

CHAPTER ONE: *Reverside*

He thought there might be something wrong with the birds. Turning his head, Marto took another look at the interior of the old writing room. On one wall, a hanging tapestry depicted a partridge hunted by men and dogs in a field of red. The partridge fluttered nervously. The dogs sniffed at the ground. Feeling thirsty, he glanced about looking for a goblet or a pitcher of wine. There wasn't one, so he stared back out the window at the birds. It wasn't the birds. The birds were fine. It was time to make a start.

The Lester Sunshine Inn used to be a private mansion for wealthy families before it was sold and converted to a bed and breakfast. After The Great Tide, it was transformed into a shared salon where the Interconnected could dream and create in comfort and serenity. The next episode of the Wakeful Wanderer's Guide starts in this grand house, at a nexus of history and happenstance. Dear friends, followers, and readers, this is where our new adventure begins.

– The Wakeful Wanderer's Guide, Vol. 6, line 1

Marto set his quill back down in the inkwell and re-read his opening paragraph. His clumsy scrawl rearranged itself into neat rows of graceful script on the antique page. Satisfied, he lifted his head to gaze back out over the Sea. He spied rock doves, ivory gulls, and terns playing over terraced groves of olive and lemon trees.

All at once he saw it. It was the sun, not the birds. The sun was setting in the East. It was stuck in the same position on the horizon for a half hour now, intersected by a thin pink cloud. His window was clearly overlooking the Ligurian coast of the Italian Peninsula and the sun was setting the wrong way. There was a rasping noise behind him. He spun to face the stone spiral staircase. He heard the scrape, clank, and rattle of metal chains coming from below. ["Wow, who wrote this?"] he thought-texted to no one.

Of course, he knew the answer. He gave ratings and feedback before sending the commands, [“save”] and [“exit”] and returned to the waking world.

The tower faded, as its floor, the sea, and the earth itself gave way to stars, moon, and sun before finally going black. There was a moment of vertigo as the body left its engaged state in the construct and found its natural position in the waking world. Marto’s eyes opened to daylight filtered through the tall, white-framed, rectangular window panes of the Lester Sunshine Inn.

Marto’s full name was Marto « Maria « Denise « Martina « Joia « etc, a convention used by the Interconnected to trace the lineages of their foremothers. He sat, relaxing on a sofa in the parlor. The Inn was a sturdy stone and beam home, built in the grand style of the late nineteenth century. It could well withstand the violent storms that hit so often these autumn days.

Near him on the threadbare rectangular sofas and shabby geometric chairs were two dozen dreamers, super-mods, and socials. The faded 200-year-old Iranian rug was slowly turning to dust. A large industrial steel coffee table hunkered low and bare. The shabby interior was a feature of the Inn, considered charming by most. Marto was too accustomed to it to find it charming. He wanted a breakfast bulb.

His feedback on the medieval writing castle received a response by its creator. Delamine « Tourea « Yasmine « Delphinia « Rosemarie « etc took issue with him at once. [“The sun isn’t setting, it’s rising,”] she thought-texted him from the Great Lakes tribe in Lakeshore. [“Though I am honored by your review,”] she added.

[“There is a distinct difference in both the temperature and quality of light. It did not seem like a sunrise to me,”] Marto countered, [“I recommend some revision there.”]

After a gap, Delamine expressed her appreciation for his valuable feedback. She requested he try again after she had made some changes.

[“Also – what is with the clanking sound? Is it a dungeon?”]

[“My other visitors find it romantic and exciting,”] Delamine returned. [“It has seen a fair bit of use but I can remove it for you as a personal config.”]

[“Well, if you are after romance, a little wine would be nice. Maybe something from the era if you can find the data. It also should definitely be sunset. Put a window on the other side or move the whole construct to the western coastline. The incongruity was too distracting for me. I thank you, Del. While your new creation does not fit my current needs, I continue to be a fan. Until next time,”) Marto replied, signing off.

He appended his review with pleasant thoughts about the eagerness and expertise of the villa’s author, pausing midway to accept a breakfast bulb from a member of his tribe.

Marto stayed, when he was not out roaming and writing, in Reverside. Located near the rebuilt Tappan Zee Bridge, it was one of the largest tribal communities in The Lower Hudson Valley. He fancied himself a historian, adding context and perspective to the ever-present mountains of data. His followers knew him as a travel writer.

He published both as rich-text and in English text and his work was both re-texted and translated by a growing number of fans. He had heard that his work was enjoyed by people as far away as the tribes of Australia and had some readership among the Luddite Neo-Feudalists. Marto regarded the latter as a high compliment, though it sometimes made him nervous.

The breakfast bulb was created by a local named Thirty/Fourteen, dreaming up dishes in the Inn’s kitchen. Marto held a round bud-vase shaped vegetal wrap filled with spicy sweet beans, a touch of pickled beets and a single chicken egg. It was a gift from Thirty, delivered by Dexter « Wendi « Maria « Martina « Amparo « etc. This particular breakfast bulb was known by Thirty to be one of Marto’s favorites.

Marto rated both the breakfast and the delivery highly and decided on a walk around the town to digest. The hot summer weather was finally giving way to autumn, such as it was, and the air felt dry. Marto stood in what once was a circular driveway, now a slight impression in the sheep shorn grass.

The Inn crouched atop a gentle hill with a commanding view of the town and the river. The great bridge was visible to the north and the center of the town was a 15-minute walk in the same direction.

The brisk air and quiet of the morning felt refreshing and rich. Marto passed groups of small cube-shaped dwellings staggered at angles along curving lanes. Various community members were waking up, exercising, stretching, and starting their day. Marto knew them all and sent greetings of [“good morning,”] with replies in kind. At the end of Benedict Lane, a new home was being printed, dotted with hundreds of palm-sized robots. It was nearly complete.

Suspending his usual intake of the day’s news, he focused on the undistracted feeling of walking. The path beneath his feet was dark gray and smooth, comfortable even with bare feet, which was the custom in Reverside. The surface had a dark gray sheen and it curved gently to the middle. Thinking about the benefit of roads in his everyday life, Marto decided to give spontaneous Merit to the local road techs; Dizzy, Mem, Lacy, and Bryce.

Up ahead of him, he saw Piter and waved.

[“Morning, Marto!”] Piter sent.

[“Morning Piter, how goes the nursery?”]

[“Just coming from there.”] Piter was eating something as he walked past. [“Taking a break from Astrud and Billi. They were up and down a lot last night. They’re fine now. Normal baby stuff. I hear you are heading out soon?”]

[“Yup, just putting things in order before the trip.”]

[“Taking the unicycle?”]

[“Of course!”]

