

Nublius: A Day in Kintris Square

by Elliot R Ronen

A screech split the stale air of the bedroom and jerked him awake. He peeled his face from the floor where the spit, running from his mouth and down his cheek, had glued him to the smooth wood.

How he longed for that spit to be back in his mouth. So dry, he thought, pushing himself from the floor with shaky arms. He fumbled for the alarm clock, mashing at its surface to stop the terrible racket. His tongue sat thick against the roof of his mouth as he stumbled through the room, feet shoving empty bottles from his path, toward the kitchen for something to drink.

Weeks ago he would have been disgusted by the filth, but now the filth was life. Empty glass bottles, metal cans, rotting

food and piles upon piles of paper cluttered every surface. Nearly every table, chair, shelf or counter he passed had a plate with food so encrusted that not even the flies that had taken up residence with him and his empty beer bottles could enjoy it. The filth was life, these days.

Somewhere in the dining room his hand picked up a glass, but he didn't notice until its contents, moldy beer and the melted remains of a shredded cheque, spilled over onto his unsteady hand. Frowning and cursing, he poured the rest of the sour beer onto the hardwood floor and tottered through the doorway into the kitchen.

If rats had taken up residence amongst the low foothills and towering mountains of trash, he hadn't yet noticed. The marble floor was slick with grime underneath his bare feet and dust collected at the ends of his black pants as they dragged against the floor. He jammed the glass under the faucet of the sink, shoving aside piles of dishes and glasses and filled the glass. He swallowed to the rhythm of the pounding in his head.

His tongue felt the water but didn't have time to taste it, shoving it back to the parched throat behind. What good are these senses? The light coming through the dusty kitchen window burned his eyes, the skin on his hands was so blackened and charred that he could scarcely feel and the ears on his head

hardly heard what they wanted to anymore. I might do better off without them. Maybe that would make her happy.

Worst of all, it was hot as hell.

He slowly came back to himself. Stupidly melodramatic. With stiffness biting at his joints, he grabbed some pills from a cabinet and shoved a few into his mouth. Three more times he filled and emptied the dirty glass, before setting it down atop of a pile of plates and silverware. The weight disrupted the delicate balance and the structure fell, glass and ceramic plates shattering across the floor, forks and knives clattering with a terrible racket. The man groaned and cursed again, more loudly this time, slamming his fist on the marble counter. Then he noticed that his fingers were bare.

Broken glass underneath his sore, bare feet didn't stop him from running back to the bedroom, sliding across the hardwood floors and kicking garbage every which way. Skidding to a stop, he narrowly avoided stepping on a broken bottle. He scanned the floor where he'd passed out; mountains of clothes outlined a valley in the vague shape of a man who came so close to making it to the unkempt bed.

He fell to his knees and dug through the trash, bottles and cans rolling across the floor as he flailed his arms. Clothes flew at every wall and onto the bed, exposing more and more

dirty floor. Amidst a pile of wrinkled white shirts, his hand knocked away something hard. It glimmered as it skidded across the floor. All weariness faded from his arms and he snatched at it.

He rolled onto his back, clutching his prize, and the soreness and tiredness returned. In his fingers, he subconsciously stroked his singular possession, the one thing she couldn't take from him. Breathing heavily he brought it to his lips, kissed the grossly oversized crystal glass sphere, and slipped the ring it was mounted to onto his middle finger.

His hands fell hard to the floor at his sides and his pulse beat hotly in his temples. The pain of the morning melted away as he fell back to sleep, but the hissing screech of the alarm clock sent another shock through his body and forced him to a crawl. Using his knees and elbows, he wormed his way over to his nightstand. Out of the corner of his eye, a black document blinked a message alert at him, but he ignored it. He reached up, yanked the clock from its perch and flung it across the room just hard enough for it to burst against the opposite wall, contributing to the mess some plastic and circuitry. The man rubbed his blackened hands against his temples. A few moments and deep breaths later, he stood up amidst the stagnant air and dust and hobbled into his bathroom.

It was hot in the bathroom. The radiant cooling system underneath the expensive tile that adorned the floor and walls hadn't been activated in over a week, not since his WEDS allocation had been reduced to minimum and he burned his hands. His feet, sticky from sweat and garbage, made terrible sucking noises as he walked. A thin layer of dust had begun to cloud the smooth marble countertop, but it splattered aside when he turned on the sink and carelessly splashed water on his face. Even the water wasn't cold. Unpleasant water dripped from his face, and Polimal took a long look at himself in the mirror.

Long years of lies and compromise had taken their toll on him with a chisel, it seemed. His walnut skin had turned a deep olive in his hot new environment, and was none too pleased by it: deep lines dug channels of black under his eyes and down his stoney face, weighing the corners of his mouth into a perpetual frown. Although his hair only rose a few millimeters from his head, it was long overdue for a cut; his bald spot sat a shiny, sunken island in an ever rising sea of black underneath the bathroom's skylight. He tugged at the water on his face with fingers thick with fat and swollen by the heat, his chin flopping lifelessly as he stroked it. His shirt exposed the evidence of his condition: splotches of alcohol dripped further and further down the shirt, arching over his bulbous stomach,

while three separate rings of sweat caked around his armpits, revealing how long he'd been wearing these clothes, and not for lack of options.

Polimal was used to people not liking him. Just not like this.

His thoughts had to yell to be heard over the din of the thumping in his head. She knows she does this. She thinks she can take control. Otherwise she wouldn't do it. The heat in the room grew more unbearable with each drum beat at his temples. It was impossible to tell water from sweat. With shaky arms, Polimal lowered himself onto the toilet and relieving himself of last night's pleasure. Once finished, he groaned and dragged himself to the floor, sprawling out across the marble, hoping it would whisk away the heat. The unpowered floor proved no cooler than the rest of the room. Defeated, Polimal thanked the goddesses that nobody was around to see him, lifted his head and placed his cheek on the final bastion of cold in the bathroom: the side of the ceramic toilet bowl.

His eyelids weighed heavily down. He fumbled his eyes around in their sockets, shooting pain rushing through them as they reached the edges of their movement. He couldn't tell you later how long he'd kept his face pressed against the toilet, grateful that it was even a few degrees cooler than the floor,

but at some point he started dozing off again. The burning, thumping, dryness of the hangover dissolved like the heat from his face into the toilet.

It might have been the acoustics of the cavernous bathroom building the sound to painful proportions, but he was so startled by the shrieking alarm clock that his head slammed against the cabinetry as he shot to his feet. He stormed back to the bedroom, muttering a curse with each step. Trash flew everywhere when he ripped through the pile and picked up the plastic shell, digital display and silicon circuitry that remained of the clock and stormed toward the dining room with death in his eyes.

It might have cried out for help if it knew how to make more than one noise. Goddesses know it's going to need it. Furiously, Polimal grabbed a bowl from among the piles of muck, filled it with a handful of paper from the "bills to be paid" pile and garnished his concoction with the screaming remains of the alarm clock. Through squinted eyes and blurred vision he concentrated as hard as he could for what felt like an eternity before the bowl sparked to life and the paper caught fire. Shoving the dirty contents of a dining room chair to the floor, Polimal sat down and watched with twisted delight as his alarm clock melted in a soup bowl, waving his hand to relieve his ring

of its churning heat. The choking odor of burning plastic, from the clock and the envelopes, befouled the air. He waved his hand in front of his face, shoving away the thick smoke and foul smell and cooling his warm ring. The shrieking gradually shrank lower and lower, sadder and sadder, until all that remained of the clock was a melted plastic husk in a bowl and a foul smell.

Now that he was free to go back to sleep, it was the last thing Polimal wanted to do. Instead, he returned to the kitchen, his feet making the floor ring out with pain under every heavy step. He pushed the remaining plates in the sink out of the way and ran warm water over his ring to cool it more quickly. He didn't bother putting the flames out; he had to pay for water, so he left the bowl to flicker out on its own.

The smell had already arrived in the bedroom much more noticeably than he had anticipated. Stepping around piles of garbage, he opened every window in the room using the manual levers, since their control panels didn't work. The air that flowed in was hot, but at least it wasn't stagnant. Dust hovering over every surface began to churn and run like silt in a sea current.

Polimal pulled open the door to his closet, itself half the size of his bedroom. The floor to ceiling shelves were packed with clothes, the walk-in closet the last remaining bastion of

cleanliness and organization in the house. Instinctively he flicked on the light switch and cursed when it didn't work. Fumbling in the weak light coming through the door, he grabbed a handful of shirts and pants and threw them back at the bed. His fingers thick with heat, he didn't bother trying to undo the buttons, instead pulling his stained shirt over his head and letting it fall to the floor. His musty black pants shortly followed and before long he was clad in a fresh white button down shirt and black pants, exactly the same as the ones he'd soiled and slept in. The clean clothes cooled him instantly, for which he offered thanks to the goddesses; their high quality fabrics were designed to move heat away from the body. From his dresser he collected a new pair of black socks, his feet offering thanks to him as the smooth material slipped over their tired surfaces. Without thinking he reached for the pair of black shoes he wore the past few days, but he quickly realized that they wore the regurgitated good time of one of his bar mates from last night's exploits. Instead he picked a fresh pair from his closet.

He flicked at least three light switches to no avail making his way to the garage, cursing each one. His mobile phone laid on a table by the door, flashing urgently of missed calls and messages. Leaving it on the table where it seemed comfortable,

he passed by and slipped through the door to the garage. He didn't bother locking the door to his expensive hovel. Instead he got into his small two-seater car and thanked the goddesses that those idiots at WEDS decided to let his garage door opener work.

Garage door and alarm clock, he thought, kissing his ring and slipping it from his finger, real "necessities." He knew his wife didn't want his car (too impractical and gaudy, she called it as if she'd known what those words meant), so it remained as immaculate as ever. The grain of polished wood panels flowed around a myriad of screens in all sizes, itself outlined in a gaudy chrome (but a good gaudy, Polimal thought nearly every time he looked at it). Each shiny screen reflected back at the driver, waiting to come to life; all except one, a flat black circle outlined in a matte gray with no marks or labels next to the steering wheel. Polimal took his ring, its bulging crystal glass sphere nearly as wide as his fat fingers, and pressed it against the matte panel. Smooth black absorbed the shiny white crystal until it was halfway consumed, the thick golden ring sticking out like a handle and the car sprang to life without a sound. Every screen lit up and welcomed him in a bright display. Gauges jumped to life, their virtual sticks and meters stretching off the long rest. As Polimal listened, not a

sound came from the engine, to his satisfaction. The door was open and the sun had fully invaded the garage. The car's glass adapted and darkened. He kept the radio down low, the pills he'd downed having not fully taken effect yet, but even a soft song wafting out of the radio could drown out the low hum the engine made when he dropped his foot heavily on the accelerator. Thick black marks left by his wall-less tires remained on the garage floor after he peeled out into the bright desert sun shining behind the cracked, glassy sky.

