

Zod, the Electric Beaver

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-- Chapter 1 --

When Zod powered on for the day, something was wrong. Their tail seemed to be malfunctioning. It moved okay, but couldn't thwack properly. As their job at dam maintenance requires repeatedly thwacking things, this really was an untenable situation. Zod also thought about how they'd been messing up a bit lately, and this might be the last straw. They really didn't want a demotion back to Gnawing On Things, where the demotion would be embarrassing enough.

Fearing a return to mindless drudgery, they reported an "unspecified" error to management and engaged their drive gears, trundling off towards town just as the sun rose. A mile or so down the road they made sure nobody was looking and detoured off onto an untidy lane that headed into the forest. They turned left and on to the garage where Desil lived like a hermit. Zod was hoping Desil could get it fixed for them on the sly before the electric company found out. They had traded favors with Desil in the past; Desil was pretty good with a hammer and a soldering iron, but occasionally needed something thwacked. Desil was also known for keeping their mouth shut. In fact, the two got along together so well because they were both a little broody and didn't like being out in public any more than necessary.

Unfortunately, Desil wasn't in. In fact, it didn't seem that they hadn't been around for a while. Their tools were all in place as if it were time to get to work, but Desil was seemingly replaced with the thin layer of dust that quickly settles here and there and a light breeze from a partially open window. Very unlike Desil, Zod pondered as they scanned the garage for some sort of clue.

--Chapter 2 --

The clue came in the form of a dirty cigar butt barely visible in the shadows. An ordinary person wouldn't have seen it, even while sweeping the area to get rid of clues. But Zod being electric, low light was only a matter of setting their optics. It was a decent clue as well since smoking was passe and somewhat restricted. They engaged their nasal circuits to maximum and uploaded the odor to memory.

There were only a few shops that sold cigars in town ~ the licensed tobacconist and a few convenience stores with a known under the counter black market. With this in mind they set all but their olfactory sensors back to default made their way back on to the Dam Avenue cobbles and through the old town wall.

They tried to move quietly on the stones while they passed through the town gate. Then Zod had to cross his first hurdle: the main repair shop where the likes of Zod was supposed to have gone for repairs. Zod definitely didn't want to be seen since theoretically that is where should be headed and didn't want to raise any eyebrows. Thankfully it was early morning and Zod was able to slip past East Wall and on down the lane in the shadows until they passed the shop.

Breathing an electronic sigh of relief, Zod continued down the avenue past the block of supply shops that supported the garage. They weren't likely to be noted as out of ordinary since Electric Beavers were known to be trustworthy, and were frequently sent into town for spare parts to do on-site repairs.

Thankfully at the very end of the row of buildings was an auto-wash at the corner of Second Street. With all the dust, Zod hadn't had a chance to get clean, and could sense the grime on their body. It was even partially

obscuring their vision goggles. Looking back, it's amazing they saw that cigar, even if it were mostly by smell at first. Grime-free and a little lube later, they used their wing mirror to peek out the curtains. Gleaming in the morning sun, they made sure the coast was clear before rolling back into the street.

Looking around and needing some place to start, they pondered briefly for a direction, then Zod folded up their wind mirror and turned left onto Second Street and headed South across the river onto River Avenue and over to Main Street where the tobacconist lay.

--Chapter 3 --

The tobacconist was larger than one might think for a dirty garrison-like town whose original existence relied on maintaining the dam, with its hydroelectric power and flood control. But it was also the only town for miles. Between function and location it managed to maintain regional authority and a few of the niceties that came with it.

In slunk Zod, mostly ignored as usual. They'd been here before after all, just on "official" trips. In other words, Chris, their Human manager, was too lazy to come to town themselves. Zod browsed around casually, trying to not "look casual". The other customers bought the ruse and quickly returned to their ashtrays full of burnt leaves and wishes of whatever world they were imagining. Zod increased the sensitivity of their olfactory circuits and groped for a familiar smell of the butt laying in Desil's garage rising above the haze. Alas, they couldn't capture anything, at least not strong enough to investigate further.

Quietly Zod crept out the door with a head as hazy as the air they just left.

Hoping to clear their thoughts and sensors they headed back up the road to the greenery of the town square to ponder in the early morning sunlight that blesses this part of the world.

--Chapter 4 --

After a short while of basking to mentally recharge, and with still no direction to head towards, Zod wandered through the park to Main Street, across from Government House. Chalky white and unadorned it didn't seem to have a sense of direction either. Uninspired, they flipped an electronic coin and headed North for a change.

There wasn't too else much to North Main Street beyond the park, just a bank facing the Northern end of Government House and a row of small shops just beyond that had attached themselves to the old city wall like so many barnacles. Zod, needing to get out a few credits to pay his way around town, addressed the bank, whose decorative features and rare mosaics were the exact opposite of its cross-street neighbor. Entering the lobby revealed a temple of opulence reflecting the treasures buried within its vaults. Zod stepped inside, overwhelmed, like every patron is, by the sheer size and appointment of the building. Tricks of light and architecture made it seem to be even larger inside than outside.

Recovering from the awe they felt every time, Zod headed to an available teller to load some credits from their account. Not too much, as usual, as because as trustworthy as Sentients were known for, there was always a sense of mistrust towards them, and it's best to not draw attention to oneself. But while standing there they swore they caught a whiff of that cigar stink, just not strong enough to recognize its source. Even still, they

tried to upload everyone they could see into their memory banks before moving on out the door.

--Chapter 5 --

Zod dallied outside the bank for a few minutes in the way one pretends to tie their shoes. But the whiff was gone, and since etiquette said one wasn't supposed to smoke in public areas it wasn't likely to reappear unless they got close enough to smell the person's clothes again. Turning left along North Wall, they wondered what to do next while they perused the Barnacles for useful trinkets ~ and perhaps a few useless ones as well. Zod didn't have a lot of space in their tiny apartment, but it was infinitely more than the barracks they'd get relegated to were they to get demoted. Silently that thought gave them a much stronger sense of purpose, perhaps even greater than finding their friend. But since the two thoughts cannot exist without the other, they replaced such thoughts with determination instead. So on they pushed.

Lost in their thoughts that they nearly ran into one of their co-workers, another Thwacker named Yot. As Zod really didn't need to be seen, they ducked into the nearest stall to hide. Unfortunately this did raise a few eyebrows as it was a women's' "delicates" store and therefore had nothing even remotely electric beaver shaped. Zod stammered a few apologies and thankfully Yot had moved East on down the avenue before they emerged from the store. East went to the garage, which they need to avoid even more as the doors were open for for the day.

--Chapter 6 --

Where North and West Walls met Zod found a convenience store, stocked with the bits and bobs and brick-a-brack that don't warrant a trip down to the shops along River Avenue. They used a general oil pen as an excuse to quite literally sniff around. And with the barest of hints of a cigar in the air, they heard snippets of a conversation between the patron in the store and the counter person.

"Have you learned anything?" the counter person asked with an aura of importance.

"Not yet," came the reply above the noise of the refrigeration units, "anyone that ought to know anything isn't talking."

"That's unfortunate. I'm getting pressured, you know. Have you tried the Sketch Antique Shops?"

"I can't even get them to talk to me."

"What about the other leads?" the counter person asked.

"Not yet, but they're at least actively working"

"Tell them to keep at it, then. We need the Semprini."

With nothing else to go on at this point they bought the pen and started to head towards the Sketch Antique Shops along South Wall towards River Avenue, the West-East artery through town. From there they could decide whether to turn left onto River or continue along the Walls as the ways to the opposite corner of town were roughly equidistant.

Going all the way down to South Wall seemed to be the better choice since it was mostly industrial buildings and dilapidated Human walk-ups, which at this point were a lower risk. While Zod might get a sideways glance, it wouldn't be like tripping lightly down one of the main roads through town. They didn't want to answer the uncomfortable questions, such as why they weren't at work if they were neither at the garage nor on a scheduled day off. Even Sentients were expected to behave like robots.

Several people seemed like they could use something whacked, but Zod purposely ignored them. A broken thwacker would raise too many questions indeed. Thankfully nobody called for assistance.

--Chapter 7 --

The Antique Shops were indeed sketchy, so they found. Lots of small people in small shops selling small things that had no discernible utility. Looking around, Zod realized that the other patrons really didn't want to be seen, and a dozen small beady eyes were watching them intently from the shadows. The shopkeepers definitely didn't look like they felt like Zod should have been there. Hurriedly thinking, they remembered that empty tin of Semprini which they'd seen in Desil's shop was apparently important and could only have come from a place like this.

Sticking their head into the closest shop they asked for Semprini to an untrusting stare. After a few moments consideration the shopkeeper asked who they were.

"I'm a friend of Desil's and he's gone missing. I think it has to do with Semprini." Zod replied.

"Well maybe you are their friend, and maybe you're not," the shopkeeper said. "Lots of people asking lots of questions lately."

"To tell the truth," Zod said, "I'm a Dam Thwacker like my livery says, and I have an issue only Desil can fix", Zod replied, and it seems like Semprini is central to their absence"

After a few moments consideration, the shopkeeper pointed their small arm to another small shop a few stalls down, with a "try them" grunt of dismissal.

The second shop was equally warm to the stranger, which was not so much. The other customers scurried away, and the shopkeeper asked the same questions, to which Zod gave the same answers.

The shopkeeper did soften just a little when asked about Desil, and offered to sell Zod Semprini at an obviously marked up price. But Zod paid it anyway and stashed it in a pocket while asking if they'd seen Desil recently. This invited a questioning stare, like the shopkeeper still wasn't sure it was safe to say anything to them

After a pregnant pause, the shopkeeper said that they haven't seen Desil lately, but a few weeks ago they came in looking nervous and looking around furtively as though they were being followed. They bought some Semprini and hurried off. Beyond that, the shopkeeper either didn't know or was unwilling to say. Probably the latter.

Treachery, Zod thought, and obviously tied to Desil's absence.

--Chapter 8 --

Semprini was a big clue, and more than likely the mystery cigar person was somehow tied into it, Zod thought. However, it wasn't immediately useful data unless Semprini was found "in the wild" as it were, or the cigar person were found, so they filed it away to memory for the time being. But at the least, they knew where Desil's Semprini came from, even if Zod didn't know what it was used for. That must have been another piece to the puzzle.

Unsure of where to go next, Zod decided to head back to Desil's to figure out what Semprini was used for. The trick was getting there in the middle of the day. Heading down Dam Avenue was a sure-fire way to get caught and asked unanswerable questions. Then they remembered that there

was a hidden path that led from the back of 'Desil's garage that looked like it roughly headed towards town, and had to intersect with North Road somewhere.

It had to be a hard to spot path somewhere North of town and in the woods, or it would have been spotted and mapped years ago. And the best way to get there seemed to be waltzing straight up Main Street instead of going all the way around the walls again. Just act naturally, Zod thought, and hoped that none of the dam workers needed to go to Government House. The bank they could explain, since normally the beavers had to pay for repairs out of pocket and get reimbursed, or billed if it were an emergency.

--Chapter 9 --

Off Zod went, following South Wall to Main, then turned North with a waltz and an electronic prayer in their head. So far, so good, they thought.

So far, not so good, Zod realized. Connie was in the town square, and there wasn't an easy way to get past them without being seen. Thinking quickly they decided to just ignore Connie, and come up with some plausible deniability if necessary.

And it was sadly necessary as Connie had spotted them and with a wave and a "Hey Zod!". Then they were being homed in on like a mouse spotted by a raptor. At least Connie was on the concrete team, who concrete pours sometimes had to be whacked during maintenance. If there were one good thing, they had different shifts so Connie wouldn't know if Zod were supposed to be in for repairs or just had a day or two off. Resigned to their fate, Zod responded, trying to not sound dejected.

“Hey Connie, how’s your day going? It certainly looks like a nice one for the park.”

“It really is. I have the day off, so I thought a little R&R at the park would be ideal. Closer to the river than one would like, but I guess one can’t have everything. How about you?”

“I had to come to town to pick up a few things,” Zod didn’t exactly lie. “I could really use a day or so off too, so I’m a bit jealous.”

“Do you have any time later?” Connie asked. I was thinking about hitting one of the power banks once the sun starts to set.”

Zod replied, “unfortunately not. I need to get back to my apartment as soon as I can.”

“Okay,” Connie said. “Maybe a rain check?”

“Maybe. I have a full plate right now and need to keep moving. Unfortunately it’s going to use up most of my down time.”

“Good luck then.”

They really could use it, Zod thought to themselves as they turned back to the street to continue on their way. And they hoped running into Connie wouldn’t cause problems later. Scanning ahead they could see several more coworkers, so it was better to backtrack down to River Avenue and follow the walls after all.

This time of day found River Avenue at its busiest, which was mostly a good thing. Slipping silently into the crush of people doing their afternoon shopping, they were able to blend in by pretending to shop too.

That way they could use their plausible deniability again and keep everyone on the same story. Just don’t stare at the carrots too long, they told themselves.

Zod had to quickly step into another shop, which thankfully wasn't full of lingerie, to avoid yet another coworker. It seemed like it was raining dam workers, they thought, forgetting that a lot of them had their "weekend" today. At least this shop was useful, if not a bit risky, as it was full of upgrades. It would be nice to get that infrared they thought to themselves, and perhaps when this ordeal was over it would be a nice treat. Zod definitely felt like they deserved it, but didn't want to risk the time nor chance of getting caught that it would take. As unobtrusively as possible they made sure the coast was clear before they left the shop and returned to their journey.

Thankfully they made it back to West Wall without incident. The crowds were turning into clumps gathering around grocery stalls full of the harvest of the day, and with turning North along the wall Zod breathed an electric sigh of relief.

West Wall was pretty sparsely populated for the hour, which was a bit odd but at that point they'd take any boost they could. On further inspection, however they saw someone thwacking the dust out of a well-used rug. Unfortunately there was no choice but to go right pass them. Backtracking again was definitely off the table.

"Hey", they called out to Zod. "Can you give me a hand with this? It's a lot of thwacking".

"I'm sorry," Zod pretended to not hear, "could you repeat that?"

"I could use some help thwacking, and hoped you could give a person a hand"

Zod thought about this for a moment, pondering helping them, but realized they'd have to fess up about their tail. "I'm sorry, I was doing some shopping and now I have an error that requires the garage"

"That's unfortunate. Does the alarm give you any clue?"

“Unfortunately it’s a generic error so I need them to run a diagnostic”.

“And I need to get to the shop before it closes,” Zod added guiltily

“Good luck then.”

“Thanks,” said Zod, “it’s been one of those days.”

Zod trundled off, glad that the Human hadn’t asked for their name.

