

## 1. Sensory Capture Array

Sylvia Baron was imprisoned, not that she particularly minded. She'd been held for almost three and a half years at Symonston Correctional Facility in Canberra without being convicted of a crime or even facing trial. For most of that time she'd had a room of her own, without needing to worry about money, work, or the needs of other people. It was a strange form of punishment. Her life was tensionless, a great empty. She had been sick; she was ready to admit that. But her ailment had been twenty-first century civilisation itself. Work had been her enemy. Colleagues had been her nemeses. Leisure had been her Achilles' heel.

But now she was cured, or so she imagined.

She didn't spend all her time in this space, of course. She was allowed an hour outside every day, in a walled quadrangle with a patch of grass and a park bench. The occasional bird came to meet her. And she spent an hour in the gym each morning, mostly running but also lifting weights. She hadn't had as much as a mouthful of wine in more than a thousand days, and she was down under sixty kilos for the first time since she'd met David, her ex-husband. There was every likelihood that he would eventually be executed for his crimes, especially now that his co-conspirators, Clyde Owen and Patrick Crews, had testified against him. Her own crimes had mostly been apathy and cowardice. That was what she called it. They called it 'Conspiracy to Commit a Terrorist Act'.

She was lying on her bed thinking about this phrase when her cell door opened and prison guards came into the room. "The Governor wants to see you," one of the guards said.

And so she went quietly. She had long since discovered

that passivity was the key to a quiet life here. Even the slightest display of aggression was acted upon swiftly, and so for her there were no such outbursts. The guards, perhaps sensing her calm, did not clutch at her the way they sometimes did other inmates. She allowed herself to be led along corridors and into the Governor's office. The air-conditioning was better in here. The stout, grey-haired woman behind the desk was Governor Marley and the others were her underlings and flunkies. Sylvia recognised one of the men as her advocate; she could never remember his name. She sat down where they told her to sit like a perfectly behaved automaton or slave. She had practised a serene expression in the mirror in preparation for this day or for days like these.

"Inmate Baron," the Governor said, "the time has come for the terms of your release to be explained to you."

"I'm being released?" Sylvia said.

The woman nodded slowly but she did not smile. "I'm afraid that our time together may be coming to an end far sooner than either of us could have anticipated. Ms Rose?"

One of the grey-clad wraiths cleared her throat. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, about Sylvia's age. "I'm Superintendent Lyncoln Rose of the Australian Federal Police," the woman said. "I've been authorised to rescind all of the charges against you, providing that you agree to a suite of probationary conditions. Most of these are fairly routine. You won't be able to obtain a passport or to leave the country for two years. You'll be barred from certain occupations. And for obvious reasons you'll be barred from the CIQ Sinocorp Protectorate at Yellowcake Springs."

"All right," Sylvia said. She didn't ever want to go back to Yellowcake Springs.

"One of the conditions of the charges being dropped is that you will fully assist the AFP in the continuing investigation into the criminal conduct of your ex-husband, David Baron, as well as that of his followers."

"I've told you people everything. More than once," Sylvia said.

“And your depositions have been most helpful,” Lyncoln Rose said, “but the AFP feels you could further aid our investigation by providing further information regarding the plans of the illegal organisation known as Misanthropos.”

“There is no Misanthropos beyond David and those two backstabbers,” Sylvia said. “I’ve told you people that a hundred times.”

“I’m not referring to Misanthropos members active in 2058. I’m referring to Misanthropos members active now.”

“It’s news to me.”

“Well,” Lyncoln Rose said, clasping her hands together. “Let’s just say that if there wasn’t a widespread organisation by the name of Misanthropos in 2058, then undoubtedly there is one today. Your role will be to infiltrate this organisation.”

“I’m not interested,” Sylvia said.

“These are our conditions,” Lyncoln Rose said. “You will be interested, and you will attend any and all Misanthropos meetings you are invited to attend.”

