

Whitewash

A Paranoia Adventure (Feb-Jun 1999)

Chapter 00—Prologue

Deep in the heart of OID Sector, a terrible mistake has been made--a terrible yet simple mistake. A careless employee in HPD&MC accidentally loaded a paintbot with white paint, when the service order clearly asked for black. As a result, corridor QZ was painted white.

Since corridor QZ is part of the main route between the INFRARED barracks and the main production area, no one could get to work. The Computer noticed the extreme drop in production and immediately ordered random executions among the workers. Normally, this would shape things right up, but in OID Sector--nothing.

Naturally, many clones reported that corridor QZ was white. Checking its records, the Computer found that this corridor was recently repainted, and the records clearly indicated that the corridor was painted black. Therefore, anyone claiming that it was white was obviously a traitor.

As more and more traitors came forward to claim that the corridor was white, it became obvious to the Computer that there was an insidious conspiracy afoot--a mammoth conspiracy involving clones at even the highest levels, all working together to convince the Computer that this corridor was white. Fortunately, the Computer saw right through this and was able to root out and execute many of the "white corridor gang."

This is where Kosmik-V-OID comes in. Kosmik is the HPD&MC Director of Productive Efficiency and Industrial Re-education. Kosmik is a truly devoted clone and a shoe-in to be the next ULTRAVIOLET High Programmer in OID Sector. Kosmik sees the writing on the wall and knows that if he doesn't get this straightened out, it'll be his ass.

So Kosmik decides to send in a troubleshooter team to repaint the corridor. Knowing how troubleshooter missions normally go, Kosmik figures that even if they don't repaint it, they'll probably just blow the whole thing up. Either way--problem solved.

Knowing he can't just openly order the troubleshooters to repaint the corridor, he sets up a bogus mission to the outside to retrieve some phony cylinders, and then plans to brief the team in secret about the real mission.

This cover story is so convincing that other service groups and secret societies have picked up on it and are

now busy killing each other to get those cylinders. In fact, Kosmik is the only being that knows that there really was no Vulture crash and no cylinders to recover.

To cover his own tracks, Kosmik has altered records so that if anyone checks, it will look like he has been on an extended secret mission to FAR Sector for the last two weeks. He has also reprogrammed the recorders in the briefing room so that no record of the mission briefing will exist.

As the man in charge of Emotional Therapy, Kosmik will do what he can to go easy on the team, but many of the TaFT-bots are now under direct Computer control, so it won't be easy.

Chapter 01—Mission Mission Briefing Briefing

LET'S GET IT ON

A mission announcement goes out, calling a new team of troubleshooters to briefing room AB in OID sector.

Shortly, the team begins to gather. Briefing room AB turns out to be a veritable vault. The door is two feet of solid steel, and the walls are reinforced plascrete. Against one wall is a small bench where the team sits. Against the other wall is a desk. Kosmic-V-OID sits at the desk. He says nothing.

The team so far:

Pole-R-OID-1--Medium height, medium build, with bone white hair in a buzz cut and pale pink skin. Pole has a camera and a multicorder on straps around his neck.

Puck-R-UPP-1--Shortish, stoutish, balding with glasses. Your typical paper pusher or file clerk.

Red-R-MEE-1--Tall and gangly with vivid red hair. Kinda big teeth--he smiles too much.

Sock-R-TES-1--A big bear of a clone. He stands about six foot six and has a girth to match. He has a bushy beard which is not really regulation, but everyone's heard that Sock is some kind of hotshot up-and-coming scientist, and maybe the rules aren't as strict over in R&D.

Kosmic-V says, "We are only waiting on Herc- R-LES, to fill out this group. I will give him five more minutes."

THE MISSION

Puck looks Pole up and down for a moment, and then leans over to him--a little too closely-- and says, "Hey, been catching too much sun lately, hm?" Puck laughs a forced but self-congratulatory chuckle. He then tries to look relaxed but fails utterly.

Just then, Herc-R-LES-1 arrives. "Um, sorry about that. I wasn't sure which room. This map is kind of old. You can't be too sure." Herc realizes Kosmic-V is glaring at him, and he kind of trails off. He sits at the end of the bench.

Herc-R-LES is a small wiry guy with thin limp hair and bug-eyes. Actually, he looks almost exactly like Steve Buscemi.

The door slams shut.

Kosmic-V-OID addresses the group, "You are here to help us solve a little problem in OID sector. You see, there is a corridor near here that the INFRARED drones

use to get from their barracks to the main work area. This corridor was accidentally painted white, and now no one can get to work."

Outside, someone is pounding on the door and yelling. The team can barely hear it through the thick door. Kosmic-V continues without pause: "Your job is to simply repaint the corridor black. Any questions?"

The faint pounding at the door continues.

Q & A

Red asks, "Do we get any special equipment to make sure the mission is accomplished perfectly sir? Maybe paint, some brushes, some smoking weapons from R & D?"

Kosmic says, "As usual, the Computer has anticipated your needs, and after the complete briefing, you will visit PLC and R & D, and you will be provided with everything you need for a successful mission."

Pole raises his hand... "Mr. Kosmic, Sir, um, are we cleared to walk down the aforementioned hallway? I mean, it's painted, you know, WHITE!!! I'm not sure I can bring myself to do it!"

Kosmic replies, "This is an INFRARED corridor, and the Computer's records clearly show that, so there will be no penalty for any citizen who uses it. As resourceful troubleshooters, I'm sure you will have no trouble seeing past appearances."

Pole leans over to Puck and whispers, "What's 'sun'? You treasonous, little phuck!"

Then with hyperspeed, Pole slaps Puck sharply, faster than the eye can follow.

Pole seems suddenly very tired.

The pounding at the door continues, and faint yelling can be heard saying something like "report all of you... treasonous...let me in". Kosmic seems not to notice.

GUESS WHO'S COMING TO DINNER

Herc stares at a point on the wall and says, "Geez, it seems like I've had this headache all day. It just won't stop. Pounding. Pounding." He looks around suddenly and yells, "Doesn't anyone else hear that POUNDING?!?!"

Everyone stares at Herc, and he pulls out his mission request. Very calmly he turns to Kosmic, "So am I really in the right room? You know how easy it is to mis-read

these printouts. I mean, I'm thinking I'm supposed to be in briefing room AB, but you never really know."

Kosmic is glaring at Herc again. Herc looks surprised and leans over to Red and whispers, "Boy, does somebody have an attitude problem, or what?"

Red stands and walks to the door, raising an eyebrow at the continued accusations of treason that can still be heard from outside. Red says, "Do y'all hear that mug? Playin the fool out there pounding down the door." Red starts to open the door and pauses, "Mr. Kosmic, you won't wig out if I take care of this traitor trying to break up our meeting will you?" Kosmic gives a barely perceptible shake of his head, and Red says, "Well, alrighty then."

Before Red can get the door open, Kosmic touches a control on his desk, and a heavy steel wall drops from the ceiling between Kosmic and the team. The room is now about three feet shorter, and Kosmic and his desk are nowhere to be seen.

The door finishes swinging open, and in walks Urly-B-OID-3. His blue jumpsuit is rumpled and his face is sweaty and red with anger. "ABOUT BLASTED TIME!" He fixes a hateful stare on each team member one at a time. "This will not reflect well on any of you in my report!"

Urly smooths his uniform and takes a deep breath, pulling out some papers he reads, "You will be taken to a door into the Outside. Using a device you will be assigned at PLC, you will locate a crashed Vulture Model 616. In the cargo bay of the Vulture, you will find three two-meter long, 30 centimeter wide INDIGO cylinders. Under NO circumstances are you to open or damage these cylinders. You are to return the cylinders to Alpha Complex.

"Now, the Outdoors is in many respects quite bizarre, very different from our own beloved Alpha Complex. Outdoors, the floor is white and the ceiling is blue, but you shouldn't worry about security clearances. That's just the way things are.

"You are expected in PLC here in OID sector in about 20 minutes to collect your mission equipment. After that, an escort will take you to your destination. Any questions?"

SMOLDERING COAL OF ANGER

Herc hid behind Sock as soon as Urly entered the room. Still in hiding, Herc asks, "What about the paint?"

Urly looks around, not realizing who has spoken, "What paint?"

In the meantime, Puck has been distracted, only partly listening to this new briefing. Finally, Puck looks over at Pole, afraid and hurt at first, but then a burning coal of anger seats itself in Puck's soul. (Actually, it was there before, but it's almost visible now.)

Using his mutant ability, Puck attempts to project an olfactory image in Pole's head.

Pole is still very lethargic and seems only partly aware of the surroundings. Noticing something, he sniffs the air around him a little with a look of disgust. Soon he realizes that the foul stench around him is coming from his own pants. In panic, Pole begins to wonder if there might not be a load of crap in his shorts.

E'RE-WAY EWED-SCRAY

Sock leans over a little and pushes out a high squeaky fart. "Yeah, what about the paint?"

Herc ducks down further behind Sock (oblivious to the danger) and speaks in a deep voice as if trying to disguise his voice, "I don't know, sounds kind of dangerous to me."

Red smiles a very wide, very unnatural smile at Urly. He says, "You can count on us, Mr. Urly. Nuff said, Big Guy. Escort takes us to the door. Door to the outside. We run around and bring back three cans. Check, check and check. We're on the job, tough guy." Red turns to Sock, gestures ever-so-slightly to Urly and whispers, "Eye-yay ink-thay at-thay ee-way are-way uck-stay ith-way oo-tay ission-mays." Red looks up and gives Urly an enthusiastic wink and the OK sign.

Pole's eyes have gotten very wide. He seems very awake now and keeps glancing at the door as if he's anxious to leave.

PAINT?

Urly seems to be getting annoyed. "Look, the mission is extremely simple and straight-forward. You follow the homing device to the Vulture. You retrieve the canisters. You return.

"This will not be dangerous in any way. You will have fun. You have no need of paint to accomplish these tasks.

"Now, are there any questions related to the mission?"

CAN'T STOP THINKIN' BOUT SOCK'S ASS

Herc stands up and giggles in Sock's ear. "Wow man, you should have that thing registered as a deadly weapon."

Red frowns as the smell of Sock's fart reaches him. He says, "Yo, that is rank, homes." He goes over and sits next to Pole and begins whispering something.

Red whispers to Pole just loud enough for only Pole to hear him. He says, "Can you believe these Rubes? Ready to just follow along even though there has been some obvious miscommunication. I mean, what is the complex coming to anyway? Don't tell anyone, buddy, but micro-management like this has been killing productivity of other sectors of the complex." Red looks around suspiciously and whispers again intently, "Micro-management is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless complex, and the soul of soul-less conditions. Micro-management is the opium of the people."

Pole jumps up immediately, "Can I be excused? I need to go to the bathroom. I'll meet you all at PLC." Pole leaves.

Urly says, "Well, since there are no questions, I'll be going." He folds up his papers and heads for the door. "All of you have 15 minutes to do whatever you need to do, and then you will meet in PLC." Urly leaves.

HEY WAIT

Herc rushes to the door, "Wait, o wise one. I have real questions. Honest."

When Urly gets back to the doorway, Herc asks, "So will there be anyone else who might be looking for these cylinders? Commies or something."

Urly gives an indulgent chuckle, "Oh no, don't you go worrying yourself about Commies. There was a simple mechanical failure with the Vulture. This is a simple find and return mission. No one else even knows the cylinders are out there."

Herc then asks, "Is there anything we need to know about handling the cylinders?"

Urly: "They are simple metal INDIGO cylinders. They are not dangerous in any way. Just don't open them or drop them or shake them violently."

Herc: "What about the Outside. I never even knew there was anything outside Alpha Complex. Do we need to be prepared for anything?"

Urly: "The only current problem with the Outside is that all the furnaces must be broken, because it is extremely

cold out there. PLC will provide you with protective gear to handle this.

"Anything else?"

Meanwhile, Pole gets to the nearest bathroom and quickly yanks his shorts down in one of the stalls. Nothing. No crap. No stains. No smell. Must have been someone else.

As he stands up, Pole notices feet in the next stall. Pooled around the feet is a familiar black hooded cloak--Seeker. Seeker flushes and leaves, but not before tossing a note over the partition into Pole's stall

It reads: "Grasshopper--Sierra Clubbers have a plant on your mission team. Befriend him and find the name of his closest superior in the society. Then kill him and report to his supervisor as a new member. Also, while in the Outside recover any document or book that refers to 'hockey' and return it to me. Now eat this document."

Pole eats the note.

CULT OF PERSONALITY

After a pause, Urly realizes that this is going nowhere. "Fine--everyone in PLC in 15 minutes." He leaves again.

As soon as the door shuts behind Urly, Sock stands up and snags Herc by the back of the neck. "Okay, first things first. . . no one gets that close to my ass without my permission unless they plan on licking it. . ."

Sock pulls Herc a little closer. Herc says, "OOOW! That HURTS!" (As if Sock might not know that.)

In a deep, dominating tone, Sock continues, "Do you plan on licking it? Thought not." Sock scratches his beard. [OCC: Looking much less like Paul Bunyan and more like Fidel Castro.] "Let's go get our gear. Pole has already volunteered to be point man for this shindig. And if he gets knocked off by Commies, then my little buddy Herc will take his place" He drops Herc and looks around the room, and in a booming forceful tone he asks, "Any objections?"

BUTT SNIFFERS

Herc says, "No way, Skipper. You know I'm always behind you. But I don't think I'm cut out for point man. I was thinking that Red was right out there with that door thing. He'd be great on point. Oh wait...or how about Puck. He's a big enough target to give us all cover. Besides, I could be much more useful to you back here. I could fetch stuff. I could take dictation. I could pick mites from your beard. Very symbiotic."

Sock seems intrigued. Puck, however, seems very offended by the mention of his little weight problem (it's glandular--it's not his fault-- he eats like a bird--really.)

Red helps Herc get to his feet and gives him a sympathetic look. Red says to Sock, "Sir, I have no objections to your plan. And may I further say that your commanding presence not only qualifies you for the position of leader on this mission, but if I may be so bold sir, you deserve such a position. You can certainly count on me, sir, to serve both you and the Computer one hundred percent. I think that's the least you can expect from each of us." Red looks around the room accusingly at the rest of the group, as if they had done something wrong in not having said this before Red did.

Red says to Sock, "And may I suggest, sir..." As he's speaking, Red shoves out a hand, catching Herc off guard and pushing him ass over feet to the ground, "...that since Herc here likes sniffing people's butts like some kind of dog-bot, that we pronounce him the team mascot. Do you think we could do that, sir? Could we make Herc our little butt-sniffing pet for the mission?"

The minute Sock is not looking, though, Red gives an apologetic, embarrassed shrug to Herc and whispers/mouths the words, "I'm sorry. I'll explain later."

Herc pulls himself to his feet again.

In the bathroom, Pole just stands around stupidly, wondering if everyone else is at PLC yet.

SORRY--I'LL EXPLAIN LATER

Herc looks at Red and begins panting, and drooling with his tongue hanging out. He leans over and repeatedly licks Red's face. Afterwards, he whispers to Red "I'm sorry. I'll explain later."

