

The train was in the station and sitting idle. At some point the day before the engine and the big tank behind it had been moved so that they were pointed the other way, changing the order of the cars so the front was now the back. There were people swarming around the engine, preparing it for its return journey, and Perry could see that the cargo sections were being loaded up with produce and goods produced in Grabler's Gulch and the local environs. He wasn't sure when the train would be leaving, but he was hoping to be on it, depending on what was going on in the Gulch.

Anaksi walked beside him, resigned to her fate.

With nothing for it, Perry went to the small building labeled 'Sheriff' in big letters, keeping a careful awareness of where Anaksi was. They got some looks, but less than he'd thought they would get.

The office had three desks with no one at them. There were two cells in the back, and those were empty too.

"I can put myself in a cell," Anaksi offered.

"Well," said Perry. "The sheriff was recently hanged, and the deputy ran away. I've got no clue what this place is doing for law right now, so —"

"So you have to let me go," said Anaksi.

Perry looked at her. She smiled at him.

"Humor doesn't transcend cultural barriers very well," she said.

"You're not worried about being executed," said Perry.

She shrugged. "You said you would speak on my behalf. If I was going to be lynched, they would have done it as soon as they saw a Yuuk come in."

The Yuuks were allowed in the town, there was no law against that, not that there was anyone around to enforce the law. He was surprised that no one had talked to him about coming in off the tracks. The two men who'd run away when the shooting started should have arrived before them, and certainly everyone on the train knew that it had been robbed.

"I'm not going to let them lynch you," said Perry.

"Why?" asked Anaksi.

"Just a general anti-lynching philosophy," said Perry. He clucked his tongue. "So ... I guess we're going to wait."

He went and sat down on a long bench against the side wall, and Anaksi sat down beside him. Her eyes were roaming the sheriff's office. There were wanted posters up on the wall, and a handful of papers on the desks, but there weren't weapons for her to grab, not that Perry could see. It mostly seemed like a place for people to deal with administrative work, though he

suspected that there might be guns or at least bullets in the desks, at least if the sheriff was surprised by his lynching. The cells seemed more like they were suited for holding someone drunk and aggressive than violent criminals.

They didn't have to wait all that long before a man in black came in. He had a piece of paper in his hands that he was reading closely with half-moon spectacles, and he sat down at one of the desks, still reading it as he took his hat off. His outfit was clean and crisp, with a white shirt and black tie, and black books with shiny embossed leather. He was older, graying, with an oiled mustache and a goatee. His face was weathered, and he ran his tongue over his dry lips as he reached the end of whatever he was reading.

He looked up at them.

"Now, how can I help you?" he asked.

Perry stood. "I haven't made your acquaintance," he said. "You're the new sheriff, or the man standing in for him?"

The man shook his head. "Sheriff is dead, they tell me, and the deputy ran away. I'm the new marshal, came in off the train yesterday, and none too soon. Didn't know I was going to be coming into a lawless town. You're local?"

"No," said Perry. "I'm from Charlonion originally. I was part of a posse yesterday, the one that went down along the rail. Peregrine Holzman." He held out his hand, and the man came from around the desk to shake it.

"Marshal Eller Briscoe," the man replied. He nodded at Anaksi. "Who's the Yuuk?"

"This is Anaksi," said Perry. "You're ... aware the train was attacked?"

Eller chuckled. "Aware there's a missing harmonizer, melted locks, and four dead guards? I'd be a piss poor marshal if I didn't know that. Dead Yuuk in the car, too."

"This is the other one," said Perry. "He did the killing, I'm pretty sure, but she was a part of the robbery, so I've brought her in."

Eller looked between the two of them. "She came willingly?"

"I brought her in," said Perry.

"On horse? On foot?" asked Eller.

"On foot," said Perry.

"So ... let me get this straight," said Eller, scratching his chin. "Some Yuuks drop down onto the train, they kill their way to the harmonizer, take it, then at some point you — by yourself — catch them, and you bring one in on foot, taking a day to do it. Which means sleeping out under the half-lidded moon, presumably."

