

12.

It was a massive crowd of workers, comparable to those which comprised some of Superior's most noteworthy worker rebellions, that gathered in the streets before Capital Tower. Thousands of working class and workless poor, drones and slags as the administration saw them, stood together in tightly packed ranks between police barriers, which stood at either end of the street and ran perpendicular to the building's face. Fully armed police troops stood at arms' length from each other, outfitted in special response armor and forming a wall immediately opposite the steel and concrete barriers that fenced the crowd into the area. They had been deployed after the bulk of the crowd had amassed, erecting the impenetrable perimeter around them, as the administration had been insisting in the weeks prior to the event, "to protect the citizens of Superior should the gathering turn violent."

Andre Williams surveyed the police presence from his position at the top of the steps leading from the street to Capital Tower. Their presence was subtle, yet impending, as they lingered in their metallic armor like a shiny mirage at the edges of the dirty poverty-ridden mass. He had heard the justification for this, perhaps more than anyone else, as his role brought him a requisite involvement in the hoopla surrounding the event, and the connotation with which the police action was rife left him queasy. There was an implied separation, he reasoned, between the attendants of this event and the "citizens of Superior". It was a subtle implication, one that went unnoticed by most, but the same was implied subtly as would have been overtly, and the Legistar General knew all too well how effectively subtlety had been employed in the past so as to sway a party's opinion or allegiance toward favor of one course of action or another. From this thought, he felt a chill so sharp and deep within his bones that the cold, damp air of the dreary overcast morning burned with the fiery heat of the noon sun by comparison.

As he mulled over the sentiment's meaning, Andre's inner chill turned to a deep freeze that penetrated to the core of his soul, cracking and breaking the man's spirit within, as he considered another possible implication thereof. What if the statement had simply been a semantic oversight? Rather than an attempt to sway opinion, it could just as easily be a confession of opinion that bode all but well for his supporters. Were it true that the administrative majority did perceive a notable difference between the people gathered before him and those who were not, so much so that the former were deemed unworthy of citizenry status, then any hope of advocacy on their behalf that he may have entertained had been entirely delusional. Worse than that, a more immediate danger lurked in the near future for them. The combined indifference toward their well-being and the unprecedented police presence quickly brought Andre's speculative mind to any of several alarming conclusions.

There was no need for such a show of force by the police. Parades, street festivals and the like, which drew much larger turnouts, had invariably elicited a comparatively minuscule showing by Superior's internal peace keeping force. Diminishing public credit lines had left all of Capital's major precincts floundering, with dwindling numbers and an inability to deploy large squads, to the point that a police presence of this magnitude would require the participation of every precinct, of every officer and soldier therein, throughout the metropolitan hub. By Andre's estimation, every active and reserve internal peace keeper fit for duty in Capital was present, be they walling in the

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masses or patrolling adjacent sectors of city for suspected dissidents. They had not made such a magnanimous show of their presence since the last of the workers' rebellions had forced them to take to Capital's streets en masse and disperse adherence to the law indiscriminately, and by any means necessary, nearly fourteen years ago. These men were young, the officers who commanded and the soldiers even more so, and none of them had logged any experience, aside from academic, in mass crowd control under riot conditions. If this day's events were to play out as they did in any of the horrific scenarios Andre found himself dreading, then the police had been deployed for training. The region's administrators, all of whom were meant to carry out the Legistar's dictate, had called this gathering to serve as a simulation by which the police could hone their skills on a faction of the population that had been deemed useless by any other means. A use had been invented for that faction. If the Unified Peoples Resistance and the movement from which it had sprung continued to gain influence among the region's subordinate class, then experienced police would be needed to maintain and protect the social order against the will of the workers.

Andre looked to Darian, who stood nearby in the cold grey morning haze, and motioned for him to approach. The understudy obliged his elder as quickly as discretion would allow, moving nonchalantly to stand next to him. Leaning closely toward Darian and speaking in a low voice so as not to be overheard, Andre directed his assistant to make arrangements for the immediate release of any individual arrested at this event. He wished there were more that he could do, but short of calling off the vote and risking the integrity of both himself and the work he had made his sole devotion, Andre was powerless to prevent whatever inevitable police action had been planned. If he could not prevent their arrests, however, he could at least avoid the imprisonment of anyone unfortunate enough to lend their unwitting involvement to this police training exercise.

As Darian turned to carry out his task, Andre pulled him close once more and, as an afterthought, instructed him to unearth whatever information he could as to the party responsible for the impending travesty. They, whoever they may be, would face a full inquisition at the hands of the Legistar's Office when this was over. Darian left Andre's side, brushing past Amelia Buzzard as she lumbered out of Capital Tower's main entrance and took her spot among the rest of the region's upper administration, then he skirted the edges of the crowd as he left the gathering in pursuit of his goal.

