



EVERY 400 YEARS

KERRY BURNS



The story is set 470 years in the future. Six couples struggle to maintain a safe and stable life as society slowly disintegrates for a second time after reaching a level of technology similar to the late 20th century. Religious, political and bureaucratic themes and philosophies of the present play out in more extreme forms. Is there any hope for the future?

Every 400 Years

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ISBN – 978-1-62141-255-7

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Printed in the United States of America

Booklocker.com, Inc.
2012

CHAPTER I

21 September 2482, Ramona was driving home from work early in the evening and the traffic was light. Most who worked in the intellectual cabal didn't return home until 10:00 pm or later, but Ramona had not felt well for the past couple of months and had left work early.

This won't help my chances for promotion. It's the third time this summer I've left work early. Soon the research project will fall behind and the finger will be pointing at me.

Hers was a small part in the project to develop a new structural material, but every individual had to do his or her part well and on time. Points were given for promptness as well as completion.

Between the nausea, the light headedness, and fretting over work schedules, she failed to see the prime status car from the Spiritual Cabal which always had the right of way. Her car struck its rear wheel sending them both spinning into the curb. The driver of the Prime's car was out and cursing in seconds. The prime status man, they were always men, looked shaken. He was old and frail.

"My Prime is on the way to an important ritual, and you've delayed us and disrupted our organizational flow."

Ramona knew it was a dangerous charge that could be leveled; disrupting the organizational flow in the Religious Cabal.

What have I done?

"We'll have to wait for a member of The Committee for Public Safety," said Ramona.

"Some things can't wait," the driver snapped.

Ramona grabbed her communicator and called Science Org Protection. She was going to need a lot of help on this one. The

Prime's driver was doing the same thing, and the old Prime had put himself into a trance.

An officer for Public Safety arrived in minutes. His equipment detected a disruption in traffic flow which led him to the accident. These kinds of collisions were becoming rare with the development of mobile sensors and guidance systems. As soon as the officer saw the prime status car, he knew this incident would be a mess and called his superior.

At the same time, the sensors on the two cars detected the damage and called the Materialist Cabal. No one owned their cars, but leased them from the Materialist Cabal, according to their personal and Cabalist status. A representative was dispatched to the scene for this. Prime status cars were not always in inventory, and they usually had specialized features.

"I'd better buck this one up a couple of notches," said the Materialist representative.

Soon, cars from the three cabals were on their way to the accident scene. Org Protection and Medical would pick up Ramona. She left a message for her husband and left the car to face the representatives of the other Cabals.

I hate having to deal with these people. They can never get things straight. Half the time they're not even logical.

Armand from Public Safety removed the black box from each vehicle. They would give a complete record of the recent trips. Next he had to take a statement from each participant.

These people in the other Cabals don't make any sense. They want to ascribe a simple car wreck to divine intervention or some kind of magic.

He approached Ramona first to get an idea of her condition and possibly her ability to drive. She was holding herself with one arm braced against her car and throwing up in the street, her chestnut brown hair hanging limply around her face. He turned

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to the driver of the prime car, and one look told him and knew something was wrong. He was shouting and gesticulating about the importance of the ritual that the Prime was missing and the stupid bitch that caused it. His eyes were red rimmed and glazed.

He's been to a pleasure house, Armand surmised. He's probably impaired. I need to get some lab work done on him right away before those medics clean him up.

Armand put in a call to headquarters. "De Silva will have to back me on this, or I'd better go home now. Religious Primes are nothing to mess with."

"We'll send out the shift supervisor," dispatch said. "De Silva isn't available right now. How about the woman? Is she loaded too?"

Ramona was leaning against the side of a car and had regained some of her composure. "Hard to tell; She looks sick as hell right now," Armand replied.

"Get a blood sample from them both if you can."

Armand walked over to Ramona, "Could I see your ID, please?" She nodded her head and returned to her car to get it. He examined it briefly and recorded the information.

"I'll need a blood sample from you. It appears that you're impaired."

