He smiled to himself as he approached slowly, visualizing what he must look like to a newcomer; eight feet of metal and blinking lights. The group of four huddled together as some tried to bury themselves in the piles of trash that lay about. Others turned their faces to the wall and tried to shut out the apparition before them.

He circled around them, killed the lights and turned off the taser. "I am Sentry Martin," he said as he backed up to a less intimidating distance.

Two of them turned apprehensively, lowered their hands slowly and looked him over.

"Wha, what are you?" one of them finally asked, with the trace of an accent, then stepped around the others to get a closer look.

"I told you," Martin answered as he backed off another step and into the sunlight that streamed through one of the broken windows. "I am a Sentry and this is my area. You look like newbies to me."

"Newbies?" the one with the accent repeated quizzically as he looked at the others. "What's a newbie?"

"You are," Martin replied, extending his arm and pointing as the group jumped back in unison. "When'd you get in?"

"In where?" another asked with the same accent that he now pegged as British.

"In here, in the City," he said as his arms made a sweeping gesture. "Nobody can be as ignorant as you assholes and not be new to the City. Let's see," he said stroking his chin as he whirred silently, slowly around them. "You must've got in early this morning. My guess is they sent you through the north gate or this many of you wouldn't have made it this far." He stopped and looked them over again. "You're not from here, the states, are you?" he asked with a wry smile. "Where you from?"

"Birmingham," the bolder one said as he pushed through the trash and approached Martin. "Birmingham England. We came to the states together about three weeks ago, just to look about. We'd never been here."

"Well, what did four nice, English boys like you ever do to end up in a place like this?" Martin asked with a smile as he backed up against a wall, lifted his visor and folded his arms.

"You say you never been to the states before huh? Well you picked a real armpit of a place to end up fellas."

They were silent as Martin stared at them with an amused smile. The Brits stared back with frightened, curious looks, not sure if the thing before them was friend or foe.

"I have to wonder," Martin said finally as he maneuvered around them tapping his chin. "What nice, little English boys like you would do to get sent in here."

No one responded, only huddled together more tightly in the corner.

"Oh come on now boys, we're all friends here," he said as he moved toward them. Still he received no answer so he extended his arm, preparing to grab the boy nearest the wall. "Well, I can find out easily enough," he said as the shiny, metallic arm snaked its way toward the boy who immediately went into hysterics. "Oh, a fighter," he said as he clamped his hand over the boy's wrist. "I love it when they fight."

Everyone backed away from the boy as he fought and jerked like a fish on a line.

"No! No!" the boy screamed in terror as he bit and pounded on Martin's arm.

"Whoa, whoa," Martin said, reaching out his other arm to restrain the terrified boy. "Hey calm down kid, I just want to scan your prints."

The boy screamed and yelled incoherently - sobbing, biting, clawing and kicking - so Martin turned to the others, who seemed petrified.

"You better talk to this kid, he's gonna hurt himself. All I want to do is scan his prints and bring up you guy's records."

"Please Guv," one of the Brits finally stammered. "Davey ain't right."

"What do you mean he ain't right?" Martin asked as he continued to struggle with the boy.

"Last night me, Davey and a friend of ours, Micky wuz hidin' in the trees when this ... thing crashed through and ... killed Mick. Davey ain't been the same since Guv."

Martin looked at the boy who had spoken, then to Davey, who had stopped fighting and sat sobbing in a pool of his own urine.

"Oh, so that was the meat," Martin said, releasing Davey's reddening wrist and backing up. "Boy, you fellas sure fell in it up to your necks. So who are you?" Martin asked, pointing to the man who had originally spoken.

"Terry," the man stammered back, "Me name's Terry. Look Guvna," he continued, holding his hands out pleadingly. "Me and the blokes were just out for a bit of fun. I don't even know why we're here."

"Terry?" Martin queried, gesturing toward the Englishman who responded with a nod. "Come over here."

Terry approached warily, looking to his friends for support, but none was forthcoming. He stopped and stood in front of the towering Sentry but refused to look at him.

"Terry, put your hand on that panel," Martin said, tapping the upper left-hand portion of his chassis as he slid down the visor. "Just leave it there for a couple of minutes."

Terry reached out a trembling hand and laid it on the smooth, flat surface.

"Naughty boys," Martin said finally as Terry jerked his hand back and examined it closely. "Oh, you were very bad boys." Martin lifted the visor then waved Terry back to the group. "Grand theft of transport, burglary, entering the country illegally, resisting arrest; seems like you guys have been busy."