Andre knew that the information would be difficult to attain, but if anyone outside of the Academy could retrieve it, it would be Darian Lopez. He would have preferred to entrust the task to a Stone, but his attache from the Academy was still missing, along with his other prized understudy. He had had no luck in his efforts to contact Amanda Decker. Either she was unwilling to respond to the pages he'd been transmitting to her com phone, or she was unable to do so. The Academy had enjoyed no more success in their attempts to locate Will, whom they had sent into the field prior to his final outfitting session and devoid of global positioning hardware. The headmaster had assured Andre that Will was conditioned to seek a means of communication, and to advise the Academy of his situation, at the first possible opportunity, and as such the inexperienced agent's report was expected at any moment. The headmaster's expectation was based on the assumption that his agent would eventually be in a condition suitable for such an effort, but Andre had known disappointment and disillusionment far too many times to keep such an optimistic outlook as concerned his young understudy and her escort, especially accounting for the conditions under which the two of them had disappeared.

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The train that the two had been returning on had been found hijacked, sunken into the track in which it was designed to hover, and abandoned over the forgotten zones. The UPR had carried out the attack and, in keeping with their reputation, had turned their looted victims loose after having collected everything of value they could gather. All of the frightened and disoriented passengers had been collected the following morning by the waves of special response teams that had swept the area surrounding the wreckage of the train, and each of the survivors of the incident had recounted a similar tale in which two courageous young passengers, a man and a woman, had dared to fight back against the brigands. The young man, being unusually small and therefor obviously weak, fell quickly as the hijackers surrounded him and filled him with bullets. His female companion became hysterical and was locked with him inside the passenger car as the guerillas fled. After a few hours passed, some of the passengers who had taken up concealment within earshot of the wrecked train heard what they had described as more gunfire and, after gathering the courage to return to the scene of the crime, they had discovered that the young couple's makeshift prison had been compromised and the two were gone.

Neither of the them were anywhere to be found, but every one of the other passengers roundly agreed that the young man could not have survived the ordeal, and the amount of his blood that soaked the car's interior only corroborated their assumptions. There was no hope for Will, as feeble as he was already rendered by his sickly stature, although Andre had politely refrained from voicing this belief when he had spoken to the headmaster, but Amanda might still be out there, alone and vulnerable within the crime ridden hovel of the region's foulest inhabitants, and there was nothing the Legistar General could do to relieve his concern for her.

Glancing briefly at the two Stone Agents standing near him, Andre briefly considered enlisting their help, but stopped himself. Those agents were not on his payroll. As such they would offer him little more than the cordial respect a former Academy Headmaster was due. Darian would have to solve this mystery on his own, if at all.

The concrete and metal dias at the base of Capital Tower's looming face seemed to tremble rhythmically for a brief moment, as if it suddenly rested uneasily on its foundation, and a faint sound of whirring servos and labored breathing crept into earshot. The Legistar turned around to look, already knowing what he would see. Amelia Buzzard had not been able to conceal her approach, from any distance, in decades, and she had brought her bulky girth to rest just inches from Andre's back. She stood there, trying not to move, recovering from her effort, and smiling wryly at the worried man whose achievements had once dwarfed hers as greatly as her hulking visage now did all others. Even the Stones seemed like little more than tall adolescents as they stood behind her.

"Hello, darling." Amelia Buzzard said between gasps. Andre only stared blankly, unable to voice the responses that came to mind. "The luck you've had with your Stones," she continued, pausing so as to provide optimal emphasis where necessary, "It's really pitiable, isn't it?" His jaw opened and closed, but the silence that spewed forth only further betrayed the bewilderment that was evident in his disbelieving glare. A struggling, pudgy hand, the electric motors therein nearly burning themselves out under the strain, fought gravity's cruel pull and met the man's jaw in the midst of an opening motion, then gently pushed it shut before falling back to a limp hang at its owner's side. "Is something wrong, my precious Ideal Man?" Buzzard inquired innocently.

"You..." Andre stammered as he overcame his disbelief. "You're..." he began, then fell short. There was no polite way for him to say it, at least none that could adequately conceal his

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complete and total horror at her condition. *You should be dead in your condition*, he thought. “You’re looking well,” he lied. The grotesque woman wheezed out a synthetic flattered giggle.

“I know,” she replied. “Isn’t technology wonderful?”

*Wonderfully monstrous*, he thought. “Quite,” he said.

“I don’t know what I would do without it,” she boasted, waving a jiggling arm with a flamboyant flourish and a whirring of internal machinery.

“Die, I’d imagine,” he said. *I’m sure you’d find something*, he thought.

Oops. As his unintentional words fell on unappreciative ears, Andre blushed brightly and fell silent, waiting for Amelia Buzzard to overcome the offense and continue with her patronization. After a long moment her disheveled frown returned to its previous form as a practiced smile and she regained her composure.

“My dear Andre,” the woman responded, “we’ll have plenty of time to catch up when this soiree is complete.” She turned slowly and with practiced patience, then slowly started herself in the direction of the other administrators. As Amelia Buzzard moved away, trailed by a petite woman clad in black, she added, “I just wanted to see you again before this started. Goodbye, darling.”

