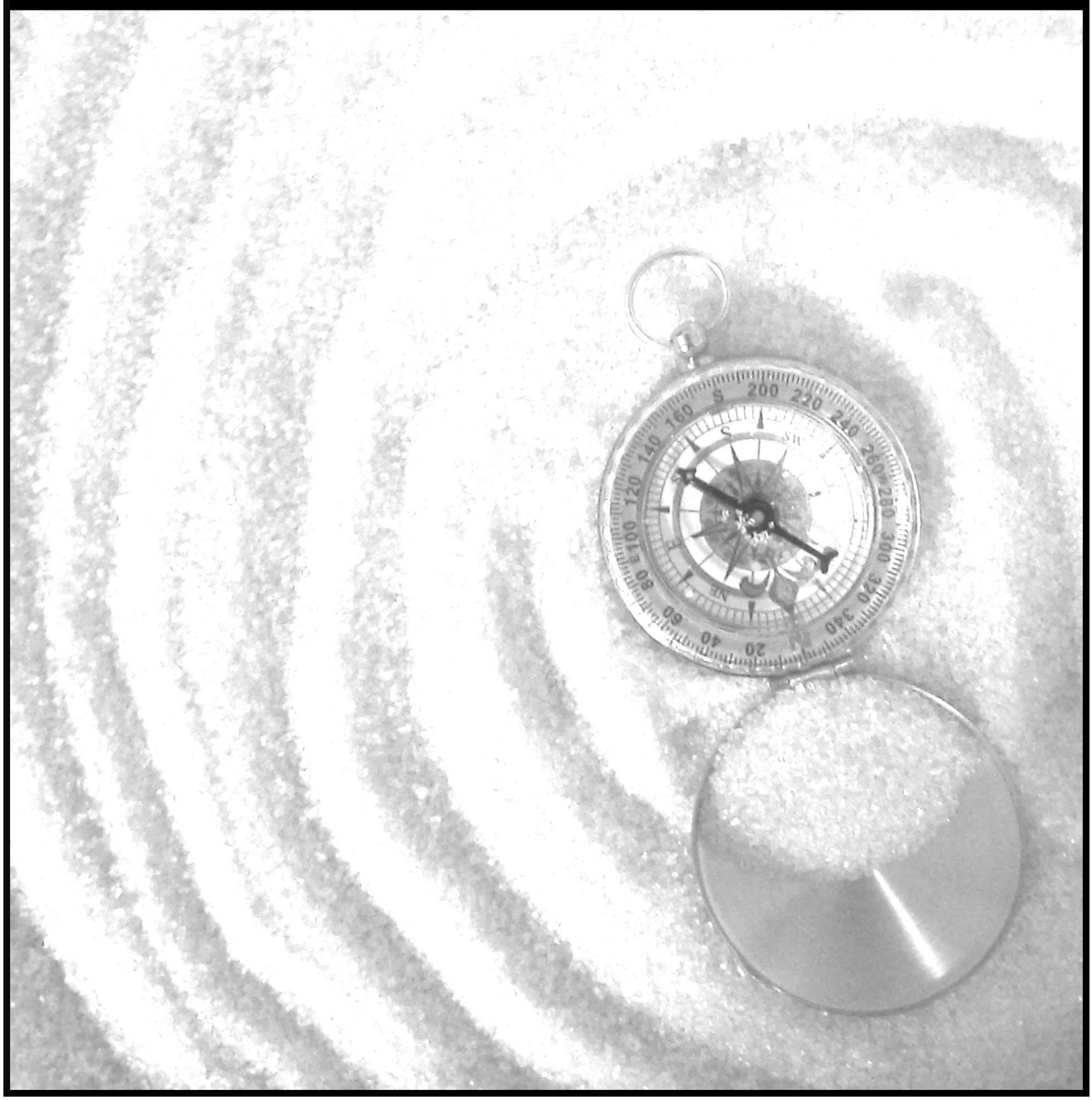
Westwarden

by

Mordechai Lazarus



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by Mordechai Lazarus
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Us folk who live here on Elena know about the jokes. Heck, we tell 'em ourselves. Everybody knows that nobody would have ever ended up on this planet if it weren't for the mining and the ranching back when. Even nowadays everything here would probably have been left to be blown away into the plains if it weren't for the visitors out to the Sage Sea since they put them big resorts up. Folks here know that Elena ain't much more than a poky frontier world, that has more dust an' sand than anyone could ever want, all that sand that gets into everything, and it ain't exactly a joke that Elenites always crunch when they talk because their mouths are always full of grit. Along with the sand that creeps everywhere, there's also them unusual magnetic fields here on Elena an' machines that do their things elsewhere don't hardly ever work proper around here. 'Cause we're so far off, an' 'cause of the fields and the sand everywhere, things tend to be simpler on Elena. We ain't always got the latest tech out here, or the latest fashions, or any of that sort of thing. What we do got, and I say this as a lady born and bred right here, third generation of the Pipsikov family - we've got the most beautiful damn sunsets in the whole universe. I ain't no complete bumpkin - I've seen all them videos that come out of the Homelands, and the light just isn't the same there. Here on Elena the sun goes down with bright streaks of colour all across the sky, and no matter how tough a day you've had struggling against the wind an' the dust an' the heat, it's like Elena is tipping its hat to us and lifting our spirits just a mite.

'Course, I don't even live in one of the big towns here, and there's good reason for that. I'm miles from Arcborough - the biggest city hereabouts. Gramps and Grandma built this place, and Pa an' Ma added to it, this ramshackle collection of rooms put up an' nailed onto each other as the mood struck them. It's just me here now, out in the scrublands, me and Socrates, and I never get visitors here out at the Shack, as folks call it. Like I said afore, the solitude suits me just fine. I've got the family condition, y'see. Way back when Gramps was a strappin' an' foolish young fellah, he was a soldier, like lots of other poor young folk who couldn't think of anyway better to earn a living than getting shot at. Well, before he served in the Finites Wars, he signed up to get the Injection. The clever bunch who developed this Injection said it was something about experimentin' with new senses. Grandpa didn't really care one way or another, he was just up for the pay. Like all the Injections of that age, it was designed to change a body so they'd pass it on to their children. After the war, Grandpa moves to Elena and meets Grandma and they have my Ma, who gets the full whack of that genetic stuff. Poor Ma. She inherits a bunch of problems from that ol' Injection. The official folks called it enhanced psionic perception, but my family always called it 'tecting and 'cerning. Folks with that Injection can perceive matters in a way regular folk cannot. It's like a combination of being able to sniff and see and hear things not like your regular folks. Y'can kinda feel things all around you, all the time, an' it's every which thing around you, too. A cerner can tell what you've eaten and how much your blood is pumping and all manner of traits invisible to regular folk. It's kinda like there's just these constant floods of information, crashin' into you like rough sense waves. Poor Ma couldn't handle being like that. She struggled with it her whole life. That's why we lived out in the Shack, far away from all that stuff you can cern in big cities. But Ma still saw so much, too much. Pa tried to help Ma, but eventually she couldn't handle it anymore and she took her own life. We don't talk about it none. I try not to even think too much about how Ma ended up.

Me and my brother Andreas also inherited the Injection and the cerning, and poor ol' Pa tried to make sure it didn't break us the way it did Ma. He didn't have the most success with Andreas, but he tried to train and focus me - taught me tracking an' hunting an' the like - things to help me focus an' concentrate so I could ignore everythin' that was too much around me. Andreas never went in for that sort of thing much. Nowadays, he goes his own way, but I'm happy to live out here with Socrates in the middle of nowhere, keeping apart from the noise as much as possible. It ain't a perfect life, but what is? I'm just right glad to be left to my own devices.

I sighed when I looked at Socrates' stores, and on my way into the living room at the heart of the Shack, I noticed the phone is blinkin' away. Like most tech on Elena, it's old, big, an' ugly, but reliable. I pressed down the play button and I hear the thin, bored voice of Grish, the desk-boy of my sometime-colleagues, the duly appointed police force of Arcborough.
"Warden Pipsikov," said Grish's recorded voice, "We got some work for you. If you'd be so kind as to be nearby the cliff-face out in the Pools by thirteen-hundred hours, we'd be ever so grateful." Grish swallowed and made a clicking noise on the message, "Sheriff Khan will be there to meet ya, and expects you to be prompt, of course."
Hell, if Khan was going to venture out from her air-conditioned office, it must be something full of juice an' serious. Well, a woman has to eat, and Socrates gets pretty grumbly when he ain't had his feed too, so as the local warden, I was gonna have to saddle up and head on over to the Pools an' see what was what.
That said, ain't nobody ever going to hurry a Pipsikov too much, as my Pa used to say to my brother and me, and one of the fine things about living out here in the sandscrubs of Elena is that there ain't nobody but Socrates who might try. I got my coat and broad-brimmed hat on, stashed some water, and tucked away the family pistol we call the Masher in a pouch inside the coat. I headed outside and fitted the cracked straw hat over Socrates' long ears. He gave me a look.
"Yup. Sorry, boy, but we gotta head to work."
Socrates lowered his head in resignation. He's an understanding burro. That's why he's good company out here in the Shack. Like me, he'll bear the occasional bit of business if it means we get left in peace for the most of the day.
I got Socrates set, hop on, an' we head out at a slow'n'steady pace toward the Pools.

I sense - I cern the signs of people long before I can squint 'em out. An angry blot of indigestion and tension resolved itself into Sheriff Khan, stomping about the Goliath-sized tank of her automobile. Khan's truck looked all shiny in the mid-day sun, with brand spankin' new red-and-gold paint in the Arcborough law colours. Lucky, Khan couldn't see what was happening under that purty paint job. I could cern that the sand and the fields were already working their slow war on the bits and parts of the automobile. Khan stopped stomping when she caught sight of me. She wiped sweat from her thick neck and adjusted her collar.
"Sheriff," I said, with a nod at the car, "It break down much down on the way?"
Khan scowled.
"At least it got me here on time, unlike your damned donkey, Pipsikov," she said.
I smiled. I was biased, I knew. My family had been using burros to get around Elena for a while now. They had done been bred an' genengineered for this world, an' even if he didn't have his winnin' disposition I'd still trust an ass like Socrates any day of the week over a fancy pile of shine an' sparks.
I didn't ask why Khan had come all the way out here. I cerned how taut she was. More so than usual, an' that was sayin' somethin'. Khan was a Homelands woman stuck out here on Elena, and she hated every minute. She told me to follow. I tied up Socrates, leavin' him to whatever philosophies burros think on when left to themselves. Soc sighed and I patted his nose.

Khan led me down the crunchy path of the Pools, the big stagnant lakes of dirty water spreadin' out to the side of the cliffs. Them cliffs'd been gnawed away at by the ol' departed mining machines, an' had slowly bled out the thick liquid of the Pools. We got closer to some of the dusty, broken, former site buildings an' the scraggly huts built into the side of the hill facing the still, black lakes, an' a bunch of sense bubbled up over me. After the quiet of the Shack, it was starting to build up. Adjustin' to civilization was sometimes a mite tricky. I was familiar an' comfortable with what I could tect about the Shack. Wherever you find people, on the other hand, you got a whole lot of other movements an' materials springin' up everywhere that presses on my mind. Right now, f'r'instance, I could cern that there were people hunkered in

bunches in dwellin's dug into the rock by the Pools, hidin' there from us law folks.
"They're bein' quiet." I said, lookin' toward where the residents of the Pools were set.
Sheriff Khan cleared her throat. She led me down the old mine path to a spot at the bottom of the cliff.
A dead body was slumped there.
"Too bad," I said with a shake of my head.
Khan grunted in agreement.
Looked like she had been the young side of middle age, before she had wound up a corpse. She was wearin' a city suit and a legionary cap, so pro'ly local. Someone dressed like that maybe worked between the plains and the city. She was all dressed in linen office wear - but practical stuff for being out and about in places like the Pools where the temperature gets varied, while still lookin' her best in the office back in Arcborough.
There was a big knife right in her guts, pinning her slumped body towards the bright cliff.
"Reported by the locals," grumbled Khan.
I sniffed, trying to ignore the sense of all the people hiding on the edges.
The knife in her looked to be made of somethin' organic, maybe hard bone, and the handle was wrapped in a kinda rough leather.
I sighed. I recognised the style of the blade. I let my cernment wander over the handle.
"No fingerprints," I said.
Khan looked disgusted.
"Lucky guess," she growled. Like most people on Elena, the Sheriff don't know about me being Injected. We don't like to spread it about the place, especially after what happened to Ma. Our business is our business.
"Didn't expect you all the way out here, Sheriff," I said, "People die, an' sometimes get killed, even here. Ain't no reason for you to put in a personal appearance."
"It's a murder, Warden Pipsikov," Khan grunted. She stood up straight an' jerked her head at the huts dotted all over the place. "In the top levels of the city, dealing with places like the Pools is the political talking point this year. Some of the Founding Families have got an interest in all this, for some damn reason."
"Rich folk needs hobbies too," I said with a shrug. Behind us I could tect the vibrations that came off Deputy Moroz's shamblin' walk. A lanky foal in a policeman's uniform, he did most of the Sheriff’s running around and was too green to complain too much of it.
He gave me a shy grin.
"'Ello, Pips," he said.
His stomach was twisting on itself. I reckon he'd skipped breakfast an' missed lunch an' couldn't wait to get out of here.
"I can take it from here, Sheriff," I said, "My ward, after all. You fine folk head back to town an' git yourselfs a nice cool drink."
Khan's skin was prickling in the heat and while she made a few noises to show me who was boss, she was as keen to leave as her Deputy.
"Deputy Moroz has taken statements from the locals," Khan growled.
Moroz bobbed his head apologetically.
"Well, Pips," Moroz mumbled, "As you might imagine, they don't want much to be talking to the law around these parts. I did manage to get out of 'em that the dead lady is a Ms. Magera. She was some sort of manager for the Foundation of Economical Environment or somesuch."
"That's one of the pet departments of the Founders at the moment, Warden Pipsikov, hence the interest from the city," said Sheriff Khan, suckin' her teeth, "We need this handled carefully, Warden, clear? You have got to twist the local Amphibs' arms without getting them mad, and get this all done clean and sharp to keep the Founding Families in Arcborough positively goddamn radiant with happiness."
"Shoor," I said, "Y'all get on back."

Khan looked dubious, but she knew that even if I looked after my ward different from how she would have liked, I was reliable. She knew my record, even if she did think the Elenite sand was too deep in my head to ever make me presentable an' civilized-like.
"Ambulance will be along at the end of the day to get the body and evidence," Khan said as she struggled into the truck, "Don't let any of the locals touch anything until they get here, Warden Pipsikov."
"See ya, Pips. Grish will send you the notes when he's got 'em done," Moroz said from the other side of the machine.
"Shoor," I said, although I was pretty certain there wasn't anything useful in them notes. That's why we got wardens here on Elena. If you're just livin' in one of them big cities, you ain't going to know the comin's an' goin's of all the scattered settlements, towns, bands, gangs, packs, an' camps all across the wide Occide plains. Us wardens look after the law not just in places like Arcborough, but in all that space around the big cities where most of Elena is to be found.
The Sheriff’s machine spun up until it was makin' a whining sound and it whizzed on across past Kabalo an' back into Arcborough, leavin' a cloud kicked up in its wake.

