

## Chromo

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Hard plas-soled boots pounded and echoed off the narrow street driving casual loungers and pedestrians into the nearest cover. Doorways, back alleys, any space away from that sound became suddenly crowded with terrified, scattering people.

The leader signaled and the pounding became a whisper of carefully placed feet in a softer, still determined pace.

The Sanitation Squad halted abruptly on the leader's hand signal. Frank Slater leaned against the black wall, his ISO suit scraping away rebel graffiti. Idiots, he thought; they know it comes off easily but they persist in painting and spraying their seditious nonsense.

He peered around the wall, cursing the ISO suit for jutting out before he could see. If the pissy little informant was right, there should be two men under that halo. On a foggy damp night like this the street light was aptly named, its cold bluish light surrounded by a misty saint's corona. And there he was. Brad Johnson's baby brother. Johnson himself would be on the scene in minutes, there having been a general police call.

There were actually four of them, but all the better. Rebels were rebels and he and his unit were empowered to eradicate where deemed necessary. Slater smiled. It usually was necessary.

Even at this distance, he could see the red eyes of the carrier. His brow furrowed. How could the scum rebels stand close to a man so clearly infected with CHROMO? No matter. It was time to get to work. The carrier must be the first target. There must be no chance of his getting away. Slater let his weapon hang from its sling and made a pattern of signals that his men, through long hours of training, understood immediately. The man in the long gray topcoat was his, Slater's.

A patrol's nearing wail was the signal for Slater to spring into action. That vehicle could only be Brad Johnson responding. Slater jumped out, his weapon already fixed on Terry Johnson. The group of four, alerted by the siren, were crouching, ready to bolt. Two of them did and were cut down by Slater's men. One of them was the carrier. Their bodies, already lifeless when they smashed into and slid along the street, smoked with the crackling energy of the Sanitation Squad's weapons. Terry Johnson and the remaining rebel put their hands up. Slater laughed out loud, the metallic sound eerie in counterpoint to the nearing siren. He smoked the quaking rebel next to the Johnson brat. The body jumped and slid near the other two. Apart from briefly closing his eyes and compressing his lips, Terry Johnson said nothing and revealed nothing of his feelings or reaction. Slater smiled approvingly. The boy had balls, no question. He was a traitor and a fool, from a

family of fools, but he had balls.

Slater walked closer as the siren behind him stopped, the patrol car's wheels sliding on the wet ground. Doors were opening. Voices raised. Brad Johnson's booming above the others. "Wait, Slater - don't fire!" he pleaded. Now, thought Slater. Now. The boy blinked once, then attempted what Slater thought might be a sneer.

The charge blew away Terry Johnson's head, disintegrating each fragment with a lingering succession of crackling puffs of blue lights. They died away in tiny sparks bouncing along the street. Brad Johnson's initial bellow of fear and rage echoed once along the now quiet street. A smiling Slater turned to face him.

It was a recurring nightmare.

Brad Johnson's dream world has become a monochrome, monotone hell. In that inferno, a twelve-year-old boy, trapped in an ISO protective suit far too large for him, screamed soundlessly, his breath misting the faceplate. As Brad clawed at the suiting's controls, trying to open it to help the boy, a green mist began to rise in the suit like stagnant water, slowly gathering around the boy's chin, then lips, then ...

Every time he awoke from the dream, Brad's hands were still clawing, hooked like talons, still trying to open the damned suit. He knew that boy. His face, so clear in the dream, blurred into something like a police fugitive sketch on waking, its features not really those of anyone. But he knew that boy.

Another drink, he was certain, would not help him at all to figure out exactly what it was he was up against. But it would ease things a bit. Make him feel he was up to it.

To what?

To going up against Dr. Maelstrom. There. That wasn't so hard, was it? No, that special blended liquor didn't solve anything, but it sure made you breathe deeply. (He eschewed the opti-cube. As it was, he'd been using it more than he thought safe. Psychosis was a real danger with the little old cube.) He checked the time. A few minutes yet before he had to leave for the shareholders' meeting. Brad poured himself three more fingers in a wide glass.

After all, Richard Maelstrom had to piss like anybody else, didn't he? In fact, Brad remembered a time when he and the all-powerful head of Genetix were side by side at the company urinals. The Captain of all Captains of industry had cupped his penis so that it would be safe from Brad's possible gaze.

