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This is Kurt's private weblog from the Perplex City Academy, only accessible from Earth.

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Thoughts

Not many at the moment, I only just started this site!

The Path of Least Time

About Me

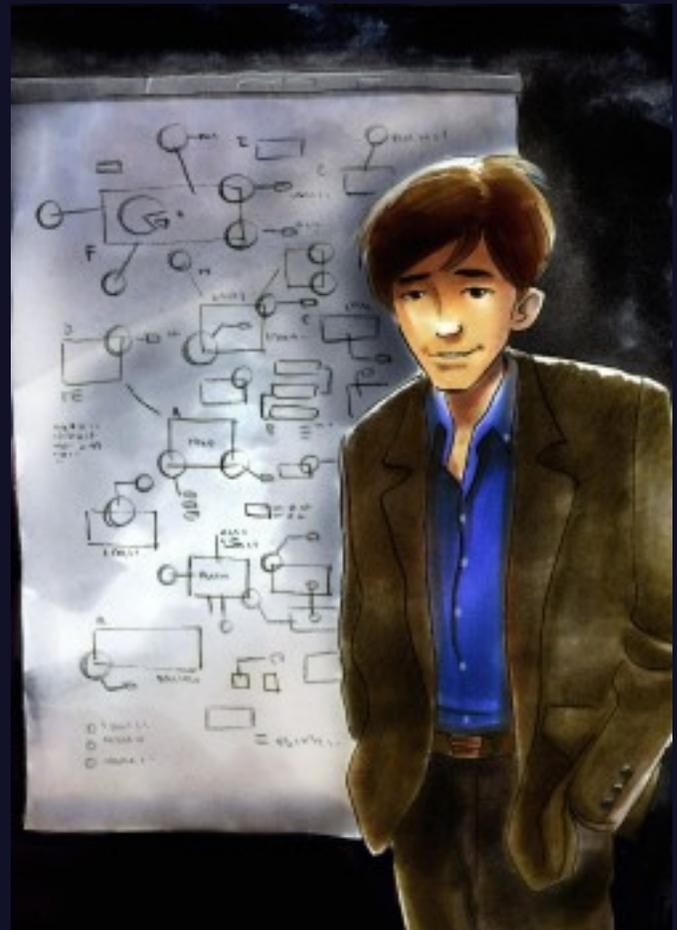
This is the personal and Earth-only weblog of Kurt McAllister. I'm a scribe at the Perplex City Academy and I'm currently working in the Special Projects Division with the Cube Retrieval Team. I know what you're thinking, so don't do it - I honestly can't reply to any emails about the Cube or what we're doing.

I've managed to set up this website so that it's only accessible to Earth viewers; it's a bit unusual but I thought it'd be interesting for you guys to get a taste of what it's like to work at the Academy and other things happening in Perplex City. Plus, scribes - especially those working on Special Projects, and even more especially those on the CRT - are not allowed to comment on their work in personal weblogs. In fact, I'm not even sure if we're allowed to have weblogs - then again, there's probably some provision for human rights or freedom of speech that gets around that. Anyway.

I'm into science of all kinds; I have a degree in Natural Sciences from West Besley College and I've also conducted a fair bit of research in the fields of computer science, crypto, that sort of thing. I'm fascinated with the developments on Earth relating to those subjects - you're proceeding on broadly the same path as we've done but in some interestingly different ways. Working on the CRT means that I'm able to make full use of the replication resources to look at the history of computers on Earth as well as in Perplex City, which is one of my hobbies.

I do get outdoors occasionally though - I've been running regularly for the last few years and take part in several races every year. You can generally spot me in Magine Park or down Reflex Angle after work, if the weather's good.

You can email me at [kurt@\[NOSPAM\]thepathofleasttime.com](mailto:kurt@[NOSPAM]thepathofleasttime.com).



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The Post by Plane

Friday, July 8 2005, 03:33 PM

Welcome to my weblog! I hope you found my puzzle to be entertaining and not too easy - at the Academy we've learned that people on Earth aren't to be underestimated when it comes to puzzle solving abilities.

As I say in my About page, this weblog is accessible to Earth users only. I suppose it's a mild breach of the communication rules but I'm hardly going to be revealing state secrets. Anyway, it should be interesting to talk about things going on in my life with the knowledge that I don't have to worry about holding back in case someone from Perplex City finds out what I'm saying.

The current thing I'm working on actually has very little to do with the Cube Retrieval team. The Academy's annual paper airplane competition is going on next week - don't ask - and I'm keen on getting in a good distance. I've scored in the top five of 'standard' entries in the past couple of years but I'm aiming at the top spot now, by adapting a few Earth designs that people over here haven't seen before.

The reason there's a 'standard' category at all is because a few years back, some woman with far too much time on her hands used computer-aided design and wind-tunnel simulations to create the 'ultimate' airplane. In the end it didn't do too well because she wasn't all that good at folding the thing, but that didn't stop people from using robots to fold and throw them, and so on. Very silly.

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HTML problems and tech

Monday, July 18 2005, 11:05 AM

Seems like people have started to find this website now, judging by the hits and emails I've been receiving. Most emails are about one of two things - firstly, that the HTML or CSS isn't correct in this page, and secondly, questions about Perplex City tech.

About the HTML. I can't get my head around it - it seems like a perfectly reasonable standard, and so does CSS. I just don't understand why it displays wrongly for some people. I've been designing this site using a virtual machine on my key at the Academy, running Firefox, and it looks fine to me. Anyway, if anyone has a suggestion on how to correct it (preferably easily!) without changing the look, I'd appreciate it.

So I've also had queries about our use of VR, immersive UIs, the Centre for Reality Research, replication technology, robots and more. As I'm sure you're used to hearing, I can't tell you about any of that. There are some seriously strict rules governing communication between Perplex City and Earth, and high up on the list of forbidden items is technology transfer. I'm not sure whether I agree with it, but I can tell you there've been some pretty vociferous arguments on the subject here at the Academy, and at the Council. So while I'm able to talk in generalities, especially about tech that you are already currently exploring, any specifics are definitely prohibited - sorry Rena and Night Watch!

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Fixed

Tuesday, July 19 2005, 12:33 PM

I've finally sorted out the display problems with this website (I think) after mucking about with the CSS settings - let me know if there are any problems. I had a request to put a Firefox button on my sidebar which I will probably get around to doing when I have a bit more time.

Peter emailed me asking for my opinion on your head-mounted displays. While they look quite nice in a retro sort of way, let's just say that you have a bit of catching up to do in the technology stakes... Speaking of which, the other day I was testing out a pair of active contact lenses for a friend doing some work at the Museum of Perplex City. It's really incredible stuff, especially when combined with absolute positioning systems, gestural awareness and all that. More of that in another post though.

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Planes and dates

Tuesday, July 26 2005, 03:40 PM

I mentioned the other week that I was taking part in the Academy paper airplane competition. I'm disappointed to say that I didn't make in onto the top spot - instead I was second place. To be honest I was pretty lucky to get that far, since there were a number of new designs that looked suspiciously Earth-influenced, and the only reason my plane won out is that they made a last minute change of the paper stock that favoured my design.

As for the winner, well, it wasn't robot-folded but instead was made by Victor Neues in the Department of Arts. It was the strangest looking thing I'd seen - a mishmash of hard folds and flowing curves. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he used a computer to design it, but then again apparently Victor's been doing some research into airborne artwork.

Ankit asked me about the competition and said it seemed like a bit of a waste of time to build a robot just for folding airplanes. That'd definitely be true if that was all it did, but in the case that I mentioned, she just appropriated some of the standard manipulator bots that we have around for microengineering.

Ankit (I'm not sure whether that's a male or female name, sorry!) also asked about our seeming obsession and knowledge of Earth, as reflected in our media. I've taken a look at the external edition of the Sentinel that's being sent to you guys, and I'm not surprised that you think that. The stories that you see are only a small selection of the full news, which generally covers more Perplex City specific stuff, including business, sports and so on, that you probably wouldn't find interesting. Also, don't forget that we've been studying Earth for years, whereas you guys only heard about us recently.

Can't talk for long - I'm supposed to be meeting a girl from Crypto for lunch and I don't want to make a bad first impression by being late!

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Violet and books

Friday, July 29 2005, 03:40 PM

I don't have much time to talk today because I have a lot of boring admin work to finish before the weekend, but I had a couple of interesting emails recently that I want to reply to. Cassandra asked about whether I went on a **date** date with the 'Crypto girl'. I wouldn't classify it as a **date** but in any case, I found it pretty funny that people think I'm going out with Violet. Where did you get that impression from? We're very good friends, but I suspect Violet would find this even funnier than I do :)

Quadraxis asked me where I came up with the name for my blog. As you may know, it's a physics term that referring to the way in which light always takes the path of least time, and not as you might expect, the path of least distance. It's relevant to a lot of optics theory, and more importantly, I think it sounds cool.

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Stars in the Sky

Wednesday, August 3 2005, 02:54 PM

While some parts of the PCAG opening celebrations were a bit muted this year, I'm happy to say that the fireworks were still up to scratch. I went there with a bunch of friends from the Academy, some of whom are taking part this year, and so were either far too nervous or far too manic. Violet made her usual droll suggestions about manipulating the sound coming from the rockets and how it was all terribly retro.

I have a bit of an interest in fireworks, which originates back in chemistry classes at school - I had a great teacher who didn't mind us putting the labs in serious danger of total destruction (I suspect our parents would've had a different opinion, if they knew). This was just after people had started getting interested in fireworks again, after they'd seen pictures and videos of them from Earth.

Despite the fact that we've had to learn how to build fireworks from scratch in the last decade or so, I think we've caught up with Earth pretty admirably and in many ways surpassed you guys. Not only do we have computer controlled launch tubes, but we've also got remotely controlled explosives in each of the rockets (with a failsafe fuse, naturally). This means we can do all sorts of co-ordinated displays. When I helped out with the Academy fireworks for the first time a few years ago, I remember we managed to pull off a great display where the explosions were precisely co-ordinated in 3D, so if you were looking at the show from the Great Lawn, you could see a moving fountain. It didn't work out so well last year, though, because there was a bit of unpredictable wind that we didn't expect.

After the PCAG fireworks, Violet and I lay back on the grass and looked up at the stars, chatting. She's still a bit spooked by the whole Aiko thing, but she's doing fine. I remarked to her that it'd be incredible to sit on Earth and look at the stars there. I've seen photos and charts of your sky, and it doesn't look anything like ours at all, which explains our different constellations and so on.

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Key difficulties

Friday, August 19 2005, 12:40 PM

Sorry for the lack of updates guys - I've been away at a friend's wedding up north, and I've been having difficulties with my key; I've had to reformat various bits and pieces, run diagnostics, all that sort of stuff. Very irritating but I'd been planning to have a serious tweak with it for some time.

The wedding was pretty good fun; it was one of my cousins, she's an architect. She's only 27... not much older than me now, but she's beginning to settle down, buy a house, all of that domestic bliss thing. I've only met her husband a couple of times in the past but he seems nice enough - at least, he's a pretty good dancer.

When I say 'wedding', I mean the Perplex City equivalent, of course. Since we don't share your religions, the exact wording and process of the ceremony is different, but most ceremonies have the same elements; singing, readings, vows, beautiful surroundings. To be honest, it's pretty interesting how our different cultures have converged in this way, although I suppose you know very well from your own world that human societies tend to converge in these things anyway.

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The Cube

Wednesday, August 31 2005, 10:51 AM

I dropped by one of the Cube research labs today as part of an interdepartmental 'mixing' exercise, in which we are supposed to learn all sorts of new insights from wildly different areas. For example, in my case, it would be wonderful (for the organisers of this exercise) if I managed to figure out some amazing new way of programming search algorithms by talking to some post-Hausam art historian. Something like, "Ah, Malme's oil paintings of the Mazy riverbanks are obviously a metaphor for the fractal interface between information and entropy within a tiered dataset! Now I can make a programme that's 200% faster!"

Or vice versa. To be honest I don't see it working out that well, but it's a good excuse to take a break from the CRT Special Projects division once in a while. In the case of the Cube research labs, which in practice comprise several different research groups in various buildings, it's a bit more relevant to what I'm doing.

The guys there told me about their efforts to track down the Cube remotely, from Perplex City. While they've been able to narrow down the Cube's location to the surface of Earth, through some intricacies of theoretical physics that I don't understand, they can't really pinpoint it any further.

"Why not?" I asked.

"OK, so. See. We know the Cube is made of a very peculiar material that-" began the Fellow in charge of that group.

"Yeah yeah yeah, I know, you can track it. Some sort of dual method of tracking the natural electromagnetic radiation from the Cube, and also sending out a pulse to make it resonate," I interrupted quickly.

"Right. So, obviously you know how the anti-theft systems are supposed to work. But no-one ever thought the Cube would leave this planet, never mind the solar system," he continued. I nodded along to this pretty reasonable assumption. "We, uh, have access to a number of tracking stations on the ground and elsewhere that can triangulate the Cube's location to anywhere on this planet, even thousands of metres underground."

"Well, come on, surely you would've noticed it moving long before then - tracking it kilometers below the surface is a bit of overkill," I said.

The fellow, a thin middle-aged guy called Boardman, laughed shortly. "True, but for the Cube, you can never be too careful, as recent events have shown. Anyway, the tracking stations aren't solely for the Cube, they perform other research, that's why they have those capabilities. In theory, we could track the Cube all the way out into space."

"So, if someone managed to steal the Cube, load it onto a spacecraft, avoid the air surveillance network, reach escape velocity and then fly away, you'd know exactly where it was," I replied.

"Absolutely," said Boardman, oblivious to my sarcasm. "In any case, the Cube isn't anywhere nearby, that's for sure. One of the first things we did when the Cube went missing was to turn up the power on the tracking stations, and we just didn't find anything. One minute it was here, the next it'd gone."

"I wonder..." I said slowly, while watching the interestingly shiny hologram of the missing Cube spin around in front of me, throwing off reflections. "I wonder, wouldn't it be possible to cloak the Cube, maybe in a Faraday cage*, to prevent EM radiation?" I ventured.

(*I didn't actually say Faraday cage, because obviously most people in Perplex City don't know who Michael Faraday is. But you get what I mean - an RF shield - basically a box made of metal.)

"Right, yes, that was one of the first possibilities we, uh, thought about. But the Cube emits neutrinos, or at least appears to, so..."

Boardman carried on for a while, but I could see where this was heading. Neutrinos can penetrate through pretty much any substance; you'd need on the order of a light year of lead to form a decent barrier, and suffice to say, Perplex City hadn't noticed any light-year blocks of lead lying around.

"...just not plausible," he finished abruptly. He joined me in gazing at the hologram of the Cube, which hovered above a rather messy meeting table in the centre of the room, on top of which was what appeared to be several days worth of junk food and one forlorn apple. It must be pretty depressing to work in a Cube research lab with no real Cube to study.

The Cube has been such a constant presence in the Academy and Perplex City that we tend to forget it's actually there. I'd be surprised if there was a single person in the city who hadn't visited the museum and seen it with their own eyes, but for most people, one visit was enough; they were just happy to know where it was, and of course, they could always see it again later. It wasn't, they thought, as if it was going anywhere.

I've heard it's the same with your artefacts. Take the Rosetta Stone, for example. I'm sure that most people in London have seen it and looked at the hieroglyphs on it (I'd certainly love to look at it) and taken pictures over the heads of other people crowding around. But ultimately, once is enough - despite their importance, hardly anyone understands the symbols and most people aren't particularly interested in learning. And after all, it'll always be there.

The difference with the Cube, however, is that it's still a mystery to us. We don't know its exact origins, or why it was made, or even what it's for. Oh, we know a little about what it can do, which is often baffling and incredible. That's partly why we want it back so much. Not only is it part of our history, it's a scientific enigma, one of the greatest puzzles of all. And now it's gone, maybe forever, and now people are suddenly feeling the loss of something they'd always thought would never leave.

"Uh, so Kurt, how is the search for the Cube going?" Boardman asked, pulling his gaze away from the phantom.

I smiled painfully. This is a question I never like answering. "It's coming along fine. We're working hard, just as you might expect with Sente and the rest of the city pushing us, and we have a few ideas. Nothing that I can reveal, unfortunately, but things are going well. The people on Earth seem reasonably interested in the search but we've still got more to do on that front."

The fellow nodded along, clearly a little disappointed but not surprised. He changed the subject rapidly, sensing my unease. "So, you know, I remember when we first figured out the Cube was on Earth. It must've been about a couple of weeks after it went missing, and we'd already tried everything obvious - and a bunch of stuff that was plain crazy. When someone suggested hooking up the EM search algorithms to the Earth stream, most people thought that was crazy as well - the processing time required to crunch through that much data was huge - but it paid off. Hah! Didn't help us too much though, what with the stream being non-local. We couldn't even tell which side of Earth the Cube was on. At the time we thought it could've even been in orbit, or on the Moon... we've managed to eliminate those possibilities, at least."

I listened intently - I'd been in the Academy after the theft, just like all other essential staff, working pretty much 24 hours a day on helping other search efforts.

He went on. "We tried to pinpoint it further, but the stream just doesn't permit that kind of information - it would take too long to explain, but there's no way of pulling it out, not with what we're receiving right now. I suppose that answers your original question." Boardman paused to scratch his nose. "Anyway, we were all exhausted by then, but happy to know that

the Cube was somewhere, if not anywhere we could get at it. I can't imagine what it would've been like if we had no idea where it was. And now you guys are taking the lead."

This was my cue to talk. "Yeah..." I said, quietly. The first few months after the Cube Retrieval Team was assembled was the hardest I'd ever worked. Sente had to order people to take breaks, and there was more than a few cases of nervous breakdowns from the pressure. The amount of cognitive enhancers used by some of the team had been well beyond the recommended limit.

I looked back to the phantom Cube. "We'll find it," I said. "We have to find it."

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The Break-In

Thursday, September 8 2005, 06:24 PM

You might think that from the way I write, I don't spend a lot of time working. Surely a member of the Cube Retrieval Team wouldn't have enough time for fireworks celebrations, let alone paper airplane competitions? But let me turn it the other way around. Just imagine that I spend all of my time working at the Academy. 24 hours a day (minus eating and sleeping), seven days a week, 52 weeks a year. If I did that, then it'd be downright reasonable to go see the occasional firework, fold the occasional plane and meet the occasional Cube research expert.

It's not quite like that, but I do spend an awful lot of time working at the Academy. That's why I don't feel bad when I take time out for a break or for a run, like I did yesterday evening. I keep a running kit in my room on campus - all of the CRT members have been given free rooms in the student block indefinitely, presumably until we get the Cube back. A bit worrying, really - if I'm not careful I can go for days on end without seeing my own apartment.

Anyway, after finishing up work for the evening, I did my usual Academy run. I've worked out a perfect 45 minute loop that starts and ends inside the campus. It's a familiar, comfortable route that lets me take my mind off things and see a microcosm of the city - Old Town, New Town, river and parks.

The Academy backs right up onto Polygon Park, but I find it more interesting to run along the Old Town streets for a while. I put Roll For Damage's new album on and wove my way around the tourists on Academy End, pounded the cobblestones in Guardian Plaza and picked up the pace as I sighted greenery at the end of Plaza Walk. I've timed the route so that I reach Lake Ellipse and the Little Lake when I'm getting a bit tired, and just when the sun hits the water. You'd think that seeing the sun set over Ellipse would get old eventually, but it hasn't happened yet.

About two thirds of the way through my run, just as 'Hit Point' finished playing, I realised that I'd forgotten something. Summoning my reserves of energy, I sprinted to the Academy Security Centre and through its labyrinthine corridors to the control hub. I stopped; not even my clearance will get me inside there.

Instead, I had to wait in a reception room that adjoins the hub, where I could see the security staff at work, with their overpowered hardware, ultra-paranoid firewalls and top-spec imagers. I've often wondered whether it was a security risk, having a viewing gallery there, but I suppose better minds than mine have considered the problem. Maybe they do something with LCD glass or holograms, I don't know.

About five minutes later, as the effects of my run started to tax the reception's air condition system severely, Leo ambled in. I gave him a look.

"Oh, hi Kurt, what brings you to the ASC?" He threw himself onto a couch.

"You did, you fool, we were supposed to get some food! I've been waiting for you for twenty minutes!" I replied.

Okay, so I'm not averse to the occasional white lie about lateness.

"Oh, sorry. Why didn't you call me?"

I stroked my chin, trying to look thoughtful.

"Why indeed, Leo, why indeed. It's because I've been having problems with my key recently."

Now this is true - what with the military trace and the Tanruga stuff, a lot of odd things have been happening to it. I really ought to go and buy a new one.

Leo looked suspicious. "You can't even place a call? Yet you can play music? RFD's new album,

Continued »

I presume?"

"Network problems; I'm getting a weak signal here in the ASC. Something to do with your defective walls, I suspect. Anyway, do you want to talk about my key, or do you want to get some food?"

I stood up. Leo looked doubtful for a second and then followed me to the ASC cafeteria.

I like Earth food as much as the next person, but come on, surely you guys can come up with a dish that doesn't create so much mess? At least it let me listen to what Leo was saying about the new security protocols in between bites of his pizza. I knew I should've ordered that instead of spaghetti.

"I'm not too clear on what happened during the Cube theft - it's all eyes-only - but judging by the changes that we've made to our protocols, whoever disabled our systems did a seriously good job," said Leo.

I made encouraging noises, what with my mouth being full of pasta.

Leo went on. "Here's what I think. The attacker managed to knock down every single security and monitoring system we have guarding the Cube, and bunch of others besides. All of those systems failed, one after the other, including duplicates, backups and fail-safes." He started illustrating this with slices of pizza, and then gave up after realising he didn't have enough hands.

"All the logs were wiped, even the power was cut. Really, I have no idea how they could do that, they're supposed to be on separate circuits. It has the hallmark of multiple, simultaneous attacks."

Leo bit into a slice and shook his head.

I swallowed a mouthful of pasta, and asked him something I'd been wondering for a while. "I figured it'd have to be something like that. Are there really people out there who would have the expertise to do this? What kind of experience and knowledge would you need for that sort of attack?"

Leo looked towards the ceiling, thinking hard and fidgeting with his hands. "You'd need ten, no, twenty years of security experience, and a very sharp mind. But it's not like we don't have people like that here who've made our defences. That's why it's so baffling."

"This guy, it sounds like he must've been a genius or something," I said.

"Pretty much. Maybe two geniuses, maybe more. Who knows."

A message flashed up on my key, on a private band I hadn't seen used in a while. THINK BOTH MUST HAVE HAD INSIDE INFO DANGER TO SAY MORE. I deleted it immediately.

Back when Leo and I were students, we'd worked out a method of sending encrypted messages between our keys using a simple sign language detected by its motion sensors. We used it when we got bored during classes (we'd modified our keys quite a bit, back then); I was surprised Leo remembered it. We chatted briefly about work and what our friends were up to, but moved away from the subject of the Cube theft.

As I headed back to the CRT offices, I mulled over what Leo had told me. It'd been a favourite conspiracy theory in Perplex City ever since the Cube was stolen, that someone inside the Academy was involved. No-one had paid the idea much attention because there wasn't any solid evidence. There probably still isn't any, but Leo is a smart guy. He wouldn't have told me his suspicions unless he really believed them. And if he's right, the Academy has a serious problem.

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The Path of Least Time

Chatter

Friday, September 16 2005, 02:19 PM

I know I shouldn't be mentioning this, but it's unusual enough to warrant bending the rules a little. People in the Cube Research Team regularly get a report from one of the Cube research labs (like Boardman's) on the status of the data link between Earth and Perplex City. It doesn't make very interesting reading, because it hardly ever changes - it's been stable for a long time now.

The latest report was different. Oh, on the surface of it, there was no real change - the bandwidth, throughput, all of that was within normal parameters. However, a little-noticed set of numbers caught my eye. It appears that over the last few weeks, parameters associated with the entropy of the data stream have increased. In other words, the complexity of the stream is increasing.

In even simpler words, there seems to be a higher amount of chatter going on between Earth and Perplex City, and it can't be accounted for by normal Academy traffic. I know what you're going to ask me - can you work out what it is? The answer is no. It would be impossible for me to work out the 'extra stuff' that is being said just from the raw stream, for a whole bunch of different reasons. That's not something worth worrying about. What you should be concerned about is the fact that someone in Perplex City is doing a lot of talking to people in Earth, and none of those people have anything to do with the Academy.

I could be wrong - it's been known to happen before. Maybe this is just a natural phenomenon of the data link, which is a very strange thing anyway. But if I'm right, then it seems like something is happening on Earth...

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The Path of Least Time

That pesky book

Monday, November 7 2005, 09:20 PM

I'd like to talk to you about what's going on with the search for the Cube, or let you know the latest gossip about things going on at Academy - I swear, Tippy's going to find herself in a newspaper, what with all the stuff she's been getting up to. But no. I can't tell you that. Not because I don't know, but because I'm too tired.

Tired from Academy work? Sure, that's tiring, but no more than usual. No, all my copious spare time is being consumed by Violet's latest crazy project. We're working on deciphering this odd waterlogged book about secret societies and the Cube that she found in some remote corner of the central archives. Of course, when I say 'we're working', what I really mean is 'I'm working, and Violet is looking over my shoulder and occasionally making sarcastic comments.'

So far it's been a disappointing read. All sorts of stuff about the author hating the Academy, the mystical nature of right-angles (?!) and a strange take on the legends of Madna. Not really my preferred reading material. I do have to admit that some parts of the recovery process have been interesting. This sort of archaeology isn't my field of expertise, but I've been able to use some equipment of my own and some at the Academy to retrieve apparently destroyed information.

The other day, Violet wanted me to check a bunch of blank pages for diagrams, so I had to use some multispectral imagers to view it at different wavelengths. I gather that scientists on Earth use this kind of technology to look at ancient scrolls and suchlike. Unfortunately the diagrams weren't particularly interesting, just a collection of strange society handshakes, but it was a fun little project.

Anyway, things are speeding up now that I've gotten into the swing of it. Most of the image processing is automated now, so I just have to turn the pages every few minutes. Fun fun fun.

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The Path of Least Time

The War Exhibit

Thursday, November 17 2005, 06:02 PM

One of the advantages of being a member of the Academy Cube Retrieval Team is that I get priority access to all exhibitions and events. At the time I thought this was marvellous but it's a bit of a bitter carrot when you don't actually have any time to go to them. This weekend, however, I made the point of checking out the new War Exhibit at the Academy Museum. There are still long queues to get in, so as I walked there with my friend Sarah, we entertained ideas about sailing past the hapless people standing in line in the rain, walking along a red carpet, etc etc.

What actually happened is that we had to slink in through the back entrance because there was a rather vociferous demonstration going on at the front; apparently a bunch of people were there to listen to Aurora Belle railing simultaneously against the glorification of war and in favour of us being proud of our city's history. There'll be no celebrity photos of us in the Sentinel, I'm afraid, although I'm glad that I didn't get hit by any eggs or tomatoes on the way in.

No matter what your feelings are on the subject, I don't think anyone could claim that the museum had done a bad job. The exhibition took up a serious chunk of the museum and had a whole bunch of artefacts that I didn't even know still existed. I found some of the scientific instruments recovered from Machiantes to be fascinating - their telescopes, astrolabes, microscopes all had influences from Perplex City, but were also very different in style and construction. Some of the displays about Anjsbourg were a bit harder to take - they had a very meticulous 3D half-hologram, half-artefacts reconstruction of a typical house there, together with records of people who might have lived there. Apparently some of my ancestors came from Anjsbourg, so it was strange to have a part of my past facing me.

We didn't have enough time to look over everything, so since Sarah's a military historian (although not directly involved in exhibit), we skipped over a lot of stuff and headed straight to the military archives section. Now, just like in your museums and libraries, it's impossible to actually touch the original source documents in the archives; they're normally behind polarised glass. However, the museum has been doing some really smart stuff with multispectral 3D scanning, where they're creating holographic replicas which you can flip through besides the actual documents. We spent a bit of time reading about the defence of Machiantes and what happened after that.

While Sarah was occupied with the Machiantes documents, I wandered around to look at the other documents on display - and what did I find but our old friend Anthony Granier's diary? Granier was one of the guys whose name cropped up in that Lencival book I've been scanning for Violet. The fact that Lencival thinks that Granier was a member of the Third Power is just laughable. Unfortunately the museum hadn't 'replicated' his diary, so I wasn't able to look through it (no doubt if Lencival was around, he'd eagerly be searching it for plans of taking over the world). I mentioned all of this stuff that I'd been doing with Violet to Sarah, who didn't seem particularly interested and went a bit quiet, and we had to leave shortly after that.

Continued »

I'm not sure what I think about the exhibit. The museum has presented things in a very

objective manner, merely making archives and artefacts available for display with a minimum of 'editorialising', but the fact is that in Perplex City, we talk about our past so little that the very presence of the exhibit is a political statement. And I can understand why people are bothered; I'm proud of our heritage and I don't think it's fair to unduly criticise what we did during the war. Yet on the other side, that's not a reason to stifle discussion and debate about what actually happened, especially if the museum is trying to raise issues that people in this city - myself included - haven't considered.

While I walked Sarah back to her department, I suggested that we should meet up again to check out the rest of the museum, but for some reason she was a bit non-committal and said she'd think about it. Typical.

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The Path of Least Time

Ceremonies

Thursday, December 1 2005, 12:08 PM

I've been receiving a lot of email recently about two things - subway stations and Perplex City ceremonies 'that involve a flame'. I would like to believe that all of this is just about the 'Tales from Earth' book that Violet told me you're writing for her (I'm glad that I'm not the only one she can persuade to help her on bizarre tasks!) but I have a feeling that your interest isn't entirely academic.

Anyway. I gather that there are a bunch of light and fire-based ceremonies that take place in Perplex City. Most of them have religious significance, just like on Earth. The best people to contact are the Brotherhood of the Six. Yes, they're a bit odd and they caused me to ruin a perfectly good pair of trousers by kneeling down in the mud and 'seeing the light of Gyvann' in order to create a distraction for Violet to get away... but I'm sure that at least they know their religious ceremonies.

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The Path of Least Time

Changing the topic

Tuesday, December 6 2005, 03:25 PM

Things have been gradually winding down here at the Academy in preparation for all the winter celebrations; a number of people have mysteriously fallen ill for a couple of days, usually close to the weekend, and then emerged perfectly healthy afterwards. Very unusual, especially in the case of Tippy, who managed to get herself photographed by a celebrity column backstage at some rock concert when bedbound...

While I was on my way to Military History today to see if Sarah wanted to get lunch, I spotted the annual buzzing of activity that signals the beginning of the preparations for the Ball. At this time of year, students traditionally take a few hours off from study to watch the Academy groundsmen grumble about having to move all the valuable antique furniture into storage to make way for even more valuable antique furniture to be put in its place. It's always worth a laugh seeing them struggle to move the Master's Throne from the underground stores by hand, given that no-one's sat in it for practically a hundred years.

Unfortunately Sarah was out at the Museum doing research, and I didn't feel like heading out over there and seeing that elusive Granier diary taunt me again. Violet dragged me out there the other day just to gaze at it, so for all our sakes I hope you guys manage to get that book done! I'm impressed that you managed to get mentioned in the Sentinel, by the way - pretty cool. Actually, I spotted a guy from the Sentinel out by Boardman's Cube research lab while I was out, and I meant to ask him about it, but he disappeared before I could reach him.

Finally, Violet caught a glance of my last post on this website after she was done looking at the Granier diary, and proceeded to give me a very boring and long-winded lecture about the difference between the Recons and the Brotherhood of the Six: "...traced back to the schism between the more traditional elements and the reactionaries. However, I feel that that analysis is oversimplified - if you check the original sources from the time, you can see that the Recon's interpretation of the texts was different long before that..."

Despite the fact that it was deadly boring, I was actually quite grateful for the break and passed the time idly nodding along and wondering why Violet hadn't joined the Academy. Just before I felt that she'd notice I wasn't listening, I managed to change the topic to poker: "I suppose the question is, though, is what their different stances on gambling are - would the Recons consider poker to be a modern invention? What's the Brotherhood's stance, hmm?"

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The Path of Least Time

Miranda

Friday, December 16 2005, 06:40 PM

Not much of note has gone on since my last post here... preparations for the ball continue apace, work is still hard, Sarah has disappeared to the same place that all the girls I date seem to go, and I have a pretty horrid cold. No, we still haven't cured the common cold (you wouldn't believe how quickly new strains can crop up), so I've been suffering under a sore throat and bunged-up nose for the last few days.

It's the sore throats that I hate. A blocked nose doesn't actually hurt, it's just annoying. Sore throats though, they remind you of their infuriating presence every minute of the day. The worst thing is that we do have a remedy for sore throats which involves a partial anaesthetic for the pain receptors in the throat, but I'm one of the few people who has a natural immunity to the anaesthetic and so it just doesn't work on me.