I walk on slow over to the pile that used to be Manager Magera. I cern she's been dead maybe fourteen, fifteen hours. There are the remains of what look like some sort of booze in her gut, and a decent amount at that. It's hard to separate the drink out from all the decomposition that's started inside her, but the stuff has a feel that reminds me of old moss for some reason. Her hands were kept pretty clean for someone who works in places like the Pools. That took some effort from Magera. She didn't like letting the grit build up under her nails. Magera might have worked out of city, but she didn't want people around these parts to think she was plainsfolk. Nothing much else was on her. It took me a while to ignore the cerning and focus on her face with my own two eyes. She don't look like anything much. Her mouth was just a touch open, like someone had told her she'd died and she took it like she was told a mildly surprisin' story.

I took another good look and tect at the knife sticking out of Manager Magera. Khan and the city police weren't going to miss something that obvious. There weren't no doubt about it. It was an Amphib knife, and those folks are pretty touchy about ever giving up their blades to anybody else. These kinda knives was home-made an' had kind of a sentimental an' traditional value amongst them. This was going to mean trouble. Worse still, I reckon I recognised this particular poker. I straightened up and scanned over the huts. Used to be a mining and processing spot here, with all sorts of work an' machinery at the go, at least 'til it was cheaper to move the whole thing elsewhere in Elena. Now all that was left was a gash cut into the cliff, a whole bunch of giant pools of nasty water, and a bunch of Amphibs and similar folk who had worked the Pools and now were left behind here to live in the mess.
I could tect the outlines of some locals who were still hunkered down an' watchin' me. I found an ugly rock and sat myself down.
"I ain't going anywhere, and I know y'all are in there. I don't mean to intrude on you now, but I got a job to do, an' you may not have talked to the city law, but I'm going to wait right here until you come out and talk to me, y'hear? I give you my word I'll do this with as little fuss an' trouble to you as I'm able. Y'all know me, and you know I don't go back on my word and I've got no time for causin' more strife than is justly needed."

There was a pause as the hidden folks talked to one another. They were stirrin'. Socrates came over, chewin' on his rope an' I gave him a pat on the side.
"Is Joe here?" I called out again, "I need to have a particular word with him. Come on out now, else I'm liable to start singin' to while away the time, and not even my burro here finds that too pleasant."

A group of three Amphibs came out to meet me. They were all decked out in overalls. Amphibs are from an Injection too. One that was supposed to make future generations of explorers - kids who could live in almost any conditions on the distant new places far from the Homelands. Mostly, the Amphibs was sent to the crappy places nobody else wanted to go, 'cause they were genengineered for it and 'cause they were usually from poor families who had also taken the Injection in the first place because they needed the money.
The Amphibs' skin glistened in the sun, all different rainbows of colours. Unlike what me and my kin has got, Amphibs can't hide their Injection. They've all got some kinda scales for skin, which means their hide is like armor and plenty tough.
The tallest of the three eyed me up. It was hard to tell age for their folk with your peepers, but the shimmer in her skin told me she was some kind of elder here.
I stood up and nodded at her.
"Ma'am," I said, "I'm Warden Pipsikov."
She stared at me some more. The two boys either side of her chewed at the inside of their mouths.
"Howdy, Warden. We heard of you all right, and they say you ain't the worst, for law."
"Thank you kindly, Ma'am."
"I'm Nokai. These here's my boys."
The boys made a noise at me. It weren't a welcomin' noise.
"You know this dead lady, Ma'am?"
Nokai exhaled through her teeth.
"Yup. She was some busybody from the city. Said she was here to help manage communities and improve our lot, but I don't recall her doing much good for us."
Her two boys were simmering with resentment. I stared off to the oily water. It ain't that I was tryin' to be ill-mannered, but people can get too full with all sorts of signs, and when the cerning starts to get to my head, it helps me to look at something more settlin'.
"Joe about?"
"We don't know no Joe," snarled the boy on Nokai's right. Heck, you don't need no enhanced extra perceptry sense or nuthin' to tell this kid was lying.
Nokai frowned at her boy an' turned to me.
"Whatchya want him for?"
I looked at the ground in front of her.
"I used to know him, a ways back. My Granma was part of sumthin' called the Reading Society. That bunch back in the day who'd go about the place tryin' to get some learnin' into younguns. I went on some of Gran's trips to round these parts. Met Joe when we weren't hardly nothing but babes."
Nokai stared an' considered, taking the measure of me.
"I ain't gonna sugarcoat it for you, Ma'am," I said, "I know Joe is in a lot of trouble, and I can tell you got the sense to see it too. It's his knife that kilt the Ms. Manager, weren't it?"
"What if it were?" said the shorter of Nokai's lads.
"I know your folk make those knives theirselves. Like a sign of growin' into an adult and such. Seems to me fair unlikely anyone would just lend one of them knives out to any ol' person like it was a breadknife."
"That don't mean Joe had anything to do with this, Warden," said Nokai quietly.
"Afraid city law won't quite see it that way, Ma'am. If you let me know where I can find Joe, I promise to treat him fair. If you let the town crowds find him, and they will find him eventually, it could mean a whole lotta trouble for your folk. You know there are some of them in the city who ain't too fond of your kin and friends livin' out here in the Pools."
Both her boys sneered. They hadn't ever seen much of a fair shake from anybody on Elena or in the whole wide universe, so they weren't expectin' one now. Their ma Nokai was a little more even-mind an' patient than her kids, an' nodded at me after a while.

"There's a hoard-hole out by the edge of the gum forest, hidden amongst a bunch of big rocks, look like giant marbles. Joe's out there."
I thanked Nokai.
"I'm takin' a chance that you're fair, Warden," she said with an edge that made her boys smile, "Don't let me hear otherwise."
"I'll do my level best, Ma'am," I said and climbed atop Socrates.
"You probably won't find the hoard anyways," the taller boy muttered at me, "Not out there."
"Don't worry about that, kid," I called over my shoulder as Socrates trotted off, "Leave the findin' to me."

2.
I knew the gum forest well enough - all scrabby and twisted, the sort of thing that took well to Elena when the Founders brought it over, an' Socrates and I found the rocks without too much trouble. I sit on Soc's back and focus on cernin' the area until I can find tracks shiverin' an' obvious leading a path between some of the giant marbles. I leave Socrates to chew on whatever he can find and check the Masher is still holstered in my coat. It ain't nice to walk in with yer gun ready, but it's safer to start out thinkin' the worst. I knew Joe back in the day, but that don't mean I know him now. The tracks I sensed led down into a hidden tunnel.
I shuffled down the narrow path. It was plenty dark down here, but that don't worry me none. I don't need to see with my eyes to know where the walls of the cave are and the shape of the ground. I got a tingling map in my head.
It smelled damp. Looked like the floor of the cavern down here has filled up with rain over the years. That's a pretty good way to keep outsiders out. Amphibs don't worry so much about being underwater. Still, I weren't about to try to wade my way through all that water. Too dangerous. I reached out to see if I could tell if Joe was about.
"Joe?" I called, my voice echoin' in the cave, "Warden Pipsikov here. Some of the folk at the Pools told me I might find you down here. We need to talk, Joe. Things look bad for you, but I guess you wouldn't be down in this damp hole if you didn't already know that."
He was coming closer, examining me in the dark.
"Howdy, Joe," I said when he had silently creeped up to within just a few feet.
I could tect that he jumped a little in the dark.
"Pips," Joe said, lettin' out his breath, "Guess that must be you. You're still Spooky, hey? Noways anybody else could find me in this here gloom."
"You got somewhere we could sit and talk, Joe?"
"Sure, Pips. Anythin' for you."
Joe looked around wary for a moment, but when he was satisfied it was just me he had to deal with, he waved an arm to a little alcove on the edge of the water and bowed.
I followed him over and took a spot on a low rock ledge. He fished out a small waterproof lantern and switched it on a low setting. At least he hadn't tried to run from me. That was somethin' in Joe's favour.
"Git ya a drink, Pips? Something to eat? Alls I've got is water and dried smokefish, but I don't want word to be gittin' around that I'm a bad host."
I took my hat off and laid it on my lap.
"Thank you kindly, Joe, but no thank you. I've had your fish before, and I'm afraid we don't have time to sit here all day chewin' at it."
He gave a tense smile and then lowered his head like he had a whole lot of unseen weight stacked up there.
"Now, I ain't going to insult you, Joe, by pretending we don't know why we are here. A lady was found stabbed in the Pools with your knife in her."
Joe groaned and slumped some more.
"Hell," he said, "It had to be you who ended up Warden around these parts, ey, Pips? If it had been anybody else it would have taken 'em a devil of a long time before they

started pointin' the finger at me."
"Kind of you to say so, Joe."
"I know everyone's gonna think it was me, Pips, but I promise you I had nuthin' to do with what happened to her. I ain't no damn angel, Pips, I've had more'n' my share of trouble and foolishness, but I ain't no damn murderer."
"So why hide then?"
Joe barked a hollow laugh.
"My knife, ain't it? Ain't no denying that. Even if I'd got it back before you showed, others had seen it. No other like it in the world. Who's going to believe a low-down like myself didn't have anythin' to do with this? I ain't got no damn fancy air-conditioned home or nice clothes and money to make people listen to what I got to say. I live in holes, Pips, and do whatever I need to make sure I eat."
"So how did the knife end up in Ms. Magera?"
Joe shrugged.
"I swear to you high'n'low, Pips, I got no damned idea. Someone musta stole it."
He was tense and twisted with anxiety, but I couldn't tell if it was fear or guilt, or maybe both.
"You know Ms. Magera?"
Joe grunted.
"Shoor. We all know her over at the Pools. A nose from the city. Did surveys and the like, talkin' to people an' takin' notes like she were gradin' us all. She was out at the Pools a fair bit, botherin' me all the time. She said she was sent from the important city folks to come lookin' to improve the neighborhood or somesuch foolishness."
"Think of any reason someone would want to stab her?"
"Didn't know her that well, Pips, but I saw it meant trouble for me that she was killed with my knife, and it had already been reported by the time I found out, so it were too late for me to do something about the whole damn thing."
"So you thought you'd hide out in one of these boltholes?" I shook my head.
"I know it sounds dumb to you, Pips, but I needed somewhere to think."
As he wrung his hands, I could cern something glitterin' on the other side of the cave water, stacked up neat-like an' hidden, something familiar.
I jerked a thumb at the bolthole concealed behind the water.
"So what you got stashed in there, Joe?"
He shifted uncomfortably.
"This and that, Pips, it ain't my hoard, so I couldn't rightly say."
I leaned back on the cavern wall. I could tect remnants of the stuff on his hands. Just trace bits an' pieces you couldn't see, but I could cern it there glitterin'.
"I could probably rightly say, Joe. I could rightly say that you've been handling some unrefined Fugue-juice, an' recent too."
Joe's eyes widened.
"Ah, hell, Pips, why'd it have to be you?"
At least he had the respect not to deny it.
"Now, some folks joke that our home ain't got all the law an' civilization of the rest of the universe quite yet, but we do got some nice laws already, an' you may have heard that there Fugue is an illegal substance, Joe. I forget what its real long chemical name is, but I do remember that you can take the pure stuff and make all sorts of recreational and professional drugs that the state tends to frown on folks usin'. Heck, I hear in its pure form, it's strong enough to even give a kick to hardy folk like yourself."
Amphibs filter out poisons better than most, which means that when they want to intentionally poison themselves, regular booze and smoke don't do nothing for 'em. Fugue is strong enough to knock 'em out of reality for a bit.
Joe twisted his neck like he was wishin' to squirm right out of there. I just stared at him.
"Lissen, Pips, I can't make you believe me, but I tell you, I swear to you on my Ma's grave, I moved some stores about for somebody. I own that I didn't have any

inclination to ask, but I also didn't have the first idea what was in those cases. It was because I had done that little bit of work that I knew this here hoard might be a good place to collect my thoughts when I saw Ms. Magera dead by my knife, and ol' Nokai agreed with me."
I nodded. I didn't believe him, but I didn't disbelieve neither.
I stood up.
"Here's what we're goin' to do, Joe. You are going to sit tight here. I ain't ready to turn you into the city law just yet, and if they got hold of you just at this moment, they might be liable to jump to some fool conclusions about you before I got all the facts. It'd kinda make it hard for me to get at the truth, see? Don't try to run off, Joe. You know I can find you. You seen me track hares when we was young, and I reckon I'm a mite better at seeing the comings and goings of things nowadays. You just sit tight, and wait, and if you've done nuthin' wrong, I'll find out, and if it's the other thing, I'll find that out."
Joe stared at me and I thought for a minute that if he decided to knock my brains out here, I wasn't entirely sure if I could reach the Masher holstered in my coat before he got his mitts on me, and that'd be the end of this Pipsikov.
But then something in him loosened. That angry afeared snake in his back quietened down and I could see the Joe me an' my brother had played with when we was kids, scratching about the scrublands. That Joe looked at you funny sometimes, but would rather sit in company than knock a soul down. There wasn't much left of that ol' Joe in this big, tight-eyed one, but I could still see some few remains of him, just little embers, but maybe enough.
"One last thing, Joe, and I know you ain't going to like it, but you've gotta tell me who had you move the Fugue-juice in this here hoard. And tell it true, Joe, for your sake, else I'll know, and it'll go hard for you."
"Geez, Pips, I remember when you was just a skinny little thing. Look at you now."
"The name, Joe."
He swallowed hard. I let the silence hang there for a while around him.
"Yer right, Spooky," he said finally, "I-I don't like it, and it won't do me much good if it gets out that I'm telling tales to wardens. But even I ain't such a fool that I can't tell that's a better hot place than gittin' stuck with murder." He cricked his neck from side to side and ran his tongue about his mouth like he was tryin' to find what he wanted to say. "It were, well, to speak plain, it were a fellow named Golo got me the work."
That rang like it might be true. I'd heard of Golo. He was a petty smuggler and all-purpose ratbag who mostly worked for a bunch in the drug, robbery, an' general extortion trade, a band that gave themselves the highfalutin name of the Last Sunset Gang. The Last Sunset liked to use down-on-their-luck Amphibs an' other folks who couldn't say no to some coin for their schemes, so if it were truth, it'd square with Joe endin' up in this hoard.
"You know where to find Golo?"
Joe shook his head. Don't think he'd fess up that far even if he did know. He'd already told me more than he wanted to, an' he was worried now. He was wonderin' if he had put too much faith in the memory of two kids.
I was wonderin' the same thing.
"I got nuthin' to say on that, Pips," Joe said, lookin' at me askance, "But I reckon if you're looking to hunt down a fellow with a finger in the drug trade, you'd best talk to some of those that you might call part of that whole scene."
I got the hint about who he's talkin' about. Joe aimed a low blow, prob'bly because he's scared and wants to get some kinda control back with a little needle at me. Can't say I don't get ruffled a little, but the scandal in the Pipsikov family ain't exactly a secret.
I kept my face still and tried to block out how Joe's insides twitch and tense.
I ain't gonna react. You can't let everything outside yerself call the shots. I been trying to keep the cernin' under control for my whole life, an' I sure as heck ain't

goin' to let one little nervous remark from Joe get to me.
I told him to stay put once again as I headed back to Socrates. I was hopin' repeating the order might make it sink in. I couldn't be sure Joe wouldn't end up doing something reckless if he gets to thinkin' how tight the noose is around his neck for this dead woman.

