

## Excerpt From

# “BLENDED ISOLATION”

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*“I can’t say when I first decided to run,” I heard him say and pause, flicking the ash from his cigarette.*

*“You realized, of course,” I said, “that the decision to ‘blend’ meant your life—“ He waved his hand impatiently. “I’m not stupid. I wasn’t exactly blind to the fact. It’s just that at the time it seemed...well, worth the risk.”*

*I nodded. I was looking at a dead man, a man who had risked everything to ‘blend’, to meld into the geriatric fabric of Earth by bucking the age requirements. He would be executed by the corporate government, of course—there was no way around it. I would take his testimony, and nod, or smile, or look sympathetic as needed.*

*It was my job.*

*“Fine,” I said, affecting my official voice for the holovid. “We might as well get started. T501, you are charged with violating Federation Corporation Code C, Section 17 of the Constitution which states that no individual below the age of sixty-five is allowed to reside on the planet Earth without a work permit except for lawfully approved Pleasure Quarter stays of a duration not to exceed two Terran weeks per annum. How do you plead?”*

*“Guilty.”*

*“Thank you. Your testimony for the record please....”*

## I.

T501 leaned into a brick-arched doorway and cinched the coat tight around his neck to shield his identification collar. The tab was flashing red now, had been for over an hour; leave terminated, it meant the death sentence if he were caught prior to boarding a passenger shuttle bound off planet. But what the Hell; he would die anyway. If the oppressive monotony of the Geosync Hives didn’t kill him, a corporate stoolie would—long before the age of sixty-five. It was better earth-side, in old town Chicago—with the crumbling deco office buildings dark in curfew, the amber lights of the pleasure quarter doming the horizon, the dirty blonde glow that seemed to melt into the night like beer.

Footsteps sloshed near. The officer eyed T501 briefly, then walked on. Stopped. Turned. Slogged near again, bowed against the rain. Stared. Then grinned. The man’s black uniform slicker was dewed; the stun stick nerved against the Fedman’s meaty palm, tapping. T501 retreated a step, met the door, his breath short, stabbing. His heart lumped unsteadily in his chest; in the oily sheen of policeman’s visor, T501 was a pale, skewed reflection, running in the rain

Ticking his tongue with mock sympathy, the Fedman opened his mouth to speak. “Little off the beaten path aren’t you, bud—”

T501 struck in blind panic, bruising his forearm, catching the man on a uniformed shoulder. The Cop shouted, reeled, moved to counter; blundered sideways in the mud. Cursing, T501 flailed after him, saw the stun stick, reached for it, jammed the copper conducting tip against the Fedman’s ribs—

T501 triggered the stun stick, unleashing a burst of blue fire, an electric stench of ozone, a sickening lurch. Light flashed shadows in crazy jigs; a stiff, quivering jolt numbed his arm; he dropped the stick and winced away from the Fedman, trembling. The man’s eyes rolled, his mouth slackened, blood pooled from his ears, melting into the rainwater, washing into the storm drain—

*Killed him, shit, I killed him—*

He heard the hum of an engine through his shock... a magcar...

“Hurry,” a high-pitched voice said. “He’s only iced. He’ll come to any minute—”

The girl pulled T501 into the passenger seat, and he went, not really seeing her, seeing only the cop, blood leaking in the rain. He fell into the cracked vinyl, smelled the rust-grease-dirt-electric smell of past-prime magcars; watched as the Fedman’s body receded into the mist—

“I killed him—”

“No,” she said. She was pretty, pale, blonde, twenty, wide eyes, tight lips. She wore the blue-lit collar of a worker; her blue eyes cut at him; reflections from the rain formed dew droplets on her face like melted crystals. “No, the sonofabitch is alive,” she said, shaking her head. “They bleed like that after a stunning. Listen, I don’t think he got a good look at you, it was dark—”

“It... doesn’t matter.”

“Look, Mister,” she said sharply, glancing at his collar, “you’ve only been flashing red for an hour and a half. I’ll say that you were with me. That we were wrapped up in each other, that we lost track of time. They’ll fine you and suspend your next year’s leave, but I don’t think they can ID you for the ice job.” She held up the stun stick. “I picked it up before we got away. Any fingerprints will be drowned at the bottom of the lake come morning. Don’t you see, you’re in the clear—”

“I’m not going back. I’m blending—”

“No!”

She pulled over the magcar. The rain beat on the roof, the jet air wipers hissed steadily. She put both hands on the steering wheel; stared out to the neon rain-painted streets.

“No,” she whispered, her blue eyes wide, fearful.

She turned to look at him, mouth twitching. “Do you have a plan or are you just making this up as you go along?”

“I’ve got... money. A lot. I drew it out before I left the Hive, all of it. I guess... I guess I just wanted out.”

“I’ll say. Look, are you really serious? I mean, you aren’t gonna cop out tomorrow, are you?”