"Naw, it's not like that Guv," Terry began in their defense. "Yeah we did knick a transport and lifted a few bob from a fueling station, but it was all just a bit of fun y'know. Me 'n the lads didn't mean no 'arm."

"Well, I guess you boys don't follow the news," Martin said as an automated voice reminded him of the time. "Given the beating we've been taking in the press over there because of these places, I'm surprised you would do something this stupid once you got to the states. Hell, you're lucky they didn't throw you in here as soon as you stepped off the boat. Well, you guys better get comfortable cuz you probably won't be leaving."

"What d'ya mean?" Terry asked naively as all the boys suddenly looked at Martin.

Martin turned and was heading out the door when he yelled back, "According to your records, you're in here for the long haul."

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He rolled through the cracked, marble columns at the rear of the library and decided to take the scenic route to the Marina. As he monitored the fence for outages or breaches, he secretly wished the Englishmen well, but realistically knew that none would survive more than six months. Cresting the ridge overlooking the ocean, he wondered what the 'official' word would be of their death, but discarded the thought since it didn't matter to him anyway. He paused at the bluff and stared down at the steel-gray water, trying to remember what it felt like to walk in the surf. He couldn't and the realization saddened him. Too many years of living with metal and plastic had made him forget the feel of flesh and blood. He turned from the scene angry and secure in the belief that his suicide was right. As he continued toward the Marina he waited, with anticipation, for the 'click' that would send him along the releasing path.

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His shift was almost finished and his heart raced as he counted down the minutes in his head. The beams of his headlights bounced crazily off the worn pathway as he whizzed toward the

bluff at forty miles an hour. His plan was, when the mechanism kicked in he would have built up enough speed to crash through the fence and over the cliff with his armor protecting him from the lethal voltage. Afterwards, he hoped, he would fall into the ocean and finally feel the water.

The path was bumpy at this speed and he had difficulty maintaining control, but he did and pushed the unit to its limit. He could see the fence up ahead, silhouetted against the horizon, as the buzz of electricity grew in his ears. The sensors picked up his proximity to the fence and an alarm went off signaling the unit to brake. His efforts were successful, as he felt no decrease in speed, so he steered himself toward the farthest rise. Sliding his visor back, he blew the panel that covered his chest and stomach, anxiously awaiting the coolness of the water. The fence grew before him as the sound of the alarm drowned out the buzzing in his ears. "Finally free," he said as he hit the fence and the shock to his system was tremendous. All on-board circuits blew except the fusion generator, which supplied energy to the transmission and life support. His body jerked and twitched in the metal vest as the electricity coursed through him. The unit was on the verge of shut down and his speed decreased as the transmission's gears went. His momentum, however, carried him through the fence and he was still alive. The edge of the cliff was only thirty feet away and he smiled with satisfaction as he neared the edge. Suddenly there was a

flash as a Repulsor field sprang up in front of him. He was still doing about twenty miles an hour so, when he hit the field, it threw him back with equal force. His shielding could not protect the generators and sparks flew from the vest as he crashed, sideways, onto a rock that ripped open his abdomen and snapped off the locks that held him onto the chassis. The generator slowly died as he pulled himself toward the cliff, leaving a trail of synthetic blood and intestines. The last erratic signals pulsed through his arms and he watched resignedly as they wriggled and slowly lay still. He felt cold as his blood pooled beneath him and he stared up at the bright, full moon. His mind was blank, his eyes closed slowly and his heartbeat ceased, as the only sound was that of waves crashing on the rocks below.

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Connecticut Crowley tossed his jacket onto the cloth footstool and leaned heavily against the door. "Lights," he said then added, "Low," as he took off his sunglasses and blinked until his eyes adjusted. He shuffled over to the contoured lounge and sank into it gratefully. "Oh, bitch of a day," he thought as he exhaled deeply, slung his arm over his eyes and struggled to fall asleep. He became like this periodically; bone tired but not sleepy, and he hated it. In this state he felt like a quadriplegic: an active mind but a totally unresponsive body. He laid there, his mind racing, thinking of some of the people he'd run across during his patrol of the suburbs. "Two sides of

the same coin," he thought, contrasting the calls he'd answered tonight to some of his forays into the City. "Sometimes I don't know which is worse."