[“I love the unicycle. Keep an eye out for the critters! They tend to trip you up.”]

Marto laughed. [“I will,”] he sent.

He looked up and saw a group of children teasing apart a dandelion cube with bamboo poles. The impacts sent the photosynthetic seedlings into the air. Tiny and light, they would find

updrafts and suck up enough carbon and methane to drop back to earth. A lucky few would become the seed for a new cube. Dandelion cubes like this one would break apart on their own given time but children in tribes everywhere loved to tease them apart as soon as they showed signs of sprouting. The children at this cube were singing a revised version of Frère Jacques out loud.

“Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques, Où êtes-vous? Où êtes-vous?

L’ouragan arrive – eh! L’ouragan arrive – eh!

Entrez-Vous. Entrez-Vous.”

Following the path toward his home, he glanced at the top of the enormous blade farm in the north of Reverside. Recently reconstructed, its design was like many other vertical farms but with an innovative feature keeping it safe from the frequent and violent storms. The entire 150 meters tall, 100 meters long, 200-hectare farm was able to collapse into the ground to protect itself during a hurricane or tornado. It was a major upgrade for Reverside and sat on what used to be a high school football field. Its author was Maxtor « Dorina « Georgina « Chari « Shandra « etc, known to all as Maxtor Uber G, of stratospheric Merit. His each and every wish was fulfilled before he ever had to think of it.

The leaves in the trees were shifting the morning light along the path leading to his home. It was a two-story cube with a bed in the loft above, a low table and a series of cushions below. He had been inhabiting it for a year and a half, living through the seasons after his last tour. By tomorrow night, he thought, this house will shelter someone else.

Two gifts were waiting for him in gratitude for the launch of his new tour. One was a beautiful new cup, fired in the local kiln, brown but with a sheen making it look like copper; the other, a pale blue wool and nano-mesh shirt. He sent thank yous and ratings. Marto joked with Seemi « Gisella « Yadael « Isha « Hester « etc, who left the shirt, mentioning his current one was an eyesore.

Once at home, he returned to his writing.

Lester Sunshine, born Lester Martin Chandler (1965 - 2033) moved from Stone Mountain, Georgia, in 1992 to establish this Inn at Tarrytown with a sizable and reluctant inheritance from his father, Lester Norman Chandler III (1923 - 1989), a veteran of both the Second World and Korean Wars [video compilation], who made his fortune importing and selling goods from the Philippines [geographical/historical blast]. Lester Martin, eager to leave his southern, patrilineal, homophobic past, legally changed his last name to Sunshine, thereby adding a bit of fun to the Inn's name [audio sample]. Once established in his new home, Lester enjoyed the freedom and vigor of a refreshing variety of guests as they made their way to him from the cities of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston for weekends, weddings, and holidays. Soon, the Inn thrived as a destination for the artistic and creative. It was called 'A Haven on the Hudson' [from the 2002 HTML review] for the capitalist and poet alike.

– The Wakeful Wanderer's Guide, Vol. 6, line 2

A blast of information interrupted Marto from his seat at Hemingway's tiny studio desk in the long-lost Florida Keys. Contained within the raw stream was a collection of sea level measurements in the South China Seas during the end of the twentieth century. He also saw numbers for strength and frequency of tornados in and around Atlanta from the same period. Marto wanted to reply with a query for context but he surmised what had happened. A few days ago, while doing some research, he had adjusted the parameters of his personal algorithm to include voluntary-verbals and super-mods. He threw up a hasty filter so his concentration wouldn't be broken by any more raw data and tried to continue writing.

Not all who visit the Lester Sunshine Inn are aware of its rich history and contributions to our society. It may seem odd to you that such an ordinary point on the map could have had such a profound impact on what we all now take for granted. If we look closely at

this nexus in time and location, we can see a series of collisions of both people and ideas combining to create the underlying code of our current existence.

– The Wakeful Wanderer’s Guide, Vol. 6, line 3

The virtual Keys were comprehensively sourced. They were collected from memories and map data and compiled by a vast community of creators. In it, a visitor was able to roam from island to island and even get a little lost.

Giving up on his writing for the time being, Marto left the circular tabs of the black Royal typewriter to walk to the center hallway. He stopped to pet one of the six-toed cats and grabbed a coffee from the kitchen. A stroll outside the grounds had him gazing at the Gulf. Seagulls swooped and called near a sign declaring “90 miles to Cuba.” Key West was empty. Only a few of the Interconnected roamed from place to place, soaking in the bygone calm. Marto felt a creeping sadness and returned to the Waking.

He felt the ghost of the construct coffee fading in his mouth and decided he desperately wanted a real coffee, or something as close to it as possible. It was getting near lunchtime and he was alerted to a desire from someone nearby. It was a new arrival named Nora « Jennifer « Susan « Barbara « Rose « etc. Marto was glad she had figured out how to post a request. She was integrating well. He first flagged his own requested coffee as [“do not deliver”] to prevent an eager Merit seeker from bringing him a cup during his visit with Nora. Then he headed to the local pantry to make two omelets and pick up four tortillas. Down the hill was a water station where he filled his beautiful new cup for Nora, who waited for him closer to the river.

He strolled down the path to see the perplexed new arrival staring at the river from her porch.

[“I just can’t get used to it. So many voices, so many desires. I have to block it out. I know it’s rude.”]

["I made an omelet and brought a wrap,"] Marto responded as gently as he could. ["I don't really know if it's something you like. Hopefully, with time you will get more comfortable with the upgrade. This is how we all get along here."]

They ate in silence. Marto blocked his communications in empathy with the new arrival.

["It was hard you know, for so long. But I managed. I survived. This doesn't seem real now."]

Marto looked at the muddy Hudson through the leaves. ["This is real, you know. It's all real."]

["But do you know what it means really? I mean, you people doze about and fantasize all day and do nothing but bring gifts and food to each other. It doesn't seem like reality. It seems like you are all drug addicts or members of a delusional commune or a cult."]

["Well, it's not really so simple. I think you know we frown on chemical addiction here, so if we seem like addicts, it must be our tendency to sit still while we work. As for the comparison to a commune or cult, we have no single charismatic leader and no single location. There is no particular belief system we all share, other than the system of Merit. As for the gifting..."] Marto could feel himself taking a defensive stance. He drew down her history again. ["Look, we know you've been through a lot. This is a big transition. Give it time."]

"But you just keep bringing me things!" She was shouting. "And it's so quiet here! Why don't you all say something?"

Marto paused. If she were anyone else, her Merit would suffer a severe drop. He composed himself.

