

NEBULA RIFT

The background of the cover is a futuristic, high-tech environment. A large, glowing blue sphere is the central focus, surrounded by various mechanical structures and cables. In the foreground, a person stands on a circular platform with glowing blue patterns. The overall color scheme is dominated by blues and purples, creating a sci-fi atmosphere.

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NEBULA RIFT

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LICITUS

LB BENTON

In an authoritarian world, without judges or juries, guilty/not-guilty verdicts are determined through public voting over the world-wide web via a computer system called LICITUS. Defiant blogger and freedom fighter Slate Joiner, arrested for his anti-government writings, knows, however, that the State always has the last word.

The guard led Slate Joiner to a table, then removed hand and leg shackles and a white canvas-like hood with a red stripe. Slate wore the coarse white uniform required of all State prisoners. The fatigues, made of a thick, canvas-like material, had two red stripes running up the front and back and others down each arm. He sat at the table and rubbed his wrists.

Without looking at Slate, the guard muttered, “This is the Court of Criminal Justice, room 101, the main courtroom.” He gestured with a brief wave of his arm. “Your trial will be here,” he said with practiced disinterest and a touch of boredom, then checked his clipboard and made some notes on a sheet of papers.

Slate said, “This trial means nothing.”

The guard glanced momentarily at Slate, muttered something under his breath, then turned and walked to the back of the large room and left, closing a heavy metal door behind him. The door’s internal lock clattered and scraped. A second guard stood silently to one side.

Slate had been interrogated in a small, gray, cell-like

place where the air had been smoky and disgusting. This huge hall was clearly for formal proceedings. It was auditorium-sized with wood paneling and carpeting. Here and there video cameras stood ready for live-feed streaming of events. To the side was a window to a control room in which he assumed technicians would be located, switching cameras, turning audio on and off, running image streams, and keeping the trial on schedule. To Slate, it was all a great farce. He laughed to himself thinking of the enormous efforts the State had expended to create a sense of legitimacy.

To Slate's right was another table, which was empty. He assumed this was where the advocate would sit. In the front of the auditorium, hanging from the ceiling and spanning wall to wall, was a huge transparent monitor, the size of a theater screen. Across its face was the word 'LICITUS' in large red letters. Another table, also towards the front, held a keyboard, small monitor, and a holographic image generator. *All the tools the State will need to prove me guilty.*

He had lost track of the days. After his arrest he had tried to keep a mental tally but, without a window in his cell and because of the drugs, it was useless. He tried to recall what had happened, the drugs, the lights, the questions, seemingly endless. He had not seen or talked to anyone other than the interviewers. The Enforcers had found him, somehow. Out of nowhere, they grabbed him off the street. What had he admitted to? He couldn't remember. They seemed to know everything anyway.

It was true, he ran the website, wrote much of the content, had spent at least a year getting it up and running. He had admitted to it all. Did he implicate anyone else? Amanda. Had he implicated Amanda? He tried his best to think, but it was a blur. The memory was gone.

The others? Tony? Bear? Chico? He couldn't remember. He wondered where they were, especially Amanda. Now came the trial. Just like a burglary or murder case, his crime would be presented over Licitus, and the net-crowd would vote: guilty or not guilty. But, regardless of the outcome, regardless of the opinion of the people, no matter the final Licitus results, Slate was convinced the State had already judged him guilty.

The ventilation system pumped cold air into the room, air that carried a foul, offensive medicinal smell mixed, oddly, with the pungent odor of machine oil. Slate shivered and rubbed his arms. The leaden bolt scraped and clanked as it slid back in the door, and a man entered. He was short, thick-set, with a melon-shaped head and tangled black hair. His head rested on his shoulders like a cantaloupe on a large rock. Almost no neck showed above his light blue collar. He carried a notebook and some folders which he laid on the advocate's table. Large bulbous eyes peered out from under thick black eyebrows. His wire-rim glasses were set down on a full and prominent nose. Glancing around the room, he momentarily settled his gaze on Slate. Two guards positioned themselves against the wall on either side of the exit door as its bolt locked.

The man stood at the table and was quiet for a moment as he rifled through some pages of the notebook. Finally, he sat down, turned his chair so he faced Slate, and said, "My name is Lieutenant Curtis Nelms. I am a member of the General Advocacy staff, and I've been assigned to your case. I'm sure you know why you are here."