Sock says, "Then it's settled. Herc, stay where I can see you. Puck, lead us to PLC and let's find Pole."

Puck grumbles under his breath, but heads out. The other three follow. Out in the hall, Red's Army issue com-watch begins vibrating--incoming message.

Pole finally leaves the bathroom. Kosmic never said exactly where this corridor was, but Pole was raised in OID sector and has a pretty good idea. He swings by there on his way to PLC.

Sure enough, it's white. The corridor is about 5 meters wide and 3 high. It is 75 meters long. It has a couple of access panels along its length plus the usual inspirational signs and ads for the newest vid-shows. Except for being this brilliant white, it's exactly as Pole always knew it growing up. It ends at T intersections

with INFRARED corridors at either end. Absolutely no one travels the white hall.

Pole hurries to PLC. He is the first one there.

IT'S GOOD TO BE DA KING

As the merry troops roll along to PLC, Sock says, "All right Puck quit sulking and speed it up. Red, once we get our stuff, you'll take point." Sock turns quickly to Herc, "And you, sweet-cheeks, stay close to me." Sock pulls out a knife and a small whet-stone and slowly sharpens his blade as he walks. "And where in tarnation is that other yahoo?"

PLC IN CHAPTER ONE

Pole is thrilled to be first in line. In fact, other than a BLUE level PLC supervisor (Raven-B-OID), there is absolutely no one else here.

Raven sees Pole and says, well it's about time your team started showing up. Your escort will be here any minute. She jerks her thumb at a pile of equipment and says, "There's your stuff."

Pole immediately starts sifting through the pile and over his shoulder, he says to Raven, "While I'm working on this could you see about getting me a couple things? I really need a bag of pretty colored marbles--maybe a thousand or so--and also as much black paint as you have on hand."

Raven bursts out laughing, "HAHAHAHA, yeah all the black paint I have. Sure, let me see what I have."

In the pile, Pole finds: 1 Standard issue Brunton compass 1 6-clone tent 5 canteens 5 mess kits 1 propane stove 5 sets of heavy winter clothing 5 pairs snow-shoes 5 pairs ski-goggles 1 manual entitled "Treating Frostbite" 5 propane lighters 5 pairs battery powered electric socks 1 case of chapstick (about 150 tubes) 1 battery powered hair dryer

Shortly, Raven returns with a sack of about a thousand RED and black marbles. With a huge grin, Raven says, "Funny though, we seem to be straight out of black paint. Normally we keep a few spare 200-liter drums, but we've had a real run on it lately." This is extremely funny to her, because black paint is cleared for ULTRAVIOLET citizens only.

Pole takes the marbles, and looks again at the pile. Not much to choose from, really. He pockets the compass and the hair dryer, then starts picking out one of everything for himself. He'll leave the stove and tent to some sucker with a stronger back, though.

Raven seems to remember something and reaches under the counter. "Oh yes, I'm also supposed to give these to the chosen team leader." And she pulls up a set of ORANGE shoulder braids.

In the hall, Herc says, "Right by ya, boss. Whatever you need." but his eyes keep coming nervously back to the knife.

Red says to Sock, "Not a problem, big guy! I'm your go-to clone!"

As the group rounds the first corner, Sock suddenly wavers for a moment. He lets out a large sigh and seems to go weak at the knees. Crap--this always happens when PSION sends in one of their telepathic orders--they always have the worst timing.

Sock hears: <<SOCK, WE SENSE THAT THERE IS ANOTHER POWERFUL MUTANT ON YOUR TEAM. HE IS AN EXTREMELY RARE TYPE--AN ILLUSIONIST WHO CAN FOOL THE SENSES OF ANY CLONE. FIND OUT WHO HE IS. THEN WE WILL CONTACT HIS MIND DIRECTLY.

<<ALSO, OUR SOURCES SAY THAT THE CYLINDERS YOU SEEK ARE FILLED WITH A PROTOTYPE MUTANT-KILLING POISON GAS. DESTROY THE CYLINDERS BEFORE THEY REACH ALPHA COMPLEX>>

Sock quickly regains his composure and keeps walking.

Puck speaks up finally in a very sympathetic tone, "Whoa, you okay there big fella? You got to watch out. A moment of weakness like that could really cost you out in the field." Puck instantly looks like he wishes he had just kept quiet. He turns red and looks at his shoes as he walks.

At the same time, Red accidentally drops his fanny pack and bends down to pick it up, trying not to fall too far behind.

He activates his watch, making sure the volume is just low enough that only he can hear it, and waits expectantly. He also notices a folded note which has fallen from his pack. He palms it for later reading so as not to be too suspicious right now.

Quickly, a voice comes over the com-watch, "Red, we've been monitoring the briefing through your link. We have a large blank space before Urly came in, but we caught the entire briefing. Also, we can't seem to hear when you whisper, so you'll need to speak up.

"We've done some fast research, and it turns out that there is no record of any Vulture crash outside of Alpha in the last 90 day-cycles, and certainly no record of lost cylinders [OCC: the Army runs all of the Vulture

squadrons.] You have two objectives: First, get the serial number of the crashed vehicle, and we will determine if it is, in fact, one of ours. Second, find out what is in the cylinders before they are returned to Power Services.

"If you have questions, find a secure location."

Red soon pulls back to point position, and is the first to reach PLC. He opens the door, and Puck comes in right behind him, followed by Herc and Sock.

Inside, Pole is standing in a pile of equipment looking at Raven-B-OID, the only other person in the area. Raven is holding a set of ORANGE shoulder braids out to Pole.

Red and Puck, as first in, heard Raven say, "Oh yes, I'm also supposed to give these to the chosen team leader." Probably the others did not hear this.

Pole seems eager to get the braids.

Chapter 02—Get Some, Get Some

MINE, MINE, MINE, MINE, MINE

Pole steps quickly over to the counter where Raven is standing, "Gimme that." He snatches the braids from her and starts looking for how to pin them on.

He turns to the team and says, "Welcome to PLC, everyone. Glad you could make it. You can begin equipping yourselves at the pile over there. Any special requests can be handled by Raven-B over here."

STUFF

Raven-B looks the team over and says, "Yeah, happy to serve. Nothing formal since we're the only one's here. Just write out your lists and I'll see what I can find."

Red strides purposefully toward Raven.

Herc steps in Pole's direction (but not too close) and says, "Um, Mr. Pole. I don't know how things normally work, but I'm pretty sure those braids should go to Sock-R-TES since he is the chosen team leader." Herc then immediately rushes to a side counter and starts writing out a list.

Sock glares over at Pole, and his eyes twitch just a little. Still holding his knife, Sock strides quickly up to Pole and says, "Do you want to be in charge?! Tell you what, if you jack it up, I'll shove those braids down your throat and wear you on my sleeve!" Sock keeps his hands at his sides as he looms hugely over Pole.

Using his pyrokinesis, Sock tries to set Pole on fire. No flames, but Pole flushes bright red and begins sweating profusely. He feels very warm and uncomfortable.

Red pulls out a pre-prepared list and hands it to Raven. He says, "Thanks for all the help, sir." Red surveys the stuff and immediately picks up the largest, most bulky item in the pile (a propane stove) while he looks through the rest of the stuff.

[Red's list reads as follows:

"Dear PLC-associate,

Mr. Red-R-MEE has several pieces of equipment that he feels are necessary to serve the computer to his utmost potential. While Mr. Red is not inflexible, and certainly works well with others, above and beyond his extraordinary troubleshooting skills, there are simply some items he feels are necessary. Mr. Red cordially requests the following items of "standard" equipment for this mission:

1. A Gag-Oversized-Laser-Site which is compatible with a standard Red level laser pistol [OCC: It works like any other laser site, but "paints" the target with a mark the size of a teacup, instead of just a point. Also on the gun, it looks HUGE].

2. 5 confetti grenades. [occ: Harmless. Come with 5 second delay and explode without doing any damage, but releases 10 pounds of confetti and covers a 50 meter by 50 meter by 50 meter area. In nearly microscopic print, each tiny piece of confetti reads "Rejoice. The computer is doing a fine job of managing every aspect of your life." Even though each grenade hold 10 pounds of confetti, each grenade weighs a mere 8 ounces.]

3. A red, floor-length cape (optimally that says "Red" on the back).

4. One red, walking cane.

5. One pack of pocket tissues.

6. One box of jelly doughnuts made with MSG.

7. An unlabeled can, unopened, approximately the size of a can of beans, filled with a substance that is not beans, with a pop-tab on the top for easy open.

8. One sleep detector. [occ: Small object that doesn't identify itself, but looks like a detector of some sort. Beeps loudly and irritatingly when it is activated and within the proximity of sleep. The closer it gets to something asleep, the louder it beeps, and the more irritating it gets. In the harshest situations, it will bark computer dogma about how "early to bed and early to rise makes a clone, healthy healthy, and healthy." Has an on-off switch.]

9. One programmable, gag, thought bubble. [occ: Approximately three feet long by two feet high by two inches wide. Operates by remote control. Can be "assigned" to an individual, at which point it hovers over their head and follows their every move. In the shape of a "bubble" with other small bubbles that lead to the "assigned" individual's head. The main bubble can be programmed, via remote, to display a 30-character message in red lights. If the "assigned" individual goes someplace that the bubble cannot, then the bubble will wait until it gets another command, or the assigned individual becomes visible again. While the bubble is very reliable, it is made only of glass and will break if anyone tries to hit, shoot, shove or damage it.]

10. A concealable laugh track. [occ: Device that can be hidden on a person's body, and when activated by a slight "twitch- switch" located in an individuals mouth (usually activated with tongue) a recording of raucous laughter plays for five seconds. At times, the laughter is followed up by appreciative clapping. The acoustics of

the machine work on a projection- delay-and-reverberation effect such that the sound is not actually audible until it is reflected off of a wall or other larger-type surface (the ground works). The effect is that the laughter seems to come not from one source, but rather from all around.]

Please bring all of these objects to Mr. Red-R-MEE contained in a large brown bag.

Thank you.

P.S.- please return this note to Mr. Red-R-MEE after he has received the items, but only when it is convenient for yourself.]"

Puck has been hanging back, with his back to the group. Keeping his back turned he starts speaking loudly and purposefully, "Well, from what I've seen, we've got butt sniffers and farts as our top team qualities, so far. And I'd like to say that I was NOT--" Puck swipes his hand across a horizontal plane-- "not the one to drop the issue with the paint, and, and I think that we should all, you know, be careful about that one. I think ahead about this stuff, you see," Puck taps his noggin with his index finger, "and I'd like to suggest that for the safety of everyone here, involved, here, that I probably have the most experience with these things, and I think that I should..." a deep nervous intake of breath, "I think that I should take care of all the weapons for this mission. It's completely reasonable that I should do so, so I hope that no one will argue because it's just reasonable, that's all." He darts a few nervous glances back over his shoulder at the other guys, but can't gauge their reactions. Puck just now realizes that Sock and Pole are in some kind of confrontation.

Herc finishes his list and passes it to Raven who is still reading Red's list. Raven seems very amused and occasionally giggles to herself as she reads. She is paying no attention to the group.

[Herc's list:

- 2 pair sunglasses
- 1 big knife
- 1 small knife
- 1 box of homing devices linked to a single control
- 1 box of sympathy cards
- 3 extra RED laser barrels
- 1 box of RED bouncy balls
- 1 grappling hook
- 1 fur-lined hat with ear flaps (checkered preferred)
- 1 tin of flourescent smiley face band-aids
- 1 can of spray string
- 1 compass
- dynamite
- anti-gravity grenades
- 1 inhaler (filled with saline)
- 1 magic 8-ball]

The pile of mission equipment consists of:

- 1 6-clone tent
- 5 canteens
- 5 mess kits
- 1 propane stove (Red has this)
- 5 sets of heavy winter clothing
- 5 pairs snow-shoes
- 5 pairs ski-goggles
- 1 manual entitled "Treating Frostbite"
- 5 propane lighters
- 5 pairs battery powered electric socks
- 1 case of chapstick (about 150 tubes).

[OCC: While clones may request whatever extras they like, the issued mission equipment is not optional or exchangeable. Everything must go, and the team will have to answer for any equipment that is not returned by the end of the mission.

The "heavy winter clothing" for each clone consists of thermal underwear, two sweaters, insulated water proof pants, an insulated and quilted oversized parka, a ski-mask, thin work gloves and a pair of fur-lined mittens. Anyone who chooses to carry their clothing rather than wear it will have no use of their hands until they set it down, will move at an awkward one- fourth the normal speed, and will have limited range of sight because of the heap of clothes in their arms. (wearing the clothes only cuts speed to three-quarters and cuts agility a little).]

BALLS OF STEEL

Herc rushes over and grabs the tent, the manual, and a handful of chapstick. Afterwards, he rushes back over to the counter to wait for new equipment, guarding his stuff in his hands.

Pole finishes putting on the braids, and faces Sock, "How DARE you threaten a superior officer! Why, you're not worth the dustball-off-the-back-of-a- circuit-board the computer obviously gave you for a brain." Pole moves up to about one inch from Sock's face. Sock can feel the spit... "You hopeless<pit> ssss<pit>tupid faulty peripheral!

"For your general information, you were selected as 'team leader' while I am, obviously due to my superior rank, the mission commander. I may forgive your insolence if you have an appropriate exc... reason- for your actions." Pole starts pulling out his Multicorder camera. "Before you answer, let's record this. When the debriefing begins, I want to be able to show why I did not send you immediately to the termination chambers."

Pole turns to Puck, "Could you come over here and help me with this thing? As our new weapons officer, you will

need training in the operation of the multicorder in case I am wounded in combat, or if I fall down suddenly for no reason."

Puck steps forward hesitantly, unsure of what to do, but takes the multicorder that Pole is thrusting at him. Pole jams the 'record' button.

Pole continues to Sock: "Well... What do you have to say for yourself? Hmm?"

LOOK...I'M ON TV!

Herc walks casually past Pole and Sock on his way back to the equipment pile. Making sure that Sock can't see, Herc gives Pole a very low thumbs up and mouths the words, "Great job, dude. I'm right behind you." He then stands watching the confrontation as he slathers on some chapstick. He gets through about half a tube and just keeps going and going...

Red puts down the stove for a second, and picks up a canteen, a handful of chapstick (in the MEE sector it is known as lip balm), a propane lighter, and a mess kit. He puts on a pair of goggles and winter clothes and begins putting on the snowshoes. He is watching the situation unfold between Sock and Pole, careful not to interfere.

Puck points the camera in the general direction of the argument, but soon starts panning around at stuff in the PLC. The pan eventually works around to Puck himself, and he narrates in a documentary-type of tone. "Mission: Puck-R-UPP. One man, against the raw elements. Aided only by four inexperienced and unimportant clones, he faces now the most challenging and rewarding task of his life--to become the only person to survive this harrowing escapade!!" Puck laughs a little at this last joke, and looks around to see if anyone was paying attention. "Already, his porters are arguing over the most precious of the supplies to be carried on the journey; it looks as though morale will have to be kept in swift and sure check, by the stern hand of Puck." Puck is beaming at his own cleverness.