Socrates sniffed at me when I returned from the stash-cave, making a noise that sounded to me like he was snorting exasperated at all the sort of things humans get up to, and how you'd never see no donkey go around murderin' and the like. I patted him on the nose and told him that I was sorry, but work was goin' to have to take us into the big smoke if we was going to track down this Fugue smuggler Golo. I promised, by way of compensation, that we'd stop by our favourite waterin' hole in Kabalo sometime to make up for it. Neither of us cared much for the city of Arcborough. It was a noisy, busy place that was hell on someone like myself with the advanced extra sens'ry perception, an' Socrates weren't no fan of the loud vehicles and show-ponies the city folk favoured neither. But duty called, and so we trotted on toward Arcborough, Socrates movin' a little faster than usual so we could get in and out of town as quickly as our work would allow.

3.
Arcborough is okay enough in the inner circles of town, I s'pose, if you like that sorta thing. The city grows in expandin' rings, like ripples when you toss a pebble into the water, an' at the center where the Founders first dropped the pebble of Arcborough you find all them big white civic buildings an' mansions with columns. It ain't always so pretty in the outer rings. Folks will throw up any old dwellin' they can out there on the edge of the plains, an' the ripples of the city keep spreadin' outwards, 'cause in a few years another bunch will take another circle of the scrub a little further out for more houses an' shops an' whatever they can think of. Ain't much you can do about it, and I ain't rightly sure that it's all bad. It's just progress. Even a solitary planet like our Elena can't hide from change for ever. With all that space, ain't no need for Arcborough to build tall like they might on other balls - everyone just spreads on out. That's one fine thing about living on Elena - you don't ever got to feel cramped, at least not yet, anyways. There's room to breathe an' live. I wouldn't trade that for all the fancy fineries you can get from anywhere else in the whole blamed universe, an' every now and then I thank Gramps and Grams for coming over to settle in this part of the map. One thing the outer parts of Arcborough ain't got yet is the towermasts. That's how you can tell where the money and the nice white buildings are spreadin'. The districts of Arcborough that mean anythin' have got to have one of those big metal towers so's they can get all the latest news and shows and noise shot over through the magnetic fields all the way from the Homelands. How else would they know what sorta boots an' clothes an' geegaws were fancy this year if they didn't have the far side of the universe chattin' in their ears all day and night?

I was starting to feel dizzy, and I grabbed at Socrates' neck to steady myself. That's the main reason I can't be having with a big city like Arcborough. There's too much movement, and it just gets harder and harder to block the cerning and to focus. To me an' my sense, Arcborough is like an angry storm goin' on all about me. I pull a stick of lickwish root from my coat and chew at it. It's an old trick Pa came up with to help me ignore the crash of cern sense. I chew away an' try to think about the strong aniseed taste of the lickwish, try to make the world small, quiet an' manageable. It can't stop me feeling all of the city's violent movement, but it helps some.

I knock on a bunch of doors of runners, snorters, smokers, hosters - every dirty little spot I can think of up an down the circles of the city where I heard there might be someone connected to the Sunset Gang and Golo, just to see if there's anythin' in Joe's story. My Granma always used to say that if you was going to do a job, it was

better to do it thorough first time. I probably don't want to admit it entire to myself, but a small part of me is also hoping the Sunsets and Golo are responsible for the murdered Ms. Magera and that Joe hasn't been feeding me a bunch of falsehoods. We'll see.

I heared some bits and pieces from the seedy crust of outer Arcborough. A lot of people cussed at me and there are a bunch of dens that are going to have to run if they don't want to be picked up by the city law. One of the last places I had to check is the back of an empty factory that sometimes gets used as a smoke palace. 'Course, it ain't really much of a palace. It's just a big empty concrete room with some mattresses strewn about the place so puffheads can lie about with their pipes and stew in their own hallucinations an' deliriums. The smoke palace ain't been here in a good while, and I figured that it's probably time that the proprietors might have moved their customers back to this particular haunt in their reg'lar rotations. I could tell that behind the walls there were a couple of individuals inside, lying about the place. I might be in luck. The smoke palace looked to be back. There was a side door to the room. To make sure they don't try to scatter when I go knockin', I found a bit of wood and jam it under the doorframe so it'll at least give them pause. To be honest, I didn't reckon the puffheads would have the get up an' go to git very far, but I didn't want any lead to Golo to be slipping by me.
I banged on the front door.
A scrawny, bent woman opened the door a crack and squinted out at me. Her tiny face was weathered like a piece of fruit left out too long in the sun.
"Warden Pipsikov, Ma'am. I'd like to come in and ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."
She nodded like she understands, but I ain't sure she's all there. She ushered me inside. Nothing much had changed since the last time the smoke palace was at work here. The mattresses were maybe a little bit dirtier, but otherwise there were the same-lookin' puffheads lying an' staring slack-jawed at whatever they think they see on the roof, hose-pipes held limply at their lips so they can smoke away at whatever concoction is being currently bein' peddled here.
"You looking for the Painter, yes?" said the squinting little lady who let me in.
I started explaining that I was looking for a ganger called Golo, but she shuffled to one particular mattress island over by the brick wall.
"The Painter, yes?" she repeated, waving both hands at a puffhead fellow grinning away like a dreamin' fool.
He looked up at me and said "Ah!".
"The Painter Pipsikov," the woman insisted.
It ain't a complete surprise. If I was going to trawl through all the spots where people try to dull their minds in Arcborough, I was fair likely to come across him.
"Andreas," I said.
He looked at me for a moment, eyes glazed, trying to work out what he was sensing in front of him. His hair was just as messy as it ever was, and he looked as comfortable as a king on velvet cushions, slumped there on his dirty mattress with his smoke hose. There was paint on his fingers, although I didn't know if that meant he had been working recent, or if he just hadn't taken a bath in a good while.
Andreas showed his teeth when his smoked brain worked out who I was.
"Howdy there, Ana," he slurred, "What's m'little sister doing in an unsavoury place like this?"

Andreas might have been fifteen months older'n' me, but he wasn't inclined to such responsible practices like lookin' after hisself. He was an Injected, like me, and he had the cerning too. You might be inclined to think that having a rare person in your life who could perceive the world in the same sorta way as yourself would have brought you together and been a solace and a comfort, but things don't always work out that way, especially when it comes to kin. Y'see, Andreas mostly took after our

Ma, in more ways than one. He had always been the clever, creative one, and his cernin' meant that when he started painting serious, he was one of the first Elenites to get something of the real soul of the land. Now, unlike my brother, I don't know squat about art, but I knew when he did a picture of some wild camels walking with their backs to a lonely line of midbar bushes an' the low summer sandwinds whippin' in the air, he caught the way things moved, all the colours an' shapes an' shifts of our world there in his still paints and oils. Some city folks got over tryin' to always ape Homelands art styles an' started takin' to Andreas' pictures. He even sold a few to the collectors back in the Homelands. As ever is with Andreas, it was a mixed blessin'. He had money to burn now, and he used it to burn his brain up whenever he could. Like with poor Ma, the cern sense he had was sometimes too strong for him. He used puff and Fugue and booze and anythin' he could get inside him to try and dull the scratchin', screamin' feeling of the world all around him. Our sense helped him make some great pictures, but it didn't help him live too good.
He resented me some, too, because he reckoned Pa had favoured me, not just teachin' me to focus my cernin', but taking' me out trackin' in the scrublands when I was a kid. I don't remember it like that, but who knows what happened all that time ago? We don't talk about Pa or Ma much anymore. Heck, we hardly talk now, period.
"Nice of ya to drop by," said Andreas, wavin' the end of the smokehose at me, "Been worryin' about me, Ana? M'little Ana Banana?" He giggled at himself.
He'd been calling me that since I were a little girl. It had always gotten me riled. Bananas didn't even grow on Elena. They were imported by the rich and fancy. Andreas always reckoned there was something fancy about me, like I thought I was better than others. Becomin' a warden didn't help much with his thinkin' that.
"Won't ask if you're doing all right, Andreas," I muttered.
He cackled.
"You kiddin', Anabanana? What else does a - a - a simple fellah like meself need? I'm as, y'know, as happy as'a gerdamn boar rollin' all about in mud. You should try a little smoke of sumthin' sometime. Soothes the head just fine, fine, fine."
I ignored him. Wasn't sure how much he'd remember of this when his head cleared anyways.
"Lookin' for a peddler called Golo. You know him, Andreas?"
In his cloud of smoke, his eyes closed, an' he tried to think.
"Surely, surely. Golo. He a skinny guy with a bad tattoo of some beastie eatin' the sun? Done so bad, it looks like an ugly lil' dog hackin' up a ball?"
I nodded. That tallied with what I'd heard about him.
"Well, shoot, Ana, reckon I could do your job for you. I know where you can find the man. Why, I seen him not more 'n' a while back. Can't remember exactly when it was, but..."
He drifted off as he tried to remember when he'd last seen the smuggler. I'd seen Andreas off his head beforetimes. If I let him be, he'd be lost in smoke dreams in a minute or two and I'd not get a sensible word out of his mouth.
I reached over and shook him by the shoulders. His eyes slowly focussed on my face again.
"Whass that? Whadya want, Ana? Lemme alone. Don' touch me."
"Golo," I repeated, "Where did you see him? It's important, Andreas. Get yer brain in order for just a few seconds and then I'll leave you be."
He pushed me away feebly. I let him go.
"Innaback, back room of the, whatchyamacallit, Games Hall. Was just there, asking about where I could find some puff, where I oughta go to lie an' relax, was askin' a hand there, and saw Golo playin' some billiards. He's terrible, too. Couldn't hit a ball with a blamed hammer."
I thanked Andreas, but through the haze he suddenly scowled at me, then turned his face from me in spite. The little wrinkled woman who'd let me into the smoke palace was lookin' over at us an' shakin' her head, all disapproving-like. I woulda sighed, bein' judged by a puffhead outta their gourd, but it weren't the first time folks had

looked unkindly at Andreas an' myself. They maybe thought that I was ashamed of him, since I was a warden and all, and that I'd cut him outta my days. There was a lot of bad blood between us, enough to make me weary to the bone, an' now I didn't hardly have the strength to try helpin' my brother when he was so set against any assistance from me or anyone else. Still.
I stood up and made to leave.
"Andreas, you think you maybe want to come past the Shack some time?" I said quietly.
He took a long, thoughtful drag from his pipe, then spat an angry plume of smoke out of his mouth in my direction for an answer. I hadn't expected anythin' better.
I tipped my hat.
"Well, I'll be seein' you around, Andreas," I said, but I weren't at all sure if that were true or not.

Before leaving, I told the wrinkle-faced woman that I wanted the smoke palace closed and the puffers sent home. She shook her head and tutted some more, hardly listening to me, her brain all fogged up.

4.
The Old Games Hall wasn't too far, which was a fine thing, because the static of city life was starting to get to be too much, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit that seeing Andreas made a small pit in my innards too, just like it always does. When I was a kid and couldn't control the cerning worth a damn, I used to lie in bed at night, squirmin' in my sheets and sensin' all the worms out in the soil, the bugs in the air, things flashing and darting in every direction, prickling at the inside of my head. Pa had the idea of giving me a sort of nightlight, like you do for children who are afeared of the dark. It weren't because I was afraid of the dark, it was because the dark was never empty or still for me. Pa had a little shade on the lantern, an' it threw a small cone of light, like I was in a dim spotlight. It helped me think only about what were near me, blocking out everythin' outside the cone of lantern light. Figurin' that I needed to make the world smaller now, I think about the smell an' taste of lickwish stick in my mouth, keepin' my feelin' for things tight about me like that child's lantern. Too bad I ain't got no trick like that for how I sicken inside when I see Andreas, but not all hurts can be helped.

The Old Games Hall is one of sev'ral similar places in the outer ring of Arcborough that I imagine probably spring up all over Elena and all over the universe like weed grass. Now, another reason I ain't partial to coming into town is, besides the cerning makin' it uncomfortable to be about, I also seem to spend most of my blamed time in places like the smoke palace dive an' dark foul-smelling saloons like this Old Games Hall. This was just another place where you weren't sure if somebody might try and cut you at any moment on a whim. Right here in the Old Games Hall, the floor stuck, the air stank, an' the drinks were stale. Because the day was wearin' on an' these folks didn't fuss too much about office hours, a fair few roughs of outer Arcborough had already drifted in for a glass of something poison and a low talk over the tables. At one end were the hulking cases of some sim games, lights flashin' in the gloomy saloon, tryin' to tempt folk to part with their hard-earned and not so hard-earned cash. 'Cause it was so costly to keep the temperamental machines running right, they were eye-waterin' overpriced. Yet, fer some reason I couldn't hardly fathom, every dive like the Games Hall had at least one of the flashing game machines where you could pretend to fly a ship or shoot monsters in the face or such like. It was like an unwritten regulation - on Elena, it weren't a proper dive unless it had all the required parts - the sim-machines, the shabbiness, an' the shady customers.

I walked past two sharp old women playin' backgammon on a table in a corner so dark, I ain't sure how they could see the dice. They stared at the game with vulture-

eyes, lettin' the fall of the dice and the clack of the pieces do all their talkin' for them. Golo was in a corner, smokin' a long cigarette and propped up on a billiard stick. He didn't seem to be playing just at the moment, but was loiterin' about, leaning on the stick and watchin' games around him lazily. His tattoo was as goofy lookin' as Andreas had said and did kinda look like a doggie playin' fetch, rather than whatever intimidatin' thing he thought it was supposed to be. Golo was a lanky creature who hardly looked like he had the energy to stand up straighter than a bag of wet noodles. I didn't reckon he'd be too hard to handle. I was more concerned about the lady he was chattin' to at the billiards table. She was tall, wiry, tense, an' knockin' balls about the felt like they'd done her some wrong. She had enough muscles that her tattoos - jagged patterns of barbed wire in bright red - did actually look intimidatin', unlike her less imposin' pal, Golo.

I strode over to the table as the big woman cannoned a ball into the far left corner pocket. There was something moving in her blood. She was het up on some substance, an' it didn't look like whatever med'cine she was takin' sweetened her disposition any.

"Mr. Golo. Would y'mind givin' me a moment of your time?"

Golo's eyes widened when he caught sight of me, an' he pushed himself upright with the billiard cue. He rolled his head an' cracked his neck.

"Ain't got nuthin' to say to you, Warden."