"There's been a mistake." Slate's body tensed. He started to say more but stopped before blurting out something he feared he would regret.

"Um, yes of course. Mr. Joiner, but please, I haven't

time to debate your assertion. Today, as you might have guessed, is your trial. It will, of course, be held over Licitus, as are all trials. The evidence against you is overwhelming, and I have a tremendous caseload in my office awaiting my attention, so we need to move along. You've already given your statements to the interviewers, so there's no more to be done. What you say here is not being recorded, will not be used against you, . . . so, you can speak freely. There is no need for pretenses or arguments. You may claim whatever you like, but we have to move along to stay on schedule."

"But I wish to appeal the charges." Anger rose slowly in Slate's chest.

"Appeal? You know, of course, there is no appeal. The results from Licitus are final. The investigators should have explained all this to you.

"We both know this is a farce, and I don't accept it." *Nelms is a dupe. Convincing him or any of these people of anything is going to be impossible.*

Nelms frowned, glanced briefly at Slate but didn't comment. Instead, he opened a folder, spent a few minutes studying the material, then said, "Briefly, Mr. Joiner, you are accused of operating an illegal website called the 'Hammer and Anvil'? The site is run by a person known only as 'Anon.' You are, of course, that person, Mr. Joiner."

Nelms hesitated, then continued, "The site, . . ." He looked up, ". . . Your site, . . . has no license to operate, you have no official sanction to post any writings, you are not a registered member of the government union of writers, and the originating server is not included in the required regular global monitoring program. I'm right about that aren't I, Mr. Joiner?" Nelms looked coldly at Slate as he listed the accusations. Slate didn't respond.

Nelms looked again at the folder and continued, "This

rogue site, your site, has operated for at least four years, hidden in the complexities of the inter-global web. It was camouflaged amazingly well; floating IP addresses, cascading servers, circular routing through the Darknet interstitial web traffic, even quadrant skipping. Using our best technical support investigators, we were finally able to trace the site's origins and what we found Mr. Joiner was, well, . . . what we found, of course, was you. I know I don't have to tell you all this."

"I'm not involved." It sounded artificial. After the interrogations, it was almost impossible to deny involvement, but Nelms wasn't listening anyway.

"Please Mr. Joiner, you can drop the pretense. As I said, nothing you say here can be used against you. The inquiry is over. You've admitted to all this and more. There remains only the trial. I don't believe there is any question of your guilt. We've been following you and your writings for some time. I've read your material and, frankly, it is quite good, . . . but quite illegal.

"It is my right to write what I want. We have laws allowing free expression." Slate shifted in his chair and wondered if an appeal to truth would have any effect.

Nelms laughed softly. "Mr. Joiner, I'm afraid the 'free expression' clause of our Criminal Code, means a person is free to express thoughts only within a well-established framework of opinions and ideas created by the State. You must follow the state's guidance. I don't need to point out that your writings are well outside that framework. You have misunderstood the phrase 'free expression' and mistaken it for something it is not. But I am sure you know all this. . . . Isn't that correct, Mr. Joiner?"

"Free expression' means 'free expression,' so far as I am concerned." Any glimmer of hope for escape in Slate was quickly disappearing.

“Actually, Mr. Joiner, we here at the agency genuinely admire your skills and abilities.” Nelms stopped, folded his large hands in front of him, and looked up at the ceiling, then back again to Slate. “I’ll tell you what, Mr. Joiner. By the way, may I call you Slate? I hate all the formality.”

“Call me anything you want. Makes no difference to me,” Slate said this without looking at Nelms.

“Before coming here today, I was in communication with the Department of Information and, after some discussions; I managed to strike a deal. My agency and the Department are willing to make you an offer, one I think you will find very attractive.

Slate folded his arms across his chest. He was here by force. They couldn’t make him participate, be part of some charade. Slate pretended disinterest, looking at the floor then at the door in the back of the room.

Nelms leaned forward. “Here’s our proposition.” He waited to be sure Slate was paying attention. “You agree to give up writing about the State and about our society’s culture and post a full apology. Then, you take a position as an Associate Editor for the Department of Information and, under their guidance, write materials for their many publications and blog sites.” Nelms leaned back in his chair. “Do this, Slate, and we will forget about this whole business. Your case will never come to a decision point, will never be posted on Licitus, and you will be free to live a normal life.”