WHISTLE WHILE YOU WORK

Puck turns around again so that Pole and Sock will be in the background as he films himself. He speaks in a low voice [OCC: in an Australian accent], "Behind me, we can see the natural enemies 'team leader' and 'team commander'. Let's see what happens when we...HEY!"

Sock has now reached over Puck's shoulder and gently tugs the multicorder out of his hands. Turning ever so slowly to Pole, Sock mangles the recorder with his bare hands and drops it at Pole's feet. "One slip up and you'll digest those ribbons."

Sock deliberately turns his back on Pole and walks to the equipment pile. Picking out the largest garments, he starts getting dressed.

Red, by now, is in full Eskimo gear. Herc is also getting dressed and says, "You know, now is the perfect time for an uplifting dressing song:

"Oh, the Commies Outside are frightful, And the Computer's so delightful, But since we've two places to go... Let us go Let us go Let us go."

For the second verse, Herc just trails off to happy humming as he finishes slipping on his new garments.

HAM ON RYE

Red watches Sock turn away, and to no one in particular says, "Only one clone could stand and wear the braids of authority. The iron dice have been cast, and Sock has blinked." Red saunters over, shakes Pole's hand and says, "Congratulations, captain my captain." Red picks up the stove and sets it in the corner of the room.

NOTHING

Red waits at the PLC counter for his stuff.

Red pulls out the note he found and reads it:

"Comrade Red, [no subterfuge here] Recently, we were able to down an Armed Forces vulture, but our strike force become martyrs to the cause. We hear you will be seeking out the cargo of that ship. One of our operatives will be disguised as a delivery drop box just inside the door to the Outside. Once inside, drop one (or more, if possible) of the cylinders in the drop box.

"Also, I have covered for you as much as possible, but you have brought in no new members since you joined us. Many ranking party members have begun questioning your dedication.

"Power to the people. Long live the glorious Communist Revolution of which Red-R-MEE-1 is a proud member."

Sock leaves PLC.

Once he is out of sight in the hall, he becomes invisible. As usual, he starts getting gassy right away, and he's really angry, so it's worse than usual.

Raven produces a large cardboard box of stuff, which she slides over to Herc. "Here you go," she says.

Herc opens the box and looks inside. It contains:

- 1 Request list written by Herc
- 2 pair sunglasses
- 1 big knife
- 1 small knife
- 1 box of 10 homing devices
- 1 controller for homing devices (no instructions)
- 1 box of sympathy cards
- 3 extra RED laser barrels
- 1 box of RED bouncy balls
- 1 grappling hook
- 1 fur-lined hat with ear flaps, checkered
- 1 tin of fluorescent RED smiley face band-aids
- 6 unlabeled grenades
- 1 inhaler, full and unlabeled
- 1 can of silly string
- 1 magic 8-ball
- 1 sealed envelope that says "TO: HERC"

POLE POSITION

Puck alternates between grumbling and sudden stabs of friendliness toward his teammates. He attempts to hi-five Sock as he leaves the PLC, but Sock ignores him.

Red has a sudden coughing fit. While pretending to cough, he stuffs his note in his mouth and swallows it.

Seeing more stuff being given out at the counter, Puck saunters up to Raven, and says "Hey, there. You've got a box for little me, too, don't you?" He flashes a big, big, big smile at Raven. His teeth are very white, but his beady eyes almost disappear under the flesh of his face.

Raven is putting together another package and gives Puck a dismissive wave. "Yeah, go make out a list like everyone else."

Puck bats his eyes prettily. "Oh come on, our escort will be here any minute. Don't you have anything for a team officer?"

Raven takes note, "Officer?"

Puck sniffs proudly and hitches up his utility belt. "Well, if you must know, I'm the chief weapons officer for this very important mission."

Raven says, "Hold on." She pulls a box from behind a counter and begins throwing things into it. From a stack of envelopes, she grabs one marked "Chief Weapons Officer" and throws that in, too.

She pushes the box over to Puck, "There you go, Champ." Then gets back to her work. Peeking into the box, Puck notes it contains a varied assortment of well-used and scuffed weaponry: knives, lasers, 3 or 4 ice guns, a net, a couple tanglers, some unidentified items, a few pin-less grenades held shut with masking tape, plus that envelope she threw in.

Meanwhile, Pole sidles up next to Herc. Pole begins getting his gear on from the pile and says to Herc, "Thanks for the support, buddy. I know I can count on you." He tries to sound very casual, "So, did I miss anything at the briefing?"

Herc is thrilled to be helping Pole. He talks very rapidly with lots of gestures, "Hey, I'm here for you, sir. You didn't miss much. While everyone else was dawdling, I cleverly thought to question Urly on the details of our mission. So if there's anything you need to know, I'm the guy to ask.

"Of course that was when Sock tried to take over as team leader. I resisted and told him he was too big a pussy to handle such responsibility, but he didn't listen to me. And of course Red was a total wuss. He was sucking up to Sock like a little butt-sniffing pet. But don't be too hard on him, I'm sure he was scared for his life."

At this point, Herc leans around to Red. Herc gives Red the "OK" sign and clicks his tongue twice. He whispers loudly to Red, "Don't worry. I've got you covered." Herc winks and turns back.

Sock is sneaking in quietly and invisibly, hoping he can hold his gas until the moment of truth. He creeps up on Pole who is talking to Herc, and just as Herc turns away for a moment, Sock grabs Pole in a choke-hold and starts whipping his head back and forth to try and snap his neck. Sock finally rips off a giant fart, which seems to go on forever.

Pole is just pulling on his insulated pants when he suddenly lunges backwards with a strangled "URK!" His face gets very red, and his breath is coming in short barks and gasps.

Pole can feel something holding him around his throat and chest, but can see nothing. His breath is being squeezed out, and he knows he will be unable to speak.

Pole is rocked back on his heels. His head keeps whipping from side to side. His arms flail in the air around his head and neck.

Pole thinks he can feel something firm but fleshy closed over his neck, but when he tries to turn his head, he still sees nothing.

UNIVERSAL SIGN FOR CHOKING

Red shoots back the thumbs up to Herc and smiles. He says, "I appreciate it, Herc. But I'm a little worried about you. You're looking a little green. Are you feeling okay, because I'd swear you look very green."

Herc yells, "For goodness sakes, man, can't you see he's choking!" Herc fishes out a homing device and palms it.

Herc runs behind Pole and says, "Don't worry, sir, I know the Heim-O-LIK maneuver."

Pole is still thrashing, and he is leaning back at an almost impossible angle, as he continues to gag. His eyes are watering like crazy, and his face is nearly purple.

Sock sees Herc coming and spins so Herc can't get behind him.

Pole spins jerkily around so that he is still facing Herc. Herc tries again, and Pole spins again. Pole's feet seem to almost leave the ground as he does this.

ONE DOWN, TWENTY-NINE TO GO

Red jumps in and tries to assist Pole. Red tries to slap Pole on the back and hold him still so Herc can apply the Heim-O-LIK maneuver.

Pole keeps spinning to keep the others from getting behind him, and as Herc and Red spread out, Pole slides backwards away from them. Pole's flailing has slowed down. His head continues to whip around until there is a sudden loud "CRACK". Pole crumples to the floor with a long slow fart. Pole seems to have died.

The fart, of course, is actually from Sock. Sock has dropped Pole and slowly creeps out the door.

Herc moves to the counter and pulls out his envelope. The letter inside appears to be a greeting card. It reads, "Congratulations Herc! We all knew you could do it. Despite all the troubles you had in the motor pool. We always saw great chocolate in your shoes. Don't forget all of the shelters. Walk slowly. Love, the team."

Herc whips out his decoder ring and gets to work.

TEAM IN MOURNING

Puck stows all of his goodies in his jacket and on his belt. Oh, and joy of joys, there are two bandoleers in the box with multiple holsters for his new weapons. The pinless grenades, he leaves in the box, but of course, duty requires the box come with him.

Puck opens the envelope and reads the enclosed sheet:

"Chief Weapons Officer

You are responsible for assignment, deployment, and use of all weapons assigned to the troubleshooter team:

- 7 laser pistols
- 2 laser rifles
- 21 RED laser barrels
- 1 set of brass knuckles
- 1 taser
- 2 regular grenades
- 3 smoke grenades
- 3 stun grenades
- 5 irregular grenades
- 2 large knives
- 1 small knife
- 1 penknife
- 3 stun grenades
- 1 hand flamer
- 3 ice guns
- 2 tanglers
- 1 stun gun
- 1 semi automatic slugthrower
- 1 hand plasma generator"

The laser rifles, ice guns, tanglers, and the stun gun are now in Puck's arsenal. The number of "irregulars" matches the number of pinless grenades. Puck has three pistols that could be anything. The rest of the list could be assigned to other group members already, or could just be misprints.

At the other end of the counter, Herc is keeping to himself. Trying to stay inconspicuous, he pulls out a sympathy card with his own picture on it and fills it out.

Herc peeks around the end of the counter and stares at Puck for a moment. Puck is busy strapping on what must be 12 or 15 different guns.

Puck notices Herc peeking around the counter at floor level and just staring at him for a few seconds.

Herc ducks back behind the counter.

Herc gets the decoder ring back out. His secret message translates as follows:

"Suspect Sock to be a mutant traitor. Cylinders contain gas that is deadly poison to all mutants. Open one in front of Sock. If that fails, simply kill Sock. If possible, try to recover a cylinder for the Knights."

Herc passes his greeting card to Raven for delivery.

Meanwhile, seeing that Pole is dead, Red tears the braids off his arm and puts them on his own sleeve.

Sock bustles back in the room at that moment. He spots Pole on the floor and is immediately outraged. "What happened here?" he demands. "Red, what in Computer's name have you done to our team commander?" Sock shrugs and reaches for the body, "Oh well, I guess he won't be needing th..." Sock notices

that the braids are gone. Looking around quickly, he spots them on Red's shoulder.

Red stands back and says, "Well, as mission commander I've decided there are many things that need to be done. First, we all need to get ready for our escort who will be taking us to our location. Second, we need to begin an investigation surrounding the death of our good citizen Pole-R-OID-1. Since Sock had the most communication with Pole, he seems to have known him best. Accordingly I am assigning Sock to be the lead investigator of the Pole-death. Third, I'm very thirsty and I am sweating up a storm in this suit. I am assigning myself to the task of finding water for myself." Red struts over to the PLC desk to find Raven-B-OID.

Raven has a glass of water ready, plus a cardboard box with Red's name on it. Lastly, Raven hands him a stack of envelopes and says, "Here you go, 'Team Leader', I'll let you hand these out."

The envelopes are labeled,

- Deputy Team Leader
- Loyalty Officer
- Recycling Officer
- Deputy Recycling Officer
- Hygiene Officer
- Inventory Officer
- Morale Officer

Chapter 03—Put a Sock in It

NEW WORLD ORDER

Red reads the envelopes and announces, "Change of plans everyone." He hands Sock an envelope and says, "Sock, you are no longer investigating the death of Pole. Now you are the recycling officer. Your first responsibility will involve informing the computer that we need Pole-R-OID-2. We have great expectations for you, citizen." Red turns to Puck.

Sock throws his envelope to the ground and says, "Wait... Red, you were one of the last to see Pole alive. What did you do to prevent Pole's death? I guess you just stood there and watched. By the angle of his neck, I'd say it's broken, and you're the one who did it."

Sock throws a large bear-hug on Red and continues, "Red, with the authority given to me by you as chief investigator, I place you under arrest and relieve you of command." Sock whips out a length of cord and goes to bind Red's hands.

Red goes all plastic for a moment, but as subtly as possible.

Red oozes from Sock's embrace into a crouch on the floor and then springs away and wheels to face his attacker.

INTERMISSION

Sock and Red face each other warily when Puck approaches.

Puck sticks his thumbs behind his bandoleers and struts away from the counter; in spite of the way he's trying to appear, he ends up just looking really fat. Puck moseys over to Sock and gets him to bend down in a conspiratorial whisper session.

"I, ah, couldn't help noticing your losing of face just now. I know, it's okay, we're teammates, you can talk to me." Puck winks and grins at Sock's ear. "I think we're going to have to really be careful about that Red-- he obviously has an agenda, right? I know that you know about that kind of thing, right?" Wink. "Hey, let me help you out, a little manly help, clone-to-clone, hm? Hm?" wink wink "Take this! It's a stasis grenade!" Puck holds out a grenade with masking tape around it. "If you set it off within two feet of Red, he'll be paralyzed for a minute-- enough time for you to get your beads and keep him from messing everything up! Whatdya say? It's the right thing to do! Are you with me? Teammate?" wink wink grin wink

Red just stares astounded as the two talk.

RESPECT MAH AUTHORITAH!

Red says, "Apparently, you didn't hear me, Sock. You have already been reassigned to recycling officer. As mission commander, I am ordering you to desist your baseless accusations and perform your duties as recycling officer." Into his com-unit, Red says, "Computer, this is Red-R-MEE-1, the mission commander now that Pole has unfortunately passed on. I would like to inform you that Sock is attempting to mutiny this mission and the team is currently taking efforts to subdue him and correct his insubordination." Red looks at Sock, "Are you undermining my authority, sport?"

Sock says to Puck, "Gee, thanks buddy." He then turns and punches Red square in the nose.

Red rolls backward with the punch, and it barely phases him as he spins away.

The Computer responds over Red's com unit, "Thank you for your prompt report, team leader. Please file an immediate report when the suspected traitor has been subdued. Don't forget to floss."

Realizing all this may take a while, Herc approaches Raven-B. "So, what's a nice clone like you doing in a place like this." Raven takes her eyes off the show and chuckles at that.

Emboldened, Herc continues, "So, uh, what do you know about Kosmik-V? He's from around here."

Raven wrinkles her nose, "Him? He's so clean, he squeaks. He's high commander in some super secret service something or other. Computer loves him. He's a shoe-in for High Programmer someday if this productivity thing doesn't hurt him."

Herc had another question, but he follows this, "Productivity?"

Raven goes on, "Yeah, productivity for OID has been zilch for a couple weeks. Computer sent IntSec goons in for random executions among the laborers, but it didn't seem to get anyone working. Makes us all look bad."

Herc tries to be casual, "Oh yeah, that's because of that corridor, right?"

Raven fixes Herc with an intense gaze and shakes her head almost imperceptibly. Suddenly, she's all business, "Well, if you don't have anything else, citizen, I've got work to do." And she hurries behind some shelves and noisily gets to work.

THIS TIME, I'M THE COYOTE

With Red momentarily stunned, Sock grabs the grenade that Puck is offering. The grenade is wrapped in masking tape, which Sock starts stripping off as he advances on Red. Sock raises the grenade and the tape with the obvious intent of taping it to Red. It's at this moment that Sock realizes the grenade has no pin and the tape was all that was holding it together.

Sock's eyes go wide as he drops the grenade and begins back-pedaling. Puck was well on his way to cover the moment Sock took the grenade. Herc was already halfway behind the counter anyway, and live explosives are just the motivation he needs to duck entirely into hiding. Red backs into the counter, trying to get away and then takes a flying backward leap over the counter just as...

BOOOOOOMMMMM!!!!

Trying to soften himself, Red rides the shock-wave backward over the employees only area.

