

# Garbage Day

by Wil McCarthy

Be careful what you wish for. You may not anticipate the side effects ...

## 1. Camp Friendly

Conrad had never seen an angry mob before, much less been a part of one. Like an ocean wave it seemed to offer two alternatives: ride along or be smashed under. And the ride, truth be told, was fun; since the raid on the boathouse, and with it the capture of canoe paddles, the counselors were actually *afraid* of them.

Of a bunch of fourteen-year-olds! Even "Rock" Denge was on the retreat, falling back along the side of the Arts and Crap cabin (and casting a worryingly broad shadow on its clay-and-log wall in the slanting light of a fake and miniature sun).

"What the hell you boys doing?" he demanded.

"Busting out," Bascal answered lightly. Cheers rewarded him at once, from Conrad himself as much as anyone. "Prince Bascal! All hail Prince Bascal, the Liberator!"

"This a summer camp," Rock pointed out. "Recreational. You here for fun, right?"

"Had enough," Bascal replied. Bascal Edward de Towaji Lutui, Crown Prince of the Queendom of Sol.

The badder boys — Steve Grush, and that Ho kid whose last name was spelled "Ng" but sounded more like "Eh" — were flanking Rock on the left, flicking cigarette butts and hooting, and you'd better believe *that* got his attention.

"I gotta hurt someone?" he wanted to know. He looked capable of it — strong and pissed off, but in control. Taking care of "troubled" boys was his job.

"We got to hurt *you*?" Ho Ng shot back, and gave him a whack on the skull with the paddle. Tried to, anyway; Rock deflected it with a sweep of his arm. But since that left Steve an opening to jab him in the nuts, it didn't do much good. Rock doubled over with a froggy kind of sound, but stayed on his feet. Taking on *fourteen* troubled boys was a bit beyond his faculties.

There was a definite satisfaction in seeing a big guy pacified like that, but then it looked like Ho or Steve might hit him again, maybe harder this time, and truthfully that made Conrad afraid, finally, of the consequences. And ashamed to be a member of this particular mob, yes, because Rock Denge was definitely not a bad guy as jailers went. Kept the rules without treating you like a little kid, which was more than he could say for most of the others.

But fortunately, Prince Bascal stepped forward, into what would have been the line of fire. "Steady, men. Nobody wants to get hurt over this — we just need the fax gate."

"Can't leave without your parent or guardian," Rock said, attempting to straighten. "Regulations, no exception."

"Except today," Bascal said, and Conrad had to marvel at the casual, agreeable tone of this kid's voice, trained from birth in the art of persuasion. It wasn't going to *convince* Rock or anything — especially not

after he'd been whacked in the balls with an oar — but it did put a vaguely legitimate face on these proceedings. Made it sound like their side of it had some validity.

Which it did; this wasn't a jail, strictly speaking, but neither were the boys free to leave, or to do as they pleased while "guests" of the camp. Which might be great if you were ten or something, but sucked hugely when you were old enough to want female companionship and other assorted contraband. But there was no one to complain to, no cops or social workers to call, no one here at all who was not in the immediate employ of Camp Friendly, and therefore an extension of the parents who'd banished them here.

So here in the twenty-ninth decade of the Queendom of Sol, on a miniature planet orbiting in the middle depths of the Kuiper belt, far from the Sun and planets, young men were forced — literally forced — to live out scenes from an earlier, less civilized time. So it made perfect sense for them to respond in an uncivilized way.

"You kids are in a lot of trouble," Rock cautioned. From his tone he was worried *for* them as much as because of them. He wasn't going to offer any further resistance — couldn't win if he tried.

On the horizon, twenty meters away, three more counselors materialized. One Conrad recognized but didn't know — he worked with the younger groups on the other side of the world. The other two were D'rector Jed, both copies holding the electric cattle prod he'd often warned about.

"What's going on here?" one of them demanded officiously. The other just stood there looking stern. It said a lot about D'rector Jed, Conrad thought, that he liked to go everywhere in twos. Did he enjoy his own company that much, or was he simply concerned that the Universe outnumbered him?

"Cessation of involuntary confinement," Bascal called back without missing a beat. "This man illegally tried to detain us."

The distance was not too great to see a veil of caution drop across D'rector Jed's features as he recognized Bascal's voice. He seemed to have trouble actually picking Bascal out of the crowd, though — before starting they'd smeared their faces with dirt and mussed up their hair, mainly as a way of psyching themselves up, but also, Conrad now saw, to blur the lines of identity which made them accountable.

"Your Highness," one of the Jeds said, and you could see him still mentally backpedaling, rethinking his approach. "Prince" was a funny word, a funny concept really; the child who would someday rule.

(If his parents weren't immortal.)

How did one treat a child, educate or punish or even reward a child, who would someday stand higher, enormously higher, than the educator himself? A tricky business indeed, and one which Bascal, in Conrad's limited experience, twisted constantly — perhaps reflexively — to his own advantage.

"Highness," the other Jed tried, "you and your friends have been entrusted to my keeping. I will not hesitate — "

"You *will* hesitate," Bascal shouted back, taking a large symbolic step in the Jeds' direction. "In fact, you'll stand aside entirely, or my merry men here will beat you both senseless. This is not a joke; they're escorting me for a call to Child Welfare Services, with whom I have a total legal right to consult."

This was news to Conrad; three minutes ago, the plan had been, "Come on! Let's show these bastards!" But this sounded better, more refined. Legitimate, almost.

"I've sounded the alarm," Jed told him. "It isn't just me you'll have to deal with, it's multiple copies of every counselor on the planette. Plus the Secret Service and Royal Constabulary."

"Yeah," Bascal agreed, "ten hours from now." That was the speed-of-light round-trip time from here to the Queendom proper.

"The fax gate itself is protected by your own Palace Guards. They won't let you leave."

"I don't need to," Bascal said. He glanced sidelong at Rock Denge, who was still struggling valiantly to stand upright. "There's already been a regrettable incident here. We're prepared for there to be more if you interfere with us."

"Cancel the alarm," Rock advised, throwing his voice behind Bascal's. "Let 'em in the office. We don't outnumber them much, and they want to call Welfare, I say fine. Got nothing to hide. Parents need to know about this."

D'rector Jed didn't respond to that, but when the boys started moving, *en masse*, in the direction of the office, he didn't try to stop them, either. So they walked right past both of him and over the horizon, the little sun slipping behind the planette as they went. Small planets were like that — times of day were little places you could walk to. Here, the stars shone down like a vindication from God himself.

Superficially, the office looked like one more log cabin, especially in the dark. It was larger, though, and the light spilling out through the windows came from a proper wellstone ceiling, not a damn kerosene lamp. And once they got the door open and mobbed their way inside, the illusion was shattered completely. This could be anywhere in the Queendom — the bathroom had a *flush toilet*, for crying out loud. A further sign of the basic injustices here.

The fax was in a back room, a kind of entryway with no door. The camp had several other fax gates whose activation they could maybe have demanded, but this was the only one known to be on all the time, with a hardlink gated directly to the New Systemwide Collapsiter Grid, the Nescog, that could get their message — or even their material selves — out of here in substantially less than the blink of an eye.

Unfortunately, as promised, the gate was guarded by a pair of gleaming Palace Guard robots, their blank metal faces and sexless metal bodies both unreadable and immobile. They were here, no doubt, to keep unauthorized persons from entering Camp Friendly and harming, in some way, the Queendom's only prince.

Although, Conrad mused, the fax software could probably do that all by itself — filter out any images not specifically authorized here. Were these guards redundant, a hedge against someone corrupting the system somehow? Were they also parental spies, sent here to keep Bascal in line? Jed had certainly seemed to think so.

As bodyguards they were certainly intimidating enough; Conrad had little doubt they could burst from this room and be anywhere on the planette within minutes. The boys stood well back, milling around in the outer room, a few of the bravest eyeing these monsters from the "safe" distance of three or four meters.

Bascal alone seemed unimpressed, striding in toward the fax and gesturing at the two robots. "You, you, come with me. We're evacuating — the planette is on fire. *Come on.*"

He stepped right up to the fax and said, "Nearest emergency center." The robots hesitated for a barely perceptible moment, then the first of them, with alarming fluidity and grace, turned and leaped through the gate, vanishing in a puff of quantum dislocation.

The second robot seemed to be waiting for Bascal, seemed somehow to be expecting to follow him through. But instead it fell twitching to the floor, when Bascal produced a tiny, toyish-looking gun of blue plastic, and calmly made the robot's mirror-bright head disappear. There was no mess, and barely any sound. A teleport gun?

"Close the gate to incoming calls," Bascal said to the fax, then turned to his troops with a self-satisfied grin. "These parents of ours, they have nothing to pass on or share. Nothing to teach us except sit down, shut up, and live in their shadows forever. It's *their* Queendom, right? Always will be."

Grumbles of assent from the boys. They had immortal parents, too. They'd maybe given this issue some thought; Conrad certainly had. And anyway you just had to admire the prince's *cool*. Like it was all a game, like he could walk anywhere, through fire and bullets and untamed black holes, without so much as a flinch. You wanted to stand behind him, you really did.

"Well," Bascal continued, "What say we tear the place up a little? A night on Earth, my treat. You break it, *I* buy it."

Conrad had always had a problem with impulse — it was pretty much why he'd been exiled here in the first place. So while he knew there'd be hell to pay eventually, he really did like the idea of busting things up. What fourteen-year-old didn't?

"Jesus Christ, Bascal," he said with conviction, "I'd follow you anywhere."