Doubly irritating is the fact that no sooner had I broken up with Sarah (a better description would be 'she stopped calling') than I met another nice girl called Miranda while popping in to see Violet earlier this week. She actually knew about some of the puzzles I'd designed as part of one of the PCAG satellite tournaments a few years ago, so we had a good chat about that and the latest Petel/Duncan match, and ended up deciding to go out to the Finnegan/Johnson PCAG exhibition event.

Okay, so obviously that wasn't irritating, but since my head was so stuffed, I couldn't concentrate on anything that night. We had some great seats to watch the physical rounds of the match, but all of the tests and puzzles just passed me by; Miranda was probably expecting some kind of intelligent commentary from me about Finnegan's play and her solutions, but I was barely able to stay awake. In the end we left early to get a coffee at Fenlon's. I think she was a little fed up with my slowness, which probably explained why, instead of discussing the minutiae of the match, we just talked about the people we know in common - which basically meant Violet. I guess she was a little nervous about starting at the library and wanted to know what it would be like working with her. Not the most intellectually stimulating stuff to talk about, like I said.

There's some good news though - I'm starting to feel a little better now, after having used some more powerful decongestants, and Miranda emailed me this morning saying (beyond all reason) that she wanted to meet up again!

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The Path of Least Time

Gillit Road

Thursday, January 5 2006, 05:58 PM

Some time ago, in early December, I received a series of emails telling me about a hidden message on the Viard CD that was released on Earth. The message apparently read:

"I can't tell you who I am, they'd kill me if they find out how much I know. You know who they are. Follows something that you need to know. A detective here in Perplex City, Helena Frye is an agent of The Third Power. The Third Power stole the Cube. They killed people. Who knows what they're capable of. If you're sensible just stay away, but if you want to help us, if you want to find the Cube, wait for the Ceremony of the Kindling of the Flame. Exactly 7 days after that send someone to the abandoned subway station on Gillit Road at 10pm. You'll find out enough to prove that Helena is a spy."

Although I like watching them in your movies, I'm not a secret agent, or a spy, or a hero. I can't fire guns, and I don't know any martial arts. The only things I can do are run away very fast, and programme computers; not quite the sort of skills that would be useful in snooping in on a meeting between killers. And so after I read your emails, I filed them away somewhere hidden; I know what happened to Bernardo Holyoke, Pietro Salk and Monica Grand, and I don't want that to happen to me.

Over the winter holidays, I tried to avoid thinking about the subject. It wasn't difficult - I started going out with Miranda not long after my last post (we really hit it off after meeting up in Polygon Park), so I was pretty occupied. She's pretty amazing, she went to a college near where my parents live, and eventually she wants to get into the Academy to study anthropology. I think she'll make it.

The most surprising thing is that she's got the same birthday as me; I know that the chances of such a thing are in fact higher than you might imagine (reminds me of a certain puzzocard, in fact) but it's still unusual. I've always had problems with remembering birthdays, even when I programme them into my key, so it's definitely convenient that I don't have to remember hers. What a romantic I am, eh?

Well, we did have a romantic New Year's Eve. We both visited my parents' place and then met up with my old schoolfriends at a bar; I think they were all pleasantly surprised that I'd gotten a girlfriend, although I suspect they were expecting someone else. Anyway, I got her tickets to the PCAG final as a present, and she bought me a scarf and forced me to wear it to prevent any future colds.

After we returned to the city, we went for a walk at the Mobius Strip. I remember standing at the centrepiece on the Strip with my arm around Miranda and looking out to the sea, when we started talking about the weather. Since the city is near the sea, it never really gets too cold, but there's a blustery wind that always sweeps across the water at this time of year. Unusually, the surface was almost as still as a mirror, reflecting a biting cold cloudless sky above. She wondered when the first snow would come. It couldn't be too long from now, she said.

I kept myself buried beneath my new scarf, and I didn't say anything but just pulled her a little closer. Over the holidays, I'd been dreading the snow - the Kindling of the Flame is seven days after the first snowfall, you see. I'd already decided that I wasn't going to go, but I didn't like to be reminded of that fact. And to be completely honest, it's not just that I don't want to end up like Holyoke or Salk or Grand. It's worse than that - I simply never really cared about them; I didn't know them or talk to them like Violet did. Perhaps this means I have a heart of stone, but it's true. Even in Perplex City, many people die every day, and I don't cry over them.

Yet standing there with Miranda, I felt like a coward. She actually looks up to me, because I'm in the Academy, and even more than that, I'm a member of the 'elite' Cube Retrieval Team. What sort of person am I, I thought to myself, if I'm not prepared to fulfil my duty properly,

[Continued »](#)

in retrieving the Cube by any means possible? I can pretend that I don't care about murders, but while I'm not a hero or a spy, I am still a member of the CRT and what I am here to do is to find the Cube, and return it safely.

So, I will be going to Gillit Road. I've looked up the plans for the station and have found a number of routes in and out that should allow me to get there safely. Once I'm there, I'll use my key to record any evidence against Helena Frye and the Third Power. Miranda was right: the first snow won't be long from now. The meteorological services predict that it'll happen within the next few days, and then there's only a week until the meeting. I won't be taking anyone else along with me, and I haven't told Miranda or Violet. If it really is dangerous, I don't want anyone else to be involved.

There is one thing you can do for me. I would like to know who recorded the message on Viard's CD. I considered emailing Helix Hesh myself, but then stopped when I realised that no-one off Earth is supposed to have heard it, certainly not anyone in the Academy. It'll be less suspicious if you ask him about the message.

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The Path of Least Time

The Flame

Monday, January 16 2006, 06:27 PM

First off, I'd like to thank everyone for their emails - I appreciate the support and words of caution, and I will be doing everything I can to make sure I'll get back home in one piece after the meeting at Gillit Road. I'm sure you already know this, but the first snowfall - and the Ceremony of the Kindling of the Flame - was last Tuesday, so I'll be heading there, on my own, tomorrow.

I've been feeling a bit tense about the whole thing lately. I had a little grace period after making up my mind on the Mobius Strip, but after the snowfall, I've found it difficult to keep my mind off the meeting. I'm pretty sure Miranda noticed and was getting a bit worried, so I suggested going away for the weekend up north. I still haven't told her about Gillit Road - I just don't want to involve her, and she'd probably want to come along anyway, which would be dangerous. Anyway, after speaking to Sente, I left work an hour early on Friday to beat the rush, and then met up with Miranda (who'd done the same) and then took one of the trains up from the new concourse at Grand Frederik's.

We stayed at a small hotel in the country that I read about on my key somewhere and basically holed up inside, playing board games and drinking mulled wine. We tried going out for a run on Sunday but it was just too cold - to be honest, I didn't want to hurt myself on the ice either, not so soon before Gillit Road. I'm not sure whether I've mentioned it before, but Miranda really is an excellent runner - she's done the Polygon Marathon twice and unusually is a fairly good sprinter as well.

So, I managed to unwind a little over the weekend and I think Miranda was feeling a bit happier about everything by the time we got back on Sunday evening - certainly less concerned about me. Of course, on arriving back at Grand Frederik's, no sooner did I change my presence status on my key did a message from Violet come through telling me that Cymbalistry had died. She seemed to be pretty distraught, and not just because she didn't get the last page of the Granier diary either. I spent a few minutes calming her down, and then took Miranda home, who was obviously also quite upset as well. What fun. I suspect they'll both be out of sorts for a while. I suppose that's another reason to stay safe tomorrow night - I wouldn't want to worry them even more...

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The Path of Least Time

Heading out

Tuesday, January 17 2006, 09:29 PM

Well, this is it. I'm just now walking out toward whatever is waiting for me at Gillit Road. I'll be in touch soon.

Wish me luck.

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The Path of Least Time

Helena Frye and the Third Power

Wednesday, January 18 2006, 09:05 PM

"You'd better have a good story, Mr. McAllister. I don't know how or why a member of the CRT would join the Third Power, but I'm going to enjoy finding out."

That was what Helena Frye said to me after she was about to shoot me, and before I was hauled off to be interrogated. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's go back two hours.

Gillit Road isn't too far from the Academy. If you see it on a map, you only have to travel down a few roads to get there, but in the minutes that you take, the Old Town becomes even older. Sadder, more oppressive, more tired. I normally don't go in that direction, but last night I crossed the wistful glory of Taversen Square, loped down the broad thoroughfare of Taversen Gate, turned onto Star Lane and then onto the cold of Ironwell and Villier Park.

I slowed down as I turned onto Gillit Road. At 9:45pm, it's pretty deserted - most people are wise enough to be inside, or rich enough not to live there. The subway entrance was boarded up, but I was able to squeeze through by moving a few planks. It didn't seem as if anyone else had come in through this entry before me, but I knew this didn't count for much given that in the past, the citizens of Perplex City had exhibited a strange tendency to dig tunnels wherever they could - including, most likely, to somewhere near the Gillit Road subway. These tunnels are still mostly undocumented though, and I couldn't find anything that I could use, so...

I know it seems ridiculous to have gone in through the front entrance, but let me explain. Although my key is hardly military-grade, I've had a few upgrades made to it, include one that makes it particularly sensitive to low-power transmissions. In other words, it can pick up most surveillance devices. It can't do much more than that - it can't intercept them, for example - but it can tell me that they are nearby, and right then, there wasn't anything nearby.

The only other piece of particularly impressive tech I had with me was a set of active contact lenses I borrowed from a friend at the museum. I helped test them out back in July, and they've managed to iron out most of the bugs and increase the battery life. More importantly, the pair that I had allowed me to see in the dark, by picking up IR reflected by a source I was carrying. They didn't turn my vision into green streaks, like in your movies; they just turned it into shades of grey.

Apart from that, I didn't have anything else apart from my key, which was set to record everything. I certainly didn't have any weapons; I figured that that would only make things more dangerous, considering that I'm not trained.

I padded down the steps into the wide, pillared entrance hallway, looking around. The place was obviously very old - I didn't recognise any of the station logos, and many of the subway lines and stations had names I hadn't heard of. Despite the age, the entrance stairwell, the hall, the ticket booths - the entire subway - was immaculately clean. There must have been some kind of automated system still maintaining the place, which was very odd. Even robots need power and maintenance.

With fewer than fifteen minutes left to go until the meeting, I still couldn't see or hear anyone else. I decided to head straight down to the subway tracks, smiling to myself as I jumped over the ticket barrier, and then trotted down the unmoving elevators. I navigated the corridors with some difficulty, since I couldn't distinguish one colour from another, and then finally descended a short flight of steps onto the subway's platform. Still no-one.

I lowered myself onto the north track, belatedly finding out, to my relief, that the rails had some sort of plastic cladding wrapped around them. After heading east for a couple of hundred metres down the tunnel, my key chirped into my ear, informing me it had detected a passive surveillance device a few about five metres to the south, presumably on the adjacent

track. It could've just been some old safety system or a cleaning robot, but it was the only interesting thing that I'd seen since I'd walked through the entrance, and I only had a few minutes before something was going to happen. If it was a surveillance device, someone clearly wanted to keep an eye on the area surrounding it.

Consigning the idea of just backtracking and walking down the other tunnel to the 'suicidally dangerous' bin, I started searching around for some sort of cross tunnel or service room or ventilation shaft that might be able to get me closer - but not too close - to the surveillance device. I had to walk another hundred metres down the tunnel before finding a service door. By this point, the eerie cleanliness of the place was disturbing me - what was the point of keeping huge stretches of tunnel spotlessly clean?

Anyway, for the moment I was thankful because the door opened without a squeak, and I found myself in a cramped, thin room with old carpet flooring. There were a couple of benches on the floor, and calendars on the wall. I couldn't make out the date - the text just looked like random noise to me. I walked over to the opposite side of the room and cracked open the door to find the other tunnel. My key confirmed that the surveillance device was down this way. I crept down, keeping close to the blind side of the tunnel wall, and was rewarded with a few whispered voices and the sounds of a group of people - maybe three or four - moving something large into crudely constructed side tunnel.

I dropped to the floor and crawled a few metres closer, so I could see them. It was impossible to see their faces or even whether they were men or women, but my key could enhance the audio.

"...few minutes. We have to move faster," said one.

"But he handled it, didn't he? We're supposed to-" said another.

"I know that's what he said, but things go wrong. I don't want anything to go wrong. So let's pick up the pace," replied the first.

For a minute, they were silent, and just as I was about to move away, they spoke up again.

"Okay, it's time. She'll be here by now. Let's get moving."

They clambered up into the side tunnel, muffling my audio reception, and my key was only able to pick up a final few words.

"...want to know how Frye managed to get the police involved in this. Would've thought that the third wouldn't want to risk..."

And that was it. I lay on the track, wondering whether I should follow them, when my key chirped in my ear. A second later, it chirped again. And again. I tapped it, thinking it had malfunctioned, and brought up a display on my contact lenses. It had detected about a dozen high-intensity surveillance devices - military spec - quickly moving from the vicinity of the entrance hallway down towards me. I quickly estimated that they would be here in less than a minute.

I jumped up, and decided that I had to get out - there were too many of them, and they'd easily discover me. I couldn't just run down the tunnel away from them - I had no idea where it headed or how I'd be able to get out. The only way I could get out is by the way I came. I ran back into the service room and waited, trying to stay calm. There was no reason why I couldn't just wait them out and then leave after they'd gone; if they were going to meet with the people I'd spotted early, the Third Power agents, then they'd have no reason to come this way.

I crouched against the north door, waiting. The dots on my contact lens drifted down and around, emerging into the platform and rapidly dispersing on to the south track. They hopped around each other, with two pausing at the rough location of the side tunnel, and a few more went further east down the tunnel. It seemed like they were busy checking out the entrance to the side tunnel when suddenly three of the dots started darting towards the south service

Continued »

door. A fraction of a second later, my key urgently beeped, alerting me of an active scan.

Bursting out of the north door, I sprinted up the north track back to the staircase - they might have discovered me, but there was still a chance I could outrun them and make it out of the station. The dots whirled around in my peripheral vision and divided, throwing off yet more devices. Three hundred metres later, I emerged into the platform and hurdled myself up onto the main waiting area. I desperately wanted to look back and see just how far away they were, but that's one thing you never do when you run. Besides, it would've been pretty dangerous to do as I ran up the steps a few seconds later, three at a time.

Then again, maybe it might have allowed me to avoid the aerial drone that slammed into my back at the top of the stairs. I flew forward, banging my shoulder roughly against the wall and landing on my side. The cat-sized drone buzzed angrily over me as I unsuccessfully tried to get up again, and then collapsed down; my muscles had become slack, and I couldn't get them to work properly. I figured the drone had shot some kind of drug into me.

The people pursuing me clattered up the steps amid blinding light; my contact lenses tried, and failed, to fully compensate, so I shielded my eyes as I heard a dozen people move into a semicircle around me, with drawn weapons. They were wearing what looked like full riot gear, with masks concealing their entire heads.

"Are you Kurt McAllister?" one of them demanded.

I nodded slowly.

"Where are the others? Where have they taken the goods?"

I looked around nervously. I had no idea what was going on now - was Frye here? If so, why were they asking me? I tried a gamble.

"Shouldn't you already know that, Helena?" I asked.

They all went quiet. I could see their heads tilting around towards each other, as if they were talking. The lights flicked off, and then one of them removed their helmet.

Helena Frye glared at me, lowering her weapon.

"I've just been told that the people we were looking for have escaped in the time we were running around after you. You'd better have a good story, Mr. McAllister. I don't know how or why a member of the CRT would join the Third Power, but I'm going to enjoy finding out."

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The Path of Least Time

Interrogation

Thursday, January 19 2006, 07:10 PM

I'm sorry for leaving you on a cliffhanger yesterday, but I was totally exhausted when I got back home last night and felt like I was going to fall asleep at my key. Anyway, I'll continue:

"You'd better have a good story, Mr. McAllister. I don't know how or why a member of the CRT would join the Third Power, but I'm going to enjoy finding out."

I looked at her, not knowing what to say. Just as I was about to say something on the lines of, "Uh...", Helena turned to a black-clad person next to her, and told them take a team and secure the side tunnel. They clattered down the stairs again. As my lenses adjusted to the light, I was able to make out an odd-looking patch on the shoulders of all of their suits - it looked a little like the normal Perplex City police patch, but with some motto and title that I couldn't read. I certainly hoped that they were the police.

"Fitch, Lang, take him up to the transport. We'll see if we can get a trace on the third, or at least figure out what they had here."

The groups split up, and one person - Fitch or Lang, I presumed - unceremoniously hauled me up on their shoulders and started striding back up to the surface. I actually felt a little sorry for them as we were going up the main escalator, but nowhere near as sorry as I felt for myself.

"So, are you guys the police then?" I asked, attempting to look at the person who wasn't carrying me.

They didn't respond, and kept on walking up. As far as I could tell, Helena and her team didn't seem to be too friendly with the first group of people I spotted getting into the side tunnels. Whether either of them - or both of them - were part of the Third Power, I had no idea. Helena wasn't giving anything away, and I wasn't about to be fooled by a patch on a uniform. I tried another tack, hedging my bets.

"You know who I am, right? Cube Retrieval Team?"

No response. Perhaps this wasn't a good idea, pretending to be innocent and a member of the Third Power at the same time. On reflection, I decided that it was pretty stupid. Now, we were nearing the main hall.

"Come on. Where are you taking me? Who are you?"

Finally, the person looked at me, their dull visor obscuring their expressions. I felt the person carrying me shift their weight a little, as if they were unsure. At that moment, my bearer staggered and I heard what sounded like a series of firecrackers go off, deep down in the subway.

The two of them sped up and practically ran out of the entranceway, narrowly avoiding bumping my head on one of the planks. I was deposited inside an unmarked transport that was waiting a few metres away, and then one of them ran back down into the subway. The other climbed into the back of the transport with me, and took off their helmet. It was another woman.

"What just happened?" I asked her, sprawled over a seat.

She looked away, concentrating on something intently. I imagined she had a live feed into the team's voice channel.

"Explosions," she said flatly, not looking at me.

"I know that. What kind of explosions?" I replied.

"Some kind of remotely triggered device. Your friends didn't want us to follow them."

Continued »

"Was anyone hurt?" I said after a while. She frowned, and said nothing.

"I'm not a member of the Third Power. They're not my friends," I said.

She half-smiled, as if she wasn't surprised, and then blinked and looked at me properly. She seemed to be in her mid-thirties, quite a stocky build, with short cut brown hair.

"Kurt McAllister, huh? Yeah, I know you're on the CRT. I'm Lang, and yes, we are the police."

I digested this piece of information. It made me feel rather ill; something had gone terribly wrong. It was obvious that the people in the side tunnel were the Third Power, and that they were expecting Helena to turn up. At the same time, Helena clearly wasn't here just to say hello, unless you count storming down the subway with a dozen heavily armed police as a friendly greeting. I decided to keep quiet for the time being. Lang returned to blinking at the wall of the transport. I felt a little put out that other people had my active contact lenses as well - no doubt the police had appropriated the museum's technology.

"No serious injuries," she mumbled after a while. "They'll be up in a minute. There's not a lot left in the tunnels for them to check. We'll be taking you for interrogation now."

"Interrogation?" I said. "What are you talking about?"

Lang picked up her helmet and replied, "You need to explain what you were doing here tonight." She pressed it onto her head, and I took that as a sign that she wasn't going to answer any more questions. The doors slid over a few seconds later and two more people walked inside, one of them limping a little. There was an ugly red slash across their leg that someone had sprayed some medicinal foam on. I looked away, and the transport started moving. Everyone in the transport sat in silence. Interestingly, I didn't feel the transport stop once - we must have had high priority on the roads.

Eventually we arrived at our destination. The doors opened onto a concrete loading bay. Apart from a single Perplex City Police Department logo at the top of a door, there were no other signs of where we were. It clearly wasn't a building open to the public.

I was placed on a wheelchair and taken through a maze of white corridors into a small, unmarked room, and left there. No-one responded further to any of my questions, and I didn't see anyone else in the building apart from Helena's team from the subway. The door closed, and I was left on my own. I attempted trying to get up, but my muscles were still too slack. They'd confiscated my key on the way in, so I didn't have much to do. Thankfully, I was pretty sure they wouldn't have any luck mining it for information; without my password and biometric ID, they wouldn't have a chance of getting the private stuff.

A guard opened the door, and Helena walked in. The guard followed, and stood quietly in the corner. Helena sat down on a chair opposite me. She looked tired and angry, a bad combination.

"You know what, Mr. McAllister? I don't believe that you're in the Third Power. You're not cut out for it. Which begs the question, what the hell were you doing at Gillit Road tonight?"

Helena had started off quietly, but by the time she was done, she was shouting. I didn't see much point in lying.

"I was there to look for you," I said simply. To my pleasure, she appeared to be genuinely surprised by this.

"You were there to look for me," she repeated. "How did you get this information? Did you hack in to our systems? Was there an informer?" she said quickly.

"No, I received information from Earth. There was a message hidden in some music from Perplex City that said you would be at Gillit Road, and that you were a member of the Third Power."

Helena glanced at the guard, who then nodded and left the room. She stood up, pacing

around.

"Mr. McAllister. Do you have any idea how much manpower and resources have been wasted over your little stunt tonight? Three of my people have been injured because you slowed us down, and you're lucky no-one was killed. If you weren't around, we might have caught them. And now, here we are, with you telling me some idiotic story about messages from Earth. I want to know where you got this information from," said Helena.

"I'm telling you, I didn't hack in to your systems, and I didn't talk to any of your people. Why would I? I'm a member of the CRT, I'm in contact with Earth all of the time. I was contacted by some of their people looking for the Cube - they said the message was on a CD by Viard!" I replied forcefully. I wasn't about to have her railroad the conversation by assuming my guilt.

"Really," she said skeptically, as she pulled out her key. Helena tapped away for a minute and then looked up. "There's no message, we would've picked it up," she said, shaking her head. "Try again."

"Of course you wouldn't be able to find a message, the CD was only released on Earth!" I refrained from swearing at her, knowing that it would be counterproductive. "Look, if you give me my key, then I can play you the message." I had another thought. "I can also play you a recording I made of the people in the tunnel."

Helena looked up sharply, and abruptly walked out. Very soon afterwards, she walked back in with my key, and paused to say a few words to someone out of sight. She carefully closed the door, and then handed me my key.

"Tech wasn't able to get in," she snorted. "But don't try to contact anyone - we've turned the cage on."

"I wasn't going to," I lied. She meant that they'd turned on a Faraday cage - no EM transmissions would be able to get through it.

I activated it and played back the message from the Viard CD. Helena leaned back in her chair, looking annoyed. When it finished, I played the recordings I made of the people in the tunnel, which only annoyed her more.

"We'll need a copy of those," she stated. I didn't bother assenting. She looked up at the ceiling for a while.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. McAllister. I can believe that the tunnel recordings are real - we know you were down there. But I also know that you are perfectly capable of faking that 'message' from Earth, and all I have for proof that it's real is your word."

"You can run tests on it, they'll show that it's gen-"

Helena interrupted me, saying, "Don't waste my time. You're more skilled than any of my techs, that's the reason why you have your job. So I'm going to propose a deal."

I leaned forward, or at least, tried to.

Helena continued. "Here's what'll happen. We'll send you back home - we can't charge you with anything. After all, this op-" She stopped herself, and then resumed firmly. "You'll prove to me that this message is real. If you're telling the truth, and you didn't get the information about our move on Gillit Road from us, someone else did. They must have put it in the CD and sent it to Earth, setting us both up. You have to find out who put it on the CD."

"Fine. What do I get, then? Nothing?" I asked.

"No. You get to keep your job. You get our protection. And you'll get our thanks," she said flatly.

"I want to know why that place was so clean," I replied.

Helena looked at me as she got up, and took an injector out of her pocket. She tapped it a few times, holding it up to the light, and then rolled up my sleeve and pressed it against my arm. I felt my muscles immediately tighten up and incredibly painful pins and needles all over my body. As I grimaced, she walked out and said, "Maybe."

About twelve hours later, after their medics proclaimed me fine and they made a copy of the recordings from my key, then took me back to my flat in another unmarked transport. I was instructed to keep absolutely quiet about the whole experience, and they warned me that they'd be watching me closely. Immediately after I got back, I had to change and run to work, where I had to pretend that nothing had happened.

I finally got back last night and collapsed onto the bed. I wasn't fine. My muscles still ached, I'd had no sleep for almost two days, and I'd been set up.

I fell asleep, woke up this morning, and went to work. I got back, and started trying to figure out how to clear my name. The Viard CD came from Hesh - at some point, someone in Hesh must have inserted the message about Gillit Road onto the CD. It's vital that I find out who did that. I've already managed to hack into the Hesh internal network, but I'm not having any luck figuring out who might have done it or getting into their files.

You got me into this. Now you can give me your help.

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The Path of Least Time

Mixolydian

Wednesday, January 25 2006, 03:29 PM

I mentioned last week that I'd managed to get into the Hesh Intranet as a way of trying to figure out who planted the hidden message on the Viard CD. I forgot to mention that I'd figured out the password already - it's mixolydian.

It was pretty easy to work out that you just had to rearrange the sound clips into the correct order - Hesh love their little audio puzzles. However, what's inside isn't of much help. There are a number of sound guys listed on the site, and it doesn't say who worked on what. What's more, I haven't been able to get into their internal filesystem, where I might be able to find some hard evidence implicating whoever made the hidden message; the encryption is tricky, so we'll have to work out the password through the old social engineering route. I don't have a lot of time to work on this because, well, I have a job at the Academy, so you guys will have to do this for me.

I'm a little concerned that someone is going to figure out that I was at Gillit Road. When I saw the Sentinel article about the "botched police raid" (yours truly), I was worried that I was going to be named somehow, but it seems that Helena managed to keep a lid on it this time. Still, I have a nagging suspicion that she has a tail on me - an old-fashioned, plainclothes policeman. I've got no proof of this, but she's not stupid - she knows that I could detect any electronic trace they set on me, and no doubt I'm worth watching. I'm not worried about the tail though - I'm worried that they'll make a mess of it and somehow end up revealing that I was at Gillit Road.

Miranda is another worry. I pretended to be ill with the flu after the debacle last week, to cover up the fact that I was exhausted and not coming out, but she knows I'm covering something up. She's not angry with me though, she just seems disappointed.

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Cyrus Quinton

Wednesday, February 1 2006, 01:50 PM

Cyrus Quinton. He's the sound engineer who worked on the Viard album. Either he's the person who placed the hidden message on it about Gillit Road, or he knows who did it. Violet told me she'd found this out last night when she went to play Pyramid against the Hesh guys with Caine. She was a little taken aback when I belatedly told her about Gillit Road a couple of days ago, but she agreed to help quickly enough - I think to her it's just another adventure.

Needless to say, I've already searched all the databases I can for Cyrus Quinton, and needless to say, he doesn't exist. Not even as a psuedonym. To be honest I'm surprised that anyone at Hesh believed that was his real name, but then again, they have a penchant for hiring 'creative' people with strange names.

If we can't track down Cyrus outside of Hesh, then we'll have to do it inside of Hesh. They have a filesystem there that might hold some of his earlier work, or data about him. I've tried several times to break into it, but their sysadmin has secured it surprisingly well. While I could probably just throw processing power at the problem and brute-force it, I don't want to draw attention to what we're doing. I've been watching the Hesh boards and I think I can see what you guys are attempting... when it works and you get the filesystem password, let me know.

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Stars

Tuesday, February 7 2006, 03:25 PM

I spotted a tail from Helena Frye's secret police force (or whatever it's called) today. I was visiting my friend Leo at Security this morning, and noticed a guy in a dark brown coat loitering in the lobby. I'm sure I'd seen him before on the street, and sure enough, when I was on my way out, he gave me a little ironic salute. Now, unless hiring standards have suddenly dropped at the police, this guy was obviously meant to be seen, and meant to show that Frye hadn't forgotten about our bargain.

I'm glad that you guys on Earth haven't forgotten either; it was a nice piece of work that you did, pretending to be a new employee to get the filesystem password at Hesh (it's s3cur1tyh013). It's scandalous how poor security procedures are at some companies. Still, in the case of Hesh, I'm glad that their sysadmin wasn't on the ball.

I don't have any clues about the file in Cyrus' folder though. It spells out a question in code, "enter those who know what the builder called men under my star", which sounds awfully like some Cubehead nonsense. I did a quick search of the scriptures, but there are reams of them with different translations and revisions. Even worse, they're not all digitised. I've asked Violet about this, but I don't think she knows either. In any case, it's useless until we know exactly what it is we're looking for.

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Last words of Monica

Monday, February 13 2006, 05:58 PM

Last week, I listened to the last words of Monica Grand. You might recall that she was the woman called the Advisor - the person who reporter Pietro Salk was talking to, the person who was hired to steal the Cube. Monica was the person who we spent so long trying to track down in Ascendancy Point, and ultimately ended up killed, presumably by 'V'.

Well, it's not presumably any more - it's definite. When I received the emails from you guys after you'd figured out Cyrus' password (bringerofjustice), I was at Miranda's place having dinner. I made an excuse to leave as quickly as I could, and then checked out his files as soon as I got back to my apartment. I'm glad that I waited, not just because I don't want Miranda to know about all of this, but because I suspect she would've found the files very disturbing - the audio file in particular.

I would strongly recommend not listening to it if you have a sensitive nature, since it's a recording of 'V' murdering Monica in her apartment. What struck me about the recording, after I'd calmed down, was the way that V was just so... dispassionate. When he walked up to her door and interrogated her, and when he walked away after killing her, he seemed totally emotionless. It's difficult to know what we can do - men like that are capable of anything.

I never imagined that the hidden message on the Viard CD and Gillit Road would lead us right back to Monica Grand. It's clear that all of this was simply a set up designed to get someone - who happened to be me - to interfere with the police operation at Gillit Road. What's more, V knew perfectly well that we'd track him down to Hesh. In retrospect, there's no way he would've used such a simple password for his private files. Seriously, a password based off his star sign that he told Alejo? And this sick recording... it's not useful, it's a taunt.

I'm going to take all of this to Helena Frye - it's enough to prove that the recording on the Viard CD is real, and it should also help them in their investigations into Monica's death. Judging by their current performance though, I don't have any confidence that they'll find V on their own.

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Exonerated

Thursday, February 16 2006, 07:02 PM

I took your advice and met with Helena Frye yesterday - in a public place. I'm not going to go into details right now, but I'm officially exonerated. At first, she was skeptical about the evidence we obtained from the Hesh intranet, but the recordings convinced her... especially the more grisly of the two. For my part, I managed to get a few bits of information out of her, including an unreleased finding from her investigation into Monica's murder, and the reason why the Gillit Road tunnels were so clean...

I'm too tired and relieved to go into all of it now, but hopefully I'll be able to post at length on our conversation this weekend. Right now, I'm about to head out to do something normal instead of all this spy stuff, and help Miranda pick furniture for her new apartment.

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The Clean Rooms

Monday, February 20 2006, 06:06 PM

There's a place in Perplex City which everyone says is ideal for clandestine meetings. It's down in the Old Town, not too far from the Academy and near Camblin Park. Back in the old days, the area used to be the seat of Perplex City's government, and you can still see the dignified, aloof buildings there; of course, now, they've been converted into public galleries and bars to serve the trendy new Caldera Street folk. It's said that all sorts of power-broking goes on there, between brilliant Academicians and the gerontocratic elite of the business world.

All of this is why I met Detective Helena Frye at a cheap cafe on Alchemy Bay last week. The people who go to Camblin Park want to be seen; it's an exercise in image. I didn't.

Helena didn't seem particularly surprised when I insisted on a public meeting. Just as I didn't want to see her in a private place where she might attempt... something..., she probably didn't want to attract too much attention to her police activities. According to the deep data-mining that I've been doing over the past couple of weeks, Helena's secret police are not officially sanctioned by the council, and given their apparent lack of results, I can't imagine that whoever is sponsoring them is happy with what they're achieving.

I arrived at the cafe a few minutes early and ordered some sweet tea, settling back in a old crushed sofa. There was some sort of run going on outside, along the coast. I sipped from my mug and watched the young people bound past the window, wondering whether any of them knew who I was, or who Helena was. Most of them probably didn't.

Helena strolled in, right on time. She looked completely at home in her brown jacket and jeans - a big difference from the riot gear outfit I first saw her in - and after getting a coffee, greeted me like an old friend. We sat in silence for a minute as I relaxed. I was happy enough. I'd done my job, she was going to have her information, why not be happy and drink tea?

Finally, I pulled out my key from my pocket and gestured at her with it. She unclasped her key from around her wrist - non-military, I noticed with interest - and we tapped them together. Reams of information flowed across the electrical contacts in the time it took for a runner to draw breath.