Red is slammed against a wall far behind the PLC counter. He looks shaken and bruised but is moving.

When everyone peeks back out, Sock is laying face down in a pile of his own shredded flesh and parka. He is very dead.

Pole's body seems to have caught a bit of shrapnel as well.

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED...

Red gets up and shakes himself off. He picks up his box of stuff, which was miraculously unhurt. He hands Puck an envelope and says, "Good work, weapons officer. You are also the deputy recycling officer, so I think you have to take care of some business. We're all proud of your valor, citizen."

The envelope says, "Deputy Recycling Officer," and the paper inside reads:

"DEPUTY RECYCLING OFFICER

You fulfill the duties of recycling officer should it happen that the recycling officer himself dies.

Duties of RECYCLING OFFICER

You are responsible for handling the death of any team members. Fortunately, all assignments are perfectly safe, so deaths are extremely rare. Should, however, such an unfortunate circumstance occur, you will be required to report the death to the Computer to ensure a new clone is issued. Also, it is your duty to ensure that the deceased clone's possessions are not disturbed by

others so that the newly issued clone can take possession of them. Lastly, you must brief new clones who join the group on the mission objectives and what has happened so far."

Red hands Herc two envelopes, "Herc, you'll be the Hygiene and Morale officer. Pole will be deputy leader, when he gets here. Sock will be the recycling officer. I'm the loyalty officer as well as mission commander. Now I have to go urinate."

Herc's envelopes are labeled, "Hygiene Officer" and "Morale Officer." The papers inside read:

"HYGIENE OFFICER

It is your assignment to ensure that all team members display appropriate hygiene habits at all times. Members who are out of uniform, messy, or sloppy need to be reprimanded. The hygiene officer's primary tool when clones become resistant is the issuance of citations and fines. You have a pad for this purpose. These are left to your discretion, but suggested fines are: Out of uniform--20 credits; Sloppy appearance--10 credits; Urinating in pants--20 credits; Bleeding on uniform--5 credits; Bleeding on others--25 credits"

And: "MORALE OFFICER

You are responsible for maintaining the morale of the team. This is a very easy position, since the Computer provides for all needs, thus ensuring that everyone is already happy at all times."

Red leaves to go to the restroom.

When there, Red peruses his box like a embryonic-clone in an experimental R&D store. He finds:

- 1 Oversized laser sight
- 5 grenades (unlabelled; about 8 oz each)
- 1 RED floor length cape with "RED" embroidered in clumsy stitching across the back
- 1 RED walking stick (collapsible to about 30 cm; with Computer terminal carved grip)
- 1 pack of pocket tissues
- 1 can (with pull tab; unlabelled; unopened)
- 1 digital AM/FM clock radio
- 1 miniature tape player (with BOSE emblem on side)
- 1 tape labeled "laughter"
- 1 glass sphere (60 cm diameter; 20 cm circular flattened side; 20 cm circular opening opposite the flattened part)
- 1 letter to PLC by Red-R-MEE-1

TALKING HEADS

Herc walks up to Raven, and says, "I forgot to add something to my supplies. Is it possible to get some black paint, and brushes?"

Raven just laughs: "You guys and that paint again. You kill me." She laughs some more, and tears come to her eyes--she says sarcastically, "Oh sure, I keep a 50 gallon drum of black paint in the back. It'll just take a minute." She makes no move to go anywhere.

Puck sees an opportunity here. He searches Sock's shredded body for his Recycling Officer envelope (which he finds on the floor next to the body). Puck continues searching and finds mostly standard issue fare, but then comes across a bag of dirt. Puck stuffs this in his pocket. Maybe he can use it to impress those Sierra Club freaks.

Puck announces, "Well, I'm obviously the Recycling Officer now. Since our fearless leader went to combat the evil urine attacking his groinal muscles, I believe he should be made the Deputy Recycling Officer. Hm?"

Puck walks back to behind the counter and makes a report to the Computer over his com unit: "Oh Great Computer, this is Puck-R-UPP-1, reporting a traitorous action by Team Leader Red-R-MEE-1. He used some sort of mutant power to rip Sock-R-TES-1 to shreds! Sock's body is currently laying on the floor of the PLC, and Red has left the room, shirking his assigned and delegated duties as Deputy Recycling Officer to clean up the body of Sock."

In the bathroom:

Red puts the tissues and unlabeled can in his pocket. He loads the tape into the tape player and secures the tape player to his body (he assumes that there is a secret twitch-switch which secures in his mouth). He places the grenades, clock and letter in the pockets of his parka. He puts on the cape and holds the cane. He affixes the laser site to his pistol and then tries to figure out how to operate the sphere. While he is doing this he says into his com unit:

"Computer, the following assignments were made for the mission:

"I will be mission commander, loyalty officer. Puck is the weapons officer and deputy recycling officer. Herc is the Morale and Hygiene officer. Sock was, and will be again, the Recycling Officer. Pole will be Deputy Team Leader and inventory officer.

"We have agreed, as per computer protocol, that all of these positions are inherited by our clones (with the obvious exception of team leader, of course) should something unfortunate happen to us, which seems unlikely since the computer is all-knowing and wouldn't put us within the path of danger.

"As for my report, the mutinous traitor Sock-R-TES-1 has been exterminated and no longer poses an overt threat to the mission. I successfully distracted the scum while Puck valiantly secured his ultimate demise. Herc played an integral observational role. As team leader, I would recommend Puck for an official commendation for his quick thinking. Puck will contact you to perform his duties as deputy recycling officer. Puck, are you receiving this?"

Through incredibly poor timing, Red and Puck both started their reports to the Computer at the same moment, so they could not hear each other. When Puck finishes, he and Herc can hear the last paragraph of Red's report.

As Red finishes, his com unit's message light winks repeatedly at him. Red hits the playback button, and the prerecorded voice says, "You have...one... message, received while you were broadcasting." Then Puck's broadcast plays.

KAISER SOSE

Herc leans over to Raven and asks, "Did you see all that?" and waves in Puck's direction.

Raven replies, "Sounded like treason to me."

Herc sits back smugly for a moment until he realizes Raven isn't doing anything, and it's up to Herc to take action.

Red leaves the restroom, leaving the bowl in the hallway. He pulls out his laser pistol and begins speaking into his com-unit and says:

"Herc, Puck, apparently there has been a misunderstanding as to who the mission commander is now. It needs to be understood, Puck, that I am the mission commander and any acts of treason or insolence will suffer quick and painful retribution."

As Puck hears this, he gets behind the door to PLC with two pistols ready, trying to act casual, as if this is how he hangs out when off duty.

Herc meanwhile is sifting through his box of stuff and pulling items out one at a time and setting them aside:

"Chapstick. . . No. 8-ball. . . No. Knife. . ." thinks a moment, "No. Dammit, where is that laser"

Helpfully, Raven suggests, "Did you check your holster?"

Herc throws his hands up, "Holster? Holster? That's the first thing I tried?!" But his hand goes to the holster anyway, "Oh here it is."

With Puck's attention elsewhere, Herc drops to the floor and crawls around to the far side of the room to get behind Puck.

Someone is outside the door, and just as it is kicked in, Herc puts four shots in the back of Puck's head.

Red kicks the door in to PLC and storms into the room, waving his pistol, just in time to see Puck's fat smoking body fall in a dead heap at his feet.

Herc, holding up his laser, gets on his com unit: "Computer, this is Herc-R-LES-1 reporting. I was forced to execute the traitor Puck-R-UPP-1 for looting dead citizens, making false reports to the Computer, and generally lowering group morale. As temporary recycling officer, I report that Puck-R-UPP-1 is now officially dead. We have also lost Pole-R-OID-1 and Sock-R-TES-1, and would like new clones sent."

The Computer replies, "Thank you, citizen. Happiness is mandatory."

Herc winks at Red and blows imaginary smoke from his laser. "I told you I had your back, boss." He flashes the "OK" sign and clicks his tongue twice.

Red seems more than a little surprised. He has on a giant red cape with "RED" on the back of it, and is holding a red cane in the hand that does not have the gun. His gun is fitted with a giant laser site.

TRY TRY AGAIN

Herc pulls out a pad and starts jotting down notes, mostly about his conversations with Urly and Raven. He also fills out another couple cards for Sock and Puck.

Within moments, the door opens and Pole-R-OID-2 and Sock-R-TES-2 enter. Raven-B tells them to go ahead and gather their equipment from their dead clones on the floor. "Sock," she says, "I know the insulated clothes on your brother there are kind of shredded and bloody, but they're the only ones in your size, so you'll have to take them."

As Pole and Sock begin to suit up, Raven says, "Oh, and these came for you." and hands them each a greeting card.

Both cards have a picture of Herc-R-LES waving and an expression of sympathy, signed by Herc.

REBRIEFING

Red says, "Welcome everyone. Let's all get suited up and ready for our escort. We can't be late for our trip to

the outside. Right then." Red goes into a corner with his cape pulled around him.

Red is trying to figure out how to work that glass bowl, but unfortunately, it has no controls.

Herc looks frustrated and turns to the new guys and says, "Okay, as my final duty as," he turns to Red for the next word, "TEMPORARY," turns back, "recycling officer, I'll do the briefing. There's a hallway we need to paint, and we've got to go outside to recover a couple of perfectly ordinary run-of-the-mill INDIGO cylinders. Red's in charge if you have questions."

Everyone finishes suiting up, finding convenient pockets and slots for all their equipment. Sock's parka has a giant, bloody, shredded hole in the front, but it least it has just enough buttons left to keep it shut.

Suddenly, the door flings open, and five GREEN level IntSec troopers storm in. The escort. One of them, with blue braids on his shoulder, starts barking orders: "Alright, troops in order!" Each trooper lines up with one of the troubleshooters, including one that stands by Puck's body. The commander continues, "Golly-G, you remain with the downed citizen and bring his replacement immediately! The rest of you--force march! Let's go! Hup! Hup! Hup! Hup!" And everyone gets marched out the door.

FOLLOW THE YELLOW BRICK ROAD

Sock tries to get next to Red as they move out the door. "Hey, what is going on? I didn't get a briefing, and I'm not sure what is going on, or what I doing here." Looking at Red, he asks, "How did my clone die? I thought I was going to be in the holding chamber forever."

Puck-R-UPP-2 arrives at PLC. Raven-B-OID is still behind the counter. Two scrubbots are working to clear away the corpses of Pole-R-OID-1 and Sock-R-TES-1. A GREEN level IntSec trooper, Golly-G, is standing by Puck-1's body. Puck-1 looks as if he took several laser shots to the back of the head.

Golly-G barks, "Puck-R-UPP-2, gather your equipment from your dead brother, and then we need to catch up to the rest of the group."

Puck starts getting all of his stuff together. He gets everything Puck-1 had, including all the weapons, the winter clothes, and the bag of dirt.

As Puck is just ready to walk out the door, Raven says, "Oh yeah, this came addressed to Puck-1." And she hands him a greeting card.

Inside is an expression of sympathy, and a picture of Herc-R-LES crossing names off a list.

ACE AND GARY

Very subtly, Sock moves up next to Herc as they march, and puts an arm around his shoulders. He squeezes Herc's arm just a bit and says, "Hey, wow, do you work out?" Then speaking softly, "You know, people need friends, comrades I should say, and with just any nimrod in charge, a clone has to watch his back, and... well... I feel like I could trust you. I mean, " he gives a slight chuckle, "you have an honest face. What I'm getting at is we could be a team within the team-- stick close--be partners--mi casa es su casa." Sock then fixes Herc with a stern glare, "You get me partner?"

LAME TITLE

Herc winks at Sock and says, "Right on."

Red triggers the laugh track as he marches.

Right then, laughter starts. Lots of it, like a whole audience, and mixed with applause, but not terribly loud. Everyone looks around a bit, but there is no obvious source of the noise.

The group, jogging along in their heavy insulated clothing, has become extremely hot and sweaty, but the IntSec goons seem ready as ever.

The IntSec commander stops while yelling, "STOP!"

The team finds themselves at a "T" intersection. The corridor they came from is black and continues on straight ahead. It is a main corridor, about ten meters wide and seven high. Where they have stopped, a white corridor branches off to the right. The white corridor is about seven meters wide and five high, and the team can see the other end where it runs into another black hallway about 70 meters away. The corridor (labeled QZ) seems very normal, with vents, doors to restrooms, water fountains, a confessional, the usual patriotic and inspirational posters, except that it is white. Like all of Alpha Complex, the white hall and the black halls at either end are all very clean and well-lit. There is occasional traffic in both black halls (INFRARED laborers and a few scrubbots mostly). Nothing moves in corridor QZ.

The GREEN troopers march off the way they came.

Back in PLC, Puck finishes gathering his stuff, and Golly-G orders him to get up and get moving. They begin marching away, when Puck feels a sharp sting in his right buttock, like a needle or something. Puck glares at Golly-G, but Golly just shrugs and says, "Sorry about that. Orders."

After a couple seconds, Puck is struck by the certain knowledge that the success of this mission is of extreme importance to the Smithereens and their patron. Even as he wonders how the hell he could know this, Puck realizes that the INDIGO cylinders were part of an intricately planned Smithereens undertaking. The mission was sabotaged by Armed Forces personnel. Recovering those cylinders would make Puck a hero, and there would be a promotion and hefty credit bonus in it for him.

Golly-G yells for Puck to keep up the pace.

Chapter 04—The Fruits of Treason

LET THE GOOD TIMES ROLL

Puck glares at Golly-G and shouts, "Hey, don't touch the tush! Understand? No touch! Tush bad!" Puck looks very aggravated and confused, and keeps rubbing the back of his head.

Pole runs to catch up with the Intsec commander.

After a quick salute, he whispers in his ear:

"Sir, I have not been given my IntSec mission assignment. This may be brash of me, but I am anxious to begin carrying out my duties for IntSec on this mission that I may protect the computer with my life the computer from the commie mutant traitors. How can I assist you?"

The IntSec commander (Fun-G) replies, "Oh, you're the one." He eyes Pole's hair, "Good cover, I almost didn't suspect you." He hands Pole a multicorder cartridge and says, "Everything you need to know is in here. And watch out, those R & D nerds are out to sabotage the cylinders. They screwed up and want to hide the evidence. Don't let it happen. Report directly to me when you finish."

The troopers leave.

The laughter and applause are still coming from Computer-knows-where. Herc begins waving and bowing repeatedly to no one in particular. The noise then cuts off suddenly. Herc is still hamming it up.

Golly-G arrives with Puck. Golly-G leaves immediately. Puck spots Herc and gives him the nastiest glare that a little irritating fat guy can give.

Herc gives one last bow in Puck's direction and then jumps behind Sock. Puck meets Sock's eyes for a moment and then looks away suddenly and shuffles his feet uncomfortably.

Seeing that everyone is together, Red says, "Right then. Herc, Pole, start getting the painting supplies ready. Sock and Puck, prepare the paint so that we can get this hallway painted and get on to the second part of our mission."

BELAY THAT ORDER

Sock looks annoyed. He bellows, "Belay that order! Herc and I will get the supplies, and Puck and Pole will begin painting when we are ready for them. And Red," Sock takes off his bloody and tattered coat, "you will hold my coat for me." Sock flings the coat at Red. Red ducks, and it lands behind him.