Despite he and his long time coworkers telling people all over the world that they should move to their fabricated paradise, Polimal had never actually considered for himself it until his wife brought up the idea. He couldn't explain his aversion to it; he hated cold weather and these new communities were in a desert, the houses were newly constructed in brand new developments with all the luxury amenities one could want and you were surrounded by other wealthy people. It wasn't until after his wife convinced him and they moved that he realized why he disliked the idea of living in a community he was paid to sell all day: when driving down any of the perfectly paved streets, it was all too easy to fix your eyes on the horizon and get vertigo.

Every house in every development was exactly the same, inside and out. Luxury amenities lost their value when everybody on the block, in the neighborhood and in the state had them. And being around other rich people hadn't turned out to be the picnic Polimal had expected when he caved to pressure from his wife and they moved into one of his sales units. He was used to talking about how much money he had, but he wasn't used to people responding with how much more they had.

Worst of all, it was hot as hell.

From horizon to horizon the sky looked like a giant pane of glass that had been showered with pebbles. Cracks, crevices and blemishes blocked the sun or focused it like a cosmic magnifying glass, resulting in whole strips of land that were unusable due to being scorched daily as the sun moved across the glass sky. Where the sun scratched and burned the land daily were called searing points.

At least the paths of these searing points were predictable: the spinning of the Earth and its crystal sky were geosynchronous, so the sun refracting through the sky's giant lenses passed over and burned the same earth and water every day. Searing points ranged from a few meters across and only hot enough to make you break a sweat around noon to a thousand kilometers across and constantly thousands of degrees at ground

level. The largest searing points, named Nangov after the astrologist who identified them, descended from a smooth, concave strip of glass sky that extended all the way around the globe in the north, resulting in a thousand kilometers that were constantly being burned and melted. The result of the sun tempering the land on this foreign northern continent every day for all of recorded history was the endless Nangov Desert.

Long ago, explorers discovered a strip of land on a peninsula at the southern tip of the Nangov Desert that was far away enough from the searing point to be inhabitable, if a little warm. Despite its tropical weather, it lay dormant and ignored for hundreds of years, until the early 1760s when Polimal's real estate company jumped on the chance to buy and develop it; to build so near the largest searing point in the world would truly be a fantastic business opportunity. It was hot, but the water on either side provided just enough humidity to make it livable. From the dead, burned ground sprang a lively community: Kintris Square, or so was written in the sales brochure when the development was ready for sale after nearly thirty years in planning and under construction.

The desert sun drew to the car like an eye to a period on a blank white page. Even here, in a place scientists had said was unaffected by the searing point, nothing grew naturally due to

the heat that flowed from the Nangov Desert. The only plants and trees he sped past were planted by the developers and even those were having trouble taking root. When Polimal's black roadster reached the end of the development, the green lawns and palm trees faded away and he passed into the golden sea that surrounded the housing and shopping plazas, thousands of hectares of sand just waiting to be brushed aside, paved over, made into firm foundations and built upon. Thousands of kilometers away and over the horizon, the Nangov searing point burned the earth and ocean into submission, but from the road it was reduced to a white fuzz that made him put on his sunglasses.

One of the smaller screens embedded in his car's console displayed a picture of two people side by side and some environmental information. He cursed the heat with words and actions, adjusting a few settings with a poke of his finger to the screen and cold air blasted from vents all around him and through his seat. It was still hotter than he'd liked in the car when his tires squealed around a corner into the Kintris Square WEDS station's parking lot.

The pyramids of the Wireless Energy Delivery Service were always a sight to see: their smooth, barely blue glass skins and rounded point reached hundreds of feet into the air to oppose the rough, broken glass of the sky above. But the traditional

arboretum inside stood out more in the desert hills of Kintris Square, a green island in the slow sand waves. The only other sign of development was a great expanse of lined concrete before it. Not many people were employed by this WEDS station since most of the houses here were still empty and demand wasn't very high, so the lot was mostly deserted, only four cars baking in the sun. Polimal didn't bother to slow down, rushing down an empty aisle to get as close to the building as possible. With unnecessary speed, he yanked the car into a spot, parking solidly on the line separating two spaces. He slipped his finger through his gold ring and pulled the crystal from the console. The gauges died and doors unlocked with a pop. He used his other hand to settle the ring on his finger before getting out of the car and walking briskly through the desert heat toward the towering glass structure.

His temperament didn't cool down even when the automatic glass door slid smoothly open in front of him and the cool air inside blasted him in the face, forcing a shiver through his body. The inside was just as abandoned as the parking lot. Polished marble floors stretched to each corner of the station, with benches situated near the service desks and around the cold air arboretum that sat directly under the pyramid's apex. Without people milling about like at a WEDS center in more

populated area, the trees provided most of motion inside the pyramid, their tall leaves and branches swaying gently in the artificial wind.

He had never had reason to visit this WEDS pyramids before today, but the design and layout never varied from station to station. He turned to his left and approached the frosted glass customer service desk. Behind it a young woman, no older than college age he guessed, sat reading a black document. The clunking of his shoes bounced around the pyramid as he walked up and leaned on the counter. Before she said a word, Polimal noticed two things. First, the medicine finally kicked in, so his headache was gone, and second, the girl's dark hair was tied back in a ponytail so tightly it constantly made her look surprised.

"Welcome to the Kintris Square WEDS center," the girl said, the amount of energy in her voice surprising considering she didn't look up from her black document until she stopped talking, "how can we help you today?"

Polimal had half a mind to look around at the empty plaza and make a comment about the "we" she mentioned, but he quickly remembered why he was here and decided against it. "I'd like to get my power turned back on, please."

"Is this a new residence or an existing account?" the girl asked, looking up at him for the first time. On the glass desk in front of her were two thin screens, one flat against the desk, the other standing up, both black due to being idle. She placed her black document on the desk. Polimal saw a colorful page of a gossip magazine sprawled across its face before the girl flicked it off with a motion across its smooth surface. The two computer screens glimmered to life when she rapped her fingers across the bottom one.

"An existing account," Polimal said as sweetly as he could muster, which ended up being of comparable sweetness to a lemon. "My allocation was recently changed to minimum."

"Of course sir. If you could place your GID on the scan pad, I'll bring up the details of your account and we'll see what we can do about this." She pointed to a black pad atop the counter. Polimal slipped off his ring and placed it on the pad. A few seconds later, the girl said, "Alright, thank you Mr. Nakcasc, you can take your GID back." He returned the absurdly large ring to his finger. A keyboard appeared on the screen against the desk and the girl began to type. Keys shifted beneath her fingers as she moved through the program and her hands responded instantly to the changing buttons. Polimal

looked at her eyes scanning the top screen, but the color was obscured by the glare of the screens and impossible to discern.

"It looks like your WEDS allocation was changed to minimum due to a court order pending a divorce hearing." Her words stung, sending small pangs of anger through his chest.

"Unfortunately, that means I can't change your status. It says here that the hearing is set for tomorrow. The minimum service allocation is designed to provide power to the bare essentials of a home, in this case for record keeping purposes. Do you think you can deal with this level of service for one more day?"

Polimal had taken his time coming to complain about this: it had been over a week without lights, television, all his appliances (only his refrigerator still functioned), but now that he was sober and here, he was determined to get the power back on. He furrowed his brow and replied, "I would really like to restore full service again."

"It is just one more day, our records indicate that you've been at minimum allocation for nine days now," the girl said, clearly hoping to avoid getting up from her chair. That only served to push Polimal onward.

"I'd really prefer not to. I've been a customer for a long time. Can't you ask your manager if there's anything you can do?" he asked.

This girl is a professional, he thought as she held back a groan and pushed her chair away from her desk. Behind her was the stone staircase that led down to the basement offices. He got a good look at her shape as she stood and descended; regardless of whether or not he succeeded in getting his power turned back on, her tight black shirt, tweed skirt and tall, deep red heels made the request for a manager worth it. Above the images in his head, a tiny voice wondered aloud if it was heels and skirts and shirts that had spurred this whole situation into being. When she was out of sight, he turned and leaned his back on the counter, gazing at the trees swaying against the desert backdrop. He had learned long ago to ignore that voice.

Cool air nipped at his skin beneath his loosely buttoned shirt. He was too far from the densely packed bundle of trees to read the engraved stone plaque in front of it, but he assumed it had the same speech it had in every other WEDS pyramid. It prattled on about how the cold air simulated the average temperature in Vinterios, the country that was south of just about everything, where WEDS technology had been created. It described in detail how much energy it took to keep the air at exactly the right temperature to promote the health of the trees, a collection of beech, spruce, pine and birch trees

representative of the native trees in the large mountain nation. The designers and engineers had obviously gotten it right; the trees towered over everything inside and surrounding the glass structure, stretching nearly to the apex, and the air inside was cool and crisp. When he was younger he often wondered how much energy it really took to keep a huge glass pyramid cold on the inside regardless of the conditions outside, but he always ended up resigning to the unspoken rule about WEDS: when energy is so easily available, does it really matter?

The girl's return was well timed. Polimal had just grown bored of staring at trees in the desert and had begun rapping his knuckles on the glass countertop. She returned with another black document in her hand, a screen so razor thin that it was folded in thirds like it had just come out of an envelope.

At least she was cordial. "Sorry for the wait, sir. After speaking with my manager, I regret to inform you that we can't make any changes to your account until after your hearing, which is tomorrow," she said, only the remorse a lie. She unfolded the black document and it flickered to life. On screen laid a letter from the court asking for the reduction and account freeze. Her fingers danced across the thin screen, the pages flipping along in time, until she came to a line with a large signature across the bottom of the page.

