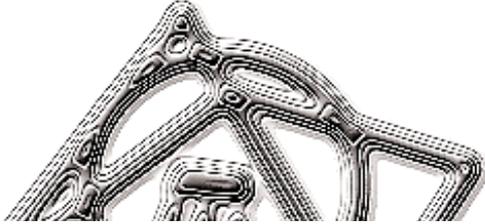


It started out as a novel...

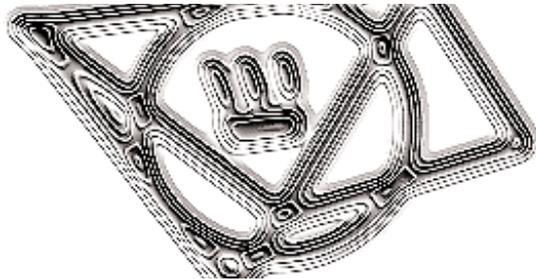
Then it was a novella...

Then I got sick of working on it.

Now, from the author of the severely over-written story
“Analysis of a Name Drop Drunken Orgy,”
comes, severely underwritten...



The Heavy Handed Adventures of Retchfield & Crynge



...A long short story (or a short novella, depending on
how you look at it) by Chris V.

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER:

WHAT FOLLOWS IS A WORK OF FICTION. ANY SIMILARITIES TO PLACES, EVENTS OR PERSONS, LIVING OR DEAD, IS ENTIRELY AND PURELY COINCIDENTAL. THIS IS NOT A TRUE STORY. THIS IS A FALSE STORY. FICTION. NOT REAL. SO, IF YOU, THE READER, THINK IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH REALITY, SURREAL, HYPERREAL OR OTHERWISE, YOU ARE NOT ONLY WRONG, BUT ALSO A TOTAL IDIOT. NOT TO MENTION A STUPIDFACE AND A DUMBFUCK. SO DON'T BLAME ME FOR WRITING IT. I MADE IT ALL UP.

THANK YOU.

Foreword

Finally, the first edition of this story will come to light, in a sexy PDF format no less. I started thinking about these characters a long time ago, and, while I've done them great injustices by not developing them properly, frankly, I'm sick of looking at them for now. That's not to say I don't love them. And, that's not to say that I won't go back to them. I'd love to rewrite this as a script for a graphic novel (artists feel free to apply). I made many mistakes in writing this, and I think with a few more years of rewriting it, it could turn out to be really important and profound. Unfortunately, by then it might be out of date and irrelevant. We're living in an extremely bizarre time in the history of human civilization. Just about the only thing I can think of to do is write about it. I'm also inherently lazy though, and a terribly slow learner, which is why it took me years just to get out 55-or-so pages of semi-decent crap. That is also the reason that I'm not even going to try to get this thing published (publishers feel free to apply) except by my own means and only for the small fee of whatever you think a U.S. penny will be worth in 200 years. Send payments (of any amount) to a good charity that clears minefields or somebody else who actually does some good for the world and deserves it. There's too many people to thank, but I'll try: Thanks Carol, Lucas, Faraz, Sean, Shane, Gabe, Caleb, Hugh and anyone else I bugged to read my work.

Enjoy!

Chris V

redsatur23@yahoo.com

<http://www.angelfire.com/weird2/chrisv/>

"When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity."

Jean Baudrillard

"Furthermore, there is nothing so contaminated with fiction as the history of the Company."

Jorge Luis Borges,
"The Lottery in Babylon"

One

Retchfield sat down and opened his book, The Unabridged History of PolitiCo and Its Many Arms. ...PolitiCo Sector 23, a corporate microstate which was built along the River Aegris on land purchased Political Technology Systems, or PolitiCo. The most recent and, more importantly, inconvenient war was the War on Wars, in which pretty much everything was laid to waste, and then everything left over was used to destroy anything left over. W.O.W. was preceded by the ever popular Holy Crusade on Wars (Holy C.O.W.), and before that they had to worry about T.W.A.T., but no one likes to mention such vulgarity really.

A key poked into the lock on the door in the studio apartment. He jumped but relaxed to see a 23-year-old with a face of seventeen walking in with groceries.

"I see you've been working hard today." Crynge set down a small brown paper bag on the counter and took off her mirrored sunglasses. She pushed her long brown hair behind her ears, opened a bottle of beer and sat down on an easy chair.

"Reading is work, isn't it?"

"Maybe it is, but it's not putting food on the table. And you need a shave."

"The important things in life, shaving every day, putting on pants, running errands for groggy old pharmacists, sounds like alotta fun. Real productive too. Maybe I should go dig ditches or something."

"Maybe you should. Sitting around, taking pills all day, reading fake-ass history books isn't so productive either."

Retchfield slumped in his chair. "I don't feel good, I toldja. I think I'm getting sick." His eyelids drooped on his 23-year-old face that looked unflatteringly ten years older.

"I keep telling you: 'let's go see a doctor,' but you

don't even wanna get up to do that. I'm sure he'd give you some more pills. Maybe you'd feel better if you ate some food once in a while instead of more drugs. You look like a damn walking stick."

"Could you keep your voice down? I don't want the neighbors to have to hear this."

"Neighbors? This building hardly has anyone in it. Quit avoiding the issue."

"It's not that I don't want to do anything. I want to do something that matters."

"You could start by cleaning up the place. There's books and papers everywhere." Crynge pointed with her eyes at the surrounding room. Newspaper littered the floor in what appeared to be order to Retchfield, along with books of various types, some of which, in fairness to Retchfield, did belong to Crynge. The walls were painted various shades of brown and orange. The one barred window cast a shadow across the floor.

Retchfield placed his book on a small glass table and stood up to rearrange the items on the floor. He laughed. "That's enough of that."

"Yeah, I'm getting tired just watching you." Crynge laughed slowly and walked to the door. "Let's see what's going on outside."

The cityscape of Pharmacoepia sprawled around like a vast labyrinth. Pharmacoepia was not densely populated, however. The rest of the world wasn't what one would call highly populated either. People just weren't as much of a common sight as they used to be. A blanket of quiet rested on the heads of Retchfield and Crynge, even when taking into account the thin walls of their elaborate, yet annoyingly simple, apartment complex.

"You really think I'm that lazy?" he asked, looking down at her.

"I'm just worried that you're never gonna want to work. Ever since you started gettin paid for sittin around all day you haven't done a whole lot."

"No one likes to work, if they did, then no one would have to pay them. The problem is that sitting at a counter and tearing tickets is not a natural human activity. Besides, I can't work. That cleanup project really messed us guys up out there. I don't know what it was, but I can barely move now without pain."

They sat for a few minutes, watching the vacant skyline.

"Someone's gotta work though. You use products. Someone's gotta make them. Those scientists had to design and make those nepenthezine tabs you like so much," Crynge said.

"But they proly enjoy their work. It's intellectually fulfilling. You just have to find work that's pure." Retchfield stretched and yawned immensely.

"You're living in a fantasy world. Even the best job comes with some degree of bullshit. There are scientists everywhere that hate their jobs. They got into it because of their idealism, and then they wind up hating their lives because they're just making money for their bosses."

"They can always change careers if they don't like what they're doing anymore."

"I'm sure it's just that easy too. Just pack up and learn something new."

"Why not?"

"Maybe they have to feed their kids. Not everyone can get a check from PolitiCo for sitting on their ass and taking pills all day." Crynge's mirrored shades obscured her brown eyes. She brushed a lint ball from her faded tan corduroy jacket with a rip in the elbow.

"I'm helping out the Public Pharmacology Clinic. I go every month and let them pinch and probe me. Research is important. You do believe in that at least, eh?" He scratched the short dark hair on his slightly balding scalp. "I'm gonna put on a sweater. This two week winter is starting to get to me."

She leaned her back against the rusted railing and

looked up at the overcast sky. "I love this weather."
Retchfield returned to the balcony wearing a black sweater.

"It's nice, but, I kinda like to get a change of climate.
A change of scenery. Anything."

"To answer your question: yeah, research is important. You should be careful though. I don't trust pharmacists as easily as you do." She looked into Retchfield's green eyes that were obscured by an onyx pupil.

"I'm not as gullible as you think. I hurt, okay. That's why I take the pills. I admit it. It's not purely selfless. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

"Yeah." Crynge tried to hold back a laugh but failed.

Retchfield sighed and walked inside. "You're hopeless."

"You too, sweetie," she said. "Seriously, though. I think you should see a doctor."

"I don't need someone probing around in my head. I see enough researchers in lab coats as it is when I go down there every month. Thanks anyway." He sat down and pretended to read his book.

"Not that kinda doctor," she said. "A real one."

"We don't have the money, not that I should have to pay anyway. I used to work all the time, and look where it got me? I feel like shit every day. I gave everything I had to PolitiCo."

She sighed. "Not this speech again, please."

"I cleaned up after the human race's stupidity. I don't know what was worse, the war or moving all of the toxic shit out of the way. Anyway, I gave PolitiCo my health, and I didn't get a damn thing for it."

"Are you done? We're going to Medica. PolitiCo can give you back your health, or at least make you feel better. They do have free health care there, so quit yer bitchin." She stood next to Retchfield's chair and tried to look bigger.

"I toldja already, I ain't goin nowhere. I feel like a sack a crap."

"Well I'm going to Medica. I have to make a drug

delivery there. C'mon, it'll be fun. We can pinch a little off the top, see the landscape, meet new and exciting people. An adventure for you and me." She danced around in a silly circle.

