



THE BLOOD

BY ANDREW MOODY

MILES

Vivid and spiritually rich ... a story to be devoured in one sitting, then closely contemplated over many more — J.J. Fischer, author of *The Nightingale Trilogy*

THE BLOOD MILES

by Andrew Moody



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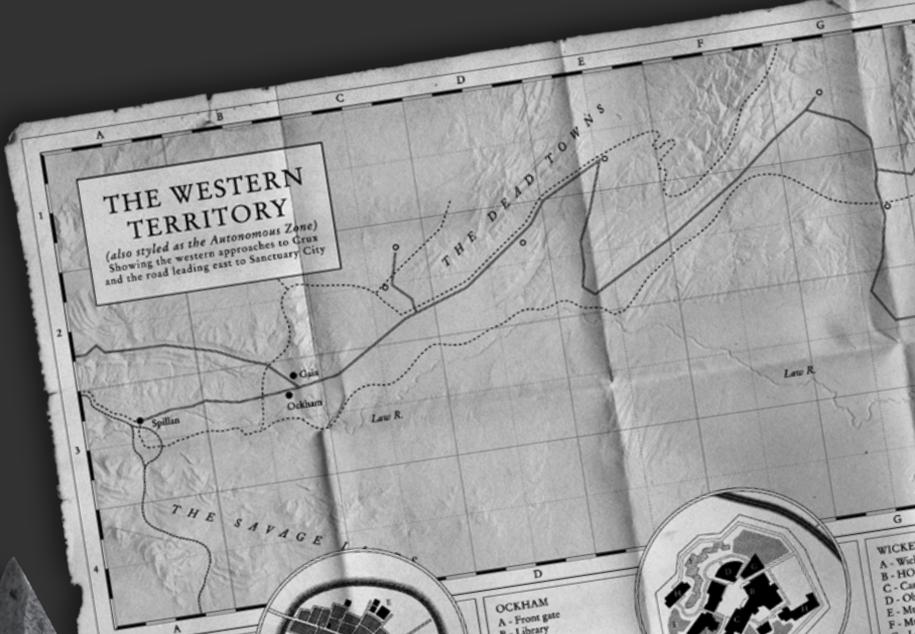
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THE WESTERN TERRITORY

(also styled as the Autonomous Zone)
 Showing the western approaches to Crux
 and the road leading east to Sanctuary City



- SPILLAN**
- A - Cemetery
 - B - Grand Hotel
 - C - 'Morrow we Die Inn
 - D - Chris's house
 - E - Cultivation Quarter
 - F - Industrial Quarter
 - G - South redoubt
 - H - Old station
 - I - Diner
 - J - Warehouses

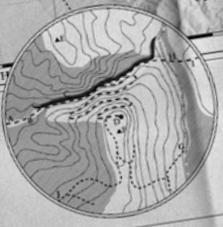


- OCKHAM**
- A - Front gate
 - B - Library
 - C - Cafeteria
 - D - Administration
 - E - Greenhouses
 - F - Fishpond
 - G - Vera's lab
 - H - Residential halls

- WICKET**
- A - Wick
 - B - HOR
 - C - Can
 - D - Ob
 - E - Mr
 - F - Mt
 - G - La
 - H - R
 - I - To
 - J - To



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- A - Front gate
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- ADDLE**
- A - Entrance & Street Stalls
 - B - Shallow Dive
 - C - Scenic Railway
 - D - Sen's Flax
 - E - City Watchhouse
 - F - City Square & Pillory
 - G - Dungeons (Gains)
 - H - The Castle

- WICKET GAP REGION**
- A - Wicket Pass Rd
 - B - HORD Camp
 - C - Canyon Pool
 - D - Observatory Base
 - E - Mt. Tanak
 - F - Mt. Dababo
 - G - Law River (mod)
 - H - River Crossing
 - I - To Crux
 - J - To Disruption

Archivist's note: This telling is a crosschecked collation of written notes from Citizen Walker. Quotations from the *Roadbook* were added at the subject's request.



VOLUME 1

“You’re not listening. This is the way it’s got to be. It’s the way it was always gonna be—I tried to tell you about it before. But that’s not where it’s gonna end. You’re gonna come back and you’re gonna see something. You’re gonna find out that there was a plan all along.”

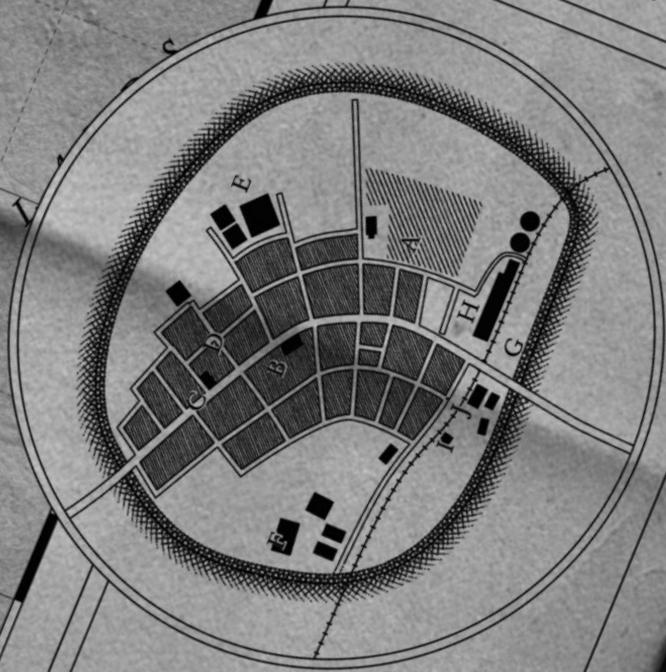
Roadbook; Chapter 42, “The Envoy”

Law R.

THE SAVAGE LANDS

D

- OCKHAM
- A - Front gate
- B - Library
- C - Cafeteria
- D - Administration
- E - Greenhouses
- F - Fishpond
- G - Vera's lab
- H - R



SPILLAN

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A

4

CHAPTER 1

It started with Eve, of course. On the day she came to Spillan, it was four o'clock in the afternoon, and we were out the back of the town, burying the sister of my best friend, Stick. The Parson was going on and on like he always did. He was saying how noble Angie was, and how we'd always keep her in our memories, and how sweet and fitting it was to die for your town.

I was standing next to him with a shovel, thinking how sweet and fitting it would be to wham him in the head with it. I hated the way he always tried to dress things up like that. Angie hadn't been a hero—she hadn't chosen to sacrifice herself. She would have died scared. Maybe she'd tried to fight or bargain or switch to exile at the last minute. People did all kinds of things—but none of them looked like what the Parson was talking about.

Stick was on the other side of the grave with his hands in his pockets. He'd never been very close to his sister—she'd moved out of home when he was just a kid. But she had been the last of his living relatives. When the wake was over, and he went back home to sleep above the machine shop, he'd be there by himself. And he'd know that he was the last of his line. I knew what that felt like too.

Flex, the third of our trio, was next to him, holding the other shovel. He caught my eye and made a mock-pious face. Flex would never be bothered with thoughts like that. He'd just go on being Flex.

The Parson finished his fancy speech and turned to Stick.

"Callan, would you like to say a few words?"

Stick kept looking down. "Yeah. Thanks for coming, everyone ... I'm sure she would've liked you all being here ... Yeah, that's all."

"Thank you, Callan," said the Parson. "These are hard situations. Sometimes, it can take us a little while to express our grief."

He turned and waved his hand at the old bluestone chapel that stood at the top of the cemetery. A second later, the tower bell began sending its tolls out into the motionless air. All the people started going past and shaking Stick's hand and patting him on the back.

Meanwhile, Flex and I started filling in the hole. Flex was making a mess of it—chucking in big spadefuls—which was bad because it was likely to pull the blanket off Angie's face. But I couldn't tell him that with everybody there, so I just said, "You do that end, brother," and got him to concentrate on her feet.

We had just about got her covered when the siren went off, and everybody who was still hanging around went running.

Not the three of us, though. I looked over at Stick.

"Unbelievable," I said. "He picks this moment to run a drill."

"Probably making a point," said Stick.

"Probably. Why don't you just stay here? I can cover for you with Stricton."

"Nah, it's okay," he said. "I'll come. We can finish later."

