



The Digital Now: Excerpt

Roland Allnach, Copyr. 2015

Tabalt Press

ISBN 978-0996785402

Available at Amazon in print and Kindle

I

Kill the Continentals, their rockets make me mental...

Carly hummed along with the riotous song bouncing in her head. She'd heard the tune countless times, but even so she lost the words beneath its pounding rhythm. It was good just to feel it in her bones and let its infectious energy buoy her mood.

She popped a fresh clip into her repeater and chambered the first round, her blood simmering with the anticipation of violence. Her palm slapped home the weapon's bolt before she cradled the repeater to her chest plate. It felt right to hold it close. It would feel even better when she pulled the trigger and the stock pounded her shoulder.

Hungry for that moment, she pulled at the chinstrap of her helmet as she looked out from the windshield of her armored Patrol car. Crouched between the front seats, she could still make out the chaos of a riot through the rainy night. Burning tires littered the street, their heavy smoke skating over the teased surface of puddles. The neon glow of storefronts went dark as bricks and public sanitation pails were thrown through windows.

Her patrolmate held a steady stare through the windshield. "Come on, Chap," she said, encouraging him with a poke of her elbow. "Chiggers to this. We go in hot, now."

He looked to her and returned her nudge. There was no mistaking the humor in his

eyes. "Easy does it. Already looking for another good aim?"

"Why not?" Carly raised an eyebrow. "I already made it on *Killshot*. I even got a move to a new domicile out of it."

He looked back to the net screen on the car's console to watch their communication bands. "We'll see what tonight brings. No word about coverage yet."

Carly kept her gaze out the windshield. "Just another day, right?"

He was about to answer when he pressed his headset to his ear and held up a hand. "Copy, this is Chapel," he said before wrapping his hand over the microphone and mouthing *Beak-nose* to Carly. He pointed to the net screen and let go of the mike. "We copy your orders, Patrolmaster Bayard."

Carly shifted back toward the sliding door of the crew area. "Are we going hot?"

He took off his headset and tossed it beside the net screen. "Drive Control passed word to Bayard. Non-lethal intervention only. Suppression protocol. No firearms."

Carly admired her repeater before stowing it with a muttered curse. She came by Graham and rested against the side of his seat. "So, I guess we do it up close and personal." She leaned over with a smile as she put her lips by his ear. "Patrolman Chapel, are you ready to crack some heads?"

He reached up to caress her cheek. "Right proper, Patrolman Westing."

Carly opened the crew door and hopped out. Rain dripped from her helmet. Graham came around the front of the car as a second vehicle rolled to a stop. Two patrolmen from their detachment hopped out to join them. Oboe was a stocky brute of a man, while Gwen had a lean build similar to Carly. Unlike Carly, who kept her dark hair short, Gwen had a knot of

strawberry blond hair poking from the back of her helmet. Carly glanced at Oboe before looking back at Graham. He was a little taller than her, and his body was a solid wall of Patrol-honed musculature.

Gwen hooked a thumb toward the turreted machine cannons of her car. "You mates are on your own. Bayard wants me on the turret. The cars stay here."

Oboe pointed to his side. "We're to move down the alley, through a building, and come out at the tail of the mob."

Graham looked up. "Keep those roofs clear, Gwen."

"Drive Control says there's no vertical threat," Gwen said as she walked to her car. "You should be good. Street level engagement only."

Oboe came over to Carly and Graham and punched their shoulders. "Are we ready?"

Carly slapped Oboe's chest plate. "Crack a few heads and then crack a few bottles of Heavy, right?" she said as she pulled free the length of her civi-stick.

Graham and Oboe clacked their sticks with Carly's. Graham nodded. "Heavy, domicile, bulls on the rise. We're Patrol."

"Nobody better," Oboe said.

Carly nodded. "And we never back down."

They jogged down the alley, found the rear entrance Patrolmaster Bayard had described to Oboe, and made their way into an apartment building. An unlucky resident came down the stairs and received a prompt greeting from Graham's civi-stick. The man collapsed and tumbled down the last two steps to the floor. Carly ignored the resident's slumped shadow as she stepped over his prone form and advanced through the darkened lobby to the front doors. She

sank to a crouch, waving Graham and Oboe forward until she signaled them to duck and cover.

She was anxious to charge out and swing away, except they wouldn't stand a chance if the mob made a determined turn. They'd be overwhelmed, regardless of armor, weapons, and training, and she had no intention of getting meat-farmed before she could move to her new domicile. Besides, whether people in the mob were citizens or just dissident cones wasn't important. It wasn't just a riot; it was an unendorsed riot. There wouldn't be any media coverage. Even if she blew someone's head off, no waiting camera would make a record of the shot.

The tail end of the mob passed by. She turned to Oboe and Graham. The look in their eyes changed, just as she knew the look in her eyes changed. Predatory thrill and its wild excess hardened their stares even as it lit their gazes. They waited for the signal, hands wrapped tight about their civi-sticks.

It came soon enough in the metallic grate of a bullhorn.

"Disperse immediately. You are ordered to disperse."

Screams sounded out from the far end of the street. Carly looked over her shoulder. Graham pointed out their directions. Carly had the middle. He put out his hand and counted off his fingers.

One, two, three—

Carly threw open the doors of the building, startling the people already panicked by the sudden onslaught of Patrol ahead of them. Graham and Oboe came out to either side of her, cracking their sticks into the heads of two people. Carly already had her target in sight, a lumbering mountain of a laborer standing straight in front of her with a pipe clenched in his

hand. She planted her feet and swung with everything she had, the end of the stick whipping in a vicious upward arc that smashed into the laborer's cheekbone. Blood and skin took flight from the man's face. Carly swore she almost took off the top of his head before he toppled back and flattened a woman beneath his weight.

