

1. Welcome to Yellowcake Springs

Sylvia Baron was dreaming, but not without assistance – she was in Controlled Dreaming State. Her body was strapped to a soft chair in her office. There was a veil over her eyes and a skull cap on her head, allowing the CDS console to interface with her brain. Sylvia was working on a new 3V 'vert for the town. In her dream, she floated high above Yellowcake Springs.

“Play the opening,” she said.

The words *Welcome to Yellowcake Springs!* flashed up in a gaudy yellow font in the sky over the town’s main gate. Was that exclamation mark really needed? She’d discuss it with her supervisor Peters later.

“Welcome to Yellowcake Springs, the first of CIQ Sinocorp’s Complete Communities to be opened on Australian shores,” the voice-over said in a smooth and comforting tone. A corny tune played in the background. “Yellowcake Springs is a Green Nuclear initiative fuelled by yellowcake uranium mined right here in Western Australia,” the voice-over said. Now the perspective zoomed in on the reactor complex. “These are the engines of the future. Nuclear energy – clean, efficient and one hundred percent carbon neutral. Here we harness the power of the atom, the quiet worker!”

A little overzealous, Sylvia thought. That last phrase could go.

She knew the script by heart – she had written it – so she concentrated on the visuals instead. The camera hovered at a respectful distance while the reactors’ main features were pointed out. After all, the potential residents weren’t going to be living *inside* the reactor complex. The realism was supreme. There were a hundred finishing touches: a coach load of new residents arriving for a guided tour; the gentle breeze buffeting

the leaves on the trees; the sun emerging from behind a cloud as the voice-over honed in on a key selling point. They had done something to the smell, too – was it pine? Something earthy and clean, as though the reactors had emerged from the earth through some organic process.

“This is the two kilometre exclusion zone, known as the Red Zone,” the voice-over said as the perspective panned out. Aside from the tree-lined drive at the entrance to the reactor complex, the terrain was barren and windswept. “Inside the Red Zone, you’ll receive no more radiation than on a summer’s day. The reactors aren’t merely safe: they’re infallible. Fourth generation reactors render a meltdown a statistical impossibility.” In actual fact that was a white lie. But the chances of a meltdown were remote. That word ‘infallible’ though; should they hedge their bets a little more? Would ‘virtually infallible’ seem like an admission of vulnerability? Peters would have to be the judge of that.

Zooming back beyond the fence of the Red Zone – over a checkpoint complete with helmeted guards, their rifles discreetly hidden – the perspective swung around to take in some of the sights and sounds of the Amber Zone. “This is the five kilometre exclusion zone,” the voice-over glided. “The Amber Zone is the industrial and administrative hub of the community.” Down to street level, they were fleetingly placed among the workers bustling to and fro. Lost for a moment, Sylvia didn’t hear a word of the spiel about the prospect of new residents joining the ranks of the technological elite.

Next on the agenda was the Green Zone, where Sylvia and her husband David lived. “This is the residential area,” the voice-over said. “This is where you and your family, Yellowcake Springs’ newest initiates, will live. Here you will be more than just valued employees. You will be part of the CIQ Sinocorp family. An inclusive family, made up of citizens of every nation and creed, each member firmly committed to the principles of industry, harmony and equality. In Yellowcake Springs, you’ll have nothing to fear.”

There was no need to mention the defensive perimeter. The fact that the residents themselves would be obliged to join the ranks of the security force was small print, unmentionable at this first pitch stage. Sylvia disliked guns, but what she detested most of all was the compulsory 'Preparedness' training that chewed up four weekends a year. It seemed like more. There were other unmentionables, such as the fact that new residents would be required to submit to implantation as part of their citizenship ceremony. It was for their own safety, of course – if a citizen was abducted or otherwise became lost, then the security forces would be able to track them using their implants.

She paid scant attention to the rest of the 'vert, her mind reliving the previous night. A hard, angular face – not her husband's – swam into view. His name was Rion. A sun-drenched beach, a secluded lagoon. It was all horribly clichéd, but what did it matter? Their tryst had been impossible, unreal. And yet Rion existed; of this she felt sure.

Years of Controlled Dreaming State use had taught her to differentiate between human users and computer generated simulacra. The bots were getting better every year, and one of these days someone would design one that really did behave like a human being. These wraiths roamed CDS as its native population, making human users feel that they were not alone down here in the depths of their own minds. But the bots betrayed their unreality in a myriad of ways, from their clumsy pick-up lines to their brilliant but dead eyes. What had Rion said?