We put down our shovels and started down the hill toward the red earth rampart that lay beyond the silos. But, just as Flex branched off to go to his post, one of the little kids that the Mayor used for his runners came charging up from across the tracks.

"Boss says he needs you in the South Redoubt, Chris. You too, Stick. He said to say it's not a drill. There's something really bad coming. He said it's Savs."

Then we looked at each other and both started racing toward the wall. Soon, we were at the top, running along behind the tyres and barbed wire and dodging around other people headed in the same direction. Some of them were carrying pitchforks and stakes; others had crossbows and Molotovs.

The South Redoubt was a command post—a sunken circle ringed with sandbags that looked down on the south gate and out to the mallee.

Right now, it was a hive of activity, and Mayor Stricton was standing in the centre of it with his legs apart and his field telephone up against his cheek.

“Yeah, more on the South Gate” he was saying. “No, a lot more than that ... Someone, shut off that siren ... If they breach we’ll need everyone firing ... Make sure Henry’s got his thrower down there ...”

When he saw me and Stick coming up, he said, “Good, here’s our eyes. Get yourselves set up, boys.”

So I went up to the big anti-materiel rifle that was sitting there on its bipod, while Stick grabbed the binoculars and flipped off the lens covers.

“What are we looking at?” I called.

He shoved the telephone at one of his men and came over to us.

“I got a message from Oswald out on patrol—says there’s Savs coming up the south road. Says they’re driving something big. I need you to stop ’em. I want you to put a round through their engine block.”

“Okay,” I said. “Have you got some ammo for me?”

“Last of the good ones,” said Stricton. “High explosive, tungsten. Make ’em count.”

He reached into his pocket and passed them to me—all fat and coppery-green with a white ring near the tip. I’d never even seen one up close—the rounds I had trained with were all lead reloads. These were much heavier—something from another time.

I loaded the first one into the breech and put the other two down on the drop sheet.

“How long have we got?” I said.

“Soon as your spotter sees ’em.”

“Nothing yet,” said Stick. “Pretty hazy. Visibility out to about six thousand.” He was sweeping back and forth, one hand fiddling with his stopwatch as the other grasped the binoculars.

“I want you to set for six hundred,” said the Mayor. “You go at six

hundred you've still got time to get the other two off if you have to—long as you're fast. Right through the engine block. Driver's gonna be too hard to hit. You remember your specs?"

"Yes sir," I said. I began adjusting the scope from the figures I had memorised. Of course, I had no idea if those specs were right. Nobody had fired tungsten for years—for a generation. If the old rounds didn't work like they were supposed to—or if the velocity-data was wrong—I could be way off.

But there was no other option. I dialled the scope to allow for the fall and tried to imagine how the shot was going to work. At six hundred metres range, travelling at three times the speed of sound, it would take a little over half a second for that bullet to reach the target. That meant I needed to allow, not just for the fall of the bullet but also for the movement of the machine. I would have to aim ahead of it—how far ahead I wouldn't know until Stick gave me its speed.

Then Stick said, "We got 'proachers." He sounded pretty cool, like he usually did, but he had spoken a bit more quickly too.

"Still outside the markers," he said. "Probably about fifty-five hundred."

"What are you seeing, son?" said Stricton.

"Some sort of ATV," said Stick. "Grey panels. Going pretty quick. Got a red X on its side."

"Well, well," said the Mayor. "Haven't seen one of those for a long time."

"What is it?" I asked. I was still trying to find the vehicle with my scope.

"That's a Central Government vehicle. It'll be an Agent driving it."

And now I could see it—a tiny machine, speeding along the south road with big clouds of dust billowing up in its wake.

"Is that what you want me to hit?" I said,

He laughed as he heard the doubt in my voice. "Not worth the trouble,

eh? No, not that, son. Look behind it. Wherever you get Agents, you get trouble following.”

He was right about the trouble but not about my hesitation. I had my own reasons for not wanting to shoot at an Agent, reasons that I was never going to tell him. I pushed that thought away and tried to find what was following the van.

I didn't have much luck. The scope on my gun had great magnification but too narrow a field of view to be much good for something like this. Wherever I looked, there was just a cloud of churning chaos that made me lose my orientation.

“I can't see anything,” I said.

“Me either, brother,” said Stick. “All I can see is ... Oh, hold on ... Oh, Tox! Ram-rig. Really big one. It's not on the road—look off ... look off to the left!”

I dipped and swung the scope. There was the little van, still speeding toward us. I went left ... and there it was.

It was a huge machine—an old mining truck with armour around its cabin and a big white skull painted on to that. Lower down, a kind of plough or wedge shape had been welded above the wheels.

I'd never seen a live ram-rig, though when I was a kid I had played on the rusted wreck of one that attacked the town in the days when my dad was young.

In those days it had been the Bloodsoil clan that had been raiding the towns of the Autonomous Zone. Now the threat came from a host of smaller tribes—some just as ferocious. Travellers and merchants that came to Spillan told stories about attacks on caravans, about villages obliterated, about men butchered and women made into slaves, about children carried off to become new warriors.

But I couldn't think about those things. I needed to be calm.

“Okay ... that's four thousand,” said Stick. I'm using the front vehicle for speed.”

I tried to concentrate on my breathing, but I was also wondering where I should be aiming in that massive grill to hit the engine block.

“Three thousand!” said Stick. “Forty-three seconds.”

“Can you give me a per-second?” I said.

He fiddled with the slide rule, which seemed to take a hundred years.

“... About twenty-three metres ... That’s two thousand by the way”

So I broke it down. If it took half a second to reach the truck, I needed to aim about eleven-and-a-half metres ahead of where the truck would be when I fired the rifle.

“Alright. Count me down in hundreds from one thousand,” I said

“Yeah, brother. Just gone eleven hundred ... one thousand ...”

It was a mind game then. I didn’t have enough time to think about anything useful, but plenty of time to mess up my instincts by thinking about what would happen if I couldn’t stop that machine.

Images flashed through my mind of it smashing through our south gate. I thought of men in skins and warpaint swarming through our streets, hacking down everyone in their path. I remembered how one survivor from Borough had described hiding in a drain while the Savs cooked people on a big grill.

How could I hope to stop monsters like that with just my rifle? What if I missed?

I tried to remind myself of my training. The Mayor had picked me himself—said I was the best Gunner they’d had for years. And these bullets were giant-killers; they would punch through anything. I just had to get them in the right spot. But how was I going to adjust the scope for that second shot?

“Eight hundred,” said Stick.

My mind kept spinning. If it was eleven-and-a-half metres at six hundred, what would it be at four hundred? Maybe ten?

“Seven hundred ...”

I moved the cross hair out in front of the moving vehicle. Was that

eleven metres?

“Six hundred.”

Then I exhaled and squeezed the trigger. The sound was just immense. Dust, stirred by the shockwave rose from the drop sheet. The recoil, even with the muzzle-brake and suspension system, took me by surprise as it always did. But there was no time for thinking now.

“Go again, brother!” shouted Stick. “Hit the top of the ram.”

I swore, but I was already pushing the next round into the chamber.

“Five hundred.”

I slid back the bolt and sighted the weapon again. It was guesswork now. Was that four-fifty?

“Come on, Gunner, you can do it,” said one of the men in the background.

“Four hundred,” said Stick.

I fired again ... and immediately groaned.

The sound was much too dull—as if it had just been the primer that had gone off. And that gave me another thing to worry about. If the force hadn't been enough to eject the bullet from the barrel, the next round would explode, probably taking my face with it.

Now my hands were shaking as I rushed to reload.

“Three hundred,” said Stick.

I tried to aim for three metres in front of the cabin. Hitting the engine wouldn't make any difference—the machine's momentum would still carry it straight through the gates. I knew I would have to kill the driver and hope he or she would turn the wheel.

“Two hundred,” said Stick and I fired the last round. There was no science or maths to it now. I just compressed the trigger as Stick called the number.

The shot was a mess. Even as the butt kicked my shoulder, I knew I'd missed the mark.

But now there was a flash of light through the slot grill over the driver's

compartment. Something was burning in there, and something was happening to its steering. The truck was really lurching and swerving.

It skidded. It was turning ... It was running past us! Parallel to the wall and slewing from side to side.