"Sure you do, Golo. You've got all manner of interestin' things to talk about, an' I'm just dyin' to hear about 'em. F'r'instance, howsabout that hoard of Fugue out by the Stone Marbles? That's a conversation starter right there."

Golo licked his lips nervily.

"Dunno about any, ah, Fugue."

His medicated large friend was movin' behind me. I could tect her flexing an' rushing me, but she was moving so damn fast, knowing she was coming at me didn't do me a lick of good. She had her arms wrapped up around me like steel cables. She was strong. Too darn strong. It felt like she was crushin' my chest with my arms pinned, and then my feet and the ground quit company as she hoisted me up in the air, squeezing the life out of me.

She was Amped. Usin' boostin' med'cine to make herself faster an' stronger. That's what I'd tected in her blood. Whatever pharma Strangle-Arms here was on made her more forceful than a stallion's kick. Ampin' drugs also tended to make users a mite twitchy and regularly prone to rash and poorly thought-out decisions, as we could see from the current situation.

I heard Golo gurblin' something about telling his friend, whose name 'ppeared to be Jel, to hang about a moment, but she wasn't havin' it. I felt her breath hissing.

Was sure getting hard to breathe, an' there was no way in Hacklebarney I could get ahold of the Masher gun in my coat when I was being held so painful tight. On the other hand, life and death situations luckily can help clarify the mind. I was in the cone of light an' could cern Big Ms. Amp without any distraction.

She had a weak spot in her left knee. Seemed to be an old gunshot wound that had healed poorly.

Tensing my gut, I raised my left leg, then brought my boot straight down on the mark. The blow shook the weak knee. I dunno if Ms. Jel could feel pain properly right at the moment, but her knee gave way anyhow an' her body got enough of a shock that she loosened her hold on me long enough for me to break free.

Jel had lost her balance and had fallen to her good, unkicked knee. She looked mighty confundled. Now my Granma always told me never to hit someone when they was down, but my Pa was of the opinion that if they'd already hit first and gittin' 'em when down stopped 'em gettin' up again, then you probably shouldn't feel too bad about it. The Amp in her system made her fast an' dangerous, and I needed to get it into her skull that strangle-time was over. Tryin' to sense the best spot in her jaw, I hit her as hard as I could with my elbow.

Jel looked uncertain for a moment, like she was tryin' to make her mind up. Then she

crashed over to the ground.
I didn't let out a sigh of relief, much as I was inclined. It was always better for the reputation if you let 'em think you'd intended to do that. Never give Luck too much credit if you can help it, no matter how much of the drivin' it did.
Jel shook her head and was starting to lift herself off the floor, but I'd been given enough of a breather to get the Masher pistol out of my holster. I had no notion of using it, an' I was pretty certain I wouldn't need to, now that Ms. Amp had been given a moment to reflect on the probity and sensibleness of throttlin' a warden. Besides, our little scuffle had attracted the looks of some of the other roughs in the saloon, an' the oversized Masher was an excellent way of unattracting that attention.
Golo hadn't done a dust-darn thing the whole time his pal had been at me. He was pretty much in the same position, although he had taken to sweatin' some.
Behind me a round-shaped fellah was scrabbling underneath a counter for something. Without turning about, I pointed the Masher back in his direction.
"I wouldn't advise reaching for the Scramble Gun you got under there, mister," I shouted, "It's ain't quite legal anyways, and might well cause you all sorts of trouble. How's about you throw it over here, an' I'll take care of it for you?"
The round fellow behind the counter swallowed and before he had time to think about it too much, he threw the ugly home-tweaked rifle across to me. I dragged it over with my foot, picked it up with my free hand, an broke it open, removin' the ammunition an' pocketin' it.
Everyone in the Old Games Hall had gone silent and was staring at me, even the two old ladies playing their vengeful backgammon. Like I said, it never hurts to build up your reputation a little.
I waved the Amped musclewoman away with the Masher. Jel thought angrily about it for a spell, but eventually her better manners won out. Holstering my pistol, I leaned up against the billiard table.
"Won't take too much of your time, Golo. Just need to hear from your own lips about smugglin' a hoard of illegal Fugue and who exactly you hired to get the heavy liftin' done."
Golo swallowed and looked about for a friend, only to find he had been left to his own devices. The customers in the saloon were curious enough to see how this here chat might play out, an' glanced over their drinks and games at us over in the corner, but none of them was so curious that they wanted to butt in.
I just stared at Golo without movin' a muscle. He was the sort of squirmer who couldn't take pressure for long without cracking, I was pretty sure.
"Look here, listen," he said, lowering his voice and leanin' over toward me. There you go.
"Listen, Warden, I jest got a couple of Amphibs from out the Pools, that's all. They're better at getting in and around there, and they're strong as the devil, and don't ask too many questions, yeah? If they did sumthin', it ain't nuthin' to do with me, is it, Warden? You can't blame me for anythin' they done, can you?"
I cut him off.
"Tell me about the drugs, Golo. The Fugue moved into that hidey hole pretty recent, weren't it, Golo? Who an' when exactly?"
"A couple of them over the last week. Taki, Pete, Zaharin, Joe."
"An' the last shipment?"
"Uh, last night, Warden."
Golo then started on begging and pleading for me not to go about telling anybody, but I was only listening with half an ear. It wasn't an alibi that would convince any judge, but I now had some evidence to back up Joe's story.
It was looking possible that he was speakin' true about not being around when Manager Magera was knifed in the Pools.

It was gettin' late. I found a phone box and called up Khan's posse, giving them a run down of a fair piece of the day, but keeping quiet about having Joe stashed away. It

was no secret that the city police was already under pressure to get this case cleaned up. Murder, after all, being not just bad for tourism, but havin' a real adverse affect on civic pride.
Next, I went to round up Soc. He was a darn fine burro, and while he weren't exactly happy to be left in the city while I went about my errands, he waited with good grace and patience, an' bein' mature an' refined he hardly ever kicked up things when he got bored these days. I scarce even needed to tie him up. Most of those in Arcborough wouldn't bother to try and steal a burro, being too foolish to see what he was worth, aiming instead to rustle away some nice inthoroughbred horses or maybe even an automobile, if they thought they could get away with stripping it somewhere. Soc brayed a greetin' at me. Looked like he had whiled away the time by finding some grass patches that grew up from the Arcborough streets, chewin' away at them with his connoisseurin' mouth. Don't think he was too impressed with the local fare, mind. I keep a couple of small carrots in my pocket for the burro, and handed one to him now to thank him for his patience while I was gone an' about. He took it in his maw with a formal nod, and got to chewing. I adjusted his straw hat, which Socrates snorted at, because he reckoned it looked just fine as it was, then gave him a pat and hopped in the saddle so we could head back to the quiet an' peace of the Shack, just the two of us.

The ride home gave me time to think. I weren't certain Joe was bein' truthful, but presuming he was on the straight an' narrow, why else would somebody have stabbed Magera out at the Pools? Maybe somethin' to do with all the drugs and who knows what else bein' smuggled and stored in the area? Could be she saw something she weren't supposed to. My head was startin' to ache somethin' fierce, so me an Soc was relieved when we caught sight of the Shack. I turned him out to his spot, hung up both our hats, an' made sure he's got some clean water and enough hay to keep him happy. Then I put away the Masher and threw my coat over a chair, riffling through the pantry until I find some tinned goods for supper. At the end of a long dusty day, I ain't too fussed about what exactly is in my bowl, and I couldn't tell you what I ate if my life depended on it, that's how beat I was.

Once I'd et, I figgered I'd better have a look over myself to see if that musclewoman Jel had done any real bad damage. I keep a pretty good doc-chest - you gotta when you live aways out from everyone else, so I could patch myself up if needed. When I checked myself, nothing seems to be messed up too bad from the little altercation at the Old Games Hall, although I was goin' to bruise up right pretty and my chest was givin' me some pain. I dose myself with some medicament I've got - just a few pills. It's tempting to take more, to block out the cerning just for a night so I can sleep through without bein' woken by the movement of the air an' the shifting of the sands. But I can't afford to start relying on that. I layed myself down, switched on the radio and listened to some fiddle tunes from somewhere out there in Elena until I drifted off to a none too restful sleep.

5.
I waken before dawn is fully out of bed itself. There was a nest of wasps stirrin' over in a far corner of the Shack and their shufflin' about their day made it plum impossible for me to get back to sleep. Even out in the quiet of the Shack, it ain't unusual for me to hardly get a full night of rest. You train yourself to get along anyways.
I fried up some vegetable mash for breakfast. The cookin' ain't up to much, but nobody is around to complain except myself. I tidied the place a little after I cook, since I try my darndest to keep the Shack as neat and tidy as it allows. That was one of the few things I remember clear about Ma. She always kept the place orderly. Don't think she could stomach things being out of place.
I headed out to Soc's stable and throw him a good feed of hay, drawin' up a stool to

sit and eat together. Socrates looked at me like he's doin' me a favour, lettin' me sit here with hisself. Still, I figger it's better to have a feed with that high-hatted burro than to eat alone everyday.
I got my coat and gun on, and swallowed another pill to dull the pain from the tussle yesterday, hopin' it's strong enough to tide me through the rest of the day. I made sure I had another couple of sticks of lickwish packed. Today was goin' to be a wearyin' one.

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I thought I'd better check on Joe on my way into town, it being more or less on the path for Socrates an' myself. Also figgered it was good sense to make sure he hadn't gotten a mind to run, and if he'd stayed put, to make sure that such thoughts didn't enter into his head.

I checked Soc's hat was on firm in case he decided he wanted to wander out to do some sunbathin' in the early-mornin' light, but advised him to watch his complexion an' stay where he was in this fine spot in the shade of a giant stone. He grunted to tell me to stop fussin' an' go about my own blamed business.
I descended into Joe's hidey hoard. He was tense as heck, watchin' the entrance from half under the water. I wasn't sure he'd slept a wink in the night, for fear that somebody would come upon him and toss him in chains, or worse.
"Settle down, Joe, it's just Pips here," I called out to forestall Joe from doin' anything sudden and foolish.
He only relaxed a touch. Guess he don't fully trust me neither.
"Can't stop for long, Joe, but just thought I'd bring you a few things, an' check up on you."
I held out a bag. He hesitated for a moment, then rose drippin' from the water an' reached cautiously for the bag. It made a clinkin' sound when he took it from me.
"Some tinned food," I said with a gesture, "Bits and pieces. 'Fraid I don't pay too much attention to my larder at the best of times, so you'll have to see what you'll get."
He peered into the bag and nodded.
"Couple cans of soda water in there too, an' maybe a few root beers, I think. Now, I know you probably got a little food stashed here an' I'm sure Nokai an' the folks from the Pools have tried to keep you fed, but I thought I'd better drop some things off just in case."
He stared at the bag like he weren't sure what to do with it.
"Thank you kindly, Pips," he said at last.
I could tect he was hungry, but he didn't want to open the things in front of me, as he was still proud on top of bein' suspicious.
"No reason you got to starve while you're here, Joe," I said, "Also, I talked to Golo. Took some finding, but he confirms you was shifting Fugue for him more or less when the stabbing was supposed to happen. 'Course, it ain't much of an alibi, an' Golo an' his pals ain't no kind of witnesses you'd want to bring into polite policin' society, but at least this gives some weight to your story."
He let out a little sigh of air. Can't imagine what had been runnin' through his head all alone here.
"You need to stay put a little longer, Joe, 'til I get a bead on who would want to put Ms. Magera out of this world an' why. Taking your knife unseen can't have been an easy thing. As I understand it, folks in the Pools don't take too kindly to strangers about the place. Would have been a mighty tricky affair for somebody to get in an' steal your blade without anybody around the place seeing the deed done."
"You'll find 'em, though Pips, won't you?" said Joe with a little desperation, "If anybody can it's you, Spooky. I can't end up in jail, Pips, it'd kill me. You can't put someone like me in a tiny gray box fer the rest of my life. It ain't living. I need to be

out in the open, under the sky. I ain't never had much in my damn life, but I've always had that, an' to my way of thinking, if you ain't got that freedom, you ain't got nuthin'."
Sure, I guess I understood that at least.
"I'll do my best, Joe, y'have my word on that. You need to stay here, mind. The Arcborough law is going to want to round you up soon enough. Me, I don't have a hankering to put you in the city jail provided you stay put here where I can find you."
Joe nodded slowly.
"I'll be getting along, Joe."
"Come back, soon, Pips. Come back with some good news."

***

It was goin' to be another warm one today, an' we weren't even yet into high summer. It felt warmer still to me an' Socrates once we was surrounded by the Arcborough buildings, seeing as how they don't let the wind through proper, but trap the heat swirlin' all about the metal, concrete, an' hard paved roads.
Out the front of the Arcborough City Police Department, me an' Soc found the shady side, an' I tied him slackly to one of the columns. He stared full of judgement at the preenin' horses that a couple of well-dressed an' stiff-backed people cantered past upon. I told Soc to be more open-minded, but he didn't look too swayed. Figured I'd better mosey past and get the interviews of the Pool folks from Sheriff Khan and the Deputies. Also maybe get a sense of whether the indoor law has gotten around to sniffing down Joe yet. I left Socrates eyeing up the police autobikes racked in the front of the station, like he had a mind to try chewin' on them. The bikes were plastic, fragile lookin' things on slender metal frames that Khan had pushed in for city patrols because to her mind it weren't fittin' for city law to be seen on horseback, like a bunch of hicks. I also reckon that Khan was secretly terrified she'd have to get on a nag at some point if she didn't provide an alternative for her people.