"I want to meet you for real." And then, if that hadn't been clear enough, he'd added: "Outside of CDS." For real? Was this not real? She had said something to that effect and he had shaken his head impatiently. Bots were never impatient.

A clumsily constructed excuse later and Sylvia had disconnected. *For real?* What had she looked like in that scenario, anyway? Still a bronzed goddess with straight blonde hair and perfect legs? And what about him? What would he look like in the real world? Her life – all of this – was boring,

but it was safe. And Rion, as attractive as he had been, had seemed anything but safe.

The 'vert was ending.

Waking from Controlled Dreaming State was a process of unravelling, of unwrapping. First there was the sensation of corporeality, of being strapped into the chair. The veil over her eyes and the rhythm of her breath. You couldn't rush it; awareness came slowly.

"Peters said he wants to see you," her workmate Tiffany Cramer said the moment Sylvia opened her eyes. "He said it was important."

Sylvia shuffled downstairs, still groggy from her morning spent in CDS.

2. The House of Orion

His name was Orion, but nobody knew that. To others, he was Rion, and if he ever had to explain the unusual spelling, he put it down to the fact that his mother – the only family he'd ever had – had been a poor speller. And Rion's mother had been dead a long time. Rion wasn't sure what year he'd been born, but it was probably '35 or '36. If anyone was to ask him – no one ever had – Rion would have told them that his birthday was the 8th of August 2035, which made him twenty-two.

Rion lived – if you could call this living, which he did – in a dilapidated husk of a house on Fielding Street, in the town of East Hills. Once, this region had been known as the Wheatbelt, but now that the crops had failed for the last time it was just the Belt.

Fire had scorched the fibro cladding of the house at some unspecified point in the past, blackening the exterior, and while there was no reason why he couldn't have chosen somewhere in a better state of repair, Rion lingered here. He would certainly have to move on before the rain came, if it was ever coming, as there were several skylights that had never appeared on any floor plan. The windows were all broken, although some had been boarded up. The outer walls were dotted with scars, like an acne-pocked face; it was a surface that told a story of needless, desperate violence.

Presumably a young family had once lived here, for there were traces of them everywhere: a headless plastic doll in the backyard, a child's cot in one of the bedrooms, faded scribble on the walls throughout the house. Most likely the family had moved away when the situation in this town became untenable, but Rion was living proof that what constituted an untenable situation was a matter of opinion.

What bothered Rion most about this particular hovel was not the fallen roof in the lounge room. Nor was it the termite-infested decking around the house, through which one's foot might plunge unexpectedly. No, what bothered him most was the stench of the rotten carpets, black with filth. The smell was worst in the heat of the day, when the rusted shell of the air-conditioner grinned mockingly at him from the corner of the master bedroom. It was a smell to which he'd never become accustomed, and it'd almost been enough to drive him out on several occasions. And yet here he was.

There was only one thing of value in the house and that, he had brought with him: the Controlled Dreaming State console he had stolen from the police station. He remembered that night well, the night East Hills severed its last link with lawful society. The local militia and its firebrand leader Keith Gillam had been locked in a murderous cycle of raid and reprisal with the police. But this had been a raid that went unexpectedly well, so well that the police had been driven out of town entirely. It now seemed that the turreted façade had been only that: an illusion. But illusions had long prevailed in this town, all throughout Rion's feral childhood.

One memory that lingered with perfect clarity was that of the policeman's skull cannoning against the concrete floor in one of the holding cells, and the bloody foam that came from his trembling lips thereafter. Rion had no proof that the man had died, that he himself might be termed a murderer of the worst kind. But there could not have been an escape for the policeman that night. Gillam's men had not gone quite so far as to stake the corpses in front of the burned-out police station, but the idea had been mooted.

If Rion could reconcile himself to his actions at all, it was only in that by killing or at least mortally wounding the policeman, whose name he'd never been able to ascertain, he had gained access to the console he would use to leave this place forever. He had to keep it hidden of course. Gillam and his militia - of which Rion was theoretically a member - did not allow individuals to own private property. Rion kept the

console hidden in a cavity beneath the rotting floorboards in the laundry. The console ran on batteries or mains electricity, but there hadn't been mains electricity in East Hills for years and he was running desperately short of batteries.