She stared at him somewhat blankly and held out her arm to give the sample. He led her to his car and sat her down, and drew the sample and put it in the analyzer. The medical/legal team from the Science Cabal arrived as he finished.

The driver of the prime car was still ranting as Armand approached him.

If I can get a sample from him before their medics arrive, things will go a lot better.

“As a part of my investigation I need a blood sample from you to demonstrate your guilt or innocence,” Armand stated in a firm voice.

“Why should you want one from me? You have one from that filthy sinning whore, that’s all you’ll need. She’s endangered the life of the Prime with her sinful ways and bad driving. She must pay for this.” His voice rose to a shriek.

Since the Prime remained in a trance and there was no sign of others from the Religious Cabal, Armand decided to take a chance. He seized the ranting driver and slammed him against the public safety vehicle. Before the driver could get his breath, Armand sat him down and took the blood sample.

The driver lurched away from the public safety vehicle and began throwing up on his way to the Prime’s car. He seemed to have lost his interest in ranting. There was no medical support from the Religious Cabal yet. The old Prime was still in the back seat unmoving. Ramona’s Org Support spoke briefly with Armand and whisked her away. The Materialist Cabal was ready to remove her car. When the driver reached the old Prime’s car, he got out his communicator and called again, but he was ranting into the communicator. Armand’s communicator began to buzz, and when he responded, it was someone from the Religious Cabal.

“Our driver is apparently injured and unable to give us an address for the accident. Could you do so?” Armand stated the address and broke contact.

Religious legal/medical will soon be here and the fun will begin.

Each Cabal has its own medical section. The old Medical Cabal had been disbanded for many years, and each Cabal felt it could be more self-sufficient and in control with its own medical facilities. The same had happened to the Legal Cabal. The Science Cabal combined both into an organizational section

subject to Science leadership. Ramona was glad to be in their hands. She was ill and shaken. Legal would protect her from the charges of the Religious Cabal. Science Cabal had the best medical facilities, and she'd soon be in the hospital for an examination.

I hope there's something wrong with me, or I'm going to be in a bunch of trouble. Ramona mused as she was moved into the hospital. *The project is more important than the individuals working on it, and I'll not be the one to drag it down.*

The first injection at the hospital put her out, and the medical examination proceeded from there.

"Well, Ramona, do you want to know what's wrong with you?" asked Dr. Ye.

Those were the first words first words she heard on awakening. "You're anemic, working too many hours, you have a minor infection in your ear, and you're three months pregnant."

"PREGNANT, how can that be?" gasped Ramona."

I'm thirty-six years old. My husband and I were authorized a child when I was 22, but nothing happened. I thought I couldn't get pregnant."

"I have to say," mused Dr. Ye, "your body doesn't like the idea either."

"But this is such a bad time, the project and everything," she said wistfully.

"If you don't want the child, we can certainly take care of that in several ways. You're near the end of your authorization anyway. Perhaps, it would be better professionally if you don't go through with this pregnancy."

"Oh no, that's not it at all," she said trying to sit up. "I want the child. Oh, I don't know. Call my husband. I have to think about this."

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“Very well, Ramona, there’s no hurry, and it’ll make legal happy. You’ve a justifiable reason for being an inattentive driver if it comes to that.”

The old Prime remained in a trance in his damaged car until after religious support arrived. The car retrieval man stood by helplessly waiting until someone removed the old man. He couldn’t tell if he was dead or not. This would be trouble; he was already over 8 minutes late in retrieving the car and getting it back to the repair section.

Armand was also getting nervous. “This incident is taking a long time to get cleaned up. I’ve been here thirty minutes. That stupid driver couldn’t even call in the correct address.

“The initial analysis of the driver’s blood indicated at least three different drugs in his system including a narcotic and a hypnotic,” he muttered to no one in particular. “I heard that some of these religious types try to enhance their experiences with drugs, but I doubt if that’ll wash for the Prime’s driver. It won’t wash with Public Safety.”