"I'll be just fine here. I've got plenty of books."

"If you change your mind, let me know. I'm going out for the night. I'll wake you before I leave tomorrow morning."

"Don't let the door," he mumbled.

"What?"

"Bye." He went back to reading. After a sentence or two, he walked out of the door to catch her, to go out with her, but she was gone. The skin on his forehead crunched together. He slammed his fist into the railing of the balcony. He went into his black bag that he always kept packed in case he needed to escape in a hurry and got his bottle of nepenthe. Chasing a tablet with water, he considered walking around outside to find her, but decided to stay home and get some work done. Sitting on his cot, he read for a few minutes. He set the book down on the floor and curled up under a blanket. After feeling sorry for himself, he soon passed out.

Two

Crynge approached the small movie house by herself. The quietly automated box office and ticket ripper's tiny turning gears hissed through the silence. After all the years, the mechanisms still worked. Technology at the peak of civilization had been amazingly well constructed. She helped herself to some buttered popcorn and ran her card through the slot. Inside the theatre, a piano played as if by mechanical spectre. A loud click in the projection booth startled her, as it did every time she went to the movies by herself. The rattle of the projector churned out flickering light through crackled film. The feature was something with all dialogue (subtitled, of course) and no action. She admired the intricate carvings on the ceiling. Despite being slightly put off by the mechanical atmosphere of the theatre, she continued to return every once in a while.

During the intermission, a nostalgic short about pre-apocalypse times poured onto the screen. She had never seen it before, and she realized a feeling she had never felt before. She had heard the word "nostalgia" once, but never understood it. Only when referencing back to a time of extreme sentimentality could she begin to know what it was like to want things to be the way they once were. Crynge felt herself sink into the seat. The short film was a plea for peaceful solutions. She understood what immobilized Retchfield on a regular basis.

The film returned, an old science-fiction piece about robots taking over the world. The whole idea made her laugh. "How could robots do anything but what they're designed and programmed for?" Her 3D goggles made her head itch and she adjusted them frequently. Her eyes had trouble adjusting when she took them off.

At a club, she found the only table with a light over it and pulled out a book. She watched people dance to throbbing music. The club had survived the many wars, and at

one time held massive parties that could only be imitated now. Crynge longed for the booming entertainment of the past. She noticed that no one looked at or talked to anyone else in the place, not even people they were supposed to be with. Her soda tasted like pesticides. She got a beer (bottled) from the bar and a few more. She closed her book and walked over to the dance floor, on the way tipping the bartender. Apprehensive at first, she danced and drank and danced and drank. No one that she was aware of looked at her. Usually at least someone would make eye contact with her, but the perceived snubbing bothered her. She slammed her beer down her throat and walked out.

The usual mist had concentrated into rain by this point and forced her to walk hastily. She stopped by a small bakery that doubled as a coffee shop. After eating a small pastry, (having dropped her change into the tip jar) she drank a paper cup of water.

"You gonna walk home in the rain?" the freckled boy at the counter said. "You got an umbrella?"

"Yup. Nope."

"Take this extra umbrella."

"Thanks. But, no thanks," she said. "I like walkin in the rain."

He smiled as she walked out. She came into her furnished room to find Retchfield asleep. She wanted to wake him, but decided against it.

Three

The alarm clock shattered Crynge's five hours of sleep into shards. She fell off her mattress and pulled the clock down with her, indirectly shutting it off. She looked over at Retchfield and knew he'd still be asleep. The fluorescent light in the bathroom pointed out her early morning imperfections with gleeful radiance. She frowned at the sagging eyes in her reflection and stuck out a flat yellowish tongue to her disgust. After her shower, she put on her yesterday clothes, as they were only one day dirty. Of course, she wore a clean bra, underwear and socks. Back in the mirror, she attempted to put on a small amount of natural looking makeup, but was disappointed with the results. "At least I feel clean," she thought.

She shook Retchfield's shoulder. He had curled up on his small cot and was drooling onto his arm. "Retch, wake up. I've gotta go figure out how I'm gonna get where I'm going. Are you comin with me or what?"

"No. Lemme sleep." He refused to open his eyes. Waves of color projected from his brain onto the blackness of his eyelids. His consciousness floated somewhere near him.

"I'll see you in a few weeks then." She put on her backpack and made her exit.

The refrigerator made a popping sound and he jumped up. He remembered he had packed a bag just in case he'd change his mind, grabbed it and ran out.

"What made you change your mind?" Crynge asked.

"I got lonely." He smiled awkwardly.

The two walked toward the bank of the River Aegris, which slithered down through PolitiCo23. Blackened broken trees littered the path through the quiet soil. Pain returned

to Retchfield's abdomen just as Crynge noticed a Food Establishment restaurant ahead in their path.

Greasy air patted them on the face as they entered. Retchfield examined the packaged food items. "What happened to having choices? Why does one company get to decide what I eat and how I eat it?"

"Someone's gotta provide those choices. Do you want to make food and sell it to everyone or what?"

"We should be able to come in here and cook our own food."

"You really think people are responsible enough to do that?"

"Well I'd do it," he said.

"I do agree with you though. I don't see why PolitiCo only holds a contract with one company at a time. First Socortex-Maliocatio. Now ArrowHeart Industries. They've already got our money, why should they bother making it taste good. It's so unhealthy too."

"I swear they're tryina kill us at a young age. I'm not really interested in nicotine bran muffins, if ya know what I mean. And I really don't like that all of this was made with prison labor."

"Not to mention this is what prisoners eat too. Not even serial rapists deserve stale cereal," she said. "I've lost my appetite."

"I never had one to begin with." He grabbed a box of cereal. "Grey meat's just not my thing. Serial rapists might deserve this, but prisons are filled with people like us too. Drugs are only legal in Pharmacoepia, remember?"

"Shit! I forgot my meal card." Crynge patted the pockets in her faded baggy jeans.

"It's cool. I've got plenty of credit on mine. Looks like I'll be supporting you for a change."

"It won't be the first time." Crynge ordered a plate of neon orange macaroni and a pile of grey egg-like substance.

"This is disgusting."

"I'm sick of this shit. I'm gonna tell this asshole how

to cook." Retchfield began to walk up to the counter.

"I thought you were all about the common man, Retch. Now you're gonna go makin this guy's day worse?"

He sighed. "We still shouldn't have to put up with this shitty service. I hate how the people who are really responsible for this crap hide behind people like us. Chains of command ruin everything."

"Okay, you're getting a little too didactic. I'll worry about getting my order right next time. Now I just wanna eat."

They found a seat far away from other groups of people that together made up a hissing background noise.

"I think I've figured out a way to get to Medica. We need to find someone with a vehicle and offer them some pills for a ride," Crynge said.

"Where are we gonna get pills?" he said quietly.

"From a pharmacist. Where else would we get them? I need to make a delivery to Medica. Why not skim some off the top?"

"Now you're thinkin like me. Those doctor's deserve to get ripped off for trusting us anyway."

"I wouldn't put it that way. No one deserves to get ripped off, but it's just a matter of necessity. I couldn't come up with anything better. I hate myself for even thinkin of it really. Consumable currency is a scary idea," she said.

"I see your point. Sometimes your beliefs have to adapt to your situation."

"Sometimes is the key word. I've got standards, you know."

"That's why you hang out with me, right?" He pushed away his half-eaten bowl of soggy cereal.

Crynge finished her greasy food and wiped up her crumbs.

"You should finish your cereal. You're just gonna throw it away?"

"What do you think they do with the food at the end of the day? Give it away to people hungrier than us?"

"I'm doubting it," she said.

Four

Retchfield paced in the aisle while Crynge picked up the package at the front of the store. He tried to avoid eye contact with faceless people, but his background thoughts began to bore him. Laughter echoed from strangers at him. Products stared back from the shelves, pushing him back. He tripped and nearly fell over on a small old man who was kneeling down on the floor.

"Are you okay?" Retchfield said.

"I'm fine, young man. You didn't hurt me. My bones hurt all the time, but I've got a good prescription coming."

"I know whatcha mean. I'm waiting for a package of nepenthezine. But we have to deliver it to Medica."

"That's a shame. If it were me, I'd take a little off the top." The old man smiled. "My name's Satyr'n O'Naffy, by the way."

"Retchfield Commock. Nice to meet you."

The two stood in the aisle with a silence awkward to Retchfield.

"You know, if you wait standing until you can't take it anymore and then go sit down, they'll call your name right away."

"I'll try anything twice." Retchfield sat down on a flat bench.

"How are you getting to Medica? Transportation's hard to come by these days," Satyr'n said.

Crynge walked up with a large paper package. "That's a good question."

"I've got a barge with a hydro-electric motor that I don't need anymore. It's not much, but it's got a nice shack to keep ya dry." He leaned on his black cane. "I used to pilot it up and down the River Aegris when I was your age."

"That's awfully nice of you, mister." Crynge looked around and unfolded one side of the package. "Take these for your trouble."

"Neps! Thank you, young lady. These are the new thing I hear."

Retchfield grabbed some for himself, chewed one up and put the rest in his pocket. "Be careful with those. They're strong."

"Don't worry about me, son. I've been killin the pain for a long time. Lemme get my scrip and we can get outta here." Satyr'n groaned, bending over to tie his shoe. As soon as his knee touched the ground, his name was called.