"I dropped down onto the train too," said Perry. "I was the one who killed the Yuuk you found." He'd put his sword back into the shelf space earlier in the day, while Anaksi wasn't looking. "She jumped off the train with the harmonizer, and I jumped off after her. There were some passengers who should have seen me."

Eller frowned at Perry. "And that harmo, you know where it is now?"

Perry reached into his satchel and drew it out.

"Well lean me over this desk and fuck me rotten," said Eller with a whistle. He took the harmonizer and rotated it around. The pink glow from it was very faint in the light filtering in from outside. He looked up at Perry. "But why'd you bring the Yuuk?"

"The Yuuks aren't going to give up," said Perry. "They're going to gather up their people and try to take the harmonizer. That's harder for them than when it was on the train, but they *are* going to try. Might be tonight, might be tomorrow, but we have to be prepared, and she's a source of leverage and information."

"Seems like a poor plan for them," said Eller. His eyes hadn't left the harmonizer. "You're just ... bringing this back?"

"Yeah," said Perry. "Town needs it."

"Not asking for a reward?" asked Eller.

"I didn't figure that there was a reward on offer," said Perry. "I'd take one, if you wanted to show some appreciation."

"And you've got a docile Yuuk you want to throw in jail," said Eller, glancing at Anaksi, then over to the cells.

"I don't know what's done in these parts," said Perry. "I guess if you're the replacement sheriff, it's for you to decide."

Eller frowned. "Sheriff and marshal are different, son," he said. "A sheriff serves the county, a marshal serves the law. Law is, that woman there was part of a train robbery? She'll see the local judge soon enough and likely face the noose for it."

Perry looked over at Anaksi. She was staring straight ahead, like she wasn't even listening to the conversation where her fate was decided. The thought of her lifeless body hanging from some rope didn't sit well with him, but he didn't know what else he was supposed to do.

Perry turned back to Eller and nodded slowly. "I can leave her here then?" he asked.

"Sure," shrugged Eller. "Does she speak?"

"She's fluent," said Perry.

"You fluent?" Eller asked Anaksi.

*"I will not speak to swine such as you, kill me if you must,"* she said to him in her own tongue.

Eller looked back at Perry and raised an eyebrow. "Ornery one?"

"She's facing the noose," said Perry. "I'd be ornery too."

"Well, we'll see about getting her to the judge real soon. If what you said is true, we'll have more than enough to hang her." He nodded.

"I don't think she needs to be hanged," said Perry. "She didn't kill anyone, I can attest that it was the man with her, the one that's already dead. She did try to steal the harmonizer, but I took it back from her. So she's guilty of ... conspiracy to commit robbery?"

"And just who are you?" asked Eller, sizing Perry up again. "Are you her lawyer?"

"Just a concerned citizen," said Perry. "I want to make sure that what happens to her is justice."

"She's a Yuuk," said Eller. "Justice comes for them, sooner or later."

Perry really felt like punching the marshal in the face. Why he'd thought this would go any other way, he didn't know. Leaving Anaksi in this man's care no longer seemed like it was an option, but it didn't seem like he had a good way to back out either. Could he just ... leave with her? Set her free? She'd tried to rob the train, and while she might not have killed anyone, her husband had. She was part of the plot, that deserved *something*, just not this.

"I'm going to come back and visit her tomorrow," said Perry. "She'll be in that cell?" He nodded to the back of the office.

"Sure, though I'm only barely settled," said the marshal.

"She'll get food, water, all that," said Perry. "She'll be safe here." He wasn't saying those as questions, more as threats, which maybe wasn't wise.

"I serve the law," said the marshal. "Who's she to you? You take a shine?"

"I don't leave someone in the care of a stranger, not even a criminal, unless I have some guarantee that they'll be treated well," said Perry.