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## 2. Domes of the Popcorn Moon

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They bounced through a repeater just inside the orbit of Pluto, and were funneled into a ring collapsiter segment where their signal could travel, for a while, much faster than the classical speed of light. Planets and planettes and planetoids whizzed by, unseen. There was no sensation associated with this; the boys' bodies and minds — perhaps their souls — were reduced to quantum wave packets for the journey. This was the NESCOG, the New Systemwide Collapsiter Grid, brainchild of Bascal's father. To an outside observer, the journey from Camp Friendly in the middle Kuiper belt, to Earth in the Inner System, could appear to take anywhere from eight to ten hours, depending on network congestion and the alignment of the various nodes and conduits. To the boys themselves, the journey felt — and for practical purposes *was* — instantaneous, no more significant or amazing than stepping through a curtain.

They could have specified a number of copies, and spilled out the other end *en masse*, an army of themselves. They could have specified a color, and come out painted bright blue. They could have specified an orientation, and come out facing backwards. But they did none of these things, and stepped out as themselves. Nothing else had occurred to them on the spur of the moment, and anyway antics like that would trip the filters and provoke inquiry.

On the curtain's other side was Athens, where it was noon, and brutally hot. Another single step whisked them around to Calcutta, which was also hot, and drenched in monsoon rains. They ended up in Denver, where the Sun had recently set on a summer-warm city, and the air was just fine. They spilled out into Market Street Station, jabbering, punching one another, giggling. Freedom was theirs at last, and the news of their escape could not have traveled any faster than the boys themselves. It would be a while before anyone came looking.

A billboard of animated wellstone proudly announced the station as one of only five public fax depots in the downtown area. A little map showed their locations, scattered across a kidney-shaped district a couple of kilometers across, and the flanking text informed the boys that ownership and operation of private fax gates within the exclusion zone was sharply restricted. Depending on the boys' exact

destination, their transportation options from here included bus (free), automotive taxi (\$), horse-drawn ("hansom") cab (\$\$), and of course walking, which according to the sign was strongly encouraged in a commercial preservation zone of Denver's caliber.

"Ooh," one of the boys said, pretending to be impressed, and of course emphasizing the remark with the raised, limp hands of some supposed effete aristocracy. It was Yinebeb Fecre who did this, with an additional layer of irony he probably wasn't aware of: by the standards of Camp Friendly, he *was* an effete aristocrat, the hyperactive child of two well-known television critics. Feck the fairy.

"Shut up," Bascal told him mildly. "Denver's raw. It's good."

Conrad hadn't seen the place except on TV, but overall he was inclined to agree. Back in his parents' day, fax technology had hit urban areas like a saturation bombing campaign, rewriting their maps and landscapes overnight. Many cities became beehives of addressable spaces whose physical locations were all but irrelevant. Streets vanished; sidewalks vanished; neighborhoods vanished. In some cases the cities themselves vanished, or became hypothetical entities with outposts scattered all over the solar system. But Denver's urban planners had seen it coming, had drawn this cordon around the heart of the city to preserve it from the tyrannies of convenience. Not just a Children's City, this, but a Federal Historic District and member of the Living Museum Network.

The terminal itself was underground, a dimly-lit urban space filled with columns and information kiosks and snack bars, and old-fashioned telephones that were probably just for show. Another billboard — this one illuminated with tiny red dots — announced periods of planned outage in the fax gates here, and periods of broadband connection to some specific destination for some specific window of time: HONOLULU 21:15-21:17 TODAY. There were ranks of embossed numbers along the ceiling, although what purpose they served was not apparent.

Some people carried luggage — an eccentricity in a world where fax machines could store any object in callable library routines and print copies on demand. There were other eccentricities apparent in the crowd: people who looked older or younger than the "ageless" standard of Queendom beauty. People who were dressed funny, people who had funny hair. And children of various ages, of course — comprising nearly ten percent of this crowd of dozens. The mix was interesting and cosmopolitan and yeah, highly raw. Fresh, original. Whatever. But everyone in the crowd — even the children — seemed to greet the arrival of fourteen unescorted, dirty-faced adolescents as a sign of trouble. A mother snatched up the hand of a toddler and pulled him close. Others were less overt, but their suspicion was lightly veiled at best.

Welcome to Denver. Keep your hands where we can see them.

Conrad gave back some dirty looks. It wasn't like people got away with crimes anymore; not when the whole Earth was one giant sensor. Even where events weren't explicitly recorded in a wellstone matrix they left, like, quantum traces in the rocks or something. Ghosts. With enough patience and computing power, almost any event could be reconstructed.

Ignoring the ill will around them, Bascal surveyed the chamber itself, and laughed. "I think we're here, men."

There was an escalator leading up to street level, and Ho Ng and Steve Grush, with hardly a glance at Bascal or any of the others, hopped onto it and went up. The prince, perhaps sensing a threat to his leadership, hopped onto the down escalator and called out, "Onward! Onward!"

It wasn't hard to run upward against the descending staircase, although what effort it took was strangely infuriating, the laws of gravity doubly stacked against you. And the people riding down were of course

not amused as the boys swarmed past, but nobody said anything or tripped anyone, so Bascal made it to the top only a few moments behind Ho and Steve. And right there beside him was Conrad, the right-hand man, feeling important. Oh, he'd felt important a time or two already this summer, going to the same camp as the Prince of Sol. But this was different, this was nonaccidental. The two of them were *actual friends*.

"This is raw," he said to Bascal in a low, private tone, and the prince responded with a fist raised defiantly but low, where only Conrad could see it.

"Until somebody recognizes their *pilinisi*, me boyo. Then it gets complicated."

"Mmm." Conrad could only nod knowingly. "Pilinisi" was the Tongan word for prince, and he knew — or imagined he knew — what that meant for Bascal's life. No shortage of women, for one thing, but no privacy either. Everyone figured they knew him, when in fact almost nobody really did. But really, this disheveled boy in camp shirt and boating culottes didn't much resemble the Bascal Edward you saw on TV.

Up at ground level, circular doorways irised open for them in the terminal building's glass outer wall. The air outside was perfect: summer-warm and sunset-cool, not a bit muggy. It smelled of food: garlic and fresh-baked bread, maybe kettle corn popping somewhere nearby. The sidewalks were concrete with inlays of what looked like real stone — you could tell by the rough texture of it, not at all like a wellstone emulation.

So here they were: 16th and Market in the Mile High City, an almost mythical address. To the east a few blocks was Self Similar Street, where they were still recording the puppet show live every week. Somewhere to the south was the Cola Dome where the Broncos and Avalanche and Nuggets still played, where famous concerts were held, and paintball battles. On the streets, as advertised, was actual vehicular traffic: white buses and yellow/black taxis, delivery trucks and horse-drawn carriages. Rather a lot of bicycles, too, piloted not by children but by serious-looking adults swathed in impact-resistant wellcloth. There were also a few pedicabs drawn by midgets, which struck Conrad as an odd touch indeed: where did you find midgets in an age of perfect health?

The sidewalks were crowded and vibrant, full of obstacles for the pedestrians to flow around in artful patterns. This was a city of posts and pedestals, columns and obelisks. A fountain burbled merrily. There were little trees everywhere, maples and poplars and even acacias, no more than four or five meters tall. But the towers looming all around were anything but miniature, blocking the view. It was only when Bascal led them around a corner onto 16th Street that anything resembling mountains became visible, hulking dimly ahead in the sunset, shrouded by clouds, crowded from beneath by low buildings. But the mountains were lower than Conrad would've expected, or perhaps farther away. In the golden-red glow of the clouds it was hard to tell. But that was the direction Bascal led them: away from the towers, toward the sunset.

The boys made a rough passage through the city: hooting, snatching at leaves, kicking and leaping over benches, crowding people out of their way. There was no law against being surly, and oh boy did it feel good. Still, Conrad couldn't quite keep his eyes off the architecture. It was one of the few things he was good at and cared about: the history of building, and of the buildings themselves. Here, that history was written in the walls, layered like geological strata.

"Look at the sidewalk," he said to Bascal. And when that was ignored, he tried, "Look at that *wall*. Is it brick? It looks like brick."

"Whatever," Bascal replied, not mocking but barely looking, either. The question didn't interest him.

Conrad tried it on Yinebeb Fecre. "You study architecture, Feck?"

Feck raised his limp, sarcastic hands again. "Ooh, architecture!"

Okay, so maybe it wasn't a popular subject. Still, it seemed important — especially here. There were exactly two subjects Conrad hadn't failed in his last school year: Architecture and Matter Programming. These he pursued with an intensity that upset his teachers nearly as much as his apathy on the other subjects. Only History had inspired any enthusiasm at all, and only because this time it had included the Light Wars, which of course were the first intersection of architecture and matter programming.

The moment wellstone — programmable matter — had found its way into the old republics, the Light Wars had started. What anarchy: buildings greedily sucking in ambient energy, dumping waste heat, offending the eye with patterns of superreflector and superabsorber, with flashing lights, with blasts of communication laser unfettered by any cable or conduit. It was much cheaper to rustle energy out of the environment than to buy it off the grid, so all concern for aesthetics had flown right out the window, overnight, along with concern for the comfort of passersby and even, to some extent, for their safety. You could have all the electricity you wanted, if you blackly drank every photon that touched you. You could stay cool in the summertime, if your building was a perfect mirror focusing the heat back on unfortunate neighbors. In fact, if you were clever and obnoxious you could do both at the same time: deepening every shadow, amplifying every pool of brightness for your own convenience.