Polimal knew what to expect. He barely glanced at the signed government statement before flipping the pages back to the front and turning off the document. "Are you sure you can't turn it back up a few notches? Not even for a guy who just wants to watch the big game?" Polimal asked, as smooth as the sand blowing against glass pyramid.

"I'm really sorry Mr. Nakcasc," the girl said, any excitement gone from her voice. "Is there anything else we can do for you today?"

Another comment about the "we" in her words flashed across Polimal's mind, this one much ruder than the one before, but again he kept it bottled up. Instead, he replied with, "Looks like another night in the dark, then," which was at least only snide, not rude.

The girl replied as if reading out of a very boring instruction manual. "All clients on the minimum service level are entitled to a few chemtorches while their lights are off. Do you need any more?"

Polimal wanted to see her skirt again. "You know," he said with a lecherous flicker in his eye, "I do think I used my last one yesterday." His hopes fell as flat as the girl's tone when she reached down and pulled four chemtorches from a box underneath the glass podium. Whether she bent the corners of her

mouth into a tiny smile when she handed over them to him he would never truly know, but that didn't stop him from feeling defeated in a small way as he took them, smiled a gross smile, and left.

Polimal was used to getting his way. Right now he would take what he was given, but he wouldn't be very happy about it.

Oppressive heat and the bright desert light forced his eyes shut as the sliding doors eased out of his way and he left the cool, blue pyramid. The plastic wrappers of the chemtorches crunched together in his fist. He held up his hand to block his eyes from the sun. Sweat had already begun to form on his balding head by the time he reached his car. He threw the chemtorches onto the passenger seat, slipped the ring from his finger and placed it in the starter. The screens and gauges came to life once more, and cold air blasted from the vents to stave off the baking heat. He had just removed the parking brake with one hand and gripped the steering wheel with the other when he realized that he had nowhere to go, and his head had begun pounding again.

His exit from the parking lot was a lot slower than his entrance. Polimal released the brake pedal and eased across the pavement, its lines and the sand beyond dancing in the sun before him. He could go home, he supposed, but he knew what that

was like. He couldn't remember the last time he had been without somewhere to be. Between sales calls, property showings, screaming arguments at home, and golf, he was never lacking for things to pass his time. Even today he had had scheduled sales calls, but he doubted he'd be any better at attending them than he had the past few work days. Out in a parking lot in the middle of the desert, Polimal did something fairly uncharacteristic: he wondered.

He wondered what he should do next, how he should approach his divorce hearings, whether he should be at all surprised that he had landed in this situation and he wondered if he was really surprised that he had been caught. Such a long, ongoing affair surely would've been figured out eventually, especially with him involved, not the most subtle of men. He wondered if he should clean up the house before the hearing, if she would even demand it like he expected and he wondered if anything would happen the way he wondered it would. He wondered if he should turn left or right.

The end of the parking lot sat before him, leading to a road that lead left and right, with naught but dunes straight ahead. Home was left. To the right was the center of Kintris Square. He had only ever seen pictures of the actual town center. He hated living in the town so much that he had never

taken the time to go there. All the houses in his sales district were far from the town center, although the way he described it to prospective customers made it sound pretty.

I like pretty, he thought.

Polimal turned right to see what all his own hubbub was about. No sooner was he cruising down the thin desert highway, the only noises the sound of his hollow tires hitting the pavement and the radio wafting softly, when the radio muted and jingled at him, and the face of his new assistant flashed on one of the screens in the console. She had called every single day for the past week to inform him that he was missing his appointments. He rolled his eyes so widely that his entire head wagged, and pressed a button on the steering wheel to pick up the call.

"Hello Harliniq," he said, failing to hide the dismay of being bothered while doing nothing.

"Good afternoon Mr. Nakcasc," her high pitched voice blared through all thirteen speakers in his tiny car, a nasally knife that cut the air, "are you aware you're missing your two o'clock sales appointment?"

Polimal rolled his eyes again at the reminder and strung his lies together. "Yes, Harl, I'm sorry I can't make it,

something extremely important came up. Do you think you could reschedule with Mr..."

"Omsteb, and his wife," she filled in his hesitation.

"Right, reschedule Mr. and Mrs. Omsteb for a later date, and cancel all my other appointments."

His assistant protested, as he knew she would. "But sir, you have a number of appointments for this afternoon and evening. There's Mr. and Mrs. Geasse, Mrs. Taobip, and Flamma Fradin. Should I cancel all of those appointments?" Her picture on the screen stared blankly ahead, lips frozen, but the tide of words just kept coming. "You already missed your morning appointment with Ms. Kir, but she didn't show up or even call and when I tried to call the number that she left us it went straight to her voicemail, so you got lucky on that one. You've missed every single appointment I've scheduled for you this week. You're not going to be hitting your sales quotas at this rate. What should I do, sir?"

Her voice and her questions strained his whole body more than the sun did. Mistine never asked questions like these, she didn't have to. "Reschedule the ones you can, I don't care. I won't be able to make any appointments today," he answered sharply.

"Should I keep trying to contact Ms. Kir to reschedule?"

"No, she didn't show, she doesn't care. Don't waste my time."

"As you wish, sir," Harliniq replied, sounding like her attention was elsewhere.

"Is that all?" Polimal nearly seethed into the phone.

"That should be all sir, is there anything else you need from m-"

"We'll talk later then." Polimal hung up the phone with a press of a button. The curse of WIM, he thought, glancing at his ring stuck in the starter pad.

Years ago, governments around the world passed what was hailed as the ultimate solution for individual identification. Scientists studying the properties of Will stones made a breakthrough: it was discovered that each Will stone has a unique signature detectable on a molecular level created by a combination of its gravitational and electromagnetic wavelengths and its composition. Factoring in all three properties resulted in an infinite number of possible combinations. From that point on, each Will stone was referred to by its gravitational and electromagnetic wavelength and compositional identification value, or GEWCIDV value. Sheer awkwardness gave rise to its simpler, more common name, the GID.

Based on this finding, the Will Identification Mandate standardized all identification on assigning a single Will stone to each person when they were born, linking their identity to the GID of the stone. The program was a roaring success. Despite scientist and criminals alike spending years and fortunes trying to create Will stones with identical GIDs, WIM remained an unbroken identification system for over sixty years.

Every citizen from then on was required to keep their linked Will stone on them at all times, but unless you were going for a jog around town it was virtually impossible to be without it. Hardly any industries went unaffected by the security of the GID. Within a few years, GID readers had popped up in every device they could be stuffed into: they unlocked your doors, started your cars, retrieved your account information anywhere you had one and paid your bills.

It was possible to change your GID, although a lengthy and tedious process. Polimal himself had gone through it twice. The first time was when he landed his first huge sale. To celebrate, he traded in the government issued Will stone from his childhood for a huge sphere of crystal glass mounted in an ugly setting on a thick gold band, the most expensive he could find.

The second time was for his engagement to his wife. As was custom, he gave her his gaudy ring for their engagement and

promptly bought himself a new one, exactly the same. Even though they were the same size, weight, and material, he'd had to reregister with this new stone. No doubt his wife would be wearing his original ring at the hearing tomorrow, and no doubt she'd pawn it shortly thereafter for a fraction of its worth.

But as much as he liked the security and convenience of the WIM and GIDs, Polimal would give it up to rid himself of the integrated car phone. Telecommunications companies partnered with automobile manufacturers as soon as they adopted the GID as the ignition key for their vehicles. Shortly thereafter, a phone was built into every vehicle that activated when your GID was placed at the vehicle's ignition panel.

Polimal loved the phone. The phone was his livelihood. Without it he wouldn't land deals or make any money. He was sure that he had spent more time on the phone than he had eating, sleeping and watching television combined. His love for the phone in his extremely expensive sports car, however, waned a little more each time his new assistant's face appeared on its incoming call screen. He knew how much he'd paid for the car. He also knew how much he'd pay to make her unable to call him anymore.

Angry thoughts stewed and milled about his head as he tore down the desert road. It came as little surprise then that when

his phone rang through his speakers again, he nearly ran the car off the road and into the dunes. It rang and rang, the small car swerving back and forth across the empty road, kicking up sand and dust from beneath its squealing tires. Once the driver had righted his car's alignment with the road, he glanced down at the screen to see that it was not his assistant calling, but his wife's lawyer's, and he nearly crashed the car for the second time. Polimal composed himself and his vehicle before answering.

"This is Pol," he said, unsure if his voice was angry or shaken from his excitement on the empty road.

The voice on the other end spoke quickly, with tight enunciation. "Hello Mr. Nakcasc, I'm calling on behalf of the firm of Boostian and Boostian to confirm your presence at the divorce hearing tomorrow."

"I'll be there," Polimal replied, this time sure he sounded angry. Something struck him as odd, so he asked, "Do you usually confirm divorce hearings like I would a doctor's appointment?"

"No sir," the woman's tone said with an air of impatience, "but I have here a special request from Mrs. Nakcasc that reads, 'Make sure he isn't drunk. He probably will be, so make sure he isn't too drunk.'"

"Of course you do."

"Just doing our client a courtesy, Mr. Nakcasc."

"Well, you've found me in the car and I'm not drunk, so you can let my wife know that I'm alive and well."

"I'll pass the message along, Mr. Nakcasc."

A witty response formed on his tongue, but it was rebuffed by music coming through his radio again. Instead, he replied out loud to nobody in particular, "Well that was rude."

After that, he paid the woman no heed. Instead, Polimal spent the next few kilometers of arid desert thinking about how the desert sun wasn't helping the throbbing in his head, spurred on by the low thrum of tires on asphalt. He flicked his absurdly large ring around his finger. The huge white stone's perfectly spherical surface shone with a brilliant luminescence, even in the middle of the desert. In his thick, knobby fingers, it felt even smoother than it looked.

Over the horizon to his right lay the Nangov searing point burning horribly down far to the north, too far to see where it met the ground. From here it seemed a huge spotlight shining down from a smooth patch of sky, bright enough to be seen even in the middle of the desert day. It made it's terrible presence known, announcing to all in the hemisphere and it was responsible for the desert in the first place.