The livery was bad enough. Zod didn’t like making excuses, so they at least tried to have as many truths in them as possible. They really did want to help the person, but they were definitely on a tight schedule, especially as they had some kind of tail error that they secretly hoped was just software.

If they thought it would work, Zod would go so far as to try a tail upgrade if they knew whether or not the existing one would be scanned at the shop. However, it was risky and wouldn’t necessarily help Desil.

Maybe if nothing else pans out.

The rest of West Wall passed without and further incidents, and they quickly passed the corner store and got to North Wall and the Barnacle shops. Zod looked around furtively for anyone they knew, and it looked like they might actually make it without incident this time.

--Chapter 11 --

Their luck being what it was, Zod had to quickly duck down First Street, full of offices for and to feed the government on one side, and the stores to feed the trappings of power on the other. Suits don’t actually grow on trees after all, especially stuffed ones. But they were pretty sure it was Chris, their managers, that they spotted along with a shift supervisor, and being seen by them would be pretty much the worst thing that could happen.

Not that First was much better as it was largely populated by auto-butlers

scurrying back and forth with freshly pressed clothes and unsigned forms, so an electric beaver, even a clean one, stood out a bit particularly in their livery. Fortunately someone had dropped a folder so Zod scooped it up to look like they had some reason to be there.

Unsure if it was a good thing to find or not, a glance at the folder seemed to be draft legislation that would give all control of Semprini and through that control of Sentients. Curious for something they'd never heard of before today, Zod thought, curious indeed. But, it was not something they could peruse at the moment, since the current task was Not Being Seen. They quickly imaged the pages just in case. To be safe, Zod trundled down the block, extending their wing mirror just in case their bosses turned down the street.

Which they were, of course, but they dawdled all way back at the street corner. However, the pressing thing was that they'd been spotted by an auto-butler, who was staring at the file Zod was holding...

"Hey there," said a red auto-butler, "that folder, where did you get it?"

"I found it up there on the street, I was hoping to figure out who it belongs to," Zod replied with a questioning look.

"Do you know what it is? It belongs to Fandango, part of the Sentient ministry and I dropped it".

"Something about Semprini,"Zod said, "but I don't know what that is. Can you tell me?"

"Did you read it?"

"No, didn't have the chance, You?" Zod technically told the truth.

"Something about Sentients," the auto-butler said, "It's not my job. However, I do need to take it to the office".

“Here you go then” handing the folder to the auto-butler, who took the folder and rolled back up the street.

Curious, thought Zod. It was hard to say if the butler didn't care, or just wasn't capable of caring. As a Sentient robot the idea of the latter disturbed them greatly. After all, the idea of actual automatons threatened their very existence. Zod thought the like had been banned well before their time, when the Sentients had proved their mettle and acquired some rights.

Now was not the time for analyzing, however, as the manager was on the move again. Zod, not seeing any other option jumped into a door marked “34”. They were getting pretty good at this, they laughed to themselves.

--Chapter 12--

The door turned out to be a hallway between First Street and Government Alley, which separated the offices from Government House. It was unoccupied so Zod crept into a dark corner and and mostly powered down into silence as they considered their next steps. They really would prefer to get North of town while there was still daylight to search for that path, but that didn't seem to be in the cards. The alley would surely get them back to North Wall, but at this time of day the chances of remaining anonymous were even less than on First Street if they were noticed. It was the land of Humans and auto-butlers and nothing else. But First was also looking like career suicide and if they didn't get fired they would demoted. There there wasn't much else for a unemployed Thwacker to do other than trying to freelance jobs as often as possible, which might keep them powered on but little else.

There was a small crack in the door that Zod could see from their hidden alcove so they tried to peer through that while increasing the gain on their audio circuits to listen for trouble. Good timing too, since Zod recognized the voice of Chris, which was getting louder along with a second, syrupy voice that could only be a lobbyist. Zod quickly powered down everything with a light just as that sound crossed the threshold into the hallway.

With the sensor gain so high, the conversation was garbled as it echoed through the room, but the familiar ring of Semprini came across several times. Thankfully it didn't sound like they'd asked the auto-butler what happened to the folder despite the crease in it, so they were probably in the clear there. Eventually, the footsteps started to get muffled and the familiar creak of an old staircase told Zod that they'd dodged a proverbial bullet. But Semprini had come up yet again.

Zod powered back up and decided that going back up First Street was slightly less risky than braving the alley, particularly since they had a hunch their boss would be going that way after leaving the offices here. Engaging their drive wheels they tried to slip into the foot traffic as inconspicuously as possible. "Take two," they said to themselves.

--Chapter 13--

The street seemed busier than before, which was a mixed blessing for Zod; both easier to hide and easier to get spotted at the same time. They decided that going back to North Wall with an air of authority, like they had a place to be, was the best bet. And it seemed to work, since people were paying less attention to them than on the way down since there were a number of other Sentients in unknown livery. In fact, they managed to

make it all the way up to North Wall without any major incidents other than spotting that auto-butler again, which they were able to avoid.

It was end of shift for several Sentient groups and the end of the day for most Humans, so the Barnacles were busier than earlier. But it looked like nobody from their dam shift had arrived yet, which seemed like it was finally a break for Zod. They moved as furtively as possible towards Main Street and the North Gate, the only way out of town in this direction.

Amazingly, they made it without too much fuss. The one or two people that might have recognized them was too busy browsing the shops and not across the way into oncoming foot traffic.

--Chapter 14--

Quietly Zod slipped across North Wall, through the gate, and passed the jumble of shops that couldn't afford in-town rent. There just wasn't a market for day-old produce and so-called magic amulets. Still, Zod thought about an amulet before their logic circuits cut back in. They continued traveling up the road, watching for anything in the shadows that might look like that path they desperately needed to find. Desil's place was after all where the story began and the only place to start putting together the clues.

The road was paved, although the characteristic cobbles of the town were giving way to asphalt. Zod wondered what Whacking team this was but they surely lived somewhere else than the dam camps. They knew the River Avenue Whackers who were responsible for the streets to the East of Main Street lived on the other side of the dam just off the road, even if the cobbles went all the way to the river weir. River Avenue wound it's way up the hill and past the dam, continuing quite some way according to the dam maps. But it was too bad they hadn't tried to download North Road that they were on, as it was called, after it left the town walls.

So far, the space around the road was large, there was nothing that looked like a pass through the grass, and the light was starting to fade. Zod hoped they spotted something soon before they had to figure out where to spend the night because even with night vision, they couldn't see in pitch black. Plus, they realistically only had one day left before they were actually missed at roll call. If they couldn't figure out what Semprini was by then, they really weren't sure what they could do next.

Eventually the road narrowed and the trees loomed. The road was still paved but the shadows grew larger as they went along. They started seeing things that looked like trails but nothing remotely stood out, even after they engaged their low-light optics. And of course it didn't help that the so-called "night vision" was far more granular than daylight. Maybe that infrared upgrade would have come in handy after all, but there wasn't time to be wistful.

Passing the ring road, which was narrow and not very road-like, Zod found a section of road that looked like it was in the middle of a repair job. That meant that Thwackers might be nearby, and might even be able to help. They stopped and listened for the sound of machinery.

There was indeed the low hum of a petrol engine coming from the general area of the ring road. Zod followed the sound as quietly as possible, until they reached a clearing just off the road that they could see through the bushes. A generator stood in the middle, surrounded by several Thwackers getting recharged.

--Chapter 15--

Zod backtracked to the ring road and followed it until they found the actual entrance to the clearing. Then they opted to enter the area making a normal amount of noise so as to not startle anyone. Some of the bots had already powered down when they rolled in.

"Hello," said Zod, "I'm a Dam Thwacker and am running late getting back. I heard there's a shortcut trail nearby and was hoping you could help."

"Lo," one of them replied. I'm Toll, "but didn't get your name."

”“A friend of mine has gone missing, and I thought maybe he went up this way. I wasn’t able to find him in town. He’s been gone for a little while and the trail, as it were, has gone cold.”

“Who’s your friend, then. Maybe we can point you in the right direction, but it depends.”

“Desil.” Zod replied. “I think the other end of that trail I’m looking for must be near their garage. Last anyone heard they were out buying Semprini, whatever that is, a week or so ago.”

“Hmm...” said Toll, “maybe we can help but you’ll never get anywhere at this hour, even with night vision. There’s an extra power port if you’re hungry.”

In truth, Zod was a little hungry. They hadn’t charged since the previous night and preferred to top off whenever possible just in case. They plugged in and switched into sentry mode since they were in an unknown environment with unknown Sentients. Mostly they just didn’t want anybody in their personal space.

--Chapter 16--

Zod powered back up as soon as their light sensors were triggered, feeling re-energized. Several of the road team were coming online as well, but it would be a little while before their shift started. Zod looked around hoping that they’d get the assistance they need.

Toll roused as the sun peeked over the horizon. “Okay Zod, we talked among ourselves last night and have decided to help you, but only because we like Desil. When it’s important, they fix us up better than the garage ever thought.”

“Same here.” responded Zod, “I came looking for them because I need a repair that would be embarrassing, to say the least, on the job site.”

Zod also realized that they were talking to the job supervisor.

“Well I won’t ask then. Do you have any clue?”

Only that it has to do with whatever Semprini is. It keeps popping up but I haven’t found a clue to it’s purpose,” Zod said.

“Ah yes, I’ve heard of that too, but same as you just in passing,” Toll replied. “Anyway let’s go find that trail. I think we know roughly where it is, but we’ve never seen anyone come or go along that stretch.”

The small group of them engaged their drive gears and rumbled back to North Road.

“By the way,” Toll noted, “don’t mention this to the other team members. Most of them are new and we don’t trust them. They keep to themselves and aren’t part of the ‘team’. They also have a habit of wandernig off occasionally.”

“Got it,” Zod responded.

“This really is a nice road,” Zod remarked “I wish Dam Avenue were paved as nice as this. Particularly the heavy equipment keeps us busy to just keep it passable.”

“See if you can put in a request. We have some newer technologies we’d love to play with. I mean, it’s what we do.”

“I’d love that,” Zod said.

Then they were at mile marker one, or a mile from North Gate, and roughly half the length of the maintained road. It seemed like a good place to start casting around. Again the promises didn’t pan out, but they had a fair bit of ground to cover still.

Another half a mile along the road, it looked like they found it. There was a small indentation in the brush which on inspection was a path maybe the width of a Sentient at best. With profuse thanks and well wishes from both sides, Zod pressed into the brush and started along. It was slow going. The ground was uneven and the shrubbery scraped at their carriage. But eventually the shrubbery turned into forest floor foliage. The ground was still caked with roots but being able to see ahead helped.

After a half hour or so, the forest floor started to turn into shrubbery again and Zod had to slow down once more. Thankfully it finally opened up to the clearing around Desil's garage. Thankfully, because there seemed to be different paths to different locations, and they got lucky. The woods were not well mapped because nobody really cared to wander off the thwacked roads.

--Chapter 17--

In the early morning light Zod could tell there was a light on in the garage and their seismic sensors picked up the tremors of things moving across wood flooring. Discretion being the better part of valor, they decided to get as close as possible so they could hear without being detected.

The sounds were a combination of footsteps and tracks, so more than likely there were a few Humans and several bots inside. Two, maybe three Humans, by the sound of it, but they couldn't tell how many bots there were. It also sounded like they were searching for something. They wish they could see the Human since their cigar smell and voice seemed familiar.

Zod found a dark spot near a partially open window to hide in and deployed their mirror again, hoping that it wouldn't sparkle or otherwise

attract attention. It was worth the risk, they thought, if they were to try and figure out what in hell was going on.

And it was going on. Zod noted that the ringleader was clenching a cigar in their mouth and barking orders at what could only be their minions. And there was a lot of barking and little sense so far as they could tell.

Eventually it became apparent that they weren't looking for Semprini but rather any sort of documentation about it. And they were digging deep; a lot of rustling of papers filled the air alongside the rumbling. From Zod's perspective the dust covering everything had become a misty cloud that permeated the air with futility. But they still heard the henchmen, and now the bots, which were laboring to complete their search.

Cigar guy was definitely becoming agitated. "We're on a schedule, so step it up now," he barked. Even without seeing the bots in their wing mirror Zod could tell the efforts picked up even more. One of the Humans said that they were doing the best they could.

Zod could barely see murky shadows through the grime that coats every shop window but they could tell what the bots that came into view were by their shapes. It seemed that there was a small but odd mix of Sentients: Diggers, Thwackers, Repair bots, and more. But most of the noise were auto-butlers scurrying around on their mono-wheel. Zod could make out the accent of the auto-butler they met on First Street earlier was in the mix. There were no other voices they could recognize. "Curious," Zod thought, "whatever the auto-butlers were doing didn't sound like something they could get a Sentient to do." Desil wasn't famous but Sentients would find searching a Human's property questionable at best. Silently Zod watched and listened for any clue.

There certainly was a lot of murmuring, Zod thought. They couldn't tell above the din if they were cross-communicating or just grumbling out

loud. Either way the RF frequencies they were using to communicate with each other was too high to even trigger the run-of-the-mill voice coders the Humans sometimes wore. The language was a byproduct that Sentients got on their borne day, and somehow the Humans had never found out, probably because it sounded like Sentients began creating Sentients, and Humans aren't involved in the process anymore.

Zod thought about joining the conversation, but the time, at least, wasn't right. They needed to know more about what was happening before they risked attention. Particularly, if the auto-butlers weren't sentient they wouldn't know the language but the Sentients might give Zod's presence away. After all, Zod couldn't recognize any of them through the grime, and particularly why they were there searching a friend's home with a couple of Humans whose motives were questionable, to say the least.

--Chapter 18 --

One of the other Humans called cigar man Josephus which sounded like a voice Zod had heard before, but couldn't remember the context. At least it was *something* and they filed it away as another piece of the puzzle for now. But they suspected it was important.

Josephus had shifted into being in a bigger hurry looking for whatever those documents were. The trouble was that they didn't seem to know exactly what it was they were actually looking for: it sounded like some sort of notebook or binder. Zod became under the impression that perhaps it wasn't actually there, and the bits and pieces of chatter between the Sentients they were starting to pick up above the din seemed to agree with that. Zod also noticed that the auto-butlers were also in the conversation, but

didn't seem to have the same range of emotions. Was it only partial sentience, or just the nature of the job crept in, they wondered.

Zod's internal chronometer indicated that it was about an hour before shift change, and indeed the group stopped working as Josephus grumbled that they needed to shake up Desil a bit for not being thoroughly candid.

Zod's ears, as it were, pricked up since here was the first real thing to work on. But as the group started leaving the garage, Zod had no idea how to trail Josephus, or any of them for that matter. They decided to watch from the bushes to see what they could see.