The sealed doors sucked open when I push against 'em, making a sound like a boot being pulled out of mud. Inside, the air-conditioning was whining away, tryin' to get the station down to a temperature the Sheriff could bear. Got to admit, Khan runs a clean shop. Everything looked neat an' tidy an' as Homelandish as Khan can make things on a city budget. I approached the front desk, where Grish sits prim, bashin' away at a keyboard like a confused pianist, an' speakin' sweetly into the phone headset he always has strapped to his face.
I wandered up and took my hat off.
"Howdy, Grish, thought I'd pop past an' collect the files for the Magera case, an' maybe see the chief, if she can spare the time, nacherly."
Grish blanched at the sight of me.
"Warden Pipsikov! I wish you'd make an appointment. You know how the Sheriff likes to keep things straight in her schedule."
I shrugged.
"Not to worry, Grish. I've got a bit of time before I get back to the investigation. I'll wait here a spell."
I sat down on a chair to one side of the reception, pulled my hat down, crossed my arms and closed my eyes, narrowin' down the world.
I could tect that Grish was trying to make his machine talk to another one elsewhere an' was having a devil of a time, an' I could cern that his hand kept drifting toward a draw where he had a packet of salted goat jerky that he wanted to eat but knew was bad for him.
He had just decided, after a fair bit of agonised thought, to break off a small piece of that salty jerky an' sneak it subtle-like into his mouth, when his headset made a noise that told him to wave me through to Khan's office.
"Crux and fire, Pipsikov, why can't you make a bloody appointment like a normal,

civilised human being?" was the first thing Khan shouted at me when I walked through her door.
She kept her office pretty simple, with a few tasteful geegaws from her days in the Homelands to remind visitors that she wasn't really from 'round these parts. She also had a smilin' photo of herself an' her groom, which was strange, 'cos everyone on Elena knew that her fellow, some fancy opera singer or such, all frills and ruffs, resented their being moved out to Elena so much that he had run off back to the Homelands after just a couple of months in Arcborough. That was one reason for Khan always bein' all boiled up with resentment. The other was that there was no air conditioning machine in her budget that would ever get her to feel a sufficiently cool an' pleasant temperature.
"I cannot guess what riding around the blasted desert on your absurd donkey does to your sense of time and perspective," Khan grumbled as she swung back an' forth agitated on her chair, "But we are trying to run a proper police force out here in Arcborough. One Elena can be proud of."
Far as I was concerned, weren't nothing that we had to be ashamed of here, and the only one who seemed to be all frettin' about it was Sheriff Khan, but I couldn't see no sense in rilin' her up by mentioning it.
Khan handed me a folder with the Magera murder investigation print-outs featurin' Deputy Moroz's interviews, an' she said something about Grish sendin' copies over the machine to me.
I flicked through the file and caught sight of some up close an' detailed pictures of the murder weapon. Notes alongside identified it as an Amphib knife and said they'd get some expert to have a look over it to see if they could trace its origin. Joe didn't have much time before they started wantin' to fit him up for the crime, an' that meant I didn't have much time to do my best to give Joe a fair shake.
Khan straightened her collar and smoothed her hair back.
"Listen, Pipsikov, I told you the murder of this Magera woman is a damn hot one. I told you she was working for the Foundation for Disadvantaged Environments. Well, what I haven't told you yet is that the most toweringly important Founding Family is at the top of this foundation."
I nodded. I knew who she meant. Everybody this side of the Sage Sea knew. The Dvoryan family. Been out here since people first started colonising an' mining Elena, and had as much money as there were grains of sand out in the scrubs, or at least near enough as to make no difference. Old Alex Dvoryan was the current patriarch, although the rumour went around that most of the actual day-to-day runnin' of the family empire was being slowly passed on to his eldest daughter Juliana, and her younger brother, Nicholas.
Khan leaned forward, like she was goin' to tell me somethin' surprising an' secret.
"The board of the foundation Magera worked for, the Dvoryans, they want to meet with you."
It sure was a surprise at least.
"What the heck for, Khan?"
Khan leaned back in her chair and made a little steeple from her thick fingers.
"This Foundation that Magera was working for, it's the Dvoryans' baby. They're important people, and you can imagine the political stink if this turns out bad and one of the employees of their pet project was murdered without the killer being brought swiftly and efficiently to justice."
"Meeting the fancy folk that run the thing ain't likely to help me find the killer any faster, Sheriff," I protested, but Khan cut me off with a wave of her hand.
"This isn't up for debate, Warden. It's a little time out of your day, and as it happens, your damn poor grasp of how clocks and schedules work hasn't made things too difficult, for once. I happen to know the Dvoryans are meeting today to discuss the Foundation. I'll phone through to their people, and you can go meet up with them and assure them that everything is going perfectly well with the case."
I was about to try and argue with the Sheriff, but she had a fixed stony look about

her, and I could see that her mind was made up an' it would be a near impossible job to unmake it.
"Fine," I sighed, "If you'd be kind enough to give me the address, I'll go get my burro."
It weren't big of me, but the expression on the Sheriff's face as she imagined me riding up to the Dvoryans' on scruffy ol' Socrates made me feel a mite better.

6.
You couldn't view too much of the Dvoryan Manor from the fence, seein' as it was quite a ways back on its stretch of land. There were cameras at the gate looking over me an' Soc, I s'pose to make sure you knew you was being watched an' to remind you that this was a place where they could afford to keep maintainin' machines like that. I waved at one of them and a crackly voice appeared in the air asking me my business. I introduced myself an' Socrates, and a side door swung open, leading us up to a path where a woman in tan-coloured fancy finery waited who 'ppeared to be a stable hand. She took my burro with a slight sniff and led him to the stables, where it looked like a bunch of thoroughbreds were bunked in. The stables were sealed with sand-proof doors to prevent anything unpleasant gettin' blown up the nose of any of the four-legged inhabitants. I was beginning to worry that Soc might get snobbish, hobnobbing in such pretty accommodations, but sometimes you just have to trust your burro won't turn his head after a small taste of luxury.
Another hand of the Dvoryan estate, this one with sculpted blonde hair an' wearin' a pale-blue version of the stablehand's tailored coat, led me into the house through another silently sealin' door. The temperature of the air would have made Sheriff Khan weep, it was that spot-on perfect. Everything was supposed to be so quiet an' clean in here, it was like being in another world. 'Course, it weren't that quiet for me. I could tell there were a bunch of machines all about the house makin' sure that pleasant air was maintained, an' doin' who knows what other little jobs. There were also a number of folks in white versions of the estate's uniform, who were wanderin' about in passages between the walls and under the floor workin' away as unobtrusive as possible to make sure the Dvoryan house stayed perfectly pleasant.
I was passed on to a stern lookin' fellow with a fine thin moustache that must have taken some doin' to keep so straight an' neat. He had the same tailored coat on as the rest of the Dvoryan staff, but his was white with gold an' black trimmings, an' he 'ppeared to be some sort of butler. He offered to take my hat an' coat and hardly even wrinkled that fine moustache when he looked at my dusty things. I let him have my hat, to keep him happy, but held on to my coat, an' he lead me to a pretty elevator that was decked out in coloured glass like a temple window.
This butler fellow took me up to the fourth floor of the house, an' ushered me down some expensive carpet that looked to be imported from off-world, until we wound up in a meeting room, all simple and business-like. The butler cleared his throat an' announced me. As I was thankin' him, two figures stood up from their seats about the round meeting table and gave a little bow each.
"Warden Pipsikov, thank you for coming," said the young woman, "I am Juliana Dvoryan, and this is my brother Nicholas Dvoryan. Do sit down."
The first thing that struck me was how darn young the pair of next-generation Dvoryans were. Why, I'd wager that the elder child, Juliana, was even younger than myself. She was thin, an' dressed in a plain cream linen suit, hair kept short an' tied back in a little brush. Like everyone on Elena, I had seen her Pa on the box once or twice. Juliana Dvoryan didn't exactly look like him, but she had sumthin' similar in her face. Like her Pa, she looked like she was used to folks listening to what she had to say, despite her youth. There was also a kind of far-away and stern look about her eyes, like she was always thinkin' about important things. She had a touch of the holy woman in that look, an' it made you think Juliana Dvoryan kept her sights on matters above the earthly.
Her brother Nicholas, on the other hand, 'though he was dressed in matching style to

his sister an' had a similar short-cropped trim to his hair, he wasn't built in the same lofty marble as his sister. Nicholas was a touch taller than the elder Dvoryan, an' that touch of height was the difference between lookin' regal and dignified an' bein' lanky an' awkward. Unlike his statue of a sister, Nicholas couldn't keep his hands still, and was always fidgetin' an' dartin' his eyes to follow his sibling's lead. He wasn't much more than a lad, was Nicholas, an' it was clear that he adored and revered his elder sister, which was not such a surprisin' thing, given the strange an' almost spiritual certainty Juliana radiated.
Juliana Dvoryan waved a hand to a seat.
"Warden," she said, "Thank you for taking the time to come and visit us. Father, Nicholas, and I were all so devastated to hear about what occurred to Ms. Magera."
I wondered where Pop Dvoryan might be if he cared so much.
"We feel particularly strongly about preventing such senseless and violent tragedies, but for such a crime to be inflicted on one of the Foundation's employees is especially upsetting."
"You knew Magera personally?"
Nicholas shook his head.
"No indeed," he said, his voice still havin' a hint of boyish squeak to it, "We employ hundreds of people in the Foundation alone, and that is just one of the many going concerns our family is involved in for the betterment of Arcborough and Elena as a whole."
"It is a sad truth that we cannot personally meet all those who work for us," went on Juliana, "No matter how much we might wish it. We did, however, feel it best to meet you, Warden, so that we could express to you how important it is to our family and the citizens of Arcborough that justice is done as swiftly as possible in this case."
I ignored the pressure them remarks was supposed to gust my way. Maybe the Dvoryans were sincere, an' on the other hand maybe they wanted the mess cleaned up quick so they could back to doin' rich people things like camel polo an' seaside charity galas without havin' any unpleasant gossip hangin' about them.
"You know anythin' about this Magera woman?"
"Only her assignment," Nicholas said.
"She worked for our Environmental Charity branch," continued Juliana, "Perhaps you have heard of the noble work of our Foundation? Our family firmly believes that if we can improve the surroundings of the less fortunate, we can help lift them from violence and wickedness. Our father brought Nicholas and I up to believe that we have inherited not simply the name of Dvoryan, but the responsibilities of that name."
"We strive to be builders of better tomorrows," put in Nicholas. It sounded awfully like a catch phrase he'd been repeatin' since he could say 'Mama', but Juliana lowered her head a touch in acknowledgement like she felt the truth of the thing.
"It is not enough to simply throw money at problem communities like the gene-altered and others who have inherited patterns of misfortune, at the so-called 'Pools' or all over Elena. We must rebuild the way they live, where they live, and how they live. By understanding their lives in their environments, we can work to bring real and effective change."
Well, I didn't know the first thing about all that, but Juliana Dvoryan certainly believed in it, an' there was something impressive in the way she preached. Her brother was smilin' slightly at her.
"An' how, if you don't mind me asking, did Ms. Magera fit into this?"
"According to our records," said Nicholas, who peered over at some papers arranged on the table, "She was working as a census manager. Her role was to examine the communities in the region of the Pools, to take notes on their habitations, family structures, and ways of life. To investigate them, and document. She collected information to enable us to decide how we could go about improving the region."
Sounded a little like the sort of stickin' your nose in that the Amphibs wouldn't have taken too kindly to. Mebbe someone there took real unkindly to Magera's nose, and felt strongly enough to stop her heart with a blade.

"She work with anyone? Anyone who might know more about her, like if she made any enemies or such?"
Juliana Dvoryan's face tightened a fraction, like she had just drunk down a whole glass of sour juice.
"Warden, the role Ms. Magera worked in required someone to labour mostly independently, I am afraid. However, since she was an employee of the Foundation, I would be surprised and dismayed if anyone working for such good causes would attract the enmity of others. We sadly cannot help you there, Warden, but, on behalf of our father, my brother and I can assure you that we will do all in our power to make certain that this tragic wrong is put to rest with all haste, so that the good work of the Foundation might continue."
Which was a dressed-up way of saying that I was to help the city law make this murder go away, swift as you please.
"Indeed, we feel that action must be taken without any delay, even if Ms. Magera fell a sad victim to someone from within the very community she worked to help," put in Nicholas. His sister frowned a little at this, maybe because he didn't have her knack of makin' what was said sound like it was coming from somewhere on high.
I'd got the message loud an' clear - the famous Founding Family of the Dvoryans weren't goin' to let this case sit still long enough to get cold. It wouldn't square with their principles or their reputation. 'Course, none of what the Dvoryans wanted mattered any to me. Without another word, I stood and said my goodbyes, as polite an' civilised as I could manage in such fine company. This had already been enough of a distraction from the trail.

The butler escorted me out, past a large garage housin' a fleet of automobiles - more'n' I'd ever seen in one place, I reckon - an' he waved me back to Socrates. He then nodded an' went on his way to do some butlerin' about the garage. Behind the sealed shutters of the auto-stable, I tected him fussin' about the automobiles, giving 'em a thorough an' futile scrub an' shine. I wondered how many times a day the poor guy had to pick the determined Elena sand an' dust from the crannies of the machines. I s'pose everybody needs somethin' to keep their hands from falling idle, an' even with all the dust doors on Elena, you couldn't keep them autos dirt-free without the occasional spit an' polish.

7.
Socrates and I rode out to Trinstone, a burg in Arcborough where I'd been told the former Magera's home could be found. Trinstone was a place for people who were probably goin' to move somewhere in life, economically speakin'. Some of them were going to end up poorer, an' some were goin' to fight tooth an' nail to get richer an' move somewhere more central. The houses here reflected that, aspirin' single-floor homes, rather than stacked apartments like in the crummier bits of outer Arcborough, but there were sure a heck of a lot of 'em all crammed together in rows, which you wouldn't see in the nicer 'burbs of Arcborough, where lovin' your neighbour meant keeping 'em at a distance. Magera had lived in a crescent of modest-lookin' small box-houses all painted a fadin' pale blue. I left Soc to inspect the neighbourhood an' gave him to know I would meet him back here in a few, then went off to find the one particular identical box-house where Magera had hung her hat.
Her row was looked after by an old caretaker I met at the front of her place. He said he didn't really know much about Ms. Magera, seeing as how she was always off travellin' about the place for work. That caretaker was shufflin' his feet with all the nerviness some folks with minor guilt get when they see a warden, but he managed to stand in one spot long enough to let me into Magera's rooms. He stood an' kept scufflin' at the open door. I thanked the caretaker, an' gave him to understand that if he'd leave me be to do my goin' about the place, I wouldn't look too closely into whatever thing he'd done that was weighin' heavy on his conscience. That seemed to make him happy enough an' he went off.

Magera's place looked even smaller on the inside. No signs that she lived with anyone else. In fact, no sign that there had been another soul about the place for a good long while. Everythin' was set for one - the pots an' pans, the furniture. She had a leather chair facin' straight in front of a whopper of a screen. I flicked it on, an' scrolled through her shows. Mostly soap operas set in the Homelands. That big ol' screen looked pricey. There was also a upper-range brand of comp wired into the desk. It was a heck of a lot shinier than my clunky government-issue box back in the Shack, that was for sure. Seemed to me that Ms. Magera had done pretty well workin' for the Foundation. The Dvoryans must be more generous bosses than you might've imagined.

I sat in the dead woman's chair and leafed through the notes from the Sheriff's people. With my eyes focussin' on all that text, I let the other parts of my brain wander, tectin' over the room. I couldn't sense any sign she'd been here for a few days. Everythin' was cold. Magera must have had somewhere to camp out near the Pools when she was checkin' up on the Amphibs an' doin' her censusin' for the Foundation.
There was one thing I could cern, a tingle of something behind me - a metal square set into the wall, behind the outer layer. I stood up and ran my fingers over the surface. It was well hidden inside, but it felt to me like a safe. One of them biolocks in it. It would only open for the owner, an' she wasn't going to be around any time soon. I couldn't crack it here an' now, but we could get someone in to rip it up in good time. I didn't need to open it, anyhow. I could cern what was inside. Ms. Magera had a nice little hidden stack of cash. She had been doin' real well all right. Too well for someone in her line of work. How exactly had she come by all that money? Probably not in any ordinary way. Ordinarily, your regular folks on Elena don't tend to keep gigantic sums in hidden biosafes in their walls.

