

Skymion

Book One of The Sweetland Quartet

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Prologue

THE THING'S BREATH, HOT AND FOUL, TOUCHES THE BACK OF her neck. Muscles tense as adrenalin kicks in. The predator's shadow, crouched and waiting, hangs just off to the right. She attempts to judge the distance, but its other, fainter, shadow, a little further out and behind, complicates the calculation. What have they taught her? *Triangulate*. She senses the vircat tense, its movement imperceptible. Perspiration rolls down her forehead. *Time to decide. Now*. She jumps, whirls around, swinging her long knife point forward toward the vircat. *Miscalculation*. The creature's huge claw rips into her shoulder with a terrible tearing sound, and Gretel deVoid falls hard under the full weight of the cat.

The vircat disappears, and she scrambles back to her feet. "Damn, I don't think I'll ever get this right."

"You're doing just fine, Gretel." Toxine's voice comes from nowhere and everywhere. "You need to speed up your calculations. Practice. Shall we try again?"

"I can't. Homework tonight." Homework has never decided her life in the past. But it's different now. This homework *means* something.

“Very well,” says Toxine, as the nighttime forest with its two moons fade, and the classroom at *Universidad Simón Bolívar* resolves around them. Toxine looks at Gretel with pride. “You are a brave girl, you know, leaving for an unknown world, forging into the wilderness.”

Gretel scans the floor, self-conscious.

“How are things progressing with your dad?” Toxine asks.

Toxine’s not unexpected question produces a heavy sigh. She’d hoped to avoid this subject, which brings up all her doubts and fears. Her eyes continue to lock on the floor for a moment before she looks up to meet Toxine.

“I haven’t told him yet. I still can’t figure out how to get through that stubborn wall of his.”

“That will come in time. Just don’t let it slide. Now off to your homework, eh?”

“Thanks, Toxine.”

JESSIE LARIVEE, AKA GRETEL DEVOID, ZONED FROM THE GRID and sighed. A silence had grown between herself and her father. She’d let it go too long. Now, when she played the scenario in her head, she heard his voice saying, “It’s impossible, Jessie, you can’t get to another planet on the Grid,” or “You’re only fourteen. You’re too young to make these kinds of decisions on your own,” or maybe he’d stand slack-jawed and silent before sending her off to her room. How could she possibly convince Joe Larivee, the proud luddite, that yes, you can go to another world, I’ve talked to people who have been there, and no, I’m not too young, and yes, I would like you to go too, Dad, but whatever you decide, it won’t deter me.

A conversation with Jolene would be so much easier. She’d neither seen nor heard from her mother in nearly six years—why would the woman care one way or another? But Toxine urged her to speak with both of them. “You know,”

she said, “you may leave them forever. You need to have closure.”

Toxine was at Masters Level. She had taken Jessie on as protégé, helping her through the tough exam preparation. The Sweetland sim was as close to the real thing as possible. With the new citspecs mods, you could smell the odors and feel the ground beneath your feet as though it was some solid thing. Amazing! Even the claws of the vircat ripping through her shoulder had left a lingering discomfort; not pain, exactly, but more like the scratchy stinging that comes when you reached barehanded through a blackberry bramble. Most sims had yet to be programmed for the new mods. But it was only a matter of time before every sim on the Grid would be hyper-sensed. Except, of course, she reminded herself, there’d be no time for that now. The world she knew would soon be ending.

Pox Americano, Toxine’s younger brother, claimed to have worked on some of the sim, but Jessie didn’t know whether to believe him. He was a bit of a braggart. “You should try the glitch sex script I wrote for the Sweetland sim, cherie,” he had said earlier in the day in his cute Quebecois accent, and she laughed at him.

“I suppose you want to try it out with me?”

“As the designer, I could show you how to get the most out of it.”

“A product demonstration. How romantic,” she said. “Well, it so happens that I plan to stay a virgin. Forever, likely, if all boys are like you.”

“You are a virgin?” He pretended astonishment. “What a pity.”

Jessie shook herself out of a developing fantasy. Dinner. Homework. She had a bunch of homework for her immigration classes. Tomorrow morning she had to make that call to her mother. And then Dad.

What is she going to do about Dad?