PERHAPS YOU DIDN'T HEAR ME

Red puts down the propane stove and looks angry. Red begins speaking to Sock, but is also transmitting over the com-unit for all to hear. He says, "You are intentionally disobeying a direct order from the mission commander, Sock. That's treason."

Red lifts his pistol. The laser site is on and is leaving a red pool of light that covers half of the back of Sock's head. "However, there will be a change in plans. Herc, Pole, you get the painting supplies together. Puck, you prepare the paint. Sock, get over here on your hands and knees and apologize to your coat which the computer was so generous to supply you with. These are direct orders from your mission commander." Everyone notices that Red is also holding a grenade in the hand without the pistol.

Puck bows to a lifetime of training, and says "Hey, we can't go in there! It's white!"

Herc, meanwhile, has stripped off his coat and insulated pants and has sat himself against a wall. He glances at Red (who isn't paying much attention to him right now) and says, "Be right there, boss." Herc is trying to fold his bulky coat. First he tries lengthwise, then shakes his head and starts over. He fails again and so tries folding the sleeves in first. When this gets him no further, he yells, "aaaarrrrgghh," while crumpling the coat and flailing his hands in the air. Herc smooths out the jacket and sighs. He tries again.

WHATEVER

Sock looks at Red hard and cold. "I gotta piss." Sock turns his back on Red to walk to the bathroom.

Red never wavers and his giant laser sight remains firmly on Sock's head. "Once again, you are flagrantly ignoring a direct order from a superior officer. You will not 'piss' until you have completed your assigned duty. That is a direct order.

Herc watches intently.

Puck deliberately does nothing at all.

Pole looks bored and picks his nose.

SHOWDOWN

Pole slyly wipes the snot on Herc. "Mr. Red, Sir? May I be excused to use the de-uriner? I have more than a full supply..." Without waiting for a response, Pole starts to move, hesitantly, away from the group. (Keeping to the west wall so as not to get between Sock and Red)

Herc looks indignantly at the drying snot on his sleeve and quickly whips out an official looking pad and begins writing.

Sock freezes where he is and puts his hands up. He begins to turn around very slowly to face Red. Sock's face is scrunched up as if in intense concentration (or straining to force out a giant turd).

Sock is trying with all his might to cause Red's eyes and hands to burst into flame.

Red's eyes begin to sting and he feels his laser heating up in his hand. Enough of this crap, he thinks.

Red drops the grenade he's holding and fires one shot at Sock's head. A clean miss. Red drops to a defensive kneeling posture and shouts, "Mutant scum!" as he cranks off two more shots at Sock's head and neck. The first shot singes Sock's coveralls, but fizzles on his reflex armor. The second, however, knocks Sock on his backside, charring Sock's ear and singeing much of the left side of his beard.

Sock remains stunned on the floor. He is hurt, but can still function pretty well.

Red stops firing, because his pistol seems to have completely melted. Red yells and drops the molten mess, then examines the blisters on his palm. Then Red's entire cloak bursts into flames around him.

PHEONIX RISING

As soon as the action begins, Herc screams like a woman and throws his coat over his head.

Sock quickly rolls to the left (away from corridor QZ) screaming "Are you crazy!? What in the Computer's name are you shooting for? I've done nothing!" Sock scrunches his face in concentration again, and simultaneously, the propane stove behind Red explodes is a shower of cheap ceramic shards. Sock continues yelling, "We must save our leader. Herc, quick, throw a blanket over..." Sock is cut off as Red catches him off guard.

Red has put his brass knuckles on while hunched over in the corner. He leaps up at Sock. His cloak is flaming and smoke is pouring. His face is contorted into a mixture of rage and impunity. He punches Sock in the face with his brass knuckles.

He's pretty sure he broke Sock's nose.

Sock is pretty sure his nose is broken.

The flaming cloak whips around Sock, enfolding the two opponents in a fiery embrace. Red takes advantage of the confusion to slip behind Sock and begin battering him toward corridor QZ.

As the cloak finally falls away in smoking tatters, Sock finds himself standing in the white corridor.

Red shouts over his com-unit, "Security Breach! Sock is in a white corridor and is violating security. The mission commander is officially ordering Herc, Pole and Puck to exterminate Sock."

Pole, by now, is well down the hall. He has passed the door to the restrooms, and keeps going.

JUST FOLLOWING ORDERS

"Happy to comply, leader!" shouts Pole from extreme range. He is past the restrooms and well on his way down corridor QA toward PLC. He empties an entire laser barrel in Sock's general direction, but only ends up subduing corridor QA, knocking out the florescent lights over Red's head, and the water fountain further up the hall. The damaged fountain is producing a slow fine mist in a little 1 meter cloud around it.

Pole continues on his way.

Herc peeks out from under his coat and begins firing at Sock. He also misses, leaving scorch marks on the lovely white walls of corridor QZ. After two shots though, he seems to be out of ammo, and just clicks a few times. Herc looks at his pistol and seems totally puzzled. Then, with a shrug, he continues to fire the empty gun while making laser firing noises with his mouth: "BBZZHHHHOOO, BBZZHHHHOOO, PPSSSOOOOWW!"

The Computer speaks through Red's com unit: "Team Leader Red-R-MEE-1. Please report your current position." The Computer seems exceptionally perky today.

UNDER SEIGE

Red pulls out his cane in his left hand and extends it. Meanwhile, he is pulling out a grenade in his right, pulling the pin. He says to Sock, "Here, sport." He lazily tosses it to Sock, hoping he'll catch it out of instinct.

Instead, Sock turns and runs down corridor QZ like a scared little bitch. The grenade bounces along behind him, but stops way short.

Red quickly ducks back behind the corner of the wall, as the grenade explodes loudly in the corridor.

Red steps back out to see Sock is continuing unharmed. Red screams into his com-unit, "Computer, this is team leader, Red-R-MEE-1. We are under seige by the traitorous Sock-R-TES-2. We are attempting to exterminate him. I flossed twice this morning, in response to an earlier question you posed."

Puck, still behind Red, pulls out an unidentified pistol. Puck is still bundled up so that only his eyes are visible. Puck is sweating like a stuck PLC clerk. Puck shouts a muffled shout, "Hold it right there, Sock!"

Puck winces in fear and pulls the trigger. A bundle of razor sharp needles fling past Red's ear and end up missing Sock entirely, embedding themselves in the ceiling.

Sock has just reached the first door on the right marked "utility". As he flings it open, Puck grits his teeth and heaves out one more shot which plants itself firmly in the back of Red's right thigh. Puck seems embarrassed, "Oh, sorry."

Sock dives through the door, and it slams behind him.

The Computer comes over the com units: "Team leader Red-R-MEE-1, you failed to adequately answer my question. Please identify the white corridor you referred to earlier. And a 15 credit flossing bonus has been added to your account."

After a short pause the Computer adds, "Will citizen Sock-R-TES-2 please report to the Emotional Therapy room ZL144 in OID sector for evaluation of mission progress." (Emotional Therapy was right next to PLC. Anyone in the group could find it.)

Pole is still huffing it to PLC. He's hotter than a HEL sector nuclear furnace in this getup though, and it's slowing him down a bit.

WHITE FLAG

The "utility" door swings open again, and everyone can see just Sock's arm as he props it open. Sock shouts, "Okay, okay! Red, I'm coming out with my hands up. Don't shoot!"

GOODNIGHT-CYCLE, SWEET PRINCE

Red uses his mutant power to ben his leg upward from the shot wound.

Red falls on his stomach to the ground screaming. Where Puck shot him, his leg has been ripped apart and seems to be attached only by a thread. It is bent at the midpoint of the thigh, at a ninety degree angle. Red's voice is getting weak.

While on his stomach, Red pulls out a confetti grenade and pulls the pin, holding it closed with his hand. Thus when flipped over, or if searched, the grenade will detonate.

Inside the utility closet, Sock finds 2 brooms, 2 mops, a large bucket with wheels and a mop wringer, and a large locked cabinet. Sock quickly spots what he's looking for: a removable ceiling tile leading to some kind of ductwork or access area above the closet. Sock pushes this aside, so it will look like he made his escape there.

Sock then becomes invisible, and creeps quietly back into the main corridor.

With the last of his strength, Red says, "Remember, Pole is deputy team leader. Herc is the morale and hygiene officer. I am the mission commander and loyalty officer. Puck is the weapons officer and deputy recycling officer. Sock is the Recycling officer and inventory officer. It was a pleasure and honor to have worked with all of you. When the darkest hour of our discontent allows the malevolence of traitors to oppose the righteousness of all clonedom. We must remember that it is through the powers of our own self will that we can change the complex for the better. Goodnight-cycle and bless you all." Then, all signs of life fade as Red ends his melodramatic death speech.

Red is shallowly breathing, but using his plastics to make it not noticable. Red is also plasticing his internal parts to cut off the bleeding in his leg. He lays still.

The Computer says, "Team leader Red-R-MEE-1, you have still not given adequate response to my questions. Do you require assistance?"

BIG BANG BOOM

Puck looks scared out of his mind, for a minute, but as Red lies prone, he sees the window of opportunity begin to close. He catches eye contact with Herc and then dives for the orange braid.

Herc rushes in at the same time, but with different motives: "Oh, Computer's mercy! Red! Red! What have they done to you?"

Herc feels for a pulse as Puck grabs the braid and snickers.

Herc shouts, "Quick, he needs CPR!" and rolls the body over.

Surprisingly, Red was laying on a grenade, his body holding it shut. Now it just lays there, pin-less.

This fact has just enough time to register with Puck and Herc when. . .

BOOOOMMMMM!!

Herc, Puck, and Red all seem to be dead.

GOSPEL

Remaining invisible, Sock creeps over and checks to see if Pole is about. He's nowhere around. That done, Sock becomes visible with a heavy fart and picks up the ORANGE braids.

Sock announces over the com unit: "Friend Computer, this is Sock-R-TES-2. Red-R-MEE-1, Herc-R-LES-1, and Puck-R-UPP-2 seem to have killed themselves in some kind of grenade accident. If it's not too much trouble, could you issue new clones? Also, I will now be taking over as team leader."

The Computer replies: "Sock-R-TES-2, Pole-R-OID-2 was appointed deputy team leader by Red-R-MEE-1. He will now be team leader. Your presence was requested in the Emotional Therapy room. I am severely displeased with you for your tardiness. My therapists have been waiting."

After a pause, the Computer continues: "Pole-R-OID-2, you are now the team leader. Please appoint a deputy as soon as possible. The Computer has every faith in your ability to lead your team to glorious success in the Outdoors."

MY PLEASURE

Pole responds over his com unit: "Friend Computer, I am honored that you have bestowed the honor of leadership upon me. I promise to faithfully carry out my duties and ensure the success of the mission."

Pole then hoofs it the rest of the way to PLC.

Once there, he asks Raven-B (who is still the only one around), "Hi, I seem to have had an accident with my multicorder and was wondering if I could get a new one?"

Raven responds by pushing a package at him. It has YELLOW coveralls (with RED stitching that reads "brevet promotion") and three YELLOW laser barrels. Pole notes with disappointment that YELLOW reflex is not included.

Raven then says, "Here, you can take this one." and slides him a new multicorder very similar to his old one, but obviously much older and a little worn. Before Pole

can grab it, Raven adds, "But you'll have to sign for it." Which Pole does.

YELLOW?

Pole-Y says to Raven-B, "Happy to sign, fellow citizen! I appear to be missing the accompanying yellow armour, however. I'm sure this is simply an oversight on your part, as the good and gracious Computer surely intended his team leader to have it. I'll be happy to sign for it and exchange what I'm wearing here..."

Raven says, "Yeah sure, they must have left it in the back. I'll check for it as soon as I get a chance." Pole is suspecting sarcasm, because Raven follows this up by pulling out a comic book and sitting down to read.

Then, Puck-R-UPP-3, Red-R-MEE-2, and Herc-R-LES-2 enter PLC. They see Raven-B behind the counter reading a comic book ("Nick Fu-R-EEE, Troubleshooter of SHIELD" it looks like). Deputy Team Leader Pole-R-OID-2 has apparently become Team Leader Pole-Y-OID-2 and is just now suiting up with a set of YELLOW coveralls (which have RED stitching saying "brevet" to indicate the temporary nature of the promotion.)

Raven passes envelopes to Puck and Red and says to them (and Herc), "The rest of your stuff should still be with your last clones. I'd get down there before the scrubbots come to clean."

[Each envelope contains a card from Herc-R-LES, with an expression of sympathy and a picture of Herc waving.]

Sock looks defeated. He says into his com unit: "I'm on my way."

Sock trudges unhappily to the Emotional Therapy room. Once there, he opens the door to find an empty room. Then the door slams behind him, and Sock sees the large black bot who was standing behind the door.

The bot says very sharply, "Sock-R-TES-2, please strip immediately, and leave all of your possessions by the door."

GLAD I'M NOT HIM

Following the big bot's orders, Sock begins piling his stuff by the door. When he gets to his knife, Sock grips it tightly and begins to stammer, "Hey, you know, I, uh, look, can't we, well..."

The bot shouts "Shut up, traitor!" and smacks Sock to the floor. Hard.

As Sock keeps taking stuff off, the Computer's voice comes through the bot's speakers:

"Suspected use of a mutant power. Ignoring a direct order from a superior clone. Disobeying a direct order from a superior clone. Bloodstains on your Computer-issued property. Ignoring a request from the Computer. More suspected use of mutant powers. Assaulting a higher clearance clone. Possession of a "Magic 8-ball". Failure to be happy.

"Tell me, citizen--why should I not kill you?"

Puck holds the card out to Herc and stands impatiently for a few moments, proving his point. "What the hell is this? What's this supposed to mean? Hm? I'm standing here!!!" Puck's voice trembles with indignation. "Papa wasn't no rolling stone! Go console your own damn dead clone." Puck whips the card out of Herc's face and stuffs it inside his coveralls. Then he leans over the counter and says very pleasantly to Raven, "Hi there, do you think I could have a really big gun please?"

Raven barely glances up from her comic and mumbles something about, "no authorization... further equipment for this team...dead clones got it."

Herc looks at Puck rather oddly but then turns to Pole-Y and says, "Congratulations, sir. I knew your last clone--tried to help him out in a tight spot. Well, got to go get my stuff." Herc leaves.

Red hurries out as well, off to recover his stuff. On the way out of PLC, he notices a giant glass bowl and picks it up. He continues on to the hallway to steal his old clones inventory.

As Herc and Red pass the Emotional Therapy room, they hear a mechanical voice yelling, "Shut up, traitor!" followed by a loud meaty smacking noise.

Herc and Red glance at each other nervously. Herc looks up and quickly shouts, "Hail, Computer." They hurry on.

Reaching the junction with the white hallway, Herc and Red begin gathering their stuff.