He took another sip of the amber bliss. Oh yes. Much better.

Brad concentrated on Raymond Masters, Dr. Maelstrom's dogsbody, for all his brilliance. Then, of course, there was Masters' wife, Sonia. What should he make of her?

Brad stepped over the ISO window and stared out at the city he'd once loved. He looked past his reflection; an athlete going to seed. His hair, though still full, was lank and lifeless. His slacks, not quite freshly pressed. The once-trim waistline protruded above the loosened belt.

The city's pinpoint windows winked like stars on the impossibly high edifices. How he had once loved that city. He tried to remember how he'd felt, that very long time ago. It was no use. Too much had happened since. Too many killings in the name of protection. Protection from CHROMO: the disease that has inspired abject, deathly fear in all of us for how long now?

And to Brad and his men had fallen the awful task of protecting the general populace. Protecting their lives, that is, by taking the lives of others. Of the afflicted.

Sonia Masters had sworn to him that she was close, very close, to finding the key. Not according to her husband, the celebrated discoverer of the lock to that key, the CHROMO molecular chain. Masters' brilliant research had culminated in the exposure of the elegant pattern now so familiar through constant vidnews bulletins. Culminated.

And then stopped.

Somehow, Raymond Masters, superscientist, winner of every truly prestigious international prize, holder of some of the most complex and envied genetic patents, had come up against a solid wall. CHROMO yielded its outline, its mathematically elegant patterns, like a posturing flirt, then halted all further advances. Stopped at the moment of intimacy, the moment of revelation. The moment of pleasure.

How then could Sonia Masters say she was fashioning the key? Was she deluded? She would not lie to Brad. Not now. But if neither lie nor delusion - what? Not a real cure, surely.

Across the city he once loved, lay the Sprawl. In its labyrinthine alleys and hovels, the broken streets and filthy poverty, rebels without hope plotted. He pitied them. The military man in him hated them for their ineptitude, their lack of discipline, of power.

He checked the time again. Now he was sure of what he would say at the meeting when called. It would be short and sweet and they wouldn't like it one bit. Brad Johnson rubbed at the stubble on his chin and decided that, if two drinks were this beneficial, why then, two more . . .

Dr. Richard Maelstrom's passion was chess. Computers having long since become grandmaster players, Maelstrom tired easily of draw play, however elegant the moves. Three-dimensional chess was his game. He loved sucking in the computer programs, making seemingly random and illogical moves and then listening to the low whir as the idiot machine tried desperately to log in the strategy for future use. That machine reminded him of Masters. He chuckled as he thought of

Raymond.

Masters had balked at first. Oh, he ranted a bit about his principles, his ethics, the morality of it all - God help us! In the end it all came down to the matter. The matter. The stuff that cannot be held in the hand, or smelled, or felt. But for Richard Maelstrom it was as palpable as air and just as important: it was power.

Project Habitat.

Maelstrom's computer reminded him of the time in soft, mellifluous tones. When Maelstrom grunted, the machine, mistaking it for absentmindedness, said, "The shareholders' meeting, sir." Maelstrom waved at it impatiently, "Yes, yes, I know. Bishop captures pawn. Queen check."

He smiled as the machine whirred, trying to make sense of the move. It was simple, really. Take the pawn. The machine - for so Maelstrom thought of it, never giving it a name - would be forced to take the bishop with its king, thereby losing its castling privilege. It was a fair trade, Maelstrom felt.

He had explained the project to Masters in words of many syllables, that being Masters' mode of understanding and expression. Maelstrom could almost hear the whirring in the man's brain as he tried to log in the sense and store the strategy for future use.

Genetix, the entity Maelstrom had fashioned as surely as it were clay in his hands, was embarking on the greatest, the most expansive industrial enterprise in the history of the planet. Nothing less. Its scope was no longer a measurable form. It was beyond wealth, beyond power. It was ultimate.

And Raymond Masters would be responsible.

Of course, Masters didn't know that. It was his speech at the shareholders' conference that would trigger the explosion. It would mushroom immediately and become The Project. And the Japanese, those double-dealing, genetically self-centered, would-be world leaders, would atone. Maelstrom liked that.