Part One

Drowning

“Our drowning cities have brought on a new kind of flood, as refugees by the millions compete with those fleeing the dust bowls of the midwest for safer ground. Riots have broken out in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and elsewhere, as new arrivals discover that there is nowhere left to go. The army has removed tens of thousands of squatters from private property into hastily-constructed reservations.”

—*Newshour, September 20, 2035*

*“The weeping child could not be heard,
The weeping parents wept in vain.”*

—*William Blake*

THE ANCIENT TRIMET BUS LURCHED FORWARD WITHOUT warning, throwing Joe Larivee into the passenger standing behind him, upending Joe's bag and spilling its contents. "Sorry," he managed, as he watched his sandwich skid down the aisle toward the back of the bus. A skinny bare arm, red and pocked with oozing sores, reached out and snatched it.

Shit, no lunch today. He should have left it in the fridge at work. Payday was late again this month. The Agency was out of funds, and he was out of food stamps. And out of creds with the burrito man on Division, not that Arturo had any edible tortillas anymore.

Joe squatted to retrieve his belongings from the floor. As he rose, the bus pitched, and he braced himself on the back of the nearest seat. The SmartSpots above the bus windows flashed in red, white, and blue. *Make her happy tonight. Guaranteed.* The hackers had struck again.

"One-hundred-twenty-second and Stark," announced the prerecorded voice on the com. "This stop sponsored by Tommy Tonkin Bicycles by Toyota."

An old woman rose with difficulty from the seat next to him and hobbled from the bus. Joe sat in her place. A large gaping wound in the plastic seat pinched and poked his buttocks each time the bus encountered a pothole. The young man beside him gripped a ragged backpack against his chest. He looked frantic, his eyes darting between the window and the front of the bus, as though searching for an escape. Joe's heart skipped. Thoughts came unbidden. What's in the backpack? Why is this boy so scared? That was what he was, just a boy with a few scraggly hairs jutting from his chin. Settle down, Joe told himself. There's a thousand reasons this guy might be scared. Too much like a jackrabbit to be a 'cider.

In front of him, a woman wearing buds jerked her head to some fast-paced music. Tweaking. She was likely younger than him, but her teeth were gone, her face scarred with the pock-

marks of an old-fashioned meth addict. *Trash-tweaker*. Not so many of those anymore, with all the new designer drugs. Plenty of his customers were recovered tweakers or had moved on to a drug more subtle in its ravages.

Next to the tweaker a young woman with wrap-around sunglasses, her head turned toward the aisle, moved her lips almost imperceptibly, her throat pulsing. He had a vague idea about the wraparounds: popular new hardware that tapped into the simulated worlds of the Grid. Just another way for the advertisers to get into your head and sell you crap.

He sighed and pulled a worn file folder from his bag, “Connie Velasques” written in pencil on the tab. Beneath the name, the ghosts of Mary Snider, Tomas Sylvan, Letitia Jackson; erased just enough so that a stranger would not recognize them. But Joe did. And he knew their children, and their ex-spouses and lovers, their job history, their drug habits, and their pain.

“You’ve got to remove yourself from all that.” Susan Miller’s voice echoed from some cubicle of memory. “You’ve got to mind your boundaries, Joe. You’re not responsible for the mess these people’s lives are in. If you hold on to all this suffering, you’ll drown in it.”

That was five years ago, his first week on the job. Whatever became of Susie? One day she just didn’t show. It was a recurring script. Many new caseworkers didn’t last six months, but even old-timers like Susie disappeared without notice, worn out, unable to heed their own advice.

He opened Connie’s folder. A routine check-in today to find out how Connie was managing at her new job, how the children were faring, if she was keeping clean. Connie had just kicked a seven-year heroin habit when his supervisors assigned her to Joe in January. She had done well over the past nine months. School had started last week, so daycare would be less of a money sink while Connie looked for work

or performed the occasional temp job. He had high hopes for her.

But Joe's heart sank when the bus pulled up in front of the apartment building—the ambulance, the blue and red flashing lights of police cars, a knot of officers standing around an open door. The door to Connie's apartment.

Another one of those fucking days.

JOE TUCKED CONNIE'S FOLDER BACK INTO HIS BAG AND STEPPED off the bus. He hated talking to the cops. Uncle Louis had been a cop, and Joe knew a little too much of what went on in the back rooms. He didn't like most of the young uniforms, just back from war, with their arrogance and their disgust for these poor people trying to survive on the broken streets—as if this wasn't a battlefield, too. But here the land mines were everywhere, not just underfoot.