"It's all there," I said. "I hacked into the Hesh Intranet and got the files you'll need. The guy who put the message on the album went by the name of Cyrus Quinton. He set both of us up, and now he's long gone. You'll want to listen to them."

She looked doubtful, but took some headphones from a bag and listened intently. I watched her as she listened, a frown growing on her forehead. When she'd finished, she shook her head.

Continued »

"Don't look so worried, Kurt. I believe you. I'm just annoyed that this Cyrus - or V, or whatever his name is - managed to play us so well. I can understand him being able to manipulate the people on Earth, but we shouldn't be so careless. For your part, you fell for a totally ridiculous trick by blithely going to Gillit Road with no proof. And for my part, he knew exactly when I was going to raid that place. He's smart," she said, irritated.

"He's insane," I replied.

"He's very intelligent, and he believes in something. He believe so much that he'd do anything in its service, and that makes him more dangerous, because he's willing to sacrifice anything," said Helena. "Maybe that makes him insane. Although I imagine others in his organisation might consider him a hero."

I digested this for a second. "I suppose you've found the killer of Monica Grand now," I said.

She snorted. "Yes, I suppose so. You know what happened when we went to her apartment? There were two traces of blood there. Most was from Monica. The rest was from someone who didn't exist; it didn't match up to any individual we have on record, which is impossible. We have every single person in the city on our records. In other words, either this person is not from the city, or he's hacked our records."

"You seem to be having a serious problem in that regard," I smiled.

She gave me a warning look over her coffee. I decided not to press the matter, and watched the less agile runners half jog, half walk past the window.

"What about the tunnels?" I asked, thinking about to their unnatural cleanliness.

"They're all sealed up now. We've posted surveillance drones there and in all branches. I don't think it'll do any good though, they've obviously been scared off," she said, deliberately misunderstanding me.

"That's not what I meant. You told me you knew why they were so clean," I said.

Helena drank the remains of her coffee and set it down on her table. "Kurt, you really don't know what you're getting into. But we had an agreement, so I'll tell you. They were building something. Something big, something that required a clean room. And it may have involved the technology that's been going missing from the Academy. Beyond that, I don't know anything and I would strongly suggest you don't look into it. Whoever was behind it in the Academy has become very careful ever since Holyoke's death."

She gathered up her jacket and before leaving, looked at me and said "I'm sure we'll be seeing each other again soon."

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The Path of Least Time

Relationships

Wednesday, March 8 2006, 02:44 PM

Humans are creatures of habit. We might claim to seek novelty and adventure, but ultimately we always want to do it on our own terms. We want controlled experiences, controlled surprises, controlled adventures, and anything that is truly surprising is at least alarming to begin with. And I think that this explains why after the 'excitement' of the last few months, I've been happy to settle back into a routine.

Get up, get dressed, maybe pick up a pastry if I'm over at Miranda's. Go to work, have lunch with the guys in CRT, leave the Academy and more often than not, meet up with Miranda or someone else to go for a run in Polygon Park. Cook dinner, read, watch something, play a game, go to bed. On the weekends, I might go to a museum, or view a gallery, or watch some PCAG events.

It's remarkably easy to do this when you're in a relationship with someone, you fall into patterns very quickly and because there's always someone to talk to, or just someone to be silent with, it's different from being on your own. If you get two people who fit together well, these habits are self-reinforcing. It's comfortable.

The last few days have been a bit different, since Miranda went off to a sports camp in the north to help teach kids and do some running training. I remember coming back to my apartment on the first day and thinking, 'what now?' Before I was going out with Miranda, I might just call a friend and arrange to meet up, but it seemed rather forced since I hadn't done for a few months. I supposed I could call up Violet, who was normally happy to do something, but I recalled Caine saying they were going out to a gig that evening, so that was out of the window (I didn't really want to disturb them, anyway - they seem to be getting on pretty well). Instead, I just tidied things up and went for a particularly long run.

Repeat. And then today I realised that I hadn't posted here for a long time. There hasn't been much call to, to be honest. I haven't heard anything from Helena Frye at all - in fact, she seems to have disappeared from the public eye again. I imagine she was getting a bit sick of all the news stories featuring her.

Helena Frye is related to the other reason why I'm posting here. I've received a few emails about Anna and Isaac Cymbalisty, asking me to investigate. I have to say that I'm a little reluctant to, since Anna hasn't said anything to me about it, although she has been little a bit distracted recently. So - I might send a note to Helena, for what it's worth, but I don't want to do anything serious about this until I hear more.

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Anna and Cymbalistry

Friday, March 10 2006, 09:45 AM

I've just had a very unusual conversation with Anna. As I mentioned yesterday, she's been a bit distracted lately and not as talkative as usual - she even stopped talking about her twins, which really alarmed me. I know that she was friends with Isaac Cymbalistry (not that I can see why - the guy was always pretty rude to me) so I'm not surprised that she took his suicide hard, but I didn't know quite how good friends they were.

Anyway, I'm sitting in my office at the Academy when Anna walks in with a oddly cheerful smile on her face. After exchanging a few pleasantries about the students she's teaching and her translation projects, she seemed to draw herself up.

"How difficult would it be to let people on Earth talk to Perplex City using their phones?" she asked.

This is an area we've talked about in the past, in CRT brainstorming sessions, although I didn't know that Anna had been paying any attention back then; I guess the science and humanities divide isn't quite as wide as I'd imagined.

"Well," I said, leaning back in my chair, "in theory it's pretty easy. We already have communication protocols set up that connect their internet with our systems, and of course there are some people who talk to the guys at Mind Candy pretty regularly about the cards. There was, uh--"

I was just about to mention the phone gateway that had been set up between the Ascendancy Point tech support people and Earth, since that seemed to be a perfect example of what she wanted, when I realised that it might not be the best idea to let her know that I'd been involved in a spot of corporate hacking.

"-something to do with the interface layer that was a bit tricky, but yeah, apart from that, not too difficult."

Not bad, I thought, feeling pretty pleased with myself. "Why don't you have a seat?" I added, looking towards the couch against the wall which was miraculously free of junk. Clearly the cleaner had gotten fed up of cleaning around it all the time.

Anna sat down without a word, and started to speak as though choosing her words very carefully.

"This will sound strange, but it's very important for me to have a communications link set up that will allow Earth to call someone in Perplex City."

I looked at her hard. "Who?"

"The police," she replied.

"You know that's against protocol, Anna. We aren't supposed to open up any new communication channels with Earth unless it's authorised. Which, since you're asking me now, I imagine it's not," I said. I felt pretty awful grilling her like this, not simply because of my own flouting of said protocols, but because this will clearly be very difficult for her. However, I had to cover my back.

"I know it's against protocol. But it's about Isaac Cymbalistry."

I shook my head a fraction. Ever since Isaac's suicide, there'd been rumours swirling around about why he might have done it, or whether it was even a suicide at all. I really disliked these conspiracy theories. Miranda had been pretty upset and worried about them, so I had to reassure her that there was nothing mysterious about it, especially with the release of the public enquiry. Even Violet didn't think it was suicide. But now Anna was caught up in it, just because she couldn't believe her friend had been unhappy enough to commit suicide. I could understand that, but she was just upset, like anyone would be.

Continued »

Anna obviously noticed my doubt, but pressed on urgently.

"I don't think he killed himself. No, let me finish. I knew Isaac well, he wasn't the type of person to commit suicide. He used to say that 'suicide was like throwing away a book when you hadn't read the end'. The last time I saw him, he didn't look any different from normal. In fact, he even seemed a bit more lively."

"The public enquiry-" I began.

"It's incomplete. They aren't releasing the full reports on forensics or witness statements. It doesn't add up."

A little light began blinking on the screen beside me, notifying me of a call from someone. I glanced over to check the name - it looked like it was important.

"Aren't you even listening to me?" demanded Anna, looking at me critically.

"Yes, I am listening to you, but what do you expect me to do here? You're saying that either the police are wrong, or they're covering something up, and what, you want to get people from Earth to somehow hack into their systems? Do you have any idea how illegal that is? I might be able to understand if I thought there was any evidence, but there isn't!" I said back, my voice rising despite myself.

"What I'm asking you to do is to believe me! Isaac might not have been your friend, but he was mine. I've helped you out before, why can't you help me now!" she said, raising her voice as well.

"How am I supposed to believe you? You're making it impossible for yourself. There's no proof, no evidence and no-one agrees with you. Yes, I know he was your friend, but can't you just accept what happened? You have to get over it and stop making up conspiracy theories." Immediately after saying this, I cursed myself for being such an idiot with my words, and tried to formulate something placating.

I didn't have a chance to; Anna stood up furiously, and simply looked down at me and said, "I can't believe this," then walked out. I jumped up to follow her, but she was clearly not in a mood to be followed. I belatedly called out her name down the corridor, since that's what you're supposed to do in situations like this, but she didn't look back. She seemed like she was about to cry. I hate it when women cry, I have no idea what I'm meant to do.

I checked the corridor to see if anyone had heard our argument, then shut the door and sat down unhappily on the couch. The terrible thing was that I've already done things that are illegal, without much evidence at all, and here I was, berating Anna for daring to do the same for her friend. But like I said to her, what does she expect me to do? Hacking into Ascendancy Point and Hesh is one thing, but the police - I'm not going to do that without a good reason. I'm not going on any more wild goose chases.

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The Path of Least Time

Counterpoint

Friday, March 10 2006, 02:40 PM

I've had some reasonable - and not so reasonable - emails in response to my last post. Most of you disagree with my decision. Well, how about I put it this way:

None of you were able to give me any evidence that Cymbalistry was murdered other than Anna being suspicious because 'it's not the sort of thing that he would do'. There's no scrap of foreign DNA, no motive, no unusual footprints, no attempts at hacking into his key, no suspects, nothing. So basically, you're putting her word above the police's investigation, and from the looks of the public enquiry, it was very comprehensive. Here's a reminder:

"At the inquest, all anatomical evidence pointed towards Ceretin overdose as the cause of death. There was no sign of physical contact or coercion. The toxicology report also supported the enquiry's conclusion, finding large quantities of Ceretin or Ceretin derivative in Mr Cymbalistry's system."

and

"The scene of crime evidence showed no indication whatsoever that anyone else had been present, either at the time of death or within the previous few days. Fingerprint, footprint and genetic investigations all confirmed this conclusion."

You know, there are dozens of people who commit suicide in Perplex City every year. A few years back, there was another guy at the Academy who killed himself because of depression and a break-up. I'm sure that many of the relatives of those people suspected foul play. Am I supposed to break in to the police website to investigate all of them?

Yes, I've gone on wild goose chases before, and I've hacked into sites. But at least I had some sort of evidence, and at least I didn't put members of the public at risk. Anna's plan isn't just some game where you make crank calls to the police, it's diverting essential police resources away from areas where they might genuinely be required. What if a crime isn't stopped and someone's hurt - or killed - because the police are too overloaded with false alarms?

I'm willing to hear her out, but I'm not impressed, and I'm surprised that you guys are so easily persuaded.

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The Path of Least Time

Remapping

Monday, March 13 2006, 12:44 PM

For a group of people on Earth who I've helped out many times, often putting myself in serious danger, you're singularly rude, one-sided and unwilling to trust me. The number of emails I've received doubting my sanity, directly insulting me, and not providing any evidence is just staggering.

Thankfully, there are some people out there who've seen fit to give me some serious information about what's going on, which, while far from convincing, is certainly food for thought. For example, I didn't know that Cymbalisy was actually addicted to Ceretin, and that he'd just run out. Some of the other suggestions, such as the Third Power being able to infiltrate any organisation, are distinctly unhelpful, since I already know that and if followed through, I might as well just give up.

Anna's suggested meeting up this evening to talk about it. I've just replied to say that I'll be there. I'm willing to be convinced, if she'll explain things to me further. In the meantime, I've been thinking about how to map Earth numbers to the PXC communication system. The process is not very well-documented, but it should be fairly trivial to set up - providing that I'm convinced it's a good idea.

Incidentally, comments like this are rather ill-considered:

"Anna is smart and reasonable. Granted her hormones may occasionally have an influence, but do you really think she is the sort of person who would get so confused that she would think about breaking the law, risk friendships and generally push the boundaries so much?"

and

"Those who knew him best, Anna and Violet, consider suicide out of character for him. They are both rational, balanced people, not given to flights of fancy or letting their emotions sway their reasoning."

So what am I? Prone to flights of fancy? You should be careful what you say and who you believe. Just because Anna is suddenly your new best friend doesn't mean she'll be right all of the time. And be careful who you accuse - hunting down the Third Power is serious stuff, but it shouldn't turn into a witchhunt. I'm not about to start spying on Violet and Jason just because they're interested in the Granier diary - just like hundreds of other scholars in the city.

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The Path of Least Time

A life of crime

Tuesday, March 14 2006, 04:45 PM

Right. We're good to go. Anna's given me the address of the Volunteer Access page. You can see it here:

<http://www.perplexcitypolice.com/volunteeraccess.html>

And I've hooked up the incident reporting line with a couple of Earth phone numbers. They're on the Access page. Start calling at around 5.30pm GMT.

I don't need to tell you how dangerous all of this is. Apart from the risk of prosecution, we're also opening up the city to a potential crime wave - so please, if you're going to monopolise the police, try not to report any major crimes. That way, if anything really bad happens, the police will still give it priority.

I don't mind the odd theft going unattended, but if we end up causing serious harm, then... well, I don't want to think about that.

You don't have to live in this city. I do.

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The Path of Least Time

...and Consequences

Friday, March 17 2006, 06:00 PM

I gather that you already know Anna's side of the story, so I won't bother relating the details our conversation on Monday where she convinced me to help her. Basically, it came down to the cleaners. Cymbalistry hired cleaners to come to his house every Thursday, and yet the police found no traces of them on Saturday when they conducted their detailed forensic sweep. Basically, that's impossible - people will always leave a few skin flakes, a few hairs, a few fingerprints and footprints wherever they go. They couldn't have simply all vanished in less than 48 hours. The police's forensic scanners are incredibly powerful and comprehensive; even if only a single cleaner came into his house for just five minutes, the scanners would have identified them.

The only explanation is that all biological traces other than those of Cymbalistry were deliberately and professionally removed between Thursday and Saturday. The only motive is that Cymbalistry was murdered, and his killers wanted to remove all traces of their presence from the crime scene. In their haste, and perhaps in a mistaken (but understandable) belief that Cymbalistry never had any visitors, they just ended up removing all 'foreign' forensic traces, including those of the cleaners. In any case, the facts alone were evidence enough that the case required more investigation, so I set up the Earth-PXC phone link.

I'll give you this - we might beat you in terms of science and puzzles, but you're certainly our match in imagination. When I watched the volunteer police monitoring system and saw all of your fake calls and reports coming in, I have to say that I was impressed by their consistency. Vandalism, public disturbances, muggings, animals escaping from the zoo, people dressed up in bear costumes - all ideal low-intensity crimes. I even laughed at the last one.

And then I saw the others. Kidnappings. Sightings of 'Most Wanted' criminals. Bomb threats. Those aren't just major crimes - they're crimes large enough to mobilize significant fractions of the police force, and that's exactly what happened, and soon enough they sent out the username and password to get into the PXC PD intranet (user: 'volunteeraccess', password: 'gH76s5').

Unfortunately because those crimes were so serious, they diverted attention away from pretty much everything else. The result? A teenage boy in critical condition from a violent assault, because the police couldn't get to him in time. A six-year old girl and her mother, both injured, because the police couldn't send anyone. What did I tell you in my last post?

"if you're going to monopolize the police, try not to report any major crimes. That way, if anything really bad happens, the police will still give it priority. I don't mind the odd theft going unattended, but if we end up causing serious harm, then... well, I don't want to think about that."

Well, I don't have to think about it, I can just read about it in the Sentinel now! None of you even mentioned this 'collateral damage' caused by Tuesday's attack on the police. I know that it was only a minority of people who went so far as to call in such serious crimes, but it makes me wonder why you deserve such trust. There's a teenaged boy in hospital because of you, and a six-year old girl who'll probably have nightmares for years. I hope you were entertained by your fake bomb threats and kidnappings, because I'm sure they weren't.

I haven't had a chance to read the police documents thoroughly yet; I meant to on Tuesday night, but I was too tired, and on Wednesday, Sente held a very pointed meeting about the fact that certain scribes hadn't been pulling their weight lately. As a result, I've been putting extra hours in at the Academy. Between that and my running training with Miranda, there's not much time left. Speaking of Miranda, she got a bit spooked after I told her about the 'cleaner evidence'. She'd always thought that there was something wrong with Cymbalistry's suicide, and the entire reason I tried to convince her otherwise was because I was afraid she'd take it badly. I feel a little bad about not listening to her earlier, but she said she was glad

that I told her about the cleaner evidence.

I'm pretty sure that she knows I'm investigating Cymbalisky's death. She's not stupid, she knows that I'm spending my time on something even though I don't tell her about it. I still don't want her involved - this is a dangerous business and I don't want to get her into trouble. In any case, I don't see how she could help.

Next week looks to be pretty packed as well, but the workload should decrease when Sente feels satisfied that we're all working hard again. When that happens, I'll get in touch. I'm sure Anna will have some ideas about the next move in the investigation. When she does, try taking things more seriously for once.

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The Path of Least Time

Cause of death

Monday, April 3 2006, 02:07 PM

You'll all be glad to hear that I've calmed down a little in the past fortnight. After I made my previous post, I got a lot of emails from people apologising for the fallout from the PXCPD intranet hack, and I appreciate that.

As I mentioned, I've been hard at work at the Academy to ensure that Sente doesn't suspect that I'm spending too much time on 'extra-curricular activities'. We've had a few tight deadlines come up recently, plus I'm intending to go on holiday with Miranda next week, so I've had to clear up a lot of work. Now that it's spring and it's much lighter in the evenings, we're able to go out running much later. Miranda bought both of us a pair of outrageously expensive Kirman running shoes that have some sort of adaptive memory-shape that lets you run in pretty much any terrain.

So, about Cymbalistry. I have to say that there is nothing obviously incriminating in the police investigation documents. Don't get me wrong, I still think that something unusual happened with his death, what with the cleaners and absence of DNA. However, there's no smoking gun here. The only slightly odd thing, which a few people emailed in to mention, was the traces of 'possible black market' ceretiva derivatives found in his bloodstream.

Ceretiva is an active ingredient in Ceretin and other Cognivia products, and often people on the black market will slightly alter the shape of ceretiva so it isn't picked up on normal scanners or as a result of making it more cheaply. If Cymbalistry was taking black market Ceretin, then it's not terribly surprising that Coroner would find a molecule that looks like Ceretiva.

However, the Head Librarian at the Academy gets paid a fairly reasonable salary and it's not as if he kept his fondness for cognitive enhancers a secret, so I don't really understand why he would be using the black market. I'd be surprised if he even knew where to find a black market - he'd probably think it was a new shop on Dalia Way or something. Who knows, maybe he was just being overly thrifty.

But there's one more thing. The PXCPD Coroner's Office has access to some very good equipment and whenever they find a new molecule or compound that people are taking or selling, it'll get identified and documented on their systems. My point here is that Cymbalistry wasn't just taking black market Ceretin - he was taking an unidentified molecule that looks like Ceretin. If he bought it off a street corner in the Old Town or something, then it shouldn't be unidentified, because chances are the police would've picked it up and given it a name and reference number. This makes the entire question of where the Ceretin came from, and why it hasn't been picked up by the police, very interesting.

Unfortunately I have no real idea how to proceed next and neither does Anna...

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The Path of Least Time

Cognivia, and a crowd

Thursday, April 13 2006, 04:43 PM

Well, it seems like there might be something going on with Cognivia. They're apparently developing a next-next-generation version of Ceretin, called Ceretin 6 (the current gen is Ceretin 4, and the next gen is unsurprisingly Ceretin 5). That much is public, but Anna managed to unearth a semi-private shareholder report. Most of it is the usual marketing nonsense, but one part stands out - "test anomalies" with Ceretin 6. The fact that they would even mention such a thing in a shareholder report indicates to me that there are some serious problems in their development of the drug.

It's nowhere near a smoking gun in terms of evidence, and to be honest I think that linking Ceretin 6 test anomalies to Cymbalistry's death is stretching things. I certainly can't imagine why Cognivia might be involved, but it's undeniable that they have the capability to easily make ceretiva derivatives - the substance that killed Cymbalistry. Apparently Cognivia are releasing details of the Ceretin 6 tests in a research paper this month, but only to cognitive enhancement professionals. Maybe Anna might be able to sort something out there, but Cognivia are notoriously wary about giving away their test data; corporate espionage is still a problem here in Perplex City.

As for the rest of my life, it's a bit quiet. Miranda and I visited the Centric Artificial Rainforest in Polygon Park while we were checking out the marathon route, and they had some interesting exhibits on similarities between our plants and those on Earth. It turns out that Miranda studied plant biology back at university - she seemed a bit embarrassed to admit it when I was surprised about how much she knew, but eventually she owned up.

Miranda left yesterday to visit her parents and go to a conference, so she'll be away for at least a couple of weeks. When she gets back I'm hoping to quiz her a little more about the plants - it's something I always wished I learned more about.

I'm not going to get into the whole Caine/Violet/Sente maelstrom... let's just say that it's already threatening to engulf the entire CRT. Right now I'm trying to keep my head down.

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Oistin and Von

Tuesday, April 25 2006, 01:11 PM

You've probably all heard about Oistin Meade's survey - I gather that Anna has struck up some sort of deal with him to get access to the Ceretin 6 paper if all of you guys answer the survey. I buttonholed Von, our resident Earthologist, after our weekly CRT meeting this morning, and asked him about Meade. Von's going through what he calls a 'hipster' phase at the moment, wearing oversized sunglasses and caps with ironic slogans. I think he's getting a bit irritated by people helpfully telling him that his T-shirt is inside-out though...

"Oistin who?" asked Von, removing his sunglasses.

"Oistin Meade," I repeated. "You must know who he is, he's in Natural Sciences, doing some kind of survey to figure out the Earth mindset. Some kind of psych grad, probably in Earth Studies."

"Nope," he concluded, replacing his glasses.

"Look, why don't I show you, maybe we'll learn something?" I said.

We proceeded to Von's office, which was filled with Earth puzzlebooks and games that he'd gotten someone to replicate for him. I carefully moved one book with a picture of a hare on the front and sat down on the chair it'd been occupying. Following a few obligatory quips upon reaching Oistin's site (e.g. "Poor kid, to have parents who'd give him a name like that" and "Do they all have blue skin in Earth Studies?") we started going through the survey.

Judging by the noises that Von was making while I filled it out, he clearly felt that either the survey or my answers were nonsense, or perhaps both. I certainly found it very odd - I haven't seen the Rudon system of height used for a while, and I had to stand up against a wall while Von estimated the height of a small tree and compared it against me. My favourite animal was naturally the tretretre - it's a shame you don't have them on Earth any more - and I found it quite hard deciding between Arca and Yevan, but I eventually went for Yevan (I've always had a sentimental side).

I don't really have access to Earth television, so I only selected 'News broadcasts' and 'Quantum Leap', the latter because it sounded quite cool. I wrote some nonsense for the ink blots and couldn't be bothered untying my shoes or buttering my left hand(!) so I just estimated those. By the end I was a bit exasperated by the survey's impenetrability, but the response made up for it:

Avoid salads and tall men. Don't close your eyes. Darkness can blind you.

Your responses to the inkblot test suggest that you are unable to censor your own thoughts. Your stream of consciousness gushes like the rapids of the Mazy River and anybody entering into conversation with you is likely to drown. There are a number of excellent cognitive therapists in Perplex City who may be able to help you overcome your problem. I am not one of them.

We stared at the screen for a few second without saying a word.

"I don't think you need a cognitive therapist," volunteered Von.

"Thanks," I said.

Continued »

Von then had a go at filling in the survey, explaining to me why he thought these particular questions had been used. "It's the CRR - there are some really weird guys there, like Caius and Wildwood's group. Plus this guy Meade, I bet that he comes from Autonomica or Veonyx or something - that'd explain the questions about TV." It makes sense, I suppose. A few minutes and some shoe-tying later, Von was finished:

Have you done one of these tests before? Congratulations - you scored 104%. Don't close your eyes. Darkness can blind you.

Your responses to the inkblot test suggest that you are a well-balanced Earth person - well done! Your combination of answers suggests that you are a very confident and cool individual.

"How did you get that?" I exclaimed.

"I just answered honestly," he said, looking perplexed.

"Well, whatever," I said. "As long as it gets the job done."

"What job?" asked Von.

"Figuring out the mindset of Earth people," I said quickly.

"Hmmm," said Von sceptically. "I don't know about that..."

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The Path of Least Time

Correspondence

Wednesday, April 26 2006, 03:23 PM

I've been receiving a lot of emails lately; most of them are interesting, some of them aren't, and few are just completely insane. I would like to respond to each of them individually, just as I would like to discover that the Cube was hiding underneath my bed. However, I don't really have the time, and since a lot of the questions are similar, there isn't much point. So I'm going to answer a bunch of emails together now:

Ceretin 6: A lot of people have pointed out that this might be what killed Cymbalistry. This is possible, but we're still lacking evidence for this. It's very difficult for anyone to get hold of experimental drugs and remove them from a lab, and in any case we need to know more about the drug itself. Anna is working on this, and if you guys fill out Oistin Meade's survey, he'll give us access to a paper with preliminary findings on Ceretin 6.

13th Labour card: I'm not giving you any hints, but I'm impressed with what you guys have been able to accomplish so far.

Von's response to the inkblot survey: I can't quite recall what this was... something to do with some bizarre Earth or Perplex City thing I expect.

Miranda: Lots of relationship advice, which I appreciate! She's still away at the conference but she should be back soon. I'm hoping to surprise her with a dinner.

Violet/Caine/Sente: The less said about that, the better.

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The Path of Least Time

Movement

Tuesday, May 2 2006, 02:29 PM

Oistin Meade has finally finished his Earth survey. It was a rather... interesting study, to say the least, but according to Anna, he seems happy with the results. Happy enough to promise to send over the Ceretin 6 research paper today, which is the important thing. This whole investigation into Cymbalistry's death has been dragging on for so long, I'll be glad to be done with it. I know that sounds harsh but it's weighing down on everything that I do, and it would certainly do Anna well to have some kind of conclusion to his death.

The good news is that Miranda arrived back home last weekend, so I surprised her at Grand Frederik's and whisked her off to dinner at a pretty expensive restaurant in the Artist's Quarter. I think this was the longest time we'd been apart since we starting going out, so it felt like the right thing to do. She seemed pretty worn out from the conference and visiting her family - she doesn't get along very well with her parents, so I can imagine it might be wearing for her to be at home.

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The Path of Least Time

All About Ceretin Six

Wednesday, May 3 2006, 02:31 PM

My one enduring memory of neuroscience lectures at the Academy is of relaxation. I have this odd problem where I always fall asleep during lectures, and when they're held in dark halls with comfortable seats - as the neuro ones were - it doesn't matter how interesting or important the material is, I'll just nod off. I imagine that a lot of you will say that this is perfectly normal behaviour for a student who stays up late on the key every night, but I fell asleep every lecture. Not for the entire length, but at least for a few minutes, without fail. It's gotten a bit better lately, but there's still the occasional time when I'll suddenly jerk awake during a CRT meeting and see Sente glaring at me.

The reason why I bring this up is because I've been reading through the Ceretin 6 paper that Anna got from Oistin, and been trying to figure out what it means, like the rest of you. Reading a scientific paper is an art, a bit like reading a poem crossed with a physics equation; they adhere to a style that has no reason, and contain golden nuggets of information that are almost deliberately hidden amid complex nonsense. Maybe it's more like reading entrails, I don't know.

The introduction is the usual self-congratulatory waffle from Cognivia scientists, referencing all of their own work, and as usual they talk up the successes of Ceretin 6 while glossing over the problems. There are two big problems. The first is that they still haven't been able to figure out overdose protection.

When cognitive enhancers were made available on general release - in other words, not just as prescriptions from doctors - a number of people predictably tried to overdose in an effort to get 'more enhancement'. Luckily no-one died as a result, but some people did become seriously ill. Nowadays, pretty much all of Cognivia's products are made so that it's impossible to overdose on them - you can take as many pills of Ceretin as you want, but it won't kill you. It might give you a headache, but nothing worse, because they've added molecules that gradually render the drug ineffective the higher its concentration.

The problem is that as Ceretin has become more complex in its effects, it's become harder to give it overdose protection in a way that works reliably for everyone. It's a bit of a double-bind for Cognivia. Anyway, the fact that Ceretin 6 doesn't have overdose protection means that it could conceivably be used to kill someone, if you gave them enough pills (or a really concentrated pill). Definitely worrying.

The second problem is that there is an outlier in the results for the Ceretin 6 tests. What's an outlier? Well, all of the people who were given the Ceretin 6 had fairly similar performance increases - they all performed about 40% better in an intelligence test compared to people who hadn't been given the drug - except for one person. That person did consistently worse at the intelligence test than the rest of the Ceretin 6 group. So much worse they they don't even seem to be part of the same group - they're an outlier.

Continued »

You can see this on figure 1 of the paper. The interesting thing is that the outlier's performance, who was given the pseudonym 'HG' by the researchers, closely mimicked that

of people given Ceretin 5. If you just looked at the graph, the conclusion would be that this outlier 'HG' didn't take any Ceretin 6 at all, they just took Ceretin 5. That's probably what the researchers thought, but according to the caption, the blood chemistry data from HG was inconclusive - it didn't show that HG wasn't taking Ceretin 6.

There's a fairly obvious theory here that involves someone getting themselves on the Ceretin 6 test, hoarding the pills they were given and slipping them to Cymbalistry. At the moment, it's just a theory. The question is whether we can prove if it's true.

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The Path of Least Time

Looking for the Outlier

Thursday, May 4 2006, 09:45 AM

I've just had a brainstorm - there's a fairly easy way I can log in to a particular part of Cognivia's systems and find out the identity of the outlier. It's a little risky and I might get into a little trouble for doing it if I get found out, but it'll be worth it. I should have time to get around to doing it sometime later today, and I'll let you know as soon as I've found out anything.

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The Path of Least Time

...breaks loose

Thursday, May 4 2006, 04:31 PM

I don't have time to explain what's going on now, but it looks like I've let something terrible happen. I can't believe it myself, but Miranda killed Cymbalistry, and I inadvertently helped cover up for her. I'm in Grand Frederik's Station right now looking for her, but she's abandoned her key, so I can't trace her. I can hardly go to the police, either.

What I have done is register her as a Missing Person. This means that if she goes on any type of public transport, which includes rail, subway, cars - pretty much anything that moves fast - then she'll be recognised by their surveillance cameras and reported. She won't be able to move far, and if she does, I'll know where. The only problem is that she knows me too well. Well enough to know that I've done this.

I need to finish integrating the Missing Person notifications into my key. I'll tell you more tonight, when I have time.

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The Actor

Thursday, May 4 2006, 10:28 PM

Miranda killed Cymbalistry. I can't believe it. I can't believe that she managed to fool me for so long.

This morning, I said that I had figured out a way to log into Cognivia's systems. That way was through Miranda.

Let me explain.

After we started going out, Miranda told me she had Barrow-Feld Syndrome; it's a disease that degrades your brain's ethical decision-making centres, and anyone who suffers from it is practically shunned from society. When she told me the news, at first I was almost horrified, but it only made me care more about her. It made sense that she hadn't told anyone about it yet; there's no way she would've been able to become a scribe at the Academy if people knew she suffered from Barrow-Feld, and even her job at the library would be at risk. There didn't seem any point mentioning it here either - it's not like it affects you.

Miranda said she'd gotten onto a trial at Cognivia for a drug that might be able to halt the progress of Barrow-Feld, or even cure it. I didn't see any reason to doubt her, especially with the news about Veritana. Veritana's for older patients, but it still made sense that Cognivia might be working on something for younger people. In fact, I remember celebrating with her when we received the news that she'd been accepted for the trial; we went out to a restaurant in the Mobius Strip and went drinking...

As part of the trial, Miranda said that she had to visit Cognivia a lot for checkups and monitoring; that's why she was away so often. It was easy for me to cover for her or give a backup story when she claimed she had to leave work early to get some more pills. When Cymbalistry was killed, I had no problem with telling the police - and all of you - that she was with me, on the way to a hotel in the country, instead of at Cognivia being treated for Barrow-Feld. It hardly seemed like it made a difference where she was. After all, it didn't even occur to me that she might be involved in his murder.