As it went by, I could see that its tray had been converted into a kind of armoured fighting-deck—full of wild men waving spears and machetes and spiked clubs.

Up the front, there was one guy who almost seemed like a giant. For a moment, he was close enough that I could see the bones in his hair and all the Tox cysts on his face. He was shouting something and holding up a red banner, and for a moment, I was sure he looked straight at me.

But they were driving away! And it wasn't in an out-of-control kind of way, but a we've-changed-our-minds kind of way. It was all so sudden that we all just stood and watched it with our mouths open. Then everyone came to their senses and started firing guns and crossbows after them—which didn't do much—and then cheering and whooping. Big hands were slapping my back and mussing my hair. And when I looked around, Stick was up close, grinning and laughing at me.

“Nice work, brother!”

I felt really light-headed and realised that I had been holding my breath.

“I thought I missed,” I said.

“Yeah, me too,” he said. “I saw your shot hit the top of the tray, but then something went off in the cabin. Must have deflected!”

“Alright, Walker. Not bad,” said the Mayor behind me. And when I turned, the man was nodding at me and giving the first smile I'd ever seen on his face.

“Come with me,” he said. “Let's find out what our visitor from Central is doing here.”

CHAPTER 2

It was pretty weird walking along the parapet with everyone cheering at us and patting me on the back. I mean, it was nice to be appreciated, but it was too much all at once. Later on, when I had had a chance to think about it, I realised that I didn't trust it. First, they were cheering me for a lucky deflection. Second, if they could switch it on like that, they could switch it off just as fast.

But that came later. Right then, I was mostly trying to keep from falling over.

The south gate was a big metal frame made of I-beams and trench mesh that ran on wheels between concrete walls. As it slid back and we went forward, I could see the van with its battered panels, and red-X silhouette made of crossed syringes.

The driver was standing next to it with her arms crossed. She was middle-aged with short grey hair and a long grey overcoat that parted to reveal a ceramic breastplate and loose combat pants. Over all of it, she wore a diagonal leather strap that supported a sword from her left shoulder.

"You got some nerve, drawin' those Savages up to our gates, Agent," said Stricton. "Who are you and what's your business here?"

"Good day to you, Mayor. My name is Evangeline Veracis, and I'm here with a message for you and the people of Spillan from the Pantarch and the Envoy. Why don't you let me in and I'll share it with you."

Stricton looked at her for a moment, making a ticking noise through his teeth.

"We have pretty strict rules about letting carriers in this town, Agent, and those look like Tox scars on your neck. This is a Tox-free town."

The woman laughed. "You can tell your people that, Mayor, but I'd be surprised if you believe it yourself. Still, the choice is yours. If you don't

want to hear what I've got to say, I will be on my way."

The Mayor turned to me.

"What do you say, Militiaman? You're the man of the hour."

"I reckon I'd like to hear what she has to say," I said.

"Alright—there you go, Agent. One night. Now, what's your message?"

"Thank you, Mayor. I'll give it to you short and sweet. The Pantarch has ordered a Total Cleanse and Reconstruction for the whole Zone to clean out the 'fection once and for all. All the services are going to be cut and anything and any *one* infected with the Tox is going to be burned out. I've been instructed to warn everyone in the townships that they need to head to Crux before the TCR."

"What's Crux?" I asked.

"Treatment outpost," she said, stretching out an arm. "Due East of here."

"Central's offering treatment, eh?" said Stricton. "What's the catch? How much is it?"

"Treatment's free for citizens."

He laughed and turned to me. "You hear that, Walker? She means they'll treat us if we'll come to heel. Thank you, Agent, but I think we'll go on taking care of ourselves. We like our independence."

She raised her eyebrows. "Taking care of yourself, Mayor? You found a way to do without that pipe that runs under your town?"

"Spare me the propaganda, Agent. We've heard your message and we've got the Tox under control ... Walker, why don't you show our visitor to the Pacific. I think she can stay there without doing too much harm."

I told her to bring her vehicle in and walked ahead to show her where she could park. But I should have just got in the car with her, because people kept coming up and doing the back-slapping thing and saying what a legend I was, which was embarrassing and made everything really

slow.

“You’re a popular guy,” she said as she locked her vehicle.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said. “You seem pretty popular too, though. Why were the Savs after you?”

“I told them they should come and get treated. And then they said they’d prefer to stick with raiding towns and eating people.”

I laughed. “I reckon you were wasting your time with them.”

“You’d be surprised,” she said. “I’ve seen whole tribes show up at Crux. There’s more hope for them than places that pretend to be Tox-free.”

I turned and looked at her. “So are those scars on your throat really from cysts like the Mayor said?”

“That’s right.”

“But you had the treatment and got rid of it?”

“Yes and no,” she said. “It’s complicated. What do you know about the Tox?”

I thought for a moment and gave her the list that they’d given us at school. “That it’s a virus ... That it produces toxic cysts ... That it sends you savage and then kills you ... That Central dropped it on us to punish us for rebelling.”

“Yeah, most of that’s wrong,” she said.

We were almost at the Pacific now—an old truck-stop diner and motel perched on the edge of a cracked concrete car park just inside the wall. Hardly anyone went there now—which was why the Mayor had selected it. My own plan had been to simply drop her off and rejoin my friends as quickly as possible.

But she had me intrigued. I stopped a couple of paces back from the door.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, first up, it’s not a virus; it’s a gene hack. It *started out* as a virus, but the virus was just the carrier. Now the virus is gone but the hack is everywhere. We’re just born with it—all of us.”

“Then we’d all be savage,” I said.

She shook her head and began rummaging in her pack.

“Savagery’s just one form it takes. Here—you should read this. It’ll explain how it works.”

She had pulled a book out of her bag—pale grey leather with the same crossed-syringe symbol that I’d seen on her van.

The sight of it sent a kind of spasm through my neck. I knew if I could see the embossed title on its spine it would say “Roadbook”. I felt a sudden panic, wondering what I would do if she tried to pass it to me.

But she didn’t offer me the book. Instead, she pulled something out from a pocket inside the back cover—a red folded card with white writing and rounded edges. “Guide to the Tox,” it said up the top.

“Here you go,” she said.

“Thanks. I’ll take a look later on,” I said, pushing it into my back pocket. “I guess I should introduce you to Harry.”

I pulled open the aluminium frame door and the diner greeted us with wafts of burnt toast, coffee and cigarettes. Harry Frieden, the proprietor, was sitting in one of the booths, surrounded by piles of books.

“Hello, hello. Who is this? I’d say you aren’t my regular customers, but since I don’t have any of those, I will say something different. Nice to see you, Chris. Who have you brought ... Are you an Agent? Is that what the alarm was about?”

I liked Harry. Before his eccentric ideas had gotten him sacked, he’d taught us reading and writing in year nine. Sometimes I still came down to the Pacific to chat with him or play a game of draughts. But I knew that once he got going, it would be hard to get a word in edgewise and even harder to extract myself.

“Harry, this is Agent Veracis,” I said. “She had some Savs chasing her and the Mayor has said she can stay here tonight.” Before he could start, I said my farewell, “Nice meeting you, Agent. I hope the rest of your journey goes better ... Oh, and don’t eat the fish sticks.”

"I heard that," said Harry.

I retreated—pausing at the door as I remembered a final question that I had wanted to ask her.

"Hey, what was that you said about the pipe under our town?"

"Water pipe," she said. "Runs all the way from Central. All the towns west of the mountains are on it."

"Huh," I said.

* * *

Stick and Flex had almost finished with the backfill by the time I made it back to the cemetery.

"Ooh look, it's Gunner!" said Flex with a grin. "Can we be your friends, Gunner?"

"Shut up," I said. "Give me your shovel."

They stepped back and let me do the last part. I packed in the clay and spread the lighter topsoil that we'd kept aside. It was a good job. If there was a dew, the little mound might even sprout a weed or two.

"How was the Agent?" said Stick as we shouldered our shovels.

"Dunno," I said. "Bit weird. She reckons we've all got the Tox and Central is going to wipe us out unless we get treatment."

"That'd make things simpler," said Stick. "Maybe we should dig some more holes."

"Hey, is she really from Central?" said Flex. "... Do you remember there was that Agent that came around when we were kids, and the Savs got him?"