At least he was in popo territory and didn't have to deal with the clean-n-safes. He held another level of disdain altogether for the private security firms hired by Portland's wealthier business associations as a local solution to social and economic breakdown. The poor, less-organized East County businesses couldn't afford to hire their own private police force. There would be anarchy here when full Privatization hit, and the PPD auctioned off to the highest bidder.

Across the street, a blackwater stood sentry at the west-bound MAX stop, clutching a semiautomatic. Even from a block and a half away, Joe saw the nervousness in his youthful face and the uncertainty of his footing. Waiting commuters eyed him with skittish diffidence.

Joe approached the popos with caution, flashing his identity badge to show them he worked for the Agency.

"You got business here?" said the officer at Connie's door.

"I'm her caseworker." Joe looked askance through the

window. Inside, Connie slumped on a couch, a rubber tourniquet wrapped around her arm, the hypodermic needle still dangling from her flesh; on the coffee table, the lighter, the spoon.

“You *were* her caseworker,” said the cop. “Your docket just got cleared of one problem. This one’s gone to Sweetland.”

“She’s got kids at school,” Joe said, adding *asshole* under his breath.

“Well, I guess you get a paycheck then, after all.”

Joe swallowed his anger and nodded.

“You should go take care of them kids, now,” said the young cop, dismissing him.

Don’t argue. Arguing just gets you in jail. Or disappeared.

“I’ll do that. Thanks, officer.”

He retreated to the bus stop across the street, weaving his way carefully through the bicycle traffic. Out of nowhere, a group of young boys dashed past. A bottle flew, landing at the feet of the blackwater, who raised his gun, threatening. Adrenalin rushed through Joe’s body as he ran the remaining distance across the bus lane. His heart raced as he waited for the oncoming bus to pull up to the stop. He stepped into the vehicle, and two of the young troublemakers broke from the pack, boarding behind him, taking the seat across the aisle.

Joe clenched his jaw and wiped the perspiration from his forehead with the back of his hand.

“Did you see that blackwater’s face?” one kid said.

“Yeah, chuck,” replied the other. “He was friggin’ ready to piss his pants.”

“You boys should be a little more cautious,” admonished the sixtyish woman behind them.

“Whatever, Grandma,” said the first, but they became silent and left the bus after two more stops.

Joe exhaled.

. . .

THE GENERAL DYNAMICS CHURCH OF CHRIST BUILDING housed the Agency in its basement. They had converted the chapel to corporate offices, but a few die-hard church members still met in an attic room. After losing their tax exemption, the Church had succumbed to the realities of Privatization. Soon the Agency would follow. In two more years, there would be no public sector, just the so-called Free Market; police, libraries, schools, churches, social services, all under the dictates of private profit. Even the spontaneous co-ops and workers' collectives which had sprouted up like spring weeds wouldn't be sustainable against the determined kleptocracy. There was nothing Joe could do about the havoc being wreaked by the Free Market gods. Nothing anyone could do. It was a done deal.

A deep despair consumed him as he entered the basement and walked along the dim, shabby hall, its light green paint peeling and scuffed by the shoes of hundreds of weary people resting their feet against the wall as they waited for assistance—help that often never came and wasn't enough when it did. He slunk past Christi, the receptionist, signed in, and bee-lined to his cubicle to verify that Children's Services Corp employees were picking up Connie's kids. Then he discon'd and put in his buds, surfing to his favorite Gridcast channel to zone out on some soothing music.

No one would know or care.



SHE HADN'T PLACED THE TAP YET. BUT SOMEONE OR something was already pinging her, searching for a chink where they could inject a tracer. She tried to not let it bother her as

she waited for Maxi to scan the server code for a hook of her own.

“We’re in,” said Maxi. “Here comes the flood, hon.”

Data flashed across her VR overlay. Intermediate level code. She’d have to get Stan to scrutinize it, but even with her untrained eyes she picked up some important references: Grid nodes; likely top security government and corporate pipes; pipes which controlled the utilities and other infrastructure; and references to something called Sweetland; more references to skyrmion. Code words?

“Tracer,” said Maxi with urgency.