PLEASE DON'T KILL ME

Sock begs for his life: "Please don't kill me!" He drops to the floor with his hands on his face. "I'm a humble servant of the Computer. My intent was merely to ensure that the mission was completed as directed." Sock continues, crying like a baby that can't hold its pee: "Besides Herc-R was telling me that the Computer had a secret mission for him and that I was to help, but the first thing was to have Red give up his command. Besides the only reason he was in command was that he stole the

braids from Pole's dead clone. Pole should have been our commander, not Red. Th..th..then Red freaked out and started shooting at me when his laser blew up in his face, and that's when he stated calling me mutant." He screams like a dying woman, "PLEASE DON'T KILL ME!!!!!"

All this time, the big guardbot has been sorting through Sock's stuff, sorting it into two piles. The Computer says, "You may go back to your team now, Sock-TES-2." Sock realizes the Computer left his rank out of his name. That can't be good.

The guardbot picks up the smaller of the two piles and hands it to Sock, "Your equipment."

Still sniffing, Sock starts to suit up. He gets a set of black coveralls (INFRARED, oh no), his pad and pen, the ball of string, a putty knife, the winter clothes (still torn and bloody), and the fanny pack (now empty).

The Computer says, "I am trying a new way to handle inept traitors such as yourself. You may continue on this troubleshooter mission, and if you perform well in your duties, you may earn back your RED security clearance. If not, HEL sector could always use a new INFRARED drone to help maintain the nuclear reactors."

Red takes all of the stuff off of his old clone, and puts it in with his own stuff. He shoves something in his mouth (the laughtrack switch).

Red leaves the cape, but extends the cane and holds it in a stately fashion, admiring the handiwork. Red begins putting on his heavy coat and clothes.

He gets done and looks over the glass bowl as he walks back to PLC, "Cool bowl." [It is 60 cm diameter; 20 cm circular flattened side; 20 cm circular opening opposite the flattened part--basically a 2 foot wide fishbowl.]

Herc has also finished suiting up, and as if on cue, Herc and Red both start heading back to PLC. As they pass the ET room again, they can hear something that sounds like a clone begging for mercy, which wraps up with the words, "PLEASE DON'T KILL ME!!!!!" and a very womanly scream.

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE RANCH

Pole stands loosely, his eyes not seeming to focus on anything in particular.

Puck grins at Raven-B and puts on those puppybot-eyes that seemed to work so well last time. "Yeah, come on, Raven. I'll go pick up that other stuff in a minute, but surely there's just a little something back there with my name on it." Puck awkwardly slides something across

the counter to Raven, trying to act as if it is someone else's hand doing the work.

Raven glances up and scoops up Puck's offering (15 credits). "Hey, what do know," she says, reaching under the counter, "These were supposed to go in your last box, but must have been left out accidentally because they're so big." She hands Puck a smallish flamethrower (with huge fuel backpack) and a guass rifle (sends out electromagnetic pulses that disrupt and damage robotic systems but organic targets).

As Puck straps them on, Raven-B says, "My sincerest apologies for the ommision, citizen."

Pole's jaw hangs open slackly. He looks like he might start drooling.

TOGETHER AGAIN

Red-R and Herc-R enter PLC to find Puck-R just strapping on a flamethrower and some kind of large rifle. Pole-Y is standing nearby with a vacant look as if he is thinking about taking up drooling.

Sock emerges from the Emotional Therapy room just in time to see Red and Herc headed back into PLC. He follows them.

Red approaches the counter just as Sock enters the room. Everyone turns to stare a poor Sock (even Pole seems to shake himself from his stupor). Sock still has his winter clothes on, but the coveralls underneath are clearly black.

A demotion. He is now Sock-TES-2, and like any good INFRARED drone must take orders from any higher level citizen.

Sock gets an eyeful of Team Leader Pole-Y-OID-2 who has apparently been promoted to YELLOW.

Chapter 05—Up in Smoke

SWEET SWEET PLC

Red hands a preprepared note to Raven. He says, "Another Red Laser Pistol and some black paint with brush, please."

Scrawled at the top of the note, is written, "Use only after first note has failed, or been destroyed. Only use this note when desperate for equipment." Typed under the scrawl it reads:

"Dearest PLC staffer,

Please provide Red-R-MEE with the following:

1. Anything from R&D that the average trouble shooter can carry without discomfort.
2. A red cape.
3. A red cane.
4. A wide, happy smile when you deliver the goods. Then a wink, nod, two shakes of your head and a long loud sniff. Then say, "Mr. Noodles, you can eat crackers in my bunk anytime."
5. An unlabeled can with an easy-open pop tab filled with beans.

Please return this note to Red-R-MEE when the equipment has been delivered."

Puck looks stunned for a second by Sock's appearance and then waddles over to Sock and puts an arm way, way up around Sock's shoulder. "Sorry about that, bud. Hell of a break."

Puck turns, and the pilot light on his flamethrower accidentally brushes Sock's coveralls in the back, causing them to smolder slowly.

Red is holding a 2 foot wide glass bowl. He turns it over and puts it on his head. He crouches in a defensive posture with his arms extended, fingers splayed. He looks around suspiciously with his eyes without moving his neck. From inside the bowl, with a hollow voice which echos slightly, he says, "This is one small step for a clone, one giant leap for clone-kind."

Red takes one small step forward.

Pole seems to regain his bearings and focuses on Puck, "Excellent weapon selection, Puck-R! We need to be sure of that piece of hardware before we test it in combat, however. As team leader, I have decided to take the team back to corridor Q-whatever to test the

flamethrower, in case we have to use it during the mission.

"We should not have to worry about damage though, due to the unfortunate grenade blast." Pole glowers at Sock suspiciously. "Any objections?..."

Puck suddenly remembers something and is running out the door as Pole continues without pause, "...Good! Let's get going!"

Pole-Y, Herc-R, and Sock start to head out the door, but after taking his one small step, Red, still in the defensive posture, says, "Niag-R-FLS! Slowly I turned." Slowly he turns. "Step by step." He takes several steps towards the PLC counter. "Inch by inch." He shuffles a few baby steps until he reaches the counter. Then he props an elbow against the counter and waits.

Raven responds with, "Yeah, I'm on break, but I can get right on this order in a half hour or so."

AN OLD FLAME

Sock pipes up for no apparent reason and shouts, "One of y'all get dat cracka!" and then falls silent again as he walks with military stiffness next to Pole-Y.

Pole-Y pauses briefly on his way out the door, and like obedient sheepbots, Herc-R and Sock pause with him. Pole calls out, "Red-R, come on! That's an order."

Red turns and lifts his helmet with a quizzical expression. "What? . . . Oh. Yeah. Okay, sir, I'm on my way." Red turns and slowly shambles toward the door as Pole-Y and his entourage start up again.

Pole-Y has put a small earphone from his multicorder in his ear, and his attention stays on the multicorder's small LCD display as he walks toward corridor QZ.

On the screen is Fun-G, the IntSec commander. "Quick, soldier, you must get immediately back to PLC. We have made arrangements for you to be team leader. Once we have identified you, we will make a brevet YELLOW promotion available, and the equipment will be in PLC."

Herc-R slides up next to Sock and is about to put an arm around him when he notices that the back of Sock's coat is smoldering and just starting to flame up.

In a blind panic, Herc-R yells, "STOP!" and shoves Sock hard in the small of his back. Sock falls to his knees, and Herc-R tackles him shouting, "DROP!"

The surprised Sock finally realizes that he smells something burning, and he thinks it's him, because his ass is getting really hot.

Herc-R finishes the job by yelling, "ROLL, SOCK, ROLL!" as he shoves Sock back and forth on the floor.

On Pole-Y's screen, Fun-G continues, "Now, we are afraid that Kosmik-V is some..." Pole is interrupted by Herc's shouting, so he jams the pause button and looks up to see Sock on the floor with smoke rising from his back, and Herc shoving him back and forth.

His job done, Herc-R stands up and falls back in line next to Pole-Y who is staring at him like he has a laser sprouting from the top of his head or something.

Puck-R has reached his last clone's body (which is the only one left in the hall). All of his equipment is still there, and Puck suits up as quickly as possible.

The full arsenal on Puck-R's person is now:

3 laser pistols 2 laser rifles 9 RED laser barrels 4 irregular grenades 1 penknife 1 hand flamer 3 ice guns 2 tanglers 1 stun gun 1 semi automatic slugthrower 1 hand plasma generator 1 flamethrower 1 guass gun (some 25 kilos of weaponry now)

FIREMEN DO IT WITH A BIG HOSE

Sock rolls over, glaring backwards and yelling, "What the hell! Red...?" and he trails off when he realizes Red isn't there.

Red is just coming around the corner, hurrying to catch up, bowl still on his head. He sees Sock laying on the floor, the back of his coat somewhat charred. Red looks disapproving and keeps his distance.

Pole-Y focuses on Herc, "Excellent work, citizen Herc-R. I hereby designate you 'Fire Control Officer'. Your task is to extinguish all the bad fire the team comes in contact with for our safety and the safety of Alpha Complex. Your excellent use of the Stop, Drop and Roll and Duck and Cover methods of fire control have earned you this exhalted promotion. Guard against the misuse of your authority!"

In corridor QA, Puck stands around thinking and looking frustrated, holding Herc-R's latest card in one hand and his flamethrower in the other.

PLAYING CATCH-UP

Red helps Sock up. He whispers something to Sock.

He whispers, "It's okay brother, I've got your back. Don't let the man get you down."

Red pats Sock approvingly on the back and smiles at the rest of the group.

Puck comes around the corner from up ahead. He has something like a dozen or more different guns strapped to his person. He says, "Hey, are we on a mission here, or what?"

RIGHT ON

Sock looks to Red, holding up a closed fist in salute, saying, "Yeah, bro, they can't keep me down. The bots will see when I rise up and break the chains that bind me, enslave me..." Sock pauses dramatically and lets his head drop, "...betray me. I WILL overcome." He stands tall with his chest puffing out. "MOUNTAIN MOVE OUTTA MY WAY!" Then he begins to sing (very badly and off-key): "Swing low, sweet Flybot 13, coming for to carry me home."

Puck has been standing impatiently with his fists on his hips. Obviously exasperated with Sock's sentimental display, Puck interrupts by flicking a single credit token at Red's bowl. It strikes squarely with a resounding "BOOONNNNNNGGGG!" causing Puck to giggle like a schoolclone.

FUCK, I CAN'T THINK OF A TITLE, NOT LIKE YOU EVER USE THEM ANYWAYS, YOU UNGRATEFUL SHIT

Red pulls out a red cloth and almost unconsciously begins wiping the bowl which is on his head.

He seems not to have noticed Puck's little trick.

Red makes sure his com-unit is not broadcasting to everyone, hits his laugh track and begins whispering to Sock intently.

Unseen laughter and applause again seems to suddenly come up from everywhere around the team.

Red whispers excitedly, "Yes, my brother, now you understand the difficult obstacles that we all must face everyday as citizens of the complex. Simply having to exist as clones is hard enough, but with the micromanagement that seems to pervade our every existence, this my brother is what tears at our essence. Look at what has been done to you. To be demoted. And for what I do not know. Let me know, my brother, and I can tell you more later."

Red winks at Sock, and gives him a friendly nudge with his elbow.

VIVA VGS SECTOR

Pole-Y turns his attention back to the little LCD screen on his multicorder. He still has his earphone in.

On the screen, the IntSec commander Fun-G is saying: "Now, we are afraid that Kosmik-V is some sort of subversive. We know he is in line for a promotion to High Programmer, so we cannot figure what he has to gain by trying to distract from the true mission. The only thing that matters is getting those cylinders back unharmed. Also, find out what Kosmic-V is up to with this hallway thing. Uncovering a VIOLET level traitor could make your promotion permanent. Good luck."

The applause continues, and Herc perks up at the sound of it, cocking his ear to make sure he hears correctly. He bows quickly and then in his best imitation of Elvis-R-SLY, he sneers at Puck, "Thank you. Thank you very much." He turns to Red, "Thank you." Then turns and points and winks at Sock saying, "Boo, baby."

The laughter and applause cut off suddenly.

CHIPS

The team continues on to corridor QZ.

Puck-R, his pudgy body bristling with weaponry, sweat running into his beady eyes, has the lead position. He struts bravely as if this doesn't bother him at all, although it does.

Pole-Y has shuffled along absently, watching his multicorder, but now he switches it briskly off, shoving the tape in his pocket. He yanks the earphone out and runs his hand through his white, white hair and surveys his motley team.

Herc-R, bug-eyed and grinning, follows close at Pole-Y's YELLOW clad heels.

Behind them, Sock, in his INFRARED coveralls and burnt blasted parka walks at stiff attention.

Red-R, stays close to Sock, with his huge and ludicrous glass ball still topping off his lean gangly frame, and his RED cane swinging loosely from one hand.

Red pats Sock on the back one more time and whispers, "For the first time, I feel like I really know you, man-clone. We have much to discuss the ways in which unity can bind the ties of adversity. But we can't discuss it at the moment. Let us end our little philosophical foray by agreeing that equality is the higher path, eh brother? For now, though, it will be necessary to keep up appearances for the sake of the others."

In an obviously too-loud voice, Red says to Sock, "Now, why don't you go to the hallway and begin trying to chip

away the paint. Need I remind you that this is an order from a higher ranking officer?"

Red puts on his brass knuckles.

TRY TRY AGAIN

The team reaches corridor QZ. The bodies have all been removed. The area has the occasional scorch and blast marks from previous team discussions.

Sock obviously heard Red's command, and is now staring at the white corridor, looking confused.

HELLO, MY FRIEND, HELLO

Red approaches Puck. He says, "Puck, my good friend. It seems my last laser spontaneously melted. I would like to come to an arrangement with you. As loyalty officer, I've noticed that your loyalty is unparalleled. Maybe if you could supply me with some firepower, I can assist you in some way."

Pole-Y addresses Herc, "Fire Control Officer, standby..." Then to Puck-R, "Citizen, flamethrower ready... Commence testing!" Pole-Y brings his multicorder up, ready to begin taping.

EVEN INFRARED TRAITORS ARE WORTH ONE POINT

Puck-R replies to Red-R, "Absolutely, valuable teammate!" Puck looks through the glass bowl as if something dead is floating at the top. Puck hands Red a penknife. "Be careful, it's loaded."

Herc-R maintains his position at Pole's side and watches carefully.

Pole-Y barks, "Citizen Red-R-Mee-2, please step away from the loyalty officer! We are involved in weapons testing! The Computer will provide!"

Sock-TESS-2 chooses to brazenly and traitorously ignore the direct command given to him by higher ranking clone Red-R-MEE-2. Instead, he looks to Pole: "Should I begin painting, sir, or is there some other way you could use my great strength. You know, I was thinking that one in your position would view security as a vital issue." Sock leans in meaningfully, "Personal security, if you get my meaning. And with the high mortality rate of this team's commanders, surely in your great wisdom, you see the need for personal safety..."

Sock continues to wallow in his treasonous behavior as he keeps ignoring Red-R while waiting for Pole's answer.

WHAT?

When Red turns to Pole, Puck uses his illusionism to make it seem as if Red has shouted, "Fuck the Computer!"

Red hears it in his own head. Pole hears it from Red and Puck's direction but did not see either one speak. Herc believes Red said it. Due to his PSION training, Sock doesn't notice a thing.