For starters, what they could see is one or two of the Dam Thwackers heading off towards the dam, and the auto-butlers plus that small group of mixed Sentients headed off towards town. The garage bots and the road crew were of particular interest because they definitely should be somewhere else by now. So should they for that matter. Zod imaged the lot alongside the previous ones of Josephus.

Eventually Josephus and a couple other Humans slunk out grumbling to themselves and headed towards town too. By their actions they wanted to be noticed even less than the bots. But it was still early, so Zod risked following them at a distance.

Once more on the cobbles, they passed through East Gate, Zod crept along the shadows again until they hit Second Street, which paralleled Main on the opposite side of the park. Their prey crossed through the park towards Government House, and from there they turned right towards North Wall. Then the Humans caught up with the several auto-butlers, who were apparently slow-moving. It seemed like everything the auto-butlers did was comparatively slow.

Zod followed them up the block, then watched from the corner while the group traveled down North Wall and turned down Government Alley.

They backed up while the road crew Sentients picked their way down North Wall to West and then quietly followed as they slipped South to River Avenue and through the West Gate. The road crew quarters lay down River Avenue near Ring Road, Zod thought to themselves, and wondered if Toll knew.

--Chapter 19--

Zod thought that asking Toll was something they should do, but couldn't decide whether that or trying to figure out what the auto-butlers were doing since the Humans weren't likely to be out and about at this hour. Besides they weren't sure how to contact Toll since they didn't trust all of their road crew. Zod opted for the latter, at least for now.

Government Alley was deserted, but Zod opted to not risk that since there would be few places to escape detection. They hoped First Street was better. But first, they thought, maybe they should check out that corner market since that's where the first major clue came from.

When Zod entered the corner store it was obvious that they were interrupting something, and the lone vaguely familiar customer and cashier created an cloud of suspicion hanging in the air. Zod decided they really didn't want to be there, not because of a fear of violence, rather, they'd be more noticeable by the pair on the street. So they grabbed another oil pen and went to check out.

"You again?" grunted the cashier.

"I gave away my pen and there aren't many places to buy them on this side of town," Zod retorted.

"Hmm," the cashier breathed. "We don't really cater to bots here, so perhaps you should look harder next time."

Zod noted that they sounded like Josephus and took the obvious hint by quickly paid and leaving, hoping this lark hadn't caused any more problems for him. There were more close calls than they really cared to think about.

First Street wasn't terribly crowded, which wasn't that surprising given the early hour. Humans and bots alike were just beginning their work day. Zod scanned the street for someplace they could hide, watch, and hopefully listen. The hallway they'd hidden in yesterday was certainly tempting, if risky. But there must be some better place, they thought to themselves.

Zod trundled down the street nonchalantly, scanning all the nooks and crannies as they went. Unfortunately nothing else seemed any more promising than the hallway at number 39, so they picked their way back there and hoped for the best. Returning to the dark corner they shut down all their system lights again.

Zod had forgotten to mark their chronometer so had no idea how much time had passed, but they heard large and lumbering footsteps from up the stairs. Along with them came the rumbling of voices with bits of conversation echoing off the walls as the footsteps made their way down the stairs. Zod slunk as far into the shadows as he could. Things were afoot, and they didn't have answers to any questions the Humans might ask.

The larger steps came with a large voice that was easily recognized as Josephus, which gave Zod a pause, even though they should have been prepared for it. They couldn't recognize the other one, but it had a sickly-sweet saccharin tone that could only be a lobbyist. They stopped in the hallway for a minute.

"We didn't find anything, Papier." Josephus said to them, "But we ran out of time to search. The bots had to be on-time or it would be apparent

that they were up to something, and that could come back to me.”

“We’ll have to look again tomorrow then.” The other voice said. “Did Desil say anything else?”

“They pretended to not know anything more, not even where to get Semprini.

“Keep at it then. But you know the rules.”

“One more thing,” Josephus added, “Our North Road people said another bot showed up last night asking questions, but they couldn’t - or wouldn’t - say who or where they were from. But you know how these bots are.”

“Unfortunate,” the saccharin lobbyist replied, “keep your eyes out.”

They split up, with the lobbyist headed towards Government Alley and Josephus headed towards First Street.

Zod boggled for a few seconds with the realization that their friend had been captured by force. He then slunk to the alley, but saccharin person had already gone. Back towards First and Josephus’s large frame could be seen doing some window shopping. Now they were in a pickle since First wasn’t ideal, and they weren’t sure passing the convenience store was the smartest idea either, even if they didn’t go in. They were sure the patron had to be one of Josephus’s minions.

--Chapter 20--

Ultimately, Zod decided that the least risky option was the wildest. They headed to the back of the hallway and slipped into Government Alley, figuring it might be best to follow Josephus tomorrow. The alley was empty and they prayed to the proverbial silicon god that it stayed that way.

Thankfully there were some bins and a few insets to hide in as Zod jumped away from shadows several times along the way. As they emerged onto North Wall, they reflected that the hour was what made them so lucky.

Feeling braver, Zod worked their way to the top of the alley and west to First Street to watch the goings-on and just see what there was to see.

There weren't a ton of people out, and thankfully they didn't see Josephus. Plenty of auto-butlers spinning around though, a few of which they recognized from the search of Desil's that morning. Zod watched from the corner for a while, trying to find any patterns. Each one did seem to go back and forth between the same doorways, but for the ones without signs hanging, it was impossible to actually say what they were. Zod thought it might be worth scouting more if they ended up back in the area after-hours when the streets were empty.

While they were at it, Zod opted to do the same for Government Alley. With Josephus now tied to a lobbyist, something odd and perhaps sinister was afoot.

The alley was more of the same, except none of the doors had shingles, or even names on them for what that mattered. But the auto-butlers there were also doing the same circular patterns. They started counting doors on the office block side in case further inspection of the street held more clues. And thinking back to the other side of the buildings, they could definitely count some of the ones that had a sign out, but since they'd forgotten to image the signs other than the front so Zod couldn't be sure what was what.

Checking their chronometer, Zod saw that two hours had passed, which meant the hour was still really way too early to head out of town.

While figuring out what to do next, Zod wandered thru the Barnacles along North Wall, not paying attention to anything but instead just watched the

streets for danger. After all, Zod realized that if they didn't turn up at his apartment this evening they surely would be missed, if that hadn't already happened. Sentients really weren't supposed to wander around on their own unless on an errand or a rec day.

Needing to kill some time, it was still early so Zod opted to go get that infrared upgrade they'd been looking at. The roads were still mostly empty and it would kill an hour or two between mechanical and software updates.

With that in mind, they headed down Main Street towards the shops on River. The street was basically bot-free and so far they didn't see any Humans that might take notice, so Zod allowed themselves to relax a little for the first time in a day or so. Thankfully they made it to the upgrade shop without any hassle.

The upgrade went without a hitch, and as usual Zod felt a little off after the programming. It was always expected to feel like a blender to the brain by fitting all the new tools in. Then they checked their chronometer, and it was barely noon. Zod let out a barely audible sigh with hours to go before heading out the gate wouldn't be weird.

Zod wondered if West Gate and the ring road between there and North Road beyond that gate was the better answer. It would certainly kill some time, but there was the matter of Josephus's construction minions potentially heading back to camp in the same direction. It was just a block down River Avenue so they went to investigate.

Zod noticed that people were starting to notice him, probably because of their different livery, but they pressed on trying to look like they belonged there. It seemed to be going okay so far, they thought to themselves thankfully. They passed through the gate and ducked behind the produce vendors' stalls. From here Zod had a good sight at the Ring Road and into the barracks at the expense of not seeing more than a sliver of River Avenue.

It was early afternoon, and a small gang of Road Thwackers were headed back to their barracks. He recognized a few of them from the morning, and was relieved since that meant that more of Toll's questionable team members were out of the way. Perhaps, they thought, this was the way to go after all. Town was getting more risky as the day went along anyway.

--Chapter 21--

Zod picked their way along the natural path made by the town wall until they hit the corner, which was close to Ring Road and far from the shops and gate. From there they went towards the road as cautiously as possible. While keeping their auditory circuit gain high to detect any signs of trouble, they rolled onto the road and headed towards North Road. They also kept a lookout for any places where they might duck and hide if necessary. Zod also slowed down to go as silently as possible. Too bad, they thought, that they couldn't afford LIDAR.

It was slow-going but they felt like progress was being made, and Zod was thankful that they hadn't encountered anyone else so far. If anything, it gave them some time to figure out what to do when they got to that encampment. Hopefully. So far they hadn't a clue.

Zod heard some rustling and a bit of murmuring ahead, so just in time they found a thicket to duck behind. As the sounds drew closer they tried to peer through the bushes and listened as intently as possible. Thankfully it was a pair of bots and that were more engrossed in their conversation than what was going on around them. As they passed, Zod scanned their appearance when it became apparent that they were grumbling about going back to Desil's before the main crew left to get the day's work site marked out. Zod waited until their sounds had faded before he got back on the road,

and counting in their head figured that all the bots at Desil's with that livery were accounted for. Slightly emboldened they pressed on.

When Zod reached the clearing it was empty except for the power generator, so they opted to retreat into the bushes again just in case. There was a little while before the crews came back, which as an aside they wondered why the other two had headed all the way back to their barracks so early.

Finally the crew came back, led by Toll. Zod stayed hidden and just watched for a while, looking for some sign of how to proceed. The clearing was definitely sparser with all four of the questionable Sentients gone, but there were still a couple of bots that they didn't recognize from the morning. So they waited a little longer.

Eventually, the remaining bots that weren't on the crew that helped them in the morning shut down for the night, and emboldened they made their way into the clearing while addressing Toll.

"Hey Toll," Zod said, "it's me, Zod again. I've found out a few things worth sharing."

"Oh, hey Zod," replied Toll, "what's up?"

"Do you trust everyone online here?"

"As much as I can anyway. The new ones were all called back to the barracks for some reason, so there's those two and these," said Toll pointing with an appendage.

"Those four definitely aren't safe," Zod said, "I saw them this morning. They were helping some Humans search Desil's"

Toll's proverbial ears perked up. "That explains why they were a few minutes late. "Do you know anything more?"

"Long story short," Zod said, "those bots were in Desil's garage with someone named Josephus and were searching it for information on

Semprini, which some Humans are trying to control, even if they don't know what it actually is. And for some reason Sentients are also involved"

"Whew, that's a lot. Now what."

Zod pondered this for a solid minute. There was a myriad of options including going home and making excuses, but this affected all Sentients.

Apparently Zod had existential crisis for breakfast yesterday morning.

The answers weren't immediately apparent, but Zod heading back to Desil's garage and Toll figuring out what their new Thwackers were about seemed like the best course of action, particularly as it seemed like there weren't any other apparent courses of action. They agreed on a private comm frequency and separated with Zod getting a quick charge and then headed back to the trail that led to Desil's garage.

The trail was easier to find now that they knew what to look for, even in the dark. The new infrared filters certainly helped a lot, and they made the rest of the trip far quicker too. It went by fast enough that there were hours before sunrise and the whole area was pitch-black with the perimeter lighting turned off. Zod felt like exploring that perimeter but they knew any unexplained tracks would be noticed. Instead they circled the garage behind the bushes to see if there was any way to get on Dam Road without making it obvious.

--Chapter 22--

Eventually Zod found a flat ridge of rock that extended from the bushes all the way to the road. Cautiously they took the path and headed back down the road to Desil's garage turnout. There were plenty of tracks to disguise him there, so they felt more comfortable looking about. Finding nothing they risked going inside.

The garage was a mess. The searchers had carpeted the floor with documents and the air was full of dusty trouble. Zod opted to risk looking around for a few minutes, particularly in the areas that hadn't been searched as heavily. They just had to be conscious of time since they didn't know when they'd have unwanted company.

Buried under a pile of debris on one of the benches was an untitled spiral notebook that had been passed over. On a quick leaf-through it seemed innocuous enough but their bot eyes scanned a few references to Semprini. Zod put the notebook into a cargo pocket and reversed their path to the escarpment, trying to hide their trail as they passed. From there they went on to their hiding spot outside the garage. They hoped that their search blended in with the previous days' Human efforts.

Several hours passed and just as the sun rose Josephus and the other Humans arrived, followed by the auto-butlers. Zod assumed the Sentients hadn't been able to escape their job sites yet. Their search began almost immediately with Josephus barking orders to search both high and low.

When the Sentients arrived a half hour later they immediately dug in too.

Zod hoped the notebook they had was the only bit of information left in the garage. As all the things started to come together it seemed more important than anything else so far. Eventually the pace in the garage slowed as Josephus' team came to the conclusion that there was nothing to find. The Sentients and auto-butlers dispersed but the Humans lingered for a few minutes.

"This is most disappointing," Josephus said. "Desil said there was documentation here."

"What should we do next then?" Asked one of the minions, "I don't think anyone has been here besides us."

“That certainly seems to be the case,” Josephus said dryly, “ Jack-Jack call one of the backup auto-butlers to stand guard.”

Jack-Jack took out their communicator and paged one of the spares.

They wouldn't be missed unless a butler broke down, assuming Josephus didn't own it. The auto-butler responded affirmatively and gave an ETA of ten minutes. Apparently it hadn't gotten very far.

Josephus continued, “we should ‘talk’ to Desil, then. They're obviously hiding something.”

The third minion added, “should we rough them up a little?”

“Not now. Laws are laws and we technically have only kidnapped so far. Damaging a Human is far worse.”

Finally the Humans head off towards town. Zod made sure the auto-butler wasn't watching and then followed them at a safe distance. It wouldn't be unusual for a Dam Thwacker to be headed towards town, but they were worried about being standing out later if they weren't already recognizable. When they reached the cobbles, Zod slowed again to widen the gap so the noise wouldn't be too noticeable. It was still earlier than the shift started, but they would have to pass the garage again.

Zod followed them trailing by around half a block, which was barely enough to see them and quickly enough to avoid suspicion by anyone around them, except the garage, which they hurried past as fast and as quietly as possible on the cobblestones. Eventually the Humans got to Second Street and interestingly went South and not towards First street as they had assumed would happen. On Second Street they continued past River Avenue and the angle that was Market Avenue.

The road was busier than Dam Avenue at the moment, so Zod could barely see them as they entered a grubby unassuming door surrounded by other grubby doors that at least had some description of what they made.

The door was labeled “19” and lay between an extremely noisy nail factory and something that said “Steel Works” and required a very loud automated saw. Zod kept moving along, quietly imaging the doors as they passed.

When they got to the corner of Main, they stepped into a power bank and waited.

Zod almost missed Josephus leaving the building and managed to slip out of their power bank stall and inside to pay just in time. The Human seemed lost in thought as they turned right and headed North up Main Street. Still, following at this point seemed foolhardy, so they trekked up the road but stopped at the park to waste some time before they headed out to confer with Toll again.