“You are offering me the worst kind of normalcy, Nelms. I don’t think so. I could never do it.”

“You shouldn’t be so hasty, Slate. We have ample evidence against you, more than enough to convict you of crimes against the State. . . . A conviction, as I’m sure you know, that carries the death penalty.”

“Sorry, Nelms, I’m not interested.”

“Slate, really you need to think about this. The position pays more than 4000 credits a month, and we have arranged to provide you with a government living unit,” Nelms leaned towards Slate and said in an enticing and alluring way, “... with a window facing the river. Very hard to come by, Slate, very hard. Think about it.”

Slate laughed to himself at the prospect of working with the very people he had criticized for so long. It was preposterous after all he had gone through and everything he had done, though such a life would offer great ease. “Sorry,” he said again.

“I’m a bit surprised Slate. I thought you would take my offer. Surely you know the penalty is death for being found guilty of crimes against the State. Our case is solid as you can see, and when we present this material on Licitus the net-crowd will obviously give you thumbs down. Crimes against the State do not go unpunished, Slate. Never.” Nelms leaned forward and repeated in a deliberate and lower voice, “Never, Slate, never. Bear that in mind.”

“The answer is still ‘No.’ Why do you even care, Nelms? I’d think you’d just as soon see me convicted.”

“You have talents that may be useful, but I suppose our profiling is wrong.” Nelms looked down at the folder and thumbed through the sheets. Not looking up, he said, “You have a history of crime, Slate; petty stealing, selling fake travel authorizations; the list goes on.” Nelms looked up to gauge Slate’s reaction. Then he looked back at the reports, “Really, Slate, these are not the traits of a man of noble principles. Now you present yourself as guardian of the people. Quite hypocritical, don’t you think, Slate?” Nelms raised one eyebrow. “Eh?”

“We have to survive; I make no apologies. So far as your offer goes, the answer is still ‘No.’”

“It’s up to you Slate. Just remember, until a decision is made by Licitus, the offer remains open, . . . but it is your choice. You still have a bit of time to think about it. You can still save yourself.

“But, now we must move along; I have many cases to work on today. It’s really up to the system at this point. I assume you know how Licitus works?” Nelms began busying himself by setting aside several sheets of paper, opened his notebook to a pre-marked place, and cleared his throat. “We will leave it up to the net-crowd. You know the process, of course?”

“I refuse to participate. Why should I make this farce look legitimate?”

“Of course, that’s your choice. But, as your advocate, I recommend against it. We have had some in the past who have refused to participate, and they did very badly.”

“The outcome means nothing.”

“It means everything to the State.” Nelms referred to his notes then said, “Everything required for a trial is present in Licitus. All the evidence, defense, everything is there to administer real justice, . . . only there is no judge and no jury. Today, the net-crowd serves as judge and jury.”

“You’ll never stop all of us; we are too many.”

Nelms hesitated but ignored the interruption. He then moved to the desk with the keyboard and holographic image generator. In front of them, the jumbo transparent monitor hung from floor to ceiling. Nelms pressed a button. The room darkened, and the huge monitor glowed, then figures and images flitted across the screen. A floodlight in the ceiling snapped on with a dull clank and shined down on Slate, illuminating him as he sat at the table. Slate shielded his eyes from the sudden brightness. From a distance, Slate appeared like an actor, sitting

alone on a stage in a column of brilliant lighting.

“I have already prepared the personal web page for you, which users will see when they log in,” Nelms said as he worked vigorously at the keyboard. He stopped, quickly walked to his table, retrieved some sheets of paper, then returned to the keyboard.

“As you know Slate, there is a space in which you can type statements for your defense, present evidence, make pleas for your innocence. Also, I have prepared a holographic image video which is loaded and ready to stream to the entire web once we are underway. This video presents the government’s accusations against you and a summary of our evidence.

“When your trial begins, every computer in the world will link to the system. Anyone may participate. It’s important we get this underway; there is only so much time.”

Slate sat silently with his arms folded. Nelms turned to the keyboard and quickly entered some commands. “There,” he announced, “everything’s underway. In five minutes I’ll run the video, and after that, the voting will begin. You will be free to post any defense you believe will help your case at any time after the video runs. . . should you decide to participate.” Nelms sat back in the desk chair and watched the monitor’s images; to one side a picture of Slate appeared. Under him were the words, ‘Enemy of the State’ and ‘Criminal’ in large letters. Other statements declared Slate to be ‘Corrupter of Minds’ and ‘Leader of the Agitators.’ Bright images scrolled across the screen and boxes appeared which would show vote totals and viewer counts.