This wasn't as crippling a blow to city life as the Fax Wars twenty years later, but the scars remained even after the Queendom's founding, when the Architectural Courtesy edicts were rammed through. Here in Denver you could practically tell, just by looking, which decade each building had been constructed in: here an ancient steel-framed structure of poured concrete, its wellstone a mere facade. There a building of pure wellstone, held up against gravity by the pressure of electrons in quantum dots. (This had struck Conrad as a dumb idea the first moment he'd heard of it — what if there was a power failure? — but truthfully he'd never heard of a case where one of these selfish buildings had collapsed or dissolved. There must be all sorts of safeguards.) The majority of the buildings were post-Queendom: diamond frames and floors, with wellstone sheathing and facing. But even these had been dressed down, made to resemble materials of more or less natural origin.

Denver, like most of the really great cities, had forcibly regressed itself to something resembling the end of the twenty-first century. A preponderance of stone and metal and silica glass. Lighted signs had to look a certain way: like neon or mercury vapor or electroluminescent bulk diode. As the sunset deepened and the streetlights came on one by one, he noted with satisfaction that they were simulated gas flame. Had there been gaslights in the twenty-first century? If not, there ought to have been!

As the boys made their way westward, a full Moon slipped into view from behind one of the towers.

"Awooooo!" said a kid named Peter Kolb, pointing.

Bascal turned, looked, spread his arms. "Ah, now that is a Moon. July, to be specific. The Buck Moon. And we, my friends, are the young bucks making our way in the world. Let all the people of the domes of the Moon gaze down upon us in wonder. This is our night."

"Buck Moon? Says who?" someone asked.

"Says the Naval Almanac," Bascal answered.

Feck cleared his throat. "It's, uh, from the Algonquin."

Conrad turned. "Eh?"

"North American tribal society. Very old, but, you know, still in existence. Almost as big as the islands of Tonga, actually. Almost as many people."

Now everyone was looking at Feck, and even by gaslight you could see him blushing.

Bascal looked surprised. "Feck! You don't know things, do you? *Peter* knows things, he's the son of Laureates. Conrad *thinks* he knows things. But you? Ah, wait a minute, I'm perceiving something: you have a connection to this tribe. Wait, don't tell me! You're, let's see ... " He studied Feck's complexion and features for a moment. "You're one-eighth by blood."

"One-quarter," Feck said, "But it's not Algonquin, it's Chippewa. Their neighbors. For us, this is the Raspberry Moon."

"Ah! You're practically a native guide! I had no idea."

"I've never been to North America," Feck said. "Anyway, this area is Kiowa, or maybe Lakota. The Horse Moon."

"We'll have to horse around," Bascal answered merrily. "And give a big, fat raspberry to the good citizens of Denver. Any other moons we should know about tonight?"

Feck scratched his ear, uncomfortable with the attention. The crowds were lighter here; the boys were practically alone in their pool of lamplight. "Uh, the Corn Moon? Or maybe it's Popcorn Moon. Also Raptor, Thunder, and Blood."

"Wow. That's raw. I like it. We'll screech like eagles, leaving a wake of thunder and blood. And raspberry popcorn! Actually, that's quite silly. But anyway the town is ours, and I say we take a bite."

Ah, the Poet Prince. Conrad snorted to himself.

Ho and Steve, unimpressed by this dialog, exchanged a look, then turned and started off toward the sunset again. And once again, Bascal seemed honor-bound to go after them, to assert himself. He got between them, and propped his elbows up on each of their shoulders, looking side-to-side and grinning.

"You know," he said, "a preservation district like this one runs on what they call a 'service economy.' You walk around looking at objects on display, and if you like one, the shopkeepers will print out a copy for you, or have it faxed to your address. Or you can sit in a restaurant, and order yummy comestibles from a highly restricted menu. Sometimes the whole selection fits on a card, or a sign. There's a theme to it. See, what you're paying for is ambience — the way things look and smell and fit together."

"Uh-huh," Ho said uncomfortably. He obviously realized that he was expected to reply, to suggest something. But he was just too damned stupid.

Steve Grush ducked away from Bascal's elbow, and then Ho did as well, and both the badboys were stepping back, sizing up the prince in some kind of unspoken power struggle. They never had a chance; at a loss for words and deeds alike, Ho finally shrugged, and gestured for Bascal to lead the way.

"You probably know where you're going. Sire."

Conrad couldn't help wondering if this was a learnable trick, something Bascal had had drilled into him by tutors. He hadn't really *done* anything — it might be something coded in his genome, some sort of dominant pheromone signature that made others feel more submissive the closer he got. Was such a thing possible? If so, it stood to reason that Their Majesties would give their son every advantage in the world. But perhaps being Prince was advantage enough; it wasn't like Ho could punch him out or anything, like



anyone would stand for it if he did. Conrad felt a burst of pride and affection for this, his personal monarch, and it occurred to him that he would never *need* a trick like that, as long as he was standing right here at Bascal's elbow. That was all the leadership any of them were going to need. This was the whole point of a Queendom, right? The need to follow someone, to surrender — if only symbolically — that unpleasant sense of personal accountability. *Figureheads, right: they pretend to lead us and we pretend to follow. How very well we pretend.*

Bascal dogged their course left a block, to pass through rows of buildings faced with what looked, yeah, like actual brick (although this was hard to believe — couldn't it, like, fall off and hurt somebody?).

"Where *are* we going?" Conrad asked, in a tone that was private, but also calculated to be overheard by the other boys. Look, look, I'm speaking privately with your prince!

"Somewhere," Bascal said. He certainly seemed to know, or maybe he was just going by instinct, but his course seemed unerring and sure, and the boys followed along willingly enough. They passed a building labeled in big metal letters: UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE TERMINAL ANNEX. How medieval. Did they still deliver "letters" and "packages" here, or was it just an old name, for an old building?

Westward they went: toward the mountains, away from the buildings, away from the towers and the lights and the crowds. The downhill slope in this direction was unmistakable. You could still see the afterglow of sunset up ahead, but otherwise it looked gloomy. Empty. Forsaken. Maybe they were nearing the edge of the fax perimeter — that would make these places harder to get to, right? Less valuable, less desirable. "Bad neighborhood" was essentially just a theoretical term to Conrad, but like the Light Wars, it suddenly made a new kind of sense to him here. Maybe there was less wellstone in an area like this, less record of what went on. Was that what Bascal wanted?

He felt obscurely glad, all of a sudden, that this raw, real place was one of the Children's Cities, where parents came when they felt the urge to spawn, and raise their young among others of their increasingly rare kind. Immortality was another wave that had hit society hard, and here was the reef where waves like that were broken. Denver! Denver!

The crowds were almost entirely gone now, the buildings thinning out into empty, meadowy lots hemmed in by gray metal fences. This afforded a very clear view of the mountains, and Conrad saw that one of the buildings he'd thought was downtown was in fact much farther away, in the foothills. The Green Mountain Spire, of course, a tapering, five-kilometer spike he should have recognized immediately, if for no other reason than because the top half of it was still in sunlight, and glowing as if hot.

Vehicular traffic tapered away and died. They passed along a pedestrian sidewalk and under a couple of bridges, until the area began to feel almost like a wilderness. There might actually be wild animals here. Heck, there probably were: rabbits and squirrels, and maybe even their predators. Would those be foxes? Mountain lions? As the walkway dipped beneath the bridges, cement walls rose up around it, mostly blank but with occasional attempts at ornamentation, inlaid tiles and bas relief sculptures of deer and mountain goats and bears, of trout in a little river, and a scene of the mountains themselves, which were visible again as the walkway emerged. Moonlight was now the primary source of illumination. Thank God for the superreflector glare of the Dome Towns up there, on the round-faced Popcorn Moon, or Conrad wasn't sure he could see at all.

The boys passed some benches where a pair of ragged men slept, and here was a genuine shock — there were hermits in the Queendom, he'd always known it, crazies and addicts and social malcontents. These ailments could of course be stripped away by the morbidity filters in any fax machine, but only with the patient's consent. Mind control was severely frowned on, so you inevitably got some sludge at the

bottom of the societal keg. But this was a hypothetical issue, not something that should be sprawling on a bench right in front of Conrad Mursk, and stinking like rotten cheese.

Ho, racing out in front of Bascal once more, leaned over the benches and treated both men to a blood-curdling shriek. They startled awake immediately, their eyes wide. They didn't make a single noise of their own, and the look on their faces was one of frank fear, even when they realized the scream was just some kid having fun. They expected, what, to be beaten? Murdered? Dragged forcibly through a fax gate until their drunken heads were clear? Now *there* was a bit of teenage thuggery you could probably get away with. But Ho just laughed, and then Bascal was laughing too, and the boys were on their way again.

And then, without any warning at all, they crested a low hill or ridge and found themselves at the edge of the fax perimeter. You didn't need a map to see it, there was just this big park: grassy meadows and big stone staircases, and again with the little trees. Wellstone paths snaked through it, glowing faintly and tastefully in the moonlight, and just beyond these stood a row of brightly lit buildings, lining a depression that must be the Platte River.

Indeed, as they drew closer there was an unmistakable smell of "waterway" which Conrad had never realized he could recognize. Interesting. That smell had once meant the difference between life and death for his primitive ancestors, so maybe it was coded in his genes. Probably was, yeah. *Too much tinkering*, he thought, *and we could lose these little details. Stop being animals and start being something ... else. Self-designed, with all the foolishness that that implies. Evolution is at least impartial.* But Conrad was young, and thoughts like that one were fleeting, like snow which melted rather than sticking.

Bascal clapped him on the shoulder, dragging him forward in the process. "Conrad, my man, you stop to brood every time we round a corner. You're thinking too much, and it's getting to be a problem."

"I've got impulsiveness issues," Conrad answered with a laugh. "You should be glad I'm thinking at all."