"It's back here somewhere," Satyr'n said. The ground was getting moist and Retchfield's boots slurped through the terrain. Trees hung low and obscured their path. Crynge took in a large breath. "What's that god-awful smell?"

"Toxins in the water, most likely. This river isn't exactly a hotbed of purity. We are downstream, you know. The River Aegris Basin." He pushed aside foliage in the path with his cane. "Here it is."

A 15'x15' barge sat tethered to a tree. Bent guardrails with chipped yellow paint poked out of the base toward the sky. What appeared to be a small tool shed rested in the center. The portal cut in one wall of the shed revealed a floor riddled with holes caused by oxidation. An old blanket sat in a corner, which had probably been used to cover the holes in the floor. On one outer side of the shed, a hydro-electric motor hung into the water. Retchfield and Crynge looked at each other. Crynge wrinkled her eyebrows.

Retchfield shrugged.

"Good luck." O'Naffy grinned.

Five

Retchfield and Crynge relaxed in the hazy glow of a red sunset. The engine safely splashed its way up the River Aegris in an overcast calm. No one else was around, and the surveillance satellites probably weren't paying any attention to them, so they could have been exploring more intimate pastimes. However, their relationship had devolved (or evolved, depending on your moral posturing on sexuality) to the point of being just close friends, mostly due to Retchfield's heavy medication having shriveled his libido. They made conversation from time to time, but mostly kept to themselves, reading their respective books: Retchfield, A Brief History of PolitiCo and Its Policies, and Crynge, The Hypertext Edition of the Skeptic's Annotated Writings of the Dalai Lama.

"I can finally just chill," Crynge said. "Even though technically I'm working, this is a lot easier than running around doing deliveries in town. It's almost like a vacation."

"I could only bring a few books. This kinda put a damper on my work, but it is nice out here. I bet the river used to be beautiful."

"What's that?" Crynge saw a large boat approaching them.

"Looks like some kind of large boat," Retchfield said.

When it came closer, a small man-boy in a business suit shouted with a bullhorn, "Identify yourselves. You are approaching the gated town of Anthema and its waters."

"We're delivering medicine to Medica," Crynge said.

"Don't tell him that!" Retchfield whispered.

"What kind of medicine?" The man asked.

"Antibiotics." Retchfield shouted.

"Oh. I am the great architect, Alvert Scand," he shouted through the bullhorn. "I have designed this great landscape you see before you."

Crynge gave Retchfield a confused look and took

out her binoculars to look at the riverbank. "Alvert, tell me, why are the buildings all fucked up? That mall's not even finished and there's people shopping in it. I can see right in cause there's no frickin wall."

"Excuse me? The buildings are my design. They are exactly what I have decided upon! I am the chief architect of PolitiCo23, and we can't deny people the experience of shopping or movie going just because the buildings aren't finished. Regular people need the freedom to have these things that enrich their lives. Time is money, my dear, and so I must be going." He spoke quickly and motioned to someone to turn the boat around.

"What was that all about?" Retchfield pretended to seem only slightly interested while reading his book.

"No idea. We need to get something to eat. Let's park the barge."

They came upon a diner after some time, if it could be called that, an unadorned monstrosity made out of what appeared to be high-impact plastic. They ate grey granola and watched the news broadcast on the monitors. The words scrolled across in bold letters:

"Cracked Heads: Officers split open skulls of cocaine users during midnight bust in Marshala,"

"Rich Snitch: Anthema residents tip agents on fellow citizens for community safety,"

"Party Hard: A young boy's birthday party accidentally bombed by peace officers in Anthema," and on they went.

Retchfield fingered his pile of granola and cleaned dirt from his fingernails. Crynge sipped on coffee and shoveled some grey eggs into her wide mouth. Her eyes shifted from one monitor to the next but never rested on any particular screen.

She saw Retchfield staring at her plate. "Do you want some eggs?"

"What?" He hadn't noticed that he was staring through the counter in her direction. "No, I'm not hungry." He felt the stares of other patrons.

Crynge took off her mirrored sunglasses and examined her face in them. Her brown hair was already starting to stick together. She licked the inside of her mouth and tasted the film of dead skin and plaque. She pushed her plate forward and put her shades back on.

He threw away the scraps of lukewarm food and quickly walked to the bathroom. Once inside, he took out one of the tablets of nepenthezine and held it between his finger and thumb. He noticed how thin he was getting when he saw his bony wrist slide out of the long sleeve on his old jacket. The tablet had a strange jade color about it, but it was gone soon enough, as Retchfield popped it into his mouth and chewed it up. He barely flinched at the bitter chalk on his teeth. He walked out and Crynge was waiting for him.

"How are you feeling?"

"Lots of pain in my chest. I'm feeling pretty weak. Can we go out to the pub while we're here? I need a drink," he said. "I need something to kick in this painkiller."

Six

Upon arriving at the club, another bland building, they noticed it was hardly built at all--just a plastic structure comprised of blocks of various colors: pure red, yellow and blue. A second floor that had barely enough walls supported the roof. Construction equipment lay about the site, ready to be utilized the next morning.

Retchfield laughed as he dropped a pill into his pint of beer and it immediately sizzled into the liquid. He gladly slurped up the aqua foam.

"This music is shitty," Crynge said.

"Fuck yeah...what the hell is up with that trite shit? Wanna play some pool?"

Crynge walked to the jukebox, and after a frustrating few minutes, found a catalog of pre-apocalyptic music. Fascinated and dumbfounded by the enormous selection, she randomly selected a track that turned out to be a gloomy anti-war rock fugue. Her choice drew unkind mutterings from a few people who were accustomed to more comfortably repeatable melodies.

"I set up the game. Nice choice in party music." He laughed.

"Shut up. It's good." She nodded her head to the beat. While playing pool, they talked about having to go through Marshala. Retchfield reactively got his mind together as a hyped-out Anthemite walking up behind Crynge as she scratched while trying to hit the 8-ball.

"Heard you were talking about Marshala...man, I don't think you wanna go there," the small man said. "My name is Drew. Drew Scand."

"You wouldn't happen to be Alvert's brother, would you?" Crynge asked.

"That's my bro. A little weird, but a good kid. He's the chief architect here, but you probably already know that if you've met him. He's one of the few rugged individualists

still working. Most of us are on strike to teach those scumbags in Mecha that they can't get anything done without our focused leadership. I own various companies...computers, news media, but steel and copper, oh, and oil too, which are virtually inexhaustible industries. So, in other words, I like to party a lot."

Retchfield choked up on his pool cue. Crynge stamped down her foot to shut him up. "Yeah, I know how that is. Never let sleep get in the way of a good time," Crynge said.

They pulled up to Drew's mansion in his tank-like vehicle. Retchfield sat looking at the road, still contemplating the murder scene they found when leaving the bar. A fight gone wrong led to a head split open with a bullet. The head had rested gently on the wheel of a car. Retchfield couldn't feel his painkillers anymore. Crynge poured over the towering wall that forced a gap between the outside world and Drew's fortress of functionality. She wondered if houses used to look that way in Pharmacoepia but then remembered that Pharmacoepia as people knew it wasn't much older than herself. When her parents grew up there, the roads were still gravel and backyards were brackish swamps. The interior of the house continued to stun her. She had never seen such opulence. White columns scattered around a large main room held up bubble shaped screens, each playing a random loop of visuals. She rubbed the soft upholstery on the couch.

"So, I hear this place is a good city to raise kids," Retchfield joked.

"Children? Are you crazy? This is no place for children," he said. "Just like Marshala."

"I hear Marshala's pretty scary with all the W.O.W. veteran gangs patrolling," Crynge said.

"Yeah, I fucking hate those pig bastards...I'd like to

lock them all up in a zoo," Drew said. "You guys want some crank? This is primo stuff. Better than the shit fighter pilots get."

"No thanks. We've got nepentheazine. Want one?" Crynge said. Retchfield gave them both unnoticed wary looks.

"You drive a hard bargain. It's hard to turn down some neps," Drew said.

They each took one. Retchfield had a second for good luck. Drew flipped on the main monitor.

A barrage of images flashed that rendered all forms of parody and pastiche useless, as they were exactly what one might have found in the satires of the old times, except that they weren't kidding. Mock futuristic commercials strobed on the set, but they were in themselves advertisements for actual products.

Marshallian War Criminal Action Figures with Drug Prison Play set!

Currency Crush: The new extreme strategy game where you get to build up the Anthemite nanodollar and crush the Mechan competition with the brute force of an iron fist and slithering whisper of disinformation!

Recommended for ages 4 and up.

News in five: A cold front approaches from the north, could weather terrorists be to blame?

Crynge admired further the symbols of great loyalty and wealth arranged about the mansion. Retchfield's eyelids began to cover even more of his eyes than usual. Staring at the monitor made his mind drift to a place where he hoped to find interesting characters. Instead, he opened his eyes to a two-minute show about everyday people performing pseudo-shocking warlike acts replayed over and over, stripping the phrase "fifteen nanoseconds of fame" of all its irony. A commercial plainly said: "*Obey your id.*" Drew was enraptured by the programming, and said suddenly: "Man, I love freedom. Don't you guys love freedom?"

"Of course," Retchfield said, "who doesn't?"

"Freedom from work is great. That's what makes Anthema such a great place. We can just sit back and enjoy the finer things in life. I don't owe anyone a damn thing, and I don't need anyone to do shit for me." Drew fiddled with his gold bracelet.

"Yeah, one day, mechanization will let us all finally be free from useless toil and happily unemployed," Retchfield said.