His fall was already forgotten as Carly bulldozed her way forward with Graham and Oboe. They smashed anyone in their path, taking no care as to male or female, young or old. When Carly had no space to swing she drove the stick out to crack ribs; when someone tried to fend her off she struck with the stick before driving her heel into the person's gut. She swung low to collapse the knees of those taller than her, swung across her chest to shatter the elbows of people with weapons, swung over her shoulder to bring the merciless end of the stick straight down on the foreheads of those shorter than her.

Screams and blood filled the air as the panicked rioters rushed about in a futile effort to escape. A few of them fought back, crazed with the delusion of resistance, only to discover that resistance tripled the beating they received. A window shattered when Graham threw someone, and Oboe let out a shout when he slammed his stick so hard across a defiant rioter's nose that the man's face collapsed into his skull.

Carly lowered her arms, her chest heaving, as the mob fled. She unclipped her helmet's chinstrap and surveyed the street. What was once a swarm of rioters had been reduced to a squirming mass of broken flesh crying for help. Several bands of strays ran about, but they didn't get far. Cornered on the sealed street, they were chased down by other members of Patrol and received savage group beatings. Trucks from Drive Control were already rolling toward the scene. Their little blue marker lights swirled across the heights of the buildings and

reflected on long sheets of polarized glass.

The metallic voice of the bullhorn continued to shout the order to disperse.

Graham and Oboe returned to Carly, shaking their fists in the air. Oboe paused to stomp someone who grabbed at his leg, drawing a laugh from Graham. Carly slid her stick into its belt loop and opened her hands to the mess of humanity around her. “Got them all; got them good!”

Graham looked to her. His eyes bulged.

Before Carly understood his alarm a brick crashed to the street beside her. She whipped her stick free. Her gaze darted upward, too late.

The brick was just a shadow in the dark. Shadows, she thought, weren’t supposed to hurt anyone. Shadows were supposed to bring peace.

The brick crashed into her helmet. It was more a white flash than a bolt of pain that plowed through her awareness, but she had no time to consider that distinction. Unstrung, unconscious, she dropped to the street like a pile of uncooked dough.

“She’ll be fine,” she heard a man’s voice say. A bright, tight cone of light swung from one of her eyes to the other. Someone flicked her forehead to summon a reflexive jolt. “See? She took a good shot, but her brains didn’t get scrambled. Not much in there to damage anyway,” the man said before tapping a finger on the bridge of her nose. A pill was shoved into her mouth. “Swallow that, Patrolman.”

The pill slithered down her throat as she swung at the light in her face. Her eyes came to focus on the interior of her Patrol car, where she was laid out on her back in the crew area. She propped herself up on her elbows and realized she was still at the riot scene. “Time for some Heavy?” she said, her voice hoarse.

Graham was sitting sideways in the driver’s seat to watch her. His eyes were narrowed with concern. “Hey, you alright?”

She was about to give him a defiant *right proper* when a long nose zoomed into her sight, its protrusion flanked by a set of pale irises. Her blue eyes widened as she blinked to focus. Recognition dawned through her muddy vision. “Beak—” she started to say, but then caught herself. “Patrolmaster Bayard.” She coughed. “I’m, I’m still good to go—where’s my stick?”

Bayard grabbed her neck cowl and pulled her upright. He patted her cheek with the back of his bony hand while he looked into her eyes. “No, Patrolman Westing, I think you’re done for the night.” He turned to Graham. “Take us back to her domicile, Patrolman Chapel. I’ll see she gets inside.”

Graham hesitated a moment before nodding. “Sir,” he said and started the car.

Bayard stared at Carly with a smile, the corners of his mouth looking like they would split open the sides of his narrow face. He waved to her before letting her flop on the floor of the car.

Her eyes opened at the hiss of elevator doors. She staggered along, her arm draped over Bayard's shoulders as he led her toward her domicile. He stopped before her door and she waited while he dug through the pockets of her bodysuit to find her security card. When the lock clicked open he led her in. Her arm slid away from him as she stepped into the cramped space of her living quarters. She stared out her windows, her arms hanging at her sides, her head swimming between the impact of the brick and the pill that was stuffed down her throat.

Bayard lingered behind her. She could see his reflection in the window. "You're off duty, Patrolman," he said.

She replied with a nod. Her fingers found the buckles of her body armor and dropped it piece by piece to the floor. She shrugged off her armor vest, pushed off her cracked helmet, pulled off her boots, and unzipped her bodysuit. The suit slipped down as she rolled her shoulders free and sank to a crumpled mass around her ankles. She stood there, naked except for a black sleeveless shirt, as she shook her feet free of the suit.

Bayard shoved aside her equipment with his foot. He took the bottom of her shirt and lifted it, watching as reflex summoned her to pull the shirt over her head and drop it on her bunk. He looked at the shirt, still able to pick out the letters across the front. Large and blue, they spelled out the name ENDO.

The color matched her eyes.

"Patrolmaster?"

He stared at her naked back. "Call me Alden, please."

Her vacant gaze lingered on her windows. "Why did my city hurt me?"

“The city belongs to Drive Control and Central. It’s not yours.”

Her head sank. “Okay.”

He looked her over, his gaze darting to the windows. They were polarized, so no one could see in, but he wasn’t concerned with privacy. He wanted to see the rest of her, the tight, aerobic tone of her combat trained physique, the alluring taper of her waist, the small globes of her breasts, the graceful length of her neck, her parted lips beneath the smooth curve of her cheeks. He stared into the vacant reflection of her bottomless blue eyes before resting his gaze on her neck.

He licked a finger and traced it down the length of her back.

She turned to stare over her shoulder.

“Such a lovely specimen,” he whispered to himself. He met her gaze. “Okay?”

Her empty, dilated eyes held to his before she looked away. “Okay.”

He rested his hand between her shoulders. Her body was loose, devoid of the taught energy that fueled her aggression during the riot, but he knew the explosive savagery that lurked within her. It thrilled him as if he held a grenade with the pin pulled. His heart pounded with the risk of imminent annihilation.