Most searing points that touched the ground at dangerous temperatures lasted an hour or two each day due to the rotation

of the Earth and its shell, and the refraction of light. Since they only lasted a mile or two and their locations never varied from their set path, they were easily avoided and built around. The Nangov searing point was different: it was actually two near perfect searing points that hit the same spot. Although its location remained constant, the sheer length and perfect smoothness of the sky above resulted in searing points that burned almost precisely at the surface, like a giant magnifying glass melting ants, and extended over five hundred kilometers north to south. Scientists estimated that the ground at the center of Nangov while the searing point was overhead reached over 1,500 degrees centigrade, creating one of the most beautiful, deadly and potentially profitable places in the world and turning the world around it for hundreds of kilometers into burning wasteland.

That wasteland made the image on his car's map a bleak one, a blue string of road cutting straight through endless yellow surroundings. It barely seemed to update as he drove since the scenery never changed, so when a small icon appeared down the road, past where Polimal could see through the hazy curtain, it seemed extremely out of place. It wasn't until he saw that the icon signified a restaurant that he realized he hadn't eaten anything all day. Maybe some food in his system would help

relieve the pain shooting like an arrow from one temple to the other.

Destiny, he mused. Later he would think that a silly thought. If destiny was a single road going through the desert providing no options and no escape from the sun, then maybe destiny wasn't for him.

It was ten minutes still before he arrived at the restaurant. Just calling it a restaurant was extremely generous. It was little more than a shack on the side of the road, so small that it made him wonder how it managed to garner a symbol on his car's map at all. Nevertheless, Polimal pulled off onto the dusty shoulder, his wheels kicking up a brown cloud, and skidded to a stop directly in front of the diner. When he placed the car in park, the windows' tinting lightened to allow his eyes to gradually adjust to the bright outdoors. The windows of the shack were also darkly tinted, although whether their tint was permanent or dynamic he couldn't tell. There were no other cars parked in front, and the dunes encroached so closely on the back of the building that there couldn't be any parking back there, but there was a lighted "Open" sign in the window and that was enough for him.

Polimal pushed the door open. Arid air rushed into the relative cool of the car. If he wasn't so out of breath just

from the sudden change in temperature, he would've ran to the door. Instead, he bounced his way to the restaurant at a painfully slow trot. A small bell jingled when he pulled the door open and passed into the restaurant.

The dark tints of the windows had a great deal of success in keeping the light out; the yellow world and shining sky outside were reduced to deep browns and weak twinkles. The air hung so thick and still it might as well have been smoke. Lined up in front of the bar were metal stools with sparkly blue seats, their leather cushions cracked and worn with age. The booths didn't fare much better, with shapes of bodies seemingly burned into their seats at regular intervals and table surfaces faded where arms and elbows leaned to rest. Oddly shaped lights over each booth were turned down low, as if in appreciation of the good work the tinted windows were doing. Unsurprisingly, the place was empty, save for a bored cook leaning against the bar, reading a black document.

"Make yourself comfortable wherever you'd like," the cook called without looking up from whatever it was he was reading. He had a lazy drawl that made each word blend into the next.

Polimal could tell this wasn't going to help his headache.

Interested in avoiding any awkward conversation, he took a seat in a booth near the entrance. Despite being dressed like a

cook, with a short red cook's hat and a brown, grease stained apron that might have once been white, the man was also the waiter. He brought over a menu and a place setting, but he dropped them all unceremoniously in front of his guest.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" he asked flatly.

"Water. And an aspirin."

"Can't drink an aspirin," the cook answered with a sigh. He wasn't an old man, simply too old to care. The only wrinkles in his face were caused by the heat, not his age. A thick ring of sweat stained the rim of the hat a deep maroon. He was gone before Polimal could reply.

The menu was a dismal as the setting. Breakfast and snack foods adorned a blank white sheet, few enough in number to barely qualify for a smattering. Polimal assumed the menu didn't change frequently enough to warrant using a black document, as expendable as they were. It had been a long time since he'd seen a menu printed on actual paper.

The cook returned with a short glass, a tall jug and a bottle of pills. He filled the glass from a jug and said, "Feel free to take more than one. On the house."

How gracious, Polimal thought while thanking the man. He half expected the water to be warm. Instead, he was pleasantly rebuffed by the wetness already gathering on the ice cold glass.

The cook stood idly by as his patron downed two pills and emptied his glass.

He filled it up again. "Ready to order?"

"Two eggs over easy on toast," Polimal replied.

"You got it." The cook scooped up the menu, the bottle of aspirin and the jug of water, but stopped when Polimal raised his hand.

"Leave the water," he said.

"You got it." The cook turned and disappeared behind the bar.

Even diminished by the dark window, the golden sun caused the lifeless sands to shimmer and wave as far as the eye could see. His black car, speckled with sand, baked amidst the yellow. The only thing not moving was the crystal ceiling above, cracked here and glassy smooth there. There were many beliefs and even more theories as to where the glass sky came from. For all his people's mastery of energy, comparatively few were the inquiries into how the shell that enveloped their planet worked or what it was made of. Maps of the crystal sky's surface had been completed hundreds of years ago, and since then people had long turned their eyes away from it.

None of it was of any interest to Polimal so long as his windows darkened when they were supposed to and the air blowing

in his face was cool. Where he had grown up and lived until now, far to the south, there were real seasons that changed four times a year and reasonable temperatures that didn't burn you during the day and freeze you at night. He was completely averse to moving to this goddess forsaken place until he took another look at the development and real estate numbers. His wife's words of encouragement to try something new rolled off like the sweat that poured from him whenever he was outside during the day. Only the numbers mattered. All he knew about the sky was that it was responsible for creating this lifeless pit that extended nearly the entire northern hemisphere.

Rather than study the shell, scientists instead used it to study the Earth. In order to better understand the nature of the desert, scientists had begun launching satellites that would mount themselves on the shell and stare down at the ground below. Perched upon the glass sky, they provided the first true glimpse into what lay at the hottest parts of the Nangov Desert, where it was too hot to travel even in the cold of night.

Once a day the twin points of Nangov burned their way across the arid landscape. The heat beat the desert like a hammer left over a fire, melting the sand below with ferocious temperatures unknown anywhere else on Earth. Under the pressure of the light, the sand melted into glass, glass so pure and hot

that during the day it was alive, a putrid, bubbling liquid, like holy magma. As the winds brought more sand down upon the glass, it too melted, forming layers upon layers of glass that slowly pushed its way deeper into the sands. At the center of the Nangov Desert lay the area that scientists named the Deep Crystal Ocean, a naturally occurring sea of liquid glass.

Right now, Polimal's head felt like it was submerged in the glass ocean. From the kitchen, the sounds of eggs being prepared popped cheerfully throughout the empty restaurant. He poured himself another glass of water and downed it quickly. He filled his cup again, this time nursing the cool glass between his blackened hands. He sipped at the water until the cook returned with a plate that supposedly contained his food.

Polimal looked down at the burnt eggs on crumbling black toast. "I'm sorry, what's this?"

"Two eggs over easy on toast," the cook replied.

"Would it be too much trouble to ask you to make me another one that's edible?"

"It wouldn't, but they probably won't be much better."

Polimal rubbed his forehead. "You're not a very good cook."

"Neither are you, I'll bet."

"Yes but I'm not-" His patience was wearing thin. "You have a lot of nerve talking to a customer like that." Despite their

ashy consistency, he balanced a bite of burnt eggs on his fork and shoveled them into his mouth.

The cook sat down on one of the bar stools and leaned back on his elbows. "Maybe the customers don't matter," he said tiredly.

"Are you even a cook?" Polimal asked in between crunchy, dusty bites.

"I haven't exactly been classically trained, no," the cook said, removing his stained cook's hat and running his fingers through his short black hair, peppered with stresses of white. He looked up and down the empty diner and whispered, "But don't tell anybody else, it could affect my bottom line."

Polimal wasn't having any of it. Naught but dust left of his eggs, he started on the charred toast. "Who thought it would be a good idea to build a restaurant in the middle of nowhere?" he asked with a sneer.

"I did," the cook replied, "I'm also the owner."

"Did your cook call in sick today?"

"No, I'm really the cook."

Polimal paused. His toast felt like black soot between his teeth and tasted little better. "So why did you think there needed to be a restaurant here, exactly?"

"Utility. You know, just in case anybody was driving by and needed it. We thought it was a pretty good idea at the time."

"Right," Polimal said, hitting his limits. He dropped his fork onto his empty plate with a clank. "Bring me the check."

Reluctantly, the cook pulled his cap back on and pushed himself away from the bar. "You got it."

The aspirin hadn't yet kicked in, but Polimal felt better to at least have some food in his stomach. He drank two more glasses of water before the jug gave out. The cook returned just in time, carrying a small black pad with an even smaller screen. He placed the pad on the table, but when he went to pick up the empty water jug, Polimal stopped his hand.

"Fill it up again," he said. "Can never be too safe, don't want to dehydrate."

The cook nodded and obliged, filling the jug behind the bar. Once it was back on the table, an unseen phone began to ring, and he vanished into the kitchen to retrieve it.

Polimal ignored the bill pad for now, instead pouring himself another glass of water and frowning. Something the cook had said trudged up a bad memory. We thought it was a pretty good idea at the time. Suddenly, his thoughts were on Mistine.

Or was it a good memory? He brought the first glass of water to his lips. He thought back to the day when he hired

Mistine as an assistant. She was young, but experienced. Her big brown eyes could swallow you up, and her closet seemed full of skirts and shirts designed to excite. He saw the way her hair would bounce when she nodded and the angle at which her nose was cutest. A coworker had joked that day that hiring him such a pretty secretary was going to be trouble. He had been correct.

He drank a second glass of water. He remembered the first time he and Mistine sprawled out together on the floor of his office, and then the second time, and the third, the fifth, the tenth. The count had been lost, but the thrill never faded.

The third glass of water had him wishing it wasn't water. He remembered the day the fights began at home, the day his wife called him on his late nights at the office, the day they fired Mistine, the day they hired Harliniq.

By the time the fourth glass had run dry, it was all he could do not to slam the glass into the table.

Breathing slowly, Polimal picked up the pad. The screen came to life with the amount he owed. Far too much for that, he thought, as paltry as the total was. Unwilling to argue for once in his adult life, he placed his ring over the pad. A second later the screen blacked out and flashed "THANK YOU. COME AGAIN!"