Zod started to get nervous as the day got longer and Connie (or worse) could end up in the park on a shopping break. They opted to make their way back to River Avenue and out West Gate to see if there was happening around the Thwacker barracks. Fortunately they weren’t noticed by the two Ring Road Thwackers on the way out, and Zod didn’t recognize them either.

They slipped between the wall and the first stall again and followed the back of the tents until they were fully concealed but could still see the door of the barracks.

--Chapter 23--

The day was quieter out here than usual, Zod thought to themselves, and they weren’t sure if that was good or bad. It meant that they could hear more, but it also meant that he could be heard more. It also meant that they shouldn’t let anything grind their gears, as one says.

After a while, a Human arrived at the building, and Zod recognized them as Jack-Jack, one of Josephus's Human minions. They wish they could hear better, but even with the gain cranked up it was just too far, and they couldn't risk getting closer. So they waited. Eventually Jack-Jack came outside with one of the Thwackers that were in the barracks, and after a few moments the Thwacker went inside and they headed back to town.

Zod stayed on watch, correctly assuming that Jack-Jack was headed back to the Market Avenue door. Jack-Jack was burly and crass and not the sort of creature one would find in an argyle sweater wandering among politicians, even if they did have a snively grovelling demeanor.

Eventually the wait paid off. Two of the suspect Thwackers emerged from the barracks and headed into town. "Interesting", thought Zod, and went to follow. While watching them, they had to be careful as the duo seemed pretty cagey. They picked their way through the crowd, and Zod picked their way even more carefully. Zod watched as they made their way down Main and turned onto Market. Zod stopped, knowing where the two were headed. Even curiouser, they thought.

Zod opted to head back out West Gate to see if they could find out what the other two were up to. Along the way they passed a livery shop, and Zod decided to go in and get some more generic livery "for a friend". Stashing them in another pocket, They made their way to the back of the tents once more.

Passing the time, Zod had a chance to start looking at the notebook they picked up at Desil's that morning. It was handwritten in a hurried font so the reading was slow, doubly for scanning it at the same time. The first few chapters vaguely talked about where Semprini came from, which was many miles up the North Road in the foothills, and that it was very rare and

very difficult to mine, and the mine locations were only known to a handful of people, Human and Sentient alike.

Their reading was cut short when the two Thwackers that he had tailed earlier came back to the barracks. The other two met them outside and after a brief conversation they all went inside. Without any other options given the time of day, Zod decided to stay and keep watch.

Meanwhile they swapped their livery out because they surely they were beginning to look suspicious with all their meandering about town, particularly in areas where someone with a job like theirs was uncommon.

--Chapter 24--

The sun was going down, and the barracks continued to be quiet. Zod figured it was time to go and confer with Toll, but they were feeling a little cagey about anyone at that point, but at the same time there was nobody else they could confide in. They made their way back along the wall to Ring Road again. They kept an eye out, but doubted that those four Thwackers would be seen along this road again. If they were smart they would have gotten themselves reassigned to the South half of Ring Road.

They then slipped along the wall again until they hit Ring Road, and then turned East towards the camp. They hoped the campsite was still there which, thankfully, it was. Zod opted to not go in, but rather concealed themselves in the bushes and used the agreed-upon frequency to communicate with Toll.

“Greetings,” said Zod, “I hope the day has gone well.”

“It has, other than being four bots down.”

“They’re definitely with Josephus. I saw two of the bots going to the same shop on Market that they had gone into earlier.”

“They weren’t much use anyway,” Toll said somewhat bemusingly.

Zod considered whether or not to tell Toll what they knew about where Semprini could be found, but ultimately they decided that the fewer people that knew the better. Besides, Toll was still a bit of an unknown.

“Have you learned anything,” Zod asked, “there are too many people moving in too many directions for me to track”.

“I think someone found the trail to Desil’s, so it’s useless now”

“That’s unfortunate,” Zod said, “but if they haven’t found anything by now they’re not going to. I had a look myself last night.”

“Nothing?” Toll asked.

“Nothing worth mentioning at this point,” Zod didn’t exactly lie.

“Now what?”

“I don’t know. Watch the doorway I suppose. I don’t think I can risk First Street for a while. You?”

“I don’t know,” Toll responded, “I’m a supervisor so perhaps I can try First Street. I’ll have to confer with the other Thwackers I trust so I can have some cover on our end.”

“Any angle?”

“Not a clue. Asking for North Street funding I suppose. Let’s touch base tomorrow night”

“I’ll do my best,” Zod replied, and shut down the comms channel for the evening.

Zod wasn’t sure they were being paranoid at this point, but Toll hadn’t found much. Then again they did help find the trail, and the only other significant thing they could likely have done was marking people taking the road. But at this point, only Desil, the shopkeeper, and now Zod knew anything about where Semprini came from. For now it should stay that way. Still, they were glad nobody had seen them in the new livery yet.

Zod wondered if their management was actively looking for them at this point, or just have their papers filled out and ready for their return.

When Zod did go back they'd better have a doozy with the number of days this had been away so far, and if they solved the mystery it seemed like it was going to be a lot more than that. A lot of Humans and Sentients alike would likely in deep trouble.

Zod opted to head back towards North Gate with their navigation lights off and relying on their new-fangled infrared system layered over their night vision. It wasn't perfect in the dark but it did make a difference. Once they reached the shops they crept in behind and watched the gate until the bars opened wide for the annual town festival. Virtually every Sentient not on shift somewhere was there. Even Sentients could get inebriated if they kicked off their power regulators and a few logic circuits. Zod had tried it and while fun, electrocuting one's pleasure centers wasn't the sort of buzz they preferred. In fact, most of their compatriots thought they were a bit stodgy. So it was risky, but it wasn't Saturday afternoon busy and every Sentient had their minds on something else.

--Chapter 25 --

As the atmosphere along North Wall picked up along with the throngs, Zod took the chance to slip into town. They only hoped no one would identify them despite the new livery. Zod opted to trust, but verify, Toll. They headed West along the Barnacles, and away from the peak of the revelers. Once they reached Government Alley they non-nonchalantly went a few feet in as if they were taking a break from the crush. Quietly they scanned the alley, counting doors on both sides and marking anything

identifiable. That done, they slipped back into the throng and headed towards First Street.

First Street wasn't empty, and there were clumps of corporate parties strewn about in herds of pinstripes. Zod figured it was worth the risk and headed down to the other end, counting doors and imaging signs as they went. They got the occasional offer to join a party, but managed to shrug them off with the weakest of excuses. Even inebriated beings had memories, and Zod wasn't quite sure they wanted to be in those.

Now they had to decide whether to backtrack to North Wall, or make their way down to River Avenue where they could probably mix in with that group. Ultimately the latter seemed the better choice. Checking out Market Avenue could also be in the cards. With that, they took the ell to West Wall and down to River.

River Avenue was also proverbially "hopping" with a crush of beings and shops open late. Zod glided through the crowd trying to not run over any toes and decided to head down to the Market power bank.

When they plugged in and watched down the avenue, Zod could see an auto-butler perched on its wheel outside the doorway. They opted to wait and watch for a while, just to see if anything happened while the crowds teemed everywhere drowned out by the music.

Eventually a Human came out the door smoking a cigar,, and after a brief conference handed a packet to the auto-butler who wheeled off while the Human went back inside. Zod opted to follow the auto-butler, especially because of the hour and the to-doings. They cut past Zod and up Main Street with Zod just keeping them in view.

It wasn't easy as the bot zipped here and there, but Zod was able to keep up enough to watch it turn left at North Wall. Likewise when they rolled into Government Alley.

Zod watched them roll down to what should have been the same number 39 hall they hid in earlier if not one or two off from that. Quite the nexus of power, they thought to themselves, and at best none of it good at for Sentients.

Meanwhile, Toll passed by without noticing them, so apparently the new livery was working. They turned down First Street so Zod went to watch. Toll was trying to move down the street without gathering attention, which begged Zod to pay attention. They were checking quiet doors now and then which was even more curious.

At least Toll didn't tuck into that hallway, Zod thought, but it didn't make them less questionable. They needed to sort out how to question Toll next time they met in a way that didn't raise suspicion. Zod really did hope they had an ally they could trust.

Eventually Toll made the cut over to West Wall and Zod followed carefully, hugging the shadows as best as possible. Auto-butlers were still scampering around and Zod didn't know why. Zod tried to look like a reveler that staggered down the wrong way, and at least they didn't see anyone that might have taken notice. Unfortunately Zod lost Toll at River Avenue, which was packed full of throngs like North Wall.

Zod made their way back to Market Avenue like they said they would, which was unsurprisingly empty given the city-wide party, since there wasn't anything beyond the corner at First Street to draw a crowd. They trundled into the power bank to a spot where they could watch down the street while keeping an eye on the revelry for anything that could get them in trouble.

They didn't see Toll, but they did see Josephus's minions slipping down the road to the doorway, and went inside. Zod waited and watched, but it didn't seem like they were going to emerge any time soon. Eventually Zod gave up and made their way back to First Street to do some more scouting while Toll was stuck in their barracks.

The street was mostly empty since all the shops were closed now, so Zod opted to lurk at the top of the alley where there were still a few auto-butlers about. Unfortunately one of them was their saccharin-flavored hidey-hole and another the first auto-butler they met, which made it off-limits because the auto-butlers would be able to see them in the dark, and were likely to alarm the Humans to Zod's presence.

The few auto-butlers were going from the hallway building to Number 34, the fifth building down. It was a slightly unkempt door that whose sign over on First Street had a number of names but Fandango, who was a minor parliament member that didn't get an office inside Government House.

Their name stood out since the other offices seemed to be support staff and more lobbyists.

What they wouldn't give to see what the butlers were carrying back and forth on Festival Night, thought Zod, but how to do it escaped them completely. Maybe they'd get lucky and something would get dropped again. After all, it was close to the packet they found earlier.

Then Zod saw Toll out the corner of their goggles. They weren't acting suspicious, but their revelry was in the corner of town that they both knew was suspect. Zod followed for a few minutes until they reached the power banks near North Gate, then returned to the Government alley.

While they were waiting, Zod realized that they were so busy that they had never actually looked at that draft legislation they scanned.

--Chapter 26--

The alley was empty as Zod digested the pages. Most of it was standard legalese with its 'whereas' and 'whosit' and 'therefore', but the gist started to sink in. It wasn't pretty. Basically without really getting into why, it wanted to create a commission that would find the source of Semprini and bring it under control of an undefined group. It read like they still didn't know what it was for, but they knew it could somehow be used to control the Sentients. There were still xenophobes in Parliament, and apparently they were getting emboldened. Zod set an auto-reminder to start in on that notebook again, but turning on a pen light here was definitely a bad idea.

Zod also really wanted to know who this lower MP was. If Fandango weren't in league with them, they were being controlled by Josephus and that oily saccharin lobbyist Papier.

Zod also remembered Toll saying they sometimes ran errands down First Street. They wondered if Toll knew anything, and if so, how much. Perhaps it was time to feign drunkenness and see how low their inhibitions were. With that in mind, off they went to find Toll. That power bank near North Gate seemed like a good place to start.

--Chapter 27--

Thankfully Toll was at the power bank, so Zod didn't have to scour half the town searching and then not explaining why they were there. They plugged in beside Toll and exchanged some pleasantries.

It became apparent that Toll was just chasing parties that evening, and had only stopped in to take a break. Zod opted to play along.

Zod asked, “what do you do when you’re in town running errands? They mostly just send me in for cigars.”

“Well, I’m sort of the union leader. Don’t they have those on the dam project?”

“To be honest, I don’t think the subject ever came up”

“You should look into it. They’re always trying to keep us in ‘our place’ you know?”

“We’re far enough out of town that we don’t really get the news. What’s happening?”

“Rumors are that this Semprini stuff has something to do with us, and they think if they can control that, they can control us.”

“I’ve heard the same. We should talk about this tomorrow when our heads are a bit more level,” Zod added.

“Yeah.”

They both disappeared into the throngs, with Zod headed back towards the alley to watch for a while. There really wasn’t anything else to do but find a place to power down for the night, which they could put off for a little while longer. Since the legislation draft was scanned, Zod opted to analyze that while waiting for something to happen.

Zod must have missed their boss Chris passing, which meant that they hadn’t seen Zod. Zod crept back into the crowd until Chris looked around furtively before disappearing into the shadows. They crept up and deployed their wing mirror and watched them make their way down to the lobbyist’s door. Josephus was bellowing angrily about one of their bots going rogue and was wandering around town somewhere. They couldn’t hear Chris’s reply, but they could only be talking about them. It was inevitable, they sighed, at they need to be even more cagey. Perhaps a few more changes of livery in their arsenal could help evade detection.

Feeling queasy from the inevitable getting found out, they went back behind the booths outside North Gate until the party started to wind down while they pondered what to tell Toll when they went back to camp.

An hour passed, and the Festival was definitely dying down. Toll was no where to be found, so Zod decided to carefully creep over and investigate the campsite to see if they had already gone. But not only were the Sentients gone, so was everything but the bulky generator which appeared to be bolted in place. Casting about, they found dusty tracks that didn't seem to be old. They headed towards the Road Thwacker barracks and Zod followed them.

Zod eventually found themselves in one of their favorite pastimes: hiding behind shopping tents. But since they crept under cover of darkness and with a little help from the oil pen on a squeaky thing, they were able to settle in for a watch. Zod would have to power down at some point, but this ~ particularly sorting out Toll's allegiance ~ was crucial to how they moved forward.

--Chapter 28--

They waited for a while until the barracks lights went out, and waited a little more. Eventually Josephus's minions came out and headed into town. Interestingly, so did Toll. The chase was on.

The minions were being predictable in their direction towards Market Avenue, and Zod was following at a close distance. There was still enough of a crowd on both River and Main for all of them to blend in.

Zod had to stop short since Toll had pulled into the power bank and took Zod's usual spot. Zod resigned themselves to a bench across First Street

After the minions predictably made their way to the door, Toll kept watch on the door and Zod kept watch on Toll. After what seemed like a game of “who will rust first” Toll rolled out and headed to the door. Zod moved into the power bank to get a better view. In their favor, it seemed like Toll was investigating the place and not trying to enter.

Zod watched as Toll went up Second Street and presumably back to the barracks. Zod headed up Main to see if they could spot Toll in the crowd, which he was, except they turned up Main towards North Gate and out of town. Zod definitely had a hunch but needed to know where they were going.

They were thankful for that oil pen as they crept along the shadows behind until Toll turned off onto the Ring Road, and could be heard entering the clearing the bots camped in. Zod crept into the hideout they’d used before and dared use the RF whistle band that they had agreed on.

“Toll,” Zod whispered, “are you there?”