He made his decision, supervisor or not, he was going to arrest the driver. He moved over to handcuff him.

“Leave him be, he’s done me a great favor today,” came a soft voice from the car.

Armand froze; it was the Prime speaking. The religious support people also stopped what they were doing. They had assumed that the Prime was unconscious or worse. The old man climbed out of the damaged vehicle rather slowly and walked over placing himself between the driver and Armand. There was a gentle smile on the old Prime’s face.

“This is too important a matter for you. We’ll take the driver with us. You can have your superiors contact our legal office to resolve this.”

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With that, the support people eased the Prime and the driver in their car and drove away.

Well, crap, what do I do now? I'm standing in the street by myself with all of the parties gone and waiting to get my ass chewed by the shift supervisor.

Armand was musing on his problem when he was approached by the pickup men from the Materials Cabal.

"We need to know who's responsible for the damage to our vehicles so we can bill appropriately. Who are you charging with the accident?"

"I haven't decided yet," was about all Armand could blurt out.

"That's not good enough, Officer. We have to put something down or we're in deep shit. There can't be an accident without a responsible party," said the pickup man.

"I know that, and don't get smart with me. I don't need some materials man to tell me how to do my job. You know as well as I do that when a Prime is involved, things get bucked upstairs. My shift supervisor is on his way. So get those wrecks off the street before he gets here, and I have to write you up for blocking traffic and resisting Public Safety."

"We can call supervisors too, and it looks like we have to. I'm not going to let the Cabal take the cost of these wrecks out of my check," muttered the second materials man.

He walked over to their vehicle and put in a call to their supervisor. "Better get down here John; we've a hell of a mess and a wreck with a prime vehicle. The cop won't even write the ticket, and he wants us out of here before his super shows up. The driver was loaded on dream gas or something. Ranting like a mad man and the Prime protected him."

"I'll see if I can get Fugimoto himself to come down before this gets ugly. You guys lie low and keep your mouths shut," said John.

Abban, the old prime, rode in the medical transport with his driver and the medical/legal team. His driver was in restraints at the back of the transport.

“What’s wrong with him,” asked Abban.

“Probably dream gas or one of those fancy new pleasure drugs,” replied the medico.

“People with strong religious fire tend to react differently to this new stuff. Instead of getting sexually aroused, they get religiously aroused, but it’s not very disciplined, and I don’t think anything good happens. Was he at a pleasure house today?” inquired the lawyer.

“He may have been. I was doing some ritual preparation for this afternoon, and I was gone about an hour.”

Abban called the Chapter house and asked if the ritual was still on.

“We’re holding for you” replied the voice at the other end.

“What about the time?” asked Abban.

“We have about 20 minutes before the efficacy window closes.”

“I’ll get there as soon as I can. I’m not hurt, and these emergency people can take care of the details,” he replied. “Driver, to the Chapter House first, I’ve a short time to get the ritual started. Then take my driver to wherever he needs to go.” He used his command voice.

They were waiting at the door of the Chapter House when he arrived. He hobbled as quickly as he could to the knowing room. He was aware that while the accident had not injured him, something had shaken him out of his sense of calm.

It was something about the driver and what he was saying, and then that strange dream I had in the trance. This is the time of the equinox and the spirits are approachable. We didn’t get much in the spring because of the strange disturbances in the

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ether. I must be focused this time if I'm to remain Prime. Some of them think I'm slipping.

He glanced at the clock. There were only minutes until the equinox window was closed. All of the others took their seats and began the chant. The chant was 90 years familiar, and he centered himself and slipped down into an appropriate trance. As he went, he could feel himself pulling the others with him. Two of the younger ones weren't ready to go so fast and were pulling back a little. He wrapped his loving mind around them and dragged them down.

This's no time for learning and practice. These Tertiaries are to be trained and ready.

The circular call began to go out from each in turn. First the Tertiaries, then the Secundi, and finally the Prime picked up the roundelay theme. Each repeating his part over and over until both the room and their minds began to reverberate.