The excitement was too much for him to resist. He slid his hand up her neck to grab her short locks as he nibbled on her shoulder. It only took a quick tug of her hair to shove her against the wall, given the confines of her single room domicile. He grinned as he thought of her nipples pressed against the damp concrete. Two little kicks against the inside of her ankles moved her feet apart. He unzipped his bodysuit with one hand as he kept a tight hold on her hair. Nostrils flared, teeth clenched, he grabbed her hip and pushed into her.

He whispered into her ear. Her eyes did not open.

“WESTING, CARLY. ACTIVE STATUS. CALLBACK DELAY INITIATED.”

Carly groaned in the wake of the synthetic voice, the small sphere from which it came covered by the drooping edge of her blanket. She had no interest in moving, but her eyelids crept open to find the ceiling and its idle fan. Her net screen mumbled away, folded flat against the wall over her head to keep the never-ending programs out of her waking gaze. She heard the patter of raindrops against the slanted outer sills of her windows.

Just another day.

She ran her hands through the disheveled mass of her short, black hair. She pulled at the chaotic locks between her tingling fingers until she heard the low echo of a memory, a little gray thing that nagged the raw edge of her awareness as a single whispered word.

Nimbus.

She shook her head and dismissed the memory with a silent curse. She rolled on her side and sat up after grabbing the beeping black sphere of the reporter orb. With two angry shakes it went silent, and she stole enough time to look over the haphazard pile of gear on the floor of her domicile.

The beep returned with a lower, angry tone. “WESTING, CARLY, ACTIVE—”

“Confirm! Westing, Carly, five-four-six, two-three-two, five-one-ten.”

The sphere went silent.

Her instilled sense of duty caused her to stir, tightening her legs to drive her from bed. It only took three shaky steps to cross her single room domicile to her sink. She grabbed the metal basin, ran the cold water, and dunked her head. The chill pressed through her skull, and she held still to let the water pierce her temples like two spikes. When her lungs ached for air she lifted her head to stare at herself in the little mirror over her sink. A deep purple bruise poked out from the wet tangle of her hair. Her eyes narrowed as she probed the welt with a cautious finger.

The void within her mind began to fill with shadows. She remembered the sprawled bodies of the mob. She remembered being laid out from the brick. It explained the dull ache in her head.

Just a shadow.

Her eyes widened as her stare lingered on the bruise. She blinked and leaned toward the mirror, her focus dwelling on the bruise as she neared her reflection. It wasn't so much knowing the bruise was a bruise that disturbed her, but knowing *how* the bruise became a bruise was something quite different. Her skin crawled as her stomach knotted with trepidation. It was dangerous to wonder the how or why of things. Not only was she aware of that standard, enforcing it was her duty.

"Cones," she said with disdain as she grabbed the towel hanging on the wall beside the mirror. She dried her hair and hung the towel, only for it to slip off the hook and fall on the floor. Her lips fell in a frown before she waved and turned away to pull on her bodysuit.

A single step put her before the large rectangular locker of her dispensary. From the top she took out a box of Shaky Flakes, poured them into the metered bowl on the dispensary's

weigh plate, and returned the gray cereal box. From the bottom of the dispensary she opened her cold storage and pulled out a waxed carton of Moo-ju to pour the white liquid on her flakes.

Shaky Flakes and Moo-ju, breakfast for good drive.

With her bowl in hand she opened a shallow drawer beneath her sink to produce a metal spoon. She devoured the cereal at once, the flakes crackling in her mouth as she looked out the windows that formed the exterior wall of her domicile. A sprawling urban landscape met her gaze. Obscured in the hazy drizzle, she still knew it as a scattered collection of gray buildings beneath a gray sky, matching the gray of her Patrol bodysuit.

She ate with the City of Seven Hills—her city—reflected on her eyes.

She sat on the front steps of her building, once again probing the lump on her temple. Her helmet hung off the back of her neck cowl. Its padded interior was soft but still antagonized the bruise. It would probably annoy her all day, the stupid little thing. At least the headache had eased up.

She dropped her hand from her temple and frowned. She couldn't wait to get her hands on the first cone that stepped out of line.

A mischievous grin crept across her lips as she looked down the street. A small knot of children stood beneath the corner streetlight and the mumbling programs of its net screen. The children were laughing as they took turns splashing their booted feet in a puddle beside the curb. They looked like little dolls beneath the bright colors of their slickers, a splash of red,

yellow, two blues, a violet; joyful splashes of color in a world of gray.

They were part of Rainbow Go, reminding Carly of her own time in the youth training program. Rainbow Go had fun with little games and splashing in puddles.

Patrol had fun with drunken riots and smashing heads.

She took her repeater off her shoulder and leaned her cheek on its muzzle guard. One of the children looked to her. Carly waved, but the child turned away in haste. The local kids knew she was part of Patrol and what she did as part of Central. They might shy from her intimidating presence in their youth but, in the end, she knew some of them would be part of Patrol—at least the ones that didn't get drafted into the ranks of Central's bureaucrats. It was the way of things, and that was that.

She savored the thought, the elegant simplicity of Central's way. Yet, as the moments passed and the idea grew of those happy little children being part of the life Carly knew under Central, so too her heart grew heavy. She dropped her hand and let it dangle over her knee.

Little cones, some of them, I bet. No difference.

Her hand returned to her temple.

One way or the other, we get them all in the end. It's just easier to catch them early.

She looked away before closing her eyes.

Graham glanced from the road to watch Carly as she went through the vehicle's maintenance list. Their armored car rumbled around them as Graham drove down the street.

Carly felt his stare as she imagined him visualizing the bruise on the side of her head. She turned to him. "I'm fine, Chap."