"Mechanization? You're not in favor of full automation, are you? Are you two Mecha-lovers? Damned workers' councils and collective nonsense! Mechanize everything and then you'll just have a bunch of dirty riffraff lying around doing drugs all day, or worse, taking back what we've planned so hard for!"

"We didn't mean..." Crynge tried to interrupt.

"Actually, I..." Retchfield attempted to speak his mind, but Drew cut him off anyway.

"You guys are Mecha lovers! I'm calling the cops!"

Retchfield said lowly to Crynge: "I don't think this guy is very sane. Let's get outta here." They ran from the mansion without looking back.

Seven

When they entered the diner, Retchfield had expected some trouble, but old people simply sat and ate their breakfast while watching a news story about the lack of news. Crynge picked up some packaged foods. Retchfield ordered a breakfast meal, as it was now becoming morning. He nervously watched the ticker.

"Steal Giant: Andrew Scand, entrepreneur, reported two tourists, First Names Crynge and Retchfield, were handing out anti-Anthemite flyers. Claimed to be headed for Marshala and carrying the drug nepentheazine. Stay tuned for 3D rendered artist's sketches. But coming up next...Is your neighbor spying on you? Find out with new anti-spy surveillance equipment. Available at both major retailers."

"I left my wallet in the car, let me go get it," Retchfield stuttered to the cashier, who wore a diaper to save company time from bathroom breaks. "Honey?" he looked at Crynge while holding the door open and urged, "let's go out to the car and get the wallet."

Crynge was just then sliding her card through the packaged food dispenser and an alarm went off. Red lights strobed and a lock mechanism jutted out of the open door in a vain attempt at keeping them inside. They ran into the blinding sunlight.

A pack of agents and narc dogs rumbled through the heated dust at them. Retchfield and Crynge ran down the gravel road in the direction of their barge. An unnecessarily large vehicle pulled up. They jumped back and ran toward the diner.

"Get in!" Alvert shouted, waving a shiny handgun at them. Retchfield attempted to run but fell down, coughing up crimson pulp. Crynge knelt down to help Retchfield. "Let's just go," she whispered.

"Hey, where ya headed?" Alvert asked.

"Over there, down by the river," Crynge took a look around the inside of the vehicle. Papers littered the interior. Retchfield took out a handkerchief wiped his forehead.

"Yeah, to that floating shed thing y'all got?" He took them via a strange route that bought them some time. The cops followed close but fired no weapons. When they arrived at the bank of the River Aegris, Alvert said: "I know what you did to my brother, but worry not. I have a han-kerin for this fine young lady here, even if she is a low-life rifferaff trashy slut. But I do appreciate you reciprocating the help I just provided."

"Eew. Nasty!" she shouted.

Alvert jumped onto her growling: "You little ungrateful bitch!"

Crynge, thinking quickly, reached under the seat. While Retchfield pondered the ethics of whether or not he was compelled by his reason to attack Alvert, Crynge pulled out a large wooden slide rule and plunged it into Alvert's windpipe.

Retchfield and Crynge escaped the vehicle and ran to their barge. They quickly switched out the motor and headed off, with dogs barking at them from the bank. One jumped in after them but its flesh began to bubble on the bone. The motor picked up some speed and carried them down the river once more. Retchfield sat down and remained quiet, his face a pale grey. Crynge reclined next to him and fell asleep. He looked down at her face and wanted to contribute more. As his vision blurred, he exhaled, unsure of what emotion pressed its way out of his lungs.

Eight

Retchfield and Crynge awoke near nightfall and tore into their packaged food. They were nearing Marshala and Crynge noticed that the passage of river became very narrow. The barge fought the current up the river. All of the veterans living in Marshala were in the middle of a brutal civil war, although no one could truly say what they were fighting over. Most of them had been military police during the War on Wars, so tourists usually just referred to them as cops. Razor wire snagged on for miles, and piles of rubble built up everywhere to form a landscape of peaks and valleys. Charred metal twisted up from grainy black sand. A tattered flag flapped on the end of a splintered human femur. Billboards on rusted poles identified the mini-territories. Dirt roads used for tank travel winded under layers of war leftovers. Retchfield found it difficult to imagine how the place looked in sunlight, as it seemed to him all too proper for Marshala to be covered in a constant darkness. He doodled random symbols errantly in the margin of his book.

"What was that?"

"Sounds like the motor stopped," Crynge said.

"I guess were gonna have to walk it for a while."

Retchfield tried to comfort himself but stood up and paced, stopping short of punching the inside wall of the shed.

"Let's get our backpacks together and let this piece of crap float back down the river."

While walking late at night, they happened upon a pack of cops with narc-attack dogs.

"It's a shame that those dogs can't help what they're doing. They just don't know that they're being evil," Crynge said.

"Shhh. Don't move. I think we're downwind."

A huge deserted apartment building towered over them with an ominous distorted shape. It looked like it had been

vacant for at least twenty years. The building consisted of thick grey concrete that were perhaps painted brown at one point. The walls were now covered in a variety of occult graffiti by unknown artistic teenagers. However, a police guard station lit up the ground floor to keep out squatters and vagrants. They approached one of the side stairwells that was out of view. Overhead screens displayed their grainy grey appearance to plentiful security cameras.

"Maybe we shouldn't go," he said.

"You're the one who wanted to check it out. We need a place to sleep."

Conveniently, the door to the stairwell was unlocked. The lights lining the walls hummed angrily at them. They found a room with a broken window on the seventh floor and he reached through and unlocked the door.

"What's that smell?"

"Hopefully nothing toxic," he held his shirt over his face for a minute, but realized the futility of it. He found a small lamp that worked but only served to illuminate the pseudo-satanic drawings all over the room.

They sat on opposing prison mattresses with their backs to the walls. Crynge took a baggy and a bottle of water from her backpack and tossed them to Retchfield. He pulled a book and a pair of needle nose pliers from his bag and crushed a nepenthezine tablet into a milky powder. He used an ID card to push it into two lines. "Want some?" Crynge folded her arms and looked him in the eyes. "You know I hate when you do that."

"You don't have to snort it. Here, have a fresh one."

"I said no."

"You really should take one."

"Fine," she said. "Gimme one." She got up and grabbed one from his hand and whipped it down her throat with a splash of water. She sat down and kept the water bottle. He snorted both lines. They stared at the strange markings on the walls and ceiling that blended in with the mildew to form malevolent faces. Crynge noticed how dark

it was. The surroundings uneased her.

He was entranced by the complex occultish symbols scrawled over the room. He got a feeling of déjà vu and quickly got out his book. "Look at that symbol over there!"

"Where?" Crynge jumped in her seat.

"It's just like this one I drew earlier. See." He pointed at the margin of his book and back at the wall.

"I'm not seeing it. I guess it kinda looks like it."

"Kinda? It's exactly the same. How could I have known about that symbol earlier. It's impossible. It's got to have some significance!"

"It's a coincidence. Just because you attach meaning to a coincidence doesn't make it magical," she said.

"What about what Satyr'n O'Naffy said? I've been thinking about it. If you apply certain beliefs to certain situations, you can change them."

"So you can get a seat in a waiting room? Watch out with that powerful magic, buddy," she mocked. "Anyway, it's still your perception of the coincidence as something more than it is."

"If I can change small things like the open seats in a room, that says something pretty amazing about reality. Just imagine if someone could apply that to something bigger! I just want to know the nuances of reality's programming," he said.

"I really thought you were smarter than that. How do you know if it's working if you can't get consistent results? This is ridiculous."

"Science just hasn't gotten to that level yet. One day, the stuff Satyr'n does will be explained in science book. Quantum theory of mind and stuff."



"You're just as bad as the creationists. You realize that, right? You can't make reality fit your theories. That's ass-backwards." She smiled. "You're so funny." She got up to sit on the bed next to him.

"Watch out for my book," he said. He had the book pinned to the bed with one finger and began to read.

"Sorry." She put an arm around him and laid her head on his shoulder. She moved in to kiss his neck.

"I'm trying to read."

"Don't you want to relax for a while?" She kissed his ear.

He shut his book and gave a heavy sigh. "You know I can't do this. It's the damn pills."

She stood up quickly and walked to the other side of the room. "I can't take this smell anymore!" she said. She began to look green to him, but he couldn't tell if it was real or effect.

"Well, there isn't much I can do about it. I need to piss," Retchfield had some trouble getting the bathroom door open. He kicked the door and it fell into the bathroom and kept falling. He grabbed the doorframe to keep from falling through the floor (or lack thereof).

Crynge screamed. "Are you okay?"

"I nearly fell into an abyss of infinite darkness, but other than that, I'm fine." He moved the lamp to see what was below the bathroom. A legion of plump blue metallic flies rose up with the sound of a tornado. He only got one moment to see the feast of human parts below being further liquefied by the fly children.

"Let's go!" Retchfield held his choking throat. Crynge gathered up the supplies and followed. They ran down the stairs.

"I knew going in there was a bad idea," Retchfield said.

"Well it wasn't my idea."

"You certainly didn't mind going."

"I'm the one who grabbed the shit. You just ran out."

"Fuck you. You're the one who..."

Barks and growls and flashlights approached them from below.

"Dogs!" They both yelled.

They ran up to the floor above and huddled in a nearby hole in the wall.

"I think we should split up," Crynge said.

"You mean like split up-split up, or just like, going in different directions?"

"I don't know. I guess just different directions for a while or something. We should take separate stairwells, I mean."