And so Rion's Controlled Dreaming State ventures were brief and to the point. His purpose in CDS was not escapism, but actual *escape*. He had a plan. He needed a benefactor, preferably a rich woman. There were hundreds if not thousands of such women somnambulating their way through the dreamscape, and that was in the Western Australian network alone. That was how he'd met Sylvia Baron.

She was beautiful, of course, but then so was everyone in CDS. He himself had been tall, swarthy and muscular; all the things he wasn't in real life. But Rion wasn't vain, merely practical. No one would want him if he didn't present himself in a certain light. And so he had reclined with her on a fantasy beach, doing his best to seem relaxed and agreeable. But every moment spent was precious battery life wasted. He could not truly relax here, and that was when he'd made his mistake. You didn't ask to meet someone for real, not this early in a relationship. But Rion knew where to find Sylvia Baron online. He'd try to make amends tonight.

It was overcast and blustery outside but it did not look, to his trained eye, like rain. They would need some soon; the riverbed was dry and his tank almost empty. Food was another issue. Yesterday he'd eaten a can of tomato soup and some dry, expired noodles, but he'd left precious little for himself today. He had planned on going down to the co-op this morning and asking for a handout, but now the thought held little appeal. There was still half a can of spaghetti on the bench that the ants hadn't gotten to, amidst the debris.

Spooning the food into his mouth, Rion swallowed without relish. He felt dirty and unwell. Could he face another day of staring into space, of the piles of detritus around him? Rion passed the now-empty can from hand to hand. There were hours to fill and little to fill them with, but he was accustomed to that. Sometimes he went rummaging through abandoned

houses, just because he could, but anything of value had long since been taken. The chances of finding something trade-worthy were slim.

This was not what motivated him.

What Rion was trying to do as he stood in musty bedrooms and dust-choked kitchens was to recreate the life that had existed here in the old days. The end of mains electricity meant that items that would once have been worth something were now so much landfill. Televisions, computers – junk. What Rion wanted was photos.

These still lives were all he had. He could recreate the decade of his infancy and imagine that some of these photos depicted his family. In these images he was searching, not only for his dead mother, but for the father, brothers and sisters he'd never had. And Rion wanted more than just an immediate family; he wanted grandparents, cousins and friends, even if he did have to scavenge them from the houses of the departed.

Over the course of the last decade, Rion had accumulated more than six thousand photographs. At one time he'd collected pin-up boards to display them. He liked to keep the images in view around him, in every room, but this had eventually proven too cumbersome. Moving was torturous. So the pin-up boards had gone and he'd moved onto photo albums. Rion now had more than fifty of these, and he could see the day when he'd have to start culling the photos he didn't need to make room for those he found on his jaunts. The albums were piled up in his photo room on a tarpaulin. He had another tarp with which to cover the albums in the unlikely event of heavy rain.

Today Rion was working on Family Holidays 3.

This was a thematic collection, arranged by family and, if he could tell, by destination. Much of the album depicted domestic adventures, in mostly coastal locations across the country. But toward the end there were scenes from overseas holidays. Bali was common, as were other popular Asian destinations, but there was also England, the U.S. and Europe. Using these images, Rion had taught himself a little geography,

which had been supplemented by reference to a World Atlas that tended toward disintegration when he turned the brittle pages. What Rion was trying to do currently was to rearrange Family Holidays 3 in such a way that it became an 'Around the World' trip. Ignoring the fact that different families were depicted in the images, Rion could imagine that the entire collection had been snapped in one glorious year, which he had decreed to be 2035, the nominal year of his own birth.

Hours passed before Rion was fully satisfied. At dusk he sat holding the only picture of his mother he had. It showed her as a young woman, being presented with an award for athletics. She was smiling brightly. It was a clipping from an old-style print newspaper, and although the newsprint was nearly illegible now, he could just make out her name: Lisa Matth...the rest was obscured. Rion had never known what killed her. He'd been about five years-old at the time. But he remembered her lying in a sweat-soaked bed, begging him for water. But even then clean water had been hard to come by. He remembered her face, her pleading, and now all he had of her was this. He had looked at this scrap of paper so often that he knew it was close to coming apart in his hands. Carefully, he returned it to its album.