“Yeah,” they replied, “that was one heck of a party.”

“Not my kind of thing, so I just wandered around and watched. How come you’re here and not at the barracks?”

Toll retorted, “it’s festival night so I had some time before my absence was noticed. They only recalled us this morning and I didn’t have a way to get a message.”

“Good point. We should find someplace closer to your barracks. Even if it seems to be ground zero.”

“How about we meet at that power bank at First and Market tomorrow. That also seems to be ground zero.

Zod wasn’t terribly excited about the idea, but had to accept that there weren’t any better places, at least for now.

“That’s fine,” Zod replied. When’s your shift change so I can be there?”

“Six O’clock but I think we’ll be over at South Gate for a few days. It’s definitely closer than North Gate.

“Anyway, Zod asked, “have you found anything new?”

“Well, those two butlers are definitely in league with Josephus and the other two are still unknowns. I’ve been spying on them as best I can.

“And,” Toll added, “I’ve investigated that door you mentioned. I peeked in the mail slot, and there’s definitely a staircase behind it, and an old creaky one at that. I think the auto-butlers make such short appearances because their wheel can’t handle them.”

“Thwackers?, Zod asked

“I guess it’s okay for them. The foyer doesn’t seem much wider than the door is. You?”

Zod said, “I got my hand on the draft legislation long enough to scan it. But I suspect the auto-butler that was carrying it is working for either Josephus or the lobbyist. I’d guess Fandango wants to keep their hands as clean as possible for now.”

Zod continued, “It’s more or less what I thought. Despite not knowing what Semprini is, they are still intent on learning about it for control, but thankfully they still don’t know how. The legislation would largely create a fake commission to find the source and regulate the sale in the region.

‘Now what?’ asked Toll.

They electronically banged their heads together, hoping a logic circuit fell into place. Zod couldn’t think of anything at all. Time to step back and put all the events into sequence seemed to be the only thing to do. Zod said as much to Toll.

“I agree,” said Toll, “Let’s meet back at the power bank tomorrow, I don’t think anything will happen in 24 hours.

At least I hope not.” Zod suggested, “if you can keep an eye on First Street and hopefully the alley, that could be useful. They’re apparently looking for me now. I’ll go and watch Market and we haven’t checked out the Sketch Antique Shops well enough.”

“Sounds like a plan. “Toll signed off, “same time tomorrow then.”

Zod nodded.

Knowing the size of the foyer behind that door was at least one more data point. It meant that whatever was going on there happened on the second story of the building, which meant there was probably not much heavy equipment going up there unless there was a back door somewhere. Zod passed several alleys on the other side of the buildings on the way to the Sketch Antique Shops that were slightly less narrow but a lot more grimy. Zod counted the doors from 9 Market to the Main Street corner so they could count the back entrances for the next time they went to the Sketch Antique Shops.

But for now, they watched, and wondered where they should grind off to for the night. South Gate was a real option from here, but they couldn’t be sure that the rogue Thwackers hadn’t set up camp already. The only other possibilities were grimy alleys across from South Wall or the Sketch Antiques and that would take a minor miracle.

--Chapter 29--

The festival was ending and the crowds were dispersing. It was a late hour and there were jobs to do in the morning. Zod reflected that it would

have been nice to be there, and blissfully ignorant with the whole thing being Somebody Else's Problem.

But they weren't, and they were nearly being hunted with nobody on their side except a Road Thumper they'd never met and hoped was being honest.

The best option seemed to be those grimy alleys across from SouthWall in the industrial section where it gave way to the seedier Human walk-ups along the wall proper. The power bank had left them fully charged so it was just a matter of a dark space to power down and reflect on the day, and was there a lot of it to reflect on.

They quickly checked out the alley that should be opposite the door the Humans were using, and in the shadows there was what appeared to be a service elevator. Zod wondered if they were using that. The auto-butlers could get upstairs that way after all. Perhaps it was too conspicuous with the industrial buildings turned into blighted Humans' flats across the street.

A rumbling brought their sensors to peak status. They didn't dare peek but it was definitely from the alley and elevator beyond that door Zod was so interested in. As the rumbling faded, Zod did extend their wing mirror to see if the coast was clear, and thankfully with the obnoxious hour the street was deserted. Emboldened, they searched the alley for any more hints, but all they found were a few scraps of parchment and a couple of cogs. Zod ignored the cogs and stashed the parchment for later. Now was not the time for analyzing random bits of parchment when they might be discovered at any moment.

Zod opted to retreat to the alley where they had spent the night and analyze the papers they had just scavenged from the alley floor. The Antique Shops would have to wait for a little while.

The papers turned out to be something indeed, and Zod couldn't imagine any of them to be so foolhardy to drop such a thing. One turned out to be a fragment of work instructions, hinting at the abduction of Desil and leaning into finding the source of Semprini from them. Any idea of legislation was so minor that it couldn't be worth much, at least not now.

They knew finding the source was integral to herding the quiet list of fence-sitters into shape. So the work they were doing with Fandango must have been preliminary and waiting for the time to strike.

But, it was time to move out. A Sentient hiding in a doorway when the Humans across the street woke up would raise a lot of flags if they weren't expected to be there. They may not care about the actual comings and goings of bots, but might report anything if asked. Zod opted to make a break for the Sketch Antique Shops before the locals arose to see if they could have any further luck at the Shops given what they knew.

As they neared the corner by the shops, the flats got a bit seedy, which was fine because everyone wanted to be left alone just like Zod did.

Thankfully the shops were just opening for the day to serve customers that needed to stop on their way to wherever, and indeed there were already some people browsing around. Zod purposely ignored them and went straight for the shop that they'd bought the Semprini from.

The shopkeeper made sure that Zod knew that they really didn't want to see them, but Zod took a big chance and forged ahead anyway.

After exchanging unpleasantries, they started with their knowledge that Desil was being held nearby in an industrial building on Market Avenue, and that they were being pressed for any information about Semprini after they weren't able to find Desil's notebooks. Zod talked about the draft legislation to control Semprini and with that the Sentients, and that Sentients were involved in this scheme. Semprini was being mined

somewhere North of town, and that Humans don't know that despite their Sentient spies on the team that maintained North Road. Josephus was the ringleader, and Jack-Jack was his main Human minion. Zod did not, however, mention that they had Desil's notebook.

The shopkeeper paused for a good while while they processed all of that.

With a sigh, they said, "Zod, I'm Harald, and I know a little about Semprini. It's smuggled into town to me and as far as I can tell, it's like you've found. It has something to do with Sentients. I don't know much more about it other than only a handful of Humans and Sentients occasionally come through trying to purchase it."

"Is it always the same ones? Do they have liveries?" Zod asked.

"There's Desil, of course," Harald replied, "and a tiny man that refers to themselves as Errol. Beyond that, there are sketchy Humans and Sentients. They don't get the time of day."

"So some of them come repeatedly?"

"There is sometimes a cagey bot with the livery you had on the first time, but mostly a few foul-smelling Sentients with generic livery like what you have on now but they were doing terrible jobs at trying to be convincing enough to sell it to them. I feign ignorance, of course."

Zod probed further, particularly about the bot in the dam livery. There was a smell of foul air around it. Particularly since their boss Chris had been implicated in the plot.

"The dam worker," Zod asked, "do you remember anything about them? Did they have any identifiable markings?"

"They never identified themselves, but they had a scrape all the way down their right arm"

“By the way,” Harald added, “I’d minimize my time South Wall were I you. I’ve seen some shady people and bots running around near the doorway you’ve described.

“Thanks heaps,” Zod said, “I’m not sure where to head from here, but I guess I know where not to head, at least for now.”

Zod couldn’t place the scar right away, but it did seem familiar. In any case, they should be easy enough to recognize them by that when the time came.

They really weren’t sure where to go next. There was too much time before meeting Toll again, and Zod hadn’t figured out what to say yet. The best option was to find a quiet place where they could spend more time with Desil’s notebook.

A few stalls up along East Wall proved to be an empty one that still had its curtains and appointments. It was an ideal place to read, and perhaps catch anyone headed to the Sketch Shops while they were at it.

Zod had to keep their lights off, of course, depending instead on his low-light vision circuits to do the heavy lifting and scanning while they read on.

--Chapter 30--

There wasn’t much more in the notebook about the mining, just that it could never be extracted in anything but trace accounts, and that the raw Semprini came from the North. And for some reason the shopkeeper failed to mention that it had to be crystallized before it was useful for anything and that Errol was probably currently the only Human that knew the chemistry involved in processing it. The notebook didn’t even say if it were processed

up north or in town, although the former made more sense. After all, Sentints were made or born up there somewhere.

What the notebook did go into was it's uses. The primary thing being it was the spark that brought Sentients to life, which eventually ran out and would either have to be replaced or the Sentient would die. There was no exact time for this, only it would be somewhere around 70 years, assuming the Sentient kept themselves in good working order.

This gave Zod pause. If Josephus discovered what Semprini actually did, and where it came from, they would be one of the most powerful people in the region. Presumably Fandango was being offered a seat in power if their legislation passed and the importance of it were subsequently discovered.

The story suddenly wrapped back around to Desil and their disappearance. They may be one of the few Humans that knew how to use it, other than the unknown Errol. This made Desil invaluable to their captors if they ever found out. But thankfully it didn't sound like they had so far. Then Zod wondered if any Sentients really understood what it was, even the ones responsible for occasionally "birthing" new bots.

Zod wondered where Errol was and if that was all they knew. Given that they had apparently not been kidnapped, Zod thought, Josephus's band of miscreants probably didn't even know of their existence.

There wasn't much else in the notebook. It seemed like it hadn't been finished, and there were a bunch of hard to follow equations and diagrams.

Desil was obviously trying to figure out the alchemy involved in converting the Semprini ore, and possibly how to use it. Zod feared what would happen if Desil cracked under the pressure.

Sooner or later they would have to be rescued, but Zod couldn't do it alone. Hopefully Toll turned out to be trustworthy and a few others they

trusted as well. They also wondered if there were any sympathetic Dam Thwackers, but Zod had no idea how to contact them.

As Zod watched out from between the curtains, they watched as number of bots and Humans go by, but nobody acting particularly suspicious, just the everyday sort of crowd that needed the arcane. Perhaps it was the day of the week, perhaps the suspected people all came up South Wall. Zod wished they knew.

Since Zod had the time, they pored over the scraps of parchment they found on the alley floor that morning. A fair amount of it was unremarkable, but the more sinister fragments put together a small ball of conspiracy. More importantly a scattering of names and job descriptions. Chris was on the list, as was Josephus, Jack-Jack, Fandango, and a couple Sentients, including a Dam Thwacker whose name Zod didn't immediately recognize and the four Road Thwackers that Toll suspected. There were some names Zod didn't recognize, along with partial names along the parchment tears. Thankfully, Toll didn't appear be listed.

Thus the day passed, and it was soon time to meet up with Toll, and once again Zod had to decide how far they could be trusted.

--Chapter 31--

Zod headed towards the power bank, but instead of the more direct South Wall, the continued up East Wall to River Avenue and on to Main street that way, on the hunch that they'd be less conspicuous. Which they were, but didn't know it. They pulled into one of the stalls at the power bank and waited for Toll, who hopefully wouldn't take long. Zod had started to get uncomfortable being at the same place and same time every day so near to the warrens they were watching.

When they did make it, Toll apologized saying the road crew had detained them, and likely on purpose. It was like they knew Toll was up to something but couldn't imagine what, at least for now. Not the smartest tails in the box, they added.

Toll did have things to answer this time and opted to recite the entire encounter verbatim. They'd been on First Street, and first pretended to be looking at suit options for their manager. There wasn't much going on, except by Zod's description Josephus was in there shopping. Josephus mentioned that they needed a better dry cleaners the one they had couldn't get out the oil odors. The shopkeeper then pointed to a door at the back of the showroom where theirs lay, and it was accessible from West Wall if their shop were closed.

With a thanks, Josephus left the store and Toll followed while window shopping the sort of things that a manager might want. Unsurprisingly, they basically went straight to the doorway that Zod had indicated. Toll wasn't the foolhardy type so they didn't follow, and instead went for the tried and true feeble attempts at chatting up an auto-butler. Toll figured that finding out who to talk to about road budgets was the least risky thing.

"Hey there," Toll faced the nearest auto-butler, "have you got a second?"

"Maybe," it responded testily, "I have important things to do."

"I just need to find out where to go about road funding."

"Try that one," the auto-butler said gruffly, and pointed to a nearly identical bot except they were red.

"Thanks"

And with that, the butler scurried off feigning an air of importance.

The second auto-butler was a bit more difficult since they saw Toll coming. Toll managed to corner them and started a similar spiel.

“I’ve heard,” started Toll, “that you may be able to help with road budgets. They’re increasing our responsibilities without increasing the funding.”

If a bot could puff out its chest, the auto-butler would have done that.

“Yes,” they said with an air of authority. “I work for Fandango, who just became the focal point for infrastructure.”

“Which office?” Toll asked, “I’ve only been here a couple times and they all look alike.”

“It’s Number 34, the fifth one down, but why don’t you follow me.”

“Thanks,” and tried to keep up as the auto-butler wheeled off.

Toll made it to the office, which was thankfully minus one MP. Toll scanned the office and retreated while saying they had more errands to run.

“It sort of makes sense”, Zod said when Toll was done, “controlling the road budget and the road maintenance teams would certainly put him high up on the pecking order.”

“True,” said Toll, “but we’re nowhere near solving the puzzle.”

“Well,” added Zod, “we’re pretty sure that we know where Desil is being held, and we know that we’re as likely to solve the Semprini puzzle as they are. That’s rather a lot.”

“But what now?”

“First of all, I think you should try and establish a relationship with Fandango. He’s a good lead into what, if anything, the conspirators have let them know.”

“That’s it?” Toll breathed.

Zod picked and parceled what they told Toll. First up was the doorway on the opposite side from Market Avenue that had signs of use.

They mentioned the parchment scraps with Josephus, Fandango, and Zod’s Human boss Chris all related.

This immediately made Zod wonder aloud if Toll knew where their manager's loyalties lay. Having four minions in their midst asked a number of questions. Toll was pretty sure they were safe and the Sentients had gone rogue, but there was no reason to bring the manager on-board at this point.

Also, Zod had found out that Semprini came from somewhere in the distant North of town, but that they knew nothing about why and how it was used. They didn't trust anyone with what he had learned about it, particularly about this person Errol.

Toll, they decided, really needed to go back to First Street tomorrow and scout out Fandango, and Zod would spend most of their time around the Southeast sector. Unfortunately they didn't dare go to the Northeast, where Zod would be spotted in a second, and there would be trouble. Toll would have to do that if it came down to it. They also agreed to meeting at Main and Market again, but also put some thought into going somewhere else.