He nodded before looking back to the road. The traffic grew in volume as they drove across the city, leaving Carly's Danfield apartment quadrant behind them. "Kilby quad's a mess," Graham said, his gaze darting to Carly at every opportunity. "Riot was bad. You're the only one that got hurt."

"Did we get the chigger that hit me with that brick?"

Graham shook his head. "No. Roof was empty when I got up there. Don't worry. We'll get the prick, and then we'll have our fun."

"Right proper to that," Carly said with a sigh. "What's the word from Patrol?"

"Bayard called on the line when I was driving over. Old Beak-nose is all crabby."

Carly's eyes narrowed for a moment before she shook her head at Graham's mention of Bayard. "Crabby about me getting hurt, or crabby about the coverage?"

Graham tipped his head as he came to a stop. A bright yellow bus filled with children clad in colored slickers passed before the sloped hood of the car. The drizzle became a downpour. "Coverage," he said at last.

Carly tucked away the checklist. "It wasn't an endorsed riot. You know how it goes. Local envens have coverage rights. Patrol only gets the riots when we sponsor them."

"No matter to that, the Beak is crabby," Graham said with a sigh.

"No matter to that," Carly echoed, keying the display screen on the dashboard to cycle the car's ammo counts. "Hey, you know, I'll be changing envens when I move."

Graham's eyebrows rose. "You don't say?"

“I—” She rapped a fist on the dashboard. “Shit. Stop the car.”

Graham grunted and swerved, the car bucking as the large front tires rolled over the curb and onto the sidewalk. Pedestrian traffic scattered at the intrusion of the menacing car and its armored mass. Only one man remained, a cowering figure that sank to the concrete beneath a poster covered in graffiti. Carly was out the door, her civi-stick raised high and threatening, before Graham could even engage the car’s foot brake. Her helmet dangled from her neck cowl by its retaining strap. Graham stepped from the car and propped the butt of his repeater on his hip. He surveyed the street traffic as she shouted at the cringing man.

Carly jammed the end of her civi-stick under the man’s chin. She pushed in and up, giving the man no option to breathe except by rising to his feet. It was a prod-and-lift, one of Patrol’s favorite methods of intimidation. She kept some inward pressure on the man’s throat just to be sure he didn’t get any ideas more stupid than the one that caught her attention from the car.

She rested a hand on her thigh mount and popped the buckle on her sidearm as she stared into the man’s eyes. It was tempting to pull her gun and meat-farm him right there on the street. No one would say anything. She was Patrol. The anticipation of venting her morning’s frustration for the welt on her head tightened her arm. She pushed harder on the civi-stick.

The man gasped and raised his hands in surrender.

She bared her clenched teeth before backing off. It was a routine defacement intervention, nothing more. She pointed at the poster beside the man, the graffiti laden poster that was the source of the man’s violation. It was a large placard of a silver-haired, hawkish

military officer, face uplifted, eyes determined. The words beneath, though, were the problem. "That's not Standard," she said as she looked back to the cowering man. "Don't disgrace General Asper by putting some silly-speak over his recruitment call. No silly-speak allowed. Rip it down."

The man nodded amid his trembling. He sprang into action, hoping to avoid what loomed ahead of him. It was pathetic. His meek obedience betrayed the very guilt of his crime in defacing the poster.

Carly watched as the man clawed at the paper. As much as she wanted to put a hole in his head she couldn't shoot someone for a simple silly-speak offense. He wasn't the one that had hit her with the brick, but he could be a target for her anger. It would be bad drive to let it go to waste.

She planted her feet and rolled her shoulders. "Turn around, fucker."

The man trembled as he glanced at her.

She put her civi-stick to work with a three-swing punishment. The first swing went to the back of his knees. He staggered before going down with a shriek. The second swing was to the back of his head, a vicious strike that drove his face straight into the wall before him. It brought a thankful end to his annoying cry. He flopped over, senseless. Carly planted her boot on his elbow before the third swing smashed the fingers of his limp right hand.

Graham's head bobbed with each strike. "That's three."

Carly stepped back, her chin held high. "Right proper."

Graham looked about. He lingered by the driver's door, rain dripping from the rim of his helmet as he surveyed the street with a predatory glare. Satisfied, he nodded and settled in the

driver's seat.

Carly hesitated a moment, letting the rain soak her hair as she stared at her handiwork. She glanced at her civi-stick before shaking the water from her head and strolling back to the car, her frustration somewhat satiated. After settling in her seat she typed at the dash screen, mocking the perpetrator as she imitated him with a diminutive yelp. Graham laughed. She eased, giving him a wink as she hit the enter key to send her report. "Okay, the file's logged with Drive Control. Pickup crew is on the way."

"Right," Graham replied and released the brake. He pulled off the sidewalk and continued their drive to Patrol headquarters. He remembered their conversation after watching another yellow bus pass by their gray car. "So, tell me about this new even."

She relaxed in her seat and rested an elbow on the door. "Well, I'm looking at either StarNet or BlueNet, depending what quad I get. I'm hoping for StarNet. Then we can watch *Riot* and *Killshot* right after shift."

"Outstanding," Graham said. "Maybe we'll down a little Heavy while we get naked and let our bulls rise. Sound proper?"

Her eyelids drooped over a wide smile. "Sounds *right* proper, Patrolman Chapel."

Carly sat in Bayard's office and watched him pace behind his desk as he lectured her. Her gaze wandered over the office as his words went in one ear and out the other. There were two file cabinets, a black desk of stamped sheet metal with a black resin surface, a black

reporter globe to the right side, a black armchair with four coaster wheels—she could've been in any office in the city. The chair was the only testament to Bayard's authority, evidenced by its high back and cushioned armrests.

A map of the city hung to her left where the desk met the wall. She knew it well. The city sat with its seven hills curved around one edge of the distant Downlow, the massive, sunken concrete dome that entombed the waste pile of the old city. Blue lines denoted the city's quads; red lines the different even zones.