BEST BOY GRIP

Pole turns the multicorder on Sock:

"Sub-Citizen Sock-TES, I believe Citizen Red-R-MEE gave you an order. If you can explain your insolent behavior to HIS satisfaction immediately, it may not be necessary to have you report to a termination facility."

Pole then turns the camera to Red:

"Citizen Red-R-MEE-2, you are authorized to take appropriate corrective action with this offender."

Then turning to Herc:

"Citizen Herc-R-LES, did you hear that?"

Pole replaces the earphone in his ear and starts jamming buttons on the multicorder.

He rolls it back again to the incident in question. He plays it a couple of times. Neither Puck nor Red speaks at all, and the voice does not appear on the tape.

I'M NOT JEFF

Puck gets this disgusting expression of glee, and starts bouncing up and down and clapping his hands. "He said Fuck the Compu--" Puck stops himself just in time, clapping both hands over his mouth.

Puck decides to move a safe distance away from Red.

Herc looks nervously at Pole, then quickly turns his head and looks at Sock with disdain. "Hear it! Yeah, I heard it! I believe it was that seditious cyber- excrement, Sock!"

Pole-Y is very puzzled as he looks from his multicorder to Sock.

While Pole is not looking, Herc gives Sock an apologetic shrug, as if to say, "what else was I to do?"

Then Herc sidles up to Red-R and whispers, "I didn't understand the meaning of the word 'fuck'. Could you please explain it to me. I sure hope you didn't just say anything derogatory toward the Computer. That would be treasonous."

MY BROTHER'S KEEPER

Sock is standing dumbfounded at the commotion surrounding him. He seems genuinely confused.

Red gives a wink to Herc then begins to approach Sock with an intense stare. As he gets closer he unconsciously licks the pinky finger on his right hand (the one with the brass knuckles), easily slides the hand up the glass bowl and smooths his eyebrows.

Red is mumbling, "Looks like I have to take care of the networks once again."

Sock now looks genuinely frightened along with being confused. "Wait!" he squeals, "What order did I miss?"

Red stands calmly in front of Sock. Red shakes his head in disappointment. All activity ceases in the room as the others watch with anticipation.

Red explosively raises his cane and rains down a series of blows on Sock's skull. The pummeling is fierce. Blow after blow lands on Sock's head; Sock's neck; Sock's torso; Sock's groin. Sock falls to the ground shrieking and crying in the horrible, horrible pain. Red continues to pummel, his face flush with anger, his hair in a state of disarray inside the bowl.

Sock is blubbing in between blows, "No...I never... wait..." but doesn't get much further.

Red is shouting, "You insolent..." crack "...insulting..." thump "...disrespectful..." crash "...treasonous sack of gutter shit. YOU WILL RESPECT MY AUTHORITY! An order from a Red officer is an ORDER, TRAITOR! Failure to obey is punishable BY DEATH!"

Red continues to beat Sock ruthlessly, yelling horrendous language the entire time. Suddenly he stops, slides a hand inside his bowl to fix his hair, and looks down at the still whimpering Sock. Red says calmly, "You are a mess, Sock-TES-2. Go into the other corner and clean yourself up. And that's an order."

Red says to Puck, who is across the room, "Nevermind my earlier request, citizen. I don't need it."

Sock works to stand proudly--defiantly. His eyes are wet. He doesn't speak.

Pole-Y says, "Sock-TES, as you have not been able to explain your behavior and now stand accused of TWO

heinous crimes, I hereby order you to report to the nearest termination center immediately.

"Citizen Red-R-Mee, please see to it that Sub Citizen Sock-TES carries out his current assignment."

Pole turns his attention back to Puck-R. "Now, citizen Puck-R-UPP, let's commence testing the powerpai... uh... flamethrower."

The Computer interrupts. It's powerful voice comes only from Puck-R's com unit, but the entire team can hear it clearly. It sweetly asks, "Citizen Puck-R-UPP-3, I don't wish to interrupt your clearly very important field test, so we can converse as you work. I merely need more information of your view of your earlier statement. WHO said exactly WHAT?" After a pause, "And please don't be nervous--you're not on trial here."

SOCK HAS SOMETHING TO SAY

Sock walks slumped over picks up his com unit, pleading for his life: "Please Computer, spare me. I don't even know what I didn't do. Wouldn't this be destruction of Computer property with out true cause? I mean, do you really think I would take that caning from Red without ramming that cane through one of Red's orifices if I wasn't obedient to his higher rank? Please spare my life. I have learned my lesson. Give me back my RED rank, and I will earn your trust. Please!"

I SAY THEE NAY

Red solemnly takes Sock by the arm and begins leading him back to PLC. He says sadly, "Come on now, citizen Sock. Let's get on with it." Red leads Sock out of the hall.

NEW PLAN, NEW PLAN

Pole-Y is watching Puck-R impatiently and tapping his foot while still trying to keep an eye on Red-R and Sock.

Puck glances nervously from Pole-Y to his com unit to the flamethrower and stammers, "Um...well...actually..."

Herc takes pity on Sock and says, "Shame to waste such a strong back. Perhaps Sock just misunderstood." Herc addresses his question to both Pole and Red. "Maybe we could put off termination for a bit if Sock could get to work on Chipping Off the WHITE PAINT?" Herc puts extra emphasis on this last phrase while staring directly at Sock.

Sock perks up and pulls himself away from Red. He reaches into his fanny pack a withdraws a black putty knife (one of his last possessions). Excitedly, Sock

leaps into hallway QZ. "Oh, oh, oh! I can do that!" He begins chipping and scraping until he reveals a dime-sized spot of black paint. "See, see, check it out! I'll have this back to INFRARED in no time at all." He keeps working like a crazed bot, working up a sweat in his heavy parka. Another big flake of white paint goes flying. "I'll do anything! You need a shoe shine? I'll wipe down your toilet seat for you. Anything." Sock continues to babble like this for a while, but his hands never slow down.

BLACKENED CLONE ON TOAST POINTS

Pole looks at Puck, then at the flamethrower, then at Puck and nods...

Puck grins broadly, his dark eyes twinkling. He says to his com unit, "One moment, Friend Computer, this won't take long." Gleefully, he opens up the flamethrower to its maximum setting.

Sock's eyes go wide in panic, and as his parka flames and his flesh boils away, the last thing he hears is Pole-Y's voice: "Sub-citizen Sock-TES. Your failure to report to the termination chamber leaves me no choice but to order your immediate termination."

Sock is well past dead, and Puck continues to catch the walls the ceiling and the floor, just for good measure, paying special attention to ensure that even Sock's ashes are burnt to ashes.

As this continues, Pole-Y turns to give a consoling word to Red: "Citizen Red-R-MEE, do not consider your failure to control the prisoner Sock-TES to reflect negatively on your service record. I'm sure our friend the Computer understands the difficulties involved in escorting unarmed INFRARED citizens to their destinations."

BOTTOM OF THE BOWL

Red screams, "Sooooooooooooock!" and falls to his knees in shock. His screaming causes his glass bowl to fog over. "Nooooooooooooo!" Red's screams trail off to low moans. He pulls his bowl slowly off his head. He dabs at his tears with his red cloth and begins wiping out the inside of the bowl with the cloth.

Puck is giggling a little as he pats his flamethrower appreciatively.

Herc quickly scribbles out something on a little card and seals it up in an envelope. He walks it over to a nearby Fedd-R-ALL Xpress drop. As he passes Red, he says softly, "It really wasn't your fault. He was pretty big." Herc pats Red comfortingly on the shoulder.

Pole surveys the result of the test and seems pleased. The first ten meters of corridor QZ have been burnt black. The spot that once was Sock has even gone so far as to blister away to reveal the brushed steel floor beneath.

Chapter 06—Doublespeak

SNAFU

Sock-TES-3 arrives at PLC. He already has his black coveralls, and Raven-B issues him a new fanny pack and a new putty knife. She then hands him an envelope addressed to him, and while he opens it, she goes looking for something.

The envelope contains a sympathy card with a picture of Herc-R-LES holding a paint roller.

Raven returns holding a jacket. "Sorry, we're all out of those insulated parkas in your size. But try this on--I think it'll fit."

Sock takes it. It's a light black windbreaker. Sock slips it on. The sleeves are tight and barely come down past Sock's elbows, and it's so small around his torso that the two sides of the zipper can't get closer than a foot apart. Sock shrugs and figures it's better than nothing.

Herc is trotting back to his position by Pole-Y when that sudden laughter and applause begins again. Herc immediately stops in surprise and begins bowing, smiling and gesturing expansively. With each bow, the laughter pauses and then starts again. This encourages Herc further, and he turns as he bows. First north, then east, then south, then west.

There seems to be no end to this adulation, and after several rotations, Herc stops. His eyes spin and roll up in his head. Herc falls over on his ass. He tries to sit up, but keeps rolling over on his side.

Pole rolls his eyes at Herc and then turns to Puck-R. "Good start, citizen Puck-R-UPP. Move further down the hall and continue testing." Pole has backed up to get as wide a view of the team as possible as he continues filming the field test.

Puck however continues staring at Red-R who is still kneeling in grief.

The Computer comes over Puck-R's com unit again: "Citizen Puck-R-UPP-3, I am rather concerned with your inability to answer my previous question. To rectify this, I will have some mood stabilizers delivered to you.

"Now, don't be nervous. You're not the one in trouble here, I just need to know more about your previous statement: WHO exactly said WHAT exactly?"

Puck uses his mutant ability to make everyone juuust be able to hear Red mutter, as he kneels on the floor, "Fucking Computer, fucking Computer, fucking Computer..."

Everyone else (including Red) hears those words coming from Red in his voice.

CENTER OF ATTENTION

Sock turns back to Raven-B. "I'll need some gloves, too, so I don't get paint on my hands. Also could I get a ski mask and one pair of sun glasses." Raven laughs, but gives Sock what he asks for, along with a new com unit.

Puck finally responds to the Computer. "I'm very sorry, O Massive Computer," Puck fusses, "but the recent acts of treason and mutiny distracted me from answering you quickly. The infidel Red-R-MEE is muttering profanity and violence in your name! Make him stop, it scares me!"

Puck runs and hides behind Pole.

Red gingerly places the bowl back on his head. He turns his com-unit over so only the computer can hear him. He whispers, "Computer, Sock-TES has been killed in the line of duty."

As he whispers, Red runs up to Puck. Red has switched his com-unit over so that only Sock-3 receives the transmission. He aggressively approaches Puck, causing Puck to take several defensive steps backwards before sucking it up and standing his ground. Red whispers the following tirade to him tersely:

"Your actions against Sock-TES-2 are deplorable. Obviously, for lack of anything interesting to do, you reacted violently in a desperate cry for attention to overcompensate for your lack of personality. Attention is not merely to be lavished upon those who beg for it. You have done nothing to set yourself apart from the mindless throngs of troubleshooters who propagate meaningless techno-babble whether in ciphers or compensation with weapons. You can be certain that your isolation is a product of your own doing. Perhaps for entertainment you should step up a level to sensory deprivation, where the excitement will carry you to new heights of torpor. Your lugubriousness is a manifestation of your lacking spirit, of your empty mind set, and of your vacuous personality. In short, you suck! If you desire any further commendations, please do not hesitate to stick your head in the toilet, shout loudly, and flush twice. I hope this fulfills your immature cry for gratification through violence."

YADA, YADA, YADA

Puck slams his hands against his ears, and his eyes roll up as he falls to his knees. "Computer, help me! Red is..."

Red cuts Puck off by prodding Puck's ample belly with a sharp jab from the end of his cane. Puck is caught off guard and stops. Red shouts, "Fine, you commode-bot molesting toilet licker! I was only trying to give you a suggestion for how to maximize your coverage with the flame thrower!"

At the same time, Puck continues his shouting: "Computer, he's trying to probe me with his traitorous tongue!!" With his ears still covered, he screams, "LA!LA!LA!LA!..."

Red continues even louder: "I guess somebody can't take a little constructive criticism!" Red walks away shaking his head and twirling his finger in a circle beside his temple.

As Red walks off, Puck uses his illusionism again to make it appear that Red shouts "And FUCK the Computer!" Puck's stretched his abilities a little with so many uses so quickly, and the moment he does this, he winces, because he knows it's a sloppy job.

Red clearly hears his own voice shouting "FUCK the Computer", but the others, distracted by Sock's arrival hear nothing.

Back at PLC, with big grin on his face, Sock puts on the ski mask (realizing it is too small, he pulls it down really hard so it looks tightly stretched and somewhat crooked. Over that, he places the sunglasses. Then he quickly trots off down the hall to meet his team.

Along the way, he can hear Red and Puck arguing on the com unit.

Sock-TES-3 arrives at corridor QZ and marches immediately up to Pole-Y-OID, saying "Sock-TES-3 reporting for duties." Sock is still INFRARED. He is wearing a black windbreaker about four sizes too small. The sleeves end at his elbows and look like they might cut off circulation to his hands. His voice is somewhat muffled, because he is also wearing a black ski mask that is too small, so his nose sticks out the mouth hole, and only one eye can see out. He also has sunglasses jammed on over the ski mask. "Ready to do whatever is needed to complete the mission, sir--whether that be knocking down trees, or...or...or knocking down trees, or even, uh, or...or knocking down trees...Sir!"

COMA DOWN DOOBIE DOO DOWN DOWN

Sock looks over at Puck, "Sir, might I suggest that you use the flame-thrower to peel the white paint off the wall. If nothing else, sir, it would char the wall black and you would have appeared to complete the first mission all on your own. You would be the grandest of heroes, sir, with maybe even a promotion from the great and merciful

Computer." Sock turns and walks away with what little dignity he still possesses...BAM!!!!...right into a wall. Sock lands on his butt, rubbing his nose.

Puck stops LA-LA-LA-ing and tears his attention from Red just long enough to ooze sarcasm on Sock's stupidity: "Holy crap! How come I never thought of that, Einst-I-ENN?"

Pole addresses Sock-TES on the floor, "Welcome Citizen Sock! Please escort the traitor Red-R-MEE to the nearest termination center immediately.

"Everyone else, let's follow Citizen Puck's example and practice good traitor avoidance techniques!" Pole puts his hands over his ears and starts shouting LA!LA!LA!..., although not so loud that he can't hear what's going on.

Red stops in his tracks and turns around to face the group. He flips his com-unit over to broadcast to all members of the party and the computer. He says:

"Mighty Computer, there is treason amongst us. Someone is surreptitiously attempting to sabotage me by broadcasting undecipherable, but clearly treasonous language across the com-units and pretending to be me. As all troubleshooters know, you are the almighty Computer and can trace the origination of such broadcasts to the true source of such treasonous statements. Obviously it is treason for someone to even attempt to deceive the Computer. If you find it in your graciousness, sir Computer, please tell me who the traitor is and I will happily exterminate the guilty party.

"Oh, and can you please send some paint bots with black paint to Corridor QZ. It would help tremendously with our efforts."

Red begins wiping the bowl on his head with the red cloth again.

Without warning, the Computer's voice booms deafeningly from all com units, the corridor speakers, and the voices of five huge gleaming black TaFT-bots which seem to have appeared from nowhere. "I WILL NOT HAVE YOU BASE CLONES MAKING A MOCKERY OF OFFICIAL COMPUTER MISSIONS!"