"Okay, but who's gonna get the pills? Should we split them?"

Crynge rolled her eyes. "I think I should keep them. Here take a few in case of an emergency," and handed Retchfield three or four pills. "I'm going to cut through Emptyland for a while and go to Acadaemia, and you know, use the university as a base of operations."

"I'm sorry," he hugged her and they broke off in their own directions.

Nine

Retchfield arrived in the middle of the Holiday. He looked around him as parades of revelers danced around. He reached into his pocket, but he had long ago run out of pills. He stood off to the side of the action and took it all in. The streets were unnaturally clean, especially for a parade. He was used to parades in his youth that were filled with garbage and its distinctive grey-brown juice. The streets were covered in soft flat stones with a natural light brown hue. Robots chirped around, staying out of the way of partygoers. They served drinks and picked up trash, each sized, shaped and color-coded for its specific task. He surprised himself by becoming relaxed at the sight of happy people. A beerbot stretched a limb up to him with a tray of beer. "What an amazing flavor," he thought. He then noticed that the smell of cannabis drifted everywhere. On nearly every corner a garden bloomed. The sidewalks were made with a comfortable lawn grass. Throngs of people came in and out of open doors on establishments on both sides of the street. They rested against columns holding up balconies. Black flags with red gears flapped proudly in the wind. Black and red floats swayed down the streets with beautiful men and women throwing black and red roses to the crowd. Retchfield picked up a black rose and rubbed the petals. They were plant matter and not the felt that he had expected.

"Boy, what the hell are you doin'?" A large hand clapped down on Retchfield's shoulder causing him to jump and stumble.

"Check it out, it's the sanest man I know! What the fuck, Lukane?" Retchfield gave him a long hug and slaps on the back, still hyperventilating from being startled.

"You know I hate slaps on the back. Chillin. How you been?"

"Not too good. Trying to get to Medica."

"I'll drink to that. Where's Crynge at?" Lukane sipped whiskey from a bottle.

"She's over in Emptyland now, but we're supposed to meet back up in Acadaemia."

"So what are you doing in town?"

"Tryin to lay low. Been having some bad luck in Anthema,"

"Damn, I'm so fucked up. I think I'm gonna go back to my place, but you're welcomed to come hang out."

Retchfield sat on the brown and green couch while admiring the organic surroundings. Everything appeared as if it came from a botanical source. The scent of what he had always imagined a rainforest to smell like soothed him. He saw almost no plastic. Even the machines, computers and robots were made of strange material unknown to him. He looked up when a noise scratched at the door.

"Don't worry. It's just my roommate, August," Lukane said.

Retchfield watched her struggle with the door carrying two cases of beer. He thought he should help, but he was too late by the time the thought completed.

"Want a beer?" she said.

"Sure," he hadn't meant to answer so slowly, but he hadn't really meant to say anything at all.

"I love Holiday!" she handed him a dark brown bottle of even darker brown beer with a black label on it.

"Yeah, I've heard about Holiday. I hear it goes on for weeks at a time or something." He looked at Lukane, trying to avoid the conversation.

"Well yeah, with all of the mechanization, we really don't have to work that much outside of negotiation meetings and mech maintenance. We mostly get drunk and write bad poetry," she said.

"Sounds like the kinda place I'd like to settle down,"

Retchfield laughed honestly but noticed a sharp pain in his chest. His hands felt asleep.

"Actually, I'm in the Young Poets Guild and on the Pharmacological Consumers Council. Great fun. You want a cigarette?"

"Wow, thanks. I can't remember the last time I had one of these. This is great." The brand tasted familiar to him, but he noticed that the flavor had a sinister delicacy. "I fancy myself a bad poet as well."

"We should get together and collaborate sometime," she laughed.

"Sounds like a plan," he drank quickly and nearly choked.

"You look kinda green. Oh, I almost forgot. My name's August."

"I'm okay. I'm Retchfield."

"Okay, Retchfield, nice to meet you."

He reminded himself that soulmates didn't actually exist. "It's just a matter of statistical probability, right?" Phlegm was growing in his throat.

"Hey, let me see that," she took the cigarette out of his mouth and placed it cherry first in hers. She crept close and blew smoke into his face. He tried to inhale but he choked on his lungs.

"That's one hell of a cigarette," he coughed. His pants seemed tighter somehow. The room spun slightly and they laughed together.

Ten

Hot rain poured onto Crynge in the dark. Steam sizzled up from the paved plains of Emptyland. Carcasses of ancient vehicles spread in all directions forming a grid of possible sleeping spots. She sat on the ground, tossed her backpack into the shelter of a boxy tank of a car and leaned against it, allowing heavy warm drops to splash on her. She wore a blue tank top, having removed her jacket earlier at the sight of the gurgling clouds. The only part she hated about sitting in the rain was her wet sneakers and socks. They stuck to her like salivating constrictors. However, she felt somewhat clean in the water. Droplets beaded on her large shiny glasses that cast back the images of lightning at the sky. One day had passed since she last saw Retchfield and she had never really stopped thinking about him. Placing a nepenthezine tablet on her tongue, she leaned her head back and opened her mouth wide, allowing the rain to push the painkiller into her body. She put her soaked hair into a ponytail. A blade of grass sagged in a crease of the flat ground. "Pavement is the ultimate pollution," she thought. The lightning kept its distance, but she worried nonetheless. After an hour of sitting, the worry nearly washed itself away. Crynge saw a form in the distant heat shadows. "Probably just a mirage," she thought. "No, it's a real person."

"Crynge?"

"Semantha?"

"Hi! It's been so long! What are you doing out here?"

"I'm just...on my way to...Acadaemia to take some classes." Crynge attempted to remember fully to whom she spoke. She concentrated still on the rain.

"Oh cool! I'm on break from my job at the hospital. I'm going to Anthema to work with the army."

"So you're an official nurse now, right?"

"It's pretty cool, I..." Semantha's voice faded into the background of Crynge's consciousness.

Seeing Semantha had made her greatly aware of how long it had been since she had seen most of her old friends. She thought about how she could never truly go back to that time. Sure, she had friends now that she had many great times with, but those times would end the same way one day, and the whole lot just caused a tightening in the center of her body that spread throughout.

"The army? I'd rather not participate in that sort of adventure," Crynge looked down at Semantha's blood-stained scrubs.

"Things aren't so bad. Why do people like you always carry the weight of the world on your shoulders?"

"You haven't changed at all. How can someone who is daily bombarded with the most revolting aspects of human life, the constant carnage of the health care field, have such a positive view?"

She knew that people like her were necessary to the world, but she was baffled nonetheless. Anyway, Semantha was the one she always used to go to when she was afraid that her lifestyle was catching up to her and thought she was going into some sort of dangerous medical condition, but it never amounted to anything. Still though, she worried that the next time her suspicions would be fatally correct.

"Anthema's army, huh? I just can't believe it. They've been trying to 'cleanse' the other districts forever and now you wanna go help them?" Crynge said.

Semantha sighed, her wet hair curling in the storm. They ate together and Crynge brought out some pills for sharing, because sharing is caring.

"We're going to have to share a sleeping bag. Is that cool?"

"Sure," Crynge said. They made their goodnight formalities and relaxed quietly.

"No, there's been an accident."

"Transportation."

"Is anyone here a doctor?"

Crynge stretched and yawned. She ate breakfast with

Semantha.

"I guess this is where our paths diverge," Semantha said.

"It's been great seeing you."

"You too."

They held each other with watering eyes and made their goodbyes.

Eleven

"Can I buy a cigarette off you?" Lukane held out some coins. Retchfield wondered about the economy of Mecha, but decided not to ask.

"Don't worry. There's plenty enough to share," August lit one up. "Besides, your dirty Anthemite coins are no good here."

"What do you have to drink around here?" Retchfield perused the cabinets. "You got any pills?"

"No pills today. There's some whiskey in the freezer. Unfortunately, Anthema keeps a lot of the software necessary to produce things like medicine from us. That's why we need people to deliver drugs to us, except for the ones we can still grow ourselves," she said.

"I try to do as much as I can to reprogram the MOPs, but I can't really do much," Lukane said.

"MOPs?" Retchfield felt that perhaps they were fucking with him.

"Means of Production," Lukane said. "The machines that we use to make..."

"Yeah, I know what the means of production are." Retchfield became irritated.

"Anthema wants to control resources in all of the areas. Naturally, we don't want that shit. We're trying to get the people in Anthema, the service industry people, to help, but the process is annoyingly slow," she said.

"Everyone is divided in so many ways. Some don't want to steal to survive, others do. Some support small factions in Anthema, even though they would do the same if they were a big faction. I'm just tryina go to school, and even that...don't get me started...we can't even get basic human rights...the food...academic freedom...don't get me started." Lukane passed the bottle to Retchfield.

"Anthema uses the fact that they control the funding to the other areas over us. The debt that Academia owes

keeps them dependent on the Anthemites' ass-backward ideas about education, whatever education really means," August said.

"I've got so much debt just to study history at U of Academia. If I didn't jack the MOPs to help us get what we need, I'd be totally fucked," Lukane said.

"I totally understand, you guys." Retchfield sipped whiskey and smoked August's herbal cigarette. "I seen so much bullshit when I worked at the W.O.W. cleanup site, and now I'm all sick and shit. We've got access to drugs in Pharmacoeopia, but all of the doctors and medical techs can't find jobs there. They have to work in Medica, which means I have to figure out how to get there to make sure I don't drop dead. Now my friend Crynge is acting all weird on me. I just..." He propped his forehead on his free hand with the bottle in his lap and the cigarette in the other hand. He laughed. "This is silly."