Eller sized Perry up. There was a three inch height difference between them, in Perry's favor. Perry's clothes didn't show off his physique that well, but it was probably obvious that in a fight, Perry had the advantage. What was going through the marshal's mind was hard to say, since he had a good poker face, but Perry's poker face was better.

"You have my word," said the marshal. "You can come tomorrow, see how she's doing, and I'll make sure she gets the noose as fast as can be."

Perry stormed out of there. Anaksi watched him go.

If she was hanged, it would be because Perry had made that happen, submitted to the local rules and expectations. Did she *deserve* to be hanged? He didn't think so, though he could see a lens through which he did, one that looked more at those dead men in the train car than at her as a person. It would certainly be frontier justice, which wasn't really justice at all.

There was a chance that Anaksi would escape on her own. She was wily, aggressive, and if he was a judge, pretty smart. He hadn't cuffed her or tied her up, and if she wanted to run, he'd given her a chance by leaving. All she'd have to do was find a horse that could be stolen in a hurry and then take off into the Flux. If he understood it right, that alone was probably enough to make sure she wasn't found.

Perry waited outside the saloon for a few minutes, facing in the direction of the sheriff's office, but he heard no sounds of fighting, no yelling or screaming. He was still waiting when Wyatt and Cecil came riding into town.

Wyatt was still alive, but soaked in blood and looking pale. The horse he was riding on was being pulled along by Cecil, who was on his own horse, and unlike Perry's arrival, people seemed to actually notice. A crowd gathered quickly, and Wyatt was pulled off his horse and onto a stretcher, taken to a doctor's just a few steps away. Cecil got down to a round of questions from the people who'd gathered there, along with a confusion of information on the train robbery, and Perry came closer to hear.

"They jumped straight down on the train!" he said as he dismounted his horse. "Never seen anything so crazy in my life, and crazier still was that woman, Trigger Queen, who got in front of the train like she meant to stop it. She leapt up at the last second and landed there like she'd practiced it a hundred times, and the two Yuuks, and then finally this dandy scholar we'd met only the day before, sword in his hand from nowhere!"

"Cecil," said Perry, raising his hand.

Cecil was off his horse and in among the crowd of maybe two dozen people, some of whom had emptied out of the saloon because of the commotion. He looked at Perry and just stopped there for a moment while his brain caught up.

"You lived?" he asked. "You got on the train?"

"On the train, then off the train," said Perry.

"I thought for sure you were dead," said Cecil. He took off his hat and slapped it against his thigh once, producing a cloud of dust, then put it back on his head. "Off the train, and not in the usual way?"

"Jumped off not long after I jumped on," said Perry. "It lacked atmosphere."

Cecil stared at him. "They took the harmonizer, people were saying."

"And I brought it back," said Perry. He pointed over at the sheriff's office. "The marshal has it now."

This brought some vociferous discussion from the crowd. Maybe it was a bad idea to brag, but it felt good to have resolved something for the town. Hell, he could have come into town holding the harmonizer high, though he wasn't sure that anyone would know what it was.

"That woman, Queenie, has anyone seen her?" Perry asked. "She was on the train. Red scarf."

"She came by," said a small girl who'd come up to join the group. On closer inspection, it was the same small girl from the passenger car, the one who'd told him that the harmonizer was toward the front. "She left the other way when we stopped." She paused for a moment. "She was pretty."

"Off into the Flux?" asked Perry, pointing the same direction the girl had pointed.

The girl nodded.

"Thank you again then," said Perry. It would be fruitless to go after her, but it was good to know she'd rode the train back. He'd keep tabs on her, to the extent that was possible. She was up to something.

Perry looked at the sheriff's office. The marshal still hadn't come out, which was suspicious. The office only had one door, he'd seen that when he'd gone in, and the back wall held the cells, with no windows among them.

Perry started walking back to the office, slowly at first and then faster. He heard sounds of a struggle just as he got there, punctuated by a scream. When he came to the door, it was locked tight, so he forced it, a palm strike against the bolt that shattered the windows of the door and burst it open.