The number of people participating grew to first twenty, then fifty, then over one hundred million. The two were silent as the images flickered.

“We really would like you to participate Slate... Really.” Nelms seemed almost earnest.

Nelms then typed additional commands into the system and leaned back. The holographic image generator had an upper and a lower plate positioned about thirty inches apart, connected by posts at each corner. Instantly, both plates began sparkling with small bursts of blue and green flashes. Then a slender shaft of brilliant lighting leaped between the plates in a vortex of hissing and crackling. Out of this eddy of light, Nelms’ image appeared, ready to address the audience. Simultaneously, Nelms’ holographic image recreated itself to millions of participants around the globe.

The image began, “Ladies and gentlemen welcome to Licitus. We have before us today a significant case, a case complete with all the characteristics of classic judicial and criminal malfeasance. In this important case, we are dealing with the protection of human rights. . . .”

Nelms’ voice droned on as Slate Joiner sat back and watched the holographic presentation unfold. Suddenly the figure flickered and shifted. An image appeared of a young woman seated in a chair with Nelms standing behind her. She seemed tired and drained. Slate straightened and squinted, leaned forward, and started to speak, but didn’t.

In the dimly lit auditorium, Nelms left his chair and stood beside Slate. Then, as they watched the image, Nelms leaned over and whispered, “I think you know this young lady. Her name is Amanda Collins. I believe, she is a close personal friend of yours. Am I right about that Slate?”

“You bastard, why is she in the image?”

Nelms, suppressing a growing sense of inner delight, quietly laughed and whispered, “You might say she is our

surprise witness. She has been a source of a great deal of information about your site and the material you post there. Once we convinced her to talk, she was able to answer a great many of our questions. We finally persuaded her it was to her advantage to cooperate with us in our investigation. She's a very strong-willed young lady. Quite pretty, I might add."

Without warning, Slate lunged at Nelms from his chair, grabbed him by the throat, lifted and pressed him back against the table. Slate shook Nelms violently, his hands firmly around Nelms' stubby throat. Slate screamed, "You son-of-a-bitch. You tortured her; that's the only way she would have told you anything," The two rolled against the table and fell to the floor, thrashing and kicking; Nelms gasped for air and uttered deep grunting, animal-like sounds as Slate screamed, "What have you done to her?"

"Arggg," Nelms reached up and grasped Slate's hands as they struggled, then both rolled in and out of the floodlight and against the table legs causing it to slide at an angle towards the front of the room. Slate held Nelms tightly. Nelms could hardly breathe as he struggled to pry Slate's hands from his throat. "Let ... go. Argg, damn it." Nelms bawled and choked, as papers fell to the floor and the table slid into a chair with a crash. Nelms was beginning to turn blue as Slate bent over him, still clutching his throat.

The two broad-shouldered guards standing in the back were surprised by Slate's quickness. Once they realized what was happening, they rushed forward, grabbed Slate's arms and shoulders and pulled him free. The guards held Slate firmly while Nelms, still lying on the floor, gasped for breath. Slowly Nelms stood, gradually pulling himself up while leaning one hand on the table. He straightened and looked menacingly at Slate. Nelms'

glasses had fallen to the floor, and his hair was disheveled. The guards roughly pushed Slate into his chair and held him in a firm grip.

“You are right about one thing Slate,” Nelms gasped as he rubbed his throat. “Ms. Collins was very reluctant. . . .” Nelms continued rubbing his throat and coughed. “. . . to provide us with any information. But, of course, we have a broad range of interrogation methods available to us. I’ll just say that our witnesses always talk,” Nelms managed a slight, sinister smile.

“You bastard!” Slate struggled briefly, but the guards restrained him.

Nelms’ image in the hologram was concluding his presentation and listing the offenses with which Slate was charged: crimes against humanity, treason, promoting group hate, racism, encouraging the overthrow of the State, and others. In the end, Nelms’ image urged participants to consider all the facts and cast their votes. Then, the hologram crackled to a close. A tiny pink spark fell from the top plate and floated downward, extinguishing itself before it reached the bottom.

Nelms, massaged his throat, and rasped “So, why do you do it, Slate? It’s so unnecessary. Why all this blogging and writing about the ‘evil’ system?”