Finally he summoned the strength to sit up and looked around the spacious apartment that had become his sanctuary. While most of the other area supervisors had chosen to live in Leland, Whitechapel or even Broadmoor, he chose to live here in New Garden, which overlooked the City, the wall and the Midway. It was nice enough he supposed, as far as accommodations went, but it never lived up to the builder's expectations of even partial occupancy. He was the only tenant in a building of 138 units.

"People don't mind taking their weekly excursions into the Midway," he thought as he stood up and slowly walked over to the picture window, "But they don't want it in their backyard." He stared down at the half-mile wide half circle of rundown tenements and makeshift restaurants that made up the Midway and shook his head.

"Entrepreneurial spirit," he said bitterly as he leaned against the warm window frame. "That vermin'll do anything for a buck."

From his apartment on the 42nd floor, Crowley could see most of the Midway as it stretched off into the distance. As he studied the dilapidated terrain, a large, flashing red neon sign that read, "The NightOwl" drew his attention. This week it seemed to be the popular spot for the subs. They came to watch the large

screen monitors that all the restaurants sported so the patrons could experience the circus that was the City.

Crowley had been to the NightOwl several times; it was part of his patrol when he went into the Midway. Lately it always seemed to be packed. Its recent success was due mainly to the satellite trajectories it had purchased. The owner had paid a bundle to do it but felt it was more than worth the cost and effort because his business tripled two days after the acquisitions. The thing that made the NightOwl's 'show' so special was that its satellites focused on the sector known as the business district. Initially, the district was not very populated because of the mutated creatures that roamed the area. The creatures were created from living so long in chemical waste and sludge that they adapted. The toxins had been secretly buried there by the manufacturing businesses before the City came along. They were discretely left behind when the companies left. With the City filling up rapidly, Residents found lodging wherever they could, that now meant in the business district. With more people, came more attacks, the more attacks the better the show and, the better the business.

Crowley had never seen a live specimen of what lived in the district, but he did see a creature that had been killed when it hit a concussion mine trying to leave the district. It looked like a large flightless bat splayed out on the doctor's metal table. Crowley shivered slightly at the thought of the thing and

wondered how many more of them might be roaming around district. The mines were a half-hearted attempt to protect the Residents from the mutants. Unfortunately the mines killed as many residents as mutants. He slid back the large, glass panel and leaned out into the coolness of the early morning air. Closing his eyes, he drank in the freshness. Suddenly a chorus of moans came from the direction of the NightOwl and Crowley wondered what they had just witnessed.

"People are funny," he thought as he swung around and sat on the windowsill, drawing up his legs and leaning his chin on his knees. "Most of the people in the NightOwl easily made more than he did. They lived in beautiful houses, some of which could arguably be called mansions, way out in the suburbs. Curiously twice a week or more they make the forty-minute trek to the Midway. They sit in a crowded box in broken down chairs, eating bad overpriced food and glued to a monitor screen. To add to that, the screen continuously poured out images of rape, torture, murder and violence not half a mile from where they were sitting. "Nothing better to do with their money," he thought as he turned his attention from the restaurant and scanned the row of Brownstones to the east. The Brownstones, like the Midway itself, were a halfway house of sorts for pre-Residents as well as Residents who lived long enough to complete their time in the City. After their release Residents were housed for six months in the Midway. There they were evaluated, debriefed and a routine

created for re-acclimating them to life outside the City. Only about a third ever made it outside the Midway, however. The trauma of living in the City, even for a month, generally left most completely isolated from the lifestyle that existed in the suburbs. Their only alternative was to try to establish a life in the Midway. Pre-Residents were also taken to the Brownstones where they would live for several weeks before finally being transferred into the City. Every year or so Crowley wagered that there would be a huge population explosion in the Midway and each time he was wrong. It seemed the City took so many of its residents that a steady balance was always maintained.

He climbed down from the windowsill and walked over to the bookshelf that stretched the twenty-five foot length of the eastern wall. He was practically the only one left with printed books anymore. E-books were the norm, leaving paper books increasingly harder to find. Thinking about the City and the Midway made him tense and a little depressed, so he scanned the shelf looking for something light to help him sleep. Prom Night Promises, Summer for the Snowman, The Price of Tea in China; none of them were light or possessed the anesthetizing quality he was looking for. He ran his fingers lazily along the leather spines, totally at a loss as to what to choose. He was about to give up when he spotted the copy of Beyond Good and Evil his ex-wife had given him. He stopped, tapped the book thoughtfully and slowly pulled it down.