None noticed that the time of the Equinox had passed. They continued in their old traditional chant, but nothing happened. There was no reply; no message; nothing. Finally, a cold rumbling ran through their minds.

"Enough, you have your message" thundered in each of their heads.

With that, 13 people were rolling on the floor. Six tertiaries, six Secundi and the Prime lay semi stunned by the force of it. Several minutes passed before those outside realized that something had happened that was unforeseen. The old prime lay unmoving. Some of the Secundi were sitting up. The chairs were scattered, the candles blown out and two of the Tertiaries were cramped into a fetal position.

It was sometime later that the Old Prime was himself again.

"What could it have meant that we have our message? What message? I heard nothing."

Outside his room, the Chapter house was in an uproar.

"The ritual has failed two equinoxes in a row and the Prime was nearly killed in the backlash. It could be years before a Prime visits here again," muttered Ishmael Guyirere. "I'll be lucky if I can keep my position at the Paradita Chapter house let alone get a promotion to a major house in a real city."

While the Chapter House nursed its wounds, the bureaucratic forces gathered at the scene of the minor accident which had blocked traffic for over an hour. De Silva and Fugimoto were eye to eye.

"Some Cabal will have to pay for this. Where does the blame lie? Decide! We don't move cars until you people do your duty," growled Fugimoto.

"Get these wrecks off the street before we have more accidents, and I'll charge your people for that," replied De Silva.

"Try it and Public Safety will be walking for the next year, you drive our cars too when we let you," snapped Fugimoto.

"Alright, alright, where is Officer Blondel?"

"Here sir," Armand replied from where he was directing traffic around the two cars. "How did the two drivers get away from you, Blondel?" De Silva asked.

"Well sir, the woman was sick and throwing up sitting on the curb. I didn't think she was going anywhere. I went to see if the Prime was alright, and I found that his driver was high on some kind of dream stuff and wandering around ranting. He caused a hassle, and by the time I turned around, the Science rescue team was putting her in their recovery vehicle. They handed me her license and a business card, said it was a medical emergency and left. I did get a blood sample from her, and it's clean. I went back to the driver and asked for a sample, but he ranted at me, so I slammed him and took the sample. It has so

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much stuff in it that it'll have to go down town to the lab. I went over to arrest him, and the Old Prime jumped out of the car and backed me off, and they left in the religious recovery vehicle. You know the rest," recited Armand with the hope it would sell.

"What the hell are we going to do? We have no one to arrest and the material people are getting nasty," noted De Silva accepting the explanation.

"We can get the driver on being drugged while driving and the woman with inattentive because she was sick, and the two Cabals can split the cost," suggested Armand.

"That's good. Write them, Armand, and we'll get Fugimoto out of our hair and the junk off the street. I'll send someone to the Chapter House to pick up the driver. I'm not letting him off easy."

CHAPTER VII

20 September 2483. The summer passed quietly for Hugh and Ramona. Mary Edith was thriving and a joy to them. However, North American had extended their training by a year, and they could look forward to another winter in Shanna Golden. For Ramona it would be more math and systems modeling, and for Hugh, there would be training in artificial environment design. This was an area that had received little attention in the past several hundred years after the Biosphere project had failed in the 1990's. There was no perceived need and no benefit to the Cabal. Hugh wondered if he was being shunted off to dead end research because he'd requested to go with Ramona. Competition for status and privilege was as savage in the Science Cabal as in the others.

“Who can know what the Cabal is doing or what their motives are. The structure of the Cabal is Byzantine at best. As rational as science is, they have no idea how to establish a functional organization.”

The Cabal had grown out of University research departments rather than by geographic division. It had also grown by discipline; these had mostly been absorbed by research departments, but in no consistent way. Science departments in a given university might be absorbed in the research department of a different university.