She licked her lips as she pondered the nature of her sudden curiosity regarding the details of Bayard's office. She'd sat there before—how many times, she couldn't tell, and didn't care to know. Something was different, though, and she couldn't put her finger on it except to know that something was different. It was unsettling for the linear clarity of Patrol thinking.

Her hand rose to touch her bruise.

She took a breath and looked past Bayard to the window wall of his office. The wall consisted of the same long, polarized panels that could be seen on building after building, allowing occupants to look upon the concrete sprawl of the city.

She dropped her hand.

Bayard passed before her and cleared his throat. He gave her a sidelong gaze that oozed disapproval, as if he knew she was paying him little attention. "And need I remind you, Patrolman Westing, that your service helmet will only provide full protection when properly strapped? Yes? The helmet you currently hold shall be tested for integrity. In the meantime, you will requisition a certified piece of equipment."

He turned on his heel to make another course behind his desk. "I've already spoken

with your mate, Patrolmen Chapel, and I shall now inform you as I have informed him. We are returning to Kilby quad this evening to search for illegal hard line access. It appears last night's riot was a cover for activity of a more sinister nature. Both Drive Control and Sector Control have detected uncertified line usage within the quad and have ordered—demanded—that we put an end to it. Both Mondial Killswitch and MG42 are coming to the city to provide entertainment for the next cycle of endorsed riots, and the aforementioned authorities wish for no civic violence until then. It would detract from the authenticity of the planned events, you understand.”

Carly perked up as she absorbed the news. “Wait, MG42? Endo Stutts! Will we be on his security detachment?”

Bayard walked around his desk to stand before her. He looked down at her and seemed annoyed by the question. “Yes, that is the plan.” He cleared his throat once more before leaning over her to examine her bruised temple. Avoiding the gaze of her large blue eyes, he drew a deep breath and traced the periphery of discolored skin with a finger. “Ah, fair Westing. How they hurt you, my lovely Nimbus,” he whispered, exhaling his words on her.

She closed her eyes as he kissed her temple. Her memory flashed.

Bayard lingered over her. “Did you already forget?”

Her gaze rested on the windows to see her reflection. “No.”

His jaw clenched before he licked his lips. “Do you mind?”

Her lips parted. It took a moment for her voice to come low and slow in a simple mechanical response. “No.” It was part of good drive, of good citizenship, after all. *Sex, it's free, and it's right proper. Like Shaky Flakes and Moo-ju, essential for good drive.*

The sky darkened over the City of Seven Hills.

She blinked. The moment vanished from her mind. “Hey, I think it’s raining.”

Patrol’s motor pool was in the building’s basement. Between thick concrete support columns it housed the intimidating hulks of the detachment’s cars in a neat row. Carly and Graham sat on the roof of their car with the open turret between them. They each worked on one of the twin ten-millimeter machine cannons housed in the turret, removing piece after piece for inspection and cleaning.

The silence broke when Bayard emerged from the stairwell entrance to the motor pool and made his way from crew to crew to check their preparations. “Big operation, important operation,” he said to each, nodding as he went. “Drive Control will be paying extra attention,” he added, enunciating each syllable to stress the ‘extra attention.’

Carly rubbed her forehead with the side of her wrist, wondering why he stressed those words. No one of right mind and good drive would tangle with Drive Control. Central made no secret that there were fates worse than the wrong end of a civi-stick.

Right. That’s what they tell us.

She sat up straight, her eyes going wide in the wake of the thought that whispered through her. Her stomach knotted. The grease on her fingers failed to register with her as she touched the bruise on her temple.

What kind of think was that? Where did that come from?

"Carly?" she heard from both sides.

She looked around. Graham's gaze darted from her to Bayard before sinking to the cannons. She looked to her side to see Bayard holding a steady stare on her, his eyes locked on hers, as she realized her hand was still by her bruised temple. Her throat went dry at the undue attention.

Graham glanced at Bayard and waved his wrench at Carly. "She's fine."

"Right, right, I'm right fine," she said and turned back to her work.

Bayard kept his stare on her for several heartbeats before continuing on his way.

Carly let out a deep sigh of relief.

Graham slid his hand across the cannon to grab her wrist. "Hey, I need you sharp tonight. We're on the line detachment. If you're not good to go you can rotate out with Gwen and pull perimeter with Oboe."

Carly blinked. She was unsure of herself. It was a horrible feeling, even though the day was no different than any other. They had a good workout in the gym pushing their bodies while Endo Stutts and MG42 blasted from the room's raspy speakers. Just another day. They practiced club fighting with their civi-sticks. Just another day. They went through close-quarter combat drills, working on their handgun draws and proper arm bracing for recoil in the cramped confines of domiciles.

After lunch break they had their usual quick-draw competition. She won. She always won. She was by far the fastest draw in their Patrol detachment. It was easy for her. There was a little tingle in her head that told her someone was going to draw and, just like that, her

gun was out and ready. Graham was the only one close to matching her, but she figured that was his familiarity with her as patrolmate. Just like always, and just another day.

Despite all those assurances she knew something was off. It was a feeling of uncertainty, a feeling that she was being watched. It reminded her of the tingle she knew from quick-draw. At the same time she knew it was different, although she couldn't decide how it was different. It left her wondering if the brick did more damage than just a bruise.

She closed her eyes and turned her hand in Graham's grasp to close her fingers on his forearm. The musculature beneath his skin was as solid as she remembered. Good old Graham. She opened her eyes and forced a hollow smile. "Hey, Patrolman Chapel. Patrol, even, some Heavy, and then bulls on the rise, right?"

Graham stared at her for a moment before mirroring her smile. "Right proper, Patrolman Westing. Let's get these cannons back together."

"Hey, Chap?"

"What?"

"I think I had a dream that I scored a headshot on a cone in the middle of a riot."

He cocked a finger at her and closed one eye as he took aim. "That wasn't a dream. You did it for real. It got you a feature on *Killshot*, remember?"