"God I haven't read this in ages," he said quietly as he carefully opened the first page. His eyes stopped, lingering on the writing on the inside cover; drinking in every perfect curve of the inscription as he touched it lightly, lovingly.

'To Connie, who has no preferences; to him everyone is the same, Love Samantha.' The meaning in the words still stung him after almost three years. His vision blurred, his eyes watering as he slid the book back onto the shelf and leaned against it.

"Sam, if I could change, I would," he'd said to her the night she left for the final time. "I just don't know how to be anything other than what I am."

"I know that Connie," she'd responded through her tears, "Maybe I'm being unfair in even asking you to. All I know is there are things I want, that I think everybody wants and I don't think you can give them to me."

Crowley remembered how helpless he'd felt in those moments. How he'd struggled for words that would persuade her to stay, but knew that even if he found them, she would leave eventually. She'd never wanted to live in New Garden. She hated the City and the Midway but felt she could wait for him to apply for a better position. She hoped that, with his new position she would be taken away from that aspect of his work as well as the people who were a part of it. Unfortunately they ran out of time. Crowley became more attached to doing what he could to help the people in the Midway and the City, renewed his contract as a Supervisor and

left her to continue waiting. All that alone would have eventually ended their relationship, but taking in Loretta hastened it tremendously.

"I want a normal life," she would say repeatedly. "I want children, a house and friends Connie."

"Sam, we have friends," he would reply weakly, knowing it was a meager defense.

"Your police buddies, the trash from the Midway? I don't mean friends like that; I mean decent friends, regular friends, normal friends!"

"Samantha honey, I guess we just went in different directions," he said as he wiped at the tears on his cheeks. He walked over to the photograph that sat on the mantle that hadn't seen a fire since he move in. "Like you said Sweetheart, nobody's fault, just different directions."

Crowley moved to the couch in the lounge pit, suddenly feeling as though a heavy blanket had fallen over his brain and his legs had turned to stone. He dropped down to the sofa, holding the picture of Samantha, and laid his head on the thick cushion.

"Different directions," he said again drowsily. "Sam honey, I don't even know which direction I'm going in anymore."

He was dozing on the sofa still clutching the photo, when the annoying trill of the phone intruded on his sleep.

"What? What?" he said groggily as he blindly reached for the phone, missed, and reached again. He sat up, rubbed at his eyes and tried to shake out the cobwebs as the voice in the receiver said his name.

"Yeah, yeah," he said, gathering himself and placing the receiver to his ear. "This better be real good," he mumbled angrily to whomever was on the other end.

"Connie, it's Eddie," the voice replied furtively, "Did I wake you up?"

"Do bears shit in the woods?" he answered sarcastically as he groaned and placed Samantha's photograph on the end table facing away from him.

"Sorry Connie," Eddie said sincerely, "But I think you better get down here."

"Jesus Eddie, I just left there, gimme a break!"
"Well, I think you really want to come down here, we got a guy in lock-up goin' nuts."

"C'mon Eddie," he said, rubbing at his eyes and falling back into the sofa, "Can't you guys do anything without me? Stun 'im and let 'im sleep it off, I'll see 'im in the morning."

"We tried that," Eddie said with growing impatience, "But it just seemed to make it worse. I really think you should see this guy."

Crowley growled, ran his fingers through his dark brown hair and surrendered grudgingly. "Okay, okay Eddie. Gimme half an hour, alright?"

Detective Crowley's craft whined to a halt and settled in front of the area "C" security station. Crowley was still irritated at having to come back in, but curious about the 'guest' who could shake off a stun and still come back for more. He adjusted his sunglasses, looked at himself in the mirror and reluctantly exited the craft.

"Hey Connie, long time no see," Aaron Bushnell, the desk sergeant said facetiously.

Crowley only smirked, shook his head and motioned to be buzzed in. "Hey Eddie," Crowley shouted as he stuck his head in Eddie Cochran's office and found it empty. "Christ," he muttered as he slapped the door frame, turned and faced the squad room. "Hey, anybody seen Eddie?"

Steven "Lightning" Lewis, who was a very good, middleweight contender before boxing was outlawed, looked up from his report. "The lock-up Connie," he said, pointing with his stylus to the rear door.

Crowley tossed his jacket onto a chair, headed toward the door, then stopped and walked over to Lewis. "Hey Lightning, you get anything on that Sentry, what was his name?" he said snapping his fingers.