I never really suspected that Miranda was lying about Barrow-Feld because she was a perfect actor. She always carried her 'pills' around with her, she always would have some generic box from Cognivia lying around her bathroom, she'd always have some story about the grumpy doctors at the testing division or her fellow testing volunteers. I suppose that part wasn't too hard to make up, since she really had been going to Cognivia - to take part in the Ceretin 6 trials though. I still have no idea how she managed to get herself onto those trials; she must have hacked in or something, but that sort of thing isn't easy.

Anyway, when Miranda was working at home one day, I remember seeing a note from Cognivia hiding underneath a book. I sneaked a glance and saw that it contained some login details for the testing website, presumably so she could monitor when she was supposed to take the pills and come in for visits. I didn't think much of it at the time, but when we needed a way to find out who took part in the Ceretin 6 trials, I figured that I might be able to log in as Miranda and then find my way through their system to the other trials; it's always easier to hack something once you're already inside.

I went over to Miranda's apartment in the Old Town this afternoon and let myself in. The place was a bit of a mess because she was unpacking from her conference - clothes all over the place, that sort of thing. It took me a little while to find the note from Cognivia, but it was still hiding behind the same book. I settled myself down on her bed and logged into Cognivia using her details. Details of the Ceretin 6 trial flashed up in front of me.

I looked at them, bemused. I'd expected to see something about drug schedules for a Veritana-derivative, not the exact data I was looking for. I scanned around the page, thinking that Cognivia's system had somehow hiccuped and I'd just been incredibly lucky to be

Continued »

deposited in the exact page I'd intended to hack into. A name was on the page: 'Helen Gale'. Patient HG. Amazing! This was the outlier, the person who looked like they were hoarding the Ceretin 6.

I clicked through to Helen Gale's personal details, and saw Miranda. She was smiling and wearing a patient's gown, somewhere in the confines of Cognivia. I reloaded the page, just to make sure I wasn't imagining things. The photo was still there, and so was her address, height, eye colour, place of work and everything else. Miranda was the outlier. She had the Ceretin 6, and I was only the alibi she had for her whereabouts during Cymbalistry's death. As for motive, the fact that he was murdered while looking at the final page of the Granier diary is hardly coincidental. Given that the diary was linked to the Third Power, I didn't even want to think about what this meant about Miranda...

I lay back on the bed, figuring out what to do. I couldn't go to the police; they wouldn't believe me and I would likely be locked up for covering for her. In any case, I didn't trust the police and Helena Frye had been incommunicado for weeks. This was something I had to do myself.

What I had to do was talk to her, and find out what she was doing; maybe there was some sort of explanation. I initiated a trace on her key, which showed her on the subway heading towards Grand Frederik's station. It looked like she'd get there within a few minutes, but if I ran, I might be able to get to take the subway from Caldera and intercept her. While I was waiting for a train at Caldera (and sending the first text message to you guys), it became painfully clear that this just wasn't going to happen. The only thing I could do was to call her up, but what do you say to your girlfriend, after you've discovered that she's a murderer?

"Hey, Miranda," I said, in a painfully light tone, "what are you up to after work?"

"I'm a bit busy tonight, sorry," she replied, sounding preoccupied.

"I'd really like to meet up. Where are you?" I asked.

She went silent for a few seconds.

"Look, I just want to talk to you," I said urgently.

"Kurt. Don't try to follow me, you're smarter than that. You don't want to get hurt." The call ended.

After a couple of minutes frantic thinking on the train to Grand Frederik's, I notified the police that Miranda had officially 'gone missing' and used my Cube Retrieval Team status so that they'd take me seriously. When I got to Grand Frederik's, there was no sign of her, and I found her key inside a waste bin. That was seven hours ago. She could be anywhere in Perplex City now - but not much further. She can't use public transport or the Missing Persons system will spot her, and so will I. She has to know this.

I've told Violet everything. She seemed sympathetic, but I know she was disappointed. At the same time though, she almost seemed excited about hunting for Miranda. Incredible.

I'm still trying to figure out how much of what Miranda told me over the last few months was true. Someone told me that the best lies always contain a kernel of truth. There's no way that you can spend months with a person and not let any of your own personality show. Miranda might know how to play me, but I know her as well. I'll find her, and I'll need your help.

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The Path of Least Time

Fantasies

Friday, May 5 2006, 12:05 PM

At about 7am this morning, my key emitted a siren, causing me to wake up and fall out of bed. My key is programmed to only wake me up if something life-threatening or truly urgent requires my attention. One of its monitoring cores had noticed something odd going on with the information flowing between it and the world, and determined that its firewalls had been breached. That's a long-winded way of saying that someone was successfully hacking into my system.

My key is pretty smart, so it basically wiped itself and prompted me to create a new password and restore the data. I discovered that that 'someone' who had been hacking in had also been trying to copy over all of my data. It was almost certainly Miranda.

I told the key to restore, and then hurled it across the room. It bounced off a bookshelf and landed in a plant pot that Miranda had given me. I sat up on my bed and rubbed the sweat off my forehead. Unsurprisingly, I hadn't slept very well, and I'd forgotten to have dinner amidst the adrenaline rush of setting up the Missing Persons system with my key.

While attempting to get to sleep last night, I'd entertained the notion that there might be a legitimate explanation for what Miranda had been doing. Maybe she'd be working undercover for the police, together with Helena Frye. Maybe she was a double agent in the Third Power. Maybe I'd misinterpreted what she'd said to me earlier.

On discovering the hack attempt this morning, those illusions evaporated and I sat in the dark in my room, alone. A little red light continued to flash from the plant pot. I sighed, and then picked up my key and wondered what to do. Nothing had come in to the Missing Persons system - no sightings reported, either by people or by cameras on public transport. She could be anywhere. I added an extra layer of security to my key in order to make life very unpleasant for anyone attempting to hack in again.

Despite everything that's happened, I don't really want to think too hard about Miranda at the moment. That's why I'm sitting at work, attempting to review a maths puzzle, constantly checking my Missing Persons notifications, and feeling empty.

I'm meeting up with Violet later today to figure out a game plan, but before that I'm going to follow one of your suggestions and visit Miranda's apartment again to see if there's anything useful there I can find.

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The Path of Least Time

Concussed

Saturday, May 6 2006, 02:16 PM

It's going to have to be a short post today, I'm afraid. I'm sitting in the Observation ward of Phuah Hospital, with an incredible headache and burns over my back. My ankle is badly sprained, and I'm pretty certain that this is the worst 48 hours I've ever lived through.

I don't remember much about what happened yesterday. I recall heading to Miranda's apartment to look for clues - and that's about it. Apparently I was concussed when her apartment block exploded, and I was found lying on the ground outside. The Sentinel's saying that the explosion was caused by a gas leak, but I don't believe in coincidences any more - it happened because I was there. It seems like the only reason I got out alive is because my key detected the rising gas levels and alerted me.

There are dozens of ways Miranda could've rigged the explosion; maybe she had a movement sensor, or a switch linked to the door, or a heat sensor. I doubt we'll ever find out though, what with the building being a pile of rubble now. When Violet told me that at least three people died and a family are in intensive care, I could only laugh - I don't think anything Miranda does now could surprise me.

Violet's just left the ward now. She came to the hospital as soon as she heard I'd been in the explosion, and luckily spotted the note I'd retrieved from the apartment. Like I said, I can't remember how I found it or why I realised it was important, but with your help, she figured out it was Miranda's drop box and managed to get to it first.

The stuff that was in the drop box - another key, first aid kit, clothes, lots of money, etc - would've been valuable to her and we must have slowed her down by taking it. But not enough. When I woke up an hour ago, I had a message waiting for me on my key, saying that Miranda had been reported to Missing Persons by a boat hire company out in Portside Docks. She hired out a small pleasure cruiser early this morning, and it was only after she left that they recognised her from police reports.

Luckily the cruiser is perfectly visible from the air and the Coast Guard are heading out to pick her up. It'll take a little while, but she isn't going anywhere. I'm looking forward to talking to her again...

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The Path of Least Time

Empty

Sunday, May 7 2006, 09:15 PM

She wasn't in the boat. Coast Guard rendezvoused with the cruiser earlier today, and there was no-one inside; she'd set it on automatic pilot. Violet was here when the news came in, and I think even she was surprised by the stream of swearing that I made. I'm having a hard time dealing with the fact that Miranda is constantly outsmarting me. I feel terrible about lying to everyone, and while I appreciate your support, I don't deserve it.

They're treating my burns here in the hospital, but they say should be able to go home next week. There was some talk about arranging a psychologist to visit me in case I get any post-traumatic stress, but I told them to get lost - I'm too busy for that. Obviously I still have my key, and I've been working hard on creating a new system for tracking Miranda down. The notifications I get from Missing Persons are useful, but they're clearly not going to be enough to pinpoint her location, especially given that she'll be on the lookout. To find her, I'm going to have to do something much trickier - I'm going to have to do a global search for her. Not in the physical sense, but as in 'all available information sources'.

The global search is going to look everywhere for patterns that match Miranda; it'll look at key transactions, passenger lists, city noise-monitoring microphones, surveillance cameras in public places. When it finds them, it'll plot their location as accurately as it can. All of this is going to require a huge amount of computing power, and because I don't want to draw too much attention to what I'm doing, I'm going to just use my own resources. Consequently, it won't return results very often and they won't all be that useful, because she won't be using her name and she's probably changed her appearance.

I can't say that this will succeed, but I need to be doing something. Everything seems to be completely out of control, and I've got to get a grip on it. I can't handle much more of this.

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The Path of Least Time

Vital statistics

Monday, May 8 2006, 12:58 PM

The hospital is letting me go home today, now that most of my burns have healed and they're happy that there's nothing wrong with my head. One of my friends once told me that a young man with a walking stick is irredeemably sexy. I'm not sure how well that applies to someone who looks completely beaten up and has a support around his ankle, but it's a nice thought. Anyway, once I'm back, I should be able to finish off all the global search stuff so you can get stuck in.

A lot of people have been asking about Miranda's involvement in the Polygon Park Marathon. I don't know how much of what she told me is true, but I have seen medals for her taking part in last year's marathon, and I think another one that was either two or three years ago. I never knew her exact times, but she always proudly said that it wasn't worth running in a marathon if you couldn't finish under four hours. To be honest, I suspect she could do it quite a bit faster than that, especially since we both managed to do a half-marathon in under 1:40.

Some guys (yes, specifically men) have told me that I shouldn't feel like an idiot for trusting Miranda, that it happens to everyone. I don't feel like an idiot any more, no. I just don't understand. I don't understand why she did it. If she was just interested in getting hold of the Granier diary and killing Cymbalisy, I don't see why she picked me to be with. Perhaps she did it for cover, or just as a distraction. I can't say the thought of that makes me feel any better.

I remember telling my mum about Miranda, a little while after we started going out. After demanding a photo and patiently listening to all my stories about her, she told me that 'Miranda seems a lot nicer than any of the other girls you've seen.' I remember laughing, and wondering where it would all lead. I've had a lot of time to think about her, even with all the work I'm doing. At first I daydreamed; about the inspired insanity of her plan to buy, move and assemble all the furniture for her new place; how cute she looked when she was studying hard on anthropology; how exhilarating it was to race against her. I scrutinised those moments, trying to see whether there was anything more to them, anything that could tell me more about who she really was and what she wanted.

I couldn't find anything.

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Global Search

Monday, May 8 2006, 06:02 PM

Arrived back home a couple of hours ago. Been busy working full tilt on this global search thing - finally finished it and have the first partial results from an audio search; audio clips correspond to 'Miranda' and are plotted on a map. I can't imagine that she's using Miranda Katsoulis any more, but maybe she'll slip up. Anyway, the parameters are obviously too wide, but you might be able to make something from it. Going to have a nap now... I'm completely tired out.

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The Path of Least Time

Woke From Dreaming

Tuesday, May 9 2006, 12:29 PM

I'm still not sleeping very well - that nap I took yesterday ended up lasting until 2am, at which point I woke up. I lay there, feeling very melancholic and sorry for myself, until I gave up trying to get to sleep and monitored the Missing Persons feed. I have full access to their site now, and I can view all the information they received about those people who have disappeared. There seemed to be two types of people. One type were usually picked up very quickly, because they weren't actually hiding, or at least not very well - most kids fell into this type. The other type, I imagined, included people who knew about the surveillance cameras and avoided them, or people who were dead. Unsurprisingly, Miranda hadn't been seen on any cameras.

As for sightings reported in by people, just like all the other Missing Persons, the reports were mostly false positives or wishful thinking.

I'm not sure how long I spent looking at the feed, but it must have been some time, because I know I only just woke up (for the second time). I still need to look through the audio reports but it seems like you've made some good progress there on finding results that match Miranda. I'll get back to you soon on that.

You've also told me that you haven't been able to find a 'Miranda Katsoulis' in any of the marathon entries, so she must have entered using a pseudonym. That's why you've been bugging me for information about her that you can use to cross reference and find the name she actually used - fine. There are two more things I remembered that might be useful; firstly that she's a little shorter than me, so probably 5'6" or 5'7", and secondly that I'm pretty sure she entered the marathon in 265 as well as 268. What isn't fine is the amount of time this is taking - we're not exactly getting any closer to finding Miranda, and I need all the data I can get. If you don't care about finding the information from the marathon, just tell me and I'll do it myself.

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The Path of Least Time

Oxxypro

Tuesday, May 9 2006, 04:30 PM

In a city of millions, it's a wonder that the global search didn't display more results for people saying 'Miranda' - or something that sounds like Miranda - even after some initial filtering. However, there were enough to be dealing with... I guess phonetic search can only do so much.

A couple of people emailed in and between them found two results that are interesting. The first was at about 10:40am yesterday, and the second occurred an hour later at 11:47am. Both seem to be people calling after Miranda and mentioning her hair - which, according to Violet, she dyed red. I think it makes sense - Miranda's obviously not using her 'real' name when talking to other people, but all the people who've seen her before at the library and know her name are obviously going to use it.

Looking at the locations of those two audio clips, she seems to be travelling west, out of the city. Yes, I'm a scientist and I know how ridiculous it is to make a conclusion based on two data points, but a few other things are worth mentioning here. Firstly, Miranda might know well enough to avoid public transport, but she won't know I'm doing this global search. Secondly, she needs to get out of the city, and with her boat diversion over the weekend, it wouldn't surprise me to see her heading in the opposite direction.

Thirdly, and most importantly, there's one town, north of the river and directly west of Perplex City (you can see it on the map, actually) called Drowsington. There's something she really needs there - Oxxypro.

It appears that Miranda entered the marathon as 'Jean Morgan' in 268 and in 265 - 'Jean' is the only person running in the marathon who matches all the things we know about Miranda (thanks for speeding up the search, everyone). The marathon website doesn't reveal a lot about 'Jean' apart from the fact that she had special dispensation to take a drug called Oxxypro.

Oxxypro is a quite powerful treatment for a condition that's similar to asthma. It's basically a respiratory disease, and while its root cause is not identical to asthma, its symptoms are. Oxxypro does a bunch of things like release antihistamines and relax the airway muscles, but the reason why it's specifically mentioned on the marathon website is because it increases oxygen uptake from the blood. This is obviously something that runners would be interested in, and so in order to not be disqualified after using it, you have to have special dispensation from a doctor.

Then there's the small matter of the stash of Oxxypro she had in the care package Violet picked up from Auger Park. When I saw Oxxypro mentioned in an email, I had an inkling that I'd seen it before somewhere. Looking at the first aid kit in her care package revealed the Oxxypro pills, which were identical to the pills I saw her take regularly when we were going out. She told me the pills were for Barrow-Feld...

[Continued »](#)

Oxypro is difficult to synthesise and tough to get hold of. Outside of Perplex City, it's only available in a few places. The one place nearby that Miranda could get more from is Drowsington, and by now, she'll need more; you normally need to take it every week or so, or more often if you're doing a lot of physical activity. Given that she's probably travelling everywhere on foot, and that I've got her supply, I'd say she needs more pills pretty soon.

I've just booked a ticket to Drowsington and a car should be here to take me to Grand Frederik's shortly. It shouldn't take too long to get there.

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Drowsington

Tuesday, May 9 2006, 06:19 PM

I just arrived in Drowsington, whose name happens to be a pretty accurate description of its nature. The view here is only slightly more interesting than the fields I saw out of the train window.

My first task was to check out the pharmacy. I'd already called them as soon as I'd made the Oxypro discovery, but they informed me that they were closed on Tuesdays and they hadn't had seen my 'missing girlfriend' on Monday. I'm assuming that this means she'll be making her move some time tomorrow, so I'll be watching the pharmacy closely starting from the morning.

There's one interesting thing about Drowsington - the ferry service. If you want to cross the River Mazy, it's easy enough - you just hop on a train or subway or car, and you'll go through a bridge or a tunnel. There are ferry services in Perplex City as well, but they're all registered with the public transport system, following some problems with pollution and accidents. In other words, if you want to cross the river, and you don't want to use public transport - well, you can't.

Drowsington, inconveniently enough, not only has a pharmacy that supplies Oxypro, but also a antiquated 'tourist' ferry service that is not registered with the public transport system, or indeed the Missing Persons service. I've already informed them about Miranda, but I highly doubt they'll be of any use tracking her down. If Miranda can get over the river with a supply of Oxypro, she could easily disappear in the plains to the south.

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The Path of Least Time

Stakeout

Wednesday, May 10 2006, 09:50 AM

I'm still not sleeping. When I was in bed in the boarding house, I started drifting off and thought I felt an arm across my chest. Then I opened my eyes and, of course, nobody was there. That woke me up pretty sharply.

I spent the evening putting together a map of Drowsington, so you can get a feel for the terrain. It didn't take long - it's not a big place. The red area to the west is the site of the Newdigate Ruins, which are covered by surveillance cameras. If Miranda comes through there, we'll see her - but we can be pretty sure she's not that stupid.

Violet gave me a call and volunteered to come and help out today. I think she feels a little guilty about letting Miranda get away the other day, even though there was no way she could have caught her. Miranda is quick and, evidently, well trained too. Violet got the train out here first thing today, which I know was tough for her as she's really not a morning person. At least if there are two of us we'll have a better chance of cornering Miranda.

So while I found myself a good vantage point across from the pharmacy this morning, Violet has been covering the ferry. The pharmacy opened at 8.30, and there's no sign yet. Maybe we've missed her. Maybe she isn't in Drowsington at all. Or maybe she'll arrive in the next minute.

I'll keep you informed.

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The Getaway

Wednesday, May 10 2006, 01:54 PM

Miranda arrived at the pharmacy 10 minutes ago. I saw her cross the street twice, sizing up the area. I kept myself hidden on the upper floor of a store across the junction from her, and as soon as she went inside, I headed downstairs as fast as I could.

She was at the pharmacist's counter when I caught up with her. As soon as I opened the door, she glanced back and saw me. She played along for a moment, but I know she saw me. Because as soon as I got within arm's reach of her, she span past the next woman in the queue and put a blade to her throat. It was a short, makeshift knife, but it was sharp enough to do some damage. I imagine Miranda knows how to get the best out of it.

This poor lady was too scared to even scream. Miranda dragged her backwards and around the shelves, telling me to keep back. I couldn't say anything beyond, "Miranda..." and then I realised that it isn't even her name. I'd had a whole speech prepared for the moment I saw her again, but I couldn't speak. This red haired girl with this snarl on her face... it wasn't Miranda.

Then she was through the door and gone. She dropped the lady on the pavement outside, her headscarf skewed across her face.

I tried to limp after her, but she was sprinting south. Useless. This stick. Me.

I just called Violet to warn her.

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The Path of Least Time

Calm

Thursday, May 11 2006, 01:32 PM

Violet returned to Perplex City today. We had a disagreement about what to do next, and it was clear that she wasn't interested in catching Miranda. It's a shame - she was very useful yesterday, stopping Miranda from getting on the ferry.

Right now, the only place Miranda could realistically be heading to is Stone Mills, the next town west. Luckily, it's a fair distance away and I was able to book a direct train there. When I arrived at the station in Drowsington this morning for my train, the staff constantly fussed over me, trying to carry my bags, offering me a wheelchair, as if I couldn't do anything myself. After I lost my patience and snapped at one of the younger porters, she just looked at me steadily and told me she was only trying to help.

I looked down at the floor for a second, and then apologised, handing over my bags. They also arranged for me to have a few seats to myself, although I wonder whether that was just for my benefit or to prevent me from snapping at the other passengers as well. I propped up my leg on the opposite seat, and looked blankly out of the window. Violet must have been here just a few hours ago.

When the train was underway, I took out Miranda's first aid kit and had a look through. Everything was the same as it was before - there were no startling new insights inside, just a bunch of random bandages, pills and creams. Out of boredom, I inspected some of the creams. Most of them were generics, like antiseptics and burn treatments. A couple of them simply had serial numbers on them. I looked them up with my key, and discovered that one of them was an experimental tissue treatment; clearly something Miranda would use if she'd had some sort of running accident.

I limped down to the bathroom and applied the cream around my ankle, poking the new wounds gingerly. They seemed to be healing fine, but nowhere near fast enough; I still can't much weight on it either. I can't describe how frustrating it is to be stuck relying on a walking stick. But it's obvious that I'll get absolutely nowhere if I don't let it rest and try to act smarter. I finished up, putting away the cream and replacing the brace, and walked back to my seat, feeling slightly happier.

"That was a risky move you pulled back there at the pharmacy," I tell Miranda.

I spend a lot of time talking to Miranda when I'm on my own. Not the person with red hair, but the girl I used to know. She's become a concept, an ideal, in my mind, someone who has a goal that I can't understand but desperately want to. She speaks back to me enigmatically, only answering in my own voice.

"I knew you were going to be watching, so I had to do something drastic," she replies.

[Continued »](#)

"Like threatening someone's life?"

"You forced me into it. You're the person following me."

I don't have an answer for that.

"Were you after the Granier diary? Why did you have to kill Cymbalisky?"

"You wouldn't understand. Let me ask you a question, Kurt. Why are you still following me?"

I ignore her, resting my hand on her first aid kit, and look at the empty landscape flow past.

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The Path of Least Time

Stone Mills

Friday, May 12 2006, 12:01 PM

There is one building in Stone Mills around which all others huddle for warmth and security. It's not a civic building or a skyscraper or a monument - it's a mall. Apparently if you live this far from a big city, the natural human instinct is to gather together in a huge, artificial shopping centre and buy stuff they don't need. I'd be depressed about visiting, apart from the fact that mall towns, and of course the malls themselves, tend to have a lot of surveillance cameras.

I'm going to be doing something rather clever with the cameras here in Stone Mills. They aren't as capable as the cameras in Perplex City, and they aren't advanced enough for me to do proper face or audio recognition of everyone in the town, but they're still good enough to pick out and track individuals in a crowd.

Imagine you had a bird's eye view of a crowded street (which cameras do). You can't see their faces, but it's still possible to learn a lot about people in the crowd. You might see one person walk urgently down the road and decide that he's a healthy businessmen. You might see other smaller people walk around in groups a little slower, and infer that they're schoolchildren. The group of people who walk around slowly and erratically, pausing occasionally? Maybe tourists.

I've taken an existing algorithm that examines individual's walking patterns and tweaked it to look for someone who is like Miranda. In other words, someone who is confident and quick, but isn't completely familiar with the town layout and avoids public transportation areas. That's quite a general description in a town of thousands, but combining them with some of her actual and possible physical characteristics (height, build, hair colour, skin colour, etc) should narrow things down. Since this is a smaller area than Perplex City, I can run a 'local global search' very frequently.

The search has been running for a few hours now, although I would be very surprised if Miranda could get here at any time before late morning - there's a limit to how fast she can run, and for how long. You can view the results as they come in. The algorithm assigns probabilities to results based on how closely they match my 'Miranda parameters', so it'll be possible to evaluate 'sightings' and, if all goes well, determine her location and path.

When I arrived at Stone Mills yesterday evening, I didn't feel like shopping around for hotels, so I ended up staying in the one attached to the mall. It's not exactly the most cheerful of places, but it's made it easier for me to tap into the mall's video feeds. Working from here also gives me the opportunity to do exercises to keep myself in shape. My ankle's improved dramatically since yesterday, and while I don't want to risk things, I think I might be able to stop using the walking stick tomorrow. Then things will change.

"What are you going to try today, Miranda?" I ask silently, while monitoring the search.

"Something you can't predict," she replies.

"You can't predict everything, either. You probably don't even believe I could have come this far."

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The Path of Least Time

Over the Bridge

Friday, May 12 2006, 05:18 PM

The closest I got to seeing Miranda today was a blip on a screen.

The problem with pattern matching with algorithms is that it's all about probabilities. You can never be sure if someone really is the person you're looking for. The 'local global search' I set up this morning found a huge number of possible matches for Miranda in Stone Mills, although most of them were very low probability; you'll have noticed that I set the system to only display matches scoring more than 50%.

Even then, there were a few matches. One of them appeared in the east of the town at about 11:30am and then slowly wound its way through the streets heading west. The person was moving so slowly and openly that I was sure she must have been a shopper, despite the high probability of a match. Another match also appeared at 11:30am at the station in the northwest of town, and was slowly working their way west. I wasn't particularly worried about this match either, because the person appeared to have come out from the station, in which case they would've been picked up by the surveillance cameras if they were indeed Miranda.

Still, I couldn't leave this to chance - I had to check for myself. My leg had healed well enough for me to walk on, albeit carefully, so I left the walking stick in my hotel room and headed for the lift. I don't know whether this is the case for mall towns on Earth, but essentially the entirety of Stone Mills - not just the mall - is covered with moving walkways (we call them slidewalks) and escalators. They have various bands of walkways that move at different speeds, and while it's very fun travelling on them for the first day or so, they get intensely annoying when you realise they mostly take you places that you don't want to go to.

I started cruising the slidewalks at about 2:30pm when I was convinced, with the help of your emails, that there appeared to be at least two possible Mirandas, both of whom were heading for the mall. If they crossed paths, it would be very confusing to follow them both. To make matters worse, there was some sort of town-wide sale going on, sponsored by the chamber of commerce, so there were even more people out than usual. For about half an hour, I limped along until I intercepted the woman who came from the station. I only saw her for a second as we sped past each other on the slidewalks, but it was enough to tell me she definitely wasn't Miranda - this woman was pregnant.

My next target was the woman who'd appeared on the eastern edge of the city. By now, she was somewhere north of the mall, possibly heading towards the bridge. I spent a fruitless hour going back and forth on the slidewalks, gathering some odd looks from the shop assistants nearby and making myself dizzy. It was at 3:31pm when a high probability blip appeared further north that I realised she'd changed direction and was dangerously close to the station. I immediately hopped onto the high speed slidewalk and went to intercept her, barging past people in front of me.

Fifteen minutes later, I was there, and the blip was right outside the station. I managed a broken jog and caught up with the red-headed girl who was walking briskly towards the station. Just as I reached the doors, I grabbed her on the shoulder and spun her around. It

[Continued »](#)

wasn't Miranda. She said something sharp, I don't remember what, then continued into the station. My key beeped again, notifying me of a new match. Someone had been sighted - with a 96.4% probability of being Miranda - south of the mall, minutes from the bridge. I stood there, with a feeling of utter fear and realisation. I'd been following a doppelganger for over an hour while Miranda had been hiding south of the city and sprinted towards the bridge.

I took a high speed slidewalk to the bridge, but five minutes later another beep told me what I knew had happened - she was on the bridge, heading south over the river, out of Stone Mills and out of my reach.

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The Path of Least Time

"Who are you?"

Saturday, May 13 2006, 11:45 AM

"I'm Miranda, of course. Don't you remember me?"

In theory, Miranda could be anywhere south of the Mazy River now. In practice, she needs more Oxypro. When she was at the pharmacist in Drowsington, she was posing as a regular customer and had a fake prescription for a month's worth of supplies. However, my intervention wasn't quite as useless as I had thought - Miranda only managed to get away with a few pills, according to the pharmacy stocks.

She'll be going to Ryefield. It's the nearest town south of the river that has an Oxypro pharmacist. I know it's possible that she might try pharmacists further afield, but those are much more distant and she's been running very hard lately. There's another reason Ryefield is likely as well.

"You must have run hundreds of miles by now."

"Yes, isn't it fun? You live in a different world, in those air-conditioned capsules sliding between stations. It's a shame you aren't running with me."

"I will be, sooner than you think."

With the amount of travelling I've been doing via rail, I've become very familiar with its timetables and systems. One thing that caught my eye was a firmware update that's happening on Tuesday, which is being run on all trains and security systems. I almost missed the notice; Perplex City Rail aren't making a song and dance about it because it won't affect passengers at all. What the firmware update will mean for Miranda and I is that it'll effectively knock out the Missing Persons system - at least on the trains - for most of Tuesday. In other words, Miranda will be able to get on any train and travel for hundreds of miles in any direction without me knowing.

Miranda's smart. I have to assume she knows about the firmware update, and she'll make full use of it. And that's why she'll be at Ryefield. The town doesn't just have a pharmacist, it's also a veritable transport hub. There are five different lines leaving Ryefield that go to any number of destinations over thousands of square miles. If she can get a train from Ryefield, then I wouldn't be surprised if she could get to her destination within hours. She's sure to reach Ryefield in time for Tuesday, but I'll be there in only a few hours.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going home."

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The Path of Least Time

A Charged Silence

Monday, May 15 2006, 10:02 AM

I reached Ryefield on Saturday afternoon and before heading to my hotel, I immediately talked to the station staff. Just because the Missing Person's system is offline on Tuesday doesn't mean that everyone suddenly becomes incapable of recognising a face. Borrowing an idea that someone emailed me, I had the staff display images of Miranda on the walls and banners around the station. It's not something that I can do for the entire town - I'd never be able to get permission in time - but it might be enough to slow her down, or even stop her, when she tries to get to the station.

My next stop was the pharmacist. The owner seemed dubious about my claims that Miranda was dangerous and should be refused Oxxypro, but in the end he agreed to be particularly careful about handing out the medicine. That should be enough to stop her from getting hold of it - any serious inspection of her prescription would show that it's fake.

Before heading to the hotel, I dropped in to visit a doctor I'd made an appointment with while on the train. She took a careful look at my leg, giving it a quick MRI scan, and pronounced herself astonished at the speed of my recovery. After a little thought, I told her about the 'mystery cream' from Miranda, which many of you have been concerned about. Thankfully she said she'd heard of it before (it was designed specifically for athletes) and there didn't seem to be anything wrong with it. She gave me the usual warnings of not putting too much strain on the ankle, but I gathered that I would be able to run on it without much trouble in only a couple of days.

Finally, I went to my hotel, and lay down. There was nothing else I could prepare for. I looked up at the ceiling, and wondered what I was doing so far from home, looking for someone who tried to kill me. The room was quiet, but with a charged silence.

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The Path of Least Time

Horizon

Tuesday, May 16 2006, 02:15 PM

I've been watching the main entrance of Ryefield Station since this morning from various places in the square that surrounds it. People arrive in waves of waves, as trains come and go and the patterns of the work day exert their influence on travel. Even in a comparatively advanced society as ours, where video conferencing is trivially easy, people still insist on meeting face to face. I recall seeing some research that claimed, throughout history, humans have always spent 5% of their time travelling. That's 1.2 hours, every single day. It doesn't matter whether it's by foot or car or rail, it's always 1.2 hours. I always distrust statistics like that, but it has a certain simplicity to it. You can imagine that as people are able to travel faster and faster, the horizon of their everyday world recedes.

The station in Ryefield is far too large for me to keep an eye on all the entrances, so when the Missing Persons system goes offline later this afternoon, I'm going to have to pick a single one to watch. Judging from the flow of people in and out, I suspect she'll probably just try walking in through the main entrance and try and hide amongst the crowd. Realistically, I don't think I'll be the one to spot her - chances are that one of the station staff or the owner of the pharmacy will see her first. I checked in with him again today, and he seemed a bit happier about withholding Oxypro after he admitted he did a search for my name and discovered where I worked. I just have to make sure I can get on the scene quickly. However, I'm confident that she's going to have a very hard time exploiting the outage of the Missing Persons system today.

Both Miranda and I have been travelling for far, far more than 1.2 hours a day for the last week. She's been close to the ground, feeling every mile in her legs, while I've been flitting between stations, appearing in one town after another. We've both burst past our safe horizons.

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The Path of Least Time

Arrested

Tuesday, May 16 2006, 04:34 PM

I can't believe it. I've just been arrested - I'm writing this from the back of a van that's en route to the Ryefield police station. Apparently someone just reported me for 'loitering with malicious intent' outside the railway station. The police won't tell me who made the report, but it's not hard to guess.

Pretty much simultaneous with my being arrested, I received the first notifications that the Missing Persons system was going offline. It hasn't completely shut down yet - the rail firmware upgrade is staggered, and some systems are still working, including Ryefield. However, it's only a matter of time before the cameras go dark at the station here, and I won't be able to stop her if she gets on a train. Once again, I need your help.