That seemed to make Bascal angry. "Your parents are what, a hundred years old? Two hundred? Fucking *experts* on the subject of impulsiveness."

"Actually, it was my school — "

"Well, to hell with your school. This is exactly why there are cities like Denver, where they at least make an effort. Parents ought to be forced to live here. It ought to be *mandatory*."

A thought occurred: "Maybe *you* should be in charge of the Children's Cities, guy."

But Bascal just grunted derisively. "Bring that bill before the Senate, hmm? I'll be fifty before they're finished debating. And still a child in their eyes."

"But your parents — "

This time, it was Bascal's fist on his shoulder, slugging. "Will you shut up? You are wrecking my mood. It's tiresome."

Ho Ng sidled up, showing fists of his own. "No pissing off the prince, bloodfuck. I'm going to pound somebody, and it might be you."

"Steady," Bascal said, holding up a hand. "We have common purpose here."

"What purpose?" Feck wanted to know. "We appear to be at the limits of the known Universe."

"Why, revolution," Bascal answered casually, pointing at one of the buildings. "Starting right there."

### 3. The Wellwood Deception

Revolution. Wow. Fuck. Was that a metaphor? Because tempting as the idea might seem, fourteen fourteen-year-old refugees from summer camp couldn't do much against a whole Queendom, with its police and truant officers, its infinite supply of infinitely patient robots, and of course its billions of satisfied citizens in their tens of billions of instantiations. Even if the boys commandeered a fax machine and printed up an army of themselves, the Constabulary would simply shut down the entire area, round the boys up, and reconverge their many copies back into single individuals. The odds were so hopeless — and the threat of punishment so dire — that nobody had ever even tried it.

"I thought we were just looking for girls," Conrad said, to no one in particular. And that was who replied: no one.

As the buildings approached, it became clear that the river had a good bank and bad bank: one side facing the city and backing to the suburbs, while the other had a nice mountain view, but butted up against the bad neighborhood and so became bad by association. The most questionable of the buildings was an ancient two-story cafe whose shabby appearance was not an act, but the result of a natural wood facade that had stopped looking luxurious a few decades before Conrad was born. This, not surprisingly, was exactly where Bascal led them.

The cafe had a scattering of plastic tables and benches and chairs in front and behind, occupied by perhaps a dozen people of varying ages. None of them looked especially old, but then again who did? Conrad guessed a minimum age of around twelve — just old enough to be let out of the house — and a median in the low twenties, with the oldest men and women just edging into their Age of Artifice. Thirty or forty years old, when the fax filters stopped merely harassing the aging process, and began simply to arrest it. Lock it up, lose the key.

There wouldn't be many folks older than that, except maybe as part of the restaurant staff — this wasn't the kind of place you came to with your parents, it was the kind of place you came with your *friends*, to drink watered-down beer and coffee and feel independent. Not much draw for the older crowd. You could of course stay in the Children's Cities as long as you liked — some people stayed on as teachers or administrators or whatever, and a few remained as passive consumers, unable or unwilling to grow up, or else making up for an actual childhood spent someplace less raw. Calcutta, for example, was famous for its "Peter Pan Ghettos." But there were better places for people like that, where stronger intoxicants were available and everyone was above the age of consent. This place was what they called a "kiddie cafe" — no identification required for admittance. Whatever bona fide grownups you found here were probably up to no good. Which Conrad supposed was the whole point.

The name of the establishment appeared to be "1551," although maybe that was its street address, or possibly even the year it was built. Here, a flock of teenage boys was apparently considered less alarming than it was downtown. Only a few people looked up at their arrival, and any surprise they showed probably had more to do with dorky camp uniforms than anything else.

Bascal seemed to take this nonreaction personally; his easy stride broke into a trot, and he uttered a quiet, ululating sort of war cry and made an overhand "follow me" gesture to the boys behind him. They were officially taking this place by storm, and yeah, that did get a bit more of a reaction. A young man who'd been leaning against the doorway now shrank away from it, not caring to test his luck.

The place was a lot warmer inside than the cool breeze flowing down along the river. Poorly ventilated, Conrad thought, and with a wood face instead of a wellstone one, it couldn't pump the heat out

electrically, either. Very rustic. Hell, it was almost like being back at the camp. The walls were an even mix of wood and plaster and brick, with wellstone surfaces only at the serving counters, of which there were several. A few animated posters hung on the walls, but there was also a lot of static graffiti done up in plain ink, and the reason for this was quickly apparent: each table had a big feather pen stuck prominently into a built-in inkwell. You could even see a few kids in the act of scribbling out their pent-up wisdom.

"They must wash these walls every week," he said to Feck.

Feck just nodded vaguely, his eyes on everything but Conrad.

A sign said "Please Seat Yourself," but there was also a staircase leading upward, and although the place was crowded with plastic tables and chairs and the people sitting at them, Bascal still had his momentum. A few zigs and zags through the crowd, a couple of bumped chairs, and he was on his way up, with Steve and Ho and Conrad right behind him, and all the other boys streaming after in a long line. People looked up at this, yeah. Looked annoyed, looked maybe a little worried.

The second floor was smaller, hotter, less crowded and less decorated. There was enough room for the boys to settle in at a corner clustered with round tables, but the doorway out to a balcony seemed much more inviting, and that was where they went. And if Bascal was looking for trouble, here was the perfect opportunity, because the balcony had seating for twenty or maybe twenty-five people, but was two-thirds full already, and the empty seats weren't in a block, but scattered all over the place.

Bascal Edward de Towaji Lutui was full of surprises, though; as the boys piled up behind him in the doorway, he could actually have cut a fairly menacing figure there. But instead he just stood up straight, clapped his hands twice for attention, and called out: "Excuse me! I'm afraid you're all going to have to move inside. The balcony is reserved for a private party."

The quality of his voice was something Conrad really was going to have to study: self-assured, vaguely apologetic, and entirely official. There was no question that you were going to comply, and if for some reason you didn't, well, there'd be all sorts of hassle for everyone involved, and in the end you'd still be vacating your chair, thank you very much. It took barely thirty seconds to clear the crowd, and settle in at all the good seats along the rail.

The last to leave was a girl of about sixteen, and Bascal, still stationed by the exit, grabbed her elbow as she passed. Wrapped in a loose-fitting dress of glossy black fabric. Her hair and eyelids and irises had been done up in a matching shade, while her lips and fingernails matched her shoes with a seething red-black glow, like bits of iron sitting at the bottom of a campfire.

"You lovely thing," Bascal said, "can you answer me a question?"

"Get lost," she replied calmly, jerking her arm away. Then she paused, taking a good look at his face.

"Oh, whatever. What do you need?"

"Are you in a hurry?"

She chewed her glowing lip for a moment, then stopped. "I'm here with friends. We had a good table, which you just took, so yeah, I need to get inside and find something. Before they come back."

"Ah," Bascal said. "I won't keep you, then."

She half-turned to go inside, then checked it and faced him. "Are you ... "

It hung unspoken: are you the prince? Bascal didn't answer. "Go on inside and get a seat for your friends.

I'm sure that whatever ... transaction is keeping them from you must be very important. But when you're settled, come and see me. Us. I have a question."

A brown-smocked waitress materialized, looking annoyed. "Did you just kick everyone off this balcony?" For some reason, she directed the question at Steve Grush.

"No," he replied, with his usual sullen brilliance.

"We'll have fourteen glasses of beer," Bascal said, jumping in. "And fourteen cups of coffee, plus some pitchers of ice water. To eat, we'll take some sort of chips and dip thing, and a big plate of cheese and veggies. Does it come with olives? I love olives."

The waitress had a wellstone sketchplate in her hand, but didn't write anything on it or speak to it. She was under thirty, but her look suggested she'd seen quite enough punk kids come swarming in here like they owned the place.

"Who's paying?" she wanted to know.

Bascal held up a thumb. "That would be me."

"Uh-huh." She presented him with the sketchplate, skeptically.

"Authorized up to twenty thousand," Bascal said to it, rolling his thumb across its surface in the accepted manner, rather than simply jamming it the way punk kids were supposed to. "Plus a hundred-percent tip."

The slate chimed softly, acknowledging the transaction, and the young woman's features softened a little. Bascal's face and voice and thumbprint and DNA pattern all had to match against an account balance — he was good for the money. Still a punk kid, but apparently not a thief or mooch. That tip wasn't going to change her life or anything; all the necessities of life and most of its luxuries were free for the faxing, or at least had downloadable free knockoffs. And everything else had a free waiting list, so no matter how poor you were, you knew your turn would eventually come. Penthouse apartment, whatever, just live to be a million. But a tip was a nice gesture — traditional, polite — and a big tip was nicer still. He didn't have to do that.

"I'll see what we can do."

"Thanks so much," Bascal agreed.

The black-haired girl had slipped away during the exchange. Shrugging, Bascal sat down next to Conrad, who was worried and asked, "Can't they track you now? The police, your parents? Spending money is always the giveaway."

"Oh, probably. But the account has ... certain security features that will slow down a search."

"Oh. That's good, I guess."

The last rays of sunset were visible over the mountains, between gaps in the apartment buildings on the river's far bank. From what Conrad could see, the buildings themselves were in tasteful colors, not selling anything or trying to be anything in particular. These were the homes of ordinary Queendom citizens, with fax gates inside, possibly right there in the apartments themselves. Here ended the Children's City, and there began the suburbs of the Queendom proper.