"You mean the one that ran the fence six months ago?" Lewis asked, holding up the report and waving it in the air, "That was Martin CS41658."

"Oh yeah, real shame; an old timer," Crowley said sarcastically, "You got anything new on 'im?"

"Naw, all we got's the blood trail leadin' out toward the cliff so we figured he's feeding the fish," Lewis said, planting his feet on the sleek desktop.

"So what about the field?" Crowley asked pushing Lewis' feet off the desk and sitting down. "Obviously he hit the field and it threw 'im back onto the rock; what makes you think he made it through the field the second time?"

"Christ, I don't know Connie. All I know is that, as much blood as we found at the scene, he must'a died near there cuz there was no way he could'a left. Naturally, there were a thousand Sentry tracks all over the scene but the sensors didn't pick up anyone else approaching."

Crowley looked at Lewis with disbelief as he slapped his palms on the edge of the desk. "There was a fifteen foot hole ripped through the fence Lightning, I don't think the sensors were working there, do you?"

Lewis lit a cigarette; put his feet back on the desk and angrily blew out a column of smoke. "Who do I look like Connie, Merlin? I been bustin' my ass for six months to find this damn thing and its vanished into thin air! You think you can do

better," he yelled as he tossed the report into Crowley's lap, "Be my guest!"

"I guess I couldn't do any worse," Crowley said as he stood up, smacked the palm of his hand with the report and stormed toward the back door.

Crowley angrily rang the bell for the lock-up guard, who seemed to take forever to come, then unsnapped his holster and laid his gun on the counter. "Come on, come on," he said impatiently, pressing the buzzer and holding it as he peered through the thick Plexiglas.

"Hey, you wanta stop leaning on dat buzzer?" a stout, middle-aged, bald man said as he rounded the corner and stood nonchalantly at the counter.

"Did I wake you Curley?" Crowley asked sarcastically as he drummed his fingers impatiently on the door that led to the cells.

Curley lazily picked up Crowley's Schreck, eyed it deliberately then sauntered toward the back to the lockers.

"Jesus Curley, come on and open the door!" Crowley said staring at the ceiling and shaking his head.

"Yes your majesty," Curley replied, slamming the locker and moving, only slightly faster, back to the counter.

"Cockroach," Crowley said under his breath as the door clicked and he shoved it open. "Good to see someone who takes pride in his work."

He turned into the hall that led to the cells and stopped in front of a brightly-lit panel on the wall that displayed a schematic of the cellblock. The panel contained a yellow square depicting each cell with the names of the inmates written beneath it. Inside the yellow square was a green dot that represented each person in the cell as they were tracked with sensors. The cell on the far end had three green dots, two of which were not moving. Crowley pressed the button beneath the cells schematic and the yellow square zoomed to a video image of the occupants in the cell. The image was a bird's eye view of the cell with Eddie leaning against one of the padded walls smoking a cigarette. The camera showed a man in a white coat bent over another man. The second man was lying on the bed in a confinement collar, his face obscured by the shoulder of the man in the coat. Crowley snapped off the video screen and walked quickly toward the cell.

"Long night," he said to himself as he stopped and knocked on the transparent, trauma-proof door. "Looks like it'll be a long day."

"Connie, this is Doctor Haskell," Eddie said, opening the door and gesturing toward the man in the coat. "Print records tell us the hamburger on the cot's some defrocked programmer named Hansen Keel."

Crowley walked over to the man on the cot, looked down at him and grimaced at what he saw. Someone or something had shredded the man's face, or at least what he thought was a man.

The eyes were gouged out and the nose looked as though it had been smashed repeatedly. Blood streamed from his ears and made large, deep red stains on the cot. His cheeks bore deep, criss-crossed gashes that looked as though they had been made by a wild animal.

"Jesus, what happened to him?" Crowley said, taking off his sunglasses and leaning in for a closer look. "Looks like he fell in a meat grinder."

"I want to show you something," Haskell said quietly over his shoulder as he rolled up the man's pants leg. "I'll think you'll find this interesting."

Both men moved closer as the doctor gingerly lifted the leg and signaled for silence. Haskell bent down just inches from the pale, hairy leg then shouted, "Sir!"

A large gash immediately snaked up the leg, spewing blood, as the man jerked his leg away and writhed in pain.