He wasn't sure what he'd been worried about, but the harmonizer was still sitting on the desk.

The marshal was in the cell with Anaksi, and he had a hand raised against her. He'd turned to look at Perry, probably because of the broken glass, and held up both hands, opening his mouth to explain. Perry vaulted over one of the desks and stepped into the small cell, slapping the marshal across the face so hard the marshal fell down.

"Are you okay?" Perry asked Anaksi.

She nodded, but her face was red on one side.

"She was mouthing off," said the marshal as he got to his feet. He was gritting his teeth, face red. "And you just struck a man of the law."

Perry slapped him across the face again, harder this time, sending him to the ground, then kicked him in the ribs for good measure. The marshal had a sidearm, and Perry was going to break his arm if he went for it.

"I left her in your care," said Perry. "I was very explicit that you were to treat her with respect and dignity, that she was supposed to get due process."

The marshal staggered to his feet again, slower this time. He was unsteady.

"I'm placing you — placing you under arrest," said the marshal. "You strike a lawman, that's the noose."

Perry was feeling the anger build inside him. It was now burning bright. He could kill this man, then raze this town to the ground, if that was their idea of law, if that was how they treated prisoners. Why had he thought it would be any different?

"Do you have any fucking idea who I am?" asked Perry. "Do you have any clue how idle your threats are? How little chance you would *ever* have of touching me if I didn't want to be touched?"

"I represent the will of the *Commission*," spat the marshal.

"Yeah?" asked Perry. "And who the fuck do you think I work for?"

The marshal rocked back like he'd just been struck again. Where the beating hadn't made him compliant, this did. His eyes scanned Perry's face with the frantic energy of a mouse running across an open field. Perry was as strictly as impassive as ever, taking advantage of the second sphere, betraying none of the rage he was feeling.

"I ... I didn't know," said the marshal.

"I'm going to talk to her in the morning," said Perry. "If she says she wasn't treated right, I'm going to hold you personally responsible, and they will never find your body." The marshal swallowed and nodded. "Anaksi, don't mouth off to this man, because he's clearly dumb enough not to take that warning for what it's worth."

She nodded at him once, eyes wide.

Perry left, doing his best not to storm out a second time.

He hadn't directly claimed that he had been sent by the Commission, he'd only left that to implication, but he was really hoping that it wasn't going to come back to bite him. The marshal was an agent of the Commission and their laws, but Perry had guessed that there would be something else, some higher authority. That much had been suggested from the way that people talked about the Commission in hushed tones.

He took a deep breath, trying to still his mind.

He sort of fucking hated the Wild West.

There were some questions for him from the people out on the street, and he brushed them off. He'd broken the door, shattering glass and wrecking the lock. He made his way to the saloon and headed toward the stairs to his room, then instead went to the counter, where Cleo was washing glasses — or wiping them with a rag, anyway. He had somehow forgotten about the black crack of rot running down her face, and quietly shoved down the part of him that wanted to pay attention to it.

"Fine morning," she said, raising an eyebrow.

"The harmonizer that was stolen is back," said Perry. "Where's it going to end up?"

Cleo frowned at him. "It was stolen, they said, it's all anyone's been talking about. And weren't you a part of the posse? When you all didn't come back last night, we feared the worst."

"Wyatt's alive, badly wounded, just came back," said Perry. "Cecil is fine, more or less. We lost three of the horses. Three members of the posse are missing in action by my count, but we're hoping they'll turn up. And the harmonizer is back now. So where's it going to be, uh, installed?"

"Basement of city hall," she replied. She scrunched up her nose. "They have a whole contraption down there, have for ages, there's a vault around it."

"The Yuuks are going to try again," said Perry. "But I'm worried that someone else is going to try too. Is there a different room, one with an angle on both City Hall and the sheriff's office?"

"There's a flop room," said Cleo. "Some of the ladies use it."

"How much for me to have it for the night?" asked Perry.

Cleo looked at him. "What is it you're thinking is going to happen?" she asked.