The Green Mountain Spire was dark most of the way up now, the sunlight glinting redly off the top hundred meters or so, and inching upward with near-visible speed. The cafe balcony itself hung over a

precipitous three-meter drop, with a small grassy bank beneath, and then the stony shallows of the Platte River, which wasn't nearly as majestic as Conrad would have imagined: maybe twenty meters across, and quite shallow enough to wade in. To the north and south there were little sets of rapids, where men and women in glowing green kayaks paddled down and, incredibly, back up again.

Where the grass ended, the river's banks were lined with a random jumble of stones, and sticking up here and there were the concrete stubs of what probably used to be bridges. Conrad couldn't imagine why they'd never been removed, although they did lend an honest, unfinished sense to the area. Neither pristinely wild nor immaculately groomed, just here.

It only took a minute for the waitress to return, first with their drinks, and then again with platters of nacho chips, smothered in melted cheese and surrounded by battlements of carrot and celery, zucchini, and olive.

"Here you go, hon," she said, dropping off the final tray in front of Bascal and Steve and Ho and Conrad. "If you need anything, my name is Bernice. Just rap on the wall, or the railing."

"My grandmother's name was Bernice," Bascal mused, when she was gone.

"Nice lady?" Ho Ng asked.

Bascal shrugged. "Never met her. She died, like, two hundred years ago, in Catalonia. Mayor of a city. Fucking historical figure."

"Jesus H. Garbage," Ho cursed, in a show of solidarity. He was always saying things like that: "donkey fuckbrain vomit" and "diarrhea blood angel," and Conrad's personal favorite, "mother-Christing piece of dammit." Ho seemed to find some weird pleasure in mixing his cusswords up that way, or maybe it was some subtle organic defect in his neural wiring, that the fax filters dismissed as a mere character flaw.

In the Queendom of Sol, character flaws were considered your own damned responsibility — you had to identify them yourself and then formally authorize a medical doctor to repair them for you. Or better yet, you could treat it yourself through personal experience and growth. And either way, if there were side effects in your overall personality, well, those were your own problem as well.

But Ho was only fourteen, so really it was his parents who should be worrying about these things. And Conrad supposed they had, in their own special way: by sending the boy off to summer camp. Very therapeutic, oh yes. Nothing cut down on cusswords like having to shit in a goddamned outhouse.

A sour mood threatened briefly to come on, but the watery beer was really good somehow, and the nachos were even better, and anyway Bascal seemed determined that all his men should be cheerful tonight. Who could argue with that?

And then, before they'd even finished off their first glass, Bascal's black-haired girlfriend showed up again, pulling up a plastic chair and inserting herself between the prince and Conrad.

"Hi," she said, matter-of-factly. How much was unspoken in that one syllable! Hi, Prince. I know who you are, Prince, but I don't care — I'm here to check you out as one human being to another. Prince.

Which was fine, sure, except that it was Bascal she'd sat down with, not some ordinary puke two years younger than her. And she hadn't brought her friends, either. Probably hadn't even told them, for fear of having to share.

"Hi," Bascal said back, in imitation of her tone.

"Hello," Conrad added, with no particular inflection, figuring he might as well at least try.

The girl nodded, sparing him half a glance before focusing her attention on Bascal once again. She asked, with mock-indifference, "You wanted something?"

Bascal leaned back and smiled. "Seeing you, my dear, I can think of a lot of things to want. But I doubt we have much time, so I'll come right to the point: I need access to a taboo fax machine. I'm carrying contraband. What's your name, by the way?"

Her eyes widened. "I'm Xmary. You need acc — "

"Eksmerry? Is that a nickname? Short for what, Christina Marie?"

"Xiomara Li Weng," she answered distractedly. "You want *what*, now?"

"A fax machine. A simple, ordinary fax machine that will copy *ta'e fakalao*. Forbidden objects and substances. My men are here are on a mission, for which they have certain material requirements. Clothes, for one thing," he said, pinching his Camp Friendly shirt for emphasis.

"And what else?" the girl demanded, clearly concerned that this was a setup, that she was the focus of some sort of royal joke or sting operation.

"Jewelry," Bascal said, with an inscrutable little smile.

"That's all?" Her eyes flicked downward, then settled on the only jewelry Bascal was wearing: the well-gold signet ring on the middle finger of his left hand.

"Pretty, eh?"

"It's not an ordinary ring."

Now there was an edge to Bascal's voice. "Of course it's not an ordinary ring. I'm the prince of the fucking Solar System. What do I wear, gold? Tin? It's *information*, darling — quadrillions of terabytes in quantum storage. It wants out."

With a shiver of excitement and dread, Conrad realized that they weren't just playing at being bad here. They were *being* bad, they were going to be bad. Bascal was really pissed off about something. Hell, they all were. As fugitives from adult supervision, they had a goddamn point to make.

This girl Xmary, hearing the tone of Bascal's voice, sighed once and then said, "I know some people. I can ask for you. It sounds pretty serious, though."

"That it is."

Nobody said anything for a few seconds. Finally, the girl got up again. Before turning to go she asked, "Am I going to get in trouble?"

"Yes," Bascal replied. "We all are. The question is whether anything useful is accomplished beforehand."

"Great."

She disappeared. Doing as she was told, going along with Bascal and against her own better judgment.

"So what's in the ring?" Steve Grush asked.

"Garbage," Bascal said.

"Garbage?"

"Garbage. Reorganization of matter at the atomic level. Into garbage."

"You mean programmable matter, right?" Conrad asked, because otherwise that made no sense at all.

"Duh. Any wellstone surface. But that's everything, right?"

Well, sort of. There were still an awful lot of natural materials around, especially in Denver. But Conrad remained confused — wellstone was fundamentally a form of silicon. Woven nanofiber, right? Quantum dots to confine electrons in atom like structures. In raw form the stuff looked and felt like some heavy, impermeable, beetle-shiny plastic, but by sending the right signals through it you could fill it with artificial pseudoatoms of any type. Silicon and gold, silicon and sulfur, silicon and plaster of goddamn Paris. Then there were the transuranic pseudoatoms, and the asymmetric ones, and the ones which incorporated exotic particles. You could alter wellstone's apparent composition in so many ways that even after three hundred years, a Queendom full of pseudochemists and hypercomputer search algorithms had barely cataloged even the fundamentals.

But pseudoatoms weren't real, and silicon was.

Bascal was looking smug. "It's Garbage Day in Denver, me boyos. If we each have one of these, and we spread out, we can make a lot of frigging garbage. We can even threaten infrastructure, which after all is what separates us from the animals. If our demands aren't met, they will at least be remembered."

"Raw!" Steve said approvingly, and a number of the boys echoed him.

"Where did this software come from?" Conrad couldn't help asking.

"Wrote it myself, boyo. Been saving it for a special occasion."

Conrad proceeded warily, not wanting to sound negative. "How does it work?"

"I archived a year's worth of patterns from the palace waste chutes, and fit them together with a tessellation-tiler. Any surface is mapped with the best possible fit in stored garbage, and the boundaries between garbage objects are heated and acoustically shocked to cut them away from the parent body. Slap it on a wall, and you get a pile of steaming garbage."

"Except that it wouldn't steam," Conrad said. "It wouldn't stink. It might look like shit, or half-eaten food, or whatever. Probably even feel like it. But pseudoatoms don't have a smell. They can't leak out into the air, like real atoms and molecules do."

"Oh," Bascal said, suddenly uncertain. It wasn't a look that fit his face.

"Still, that's pretty amazing that you thought of that. You have got power for the separated objects, right? They're photovoltaic enough to maintain their own programming? And composition?"

"Um. I don't know."

"Oh," Conrad said. "Probably not, then. You'll just wind up with garbage-shaped chunks of nanofiber silicon. It's probably dangerous, too. I mean, there's more wellstone in a building than just the facade, right? You'd better be *real* careful what you touch with that thing, or you're going to hurt somebody."

"Who made you the voice of reason?" Ho Ng asked, acidly.



"Um, nobody."

"Why don't you shut up, then? Pussy."

Conrad had no response to that. He'd already said what needed saying. Getting any further on Ho's bad side was not a smart idea, and he could see that Bascal was brooding, too, looking around with dark, embarrassed anger. That anger could, Conrad knew, be directed at him at any moment. He considered apologizing, but didn't see how that would help. Better just to pretend he wasn't here.

"Are we still doing this?" Steve Grush wanted to know.

"Yeah," Bascal said, waving a hand distractedly. "Let me think about it for a minute." Then he pinched his chin in a gesture so reminiscent of his father that for a moment Bascal might have been a younger image of the king himself. A little swarthier, perhaps. A bit more angular. Conrad felt a fresh burst of affection for this boy, this young man, this Poet Prince of all humanity.

"I have to visit the *'soir*," Feck announced loudly, from the other end of the balcony. That was short for *pissoir*, and told everyone exactly, biologically, what he'd be doing when he got there. If he'd said *'toir*, or *shittoir*, that would convey a different intention. You always knew more about Feck than you wanted to. Still, it was funny — Feck *was* pretty funny sometimes — and suddenly there was a lot of laughter, and the conversation turned to other subjects.

"Sorry," Conrad said quietly, seeing his Bascal opening as Feck shuffled past. "It's still a pretty raw idea."

"Shut up," Bascal said vaguely, not looking at him.

Taking the hint, Conrad finished his beer, then just as quietly finished his coffee. Both were making him thirstier, but he resisted the urge to chase them with a glass of water. In a few minutes he was going to have to visit the *'soir* himself. He supposed they all were. He toyed with his coffee mug instead, clinking it a few times on the glass tabletop. Turning it over a few times in his hands. Good, old-fashioned stoneware, courtesy of the Friendly Products corporation, whose swirling green logo was glazed into the underside.