“You want me to spy for you?”

“We want you to provide information to assist us in our investigation, yes, but you’ll never need to set foot into a police station again, at least not regarding this matter.”

“You want to tag me somehow. An implant.”

“I’m afraid it’s a little more than an ordinary implant, Ms Baron.”

“Oh?”

“Oh. The device is a state of the art sensory capture array, or SCA. It will do more than chart your movements: it will capture each word you hear or speak, as well as everything you touch, taste or smell. Your entire sensory experience will be recorded and transmitted in real-time to the AFP.”

“What about my thoughts?”

“No, not your thoughts, but that’s the only privacy you’ll have.”

“And it’s on all the time? Even when I’m in the toilet or shower?”

The Superintendent smiled. “Correct.”

"Where does this sensory capture thing go?"

"Inside your skull. The SCA is very small, not much bigger than an ordinary implant."

"And if I try to have it removed you'll know anyway."

"Precisely, so don't try. It's very expensive."

"What if I say no?" Sylvia said. "I could stay in prison."

Lyncoln Rose smiled faintly. "Governor?"

"We can make things very difficult for you here at Symonston if we want to, Inmate Baron," the Governor said. "That space you call your cell can easily be modified to accommodate a further three inmates. We've got some nasty pieces of work due here within the next few weeks, and I'm pushed for somewhere to put them."

Sylvia turned to her advocate. He was picking at his fingers. "Can she do that?"

He looked up, distracted. "Yeah, sure."

"Aren't you supposed to be doing something for me?"

"I advocate on your behalf. Here I am, advocating."

Sylvia sighed and turned back to her jailers. "Fine, I'll do it," she said. "But what if the Misanthropos people suspect I'm working for you?"

"Then you'll have to allay their fears," Lyncoln Rose said. "You're an intelligent woman; develop a persona. *Be* a Misanthropos agent. We won't stand in your way, at least not initially."

"Not until you spring your trap. Then what?"

"Then you'll be free. The SCA will be removed."

"You promise, Ms Rose?"

"I give you my personal guarantee."

"Then I guess I'm doomed," Sylvia said.

## 2. The Grind

Rion's eyes started itching the moment they opened, and he sat up rubbing them. Damn hayfever: he'd have to steal another packet of antihistamines from the hospital. "I'm up," he said to the alarm and it desisted. The readout read 05:30 Tues Nov 8 2061: a work day like any other. His eyes were already bloodshot, particularly his left one. The face in the dirty bedside mirror looked hostile. If he saw himself on the street, he wouldn't mess with him.

Standing at the tiny window, he looked down over the city. His knees were sore and his back sorer. The city didn't look peaceful at this time of the morning, but it looked more peaceful than it did during the rest of the day. Thirty-one storeys high. He'd think about jumping, but the windows didn't open in Prince Towers. It would have been bad for business. You could always break the window if you were really desperate, but you'd have a hard time squeezing through that narrow gap. People had managed nonetheless.

He didn't much enjoy looking over the city like this, but it was part of his morning routine. He had to remind himself that no matter how grim things seemed for him here, it was better than East Hills. In a minute, once he'd reconciled himself to another day of the grind, he'd grab his soap and towel and head for the shower. But he had to find a reason to reconcile himself first.

"I'm still alive," he said aloud, but it wasn't enough. There had to be more to life than just living.

"I have my health." Debatable.

"I could get a promotion." From Orderly to Senior Orderly at Regal Perth Hospital: that was his career path. At least then he wouldn't have to burn bodies in the hospital crematoria any more, he supposed.

“I’m a free man,” he said. “I can come and go as I please.”  
Somebody thumped the wall from the other side. “Fucking SHUT UP,” the person said.

Rion got his soap and towel.