"Yep," said Stick, looking at me.

"So are you guys coming to the pub?" I said. "Or am I going to have to drink my free drinks alone?"

"We'll help you," said Stick.

The *Morrow-We-Die Inn* on Main street was full of noise and people and yellow light and cheering as we came in the doors. People kept calling me "Gunner" and telling me I was the saviour of the town and

buying me drinks.

I managed to pass most of those on to Stick and Flex. But the ones I downed helped me feel a bit less embarrassed about it all. I even tried telling some of the girls what had happened and managed to make it sound like I had known what I was doing.

After that, someone put on some slower music and Sally Menders—who I had always fancied from when we were at school, but who had never paid me any attention—came over and dragged me up for a dance—which was nice, until she put her arms around my neck and something stabbed at the base of my skull.

“Hey, what was that?” I said as I jerked backward.

“What was what?”

I reached around to the back of my neck. “Did you stick a pin in me or ...?”

“A pin? ... What are you talking about, Chris?” she said.

I looked at her and shook my head.

“I don’t know. Sorry, Sally. I gotta go,” I said.

I broke away from her and blundered toward the toilets and then the back door of the hotel. Of course, as soon as I said it, I knew it wasn’t a pin—it just wasn’t that sort of pain. It might be an infected hair or an insect bite, perhaps even a pimple. But after my conversation with Eve Veracis, my first thought was that it might be something else—something much worse. And if it was that, then Sally Menders was the last person I wanted knowing about it.

My brain was too foggy to think straight as I staggered home. But I was still clear-headed enough to be able to feel the small and tender lump at the nape of my neck. When I got back to the cottage I found a piece of broken mirror and tried to look at it using the bathroom cabinet and an oil lamp. But the light was too dim and my eyes were too blurry, and now I was suddenly really tired.

I kicked off my boots and trousers and fell asleep on the couch.

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It was well after sunrise when I woke up. My head was pounding and my mouth felt so dry that I worried it would stick shut if I swallowed. But when I opened my eyes and saw the lamp and the mirror on the floor, I remembered everything.

The mirror still wasn't much help to me—even in the morning light. I thought I could, maybe, see an ominous yellow tinge in the skin when I pulled back the hair, but if it was a Tox cyst, it hadn't come to the surface yet. Maybe it never would, I thought—maybe I'd just have the one cyst deep down there and nobody would ever know.

On the other hand, what if this was just the start? What if the next one came up on my cheek, or forehead, or hand? Then I would be done. They would drag me in and give me the choice—just like they had with Angie; just like they had with so many others.

From there, my mind scattered. If it was the Tox, how had I caught it? From the Agent? (surely it was too quick for that). What if it had already been in my system, like she said?

I suddenly remembered the card she'd given me at the Pacific. It was still in the back pocket of my trousers. I drew it out and unfolded it.

GUIDE TO THE TOX (CONGENITAL PERINEURAL CYSTOSIS)

THE TOX, OR CPC, IS A GENETIC DISORDER THAT IS ENDEMIC TO THE WESTERN TERRITORIES (OR AUTONOMOUS ZONE).

IT GIVES RISE TO TOXIN-FILLED CYSTS THROUGHOUT A SUBJECTS NERVOUS SYSTEM, ESPECIALLY IN THE BRAIN.

CPC CYSTS CAUSE A WIDE RANGE OF SECONDARY PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS, INCLUDING SENSORY IMPAIRMENT, HOSTILE OR VIOLENT IDEATION, FIXATION AND VARIOUS FORMS OF...

"Blah blah blah," I thought, and chucked it down. Maybe it would

make more sense when my head hurt less. I resolved to stop thinking about the thing on my neck and get ready for work.

I went into the kitchen and began to make myself a cup of coffee. But it was too bright in there and the morning light was reflecting off the bits of mirror that my mum had glued onto the wall.

Just before the Council had found out about her cyst, she had suddenly decided to cover all our blank walls with mosaics. For six weeks, she spent all her free time scrounging for bits of broken crockery and mirrors and sticking them up in the hall and kitchen.

I closed one eye and squinted while I finished making my porridge and took it back to the lounge.

The card had landed open on the floorboards so that it caught my eye as I set down my mug.

DO I HAVE THE TOX? it said on the inside flap.
A QUICK SURVEY TO TEST YOURSELF.

I picked it up again and peered at it as I ate.

MANY OF THE MOST COMMON SIGNS OF CPC ARE SUBTLE. READ THROUGH THE FOLLOWING LIST AND SEE HOW MANY ARE TRUE FOR YOU.

- **I SOMETIMES FEEL PLEASURE WHEN I HEAR ABOUT BAD THINGS HAPPENING TO OTHER PEOPLE--EVEN MY FRIENDS.**
- **IF OTHER PEOPLE COULD SEE MY THOUGHTS, THEY WOULD PROBABLY THINK THAT I WAS EVIL.**
- **I CAN SOMETIMES MAKE MYSELF FEEL BETTER BY THINKING AND TALKING ABOUT THE WRONG THINGS OTHER PEOPLE DO ...**

I stopped reading. The remaining questions became a blur. Blood was tapping in my ears and everything else seemed to have slowed down.

I generally thought of myself as a pretty normal person. But my

normal included all of these things. I *did* actually enjoy hearing stories of Savage attacks on other towns. I mean, I knew that they were horrible, but there was something pleasurable about hearing them.

I'd felt a secret satisfaction when Stick was dumped by his girlfriend three weeks before. Of course, I acted like a sympathetic friend—and I was genuinely sorry for him. But underneath, there was also that little feeling ... like satisfaction.

And thinking about the first thing led to the second. If I imagined other people being able to see my thoughts then there would be all kinds of stuff to freak them out. Hadn't I just been thinking about murdering the Parson—bashing out his brains with a spade? If I heard Stick or Flex talking like that out loud, I would have worried that they were going savage. Was that what I was? Was I some sort of secret Savage in my head?

I sagged down on the couch. My head still ached, and now I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach too.

I thought about taking the day off—telling Marj at the Aquaponics joint that I was feeling sick. I was going to be late now, anyway.

But I didn't want to be stuck at home. I wanted to run away. I wanted to go somewhere where I wouldn't have to worry about what was happening to me or what people would do if they found out about that thing on my neck.

I wanted to see the Agent.

I finished getting ready and charged back down to the Pacific, only to find that I was too late.

"Left at dawn," said Harry from behind the counter. "Grabbed a coffee and that was it. Said she'd seen the people she had to see and had other places to go. Pretty interesting lady, that one. She's given me a lot to think about. You know I met another Agent, long time ago, who ..."

But I'd stopped listening.

"Thanks, Harry," I said. I went to open the door, but he leaned

forward, holding out something white.

“Not so fast, Mr Walker. She left you a note.”

She’d written it on a folded paper napkin with my name on the outside and two sentences on the reverse.

“Go east toward the risen sun and I will find you. Crux is your only hope.”

I made my way to work and made my apologies for being late—Marj was easier on me than I expected. I went about my tasks: feeding the fish, checking the nitrates, cleaning the siphons and topping up the tanks. But I kept going over the things that the Agent had said; kept thinking about what I’d read on the card she had given me.

Did I believe her? Could I believe that everyone was Tox affected? It went so completely against everything that our town stood for.

And what was I going to do about that thing on my neck? If it was a cyst, I was living with a time bomb. One day, that cyst, or a deeper one that I didn’t know about, would rupture and kill me. In the meantime, the Tox would be doing other bad things to my brain and personality: maybe savagery, maybe something else.

I took the flier out of my pocket and turned to the next flap—FAQ:

Q: HOW CAN I HAVE THE TOX IF I DONT HAVE ANY CYSTS?

A: TOX CYSTS CAN GROW ANYWHERE IN A PERSONS NERVOUS SYSTEM (ESPECIALLY IN THE BRAIN) AND THUS MOSTLY OCCUR OUT OF SIGHT.

Q: HOW CAN I HAVE THE TOX IF I AM NOT SAVAGE?