"Yeah, I remember." She rubbed her forehead with her wrist. "When was that?"

Graham kept his gaze on his work. "Who cares? Some other day. Doesn't matter."

"Maybe it does."

He looked up at her. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know," she said with a shrug. "It feels like a dream. Actually, it feels good

either way when I think about it. If I did it for real or if I dreamed it, I mean.”

He tipped his head as he worked. “Dreams are bullshit. You know that. Tell you what. Next time you take a brick go ahead and take your shot. Who knows, maybe you’ll earn a move to an even better quad.”

She looked at her hands. “I guess that’s the thing about dreams.” She caught Graham’s gaze as he looked back to her. “Because you can make things the way you want, right? You know, I want that, I want that right proper.”

He stared at her for a moment before shaking his head. “Whatever. Get back to work.”

She patted her hands on the length of the cannon barrel and nodded. Looking back on her day she decided she should’ve meat-farmed the asshole she caught on the street during the ride in. A few demerits wouldn’t hurt. Bayard might even give her a pass for payback on a cone after the brick. It was a simple line, after all. Get hurt, hurt back. She could hand out all sorts of hurt in Kilby, and Drive Control would be just fine with her. Compared to the uncertainty of doubt the visceral anticipation of retribution felt wonderful.

Graham was right, she decided.

Just another day.

Dreams were thoughts. That’s why dreams were bullshit.

Her mind skipped to thoughts of Endo Stutts. The bad-ass of MG42, coming to Seven Hills! That, she decided, was something out of dreams and right into reality, double right proper.

Thinking of him lifted her mood and abolished her misguided abstraction. She whispered the words of the song she knew so well, her imagination letting them burst from

Endo's mouth.

Kill the Continentals...

Later, when the cooling afternoon air thickened with dampness from the morning rain, she found herself walking a foot duty through Kilby quad's day market. It was a sprawling open-air exchange of businesses run by a mix of cones and citizens. They set up the market by whim from one day to the next with tables, merchants, and a motley assortment of residents from various quads gathering on the green outside the outer edge of Kilby. It was a mess of odors from open food stands and shouts between haggling consumers and merchants accompanied by the inescapable mumble of net screens atop portable power stands. Drive Control made sure the screens were positioned at regular intervals. It was Patrol's job to make sure they stayed that way.

Day markets were considered forums for infiltration teams from the Continent. They consisted of cones that snuck across the rough waters of the Narrows, the cratered Wasteland, the swampy Mudwash River, and then north around the Downlow to reach Seven Hills. They brought in modular weapons and espionage equipment to the scattered insurgents among the city's quads. Likewise, day markets served as an easy access for Patrol to manifest itself as the strong arm of Drive Control and to make Central's presence known in whatever way was deemed necessary at the moment. It gave Carly and everyone else within Patrol open license to put some notches on their civi-sticks, if for nothing else than their own personal

entertainment.

Carly walked through the crowd. People made a point of parting to let her through. Her civi-stick rested on her shoulder, ready to go. Market tour was tedious duty. She didn't care for it, a consideration she was willing to entertain despite its flirtation with bad drive.

She shook her head as she watched the cones. As far as she was concerned they were all for the chiggers. Despite rubbing shoulders with them as she made her way through the market, they might as well have been on another planet. Their ways, their habits, their disgusting living conditions and, worse, their unerring tendency to reduce any quad in which they lived to squalor made her resolute in Central's belief that the cones needed to be kept in line. Their ways, their habits, and their annoying silly-speaks could then be pounded into oblivion.

Her thoughts wandered as she gazed over the crowd. She blew out a breath at the notion of the desperate assholes that crossed the Narrows and the Wasteland just to deliver a few rounds of ammo, maybe a hard line splicer, or even a small rocket or firearm. It seemed so pointless, the effort of those cones, when they always wound up under the heel of Patrol. For all the violence of Patrol and her own life she was ingrained with Central's goal from her earliest days in Rainbow Go. While the cones were bent on dragging things down, Central wanted to get humanity on one track to both secure its future and end the war. Why—how—could anyone resist that noble goal?

She stopped before a stand displaying some apples and found herself all too willing to ignore the question and its aimless demands. Instead, she looked at the apples. They were red, a rich, vivid color in the midst of a gray day and the green shadow-laden trees that stood at the

edge of the day market opposite the city's edge. With a quick glance at the merchant and a drum of her fingers on her stick she picked an apple and walked away.

Despite the apple, her mood turned for the worse. Sure, it seemed an innocent thing, selling apples at a market under a cloudy sky in the open light of day. For all she knew the apple vendor or some other clod walking beside her could've been the very cone that dropped the brick on her head.

One bad apple spoils the whole damn bunch. Have to meat-farm them all, I guess.

She came to a halt with the apple in her hand. Looking into the faces of the people around her, she realized they were ignoring her as much as she ignored them. If they could all be done away with, if the lot of them were just gone, she would be alone in the market, and then—

Well, then there wouldn't be much point to Patrol, or Central, or me.

Her gaze fell to the apple. She turned it over in her hand to study its rounded form. It was a nice apple, free of blemish. She could've gone through a hundred apples and not found one quite as nice as that particular apple, yet there it was in her hand, just by stupid, careless chance, a consequence of the careless blunders that were known together as Chance. And what, she asked herself, was the meaning of that?

Nothing.

It was just another apple, and it was just another day. It had to be. After all, how couldn't it be?

She cursed under her breath, tossed the apple over the crowd, and watched it fly away into some distant part of the market. When it vanished from sight she lowered her helmet

microphone. "Graham?" She turned from the market toward the car. "Chap, you copy? I'm coming out."

"We haven't scratched the surface here."

Carly glanced over her shoulder and slid her civi-stick into its belt loop. She shook her head. "There's nothing here. They won't show. Not now."