This didn't take any great scrutiny to discern; the same instantly recognizable design appeared on their Camp Friendly tee-shirts, and on thousands of child-oriented products produced daily by the fax machines of the world. Seeing it here was admittedly somewhat surprising. What was child-oriented about a coffee mug? He fantasized briefly, that this whole cafe — perhaps this whole ghetto — was just one more Friendly Park, in a carefully supervised Friendly Park world.

Oh, God, he was getting "maudlin," as his mother would say. It was exactly why she didn't allow him any alcohol, even weak and watered as this. If he drank any more, he'd become "rash," and *then* where would Queendom civilization be?

"Does anyone else want more beer?" he asked, looking around. But they were still ignoring him, which was probably good. He'd just order for himself, then, maybe even pay. Per the waitress' instructions, he leaned over and rapped on the deck's ratty old railing. It rang solidly under his knuckles, though, more like plastic or soft stone than wood. Because yeah, of course, it wasn't wood at all, just a clever wellstone facsimile. Why would knocking on a wooden rail summon a waitress?

Suddenly, his paranoid fantasy seemed less paranoid, less fantastic. If that rail wasn't full of microphones already, it easily could be on a moment's notice. If the constabulary had tracked the boys here, for example, or if the cafe staff had decided something suspicious was going on. Hell, the building could even make that judgment itself; most of the symptoms of human intelligence could be duplicated with a

wellstone hypercomputer the size of a fingernail. Conrad's own house was always scolding him, checking up on him, ratting him out to his parents ...

The black-haired, fiery-lipped Xmary reappeared, inserting herself deftly between Conrad and Bascal. "I found someone who can help you, Bas. Several someones."

Bascal looked up at her, and the confidence was back in his eyes. "Excellent. Thank you. And will these someones require payment?"

"I didn't ask, but I don't think so. They seemed pretty eager. I'm sure you realize, you're kind of a symbol around here."

"The Prince who Won't Be King? Lord of the oppressed? Spokeschild for the permanent children? I can't imagine." Bascal flourished comically with his arms, but couldn't quite keep the bitterness out of his voice. "Take me to your underground, then. We'll see what mischief this town can endure."

"Bascal," Conrad warned, raising his voice above the general hubbub, "We should get out of here. This place isn't as run-down as it looks. This isn't wood, it's wellstone. It could be a — "

The prince arched an eyebrow, and not in amusement. "There's business at hand, boyo. Connections to be made, a whole underground to be mobilized. One way or another, Garbage Day is a party I intend to throw."

Conrad became aware of some noise in the street, rising up like the soft clickety-click of a few dozen tap shoes. Like marching boots, approaching at a trot? Like the platinum feet of robots, dancing fluidly along the street?

"Bloodfuck!" Ho Ng called out, from his seat along the railing. "Constabulary coming. Lots of them."

"Ah," Bascal said, and his tone was of regret, not surprise. "All right, lads, hit the ground running. Scatter for me, and do as much damage as possible. Brew me up a genuine riot."

Conrad *was* surprised, and afraid, and maybe not entirely sorry they'd been caught. He looked Bascal in the eye, almost challengingly. "What are you going to do?"

"What do you *think*?" the prince snapped, then walked to the railing and punched it with his signet ring, producing a kind of porcelain *clink*. At the point of impact, there was a momentary sparkle of blue-white light, fading quickly to darkness. Nobody moved, nobody spoke. Conrad didn't so much as breathe. Half a second after impact, the change began: a sprouting and sprawling of shapes and colors. It shot along the balcony rail, down through its supports and onto the floor, onto the wall, up along the roof. The sound of it was like tearing paper, like crinkling foil. The building turned to garbage around them, and the narrow spaces between the garbage glowed, and sang, and cracked away.

Conrad watched Ho Ng drop right through the floor, just moments before the whole structure gave way, and suddenly they were *all* falling, in a storm of hand-sized wellstone fragments, like shiny black bugs. The sound of the building's collapse was remarkably low, more felt than heard. Weightless for so short a time that it barely registered, he thudded onto the steep riverbank, his fall partly broken by the plasticky fragments raining around him. His momentum carried him downward, skidding, briefly glimpsing the lights of an upside-down suburb reflected in the blurry water. And then a load of crap fell on top of him, stunning, immobilizing, whooshing the air out of his lungs.

He lay there for a few seconds, taking stock, trying to breathe, wondering if he were hurt or killed, if his parents would have to print a fresh copy of him from stored patterns. He'd died once before, in some

sort of fence climbing accident when there were no other copies of him at large. Lost damn near the entire month, and never did find out what happened.

Finally, he had enough breath for a grunt of pain, and then a groan. Other groans rose up around him. And screams. And then suddenly the Constabulary was there, all around, men and women in bright blue, and faceless robots in naked, mirror-bright impervium. Hands were grabbing him, lifting, digging him out.

"Can you hear me?" a voice asked. "Are you hurt?"

Coughing, he struggled to stand. "I — ow! My tailbone. My back."

"Medic!" another voice called out. "Possible spinal! Recommend immediate faxation!" The hands on his body were gentle but very firm.

He looked around, trying to get his bearings. Trying, he realized, to recognize Bascal in the confusion of litter and bodies and flashing lights.

Then the first voice, someone behind Conrad, was speaking again. "Son, until we figure out exactly what happened here, I'm afraid you're under arrest."

"Yeah," Conrad said, slumping against the hands that gripped him. "I know it."

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#### **4. The Battle in the Throne Room**

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Some sort of portable fax machine was set up right there at the crime scene, and the boys were processed through it. Conrad's injuries were healed almost as a by-product; the fax filters compared his body against his genome and the standard human template, concluded that the damage wasn't ornamental, and sent on a corrected pattern to the other end. That these operations were performed on a snarl of quantum entanglements, rather than on a person or even the image of a person, did not impress Conrad in the slightest. Indeed, he'd experienced the process many times before, and barely noticed it at all.

He ended up in a windowless interrogation room — or rather, an atomically perfect duplicate of him ended up there, while he himself had vanished. Died, if you like, although people rarely talked about it that way. He'd been through this experience almost daily throughout his life, and thought no more about it than about the dead skin cells he was supposedly shedding every moment of every day.

At any rate, here he was, in this windowless room with a human being and a robot. The robot didn't speak — they rarely did, except in emergencies — but it also didn't move, which gave it a vague air of menace. Especially since it was positioned between Conrad and the exit.

The human being, seated across from him on the other side of a table, was named Leslie Jones. She told him gently and repeatedly that she was there to help him. He was not restrained in any way, and the interrogation room's door betrayed a sliver of light at the edge. It wasn't even closed all the way. But he'd seen enough to know that Leslie Jones wasn't a lawyer or a social worker, and seemed in fact to be some species of cop, so he played as dumb as he figured he could get away with. Lying to the authorities would be worse than useless — they'd spot it before the words were even out of his mouth — but they were also unlikely to respect his intelligence, nor to be surprised if he didn't display much.

"Why did you leave the camp?" Leslie asked him, for the second time.

He shrugged. "We weren't prisoners."

"You could have requested a pass. And an escort. And permission from your parents. Instead, we have a counselor assaulted and a Palace Guard vandalized."

"I didn't do any of that."

"But you were there when it happened."

Conrad didn't answer. They knew he was there. Between sensor records and skin cells and ghostly electromagnetic imprints, the Constabulary could probably trace just about every move he'd ever made.

Smiling, Leslie tried a different approach. "Conrad, you're not in trouble. Not very much trouble. No one was seriously hurt, and there's no evidence you did anything other than follow your friends, and then witness a crime. We just want to find out what happened."

He shrugged again. "You already know."

"Well, yes. But I'd like to hear it from you." She was wearing a green sweater with buttons made from what looked like live dandelion heads. Her hair was coppery red, and very short. He supposed she was beautiful — he'd never met anyone who wasn't — but she spoke and moved like the women of his mother's generation. Two hundred years out of date; born into a mortal world, and then "saved" from it by the rise of the Queendom. He wondered if faxes of this same woman were interrogating all the other boys as well.

"You don't know anything," he told her, not in a nasty way but just factually. "I'm sorry, but I really can't explain it to you. There's not even anything to explain." Then he disappointed himself by adding, "I want my mother."

Leslie just nodded, with a sympathy that seemed annoyingly genuine. "Both your parents have been briefed on the situation, and have asked to send copies of themselves here. The request is under review. However, as I'm sure you can understand, the involvement of Prince Bascal is a complicating factor."

Again, Conrad had nothing to say that would actually help the situation, so he said nothing, and Leslie simply started her questioning again, from the top. They went around and around like that for nearly an hour. Finally, when Conrad was halfway nuts with the repetition, a disc of yellow light appeared on the tabletop, and a little speaker formed beside it and emitted a soft chime.

"Well," Leslie said, eyeing it, "we tried, anyway. You seem like a nice young man; you should try opening up a little."

"Oh yeah? Why?" Conrad couldn't help asking.

To her credit, she thought about that for a couple of seconds before replying, "Because childhood doesn't excuse rudeness, not in a child your age. Whatever problems you believe you're facing, communication is really the only way to tackle them. You'll understand this someday, when you and your friends are the ones in charge."

Conrad didn't even try to suppress his sneer. "What day is that, Leslie?"

She really looked at him then, rolling her tongue around behind a set of pursed lips. Finally, she said, "Look, we've all made adjustments. Nobody said life was perfect. But we do have forever, yes?" She rose to her feet then, and motioned for him to do the same. "Come on. As I feared, the case has been placed under palace jurisdiction. Back to the fax with you, I'm afraid."

For some reason, Conrad felt a shiver of fear. "Why? Where am I going?"