He liked to use the showers on the 33<sup>rd</sup> floor because they weren’t normally as busy as those on his own. It was mostly junkies up here and they didn’t like to shower. But the water was always cold when you wanted it warm and warm when you wanted it cold. He recognised a few less than friendly faces as he took his place in the queue. Someone farted. He shuffled along the threadbare carpet. The line at the women’s showers down the dimly-lit hall was far longer than the men’s.

The shower warden stamped his ticket when Rion reached the front of the queue. He saw naked, pasty flesh and brown, dirty water swirling between grimy toes. He pulled off his itchy vest and dropped it into the laundry chute and his underpants followed. Then he was under the intermittent spray, scrubbing furiously at his skin with soap and a bristly brush. In a matter of seconds his allocation of water had been used and another man made to occupy the space under the showerhead.

He towelled himself dry as best he could and dressed in a fresh pair of underpants and a vest from the pile. Back in his room, he put on his hospital coveralls before locking the room and making his way down the staircase. Only someone with a death-wish or lacking a sense of smell would risk the lift. There were chemheads on the stairs near the 23<sup>rd</sup> landing, passed out in their own filth. Management would evict them come 06:00 when the office opened. It was busy at ground level. The lights were brighter; the air, if not cleaner, then certainly better circulated.

He took his place in the canteen queue, picking up a tray and shuffling forward until he came to the canteen window. Here he was given two slightly stale bread rolls, a ladle’s worth of powdered tomato soup from a great cauldron, and a cup of the vilest coffee he’d ever had the misfortune to ingest.

An obese man with oily hair was in his regular place, so he sat down somewhere else. Someone had left half a roll on a tray, so he snatched it up and wolfed it down before anyone could protest.

His belly full, he finally remembered what gave him the strength to keep doing this: the grind.

"Because I get fed," he said to no one, and no one replied. He forced the black, bitter liquid down.

06:15 and it was time to leave for work. If you didn't sign in between 06:50 and 06:59, they'd dock you a whole hour and he couldn't afford that. His regular bus, the 55, passed Prince Towers at 06:21 if it was on time, which it often wasn't. But it was there just often enough that you couldn't bank on it being late. He'd have to move his bowels at the hospital after he signed in.

"Orion Saunders?" the young woman at reception called out as he hurried past. Could it be that she actually recognised him? Dumbstruck, he stopped and peered through the grubby window at her. "Mail for Orion Saunders," she said. She was barely out of her teens and yet her teeth were as bad as his. "That's you, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Gimme your card."

Fumbling in his wallet, he spilled a range of cards out onto the desk. The Hub-Nexus card, the most important one, was bright green. He handed it over. The receptionist ran the card through the scanner and gave it back to him with a small, official-looking envelope with a blue star in the corner. "Thanks," he said, stuffing his cards away.

Clutching the envelope, he pushed his way through the crowd onto the grey, pre-dawn street. Most of the streetlights here on Stirling Road were smashed and the ones that were intact shone weakly, barely illuminating the pavement. The intersection of Stirling and Edward just up ahead was choked with cars, the reddish glow of their fuel cells providing some colour to an otherwise drab canvas. If he got that promotion to Senior Orderly, he might be able to afford a second-hand

car himself, but judging by the congestion, it might not make much difference to his journey's duration anyway. As it stood, he could barely afford the bus fare.

06:20 and no sign of the bus crawling along Stirling Road as yet. A street vendor in a tiny, fluorescent orange booth that was hitched up to the back of a motorbike hawked his wares to the waiting commuters: "I've got drinks. I've got meds. I've got something to pick you up and put you down safely again. I've got mags. I've got apps. I've got some kinda special goggles that lets you see the stars through all the goop up there."

Rion coughed up some foul phlegm and spat it out. His lungs were itching like a bitch and the street vendor's voice was like the screech of an axle grinder. 06:23. He turned to the vendor. "Just quieten down, would you? Maybe then I'll buy something."

The creases in the vendor's face were caked with grime. "You look as if you could use a pick-me-up," he declared.