Slate whispered, “I have a responsibility. They need to hear it, to understand.”

“We give them what they want; food, protection, sex, entertainment. And, of course, Oblivatol. Even though they’re required to take one capsule a day, people willingly, even eagerly, seek it out. I believe they simply enjoy being free of bad feelings and responsibilities. The capsules are free at any public smoke shop. Trust me, Slate; they are content with that, and they are happy.”

“But they have no joy, no dignity.”

“They do not miss it, Slate. Don’t doubt me,” said Nelms, still rubbing his throat. “Freedom in society is not the natural state of things. People willingly give it up for a bit of security. It’s quite interesting.

“Now see, the voting has begun.” Nelms pointed at the screen. “The web has heard your case, and now they vote. We use the ancient Roman symbol of a thumbs up for innocent and a thumbs down for guilty. It’s entirely appropriate, don’t you think Slate?”

The two guards held Slate firmly on each shoulder although he didn’t attempt to rise. The screen came alive; fields began to fill with numbers and counters became blurs as votes were cast. Figures in blues and greens filled the screen, and a small world map indicated voting by State sectors. Messages flashed across the text boxes, and computer generated images launched into motion.

The numbers on both the ‘Guilty’ and the ‘Not Guilty’ displays whirred upward in a blur. To one side a column of incoming voter messages flowed down the screen; digital posts tumbling like a waterfall down the page. Next to this, a second column was reserved for the defendant’s statements. The space was blank.

Slate suddenly announced from his chair, “I want to participate.”

“Well, that’s the spirit,” said Nelms, but, I’m not sure you’ll behave.”

“No outbursts. . . just a few words in my defense.”

Nelms laughed loudly, “Excellent, Slate, that’s being a sport. Lots of people taking part today, you should as well.” He then nodded to the guards who released their hold, but they stood ready to act if necessary.

Slate sat at the computer and read the screen for a few moments. Then, with lightning speed he typed:

In all things, resist.

Remain bold and courageous.

Slate quickly pressed 'enter,' stopped, and turned. Nelms read the message, understood what Slate had sent, but for a brief moment stood paralyzed. Then, he dove for the keyboard in a frantic attempt to delete the message, but it had already spread throughout the network. The guards grabbed Slate and shoved him back into his chair.

"Damn you!" Nelms quivered with rage, though he tried not to show it. "We'll see how things turn out." His face and neck momentarily turned a dark shade of scarlet, and veins bulged across his forehead. He didn't speak again for several minutes.

Slate ignored Nelms and turned his attention to the monitor where voters' messages were cascading down the screen.

"You really screwed up Joiner; I'm voting guilty." From user, *muddog7*. Slate glanced at the voter's avatar which was no more than a crudely drawn stick figure.

"We got your message and will never give up," signed user, *bellhop12*. "Voting not-guilty.

"Troublemaker!" Guilty." *watcher794*.

"Glad they finally caught you. Guilty." *Danish1421*.

Slate showed only mild interest in these messages and looked away. The floodlight shining down on his chair bothered him and reminded him of some of the interrogation sessions. The vote counters continued whirring upward. The final results seemed inevitable. *They will never let me go, no matter the voting, never,* thought Slate. Time was running out.

"It seems some of the users like you Slate," Nelms mused, softly. "I am a bit surprised there are so many. That's admirable in a certain way." Nelms frowned as he said this, and kept his attention on the monitor.

Finally, a message flashed across the huge screen.

“VOTING HAS ENDED. VOTING HAS ENDED.” Slate and Nelms looked at the screen. To Slate’s surprise, he had been voted not-guilty by a count of 84.53 million to 83.21 million. He restrained an urge to jump from his chair and cheer but remained still and simply exhaled softly. He had challenged the State’s authority, had called for rebellion and resistance, and had exposed their lies. The vote results were good, but he knew this was not the end. He waited for Nelms’ reaction.

Nelms did not seem surprised or concerned but leaned back in his chair, looked at the ceiling, and rubbed his hands together. “Well, Slate, it appears you have been voted not-guilty. The outcome is more or less good news for you.” Nelms referred to his folder and flipped through several pages. “According to the Code of Criminal conduct we are, certainly, obligated to release you, and you will find us quite willing to observe the wishes of the collective.” He looked at Slate, “But of course, you must understand the Code covers all contingencies, including the possibility of the defendant being found not guilty. . . We will be able to release you within, say, two weeks.”