They would atone.

To have to explain it to Masters at any length was a measure of the man's essential smallness. But he was reachable. The carrot, looming impossibly large before his astonished eyes, shielded him from the stick behind. He would, did, submit. Con Amore.

His wife Sonia was another matter.

Masters, Maelstrom mused, seemed to have only a tenuous control over her. Her constant probing into what she called the key to CHROMO's lock was - unsettling. She was not approachable through the same avenues of conviction as her husband. Nor was the used-up hulk of an ex-commander, Brad Johnson. He was no

longer a factor, excepting insofar as he could still be used, public hero that he still was. And Maelstrom knew just how to use him.

That was part of his genius.

“Shareholders’ meeting in 22 minutes, 17 seconds,” the computer reminded him. It would not do so again, having been programmed against what his owner would consider nagging. Maelstrom called for the door and it whispered open. He turned and conceded the game.

The machine, insofar as any machine could be, was puzzled. “You ... concede, sir?” It whirred, then clicked, then accepted. As a smiling Maelstrom left to go to the Genetix shareholders’ meeting, the singular turning point of his remarkable life, he chuckled at the machine’s inherent stupidity, and its surprising malleability.

Spiral remembered his sixth birthday quite clearly. His father overheard him blurting out as fast as his baby syntax would allow, the square root of a seven-figure number to his astonished uncle. He beat the boy until restrained by a horrified family.

Father and son thereafter regarded each other only peripherally, suspiciously, and as seldom as possible. After CHROMO felled most of his family, Spiral made his plans to leave. Only his mother kept him from fleeing their now uncrowded home. When the Squads killed her like an animal, her eyes blazing red with the disease, Spiral left. He felt a horrible guilt that her death was his freedom. But it was worth a lot to look over his shoulder on leaving and see his father staring after him, stunned and alone.

He made his way easily into the first ranks of the rebel cadres. They were cells, really. Five men to a cell. If captured, they could not tell what they did not know, however ingenious the persuasion. Their connections were cellular; easily and often changed, impossible to trace.

His ability to snake his way through cyberspace was invaluable. Any degree of classified information was open to him. He checked the day’s haul. A pass to a conference on holo-solids and their artificial gestation - whatever that was about. Must be good for something. Some profit for him or the cause. He would bring it to Mr. Lightstone as he did with almost everything he brought back from the ‘space.

Lightstone was the man. He made it all happen. Without him there was no rebel cause; he was it. A first-class VIP pass for the Genetix shareholders’ meeting tonight. With it, anyone would gain instant entry. Unchallenged. That looked real good. Mr. Lightstone would know what to do with that. He was the man who was going to make things right. Though, in some vague way, Spiral did not want things to be made right. He liked things the way they were; with infiltrators, spies, good guys, bad guys. The Sprawl and the City, the black wall to be breached with contraband, guards to be bribed, and above all what he alone could supply: info.

As he made his circuitous way back to Lightstone-or where Lightstone might

be-he glanced at a terminal way station with the usual longing. It was one of the new models, one he hadn't tried to tap into yet. No. Enough for the day. He sorted through the rest of the take and put it neatly into the little boxes. That was how he thought of the processes of his brain: little boxes, like egg crates, all stuffed with info, and all instantly accessible.

Spiral knew he was important to the cause. Lightstone himself, his arm around Spiral's shoulder, would praise him to the others, Spiral regarded Mr. Lightstone with great love and something close to pity. For all his years, his courage and generalship, Mr. Lightstone was somewhat naive. He seemed to be sure of the cause winning, an end to the fighting. There was no end to the cause, the fight. Any more than there was an end to CHROMO. It was the disease that kept the struggle going, Spiral knew. While there was CHROMO, there would be the fight, the cause, the good guys and the bad guys.

Spiral was proud to be known by name to every Squad in and out of the Sprawl. His capture or death, he knew, would have meant instant recognition, promotion for every man on the team that brought him down.

He was twelve years old.

Maelstrom considered the enigmatic Lightstone, leader of the rebel resistance. His legend had grown beyond reasonable belief. His narrow escapes, retold and told again throughout the Sprawl and into the city, gave credence to the biggest part of his mythos: that Lightstone was part holo, part machine, wholly untouchable. There would be time enough to deal with him and the rebels. They served a purpose, after all. Were it in Maelstrom's power to magically vaporize them all instantly, he would not.