"Not sure," said Perry. "I just want to keep an eye out without being seen keeping an eye out."

"You're looking for a gun nest?" she asked.

"That's not a terrible idea," said Perry.

Cleo tried to read his face, and he quirked his lips into what he hoped was a winning smile.

"Alright, I'll keep the girls out," she said. "Unless you don't need your eyes on all the time? In which case a girl could slip in and help you out."

"I'll be keeping watch," Perry replied. "Thanks for the offer."

"I wasn't going to charge, if that was what you were thinking," said Cleo, raising an eyebrow. "It's not often we get a man so handsome and clean as yourself through here."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Perry. He gave her another smile, then went up the stairs and found the room in question.

It was far better furnished than the room he was staying in, with a four-poster bed and a sink for washing up right in the room. There were pictures on the walls, lewd oil paintings, and if Perry hadn't already known it, that would have cemented this as a place of prostitution. There was no lock on the door, which he didn't particularly like, but he supposed that it was better for the safety of the women to have someone be able to come to their rescue. From what he knew of the saloon, there were three such rooms, though he didn't think they were used all that often — the women were mostly for hospitality, flirts-for-money more than outright sex-for-pay.

Which wasn't to say that the room wasn't used, and didn't have a certain smell to it.

He opened the curtain and looked out the window, making sure that he had a sightline to the two places he cared about, then opened up the shelf and stepped inside.

"How's it going, March?" asked Perry. "You've had a day to make some progress."

"Sixty-four percent, sir," said Marchand. "Though I'm pleased to tell you that certain systems are now online."

"Thank god," said Perry. "Anything usable? I'm really hoping you're going to tell me you have microphones, cameras, and the ability to conduct a stakeout."

"Microphones and audio analysis are, in fact, working, sir," said Marchand. "I made those a priority, as they'll be important for us keeping a link with each other via the earpiece."

"That would mean that I would have to leave you out," said Perry.

"It would indeed, sir," said Marchand. "Is that untenable?"

"We're in a lawless place without a good base of operations," said Perry. "Right now, we're in a saloon, in a room whose door doesn't even lock. I need the surveillance we used to have."

"Without the nanites, sir, I think that's unlikely to ever be the case," said Marchand.

"Still no response?" asked Perry.

"Given their size, they are likely suffering a worse version of all problems that I suffer," said Marchand. "And with no possibility of error-correcting code. I will endeavor to do my best, once I'm back on my feet."

Perry let out a sigh. "Alright, I'm going to play lookout, I'll keep a hole open so we can keep in touch, the earpiece should be ready now?"

"Yes, sir," said Marchand.

Perry got it from the small compartment it had been stored in, then slipped it into his ear. It was good to have it back, to have a lifeline to Marchand, though the AI wasn't of all that much use at the moment.

While Perry sat in a chair and watched what he could see of the main streets, he caught Marchand up to speed on everything that had happened, including what Perry could remember about the specifics about the Dusklands, along with his suppositions.

"And they think you belong to this Commission, sir?" asked Marchand. "Is that wise?"

"It gives me some leeway," said Perry.

"And do you suppose there's no method of verification?" asked Marchand.

"I don't know," said Perry. "I was angry. Worst case scenario, ..." he paused, because the worst case scenario was actually pretty bad. "Worst case scenario, I get shot in the head by someone who really is with the Commission's secret police, or someone confronts me and asks for proof I don't have, which ends in violence and me getting run out of town into the Flux, where there are *probably* things I would have difficulty with. But if they have secret police, and that's what I'm pretending to be, then I'm going to hope that they're feared enough that no one will come after me." He let out a sigh. "I really wish that we had your ears back up. You said you had microphones. How close are we to being able to monitor every conversation in the saloon?"

"With luck, half an hour," said Marchand. "That would require my physical form to be pulled from the shelf space, however, and the microfusion reactor has not been restarted yet. All power is drawing on the battery, which is drained by any communication, processing, or surveillance."