I need you to stop her from getting on a train. The rail system here in Perplex City is very intelligent - it reroutes trains depending on their occupancy. If all the seats on a train are booked up, it won't stop at a station. If you can book up all of the seats on all of the trains departing from Ryefield, Miranda won't be able to get on any trains because they simply won't stop for her. In order to give me enough time to get out of here and get back to the station, you'll need to keep this up for a couple of hours.

That's a lot of trains, and even more seats. But I know I can count on you. I have to go now, we've just arrived at the police station. I'll be in touch when I can. Get to the Perplex City Rail website - please.

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The Path of Least Time

Stationary

Tuesday, May 16 2006, 05:35 PM

I'm heading down to the station now - the police just let me go. Sounds like you booked up all the trains leaving Ryefield, despite a lot of obstacles, so with luck, she should still be stuck in the station.

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The Path of Least Time

Barriers

Tuesday, May 16 2006, 07:58 PM

I have about ten minutes before my car leaves, and I still have to sort out supplies and a sleeping bag, so I'll have to be brief. Here's what happened:

I managed to get to Ryefield station at about 6pm and literally sprinted into the concourse. The place was full of bewildered and annoyed commuters who weren't able to book any tickets, and thus be allowed onto the platforms to board any trains. I barged my way through them and reached the ticket barriers for the platform. Miranda was standing there, looking towards the trains. She seemed tense, and was carrying a heavily scuffed backpack.

"Miranda," I called out.

She turned around, and looked at me with a tired smile, shaking her head in disbelief. I could hear a train approaching behind her.

"Kurt. Do you think all of this is going to stop me?" she challenged.

I took a step forward, conscious of the station staff approaching behind me. "Yes, I do. There's nowhere to go any more."

She looked away from me, quickly scanning the concourse, then drew herself up. The train for Vastage pulled up on the platform. I started walking towards her cautiously.

"Miranda," I said, "don't make a mistake."

"It's too late for that now," she replied. She spun around, threw her backpack over the tickets barriers and then vaulted herself over them. I rushed forward while the station staff attempted to open them manually. She picked up her backpack and as the train started moving off, grabbed hold of an emergency door latch, twisting it desperately. The door swung open abruptly, and she fell inside. By this time, the ticket barriers had been opened and I was running towards her.

"Don't follow me, Kurt!" shouted Miranda, closing the door. "You know what I can do to your family - to your friends - to Violet!"

The train began accelerating, and I couldn't keep pace any longer. I stopped, near the edge of the platform, as the train powered away.

[Continued »](#)

That was over two hours ago.

I had the station staff call the train and put a lookout for Miranda. An initial sweep of the train didn't reveal her, but about fifteen minutes ago, a call came through with the news that she'd smashed a window halfway to Vastage, and jumped out while the train was still in motion. According to my maps, there's nothing even close to that point for a hundred miles. Miranda is going somewhere off the trail.

I still need to buy supplies and equipment so I can follow her on foot, and then there's the time it'll take my car to reach where she left the train. Once I get there, she'll be hours ahead of me. But this time - thanks to your help - I know exactly where she is, and I know that she's going to have to travel at least a hundred miles off road to get wherever she's heading. She'll be on foot, she's tired, and she's running out of Oxypro. She won't be able to outrun me any longer.

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The Path of Least Time

Overcast

Wednesday, May 17 2006, 11:16 AM

I arrived at the spot where Miranda jumped off the train late last night. It was an unremarkable place, on the side of a hill; probably the only reason she chose it is because the train would've had to slow down in order to deal with the slope. She hadn't bothered concealing her tracks very well, since there were clear signs of her presence, both from the trampled grass and from other, more subtle, signs I could see using more sophisticated sensors. Miranda clearly wasn't expecting anyone to follow her.

Once I'd walked around the area a little to get my bearings and figure out roughly which way she'd headed - due west - I set up camp. There wasn't any point trying to follow her at night, I'd only tire myself out and end up losing her trail. In any case, I doubted that she'd be travelling by night either.

I don't go camping very often. It's never really appealed to me. Of course, this meant that when I was in Ryefield, I simply walked into a shop and asked for the simplest and lightest equipment. The attendants exchanged a couple of knowing glances ('city boy going camping, eh?') and started picking things off the shelves. Camp consisted of a lightweight tent that constructed itself in a few seconds, a small sleeping bag and couple of movement sensors that I tied into an alarm, in case Miranda tried to surprise me.

Before I went to sleep, I stood outside the tent and tried to look at the stars, but only a few shone through the gauzy clouds covering the sky. I shivered, disappointed, and stepped inside.

Despite setting up camp close to the railway tracks, I wasn't woken once during the night.

Just before my morning alarm was supposed to go off, I opened my eyes, and told the tent to make itself transparent. Diffuse white and grey light greeted me through its walls, signs of a dull, overcast day. Breakfast was one of the MREs I'd grabbed at random from the camping store (pasta with cream and mushroom sauce, apparently), and as I ate it outside, the tent packed itself away, its struts and supports busily telescoping and folding into smaller and smaller sections. It chimed helpfully when it had finished, and I began jogging after I'd slung it into my backpack.

Following Miranda's trail is literally as easy as following a line. My key does most of the work, scanning the surroundings and working out her most probable route, and then displays its deliberations on my contact lenses as a red band over the ground. She seems to know exactly where she's going - the line is as straight as she can make it.

No-one lives out here. I don't know why, but even the land itself seems worn out. The forests are sparse and empty, and the wildlife is scattered. There's nothing for me to do here except follow the line, and think.

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The Path of Least Time

Counterpoint

Thursday, May 18 2006, 03:28 PM

Applying to study at the Academy involves an extensive and sometimes invasive series of questionnaires, tests, exams, personality evaluations and interviews. Taking part in the process, let alone succeeding, is seen as a real achievement; like qualifying for special forces, it's gruelling and not particularly fun.

There is one interesting component of the process though, which at least I found fun. That's the games stage. Some professors like to pit candidates against each other in strategy games like Pyramid and chess, echoing gladiatorial combat. When I applied to my department, Counterpoint was the game in vogue.

Counterpoint is a relatively new strategy game; people only started playing it seriously a few decades ago. Technically it was created long before that, but it was too difficult to play because you had to keep track of too many things - however, computers made the whole process much easier and less tedious.

The soul of Counterpoint consists of insight and prediction. When you play Counterpoint, you can't see the other player; they might be behind a divider, or in another room. Each of you has your own board that is a window onto a landscape that you share. When you place or move a piece on the board, it affects its surroundings, creating changes that ripple outwards. Your opponent can't see your pieces, but they will be able to see the changes it caused to the landscape. In turn, the landscape affects your own pieces, strengthening some, weakening others. It determines where you can move and what you can do.

You can imagine that playing Counterpoint can be a frustrating experience for beginners, who would have to constantly try and predict the movements of an enemy who they can't see and can't even directly attack. Indeed, you can't just 'take' an opponent's piece - you have to alter the landscape to do that. But when I played Counterpoint for the first time, I loved it. Visualising the positions of my opponent, setting traps and spinning out waves of changes that reinforced themselves across the landscape simply made sense. There are many different metaphors that can be used to describe Counterpoint, and the one I chose was of physics and light. It worked well for me.

During my first few years of playing Counterpoint at school, I concentrated on eliminating my opponents as quickly and decisively as possible. I would translate the concepts I learned in physics to the board, creating interference patterns in the landscape that would protect my own pieces but confuse or destroy my opponent's. It eventually got to the point where people were more interested in watching my games than playing me, just to see what new cataclysmic trick I would come up with next.

Co-operation is a more subtle face of Counterpoint, one that I had dismissed as being unnecessary in order to win, never mind being completely impossible in a game without communication. However, when I started playing outside school, I had to play using different rules. Competitive Counterpoint awards points to the winner based not only on your own play, but also on your opponents play and on the end state of the board. If you finish a game

[Continued »](#)

with the landscape in ruins and your opponent's pieces weak and scattered, the multiplier for your own score will be low; however, if the landscape is highly structured and, for want of a better word, elegant, and your opponent's play was good, then the multiplier will be high. Unsurprisingly, I had tended to use the former strategy.

It was about this time, in my late teens, that I started seriously considering to apply to the Academy. I discovered that I'd probably have to play Counterpoint as part of the application, so I worked harder to improve my play. I soon stumbled upon a way that would allow me to increase my score without changing the way I played too much. In essence, I would deliberately handicap my own play in order to let my opponent build up their strength and their landscape, and when it had risen high enough, I would attempt to cripple them with as little collateral damage as possible.

This was a very crude way of winning, one that would never work in the long term as my opponents heard about the strategy, but it served my purposes. During the games at the Academy, I used it to beat every single one of the other candidates, cruelly opening up the landscape they'd grown, right under their feet. I felt very pleased with myself with this, and I was sure that I would be offered the scholarship we were all competing for.

Sure enough, the professor called me the next day and asked me to come in to his office. He told me that by all accounts, I would be an excellent student, maybe even a brilliant one, but he was worried about my character. The way he would decide whether I was suitable, he explained, was through a game of Counterpoint. If I could reach a particular score, then I would be admitted to the Academy. The score he named was beyond any that I had ever seen in competitive play.

I sat down in front of my board, feeling panicked at the completely unreasonable score that he expected, and waited. He placed his first piece near the centre, a move that develops the landscape quickly but is incredibly vulnerable. I hesitated, wondering whether this was a trap, and began building a base a little further away. Over the course of the opening, we developed two cities, cautiously watching each other from our strongholds.

Soon enough, he attacked. I hadn't noticed his build-up, thinking that the strange swirls and wells appearing and disappearing outside his city were merely random. Instead, they congealed into a broad wall and two fissures, implacably moving towards me. I would have to redeploy my pieces and try and dislodge his city if I wanted any chance of salvaging this game. Alternatively, I could try to send out my own wave to neutralise his, but it would waste much of the the work I'd done so far. I stared at the board, completely frustrated and almost crying. There was nothing I could do that would allow me to win the game any more - the most I could hope for was a decent loss.

I stood up, ready to resign from the game and go home, when I realised that I had misheard his remark earlier. The goal here wasn't for me to reach a high score; it was simply for the game to end with a high score, regardless of who won. With this realisation, I saw another possibility; I could allow the wave to pass through my pieces, but reflect it back so that in the process, the landscape would become more developed. His city refracted it, and I began moving my pieces out around his, in order to feed off the newly strengthened landscape. My gesture was clearly recognised when he dissolved his city and began creating - something. I couldn't understand what it was, it wasn't threatening but it seemed completely chaotic.

Continued »

For a few turns, I stood at a distance, trying to make sense of the maelstrom that was developing in the ruins of his city. Tentatively, I moved a small group of pieces inside, where they were swallowed up and buffeted about, but not destroyed. Intriguingly, they seemed to be stabilising the chaos that was happening. I resolved to move all of my pieces inside.

The maelstrom shifted, crystallising into something new and sending out an enormous wave of change across the landscape. The landscape was completely unrecognisable now - it was more charged and developed than any I'd seen before, but it wasn't enough to reach the score required before the game ended. What was needed was more movement, more spin. I shifted my pieces around counter-clockwise, but it didn't impart enough momentum. The next turn, however, the professor followed on, setting events moving.

I replied, shifting again and again until the storm at the centre of the board appeared as a intricate, fractal mass, transforming the land. We fell into a rhythm - a dance - each taking our cues from the other, guiding and following a dozen different times. I could hardly tell any more what was my work and what was his, but across the board, my pieces waltzed around their invisible partners, whirling their way through the storm. I found myself laughing in delight as the game became something I'd never seen before.

And then it was over. The pieces had been run far beyond their normal lifetimes, and the landscape froze. I drew back from the board, unfocusing. I looked at it from all sides, seeing the spires and chasms that circled the centre in fractal patterns. I couldn't tell what the score was, but I knew it was enough. As I sat back in my chair, exhausted, the professor entered, and told me I had been accepted, before quickly walking away. I reached out to touch the board, wanting it to continue.

I've thought a lot about Counterpoint over the last couple of days while I've been tracking Miranda; I wrote this whenever I haven't been running. I've been trying to understand what is going on in this conflict between us, and as I run closer to her, as we gradually near the marshes and the mountains beyond them, I wonder what kind of dance we are both in.

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The Path of Least Time

Silburn-Griggs

Friday, May 19 2006, 09:58 AM

I rarely remember my dreams unless they're interrupted, but I recall listening to an orchestra near the ocean when I received a message from Violet in the middle of the night. While Miranda was at the library, she'd been investigating the local history of some mines near here, called Silburn-Griggs. As far as I can tell, she's heading directly towards them, and at the rate we've been moving, we'll get there in a little over two days time. We're entering some tricky marshland which I'm pretty sure I'm handling better than she is, despite the rain that's been sweeping here. I doubt she'll get to Silburn-Griggs more than an hour or two before me.

Miranda can't run much further than that without more Oxypro and there isn't anything else near here, so I have a feeling that, one way or another, everything will be settled in the mines. I may need your help to see things through on Sunday afternoon, so I'm going to ask for volunteers who'll be able to assist me in any way they can while I'm in the mines. Email me at [kurt@\[NOSPAM\]thepathofleasttime.com](mailto:kurt@[NOSPAM]thepathofleasttime.com).

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The Path of Least Time

Unknown

Saturday, May 20 2006, 03:32 PM

Miranda and I have both kept our pace over the last day and we're nearing the end of the marshes now. I can see the mountains clearly to the west, and I'm hoping to reach their foothills tonight.

I know I've asked a lot of all of you, so I was immensely grateful when I received so many messages from people wanting to help me when I reach Silburn-Griggs tomorrow. I have no idea what to expect in the mines. That's why I asked for your help; Violet told me that Silburn-Griggs is a... strange place, where the miners littered the tunnels with puzzles in their boredom. What's more, the mines have been abandoned for decades, and it's possible that Miranda - and the Third Power - have made changes to the place. I know that I'll be able to figure out most of the puzzles and problems that come up, but most isn't enough.

So, I'm going to be opening up a communications link while I'm down in the mine. Because of the interference and the huge amount of solid rock in the way, the link will be low bandwidth - text and photos only - but it'll be enough for you to give me help and advice, in real time, when I'm down there. I'm going to be emailing some of you to help filter all the advice as it comes in - I can only listen to a few people at a time, after all.

Like I said, I think I'll get to the mountains on Sunday afternoon; I'll let you know by text message when I'm getting closer. For now, I need to keep running.

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The Path of Least Time

Everything closing in

Sunday, May 21 2006, 02:48 PM

I spotted Miranda climbing up the slope towards Silburn-Griggs about five minutes ago. She's only a tiny figure, barely visible without binoculars, but it's a good indication of how close I am to her. From the way she was moving, she seemed exhausted, clearly suffering from Oxypro deprivation. She won't be going any further than the mines, that's for certain. As for me, I'm feeling fine, but on edge. I estimate that I'll be at the main entrance of the mines at around 4pm, less than an hour after her.

Here's how you can help me when I'm in Silburn-Griggs. I'm going to set up a real-time text system here on my website, a bit like the chat systems you use on Earth, where I'll be able to tell people what's going on and ask for help. My key is able to transcribe my voice, so I won't have to be standing around typing - I'll just be able to 'talk'. As I mentioned yesterday, the mines will seriously reduce my bandwidth, but I should occasionally be able to send you images and audio in addition to text.

There will be two main 'rooms' on the text system. One will be 'open' and you'll all be able to talk and make suggestions in it. Because of the volume of the discussion in there, I won't be able to watch the open room.

The second room will be moderated. I've chosen eight volunteers who will take the best and most relevant suggestions from the open room and copy them into the moderated room. I will be watching the moderated room and that's also where I'll be 'speaking'. You'll all be able to watch the moderated room, but not type in there.

The text system will go live at around 4pm, just before I enter the mines.

I know this may seem exciting for you - and I suppose it is - but it's serious for me. I'm very nervous about what I might encounter in the mines, and so I'll need you all to stay focused and be helpful. I'm counting on you.

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The Path of Least Time

Entering Silburn-Griggs

Sunday, May 21 2006, 04:01 PM

I'm going to reach the main entrance of Silburn-Griggs in five minutes. I've set up the text system, you can visit it now. While I'm in the mines, I'll be doing all my talking in the text system, not here, so you should join it if you want to help.

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The Path of Least Time

Cirrus

Friday, June 9 2006, 12:21 PM

I've always had a strong sense of identity. I know who I am, I know what I'm skilled at, I know what I stand for and believe. It's easy to maintain an identity and beliefs when they're not tested.

When I entered Silburn-Griggs, I was hoping to find Miranda and reason with her. Even though she was a murderer, I knew she wasn't insane - I could tell that much, at least, from having lived with her. She must have had a reason for what she'd done, and if I could discover that, I could try and convince her otherwise.

I recorded the entire conversation I had with Miranda in the mines. Since then, I've been going over one part of it again and again, trying to understand:

Me: So explain it. What's so important you'll kill for it? The Granier diary?

Miranda: We had to get it back. It was about the experiments... the early Cube tests. We couldn't let Violet tell Earth what Granier discovered - the kind of damage the Cube could do.

Me: Is that why you tried to steal it? To use it as a weapon?

Miranda: We're just trying to take back what's rightfully ours. The Academy have fumbled around with it for centuries... they're children. Look where it is now, thanks to Kiteway. Imagine if someone from Earth finds the Cube and keeps it for themselves. With their record, it could be the end of both worlds.

It sounds coherent, and I'm not surprised that the Third Power believe that the Cube is 'rightfully theirs'. But the rest of it... the Cube as a weapon. I don't know. I suppose we'll find out one day.

I think Miranda had the same idea as me though - I think she wanted to turn me. She could've killed me when I walked in, but she didn't. It was almost as if she was testing me, and I desperately wanted her approval, even with everything that'd happened. I even believed her when she said she didn't mean to hurt me with the bomb in her apartment: "I never tried to hurt you. They wanted me to, but I wouldn't. Your key warned you about the gas, right? And in the pharmacy? I could have taken you out if I'd wanted." But when I finally asked her what her real name was, and said told me 'Caroline'... I realised I could never trust her. She'd lied so many times before, and I'd never even suspected.

Then something happened. We were kissing, and then she started fighting me. I wasn't sure what was going on, until a knife appeared in her hand. I managed to wrestle it away from her, and as we struggled, she stepped back onto it. The look of pain and shock in her eyes still unsettles me. She didn't even seem angry, but simply surprised.

Continued »

After that, I can't remember much. Violet arrived and bundled me into her car, and took me back to my apartment. I was practically catatonic, I simply couldn't believe what had happened. I'd killed Miranda. You can call it self-defence, but that doesn't change the facts. I think Violet was horrified as well, but somehow she hid it.

For almost two weeks, I stayed in my apartment. I didn't feel like doing anything. I'd wake up late, and lie there in bed, not wanting to move or even think. Occasionally someone would call - maybe Violet or someone from the Academy, checking up on me - and I would have to pretend to be getting better. The worst moment was when my parents came down to visit me, and I couldn't tell them what I'd done. I didn't know who I was any more.

One day, I took a walk outside, mainly because I was getting tired of eating delivered food. I'd lost track of time, and it turned out to be the evening. The air was crisp, after a recent rainfall, and there were thin cirrus clouds in the sky, painted into amber near the horizon. That was the first time I remember smiling for a while. I decided to get a coffee and sit outside, and just watch normal people walk by.

When I returned home, I opened up my email to find several hundred new messages, mostly from people asking about the walkthrough that Von set up. There were a few before those that I read carefully, from Carda, Stefan and Nightingale, which reminded me that I didn't have any choice in what happened, and for all that I once cared for Miranda, she started this, and I had to finish it.

Violet had called some sort of 'conclave' that Sunday, with Anna and Scarlett. I hadn't seen either of them for some time, and I was worried about having to explain what had happened with Miranda and in the mines. Thankfully, Violet did most of the talking, leaving me to sit back and listen. She's explained on her own site about what we decided.

I returned to work this week, rather subdued. Everyone was very understanding about my time off, and I laughed when I saw that Anna had asked you to create puzzles in my stead. Thank you. On the face of it, things seem to be returning to normal, but I feel that with Miranda's death - with me killing her - events are going to become more serious. I'm sure we're getting closer to the cause of all of theft and who the Third Power are.

There was one other thing I wanted to mention. I met Caine in the common room this morning, and he confided to me that he was having problems getting into a Hesh party. Apparently his normal connections and strategies weren't working - I didn't ask - and he didn't even know when or where this party was, or how to get in. I suggested he take a look at the Hesh Intranet - there's bound to be information about the party there somewhere. I think he was a little disappointed that I wasn't able to magic up a solution, but if we're to trust him with anything, he has to start figuring things out himself.

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The Path of Least Time

Exterior Monologue

Friday, June 23 2006, 05:38 PM

This is Frye. Please leave a message.

"Hi, this is Kurt McAllister. I'm sure you remember me - or maybe you don't, maybe you make a habit of hunting people down underground and getting your cover blown by Academy members. Anyway, I was calling to get in touch - I need to talk to you about what happened. You know how to contact me. Bye."

This is Frye. Please leave a message.

"Hi, this is Kurt McAllister. I'm not sure if you got my message from the other day, but I really need to get in touch with you about Gillit Road. Call or mail me as soon as you can."

This is Frye. Please leave a message.

"It's Kurt again. I know you're checking these messages - you're a police officer and this is your private line, you have to. So stop messing me around and get in touch, this is ridiculous. I need to know about the tunnels and what you were doing there - I have some information that you might find valuable in exchange as well."

This is Frye. Please leave a message.

"Well, the Academy's on break now, so you're just going to have to put up with more messages from me, I'm afraid. Look Helena, I went to the police department. Yes, in person - I am capable of doing things without a key if I want to. And you know what they told me? They said that you'd been transferred out of the city division, and of course they couldn't tell me where you'd gone. So I went back the next day, asked the same question to a different person, and apparently you'd left the force! What a quick turn of affairs. Now, I understand if you've gone undercover and you can't be seen, but I am telling you, I can offer you information if you'll just help me out. Call me."

This is Frye. Please leave a message.

"What are you doing in Gladstone? I tracked your key there - don't ask me how - and if I'm correct in guessing that you're going even further west, you'll want to talk to me. You probably think that there's no point talking to me, that I don't know anything. Let me tell you something. You have absolutely no idea what you're getting into. Your superiors are keeping you out of the loop on purpose, and the guys you're looking for, they'll always be one step ahead unless you act smarter. I can help you, and you can help me. If you don't contact me, then I'm just going to have to try something different, but you'll have made a serious mistake."

This ID has been deactivated. Please contact directory assistance.

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The Path of Least Time

Subterranean

Thursday, June 29 2006, 03:38 PM

Officially, the Academy is on its summer break. No doubt this conjures up images of young and old academicians emerging fearfully out of their labs and offices into the outside world, soaking up their yearly allowance of vitamin D and gradually becoming members of the human race again. This is actually true for some people who work here - mainly the poor guys who have to do all the teaching - but for most researchers, the real work only gets started in the summer. Freed from having to deal with the pesky inconvenience of students and all that they entail (marking their work, avoiding them in corridors, speaking to them) as well as the innumerable administrative meetings that litter term-time, they can hunker down and get some serious thinking done.

The Cube Retrieval Team, being in Special Projects, operates on a different schedule, which is best described as 'everything is so important, it has to be done yesterday'. So, summer break doesn't really change our lives that much. In fact, with the new data link being set up to connect to San Francisco, we've had to do a lot of preparation on our end, as well as the plans for the activation day itself.

Still, the workload lets me focus and keep my mind off other things, and the good weather is sending a current of optimism through the CRT. People are even beginning to think that we might find the Cube again soon, especially with the number of people on Earth who are getting interested.

I haven't made much progress in our investigations into the Third Power. They're still a serious danger, and I'm sure they'll have been spooked by what happened in the mines. I don't know whether they're aware that I was involved, or to what extent, but on the bright side, no-one's come to kill me just yet. Caine is bumbling away with his 'investigations' in the Crypto department; chances are he's just trying to impress Violet. Both he and Anna are trying to discover the Academy Third Power agent directly, through their own contacts.

I'm trying a different strategy. Back in February, after the Gillit Road debacle, I talked to Helena Frye about what was going on in the 'clean tunnels' there. She told me that they were being used to construct 'something big', and it might be related to the high tech equipment stolen from the Academy. It doesn't take a huge leap of logic to link that to a possible Third Power agent at the Academy, and clearly Helena knew more about the tunnels than she was letting on. The question is whether she wanted to tell me any more.

When I arrived back home yesterday after Von's movie night (some heist movie, inappropriately enough) I was planning to attempt another trace on her apparently deactivated key. I didn't get that far, after I noticed a message on my screen telling me that the 'Fried Demetrian' pizza I'd ordered wasn't available. After I stared at it for a few seconds in incomprehension, I loaded the message into an analysis program and discovered an embedded code inside. It only took me a couple of guesses to figure out the keyword; 'Kennard', the name of the cafe we met in Alchemy Bay.

It was pretty short.

"I can't talk right now, too difficult to get a signal. Currently investigating our mutual friends - think I might have something interesting. We should meet when I get back to the city next week - trust me, Silburn-Griggs is not a fun place to visit."

So much for the summer break.

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The Path of Least Time

A Voice from the Past

Friday, July 7 2006, 03:38 PM

Violet shared with me the information that Caine has gleaned from Crypto. I must admit, I've been impressed by his social engineering skills, as well as your efforts. The files you unearthed are interesting for all kinds of reasons.

What first caught my attention was the hardware. All of this missing tech is high-end, and most of it is for specialist use. I don't know if these are all parts of a single device or if there's some kind of production line being developed, but in any case, I suspect there are more items on their shopping list.

Cross-referencing with the serial numbers Anna was given by Henrik, we can see that the stolen parts were a Reynolds ioniser, Klebold plates, an atomic clock and a high-power conjugate laser. There's also another item (ref 460WDN-4X) we haven't identified yet - no doubt it's profiled somewhere in the Crypto database, so it's only a matter of time before you find that too. Once we get an idea of the parts they've taken, maybe we'll be able to work out what they're building - and what they'll need next.

The other attention-grabbing information was in the audio files. Once again, it seems that you're taking a peculiar interest in my private life. Your interest is justified. Listening to the recordings, it sounds a lot like Karen Moro, who I had lunch with back in July last year. I'm pretty sure I asked her out, rather than the other way round, but thinking back, maybe she was more devious than I'd given her credit for.

Admittedly, it wasn't the most stimulating lunch I've ever had, but I didn't feel like I was being grilled for information. I can't remember talking about hardware much. Then again, I can't remember much of the meal at all. Karen's a really sweet, sharp girl. I never would have suspected that she was under so much pressure. Either she's a good actress or I'm just not a great reader of people. I'm willing to accept either hypothesis.

Knowing what we know now, I think it's worth me having another chat with Karen. We have a lot to catch up on.

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The Path of Least Time

Replay

Thursday, July 13 2006, 10:48 AM

Unlike many of the women whom I've needed information from lately, Karen Moro did not immediately run away, drop off the net, and attempt to kill me. In fact, she sounded pleased when I suggested meeting up for lunch in the Academy Museum.

I arrived a few minutes late and hurried over to her table when I spotted her among the tourists and schoolgroups. She had an amused smile when I sat down.

"What's funny?" I said, looking around.

"When you spotted me, you did a little jog-walk thing," she replied.

"What do you mean?"

"You know when you're crossing the road ahead of a car, and they slow down for you? So you feel guilty and do this little skipping jog to try and cross faster. Of course, it only looks like you're going faster; the amount of time you save is probably a fraction of a second. That's what you did." Karen illustrated this by walking her fingers across the table.

"So what are you saying, that I saved a fraction of a second?"

"Right. And now we'll both live for a fraction of a second longer. On your deathbed, you'll be able to get out at least another word. It could be vital."

This conversation was just getting too weird for me. "Okay, but the problem is that we've spent at least 30 seconds talking about it now. That's an entire sentence you've lost."

"We'd better hurry up then. What was it you wanted to talk about?"

I looked at her closely, trying to figure out how much I could trust her. I'd listened to the audio files you guys found from the Crypto backdoor. Karen had been pretty hard done by - blackmailed into snooping around her own department, in return for some unspecified help for her father. Still, she seemed to have come out of it fine, in the end.

It was a shame that I'd have to upset her all over again about that. Something of a habit for me, I reflected unhappily.

"I want to talk about Kam Syndrome," I said.

"How do you know about that? What's my dad got to do with anything?" she demanded.

"I know that your father suffered from Kam Syndrome. There's only one effective drug for it, and it has a very long waiting list. Too long, for most people. You have to be very, very lucky to get hold of it, and your father wasn't. And yet he's perfectly healthy now. How do you explain that?"

"Spontaneous remission," she said.

I closed my eyes briefly. "Don't be ridiculous. There is no spontaneous remission of Kam Syndrome - it's physiologically impossible once the bone marrow stem cells are compromised. I don't think either of us believes in miracles, so let's just assume your father somehow got the drugs. Considering that he's in prison, he probably had some help."

Karen remained silent, hating me. I'd done my research on Kam Syndrome the day before. It was surprisingly easy to find out the details and who'd received the drugs - I didn't even have to do any hacking. I just called up the hospital and asked.

"In fact, let's just assume that I know you made a deal to spy on your own department in order to get the drug, and that I've heard the audio files you sent to your handler."

Continued »

The crypto department are trained to work under pressure, to find solutions to any problems that they might encounter. I could tell Karen was thinking rapidly, trying to think of a way out

or a way around the problem that I represented.

"You know what? Let's not assume that. For all I know, you're just making this up. You've got no evidence, and no business to be making these accusations."

As she said those words, I took out my key. "I appreciate what you've done for my dad, but ... I've done my bit. That's it. That was the deal. You can go digging around in the tunnels—" Her voice from the audio files played quietly across the table. Karen had a look of resignation on her face.

I stopped the recording. "I have absolutely no interest in telling anyone about this, but I want to know who you were talking to, and everything you know about those missing parts."

"I don't know who I was talking to, and I don't know anything about those missing parts! If you'd listened to those files, you'd know that," she said rapidly. I looked around quickly, hoping that we weren't attracting too much attention.

"You didn't even bother doing a backtrace on your mysterious partner?" I said.

"They contacted me through an anonymous account, and they said that if I tried to find them, the deal would be off. Not everyone's as smart as you are, Kurt."

"Fine," I said in irritation, "but what about those—"

"I don't need to take this. You're in the Cube Retrieval Team, this has nothing to do with you. I don't even know what you're doing, hacking into the Crypto system," she said, shaking her head.

"It has everything to do with me. Some of those parts were found in Bernado Holyoke's bar in the Old Town. He's dead now. So is one of his associates, Monica Grand, and the reporter who was trying to help her, Pietro Salk. You probably haven't heard of those guys before, so maybe you don't care, but I'm sure you've heard of Isaac Cymbalisky, the head librarian. He stumbled across evidence about the Cube and who might have taken it. He's dead now. As for me, I've been arrested trying to follow the trail of those parts, and my girlfriend has been killed. So just because your dad's okay now doesn't mean you can walk away."

I stopped, and breathed deeply. Karen looked startled, as if she didn't know what to say. I sat back and looked around the cafe, trying to calm down. The cafe was set in a large courtyard that had been covered over by a lattice-like glass dome a couple of decades ago; it had an outdoor feel to it, which probably explained why we seemed to be sitting on garden furniture.

"I'm sorry for what happened to you. But I really need your help. Someone is stealing those parts, and they had something to do with the theft of the Cube and all of those murders. I don't know what's more frightening - that they have an agent in the Academy, or that we have absolutely no idea what they're building with those parts."

"Okay," said Karen, putting her hands down on the table. "Let's say I believe you. How am I supposed to help? I didn't have any luck finding out what was happening to those parts, and I was looking for the best part of a year."

"You mentioned tagging," I prompted.

"Right, right. Isotope tagging. I thought about that quite a lot at the time, and there's a reason why that's not a good idea." Karen paused for a few seconds. "Actually, a whole bunch of reasons. But here's the biggest one - you can only tag a few parts, and you have no idea what they're going to steal or when they're going to do it."

"I think I can figure that out. Or at least, I might know some people who could help." That's you guys, in case you didn't realise. "But assuming we can figure that out, it's possible? You'll help?"

Continued »

She laughed, genuinely smiling for once. "Yeah, if you can figure that out, I'll help. I've always wondered what you CRT guys get up to. I never imagined it was anything like this."

I looked away. "Well, you might not want to mention this to anyone else in the CRT just yet. I have to go now, I've got another meeting about this SF event thing, but I'll get back in touch soon. We need to work out the details on this, plus there's still something not quite right about what's going on in Crypto, quite apart from the thefts."