["It's normal to feel like things are strange and out of balance. This is all new to you. Yes, we do things differently than you are used to. We gift and request rather than trade. You have adapted to thexting extremely well for a noob. When you are ready you can find ways to gift as well as receive. Right now you need to rest and adjust. Please try to limit your responses to thexting. This was agreed."]

["You're all a bunch of fucking xombies!"] Nora thexted reflexively. Her eyes widened.
 ["I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... I guess I mean, I just don't get what is in it for you?"]

Marto explained that the tribe had agreed to bring her in by consensus. They occasionally accepted selected outsiders in need, ready for interconnected life. The benefit to the tribe was new hands, new perspective, and numbers. Nora was quiet again after this exchange and after sitting with her a while, he decided to leave her to digest the omelet and ideas. He headed back in the direction of the Sunshine Inn.

Halfway to the top was a pop-up cafe. A pot of real, actual coffee – a miracle in a cup was waiting for him as he relaxed again among familiar minds. Checking on the origin, he found it had been grown in a vertical farm in North Adams and roasted in Great Barrington. A sack had arrived at Reverside via a Merit-seeking fan of the community. It was a rare treat and discussion was underway among the foodies of the tribe as to how it could be grown and or roasted locally. He drank a cupful, heaped praise on all involved, poured more into a communal mug and strolled back to the comfortable lounge at the Inn. ["There's nothing like an imminent departure,"] he thexted publicly, ["to help you appreciate the simple beauty of your home tribe."] These thoughts were met with cheerful approval.

Shortly he was back at Hemingway's desk, returning to his writing.

Though no one person can claim responsibility for the demise of credit and the rise of Merit, Lester Sunshine is one of the few who cannot be denied his defining contributions. This is a subject of much discussion and debate but it is this writer's humble opinion, that without the Sunday Sunshine Klatsch [image], our way of life would be impossible.

A few dozen articles on the end of accumulation and the extinction of quid pro quo were published by members of the Sunshine Klatsch in the mid-aughts and were roundly dismissed by the general public as communist drivel or the product of nontrivial quantities of cannabis smoke. It wasn't until a decade had passed that these principles

were put into action by way of the Sunshine app and corresponding social network. By the time the barons of credit saw the danger, it was too late to stop it. Besides which, the old world of banking and hoarding was already facing its own growing doom.

– The Wakeful Wanderer’s Guide, Vol. 6, lines 4 & 5

Marto stopped again to review. The word ‘doom’ pushed heavily into the paper like a dead rat. In the overgrown gardens below the writing room, Marto imagined a slew of dead rats, killed by the cats, or an inevitable disaster and, as he imagined it, so it was. [“save, exit”] he thought and was back in the Sunshine.

“So you’re the famous Marto.”

She was tall and dark-skinned with bright green eyes and a spherical puff of sprouting green around her head. She was physically speaking to him, with words. Marto was taken aback for a moment, unaccustomed to someone talking aloud at the Inn and tried to find his voice.

“I am ... Marto, um, I mean, I am ... he.”

“I’m a fan of your writings. My aunt introduced them to me. I loved your book on the Great Lakes tribes.”

Reflexively, Marto made a query as to her identity and got nothing. This made sense, as she was a talker. He blinked a bit and tried to re-engage his vocal cords to voice a response.

“You are ... a voluntary-verbal?”

“Mandatory,” she responded, “though I can receive thext and information about the weather. I’m not a Phobic,” she touched the side of her head behind her right ear, “I just like to stay mostly in the here and now.”

“I am a voluntary myself. At home here, I thext, but in my travels I often have occasion to speak aloud. Welcome.”

Two of the lounging visitors to the Inn were staring at them, surprised. The silence of the room had been cut through by the sound of their voices and it was, to them, as if lightning had struck the metal coffee table.

“What can I call you?”

“Helen,” she said. “Forgive me for not reciting all my fore-mothers. Just Helen, if you don’t mind.”

“An archaic name,” he blurted this out before thinking. Realizing this was rude, he checked his Merit for an incremental drop and remembered she was not rating him. The conversation was, so far, just between the two of them. Relieved and embarrassed, he continued, “There’s much history in your name. A fine name.”

“My grandmother’s.”

“Well, Helen « Somebody « Helen, etc what brings you to the famed Lester Sunshine Inn?”

“You. I walked a long way to find you.”

This was strange. Why would anyone seek him out on foot?

“I don’t know what to say,” said Marto. “I am not hard to find. I’m not hard to thext. You say you are not phobic but you have walked here from... where did you come from?”

“Livings-town, in The Jersey,” said Helen.

“Okay, from The Jersey, 100 kilometers on foot to find me here, why, exactly?” Marto was beginning to become alarmed. This young disconnected woman could be anyone, here for any reason. She could even have been sent by one of the greedy takers in the Neo-Feudal Enclaves.

His alarm was registering in the minds of his tribe. They became ready. Marto was too distracted to notice but Helen saw it right away. The dreamers stirred. The loungers shifted their balance. Their eyes went dull and blank like the eyes of a frog watching a fly.

“Please tell your friends to calm down,” Helen said with no small tinge of urgency. “I am not here to harm you. I have a message from your mother.”

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Marto is four. He is somewhere dry and flat. The sun is setting while he and his mom and dad eat pickled eggs. They look across the vast gray concrete expanse surrounding the huge metal box with a corner torn out of it. Marto has a fever and his father, a handsome man with a light brown beard, says they are going back to live with his brother in Boston. His mother’s hands are cool as they touch his forehead. She smells like his old bedroom, he thinks. Marto is happy to be with his parents but even at his young age, he knows times are hard.

“There’s your namesake, Marto,” his mother says to him. “Sad to say we may not see one open again in our lifetimes. They were wonderful.” Tears fall on Marto’s arm and the rain begins again, the sky dark and yellow-gray.

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[“This isn’t a game,”] he thought. [“This isn’t a memory. I don’t know these people. It feels real but not like a construct. Where am I right now?”]

He opened his eyes and found himself once again in the Lester Sunshine Inn parlor, surrounded by the usual people and the mysterious traveler all looking down at him. He was lying on the floor.

[“You blinked out M,”] texted LalaUbriay. [“what happened to you?”]

[“I was following and you vanished?”] texted Hanford-D.

[“Do you need anything? Are you hurt?”] texted SpongeyPooBear.

More chimed in, concerned and curious.

“You passed out,” said Helen, reaching down to help him up. Suddenly her wrist was swept behind her and her legs were forcibly bent at the knee taking her down hard. Her left hand was clasped behind her neck. She barely had time to gasp.

[“I’m okay,”] Marto announced. [“I don’t think she’s an assassin.”]