Somehow, I doubt it. Without another word from the vanished cook, Polimal dropped the pad on the table and pushed himself up from his seat. Paper menus but GID-reading checks. Interesting place. He left as gruffly as he came, only marginally more full.

Luckily the meal had been quick, so the heat hadn't pervaded the inside of his car too badly. It instantly started blowing cool air through the vents and the seats, and with an aggressive shove of the accelerator, Polimal left the diner behind in a cloud of dust, returning to the empty road and emptier horizons on the outskirts of the huge desert.

Hundreds of years ago, explorers who ventured into the Nangov Desert toward the Deep Crystal Ocean met an untimely fate due to the unrelenting heat: during the day the sky rained fire, and at night the residual heat of the ground could radiate through the thickest of boots. Even now, with sophisticated roads and air travel it was still immensely dangerous to venture too far into the desert. Approaching from the sea was even more treacherous. Where the twin Nangov searing points hit the ocean, the water seemed to defy gravity. A thick, boiling fog permeated the surface at all times, perpetuated by the air's unwillingness to hold any more water, affecting weather practically everywhere else on Earth and making sailing on those waters deadly. Despite stretching clear around the

northern globe, the Nangov Desert and its Deep Crystal Ocean were still mostly uncharted.

The information gathered by the satellites gave rise to a new kind of treasure hunter. Traveling into the desert was no safer than it was in ages past, but those determined to get close enough to the glass sea to collect its glass were rewarded. Those who could also keep the glass pure were rewarded handsomely. Within a few years, the value of precious stones and metals dropped significantly as a new valuable commodity began to arrive on the markets in bigger and bigger volumes: crystal glass.

Polimal flicked his ring around his finger.

Each minute felt like an hour, each mile ten, each sand dune looked the same as the million behind it. He had finally managed to stop thinking about his situation, zoning out completely staring at the road, when all the gauges and screens in his car flashed and turned red. A synthesized warning siren replaced the radio, blaring.

Instinctively, he jerked his head around and searched for shade, futile on the empty desert road. Up the road a ways he spied a black building. A timer appeared on every screen, counting down less than three minutes. Polimal pushed the accelerator to the floor and the car buzzed forward, the engine

humming audibly for the first time today. He flicked the air conditioning to max at the coldest temperature. The vents instantly pumped out air so cold it hurt his fingers. Two minutes and too much land to cover remained. A yellow alert appeared on his dashboard alerting him that he was going more than twice the acceptable speed limit, and that the proper authorities had been alerted. He cursed his favorite curse and pressed on, urging his screaming car toward the building. With one minute remaining, the black building on the side of the road wasn't getting larger quickly enough. He gripped the leather steering wheel with one hand, his other hovering over the emergency event controls. With ten seconds left on the clock, he slammed on the breaks. He swerved the car to the side of the road and activated the emergency controls. All the glass in the car darkened, so black that Polimal was shrouded in darkness. Even the sun, blasting through the glassy sky, penetrated the blackened glass so weakly that it seemed a dying lightbulb in a dark room. Only the red of the screens illuminated the car's dark interior.

Then the clock reached zero, and it began to count upwards.

Polimal yanked the parking brake and made himself comfortable. He reached into a compartment in the ceiling and pulled out a pair of sunglasses. Slipping them on his face, he

leaned his seat back to give himself a clear view of his blacked out sunroof. There was no motion save for the seconds ticking away on the clock. The eerie silence was almost nostalgic; this, at least, was exactly the same as it was back home.

A full minute elapsed on the timer before he even felt the event's approach. It began with a slight vibration, like a tiny earthquake crescendoing over three minutes, slowly getting stronger but never graduating to full on shaking. Somewhere in the next minute, the event appeared on the horizon, so bright that it shined a clear white line through the blacked out windows. Before and after it, light refracted through the sky's crystal surface, extending out from the event like tens of thousands of branches made of light. Slowly the line worked its way across the sky, bending with the cracked flow of the crystal sky, rolling from horizon to horizon like a lightning bolt that had fallen on its side.

When the energy event reached the apex of the sky, Polimal watched it drown out the sun through the roof. It wasn't until it passed that he felt it, a deep, inaudible bass that thundered through his chest, shaking the air in his lungs for almost ten seconds. The cold air in the car fought but slipped and the inside of the car was hot as the desert for a split second. Dark glass around him flexed once, twice, then vibrated to the rhythm

of the ground, seemingly eager to shatter under the pressure. Energy rattled his teeth and eyes, a terrible nostalgia shuddering in his cavities.

Over the top of the crystal sky, the event rolled away, neither faster nor slower, always at its own speed. The vibrations in the air and ground waned. Even when the light had passed the horizon and its final branches faded, the clock on screen continued to count. For six more minutes, Polimal sat laid back in his car in the dark, waiting for the clock to stop.

When it stopped at just over eleven minutes, all the screens in the car turned green before flashing back to their intended purposes. Sweat had collected in the deep grooves on his face. Wiping them with his sweaty fingers didn't seem to help. He pulled his seat back to driving position, flicked the emergency controls off and stowed his sunglasses. The windows lightened slowly, giving his eyes time to adjust again to the desert landscape. It was then that Polimal discovered that his car had skidded to a stop directly in front of the small black building. He cursed at his timing.

Once the glass was light enough, he saw that the small black building had become a large cathedral, built of flat gray stone that seemed as out of place in the desert as the glass WEDS pyramid. Probably because they come from the same place. A

sign hung above the large double doored entrance. In a plain font with wispy, flaming serifs it read "Will of Flame, Kintris Square Abbey."

He wasn't religious, but that didn't stop him from swearing through his teeth for cursing in front of an abbey.

Off in the distance, the outskirts of Kintris Square baked, a fluttering semblance of a town in a yellow sea. Almost there, at least he thought, releasing the parking brake. He lifted his foot from the brake and his car began to roll away from the abbey. The moment his foot landed on the accelerator, half of the colored gauges blinked off. He swore again and punched his steering wheel instinctively. In response, the car beeped loudly and killed the remaining half.

Polimal must have pulled his ring out of the ignition pad six or seven times, swearing twice for each one, before giving up. He slumped his sweaty head onto the steering wheel and the car's horn honked weakly before fading out completely. No power meant no car phone and he cursed again at himself picturing his mobile phone on the table by door to the garage. He tried Willing his own energy through the ring to jump start the car, but that only succeeded in burning his blackened hands further and deeper.

Out in the desert wind, a muffled scream overpowered thousands of man hours spent sound proofing his expensive car, a scream that might have been avoided had Polimal noticed the two white-robed priestesses watching him from the doorway of the abbey. Since he hadn't, he sat in his chair breathing deeply the rapidly warming air inside the car, and nearly jumped out of his seat when a woman clad all in white knocked on his passenger window.

"Do you need help?" the woman yelled through the window, once it looked like Polimal and his heart were on the same page.

He wasn't quite sure what he was feeling. Perhaps it was hunger lingering after his unsatisfying meal. Maybe the heat was getting to him, or all the little things going wrong today, and the big things that were to go wrong tomorrow and the days after. Although he couldn't exactly explain why, Polimal caught himself by surprise, answering, "Yeah... yes, I think I do."

All flame abbeys were built with stone taken from the mountains of Vinterios, said to be the birthplace of their holy library. It was widely acknowledged that the snowy mountain country controlled a huge percentage of the world's wealth; between their energy distribution monopoly and their extremely convincing clergy, nothing happened in the world without the input of Vinterios.

The woman introduced herself as Flamma Aldez, lead priestess of the Will of Flame Abbey, once they pushed the stalled car out of the desert road. It might have been the temperate air inside, but Polimal couldn't help but feel a deep sense of appreciation as he walked through the great arched doorway.

Despite the sun baking the stones like an oven, the interior of the abbey was refreshingly cool. An eternal flame hovered over everything a glass sconce, held in place by glass strands extending from each of the walls like spider webs, so thin that they could barely be seen. Wooden rafters crisscrossed the length of the abbey for support, embedded with sunken lights that provided the only proof that the old-style building had electricity. Three wide stained glass windows stretched nearly corner to corner of each wall.

To his left, the glass depicted an empty black sky with hundreds of shimmering stars letting the desert sun pass through, spilling rays of white light onto the wooden pews below. In the center of the window was a perfect circle made of a different kind of glass that shone a muted off-white and was pocked with dark circles.

On the right, the second window was alive with a myriad of colors shining brightly, blending into one another, dominated by

a sun in the deepest gold Polimal had ever witnessed, all speckled with black.

Straight ahead the third window hung, depicting the crystal sky outside dominated by streams of light bursting from a swirled blue sun. A ring of steel sconces with unlit silver candles ran completely around the chapel, underneath the windows and over the entrance. Two more doors sat directly to his left and right, leading to unseen antechambers.

Below the deep blue ball was the flat dais, no higher than the rest of the abbey. Everybody was equal in the sight of the eternal flame, Flammas had once taught him, so all levels were consistent in a flame abbey. The dais was really just a bright red carpet laid across the stone floor at the front of the room in the shape of a triangle, a podium at each corner. The podiums of the Flammas were wood carved in the shape of dancing flames, each one unique. They were colored with special paint that glimmered in the sunlight and were treated not to catch fire during the rituals. It was a good thing, too, because at the center of it all stood the focal point: a huge, golden candelabrum called the central blaze, practically a column of polished brass, extended from the carpeted floor to stone ceiling.

Twenty-one thick arms shot from the column's four convex surfaces in every direction. The metal arms shrank and branched into hundreds of twiggy fingers, each bent and beaten and fused at sharp angles, made to look like tiny lightning bolts. At the tip of every bolt balanced a small brazier filled with pools of oily concoctions, each formulated to burn a different color, waiting for Will to bring them to life. Littered among the oils were candles of reds and oranges and yellows glowing in the sunlight even unlit. Polimal remembered from his schooling as a child that every central blaze was created at Grandfire Hall in Vinterios, the holiest shrine in their nameless religion. The design of each one was unique, but the number of arms, oil braziers and candles always remained constant. The carpets below had been treated to resist the oils and heat that assaulted from above when the central blaze was lit thrice daily.