“What do you mean ‘within two weeks’? I’ve just been voted innocent. You should release me immediately.”

“Slate. . . Slate, patience, please. You will indeed be released. However, in cases of crimes against the State, there is one additional step that must be taken before we can set you free. Part of the Criminal Code states that should the accused be found innocent of the charges, it is required that he or she be sent through a conditioning program for re-education purposes. Had you been convicted, then you would have been held in custody and executed. As it is, based on the ‘not guilty’ vote, before you can be released you must first submit to a re-conditioning program.” Nelms smiled a dark, smug smile

that disgusted Slate and caused a sickening fear to rise in his throat.

The lights in the giant hall returned to normal, and the floodlight shining down on Slate switched off. Nelms then rose and moved towards the door in the rear. "I need to make some preparations, so please remain here, and I will return shortly." Slate and the two guards were left alone.

Slate worried about Amanda, where was she, what had they done to her? She was one of a small number of people he trusted, and their relationship had been a secret; at least he thought it had. There was a sickness in the pit of his stomach as he thought of what might have happened to her. He missed her. She knew everything, and now, clearly, the State knew it as well. Somehow, the investigators had discovered their relationship and arrested her. There was no doubt she had been tortured or given drugs; otherwise, she wouldn't have revealed anything.

The door's bolt pulled back with a clang and Nelms entered. He was followed by four guards. In the hallway, beyond the door, Slate could see others.

Nelms motioned for the two guards to escort Slate to the door at the back of the room. "Please step in the hall Slate and lay on the gurney."

"Gurney? I'm sure I can walk."

"The gurney, Mr. Joiner, please." Nelms stepped back a bit and swept his hand to indicate the gurney. Two orderlies, in white coats with blue name badges, were waiting, as well as a woman in white who appeared to be a nurse.

"I don't think so," said Slate, who suddenly elbowed his way through the door, knocking Nelms back as he lunged for the hallway. The guards immediately leaped towards Slate, grabbing his shoulder. One of the guards

tackled him, and the two rolled out into the passageway. Slate wildly swung a fist which managed to hit another guard in the cheek, knocking him backward.

Instantly, as the two crashed into the opposite wall, the other guards charged forward, grabbing Slate and pinning him to the floor. There was yelling and shouts as all the guards jumped into the tangle, finally restraining Slate and holding him firmly.

Nelms straightened and smoothed his shirt. Then he repositioned his glasses and did his best to regain his composure. The woman in white appeared in the doorway. She had been standing at a distance. Nelms removed his glasses and began cleaning the lenses with a handkerchief. He looked at the nurse, said nothing, and nodded towards Slate. The nurse produced a syringe, removed the cap, and quickly and efficiently injected Slate as he lay pinned. Slate continued to struggle against the guards, trying, without success, to break free.

Gradually, as the drugs began their effect, his efforts subsided. His arms became weaker and his struggles less violent. Finally, he stopped fighting, and the guards gradually released him, first one than another. Once totally tranquilized, they lifted him and laid him on the gurney.

Nelms frowned. Once Slate was on the gurney, the orderlies waited. Nelms moved closer, looked down at Slate, and said, "Take him to the Re-designation room."

The orderlies pushed the gurney down the hall, surrounded by Nelms, the guards, and the nurse. They rounded a corner and pushed through double doors into a brightly lit room looking much like a hospital operating room or chemistry lab. There was a strong medicinal smell.

Slate was barely conscious and muttering. The guards had strapped his arms to the gurney on each side as well

as his feet and legs. There was a low murmuring in the room.

Nelms cleared his throat and said, "Alright, everyone can leave. I'll just need two guards outside the doors. I'll call if you're needed." Everyone left the room except the nurse who wrapped a blood pressure cuff around the limp arm of Slate Joiner.

"How is he?"

"He's okay. Blood pressure a little low, but there's no real problem."

"Good." Nelms rolled a stool up to the edge of the gurney while the nurse moved to a counter and began preparing another syringe. Nelms removed his glasses and wiped them clean, then sat for a moment watching Joiner.

Slate Joiner's head lolled back and forth as he muttered an incoherent stream of words he somehow managed to string together, "Where's Chico? . . .I, . . . get text, . . .cabinet, . . . IP address 34598.45, . . .ask Tony?"