"What the hell's goin' on here, Doc?" Crowley said, grabbing the doctor by the shoulder and lifting him up. "Is this guy human, a clone, a mutant, what?" Crowley stared at the large, purpling wound, at a loss to understand what happened. "Has he got some weird virus or something, is he sick? You better start talking to me!"

"I really don't know Detective," Haskell said thoughtfully, scratching his chin and walking out of the room. "Although, I don't believe he's infected with anything contagious."

Once they were in the hall, Crowley stopped and leaned against the wall, "So what tore 'im up like that?" he asked, throwing a nervous glance back into the room. "An animal or somethin'."

"What? Oh no, the head trauma and facial mutilation he did himself," the doctor said as he pursed his lips thoughtfully.

"You've got to be kiddin' me," Crowley said, leaning his head against the wall and staring at the ceiling. "Why would anyone do that to themselves? Are you sure?"

"Oh quite sure," Haskell said, putting on his glasses and staring into the room. "We found blood and tissue under the nails of both hands and the marks consistently bear it out. We can only assume," Haskell said as he walked back into the room and stared down at the man who moaned painfully in an unconscious stupor. "We can only assume that some of the other damage, like the nose," he said pointing at the torn, flat feature. "Was done by a weapon or tool of some sort, but wielded by him mind you," Haskell added holding up an admonishing finger.

Crowley nodded, then walked over to Eddie. "Why didn't you take this guy to a hospital?" he asked as he put on his sunglasses and focused his attention on Eddie.

"I wanted you to see 'im first," Eddie said nonchalantly as he lit a cigarette.

"Eddie, this guy could die, man, I coulda seen 'im at the hospital!"

"Hey!" Eddie replied, snatching the cigarette from his mouth. "I didn't see you fallin' all over yourself to get 'im to one! Besides, it's protocol Connie, remember?" He stuck the cigarette back into his mouth and eyed Crowley closely. "What's the matter Connie, you startin' ta git sentimental again? The guy's a RAT, a three time loser!"

Crowley scowled, turned and left the room. As he walked down the hall, the doctor stopped him.

"Detective, I'm stunned at the insensitivity of your man there!" He moved in front of Crowley, took off his glasses and glared at him challengingly. "What, exactly, did he mean by his 'RAT' comment?"

Crowley massaged his forehead as he felt a headache coming on, "Just a nickname Doc, that's all. Resident Awaiting Transfer, RAT, it's just a nickname."

The doctor did not challenge it, but was unsatisfied with the answer. "Will you be moving him to a hospital shortly?" he asked authoritatively, as he continued to stand unmoving before Crowley.

"Well, that's where I was going before you stopped me for this little chat," he said, pushing roughly past the doctor and heading for the telephone at the end of the hall. He phoned for a transport and was walking back toward the cell when the doctor brushed past him angrily and left through the squad room door.

"What's eatin' him now?" Crowley asked as he entered the cell.

Eddie didn't answer, only jerked his head toward the prisoner who now lay lifeless on the cot, his mouth painfully contorted in silent agony.

"Guess it's a moot point now, eh Connie?" Eddie said with a smirk. "Guess we'll never know why he did it."

"No, I guess not," Crowley answered as he shot Eddie a look of disgust and left the room shaking his head.

* * *

"Give me some privacy," Crowley said as the large window that looked out onto the squad room quickly frosted to opacity.

"Oh brother," he sighed as he sank into the large, soft leather chair, pulled off his glasses and rubbed at his tired eyes. He stared blankly at the walls of his office, feeling confused and weary. His gaze shifted to the dozens of citations and awards that hung on the wall and grimaced, feeling now that they were meager reward for his efforts. "Nobody's fault but mine," he said as he shifted his attention to the display built into the desktop.

He stared at the monitor screen, which displayed his itinerary and messages through the tinted, blotter-sized Plexiglas on his desk. "Eye level," he said, reaching for his stylus as the thin screen slid out through a slot that opened in the upper part of his mahogany desk and positioned itself at eye

level. "Couple of inches closer," he said sliding back the slim, mahogany lid that covered a 10" X 12" tablet. "I really need to set the preferences on this desk," he said, shifting around in his chair in order to sight the monitor comfortably. "This ritual is becoming a pain in the ass. Hanson Keel, Hanson Keel," he repeated as he typed the name into the records search field. "Let's see who you were."