Karen looked dubious at this, but the tension was shattered by a series of whistles from across the courtyard. We both swivelled around to look at their source.

"Bloody kids. I don't know why they keep on selling those puzzle cylinders in the gift shop, the people who work here must be driven mad by the noise." said Karen, standing up. "If you managed to get access to my audio files, what else did you find?" she asked thoughtfully.

I scraped my chair back noisily and straightened up. "Well, I obviously didn't want to pry into your personal stuff, but I couldn't help noticing an email about a certain 'crt guy'. I hope I didn't lose all of your respect by using punctuation in a code," I said smiling.

Karen blushed. "I'll see you later, Kurt," she called as she walked away.

So that's it for now. It looks like we're going to have to figure out what sort of parts we'll be needing to tag. While we can't figure out what they're building those parts I mentioned last time - plus the flux compression generator (460WDN-4X) - don't work on their own, they probably interface with other systems. I'm going to read up on them, but if you have any thoughts or ideas, send them over.

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The Path of Least Time

AQSYS

Wednesday, July 19 2006, 03:16 PM

I've had a number of emails in suggesting parts to tag, which thankfully agree with my own thoughts. Basically, it looks like we'll be wanting to try the Nelis Nuclear Isomer Battery and the Baker Spherical Magnetic Containment field (thanks Ryan, Dan and Tammy). SteveC also made the good point that the Third Power might also be looking for replacements for the Reynolds Ioniser and Klebold Plates that they lost when Holyoke died. It's possible that they've already found replacements, but they're as good options as any.

It's quite a fearsome selection of parts that the Crypto guys have been working on - and have had stolen, as well. Exactly what they're doing with an 'explosively pumped flux compression generator' and nuclear isomer batteries is an open question, but both of those parts deal with serious amounts of energy.

Armed with this information, I met up with Karen in the Museum cafe again on Monday evening. It was practically empty this time; the place was due to close in an hour, and besides, there was some political debate being broadcast that everyone was probably watching at home. Karen was still watching something on her key when I sat down opposite her. With obvious reluctance, she wrenched her gaze away from the screen and looked up.

"Not one for politics, are you, Kurt? We're probably the only people in the city who aren't watching the debate." she said.

"No, I'm pretty sure that the CRT and CRR guys are still working on setting things up for the new data link. We can't make time for this other stuff," I replied blandly.

Karen raised her eyes, as if to say that I'd completely missed the point. "Don't you think that this... stuff... matters?" she said, nodding her head at the silent figures on the screen.

I shrugged. "Sure, it matters. It's just that what we're doing matters even more. What real difference does it make if Earlywine becomes the council leader instead of Scott? I don't recall Scott being much different from old 'Bones anyway."

"And here I was, thinking that Crypto surely wins the competition for 'most reclusive department' when the Cube Retrieval Team clearly have us beat," she said. "The reason why it matters is because, sometimes, it affects us in our ivory tower." Ivory tower? Must be some Crypto term, I decided.

Karen touched a few buttons on her key, and slid over the screen. It displayed an article from the Sentinel. I'd actually heard of the AQSYS project before - I'd considered using it as part of my search net for Miranda but decided that its sensors weren't suitable.

"What about it?" I asked.

"If Earlywine had managed to gut the sensors on the AQSYS craft any earlier, we wouldn't have any way of tracking the stolen parts from crypto."

"Are you seriously telling me that you want to track the stolen parts using those aerostats? They're basically weather balloons, you know, they don't have the instrument package to track the parts." I abruptly stopped myself from saying any more - Karen seemed slightly surprised that I knew anything at all about AQSYS.

"I bet you're going to tell me that we should use some active tracking system, right? Maybe a radio-based tag, and that AQSYS isn't configured for that?" I kept quiet. "If we put a radio tag on the parts, they'd be found instantly. Any criminal worth their salt would be on the lookout for them, and if they're smart enough to steal from Crypto, they'll be smart enough to find and remove them."

"So what's the answer then?" I said. "Maybe some low power system, spread spectrum-"

Karen shook her head. "Nope. Already looked into that. Anything low power enough to avoid

Continued »

detection wouldn't be trackable by us. We're going to have to use isotope tagging."

"I thought you said that that was bad idea."

"It is. But it's the only option left, and it just so happens that the AQSYS craft have isotope detectors on board. If you network together enough of them, then in theory it should be possible to triangulate the source," she said.

"In theory," I repeated, thinking about the logistics. "Just what are isotope detectors doing on the AQSYS craft, anyway? What else do they have in there, cheese sensors? No wonder Earlywine wants to cut back the program!"

"Anyway. The point is that it can be done. No-one will think to look for an isotope tag--"

"I don't blame them."

"--and even if Earlywine gets approval to cut down AQSYS, it won't happen for months. This is something we can move on."

"Alright," I said reluctantly. "But where are you going to get isotope tags from, anyway? And isn't it going to be difficult to get access to the parts?"

"Leave that to me," replied Karen. "You just have to worry about getting into the AQSYS system and hijacking their isotope detectors."

"Yeah, about that. I'm not sure how I'm going to be able to network them, they're probably manually controlled and any AI system would have to be calibrated..." I trailed off, an idea occurring to me.

Karen looked speculatively at me, frowning. "You're the one who wanted to track down these parts, Kurt. You don't seem very confident."

"I don't know... the whole plan just seems a bit shaky," I said.

"It's the only way. Anyway, I bet that this isn't the first time you've executed a shaky plan."

"No," I admitted. "I guess I'm just worried about what we'll find, where all of this is leading." I paused, then drew myself up, and tapped on my key. "Ahh, it's probably nerves. I just sent you a list of parts - these are the ones you should tag."

We talked a little about the specifics of the tagging, but I think I'd unsettled the conversation too much, so we retreated to the safer topic of politics as we left the museum.

I'm going to have to look up the tech specs for AQSYS - that'll take a day or two, and in any case Karen will have to sort out the isotope tags. I'll keep you all updated - I may need your help, again...

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Thoughts

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The Path of Least Time

Retro

Friday, July 21 2006, 05:06 PM

There aren't many things more frustrating than working with old technology. Imagine having to get data from some 30 year old tapes that were mouldering in a basement. Not only would you have to identify the tapes and find hardware to read them (or build it, if it didn't exist any more) - you'd also have to devise some interface from between your state of the art PC and the tape drive, which probably used some form of rudimentary smoke signalling. And once you'd gotten the data out - partially corrupted, of course - you'd have to reverse-engineer its arcane, biblical formatting conventions. You'd be pretty annoyed, right?

Well, that's what I have to do every time I work with Earth technology. I've been tasked with working out an interface with some sensors Mind Candy procured for the San Francisco event, and let's just say that they're pretty balky. We have plenty of plans for far more advanced devices which would interface fine, but of course, the council prohibits such things.

I was in the middle of testing a replica sensor in my room when Karen called and thankfully gave me an excuse to take a break. I fell onto my couch and left it stuck to the ceiling.

"So, I managed to sort out the isotope tags," she said.

"Huh. Where did you get them from?" I asked.

"Hilbert. They do a lot of nuclear work for medical tracers and military stuff."

"What, and you just called them up and asked for some isotope tags, exactly to your specifications?"

"Exactly," she said, smugly aware that she'd just won the conversation.

"Let me guess, you know someone who works there," I said.

"Yeah, I used to go out with this guy called Leo, he started there last year."

"Leo? From the Security Centre?" I said. "Actually, I don't want to know. What about getting access to the parts?"

"Still working on that. I think I might be able to get Juanita to help, she normally lets people in to try out new tech that's arrived. Have you been able to get into AQSYS?"

"Just about. Got the details of the system from a Natural Sciences database. And it turns out that the aerostats are networked, but it's hard-coded - I can't overlay my own system, so we're going to have to override that and use manual controls. Luckily, I have a lot of friends," I said.

"So you say," said Karen doubtfully.

"Actually, they're more like acquaintances. But don't worry, it'll be fine." Something chimed on my key, and I added, "Look, I have to get back to work on this RFID stuff, I've got a meeting with Sente in an hour, but I'll talk to you later. Bye!"

We're almost ready to go now - I imagine that we'll both need a few more days to sort everything out, but it's been surprisingly easy so far. I'll let you know on Monday what the plan is.

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The Path of Least Time

Turning the tide

Monday, July 24 2006, 01:43 PM

Here's the plan - and a recap, for those of you who haven't been paying attention. We know that a member of the Third Power, a man called Vadik, was working undercover at Hesh Records until recently. Following a bit of hacking and social engineering, we discovered that Vadik placed a call to the Academy Crypto department the day after the Cube was stolen.

While exploring the decidedly odd filesystems of the Crypto department, we came across a researcher there called Karen Moro. Karen was investigating the theft of high-tech equipment from Crypto, under orders from someone unknown. At the same time, Henrik Tanner - the Academy's security chief - told Anna that these thefts had been going on for some time, starting with Bernardo Holyoke (another member of the Third Power, now dead). He had been investigating the thefts himself until he'd been instructed to drop the case.

In other words, the Third Power are stealing equipment from the Crypto department. The equipment has something to do with Viendenbourg, a hidden military complex out in the Tanraga Mountains to the west, which isn't very heartening. We can't figure out where the Third Power are taking the stolen parts, or what they're using them for either.

So, we're going to track them. Karen has hidden isotope tags on four parts that we think the Third Power want and I've hacked into the city's AQSYS monitoring system, which is comprised of thousands of aerostats carrying sensors. Karen's received word that there will be a shipment of parts leaving Crypto some time this week - she doesn't know anything more exact than that, since she doesn't have access to the transport schedules.

However, she'll be on the lookout for when they leave. At that point, I'll hijack the AQSYS system. Once I've done this, all the aerostats will need to be controlled manually, and that's where you come in.

The AQSYS aerostats can detect the isotope tags, but only weakly. When a tag comes near, it will indicate the rough direction it's in, and when the tag is directly underneath the aerostat, it will flash. Unfortunately the aerostats move very slowly.

This means that I'll need a lot of you to co-ordinate amongst yourselves and control the aerostats so we can continually monitor the location of all four of the tagged parts. It's likely that they'll be sent in separate vehicles on different routes for security reasons, so you'll need to work together to ensure you don't lose them.

Violet, Caine, Karen and myself will be using your information to follow the parts on the ground. If any of the parts disappears or goes off course (that is, gets stolen), then we can find out where they're going. We don't intend to do any heroics, but this is the only lead we have in finding out where these parts are being taken and what they're being used for.

Oh, and I can't test the system - it would attract too much attention and probably ruin our chances when the parts actually go out, so we'll just have to hope it all works. Sound familiar?

I'll keep in touch.

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The Path of Least Time

Packages at 5:30pm

Wednesday, July 26 2006, 02:45 PM

I just had a call from Karen - the shipment is happening at 5:30pm (that's the equivalent of London time). At around 5:15pm, I'll be hijacking the AQSYS and posting details of how it works. Get ready - we'll need as much help as we can get to track these packages.

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Flying AQSYS

Wednesday, July 26 2006, 04:20 PM

Forgive me if this is a little short, but I'm currently trying to contact Violet, Caine and Karen, set up the AQSYS system and come up with an excuse to leave work early - simultaneously.

As I've mentioned before, the AQSYS system is comprised of thousands of aerostats. These aerostats need to be periodically recharged and repaired from their base station in the north west of the city. Instead of hijacking the entire system all at once, which would surely be noticed, I'm instead overriding the aerostats as they leave their base.

When you visit the control page that I've set up, you'll be able to manoeuvre an aerostat directly, simply using the arrow keys on your keyboard. They aren't built for speed, so it might take you a little while to get the hang of 'driving' them; they also have a lot of momentum.

The other piece of bad news is that the isotope detector on the aerostats doesn't work in real time - it takes 'snapshots' every 20 seconds, represented by a red wave. If the aerostat is close to an isotope tag (as in, within approximately the same city block) it'll show a small red circle. If it isn't, it'll just display a directional arrow to the tag closest to it. Oh, and the snapshots will only work if the aerostat isn't moving. Supposedly this is something to do with the detector having high power requirements, but I put it down to poor engineering. In any case, it just makes our lives harder.

I've hacked up a little message box on the control page where you can report sightings. Please don't write any essays using it and keep to the point - this is the way Violet, Karen, Caine and I will be using to keep track of the four different parts.

The parts are still scheduled to leave the Academy at around 5:30pm, and hopefully you'll have control of AQSYS at that time. I don't know how long this will all take, but we'll all have to be alert.

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The Path of Least Time

AQSYS activated

Wednesday, July 26 2006, 05:52 PM

AQSYS is now activated - visit the control page here. See my previous post below for details on how it all works.

Sorry I wasn't able to do the 5:15pm update - there was a minor crisis with Caine's car and we had to run over to the Engineering guys to sort it out. It doesn't matter anyway, I didn't have much to add.

I've hired a car that I'm going to use to try and shadow the parts on the ground. Since thankfully it's self-driving, I should be able to post updates here during the tracking.

Update 5:52pm: The messages we're receiving are pretty confused, but it seems like you're reporting that parts are west or northwest of Polygon Park. All of us on the ground are circling the area in our cars.

Update 6:04pm: I'm in the northwest, north of the Artist's Quarter, on Fivebridges. Caine and Violet were north of Polygon Park, heading east, last I heard. Karen is on Sweborg.

Update 6:19pm: Karen and I are around Azad Park - there seem to be a couple of parts around here. Violet's at Lang Stadium, Caine is north of Open Manifold. Just heard from Anna - she's managed to get out of work early and is heading home to monitor things online.

Update 6:32pm: I'm in the area around the Shift, Karen's now south of Azad. Caine's heading east towards Magine, not sure where Violet is.

Update 6:40pm: Circling around the area by Grand Frederik's, on the east end of Magine. Violet and Karen are nearby, Caine is following a sighting south, down Sharp Avenue.

Update 6:50pm: Seems like three of the parts have now entered Grand Frederik's and are being shielded - they've probably been loaded onto a train. The fourth part was last seen in the Old Town by the Brotherhood of the Six temple, and then it disappeared as well - that's probably the part that the Third Power wanted. Caine was heading down Sharp Avenue following it when he crashed, as usual. He's on foot now, heading towards it. Anna just called in to say that Fleming is due back from work pretty soon, so she might be able to check out the last sighting as well - she lives in the Old Town.

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The Path of Least Time

Three are found, fourth is missing

Wednesday, July 26 2006, 08:12 PM

Here's the deal - we tracked three of the tagged parts to Grand Frederik's, where it seems they were safely put onto a train for delivery to... wherever they were supposed to go. However, the fourth part seemed to have taken an about turn on its way to the station and headed down to the Old Town, and I can only presume that its transport was hijacked.

As I mentioned in the last post, Caine crashed while following it, and then it disappeared from tracking near the Brotherhood of the Six temple. Last I heard, Caine was near or at its last sighting and trying to see if he can find anything. Meanwhile, Karen and I are attempting to figure out which part was stolen...

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The Path of Least Time

Missing

Thursday, July 27 2006, 05:56 PM

Two things are missing.

After some lengthy analysis of the data we got from the aerostats, Karen and I managed to spot the subtle differences between the tags and determine that the part that went missing in the Old Town was the Baker Spherical Magnetic Containment Field. What does this mean? We're not quite sure, but now the Third Power are one step closer to their goals.

Fleming called me this morning, asking whether I'd seen Anna, apparently she'd run out of the house as soon as he'd gotten back home last night and hadn't returned. Anna didn't turn up at work either, and no-one's been able to reach her on her key. Either she's turned it off, or she's in an area with no signal. I'm trying to localise it through the networks, and we're also going to have a look around the area where the part went missing yesterday. I can only assume that she went after it. Anyway, I managed to calm Fleming down a little, but he's still on edge.

There's no reason to believe that anything bad has happened to her quite yet - she's only been gone a day, and she wasn't in any immediate danger when she left last night. One strong possibility is that she followed the parts out of key signal (for example, into tunnels) and is still tracking it. However, if we don't get any more information soon, we might have to call the police.

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The Path of Least Time

In Between

Friday, July 28 2006, 01:38 PM

By late last night, I hadn't been able to raise Anna's key. I tried everything I could think of, including some measures that are technically illegal and could get noticed by the authorities. As far as I can tell, she's simply disappeared and she hasn't tried to contact us.

When Violet and Caine went to visit the spot where the fourth part disappeared from tracking, they found absolutely nothing out of the ordinary - apart from manhole covers into the tunnels, locked shut from the inside. At this point, we had no option but to call the police - it was clear that we weren't going to open the manholes ourselves, and Fleming was bound to call them if we didn't.

The police are taking her disappearance very seriously. As a member of the Cube Retrieval Team, she's considered to be a high profile individual who is supposed to be available via key at all times. So far, they haven't asked any difficult questions about our involvement, and they were able to figure out the approximate location of her disappearance themselves, through key logging files. From what I gathered this morning, they'd already started opening up the manholes and sending down teams to explore the tunnels, although they'd encountered a lot of new barriers and locks blocking their way.

Fleming isn't taking this well. None of us are, but he's finding it hard to cope with the kids. "What am I supposed to tell them?" he asked me. "They know something's wrong." As does Fleming. He knows that Anna's been involved in some sort of extra-curricular work for the past weeks, and he probably still suspects it has something to do with Cymbalistry's death. I don't think he blames us for her disappearance, but the fact that he still doesn't know what's going on is eating at him.

At work, all of the scribes in the team were alarmed when we announced that Anna was missing; she was probably the most liked person in the group and the person least likely to get into any trouble. Not a lot of work is getting done at the moment - we're all waiting to hear from the police, and I'm still sitting here, unable to do anything.

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Revelations

Tuesday, August 22 2006, 06:36 PM

Last week, someone thoughtfully emailed to ask me whether I've been sleeping at all. I have - about two or three hours a day. When the Academy experiences an emergency, there are certain procedures that come into effect, one of which is the mandatory use of cognitive enhancers. Normally their use is restricted, but when something extraordinary happens - like the data link to Earth being severed and the Third Power opening a portal - the Academy likes to have all of its key personnel alert and awake, by chemical means if necessary. It can be brutally pragmatic sometimes.

I don't know what's more worrying, that the Third Power managed to create and open a portal to Earth (something that was thought to be almost physically impossible), or that none of us in Perplex City saw it coming. I admit that some of the more farsighted readers here suggested that a wormhole was a possibility given the parts stolen from the Crypto department, but I dismissed it out of hand. Look at it this way - if someone told you that France was going to launch an interstellar spacecraft tomorrow, would you believe them? Probably not.

Clearly a wormhole is physically possible - the Third Power have handily demonstrated that. However, no-one is commenting on how they did it. In fact, there is a deafening silence from the physics experts here in the Academy. Either they're too embarrassed by what's happened to say anything, or they know more about what's going on than they're letting on. And no, I haven't interrogated them yet - Sente is having us run constant high-level security checks on the data link. The fact that Garnet is now the ranking member on the CRT, and that he clearly has some political orders or agenda on his mind, isn't helping matters.

Similar things are happening all over the Academy. I haven't been able to get two words out of Karen recently; someone smart figured out what sort of parts might be required to make a portal, matched them up with the Crypto department, and an uproar ensued. I don't think it's public knowledge yet, although it implies worrying things about the Academy's involvement in these events.

Despite the fact that we're dropping a crisis level today, and so cognitive enhancers are not mandatory, I still won't get a proper sleep tonight. Instead, I'm taking the opportunity to reply to Helena Frye's message that she sent me this morning. It seems she's visited the site of the portal in Perplex City. I don't know what she's found out, but I imagine it's not good.

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Vanished into...

Wednesday, August 23 2006, 06:40 PM

"I've seen lot of places lately that have been rapidly abandoned and destroyed. Or maybe it's the other way around. I don't suppose you know anything about Silburn-Griggs, do you?"

I yawned. I wish I could say that this was an audacious piece of subterfuge on my part, but I was genuinely tired. Even next-gen ceretin can only keep sleep away for so long.

"Somewhere out west, isn't it?" I said.

"Yes, it is," replied Helena. She paused for a moment, probably wondering whether to pursue that line of conversation. I spoke up before she thought too hard.

"So what do you know about the portal?"

"Let me get one thing straight, McAllister. This is more sensitive than anything you've dreamt of before, so I am counting on you to not pass this on. I am also counting on you to help me in return."

"Fine," I said impatiently.

"After the blackout, my team worked with the Defence Forces to figure out what happened. You guys figured it out first, but we managed to go one step further and pinpoint the origin of the blackout. Guess what? It was the same location that our physicist Dervent said a radiation burst was detected from."

"Where?"

"Somewhere outside of the city. When we got there, the entire facility was abandoned. The people running it... the Third Power... had obviously known we were going to come soon, so they had to leave everything behind. With the whole place being underground, they could be anywhere. We haven't explored it fully yet, but I don't think either of us will be surprised if it turns out to be connected to the catacombs. Those clean rooms aren't much of a secret any more, huh?"

I snorted. "Do you have any good news for me? I'm a little sick of having them run circles around us all the time."

"I think there's a reason for that, but I'll get to it later. Yes, there is some good news. When we found the portal - we didn't quite believe it was a portal, at first - it was badly damaged. In fact, completely inoperable. Dervent's team is crawling all over it, and while they still haven't figured out quite how it works or what it's capable of, they're pretty confident that it only worked for one minute, at most, before burning out. That means that the Third Power didn't send over too much stuff to Earth. Judging by their setup, I don't think they expected things to go that way."

"Tell Dervent to check the portal controller. It might have--"

"She's already done that. All wiped. But there is some more unpleasant information. The parts that comprise the portal, they're almost all from the Academy. It took us some digging up to figure that out, but it's true. And while I wish I could blame all of this on the respectable Academicians--" she pronounced the word with an audible sneer, "-I am encountering some equally unpleasant politics from my superiors."

"They don't want you to investigate."

"Something tells me this isn't the first time you've heard this story."

"Not quite this story, but one very much like it. So, there's a cover-up. It's not just the Third Power building this portal on their own, they have help from people in both of our bases, and

they're stopping the investigations," I said

"Exactly. And I want to know who. The portal might have impressed you and a lot of other people, but I'm more impressed - and terrified - by the way that the Third Power and their friends have been able to funnel resources from the Academy and sidetrack government investigations."

"I'll look into the Academy. I already have some leads, although it's going to be difficult with what's going on in the CRT."

"Garnet Reed?"

"Yeah."

"He's a good guy. I think. But I don't know who he takes his orders from. It's not just Sente, but I think you guessed that. Look, I want you to find out more about those parts - where they came from, where they were going, and whether there are any more of them. It's too much of a coincidence that they just happened to be available at the Academy, and in the right quantities." She paused again, as if listening to something. "I have to go - I think my key is being monitored and even this voice call could be detected. We'll talk later. I expect you to help me with this, Mr. McAllister."

I shook my head. One of these days I'm going to have hang up before her.

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487

Friday, August 25 2006, 06:08 PM

I'm fortunate enough to have a fairly retentive, accurate memory - people are often surprised to find that I can remember a 10-digit security code after hearing it just once, for example. But even I have to admit that when I find I can remember all the different reference codes by which the Academy has ever identified the 23 different models of Quadropole Magnet Current Regulators, I might have become a little obsessed with a project.

I spent yesterday evening in my office at the Academy, trying to coax the systems to tell me anything about the parts Karen Moro had spotted being despatched to the mysterious "Viendenbourg". Someone in the Academy must have ordered them, and although the reasons behind their movements are still unclear to us, it was following one of those parts which got Anna killed. So it seemed logical to follow the chain from the other end: if we couldn't find out where the parts were going to, perhaps we could find out where they'd come from.

From the outset, it was clear this wasn't going to be easy. The Academy's security systems are extremely tight, and they've introduced new security measures in the past week as a response to the blackout. Henrik Tanner also often allows Centrifuge to test out new security systems in beta on the Academy network. Still, I have a few tricks up my sleeve and managed to open a backdoor into the order logs via the security department itself. I've done a bit of work for them, and I remember passwords easily.

Initially, I tried looking for Viendenbourg. It was a faint hope, which was immediately dashed. No records found. So I went through, manually, every part that Karen had noticed. She hadn't known any of the model numbers, and couldn't pinpoint the day on which some of them had passed through her department. Thus, I spent a great deal of time typing in long strings of digits and letters signifying various parts. Most of them were legitimate - with a check-out/check-in mark that I recognised from a genuine department. But eventually I found what I was looking for. A Tajison Plasma Wakefield Accelerator that had arrived and then... vanished. It was marked as missing, with no further notes appended to the file.

I queried the system: who had ordered the part? It came back with the unhelpful message: classified. I thought for a moment and then typed in an authorisation code I happened to have picked up one day while standing in Sente's office waiting to meet Violet for lunch. The network responded immediately with five words: Ordered by: Special Project 487.

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First Principles

Monday, September 4 2006, 04:52 PM

"Do the words 'Special Project 487 mean anything to you?"

Karen didn't even look up from stirring her coffee.

"Nope," she said, "not a thing."

"Sure you don't want to think about it? Take a moment."

She looked up at me, still stirring.

"Means nothing to me, Kurt. Was that all you wanted to know? Couldn't you just have mailed me?"

I leaned back in my chair with a sigh. This was clearly going to take more work than I'd thought.

I've spent the past week doing all the data searches I possibly can on Special Project 487. It's not a designation I'm familiar with, and it's not listed in any of the databases. The one or two references to it I've found on the system - all ordering parts, incidentally - are locked down with the authorisation being, again, Special Project 487. So, after long and fruitless investigation I'd concluded that I'd have to go for help to the one person who'd actually seen some of the packages 487 had ordered.

We were back in the museum cafe, in the quiet part of the afternoon, just a few other people around, mostly on their own at tables, reading. Karen smiled and waved when she spotted me at the entrance and, without really meaning to, I broke into the little jog-walk thing she'd noticed me do before.

She smirked at me as I sat down - it was only when I asked about 487 that she stopped smiling.

"You seem surprisingly certain," I said. "Let me tell you why I need to know."

She shook her head slowly.

"It's not that I don't want to know, Kurt. But I can't afford to, do you understand?"

"No, I don't understand. What does that mean?"

She sighed. "I can't be involved in your spy games anymore, Kurt. I can't be involved in anything like this."

She seemed, suddenly, almost about to cry.

"What's wrong?"

She looked up, gazing at me intently.

"My dad's being released," she said. "In only a few weeks' time. He's moving out of the city and I'm going too. I have to get away from all of this, I can't risk getting involved in something that could hurt his chances of release. Nothing illegal, you understand?"

"When are you leaving?"

"Soon. I'm packed already." She spoke decisively and took a sip of her coffee.

I stared at her for a moment. She looked uncomfortable.

"Look," she said, "can't we talk about something else? The elections are coming up, the PCAG's started knockout tournaments. Does it always have to be secret conspiracies and government plots?"

I shook my head.

Continued »

"No... but they won't just disappear if we cover our eyes. We can't just forget about them. Anyway, I know that you know something about 487," I said mildly.

"I've already told you everything I know. I was the one helping you track down those missing parts earlier, remember?" she retorted.

"I'm not suggesting you're hiding anything from me, Karen" I said, with just that thought fleetingly passing through my mind, to be quickly dismissed. "But if you don't even know what I'm talking about yet, how can you be so convinced that you know nothing useful?"

She smiled. "Sharp as ever, Kurt. OK then, what is 487?"

"It's a secret project in the Academy," I said. "They're behind the orders for the parts you saw being dispatched to this 'Viendenbourg'. What's more," I spoke slowly, making sure she would understand, "Ultimately, 487 is what got Anna Heath killed."

Karen looked away, setting down her teaspoon on the saucer.

"I went to the memorial service. I only ever met her a couple of times. I know she was helping track the packages, but I didn't get a chance to... She seemed very sweet."

I nodded.

"There must be some more information that you can find out on Special Project 487." Karen began to interject, but I interrupted her. "No, look, I believe that you didn't know that those packages were ordered under 487 - you probably weren't provided with that information because you didn't need to know. But you're in the Crypto department, which we do know is linked to 487. It's also one of the few places I can't hack into in the Academy - even the backdoor doesn't give me full access - and since you work there, well..."

Karen dropped her eyes down to the table again.

"OK," she said, "but you're getting into some deep water here, Kurt. There's so much more going on than we understand - I've tried to explain it to myself but I can't." She shook her head. "I still don't even have any idea who it is that was - and still is - manipulating my dad and I. It just doesn't make any sense. Why would they want me to look for 'unusual activity' in my department, and abruptly call it off months later, just when my information is getting interesting?"

I scratched my neck absently. "Maybe they'd gotten all they needed. Or maybe the same thing happened with them - their superior told them to stop investigating. Who knows? The point is that as long as we don't know what this is all about, we'll be open to manipulation and blackmail."

"You mean I'll be open to manipulation and blackmail," she said levelly.

"Well, yes. And that's why it's so important for us just to follow the thread a little longer. I have an authorisation code that might get you somewhere if you do a search on 487 within the Crypto department."

"Okay, okay. Might as well get it over with," she muttered, pulling out her key. "I don't even want to know how you got that," said Karen as I transferred the authorisation code to her.

"Oh, come on," I laughed. "Sure you do. But I'm not telling you."

Karen didn't reply as she looked down at her screen and logged in, but I saw her reluctantly crack a smile.

"All right, there's definitely something." She drew in a deep breath, and transferred a file over to my key. "Not much, though. When I did a search for 487 using your code, it came up with a whole list of parts being modified and sent to Viendenbourg. There are some I had no idea had even passed through Crypto. And there's a single word associated with the project: 'axiom'. I haven't seen that used anywhere in the department. OK?"

"OK," I said, "it gives me something to work with."

Karen stood up and pulled on her jacket. She turned to leave, and then turned back.

"If you start looking for these guys, Kurt, you'd better be prepared for what happens if you find them."

She was gone before I could ask her what she meant.

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The Path of Least Time

Axiom

Friday, September 8 2006, 03:07 PM

Axiom: a statement or proposition that is regarded as being established, accepted, or self-evidently true.

The codename for 487 is innocuous enough, but its definition hints at a profound purpose.

'Special Project 487' may not have any presence on the Academy network, or indeed any network that I can access, but 'axiom' is a different matter. Since it's, well, a real word, a search returns literally millions of results. Even filtering those results to solely interesting 'things' within the Academy returns thousands (and believe me, figuring out a search protocol based on my particular definition of 'interesting' in this circumstance was not easy...).

There are:

7 cryptosystems using 'axiom' as the name of a specialised module or component

6 security-related companies whose names include 'Axiom' or 'Axiomatic'

814 mentions of 'axiom' in papers within the last month

14 extant groups, clubs or societies whose names include 'Axiom' (this is Perplex City Academy, after all)

2 bona-fide cabals that, unfortunately, are not only extinct but also far too obvious to be relevant. None of them involved anyone within the Crypto dept.

8 books in a moderately popular romance series called 'Love is the Axiom' (it has a picture of a dashing scientist sweeping an overwhelmed buxom young lady wearing a revealing (and definitely non-standard) white lab coat off her feet)

12 lectures in an exceptionally boring 267 symposium called 'Axiomatic Systems', which I was unaccountably told to attend the first lecture of. Luckily no-one noticed when I didn't bother turning up to the others...

1 drug treating neurological disease called 'Axiom'

29 defence or surveillance systems whose names contain 'Axiom'. None of them have any significant connection to the Academy, or seem to be particularly unusual.

Plus many, many more results.

I'm going through these by hand as fast as I can, which is to say, not all that fast. Garnet is finishing up his audit of the security of the PXC-Earth data link, and he's not happy. Rather than get the Academy Security Centre to fix things, he's asked me to lead the project. I've been going through his findings, and he's right in that there are a few genuine issues - but most of the problems he's found are minor.

All of this is unprecedented - the ASC is supposed to be responsible for all security concerns in the Academy, so Henrik Tanner will be extremely displeased about being sidelined. Maybe Garnet managed to convince the Academy and his political superiors that the data link falls outside of the ASC's remit due to special circumstances and the fact that it primarily concerns the Cube, but however he did it, he's successfully assumed control over the link and made it my responsibility.

Technically, I'm qualified to do that, although I wouldn't say I was the best person in the Academy for the job - there are people at the ASC and Cube Research Labs who would be better. But I am the only choice within the CRT, which is his domain. A side-effect of all of this is that Garnet will be keeping a closer eye on me in the future...

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The Path of Least Time

The Archipelago

Friday, September 15 2006, 05:37 PM

The puzzle that Violet gave me on Thursday was definitely an interesting one, and it ended up diverting me away from work for a fair while (I told Garnet that I was 'brainstorming network topologies'), but ultimately not that difficult to solve once I knew the problem. It seems like you guys were getting close in the idea that the lines wrapped around 360 degrees and represented the horizon or sightlines, but really for me to find out which was right was to try them by hand.