Nelms said, "I'm actually sorry it's come to this Slate. I really had hoped you would take our offer to write for the Department of Information. But apparently, that wasn't in the cards." Nelms looked closely at Slate's face. Slate seemed to be unconscious, with his eyes rolled back. "Can you hear me, Slate," Nelms said, leaning over the gurney.

"Uh, . . .where's Amanda? ." Slate managed to gasp, his eyes rolling left and right. He moved slightly, within the limits of the restraints.

"That's none of your concern. Right now I need to explain what is going to happen. As we promised, we are going to release you. But you must understand the position of the State. Of all people, Slate, . . .I know you understand the power of thought, the strength of words. All wisdom is contained in words Slate. Our history, our

shared understanding, all of it is the substance of language you know that. Those who think about these things know that for the State to retain its position, it must control language.

“It is the words we are most interested in. Words contain ideas, words are ideas, without words, ideas cannot be expressed. So, when someone like you comes along and tries to add ideas to the words of the culture, it only causes dissonance in people’s thinking. Suddenly people are expressing views contrary to the framework of understanding the State has established.

“In a way, your writings are corrupting words. You give people new ways of using words, . . . and those new meanings are detrimental to the State’s survival. You see, the ability of the State to control the meaning of language is precisely what you threaten, Slate, and the State cannot allow it.

“When something like this happens, Slate, you immediately become the enemy of the People. You see that, don’t you Slate?” He waited for Slate to answer, but there was no response. “I know you do, I know you do.” He patted Slate on the arm then rolled his stool back away from the gurney a short way. Then, almost under his breath, “You better than anyone, Slate.”

Nelms sat silently for a few moments, then moved closer and said, “You must listen Slate. We will release you, but we cannot allow you to continue with your anti-social writing.”

“How?Uhhh, . . . Power supply? . . . Where’s Amanda?”

Nelms ignored Slate’s mutterings. “Good Slate, I believe you heard me. Now, listen. We are going to administer a few drugs. We will begin with a diluted version, of course. These drugs produce a powerful sense of euphoria, a very pronounced ‘high’ if you will. It will be very

pleasant. And, sometimes they have a mild hallucinogenic effect. They are many times stronger than the standard government-issued Oblivatol capsules each citizen takes.”

“You bastards . . . yourselves . . . I don’t.”

“It is no longer about what you want, Slate. It is about what the State wants. But the most important thing, and the thing I want you to remember. . . . Are you listening, Slate? . . . The thing you must keep in mind is that these drugs are specially formulated to produce a terrible physical and psychological ‘crash’ as they wear off, as you come down. During this ‘crash,’ as it is called, there will be a feeling of extreme craving, of total and complete emptiness. Suicidal thoughts may swirl around you as you seek to return to the ecstasy of the drugs. Frankly. . . I don’t know how to say this . . . but a very dark cloud will descend on you until you take your next dose.

“We understand this, and we will help you. We make the drugs available to you free of charge from any of the State run smoke shops or drug dispensaries. All you need to do is request it. The exact dosage and frequency will be on your electronic file.

“You can forget about writing or working of any kind. This drug precludes you from maintaining any reasonable line of thought. Once you are addicted to our drug cocktail, it is almost certain you will never break the habit. You will only be existing. . . . and free. Do you understand Slate? It’s what you want Slate, isn’t it, freedom? No one will bother you; everything will be provided, meals, housing, whatever you need. Complete freedom, Slate. . . .we’re giving you the freedom you want, Slate. . . .You see,” Nelms hesitated, “we do understand, . . .really, we do.”

“I think you’ve . . . you, I think . . . bastards.” Slate was just able to comprehend what Nelms was saying.

“There’s a bit more.” Nelms held up a small bottle. “I’ve grown to like you Slate, so I’m going to give you this. This bottle contains four small blue tablets; they include the euthanasia drug Endose plus a substance that used to be called the suicide pill. At any point, should you feel unable to cope with life as you will be living it, you will have these available to you. Just take the four tablets, and they will do the rest. Ultimate freedom Slate, do you understand? Ultimate. . . . Freedom The bottle will be in your pocket when you are released. Keep the bottle with you.

“Nurse,” Nelms called.

“Yes, sir.”

“We’re ready to proceed.”

