

Chapter One

He had just received 'The Cure' for the fourth time. Sitting in the AutoChair moving along its hydraulic track as it carried him toward his Company jumper he squinted against the glare of the Sun, shining harsh through the open rectangles of the parking garage walls. The heat was heavy and oppressive, the air moved across his face like a series of veils sucking the life from his lungs. He lowered his head against the glare... and the pain. There was an evil little demon pounding a spike into his head right between the eyes. "No sudden movements," the doctors had warned him, "you're likely to have some dizziness and head pain."

"They weren't lying," he thought clenching his teeth against the agony.

This time it had been Cancer of the liver. Detected during one of his semiannual checkups and scheduled to be treated the following month. The success rate on Cancer cures was still holding at about 70% as it had since the cure was discovered almost two hundred years ago in 2178AD. He felt vaguely lucky; nothing he had caught so far had stuck. Thirty percent of the poor slobs that came down with hard cases of the "Big C" were still dying from it. Not the cancer itself in most cases, but the mercy termination that always accompanied a terminal diagnosis. The prognosis was always the same, "You have three months to live Mr. Smith." The TermPod, implanted at the time of diagnosis, was always timed to three months. Long enough, at least in theory, to allow the patient to take care of business and to jam in a little fast living, not long enough to allow the walking dead to become morose about the whole deal. That was the way it worked in theory anyway.

As he fuzzily meditated on his good luck the AutoChair stopped with a slight jerk and a hiss of released air. "Please confirm that you have arrived at the correct vehicle, Mr. Sung, by depressing the green flashing pad," the chair wheezed at him. Searching the small panel in front of him, he spotted the control pad in question. Looking up slowly to confirm that the chair had indeed brought him to his jumper he pressed the slightly yielding plastic. "Beep!" "Thank you, Mr. Sung. You may now disembark," the chair wheezed again in response. It issued two loud beeps that registered as sharp head pains to his drugged senses. He levered himself up and slowly stepped down and away from the chair. "Please stand clear!" it said. With a hiss it started toward the hospital on its programmed mission of mercy to thrust yet another customer back into life.

Stepping up to his jumper with a slightly unsteady gait he pulled out Key and ran it by the reader. A soft "beep" confirmed the reading and the door unlocked with a barely discernible pneumatic sigh. A wave of cool air struck his face as the door moved out, up, and open. Fuzzily he thought that the hospital computer must have linked to the jumper and instructed it to cool the interior.

Getting into the vehicle he inserted Key in the holding slot on the instrument panel. A soft chiming sound and the panel glowed softly into life the low EMF displays showing status of the systems. The CompLink spoke in a voice androgynous and soft. "Good day Ben. I note by the information on Key that your hospital stay was a successful one, congratulations."

"Thanks," Ben grunted. "Rig for jump, will you CL?"

"I'm Sorry Ben, that won't be possible, Key has informed me that the aftereffects of the drugs used mandate that I maintain control temporarily, we will have to go GroundNet. Destination please?"

"Crap sakes CL that'll take all damn day!! Override, my priority!" Ben was instantly sorry for his agitation as a new wave of pain washed over him. He held himself still and closed his eyes trying to block it out.

"I'm Sorry Ben, but Key has been programmed with a Company Priority Instruction Set, I cannot override."

"Shit," softly this time, without heat. "Just bounce me out of here then. When does Key purge the instruction set?"

"Twelve hours," responded CL. "Destination please?"

Although tempted to tell CL to hit the office first as an illogical protest to the doctors' orders, Ben decided that he was just too frazzled and had to sleep it off. "Home, James," he responded wearily to CL's inquiry. He leaned back as the control pod retracted in response to CL's silent instructions, pulling the small keyboard and guidance cluster away from him. The jumper smoothly backed out of the ParkSlot and then proceeded forward. He gazed at Key stuck in his slot and imagined Key snickering at him. "Laugh away, you little Shit" he thought to himself "The next time I walk by a DocShredder I'll drop your ass in and requisition a better class of Key."