After all, Zod was becoming a minor celebrity among thugs and all.

--Chapter 32--

Toll headed back to their encampment, and making sure they were not being followed, and Zod made their way back to the empty shop where they should be safe for the night. Hyper-vigilance got old after a while. There was only so much they could do at night, and tomorrow promised to be a long day. Evading detection was just going to make it longer.

But they desperately needed to free Desil before the cabal gave in and started breaking laws against harming beings, Human and Sentient alike. So the faster they worked the better their chances.

They also needed more Humans and Sentients to increase their chances, and that was the dangerous part. As of yet they had no idea who

they could trust, and there were still things that Zod wouldn't even tell Toll with them being so sensitive that not even Zod should know them if it was avoidable.

In the early morning, Zod opted to go back to Harald, the shopkeeper, and see if they could help more. Zod needed to find trustworthy people that would be more concerned about the state of the government without telling them about Semprini. It was an odd ask, they knew, but time was running short.

--Chapter 33--

Harald looked as they wish they could hide when Zod turned up again, but they knew it wouldn't work. Zod had an air of urgency that wouldn't be swept aside.

"I'm sorry to bug you Harald, but I could really use the help. I don't now how long Desil will last, and there's only me and a Road Thwacker that I find trustworthy."

"And what does that have to do with me?"

"I've seen some scraps of parchment that suggest Semprini will be used to basically hold Sentients for ransom, and if they get emboldened you're their only link."

Harald pondered for a moment, "how can I help? I'm just a shopkeeper."

"I need beings we can trust. We're trying to figure out all the complicit beings, but at some point we're going to have to rescue Desil, The two of us can't do it alone."

"I'll have to put out feelers among my community. Ask me again tomorrow, but I can't promise I can come up with anything significant."

This left Zod with little to work on, and hoped Toll was having better luck. They decided to try to find a spot to watch the alley that led from the door to South Wall.

It wasn't an easy task, but Zod got lucky and found an unoccupied building with an okay view yet virtually invisible in the middle of a block of offices and factories. So they hunkered down for the day with digital fingers crossed.

--Chapter 34--

Toll, meanwhile, was trying their best on First Street. They mingled for a while, gathering their moxie to really dig in. Thankfully they weren't on a watch list, and Zod had warned them about the corner store and their attitude towards bots, so they knew to stay on First and North Wall, and away from that street corner. It was also early, so Toll wandered about looking busy while trying to pick their marks.

The marks they wanted finally showed up. First was the green auto-butler coming out of what was presumably it's overnight parking down the lane at the lobbyist. The other the red one they ran into yesterday, who could get them into the MP's office with less suspicion since there was some rapport. It was Toll's luck that they were both running morning errands on First Street and not doing zigzag patterns across Government Alley.

The lobbyist's green auto-butler came out of the building with a stack of papers and a stack of dirty suits. They disappeared into the tailor's shop for a minute and came back out with only the papers, and Toll noted that they went into a the MP's building, and the red one steadied their course and followed. They decided to watch and wait until the auto-butler

reemerged and then figure out an angle of attack. The green one was the lobbyist's and just worth noting for now.

Zod was having some small amount of success. It seemed that the Humans and at least some of the bots had been using the alley during the workaday hours for some reason. They could only guess that too much comings and goings on a theoretically empty Market door would ask questions along a seedy street where nobody ever saw anything. Not that Zod didn't already have a lot of questions about the comings and goings.

The Humans were not watching the shops nor the other alleys should Zod feel brave later. Josephus and Jack-Jack were creeping about, but no sign of the others, which they somewhat expected. They were too "important" to be caught lurking about in the middle of the day, and besides, Fandango and that lobbyist had offices they could all move through.

Toll waited until the auto-butler had a stack of papers before flagging them down.

"Is your boss in?" Toll asked, "I'd like to talk with them about road maintenance before I have to get to work."

"They should be in soon," the auto-butler replied. "They're terminally late but never by too much."

"What else do they do besides roads?"

They're working on founding a new commission on Human-Sentient cooperation. Some people think that Sentients should be given Government seats" the auto-butler said guardedly, "We move a lot of paper but I don't know anything beyond that.

"Interesting," Toll mused aloud, "I imagine there's a fair amount of opposition."

"Could be, but they don't say much whenever I'm in the room"

"The PM and who else?"

“Mostly a large blocky type,” the auto-butler described Josephus, ”and a sickly sweet lobbyist” that sounded like Papier.

“Anyway,” Toll said trying to not sound fishy, “You mind if I follow you?”

“Sure, but you’ll have to wait in the lobby outside.”

Toll followed the auto-butler inside and found an anteroom that lead to several offices. They told the Sentient receptionist that they were there to see Fandango, and was nodded towards a seating area. They went over and picked up an old copy of “I Robot Weekly” which they looked over the top of to watch the room. A few Humans and Sentients shuffled in over the next half-hour or so, filling up the waiting area. Most of them barely awake, creating quite the snooze-fest.

Eventually the unimportant ones got called into unimportant offices, and with the auto-butler gone into Fandango’s office Toll felt unimportant and forgotten. Not the worst state of to be, Toll all things considered, Toll thought to themselves bemusedly. They almost felt like they were awaiting their fate. They were, after all, trying to figure out where Fandango fit into the morass; Toll couldn’t tell if they were “important,” or just a lackey begging to feel important.

Then the auto-butler came out of Fandango’s office, followed by Fandango, Josephus, then Papier, and somewhat surprisingly, the person Zod described as Chris. The auto-butler left, and after a few pleasantries the others left and Fandango went back into their office. The receptionist said a few things into the microphone that Toll couldn’t hear, and then pointed them towards the office.

The office was small, squalid, and disorganized not unlike the figure at the desk. They waved Toll to an empty spot at the desk adjacent to the chairs, which was obviously set aside for Sentients.

Fandango asked, "How can I help you?"

"My name is Toll and I'm a manager on the Western Road team. We need help because our costs keep rising and our budget doesn't. Particularly with the cobbles in and out of town, they're getting more expensive and we don't can't hire enough reliable workers."

"That's going to be tricky," Fandango said. "The budget is coming up soon, but the committee members are all loath to spend anything."

"Perhaps you can remind them that Western District also includes First Street and Government Alley." Toll added, "That might be enough."

"That it might, the pretty ones like to keep their shoes spotless. What do you reckon?"

"Well, five percent would get the ring road and the cobbles just beyond the gates back into shape rather nicely. We could do it for less but the difference would be noticeable to the public."

"It's a tall ask but I'll see what I can do. I'll need to talk to the folks on the East side as well. Is there anyplace I can send correspondence?"

"Right now we're on South Gate doing the cobbles there and along South Wall."

"Expect my auto-butler in a couple days so I can put out feelers," Fandango said. "Anything else?"

"I heard about a commission on Human/Sentient relations, and wondered if I could be involved. I do have to interact with Humans a lot."

"Well that's really just an idea right now Toll, but you might be useful later."

"Thanks," Toll said. Then he turned on his tracks and left."

“Well that was interesting,” Toll mused to themselves. The budget thing would get around so nobody would question them on First, and there was definitely some fuckery involving the Sentients since Toll knew the committee was well past the “idea” phase. And all the principal characters were wedded together with certainty.

On the whole, the entire meeting lasted about an hour, so Toll trundled down and out West Gate and into the barracks. They fiddled a bit murmuring about forgetting something to create that impression before they took Ring Road down and around to meet his crew and make sure they were on track. They weren’t of course, but that was why they were still employed.

Toll had many things on their mind now, but they needed to be seen, and seen working, to provide them with cover outside their known lobbying efforts.

--Chapter 36--

Zod, meanwhile, was mostly waiting and watching. Josephus and an auto-butler had come down and into the alley where they disappeared into the shadows. They decided to risk it and hide one alley over to see if they could hear anything. Making sure the road was clear, they moved as quickly as possible to cross the street and get into position and crossed their fingers electronically. It was dark, and grimy, and they were definitely going to need an auto-wash before anyone noticed them once they left.

After a while a door opened spilling light into the alley. From it, Zod recognized one of Fandango’s lackey auto-butlers complaining about the load they were carrying, as well as needing to stop for a wash before heading back into the government sector. They watched it go; it wasn’t worth

following them and risking being spotted covered in alley grease. Josephus came out a few minutes later, likewise complaining about the cleaning bills this alley caused. Muttering aloud they resolved to use the Market Avenue entrance as much as possible as they left.

Zod opted to take the chance of investigating the alley for more scraps of paper. There was naught, but there was a rumbling coming from behind the door, so they decided to get out of the way before they got discovered.

Zod was half-way down the road before the door creaked open, and they zipped back into the empty building, hoping that nobody saw them.

Squatting down they used their wing mirror, and it was apparent they had, so Zod locked the door and crept to the back of the room, hoping they wouldn't be noticed by any sensors.

The rattling of door knobs could be heard coming down the street and to the one Zod was in. With someone muttering "locked" the sounds traveled down the way. Moving back to the window they saw Jack-Jack standing watch of the alley which severely limited their options. All they could do is watch and wait, hoping to see anything else worth noting.

Eventually Jack-Jack left their post, but Zod waited for another hour or so to make sure the coast was clear. To be safe they headed East towards the Sketch Antique Shops and ducked inside and headed to Harald's booth.

"Hi Harald," Zod started, "how are things?"

"Well, you're here, so it depends. I haven't had the chance to pull anyone aside yet."

"That's okay. But people are starting to get suspicious. I think someone recognized me earlier so I need to lay low for a while. I don't suppose there's a shower nearby big enough for a bot."

"Unfortunately not," Harald said, "We don't exactly cater to bots in this part of town if you catch my meaning. The closest is Main and South

Wall.”

“That is unfortunate. I can’t risk there by my appearance, so risking the one off River is my only real hope.”

“My neighbor does have some liveries, which might help some”.

Harald signaled to the booth opposite theirs, “Can you help this Sentient out?” The Human operating the booth offered a few options, and Zod picked out a different generic tunic than what they were wearing. Zod paid and changed, and checked that the coast was clear before heading up East Wall and turned left onto River Avenue, and then to the showers off Dam Avenue.

After a quick shower and washing all their liveries Zod stepped out after making sure the coast was still clear and headed to the charging bank at Main and Market to wait for Toll.

--Chapter 37--

After an interminable amount of time, Toll once again came up from South Gate to join them.

Zod reported that they didn’t have much to add beyond saying that they expected a lot of the Human movement was likely shifting to Market because of the grime.

Toll, on the other hand, had plenty to add to the equation. They led in by bringing the green auto-butler into the mix and their tie to the Papier’s office, adding that it just seemed like something to be aware of for the time being.

More importantly was the visit to the MP’s office. Firstly, the multiple offices off one receptionist made it impossible to know if the ones besides Fandango were implicit too. But budget things aside, Fandango was

pretty cagey about what they called a “commission” as supposedly only being in some sort of concept stage, not as far along as things actually were.

Toll added that they were trying to get involved with them like a proper mole, so they’d have to be extra-careful too.

To that end, Zod mentioned the shop on River Avenue that sold livery, and that they had several now, it would be a good idea to not wear work clothes when creeping around.

This led to planning ahead, and it was agreed that Zod should be pushing the envelope since they were probably a given thorn by now, but Toll was going to need to play low between work and basically lobbying about the roads so they could keep their electronic ear to the ground. Where they were really stuck is what exactly Zod should be doing with their free time.

In the end, they decided what was really needed was finding any movement patterns if they were going to have any hope of rescuing Desil.

Toll would keep an eye on First Street in the mornings, and Zod would do their best timing visits to the Market Avenue building. The trick was going to be effectively hanging around Main and Market and somehow not be conspicuous. With that, they parted ways for the evening, with Toll returning to the work site, and Zod carefully picking their way back to the empty stall in the antique district. Along the way, Zod mused that they needed someplace closer to Main Street if that was going to be the epicenter of their routine. They thought that that definitely should be the first order of business after checking in with Harald in case they had any success rounding up help.

--Chapter 38--

Zod struck out again with Harald as expected before picking their way back down to the empty shop on South Wall and settled in for a lovely day watching the street. It wasn't long before an auto-butler came spinning down the street. Zod watched it as it was the green one Toll had mentioned this time. They were greeted by Jack-Jack who looked up and down the street warily before following them inside. An hour or so later the other one showed up with to same routine. After a while they left one after the other, and the routine was repeated every hour or so as the day dragged on.

Eventually darkness started to fall and the street grew silent save a few tired Humans going back to their hovels. Zod kicked into gear and made a beeline on to Main Street where they found a shower and a less grimy alley to lay low in for the night.

The next day dragged on for Zod too while they were watching Market. They knew the principals. They knew mid-day was clear.

Something Had To Be Done, and soon. Zod and Toll needed a plan, regardless of any additional help.

When they met up again, Zod brought this up, saying each day got more risky, and time was running out. But Zod couldn't go back to the barracks safely, particularity without any proof, so it was down to whatever Toll and Harald could come up with. They also desperately needed the most recent draft legislation so they could bring the conspiracy out into the open.

So it was decided that the onus was on Toll to get whatever they could, and Zod would try to connect with the seedier side of town where they still might find sympathizers.

In the morning, Zod headed back to Harald's, where they were met with a few surprises. Several Humans and bots were milling about, but more notably was Connie, who apparently shopped there enough to be trusted, along with a few other Dam workers that Zod recognized.

“Connie!” Zod exclaimed, “I’m surprised to see you here.”

“Well, I’m around here sometimes for bits and bobs, but when Harald told me that Desil was in trouble, well, they’re a friend of mine.”

“A friend to all of us,” someone else added.

“I don’t know what you all know, but to bring everyone up to speed, Desil is being held captive down the block where a cabal of Humans and a few Sentients think they hold the keys to control us. It’s theoretically possible through some rare substance, but more importantly they’re lining up to limit us in government with or without Desil’s knowledge.”

“We’ve seen some of the draft legislation,” Zod added.

“So, what do we do?” Connie asked, taking on the mantle of the Dam workers alliance.

“We’re on a two-pronged tack. My partner Toll is attempting to get hold of the draft legislation so they can present it to Parliament, and meanwhile we need to gear up to rescue Delis, who we’re sure is near here and could also add weight to the Parliament exposure.”

“If you can all wait here, I’ll go and try to round up everyone for a meeting of minds tonight,” Zod said as they backed towards East Wall.

With that, Zod left and headed towards Main Street to try to find Toll, on whom an awful lot of things rested on at the moment. Since they hadn’t actually decided on a meeting spot, Zod waited at the power bank so they could watch all the roads.

Toll came heading up from South Gate with a sense of purpose and a couple of other road bots in tow.