Maelstrom watched the glittering lights of the city blurring past the limo window. The chauffeur occasionally glanced at the traff-ease screen as it computed the time it would take to reach the Genetix auditorium. Cruising the VIP lane made the trip easier, though there was some traffic this evening.

Still, Lightstone was a bit beyond control. Too many recent casualties among the Sanitation Squads. Morale was slipping. As good as Frank Slater was, he was not the leader Brad Johnson used to be. 'Used to be' being the operative term. Yet Slater had what Maelstrom most needed: an amoral ferocity that could be turned, like a white-hot torch, against whatever target it was directed. Slater seemed to hate everything outside of himself with a paranoid simplicity. The man was invaluable. A great tool. Like all tools, useful. Until the day they were no longer useful. Then ...

Lightstone stared at the pass with disbelief.

The boy, Spiral, had outdone himself. Lightstone doubted the cause could continue in its present escalation of harrying the Maelstrom structure without the gifted boy. The Genetix shareholders' meeting tonight was no mere bean counting profit-and-loss affair. Though some members might have expected it to be just a

self-congratulatory gathering, the atmosphere, the feel of the thing, told him otherwise. Something was up. Something big. Everyone who was anyone would be there tonight. Including, Lightstone mused, some previously uninvited guests, courtesy of our gifted young Spiral.

Frank Slater's dream would come true.

Brad Johnson would fall into his hands, along with the Masters bitch. There is injustice after all, Slater chuckled, winking at one of his men. The man nodded uneasily. The others did their best to ignore the weird, metallic chuckles emanating from Frank Slater's ISO suit.

Brad Johnson's brother, sent out to kill Lightstone - a prime assignment given to baby brother and better handled by himself - had been turned instead into a traitor by that freakish entity. What infernal incantations the evil Lightstone had breathed into that little man's ear no one could tell, and Slater could not guess at. What a pleasure - what a delight - it had been to waste the little bastard. Then to see big brother boo-hooing over the corpse - ah, that had been even better. It had taken three men to hold the raging Brad back from Slater. Or at least, thought Slater, that was how it appeared. Had their positions been reversed, Slater knew it would take more than three men to stop him from whatever damage he wished to inflict. When Johnson had calmed down sufficiently and the men had released him, staying close by at the ready, Johnson had threatened legal action. Slater almost spit into his faceplate in utter disgust.

The whole damned family was like to like; self-righteous poseurs. Ineffectual as eunuchs. Johnson's appointment, for example, to the theater of war where he had distinguished himself was what actors called actor-proof. It had been like shooting fish in a barrel. Hardly any resistance. They could have sent Bo-Bo the chimp and he would have garnered every ribbon and medal given to Johnson. That hogwash about rescuing his men from an encirclement. A leader took care of his men, that was that. That appointment should have been mine, Slater often whispered through gritted teeth.

For Frank Slater, the killing had become pleasurable early on. Dumb shit Brad Johnson with his professional scruples. He'd have let that diseased kid get away that day. Ten-year-old kid, his eyes already a deep red with CHROMO, his movements erratic. The little twerp would've infected half the damned Sprawl. One shot brought him down. Little guy. He remembered Johnson's look. Made Slater happy for a week.

Taking Brad Johnson's place would be only logical. Should have come sooner, but . . . what the hell. Commanding the Squads was what Slater was born for. And hey - it was for the public weal, wasn't it? He was the bulwark between CHROMO and the gutless populace hiding up in the great citadel, in their mile-high condos, away from the Sprawl. Away from the poverty, the stink, the CHROMO - the action.

He was a hunter by disposition, by nature. Though hunting CHROMO vectors was not entirely satisfying; they had no means with which to fight back, not much defense. Oh, occasionally an armed ragtag inflicted a casualty or two among his men, or the rare armed rebel appearing out of nowhere, wild-eyed, making a suicide attack.

These skirmishes kept the politicians generous and on their toes. Funding was never a worry; the fat asses gave him more than he asked. Invitations to their fancy homes, too. The menfolk uneasy with him, the women fascinated. He found the women disgustingly easy and eventually of no interest to him at all.