[“Not your call M.”] came Reyleena « Dorina « Silvia « Maritsa « etc, breaking in.
 [“Security algorithms dictate caution.”]

Five tribal members rushed in with wet towels, cups of water, bandages, and medicines. Helen was gone and Marto was blocked from any information on the activities. He distractedly accepted treatment from his friends in a daze.

Several long minutes later, the danger past, the gifters gone, the occupants of the Lounge slipped back into their normal activities.

Normal « Gelty « Lydia « Martha « etc was working on a new design for miniature printer bots which connected to create large tidal energy collectors made out of sand. Gavin « Theresa « Josepha « Nikkika « etc was working on a new game environment, taking place in the ocean and could be used to guide submersible bots to build, reinforce, and reseed barrier reefs. Patti « Theresa « Josepha « Nikkika « etc, his bio-sister, was returning to a game set in the badlands where the enemy were Coally Rollers, riding their black smoke belching dune buggies and the good guys were eagles. Dada « Paulina « Rina « Sarah « etc, a super-mod, was working on a new method of caravan automation. The lounge was a hotbed of creativity.

Among these indifferent dreamers, Marto was supremely disquieted and agitated by what had just transpired. He went back to Delamine’s writing villa and stared out the eastern window at the sea.

150 miles south in New Atlantic, Barnabas Yoniver IV raised his head from a goggle-display on his desk and regarded the silent audience assembled in his enormous seaside office.

“She’s in,” he said.

CHAPTER TWO: *Shine*

Grif liked to keep his bike shiny. He rubbed the rendered pig fat and corn oil along the gas tank and struts, down the exhaust. When the fat was boiled long enough it usually stopped stinking. This stuff was not boiled long enough. His bike was unpainted. He liked the way the

sun hit the raw metal. Without paint, he could catch the rust before it took hold. Rust was the enemy. Parts were becoming harder to find.

He topped off the tank with ethanol and took a swig himself for the departed.

The sun was two hands above the horizon. Dust blowing up from the South had just become visible, the ghost of a pink stain padding the sky. It was too late in the day to be this hot but that meant nothing. Grif spat on the road, expecting it to sizzle. He heard Mike's bike before he could see him. He knew that sound anywhere.

Mike came back from Pittsburgh to say he got the gig. He asked for volunteers and of course, Grif said yes. So Grif got his bike ready and loaded up his saddlebags with provisions to meet the others by the clubhouse. They were heading east.

Grif and Mike were brothers. They played together in the dirt clumps behind the old motel. Grif had a set of old toy soldiers. Mike sometimes found firecrackers. When Mike's parents were murdered by xombies up north, Grif's dad took him in.

"Watch out for those goo-brains," he had told them both. "They don't look dangerous. You might think they're skinny and weak but they ain't. They don't talk, so don't try to reason with 'em. You run. They'll come at you before you can do anything – deadly evil. Just run. You run as fast as you can. You find me or anyone from our chapter. Don't let 'em get close to you."

Mike and Grif grew up together, survived the membership tests, and joined the same chapter as their dad. Mike was taller than Grif, had long straight black hair, and gray-blue eyes. He beat all challengers in hand to hand brawling and could drink his share of hooch and stay clear headed. Grif loved Mike, as a brother, as a member of the pack, and more. When Altus died, Mike became their chapter's leader.

Under his command, they raided weaker camps for water and supplies. No one dared mess with the Mennonites or the Amish but there were plenty of other farming communities to compel to servitude. They won over the fealty of several settlements under Mike's leadership but they lacked the support of one of the Boss Families. The wealth of one of the major families

might provide the support they needed to grow their chapter and gain control of more land. This was why Mike had decided to go to Pittsburgh for the gig.

At sunrise, after a night of drinking and goodbyes, the crew gathered in the parking lot of the clubhouse under the old motel sign. Women and children stood outside the main office to watch the men line up for the trip. They wore leather vests with their club's logo painted on the back. "Enduring Vengeance," flames and a skull. It was the longest running club west of The Jersey and north of the growing southern dustbowl.

Mike and Grif knew the old roads from stories passed down from Altus. The pack was riding east on the inner-states. Most of it was passable. They rode in a long line, avoiding sinkholes and rubble where the road was too far gone. Roads like these needed tending and there was no one to tend to them now, except the xombies. You didn't want to ride on their roads anyway. If the road looked too good or got shiny it meant there were xombies near. Xombie roads were dark gray and shined like coal. The part they rode along now was safe, just a pale gray narrow strip between the encroaching trees and brush. Grif had been told the inner-states used to be at least twice this wide, smooth and easy on the wheels. Those days were long gone.

They camped the first night east of Pittsburgh, making do with what was left of an old service area. They passed that night without incident.

The next day, they circled around Scranton, another town under the control of one of the Boss Families. Scranton wasn't as wealthy as Pittsburgh and the clubs there were hostile to Enduring Vengeance. The pack took a wide berth. Mike told them they were getting close.

They were well past Scranton the third day out on the gig when Grif thought Mike missed a turnoff. The road had gotten shiny and wider, making everyone nervous. The pack kept going even though it meant they were in danger. Mike was the leader. No one questioned his directions. Night came and they made camp in a large flat square near a line of ruined long buildings with grass and trees growing up through the old concrete.

The pack spent the night drinking around a fire, like usual. Bedrolls were out for sleeping, everybody getting something to eat. A couple of the guys were playing shoulder punch, a couple of others were practicing knife throws. Grif was laying down, tired and drunk. The sky was clear and there was a slender crescent moon rising. The air was cooler here than back at the clubhouse. The group was in good spirits, excited about the job ahead, knowing it would mean more work if all went well. It took a long time before anyone saw the girl. She was standing, facing the fire, just past the edge of the camp, in a thin white dress, her eyes all in shadow.

Mike got up to point his rifle. There was a hissing noise. Mike fell. Grif thought he saw his head go off on its own, away from his body. Other members of the crew scrambled for their guns and they fell. Blood sprayed onto Grif's arm and into the fire. Grif forced himself to stay down, reached to the side for his rifle and shot in the direction of the girl. She wasn't there anymore. Someone was yelling behind him. He heard movement in the dark, coming from the old buildings and he was running in the direction of his bike.

He kicked the starter hard and was away. He counted six others who made it; Nate, Barrow, Trig, Lester, Dewey, and Haight. There should have been twenty more but Grif knew they weren't coming. They crested a hill and saw a bridge. It looked a mile long, spanning a big river. Grif checked behind him, expecting to see zombies. "Over the bridge!" he yelled to the others. He gunned his engine down the hill.