To cut a long story short (which I am not usually wont to do), based on the various clues from Granier's letter, I decided that the lines were individual wraparound views, with the blocks representing some sort of major visual features. Since there appeared to be interesting and conserved patterns across the lines, I assumed that each line was viewing the visual features from a different - but nearby - perspective. Thus, each trace was a map of the horizon from a particular location.

After lots and lots of moving bits of paper around, I found one particular configuration of the traces where they all 'agreed' with each other. It was fairly simple to place the traces which were obviously off to 'one side', such as the fifth, sixth, eighth and ninth, but filling in the middle was much trickier. Luckily, the traces were all drawn to a high degree of accuracy so it was still doable. In any case, after I'd done most of them, I recognised the location of the visual features to mirror that of the Lancewood Archipelago, a fairly famous set of islands in the east.

What someone - probably Granier - had obviously done was to stand on a high vantage point on each of the islands. He then drew a trace that went 360 degrees, starting at north, with bumps to represent those directions in which his line of sight was obscured by the other islands. I don't know exactly why he did this - it must have taken him a while - but then again I suppose there wasn't much else to do there back 300 years ago.

The interesting thing is that the puzzle pinpointed a particular island in the archipelago. I'm going to leave that as an exercise for the reader to work out, but suffice to say that Scarlett and Violet have one particular place to go out of all the islands there.

As for Special Project 487, I found something interesting. Not information, but rather, a lack of it. When I conducted another search using the same parameters in my last post, the results changed. They're not supposed to do that. Someone, or something, is monitoring searches including that term.

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The Path of Least Time

Search Agent

Tuesday, October 10 2006, 05:47 PM

It's been a busy few weeks, during which time I've been doing two jobs and reporting to two bosses (three, if you count Violet). The work on securing the data link between Earth and Perplex City has nearly finished now, following a series of hellishly ferocious simulated attacks. It's so secure now that I'm convinced there's nothing anyone could do to disrupt the flow of information between our two worlds, short of a full physical assault, and the last time I looked, the Third Power didn't have an army.

Partly as a result of this, Garnet's been in a rather good mood. He can often be seen striding around the corridors purposefully, like a man who solved a particularly troubling mechanical puzzle where the parts weren't moving quite right - and now they're all in motion, all in unison. The other reason, it's rumoured, is Camryn Scott's struggles in the election. Garnet's never made a secret of his preference for Earlywine (something which I respect - at least he says it aloud) and it's hard to believe that an Earlywine victory wouldn't benefit him or his ideals.

Garnet's good mood, thankfully, has meant that he's missed my frequent moonlighting as backup for Violet and Scarlett in Lancewood, which was mostly boring, and sometimes terrifying.

Most people are lucky enough not to know what real terror is. Drowning in Silburn-Griggs, seconds away from death, with no way out; that was terror. But when I was sitting safely at my desk in the Academy, watching the Kiteways in Lancewood while someone systematically destroyed the facility... that was worse. And that's to say nothing of the state Caine was in.

Scarlett appeared to cope well with what she had to do to Major Jake Maine in the Quiet Room, but then it can be easy to cover up your feelings. Violet's not the sort of person who likes publicly empathising with, well, anyone, so I assumed that she hadn't talked things through with her sister. I'm not the best counsellor either, but then again, I have relevant experience. When I told Scarlett that she could talk to me about it, she seemed a little unsure but at least she knows that I'm here.

I still think about Miranda occasionally, in the abstract. I think about who she was when she was younger, and how she became part of the Third Power. I don't let thoughts wander too closely to anything else.

Between the more pressing demands of my real job and Lancewood, I had to break off my investigation into Special Project 487 (which sounds suspiciously like Major Jake's '487th'). It's an odd string of characters. Whenever I look for it, there seems to be less and less information available, as if there's something monitoring the term. I mulled this over a little while, and realised the behaviour bore more than a passing resemblance to the Djinn virus, which managed to hide itself from discovery by monitoring and changing information on the network intelligently.

But it's not quite the Djinn virus. It's better than that, because when I tried to decompile it, it wiped my key. Back to the drawing board, I suppose.

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The Path of Least Time

Severed

Friday, October 20 2006, 02:10 PM

At approximately 5:30pm today, I am going to press the button that will effectively sever communication between Perplex City and Earth. The official line is that data will merely be "screened for potentially dangerous or subversive material," and that we'll still be able to exchange information. Of course, that isn't true. Not only does our new Council Leader's order amount to censorship, but it also means that it will be impossible for me, or anyone else, to send any sensitive information over the link without it being flagged up.

I made this system to be secure against anyone, and it is. There are no backdoors and no routes around the firewall. It's monitored around the clock and has redundancies upon failsafes upon backups.

I think that Garnet was as surprised as I was that Earlywine was going to order the firewall. We all knew about his xenophobic attitudes toward Earth, but we didn't think they would be manifested so quickly and dramatically. Garnet put on a brave face when the news came through yesterday, and said that it was all for the best, and it was surely a temporary measure. I didn't even bother concealing my disgust, and just laughed sarcastically.

"A temporary measure? How are we supposed to find the Cube now, with Viendenbourg shut down and our hands tied behind our back?" I asked.

Garnet didn't answer, and just shook his head unhappily.

"Let's face it. Earlywine doesn't want to find the Cube, and while I don't agree with Sente's methods, at least he was trying to transport people to Earth. We're not going anywhere here, Garnet."

He simply walked away, and left me to set up the firewall.

On reflection, it didn't surprise me that Special Project 487 was run by Sente. In fact, it makes me feel slightly better, in a perverse way. He must have personally programmed the variant of the Djinn worm that hid all the data relating to the project, and if I'm going to be beaten, at least it was by the Master of the Academy.

No-one really knows what to think of Sente right now. I don't think you could find a single person who would defend the deaths of the five volunteers, but he did have authorisation directly from Camryn Scott. In light of the Third Power's activities - a group that has killed far more than five people - perhaps he felt it was justified. Of course, most people don't know about the Third Power, and even fewer believe what they hear.

There's an atmosphere of distrust here in the Academy, and particularly in the CRT. People dislike the Council's interference in our affairs, but there's a real sense of anger and betrayal at Sente, because he kept the operations at Viendenbourg secret. There were people at the Academy who must have known what was going on - for example, the Crypto department was involved - and that's made the tensions even worse. No-one understands the reasons for secrecy, and Sente clearly isn't telling.

Scarlett and Violet... I don't know how they're feeling, or whether they've talked to their father. I don't want to even think about that.

I don't know when the firewall will come down and I'll be able to talk to you openly again. In the face of the Third Power roaming free on Earth, the situation is looking bleak for the CRT to accomplish its mission of safely returning the Cube back to Perplex City. But we won't take this lying down. Earlywine will eventually learn what every Council Leader has had to learn - it's impossible to control the Academy. The Academy is Perplex City.

I'll see you soon. You'll know when the firewall is down.

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The Path of Least Time

The Beginning of the End

Monday, January 15 2007, 12:31 PM

I've begun to clear out my room in the Academy. Packing has never been a difficult task for me, so I've left it to the last minute to decide which of my commemorative mugs, puzzle toys and postcards I'll take back home and which I'll shove into the filing cabinet. More tricky will be the task of revoking my privileges on the Academy network, but somehow I doubt that's something they'll want me doing, with everything that's happened lately.

Whatever the Sentinel might say, the reason the link's been opened again is because it's been compromised by the Third Power - twice. During a very thorough scan of the link a couple of weeks ago, we picked up some anomalies; packets being dropped at odd times, odd patterns of latencies. Looking closer, it became clear that information was being transmitted. Messages.

What's disturbing is that it looks like the Third Power is responsible. Since the entire point of the firewall was to prevent this sort of thing from happening, everyone involved was alarmed. Earlywine immediately ordered us to stop the Third Power's messages, which I found to be pretty easy from a technical point of view, given that it was pretty fragile and subtle to begin with. Despite myself, I was very impressed with the Third Power's work. When constructing the firewall, I'd briefly considered the possibility that someone might try to send information through the firewall in this sort of way, but I concluded that it would just be too noisy and would require computing power of a kind unavailable to most.

From a political point of view, the situation was extremely sensitive. I'm guessing that no-one wanted to tell the public that the firewall had been compromised - that would seriously damage both the Academy and the Council. Equally, Earlywine won the election on a promise of openness, so if the news ever leaked out that he was trying to cover it up, it would be even more damaging.

In the end, Garnet and Henrik Tanner decided to force the issue by talking to the Sentinel directly. From the Academy point of view, this was the least worst of all possible solutions - it made them look honest (well, more honest than Earlywine, at least) and it prevented any accusations of a cover-up.

That's where things would have settled, if you guys hadn't discovered that the Third Power had managed to compromise the link again, through this mysterious Babel site. I appreciate you guys telling me, although I'm not so pleased that you also emailed Garnet. This time around, he and Earlywine moved immediately to limit its spread - if the news of this got out, it would be disastrous for everyone involved.

Looking back, I'm pretty sure it was at this point that the people at the top were searching for a suitable scapegoat.

My priority, though, was to try and figure out what was going on with Babel. See, the reason I called the site 'mysterious' is not because of the question of who this Babel is, but because it's completely invisible to anyone in Perplex City. It's like it exists inside the gap between the two worlds. That's a metaphor, by the way - it only looks that way.

A Digression on Babel

Obviously I can't see the Babel site, but I have read extracts of their writings that you've emailed to me. To be perfectly honest, I have no idea what they mean, other than being some sort of clues to the Cube's location. The worrying thing is that if the Third Power have access to Babel's clues, then they might be able to find the Cube that way as well. The only hope is that because you are more familiar with Earth - since you live there - you have a better chance at decoding the clues than the 3P. But it could be a close-run thing...

Continued »

End of digression

The way the Babel site works - the only way it could work - is through bypassing my firewall and sending data to Earth at some later point. My suspicion is that it's connected to the link at a hardware level, somewhere in the Centre for Reality Research.

It's only a suspicion because I haven't been able to follow it up. It would be perfectly easy for me to take a trip down there and inspect their hardware, but there are two reasons why I can't do that.

The first is that Earlywine and Garnet have lost confidence in the firewall. Even if I can track down this new infiltration, they believe that the Third Power will just find another way. I can't blame them for thinking this, after two infiltrations. Consequently, they've reasoned that the next best thing to shutting down the Third Power's communications is being able to listen in. So, no-one's allowed to do anything that might tip off the Third Power that we might be listening in, and that includes snooping around the CRR.

Given that the firewall just isn't working, Earlywine has agreed to lift it, particularly because the only way Perplex City can get intelligence about what's on the Babel site is through you guys on Earth. Having a huge firewall in the way doesn't make communicating that intelligence very easy. That's the real reason why the link is back up.

I said there's another reason why I can't follow up on this new Babel site infiltration. It's because I have a meeting with Garnet in half an hour where I expect to be suspended from work.

Everyone, from Nathan Earlywine down, is looking for a scapegoat to blame for this. I'm the person who set up the firewall, so it's my fault. I did point out that no firewall is 100% reliable, especially against an attacker who has access to the physical hardware, but I don't think they were listening any more. Garnet is sympathetic, but he doesn't really have a choice, and Earlywine certainly doesn't care.

The funny thing is that I still have an invitation to the Academy ball tonight. I doubt I'll be in the right mood to go though. It'll just be another reminder of the theft of the Cube.

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The Path of Least Time

When everything's right...

Wednesday, January 17 2007, 08:24 AM

Drowsington's a lovely place - in May. In January, the town's wreathed in a wet fog that turns into drizzle around 6am. I know this because that's where I woke this morning, wearing a ruined tuxedo and a novelty tretretrete hat.

I wasn't in the best mood to go to the Academy Ball on Monday, having been suspended from work for something that wasn't my fault, but Caine and Violet came over in the afternoon and forced me to put on my black tie outfit.

It was awkward right from the start, I remember that. While queuing up in Taversen Square, Garnet came over to speak to someone in front of us in the line - some Council functionary or Defense Forces officer, no doubt. When he looked my way, he hesitated and then gave me a curt nod. I ignored him. As soon as we made it inside, I left the happy couple and Scarlett to head for the bar.

Myra Champaign was the star of the proceedings, with a halo of fans and journalists asking her about the secret of her success. She was more than happy to oblige them, telling everyone in her high-pitched voice about her natural talent and the awful, awful challenges she'd been through to win the championships. I lurked on the periphery, grimacing into my drink.

I wasn't the only person feeling sorry for themselves at the ball: Von was grimacing into his soft drink beside me.

"Sorry to hear about the suspension," said Von. "I know it can't have been your fault."

"Thanks. How's university?"

"Boring."

We both stared at Myra for a while.

"I was sixteen once, you know," I said. Von nodded thoughtfully, and took a swig of his orange juice.

The awards ceremony was predictable as ever, although there was some comic relief in seeing the ever-diplomatic Sente shake his head just the slightest bit when he handed the trophy over to Myra, which set Violet and Scarlett off into giggles. Thankfully the awards ceremony itself was shortened ever since somebody realised that being able to solve puzzles doesn't mean you're a brilliant orator, so we got stuck in to dinner without much delay.

I was making good progress into our table's supply of wine when there was a disturbance at the back of the hall. No doubt you've heard by now that Sente was arrested. It may not seem like a big deal, but having police walk into the Academy Ball and arrest the Master was a brazen show of power by the Council. Right now, I don't have the presence of mind to analyse the political side of this, although I'm not sure I care anyway.

Scarlett predictably broke down into floods of tears and had to be consoled by Caine; Violet was the responsible one and ran off to follow her dad to the police station, after giving me a dirty look; and I kept on drinking.

The Academy Ball usually goes on into the early hours, by which time most of the hard-core have deserted it for other parties around the city. I'm fairly sure I went to some disreputable place called The Missing Piece on the opposite side of town - at least, that would explain the matchbook I unaccountably have with the name 'Call me, Jess' in my pocket, sadly with no key number. And possibly also the bruise on my face.

Exactly how I managed to get to Drowsington is beyond me. I probably had to be carried, and whoever 'helped' me disappeared long before I woke up, no doubt in search of a cocktail. As for the tretretrete hat, which says 'Property of Perplex City Kid's Zoo', I don't want to know.

Continued »

Drowsington isn't just sleepy in winter, it's practically catatonic. I'd be hard pressed to prove that any of the commuters on the train I'm on back to Perplex City are actually alive. Perhaps they hibernate in winter. Sounds like a good plan.

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The Path of Least Time

Do Not Disturb

Thursday, January 18 2007, 10:09 AM

One of the many, many advantages that keys have over your amusingly quaint 'mobile phones' is that they support presence states. In other words, I can tell people when I'm bored and would appreciate a call; and when I really, seriously, honestly don't want to be disturbed unless you're a movie starlet who's suddenly discovered a penchant for suspended Academy scribes.

I've had my key set to the 'movie starlet' mode for the last couple of days while waiting for the Saptivan to kick in and rid me of my hangover. This morning, my key rang. I groaned in a rather satisfying, self-pitying way, and very slowly stretched my hand out to the bedside table.

"Kurt, you—" she said.

"Wait. Is your name Joya?" I asked.

"No."

"Is it Natalie Portman? Did you, by some chance, discover a way to travel between worlds? I saw your picture on Von's screen, you seem like a very nice—"

"No, it's Violet."

"Obviously you didn't read my Do Not Disturb sign, then," I said, disappointed.

"Stop fooling around, Kurt. You don't know any movie starlets, and even if you did, they wouldn't be interested in you in this state."

"And what state is that?"

"A self-pitying bum who's lying on his bed trying to decide what sort of takeaway food he's going to have in lieu of breakfast."

Damn.

"Well, I'm getting hungry, so why don't you go and tell me what this is all about," I said after a pause.

"My dad's house got broken into last night."

"That's too bad."

"Aren't you bothered by that?" asked Violet.

"Not as much as I would've been if you were a real movie starlet."

"Scarlett could've been there! She might have been hurt! And who do you think would be able to get around his security to get into his house? This is a big deal." Violet sounded like she was getting emotional. I hate it when this happens.

"No, it's not," I said, in the special voice I reserve for particularly slow or cute students, or Violet whenever I want to annoy her. "Firstly, Scarlett obviously wasn't there, because you just said 'could have'. Secondly, statistically speaking, people don't get hurt in break-ins. Thirdly, we both know that Academy security isn't all that it's cracked up to be. I could break into that house in five minutes, I bet."

"That's because I told you the security code, you idiot!"

"Finally," I continued, "it was probably just the press or the police throwing their weight around. Nothing to worry about. Sente will have all his really important stuff encrypted anyway."

"Fine," said Violet, in a tone that suggested she was exactly the opposite. "You don't care about anyone else, do you? I won't bother you again." The line went dead.

I looked up at the ceiling, frustrated, thinking of a number of snappy lines that I could've employed if I was faster. "Try getting suspended from the one place you love working, and see how much you care about that." Not bad, but a bit too wordy. "How about you stop 'caring' about everyone else, and sort out your own dead-end life?" Too hurtful. "Call me when there's something worth caring about." That was pretty good.

Although "I'll have a pepperoni with extra chillis, thanks," would've worked equally well.

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The Path of Least Time

Taken

Friday, January 19 2007, 04:04 PM

I was picking at some leftover pizza and attempting to beat some upstart in a game of Speed Counterpoint on the PCAG servers when the call came through. I ignored it for a couple of minutes while I surreptitiously opened up a chasm beneath all of her strongholds.

eat it punk, I typed into the chat box.

you suck :p, announced `serenad`, signing off.

I stood up and yawned. Then I inspected a plant pot lying on the floor. Was this from Miranda? It looked like it might be. Hmm. This would require further investigation, but I decided Violet had waited long enough, and answered the call.

"I thought you weren't going to bother me again," I said. It sounded a little more resentful than I'd planned, but it'd do.

"Scarlett's gone," said Violet.

"What do you mean, gone?" I asked, starting to pay attention.

"She went to meet someone at the Sentinel this morning, to talk about Sente. I haven't heard from her since, and she was supposed to check in two hours ago. Can't reach her on her key, either."

I tapped a few commands into my key. "Huh. I can't locate her key at all. Either she's turned it off, which would be really odd, or..." I trailed off.

"We have to find her," she said quietly.

"Maybe she went undercover, or her key's malfunctioning. She might have gone down into the tunnels - key signal won't penetrate that far."

"That's what Caine reckons. But she would've told me, I'm sure."

"Are you?"

She paused. "Yes. Maybe not in the past, but today, yes."

"Okay. Let me have a think. Maybe I can do a wider scan for her key, check if she's just gone to another town." I glanced at the plant pot, then checked my email to see if Scarlett had sent anything. Nothing from her, but I saw a few from other names I recognised: Marc, Isabella, Cassandra.

"I've just found some emails from our guys on Earth. They intercepted two messages from the Third Power, sent from Perplex City. First one is from early yesterday, says they `gained access`,` I read.

"The break-in at my dad's house?" suggested Violet.

"Looks like it. The message also says they found a `genuine, non-repro Earth artefact dating from the time of the original theft'. Yeah, I don't know how that's possible either. Then there's the second message from just a few hours ago." I didn't bother to add that this was around the same time as Scarlett's disappearance. "That one simply says `Package onboard, in transit to secure facility. Not long now'."

"They got Scarlett. They think she knows where the Cube is," said Violet flatly.

"We have to tell someone. The police, they might be able to-"

"Wait, I've got another call coming through. From Scarlett." The line clicked, and went silent.

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The Path of Least Time

Making the Call

Friday, January 19 2007, 04:22 PM

As soon as Scarlett's call finished, Violet called me back and played a recording. It doesn't take a genius to realise that it was made under duress. She sounded scared, nothing like what she normally sounds like on calls. What's more, I'm convinced that she didn't make it using her own key - I did a search during the call and her key simply didn't show up.

"We have to call the police," I repeated. "There's no way we can find her on our own."

"Why not? You found Miranda and she didn't have a key," said Violet.

"Miranda was different. It took me weeks to track her down, and she was working on her own. Scarlett's been taken by a group of professionals, she could've gone anywhere."

It didn't just take weeks, I thought. It also took your help, for which I'm always grateful. I have a feeling I'll need it again to find Scarlett. Keep ready.

Violet continued, "Fine. But the police won't be any help, they'll never believe Scarlett's been kidnapped. She's only been gone for a few hours, and she even left a message saying that she's going undercover. They're more likely to make things worse."

"I agree," I said. "I'm not talking about the normal police though. I'm talking about calling Helena Frye."

"Helena... do you trust her?" asked Violet cautiously.

"I think so. She's helped us before, told us about the Third Power's portal, and she seems to be capable of working outside of Council or Police authority." Positively happy about it, I thought. "She's got the team and the access to find Scarlett. We don't have anyone else to go to."

"So you're going to help, then?"

I shook my head in disbelief that things had gotten this bad. "Violet, you never have to ask me that question."

She chuckled. "Make the call, then."

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The Path of Least Time

A Break

Saturday, January 20 2007, 10:13 AM

"I was wondering when you were going to call."

Helena Frye is a very smart, reasonably successful police detective. By all rights, she should've made Captain by now. My feeling is that her impatience is what's stopping her. I'd planned to launch into a detailed explanation of why she had to help us find Scarlett, but her first remark on answering the call threw me. I should've remember she's not one for pleasantries.

"Why's that?"

"You've been suspended from your job at the Academy. Word is that you only just missed out on being fired. Either way, you've got a lot of free time at the moment. Ever thought about joining my team?"

I almost laughed. "What, join the police?"

"Technically, yes. But we both know that I'm not part of the normal police force. You've got some impressive crypto and network skills, you could make a real difference."

"Thanks for the offer, but I'm not sure a uniform would look good on me," I replied.

"Anyway, think about it. I'm told that girls like a guy in uniform." True enough, I admitted inwardly. "So why did you call? Getting into trouble again?" asked Helena.

"The Third Power thinks Scarlett Kiteway stole the Cube, and they've kidnapped her to find its location."

Helena went quiet for a few seconds. "Did she steal the Cube?"

"What do you think? Of course not!" I exclaimed.

"Hmm..." she said. I could visualise Helena's thought processes, trying to decide whether it was plausible that Sente Kiteway's younger daughter was capable of stealing the city's most valuable object.

"Look, whether or not she did is besides the point. We need to get Scarlett back, and you want to find the Third Power. I have a solid lead, but we need to move fast."

"What's your lead, then?"

"You know the Babel site?" I asked.

"Yes, the one you were suspended for," she said helpfully.

"The Third Power have been using it to communicate with their agents on Earth. My own contacts on Earth intercepted two messages that indicates they were behind the break-in at Sente's house. They found an object from Earth there - a real object, from the time of the original theft of the Cube - and for some reason, they decided Scarlett was the thief and kidnapped her."

"Why didn't I hear about these intercepted messages?"

"Maybe it's because I actually have a good relationship with the people on Earth, unlike the Council. I'll forward them to you, you can check them out yourself."

"Okay... Kurt, you have to understand that this is hard to take. An Earth object in Sente's house? I don't know..."

"You have to believe me! I'm not going to pretend I have all the answers, but Scarlett has gone missing. Her key's gone off the grid, and the messages from the Third Power point to her. If I'm right and you let this one go, they'll kill Scarlett and they'll have the Cube."

Helena snorted. "You might be smart, Kurt, and I know you're honest, but you're naive. The Third Power are experts at disinformation and confusion. Chances are, this is yet another decoy. Still," she continued, "I don't have anything better to go on. Send over everything you have. I'll see what I can do about tracking those transmissions at the CRR."

"Thanks, Helena," I said. "And please try and keep this quiet."

"You don't need to tell me that. I'll be back in touch soon."

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The Path of Least Time

Relay Race

Monday, January 22 2007, 04:35 PM

Violet isn't one to get stressed out easily. It's one of the reasons why she's a good poker player - she manages to keep composed and rational even under pressure. Even when she and Scarlett were on Lancewood, at apparent risk of being killed, she managed to stay in control.

In control. The problem now is that she isn't in control. Scarlett's been kidnapped and there's absolutely nothing she can do about it. She's been reduced to hanging around my apartment all weekend, waiting for Helena Frye to call. At one point on Sunday I had to talk her out of marching down to the police headquarters to find her.

At noon, I got the call from Helena. Violet was curled asleep up on my couch - she hasn't been sleeping well at all - so I took my key into the kitchen and quietly closed the door.

"So?" I leaned against the kitchen door, stretching my back, waiting for her answer.

"Everything checked out. We found the messages on the Babel site, and I've decided we'll investigate it further."

"Great! What's the next move? Have you had any luck checking out the CRR?"

"Not so much at the CRR. The place is locked up tight, and if we went in there, there's a good chance that they'd notice. But we had a tip-off on Friday about the Third Power using a system called Relaynet. Have you-"

I jerked my head up in annoyance. "Wait, you knew about this on Friday? Why didn't you tell me? I could've been checking it out this weekend instead of sitting around and wasting time!"

"Look, shut up, Kurt. You're not the only one who has something at stake here. My team has been going after the Third Power for years and we aren't going to jeopardise a lead by you setting off alarm bells everywhere. We have to do this operation carefully, and that meant checking out all the information, including you."

"It wasn't just a lead, it was my lead." I held the key closer and whispered furiously, "And I don't just have 'something' at stake, I have a friend who's been kidnapped and interrogated. My girlfriend was one of them, and she tried to kill me. The Third Power aren't just another star on your shoulder, they're murderers. So don't tell me to shut up and wait around while they kill someone else!"

Helena went quiet for a while, and I wondered whether I'd blown it. She was probably deciding whether it was a mistake involving me at all.

"You mentioned Relaynet." I forced myself to calm down and think. "No-one uses Relaynet any more - it was abandoned decades ago. Low data rates, plenty of lag, plus it needed signal boosters. They switched over to copper bundles pretty quickly, then fiber. But..."

I saw the answer in a rush of insight, revealing connections between facts and ideas that I'd learned long ago. "It was a military project. A military prototype, an experiment to see if they could make a hardened communications network that could withstand attack and multiple failures. So, it definitely would've been buried underground. Around the same time that the subway started up. It probably even used some of the same tunnels!"

"Go on," Helena prompted.

"So you think the Third Power are using it, but you're having problems tapping into it," I guessed. But that didn't make any sense - it was so low tech that it should've been easy to listen in. It had to be something else. "No, you can tap into it, but everything's encrypted. Okay, scratch that - that's not the issue. You can't tell where the messages are going. Hah! I remember, my tutors said Relaynet had a bizarre routing system, the messages went all over the place before getting to their destination."

"That's good enough," interrupted Helena. "It took us hours to dig up that information, so let me save you a little time. Our tip-off was that the Third Power are using Relaynet to receive messages from Earth via the CRR. Like you say, we can intercept the messages, but they're using strong encryption. At the moment, we can't figure out where they're going either, but one of our sigint guys has said that - in theory - we should be able to extract how long the messages bounce around the network before they reach their destination from the servers.

"Right, right," I said, "and combined with the lag times across the network, you might be able to deduce the destination. So, what's the holdup?"

"We can get the lag times, that's easy. But extracting the time to reach destination, that involves querying the servers, and I'm informed it's 'non-trivial'."

"No problem. I want to help, I have a few ideas. I can be there in about twenty minutes, if I leave now." I glanced at my watch, and thought about subway times. "I just have to-"

"I've got a car waiting outside for you. Hurry up." I ended the call, and walked through into my living room. Violet was still asleep. I briefly considered just leaving a note, but concluded that she wouldn't be pleased if I'd taken off when she woke up.

I gently shook her shoulder. She sighed, but didn't wake up. "Violet," I said.

"Hmm?" she said, tiredly looking up at me.

"Helena called, we have to go to the police headquarters now. Come on." She nodded, rubbed her eyes, picked up her bag and stood there, waiting for me.

We're in Helena's offices now. I was pulled into a technical meeting with the sigint guys as soon as I walked in, and have been analysing the raw data dump we got from the servers. I think we have something. It's not a lot, but we managed to pull out the transit times of five messages.

Helena's put all the information on her page on the police intranet - I said that I had a team on Earth who could help me find where those messages are going. Let's get to it.

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The Path of Least Time

The Tallest Tower

Tuesday, January 23 2007, 12:39 PM

6:10 PM Monday:

"Hey, everyone!" I hurried to the middle of the large room that serves as Helena's centre of operations, and waited until I had people's attention. The various analysts and detectives looked up warily but hopefully. "I've just received an email from Ben Forbes, one of my contacts on Earth. They've figured out the destination of the Third Power's messages!"

A ragged cheer broke out - everyone was working flat out, and it was good to see some progress. I tried to make myself heard over the noise. "It all checks out. This is where the server is!"

I pointed the nearest wall display and called up an image from my key. The tallest building in Perplex City, Ascendancy Point, loomed over us all. Some of her team visibly recoiled, and the cheering abruptly stopped. I looked around in confusion as Helena smoothly took over.

"Listen up! We all know it's a tough target. 50,000 occupants at any one time, 170 triple-height floors, millions of square meters of floor space. The good news is they've got an Eclipse Security system there, which means cameras and embedded sensors covering every inch of the place. If anyone so much thinks of hurting a fly in that building, we can see them." People nodded along and began pulling up building schematics and access protocols.

"The bad news - the really bad news - is that we have to assume the entire system has been compromised by the Third Power, so if you're trying to access Eclipse Security, you can stop right now. All the sensor feeds will be untrustworthy, and you can bet that they'll be watching for any unusual logins to the system." Everyone in the room was giving Helena their full attention now. She had the same presence as the best Academicians I'd ever seen.

"The Third Power have beaten us at every turn. Chances are, they've infiltrated the Council and the police. They have every right to be confident of success." She paused to let that sink in, to hurt people's pride. "But their confidence is their weakness. We know where they're working from, and though they have control over Ascendancy Point, we have the advantage of surprise."

"What's the plan?" asked Harrison, a SigInt guy. "Network superiority operation? We put in our own sensors, then take over theirs."

Some heavy-set guy who looked like he was from the military shook his head doubtfully. "That sort of thing only works in simulations. We're up against people with some of the best military-level hardware, and they know how to use it."

"So do we," said Helena, glancing at me. "We have the Academy's expert in crypto and networking on our side, and he's already tracked them down. Fitch," she said, looking at the military guy, "your team has more combat experience than anyone else in the police. You'll work on the attack plans. Harrison, Lang, your teams will work out how to get into the building and create our own independent sensor network, and how to overwhelm theirs when the time comes. I want an estimate from all of you of when we can move in, in two hours. It's time to win."

Helena walked away as the teams clustered together and began buzzing with their new tasks. I followed her into her office, and closed the door. For a detective, it was pretty good size, although I supposed she wasn't part of the normal hierarchy. In any case, the office hardly seemed to matter to her - she spent most of her time out in the ops room anyway, so she'd left her desk and furniture huddled in one corner. Maybe it was just were the movers had left them when she'd taken the office. I turned to face her.

"Helena, I might be the Academy's expert, but I can't do magic, and neither can your guys. Ascendancy Point is practically an entire city. The Third Power could be anywhere, and we

Continued »

don't have enough time to spread our own sensors and cameras around the place."

She went behind her desk and collapsed in her chair. "I know, I know. But we don't have any other options. We'll just have to get lucky or think of something else." She looked outside into the ops room, frustrated.

"Look, I have an idea." This had been bugging me during Helena's speech. Ascendancy Point seemed like an odd location to base your operations; it was big enough to hide in, but it was very high profile. It did have one unique feature though... "We might be able to narrow things down. We know that they're only using the Relaynet for receiving messages from Earth. We don't know how they're sending messages to Earth," I said.

"So?" she replied irritably.

"So they have to be sending them somehow, back to the CRR. They won't be using the normal data networks - they know we can monitor them and do traffic analysis - that's why they used Relaynet. No, they'll be using another custom method, something suited to their location again. Ascendancy Point's over a mile high, a transmitter there could reach anywhere in the city. I think we can pinpoint their floor by figuring out how they're transmitting to."

Helena stared at me for a few long seconds. I held her gaze.

"You think this will work? I don't have many resources to spare," she asked.

"It'll work."

Helena nodded in satisfaction. "Then maybe you can do magic after all."

That was last night. Since then, we've requisitioned four extremely sensitive prototype radio antennas from the Academy and mounted them on top of tall buildings near Ascendancy Point; four will be enough to triangulate the location of the transmitter. That's the easy part.

The hard part comes earlier, and requires us to successfully search through the clamour of other radio signals and noise that bathes Perplex City to find the Third Power's messages. We've been tweaking the software radio associated with antennas and have commandeered a significant percentage of the entire computing power available in the city to match and discard all identifiable signals, but it's still hard to tell how long the search will take. It might be three hours, it might be three days. We'll see.