I left Magera's place and made another pub-box call to the Arcborough forces, requestin' they break into the hidden safe and try to trace the money. Maybe Magera had been doin' a little bit of moonlighting. If she did have a little sideline, maybe somebody didn't like it any.
I needed to go talk to Joe again. He might have some notion what Magera had been paid for.

I got on to Soc and we clopped off through the city out back to the marbles. It had turned out a blustery warm day, an' the hot wind was whippin' up dust in spirals an' streaks in the air in the distance all along the plains. Soon we had left the city behind. Soc could move pretty fast for a burro, if he felt like it. That was somethin' they must have added to his family line when they genengineered 'em. I felt my shoulders loosen a tad as we hit the road out of Arcborough, where the only signs of civilization are the dwindlin' rest-stops an' warehouses. The tected shivering an' motion of the city started to fade behind me, all them signals, machines, people, bustlin', an' rushin' at the back of Soc an' me. I can relax a mite now an' think straight without all that commotion. That's another reason I'm glad to travel by burro. Soc more or less knows the ways, an' once he's pointed in the right direction you can leave him to it. That gives me time to think, an' bring the cerning down to just that cone around me. You wouldn't catch me stuck in an auto. Too much goin' on at once an' no time to breathe and let yer mind be left in peace.
I got to musin' on Joe an' how he lost his Ma a couple of years after me an' Andreas lost ours, difference bein' we still had Pa. Joe's Ma had been his only family. I'd heard she passed on doin' some work on a station - signed on up in space for a year away from her boy to try an' pay to care for him, an' then drowned up there in the cold empty because someone didn't want to spend the coin to look after the equipment proper in them rustin' hulks. To their minds, it was cheaper to hire Amphibs an' the

like who would live under them rough terms. That could turn a kid mean, I reckon. I just hoped it hadn't turned Joe rotten.

Not too far from the big ol' marbles on the way to Joe's hidin' place, somethin' snapped me outta of my reverie. I could feel there were a couple of riders not far beyond, hidden by the brush and rock. There was five of 'em, and they were armed. There is nothin' much out this way, so it figured that either they're here for Joe, for the hoard, or for me. None of them choices is much good for us, anyways.
"Howdy there," I shouted, "'Fraid an ambush only works if I don't know you all are up yonder."
I could sense 'em squirmin' on their horses an' whisperin' to one another. That'd thrown 'em into confusion some. Good for reputation, too, to get 'em a little uncertain an' creeped first. One of them decided to try an' show some initiative an' fired in my direction, but it was very wide, an' it felt like they was mainly shooting at me because they felt like they were expected to. Weren't much point in tryin' to outrun them. Socrates might be pretty swift on his short legs, but they looked to have skittish tweaked nags that could move faster than we could. Anyways, I didn't want an armed posse to ferret out Joe, no matter what intention they had for him.
I got out the Masher pistol an' scootched Soc around a boulder to give him cover, and told him to stay put. He didn't need to be told twice. This ain't the first time we've been shot at.
The riders came thunderin' down from their ambush, whoopin' an' hollerin', spraying shots into the air. It was kind of a tomfool sort of show. They barrelled toward me in a wedge, kickin' dust an' noise as they went. One of them took a shot or two in my vicinity, an' looked disappointed when I didn't flinch. The shooter was using a banged-up home modified repeater pistol, an' there was no way in hell a weapon like that could come anywhere near hittin' the thing aimed at from this range, much less when jerked about on horseback.
They pulled up an' whooped some more. Now, this was a better time to start bein' concerned. Much easier to aim at me when they ain't movin'. The rider who had taken a shot at me just then was the same Amped woman - Golo's pal, Jel - who had tried to crush me back in the Old Games Hall. Guess she was neither the forgivin' nor the learnin' type. I'd half a notion we might run into each other again. I'd read up on her. She worked as muscle for the gang, with a couple of counts of beatin' on people in her book. Golo was there too, straggling at the rear with long cigarette hangin' loose from his lip, an' danglin' a rifle from a limp hand like he would his billiard cue, as half-hearted at ridin' with a posse as he was at most everythin'. Two other riders - a similar lookin' man an' woman with their hair shaved into spiral patterns - I didn't know them well, but recognised as bein' members of the Sunset Gang. I do believe they were the twins, Rustam (the male one) and Inkar (the female one), rumoured to do a lot of the stick-up an' generally robbery for the gang. The last rider was a young Amphib, scale-skin sparklin' in the midlight. The Amphib kid smiled nasty at me an' swaggered in his saddle.
I squinted at him.
"You're one of Ms. Nokai's kids, ain't ya? We met at the Pools the other day." I said.
The Amphib kid tried to look tall.
"What if I am?" he replied.
"Yer Ma seems a sensible woman. Don't know if she'd be too pleased if she heard one of her boys was ridin' with the Sunset Gang."
"It ain't none of her damn business what I do," he scoffed.
"I didn't catch yer name before, kid."
He looked a little uncertain.
"Name's Khenbish, Warden," he managed to get out eventually, "An', ah, that there, well, it's a name you'd better 'member. You are goin' to be hearin' a whole lot of me."
"She ain't goin' to be hearing nothing soon, Khennie," growled Jel, spoilin' for another shot at breakin' me, grindin' her teeth as she stared at me an' lookin' all the world

like she planned to try to finish me off with her jaws this time.
The others laughed.
I took out a lickwish stick an' chewed at it.
"Here's the thing, Khennie," I said to Nokai's kid, "It ain't my place to give career advice, but you probably want to think twice before signing up with this raggedy bunch of smugglers an' roughs."
"Shut it, Warden," hissed Jel, leaning forward on a horse as jittery as her own Amped self.
"Well, I'm actually pleased to see alls of you," I said an' tipped my hat in their direction, "Honest. Golo there didn't know much when we had a little confabulation yesterday, an' I've still got a bunch of questions I'd be grateful if you'd take the time to answer."
Golo looked guilty an' pulled his horse to slink back behind the rest of the pack.
"We don't got to tell you nothing, Warden," growled Inkar. Her twin brother made a matching noise in agreement.
"You won't be able to hear nuthin' once you're more holes than warden, anyways," repeated Jel, wavin' her gun at me. Had to pay attention to her. Them nerve drugs can sure be unpredictable, like she showed back at the Old Games Hall.
I raised my hand, casual-like, so as not to startle any of them.
"Y'all know what this is here?" I said, an' let 'em see I was holdin' the Masher.
"So's you got a gun," screeched Jel, "So what? We got four more than you."
I tilted my head.
"The thing is, Ms. Jelena, there's guns and then there's guns. This here Masher, well, they used to call it the Idiot's Gun, back in the day."
Khennie laughed at that, an' I gave him a small smile.
"The reason they called it that in my Grandpop's day was that they wanted an Idiot-proof gun for the war - well-made, durable, worked in weather on all sorts of planets, an' easy to use. You just point an' it kills, no fuss. 'Cause the folks who built this didn't trust soldiers to be well-trained enough to hit the side of a barn on their own, they figgered it was easier to make a gun that would just shoot the whole barn. There's five of you, but you rode down together all thoughtless, an' if I'm forced to draw on you, ain't none of you going to be missed by this here iron in my hand. The Masher always does what it's supposed to."
This gave some of the posse pause, especially Golo, who I knew didn't have much heart for a tussle.
"Now, say you figure you'll roll the dice anyhow an' take a shot at me," I went on, "Well, there's a couple of things you need to think about your guns. They're messes of scrap, is what you've all got there." I nodded toward Jel, "F'r'instance, that there repeater pistol you got, I can tell that it sticks as often as it shoots, 'cause it's put together a little wrong, an' it needs constant maintenance an' adjustment that it ain't seen with you. Them Perun shooters you twins got back there, they're so durned old, you probably got a decent chance that they'll blow up in your hands. Golo here probably didn't tell you this, but he didn't even load his rifle, whether 'cause of his valuin' of all life or 'cause of bone idleness, I couldn't tell you." I looked at each of 'em slow. "Yer odds of hitting me ain't as good as you reckon, an' even if you do draw, I'd be forced to fire back, an' it might be hard for you gulch-heads to git this, but that'd get me sorrowful for sure, because my job as warden is to protect everyone in this part of Elena, even a low-down dumb pack of scrags like you all. So rather than doing something foolish an' maybe endin' up on the ground, how's about you answer me a question or two, civil-like, an' then we can all go about our day?"
The twins looked at each meaningfully, doin' that talkin' without a word thing that people who are that close manage.
"Whatdya want, Warden?" growled Inkar. She raised her gun, but let me see she still had her finger restin' on the trigger, just in case.
I picked up a round pebble with my free hand. There were patterns on it, even if you couldn't see them with eyes, patterns that were all whorls an' waves made by time

that looked just a little like the lines the twins had cut into their hair.
I tossed the pebble into the air and caught it.
"The murdered woman. Ms. Magera. You ever do any business with her?"
"Fergit this," growled Jel, unable to keep all them nerve-drugs in hand, "We ain't dealing with the law." Her twitchin' mitts were movin' too close to the management end of her gun for comfort. Aiming without lookin', I threw the pebble and hit her more or less in the eye. She grunted, an' the surprise was enough to make her forget about smearin' me over the sand for the moment.
"Settle now, Ms. Jel," I said, "Don't let the Amp in yer blood hold the reins. I ain't goin' to warn you again. If you so much as shift funny, I'll have to mash you with my piece."
Inkar, who was clearly the one with some self-control in the outfit, rode in front of Jel so as she wouldn't get any ideas. Jel weren't in the gang for ideas.
"Like I said, seems to me Magera was doin' some sorta side projects. She work for your posse? Sounds like she travelled around these plains a fair part of her days, knew where the people were, an' what they were about, knew the best places to hide things, an' who might do the hidin' for a price. Could be a mighty handy woman to have workin' for you if you was in the smugglin' trade."
Inkar twisted the reins of her nag so it snorted hot air at me an' stared goggle-eyed. Inkar herself tilted her head, like she was inspectin' me from different angles.
"We didn't have nuthin' to do with her gettin' dead, Warden," she said low. She was a tough one to read.
"We come here to make sure you get that idea into your head," added Khennie. He was squirmin' in his saddle, a kid excited to be invited out on a big excitin' grown-up bit of gang business.
"An' you gonna get that idea straight anyway we can," Jel snarled.
I let 'em stew for a moment. Silence is a powerful thing. Used just right, it can crack open all sorts of roughs. Naturally, it was Golo, the one who hardly wanted to be on horseback wavin' guns around, who wanted to be back in some dive saloon loungin' about, he was the one who couldn't stand it.
"You gotta believe it, Warden," Golo blurted, "I - we maybe did a bit of talkin' to her an' she maybe put us on to a couple of things for some cash, but not for a good while. A good, good while! We didn't have no damn reason for killin' her. I myself ain't spoken to her in close-to a whole damn year!"
Inkar rolled her eyes slightly at her brother Rustam on account of Golo bein' unable to keep his trap shut. That was the price the Sunset Riders paid if they let a lazy so-an'-so like Golo join up.
"Once you were done with me here, whatever you had a mind to do with me," I says, "You was all curious to go shoot at Joe to see if he killed Magera, or maybe to see if you could squeeze him for somethin'?" I waved a hand in Khennie the Amphib kid's general direction. "What with your new greenhorn havin' some inside knowledge, I reckon you know it was an Amphib knife that killed Magera. Maybe one of you is responsible for the murder, an' you come down here to see Joe just so you had someone mighty convenient lyin' about the place, a fellow you could blame for the stabbin'? An' maybe you think that if Joe gets shot good, nobody bothers your gang here no more, an' the best part is Joe won't be doin' no awkward defendin' of hisself, on account of you all puttin' him in the ground."
Nokai's kid Khen had tension about his movements in the saddle now, part excited at the possibility of violence, part plum scared to get rolled up in a shoot-out where he might kill or be killed.
"It's business, Warden," said Inkar, all cool an' cold, "An' if, like you said, this Magera woman did some service to us, we didn't have no reason to kill her. Corpses ain't always that useful."
"Don't know how we were supposed to do it anyhow," growled her twin Rustam, which gave me a little surprise, seeing as how I weren't entirely sure that he knew how to talk.

I nodded at the Amphib kid.
"Yer new recruit is down at the Pools with his ma an' brother. Could have got the knife easy enough."
Khen shook his head.
"Don't matter to us what you believe, Warden," said Inkar with a shrug, "We didn't have no good reason for killin' the woman, an' it seems to me that if someone got the knife, either it was Joe that done it, or somebody else close by put some thought into what they was goin' to use."
I looked over them silently. Of the Sunset Riders, Jel was the most likely to do a stabbing, but I couldn't see her puttin' any planning into the job. They weren't exactly good citizens of Elena, these Sunsets Riders, but Inkar had a point. There wasn't any plain reason I could see at the moment for them to have stabbed Magera. They were shooters, thieves, an' smugglers. A quiet stabbin' weren't none of their style.
I backed up to Socrates, keepin' the Sunsets covered with the Masher.
"Well, I thank you kindly for your time. That's done fer now," I said, "Let's all go our separate ways. An' listen to this little word of advice. Don't none of you come around to try an' shake Joe any time. Don't do nuthin' that will make me come look for you. Ain't none of you can hide from me."
I could tect that the wind was stirrin' in that way where you get whole sheets of sand hanging up in the breeze. Figgerin' that it'd be a good idea to have that sand between me an' the Sunsets so as to not tempt them to try an' take another shot, I got on Socrates and as the grit whirlin' about started to cut off their line of sight, we got the heck out of there to go an' get Joe.

8.
"Git your things, together, Joe, you can't stay here no more," I called out.
He creeped out from under the water, lookin' as terrified as a poor starvin' mouse. The Sunset Riders may not have killed Ms. Magera, but they sure couldn't be trusted to leave Joe be. Even if they didn't come around to this Fugue hoard, there ain't no way someone like Golo wasn't goin' to turn Joe in if there was the farthest whiff of a reward. I had to move him. Soc complained a little when I stacked Joe up behind me on his back, but he's a good burro who does his job an' knows he'll get some reward at the end of it, else I won't hear the end of his darn braying. I was right thankful nobody took another shot at us on the way back - Sunset Gang or otherwise, an' soon we was comin' back up to the Shack an' the comfortin' sprawl of home. Off-hand, I couldn't think of a safer place to keep Joe, now that people were startin' to look for him.