"Bayard won't like this," Graham replied, his voice crackling over her headset.

"Yeah? I don't like it either."

She faltered, surprised by her answer. She had her orders.

"We have our orders," Graham said.

"I said, it's clear." She clenched her fists. "That's all there is to it."

She walked back to the car in silence, her only company the random pops and squeaks of interference over her headset.

The mood in Kilby changed with the waning gray day as the quad settled for the night. Streetlights faded and air raid sirens let off their whining wail to signal the night curfew. Kilby, furthest south of the seven hills, sat within range of the latest generation of rockets leveled against the city from the Continent. In response Central had abandoned the cratered Wasteland and moved its phased arrays back from the coast. For Kilby and the adjacent Cheshire quad the incidence of rocket fatalities was a recurrent aggravation. Advertisements for newer arrays had hit the envens, and conventional wisdom dictated that if the envens said

it, it had to be true.

Carly sat in the driver seat of the Patrol car, the door swung up to form a rain shelter. She was alone on an empty street. Rain poured off the hull of the car and dripped from the cannon barrels in the turret above her. She held her repeater, loaded with safety off, across her lap. A portable net screen sat atop the dashboard, spooling the feed from Patrol's own NetPrime even.

She liked the little portable units Drive Control loaned to Patrol. Unlike every other net screen around her the portables from Drive Control had a volume wheel. With the Kilby operation in progress she kept the volume down so she could hear the scratchy recon transmissions coming through her headset. A hardwire line evaluator sat beside the net screen, its feed wire plugged to a drum spool sitting on the street. It let out an intermittent squeak as it played out its length, following Graham and the recon detachment down the main sewer of Kilby as they checked for line access violations.

The screen hosted a replay of a Patrol detachment pounding two perpetrators to pulp. The 'interact' panel scrolling across the bottom of the display caught her attention. Ads blinked for the sale of imitation civi-sticks, Drive Control posted rewards for citizen reports of silly-speakers or signs of poor drive in neighbors, Central flashed sales positions for premium tickets to the upcoming shows of Mondial Killswitch and MG42, news queries offered access to an interview with the Madman of MG42, Endo Stutts, while another even sold copies of clothing Stutts had worn in recent appearances.

She touched the interact panel's pause icon when a blinking 'Order now!' button scrolled across for a black shirt emblazoned with ENDO in large yellow print. Interested as she

was, after counting off her inventory of shirts on her fingers she decided against the purchase.

A tap of her finger let the scroll continue.

The display of the line evaluator was boring compared to the net screen. After the mess of the riot she was eager for something to happen. Nothing would satisfy her more than getting the order to mobilize, go hot, and get clearance to meat-farm some cones. Sitting idle and waiting for something—anything—was insufferable.

She let her breath go in a long sigh.

Come on, come on already!

The clean signal lines rolling across the evaluator popped up in a little wave.

Fuck yeah!

Her radio crackled to life. “Drive Control. An anomaly trace has been initiated. All detachments to live fire pursuit status.”

“Patrol confirmation,” Bayard’s voice chimed after the click of a frequency change.

“Awaiting anomaly location fix. Prepare to move on Drive Control’s order.”

Carly tapped her headset. “Westing, copy that.” The screens beeped as she powered them down and lowered her visor. She hopped out of the car, grabbed the two handguns holstered beside the seat, and slid them into her thigh mounts.

She looked to either end of the street. “Come on,” she said under her breath, her impatience getting the best of her. “Where’s the fix? Let it be here, let it—”

The streetlights blinked, popped, and blew.

Her lips parted. *Shit, it’s here.*

Her heart bucked. *It’s here!*

She sank to a crouch, snapping her repeater to the ready. Her cheek settled against the weapon as she peered down its length to study the darkness with a slow sweep. An infiltration party had to be near, she knew. They always shorted the lights before they moved. All she had to do was get a bead and she could blow the chiggers away.

Static scratched across her radio. She activated her infrared scope. Several silhouettes came into view, lit with pale red signatures. There were six, nearing her with every step.

“Perimeter, this is Westing. Are you advancing on me?”

Silence.

She kept her gaze in her repeater scope as she reached back to key on the line evaluator. Her blood steamed for the coming firefight. Her gaze darted to the evaluator. The shaky waveforms that met her sight were a clear sign of a violation in progress.

The infrared shadows neared. A little closer, clear of the old trees lining the street, and she'd have the bunch of them free of any cover. It took everything within her to be patient.

The even grate of a Drive Controller's voice hid the urgency of a simple transmission.

“Patrol, we have a suspect rogue.”

Gunfire erupted from a window above her. A hail of bullets smashed and scattered across the car's armored hull. She hopped into the car and kicked the door release to let it slam shut behind her. Ignoring the rattle of bullets on the hull, she ditched her repeater, pulled herself up to the turret, and shouted into her headset for Graham. She ground her teeth, grabbed the trigger mounts for the cannons and opened fire. The car echoed with deafening blasts as she let heavy ten-millimeter shells obliterate the windows above her.

“Forward, hold position,” Bayard's voice called through the headset. “Recon, evacuate

priority one. Perimeter advance. Move!”

Cannon recoil rippled through Carly’s arms. “Chap, get out of that sewer!”

A flash caught her eye. A small rocket tore from a window above her turret to explode against the car, the shock heaving her shoulders against the cannon grips. She shook her head as the car dropped down on one side. A wheel had been blown loose and the armor perhaps compromised. She grabbed her repeater, pulled open the car’s crew door, and hopped out to the wet pavement.

To her relief a pair of cars greeted her as they roared down the street with their turrets blazing into the abandoned buildings to either side. Shattered glass glittered in the air amid plumes of gray masonry fragments. Rage usurped her better sense, her heart pounding as she dodged away from the car and scurried to the corner of a building. With a quick breath she emerged from the corner to charge down the street, letting off short bursts into the windows above her. Two crumpled bodies caught her eye on the side of the road. The cars ahead of her picked up speed and parted at the end of the street to lead in opposite directions. Still running, she glanced in her scope and picked out a lone shadow as it ran down the street ahead of her.