"Come here, Retchfield, I want to show you something," August rose up from her cross-legged seating position.

"Hey, bitch," speaking to Retchfield, "Don't take the bottle with you," Lukane pointed out the disproportion in commodities.

"What did you want to ask me?" Retchfield whispered. His pants felt smaller again.

"You think this is a game?" Lukane loomed in the doorway, whiskey bottle in hand. They stood at attention like reprimanded primates not knowing even if they should answer. "You're creating the context!"

They weren't sure what he meant, so they fell on the floor laughing. They kissed each other and danced around like sasquatch toddlers.

"Sometimes, I just want to break out," Lukane said.

"You mean like freak out?" August asked.

"No. I want to go past freaking out. I want to just totally break out," he motioned with his hands forcing himself out of his own body.

"Let's go have some melba toast," August walked to the kitchen.

"I helped program the monorail system in Mecha, you know. My group won the Excellence in Mechanization Award in the Transportation Technologies Programmers' Guild."

Retchfield wasn't sure if he was telling the truth, but he believed him anyway. While Lukane was distracted, Retchfield followed August. She reached up for the melba toast in the dark kitchen space and he watched her from across the room.

"Need some help?"

"No, I've got it under control," she handed him her cigarette.

"You know, I used to eat melba toast when I was a kid. I always made a sandwich out of it with some cheese."

"Yeah, I used to do the exact same thing."

"Do you ever feel like you've met someone before?" he noticed his awkward cliché. "Life makes a lot more sense when I accept the fact that I'm going insane."

"What kind of things do you feel that make you think you're crazy?" she seemed concerned.

"Obsession," he blurted out but quickly corrected,

"Obsessive compulsive, you know, stuff."

"Oh," she quietly purred. Retchfield wasn't sure what he was feeling, so he found the nearest bottle and tried to clean his mind. He thought he heard her say, "I'm sorry," as she walked out of the kitchen. He wasn't sure if she had said it, but he believed her anyway. Lukane came into the kitchen as she walked in to her room and shut the door. Retchfield sat on the countertop like a vulture ready to swoop.

"Let's go to bed, man," Lukane landed on the couch. Retchfield just looked at the door. "You're going to thank me tomorrow," Lukane reassured him. Retchfield masturbated in the bathroom and stumbled to the recliner to pass out.

"Where are you?"

"A Street."

"A street? Did you find The Venue?"

"The connection's breaking up."

"You think this is a game?"

"I can't turn the doorknob. Help me knock."

"You want me to bring you something to eat?"

"Who is that? Crynge?"

Retchfield awoke to light seeping in through the window. He looked around and noticed everyone must still have been asleep. He stood observing one of the strange plants that stood potted around the house. August crept into the room in a long t-shirt and checkered black and yellow shorts. She slipped on her horned glasses. "Hi, sorry about last night."

"Sorry for what?" he asked.

"I don't know. Nevermind." She didn't push the issue.

"Okay, I guess. I've got to get going. But, I'll see you around or something."

"Right," she said. "You've gotta come back and help us fight the power and all that."

"Yeah." After a long piss and a brief review of the bad poetry he'd written, he left to wander the city. Nearly all of the buildings and vehicles were painted black and red. Lush green gardens populated the yards. Cantaloupes and cannabis were plentiful. The Holiday was still going on and people still danced in the streets. Although he wanted to stay, forever, really, he made his way to Emptyland.

"Last stop on the route," the computerized version of Lukane's voice informed him.

Twelve

Crynge walked into a classroom and took a seat in the back left corner. She was about fifteen minutes late. The professor was a middle-aged man with his shirt halfway unbuttoned, letting sweaty tufts of chest hair peek out. After the pedantic lecture, which was on the history of PolitiCo and was quite biased toward it, Crynge walked up to the professor to tell him to mark her on the roll.

"Well, would you like to come to lunch with me? My treat." He adjusted his glasses on his unshaven face.

"That sounds really creepy, but I am pretty hungry. I seriously need to bathe."

"Ahh, you seem like a very honest person. You have a good soul."

At the cafeteria, they sat across from each other. The professor rambled on about politics and the benefits of living in the PolitiCo system while Crynge chewed fries with her mouth open, occasionally nodding down her large mirrored sunglasses at him.

"Thanks for the food." Crynge belched loudly.

"It's no problem at all. Would you like to have a shower at my place? You mentioned bathing earlier."

"Wow, that sounds like a really bad idea. Later." She stood up, kicked her chair out of her way, and walked out to the quadrangle. Some students were handing out flyers, and one energetic youth stuck one in her hand.

ANTHEMA: THE OPPRESSOR

Some professors at this university, in solidarity with the Anthemites, support removing funding for students who are planning to work in Mecha. This cannot stand. Please take action now and write a letter to your President and Dean to stop this heinous policy.

"Hmm," she said, crumpling it up and tossing it.

"Crynge!"

"Wha?" She looked around, holding her sunglasses

down the bridge of her nose. "Retchfield!"

"Hey, what's up?" He hugged her tightly.

"Just enjoying the campus." She laughed.

"Did you see this cool flyer?"

"Oh, yeah. So, how you been? How's Mecha?" She wished she weren't so poorly groomed.

"It was okay. How was the Emptyland?"

"Not bad, I saw Semantha."

"Cool. Yeah, I saw Lukane." He coughed.

"Oh, wow!" She looked at his face. "We need to get you over to Medica. Let's wrap this journey up."

"Alright. Let's take the bus."

Thirteen

A scape of sky rise hospitals filled the horizon of Medica. Retchfield and Crynge arrived at the main hospital, East Medica. Crynge went to the warehouse area to make her delivery. Sulfur perfumed her worn jacket. She kept her senses about her, looking around for dogs and tripped over a rock. She stood up straight and pushed her greasy brown hair out of her eyes with worn-nailed fingers. She noticed that she was starting to smell like a dog herself. The bureaucracy of Medica ensured that she wasn't concerned about the delivery. Any missing medication would not be missed. Still, she wondered about the off chance that they would notice.

"Sign here, please." The desk-worker didn't look up.

Approaching the desk in the waiting room was difficult for both her and Retchfield, as the nepenthezine had carried them far on their journey. The vapors of sterilization mingled with the stench of dozens of disenfranchised patients with open wounds. Retchfield wondered how they were ever going to get a doctor with such a crowded situation. The entire room was white with bluish fluorescent lights lining the ceiling, and a colony of bacteria was growing in an upper corner of the room. Crynge squinted from the harsh lights, as the room was very long and wide but the ceiling was absurdly low, causing an odd claustrophobic effect and making the lights abrasively close to the patients. They noticed a young man standing in front of his seat twitching as if he were having a slow-motion seizure of some sort while gently sobbing. Retchfield tried not to stare or listen and instead concentrated on the bitter chunk of painkiller stuck to his molar, licking at it periodically. Crynge continually shifted in her cramped uncomfortable white plastic seat with a negligible amount of back support. Crynge watched a strange flying insect repeatedly ram itself face first into the lights repeatedly. Retchfield licked his

teeth and drummed syncopated beats on the armrest of his chair.

Eventually, a desk attendant called out their number so that they could begin to fill out a short novella of paperwork.

"I see they're still using paper in the future," Crynge said.

They were herded into a disinfected cubicle and soon the doctor came in to examine Retchfield.

"Things seem to be moving quickly today," Crynge said.

"Yeah, we keep it tight here. It's just the building design that makes things difficult," the doctor pressed a cold metal device on Retchfield's bare chest. "So, what's the problem?"

"I just feel like I'm running out of time." Retchfield stared into the fluorescent light.

"Okay, you can put your shirt back on," he said, after a long silence. He paused after clicking his pen repeatedly.

"Look, I normally wouldn't worry you like this, but I see that you're really not taking it as easy as you should..."

"You mean the drugs and all?" Retchfield interrupted.

"Yes, exactly. This is always hard, but I feel it's my responsibility to let you know that there is a chance that it's...cancer. We won't know for sure until we get the test results in," the doctor said.

After a while of staring through the floor, Retchfield said, "Yeah, I know. It prolly is."

"Practically everyone back home has it, or knows someone who has it. We do live downstream, you know," Crynge said.

"Yes. I know. So take it easy...you should be easing your pain, but also you have to do other things. You have to live."

"I know. I know. I just feel like there's a boa constrictor around my life. You know?"

The doctor leaned in very closely to Retchfield. "Don't you want to have done something with your life though?"

"Well...umm."

"Look, I'm part of...an organization,"

"What sort of...organization?" Retchfield asked.

"A political organization..."

Retchfield's eyes focused more closely on the doctor's young face. Crynge looked down.

"We've been planning something." The Doctor continued. "You know that the Anthemites have been planning an attack on Mecha with the Marshalian soldiers, correct?"

"Actually, we know absolutely nothing about that." Crynge rolled her eyes.

"Wait, quiet, I'm trying to hear this," Retchfield said.

"We must lead the attack against them first." The Doctor slammed his palm onto the table.

"What did you say your organization was called?" Retchfield asked.

"The Medican-Mechanese Border Vaporization Party."

Crynge laughed.

"Well, obviously you want us to do something about it. What's your idea?" Retchfield began to put back on his tattered jacket.