Pressing his hands to his temples, T501 considered. He knew now that the decision to meld into the indigenous elder population that lived beyond the confines of the Pleasure Quarter had been anticlimactic; that he had been subconsciously planning to

blend all along. He was lean, a loner, had no real friends, no steady girl, nothing to go home to. A bland thirty-one, he was average-looking, with pale-blue eyes, lank seldom-combed black hair, and a long-lined guarded face with a taut grimaced mouth. His memories were of quiet desperation; he had no particular talents or hobbies beyond regret. Thirty-four more years of enforced corporation incarceration awaited him above before his retirement Earth-side; thirty-four years and two orbiting kilometers of sterile, crowded, frenetic, corporation-sponsored slavery. Fear had stayed him from blending initially, but over time even the dread of capture had subsided, having been diminished by the unceasing monotony of life in the Geosync Hives.

He feared the Elder population too, of course. Federation sponsored rumors claimed that they were, well...*different*. Something to do with the process of aging: a metamorphism of spirit, a madness that occurred after age sixty-five that had led to the segregation of the Elder population Earth-side. No matter, he told himself—he was different too. He'd never quite managed to...well... piece himself into the jigsaw, pre-sixty-five world of the hives. Perhaps in spite of the differences he would find a sense of belonging with the Elders, a sense of sharing, of being. If not, there was always the fabled quad of blenders, the Terran underground, the mythical Earth-side sanctuary where even the greenest blender might seek refuge from the Federation—

“No,” he said, shaking his head, meeting her gaze. “I’m in it for the long haul. I didn’t know what I was doing at first—maybe I still don’t...but I know I can’t go back to the hives. I...I can’t breathe there...the canned air units...they stink of waste...”

She nodded and stared back out to the street where a lone streetlamp burned dimly. “I’ve heard of a guy,” she said in a low, hesitating voice. “A guy who handles these things. He’s expensive.”

“I can afford it. How do you know this guy?”

She straightened; glanced nervously in her rear-vid viewing screen. A Fed magcar cruised by slowly and moved on, splashing down the street.

“Workers gossip,” she said as the cruiser turned the corner. “So do the locals; we have limited clearance to fraternize with approved elder reps as part of the job...but we don’t always talk shop, if you know what I mean. I haven’t actually met him—they say his name is George Teague.”

T501 raised his eyebrows. “He’s named—like an Elder? I thought maybe he was a worker.”

“Rumor has it he *is* a worker—or was anyway. I hear he’s a blender who melted into the general population after his tour of duty was up. Cops eventually nail most blenders, but they can’t catch him—they call him ‘the Ghost.’”

“How can I get in touch?”

“I can do that. But you’ll need a place to stay. My place.”

“Why?”

“I like you. Besides, you said you had money.”

“I don’t even know your name—”

“Sally,” she said, reaching over to take his hand.

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*“She didn’t use her Tag as a means of identification?” I asked T501.*

*He took a deep drag and smiled. "She said that 'Sally' was her real God-given Christian name and that no damn letter-number combination Tag would ever take its place. She said that she wouldn't be an ID number to someone...she...she cared about. She said her grandfather wouldn't call her by a Tag number either. He was the reason that she applied to work Earthside to begin with, you know."*

*"What were your feelings towards her?"*

*T501 stared at the ceiling, his face set. "At first I didn't know. It was all too new to me. No one ever...cared for me before. She was the first. I guess...I guess...no. No, I loved her. I really loved her. She stayed with me throughout the process. Through the skin treatments, the muscle weakeners, the bone transformation. Towards the end, I wasn't even sure myself if I would make it. She helped me, nursed me. I don't think that I could have done it without her...."*

*"So," I asked, "would it be fair to say that this 'Sally' drove you to blend?"*

*T501 shook his head vigorously. "No, damn it—that wasn't it at all. Before I went to see Teague for treatment she begged me to turn myself in. She said that I was a first offender, that I had only been absent without leave for forty-eight hours. She told me that her tour of duty was coming to a close in six months, that she would request a transfer to my Hive. We could be together then, in the Hive...but I wouldn't do it. I didn't trust her to stay with me. I couldn't open myself to believe.*

*"I was a damn fool," he said tightly, staring at me with the face of a seventy-five year old man. "After she left I thought I would die. At the end, she wouldn't even take my money."*

*He was silent a few moments and the muscles crawled over his jaw. I let him have his peace.*

*"I apologize," I said when a reasonable length of time had elapsed. "But we must continue. What happened next please?"*

*He passed a hand over his eyes, sighed. "Teague put me in touch with a brace of blenders, for training prior to shipping out to the blender colony Quad—"*

*"I need Tags," I said, leaning forward.*

*"No need to mind scan me. You know who they are already, don't you? George Samualson and Jackson Garrett. I don't know their goddamn Tags. I was with them in Chicago when we heard the news about the Ghost...."*