Slate struggled briefly but the sedative was still active, and his strength was gone. The nurse moved to the counter and picked up a stainless steel tray on which were several vials, a syringe, rubber strap, and cotton swabs. Moving to the gurney, the nurse quickly and skillfully filled the syringe and injected Slate.

Within seconds, Slate head fell back, and his eyes rolled upward in response to the waves of ecstasy coursing through his being. His head felt almost disconnected, and he was unable to control or focus his eyes. At once, he knew it was both the beginning and the end. He tried to speak but was unable, and his body went limp.

“Move Mr. Joiner to his room and continue the procedure. I have to return to my office; there is so much to do. Monitor his health and after the two-week conditioning make sure he has all the information he needs. After that, he can be released. And, nurse. Be certain he has the bottle of tablets when he leaves.”

The nurse called an orderly, and the two rolled Slate out of the room.

The clouds moved in from the west, churning and eating up a third of the sky, painting great swatches of grays and dark blues as they glided over. A cool breeze swayed the trees and signaled the coming of Fall. Bands of dark shadows boiled over the river, forming strange intertwined Baroque-like figures, mixing and churning through the heavens, leaving the overcast sky twisted and bent.

The man in shabby clothes slouched on the park bench. His unshaven face gaunt with eyes fixed on something far away. Sunburned, clothes torn and patched, he closed his eyes, waiting for the blackness, the chasm, he knew was coming. There was a dizziness, and he held onto the bench to keep from toppling off onto the grass. He thought about his writing. It had been impossible. At first, he had tried, but he couldn't even control the shaking in his hands, much less the jumble of words tumbling through his mind.

He opened his eyes and tried to focus. Vague figures moved along a bike path. Through trees, he could make out the river slowly gliding towards the ocean. Colors were dim and faded and shimmered upward. Somewhere, he had forgotten where, he had heard rumors of a mob attacking an office of the Information Department. The office held one of the State's server farms. He wondered if they had been successful. Had his friends Tony, or Chico, been there? He thought about Amanda, what had they done to her? Where was she? Was she even alive? He didn't know.

The last injection was wearing off, and he had to get another. The craving was overpowering. Nelms was

right, he wasn't able to work, hadn't been able to resist the drugs. But there was so much to do, so much to say, if he could only break free of the drugs. Perhaps he could have helped in the attack on the server farm, but maybe now it was best left to others.

He missed Amanda. She had been special to him, more special than he had ever let her know. She had helped him in everything he had done or tried to do. Together they had made progress. She had always been there for him, at every critical point.

He tried to focus his eyes. He could see the smoke shop no more than one hundred yards across the lawn. It shimmered in his vision. Slate rose from the park bench and shuffled forward. He was glad he could bypass the long line of people waiting for their Oblivatol. As a Class 1 customer, he could go directly to the counter for his injection; no waiting, no hassle.

After a few steps, a wave of dizziness seized him and his vision blurred. He leaned against a tree. The Faded Star Smoke Shop was no more than 200 feet away, and he studied the shop's façade, the anxious people, expressions vacant or anguished, waiting for their tickets to oblivion, their capsules of escape. He watched as nervous people shifted their weight impatiently, the urgency of their craving prodding them forward. Others, having received their pills, quickly left, hunched over and not meeting anyone's eyes. They hurried on their way, tightly holding their gateway to apathy. Slate thought of their humiliation, their helplessness.

He tried to clear his thoughts and press on. Holding to the tree, a quietness settled over him; an odd sense of well-being, a feeling that he was at peace with himself. The light in the sky was fading, clouds continued coiling across the horizon, and colors were becoming bleached

and dull. The bikers moved along the path as quickly as ever, sometimes glancing at him, but then quickly looking away. The river moved slowly, barely noticeable, roiling in its own silent and mysterious way. There was something extraordinarily peaceful now, something he hadn't experienced before. The smoke shop could wait. For a moment he was able to hold the crash at bay. A different kind of euphoria flooded his body.

Then, he turned away from the shop and shuffled down the street. Reaching his hand into his pocket, he grasped the bottle of blue pills and turned it over and over with his fingers.

LB Benton is a freelance writer with numerous non-fiction technical and general interest articles published in national magazines and journals. He is currently focusing on writing fiction and has had several science fiction short stories published in *Nebula Rift*, *Bewildering Stories* (forthcoming), and *365Tomorrows*. He is a member of the Houston Science Fiction Writers Group and the Brazos Valley Writers Group. He lives and works in Katy, Texas.