At the continental level, the Cabal had a more consistent form which standardized salaries and money for research and operations. This structure worked mostly because National Government Cabal insisted so that it could disburse the funds. But since there were Asian, European, and African presences in

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North America, there was redundant research in numerous disciplines and the results were not shared until after publication and reward or patenting. Hugh and Ramona were in the same university structure and in similar disciplines, but different research departments. There was usually sufficient cooperation so married couples could work in the same geographic area.

Curtis Fugimoto and Maria settled in a Level II house not far from her sisters. Maria made it a point to flaunt her new status before her sisters and other relatives. She did as much entertaining as she could manage. They were entitled to first or second access to new products. Curtis worked long hard hours and was mostly silent and exhausted when he was home.

“Curtis, I’m lonely. You never talk to me or want to go anywhere. I thought being in LAX would be fun and exciting. Even taunting my sisters is getting to be a drag.”

“I’m sorry Maria, but this new job is giving me fits. In Science they told you what they wanted and the goals of the project, but here that’s secret probably up to national. They give me limited data and ask why the results aren’t what they want. They don’t want me to do science, they want to use it. There’s something wrong with the data.”

“Well, I don’t know what you’re talking about, and I don’t care. I want friends I can trust, some company in the evenings, and a sense of fulfillment.”

“I thought you believed there was fulfillment in new and better things; we’re certainly getting plenty of those.” answered Curtis.

“Oh hell, let’s go to bed. Maybe that’ll be interesting,” snapped Maria.

It wasn’t. Curtis made a weak effort to please her and fell asleep. The next morning after Curtis left, Maria got dressed

and went out. She'd never been to Religious Cabal services and was afraid of going alone. She felt a need for something, but she didn't know what.

As she was driving to the religious center, she passed the Golden Turtle pleasure palace. Almost without thinking she turned into the parking lot.

These places are supposed to fun and fulfilling even at ten o'clock in the morning.

She walked in the front door. Maria hadn't been in a pleasure house since she was sixteen. They'd changed, and so had she, but she knew to check her purse and charge ID. She was free to use whatever the Turtle offered within the limits of her credit. She approached a young man who appeared to be a materialist.

"Hi, are you with anyone?" she asked.

"If you're interested, I am now." he said with a smile. They walked over to the drug table, and she selected several short acting hypnotics. He picked a couple of erotics, and they retired to a small room available for their purposes.

She opened her eyes a couple of hours later. Her partner was gone.

"Oh damn, I was going to a religious service. How did I end up here? Hard up I guess."

Maria dressed, paid for the room, and left. She headed for the religious hall no longer fearful and anxious. When she arrived, the noon service was ready to start. She sat in the back of the crowded building. The leader far in front began a rhythmic chant backed by soft musical tones and occasional congregational replies. There was a heavy sweetness in the air. Maria still had hypnotics in her system. The combination of the chanting and the hypnotics put her in a trance in minutes. Messages seemed to come to her, but she couldn't quite make

them out. She had vague feelings of danger, or was it the need to act.

On what? Maybe the religious cabal was better for her than the Materialist. Are they trying to lure people away from the other Cabals?

At that point she lost consciousness. When she awoke, she was crying and the building was empty. It took Maria a few minutes to get fully awake and compose herself emotionally.

Damn, if this is a religious experience, I don't think I want any more of it. I'm not sure what was going on in my brain. I'm going home to Curtis where it's safe and boring.

Even after she had been home an hour, Maria was still shaken.

What a damn fool trick that was. A materialist has no business indulging in two spiritual cabal's rituals on the same day while in a funk and with no preparation. Curtis doesn't need to know everything, not that he'd care, until I get this business sorted out in my mind.

She made some strong coffee to chase away the last of the hypnotics. She began to recite some of the materialist catechism,

"Our time alive is short. It makes no sense to suffer needlessly. The comfort and convenience of goods and services can make our short journey pleasant. The creation of goods and services can make the short journey better also for those in error who have dreams of power or afterlife. Thus, we Materialists do our ethical duty to help others and make the world better."

The Materialist Cabal makes and supplies the drugs for the Pleasure Cabal. We make the incense and the pews for the Religious Cabal. If it weren't for us they'd be nothing and have nothing. They used our stuff to run me through the wringer today."