Shit. She’d waited too long. She shut down the tap, and a tingle of electricity shot up her spine, a vague shock that ended at the base of her skull. Her head about to burst, pixels scattered into a rainbow of static. Without warning, she was sitting on her virtual office floor, her real-life head throbbing.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Something trig’d your mods, hon,” said Maxi in her syrupy Appalachian drawl. “Tried to boot you right out the back door, so I pulled you.”

The gorgeous, middle-aged brunette with a no-nonsense demeanor stood in the doorway behind Claire Deluna’s desk. Claire’s personal assistant, Maxine Magnolia, custom-programmed by KT Willow, one of the best hackers on the planet, more sophisticated than your typical out-of-the-box PA, coded for the PI biz, a package with access to several corporate, law enforcement, and DHS databases. If anyone could protect her butt, it was Maxi.

“How deep did they go?”

“Might have compromised your alias.”

“Shit. Any origin data?”

“Negative, darlin’.”

“But we captured code?”

“Couple hundred megs.”

“Okay, Maxi. I need you to trace those pipes. Find out everything you can about Mitologias and Futures, LLC in relationship with this Sweetland thing. Do a level six matrix search. Any relationship at all to our investigation, I want to know what we’re looking at here.”

“I’ll get right on it, darlin’. You know Maxi never sleeps.” Maxi winked and disappeared through her door.

IT WAS SUPPOSED TO BE A QUICKIE, A SIMPLE IN AND OUT, A parent corporation checking up on its kids; that’s what Bigshot told her, that’s what Claire knew how to do best. But she feared the job had transformed into something else, something more difficult and dangerous. The damn pipes passing through the Bolivarian firewalls had trig’d some phantom feelers before she was even close. Not by a mile.

The Mitologias SA backend connected to a complex maze of pipes carrying data between a number of discreet servers. Some or most of those servers were behind the so-called Jalapeño Firewall, a tricky gate to crash. She’d copied the node information for Maxi to google and decided on a faucet capture. The faucet—the point where the quantum encrypted data translated into readable code—was the only option, unless you discovered a leaky joint to exploit. These guys would have impeccable plumbing. They would discover her presence the instant she intercepted the quantum encryption key and rerouted the datastream. That was a given. But how did they get that tracer on her so damned fast? It was as though they had been waiting for her. And how the hell did they trig her mods to send that shockwave through her body?

She hadn’t seen that coming.

When she started out in the biz seven years ago, a mere girl, she had expected backend snooping to be like the glamorous depictions in those cyberpunk sci-fi movies from the

Turn, but it happened there were no whirling data streams or fancy eye candy taking up precious bandwidth here, no complex avatars slowing down the code; that was gamer fantasy, and this was the work world. Most of it involved looking at long strings of boring alphanumeric code. She was no code expert, but she had a special skill, an intuitive edge that helped her to access the gateways, recognize patterns, and find the data she needed.

There was an adrenalin factor, too, that helped keep her going. The excitement of waiting in the shadows, watching, slipping in undetected to ferret out secrets, knowing they might catch you in a dangerous place, that made the game fun.

Now she was no longer so sure of herself. She had been in hard places before, but her targets had been minor players, not transnational corporations and foreign powers.

She needed to rest, recharge her batteries, somehow. More than a nap. A vacation, maybe. But she had no idea what that would be. She didn't have an actual life.

She made her way to her old, battered forties couch, with virtual stuffing spilling from the tear in the cushion. She had spent hours getting every detail of her office just right, including stains, paper-strewn desk, overflowing ashtray, half-empty whiskey bottle. Her clients, those few who actually came to *her*, always got a friendly laugh from the decor.

Reclined on the couch, she tried to immerse herself in *Red Harvest*, a Dashiell Hammett novel she had recently begun. But concentration seemed impossible. She needed to make an escape from all of this. But where? How? She came to New Life to get away from the real world. Now she felt trapped in some kind of closed loop.



AFTER MAKING CERTAIN DAD WAS ON HIS WAY TO WORK AND not likely to spot her, Jessie slipped from François' Coffeeshop, next door, where she'd grabbed a few sample pastries for breakfast. François was always generous with his samples. Then she biked across the Morrison Bridge toward the downtown library, stopping at the top to survey the barren landscape. It was one of her rituals, paying homage to her childhood memories, to the city that once existed.