The Flammas themselves, unfortunately, had no such treatment. Flamma Aldez's ceremonial Will stone hung around her neck, a huge golden sphere mounted on a thick silvery chain. Bright green eyes shone from deep sockets underneath her white hood, surrounded by smooth, aged skin that tightened around her lips to fight off advancing wrinkles. Her hair was a dark brown with wisps of grey beginning to take root. She had a friendly look to her, and her soft tone reflected it, cool and

reassuring. Folded together at her front, her hands were veined and wrinkled, years of coursing energy taking their toll and displaying her service. Aside from the golden stone around her neck, she was absent of jewelry. The ends of her white sleeves were clean cut and immaculate, extolling her experience.

Flamma Aldez quickly introduced her associate as Learner Corin and quickly asked her to retrieve their phone for Polimal. The Learner was much younger (barely older than twenty, he guessed) with fiery red hair that escaped her hood and tumbled about her face. Her own Will stone hung down loose in front of her chest, but it was small and as white as her robes. As she left he could see the ends of her sleeves, pocked with singes and burns, betraying her inexperience. When she returned with the abbey's wireless phone her brown eyes never left the cool stone floor. Handing the phone to Polimal, the blackness of her hands contrasted a white metal chain fastened around her wrist. Without a sound, Corin scurried away to a chamber unseen.

He must have made a face. "She's amidst the Lighting of the Central Blaze," Flamma Aldez explained. "She must perform all three daily rituals to the goddesses for three months without pause or recourse. During this trial, a Learner is not permitted to speak with anyone except her matriarch, who oversees her

duties, and even then they can only speak when within a sealed room, away from the ears of outsiders."

He flicked his ring around his finger and fiddled with the phone as she spoke. By this time his fascination with the abbey had waned. Flamma Aldez's words dredged up memories of the religious schooling his parents brought him to three times a week. He had been in enough abbeys throughout his childhood with his parents; they were the first thing he gave up when he moved away for secondary school. When she paused for a moment he called the automobile service number and requested a tow truck. The man on the other end of the phone had even less patience than he did, and gave him a time estimate that seemed a little long considering he could see Kintris Square in the distance from the road in front of the abbey. When he clicked off the phone he must have made another face, for Flamma Aldez offered him a seat in the pew as soon as he handed it back. "Please, make yourself comfortable," she said, "enjoy your stay."

Polimal took a seat in the last row, as close to the doors as the pews permitted, and made himself as comfortable as his heavy frame was likely to get on a flat wooden bench. Despite the relative coolness of the stone building, sweat overpowered and soaked into his heat resistant clothes and clung uncomfortably to his body. He spent a few moments watching the

eternal flame where it hovered above the aisle between the pews. It burned wildly, often leaping out around the edges, but produced no smoke. There was nothing underneath, he could see through the clear glass. Just flame. Nothing burning.

And then, as quickly as he was transfixed by it, his patience for staring into a open flame expired, just in time for both Flammas to return to the main hall. Flamma Aldez carried a book in her hands before her. Learner Corin was empty handed. They both made their way to the end of the aisle and approached the huge candelabrum column at the center of the podiums. In front of it Flamma Aldez nodded her approval and left her apprentice to continue her trial. She then made her way back between the pews, and took a seat next to Polimal, placing the book on her knees and her hands across its deep red cover.

Polimal looked around. There were only still three people in the abbey, he was not imagining it. Why Flamma Aldez was sitting so close to him when her pupil was all the way at the front of the room was anybody's guess. It didn't take long for her to sense his confusion.

Flamma Aldez spoke at a whisper. "Have you ever been to the Grandfire Hall?"

She soon discovered that Polimal's whisper wasn't exactly quiet. "No, I've never been to Vinterios." If the Learner had heard him over her deep meditations, she gave no inkling of it.

"We Flammas have another name for Grandfire Hall. We call it the library," the older priestess whispered. "It's a hall by name, but by architecture it's a sprawling castle. There are so many books that long ago they were forced to build bookshelves into the walls of the hundreds of hallways, and every one of them is full. Those books are constantly in use. One person wrote them all, you know."

"Andor. I went to religious school," Polimal answered sharply, and ever so slightly too loud. "What do those thousands of books contain?"

His impatience grazed past Flamma Aldez like a flower gave and swayed in a breeze. "I cannot say what all of them contain, only one. And its contents will remain between me, Andor and the goddesses."

"My teachers always told me that the goddesses don't affect our lives." Polimal felt almost proud for remembering that.

It made the woman smile. "They do not, but that does not mean they always won't. The prophet Andor gives us hope that they will return." She patted the red tome on her lap. Set deep in the red leather, silver letters on the front and spine

reflected the light from the stained glass windows; Polimal didn't need to read them to know what they said. "Andor gave us The Truth so that we might make ourselves better individuals, and in turn better, more peaceful communities. Do you know the significance of The Truth?"

Again, he recited what he'd been told when he was a child. "It's the only book ever released from the library."

"There are thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of books in Grandfire Hall, all with red covers and silver letters, and all written by Andor, each one full of prophecies. But no two are the same, and none leave the Hall. The Truth is the abridged version of all the most important moral lessons across the thousands of volumes. Have you read it recently?"

Not since I was twelve, he quipped in his head. His mouth replied only, "No, not recently."

"But you remember its themes? The things it teaches us?"

"Maybe. Something about planetary harmony and peace."

Flamma Aldez sat up tall and smiled. "Ah... Nublius."

"Right, him."

She eyed him almost suspiciously. "Nublius finds a mysterious blue stone and is visited by three goddesses. They teach him the truth about his world, about how they created it and all life upon it and why. They grant him eternal life and

when they part, they leave him these words: 'May your eyes watch over your united people for all time.' Such is the will of the goddesses, but Nublius was puzzled."

"I would be too, y'know?" Polimal interjected.

Learner Corin's chant undulated between silence and shouting and back again. The Flamma kept talking. "As would anybody in his position. The goddesses had just finished explaining to him that his world, the world that he perceived, was only one third of the world. They explained Energy, Matter and Void. The three strands of reality that when woven together produce the universe as we know it. In each strand exists a planet. The one we can see is only one of the three. Two other worlds full of people existed alongside his own, and the goddesses granted him the ability to move between them. And yet, for a long time, Nublius never left his home, never traveled to these other worlds that had been hidden to him for so long. Worlds that everybody around him were blind to. Do you remember what he did?"

"Can't say I do."

"He wondered. How was he to watch over three separate worlds? If he alone could move between them, how would he unite them?" Flamma Aldez paused for a long time and stared at her young student chanting before the candelabrum.

Polimal sighed and took the bait. "And did he?" he asked halfheartedly, but Flamma Aldez seemed to be at a sudden loss for words, and made no reply.

The chanting stopped. Learner Corin stretched her arms as wide as they would go. When she clapped her hands together, the whole room seemed to get warmer. Her head snapped down between her arms, leaving her hood to fall around her neck. Fiery red hair spilled forward, shining as bright as the eternal flame in the sunlight. Her hands pushed against one another, shaking as if each were trying to move the other out of its way. Finally, she relaxed. A deep, warm wind passed over her lips, a breath that seemed to carry the very essence of her Will.

The closest tiny brazier on the brass column lit up first, a bright unnatural green. From there, the oils around it lit up, and the ones around those, and the next and the next and the next, until over one hundred and fifty uniquely colored flames danced at the edge of lightning bolts. Almost as tall and definitely wider than the slender young Learner, the huge tree of fire was speckled with pools that hadn't lit up like ornaments of black, but that didn't stop its brass trunk from glowing like a golden rainbow.

Flamma Aldez stood up and clapped her hands together once. "Wonderful," she called happily, striding up the aisle, "a

marvelous effort. Your progress is excellent!" Corin's shoulders rose and fell as she tried to catch her breath. She collected her hair and shoved it back into her hood before pulling it over her head. At the compliment, the Learner smiled shyly and bowed her head in thanks. Her elder approached her work.

Polimal wondered where the tow truck was and Flamma Aldez counted the unlit braziers. "Nine," she declared, "the same as this morning, but still better than yesterday." A hint of frustration twinkled in Corin's eyes, but she bowed her head again and kept it down until her teacher said, "You may go rest. I will meet with you in a moment."

The apprentice returned to her quarters, slipping through one of the side doors, closing it behind her. Polimal's displeasure with the speed of the tow truck driver overrode his curiosity about the rainbow candelabrum. When Flamma Aldez sat down next to him and continued talking about her religious texts and prophets again, Polimal decided he had been awake long enough to warrant a drink.

"Yes," she said tersely, but friendly.

The strain on his patience had also strained his voice.

"I'm sorry?"

"You asked if Nublius did his job, if he watched over all three worlds and united them."

"Oh. Right."

"Nublius discovered that, regardless of how drastically different their countries and borders were or how bizarre their customs might be, people in all three strands strove for the same goals. Eventually, he unites the three strands and brings together the three worlds in peace."

"That sounds... fantastic." He was less than enthused.

"If you'll excuse me, I have to go meet with Learner Corin." She placed The Truth on the pew beside her and stood up. "I will return in a little while."

Polimal simply nodded his reply, glad to be alone once again. When she was gone, he stood up and rushed to the main doors, thrusting them open and popping his head into the heat. He peered toward Kintris Square, merely a wavy darkness on the horizon. The road was empty as far as he could see before it flickered and blended into the yellow landscape. He grumbled all the while as he shut the doors and took his place on the bench again.

An uncomfortable silence washed over the whole scene. Even the eternal flame, raging in its glass sconce, seemed unwilling to let out a pop or a hiss. Polimal found himself staring at the glass window straight ahead with its bright blue sun dominating an angled, chaotic pattern. Something about the way the blue

glass swirled made it seem to contain every shade of blue on Earth. He felt his muscles relax, his heavy frame sinking down into the wooden seat. He must have stared for a minute when his eyes began to get heavy. It only took once glance down at his lap and the copy of The Truth on the bench beside him.

DREAM BEGINS HERE

Then, his eyes were light and open, and staring at the blue glass sun again. His body felt weightless, compelled to move. He pushed himself from the bench with his hands, but his push was just a touch too hard and it sent him up and off the ground. His black shoes passed above the backs of the pews, floating in the center of the abbey, being careful to avoid hitting his head on the eternal flame.