"I can juice the battery," said Perry. "Wolf Vessel filled up last night, their moon is weird, but it's thankfully compatible."

"I have not said it, sir, but I do regret my impairment and what it means for the mission," said Marchand. "I feel I must apologize."

"It's not your fault," said Perry. "Just the way this particular world is. I wish that the Grand Spell had warped this world to fix you up, but ... maybe the spell doesn't work that way, not for things that aren't formally part of physics in the same way. Maybe there's nothing in it that checks whether circuitry works. Maybe we could arrive in a world where bullets don't fire because the chemistry is different or something."

"It's possible, sir," said Marchand. "It does seem like an oversight on the behalf of the designers."

"Hella thought there weren't any designers," said Perry. "That we're just at the tail end of some learning algorithm's training process, or something like that. But it doesn't really matter, except in that it might allow us to predict the future. My guess is that any issues with you, or the nanites, are priced into our odds of success." He paused. "No word from the *Farfinder*?"

"None, sir," said Marchand. "Though I should say that as I have been inside the shelf for the duration, I can't be expected to have picked up any signals from them."

Perry winced. The nature of the Flux meant that he couldn't just hide Marchand out behind a hill somewhere, because in theory Marchand could simply disappear, just like Anaksi had thought their empty tins of food would. But it was clear that there were many benefits to having the armor outside of the extradimensional space, if only Perry could trust the lock on the saloon's door.

"I'm going to set you up in my room," said Perry. "Are you at the point where you can aim and fire a gun?"

"I believe I could manage, sir," said Marchand. "Would I have your permission to engage in diplomacy first?"

"Yes, of course, obviously," said Perry. "Try to talk your way out of it first, Jesus Christ."

"I believe in some of the scenarios you might be envisioning, diplomacy would reduce the odds that I would evade capture," said Marchand.

"Still, *try*," said Perry. "I'll set you up, I'm just waiting and watching, trying to gather intel. And we don't have this room permanently, just for a bit, so you're going to have to be in the other room."

"Very good, sir," said Marchand.

They talked more while Perry watched the streets. The harmonizer had been moved to city hall not too long after he'd gotten there, with much fanfare and a terse explanation from the marshal that Perry couldn't hear. In theory, the pink ball was being slotted into some machine that would do *something*, but Perry didn't really know what. He was still in the dark about the Flux.

"I have a number of theories, sir," said Marchand, when prompted. "A simple model would be one where a given location has some element of location, as given in X and Y coordinates, and of something else, which I might term drift, a vector. A step north might be up on the X axis, but that step must contend with the drift, which is probabilistic but weighted. A key insight is that after the train passed through, it was all but guaranteed that we would take a long time to arrive into town. Perhaps the passing of the train adjusted 'drift' such that the vector was pointing away from the direction of the train's travel. Similarly, we think of other pieces of evidence as being similar, such as the supposition by Anaksi that intent matters."

"Hrm," said Perry. "I mean, I guess, but there's a lot that doesn't explain."

"I do have a more wild theory, if you would like, sir," said Marchand.

"Please," said Perry.

"Are you familiar with autokinetic matrices?" asked Marchand, leaving off the 'sir' for once. The term meant 'cellular automata'.

"I got a translation for that, I'm not sure that's ever happened before," said Perry. "Update 'autokinetic matrices' to 'cellular automata'. Conway's game of life? Little, uh, squares and stuff?"

"I have never heard of Conway's game, sir," said Marchand. "But yes, cellular automata are a system by which individual squares follow rules based on their neighbors."

Perry tried to dredge up any scrap of information left in his brain about cellular automata.

"Alright, so ... gliders?"

"I'm unfamiliar with the term, sir," said Marchand.

"Because we're from different Earths," said Perry. And translation hadn't seemed to help.

"Alright, there are, um, little creatures that glide across the screen, little, uh, oscillating chunks of squares that create motion."

"To clarify, sir," said Marchand. "Cellular automata typically envisions an infinite checkerboard where cells can have data associated with them, one or zero in the basic examples, which influence each other. From this, certain phenomena might arise, different patterns of stability and meta-stability, a range of behaviors."