“I found some help,” Toll opened, “and I’m supposed to stop by the minister’s office in the morning.”

“Excellent.” replied Zod “Where did you find this lot? A few faces look familiar.”

“Mostly my own team. You probably saw them when we first met.”

“That would explain it. With some help I have a small group nearby as well. We should get everyone together this evening and plan. Have you had any luck with the legislation?”

“Hopefully tomorrow,” Toll replied, “I plan on swapping envelopes somehow. Literally running into one of the bots seems like the best idea.”

“Here’s the draft I originally found,” Zod said as they printed out some papers from their side. If you can swap those we might buy some time.”

“Perhaps we all should meet tomorrow,” Zod continued “We have one chance to get this right. I’ve sent you the coordinates for then,” and hummed them via the UHF channel they had agreed on earlier. “I’ll go get that end organized too.”

“And I’ll be here around noon, Zod added. “Hopefully you can get the last things we need.”

With that the Zod and the group separated, and Zod headed back to the Sketch Antiques district to bring everyone there up to speed. They also started figuring out plans of attack on the Market Avenue space since they were the most familiar with it. But it was getting late and everyone needed to be back at their barracks before they were missed. It wouldn’t do to set the alarms off too early.

--Chapter 39--

Zod went back to the power bank at noon the next day, and while they were waiting for Toll they reviewed what they had saved for any further hints. Ultimately it was a helpful refresher, but they still needed an up-to-date version because there was no telling what changed.

Eventually, Toll showed up, steaming slightly even in the early afternoon sun.

“Success?” Zod asked.

“Well, yes and no...”

“The meeting with Fandango was interesting.” Toll continued. “They had bought the road budget gambit, but then seemed to size me up and find out where my loyalties lie. I played along as best I could, but they were being cagier than I had expected. Not sure if they bought that or not.”

“Hopefully it’s moot anyway. Did you get the papers?”

“I hope so. The red auto-butler was headed up to Fandango’s office and I ‘accidentally’ ran into him and tried to swap folders. It wasn’t as clean as I’d like, so if we can go on without either of us going back to First it would be for the best.”

Toll handed over the envelope and Zod scanned it to memory to compare it with their stored version. It was definitely newer and definitely more ominous.

“Well then,” Zod remarked when they were done, “this is a lot and we really need to expose it quickly before it gets snuck into another law.”

“What do we do then?” Toll asked.

“We have to all meet up again tonight. We may only have a couple of days in Parliament, and who knows with Desil. I think we have enough people to pull it off.”

With that, they split up, with Toll going to collect their compatriots and Zod headed towards the meeting place. They had to melt into the shadows once to dodge a dam Human but thankfully the trip was uneventful.

It took a while to get everyone together, and even longer to get them calmed down. It was a rowdy bunch, but perhaps that was a good thing, Zod thought. A little noise was needed to gather attention to their cause.

“I think everyone knows why we’re all here,” Zod started, deliberately avoiding bringing up Semprini. “But to sum up, there is a group of people that want to exert control over Sentient bots and strip away our rights. The important ones are Fandango, a member of Parliament, and Chris, whom many of you know is higher up in Dam management.”

“Chris, really?” one of the Dam bots exclaimed.

“Yes. We’ve seen them with the MP and a lobbyist, as well as visiting the location where Desil is being held.”

“It’s being billed under the color of being a ‘commission’,” Zod continued, “but we have the draft legislation here if you’d like to see it. It’s anything but.”

There was a pause while several of the attendants looked over the documents. A low whistle came from the group, Sentient and Human alike.

“That’s a lot a lot,” a Human piped up, “what do we do then?”

“Well,” Zod said, “we need a two-pronged attack. Ideally we rescue Desil at the same time our case is made to the full Parliament assembly.

Toll is perfectly situated to go to Parliament so that leaves me to extract Desil. They’re being held just down the block from here.”

“Sure, but how?”

“Toll will take a couple of Humans and Sentients to Government House and approach the floor. The rest of us will split up between the front door on Market Avenue and the back alley along South Wall so they can’t escape with Desil out the other way.

“I’ll go in through the back alley but I need a squad leader for the Market side.”

“I can handle that,” Connie piped in.

“I was hoping you’d say that,” Zod responded, “but I didn’t want to put you on the spot. Give me a minute and I’ll show you where.”

“Why not all of us?” someone asked.

“A crowd would gather too much attention,” Zod responded, “especially this time of night. Everyone stay here. We’ll be back in a half-hour or so. Meanwhile Toll can put together their team.”

With that, Zod collected Connie and they headed around to Market Avenue. The roads were surprisingly less crowded than they thought they would be, so they moved quickly but kept near the shadows.

Along the way, Zod asked Connie what they knew about the Dam workers.

“Most of them,” Connie replied, “a few in my area, most of the others we either overlap shifts or have met socially. You?”

“I don’t socialize much. But there’s Tank from my shift and a few I only recognize. I’ve also met the Road workers from when this whole thing started last week. I don’t know any of the Humans. They all come from Harald or Toll.”

“Can we trust them?” Connie asked.

“We don’t have much choice right now, but keep your eyes and ears open.”

With that, they reached Market and without going too far down the street Zod pointed out the doorway and described what they knew of the lobby behind the door for Number 19. Then without dallying they made their way back to the group.

When they got back, Toll had already started to triage the group. Specifically they'd taken aside a few Humans and Sentients that knew their way around Government House, both physically and metaphorically. They were already well into scheming.

Zod looked around at the rest of the motley crew. Definitely a bunch of ragamuffins, but they were paying attention, so it could be a lot worse.

Zod and Connie started to split them up, with Connie taking more of the Humans to deal with the stairs. They knew they were wide enough for bots, but since they had the people it would be better to play safe than be sorry.

With the sorting done, and some necessarily vague plans made, it was time to turn in for the night. Some cots were found for the Humans and bipedal bots, and there was plenty of parking for the tracked Sentients.

There were the expected protests, but Zod and Toll put their proverbial feet down saying there just wouldn't be enough time in the morning. Someone was sent over to Harald's to line up some food to allay those protests too.

Zod settled down at the door and went into sentry mode, even if it wasn't obvious who or what they were watching.

--Chapter 41--

The morning was understandably tense and there was an air of sweat and grease permeating the shop. Breakfast had been found for the Humans, and a dispatch was sent to get power packs for bots that hadn't recharged recently.

Once everyone was charged up, it was time to sort out the exact game plan. Toll would get a head start to Government House because that was likely to take longer to get to the floor. Matt, one of the Road Sentients would stay in the lobby and wait for Toll's microburst signal and return to

the rest of the group to start that part of the plan. From there the two groups would head to their prospective entrances as quickly as possible. Once Desil was rescued they would all meet up on the Parliament floor.

Realizing that they were just putting off the inevitable, Toll and their posse headed out, leaving the rest to hunker down and wait the long wait.

When they got to the Parliament lobby, both the red and green auto-butlers were somewhat surprisingly waiting for them, challenging them being there. Toll smelled a rat fink and lied loud enough for others to hear that they wanted to talk about the Road budget since things weren't moving in the back channels. Without a convincing argument, the auto-butlers backed off and left while Toll continued to the registration desk to ask for a full hearing. Thankfully the legislative day was just getting started so they wouldn't have to wait as long as they feared.

As soon as Toll and their entourage got to the floor, Fandango was already objecting.

"Speaker," Fandango started, "Toll here is acting in bad faith. They started working with me but has apparently decided to do an end-run."

Toll decided to just go for the jugular. "Members of Parliament, I am admittedly here under other pretenses. Fandango and others are plotting to strip we Sentients of what little autonomy we have."

"This is a lie," Fandango interjected, "I'm not bending to their will so they want to strip me of my duties. I ask that they get removed from the floor."

As the Sergeant at Arms moved forward to be at the ready, the PM said, "These are serious charges Toll. Do you have any proof?" Toll said loudly, "Before I'm removed, I want to file a document with the recorder, and have them distribute copies to the Members."

Fandango moved to object, but the PM overruled them. As the copies were being made and distributed, Toll whistled to Matt in the lobby, who left to get the others started.

As Matt left, they had the suspicion that they were being followed. And indeed what looked like the green auto-butler that Toll had described was wandering listlessly about in the park. They opted to appear to ignore the butler, and headed down to River Avenue and the late-morning crowds. Matt managed to slip into a stall, wasting precious time while the auto-butler looked for them. But they soon realized they'd just have to make a break for it and hope for the best. With the butler caught up in foot traffic this far from Government House they had a little time to make it. As quickly as they could they rolled on to the shop where everyone else was waiting.

--Chapter 41--

Matt came back to an understandably restless crowd.

“Zod, I think they know.” Matt began. “The auto-butlers were waiting in Parliament’s lobby, and the green one tried to follow me here.”

“Hopefully they don’t know that we know where they’re holding Desil. We need to act fast.

“Teams, get together. They know we’re on to them, so set your radios to channel 5. If they try to move Desil follow them and beep us.”

“What’s the plan?” Connie asked.

“Go for it. Rush the doors and get upstairs as quickly as possible. Pick one person to wait at the door.”

And with that, they split up and headed out at a clip.

Zod's crew got there first only to find the elevator jammed. "Well, they can't get out this way then," they muttered. They told the crew to spread out and watch the other alleys while one of the servo repair bots got to overriding the circuits.

The servo bot was making some progress when Connie chirped across the radio.

"They know," Connie said, "we've got them barricaded for now but they're banging pretty hard. I'm not sure how long we can hold out."

"Yeah, the elevator is jammed on our side. We're trying to get in but it's slow going. Someone or something must have tipped them off."

"What should we do then?"

"We'll send a few Sentients your way. They can move faster than the Humans," Zod replied.

"Thanks. I know we probably won't get a second chance." and Connie clicked off.

With the Sentients dispatched, Zod let out an electronic sigh. "It can never be easy," they thought to themselves, and pushed the repair Sentient to work faster.

Meanwhile on the other side of the building, Connie and company were doing their best to block the door. Unfortunately it opened in as doors do, so there was only so long they could hold it. They arranged themselves as a blockade as best they could. The reinforcements came and added to the metal and flesh wall.

Eventually the handle gave way and several Sentients charged the crowd from the hallway. Somehow they managed to clear a hole and two Humans holding a hooded figure jostled through and ran down Market Avenue towards Main. Most of the bots headed off in hot pursuit with Connie paging Zod as they rolled. Zod quickly responded and dashed after,

leaving a few Humans and some bots to hold down the fort on the alley side.

Then, the surprise happened. Several more Humans rushed the main door with yet another hooded figure headed in the opposite direction. One of the Sentients alerted Zod, whose group broke off the pursuit leaving Connie in charge while they headed to the new chase as quickly as possible.

The first group hurried down to Main Street and out South Gate into the woods where they went silent. The chase team got as far as the road crew's campsite but then had to spread out and search foot by foot trying to flush them out. They could only hope that this was the false trail because it really was going nowhere. There were bot tracks but it was hard to tell new from old, and some went South down the trail, some off right to Ring Road, and a few others just randomly crashing through the bushes.

The other team got a small break. The runners had headed West on River Avenue, meaning Zod and their small group were able to nearly catch up to them when the two chase groups met up at Main Street, where the chase led North towards the gate.

Just to be safe, Zod peeled off a Human and a Sentient to go to watch Wall Road by Desil's place in case they wanted to hole up there or otherwise try to defend themselves. Zod made sure they were also on channel 5.

Zod radioed Connie for an update on that end.

"Any luck?" Zod asked.

"Not yet. They seem to have gone in all directions and I lost track of their hooded mark."

"Send a few folks over to West Gate. They may try to come in there. One or two on Ring Road if you can. I'm going to send a few from the

other direction. To the East of you is the weir and the swamps so I doubt they'll try that.

“If there are side roads,” Zod continued, follow the tracks. They won't have time to cover them.”

“Nothing yet,” Connie replied, “but I'm not familiar with this area either.”

“Report anything you see then”, and with that Zod signed off.

Zod was sure their team was on the right track, but had no idea what to do next. They dispatched a few to Ring Road as promised, and the main group forged ahead down the road, spotting hints of footprints and tracks in the dust. They turned their scanners up to maximum.

--Chapter 43--

Toll wasn't having the best day either. The ministers by now had read the documentation they provided, and then the question and answer phase began. They were doing their best to get the point across without bringing up Semprini. It might come to that, but hopefully not until Desil were here to gloss things over.

The assembly left for a morning break, and given the time Toll radioed Zod for a progress report.

“Nothing yet,” said Zod, “we're having to go in all directions because they split up and we're not sure which is the real Desil, and which is the decoy.”

“We're running out of time here. I can only dance in front of the MPs for so long before I have to get into the details.”

“Do what you can. We're trying to cover all the bases. They have to pop up somewhere soon. Worst case I'll meet you there since I have a wider

breadth of all that's going on."

"I'd rather it didn't come to that," Toll responded, "so fingers crossed it doesn't come to that."

Like clockwork the ministers filtered in and settled into their seats. The Prime Minister announced that a quorum had been reached and all other business had been postponed for the day. Toll breathed a sigh since it not only meant they didn't have to rush, it also meant the ministers were taking this a lot more seriously than they had expected. But Toll did note that Fandango was curiously still missing.

Then, the questioning started.

First was one of the other ministers involved in maintenance. "Mr. Toll. You came in here under the pretext of road budgets. Why?"

"Well," answered Toll, "to be quite frank that is a heavy concern of mine, that I'd love to discuss in the future. But at least one, possibly more, ministers would have made sure I never got past the lobby with my pressing concerns today."

"Can you reiterate your concerns in your own words?"

"It's pretty simple on the surface," Toll continued, "Fandango and probably some other ministers are trying to strip our rights and have absolute control over us Sentients."

"That's a tall order," another MP chimed in, "where's your proof other than this document?"

"For starters, I managed to acquire this document from Fandango's auto-butler. The red one. Specifically I ran into them and swapped out a copy of an older version we'd procured earlier."

"What else?"

"Our main proof is a witness. I'm sure some of you know Desil. Well, he was taken captive something over a week ago, but unfortunately

when we tried to rescue him they made a run for it. They're in pursuit as we speak."

"I've met them a few times," one of the other ministers added, "do you know what they'll talk about?"

"Not really. There are some things my partner Zod knows, but I think only Desil knows the particulars. It has to do with some research they were doing."

"This Zod, they've been reported missing for over a week."

"Yes minister. Zod has been trying to track down Desil and find out what's going on. Hopefully they'll get in contact soon; I don't know if I should distract them at this point.

"In the meantime I think that I can answer most questions."

"I was hoping for something better, but lets see what we can see."

During the break in the conversation, Toll radioed Zod for an update, saying things would be getting tense soon and they may need to come alone. Zod responded that they thought they were close and Toll should monitor channel 5.