A: VIOLENCE AND SAVAGERY ARE JUST ONE MANIFESTATION OF THE TOX. APART FROM THE SIGNS LISTED IN THE SURVEY ABOVE, OTHER MANIFESTATIONS CAN INCLUDE:

- **FIXATION OR OBSESSION;**
- **EARLY-ONSET SHORTSIGHTEDNESS;**

- **ACUTE AWARENESS OF SLIGHTS RECEIVED, PAIRED WITH INSENSITIVITY TO WRONGS DONE.**

NOTE: TOX-SIGNS FREQUENTLY OCCUR IN CLUSTERS SUCH THAT MEMBERS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES EXPERIENCE SIMILAR SYMPTOMS.

I just stood there with the hose pouring out onto the concrete floor. I had seen examples of all these things. There was the fixation: I thought of my mum's sudden mosaic obsession; Flex's mad and short-lived business projects.

I knew about the shortsightedness too—it was the reason why gunners and spotters never kept their posts past their mid-twenties. All the adults in Spillan had degenerative eyesight.

Finally, there was that stuff about the “slights and wrongs”. People were always falling out and having feuds in our town. My neighbours two doors down had been fighting with each other for ten years because Nancy had trimmed an overhanging branch and thrown it back over Bob's fence. Just the week before, two kids had been arrested for trying to burn down the cinema because it hadn't let them in without shoes—three months before. Even Marj, my boss, was likely to fly into a rage if I didn't call her “Boss”.

And of course, it was just then that Marj saw me. She was furious.

“What do you think you're doing? I made allowances for you this morning with what happened yesterday, but this is coming out of your pay. What do you think happens if we bust our water ration?”

“Oh, sorry, Marj,” I said, as I shut off the hose. “I got distracted.”

“No, really? I'd never have guessed. Get yourself together or look for another job, kiddo. And it's ‘Boss’, not Marj to you.”

But thinking about the water reminded me of something else.

“Boss ... where does our water come from?” I said.

“Underground.”

“Yeah, but is it like from a bore or ...”

“For ’fection’s sake. There’s a pipe. Now stop daydreaming and get back to work.”

But there was no hope of that now. It was like the Agent had told me the sky was made of plaster, and suddenly I had looked up and noticed a crack in it. If the Agent was right about the Tox and about the water, then maybe she was telling the truth about there being a cure. Maybe a cyst didn’t have to mean the end. Maybe I could get inoculated. Maybe the whole town could get inoculated. Maybe we wouldn’t have to keep killing and exiling ...

And then the crack widened, and a chunk of the sky fell in on me. Because, if she was right—if everyone had the Tox—then we’d been killing and exiling people for nothing. I thought about Stick’s sister lying under the dirt, and my own mother trying not to cry as they took her off to the police station.

I felt like I was going to throw up; like I had been crushed. Then I thought I might kill someone.

I turned off the tap-handle so hard it snapped and walked out of the greenhouse.

CHAPTER 3

I was sitting on my back step looking at the uncut grass when I heard the side gate creak, and the last person I wanted to see appeared in my driveway.

“You’re an elusive fella,” said the Mayor. “Marj said you wandered off the job. You doin’ okay, son?”

“I dunno what I am, Mayor.”

The man gave a chuckle and nodded like he knew all about it, “It can be a shock for a man when he rises up. One minute you’re just Joe average and the next you’re town hero. Takes some adjustin’, but I imagine you’ll be okay. Listen, son, I want you to consider something.”

“What’s that, Mayor?” I said

“I want you to come and work for me direct. Not just as part of the militia, but on my staff. It’ll be the same pay, but you’ll be doing better work. And you’ll be getting the training you need.”

I hauled myself out from the black hole of my thoughts. “Training for what?”

“Well, I’m not going to be ’round forever. And the folks trust you—you did good work yesterday with that gun.”

I looked at him. What? Was he talking about me becoming Mayor?

“Mayor, there’s something I need to tell you ...” I said.

But he was on a roll.

“We live on a thin margin of civilisation here, Walker,” he said. “If it’s not the ferals, it’s crop blight or Tox or some young idiot going savage on us.

“People take it for granted—they think that just because we’ve made it this far, we’ll keep going. Some of them want to get fancy notions about spreading out or stopping the drills. Some of them say we should go easy on the ’fection—let the cysties hang around.

“But the truth is we survived because we’ve had tough men at the top who know how to keep their heads and take the tough decisions; men who can do their duty under pressure; men who know what it is to pay the price for keeping this town from the Tox—even if it means giving up the people they care about. Do you take my meaning?”

I felt that sick feeling again.

“You’re saying that because of my mum,” I said.

“I am. But that’s not the whole of it, though. I’ve had my eye on you for a while and I like what I see. You’re a fella who knows how to get on with things. I know you’re still only eighteen, but you do your duty, and you’ve got an independent mind too.”

If only the man knew what thoughts had been going through my head.

“I’m afraid you’ve picked a bad day for this, Mayor,” I said. “I’ve been doing some hard thinking about all that.”

“About what, son?”

“About the Tox ... About the cyst rule.”

“Yeah? And what have you been thinking?”

“I’m going to go to Crux—that treatment station that the Agent was talking about.”

Now to be honest, I hadn’t been thinking that at all. I had simply been going over the Agent’s red card and feeling more convinced. But this crazy idea of me being Mayor—of me sending other people to their deaths while I had this thing on my own neck—made me feel so disgusted that I just blurted it out. I felt as surprised as the look that appeared on the Mayor’s face.

Except his surprise immediately turned into anger.

“Why the Tox would you want to do that?” he said.

“I want to see if the cure is real,” I said. “I want to see if we’ve been killing people for nothing.”

“Well ’flect me ... She got to you, didn’t she? I thought if I sent her to

Harry, she wouldn't be able to do anyone else any harm, but she got to you. What did she say?"

"She gave me something to read that told me about some of the other signs."

"The cysts are the signs! She was messin' with your head: tryin' to get you to doubt yourself. That's what those Agents do."

"Maybe. I want to find out anyway. If there's any chance she's right then everyone should know about it. If there really is a cure, I'll come back and report."

"The hell you will! Weren't you listening when I was talking to her, boy? The treatment's for *citizens*. They won't just ..."

"She just said it was *free* for citizens. I'll pay for mine somehow."

The Mayor shook his head and made the ticking noise with his teeth. "Well, it looks like I got you all wrong, Walker. I thought you had a good head on your shoulders but I might as well have been talking to that idiot friend of yours. Those people are our enemies. We're still officially at war with them! You think they're just going to let you waltz in and waltz out?"

"I'm willing to risk it for the sake of the town."

"For the sake of the town. You little plaguebrain—if you came back here preaching that stuff about everyone bein' 'fected, you'd unleash anarchy."

I looked up at him and noticed the white spittle in the corners of his mouth—suddenly wondered if his obsession with purifying the town might just actually be another symptom of the Tox.

"How do you know that there aren't people hiding their cysts?" I said, "I mean under their clothes or under their hair? For all we know, half the town could have it."

"Maybe, and when we find 'em we'll give 'em the same choice we give all the rest."

I opened my mouth to say something, but the man cut me off.

“You know, I think I’ve had enough of this conversation ... I’m glad this came out when it did. Looks like you’ve saved me from a big mistake. Go if you want. Don’t bother coming back.”

He turned and left, slamming the wire gate behind him, and I uncurled my fingers from the splintery floor boards that I had been gripping to keep myself from doing something I would regret.

* * *

I told my friends that night. I told them about the thing on my neck and what I’d learned from the Agent and about my conversation with the Mayor. Finally I told them about deciding to go to Crux.

We were sitting on the steps of the old war memorial above the cemetery.

“Don’t know why you’d want to trust those guys,” said Stick slowly, trying to read the red card in the moonlight. “They threaten to wipe us all out and you want to go and let them inject you with stuff. I mean, I get why you don’t want to work for the Mayor. But why go to Central?”

“I don’t know what I’ve got to lose,” I said. “I mean, if I’ve got it—if this thing’s a cyst, I’ll be dead sooner or later anyway. Either the Council will find out or the thing will burst—or maybe I’ve got others like the card says ...”

“Still a big gamble, though. Looking at it, I’d reckon fifty-fifty that thing’s a cyst. But if you go out there, it’s like ninety per cent chance you’ll get eaten by Savages or killed for your teeth or something. And even if you make it through to Central ...”

“I just want to go to Crux. That’s where the treatment centre is.”