The record flashed on the screen as a narrative voice read along. The report began with the standard information - height, weight, birthplace, birthday, a brief history, etc., pretty boring stuff. "Your basic society drone," Crowley thought as he listened to the computer's recitation then finally interrupted it. "Uh, can we skip to the good stuff, like his police record and psych report?"

"One moment Connecticut," the computer responded with irritating congeniality as Crowley wondered why the techs continued to try to give these machines personality. The screen scrolled down rapidly and the computer renewed its narration as Crowley turned and stared out the window. Again, it was standard until it got to job history. Keel had been an engineer with a relatively promising future but his laziness and impatience got the better of him. According to the report, Keel had BG'd another engineer's design and sold it for big money. Crowley didn't know where the term 'BG'ing came from but he knew it meant Keel had broken a cardinal rule, don't rip off other people's designs. An

engineer's design was more important to him than a family name and most people seemed to respect that except Keel. The money he had made from the sale of the design lasted him about five years. However, his resulting excommunication from the Engineer's Guild meant no more career. He floated like a ghost looking for anything in the field of technology but came up dry; nobody would touch him. Once Keel had worked for some of the top engineering firms designing cutting-edge technology, now he was relegated to doing repairs and wiring on systems in the midway.

This next part of the report caught Crowley's attention. It seemed Keel had begun hanging out with a different crowd, shunning the two-bit hoodlums for a more upscale criminal element.

"Hmmm, Lexington Doyle and 'Peter Gunn' Lucas. Why would these guys want to hang around with loser like you Keel?" Crowley asked as he gazed at the rainbow in the mist of Ketcham Falls. "Well, why wonder when I can go to the source," he said, spinning around, picking up the telephone and dialing Lexington Doyle.

Lexington Doyle was the head of the black market electronics flow into the City. He'd been operating out of the Midway for nearly twelve years behind some of the clubs he owned. Because the electronics were downright primitive and harmless, Crowley turned a blind eye to his operation.

"Get me Lexington Doyle," Crowley said as the monitor flashed twice then a message from the medical examiner popped up

on the screen. "Read along," flashed lazily next to it and he tapped no. The message was the examiner's overview of the physical injuries to Hanson Keel along with speculation on their causes. He was absorbed in the reading of the blood work when a gravely voiced character growled a hello into the other end of the phone.

"Talk ta me, I ain't got all day," the voice said as Crowley paused the screen.

"Hey Lex, what's new?" Crowley asked amiably, smiling to himself.

"Whose dis?" Doyle asked suspiciously as Crowley loaded the report from the examiner. "Yeah Crowley, what d'ya want," Doyle asked impatiently as Crowley studied the report pensively.

"Well I tell ya Lex, I'm gonna be in the Midway tonight and thought I'd stop by for a visit. What d'ya say?"

"Mighty nice a ya Crowley," Doyle said nervously, "But umm, I ain't gonna be in da Midway tonight."

"No?" Crowley responded, feigning surprise. "How can you keep track of your interests if you don't go where the action is?"

"Look Crowley," Doyle said angrily. "You got somethin' ta say, spit it out, otherwise quit wastin' my time."

"You're right Lex, you're a busy man," Crowley responded, smiling as he rubbed at his forehead. "But I'd appreciate it if you could spare me a little time for a ... talk."

"A talk?" Doyle responded suspiciously. "What we got ta talk about? Look Crowley buzz off.

"Aw man Lex, you really seem to be in a bad mood. You got somethin' on your mind, conscience bothering you maybe?"

There was a long pause where neither said anything as Crowley pulled out a cigarette, lit it and stared back out the window at the falls.

"Yeah, I think you got somethin' on your mind and you really want ta talk about it. Well I'll tell ya what Lex, why don't you and me get together tomorrow night so we can talk about it. I think you'll feel a lot better."

"Look Crowley, I tol' ya we got nothin' ta talk about and I got better things ta do with my time!"

"Hmmm, Lex let me ask your opinion on something," Crowley said stroking his chin thoughtfully. "With all the hoopla over this missing Sentry, what do ya think of us shuttin' down all black market activity in the City? In the public interest of course and uh, only for a few months you understand, but uh, ... what d'ya think?"

"So where d'ya want ta meet Crowley?" Doyle said resignedly as Crowley smiled and tapped the ashes from his cigarette.

"I don't know, how 'bout some place friendly, say ... the Ramrod? Yeah, good atmosphere, quiet surroundings; let's make it the Ramrod tomorrow 'round seven. What d'ya say Lex?"