Grif yelled to his fellows, "Far side and make for the trees!" Mike was dead and he couldn't allow himself to think about it. He was next in line. The others followed him. He didn't know what the gig was. His only thought was to get the rest of the pack to safety. If they had the dynamite, he could have blown the bridge behind them once they crossed. All of that was back at the camp.

They roared across the long dark river, wind in their hair, drink in their guts, straining to put the danger behind them. There was a town ahead. Grif thought he may have made a mistake but it was too late to turn around. Only speed could save them now. Flashes of light sparked high

up in the cables ahead of them causing Grif to rise up and get a look. Something punched him hard in the chest. He saw his bike go on without him. In the air, he reached to grab the handlebars again. Something else hit him in the eye and his body slid along the pavement to a stop.

CHAPTER THREE: *Decompiler*

One of the greatest disappointments of the twenty-first century was the advent of the Singularity. Predicted by Raymond Kurzweil in the early 1990s, the dawn of a new machine intelligence died with a frustrated whimper in the early 2030s as quantum machines reached all the landmarks of autonomous intelligence, without event. Greater and greater attempts to motivate machines to act of their own volition failed or were found to have been faked. Injection of random impulses only yielded random results. Programmed self-preservation models didn't lead to evidence of an effectual "self." It was argued this was due to a lack of pain and hunger, but every attempt to artificially create these couldn't be shown to have caused the actual experience. Others pointed out that the self was a false goal to begin with, but couldn't escape the problem that an intelligence existing without the illusion of a self didn't seem generally intelligent. Part of the blame was laid on all the attention paid to creating a specialized AI aimed at marketing goods and services rather than a generalized AI with no such goal in "mind."

The military, craving a motivated non-human soldier, cobbled together weaponized thinking machines to disastrous effect. After the deaths of victims in the hundreds of thousands by these robot killers, the Singularity was pronounced reached and also a non-event. Finally, in the 40s, plans to create these monsters were scrapped in favor of improved human and animal interfaces.

– The Wakeful Wanderer's Guide, Vol. 6, lines 44 and 45

Sleep that night was anything but uneventful. A game was afoot. This was bad timing before his journey. Attackers from the West activated countermeasures on the bridge. Marto played in the role of autonomous command from the second eastbound tower. The exercise was boring, but all players knew they would need extra cycles before waking. The Raiders, running on ethanol, both in their bikes and in their guts, came roaring over the bridge as if raw speed and enthusiasm alone would protect them. Hayden « Alia « Briana « Zoë « etc pointed to a lack of strategy in the attack. This may have been a simulation or it may have been real. Regardless, it was a regretful slaughter.

The glass-tipped gyros under Marto's command wrapped around the support cables of the bridge. Each gyro had a modicum of intelligence guiding it, expelled from its casing with a blast of compressed nitrogen. Viewing the action from high up on the bridge tower, he chose his targets, which lit up in bright red glowing bullseyes for the gyros to hit. One of his shots brought down the leader, landing square in his right eye.

The game took place in a kind of half sleep, similar to active dreaming, but requiring only a little focus. Remote operations like this one needed only minimal concentration compared to building, puzzles, adventure, possession, or invention games. Marto was able to stay in a restful state from the time the alarm stirred him until the attackers were down. The results were gory. The glass edges on the gyros cut through even the toughest armor at their rotational speed of 75,000 rpm. Gyros got stuck in the resulting mix of cloth, leather, bones, digestive acids, and blood, which was why a second wave of clean up commanders were roused to guide robotic deployers of decompilers.

Tribal members of lower Merit volunteer for this second duty, as it is an easy way to move up. The downside is, it can cause nightmares and is disgusting. Long ago, when he was a noob, Marto opted in for this chore. Thankfully, as his Merit rose, he received an upgrade to his forgetfulness implant and never had to volunteer again.

For all its unpleasantness, decompiler technology has been critical to a livable Anthropocene environment. People don't like to remember the aftermath of The Tide and its accompanying migration of people and viruses. If any upside to all the ensuing loss of life could be imagined, it was the necessary development and deployment of decompiler technology. The micro-robots distinguish between animate and inanimate organic material. They process what human beings would loathe to touch or smell, without burning it, or leaving it as food for troublesome insects and bacteria. They've been invaluable to humans and animals alike and, more than anything, have helped to eliminate new breeding grounds for parasites and pathogens. Without decompilers, human society would be at a loss to process the impossible accumulation of sewage, food waste, and bodies during the days following The Great Tide.

Decompiler tech, dreamed up by the augment pioneer Tara « Sibby « Maria « Lucy « Cynthia « etc, was achievable once the process for the auto-creation of nanotubes was integrated into independently programmed microscopic machines. The robots construct the tubes at a rate of a dozen a minute and insert them into the dead material. Liquid as gray water travels down the tube, away from the solids. The body or material is desiccated. Another robot collects the water and moves it to a neighboring tank for distillation. Finally, the dried remains are sorted into piles of carbon compounds, nitrogen, silicon and more. Some of these become the building blocks for more decompilers, the rest is transformed into dry fertilizer and other materials.

– The Wakeful Wanderer's Guide, Vol. 6, lines 46 & 47

It was 01:24:10 and Marto was still awake. He kept replaying Helen's removal in his mind. She seemed so harmless. Naturally, he trusted Reyleena and all the security team. Still, something about Helen seemed wrong. A mandatory-verbal with implants and greentops? Not likely.

What really bothered him was the message she said she carried from his mother. Marto's real mother had died giving birth to him. His father was killed by Raiders around the same time. He had seen images of them. The man and the woman by the broken box store did not match those images even a little. What possible trickery was Helen enacting? The longer he thought about it, the more Marto became uneasy so he decided to put it aside for the moment and take a late night walk around the town.

He rose out of bed, climbed down the ladder from his sleeping loft and walked out the door. The night was a cool 23°C, with low humidity. He should have been sleeping like a baby. Reverside was quiet and Marto's eyes adjusted to the dark in time to see two cats stalking nothing near the home of Zibli « Nikki « Laura « Hope « etc. Poor cats. He sent a command to one of the animal care stations to open a block away. That should make them happy.

The cats reminded him of his old friend Bruce Williams. Bruce was a librarian, living in a community called Yale Havens on the grounds of the old university. Bruce loved cats. He and his wife and daughter had nurtured a family of cats and took care of them in the old library. Other librarians began to take in strays as well, feeding them, providing them with litter and cleaning up after them. The cats became a staple in the library. When Marto arrived at Yale Havens on his first tour, the place was teeming with cats. The faint smell of cat urine pervaded the stacks. It took a little getting used to.