“... Okay, even if you make it through to *Crux*. What makes you think you can trust them not to slave you or something worse?”

Before I could answer, Flex, lying between us, finished trying to balance a bottle on his chin and raised his head. “How far is Crux?”

“I dunno,” I said. “It’s not on our map. She just said to go east and that she’d find me and take me there.”

“And will it be all hi-tech like Central?”

“I don’t know that either. I just know there’s a base there and that they say that that’s where you have to go if you want to get treated.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing Central,” said Flex. “Do you remember that brochure we found behind the bookshelf at school? And how it had that picture of Sanctuary City and the animals and trees everywhere?”

“Yeah, I remember that,” I said. “And Mrs Bleaker found us looking at it and said she’d tell our parents and get us expelled if we didn’t say who had given it to us?”

“And you told her to go ahead, and she got all embarrassed,” said Stick.

“... Hey, maybe if we went to Central, we could pick up some stuff that we could sell back here,” said Flex.

Stick laughed. “You guys are Toxed in the head. If Central is as good as the propaganda says, why would they let the likes of you in there? They’d shoot you on sight.”

I looked down at the graves.

“Yeah, maybe. I don’t know about Central, but I’m gonna try for Crux. If you guys want to come too, that’d be good.”

“No thanks, brother,” said Stick. “I hope you make it, but I think you’re crazy.”

“Yeah, I’ll come,” said Flex.

* * *

It took us a few days to get ourselves organized, and it wasn’t pretty.

As soon as people found out that I was going, the rumours started. I’d gone crazy with my success and gotten myself a messiah complex. The Mayor had gone off me. I had the Tox and was leaving town before anyone made me.

Just as my reputation had shot up, it suddenly crashed. Some people tried to gently talk sense into me. Others tried to use guilt—who would fire the big gun if the Savages came back?

The Council had an informal discussion about whether they would denounce my “plans to defect”; I heard later that one of them had even put up a motion that I should be imprisoned for my own good.

But none of that happened. Three days later, Flex and I slipped out through the eastern barricade in the morning dark, carrying our backpacks, a rifle and a water skin between us. When the sun came up over the flats, the orange light shone on our faces and cast long shadows back the way we’d come. And for the first time since my conversation with the Mayor, I felt a sort of lightness in my heart.

It didn’t last, though. Before long, the glow turned to glare, and the rising heat made the skin prickle inside my shirt.

And Flex talked on and on. He talked about how he had been thinking of travelling to Central for a long time and how it was nice that we could both go together. He talked about all the stuff we might be able to bring back to Spillan: medicine, food, weapons, clothes—and how we might go about persuading them to let us transport it in one of their skyships.

“You know Central is hundreds of miles away, don’t you?” I said.

“Sure, but if Crux is run by Central, then maybe we can get them to give us a lift. Isn’t that what the Agent said to you?”

“No, she said that if I went east, she’d find me and bring me to Crux.”

“Okay. But she must have a radio or something. She could call down a ship.”

“Maybe. I don’t know,” I said.

But even Flex went quiet as the heat and miles wore on.

Ten kilometres out from Spillan, we came to the spot where the flats went down toward the old riverbed. Most of it was dry—just a few muddy pools under the trees. But as we tried to cross, the cracked crust gave way under us, leaving us up to our knees in stinking mud that sucked and dragged on us as we tried to move forward.

After half an hour, we were totally exhausted and Flex had started muttering to himself. I couldn’t quite make out what he was saying, but

I caught the words “stupid caper” and got the impression I was being blamed for it. At some point, he came and took the waterskin off me, which made things lighter for me—but it didn’t make him any quicker. He just kept getting slower and slower and dropping further and further behind.

I tried to encourage him. “Come on, Flex. Keep it up,” I called out. “We must be past half way, now”

“Go ahead, brother,” he said, “I just need a breather.”

I sighed and pushed on.

Looking back, I guess I had always felt a bit superior to Flex. I thought I was smarter than him too. I’d seen so many of his enthusiastic schemes come and go: the rabbit meat business that was going to make him rich, the armoured dune buggy that he had started to build from abandoned cars. The year before, just after we’d finished school, he’d borrowed a whole lot of money from Stick and me to build a commercial whisky still. But he’d abandoned that, like he abandoned all his projects—and never repaid our money.

Stick and I put up with him. We laughed at him sometimes, but not behind his back. But as I went over his failures, my patience slowly evaporated. Flex was an idiot, I thought. He was going to give up soon, and if I didn’t do something, he was likely to drink half the water while he was deciding to do it.

I stopped and turned back to look at him. He was still in the same spot he’d been when I had last called out to him. Except now he was looking back to face the way we’d come.

“You doing alright?” I called to him.

He twisted round and shook his head. “This is no good, brother. I’m gonna lose a shoe if I keep on like this.”

I turned and started walking back toward him.

“Well ... what do you want to do? How about we look for a way round?” I said.

“Nah. Nah, it’s okay.”

“You thinking of going back?”

Flex shrugged.

“We’ve just got started,” I said.

“I know. That’s why. If it’s like this now, what’s it gonna be like down the track? I can’t do it. I shouldn’t have come ... Sorry ...”

“Alright,” I said. “Stay there and I’ll come and get the water skin off you.”

“It’s okay. I can chuck it to you,” said Flex. He swung it by its neck so that it flew in a tumbling arc, landing about five metres off to my left. But even as it was in the air, I could see that it was empty.

I stopped in my tracks. Suddenly, I could feel the sore at the back of my neck throbbing.

“Hey, Flex, what happened to all the water?” I said.

“I dunno,” he said. “Maybe you didn’t put the cap on properly when we had that last drink.”

“What are you talking about? You were the last one to drink. You’ve been carrying it for the last half hour,” I said.

He shrugged. “Maybe there’s something wrong with the seal, then ...”

He broke off as he saw the expression on my face.

“You idiot,” I said. “You can’t even admit it. Why did I let you come?”

I ignored the waterskin and started advancing toward him. Flex went wide-eyed and took a step back.

“Hey, Chris ... what are you doing?”

“What do you think?” I said.

He turned and bolted, and I ran after him.

When I started coming at him, I was just wanting to scare him. But suddenly, I realised I was only half acting. I wanted to knock him down and rub his face in the mud.

“Stop, Chris,” he called over his shoulder. “You’re going savage!”

“That’s right,” I shouted.

He had a good lead on me, but I was stronger. Soon I was close enough to imagine my hands around his neck, pulling him down.

I leapt, but the mud slipped back beneath my feet, so I dropped short. I tried again but the same thing happened, and I landed on my knees.

And then something bad happened to me. It was like the frustration triggered it. As long as I thought I was in control, I knew I didn’t really want to hurt him. But when I couldn’t get to him, it was like my whole head got full of fire. And suddenly I knew I didn’t want to just knock him down; I wanted to bite his neck and gouge his eyes and press him into the mud until he stopped moving.

So I charged at him for the last time, and I really think I would have killed him if I had caught him. I was all teeth and claws and rage. But even as I was preparing for that last jump, my boot snagged a tree root buried in the mud and down I went, face-first into the muck.

He was halfway up the hill by the time I cleared it from my eyes. There was no chance of catching him now, and I didn’t even want to. The red fire had gone from my head, and I just felt sick and horrified at myself.

I lay there in the mud, remembering Stick’s words from that night in the cemetery: “If Central is as good as the propaganda says, why would they let the likes of you in there?”

But it was too late to turn back now. Flex might not tell anyone but Stick about what had happened, but he might tell everyone. If he really thought I had gone savage, then he might not even think it was being disloyal. We thought of Savages like they weren’t human—like they were just the shells of the people they’d been.

So there was no going back to Spillan. I’d simply be sent away or shot from the walls.

And yet, I thought, there was still a ray of hope. If I could just get to Crux—and if the treatment was real—I could still come back as proof

that it worked. In that case, Flex's story would make my appearance even more dramatic. The Mayor would be forced to admit there was a cure. The cyst rule would fall.

But how far could I get now that the water was gone?

I got up and made my way back to where Flex had tossed the water skin. There was barely a mouthful in it.

Even as I tilted my head back, however, I noticed something on the horizon—a glint of something silver, just visible above the curve of the river valley. When I shielded my eyes and concentrated, I could see other traces of it—a line that ran right along the ridge.