She wasn't sure if it made her feel better or not.

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Curtis came home early and flopped on the new massage couch. He turned it to full power. "What's the matter Curt, a bad day?" She asked.

"The computer crashed. I lost everything I've been working on," he replied. "I'm sure it was a hardware failure, so we can get most of it back, but it'll take the techs awhile to clean it up. Sometimes I wish I was peddling cars in Paradita."

"Is there anything I can do for you," she asked haltingly.

"Not much. A couple of kisses and some strong drink are about all I can handle." She mixed the drink and handed it to him and gave him two affectionate but not passionate kisses. He drank half the drink and fell asleep.

George Hanover ground his teeth. Every alliance he had with local Cabal leaders was broken or badly damaged.

How the hell am I supposed to administer this region when I'm essentially blind? Star and Fred are afraid to speak to me; there's no leadership at the religious Cabal, Naxos at Materialist is an unknown quantity, and Science is off in its own world.

George sent another communication to National asking what the rationale was for the non-fraternization policy.

It is, after all, the real grease of government. The reply was inflexible. "Government must be the superior Cabal, and the others must look to it for leadership. We'll stand above the other five. Show no weakness or compromise in this area. We'll teach them who the leader is, especially with regard to the Religious and Pleasure Cabals."

Screw that, Fred will hang me out to dry.

Not ten miles away, John Naxos had the same discussion with himself. The Materialist Cabal had ordered him not to give any ground to the Government or Public Safety.

If they lean on you, cut out their supplies, cars, weapons, electronics or whatever.

Naxos had only been in Paradita for three months, and didn't know the people in the other Cabals. He'd been the administrator in the mid-Canada region which was out in the sticks. He'd be awhile getting accustomed to this complex city.

I'd rather not do business this way, but if this is what they want, I'm not going to endanger my career by bucking it

November 1, Ishmael Guyirere completed his first year of training. Normally, five years were required to be at tertiary level. However, the new Prime, Jesu, needed someone to take over the Paradita chapter. Three experienced Secundi suicided rather than accept the assignment.

He called him in. "Guyirere, you've done well, and you've some talent for this work. I'm appointing you tertiary and assigning you to your home chapter at Paradita. We want you to reorganize the house and to conduct services. We've had no activities there in a year."

Ishmael was more flattered than frightened.

So soon I have the opportunity to advance and have my own chapter house. That'll be my advantage. No one else knows about the message last September. I'll soon have great power. Paradita will be the most important Chapter House in North America.

"You'll go as a tertiary. I'll find some help for you for the larger rituals, even if I must come down myself. You can handle the daily rituals."

"Thank you Master; I'm overwhelmed by your kindness and the opportunity to support the Cabal."

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“You leave in two days. Do your rituals and conclude your studies as needed. I’ll see that you have appropriate dress for your new status,” replied Jesu.

The Chapter House at Paradita was in shambles. There had been no effective leadership in the house for a year. Since the mass deaths on the last winter solstice, there had been no rituals. A deep fear that the house was cursed pervaded the local Cabal, and many of the members of the Cabal feared to enter the Chapter House. Only a few low level maintenance workers lived at the Chapter House.

This is going to change. I’m not going to sit in an empty house and go through mental exercises. First, we do a physical cleaning and then we do a ritual cleaning. Every member of the Cabal will have to participate and donate money.

Ishmael’s organizational experience kicked in. He knew how to be an administrator.

I can’t be ready for the winter solstice ritual, but maybe for an initial prayer session. Regional will have to send me support for major rituals, and for the ritual cleaning.

December 4, Star Dream sat in jail dressed in jail issued clothing. She’d been there a week charged with corrupting youth. An overdeveloped 14 year old girl had been planted and then discovered by Public Safety in the Cleopatra.

“That damned Freddie, nobody from Public Safety will ever get anything in my place again. If you’re not registered in the Pleasure Cabal, you don’t get in.”