"And you're thinking that this can explain the Flux?" asked Perry. "These ... systems of stability? You're talking about the harmonizers, the railroads, the way that a lot of people together seem to create some kind of stable island in the sea of Flux?"

"The monster that came at night, sir," said Marchand. "Anaksi knew that it would come four times. There is a periodicity that I find suspicious."

"Oscillation, you think," said Perry. "Not a natural predator, but something that would recur, because it's part of a pattern. I mean ... I guess."

"The Eshkee have an adaptation wherein they create pannat, mounds of different vegetables in some kind of polyculture, if I'm understanding you right," said Marchand. "They then leave these within the Flux, and sometimes, when they come back to that spot, the pannat remains, or is propagated. This too is something that we expect from cellular automata. There are classes of generators. This is also possibly one aspect of the railroad, which can stretch its apparent distance for hundreds of miles."

"And you think this helps us?" asked Perry.

"I am uncertain, sir," said Marchand. "The mechanism is still unclear, and it's possible that we would require other explanations to be laid on top of it, but I am taken by this model of how generation might work."

Perry couldn't imagine the Marchand from a few years ago feeling the same way.

"Is this theory testable?" asked Perry.

"It's not a theory as yet, sir," said Marchand. "It's an observation or metaphor. There are other metaphors that might bear more fruit in terms of prediction, and once main processing is back online, I will endeavor to crunch the numbers as much as I can. It would be helpful to make a sojourn out into the Flux with the armor on, to collect as much visual and audio data as possible. But in theory, setting up objects at certain distances from each other can influence what is created in the unknown space between them. There are other models, of course, infilling and procedural generation, but I find them less evocative."

"Hrm, alright," said Perry. "I don't think we're going to crack this if *they* haven't cracked it, but we have better math and computation, so I guess it's possible."

"Just a moment, sir," said Marchand.

"Yes?" asked Perry. Nothing had changed out on the street. It was busy, but in a very normal, milling about sort of way.

“Regrettably, I must reset my estimation of progress,” said Marchand. “It appears that the error-correcting code is not robust to changes in condition.”

“What happened?” asked Perry. He’d felt nothing.

“The character of the errors has changed,” said Marchand. “They have reduced in number by two full orders of magnitude, but their character has changed as well, and will require revision to the error correction.”

“They turned the harmonizer on,” said Perry.

“Ah, yes sir, that’s an astute observation,” said Marchand. “That’s likely what happened.”

“How many error-correcting codes are you going to need?” asked Perry.

“Never fear, sir,” said Marchand. “It should only be a matter of revising the error-correction to be more robust. In theory, passing through different ‘zones’ should be something I’m able to accomplish without a total loss of function.”

“Good,” said Perry. “Any chance that you’ll be ready tonight?”

“I’m afraid not, sir,” said Marchand. “Though perhaps I can prioritize visuals in such a way that you could wear me. That would provide protection, if not strength.”

“Do that,” said Perry. “The train leaves soon, I think we’re going to want to be on it, to get out from under this identity if nothing else. I’m going to craft a new identity, one that will hold up to scrutiny.”

“Very well, sir, I shall be your ears, and hopefully soon, your eyes as well,” said Marchand.

Perry went out of the shelf space, but left it open, staring out the window. He wasn’t sure whether Anaksi had been bluffing or not, whether there would be an attack on the town or just a quiet night. The harmonizer was in place and secured. How many men could the Eshkee have? What would the skirmish look like? Perry wasn’t even sure that he was on the right side, but the thought of sitting out the fight and letting things happen naturally didn’t appeal to him in the slightest.

“I’m going downstairs,” said Perry. “I don’t know if the marshal is taking the threat seriously, but I’m going to spread the word myself if he’s brushing it off. People will listen to me, I think, if they assume I’m Commission.”

“If you feel that’s wise, sir,” said Marchand.