A shimmer to his left drew his eyes. The window's black glass stopped all light except where tiny white crystals flickered in an entropic pattern. The off-white sun that dominated it glowed, but not like a sun; it was a soft glow, unlike anything he'd ever seen in the sky. Now at an even height, Polimal peered at every corner of the black window, his eyes slowly making their way inward. It was probably just his mind playing tricks on him, but the closer his vision crawled to the sun in the center, the faster the stars seemed to shimmer. Finally he gazed upon the eggshell sun. Fine lines, no thicker

than a human hair, spread with ferocious speed between all the stars. The window cracked and shattered beneath the weight of his gaze. Its pieces flew into the desert, engulfed by the sand. Yet, it didn't bother him. A whisper of wind brushed past his face, tugging it toward the opposite window.

This window was quite the opposite: a chaotic rainbow sky dominated by a golden sun, pocked with black stars. There was no pattern, each color blended into every other color around it producing a variegated sea with tiny black islands. His eyes traveled as they pleased through the tangle of color. He would later swear that the colors would shift and swirl beneath his gaze. The closer to the golden sun he stared, the faster the colors shifted, until he studied the dominating circle. Faint lines of black stretched between the dark stars and the glass splintered outwards, its pieces eaten by the desert behind.

When he lazily turned his head toward the final window, he stared at the blue sun in a cracked sky, and the window resisted. No more lines grew from its patternless grid and it did not break. Instead, it beckoned him. He hadn't moved from his vantage point in the center of the room, but he reached out his hand in reply.

Then he was within arms length of the window, his fingers recoiling from the sudden glassy surface. When he pressed his

hand to the blue glass sun, it melted into the abbey, pushing him back. It became a small sphere, alive with swirling blue, and it settled in his hand. Its surface was cool and light despite absorbing the hot sun day in and day out, but most remarkable was the energy. He could feel it pouring from the stone's surface, but it produced no heat. Will, he knew. Will I'll never be able to use. I don't have it in me. When he looked one last time to the window, its pieces were already fluttering out into the dunes.

A surge of energy jolted his hand. Any more and it would be painful, he knew. He wanted to let go, but his palm was suddenly black, his fingers clutching tightly around the stone. Energy raced up his arm, engulfing his chest, and surged again with a painful rush. His heart pounded, spreading the fear that gripped him throughout his body. His whole frame shook, his flabby chin jiggling wildly, his whole self completely out of control. Suddenly the stone burned, so hot that it felt as if his hand would melt around it. His shoulders began to shake, and a voice reached out to him, the voice of the stone, it spoke but he couldn't quite make it out...

He awoke to Flamma Aldez's hand upon his shoulder, shaking lightly. His fingers were balled into a fist so tightly that his nails left curved impressions deep in his palms.

"Are you alright?" the priestess asked. "You dozed off."

Relaxing his fingers, he rubbed his hand over the stubble of hair on his head, wiping the sweat away while looking at the three windows still intact in the walls. Their hues had changed slightly in the movement of the sun. How long had he been out?

"Yes, I... I suppose I did. I'm fine." His heart still pounded.

"Dreaming about The Truth?"

Not everything is about The Truth, lady. "No." He offered nothing further.

That didn't stop her from sitting beside him again. She picked up the red-bound book from the bench and placed it in her lap. At the front of the room, the central blaze still burned brightly, although its candles had shrunk considerably.

DREAM SEQUENCE ENDS

"Do you know the most fascinating thing about The Truth?" Flamma Aldez looked as if she was about to burst with the answer.

His head felt as if it was still in a dream. Long tendrils of heat still pumped through his chest. "About... oh, right, Nublius. What is it?"

The corners of her mouth curved into a tiny smile, a sliver of emotion. "The parable of Nublius, as told in The Truth, isn't true."

Suddenly Polimal was attentive again; this had bothered him since his days in religious school. "You know, I never understood that. How can you expect people to believe that there are really three worlds instead of one, about three golden goddesses that created all three, if you go around telling people that the story isn't true?"

"The point of The Truth is not to convince people to believe in an immortal man and his golden goddesses." She didn't even blink, and her tone never wavered. "At a few points in the narrative, Nublius even makes the point that it does not matter what you believe. One of his guidelines for living a good life is accepting that everybody will believe something different. If everybody subscribed to the moral principles Nublius sets forth through the parables of The Truth, we would live in a peaceful world, full of understanding. That is why although our congregants may pray to Nublius the hero, the goddesses who created the world as we know it or Andor the prophet, we as Flammas do not."

To this, Polimal didn't quite have a reaction, which was most unusual. So he did what he does whenever he's in this situation: he changed the subject.

"What will happen to Learner Corin when she can do this task?" he asked, motioning at the myriad of dancing colors.

"Lighting the central blaze is the first trial to becoming a Flamma," the woman answered, her voice so cool that Polimal got a chill just from hearing it. "It is a task that requires monumental control, and a test of Will and willpower. Our Will, and the Will of all people, is that of energy. First, she will light all one hundred and eighty one oil pools, and then she will learn to light the nineteen candles. Her training will be complete when she can light all two hundred flames at once."

Polimal reflected back on all the abbeys he'd been in throughout his life. Although they were all built with the same materials, each was unique in architecture, scale and opulence. The abbey his parents went to was larger but dingier than the newly built Will of Flame; the only similarity was that both had central blazes made of brass, whereas different metals were often used to create them. His eyes moved again to the windows. Polimal realized why he didn't have a reaction to what Flamma Aldez had said earlier.

"Is that why there are no images of the goddesses in the abbey?" he asked abruptly. "Because you don't believe in them?"

Flamma Aldez wasn't taken back. "I didn't say Flammas don't believe in the goddesses. I simply stated that we don't pray to them. They created our world, there is no denying that. It is not the point of the The Truth to make you believe that they will save you."

The sweat beading on his forehead collected into fleshy troughs as he wrinkled his ugly brow. Flamma Aldez seemed to sense his frustration and continued. "That is why there are no images of the goddesses. The images present in any abbey, even a young congregation like ourselves, are representative of the words in The Truth."

"I didn't get it then, and I don't get it now," he said.

With a sweeping motion she pointed to the stained glass windows, their luminescence barely beginning to fade. "The windows represent the skies described by the goddesses, the different skies of the three different strand worlds. We may acknowledge that the story is fiction, but we know that the setting is true."

"You believe that there are two other worlds besides the one we can see." It was more a statement laced with flecks of disbelief than a question.

Flamma Aldez looked straight ahead. Her eyes absorbed the glass sun of the front window, a deep sunken blue. "When Learner Corin perfects the task of lighting the central blaze, she will travel to Greatfire Hall and live there. When she arrives there, she will be assigned a single tome from the library of Andor, and she will spend three years reading and analyzing that tome. She will share its contents with a small panel of specifically chosen Flammas, those who live at the Hall permanently. The insights she gains from her volume will make her a better, more understanding spiritual leader, better fit to interpret the words of The Truth for a congregation. But preach as she will the lessons of The Truth, the moment she finishes her tenure and leaves the Greatfire Hall, she will never again speak of what her assigned volume contained.

"The lighting of the central blaze is a test of control. The fires represent her control over her Will, the silence represents her control over her will. If her will controls her, she will be not be able to keep the secrets she must by duty as a Flamma. If her Will controls her, she will be burned."

"This is all very confusing," Polimal said, quite sure this was going to make his headache return.

She never blinked. "It is, but let's just say that although each of the thousands of tomes contains different prophecies,

every page of every volume contains ample evidence that the setting of The Truth is true." Her voice cooled further with each passing word. "If you could read a single page of any of the books, you would be convinced that there are three strands and three worlds too."

"If a single page is enough to convince a skeptic like me, why not just release the books? There seems to be enough of them to go around."

"It's all about control."

If the room had seemed to get colder before, it actually did now. Polimal felt a tiny change in pressure in his ears and a sudden rush of cold energy on his skin. All of the flames burning in the central blaze blinked out in an instant, wrapping the polished column in darkness. Then the cold was gone, and the air itself felt as if electricity arced through it. Without warning, the central blaze burst to life again, every pool of oil raging with fire and tiny flames dancing on the tips of the candles. At her chest, the golden surface of Flamma Aldez's Will stone flickered in the light and waves of radiating heat.

He struggled to get the words out following the display. "That, sounds, nefarious," was all he managed.

Deep breaths quietly slipped in between her cool tone. "Please don't misinterpret what I mean by control. If you have

control over yourself and your Will, you are more prepared to advise even the most lost of souls. You can never control another completely, but you can influence them. We exert our influence only to improve people's lives by teaching them how to live understandingly. To live understandingly, one must accept the truth of the nature of the universe. Having control over our holy texts, no matter how numerous, is hardly nefarious, I think." Flamma Aldez gave the slightest hint of a smile, pure and genuine. "Besides, where would the mysticism be in that?"

The sun outside had long fallen beneath the horizon. Detecting twilight, the electric lights sunken into the building's wooden beams came on in an instant. Polimal felt suddenly awake.

"Wait a second," he said, the lights dawning new processes in his mind. He motioned at the rainbow central blaze. "If you can use that much Will, you can jump start my car!"

Flamma Aldez's smile vanished. "I could," she said as she stood up and patted down her skirt, "but it would be pretty dangerous for me to jump start it so soon after I overloaded it, so I wanted to let it cool down for a while."

"You overloaded-" Polimal's voice grew almost to a yell, forgetting that he was talking to a Flamma. "Why would you do that?"

She walked up the aisle and approached the central blaze. "A Will stone can tell you a lot about a person, even more than its GID can." She stopped in front of the rainbow conflagration. Her hands came together in an intertwined embrace and she bowed her head in prayer. In every sconce lining the room, tiny wicks above the silver candles came alive with flame. "When you tried to start your car, you burned yourself easily, and you barely Willed anything. That's the feeling of a person out of control."

Polimal's disbelief ran over into disgust. "I'm always in control," he barked brusquely.

"Not of yourself. Do you think the people around you do what you ask of them because they want to? Because they believe that you have earned their respect in any sort of meaningful manner? The burns on your hands are proof of that."

"And how do you know that?" he blurted indignantly.

"Your hands are typical of Will related burns." She pointed at his ring. "You probably tried to power something before your car that took more Will than you are able to control. You have no control over yourself. A house, perhaps?"

"I didn't come here to be insulted like this--"

"You didn't come here at all." Her flat tone only prodded Polimal's anger. "You were brought here. You may have an expensive Will stone mounted on a ring, but you don't know how

to use it. You stopped directly in front of our abbey during the energy event because the goddesses want you to learn to control yourself."