Joe sat up in the saddle when he saw the Shack.
"Hell, I declare, Pips, I don't know if the damn place has changed, or if it's just gotten more so since we were little 'uns."
He walked in, lookin' around with careful wonder, tryin' not to brush up against anything. To his eyes, the place was both smaller an' bigger. Smaller, 'cause he'd been a kid when last he'd seen it an' things from the past never keep their grandness. The Shack was bigger too, because it'd grown an' spread since he'd last been here all them years ago, what with the wood-workin' Pa had put in, an' the string of storage sheds, an' Andreas' paintin' studio long left unused.
I told Joe to find himself a seat in the parlor, and went out to give Soc a brushin', some hay an' water, as well as some more carrots to thank him for his troubles, which he chewed down with all the air of someone who had only been given his just due.
I hung up my hat and coat, an' locked away the Masher. Bein' out here was as good a place to keep Joe put as any other. If Joe was going to be trouble, he didn't have anywhere to run from here.
He was starin' at one of Andreas' old paintings that was hung up above the mantelpiece. It was a simple thing, just some scraggly gums an' sleepy horses in silhouette with the sun going down over the view from one side of the Shack. It was

one of Andreas' early ones, before he started usin' whatever he could to keep the cerning quiet in his head. Those trees an' horses were standin' still in the picture, but Andreas had done 'em with a sorta swirl of colours inside their outlines that you had to look close to see, like he was tryin' to paint how he could tect the inside movement of every which simple thing, even when they weren't movin'.
"Ain't much I can offer you to drink here, Joe," I confessed, an' he turned from the painting. "Afraid I don't play hostess here too much. Maybe have some soda water, maybe some sarsaparilla-beer older than I'd care to remember, if you'd want to hazard that."
"Whatever you're havin' is fine," said Joe.
I brought him a soda water and had a good swig from a tall glass myself to get the taste of sand out of my throat.
I threw myself into my old chair, the one Pa used to sit in, and Granma before him, a chair soft from waiting for weary bodies, and I felt pretty weary right now. It was an odd thing, to be home at the Shack, where I knew the feel an' movement of every little thing around me, an' to have a grown up Joe, in a bad spot an' here in my living room, all heavy head hangin' down an' scales glintin' in the evening light. He sat there holdin' his drink an' tryin' to hold hisself together.

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We got some rest, Joe, an' I, or at least Joe closed his eyes for a while. I half-dozed, unable to help myself from tectin' the worn presence of my guest in the Shack. After a spell, I got up, stretched, an' went to check the comp. There were two wires on the box, an' both were bad news. The first was from Eudy, who ran a little drink an' grub place in the burb of Kabalo. Eudy said that it was about Andreas, that she'd heard he'd been found unconscious an' sick nearby, an' that she'd propped him up in a storeroom and got a doc in to give him a once over, but she couldn't store him forever, an' seein' as how I was his only kin, she'd be mighty obliged if I'd come clear away my unconscious brother.

The second was the message I'd knew would come eventual, the news that the city law had a tip that tied Joe to the knife an' they were coming to find him. I wondered if someone at the Pools had sold Joe out, or if the Sunset Riders had given Joe's name up. S'pose it didn't matter much now. Grish had sent the wire, an' he made it sound like Khan was going to go all out to track an' cart Joe off in irons, not just with the departmental motors, but a flock of fliers and a stampede of deputies an' who knows what else. Yeah, Khan'd be pleased to make a good show of this, let the Dvoryans know she was keeping Elena neat an' tidy for them. Juliana an' Nicholas'd be mighty chuffed to hear she'd found the owner of the knife, I'm sure. Maybe Khan'd even get a pat on the back and a cigar from old Paw Dvoryan too, if she played her cards right, an' hardly no-one got to see that sequestered patriarch these days.

Joe was hoverin' at the door. I reckon he'd heard enough. For a moment it look'd like he was goin' to try and do a bolt, maybe try an' ride Socrates out of here. It wouldn't do him no good. Ain't no way Socrates would carry anybody off without my givin' him the say-so.
"Sorry to hear about your brother, Pips," Joe said, all quiet like.
"Afraid it's bad news, Joe. I gotta take you in, else a noisy circus is goin' to tear up the plains of Elena until they find you, an' you can't hide from them now. A warden has got some independence in how they work, but I can't just let you go off now, there ain't no more wiggle-room. I'm sorry, Joe. At least I can take you in quiet."
"All right, Pips, I guess you know best," said Joe.
The fight was gone right out of him and he was broken by all this. Maybe he was even relieved now not to have wait an' watch all day an' night. I felt for him. I hadn't managed to keep him out, an' I could tell from his face bein' all open an' scared that

he was thinkin' of bein' locked up in the cells for the rest of his days. I felt for him, but I didn't say anything.

Socrates was in a mood at bein' roused out to work again when he had barely settled in for a rest, an' he brayed in an indignant sorta way to let me know his feelin's on the matter. But Soc's a smart burro, an' he also saw how collapsed an' weak Joe had gone and knew something was going on, so he quietened up with a snort an' let us ride him back to the city. Joe leaned against my back, limp as a rag doll, while Socrates swayed along the road.
"Pips, d'you'think they'll let me have my knife back?" he said in a small voice, "Ma helped me make it, back in the day. It's the only thing I got left that helps me remember her. Why'd they have to do it with my damn knife, Pips? They could have used anythin' else. Hell, Nokai's boys've both got guns in their place in the Pools, an' they wouldn't have been any harder to get hold of. Easier, maybe even. I had my knife kept in a box under some things. Why'd it have to be my damn knife, Pips? Y'know I even showed it to the botherin' Foundation woman herself that one time. 'Magine that. You never know when you're lookin' at something everyday that might well end up endin' you."
A prickle ran down my spine an' I could feel the evening shifts in the air, the stirrings of wild cats an' sand rats, and all the life in the scrub. Joe had a point, and not just in the way he meant. But I didn't have a lick of proof to keep him out of the cells. I wasn't about to open my mouth an' give him hope again, only for it to be all smashed up.

When we walked in to the station, I kept it all quiet, explained to Grish that Joe had come in willingly an' wasn't confessin' nothin', an' that I was sorry that Khan would have to call off the big search, seeing as I imagined she'd been lookin' forward to it so. I made sure that Grish let everyone know in the station that I expected Joe to be treated fair, an' that he might be a suspect but I wasn't convinced yet, an' said a little reminder about how findin' the truth was important, an' justice, not just keepin' the Dvoryans and the Founding Families happy. Deputy Moroz took him away, an' Joe was meek as could be. I didn't feel good about none of this, an' I sure didn't want to face Sheriff Khan right now.

I leaned against Grish's desk, tryin' to ignore the whirr of the whole station crowdin' in on me. I told Grish that they'd need to send some deputies out to the marbles if they wanted to seize an illegal stash of Fugue before the Sunset Riders moved it. Then I got Grish to look up a few things on his fancy box before I left, about what the Dvoryans had been workin' on the last few days, hopin' to find something I could use so that they'd keep their weight from off of Joe just a little longer. Old Alex Dvoryan didn't seem to be doin' much of anything outside the house lately. All an' sundry pretended he was still running the family estate, but everyone also knew he was very poorly an' that all his money an' influence didn't seem to be doin' much for keepin' him alive much longer. Juliana an' Nicholas had been continuin' their Paw's work, an' Juliana had been preachin' her gospel of remaking an' civilizing Elena at a fancy ball on the very same night that someone had stabbed Ms. Magera. Grish did a print for me of all the tattle on the family. I hoped I could find something to call them off Khan in there, although I wasn't mighty hopeful.

9.
Before I could try an' do anythin' more for Joe, I had to go over to Eudy's tea house an' take care of my brother. Eudy was a fair-natured woman, but she wouldn't hold on to her good nature if she had to baby-sit Andreas for much longer. This weren't the first time she had scooped him up from the street for me. Eudy was a good woman, one of the people who kept an eye around Kabalo an' the rest of Arcborough for me, and who especially kept an eye out for Andreas.

I left Soc out the front, and pushed open the doors of the tea house to find Eudy. She had a towel thrown over her shoulder an' was servin' some grub an' some of her fancy hot brews to a table of gigglin' off-world tourists who were ooing an' aahing in loud whispers about how rustic the place was. Eudy's tea house weren't rustic, it was just the way it was built. It was made out of the only local timbers that were available back in the day, with long, dark shelves all about the walls holdin' all the tea paraphernalia Eudy had collected over time from Elena an' beyond. Nobody had planned for the place to end up a quaint curiosity for gawpin' sunburned tourists. Eudy didn't let that get to her, mind. She was a professional, an' didn't let on that these outworlders were as gratin' as a mouthful of stones to her, but she served 'em an' smiled, as polite as you please, her large round face serene as the big moon in the afternoon. When she caught sight of me, there was a crack in the calmness of Eudy's face, an' she nodded me over to a corner. I liked Eudy, an' I liked her place. Both of 'em were nice an' unpretentious. Her spot was one of the few I could stand in the city, seeing as how she had some nice little areas in her tea-house where a body could sit and sip without bein' disturbed, an' the wood all around had interesting, relaxin' shapes an' movements inside of it that didn't rile up my cerning too bad.
When she was free, Eudy led me into the back, out through a thick door an' down some stairs to a cool room where she had all kinds of stuff stacked. A curled lump was lyin' on the ground on a folded tablecloth.
"He woke a few times, but I can't rightly say he knew where he was, Pips," Eudy murmured, takin' care not to wake him. Didn't look like he was likely to stir anyhow. "A sweeper I know found him out the back of a barrio alley an' brought him over. Don't know what he was on, but he was sick as a baby bird a couple of times, an' kept on retchin' a little in his sleep, 'though he didn't bring anything up. Had Doc Ray check him over, since she comes in for a brew most days anyways. The Doc said he'd live, this time at least. You Pipsikovs are some damn stubborn cusses."
I thanked Eudy and let her know that I was in her debt again. With her help, we carried Andreas out the back door an' got him on top of Socrates, tying him on to the saddle so he slumped to the side without fallin' all the way off. Soc scowled. This wasn't the first time the burro had to carry Andreas in this state, and Soc was none too pleased with it. Strapped on, Andreas would occasionally mutter nonsense with his eyes closed or twitch his stained fingers.
"You be okay to handle him?" said Eudy.
I nodded.

Soc and I took Andreas slowly back down through Kabalo to Ruinsberg, where Andreas had a place. Ruinsberg had been a building project - some sorta experimental housing called something like the Runesberg Estate at first- but it had never been finished and had then been mostly forgotten by the good citizens of Arcborough. Needs must, as Granma used to always say, and the destitute an' ragged crept into the rotting, unfinished, weed-dressed buildings and made homes out of 'em. I knew where Andreas lived - in the basement of one place where you had to fight your way through garbage and feral cats to get in. It weren't 'cause Andreas had told me where he lay his head that I knew the place, I'd had some people keep an eye on his movings, since me an' Andreas didn't talk so much. Carryin' him to his place was tricky, an' I knocked him against all manner of obstacles as he wiggled in his state. At least he didn't weigh too much. To be honest, I prayed he wouldn't awaken. At least this way he wouldn't try to fight me too much.

Inside Andreas' squat, I found a dirty bed, bottles an' pipes an' pills all about the place. I cleaned up the room as best I could, remade the bed, an' lay Andreas out there. I had a few supplies in Soc's saddlebags - some provisions an' water for emergencies, an' I brought these in and laid them where he could find them, in the hope he'd try an' get something more nourishing than smoke an' booze into hisself. At the other end of the room some of his paintings were stacked. One of them was a

half-finished picture of a pack of loose cats like the ones I'd seen out the front of his place, all prowlin' together an' full of synchronised disdain. It was a good one, or at least, it would be, if he ever got around to finishin' it. There were a bunch of other unfinished canvases nearby. Too many unfinished ones. Andreas was startin' to stir an' his eyes flickered an' rolled. I figgered it was time for me to get back to work. If he woke up with me here, he wouldn't thank me for any help.

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I needed to think. Joe wouldn't last long in the cells without tryin' to do something foolish to hisself. He'd always been dirt poor, but he'd always had the open prairie an' all the wide ways of Elena, the right to be where he wanted to be. Being locked up took that away from him, took the last thing he had.
I hopped on Soc and we rode slowly an' aimlessly out of Ruinsberg. My cerning was gettin' out of hand, as it often did when my mind wandered. I could tect the cheap pattern an' make of the materials they'd used in the walls of the former Runesberg Estate, an' I could feel the slow process of rot an' internal collapse all about the place. Khan'd be happy enough with Joe in the cells. A rough Amphib with a history that wasn't entirely clean an' who had helped the Sunset Riders move some illegal drugs? Naw, the Sheriff weren't likely to give Joe the benefit of the doubt. And then around comes Ms. Magera, doing her work for the Dvoryan's holy mission, pokin' about an' asking Joe all sorts of questions about his life an' line. The Sheriff would most likely figger that Magera found out about Joe's bein' in the Fugue smugglin' trade, so Joe stabbed Magera. But that didn't wash if you knew Joe. I didn't reckon he even knew or cared to ask about the stuff he was stashin' in the hoard. If he was worried about bein' sent to the cells by Magera when she was still breathin', why didn't he run in the first place? A fellow like Joe knew all sorts of hidden places all over Elena, an' there'd be other Amphibs like Nokai who weren't too friendly with city law who'd help him stay on the outside. If Joe'd killed her, why up near the cliffs, where she'd be easy to find, an' why would he leave his knife? Sure, he mighta panicked an' run scared, but that knife was a reminder of his Ma, he'd said, an' he wouldn't have left that behind. There was no sense that way.

A mess of ants was crawlin' over some stale buns by the side of the road. A gust was bringin' little slaps of pale orange sand from over the nor-east across all Arcborough, slowly an' quietly grittin' up everything that wasn't sealed up tight, an' even a lot of things that were. I got to thinkin'. Maybe Joe had to be the sacrificial goat here. But why him? Why take his knife when there were more convenient weapons that could throw the blame on other Amphibs with a reputation? Seemed to me that someone had wanted it to be Joe specifically to be rounded up, an' it had to do with the questions Magera had been askin' him an' the money she had hidden in her wall-safe.

Soc stopped suddenly, like he knew a thought was coming through bright an' clear as the morning light flashin' over the sky. I slapped at my leg and grunted. We needed to get to a public box an' wire the Arcborough police. If I was wrong about this, Joe would end his days in a cell, an' I wouldn't be warden in these parts for much longer, but I reckon I was on to the right answer, an' right has to be done. I spurred the burro on. He could sense the urgency as we rushed through the back streets of Arcborough, past the transmission towers an' the racin' crowds an' the noisy autos until we were headin' towards the stately piousness of the homes of the Founding Families.