"It's simple, really. I just want you to do a small mission for us."

"We're not really the fighting type, Doctor," Retchfield said.

"How do we know we can trust you?" Crynge asked.

The doctor pulled out a syringe and began to place the needle in Retchfield's elbow pit. Crynge grabbed his arm and shouted: "Hey, what is that?"

"Just a little morphine to help him for the pain. Relax. Would you like some too?"

"No thanks," she said.

"You'll both be paid for your trouble."

"We need the money to get back anyway," Retchfield said.

"You do know we we're getting into here. This isn't a game," Crynge said.

"This might be what I've been looking for. This could be my chance to do something with my life. To go down in history."

"Who's history?"

"Our history," he said, not knowing exactly what he meant.

"Well you go back in there and tell him whatever you want."

Fourteen

The Mechanese were back to work, if one can call it that. Definitely not toil, and rarely labor. People seemed nervous to Retchfield though, which worried him. They were to meet their contact at The Drown Bar and Grill. Retchfield and Crynge walked in.

"Who's mopping up after the revolution?" Crynge noticed the dark grime on the floor.

"Mechs. Robots," Retchfield said.

"Oh yeah. I forgot. They've got it all figured out here, right? So where is this fucker? Are we supposed to use some kind of lame password or something?"

"Retchfield?"

"Oh, hey." Retchfield tried to avoid eye contact.

"Hi, I'm August," she held out a hand to Crynge.

"Hey."

"So, I was told to meet you here, Retchfield," August said.

"Really? Oh yeah, the, uh, Doctor."

"Yeah, Retch, the doctor. Havin trouble there, buddy?" Crynge said.

August turned up her beer and finished it. "You guys should come back to my place."

"I can't wait to get that fucker Scand back," Retchfield said.

Crynge sat down on the couch next to him. "Yeah, that would be nice."

"Would you guys like something to drink?" August asked.

"Sure, beer's cool," Crynge said.

"Umm, same here." Retchfield coughed.

"So, you and Retchfield know each other?" Crynge

asked.

"Yeah, we met a few weeks ago." August sat down in her chair and propped her feet up on the wooden coffee table. Retchfield noticed for the first time that almost everything in the room was made of wood, or at least looked like it. Potted plants littered the corners. August began rolling up a cigarette.

"So, about this bomb, I mean, you never told me you were into this stuff." Retchfield finished his beer.

"Well shit, we only hung out for a day. It's not like you stuck around to ask me or anything."

"Can we see it or what?" Crynge asked.

August gave a feline look through her glasses and lit her cigarette. "Yeah, I'll go get it."

Retchfield and Crynge stepped outside and walked around the block.

"So, is killing a robot wrong?" Crynge asked.

"No, they don't have a consciousness."

"They've got artificial intelligence. What if their intelligence gets so advanced that it's just like consciousness?"

"Not gonna happen. We don't have the technology for that. It's always going to be artificial, anyway."

Double Trouble: Only minutes apart, East Medica General Hospital and Andrew Scand's mansion were bombed. Anthema and Medica have declared war on each other. Stay tuned for more on Mechanese and Marshalian allegiances on your friendly 24-hour advernewsertainment network.

*Well I got the dirty bomb blues,
I ain't wantin no radiation all around my shoes.
I just wanna get away from this city,*

*Past the hills
To the country,
Where I belong
Keep me 'way from those dirty bombs...*

Crynge ran up to the vined wooden door while Retchfield followed closely behind. The blinds in the window flicked up, revealing a dark bloodshot eye peering through thick-rimmed glasses. The door opened and August let them in.

"I don't understand. We didn't even do the bombing yet," August said.

"Man, this is fucked." Retchfield was sweating.

"How so?" August asked.

"I just helped start a fucking war, man!" Crynge paced around the room.

"Start a war? They were planning an attack on Medica! They started this. We had to protect what's ours," August said.

"Wait, you knew about the hospital bombing before it happened?" Retchfield anxiously smoked one of August's cigarettes, coughing all the way.

"Yeah, I knew that Alvert Scand was bombing East Medica. He's the one who built it."

"This doesn't make any sense," Crynge said.

"Why didn't you stop him?" Retchfield asked.

"If we stopped him, then how would we drum up support for our side? We needed something big. We just had to make sure we were right behind him after his first move." August looked particularly attractive to Retchfield today, despite the situation.

"No one even knows who bombed who first! This is insane!" Crynge was very animated.

"This is gonna kinda put a damper on the Sacco and Venzetti's Day Parade, though." August blew smoke in

Crynge's general direction. An explosion outside shook the tiny house. They all ran out to see a warscape of distorted metal and melted silicon, interspersed with random body parts. Someone screamed out. "Why would anyone do this? I don't want to fight in a war, Mommy." Troops swarmed into the neighborhood.

August ran out of her home with automatic rifles. "You know how to shoot, right?"

"Of course." Retchfield felt guilty for lying.

"What the hell?" Crynge threw her hands up.

Mechanese militiapersons clad in red and black harlequin uniforms snaked camouflaged through the city. Retchfield turned in circles trying to contribute to the battle but did nothing.

"Inside!" August said, motioning toward her front door.

"I can't believe I just stood there like a fool. I'm gonna do something," he thought. A bulldozer crashed through a wall.

"Okay, that's it. I'm outta here." Retchfield snatched up his belongings and starting running behind Crynge, who agreed. They made their way to Medica.

"We didn't realize just how much destructive capability the Anthemites and Marshalians had." The Doctor rushed around his home, packing up his few belongings with his family.

"Well, they are kinda the ones with all of the money and power," Crynge said.

"Oh...yeah." The Doctor hesitated slightly before continuing to place random objects in a duffle bag. "Anyway, now is the real time for action. We're going to lead the way for the revolution. Surely the people will rise up and follow us to victory."

"So, umm, about that cancer," Retchfield said.

"Oh, yes...the cure is over there on the dining room table."

"The...what? You mean there's a cure for cancer?"

"Oh yes. The Public Pharmacology Clinic released it a few weeks ago. Didn't you see it on the news ticker?"

"I've been kinda busy," Retchfield said. "Wait, why didn't you tell me about it last time we talked?"

"Just busy I guess. Plus, who wants to take major risks with their life if they don't think they're dying, right?" Retchfield just shook his head, grabbed the ice chest marked "cancer cure" on the table, and kicked the front door open. He considered giving the doctor a butter knife to the jugular, but decided against it. Partially for his guilt and partially for his weakened condition.

"Damn," Crynge said as they both walked out. "Well, now what?"

Fifteen

The bus pulled into Acadaemia in the midst of a student protest against the war. Lukane stood in the plaza shouting and handing out flyers.

"Hey, Lukane, long time no see," Crynge said.

"What's up, Crynge?" Lukane reached down and gave her a hug.

"Well, we sorta need to get this stuff checked out, and maybe see if we can make some more of it."

"What's that?"

"It's the cure for cancer. That reminds me, Retch. It's time to take your shot."

"I don't wanna use too much of it up or nothin. We need to save as much as we can. We don't know how much of this stuff is left out there," Retchfield said.

"A noble effort, but I'm not gonna let you die on me." Crynge took a syringe out of the ice chest and Retchfield took his shot reluctantly.

"By the way, nice protest, Lukane," Retchfield said.

"Thanks. Yeah, I know someone we can talk to about that cure."

The news ticker alert flashed on the board.

Official Statement from the Mecha Liberation Army

The Anthemites are indeed our enemy; however, it must be made known that they are not working alone. The entire PolitiCo system is conspiring with the Anthemites to destroy the rest of PolitiCo23. They are guilty of terrorism against Mecha and Medica, unlike our efforts that have not targeted civilians. Surely though, we will be accused of terrorism by the enemy so that they may continue their selfish and destructive policies. Their motives are to weaken our increasingly self-sufficient economy by strengthening their currency. We fear that no resolution to this problem can be reached in the near future, and we will continue our front

against the oppressors.

"I'm not a freedom fighter after all," Retchfield thought. "Just a coward with a gun."

Sixteen

Lukane led Retchfield and Crynge down the hallway of a dilapidated university building into a brown office.

"Dr. O'Naffy," Lukane said.

"How's the protest going?"

"Okay, I guess. Low turnout today."

"I remember when I was your age...I know that sounds like a cliché, but this story has a point. I went to all the demonstrations. I wrote articles. I became a teacher. Wrote books. I remember when I first got *The Unabridged History of PolitiCo and Its Many Arms* published. I thought: 'This book will change the world.' Yeah, right. All they did was take my ideas and make them happen." O'Naffy stroked his goatee.

"I have that book! It's great. You wrote that?"

Retchfield pulled his copy out of his backpack and noticed the author on the spine for the first time. "I can't believe I didn't notice."

"The eye doesn't see things if the brain doesn't know they're there. You're the kids from the drugstore, right? How'd that delivery go?" O'Naffy said.

Crynge leaned against the wall. "It's a long story."

"The book isn't true?" Retchfield said.

"It depends on what you mean by true. When I wrote it, it was just a joke. Parody. Pastiche. A satire, if you will. It was about that time that political satires were beginning to be looked into for ideas. Everyone knew that something bad was on the horizon; governments and companies were running out of ideas. They had people fucked in every hole, but they wanted to make sure."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Crynge said.

Lukane raised his eyebrow. "C'mon, Crynge. Give him a chance. I thought you were supposed to be open-minded."