That was, of course, idle talk since the Pleasure Cabal relied on members from the other cabals to generate profits.

The guards at the jail had been kind to her. She had seen most of them at her place one time or another. Two of them appeared at her cell.

“Come on Star, you’re to be questioned before your trial,” the Sergeant said. She was led to a small room some distance from her cell. “Relax, your questioner will be along.”

The door was shut and locked. Fred de Silva stepped through another entrance and indicated that she should sit at the small table.

“Damn you Freddie, you set me up. This isn’t fair,” she almost shouted.

“Keep it low Star. This room is clean, but they don’t need to hear you down the hall.” he admonished gently. “Sorry it took so long to get you in here, but it has to look good. There’s a new leader over at Spiritual. He is trying to get the Chapter House functioning. He’s recruiting people since the old staff either died or ran away. Take this chance to get someone in the house, but if you do, you have to share what you learn. Do you have any of the runaways?”

Star was silent, and de Silva waited for her reply.

“I have to think about this. I guess you got my note” she replied.

“Yeah, that was good on your part. I had to wait for the right chance. They’re watching me like hawks. Do we have a deal? I only have a few more minutes until the real questioner gets here. I don’t want to be seen,” he answered.

“Ok, I have options to get someone in, but you need to get me out of this charge. I have a business to run,” she agreed.

“Nefeda and the rest of your staff are keeping things going. “Anyway, your legal has been talking to us. We may discover we made a mistake. Keep your story straight for the questioner. I’ll set something up so we can communicate. I’m out of here.” De Silva got up and walked out the same side door.

Star waited until the questioner came in. “Hello Star,” he said. “I have to turn on the recorders and video now so get set.”

"I'd like someone from my legal section please," Star requested.

"Of course, I'll send for him; he's waiting down the hall. He pushed a button on the table, and in less than a minute, Harry Turner came in.

"Is that you Star? I hardly recognize you with your clothes on," Harry quipped.

"Yeah right, Harry, this is my jailbird costume," she snapped. "Let's get on with it kids."

The questioner led off with a series of questions about the underage client. Most of the discussion was between the questioner and the legal. Harry made it pretty clear he knew who the 14 year old was, and who sponsored her to come in the Cleopatra. She was videotaped outside the Cleopatra in the company of a known Public Safety employee. This was so clumsy as to be unbelievable. There's no way the charge could stand, and the questioner agreed to withdraw the charge.

"That's it, Star. You'll be released within the hour. I'll inform the chief that we had to back out of this one," stated the questioner formally.

De Silva's response was "fine, give her a ride to the Cleopatra with our apologies."

Once Star was back in the Cleopatra, she called Nefeda and Gordo to get a report on the previous week. This was done in her office which she assumed was bugged no telling in how many ways. The day to day stuff didn't matter much. She gave them a nod; they concluded the briefing and left the office.

"This way." Star led them to a used furniture storeroom. "I'm sure no one goes in here. They sat on an exposed couch. "Freddie set up my arrest as a way for us to talk briefly. He wants us to place someone in the Religious Cabal."

"Ishmael Guyirere is back and in charge of the local chapter. He had virtually no staff when he got here, but seems to be

putting something together,” Nefeda said. “I met him when I was over there. We’ve the same family background. He has a lot of Sufi in him.”

“Who do we have, or know, that we can send to him,” asked Star.

“There are a couple of guys I took in to do service work. They ran away after the big die off. They’re hooked on hypnotics and could end up in debt to us easily,” volunteered Gordo.

“Ok, Gordo, see if you can get them to go back,” said Star.

“Tell them Ishmael will do a purification ritual soon, and that’ll get rid of the evil spirits,” offered Nefeda. “If they get in before the purification ritual, they’ll have a chance to advance.”

“Is either of them into women?” asked Star.

“No,” replied Gordo, “they’re afraid of them. A customer girl hit on one the other day, and he dropped his tray and ran.”