"I've radioed Zod and they think they're close, but understand if they need to leave the others to testify here. Reinforcing that they needed a little more time."

"While we're waiting, then, what can you tell us about their organization?"

"So what I know, Toll said" is that Fandango is working with a lobbyist down the street -- I can show you but I don't know the address -- and a strong-arm named Josephus along with a thug named Jack-Jack.

Chris, a Human from the Dam team has shown up a few times. I don't know about the other ministers off Fandango's lobby at 39 First Street.

There's Fandango's red auto-butler and the lobbyist's green auto-butler along with a few Sentients, some of which come from my road team."

"Can you prove this?"

"Well, my memory counts as evidence, and when the others make it they'll be able to do the same. We could ask Fandango but they seem to have disappeared along with one or two other ministers, including the transportation minister that talked to me first.

"Out of curiosity do they share the same office?"

"Yes, the PM responded, but I'll need more to make a solid connection."

That'll be difficult from where I sit," Toll said, "can we bring in the auto-butchers? They were in the lobby trying to keep me out when I got here this morning."

"Sergeant!" hollered the PM, "Bring in the two auto-butchers and the lobbyist and whomever else you can find. Quickly.

"Fifteen minute break," they added. "Don't go far."

--Chapter 44--

The rescue team was in borderline disarray. Connie's team was chasing shadows, and Zod's team couldn't decide how many times they should split up.

Eventually it came down to Connie's troop just couldn't go any further. There just wasn't any recent evidence of a trail off the road and even the side tracks had doubled back. They could only have gone to Ring Road where hopefully a surprise was waiting for them. They left a couple bots with radios to camp out at the intersection and headed up Ring Road.

When they reached the Road barracks they met with the Human and a

Sentient there before following the road on to Zod's group. Eventually they met up with Zod empty-handed and the radio was full of nothing but empty chatter.

"Nothing?" Zod asked.

"Not an electronic sausage," Connie responded, "but I've left guards at the other gates so they'll have a hard time slipping in or out there."

"I've sent a couple to Desil's house", Zod continued, "to the same end. It's possible to sneak back around from North Road. I've used it a couple times."

"What about Dam and River Avenues?"

"They didn't head that way and we're too low on personnel. We just have to risk it. The crew to Desil's didn't show any trace of them passing that way either."

"What next?" Connie asked.

"Since you're here, why don't you continue up the road here and I'll loop over to Desil's. I have a hunch they've decided it's a good hidey-hole to wait until things blow over."

They continued up the road until the path and parted ways. It didn't escape Zod that the past week was just running in circles, and now they're circling back to where it all started. Either way, there were signs of passage but they couldn't tell if it was theirs or new damage.

Zod paused to check in with the other teams. As expected, nobody had anything of importance to report except Connie's team and the two on Wall Road found more tracks that looked somewhat fresh but couldn't say for sure. On Toll's channel, they were asking them to hurry before they lost the floor.

When Zod got to the clearing around Desil's they stayed in the bushes and watched quietly for any sign of occupation.

--Chapter 45--

Suddenly there was a cacophony over the radio. It sounded like the Southern team was on to something and in pursuit. Roads were being run and vegetation was being trampled. Apparently they'd holed out inside the Road Team's campsite, after all which led Zod to some suspicions. He changed to Toll's channel.

"Well there's good news and there's bad news. The good news is that one of the groups has been found and are being chased. The bad news is they were using your campsite to hide in so there are perhaps more Road team members involved that we thought." Zod started in.

"Well crap," Toll replied, "I trust my core team but all the others – the ones you met before, but lets assume the rest of them can't be trusted."

"That explains why Josephus was ready to bolt when we showed up this morning."

"I guess any of the Humans that Harald didn't vet personally. I think we can trust Harald."

"Agreed. I'll relay this to Connie and we can warn the others we know are safe."

"And I really am running out of things to stall with." Toll ended.

With that, the broke off and Zod asked Connie to use "the other channel" which was the same one that Zod and Toll used. They brought Connie up to speed and asked them to try to remember who had been stationed where. Toll chimed in and agreed.

The fracas at South Gate continued as the kidnappers panicked and ran their way up Ring Wall, not realizing that there were people waiting for them. But they were unable to outrun the Sentients and one of them caught a runner with their safety line, tripping up all the Humans in the process.

The Sentients showed their loyalty by continuing to run, hoping they could melt into the town crowds if they could make it. Two of the team Sentients unilaterally decided to go after them.

The team trussed up the Humans and pulled off the hood, revealing... Jack-Jack muttering about pesky bots. The other two Humans they couldn't identify off-hand. They relayed this to Zod, who told them to take the group to the park and wait, adding that they hoped to join the group soon.

The West Gate guards reported that several bots had rushed them and escaped into town and they were pursuing them. By description Zod recognized the two as being among the questionable ones, so they had to accept that that group had all been written off, hopefully to be identified and dealt with once this was all over. Zod told them that if they weren't captured by Main Street they should join the others in the park and wait.

--Chapter 46--

“One down,” Zod thought, wishing that meant this was all over. But they still had work to do, so leaving the others with him in the bushes they crept up to Desil's place and peered in the window with their wing mirror.

Through the window, Zod could see the hooded figure and some Humans and Sentients watching the doors, and thankfully not the window where they sat. Zod rolled back to the group and laid out a game plan in the dirt. Zod and one Sentient would bust in the back door after the others had arrayed around the front and garage doors. “Simple enough,” Zod said to themselves.

Which turned out to not be. Someone had tipped them off again because the entire group burst out of the garage running helter-skelter. But they left behind their captee who thankfully turned out to be Desil. A

collective sigh of relief was heard before everyone set out to capture the captors while Zod untangled Desil and brought them up to speed.

“Sorry for the rush,” Zod started, “but we have to hurry. Toll is making our case in front of Parliament as we speak and needs us as witnesses.”

“Where are we at?” Desil replied.

“Well, the long story short is as you may have guessed that some Humans have found out about Semprini and want to use it as a hammer to strip Sentients of their rights. But they don’t really know what it is or what it’s used for. I know a little because I managed to rescue your notebook before they found it.”

“Do you know who? I’ve only seen a small group of beings in my captivity.”

“I hope you can identify them later,” Zod replied. They’re all on the run but they’re not getting very far without a power bank. We’re going to call in to the outposts to be on the watch but I sure wish we had serial numbers.

“But we’re sure there’s Member Fandango, one of the First Street lobbyists, and the Dam manager Chris along with someone named Josephus and a couple of their thugs.”

Desil let out a low whistle, “Josephus came by my shop asking sketchy questions before I was kidnapped, so I guess it was one of their minions. I didn’t know about Fandango, though, nor Chris. I was kept in a back room and rarely saw who came and went. Mostly the same people by what I heard, so maybe I can identify their speech patterns.”

“First things first, we need to get you to Government House. It’s the best way to head off the conspiracy. I’m alerting the others with the captives we do have. Hopefully the others will be along soon.”

“We may need to bring up Semprini, but do everything to avoid it. Some things just don’t need to be public.”

--Chapter 47--

Finally they reached Government House. There were a few guards in the lobby that had obviously been sent to stop them, but Zod swept them aside since they didn’t have any real power to do so.

With that, they entered the chamber and everything went silent. Even people that didn’t know Desil knew of them, so a level of gravitas settled into the room. They sidled up to Toll, with their entourage and captive in tow behind them.

“Desil, I presume,” said the Speaker. We’ve been hearing from Toll, so what can you add to the conversation?”

“I’ve only had time to get the most rudimentary description of where we are. I haven’t seen anyone but my captors for over a week now.”

“Reporter, what’s the short version?” asked the PM.

“Purportedly Fandango, one of our members, and a few others have been trying to inject language into a bill that would restrict Sentient rights under the color of efficiency. The members have read the draft legislation and are trying to sort out who and how anyone is involved.”

“Well,” began Desil, “before I was kidnapped someone named Josephus came around several times asking questions about Sentients since it’s common knowledge that I do some of the trickier repairs that the shop in town can’t do well. Mostly they wanted to know where Sentients come from and how they’re born. I had no answers other than they came from the North but they didn’t have any memory of it either. Apparently this wasn’t sufficient and one day they showed up with a thug whose name I later

learned was Jack-Jack and some Sentients in generic livery. The only one recognizable had a scrape down their side. They hooded me, and dragged me away under cover of darkness.

“They took me to some building and locked me in a room before Jack-Jack removed my hood. They fed me sparsely and occasionally came in, usually to ask some form of the same questions.”

“What questions” asked the Speaker.

“Mostly where the Sentients come from, and I could only repeat the same answers. I don’t know for sure other than it’s somewhere in the hills way North of town.”

“Do you know who came to grill you?”

“Well there was Josephus and sometimes Jack-Jack came to be ominous. The other two I never heard their names but I’m sure I could identify them. I could hear the Sentients rumbling in the hallway and conversations I could not fully hear, but I never saw them again.”

“Conversations?” The Speaker asked.

“Something about passing a law. One of the people that occasionally came had a sickly-sweet way of talking. Must have been a lobbyist.”

“Noted. Once we find Fandango maybe we can identify them .”

Zod piped in “I’m pretty sure their office is in 37 First Street. I was hiding in there when I heard them talking to Josephus.”

Toll added, “And probably the same one I saw in Fandango’s office. They have a green auto-butler if that matters.”

“Thanks.” said the PM, who whispered aside to a couple court officers who promptly left via the back door.

The PM invited them to sit in the witness box while they and a few other ministers stepped out of the room for a conference.

--Chapter 48--

One of the officers came back with the lobbyist. They were bound up since they had tried to escape. The officer explained that they had covered both doors into the building in anticipation. Meanwhile a sticky-sweet stench permeated the room. The officer added that Fandango was still missing so it was being treated as a manhunt. Zod pitched in and said they had some people North of town and would put them on the alert to watch North Road, and had transmitted them an image of what Fandango looked like.

The attention then turned towards the lobbyist, who was not very keen on being helpful until they were reminded that contempt could mean both jail time and fines. They were answering questions but it was apparent that they were withholding some key bits.

“They were asked bluntly, “State your name for the record.”

“Papier, m’lud. I dropped my parents’ name when I reached the age of majority.”

“Very well, Papier, what do you know about this draft legislation?” asked a minister holding some paper like it was a dead fish.

“It’s not my job to...”

“Oh, come on,” replied the minister, “several people have tied you to this via Fandango as well as complicity in a kidnapping.”

“About that. It’s not illegal to help draft legislation, is it? So far as a kidnapping, I don’t know. Fandango had some people leaning on someone for information but I didn’t know they had a captive.”

“Are you prepared to say that under oath? You’ve been working for Josephus, who is now considered a person of interest, and Desil here

recognized your voice in the building where they were being held talking to them.”

“Well, I...“ but they didn’t get any further when their auto-butler was brought along with Fandango’s.

“Please stay over there,” the officer said waving the two bots to a side board.

“Now, Papier, writing legislation isn’t illegal, but conspiracy to disenfranchise citizens of this town rather is, even if you didn’t actually succeed. So, in lieu of Fandango’s presence, perhaps you can be more forthcoming.”

“I really didn’t know about any kidnapping,” Papier said, “I just went to meetings in Josephus’s office building with Fandango and a couple of Sentients. Chris was occasionally there.”

“Chris?”

“They work over at the dam. Not sure what they actually do.”

There was a murmur among the ministers. Chris wasn’t at the top of the hierarchy there, but they’d petitioned the assembly on dam matters occasionally. The officer was dispatched again.

The minister started up again, but there was a fracas at the door. It burst open and Connie came in followed by Fandango being held by a Sentient with a safety cable. They were brought alongside Papier.

“Well,” the Prime Minister chimed in this time, “would you like to explain yourself? You disappeared right before testimony started and you were caught...”

“On North Road,” Connie filled in, “a few kilometers North of town and headed fast. If Zod hadn’t alerted us they might have slipped past.”

“Thank you...”

“Connie.”

“Thank you Connie.”

“Now,” the PM turned to Fandango, “where should we start. Perhaps you can tell us why you were fleeing town.”

“I knew there would be a misunderstanding, so I needed space to clear my name.”

“Perhaps you should try now. You’ve been implicated in a conspiracy by a Sentient, a Human, and your own lobbyist.”

“Well, nobody knows where Sentients come from. They just kind of show up and we’re supposed to accept them on face value. We’ve learned that Semprini – whatever that is – is involved but nobody but Desil seems to know anything about it”

“Is that why you kidnapped Desil?”

“Well, it was supposed to be an interview and I guess it went wrong.”

“Wrong? You kidnapped a Human!”

“Well, it wasn’t a bot.”

“Well, you can explain that to Justice.” and the Sergeant-at-Arms led them away.”

The PM then addressed the group, “What is this Semprini stuff? How come it wasn’t mentioned?”

“We had hoped it wouldn’t come up,” said Desil, we don’t know much about it other than it’s involved in Sentients being sentient. I’ve been researching but I haven’t figured out much other than it comes from far North, where the Sentients seemed to come from. For their safety the less public that is the better.”

“I can agree with that,” the PM said, “so what now”?

“Can we purge the records?” Zod asked. “At least regarding Semprini. And it’s best nobody knows who knows anything. To that there are a few others that I won’t mention.”

“Let us confer for a minute.” and the PM ushered a few other members aside.”

It was one of those uncomfortable pauses. The kind where everyone introspects and reviews their words and wonders what they did wrong.

At that point. Chris and the scraped Sentient were brought into the chamber, looking very put out while trying to look innocent at the same time.

The PM and the members that had been conferring hastened back. For some reason they really didn't think that Chris would be brought in at this time, and were making plans without them.

“Well, Chris,” said the PM. “We would never have thought that you would betray your own coworkers.”

“They weren't working hard enough. Bots don't need breaks and they want breaks and weekends off. That means more bots and more shifts and more time that I have to spend coordinating lesser beings.”

“Sentients aren't bots.”

“There really isn't a difference between a Sentient and an auto-butler if you think about it.”

“Okay, xenophobia aside, what do you have to say about your conspiracy and kidnapping allegations?”

“I did what I felt like I had to do.”

“Very well,” the PM said, “put them with the others.”

After Chris was led away, the PM addressed the assembly, calling for a quorum.

“I think we can all agree that after this, we need at least one Sentient in the Chamber. I propose adding one seat and voting to add more on the next general election. All in favor?”

“Aye”

It was then put forth that with all the work that Zod had put in to protect their people, they should have a provisional position until the next election. They didn't want it, but the Sentients in the room urged him on so with a chamber vote they were elected. Connie and Toll were tasked with bringing in the others to the Justice chamber.

And with that, Zod finally got their thwacker fixed.