"Alright, the Ramrod tomorrow at seven," Doyle said curtly, his disdain for Crowley's chosen spot evident in his voice. "Anything else," he asked and, when Crowley replied 'no' he abruptly hung up the phone.

"Have a nice day Lex," Crowley responded with a smile.

"Okay, now let's see what Peter's up to," he said as he turned back to the report. Peter 'Gun' Lucas was a former porn star turned porn distributor whose goods also included drugs. He primarily dealt in synthetics but every once in a while he would grow sentimental and bring in some coke or heroin. Logically, Crowley assumed he was the one behind the whistlestick trade. Besides Doyle, Peter was another who had three or four clubs that earned him a tidy living.

Finally someone picked up the other end and the deafening noise of a partying crowd poured through the receiver.

"Yeah, hello," a voice said, sounding either very drunk or very high. "Hey I'm talkin' here!"

Crowley winced and held the receiver away from his ear. "This Peter?" he yelled irritably into the receiver as the voice tried to hush the crowd. Crowley rapped the phone heavily on the desk twice, then yelled, "Hello, hello!"

"Hey, are you crazy?" the voice responded as the noise in the background subsided. "You coulda busted my eardrum!"

"You're lucky I don't bust your skull" Crowley said angrily.

"Hey, who is this?" Peter asked furtively as Crowley leaned back in his chair.

"It's Crowley Peter," he said flatly, "You been stayin' outta trouble?"

"Sure Crowley, sure, what'dya mean?" Peter asked, his voice suddenly serious with a hint of fear.

"What do I mean?" Crowley repeated, taking perverse pleasure in hearing Peter squirm. "I mean it sounds like you got a pretty rowdy crowd there man, could be drinkin' alcohol and using drugs," Crowley said, smiling to himself. He visualized Peter stashing things in his pockets, or covering them with anything handy, as though Crowley could see them through the receiver.

"Crowley, I'm on the straight and narrow man, you won't get any trouble from me." He finished in a whine that made Crowley's skin crawl.

Crowley rolled his eyes and decided to get down to business. "Relax Peter, I'm not callin' to roust you; this is a social call. I'm gonna be in the Midway tonight and want to stop by and uh ... chat."

"'bout what," Peter stammered and suddenly his fear was disgusting to Crowley.

"Little of this, little of that," Crowley said with a shrug as he checked the clock on the wall. "Why don't you just meet me at the NightOwl tonight at eight. Be there or be ... " He hung up without finishing the sentence and smiled down at the receiver.

He turned his attention back to the screen, which displayed detailed pictures of Keel's destroyed head and face with explanatory information below each image.

"Christ he was torn up," Crowley said to himself as he browsed the pictures. "Why the hell would he do that to himself?"

He scrolled down to the section that addressed the wound that Crowley had seen appear on the leg. As he read the paragraphs about biological hypersensitivity caused by unexplained neurological conditions, it was clear the doctors had no idea what they were dealing with. He'd learned from experience that, the more they riddled their reports with medical phraseology, the less they really knew. He continued to scroll through the endless pages of documents and slowly realized that this was medical Swiss cheese and he would learn nothing substantive from it. He did, however, find several conclusions by the physicians helpful. One was that it wasn't a contagion that caused Keel's madness. Another was that, in addition to the wound raised by the doctor's scream, there were similar ones on other parts of his body.

He read the report of the incident that preceded Keel being brought in and found that it was initially reported as a suicide attempt. Upon further observation it was noted that his actions were more purposeful. He seemed to be caught up in a madness not unlike a wolf who chews off its leg to free itself from a trap.

"But what kind of trap did Keel feel he was in?" Crowley wondered aloud as he closed down the report and decided to go home and prepare for the Midway.

* * *

Crowley wasn't exactly a gun nut but he did love his weapons. He stood before the Plexiglas case with his hands on his hips as he pondered his choices.

"Don't want to cause a scene," he said as he took down the ion rifle and checked its status. "Naw, not for Peter," he said as he replaced the firearm. "No, think I'll make due with the old Schreck," he said as he pulled the dull, black gun from his shoulder holster and ejected the clip. "Yeah, if I can't handle Peter with my Schreck I got no business in the business. But, to be on the safe side," he continued as he took another smaller Schreck from the case and tucked it into the small holster on his belt behind his back. Satisfied that he was ready, he grabbed his coat and headed for the NightOwl.