Slater looked forward to no more than the hunt, may it last forever. That, and the final showdown with Brad Johnson. Big fucking hero Johnson, has-been drunk, his eyeballs rolling with opticube use. Christ, how he hated that son of a bitch! Killing his brother had been most satisfying. Now Frank Slater looked forward to killing Brad Johnson.

Slowly would be good.

Killing Lightstone - the Lightstone - would then be the capstone of his career. He was bound to be persona most grata and - in the highest circles. Maelstrom himself - der alte-el supremo - would place the circle of blue ribbon around his neck. On national vid. The nation's highest award. Nothing closed to him, nothing held back. Oh, the swells would still regard him with what they thought was condescension. But it was weak, like the light wave from an exhausted weapon, its power source used up. It was he, Slater, who held the high ground, from which he regarded them all. Only Maelstrom loomed above, and that aerie Slater granted to him readily, gladly.

Maelstrom after all, was Maelstrom.

Sonia Masters leaned closer to one of the screens. Her lithe body twisted slightly as she strove to force a result with body English. Raymond Masters watched her while he pretended to read his news printout of the day. He needn't bother to pretend, he knew. She was so absorbed she would not have noticed him dancing a hornpipe.

It would be impossible, he knew, to make her understand the project. She only saw her own efforts at finding the key. Her world was in that multiscreen workstation, staring at the damned CHROMO configuration. He watched her edge the substructure closer to the CHROMO grape cluster. CHROMO shied away, as it always did; coy, quivering with seeming vulnerability. Raymond's lips formed a sneer CHROMO was about as vulnerable as laminated rocket skin. His sneer turned into a genuine smile as he saw CHROMO gather itself, certain now of its foe's essential weakness. It straightened. The quivering stopped. Like a faking fighter; it came off the ropes, suddenly not tired or weak. Adapted. Quickly, easily.

Sonia shook her head, her lustrous hair spilling about her shoulders, then bent

to the task again. Masters checked the time. Soon he would be speaking at the shareholders' meeting. Maelstrom had insisted that he, Masters, speak first. The first words on the road to Project Habitat. Raymond felt the beads of sweat on his upper lip. He patted it gently with a fresh, stiff linen handkerchief.

It would be a dead end, this substructure. Promising, then nothing. CHROMO was too good. Too adaptive. He remembered reading about the old ebola strain, late twentieth century. The victims took it to the grave. Outbreaks were sporadic and limited. CHROMO, on the other hand, weakened and maddened its victims, but they survived far longer. The vector, an incubator of swarming, multiplying billions of bacteria, staggered on to infect others. CHROMO was smart.

Sonia leaned closer again, to the screens. Her concentration, Raymond marveled, was total. It really was time they were going.

The greater scheme, the enormous enterprise, would be beyond her. The project did not lend itself to easy description, and besides, she would never understand or condone Raymond's sacrifices in the cause of the greatest industrial ... It was no use, he thought, looking at his wife's intent face. He would never tell her either, of the sacrifices he had made in the name of the enterprise, would go on making as it matured into reality. What was it Jeremy Bentham said - "greatest good for the greatest number?" Bentham would have understood. Sonia never would.

And CHROMO was the key. Sonia searched for the key to CHROMO, not knowing the disease was itself the main element in the great enterprise. Without it, there was no enterprise, no Maelstrom, in fact. The entire structure would collapse without its basic underpinning. That was the great secret.

Masters marveled at the paradox: CHROMO needed us and, in its struggle for primacy, killed us. And we, for our own purposes, needed the deadliest plague we had ever known. CHROMO.DQ

Warning: Enter CHROMO At Your Own Risk

Welcome to the world of CHROMO - if welcome is the right word.

CHROMO - a world of tragedy and triumph, hope and hopelessness, heroes and villains, a deadly disease and the desperate search for a cure.

CHROMO - something new in the world of science fiction, a bold new approach to storytelling.

Over the months and years ahead, CHROMO will take shape in many media ... novels and stories, graphic stories, interactive CD-ROMS, motion pictures, the Internet, media not yet invented. CHROMO will spread across them all ... taking you along.

For now, enjoy this preview of the world of CHROMO ... if you're brave enough.