Could it be the pipeline that the Agent had said supplied all the towns of the AZ—the pipe that went all the way back to Central?

I slogged back through the mud and made my way up to the top of the slope.

It *was* a pipe: a fat zinc-silver snake slithering across the landscape. It was made of bolted segments supported by concrete pylons, and every segment had a logo of waves and the word "*Natura*TM" stencilled on its side. There was even a small tap on one of the pylons. Soon, I was clean, refreshed and holding a full waterskin.

Better still, the pipe ran toward the east—not dead east, but near enough to give me hope that it might take me where I needed to go.

As I set off along the line, I took a last look down at the river flat and the shimmering haze of the land beyond. What a stroke of good fortune it was to have found a way around that. Now I had water, a path to follow and shade for my head. Later that afternoon, I even came across some berry bushes and was able to fill my stomach with the sour fruit.

When the sun went down, I stretched out on the sand and was kept warm by the heat radiating off the metal.

But the next day, I was captured.

CHAPTER 4

I was asleep when they grabbed me—dreaming that I was leading the people of Spillan along the pipeline with Central City shining on the horizon. The Mayor was just saying, “We should have always listened to you, Walker.” And the next minute, everyone had charged at me and piled on so I couldn’t move to breathe. And then I woke up and realised that there really were people on top of me. Someone was kneeling on my chest. Someone else was pulling a hessian bag over my head. Someone was holding down my arms.

Instantly I was awake, razor-sharp and absolutely clear that I was about to be murdered and eaten. I found myself making a horrible groaning noise as I tried to twist free. I felt my fingernails tear as I clawed the ground.

None of it did any good. Whoever it was had me pinned. I could smell their sweat and hear their grunting as they pressed me into the ground.

“Did you think we wouldn’t notice if you came in along the pipeline?” said one of them.

“Gaians think everyone’s as stupid as them,” said a second voice.

I freed an arm and felt my knuckles graze someone’s face. I got a punch in the nose and a boot on my neck in return.

“Get him in the van,” said the first voice. Then there was twine pulling tight around my ankles and wrists, and I was being carried and dropped onto the floor of a large vehicle of some kind. There was dirt and patterned rubber under my cheek and a smell of cigarettes and ozone in the air. Somebody slammed a door, and I felt the pressure pop in my ears as the machine began to move.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked.

“Where do you think?” said the first voice, now coming from the front of the vehicle. “You’re coming to Ockham.”

“You can help us with our research,” said the second voice—now coming from higher up and on my left.

“What’s Ockham?” I said.

“Don’t pretend to be stupider than you are,” said the first voice. “Are you on your own, or have you got some friends somewhere?”

“It’s just me. I’ve just been following the pipeline from Spillan. I’m not trying to sneak in anywhere.”

“Yeah, right,” said a third voice.

“Just thought you’d take a nice little stroll along our pipe, did you?” said the second voice.

“No, someone told me that ... I’m trying to find somewhere where I can get treatment for the Tox.”

There was a pause.

“Look through his stuff,” said the first voice.

There was a sound of someone moving about, rummaging through my pack.

“Apart from the gun, it’s just travelling stuff,” said the second voice. “Clothes, flint, a few rounds, dried fruit ... dried meat ...”

“Dried meat?” said the first voice. “How about that. So you’re not from Gaia after all?”

“No, I’m from Spillan, like I said. I’m just looking for ...”

“Maybe we should give him the test,” said the second voice.

“Go ahead,” said the first voice. “Get the book.”

I heard the sound of pages being flicked. Through the floor, the engine changed note as the vehicle began climbing a slope.

“Ready, toxface?” said the second voice.

“Ready for what?” I said.

“To decide your fate.”

“Quiztime,” said the third voice on my right.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I said.

“Prob’ly not,” said the second voice. “But that’s what we’re going to

find out ... Okay. Here's the first one. Which of the following words is most similar in meaning to 'Irrelevant': A. Ordinary B. Irreverent C. Useless D. Wrong?

"What?" I said, "Why are you asking me ..."

"Not right," said the third voice.

"Barrrrp," said the second voice.

"No, wait ... wait," I said, trying to lift my head. "Ask me again. I just wasn't expecting that sort of question."

"I dunno, toxface, you had your chance. What do you think, boss?"

"Give him another go," said the first voice.

The second voice repeated the question as I tried to force my brain to listen to the words.

"It's either C or D," I said. "No, it's C! 'Useless!'"

"Lucky," said the third voice.

"Yeah," said the second voice. "Okay, here's the second question.

"Some of the children in this class are lazy. No lazy child gets good marks. Which is true: A. No child in this class will get good marks. B. Some children in this class won't get good marks?"

I tried to remember the question.

"Time's a factor," said the voice on my right.

"That's right," said the second voice.

"B," I said.

"He's guessing," said the third voice.

"Maybe," said the second voice. "Alright, let's try one without a multiple choice. If it takes five bakers one hour to make five loaves of bread, how long does it take a hundred bakers to make a hundred loaves?"

"... Can't tell," I said.

"Why not?" said the second voice.

"We don't know the setup," I said. "Are they all sharing the same equipment? If they have to wait for mixers or ovens or bench space or something, it'll take longer."

“Thinks he’s smart,” said the third voice.

“Yeah, but is he smart or just a smart ...”

“Assume the same ratio of equipment as the first example,” said the voice from the front of the vehicle.

“Then it’s the same time,” I said. “It’ll take an hour.”

There was another silence.

“Get the hood off him,” said the first voice.

I blinked and found myself staring up at the grinning face belonging to the owner of the second voice. He was a big man with a round head topped with stubble. He had wire-frame spectacles and a long battered overcoat. Standing over him, I saw a slightly younger man with dark wild hair, a leather jacket and a bandolier holding what looked like three straight razors.

“Nice work on the questions,” said the younger man. “Welcome to Ockham. I’m Liam. That’s Bill who’s untying you and this is William.” I turned to follow his nod and saw the owner of the third voice—a lanky figure with a long, crooked face.

“Why did you grab me?” I said.

“Just doin’ our job, mate,” said Bill, working the knots loose on my hands.

“We thought you were a Gaian,” said Liam. “They’re always trying to sneak in and wreck things. We didn’t know you were switched on. But if you’re a thinker, you belong with us.”

“So, who are you guys?”

“We’re deep patrol,” said Liam. “Ockham sends us out to guard the approaches and to look for stuff.” He pointed toward the back of the vehicle where wire crates full of books, magazines and old telecommunications equipment rocked with the motion of the van.

“You should be grateful,” said Bill, now untying my feet.

“For you attacking me?” I said.

“Cos of the Tox,” said Bill.

“That’s right,” said Liam. “If you’re worried about the Tox, Ockham’s the place for you.”

“Have you got a cure?”

“Not yet. But we know how to control it. And we’ve got scientists working on a proper vaccine.”

“Civilisation,” said William.

“Science,” said Bill.

“Same thing,” said William.

I looked around at them, wondering whether to trust them. Liam and William looked cyst-free, but when Bill bent down to cut the twine on my feet, I could see a constellation of the blisters in the stubble of his scalp. I wondered if it might be the same for the other two.

“How about if I wanted you to let me go?” I said.

Liam shrugged. “We could do that. “But if you were following the pipe, you would have come to Ockham anyway.”

He reached down, pulled me up and directed me to an empty seat next to William. At the same time, I felt the vehicle turning. Through the front window, I could see the silhouettes of tall buildings, distant floodlights and the first colours of morning.

“Is that Ockham?” I said.

“Yep,” said Liam.

“Is it a city?”

“No. It’s a university,” he said. “Used to be a natural sciences institute.”

Our vehicle slowed as it approached the razor wire fence that ringed the compound. A guard in a parka and grey scarf unshouldered her rifle and approached us, shone her torch through the windows and gave a hand signal to someone. There was a click and the sound of a barrier sliding back. As I looked around, I could see we were rolling up an avenue flanked by rows of jury-rigged solar arrays, caged water cubes and greenhouses. At the end of it, we entered a brick-paved quadrangle

ringed by a series of glass and steel buildings. We stopped outside the largest of them. “Montag Library”, it said on its portico.