She recalled the vast urban forest that once populated Portland, when everything greened in early spring, the dogwoods, and cherry trees blooming, Dad walking her to school along sidewalks covered in a magic carpet of pink and white petals; and later, as summer approached, the bumblebees emerging from their earthen hives to swarm the lavender and rosemary Grandma Amy had planted in the front yard, everything smelling so wonderful.

This time of year, mid-October, the leaves would drop, and there had been so many leaves that the city sent out trucks to help residents clear the streets so that the drains wouldn't clog and cause flooding when the rains came. Mountains of leaves by the curbs, smelling of sweet decay.

The first die-off came when she was seven. Dutch elm disease, spread by elm bark beetles, left dying trees throughout the city. A few years later, most of the city's old black walnut trees died, destroyed by a twig beetle which carried the spores of a deadly fungus. By that time, the bees vanished. And the cherry trees. The die-offs continued throughout her young life, the horse chestnuts, and oaks and more exotic, imported trees first, then the evergreens.

Now there were only patches of trees left on the West Hills and some higher elevations, like the Alameda ridge and Mount Tabor. Drought and fire had decimated forest Park. The path of destruction left a massive scar where the huge blaze had

traveled up through the hills, turning posh houses and everything else in its path into cinders.

The West Hills were greening again from invasive ivy, at war with thickets of immigrated kudzu, choking life from dozens of indigenous species. Only the native willows and dogwoods survived in abundance, springing up in the alleys and along the river, like weeds. If anything will survive, she thinks, it will be the grasses and the dogwoods.

Public libraries, like the trees, would also soon be extinct, so she visited the Central Library as often as she could. She loved the smell of the old books, and the feel of them in her hand. She sought a quiet corner to study and to call her mother. She might have phoned Jolene at home, but the thought of calling her with Dad in the apartment made her feel like a traitor somehow. So she put on her citspecs, set the visuals to transparent, and opened a comlink to her mother.

“Hello?” said a strange voice. Jessie panicked, considered shutting down the connection. The voice repeated, “Hello?”

“Mom?” Jessie’s voice a tentative whisper.

“You must have the wrong party,” the woman said.

“Mom,” Jessie repeated a little louder. “It’s Jessie.”

“Jessie? Jessie? How did you find my number?” Was this all her mom had to say after so many years?

“I’m sorry,” Jessie said, “I think I made a mistake.”

She was about to cut the link, when Jolene said, “Jessie, are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. I just want to say goodbye.”

“Jessie, what are you talking about?” Her mother’s voice had an edge of panic. She needed to explain. A little, anyway.

“Mom, I’m not going to off myself or something. I’m leaving, and I thought you should know because you won’t be able to reach me again.” *Ever. In case you’re interested.* Jessie felt six years of anger and confusion bubbling to the surface.

“Jessie, what do you mean? You aren’t making any sense.”

“Mom.” She raised her voice, almost hysterical. “Six years. *Six fucking years.* I cried the first two, every single night. And then, I got pissed. And now I just want to frigging say good bye.” I will not cry, she told herself. I will not cry.

“Well, I can see your father taught you how to swear just like him.” Jolene was cold. “So, where are you going?”

“You won’t understand,” Jessie snapped.

She remembered her surroundings; looks of disapproval penetrated the thick air, and she glared back in defiance. Go ahead, get the gestapo.

“Try me,” challenged Jolene.

“I’m going to Sweetland.”

Through a long silence, Jessie could hear her mother breathing on the other end. “What did you say?”

“I said Sweetland, Mom. I’m going to Sweetland. And I told you that you wouldn’t understand. I just had to hear your voice before I left.”

“Sweetland? What is that?”

Jolene’s tone had changed, softened, became the sound of a mother interested in her daughter’s life. How was she going to explain Sweetland?

“It’s a place—there’s a community in the forest,” she said, leaving out the part about the two moons. “It’s a kind of environmental community. There’s no Grid or any way to stay in contact with—” She almost said the Earth, before catching herself. “—with you.”

“Is this your dad’s idea?” Jolene said.

“Not exactly. I learned about it in New Life.”

“You have a New Life account?”

“Of course,” she said. “All the kids have one.”

“Why don’t we do lunch or breakfast or something, inworld, and you can tell me more.”

Sweetness and concern. “After six years, just like that, you want to have lunch?” *Not even a real lunch,* she thought, *but a virtual one.*