"To the palace. Didn't I just say that? Best behavior, Conrad; you're going to meet the king and queen."

The throne room of Their Majesties, Bruno de Towwaji and Tamra-Tamatra Lutui, looked exactly like it did on TV. Same reed mats over wellstone floors, same Spanish tapestries over wellstone walls, same gilded wellstone scrollwork along the ceiling and floorboards and high, vaulted doorways. It was daytime here; the ceiling was clear at the moment, and light streamed down through it from a blue-white sky, much paler than the sky of Camp Friendly.

A pair of vaguely familiar women were here, with the black hair and walnut skin of South Pacific ancestry, and the elaborate wraps and hair fans of Her Majesty's court. With prim nods and subtle gestures, the two of them gathered the boys out of a pair of fax machines, and lined them up two rows deep in front of the empty thrones.

Lucky for Conrad, he got to stand two spaces from Bascal, near the middle of the front row, not four meters from the raised dais on which the thrones themselves rested. Lucky, lucky. His heart was hammering wetly in his throat; he'd never been so nervous in his life, even the first time he'd spoken face-to-face with the Poet Prince. He still wanted very badly to see his parents; he had no idea what was going to happen to him, and the prospect of an angry king and queen was far more frightening than the bland, dutiful sympathy of the Constabulary.

The Queendom's royalty were technically figureheads, without any official political or legal powers. But they were also beloved, and brilliant, and so absurdly wealthy that they could buy the planets outright, if they chose to. So in the end it hardly mattered: in the spiritual hunger of the Restoration and the perils and tragedies of the Fall, these two had been chosen as humanity's penultimate leaders. Whether or not Conrad liked or understood it, they could dictate his fate and no one — not even his own mother and father — would challenge it.

Still, this mortal fear didn't keep him from noticing that the "boy" to his left in the row behind him was actually Xiomara Li-Weng, from the cafe, and that the fourteen assembled children did not include Feck. In a way, this made sense: Feck had been in the 'soir when the building came down, and if he'd had the sense to get rid of his Camp Friendly shirt then at first glance there'd be no reason for the Constabulary to connect him with the events on the balcony, or to distinguish him from the cafe's regular customers. Whereas a quantum reconstruction of the collapse would show Xmary standing right next to Bascal, on the balcony with the other Friendly campers.

But despite her short, dark hair and rail-thin figure, Xmary did not resemble Feck in the slightest. Conrad didn't even see how she could be mistaken for a boy, although she'd rubbed the lipstick off and lost the low-toe shoes, and even somehow taken off the nail polish. She wasn't wearing a Camp Friendly shirt, but then again neither was Ho Ng, who'd somehow traded his for a shiny gray pullover and quilted vest, although he still had the pants: beige culottes that completely destroyed his efforts to look raw.

Even so, the error was alarmingly stupid. Had no one checked the biometrics or the DNA, or even peeked under the jacket? Had the ire of king and queen so disrupted police routines that even the Constabulary could somehow arrest the wrong person? Hand her over in a moment of confusion? It was a chilling thought, and a reminder of why the Old Moderns had murdered off their royal families in the first place, leaving only the Princess of Tonga and the swashbuckling Declarant-Philander of Spanish Girona to lead them into the future.

One of the Tongan ladies, gliding back and forth along the front row like a dolled-up drill sergeant, paused suddenly in front of Bascal. Placed a finger under his chin and lifted slightly, commanding his attention. Conrad couldn't make out what she murmured to him, but he did hear the prince's incongruous reply: "Lemonade. Please."

Then a chill settled over the room. To the right of the dais, a figure had appeared in the doorway. She had the same walnut skin and raven hair as her courtiers, but her wrap and drapes and hair fans were of purple, streaked and patterned with Polynesian tapa-styled highlights of glowing white. She was flanked on either side by ornate Palace Guards of gold and platinum, and news cameras buzzed and flickered in the air behind her, like fireflies. She wore a diamond crown, and was using the Scepter of Earth as a walking stick, and somehow she brought the whole thing off as casually as any jogging suit or camp uniform. No friend or relative ever had a face so familiar, so instantly readable. The queen was furious.

She was also controlling it tightly, which made it even scarier somehow, and it was all Conrad could do to keep from flinching or even cowering as her gaze swept across him. In theory, she could order his head chopped off and his backups erased, and it would probably happen.

But Tamra-Tamatra Lutui, the Queen of Sol, had eyes only for Bascal as she ascended the dais and settled comfortably into her gilded wicker throne. Her robot guards, armed with tall, flimsy-looking axes, assumed positions on either side of the dais. The news cameras drifted out into the room, documenting the scene from all the most dramatic angles. Conrad wondered if he was on television, or would be later on in some carefully edited scene. Maybe these were simply the palace's own archival cameras, storing holie video into a library somewhere.

"All right," the queen said. "Let's hear it." There was no question whom she was addressing.

"*Malo e lelei*, Mother," Bascal replied amiably. "I've missed you."

"*Tali fiefia*. And I you," she said, with apparent sincerity. "But you're back a little early. And in trouble again. And this time, you've brought friends."

"Yes, mother."

She raised her eyebrows, tapped a foot. Finally, she spoke in tight, parental tones: "Bascal, don't try my patience, not today. You know I love you, but what you don't seem to understand is that I *will* make an example of you."

"On the contrary," the prince said. "I'm counting on it." His voice was still friendly, but his at-attention pose struck Conrad as both a rebuke and a mockery of his mother's authority.

Tamra shook her head a little, and sighed. "You think you're so clever, Bas. This isn't a chess game, where it helps to look three or four moves ahead. It's more like the tide, which comes in when the Moon drags it in, regardless of what anyone thinks or says."

"Then I'll plant a neuble on the beach," Bascal answered smoothly.

This was metaphor, Conrad realized. A neuble was a billion tons of liquid neutronium in a two-centimeter diamond shell, and would drop through beach sand or even solid rock like a cannonball through wet tissue paper. But it would affect the tide, you bet.

"Enough," Tamra said coldly. "This isn't a debate. You've injured nearly a hundred people, and destroyed a building. Someone could easily have been killed, in which case you'd be going to prison."

"I *have* been in prison," Bascal answered, finally betraying his anger.

"No," she said, "You haven't. You've been at summer camp."

"It's winter here, Mother."

"And summer in Catalonia, yes. When I was a girl, most of the world lived in conditions much worse than your Camp Friendly, and never thought twice. If you can't see the difference, then perhaps you should spend some community service time in the actual punitary system."

"Fine," Bascal snapped. "None of my tutors have been criminals yet. It's a real gap in my education."

The queen slammed the metal butt of her scepter down on the tiles of the dais, with a sound like a heavy door slamming shut. "Darn you, young man. Must you battle us on every front? At every step? Do you despise us because we're your parents? Because we're the First Family? Because we're older? You've made your little statement, all right, but you know very well it turns people away from your cause, not toward it. I miss your poetry, I really do. But I suspect that's the very reason you stopped writing it."

Bascal's stance never changed. "The summers here used to inspire me. I truly loved them. But then you sent me alone to Girona. Tending *sheep*. And then it was coconuts on Niuafo'o, and finally peaches and onions in the outer solar system. And you wonder why I'm angry?"

"You were angry before you left," the Queen said. "So eager for independence, and yet so unwilling to accept it."

"Independence?" Bascal said darkly. "At Camp Friendly? Surely you're joking. Rebellion turns *adults* away from my cause, Mother. The children understand."

With a rustle of fabrics, the queen stood up, raising a hand that might have pointed, or gestured angrily, or balled into a fist. But instead, she dropped it and turned away. "I see the day is gone when you and I can speak. Have it your way, then."

She stepped off the dais, on the opposite side from where she'd gotten on, and strode briskly to the other arched doorway, disappearing around a corner of wellstone-emulated plaster. Conrad heard a knock, and the mock creak of a mock door opening. Then hushed voices that reminded him of his own parents, when they closed themselves in their bedroom for an argument. It was oddly reassuring, to see the Queen of All Things acting just exactly like somebody's mom.

Conrad spared a glance at Bascal, who was looking evilly smug, having gotten the better of the worlds' most important person. He also peeked back at Xmary, who was standing there with her arms behind her back, trying to be as invisible as her clothes and her girl-ness would allow.

The guard robots had disappeared with the queen, and one of the Tongan courtiers had vanished at some point as well, leaving only the other one to watch over the boys. She was looking after the queen, and presently stepped into the hallway behind her, stopping at the corner.

Conrad, deciding to risk it, turned and spoke to Xmary in quick whispers. "What are you doing here?"

"Be quiet," she whispered back, not looking at him.

"But why — "

"Be *quiet*," she said, then met his eyes for a moment and added, even more softly, "Young people are supposed to shake things up. I'm here because someone else isn't. Now be quiet about it."

Was that what she thought? Did she have visions of Feck the Fairy, brave confidant of the prince, scabbling around the underside of Denver, quietly fomenting revolution? Conrad nearly laughed out loud at the idea, and even more nearly giggled. He settled for a smirk she would probably misinterpret. He tried to get it off his face, but the effort only made their situation seem that much funnier. Most likely, even if Feck didn't get caught he would turn himself in to his parents before the Sun had even risen.

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Conrad was going to say something about it to Peter Kolb, standing between himself and the prince. Crack a joke, something, but the Tongan lady had turned back toward them again, and was making little "come here" motions with her hands. "Boys, come. The king will see you in his study."