“Alright,” said Liam. “Let’s deal with the junk, and we can get some breakfast. William, take the tech. Bill, show our new friend what to do with the lit.”

Bill passed me a heavy wire basket filled with books and magazines of all sizes and gestured for me to follow him into the dimly lit library. We came past the front desk into a vast open space with a central atrium reaching up through three stories to a skylight roof. Even in the gloom, I could see rows of bookshelves stretching out of sight in every direction.

“How many books are there here?” I said.

“Too many,” said Bill. “You wouldn’t believe what a Tox of a job it was to empty the top stories. Come on.”

He led me down a flight of steps, through a basement filled with rows of empty bookshelves. A flickering glow played across the ceiling and, as we came out from between the stacks, I could see that the light was coming from a furnace up the far end of the basement. The space around it was scattered with piles of books that cast long shadows onto the concrete.

“Here we go, said Bill, just chuck ’em in one at a time and bring back the basket. I’ll meet you back at the V.”

“You want me to burn them?” I said.

“That’s right. Might have to rip em up a bit to get em going.”

“Why are you burning books?” I said.

“Heats the water. Get’s rid of ’em.”

He saw my face and rolled his eyes.

“Here, look at ’em,” he said. He grabbed a couple of random titles from the top of the crate. “*A Treatise of Human Nature ... Language, Truth and Logic*. They’re all this stupid pseudo-stuff—sociology and political studies and art and history and plaguey junk like that. That’s why we get ’em out of circulation. If we come across anything real we shelve ’em upstairs.”

“What’s real?” I said.

“Testable stuff. Science. Tech. Not this tox.” He opened the furnace door and tossed the books inside.

I watched him walk away and wondered what I’d been dragged into. What sort of University burned books? Harry Frieden used to say that a life without books is like a body without a soul. Of course, even he would have admitted that not all books were equally valuable. But these Ockhamists seemed to have a pretty narrow idea of what made a book worth keeping. Was this another kind of Tox madness?

I didn’t know. I did know that I didn’t have much choice in the matter. Whatever Bill and his friends might do if I crossed them, I wasn’t about to find out for the sake of some old books on poetry or something.

I reached into the basket and pulled out a handful to toss into the fire.

And stopped. There, right on the top of the stack I was holding in my hand, was a book with a pale gray cover embossed with a symbol of crossed syringes.

“*Roadbook. Complete Handbook and Cognitive Catalyst. Central Issue,*” it said.

I had almost burned it. Again. Suddenly, I was ten years old, trying to snuff out the flames on a book just like this.

The book was too bulky to hide in my clothes, and my pack was still in the vehicle. I thought for a moment, then quickly finished burning the other volumes, and made my way back toward the stair. As I came to the last of the empty bookcases, I reached up and laid the book flat on the top shelf so that nobody would see it from the ground.

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Five minutes later I was standing in line with my new friends as we helped ourselves to plates full of eggs and bacon from a kitchen off what must have once been the cavernous main hall of the college. At other tables, citizens in overalls, lab coats and patched jackets sat about reading

books or talking to one another. They seemed mostly cyst-free, but a few had welts around their temples and ears.

“So,” said Liam as we sat down to eat. “Are you ready to tell us your name?”

“Chris. Chris Walker,” I said.

“Welcome then, Chris Walker. What work can you do?”

“I’ve been working in a aquaponics setup,” I said. “I also helped-out at a garage when I was at school so I know a bit about fixing engines.”

Liam nodded. “Good. Somebody will find you work to do with those skills. We have a big hydroponics system here; kreaponics too.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re eating it. Almost all our meat is tank-grown,” said Liam.

“The bacon?” I said, looking down at my plate. “But it looks real. Smells real too.”

“It is real. It’s just produced differently.”

I looked around at the people on the tables around us.

“So, is everybody here a scientist?”

“No. But they all know how to think—that’s why we did the test on you. If you hadn’t passed, you wouldn’t be sitting here with us.”

“Yeah,” said William. “You’d be with Vera.”

I began to ask who Vera was, but the question was cut short by a sudden series of tones blaring over a speaker.

Immediately, most of the people in the hall, other than my companions, began getting up from the table and making their way to the door. A few paused to collect metal buckets that were lined up along the wall.

“What’s going on,” I asked.

“Air raid,” said Bill.

“It’ll be a kite from Gaia,” said Liam. “They use them to drop fuel bombs on us. They don’t do much damage if you’re quick with the sand, but we’ve lost a couple of greenhouses and a vehicle or two.”

Just as he said it, there was a whump noise and a flash from the open

door.

“Guess I better go and make sure they don’t get the van,” said Bill. “Come and take a look if you like.”

I stuffed the last of the bacon rasher into my mouth and followed him to the door. From the shelter of the portico, we could see people using buckets to smother the flames on a small garden bed on the other side of the quadrangle.

I came to the edge of the cover and stuck my head out cautiously. It took me a moment to see it because of the glare and its altitude, but there it was, a tiny box-kite hanging a thousand metres above the town. It had a long banner fluttering ahead of it that read, “Burn the machine.” I could just make out the shape of someone moving in a basket slung beneath it. Then, there was a shout from down the avenue as a sheet of flame exploded on the facade of one of the older buildings.

“What’s Gaia?” I said to Bill, who was leaning against the brick pillar next to me.

“Ferals. Back-to-naturists. They want to get rid of technology—reckon it was science that caused the Tox—so they keep trying to sabotage us, and we ...” —he paused to finish lighting a cigarette— “... just want to get ‘em out of the gene-pool. Which we will, sooner or later.”

After the raid finished, Liam took me to meet one of the Coordinators who ran the place. She was a neat woman with a grey vest, a no-nonsense stare and a poster behind her desk that said, “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the precipitate.” She asked me the same questions that Liam had asked and said that she would put me down in hydroponics.

“Do you have any questions you want to ask me?” she said.

I nodded. “When they picked me up, Liam and the others told me that you had ways of controlling the Tox ...”

“Yes, we have some researchers working on a cure, but I’m afraid I have no idea how close they are. If you ask around, somebody will ...”

"I mean, apart from the cure. They said you had ways of managing it."

"Oh. Yes, well reason is the answer," she said. "We have weekly lectures that encourage us to think about cooperation and empathy as adaptive principles."

"What does that mean?" I said.

She gave me a patient look. "You fight the Tox simply by thinking about what is most conducive to your own happiness and that of others. And then doing it."

"Okay," I said, suspecting I wasn't going to get any further. "And one other question. Am I free to leave Ockham if I want to?"

"Why would you want to do that?" she said.

"Well ... if I wanted to go to Crux or Central or something."

She laughed and then stopped "... Wait, you're serious? ... Central's gone. It doesn't exist any more."

I gave her a puzzled look. "Well, we had an Agent visit us in Spillan last week. And the water pipe must come from somewhere."

"Chris, I'm sure you're aware that not everyone is who they say they are. Just because he said he was an Agent ..."

"She," I said.

"... Just because *she* said she was an Agent doesn't mean there is a Central.

"And as for the pipe, let me ask you this: if the water comes from Central, where do you think they get it from?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess from a river or from underground or something."

"So why does there need to be a city? How do you know the pipes don't just come from the river or the ground?"

I stared at the legs of her desk. "I thought everybody believed in Central," I said at last.

"Not exactly," she said, smiling. "But, in answer to your question, of

course, you can leave any time. Now, just wait here and I'll find somebody to take you down to hydroponics."

But as soon as she closed the door, it was like an alarm went off in my mind. There was something off about the way she had smiled at me. Was she going to report me? Was she going to get a gun?

I jumped up from the chair and went to the window, wondering if I should try to climb out and escape. But we were three stories up, and there was no ledge and nothing to hold on to. And what would they do if they caught me on my way out?

And then I thought, what if I was just imagining it? What if she was just being weirdly polite? And what if these people really were on the edge of a cure?

But then I remembered the razors on Liam's bandolier, and the way Bill and William had joked before they did the test on me.

I got to my feet and made it to the door just as it flew open.

"Hello toxface," said Bill, grinning at me. "You didn't tell us you was a Centralist."

THANKS FOR READING!

This is the end of the preview, but there is more to the story! If you would like to read on, please follow the purchase links listed at:
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