Bruce introduced Marto to the study of history. The library was in trouble when he arrived. Water had made its way almost to the entrance and the librarians were relocating books from the lower levels to the upper. Marto assisted in the process, and while he was resting, Bruce provided some books for him to read. The first one was "A People's History of the United States" by Howard Zinn. Marto was fascinated by it, he delved into other histories, and noticed the divergences of accounts of the past.

"How can there be so many contradictory accounts of what happened?" he asked Bruce.

“That’s the beauty of the study of history. It’s not just the study of the past, it’s the study of the human mind,” Bruce responded.

Marto had planned to continue on his travels after Yale Havens but the books kept him rooted to the library. He spent 5 months there, reading, and sharing what he read with his growing collection of followers. The rest of his time he spent helping the librarians rescue the volumes in the lower stacks and recruiting help from the tribes. At the end of a tiring day, he posted what became the first volume of what he called *The Wakeful Wanderer’s Guide*.

People have forgotten. Everything was different not so long ago, but people have forgotten. Back then we talked aloud to each other instead of thexting. We owned things and grew up in families. We carried computers in our pockets instead of our skulls. We drove and flew places. We watched movies on screens. Our food was delivered from far away. We paid taxes to governments. We worked for a living. We owned homes and land. We obeyed and broke the law. We spent. We saved. We could be alone if we wanted. The weather was kind. The cities grew tall. The communities sprawled. People have forgotten.

We need people who remember. I remember and remind for those of us who have forgotten. I invite you to follow as I roam so we can remember together.

– The Wakeful Wanderer’s Guide, Vol. 1, lines 1 & 2

Marto’s first tour was by no means a resounding success. Prior to his inspiration to be a wandering viewer for the members of his tribe, Marto took turns working at Reverside’s vertical farm, and assisting the local road techs with debris cleanup and organizing the bots. One day, working for Dizzy, he wondered about how far the roads extended.

[“Many of our upgraded roads reach deep into the East and a little further to the West. They extend far north, and south, through The Jersey. They are growing daily,”] Dizzy replied.

[“Why do we need such an extensive series of upgraded roads if most of us never go anywhere?”] Marto asked.

["The majority of the traffic on them is by bots,"] Dizzy returned. ["They also distribute power from the solar, wind and tidal collectors. This helps with energy stability. The more upgraded roads we have, the better and safer our lives are. That's why road techs are so highly Merited."]

["But surely, some people wander these roads, right?"] Marto's imagination was sparked.

["Certainly. Sometimes we find Raiders on the roads and those have to be dealt with. They come after our supplies and wreak havoc if they get through our defenses. Sometimes, the Interconnected travel on them, but it's rare. Often it's done when a tribal member has to relocate."]

["How do they travel?"]

["Most go by foot, but bicycling is a popular method. Why are you asking?"]

["I'm not sure,"] Marto sent. ["I know I can see all the other towns remotely, but I wonder what it might be like to go there in person. I'm just thinking aloud. I wonder what would happen if I biked around and talked to people. Do you think anyone would follow me if I did?"]

["I suppose there is only one way to find out, Marto."] Dizzy gave him one of her lopsided grins.

CHAPTER FOUR: *Insomnia*

The woven carbon lane outside his home felt a little like what he imagined carpeting felt like. He wondered how one might go about carpeting a lane or street in a town like this. He posted the idea for Dizzy or Mem or one of the other road techs to think about. Luckily Marto was not the only one awake this night. As soon as he thought about Mem, they pinged him back. They were up, self-serving at an umbrella bar not far away. ["come on by"] they sent. He did.

["Valerian tea."] Mem poured him a cup. It was cool and light yellow. Mem was older than Marto by a decade at least. They had a short mop of gray hair and bright brown eyes. Mem was wearing a woolen bot-knitted white tunic covering their strong, wiry body. They stood behind the bar from Marto, who sat on a stool.

["So the problem with outdoor carpets is the dust,"] said Mem, starting right in, ["I mean people used to vacuum them all the time. I suppose we could make bots to vacuum constantly – you know, it's funny. Those were among the first personal bots, that's the kind of thing you write about. But the energy required is prohibitive – also the noise. Imagine trying to sleep through that."]

["Can't they have solar tops? And couldn't they only run during the day?"] Marto sipped as he thexted.

["Thought of it already. Too much traffic during the day. Also, we would need a ton of them to be charging and running. A vacuum motor runs hot. It's not like the farm bots or armaments or decompilers which rest and work, rest and work. To keep the outdoor carpets clean enough to meet our health standards we would need to feed them energy from the central grid. It's too old-world. Wouldn't work."]

["Okay, but I'm not ready to give up yet. What if the individual fibers of the carpet performed the dust removal themselves? A spiral movement shuffling the particles to the edges at night?"] Marto was revolving on his swiveling bar stool, and starting to feel a bit dizzy.

["Closer."] Mem sipped the tea and took a biscuit from a tin on the bar. ["But now you are using the surface for movement, and each element would have a photon collector fitted into it. Could be bulky. Also, you get piles of dust around the edges to build up and blow around. Gutters can take care of much of it, but it's a strain on the system. You know we have solar collectors and kinetic generators built into the mesh you walk on now. Lots of surface area. Most of it gets fed into the homes; it also adds to the farm, which uses most of our energy. Plus, it's porous, so the dust settles down below. Seems like a waste to lose all the energy and efficiency just to have something cushier to walk on."] Mem was stirring their tea with another biscuit. The biscuits were flat and hard, baked from spelt and honey. The pop-up had no roof tonight, as rain was not expected for at least a day. The two friends could watch the quarter moon hovering like a lamp in the cloudless sky.

["Gah."] Marto was tired, but not sleepy. ["Not such a great idea after all. Darn it. Here I was thinking I would be the next Maxtor... or Mem!"]

["You are a great contributor, doing what you do, Marto. You know we are all lucky to have you here. The stories you write offer us new perspective, fresh thoughts, and new points of view."] Mem walked around to the other side of the bar, next to Marto. ["I love how you link the forgotten actors of our past to our current situation. When I follow your work, I see our world anew. I get a view into the broader natural and human environment. That helps techs like me come up with new projects to fit the tribes' needs better than we could without you. We all love your mind, my dear. You don't need to be a tech too."]

Marto was overcome with a wave of emotion. Tears came to his eyes. Before he knew what he was doing he was hugging Mem. It was awkward.

["Easy now darling,"] Mem sent, patting his back. ["I love you too. Easy. Why don't you try to get back to sleep again? I do my best work at night. You can usually find me here again in the wee hours if you can't sleep."]

["I'm off tomorrow on my tour."] Marto sniffed, straightened. ["Not sure how long I will be away."]