As the jumper approached the exit to the parking garage the Sun again glared in his face harsh and overwhelmingly bright. "CL! Blank sides and rear, forward vision fifty percent!" he barked, head again swimming in a chaos of pain.

"Confirmed." The side and rear glass immediately went black and opaque, while in the windshield the sun seemed to retreat behind a non-existent cloud. Able to see comfortably again Ben took a look through the dimmed and polarized glass at the world outside. The jumper slowly moved

into the GroundNet traffic. Even through the darkened glass he could see the heat shimmering up from the pavement. It appeared almost solid in substance, the shadows cast by the late afternoon sun were harsh and razor edged. Nothing moved on the ground but the steady streams of vehicles in the GroundNet. Above, several jumpers could be seen streaking across the bluish-gray sky among the juggernauts of the Chicago skyline.

"It's another blaster," he thought wearily. "Weather, local," he spoke out. The screen normally used for the rear view lit up. A map appeared of the area approximately one hundred miles around the jumper. The Weather Comp stated in a concise, dry, clear voice, "The current weather situation in the Chicago MegaMetro area remains unchanged. Hot and dry with no short-term chance of rain. Current temperature is one hundred and twelve degrees with humidity at twelve percent. Current ozone protection is minimal, exposure to direct sunlight is not recommended, exposure to indirect sunlight is recommended only with Company approved SunSuits. Exposure without adequate protection for periods of longer than ten minutes is dangerous. Confirmation of longer exposures will void any Company health contracts. Pollution index is steady at a five, filtering is deemed not required but recommended if available."

"Yeah it's hot, but it's a dry heat," thought Ben wryly, a twisted grin touching his lips. "Kill weather. Music please CL, classical, low volume." Leaning back, closing his eyes a small smile touched his lips as he recognized the strains of the opera Tommy, by the Who. A ragged half humming, half singing sound issued forth. "See me, hum hum, touch me, heal meeee, hum hum.... CL, ETA?"

"ETA, two hours twelve minutes," came the response. "We will have to take New Lakeside Drive once inside the Loop."

"Crap! Link up with the office and give me my case load on screen." Ben barked as he sat up with a jerk, the seat back rising smoothly, adjusting to his new position. "Woo! Maybe I shouldn't a done that." He said softly under his breath as the world began to spin and the pain once more washed over him, wave after wave. Sinking once more back into the seat he became still. Slowly the red haze of pain drained from his eyes and the world stabilized once again. He tried to establish a BioLoop for the third time without success; blocked by the drugs he guessed.

Tommy had disappeared from the audio system and the rearview again glowed softly, the Company logo appearing on the screen. The keypad slid out and into position. "Identify please." The new CompLink prompted in the flat metallic voice that all the non-personal CompLinks seemed to share. Ben inserted his right index finger into a small rounded depression on the keyboard. "Beep! Sung, Benjamin A., confirmed. Enter security code. Beep!" Ben stroked the

keypad entering his security code. "Beep! Welcome to SecurityNet Detective Sung." The screen cleared from the Company logo to a series of overlapping blocks, like file folders with the areas of access available to him written in the index tabs. Using slight directional pressures applied with his finger in the same depression that read his fingerprint he moved the cursor, a miniature version of the Company logo, to the file tab that read Sung. With his left hand he tapped the capture pad. A new set of blocks appeared. Skipping over blocks marked PERSONAL, SNITCHES, and GENERAL CRAP he entered the block labeled CASES. Another series of blocks appeared over the top of the first, CLOSED, PENDING, OPEN/CURRENT. Skipping to OPEN/CURRENT he tapped the enter key expecting to see the list of current cases he had been working. "Huh," he grunted in soft surprise. Instead of the seven cases he expected only one file appeared. Its name was encrypted, a red restricted symbol flashing beside it.

Withdrawing his hands from the keyboard and pushing back in the seat Ben stroked his chin in puzzlement "What the Hell.... CL, can you tell me something about this? I know none of those dicks at the office would touch my cases unless I was dead.... And what's this damn restricted tag on my screen for? Run a *diag* on this piece of junk."