The nerves in his neck pumped red into his thick face and balding scalp. "You just got finished telling me that the goddesses don't exist!"

"Nublius doesn't exist. The goddesses are real, as real as the strands. And although they do not directly affect your life day to day, bringing you here is a fairly poignant sign. You need a change."

"Oh yes?" Polimal called obnoxiously, "and what would they have me do, these golden goddesses of yours?"

"Lose control. Before you can gain control over yourself, you must let go of your hold on those around you. Start anew."

He had had enough. "I'm not waiting any longer for the tow truck."

"That's good. I cancelled the call while you were napping."

His mouth dropped agape. "Why would you do that?"

A door opened a few inches. Learner Corin peeked through at the commotion.

Flamma Aldez noticed, but ignored her. "Sometimes we need to be completely powerless before we realize that change is necessary."

It was all he could do not to strangle the holy woman. "I demand that you start my car!"

"As you wish."

From deep below the horizon, the last vestiges of the sun's rays coursed through the crystal sky like a broken twilight, white, yellow and orange piercing through where the smooth blue-black skin of night had shattered. The desert air was noticeably cooler by now, sending goosebumps across Polimal's skin as he and Flamma Aldez emerged through the huge doors of the abbey. His car sat patiently, waiting where they had left it. It failed to react even when he placed his Will stone against its door panels.

"Well?" he asked, waving a hand over his car.

Flamma Aldez didn't even bother lifting her hands from her sides where they rested. Instead, she merely gave the car a stern look. "Try it again."

This time the door unlocked when his ring came near. He climbed inside. The remnants of the hot day's air had gotten trapped in the locked car. The gauges came back to life when he placed his ring into the ignition pad, a bright blue illuminating the black interior. Detecting the heat, the car rolled down both front windows to allow the night air inside.

From the doorway, the silent apprentice watched with wide eyes. Polimal leaned over the center console to address Flamma Aldez with one last question. "The library. You said the books line the walls. Are they paper books?"

Flamma Aldez leaned into the passenger window. "Yes. All of Andor's tomes are kept as physical volumes."

"Why? Why not just use black documents? It would take up a lot less space."

"Digital copies of each tome are kept and black documents are often used in conjunction with the physical volume during research, but real books are kept because it is tradition." Beneath her white hood, Flamma Aldez's hair mirrored the sky, smooth darkness veined with light. "Think about what we discussed."

"No, I don't think I will," Polimal answered. "You're not a very good spiritual leader." He slammed his door shut and dropped his foot onto the accelerator. Even the calm, collected Flamma had to jump back to avoid getting her head caught in the window as he turned down the road the way he came and sped away.

And he didn't think about what she said during the drive, he didn't think about anything. Black sand dunes rose and fell beside his car, alone again on the empty road. All the voices in his head were as quiet as the heat radiating from the Deep

Crystal Ocean in the distance. Eventually, his fingers found the quiet too much to bear and they tapped the radio on. His brow folded itself into a deep, cutting frown the entire way home.

Polimal didn't speed, he was in no hurry. A while had passed when a dim light came into view on the side of the highway. Slowly the diner crept up the dark road, the light inside shoving its way out through the tinted windows. As he approached, Polimal could see a car parked outside, one even more expensive than his own, but he didn't see anybody inside the diner. The "Open" sign had been turned off as well.

Two in one day, he thought as the shack whirled by, business is booming.

He was alone with the dark road again. It was a good long while before another light appeared, this one much more noticeable from far away. Beneath its blue glass skin, the thick evergreen trees of the WEDS pyramid sat comfortable and oblivious. Although the entire structure glowed, the round tip was lit up like a lighthouse floating in a sea you couldn't sail. The common sight of a WEDS pyramid at night wasn't enough to divert his attention from the road. The structure passed him by, a tall blue blur at the edge of his vision.

The light in the cracks of the sky had all but faded away. Flickering stars filled in where the cracks faded, like pinholes

in black satin, only to be drowned out by the sudden emergence of street lamps as he turned into his development.

Despite being identical to all its neighbors, his dark house couldn't have stood out more if its lights were on and all others' were off. His motion sensing floodlights remained cold as he turned into the driveway. Through the huge front windows, the interior sat in eerie blackness amongst the rows of bright houses and streetlights. The garage door worked, but the light inside didn't. The only light to guide his way were his headlights and the small red panel on the door. Every motion was grumpy: parking the car, yanking his ring from the ignition and shoving it back on his finger, opening and slamming the door harder than necessary, clomping around the car to the door, shoving his fist at the red pad, flinging the door open when it turned green and unlocked, slamming the door behind him, sealing out the light of the headlights.

The inside was every bit as dark as it seemed to be from the outside. Away from the abbey and its Flammas, he felt no need to hold back his cursing, so he cursed every step of the way as he retraced his steps back to his car, where he'd left the chemtorches.

In the glow of the headlights, he angrily tore the wrapper off a chemtorch. His fingers slid up its smooth glass shell,

fiddling for the automatic tab and yanking it when it was found. Momentarily blinded by the burst of light, he cursed. His eyes adjusted, the car detected the light and flicked its headlights off, prompting his eyes to adjust again. With a lit chemtorch glowing white in one hand and a fistful of wrapped chemtorches in the other, he went back inside. From the table beside the garage door, Polimal picked up his sleeping mobile phone. He slipped it into his pocket before the flicker of its big screen could hurt his eyes even further. Prepared, he set off back through the house.

Perhaps the long shadows cast from the chemtorch played tricks on him, but everything seemed filthier in the dark; garbage piles created living mountain ranges shifting and swaying as the light passed them by, waterfalls dripped over porcelain precipices in the sink, even the smells (the sources of which Polimal didn't want to consider) seemed more poignant when you couldn't see where they were coming from. He walked as similarly to a cat as a large man with little practice could, placing his feet down between the filth lightly, absurdly self-conscious about the noise each step produced despite being alone in the house. He held the warm torch before him and passed the chaos by. He stopped only to place the extra chemtorches in a

hall closet, in a box positively bursting with nearly a hundred of them.

Now with one free hand, Polimal pulled his mobile phone from his pocket. Awake and eager to get his attention, it flashed brightly with the symbols of missed calls and messages left. Instead of heeding its silent urgency, he flipped the unit around and used it to brighten the winding path through the waste while he held the chemtorch over his head.

He didn't recall closing it when he left this morning, but the door to his bedroom was tightly shut. He returned the mobile phone to his pocket and pushed it open.

The bedroom was almost cold, a refreshing reprieve in the musky dimness. Air rushing toward the Deep Crystal Ocean whistled through where he had left his windows half opened. Stepping carefully around knee-high hills, he made his way to each window. Their dysfunctional control panels were another dark reminder. He used their manual levers to shove them open as wide as they would go. The wind seemed excited, like an explorer arriving in a new land, blustering its cool influence all over the short landscape. When all had settled (and the smells distilled), he laid down in his unkempt bed, the first time he had made it there successfully in four days.

Polimal listened to the wind and wondered what it said. It had been so long since he'd tried to imagine, so caught up in the reality of work and life. Every voice he gave the winds faded into Flamma Aldez's. Hastily he flung a cover over the chemtorch to obscure its light. Her words rang in his head like wind in the desert, silent but omnipresent, her moral weighed heavily on his eyes. Polimal nodded off.

He couldn't have been out for even a minute when he was jolted awake by a buzzing on his leg. He fumbled in the dark for the phone in his pocket, its bright screen illuminating the room as he pulled it out. He squinted at the light.

Five new messages came into focus once his eyes had adjusted. He looked down the list on screen. The first was from this morning. His wife's lawyer's office had called his mobile a few times, but left one message. He was glad to have been passed out on his bedroom floor at the time, the only result of the call a useless buzzing on a table across the house. The second and third messages were from Harliniq. Goddesses know how many times she tried to get me before catching me in the car. With a flick of his finger he skipped past them. The fourth message was from WEDS, probably the automated courtesy call given to every customer after they visited the distribution centers. The final

message stopped his finger and caught his eye when his wife's personal number appeared on the screen.

At first his finger jerked at the message, but it froze just above the surface of the phone. It hovered there. Polimal wondered. Involuntarily, his finger slid to the application button and closed his messages. He opened the electronic directory application and poked out his search with his stubby, blackened fingers. A tiny pain pricked his finger with each tap on the smooth screen. His tired eyes glanced at the results. With a few more taps he had chosen one, pressed loud speaker and laid the phone down to ring on the bed beside him. Only a moment later a voice came through.

"Kintris Square Anytime Cleaners, how can I help you?" The boy sounded tired, his words drawn and long.

"Hello. I'd like to get a cleaning crew at my home as soon as possible. When is the soonest they can be here?"

His answers obviously came from a script. "We have crews available as early as tomorrow, sir. How many rooms do you need cleaned, and how severe is the mess?"

Polimal looked around his messy bedroom. "The whole house, and it's a pretty severe job. I'm only available in the morning to let the cleaners in."

The pause was the first time the voice on the other end actually seemed to be paying attention to something. "Alright, I've looked up your GID, would you be needing service at your home address? If so, we can have a cleaning crew out to you first thing in the morning."

"Yes, at my home. That would be wonderful."

"Okay. Have a good evening, sir."

Polimal didn't bother expending the effort to reach down and hang up, instead letting the line and screen extinguish themselves. When the bright screen failed to fade fast enough, he pushed it underneath the covers to join the chemtorch, glowing on only itself.

Feeling the tiredness washing over him like the desert breeze, he turned up onto his shoulder and reached for his nightstand, dismayed to find it empty. It took him a moment to remember that it had found a new home in a bowl as a liquid. The curse he muttered was long and slurred. He pulled his phone from under the covers again and set it as an alarm clock before letting it come to a rest, face down on his chest.

The room was dark again. He laid his head back into his plush pillows. The heat drew the sweat from his pores, glistening in the dark before the cool wind whisked them away. He wondered if he still had time to do the right thing, and he

wondered if the possibility of doing the right thing was even within him. His stomach growled, neglected and absent of dinner. Minutes of black faded into hours of darkness. Polimal fell asleep, for the first time in four days, sober and somber, and in his own bed.