["We will all be with you. Don't go offline for too long. We worry. I will be here when you get back. Sleep now."] Mem had a hand on Marto's shoulder. The warmth of it filtered down into his chest. It was time to go back to bed.

Sleep is sacred. Even the most heavily augmented value it for increased health and mental clarity. Without exception, those who have hacked their sleep have suffered serious consequences. Trying to control the body's natural rhythms can be deadly. One such cautionary tale was Hugh Reisenfeld, a silicon valley entrepreneur in the mid double 20s. A talented engineer, he was snapped up by SumoGen, for his pioneering work on bio-silicone implementation. Hugh became the leader of the team who developed the

underlying software which has become the basis of all neural-app interfaces currently in use. His idea was simple and revolutionary, far surpassing the work previously achieved in the area of bionics. Recognizing the brain has no unified operating system, he designed an interface to present the brain with a stable and simple set of behaviors to which it could adapt. This handshake, once accepted by the hippocampus, would proceed to new and more complex sets of signals until the brain recognized it as a new sensory node. The preliminary studies with rats had allowed remote electronic noses to be successfully employed, and more complex remote sensors were planned.

The problem came when Hugh was wrestling with deadlines imposed by SumoGen's investors. If only they required less sleep, he thought, he and his team could accomplish so much more, and be able to deliver the core products in time to go public. He developed an augmentation using the company's tech to provide the benefits of having had a full night's rest in just 60 minutes. The implant simulated REM sleep cycles once every twelve minutes with three-minute breaks.

The entire team secretly had the implants installed and within a month, they had all adapted to them and were working 22 hours a day without any apparent side effects. They were overjoyed but too busy to adequately document all aspects of their transformation. The manic pace of their work continued for 105 days until insanity overtook all but one of them. Sadly, it was Hugh. While he was out getting coffee, his team members murdered each other in the lab with scalpels and other tools. He never recovered. The story went viral and SumoGen sank without a trace, except for their intellectual property which was appropriated by the US military for secret development, only to be leaked by a former SumoGen intern two years later.

– The Wakeful Wanderer's Guide, Vol. 6, lines 48 to 50

Marto put his pen down and stared at the old wooden desk. Something was still keeping him awake and he hated it. Most likely it was the Helen mystery. He decided to forget about it for now and exited the writing villa to get some rest.

After spending a little time inhabiting and guiding simple blade farm equipment in their nocturnal duties, he dropped into his natural dreams like falling off a horse into a bottomless well.

CHAPTER FIVE: *New Atlantic*

The strongest knew it was a bad idea as it was happening but lacked the foresight to take the necessary steps. The generations devoured by grisly technologies succumbed like weak-willed addicts. They are young and old alike, rich and poor, African, European, Asian, Latino, Aboriginal, and whatnot. Lacking imagination, they hand over their humanity, privacy, and dignity in exchange for an artificial sense of belonging. We are overrun by a mass of cowards resembling teenage girls of yesteryear waiting by the phone for a call from their latest crush. Only a few of us have enough strength of character, good genes and willpower to fail to fall into this trap. Those of us who value the power of paper and ink, steel, and steam, loyalty and culture, tradition and fear of the Almighty God are too few and dwindling. The xombies thrive, as humanity falters. I have done all I can to defend our civilization. I pray those who follow me will succeed where I have failed.

As I die, my only comfort is this remnant of a world will fast follow me into the dust, and the faithful will join me in whatever Heaven awaits the just and true.

– Memoirs of Barnabas Yoniver II, page 484

Barnabas Yoniver, IV put down his grandfather's final book and gazed out over the threatening ocean skies. His ships were being moored in the newly formed harbor west of the submerged boardwalks and casinos, in what used to be Egg Harbor City. His men worked

feverishly in preparation for the oncoming storm, and Barnabas wondered how much of his fleet would survive.

He liked to think that his granddad was the first to coin the term “xombies,” a fitting metaphor for humanity’s common enemy. The office library contained portrayals of the famous foe, imagined as lumbering hulks, and spelled with a ‘z’ instead of an ‘x.’ If only their battle now was that simple. The creators of the old zombie movies and novels lacked imagination and foresight. The current scourge of implanted humans was far more dangerous than the hordes of mindless undead could ever be.

New Atlantic was his town, passed down to him from father to first son for three generations. It had several bars, entertainment complexes, a trade hall, markets, schools, two churches, and a courthouse. It was civilization as it should be, kept defiantly intact by his family’s strong hand, with the help of a few dozen armed constables.

Mary arrived with his morning tea. Barnabas wondered what he would do without his morning tea. Shipping lines to tea growers were expensive to maintain and several estates had gone dark, overcome by weather or xombies or both. Luckily, demand was low, limited to those with means, and Barnabas’ family had connections to other enclaves to purchase from estates still in operation. They took gold, of course, the only currency that mattered. On the tray was an Indian estate Assam in one of his favorite antique pots, a bone china cup, beet sugar, cream, and a thin biscuit. Mary knew he liked his tea black with sugar but always added the cream as a formality.

‘She steals the cream when she takes the tray down.’ Barnabas thought to himself. He took a bite from the biscuit, added sugar to his tea, and poured out the cream into a potted plant.

Mary seemed unaffected. “Your ten o’clock meeting has arrived early,” she said. “Mrs. Reynolds is in the waiting room.”

“You can send her in, Mary,” said Barnabas, straightening his blue cravat. “Bring us another cup and some more cream.”

“Yes, sir,” said Mary, bowing, as she left.

Barnabas sat sipping his tea in the lower half of his enormous sea-side office. His desk was higher up, in front of the floor-to-ceiling plate glass windows overlooking the darkening horizon. Three steps led down to a coffee table and four overstuffed chairs. Portraits of his grandfather and older relatives lined the walls. He sat between ferns and ficus, flowers and cactus. The room was intimidating.

Gladys Reynolds entered wearing her riding outfit. She had a restored antique red coat and white trousers above walnut colored polished leather boots. Barnabas was supposed to think she had ridden her horse all the way from Pittsburgh to see him here. He knew she had taken a chopper or a jeep the majority of the way. Likely she took a horse somewhere in Bryn Mawr or King of Prussia to give the sense she was a rugged noble traveler from years past. Even so, if she had ridden that way she would have had to come through the city, over the bridges and through Camden, which was in itself, impressive enough. Barnabas doubted she had donned the riding outfit and flown the whole way. He hadn't heard her chopper approaching.

“Hello, Barney,” said Gladys. “How's the family?”

“Fuck my family. How's production, Glad? When can we expect new shipments? My customers are thirsty.”

“Oh, come on now, doll. Let's not get right down to business. I've had a hard ride, and need to engage in a little civilized chit-chat before we haggle.” Gladys pushed at Barnabas' shoulder playfully before settling into her chair and leaning back with a sigh.