"Running..... I'm sorry Ben, the diagnostic routine confirms the Link is correctly set and all equipment is functioning properly. The restricted file is the only item in your case folder. Do you wish to query SecurityNet?"

"Screw that. No, wait, go ahead and query. See if the Net will tell you who has been messing around in my files." Placing his finger back into the controller pad Ben moved the cursor over the mystery file and softly depressed the sensor to enter. Instead of the information contained in the file filling the screen a flashing block appeared in the center of the screen.

*****ACCESS RESTRICTED TO SECURED HARDLINK ONLY*****

Another grunt of surprise escaped Ben lips. "Secured HardLink only?" He reflected knowing that meant no MobileLink could access the information in the file. "This info must be pretty damn hot!" thought Ben. The only way a file locked in this way could be accessed was from a secured HardLink, a CompLink hard cabled to the SecurityNet. The only places he could normally access a secured HardLink were either a SecurityNet Facility, his office in the Company Security Building, or his home.

"All other cases have been reassigned. No reason given." Spoke up CL. "No other information available on the locked file. Key informs me that the security seal on the file is a highest-level Company lock."

"All right CL. Just get me home quick." He was tempted to tell CL to clear the GroundNet traffic out of their way on his Security Priority Clearance but held himself back. He didn't need the hassle he would get for screwing up ground traffic for forty miles in every direction if the file turned out to be a joke. "Or something he shouldn't be drawing attention to," he thought suddenly. "Clear link," he spoke aloud. The CompScreen went dark and the keypad withdrew as he settled back in the seat once more, left to think about what somebody was getting him into. Outside the jumper moved along slowly, but steadily, toward its destination now thirty-two miles away.

"Music, CL. Same as before, moderate volume."

The music swelled once more as he closed his eyes and thought, "Just what am I really getting into?"

Sixty miles away in the heart of the MegaCity Chicago, not far from Ben's ultimate destination, Jon Albert turned away from his fading CompLink screen, a smile touching his lips. "Good," he thought with satisfaction. Stepping across the room to the bar, he poured a glass of water. Holding the glass up to the light he admired the clear liquid. "Clear and clean," he thought to himself, "not many can afford what it takes buy this kind of quality anymore." The water was from a tiny glacial spring high into what was left of Canada, one of the few profitable exports of that now tiny country. It was one of the very few things in the world today where Mother Nature was still able to supply a pure and superior product. The water cost over a hundred dollars a glass... it was not for everyone.

Still smiling he looked around at the room, one of his offices. The room was huge, decorated in an ancient opulent corporate style. Real wood covered the walls, dark and rich, the soft lighting giving the wood an ethereal glow. The room was located in a corner of his city apartment home which occupied the entire top floor of the building. Towering three hundred and twenty floors above the surface of Chicago and over thirty levels below the surface as well, it was one of the largest structures in the city. A seamless window, one side facing Lake Michigan and the other looking out north over the city, wrapped around the two outside walls, bending under on itself to form part of the floor. Moving to the window he stepped out onto the glass looking out over the heart of the city, feeling as if he were suspended in the air above it. As always his heart began to pound faster, the old fear returning, responding to the perceived danger of stepping out into space, of falling! Closing his eyes and drawing a deep breath he stepped back onto the solid floor. "Even after a hundred and twenty-two years, the fear is still there," he thought wanly. Company

doctors with all their drugs and computers had never been able to purge him of his fear. They tried, but they could not.

His position as CEO of the Company gave him the right to any dwelling he should choose, he could build anywhere, he could displace anyone. He could have built his home on any level he wanted to. "Never!" he thought angrily. He preferred the occasional attack of the old fears to the failure of giving in. He had never before let fears keep him from his goals; he would not do so now.

But the Company doctors could cure something else he suffered from or could at least hold it in check. He had the healthy body of a fifty-year-old man, a man in the prime of his life. The cancers that had attacked him over his long life were always beaten back, destroyed. The failing organs were replaced with either donated or illegal 'borrowed' ones; the sagging skin rejuvenated and tucked up in just the right places. Exercise took care of the muscles. Yes, the doctors did a good job of salvaging and rebuilding the body, of slowing down the decay that eventually overcame everyone. But now there was a different problem.