"I've got hayfever. It might be conjunctivitis."

"Hospital boy, yeah?" the vendor said, indicating to Rion's coveralls. "I'm sure they've got some cream for things like that in there."

"Yeah, but it costs plenty," Rion said. "More than I can afford."

"I hear you, brother. Let's see." The vendor rummaged around in a plastic tub. "No creams, no ointments, no nothing," he concluded. "Looks like it's gonna have to be a temporary fix. A booster'll take your mind off it for a coupla hours. Set you back two hundred."

"Two hundred?" Rion laughed. "You're going to have to lower your prices if you expect to sell anything in this neighbourhood. I can pay fifty."

"Fifty," the vendor spat. "I can't sell you a Band-Aid for that. Looks like you're gonna have to grin and bear it. Wait here, I got a better idea. You're right; people aren't buying any of this shit any more. You could branch out into a little side business yourself, if you catch my drift, hospital boy."

"Sure," Rion said. "I'll sleep on it. No, wait, I'll be sleeping in the street if I did that."

"Nah, I'm serious," the vendor insisted, lowering his voice. "Swipe me some meds. Pills, antibiotics, whatever you can lay your hands on. Smart young guy like you. All the trolley boys are doing it."

"I catch the 55 six days a week," Rion said. "How come I've never seen you before? This smells like a sting."

"I used to be over on Main Street but some hoods drove me out. This here's my new patch."

"Better suck on a booster yourself then. There's my bus."  
06:25.

"Wait up," the vendor said. "Here, take a booster. It's on the house."

Rion held out his hand and accepted the narrow tube. "You're not a cop?"

"If I was a cop, I'd wanna hope I had something more important to do than busting the lowlife trash spilling out of Prince Towers. They don't have a jail big enough."

"Prince Towers is our jail. Thanks for the tube," Rion said. He clambered onto the bus.

Things seemed to be rolling his way for once; he even scored a seat in the back corner. All right, so someone had vomited on the floor there.

"What you got there, mate?" a heavy-set man in a hard hat said, turning around to look at Rion.

"It's just a booster. Want to buy it?"

"Not that," the man said. "The letter. Go on, open it."

"I'm not ready yet," Rion replied. "Maybe I'll take the booster first." He looked at the envelope and the blue star on it. He knew then that it was something bad.

The man's eyebrows were black and bushy. His face was unshaven and swarthy. "How about I guess what it says, and if I'm right you give me the booster."

"What's my incentive?" Rion asked. The bus was moving again, but the street ahead was filled with klaxons and flashing lights. 06:32.

“If I’m wrong, I’ll give you my hard hat!”

Rion laughed. “Your hard hat. I guess I could sell it back to you.”

“That’s the spirit,” the man said. Bored, the other commuters looked on with moderate interest. “Ready?”

“Okay.”

“What you’ve got there in your hot little hands is a draft notice. You’ve been drafted into the Civilian Police Force. Cop that.”

His clammy fingers fumbled with the envelope. It wasn’t often you saw a letter on actual paper. There was his name, and yes, he had been drafted. He handed over the tube and stared at the text, the meaning dissolving into a long sequence of unintelligible symbols.

“Cheer up, buddy,” the man said. “Look, that was a dirty trick. See?”

Rion looked up; the man held up an identical letter, except for the name and address. “That’s your name, Marcel?”

“Yep. We even get to go to the same recruitment meeting. Here, take your booster back. I’m sorry I tricked you.” Marcel came and sat down next to Rion. He looked down at the vomit at Rion’s feet. “Whoa, did you do that?”

“No, but I could now.”

“Tube’ll make you feel better. Mind if I do half?”

“Take the whole thing.”

Marcel opened the valve and sucked down some of the odourless gas. “Mmm, yeah. Your turn, Orion.”

“Rion.” But he took the proffered tube and, after imbibing what remained of the booster, he felt a little better.