"I just kept thinking about the people carrying around Rousseau before the French Revolution. What if

they had romanticized some other philosophy?" O'Naffy's voice drifted.

"Make sure of what?" Retchfield leaned forward.

"The PolitiCo system was modeled after my book. They made sure they used every available means to keep their wealth. What I'm saying is: My book came true. Writing books just doesn't compare to taking action." The people in the room sat in silence for a minute.

"What can we do? Everything's been tried. Nothing works." Crynge examined her dirty fingernails. She felt disgusted with the world and herself.

"You're right," Retchfield said. "I really should have killed at least one of those guys."

"It's not about violence." Lukane stood up straight.

"We have to attack the methods. I don't want to hurt people. That's what we're against...isn't it?"

"Attack the methods. Could you be more vague? I hear all this crap about taking action but no one ever has anything to say but ambiguous romanticized bullshit," Crynge looked up at Lukane through her sunglasses.

"We can stop the system," Lukane said.

"Real original, man. Stop the system. Great idea. 'System, you'd better stop it now, you naughty system,'" she said.

"Goddamit! Let me finish. I'm talking about screwing with the programming. Sabotage," Lukane said.

"I can't think of anything else to do," Dr. O'Naffy said.

"That's it! Sabotage! I don't have to kill. I can't wait to tell August," Retchfield said.

"Yeah, I'm sure she'll be a big help. Psychotic murdering bitch," Crynge said.

"She might be violent, but she's also my friend," Lukane said. "Now all we need is a plan."

Seventeen

Retchfield, Crynge, Lukane and August sat in a circle in the house in Mecha. They tried to make a plan of action. "What happens when you redistribute wealth literally? Nonlocational wealth. It's like attacking a particular business through shoplifting, boycotts and sabotage. It's all sabotage. It's all the same idea. But what is the outcome? Is it positive? One would think that destroying a company that has done wrong would make the world a better place. What else might happen? Who will be hurt first? Definitely the weak. The strong have us fucked on all fronts. Fucked on all fours. How do the weak hurt the strong? Can it even be done? What if our plan doesn't work? It would be best to make sure it only affects us, or rather, those who control only us, so we can take full responsibility, but can that even really happen? Everything is connected and interconnected so globally, everything we do affects everyone. It's gotta be perfect."

"No such thing."

"Even if we can, they're just gonna fuckin satiate everyone with just enough to keep them from throwin a fit. Just like the new fuckin deal."

"Raw fuckin deal."

"Man, I tell ya. We gotta make sure we deplete their financial shit so that they can't afford to throw us crumbs. Keep em from crummin."

"Huh?"

"What I mean is, we gotta spread our roots down. No, seriously though. Stop the crumbs from fallin and you've got people pissed off like us."

"You can't just fuck everyone over like that. What if they still want the crumbs?"

"Fuck that man, they're not gonna want the crumbs once they realize that they can have the whole fuckin cake and eat it too. I mean, we stop the shit, let people know

what they can really have, and then, the robots man!"

"Yeah, we can totally reprogram the robots to do whatever we want."

"So, okay, lemme get this straight. We financially fuck the Anthemites and PolitiCo and all that ilk, then we getta grippa bots to do what exactly?"

"I dunno. Get em to protect us from the army?"

"Then we can set up some brand new shit and we won't have to commit any violent acts. The robots will do the self-defense and the building and we sit back and chill."

"Yeah, cept for the programmers. They have to do the work still."

"Man, I'm sure there's somethin we can do to help. We'll figure it out."

Eighteen

At the university library, they each got on a terminal. They found some computer science students to help them figure out what they were doing. Obviously, they had no idea, except Lukane, who regulated the computer lab on account of him working there for extra cash. They were in the midst of playing a futurist role-playing game full of Replickans ("We're Replickans, not Replican'ts!"), SubReplikans, Panickans and Manickans. Lukane played with them regularly, and partook in use of the hallucinogen DSL, which allowed them to stay up all night doing nothing constructive. Users inhale the drug, which is composed of nanomachines that invade the brain, distorting the interface between objectivity and subjectivity. However, they could get a job done if necessary. Retchfield wanted to ask them for help with the plan, but didn't really want to get involved in a conversation with them. Crynge had already joined in the game.

Lukane jumped in and asked: "Hey, anyone here down for some media sabotage? Financial sabotage? Anytage?"

"Sure, after this game," the stereotypes said in unison.

"Don't you guys wanna take a vote or something?" Retchfield asked.

"I don't think they mind. They're usually up for any challenge," Lukane said.

The students set up a large projection screen that reflected a visual grid of the terminal monitors. Unnecessarily fancy graphical displays explained what the saboteurs were doing. Various multicolored sigils flashed on the screen. Retchfield noticed that he had seen some of the occult-like symbols before.

"Fear our elite media virus!"

"Dude, don't say elite. We hate elitists, remember?"

"Oh yeah."

The screen demonstrated the infected versions of the newscast and tickers.

"We shall manifest our will upon thee. We've got the vaccine for your media virus. May your control over the masses be destroyed! Prepare to be inoculated...did that sound okay? Or was it too cheesy?"

"Definitely cheesy."

"Hey, are you too brother and sister?"

Retchfield and Crynge looked at each other rolling their eyes. "No."

"Want some X-pills? I don't takem, but I figured you might wanna try it. They don't work on me. You gotta be in the right frame of mind," Lukane said.

"No thanks," Retchfield said. "I don't like hallucinogens, of any kind. I keep it simple. I think I'm gonna quit smokin too."

"I'll try one," Crynge said.

"I'm surprised. You don't strike me as the type," Lukane said.

"I feel like trying something new."

Images of Mecha appeared on the screen. A decapitation. The face of war. A live feed of Anthema. Pro-war protests. Sigils flashed. "Your arrogance will be your downfall, Anthemites!"

"We're under a cyberterrorist attack!" a news anchor-person was heard shouting.

"Cyberterrorist? What? Maybe you could call it cybertage, but I mean..." Lukane cut his sentence short. Explosion in the crowd. Burnt body parts sprayed into the air. A woman screamed: "Oh my God!" The plan had gone all wrong.

"I'm not feeling it," Crynge said.

Nineteen

The agents arrested them early in the morning, as one might expect. They spent the night in Lukane's dorm room. Agents sprayed them with DSL after kicking in the door and pummeling them. Charged with cyberterrorism. The trial came swiftly, with much publicity. The legal system kept the defendants on nano-hallucinogens throughout the trial. The witnesses brought against them were from the recent past. The first defendant brought out was Dr. Satyr'n O'Naffy, charged with the creation of terrorist propaganda and association with a terrorist organization.

"You claim that PolitiCo used your ideas to divide and conquer the people of region? How could they get away with such a thing? It is the opinion of this military tribunal that you are an insane conspiracy theorist."

"There were so many alternate versions of the future published back then, one of them was bound to be correct anyway. When the information society is flooded with mutated copies of mutated copies of memes and media viruses, conspiracies are no longer necessary. The truth gets buried in distorted truth," O'Naffy said.

Neither Retchfield nor Crynge knew what part of what they were watching was reality, if any. A guard ushered Lukane onto the stand.

"Lukane, you are charged with being an anti-capitalist student cyberterrorist. Why are you bent on the destruction of capitalism?"

"I've got no choice, really. There's no other way for me to pay off my student loans."

August was escorted into the room with the standard bright yellow jumpsuit and shackle bracelets and anklets.

"Where have you been?" asked Retchfield.

"I can't tell you," she said.

Crynge took the stand.

"Crynge, you wear the typical mirrored sunglasses associated with the cyberpunk movement. Are you aware of these implications?"

"What are you talking about? You mean this isn't original?"

The military judge laughed at her.

"Goddamitt! I just wanted to keep the harsh post-apocalyptic sun out of my eyes," she said.

Retchfield's question and answer period began.

"You are the worst of them all. You are junkie terrorist welfare scum. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Thanks."

"The court finds all enemy combatants to be guilty of all terror-related charges. That is all."

Twenty

Armed guards led the sentenced group to their wire cages and sprayed them with higher doses of nano-hallucinogens. Retchfield zoned out on the crisscrossing patterns of the cage's wire walls. The inability to make sense of his surroundings frustrated him. He tried to picture mentally the wall as motionless, but it continued to morph into crawling patterns.

"Does art imitate life or does life imitate art?" someone asked.

"Both."

"They're both interacting so much that they are both now absurd."

"What makes you think things weren't always absurd?"

The drug produced levels of *déjà vu* in Retchfield that he had never before experienced.

He felt as though he were in the presence of some telepathic beam sent from insectoid beings light years away.

"What are you talking about?" Crynge asked him.

He felt as though he were solving a puzzle that had been placed in his way just for him but he could not see it—as if he wanted to unlock all of the doors but the one key he had opened none. He gave up on trying to make the cross-hatching of the fence stop moving. He fell back, looking up at the dark sky or roof in his yellow jumpsuit and let go. He heard sounds that bounced around in syncopated distorted patterns. A high-pitched oscillating noise echoed in his head, sounding as if the fabric of reality was stretched to the breaking point—a kettle of boiling water arcing through the sky. He longed for the warm touch of a painkiller to end the screaming of his consciousness.

The next moment in his memory, he stood outside of his cage, surrounded by troops and his friends. Someone said: "A large group of Anthemite and Marshalan troops

turned on their officers and joined the Mechans."

"What just happened?" he asked.

"It's okay sir, you're safe for now. We really should get you out of here," a young soldier informed them.

THE END