The two neat lines broke up into a kind of V formation as Bascal strode toward her, with Conrad and the rest of the boys trailing uncertainly behind. Meeting the king was less scary somehow, and the prospect of actually standing in his study was strange indeed, because Bruno de Towaji — once a Declarant-Philander, a genius and consort and knight of the realm — was the inventor of everything from collapsium to the blitterstaff, from the fax transport grid to the pub game of Shuffle Acrostics. He'd also saved the Sun from collapse or something during the Fall, hundreds of years before Conrad was born.

Bascal led them into the hallway, pausing for half a step to thank the courtier, whom he called "Tusite." The office door was just a slab of wellstone, folded out from the faux-solid material of the wall, but it was made to look like an ancient thing of wood and iron, more romantic than spooky.

The room itself was unadorned, and cluttered with mysterious objects and diagrams. The king was an inventor still, deeply and constantly concerned with the Queendom's technological underpinnings. Unfortunately, his study was rather small inside, and as the boys (and girl) shuffled in behind him, Conrad found himself squeezed up against Bascal, and against the room's only chair, which held a hairy, rotund, vaguely unkempt figure which took a second or two to register as His Majesty, unprepared for audience.

The king held a stylus in each hand, and seemed absorbed in the moving images his desk was projecting. With visible effort, he looked up into Conrad's face.

"Er, hello," he said, scratching at his beard with one of the styluses, then dropping it on the desktop and holding out a hand. "I'm Bruno."

Feeling distinctly weird about it, Conrad took the hand and shook it. "Conrad Mursk, sir."

The king nodded and withdrew his hand. "Ah. Well. It's 'sire,' actually. One must observe the proper forms. It's the only real purpose the office of 'king' serves, and it *is* a real purpose. Kindly keep it in mind."

"Um, sorry. Sire." Conrad blanched inwardly, and probably outwardly. He wished there were some way for him to step back, without toppling his fellow campers like shuffleboard pins. He also wished he could shut up, but that impulse control thing was going strong, and words were rising out of him like gas bubbles. "What is that you're working on? A planette?"

The diagrams before the king showed various cross-sections of some layered, spherical object, many hundreds of kilometers across.

Bruno's gaze flicked from Conrad to the desktop and back again. He seemed to study Conrad's expression. "It's the Moon, lad. Luna. The Earth's moon."

"Oh. I thought the Moon was bigger than that."

Again, that studying look. The king's head was nodding slowly. "So it is, lad."

Fortunately, Bascal came to the rescue, cutting in with a: "Hello, Father. I've missed you at camp."

King Bruno seemed to ponder this for a couple of seconds. "Hmm. Yes, well we've missed you as well. But that's hardly the point here, is it? You've misbehaved, and will be punished for it."

"Yes, Father," Bascal agreed, his voice maybe a bit too chummy.



Bruno frowned at that, and tried for a moment to rise from his chair, before looking around and realizing that the room was packed, that Conrad and Bascal weren't smooshed up against him out of pure admiration. He scanned the assembled faces, looking almost puzzled. Finally, he directed his attention at Bascal and spoke again. "Your mother and I would like to know *why*. You understand this? We've invested a great deal of time and love and energy in a creature which has become highly resentful. An explanation would help."

Bascal remained polite this time. "You've heard the explanation, Father. I've been shouting it from the rooftops for four years now. It's the seriousness of it that always escapes you."

Bruno's frown deepened. "Seriousness? My boy, I've lived a long life, and these are the least serious times I've seen. War is a memory, crime is in sharp decline, and there've been remarkably few disasters — natural or otherwise — to threaten lives and infrastructure. You've never seen a time of strife, lad. You don't know what it's like."

"No, you just refuse to see it. The strife is all around us."

"Pish," Bruno said, waving a hand. "You kids. You think teenage angst is a new invention?" Then he paused, and added, "It's awfully small in here. Perhaps the dining room would be better. Have you boys eaten?"

"We have," Bascal agreed, although it was just nachos and beer. Truthfully, another bite or two would not be unwelcome.

"Maybe a snack," Conrad said, stupidly, just as he might to any other friend's father. Then more contritely added, "Sire."

"Snack," Bruno said, pinching his chin and musing, as if this were some bold new theorem he was hearing for the first time. "Hmm."

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Five minutes later, the boys were arranged around a wellwood dining room table, with Bruno at one end and Queen Tamra at the other, and Bascal squarely between them on the long side. The table would have been huge with just the three of them, but with thirteen boys and a girl it seemed cozy enough. Everyone was solemnly drinking lemonade from delicate-looking crystal goblets, and nibbling on tiny peanut-butter-and-vanilla sandwiches, and gazing out the picture window at the white sand and coconut palms, the ocean surf throwing itself against the beach, which sprawled for a hundred meters along a gentle, gently groomed slope.

It looked sultry-hot out there, but this dining room was cool in both the literal and metaphoric senses. Her Majesty was less icy than before, but still reserved and impatient with her wayward son. She did spare some attention for the other boys, asking the ones closest to her — Steve Grush and Jamil Gazzinga — if they had ever been to Tonga before.

"No, Ma'am," Steve said, as politely as you please. It seemed strange to Conrad, that a bully as transparent and, well, *stupid* as Steve should be sitting right next to the Queen, essentially ignored by her bodyguards. Even stranger that he should look good doing it. It seemed like at any moment he should leap from his chair, grab her by the head, and start delivering noogies. But here was how the worlds really worked: act like a complete asshole and you could lunch with the Queen. Jamil, for his part, looked pale and sweaty and terrified, and could only manage to grunt a reply.

Xmary also looked terrified, probably because she was seated only two places away from Bruno, and could be caught out at any moment. But the king wore a distracted, lost-in-thought kind of look, and like the queen he was mostly interested in Bascal anyway.

"So," he said to the prince, tearing himself out of some internal reverie. "You were explaining these trying times to me. Perhaps the vanilla has sharpened your righteous fury. Would you care to continue?"

And yes, Bascal did look angry when he answered, "This is precisely my point." He gestured around the room, at the table, at the tiny sandwich in his hand. "You connive a scene here to make me look like a little kid. In front of my peers, no less."

Bruno reflected on that, then nodded across the table to his wife. "Dear, is it childish to eat a sandwich?"

"I eat them every day," she answered.

"Really, every day. I didn't know that." He popped one of them into his own mouth and chewed it thoughtfully.

"Your father," the queen added, glaring mildly at Bascal, "does not connive. The very idea makes me laugh. This is good lemonade, by the way."

"The cooks have been playing with the pattern," Bruno said. "I'll let them know you like it."

"Do, please."

But Bascal wasn't finished. He glared back at his mother and said, "You know perfectly well what I mean." Then, to the king: "You were already at university by my age, learning physics. Emancipated. Adult."

And Conrad could see how it was in this house: emotional appeals in one direction and logical ones in the other, with human servants as well as robots and household intelligences to serve as neutrals. But really they were all together, a unified front which Bascal was busily throwing himself against.

"Orphaned, lad," the king said sadly. "Living on earthquake charity. People died back then, and not on any convenient schedule. I *wasn't* an adult; I'd much rather have been learning archery and canoeing."

"Mother was already Queen at fifteen."

"Also orphaned. And thrust into power without warning, by people who did not have her best interest in mind. It's nothing to envy, Bascal. When your semester at camp is over, you can return to a loving family. Tamra and I never had that option."

"We're going back, then," Bascal said. "To the dumping ground."

"Don't be melodramatic," the queen chided. "You may learn to appreciate the comforts of our age. Of dining with your parents, even. If not, then perhaps camp isn't so awful after all." She touched a napkin to her lips and stood up. "I have meetings, I'm afraid."

"Send a copy," Bascal snapped.

"I have," the queen replied evenly, "Several. But the day is fluid, and things keep coming up. I'll spare you the goodbye kiss." She looked around the table. "A pleasure meeting you children. In the future, kindly stay out of trouble. His Majesty will escort you to the dumping ground."

With a swishing and rustling of fabrics, she was gone. Conrad felt bemused, and somewhat torn. Tamra Lutui was easy to love: beautiful and funny, intelligent and capable. It was part of why she'd been elected — or drafted — in the first place, and the effect was at least as pronounced in person as on TV. But she *was* belittling her son's grievances, and with them an entire — and much aggrieved — generation.

"We won't cooperate," Bascal said to his father. "It wouldn't be right."

"No?" the king replied, thinking about it. "We've pulled all the humans off the planet, and replaced them with Palace Guards. From this point on, your cooperation and approval are rather moot. You're only fourteen, lad."

"Yes. And someday I'll be 'only a hundred,' and then 'only a thousand.' I'll *always* be younger than you, Father."

Patently: "That's true, but by the time you're a thousand, the difference in our ages will be comparatively small. You're going to live forever, lads, and once you've left childhood behind there's no reclaiming it."

He mused for a further moment, and said, "You know, that camp of yours is gorgeous, probably the finest planet ever built. I would have loved ... would have ..." His voice trailed away wistfully. Then his gaze jumped up suddenly, and settled on Xmary. "Egad, child, are you a girl?"

"No," she replied, sounding indignant. Sounding just exactly like an indignant sixteen-year-old girl.

"Hmm," the king said, studying her for a moment. "All right. No offense meant. Shall we go, then?"

Bascal held his arms out, roadblock style, and looked around warningly. Nobody move.

Seeing this, Bruno nodded. "Hmm. Yes. Well, if you won't cooperate, you won't cooperate. I was young once, I remember how it was. We'll have the guards drag you kicking and screaming through the fax, all right? We'll all preserve our honor that way."

Then he looked right at Conrad and winked — a conspiratorial gesture of such portentous friendliness and condescension that the lad would, in some small way, never be the same again.

*This isn't over*, he thought. But for now, it is.

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