His brain was dying of old age. The deterioration of this one organ could not be slowed or stopped. The brain began its journey toward death on the day of birth, even modern medicine could not prevent that. There had been no miracle to replace the thousands of brain cells that died every day or to prevent them from dying. Sooner or later something useful was bound to drop out; some memory of something important would fade away, never to return. There could even come a day when his personality, the memories that made him him could disappear. His very soul would be gone without a trace.

But now there was hope. A new process had been discovered and developed, a process by which the dead cells could really be regenerated. Not only the brain could be saved, but the body itself could be rejuvenated, truly rebuilt into a young, everlasting piece of work in progress! He could live forever!

The doctors had told him this with their eyes on fire, hushed voices husky with the strength of the emotions coursing through their veins. One of their colleges had stumbled onto the process that could save his life; they had seen some of the test results, read some of the data, participated in some of the experiments. They could do it, make him as young as he wanted to be. The catch was that it had to be done before something useful or needed did fade away, some part of his personality or ID.

"Do it!" he had commanded.

But they returned with downcast faces. "He's gone, everything is gone!" they said. The doctor who had discovered his salvation had left, taking all of his files with him, destroying all of his work behind him!

Dropping his head, he closed his eyes and cursed them, "Damn fools said they could, and now they can't. They had it and then they lost it! I should have consigned every damn one of them to the OrganNet." But he knew even while saying it that he still needed the doctors, fools or not. He would need them later, and when they finished with what he needed them to do, then he could send them all to hell. Their organs would go to feed the hungry, failing bodies of more worthy associates.

A smile again touched his lips. "And just like I will need them later, I need you now, Ben, to find what they have lost. Oh yes, you received the best of care while you were in the hospital, because I need you in the best of health. You work for the Company and that means you work for me. I am the Company! The telltale I had attached to that file just told me you are on the case. I can feel you sniffing around already; you want to know what is going on. And I trust you to get the job done, because unlike the others in your profession you can think, you can reason, and you have to know."

He could do anything as the head of the largest pharmaceutical company in the world. His power was almost unlimited. His company ran the CityState of Chicago. The city spread out in every direction for almost seven hundred miles, broken only by intermittent strips of farmland. It had long ago absorbed smaller cities: Milwaukee, Detroit, Gary, Indianapolis and hundreds of others large and small, even part of what had been Canada was absorbed. Together with the heads of the other great city/companies of the North American continent they ran the country and the world. Each of the other CityStates in what was still called the United CityStates of America; Dallas, New York, Los Angeles, Miami and Honolulu ran the franchises on the most valued of businesses. Dallas ran power and energy, New York shipping and transportation. Los Angeles connected electronics and entertainment. Miami owned hydraulics and fiber optics. Honolulu (along with Las Vegas, Orlando, Cuba and Puerto Rico) ran R&R. And the most powerful of them all was Chicago combining drugs, health care, personal transportation vehicles and communication. Each also had a finger into the others' businesses to some degree, after all competition was still healthy. There were also their counterparts in the other industrialized countries of the world but none so large and powerful as those in the U.C.S.A., the United CityStates of America. And, of them all his were the most powerful franchises... and he was the most powerful person in the world.

The Government that still existed was weak and controlled absolutely by the MegaCorps. It

existed only to dole out welfare and police the rural areas. The President and Congress were puppets kept giving the illusion to a sedated population that they lived in a world in which they really had a say.

The governments of the United States and eventually of the world had actually given their countries away to the MegaCorps, in a very real sense they had actually created the MegaCorps. It started in the middle twentieth century oddly enough with garbage. Garbage collection and disposal were messy and expensive for even small towns, for the larger cities it was a disaster. Then some smart politician thought, "If we can't do it, why don't we sell the responsibility to someone who thinks he can. Then, of course, if his workers go out on strike, or if he can't get rid of the garbage for any reason, we can point the fickle finger at him, and we'll be in the clear! And.... if he wants to continue to do business with the city perhaps a percentage of his profits might find their way into a good public servant's pockets." Garbage grew as a business and as it grew smaller companies merged with larger ones.