“My family is a pain in my ass, thank you for asking. My wife is digging into my pockets and complaining there's nothing to do, nowhere to go, and nothing worthwhile to buy. She's right. My kids are self-entitled terrors to the locals, as is proper, considering their station. Keeping up our end here on the East Coast. How is your brood in the gateway to the Midwest?”

“Oh, everyone is as well as can be expected. Samuel is bedridden you know. Near the end they say, but he's a tough old fuck. He will survive longer than the doctors expect. Archie and

Vanessa are learning the family business and taking care of the estates. Like your children, they exhibit behaviors according to their station. Estelle, well, we've lost touch with her, but I'm sure she will come crawling back for a taste of the lifestyle to which she is so accustomed. We've had a terrible time lately with the workers though. Dissidents spread ideas of equality and merit. Many of our workers have abandoned us. I'm sure they were infiltrated by a batch of those fucking net-wits. So labor has been scarce, but we've had a good season growing this new breed of Shortcorn. You need whiskey, gin, beer, or all three?"

"Shortcorn? Are you using xombie grain now?" Barnabas was shocked by this. Use of xombie tech by any of the major families was forbidden, a rule set in place by his grandfather and agreed to by all.

"We had to, Barney. Had no choice. Our traditional varieties of corn failed, and barley is out of the question lately. If we had not raided a local goo-brain farm and grain storage we would have been out of business."

Barnabas stared at his biscuit. "I understand Glad, but you know the families will not be happy when they hear this."

"Well, they are welcome to try and find another source for booze if they don't like it. It's just a grain you know, not tech. Doesn't blow over so easy is all, and it's a fucking perennial, which is brilliant. We have all been growing hobbit wheat anyway – it's more or less the same."

"How did you like that Surfs / Pirates game last week?" Barnabas grinned at her. "Extra innings, but we pretty much kicked your asses."

"Clearly, a fluke." Gladys smiled back. "The field was muddy. There were too many errors due to bad weather. We will correct that next season. I'm looking forward to football season."

Mary entered with more tea, another cup and saucer, cream, and more sugar. Gladys took her cup without a glance at the servant woman. Mary exited, her head low.

“We get plenty of cider and brandy from Saratoga and Montreal. We are stocked with it. However, the people like their beer and whiskey, as well as your gin. I have to keep them away from siphoning off the methanol from collectors south of here. Makes them sick. When can we expect a shipment?”

“The convoy is pulling across 76 now,” said Gladys, sinking into her over-stuffed chair. “I’m here to collect payment in person.”

“Well, you will have to wait until I inspect the shipment, old pal,” said Barnabas, with a broad smile. “You know it’s always POD in New Atlantic. How odd of you to ask for money in advance. If I didn’t know better, I would say you were trying to pull a fast one on me.”

“Nothing of the kind, my dear friend. I’m on my way to Arlington is all, to talk to the departmental heads. I thought I could secure payment before I go talk to our esteemed friends there. You understand.” Gladys smiled back, broad and friendly as can be.

Barnabas put his biscuit back down beside his teacup. Gladys was playing at something here, and he didn’t know what it was. There was a threat implied in her audience with The Powers That Were. Tribute was paid by all of the major families in exchange for certain ephemeral protections, but the authority in Arlington had long been on the wane. A new alliance might be implied by her meeting, and Barnabas didn’t want to be on the outside of such an arrangement. He would have time to pick apart her plan later.

“How, may I ask,” said Barnabas, chewing, “do you expect to get there? I’m assuming you are chartering a boat from me, but as you can see,” he waved the remainder of his tea cookie at the threatening skies, “waterways will be rough for a while. I don’t imagine your horse would let you tough it out on the roads, especially past the tribes south of here.”

“Oh, I’m at your mercy for the length of the storm of course, and count upon your famous hospitality. Perhaps the caravan will arrive before I can leave. If so, it’ll be business as usual. If not,” Gladys sipped at her tea, “I’m sure we can come to an understanding.”

“Perhaps,” said Barnabas.

“So,” said Gladys, leaning in, “what are you doing up in Tarrytown?”

Barnabas did not allow himself to look surprised. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Come, come, Barney. You know how hard it is to keep a secret from the families. We know you have someone in there. What’s going on? What do you hope to accomplish?”

“I have no one in Tarrytown. I don’t know what you mean by a secret. You have been misinformed.” Barnabas felt like his stomach was on fire. He wanted to kill her, find the snitch and kill him in the most elaborate way possible. Faces and names rushed through his head. His heart raced, as he carefully replaced the china cup in its saucer.

“I’m worried I’ve upset you, Barney. I’m sure it’s merely random gossip. You know how dull things get. You can’t beat a spy story for entertainment, but if it’s false, it’s false.” Gladys’ eyes were full of kindness and understanding and skill and deceit.

“It’s discouraging you engage in such petty talk,” sighed Barnabas, looking toward the gathering storm. “I know life is enervating in far-flung Pittsburgh, but that’s no reason to entertain fantasies about my business. I have no reason to infiltrate some paltry Westchester junkie-huddle. My trade routes are strong and getting stronger. My workers are not in revolt, I can assure you. I supply valuable goods to you and yours. To be frank, I find this attempt to smear my good name a direct insult to my forefathers.” He rose. “You are, as always, welcome to stay here for as long as you like. I don’t forget my friends. I hope you keep it in mind the next time a random rumor comes to you through questionable channels. I have enemies in my ranks who are looking to advance unnaturally.” Barnabas paused, hoping Gladys didn’t take his comment as an admission. “I trust you to divulge your source when you are ready. You may think it over during your stay. I will treat any information you give me as confidential, of course. Now I must ask you to leave. I have preparations to make before the hurricane hits.”

Gladys Reynolds put her cup down and rose. “I understand Barney. I have always understood. I ask, not only for myself but to calm the minds of other interested parties. If such a

scheme were engaged, we should all be aware of it. Not that I'm saying there is such a scheme, mind you. You've convinced me. We only want to be sure we're all kept in the loop."

"Naturally," said Barnabas, swallowing back his rage. "Now, if you will, we'll catch up later over dinner."

Gladys smiled. "I look forward to it." She turned and left through the office's giant double door. She left it open, and Mary appeared.

"Leave me alone, Mary," Barnabas said. The doors closed. He rose, grabbed a cactus and threw it against the opposite wall, leaving a tear in the corner of a gigantic painting of his dearly departed grandfather.

"Brady!" He shouted, furious at himself for damaging the painting. "Brady! Brady! Brady! Get the fuck in here, Brady!"