“That’s good,” replied Nefeda. “Ishmael is pretty aesthetic. He wouldn’t tolerate ritual help if women were involved. We sure as hell don’t want another Danny Rose.”

“So true, Guyirere was the last one to see Danny alive. He wouldn’t fall for it again,” concluded Star. “You know what to do Gordo. If these guys go for the deal, and they get in at Religious, start adding a little something to their hypnotics.”

“One more thing, we need to establish a way to communicate with Freddie that’s totally secret. Electronic or personal, whatever works, but we have to be careful, Government is watching these three Cabals,” continued Star.

“That’s a tough one, De Silva doesn’t seem to have any bad habits, except, I hear, he’s spending quite a few nights at that Shara girl’s place. Maybe I could get something in there,” volunteered Gordo.

“Good, see what you can work out. Ok let’s get out of here before someone wonders why we have such affection for old furniture, and oh, Gordo, bring that lamp to my office.”

Dec 10, Fred De Silva finished his work for the shift and prepared to leave for home.

Shara’s expecting me for supper tonight. That’s three times this week. I have to tell her that this isn’t going to work. I don’t have time for romance, and I damned well don’t have time for romance with an assistant in my office. This is going to be hard because it’s been nice for both of us. Will it be more disruptive to the office and work routine if I break this off than if I let it continue as it is? I’ve made a mess of this as I always feared I would.

He drove directly to Shara’s apartment, instead of going home.

He no longer rang the doorbell, he used the code she’d given to him, and let himself in. *Before, during, or after supper.* He knew what he had to say would end the evening. Shara was in the kitchen preparing their supper. She came out and greeted him warmly.

“You’re early, but I’m glad. Supper will be ready in a few minutes, and then I have something important to tell you. And don’t look so grim; things may not be as bad as you think.”

“And then again, they may be worse,” he grumbled. Fred sat down to watch the news. It was about riots in The Apple and London by the unfranchised. That is, those who were not in any Cabal for one reason or another. That group had been growing in size and restiveness for the past few years. One of the reasons Government Cabal had leaned on Public Safety was to keep Pleasure and Religion from using or recruiting these people.”

“This is going to bring more pressure from Hanover on us.” *I’ve got to do it.*

"It's ready Honey," called Shara as she came into the room.

"I've got something to tell you Shara, and it can't wait."

"It can and it will. I've something to tell that's also important, and I get to go first since I'm the hostess," she shot back. "Now, sit down and eat, and we'll talk later."

She smiled warmly and began dishing up the meal. Fred relaxed superficially as he ate, and Shara chattered on warmly about the day. Since this was her day off, she had something other than work in her mind. Fred remained very tense inside.

She's not making this any easier.

"Gordo from Pleasure called today. He wants me to go to work for the Cleopatra."

Fred almost choked on his desert at that.

"Just checking to see if you were paying attention, Hon. Actually, he did call. He wanted to install a com in the apartment so that you and Star can communicate. I said yes, so this funny looking guy came over and installed it in the closet. He said receive is always on for live or record, and transmit is off unless you push the button."

Fred's mood shifted about six different ways. "Are you sure it's safe and not a bug?" he asked, slipping into professional mode.

"No, but we can have security check it out. They've a reason for being here. The funny little man was supposed to be fixing a neighbors receiver" she replied. "As soon as were done with desert, let's see if it works. Maybe Star sent you a message," she bubbled.

"We can check for a recorded message, but I'm not pushing send until after security checks it out," muttered Fred.

There was a short message from Star, "testing, testing, call me back when you get a chance Freddie. I think this is a clean com, but I'll check my end."

Kerry Burns

Fred turned to Shara and said, “if this works and is clean, it solves a problem. You did the right thing.”

“Damn, those two women have trapped me. I guess my great message is irrelevant. What the Hell am I going to do about this relationship? I can feel myself sinking,”

“Well, that is my important news,” smiled Shara, “what’s yours?”

“Mine? Well, it’s irrelevant. Are you interested in trading back rubs?”



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