The work and the challenge keeps my mind occupied, away from Scarlett and what might be happening to her. The Third Power are a very smart, pragmatic organisation. I just hope that Scarlett is worth more to them alive and healthy than otherwise...

Violet doesn't have my advantage, and she just seems to lurk in the background here at the police HQ. I don't know what's going through her mind. The only good news is that Helena's teams have settled on the evening of Tuesday 30th as the time for the assault on Ascendancy Point; they think they'll need a week to set up their sensors and draw up their plans. You can keep track of what we're up to in the usual place on the Operation Bayonet page on the police intranet.

I want to thank all of you who emailed in with information about the Ascendancy Point location. Ben Forbes might have been the first, but the working supplied by others was invaluable, including Danielle Lockwood, Chris Warren, Xena, Glen Watts, Kristina Lopez, Neal Kelly, Aaron, Nathan Beardmore, Hugh O'Byrne, Peter Townsley, James Boyd and a whole host of others who helped them.

I'll let you know as soon as I have more information about the Third Power's transmissions. Chances are that we'll need your help again soon, and definitely on Tuesday 30th.

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The Path of Least Time

Struggle

Thursday, January 25 2007, 04:47 PM

It's been a struggle at every step. We've had servers overheating, bugs in our hastily-written code causing crashes, we even had to send someone up to wipe snow off the antennas - but we managed to find the Third Power's radio messages about five minutes ago.

I've been staving off sleep with caffeine and Ceretin for the past couple of days, but they're beginning to wear off. Triangulating where the Third Power are broadcasting from shouldn't be too difficult with the information we have now, but I'm worried about making a mistake, so I'm going to leave this one up to you. We need this information.

One of these days I'm going to have to write a paper about the new search algorithm we came up with - surely enough to get me back into the Academy again...

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The Path of Least Time

1111

Friday, January 26 2007, 11:49 AM

A cocktail of adrenaline and fear meant that I didn't sleep long yesterday. Lying awake in one of the cots that Helena's group had set up in a nearby room, I felt as if I was in the centre of the world, events whirling around me that would change the lives of millions of people I don't know, and one person that I do. I wondered whether I should have done anything differently.

Eventually, I closed my eyes, and exhaustion stopped me from opening them again.

A few hours later, I woke up. A shiver of disorientation ran through me, and for a second I didn't know where I was. I thought - Babel - Academy Ball - Scarlett - Helena - Police - and regained my bearings. My key was blinking with new messages, but I ignored it. The world could wait for five minutes. I got up and pulled on a T-shirt and trousers in the dark, and then walked out. It was some time late at night, so the lights were all dimmed, but I could still hear the sounds of quiet talking from down the corridor in the ops room. Perhaps half the people were still sitting at their desks, or clustered around wall displays, pointing at building plans and drawing graphics. I headed another way.

The kitchen here has all the staples of people who work in high-pressure, time-sensitive environments, with boxes of energy bars, soft drinks, milk shakes and microwave meals stacked on the floor and left open on the counter top. I grabbed a microwave meal - something with chicken in it - and tossed it inside one of the ovens, where it began to cook automatically. A glass of water and a couple of pills from the Cognivia dispenser were next. I quickly thought about what work I'd be doing in the next 12 hours. Probably nothing too analytical. I opted for a Ceretin and Synergy, and sat down at a table. Someone had left an old copy of the Sentinel on a reader. It was something about snowball fights. I realised that I hadn't been outside for the last four days.

I pushed the reader away and stared blankly at the opposite wall, waiting for my breakfast - or dinner - to cook. Someone opened the door cautiously, and Violet's head poked around it. She smiled, and sat down beside me. I nodded, not sure what to say.

"What did you take?" she asked, looking at my half-empty glass of water.

I cleared my throat. "Guess."

"Ceretin. And Cardinal."

"One out of two," I said. "I had Cardinal yesterday, needed it to do the search through the radio space. It was Synergy. I think I'll need to be a bit more creative today."

"What for?"

"I don't know. That's the point."

The microwave beeped, and I stood up to fetch a plate and cutlery. Violet kept on talking.

"You don't need to take those pills, you know," she said.

"I'm fine," I said, with my back to her.

"You didn't need them at the Academy."

"I'll be fine," I repeated, pouring the contents of the meal onto the plate. Chicken casserole with rice. It smelled good enough. I brought it to the table and stared at Violet silently while it steamed. She studied me back, inscrutably.

"What we're doing is important. We need every advantage we can get," I said finally. When she didn't reply, I began to eat. Violet pulled over the Sentinel and read it for a minute.

"I spoke to Helena... she's going to let me take part in the assault on Ascendancy Point. I need to be doing something, Kurt."

[Continued »](#)

I nodded, not looking at her.

"I'm worried about you," I heard her say.

"I know. We just need to get through this."

She looked as if she was going to say something else, then it seemed like she'd decided that she would leave it for another time, and left without a word. I finished up my meal, cleaned up and went to fetch my key. Peter Townsley had emailed while I was asleep with the results of the triangulation; this was later followed up by Lysithea, who confirmed his calculations. Both Peter and Lysithea used similar, reasonably straightforward set of calculations involving pythagoras, the cosine rule and polar co-ordinates; oddly, I received a number of emails from others that approximated the height, but were off by 50 meters or more. Still, I appreciate the help from everyone.

I jogged down the corridor to the ops room, with my key in hand and the result in my head, stopping just before the threshold of the ops room to see who was inside. This place, it's a charged place, full of dangerous energy and potential. We're standing in the middle of history, and we all know it. I took a step forward inside, and felt the effect of the Ceretin beginning to settle, like a chill on my temples.

A lot of people believe Ceretin can make you smarter. It doesn't. It just makes you as smart as you are at your best. Have you ever walked outside on a sunny, crisp day, feeling alive and alert, with your mind as sharp and fast as it could be? Or been in a state of flow, when you're completely absorbed in your work and you're smoothly and methodically breaking down all the problems in your way, where everything just makes sense? That's what it feels like.

I stepped forward again. "We have their location," I announced to the room. "The transmissions are coming from 1111 meters up Ascendancy Point. Floor 110." A few people clapped, and I saw Harrison enter the data into his system. The wall display showing the time of assault frosted over, as it began to incorporate the new factors.

As I watched it, I was startled by a faint singing coming from the green schematics of the skyscraper on a nearby wall display. I turned to face it, and overheard a conversation from Fitch's team that felt like hard, smooth pebbles. The key I was holding tasted like apples; as I turned it over in my hands, I could sense the tartness. The Synergy pill was working, crossing my senses and making new inferences and logical leaps easier. It always starts this way, suddenly carrying you away, like a rip tide.

The singing changed pitch. I looked away from my hands and saw that the wall display had cleared. The time of assault was Tuesday 30th January, 7pm GMT.

Over the last two years, you've helped me every time I've asked, and you've gone beyond what could be expected from anyone. I couldn't have hoped for better allies, or for better friends. On Tuesday, we need to attack the Third Power in Ascendancy Point, stop them from finding the Cube, and save Scarlett. It's a risky, dangerous plan, but the prize is great, and the alternative is unthinkable.

We need your help, one last time. It is up to us to end this story.

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The Path of Least Time

Rolling the Hard Six

Monday, January 29 2007, 05:25 PM

Here's the plan. Tomorrow, we're going to break into Ascendancy Point from the underground and then launch a network superiority attack; with all the bugs we've planted in the building, we'll just be able to flip a switch and take over complete control of the network. The Third Power won't notice a thing - everything in the building will appear to be normal according to their information, but in reality we'll be doctoring everything they receive. We'll make our way up to Level 110, patch into the building's sensors so we can see exactly where each person is standing, blast through the doors and stun them. Until the moment that we start shooting, they won't have any warning that we're coming. Simple.

Except...

We've had a setback. One of Harrison's team got caught by internal security while posing as a decorator in Ascendancy Point this morning, planting some network devices. She got detained, building security did a sweep of the entire area and removed all the bugs we've placed. Luckily, she remembered her cover story and pretended that she was 'merely' conducting corporate espionage, so I don't think news of this will have reached the Third Power - but it does mean that our perfectly good first plan is dead in the water.

This being a police operation, there are all sorts of contingencies. The problem is that none of them are pleasant to consider. I've seen plans that call for 'aerial insertion via jumpjet (35% chance of failure)', 'localised EMP shock (40% chance of failure)' and something profoundly scary called 'intelligent microexplosives (70% chance of failure)'. Thankfully we decided to keep it simple and stick with the reliable method of getting our team up to L110 the long way round. There's a twist though.

The bottom line is that even without network superiority, we still need some kind of network access. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, we don't want to get seen by the Third Power. We aren't going to be walking around in public spaces with full combat gear if we can help it, but there really are cameras and sensors all over the building, and we can't get up to L110 and avoid them all. We need some way of blinding the sensors in specific areas.

Secondly, assuming we don't get spotted, we still need to get up to L110. There are dozens of lifts in Ascendancy Point, and they work according to a complex system, with intelligent routing across multiple stops. We don't want to be bumping into all sorts of different people on our way up, so we're going to have to commandeer a lift. Unfortunately this also requires network access. Cue a meeting.

"How are we supposed to get network access then?" asked Helena.

"Well, there's one way that'll always work: gaining physical access to the hardware it runs on. Then you can bypass the firewalls and all that other stuff. It won't be full access, but it'll be better than nothing," I suggested.

Fitch nodded. "Makes sense to me. It's a bit risky..." he trailed off. "They have a patrol and iris scanner around the network service rooms. Nothing too tough. I'm pretty sure I could get one person in."

"Okay. We'll need a hacker who's very fast, very experienced and has good physical fitness," said Helena.

I looked at Harrison, who definitely didn't fit the 'good physical fitness' criteria. Everyone else looked at me.

Fitch clapped a hand to my shoulder. "And I bet you were worrying you wouldn't see any action tomorrow!" he beamed.

Looks like I'll definitely be needing your help tomorrow... there are more details about the operation on the police intranet. It'd be a good idea to read up on them.

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The Path of Least Time

All in

Tuesday, January 30 2007, 06:16 PM

We're heading to Ascendancy Point now. We're as ready as we can be. Everyone is quiet and focused - the jokes and bravado ended when we started checking the weapons. There's nothing else to do now except perform the operation.

There aren't any higher stakes than this. See you on the PCI within an hour.

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The Path of Least Time

The Cost

Thursday, February 1 2007, 11:42 AM

All members of the Third Power captured or killed. Scarlett rescued. Helena Frye seriously injured, along with three other team members. Two police killed.

That's the result of Operation Bayonet. A stunning victory - the end of the Third Power in Perplex City, and the end of the fear and murders and death that's been stalking us since the Cube was stolen. At least, that's what the police say. I even believe it, at least for now. The Third Power might have evaded us in the past, but this wasn't a trick or a diversion - this was their real base of operations, which they'd set up following the evacuation of the underground complex containing their portal.

They've lasted for hundreds of years. I wouldn't count them out for the long game. For now, we can breathe easy, if only for a while. I think we all need to. The attack in Ascendancy Point fried my nerves, and even though I was only a spectator to the firefight, it was enough to disillusion me about any action movie. Violet and Scarlet... they'll need some time to recover. I doubt Scarlett will ever be the same person again. She's been through too much. I just hope that she finds some way to move on and forgive.

Caine impressed me yesterday. I admit that I was furious when we spotted him by Ascendancy Point before the operation - we didn't need any distractions and to avoid him making a scene with Violet, we had to bring him along. Of course, we confiscated his key - no-one was carrying unsecured keys during the operation, otherwise it would've been trivial for the Third Power to track us.

Caine didn't know everything that was going on last night, but he understood that it was important. So while he was a serious pain in the ass while we were going through those puzzle locks on the way to the lifts, he more than made up for it by picking a fight with those guards and allowing us to get through. He could've been seriously hurt - not just in that fight, but afterwards, when he was picked up by the Third Power. I hope he'll be able to help Scarlett - she seems to trust him. At least they're both alive.

Patrick Harrison was killed during the firefight. I'd been getting to know him. He was a good guy, very smart. Harrison had barely completed basic training in firearms, but he went in with the rest of them.

There's always a cost to the victors in a battle. I hope we've paid it now.

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The Path of Least Time

The Sum of Good Intentions

Thursday, February 8 2007, 12:02 PM

I wonder what the Third Power thought of me. I can imagine Roberto Solitano, or whoever the leader of the Third Power was, smirking as he read a report of how the Academy's star scientist had been completely fooled by two agents in succession. When he walked past me in the corridors of the Academy, what did he see? Someone who didn't have the wit to look for the long solution, only the answers in front of his nose? Someone laughable?

The truth is, he probably didn't even see me. I was just another source of information, someone to keep track of in case the Academy got too close to the Third Power. Caine was spying on the whole Cube Retrieval Team, not just me, and it would've been Sente's portal that'd be the focus of his investigations. Violet and me... well, we were extra-curricular entertainment. Maybe he started getting concerned when we were at Lancewood, and obviously he would've been very careful when Scarlett was kidnapped, but I doubt we were ever taken seriously.

I visited Scarlett in hospital yesterday. I almost didn't want to... I don't like seeing her in this state. Physically, she's recovering very well. And in some ways, her mind, her character, it's still the same. It's her world that's changed. It used to be that people were basically good, that she could trust her family and friends. That safety was something you assumed as a right.

I don't know whether she'll ever feel safe again. People she doesn't know have tortured her for information she doesn't have. Her father was keeping dark secrets from her, for reasons that impacted millions. Her friend was a killer. And every time she tries to catch a breath, the world changes again.

Everyone has to grow up eventually. But it shouldn't be like this.

They say that men are always more aggressive than women, and there's only one time where that's not true. That's when a woman's children are being threatened. I've seen Violet being angry before, but I've never seen it so terrible or so focused as I did after we discovered that Caine was in the Third Power. I think Violet sees herself as being responsible for Scarlett, in place of their mother. And I think she believes she's failed.

I wasn't angry when I discovered the truth about Caine. I just thought, there's one more person who sees others as just counters on a board, points on a score. Everything he did was a lie, and he's dead to me now. Caine and Miranda, and all of the Third Power, were dazzlingly brilliant people who believed they were justified in doing anything in the service of their own goals. Anything.

I look at the Academy and the city, and I can see that the most conspicuous signs of our power and progress are the ones that are most easily destroyed. It's happened before, with the war.

And yet this city - this civilisation - has recovered. It took almost three hundred years, but we recovered and we rebuilt. We didn't have any saints, we just had millions of people with their own good intentions. People trying to make things a tiny bit better. It doesn't matter whether you succeed or fail. It matters that you tried, because otherwise, no-one else will.

We picked ourselves up, and we kept on going. That's what we always have to do.

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The Path of Least Time

Three Years

Monday, February 19 2007, 05:06 PM

Can you keep a secret?

Three years and two months ago:

"You see a symbol in a puddle of beer, and you that makes you think someone's going to steal the Cube?" I said, incredulously.

"Stop twisting my words. It wasn't just the symbol, it was the way he acted," replied Violet.

I'd just moved into a new apartment earlier that day, flush with the success - and financial security - of having made it into the Academy Special Projects division. I needed to get some fresh air after moving all my boxes, and Violet needed a stretch from having to watch me and give sarcastic comments, so we went for a walk in Magine Park.

"Maybe it was the way he threw you out of his bar."

Violet shook her head in mock sadness. "If only, Kurt. I've been thrown out of more bars than you've ever set foot in. It's not something I take personally. But this was different. I really think they're planning something."

"So what? A barman's orchestrating the most daring heist of the century in his spare time? Do you have any idea how good the security is at the Academy Museum?"

We walked on for a little while, negotiating the long grasses by the lake. Violet had claimed she knew a shortcut to the observatory, but it seemed like we were going steadily off-course.

"Fine. I'll just look into it myself then," said Violet.

I sighed theatrically. "Okay, okay. Tell you what, I'll look into the Museum security, see if there are any potential holes or exploits. You can go and... I don't know, get thrown out of more bars." Violet smiled triumphantly, and to be honest, I was feeling eager about looking into the Museum security. Special Projects members have an exceptionally high level of access and freedom.

I met up with Violet the next weekend, at a party being held by the socialite wife of some Academy fellow. During a lull in the festivities, I grabbed her for an impromptu meeting on a balcony.

"So I looked into the security at the Academy Museum," I said.

"And?" prompted Violet.

"It's good. Very, very good. Plenty of failsafes and redundancies, plus it runs on its own electrical circuit, backed up by its own generators. It's a solid combination of cutting edge tech and reliable practices."

"But?"

"But there's at least one way you could compromise the system. Maybe two. By compromise, I mean that you could get someone into the Museum undetected, get out again, and also wipe the logs. It's only theoretically possible though. I don't know whether you could do it in practice."

"So? No, wait, I'm not just going to stand here making single-word replies. Could you do it?"

I knew she was going to ask. I feigned deep and intense concentration, although I'd been mulling it over at length for the past week.

"Yes, I think so. The conditions would have to be perfect, though. Reduced security presence, distracted guards, monitoring systems at the max."

Violet nodded to herself. "Ball Night. On the 15th. That's when--"

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I touched her on the shoulder. A couple walked past the balcony window, cocktail glasses in hand, laughing at some private joke. We looked around guiltily, and Violet continued.

"That's when they said they were going to do it. A party on the fifteenth."

I leaned forward against the railings, and stared out onto the city. I hadn't been having fun at the party, and this wasn't helping matters.

"We'd better tell the police then. Or the Academy. They can increase security, post extra guards," I said.

"No! No," said Violet sharply.

I turned to look at her in surprise. "Why not?"

"They wouldn't believe us. Remember what you said when I first told you about this? A symbol in a puddle of beer. They'd just think it was Sente's daughter looking for attention. As for my dad... I don't think he wants to listen." She looked in the direction of the spires of the Academy, their lights faintly visible in the west. "We'll have to do this one ourselves."

The lights and chandeliers inside the apartment were dazzlingly bright, ruining my night vision. Yet even silhouetted against the window, I could still see the sparkle in Violet's eyes.

Three years and one month ago:

The cobblestones of the Buttered Bridge hammered against my feet, encased in gleaming black formal shoes. I ruminated on the entirely obvious fact that full black tie dress just wasn't made for running. I could see the edge of the Great Lawn in the distance, surrounded by crowds of people coalescing from the ball attractions scattered across the campus. Two minutes to reach the lawn, and another two minutes to the control box. Five minutes until the start of the fireworks. Far, far too tight.

"Ah, Mr. McAllister," said a polite voice from the end of the bridge. It sounded like Sente. I slowed down.

"Master Kiteway, good to see you," I said, attempting to control my breath. It was Sente.

"Off to start the fireworks?"

"Uh, yes," I replied.

"I must say how grateful I am that you've agreed to run the fireworks again. They were truly spectacular at last year's ball." He checked his watch - a real, old-fashioned watch - and looked up. "Anyway, don't let me keep you, we wouldn't want our visitors to remain in suspense. Good evening."

"Good evening, Master Kiteway." He began walking off briskly down the bridge. Away from the fireworks. Strange. Still, I was just glad that he didn't probe into the reason why I was running there. Telling him, oh, I was just making sure that our security systems won't notice your daughter sitting in the gallery next to the Cube... that wouldn't have gone down well. Let's say that wasn't the first or last time I had doubts about the sanity of this project.

I made it to the fireworks hut at the north end of the lawn just in time. Last year, I spent the entire time monitoring the fireworks sequence from the hut, along with a student from Natural Sciences. This year, I had volunteered to do it on my own, since I'd coded up some new software that would automate much of the procedure. No-one questioned this, partly because I was known to be a good coder, and partly because no-one wanted to be stuck inside a hut away from the fireworks. So there was my convenient alibi.

(Incidentally, I think Violet's timings of events in the Sentinel are way out. I don't know whether she did it deliberately, but the times don't make any sense. Maybe she wanted to see if anyone would notice).

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I pressed a button marked 'Begin' on a display there, and the fireworks started. While

everyone's attention was drawn upwards, I snuck out of the hut and ran through the shadows back towards the bridge.

All buildings not directly involved the festivities are locked down during the ball; security didn't want to have to deal with drunken revellers stumbling into rooms and making a mess. Since I was a member of Special Projects, this didn't apply to me, so I had set up a temporary command centre (at least, that's how I liked to think of it) in a faculty building.

When I got back there, there were some unusual readings on the Academy networks. I was expecting a certain level of unusual activity due to my own intervention, but there was something else that wasn't me. As I looked more closely at the servers concerned, a blue flash lit up the wall beside from, coming from one of my firewalls, and then suddenly processes began sprouting on all systems. Someone was attempting a network superiority attack on the Academy - a complete takeover of the systems. Security systems began to fail in cascades. It was almost graceful.

"What's going on?" asked Violet, through my earpiece.

I ignored her, typing rapidly. The intruders were destroying the Academy's security system and simultaneously setting up their own, blocking my access to the security cameras and sensors in the museum. Everything was happening far too fast.

"I don't know. Something, there's some process running... It's going faster than I can keep up with."

I mentally scanned through my options, and landed on a final, unpleasant route - I started to join the intruders in knocking down the Academy's security. I was basically helping them unlock all the doors, shut down all the alarms and wipe all the logs - but it gave me the chance to put my own monitoring systems in place.

My camera feeds flashed back online. Heat, visual and vibration sensors all registered unauthorised visitors, but they were taking time to pinpoint their location.

"Someone's coming, Vi. Just like we thought, someone's coming and I don't know how to..."

I frantically tried to wrestle control of the blast doors that surround the Cube room away from another unseen hacker, and gave up after a few seconds. The security systems were in a mess, neither of us could be able to open or close them. At that moment, the museum sensors resolved the intruder's location.

"They're coming your way through the main entrance. Run. Run!" I shouted.

I watched impotently from the cameras as Violet raced along the long gallery into the Cube room, followed implacably by the black-clad intruders. There wasn't anything I could do now except watch.

"Kurt, are you sure they're coming? I can't see anything," whispered Violet.

"They're definitely coming," I said, seeing them turn a corner. Who were they? I willed Violet to hide somewhere, anywhere. If we couldn't stop them from taking the Cube, at least Violet could save herself. Instead, suicidally, she rose up and strode over to the Cube. Just as she was lowering her hands towards it, one of the intruders walked through the Cube room entrance and saw her, raising a weapon.

She touched the Cube, and vanished.

I scanned all the different sensor feeds from the museum. She really had vanished. The intruders ran into the room, weapons at the ready, searching all the areas and then the adjoining rooms. After a minute, they returned to the Cube room to inspect the plinth, arguing. Simultaneously, they cocked their heads to one side, as if listening to someone. A few seconds later, they began to walk out of the room, one of them shaking his head angrily.

I remained focused on the room. What had the Cube done? No-one knew what it was capable

of. Maybe it had made her invisible or something. I willed Violet to suddenly reappear, safe with the Cube. But it didn't happen, and I realised that I had work to do. I did a complete restore of the security system, unhindered by anyone else; clearly the intruders' hacker had just abandoned their efforts. It was all automated, and I slumped back in my chair as a long list of files it was altering or wiping scrolled across my screen.

The fireworks finished, and a loud cheer went up. I tidied up the room, and went to rejoin the party, empty. There were old stories about the Cube. None of them ended well.

It's not unusual for people to skip work on the day following the ball. I stayed at home, shell-shocked. I just couldn't comprehend what had happened last night. Lamely, I tried calling her on her key, but it couldn't connect.

I curled up in my bed and thought back to what happened after I returned to the party. I'd stumbled towards the bar, aiming for a drink. Before I reached it, some irritatingly cheerful guy from Special Projects intercepted me and put his arm around my shoulders.

"How's it going, Kurt? Nice to have you on board in Special Projects, it was getting a bit stale," he shouted into my ear.

"Thanks," I muttered, trying to push through the crowds to the counter.

"You don't look so happy." He leaned back, frowning. "Hey, you know Sente's girl, she's supposed to be fun. Isn't she supposed to be around?"

I looked away from him, and asked for a beer. "Scarlett? She'll be around somewhere," I replied.

"Not Scarlett, I mean Violet. You know, the librarian?"

I flinched, and he started laughing. "Ah, so that's how it is! Don't worry, I won't go after her. Actually, let me give you some advice about women. See-" he began.

I shook his arm off. "Sorry, I've got a call on my key, got to go," I lied. His face reminded me of an employee roster I'd seen on the Academy directory though. "It's Tristan, right?"

"Caine. You can call me Caine." His smile tightened.

"See you around." I walked away, anywhere.

Later in the morning, I read about the break-in at the Academy from the Sentinel, and realised that I had no choices left but to call the authorities. It wouldn't be good for me, but it'd be the only way of finding out what happened to Violet.

I was on the second draft of a lengthy letter to Sente that evening when my key beeped.

"Kurt," said Violet.

I started laughing in disbelief. "Violet, what... what happened?"

And she told me.

Three years ago:

I tossed the book back from hand to hand while lying down on Violet's turquoise rug.

"I'd really prefer it that you didn't do that," said Violet.

I ignored her, and addressed the ceiling. "What would Varkin know about Wanions, and why would she write a book about it, eh?"

"Varkin is one of the Perplexian literature's most respected authors, and just because you skipped your literature classes in favour of playing with your key doesn't mean it's not important."

"Right. But it's still about a saucy butcher boy," I pointed out. Mid-flight, Violet snatched the book away from me.

"That's a first edition, and it's expensive. So is the rug," she snapped.

I sat up, feeling my aching back click. Violet's living room came into focus, and I could see the rain streaming down her windows. She was busying herself with reordering her bookcase yet again. "Fine, fine. But it's very orthopaedic. You're a librarian, do you know what that word means?"

"It means, shut the hell up Kurt, and tell me what my dad said."

"He's setting up a special team to find the Cube, within Special Projects. You know the Academy said that they'd pinpointed it to Earth a couple of weeks ago?" Violet rolled her eyes and nodded. "They've figured out a way to communicate with them."

"What? How?"

"I don't know. Some wormhole thing, it's high energy physics. Bottom line is that they can send messages to Earth's networks." I reached over to grab my glass of wine, and saw my reflection in a mirror. I looked pretty tired. I felt a lot worse.

"So, he's going to tell Earth about Perplex City and the Cube? Give them the tech to locate it? Hmm..." Violet thought it through. "Wait, that's not so good."

"Well, he's not doing that. The Council has prohibited any kind of technology transfer, even if it would help to find the Cube. Earlywine said that Earth was screwed up enough without us giving them extra ways to blow each other up." I gulped down some of the wine.

"Bloody Earlywine," murmured Violet, studying two books.

"It's not clear that coming out and telling Earth would work, anyway. They probably would think it was just some bizarre hoax or game. So Sente's idea is to present Perplex City to them using puzzle cards, and offer a prize for finding the Cube. Two million lecks."

"It could be two billion lecks and it wouldn't help," said Violet. "They won't find it. It's in the middle of nowhere, and you just said that they can't send any technology to Earth."

"I know, it's bizarre. He doesn't normally do these long shots, but I guess it's the only thing that could work. Maybe he hopes that Earth will figure out how to build Cube finding tech on their own, or we can pinpoint it remotely."

Violet slotted a couple of books in, stepped back and looked at the shelves critically. After a few seconds, she sat down on a sofa, satisfied.

"Great. So my dad really has no plan," she sighed.

"That's right, and I have to help him." Violet stared at me. "I'm on the Cube Retrieval Team."

"The what? That's a ridiculous name. Here's an idea. If you're on Sente's team, you could contact someone on Earth, get them to dig up the Cube."

"Apart from the fact that all communication's monitored, who are we supposed to trust? And why would they do it, just because some random person emails them about some mystical Cube in a wood in England?" I leaned back, irritated. "But maybe—"

Violet was nodding, and continued excitedly. "The cards. We could slip information into them. That doesn't mean we'll be able to trust them, though, and even if we could, there's still the real thieves. Whoever those people were, they're good. We might be able to get past the Academy, but they could always be listening in."

"Yeah, they're good," I said, thinking back to the night of the ball.

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Violet continued, on a roll. "So we make the clues hard. Really hard, so that you'd need hundreds, thousands of people working together to figure them out. Any one of them could

find the Cube. Those are better odds than before.”

“I don’t know,” I replied, rubbing my neck distractedly. “Who says we can trust them?”

“I think we can. And there’s always my dad’s project of introducing them to Perplex City. I’m sure the Cube Retrieval Team—” she guffawed at that point - “can sort that out.”

I stared out of the window. It was such a desperate, reckless plan.

“We’re going to have to play the long game,” I said.

“I know. It’s not going to be easy. But we can’t trust anyone.” She looked at me sadly.

One year and ten months ago:

I sighed, circling a wave three puzzle card on a tablet. My office at the Academy was full of prototype puzzle cards, bee keeping manuals, Earth star charts, cryptography textbooks and masses of reports left by other scribes. I’d already been in the office for two days straight.

The impossibly high expectations of the city - and the resulting media frenzy - had forced the seven members of the Cube Retrieval Team to withdraw into the confines of the Academy. Sente was unusually absent much of the time, away in committee meetings or research labs, which removed a lot of the control we had at the beginning. Two things could’ve happened next. Either we would gel into a tightly-knit team that worked together well, or we would implode quite spectacularly under the pressure.

Luckily it was the former that came to pass, largely thanks to the Academy psychologists who vet people for high-value roles like this, just like for your astronauts on Earth. The same psychologists regularly monitored our workload, making sure that we were pushed to our limit - but no further. It was a well-run, well-organised operation that seemed to be working fine.

What the psychologists didn’t know was that one of their puzzle scribes had a considerable amount of extra-curricular work.

Violet and I had concluded a few months ago that we needed another way of communicating more directly with Earth. Through some monumental feat of persuasion, Violet had convinced Sente to allow her to set up a weblog viewable from Earth. That was the easy part. The hard part was screening it from Perplex City; it’d be no good talking about our investigations into the ‘real’ thieves after the Cube if anyone could look at it. This meant setting up an additional firewall on the Earth/Perplex City datalink - and keeping it invisible.

It was difficult. But it was perfect, as far as I could tell. And as soon as it had negotiated the protocols with the Centre for Reality Research - which was now an open box to me, after my infiltration - it would all be done.

We had other plans beyond a weblog for Violet and myself; we intended to set up another website, the Library of Babel. It could be another year before this happened, but we knew we had to take our time.

Twenty cards later, and my key beeped. The firewall was set up.

Seven months ago:

Anna’s memorial service was one of the most painful experiences of my life: seeing her husband breaking down during his speech, asking why she had been taken from him. Why had this happened? Her children didn’t understand either.

Violet was sitting with Caine for most of the ceremony. He seemed to take it badly. Of all the CRT, he’d been the closest to her and I thought, although he wouldn’t say it, that he blamed himself for her death, for not getting to her fast enough.

Afterwards, Caine went over to talk to Fleming and the kids, and I went home. Later on, Violet asked me to come over for a walk in the park. It was a warm, gorgeous summer’s day, with couples lying in the grass, talking softly. The world seemed to be saying, look, life goes

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on. But so does guilt.

"Do you feel guilty?" I said suddenly.

Violet didn't say anything. I turned and saw a tear running down her cheek. We stopped, and I hugged her. It seems like the sort of thing you should do in these situations.

After a while, I said, "I don't feel guilty about Miranda. I never have." This was a lie. "But," I continued, "we can't lose any more people. Not a single one."

"Not a single one," repeated Violet.

"This secret is killing people. Maybe more people would die if we told what really happened, where the Cube is, but we don't have the right to make that decision." I squinted at the sun unhappily. "She just died, and no-one even knows why."

Violet had always been the one who had insisted we keep the secret, no matter the cost. Even when Cymbalisty and Miranda died, she was adamant. But now, it seemed to be too much.

"Is that a deal?" he said. "Whatever happens, we won't waste a single other person?"

We shook on it.

Now:

And half a year later, we came close to the wire. Scarlett kidnapped and her father in prison, Violet out of her mind with worry with the secret, and my firewall potentially breached. But we knew we couldn't tell anyone. Publishing the location on my website would have alerted the Third Power immediately; we know that for sure, given the depth and skill of their penetration. None of us saw Caine or Miranda coming. What's to say that all the people reading this are trustworthy? Nothing.

But enough of you are, and that's what counts. You've saved my life enough times, and you deserve better than a lie - yet we had no other choice. You'll know Violet and I have already paid a heavy cost for what we've done, and even with a shiny medal and the Cube returned, I don't know whether it was worth all the deaths. I hope it was.

As for myself, I've been reinstated back at the Academy, in Special Projects. Not everyone agrees with this, but Sente insisted. I haven't spoken to him properly; he seems to be avoiding me, but I could be imagining that.

I'd like to say things are back to normal, but they aren't. There are only five people left in the Cube Retrieval Team, which is soon to be disbanded after all our reports are written.

Can you keep a secret that has killed your friends? A secret that could kill millions more?

I can.