Socrates an' me waited agin at the Dvoryan gates, announcin' that I was here to bring news on Magera's murder, seein' how they had their concerns about keeping Elena and their employees safe. Soc wandered off with his pal, the stable hand, to go and visit the fancy horses again, an' as I walked past the garage, I crouched on the

ground like I was staring at one of the automobiles. The butler fellow with the little moustache came up behind me. I stayed there for a spell, admirin' the auto, until he coughed discreet-like an' I followed him through the sealed doors into the perfectly airconditioned Dvoryan estate.
"The Dvoryans regret that they are not at home to visitors just at the moment, due to a serious illness in the family," said the butler fellow, "But they wish to express their sincere gratitude for your work and want you to be aware that they have taken notice of your efficiency in bringing the perpetrator of the crime to justice so quickly."
Word sure got 'round quick to those in the know. I took off my hat an' shook the dust from it. The butler guy ground his teeth.
"Well, that's a shame about the family illness an' all, Mister," I said, "I heard that Ol' Man Dvoryan is fair poorly an' all the best docs Elenite money can buy can't keep him alive much longer. Must be a troublesome time for his children, an' I guess they have to prepare for the worst an' ready themselves to inherit the family businesses. That's a heck of a thing, all right, at such a young age. An' it must weigh pretty heavy on Juliana Dvoryan, as the eldest child in this house, Elenite law'll give her control of the whole thing."
Butler bowed his head slightly, to acknowledge the fact.
"Things is, Mister," I said, "There's a couple of matters that don't stand the way you said. First of all, I know that the Dvoryan kids are home. Juliana's in her office over yonder, hunched over some readin', while Nicholas paces back an' forth in the room next to hers, listenin' to something on the box."
The Butler's eyes widened an' his mouth fell open just a touch. I reckon his tiny moustache might've even wrinkled a little in confusion.
"Now," I went on before he could ask any fool questions about how I knew, "I don't want to appear ill-mannered, Mister, here in the manor of one of the Foundin' Families, but I'm here on behalf of the law, an' I ain't goin' anywhere until I get the opportunity to talk to Juliana an' Nicholas Dvoryan. 'Cause there's one matter they ain't got quite straight. Amphib Joe was arrested as a suspect for the murder of Magera, but it ain't so sure that he was the one that did the killin'. I need to talk to the Dvoryan kids about that, an' I need to talk to them now, an' if you won't take me there, then I reckon I can see the way clear myself."
The Butler paused, then walked over to a panel on the wall an' had a whispered conversation with the bosses upstairs. He returned after a moment.
"This way, Warden," he said through clenched teeth, "They will see you now."

I didn't expect the Dvoryans to look pleased to see me, an' Nicholas sure didn't disappoint, his hands movin' more an' more like he couldn't wait to throw me out of there. His sister Juliana, on the other hand, kept up her distant holy air, like she was floating just out of our reach an' above of all the pains an' problems down here on the ground.
"Warden, we are of course grateful for your work in apprehending the murderer of the Foundation's employee," began Juliana, her hands together, leanin' forward so her face rested on her fingertips.
"But you must understand how precious our time is," added Nicholas, "And we cannot afford to indulge you-..."
I cut him off with a wave of my hand.
"Sure, I understand an' appreciate how busy you two are, an' you got my sympathies in dealin' with your Pa bein' sick an' all that comes along with that."
Juliana bowed her head a mite in acknowledgement.
'The thing is," I said, "I been mullin' it over, and it sure ain't likely that Joe is the killer of Ms. Magera, an' to be frank, I reckon that weight of your family name mebbe got things a little rushed here."
"We simply wanted this matter to be dealt with as swiftly as possible, as I'm sure do all concerned Elenite citizens," intoned Juliana.
"Sometimes swift ain't the same thing as sure, beggin' yer pardons. Let's follow the

trail, if you'd indulge me just a moment. First of all, the knife. It's a keepsake of no small value to Joe, an' he ain't got much that's worth anythin', sentimental-wise or otherwise. He wouldn't have left that knife behind in a thousand years," Nicholas snorted at this, but I ignored him an' went on, "An' why did the knifer want to use that particular knife anyhow? Well, I'll be comin' back around to that in a moment. Fer now, we need to be askin' how the murderer got their mitts on the blade in the first place. Seems to me that while it weren't no difficult thing to get into Joe's hut to obtain the blade, the difficulty was in knowin' it was there in the first place. Sure, some of the other folks at the Pools might have known where it was, an' some of them are mixed up in some bad business, but I can't find no sign that any of them had a real serious reason to stab Magera. So, who's left, I gets to thinkin', who might have known where the knife was an' got ahold of it? Why, hows about Ms. Magera herself?"
Juliana looked full of disbelief for a moment.
"And then she stabbed herself with that knife, I suppose?" scoffed Nicholas.
I shook my head.
"Naw, but she had been houndin' Joe for a while with plenty of questions, supposedly for the Foundation, an' Joe had shown her where the knife was kept on one of her visits. Then there's another thing that's turned up. Did you know that Magera had a secret stash of money? The way I figure it, someone was paying her off, an' that individual promised her even more if she'd steal away Joe's blade an' hand it over."
"And who on Elena could possibly want the Amphib's knife?" said Juliana with her eyebrow raised a fraction.
"Whoever killed Magera, of course. Magera was paid to steal the thing that was goin' to kill her, 'though of course she didn't know it at the time."
"Don't waste our time, Warden, with this damn nonsense. You haven't provided a single plausible reason why someone would go to all this trouble," sneered Nicholas.
"You've put your finger right on it there," I said, pacing the floor a little, "An' I confess that had me sure stumped. You've got to keep in mind the idea that while Magera did the dyin', she wasn't the main target. This whole sad thing has been to cause trouble for one person, an' that's Joe. The person payin' off Magera to get the knife, they needed to get Joe locked up an' out of the way."
Juliana stared at me with mild interest, humorin' me.
"If the Amphib gentleman in question was the intended target," she asked, "And the supposed murderer was willing to go to such lengths, why not just make an attempt on his life instead?"
"Sure, they could try, but it wouldn't be as easy as that. I don't know how much you know about Amphibs, ma'am, but the Injection that made 'em, also made 'em real tough. Them scales they got ain't just for show. Why, I seen Amphibs survive gunshots that'd kill anyone else, much less a knife. Naw, findin' an' killin' Joe would've been a much more troublesome job, and was especially uncertain if the murderer didn't have much time to plan, an' if maybe time was runnin' out because Magera was gettin' too curious anyways about all this stuff she was bein' paid to do an' she was becomin' a danger. Kill Magera, get Joe locked away - it was a nice, neat way of orderin' things."
Nicholas' brow was gettin' drawn an' heavy, an' he was barely able to hide how mad it made him that I was sitting there talkin' about grubby things that happened way out in the Pools when his sanctified sister had great works to be gettin' on with, spreadin' the gospel of the Dvoryan name. Juliana must have let Nicholas do all her ragin' for her, because she was unruffled at the idea. She didn't look bored exactly, more like I was tellin' her things that happened somewhere far away that didn't matter none.
"And who is this Amphib man that someone should do all this?" Juliana asked after a moment's thought, with the air of a woman used to devotin' her thoughts to big matters concernin' communities an' populations, not to just one person.
"That's the tricky thing, ain't it? Joe doesn't appear to be much for anyone to be riled about, does he? Sure, he gets mixed up in some rough-doin's out on the plains, but that ain't so unusual outside the city, an' he never does any real harm. Naw, I couldn't

figure it myself for a good long while, until I did some lookin' into how Magera was askin' all her questions. She was around Joe a heck of a lot more than the other residents of the Pools, tryin' to ferret out more information about him."
"Frankly, I see nothing unusual in that, Warden," Juliana replied with all the interest of a yawn, "That was surely her part of the project - a survey of the place and people."
"I've read the reports, an' I've had words with the folks involved, but it seems to me that there weren't anyone else in the Pools that Magera spoke to as often as Joe. She was diggin' for somethin'. There's something about Joe."
Nicholas snorted, like he thought that was plum unlikely.
"Did you know Joe's Ma worked like a pack-animal to try an' give her boy some sort of life, had to provide for him as best she could on her lonesome, an' even ended up dead in the tryin'? Joe never set eyes on his Pa. Never got a single bit of help from him."
"Statistically, it is a regrettable but not unusual situation among that sort of community," put in Juliana slowly, "That is precisely the sort of context our Foundation will change."
"That's as it might be, but beggin' your pardon, it ain't like your Ma, who split from Mr. Dvoryan for a pay-out, never to be seen on Elena again. Joe never even knew who his Pa was."
"Why should it matter who his damn father was?" spat Nicholas, his voice startin' to rise.
"It mattered enough to get Magera dead." I leaned against the table, "Say, I was thinkin' about the durndest bit of trivia - did you know that the Injection that made the Amphibs is like most of the other types, what's called a dominant change?" The siblings looked mighty confused by the change in topic. "I read up on it. Now I'm sure two well-educated individuals like yourselves know precisely what that means, but to my small understandin' it means that only one parent has got to be an Amphib for the kids to prob'bly turn out the same. Joe's dad didn't need to be an Amphib. Now, imagine if Magera was tryin' to find out if Joe knew who his Pa was because Joe's Pa was someone important, who had been with Joe's Ma back in the day an' then abandoned them in the dirt."
I stared at the Dvoryans.
"Imagine if Joe's Pa was your Pa, one Mr. Alex Dvoryan."
Nicholas slammed them big hands of his onto the table. Juliana didn't look so tolerant of me anymore.
"Our father is an honourable and ailing man, Warden, and I find that in very bad taste," she said quiet as a steel bar.
"Ya think? But I'm sure you two are aware that there's an old-fashioned law on Elena about inheritance - the eldest child tends to get the bulk of the say with whatever is left in most circumstances. It'd be real tricky to do otherwise in the courts, unless your Pa had taken special measures, maybe. But what if yer Pa has been sicker an' absent from runnin' business a lot longer than you two have been lettin' on? An' what if you got to worryin' that he wasn't long for life, an' then maybe out of nowhere you find out that maybe Juliana ain't the eldest after all, and all of a sudden all that wealth and influence might be at risk of being chopped up for some Amphib out in the Pools you've never heard of before, an illeg'timate Injected who ain't the sort of thing people think about when they reflect on the traditions of the Dvoryan family. An' after all the family's generations of talk of respectin' tradition an' custom, what if it got out that the eldest heir, humble Joe, wasn't gittin' a cent of his Pa's estate, after him an' his Ma bein' treated so poorly all their lives? Well, Juliana, I reckon you'd not only have a wagonload of shame to deal with, but losin' out on all that money might be a heck of an unwelcome new circumstance."
Juliana stood over me and stared at me like a cold gale, wishin' she could slice me up into frozen pieces an' blow me over the horizon.
"You think I had Magera killed for what? To keep money? And prestige? That is a disgusting lie, and that sort of disrespect for the Dvoryan name will not be tolerated,

I assure you-"
"You are misunderstandin' me, Ms. Dvoryan. I don't think you killed Magera to protect your position. I think your brother here done it to protect your position."
If Nicholas had been a fidgeter before with his big hands, he had them sped-up like twitchin' fly wings now.
"What are you talking about, of course I didn't-..." croaked Nicholas.
"Sure you did. Yer sister couldn't have done it - she was at some shindig an' wouldn't have had time to get out to the Pools and back in time to knife Magera. But you would, Nicholas. An' you did. You look up to your sister so much that the thought of her bein' unable to continue her crusade to change Elena hurt you real bad inside. An' all that money was going to leak out to Joe. Well, I guess you thought so highly of your sister's work that you had to do somethin'."
Juliana shook her head, as if she couldn't allow herself to think of her brother as a bad sort.
"Don't be ridiculous! There- there isn't the slightest blasted sign that I had anything to do with this sordid thing!" squawked Nicholas, his voice breakin' with fear an' anger which reminded me that he weren't much more than a lad, even if he was a big 'un.
"Afraid that ain't entirely true. People off-world have a big laugh about all the sand we got here on Elena, heck, I bet you've heard Elenites laugh about it theirselves. It ain't all just sand and dirt, though, by which I mean, it ain't all one thing, one type. Every area has a different kinda look an' composition. It's sorta wondrous, if you stop to think about it. The thing is, I know that the sand you find out in the Pools is in the arches of one of your great hulking autos. Your man didn't quite do a proper job of washing it all away, an' by now some of them city science-mob'll have found traces of that. It's a small thing, but it's enough to get some gene tests done, maybe talk to yer ailin' father, an' I'm sure we'll have more proof of what you done soon enough. That's the thing about Elenite sand, it just gets in everywhere an' into everywhichthing, no matter how hard you try to keep it out."
Nicholas Dvoryan made a choking sound, wavin' his mitts about, tryin' to get some air in an' some words out. Thing was, as his sister looked at him, she could see it was true, an she looked mighty disappointed in him. That was what made Nicholas done fer, not any of the stuff about his murderin' that I'd been talkin' about, but the way his sister looked at him, like he had disgraced the family name an' that she couldn't look at him like he was a Dvoryan no more.
Nicholas, bein' the temperamental sort, couldn't take that terrible thought of his holy sister disdainin' him. He babbled out some animal noises an' lunged at me as the thing that had dirtied the shinin' light of his sister's gaze upon him. He was a big boy, sure, an' those hands of his had been deadly at least once before, but he weren't no born-an'-bred rough. I didn't need to bother with wavin' the Masher about this time. I twisted, quick-like, an' scooted to the left, so when he tried to grab me he mostly got hold of a chair, which he crashed into. When he straightened himself up with hot rocks for eyes an' had another go at me, I tected the weakest point in his sternum just right an' gave him a poke there so he doubled up, an' all the breath shot out of him. Then I got him on the floor an' twisted his arms up behind him for good measure so he wouldn't have any more ideas. After a moment or two he started makin' a noise that might have been him blubbin' quietly into the fancy floorboards.

The entire time Nicholas Dvoryan had been tryin' to throttle me, Juliana sat there as impassive as a sculpture. I couldn't for the life of me tell if she was a genuine good individual or not - those types are rare, an' even my cerning can't tell me exactly what sort of person she was, but it was goin' to be hard for her to keep that halo clean when word got around about Nicholas doin' his bit for the family by killin' Ms. Magera.
"I wouldn't waste yer time tryin' to run, Mr. Dvoryan," I said quietly, leaning over towards Nicholas, "Ain't nowhere on Elena you could go I couldn't find you, y'see. An'

I'm afraid you ain't got the time to leave Elena either. The Arcborough uniforms are just now outside, knocking politely on your door, an' standin' about in an embarrassed fashion, but they'll have to take you in anyhows."
Both the Dvoryans were still an' blank now.
"I am going to find it very hard to forgive you for this, Nicholas," Juliana said in her floatin' distant way.
"Didn't do it for forgiveness. Did it to help you," mumbled Nicholas, and I believed him.

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They'd release Joe now, I reckoned, once they collected Nicholas and processed the forensic stuff. My word might be enough to get Joe out now anyhow, an' he'll get his knife back eventual too, 'though he might have to wait a lot longer until the judges and company are done with that. Goin' to be mighty uncomfortable for the Founding Families to hear about one of their own bein' locked up for murder, not to mention that Joe might well be comin' into a big chunk of their money some time soon. Dunno how he's goin' to take findin' out that his Pa was over in Arcborough all this time while he an' his Ma were slavin' to survive at the Pools. Might be better to have no Pa than to know one was nearby but never lifted a finger to meet his kid.

Socrates an' I rode back to the Shack. I got to thinkin' about Nicholas' devotion to his sister, an' then I got to thinkin' about Andreas an' wonderin' how he was doin' now. Socrates did somethin' like a yawn. I was tired too. Havin' to cern so much stuff about me for a couple of days in a row always did me in. I fished in my coat for a lickwish stick to calm me, but I was out. Didn't matter too much anyways, 'cause when Soc an' I got further away from the city an' into the plains, things were again less busy an' more of a comforting form an' movement all about me, as the night shift of Elena animal life was awakin', an' the sibling moons were risin' above this beautiful austere land.