Voices erupted on the headset.

She slowed and leveled her repeater to fire until she noticed a sewer cover lift from the street. Her gaze darted between the sewer cover and the fleeing shadow. When she saw the armored outline of a patrolman emerge from the sewer she lowered her repeater and shouted an acknowledgment. The moment she heard the reply she ran into the street to grab the shoulder cowl of the patrolman. There was only one thing she wanted to know as she helped him from the sewer.

“Chapel! Where’s Chapel?”

The man wiped some grime from his face and pointed down the street. Carly ran until she splashed to a halt beside a rising manhole. Her repeater dangled on its sling as she shoved the rising cover aside to find another grime soaked patrolman. She grabbed his neck cowl and couldn’t restrain a smile when she found Graham’s waiting face.

A bullet smashed into her right shoulder cowl and threw her to the pavement. Graham whipped his repeater to the ready and fired blind to provide cover. Carly shook off the tingling in her arm and grabbed Graham’s neck cowl. She gave him another heave to get him off his stomach and shouted for him to follow her. Graham slipped with the sewer slime on his boots and splashed on the street, almost dragging Carly down with him. Her fingers popped free as she took off at a full run.

“Westing, Chapel, hold position,” Bayard ordered through their headsets.

The Drive Controller’s disinterested voice returned. “The Kilby array is down. Repeat, the Kilby array is down. Everybody out. We have incoming.”

Bayard’s voice assaulted their ears. “Westing, Chapel—out, now!”

Graham yelled to Carly but she tore ahead of him with her pursuit of the fugitive. Her legs burned, her lungs burned, and her blood burned even hotter. She rounded a corner and looked down a dark street to see the city give way to one of the wooded expanses along its border. Kilby Copse was one of the largest of those tracts, reaching southward from the city until it gave way to fallow fields and the cratered wastes of the coast. Between the copse and the city lay a set of phased arrays, with their spindly, black metallic shapes parked on the green field where only hours before the open day market had been in full swing.

It was nothing short of suicide for the cone to go there and get trapped among the discharges of an active array. As the thought crossed her mind she spotted the cone's shadow in the light of a rocket trail.

Graham came up next to her, panting, as the rocket buzzed overhead and sank into Cheshire. He pushed his helmet back to wipe his forehead as he spat on the ground. He looked to her when her armored vest dropped to his feet. "What are you doing?"

Carly shook her head. "I'm too heavy." She hit the release for her equipment belt and let it fall. "This cone dies," she said, her wild gaze darting from the shadows as the rocket's explosion lit the cityscape.

Graham looked around the abandoned buildings before giving her a nod. "Right. This place is dead, and so is that cone when the array comes back up."

"Chiggers to that. We get him now!"

Graham looked at the array before grabbing Carly's shoulder and jerking her around to get her full attention. "No! Orders were to get out, so we get out."

Carly grunted in frustration at the voices crackling over her headset. In one quick motion she unsnapped her helmet and threw it at Graham, distracting him enough for her to shrug off his hold. Her legs sprang to life and propelled her down the street. Graham called after her but her nimble speed left him in the dark.

Carly shouted at the cone as she passed from the last buildings of Kilby to clamber up a berm of broken concrete blocks. She still felt light on her feet, despite the run to the berm. Without her armor vest, rain soaked through her bodysuit and mingled with her sweat to keep her body cool even as her temper boiled. She wanted the killshot, wanted it so bad she could

taste it, but there was no sight of the cone. Her scope offered no help, the arrays throwing off enough heat to mask the cone's signature. Her gaze swept around her as she began to wonder if the cone even ran into the array.

She sank to a crouch atop the mounded rubble, contemplating, when the uneasy sensation that she was being watched chilled her nerves. She spun toward the buildings at the edge of Kilby to look for a target. A rocket buzzed by, disintegrating over Kilby's copse under fire from Cheshire's array. The explosion lit the sky for a moment but it was all she needed. She caught the outline of a figure standing atop one of the buildings, a silhouette of a slender figure covered in a hooded overcoat.

She remembered the brick.

Vertical threat.

Her finger tensed over the trigger, yet she found herself incapable of giving the final squeeze as she stared at the figure through her scope. The unknown man stuck out his left hand to still her, holding a moment before extending his right hand to point to the array.

Another rocket detonated over Kilby's copse. She blinked. When she looked back to the roof the stranger was gone. Her anger got the better of her, and she scampered down the back of the berm toward the array. When she drew near she hunched over and wound her way between the dishes, her repeater following her gaze.

At the sound of a footfall she spun to see the cone run off behind her. She let off a quick burst, but her bullets found nothing as they clanged off the frames of the trailer mounts. Annoyed, she pressed the chase, her blue eyes gleaming with intent.

The array hummed as it powered to life. The nerve-wracking hiss of an incoming rocket

grew in volume. Graham's disembodied voice carried through the night as he called her name.

She rounded the dish of a trailer mount and emerged from behind the cupped black mesh to find the cone staring skyward.

"Cone!"

The man spun.

She let off her burst. Repeater rounds tore ragged holes through the man's torso. He staggered back in a mist of blood before dropping to the muddy earth.

Carly stood straight and looked over the length of her repeater, the stock still tight to her shoulder. She wiped the rain from her face as her gaze lingered on the dead man. Her fingers froze over the bruise on her temple. Her head began to pound. Only then did she hear the incoming rocket and the hum of the array's generators; only then did she understand that whatever the bruise did to her head yesterday, it was going to kill her now.

The cone had led her into the middle of the array. There wasn't enough time to run clear.

She looked back to the cone.

A red apple sat in the grass beside him.

The array crackled with electrostatic discharge.

Her world exploded.