The business of doing someone else's dirty work continued to grow as the politicians kept looking around for something else to dump. Larger companies looking to invest capital, to expand, to diversify jumped into the game. The next dirty job to go private was the prison system. Then the hospital and health care systems were turned over. Then the school systems, then accounting, then personnel followed. Then the police forces of every major city went private. The federal governments no longer wanted to support Armed Forces that was a constant drain on every politician's pocketbook, so it was shrunk to a token force. Internal disturbances of all kinds were left to the growing internal police forces of the newly emerging MegaCorps. Every stinking, rotten job that government (see POLITICIAN) didn't want to do was now being done by the private sector and done well.

But all was not roses. By the late twenty-first century AIDS became epidemic. Cancer became epidemic. Flu virus' and Corona virus' mutated and ran rampant across the globe. Fully twenty percent of the world's population died by 2155. While the flu and Corona Virus pandemics were a short-lived problem, only lasting thirty years before burning itself out... AIDS and cancer was spreading across the face of the earth. Over the following years almost eight billion people perished. Another thirty percent or more of the remaining four billion was infected and expected to die. The world was thrown into a sort of technological dark age, chaos ruled the day.

The people looked to the governments for help. They got none; the governments had none to give. All research, all communications, all health care, in fact all functions of government geared to protect and serve the people had been privatized. The only thing the governments of the world were doing now was debating and berating each other. The dark days stretched into decades.

The MegaCorps had already seen the writing on the wall and were applying all available resources to the twin executioners of AIDS and Cancer. When the root causes and the cures were found almost simultaneously in 2170AD they became the most highly guarded secrets in the world. The company who found the cures was his company, Corkrin Pharmaceutical. In secret the MegaCorp negotiated with the leaders of the other largest companies of the time. In return for favors given whenever asked, Corkrin would inoculate, protect and cure whichever employees and their families chosen by the different company's CEO's. Chosen to live, the loyalty of these employees would be without question. In return the others would back Corkrin in its bid to control the Government. Nothing so crude as a takeover however, the politicians could continue their endless debates and even take the credit for saving the human race if they wanted to (they wanted to). The Government in return for life would bow to the wishes of the MegaCorps in every respect.

Needless to say, the President and all his men caved in with a minimum of debate.

But the takeover didn't stop there. The largest companies around the world were made the same offers. They in turn made the same offers and conditions to their governments. One by one, quietly, the governments of the world fell into the pockets of the MegaCorps. It took eight years after their discoveries before the cures were released to the general population, eight years of quiet careful negotiation. Eight years and another billion plus people were dead.

Jon pulled himself from his reverie with a start. Although he had not been alive during those times, the history and the responsibility of that history fell to him as it had every CEO before him in the two hundred and five years that had passed since. Four CEO's had preceded him. He had lived longer, ruled (yes ruled, for that is what it was) longer and been more successful than any other CEO before him. He had been CEO for almost seventy years now and he wasn't going to let it go easily.

He had rose in the company with only one goal in mind, CEO. When he was promoted to that post as the youngest since the early beginnings of the company, no one expected him to hold on for longer than a year. The longest time period in any office pool was eighteen months, the shortest only three months. But with his position came the secrets to his power and those before him, he had been well trained by his predecessor. The ones that opposed him were ruthlessly disposed of, not all at once, but slowly, as required. He had survived many takeover bids and many coups early in his career, and now his power and position were absolute. He was the Company! He had been CEO for longer than most of the people who worked for him had been alive! Looking around again his thoughts returned to the present. "No," he thought, "I'm not going to give this up. I've gotten used to this and I won't let it go."

He thought of Ben again. "Yes, one hundred and twenty-two years is a long time for anyone to live, but I'm not anyone and you, Ben Sung, are going to help me live longer, a lot longer."