Andre tried not to think about the damage he had just done to his relations with the Bureau and the possible future outcome of his actions. Instead, as he watched the fleshy mound waddle slowly away, he reflected on his past as concerned Amelia Buzzard. He had witnessed her transformation taking place in distinct stages, from the beautiful young hedonist he had known at the New England universities to the assembly of cybernetics that struggled to support the worn body of their host, still hedonistic but far from beautiful or young, as she labored under the strain of her own breathing. Having seen her only sporadically, once every few years for the past two decades, Andre had been imbued with a far more drastic perception of the woman’s transformation than her close associates might have developed. What had been a gradual process for Buzzard and her immediate entourage had appeared to him as an almost immediate transformation, from a self-destructive misanthrope carefully concealed beneath a thin shell of beauty to a self-destructive misanthrope whose misanthropy was thoroughly pervasive. He could not help but pity the woman who had once been, however briefly, the sole object of his affection.

Andre’s pity was not just for the aging sycophant lumbering away from him, but for administrative women in general, who far too often found themselves overwhelmed by the double standards of gender within their class and eventually found themselves in a situation, albeit a far less extreme situation, similar to that of Amelia Buzzard, but mostly he felt the tinges of pity for his understudy. Amanda resembled a young Amelia Buzzard in many ways, from her constant need and near constant denial of validation to the extensive efforts she made to hide her nagging unmet desires beneath a mask of outward perfection. At least Amanda, he reassured himself, would have the self awareness and foresight to avoid the gruesome fate that Buzzard had met. She would, he reasoned, so long as he adopted more appropriate behavior toward her.

He hadn’t exactly treated her poorly over the years. He had just gradually grown more and more evasive of the lovely young understudy for his own reasons. Andre had noticed, as his assistant had grown from girl to woman, that he was developing intense feelings for her. He wasn’t attracted to her, at least not in the general sense, although she was attractive. His feelings were those of attachment, of concern and of a strong desire to enliven. His feelings, he had feared for years,

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were indicative of love, and the possibility that he was falling in love with Amanda Decker was one which he wished to avoid at all costs.

Had the Legistar ignored his own ethical constraints he could have easily given in to his desires. Amanda Decker had spent most of her life under his influence, and her resultant trust and malleability in his hands was unmatched. He could have manipulated the impressionable young understudy, guided her emotions in the appropriate directions and, in the end, instilled reciprocal feelings within her. He could have seduced the object of his desire at nearly any time, but to do so would have made him no better than fathers who seduce their daughters, and he was far from such a person whatever the norm for his social class may be. Andre Williams was a catalyst for enlightenment, not control, and he refused to act otherwise, no matter how torn and tattered the internal conflict between desire and discretion left him in the end.

He had realized recently, however, that he had been mistaken about the whole unfortunate matter. Talking with Darian in the Capital Courtyard had shed a new light on the relationship between his two young interns and himself. His feelings for Amanda, and for Darian as well, were not those of a man lusting after a woman, but of a father feeling genuine concern for his daughter. He had not realized it before, having never had any children of his own, but upon discovery of the true nature of his feelings he had felt the unbearable moral weight of his dilemma lift as the inner conflict dissolved. His feelings were valid, not lecherous, and he no longer had any reason to avoid the young woman for whom he cared so deeply.

Upon having made peace with himself, Andre had promptly set out to contact Amanda and apologize for the years of avoidance, but he had missed her. This had all happened the evening that she and Will had gone to the formal reception for Hugh Loughston, and his call to her dormitory had gone unanswered. When there had been no response from Amanda's quarters, he assumed that he had missed her and resigned himself to a night of quiet contemplation within his office, an endeavor that eventually brought him to the conclusion that she had gone to collect Will before embarking for the reception. Upon this realization, he had hastily called Will's dormitory, but that locale had been equally devoid of response. Concluding that the two had already departed, he had decided clear the whole matter up in the morning, when Amanda would presumably have returned to Capital Tower and there would be ample time to address any issues that his apology and change in behavior might raise.

It was a good plan, and would have liberated both the Legistar and his understudy from the tension that had bound them for years, had Amanda only returned that morning. She hadn't, and now, while he was free of the conflict of his misunderstood feelings for her, Andre was plagued by the thought that she had gone to her death, perhaps brutally so, under the misconception that his avoidance had been a matter of dislike or disrespect. The shame and guilt of his perceived unethical affection were to the turmoil that now resided within his soul as a grain of sand is to the beach on which it rests. It had taken him years to overcome the first struggle of the soul. The second could find immediate resolution in Amanda's return to the Tower, or it could trail him to the grave with the discovery of her untimely death somewhere within the forgotten zones. In either case, regardless of the personal torment, the outcome was far beyond Andre's control, and he had a job to do. Swallowing hard in hopes of dismissing a lump that had formed within his tight, strained throat, the Legistar General walked slowly and steadily toward the podium that had been positioned in front of his building.