The bots each line up with one of the team members. Herc is working very hard to not cry. No one seems to be LA-LA- LA-ing any more.

PANIC MODE

Puck stands bolt upright and stares blankly straight ahead. After a moment, he points at vaguely at Red-R and Herc-R and offers weakly, "I didn't mock, they were mocking..." Puck gives up the blame game and shuts up.

In low tones, the Computer addresses him through the TaFT-bot nearest to him, "Citizen, Puck-R-UPP, I understand your anxiousness. Please take these; they will help you focus." The bot offers three largish, kidney-shaped red pills which Puck does not recognize. "Then tell me of the events of the last few minutes. Specifically, I need your views on all treasonous comments and disparaging remarks made about your friend, the Computer."

With eyes full of tears, Pole speaks: "Oh my dearest and most exhalted Friend Computer: It is obvious that I have been remiss in my duties as team leader by not providing the team members with appropriate levels of discipline. I promise to do better in the future. Do you have any suggestions for improvement in this regard? I exist only to serve you and your holy peripherals!"

The Computer replies through Pole's TaFT-bot, "Your admission of treasonous activity has been noted in your service record, Pole-Y-OID. Now please accompany this bot to the confessional for further discussion on the matter." The bot heads for the confessional with a firm grip on Pole's arm.

Herc-R tries to accompany his dashing and fearless leader, but his TaFT-bot stops him and has him stand next to Puck. The Computer speaks through Puck's TaFT-bot and says, "Citizen, Herc-R-LES, please listen carefully. I will need you to verify details of Puck-R-UPP's report."

Sock begins to shake and drool as his own TaFT-bot drags him down corridor QZ toward the utility closet. "Wait, wait!" he screams, "I...I...I don't need any more psych training! I'm a good little clone. No!"

Red whispers to the TaFT-bot standing next to him. "Excuse me, sir. Do you have any black paint on you?"

The TaFT-bot begins guiding Red southward along the INFRARED corridor. The Computer speaks very casually through the bot: "So tell me, Citizen--why exactly do feel paint-bots are needed for successful completion of your mission? Think carefully, and answer truthfully. Remember that the truth is never treasonous."

TELL US ABOUT ZE TRUCKS

Red strolls along with his TaFT-bot and answers, "Oh terrifying, yet benevolent computer, it's not that the paint-bots are necessary for the completion of the mission. In Your wisdom, you assigned us to find the most efficient and productive way to remedy the problem with Corridor QZ. We have experimented with several different methods that we thought might be more efficient. Unfortunately, as Pole has just confessed, his leadership failed to find the optimum solution. Therefore, I thought

it would be prudent to see if paint-bots could effectively remedy the situation? Where are we going anyhow?"

Red keeps walking with his TaFT-bot, awaiting a response to his question. Even though it has been only a matter of moments, this awkward pause seems to Red like he's been waiting days for a response. Every thing goes a little hazy. Red begins to worry, thinking to himself,

"Good gravy! The whole systems gone haywire? I walk with this automaton and actually kiss its cold, metallic, emotionless ass, and this is the response I get?"

Red's mouth begins to pout uncontrollably. He stops walking, arms akimbo. He pokes a finger at the TaFT-bot's head and shouts, "I have feelings, too, you know. I breathe, I cry, I feeeee!" Tears are strolling down Red's face now. He yells, "If you prick me, do I not ask for more? See me, hear me... LOVE ME!"

Everything goes hazy again, and Red finds himself waking up from a little day-cycle-dream. He is still walking along the hall with his TaFT-bot, only moments after he asked the bot where they were going. Red realizes that none of the immediately preceding events actually happened, but was just a day-cycle-dream he had while waiting through the awkwardly long pause for his TaFT-bot to respond to him.

The Computer responds through the TaFT-bot, "We are merely going for a little walk to escape the noise and confusion and allow us to talk privately. Now, citizen, in your own words, please tell me about the quandry in corridor QZ as you see it. What do you think you should be doing, and how do you feel about your mission objectives?"

Pole starts whimpering. The tears are almost visible. His TaFT-bot roughly helps him into the confessional and waits outside as it closes the door on Pole. In the confessional, the screen lights up, and the Computer says, "Now that we have some privacy, I would like your view of the mission so far. In your own view, please rank your mission objectives from most to least vital. Then describe what your team has done in corridor QZ and what you feel the Computer could provide that would be most helpful."

Puck looks very nervous as he walks down the hallway. He only takes a few steps when the TaFT-bots with him and Herc block his way. Apparently Herc and Puck are meant to stay here. Puck is sweating heavily as well (although that might be due to the heavy clothing and arsenal that he's carrying). Puck leans over to Herc and pleads, "You heard it, right? Say you heard it!!" Puck cries just a little bit.

Herc replies, "Well, I heard lots of things, but I'm sure that if you tell the truth, it will match what I remember." Herc is trying not to stay too close to Puck.

Sock is shoved into the utility closet. He screams, "AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!"

The TaFT-bot follows him into the small room and shuts the door. Sock says, "What are you doing? Look, I just got here and I've done nothing but follow the commands of the great and giving Computer." He stands up and fumbles with his com unit, trying to broadcast to the rest of the team. He continues, "If I must die to show my loyalty to the great Computer, then that is what I will do! For the Computer knows things that only It can understand and I will follow Its orders with blind obedience. Never questioning. Always true. Oh, yes, and I will always remember to floss."

The Computer begins speaking through Sock's TaFT-bot, "Citizen Sock-TES, you have apparently misunderstood. I only wish to ask you your opinion of the mission so far, and ask you to report any treason you have witnessed. After that, if you still feel your death would be the most effective way to help your team, explain why and we will consider the possibility."

I LOVE YOU, MAN

Herc maintains his brave facade for another 3 seconds and then begins to cry. "Oh, what the heck am I saying? Puck, man, I'm here for you." Herc throws his arms around Puck sobbing, "We're in this together, man. I'm here for you."

Herc places one of his homing devices under the back of one of Puck's gun belts.

THOSE AREN'T PILLOWS!!

Switching off his com unit, Sock says, "The only thing that I see so far is that Pole is not capable of completing this simple mission of painting the hallway. He-he-he se-se-seems to have other agendas. Wh..what, I don't know. Surely your greatness can see that I, Sock-TES, such a simpleton INFRARED, could know nothing. No one will talk to someone as low as I, but if I could lead the group, I could find out what Pole's true motives are and complete the mission on time. All in your honor, o great Computer." Sock looks down, and he has pissed himself.

The Computer says, "Thank you, Citizen." and the TaFT-bot leaves the utility closet, turning out the light and shutting the door behind it.

Sock is alone in the dark. He listens hard for a moment, but all he can hear is a small rattle from the floor behind where the mops were stacked.

Puck returns Herc's embrace with long-repressed emotion. As his sobs subside, he plants a tiny kiss on Herc's earlobe. Puck recoils and looks at Herc very askance, with eyebrow cocked.

Puck and Herc both notice a TaFT-bot in corridor QZ leaving the utility closet (where Sock had been taken) and walking away to the east. Sock is not to be seen.

Puck gets Herc into a conspiratorial huddle and whispers, "We've--Got--to get the story straight! Our asses are this close to getting Hot-Funned!! Ohh, ohhhh... You, you tell me what you heard! What he said about the Computer, you heard that, right? Back me up here! Mmmphmmhphff..."

Puck is cut off by his TaFT-bot ungraciously poking the three kidney-shaped pills into Puck's mouth. The Computer says, "I understand your hesitation, citizen Puck-R-UPP, but if you just chew on these, I'm sure you'll feel better right away."

Pole-Y ensures that his own com unit is not broadcasting to the rest of the team and then straightens his uniform and addresses the Computer:

"Friend Computer, upon review of the stated and unstated mission objectives, I have arrived at the following conclusions. If at any point, you feel I am in error, please don't hesitate to correct me:

"0) In all ways, serve you with my entire being and every fibre of my body.

"1) Conduct myself and require of my team behavior that glorifies you, our gleaming leader of Alpha Complex, the Computer!

"2) Root out all treason and subversive behavior.

"2a) Assist internal security in the elimination of traitors.

"3) Go and get the cylinders from the downed aircraft.

"4) Ensure the survival of my team and myself.

"In corridor QZ we have been making progress toward all of these goals! We are testing the weaponry we will need before we venture out into the great unknown. In your wisdom, you have taught us to test all devices before possibly employing them in a combat situation, thus ensuring that our weapons will be functional when we confront the Commies or others like them. Completion of this testing phase brings us one step closer to recovery of the cylinders! As a side benefit, we are complying with Internal Security's request to "Keep

an eye" on citizen Kosmik-V-OID by carrying out his command to "paint" the corridor. At the same time, we are complying with his orders and thus helping to ensure discipline as he is of much higher rank than we are.

"Finally, our great success on the mission so far has caused a subversive, jealous of how well things are going, to make himself known! This truly glorifies all of Alpha Complex, and you yourself oh great Computer! The most helpful thing I could receive is help determining who the traitor is that has been uttering treasonous language within earshot of myself and the rest of the team. If you could use your far superior processing power to help us identify the traitor, we would be happy to help him along to the termination center!

"I grovel at your microchips!

"Pole-Y-OID"

The Computer is silent. The screen in front of Pole glows softly. Pole tries not to fidget and considers trying the door, but then thinks better of it.

After what seems like a terribly long time (maybe 10 or 12 seconds, really), the Computer replies, "Your comments reveal a perceptiveness far outstripping your performance, Citizen Pole-Y-OID, but I need your comments on one last issue. I have recordings of everything that happened in your briefing room as well as all that has happened since, but I would like to know what has led you to believe that a trusted citizen like Kosmik-V-OID would want your team to repaint an INFRARED corridor. Please limit your response to 35 words or less."

DOUBLESPEAK

Pole mumbles to himself (but audibly): "'Paint' is such strong terminology that I hesitated to even use it during my last statement. Hmm... Okay, here goes..."

Aloud to the Computer: "My inspired best friend the Computer, What I believe Kosmik-V-OID ordered us to do was to test the weaponry we were about to be assigned, thereby assuring the success of our mission and glorifying you!"

Mumbling again: "Now, was that less than 35 words?" He starts counting his fingers.

[OCC: 35 words exactly]

The Computer then asks, "Lastly, citizen Pole-R-OID, what were your impressions of Kosmik-V-OID when he presented these mission objectives to the team?"

Red responds, "I think our mission objectives were perfectly crafted, crafted. The quandry, though, I think is

attributable to Pole's lack of leadership, leadership. My idea with the paint-bots was a suggestion for a possible way to expedite the mission and accomplish the computer's goals, quickly, efficiently, precisely, efficiently, precisely and quickly."

The TaFT-bot stops, and maintaining his grip on Red's arm, roughly jerks Red to a stop. A horrible snapping noise comes from Red's arm, and through his intense pain, Red is sure that it is broken. (This is Red's right arm.)

The Computer says, "Oh, terribly sorry about that, citizen, I have been intending to have this TaFT-bot serviced. I have only two more questions, and then you may rejoin your teammates: One--in 28 words or less, what specific action will you take next to ensure your mission's success? And two--in 1 word or less, what color is corridor QZ at present?"

ONE SMALL STEP

Puck stands perfectly still, still leaning in toward Herc. Puck holds the pills in his mouth, and his eyes dart from side to side.

Herc seems not to notice Puck's discomfort and only stares at Puck as if the round little man were brain damaged. Herc speaks very slowly and enunciates clearly, "Of course I heard him, Puck. I'm sure everyone heard him. Now go on and answer the nice Computer. You know you can't get in any trouble for just telling the truth."

Puck's lips and throat begin working as he realizes with disgust that while he's been trying to figure out how to ditch these pills, they've gone and dissolved in a pasty mess in his mouth. He feels a rising sense of dread knowing that he has already swallowed some.

In the confessional, Pole addresses the Computer: "Friend Computer, I tended to avert my eyes from him. I must confess that I hold Citizens with Violet clearance in some awe, due to their obviously superior intelligence and abilities compared to my own. I can tell you that he was seated behind a desk... It's embarrassing, but I was, well.. I was AFRAID of him. I'm sorry I don't have more information. Have I failed you? If I have, I just don't know what I would do!"

The Computer pounces (in a metaphorical, verbal sense) on Pole's answer, "Well, citizen, that is extremely interesting, because the esteemed citizen Kosmik-V-OID has been on a personal mission at my request in FAR Sector for over one month-cycle. Your attempts at misinformation are not appreciated."

The Computer pauses just long enough for Pole to sweat, but not long enough for him to formulate a

response. "Citizen Pole-R-OID, due to the importance of your mission, I will allow you to rejoin your team as their leader, but first you must answer one final question: In four words or less, what color is corridor QZ?"

In the utility closet, Sock tries to crack the door open a little bit and peer out into the hallway. He grunts and pushes a little but finds out the door is locked.

Sweating more than a little, Sock switches on his com unit and says, "This is Sock-TES. Is anyone out there? Come in Red, Pole, Puck, and Herc come in anyone"

Suddenly a terrible note of fear enters Sock's voice and as he continues his voice quivers and shakes, "Come on somebody, answer!"

Whatever that rattling was in the corner has now gotten louder.

KING FOR A DAY

Puck's eyes are wild. He suddenly grabs Herc, spits in his hair, and wipes his tongue on the fuzzy collar of Herc's coat. Puck waddles away, flapping his arms and going "Bleah, blah! Blah!! bleah blah blah blah" The pills in Puck's mouth have become a red pasty mess, and he has now gotten it all over Herc's head and shoulders.

Puck darts south to find a nearby bathroom, but the TaFT-bots each take an arm and lift his round, well-armed form from the floor. They carry him past the bathrooms and just keep marching. Herc follows, but at a very safe distance.

In the utility closet: "AAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!" Sock throws his shoulder hard against the door, and after a couple tries, it flies open, and Sock skids out into the hall on his side. He scrambles to his hands and knees, ripping off his ski mask. He's panting hard when he notices what was making the rattle--a loose bolt in a ventilation grate.

Red and his TaFT-bot have slowed their walk, kind of meandering back the way they came. Red stands suddenly still as if entranced by his thoughts. He is snapped from his reverie by the two approaching TaFT-bots carrying Puck between them.

In the confessional, Pole answers, "Dirty White, Great Computer."

The TaFT-bot by the confessional opens the confessional door for Pole. Pole steps out, speaking into his com unit, "Citizen Sock-TES, this is Pole-y-OID. Maintain your position and radio silence. Await further instructions."

Pole sees two TaFT-bots carrying off Puck. Herc is following at a safe distance. Red is nearby with his own TaFT-bot.

Pole seems about to address his teammates, when his own TaFT-bot speaks as the Computer. "Traitor! You are foolish to think you can lie to the Computer about something so simple as the color of an INFRARED corridor. You will not be allowed to warn your commie co-conspirators that the Computer is on to them."

The TaFT-bot places an armor-piercing round in Pole's head, and Pole collapses. The round must have been a HEAT bullet, because Pole's head then quickly explodes. No one else is hurt, but the spray of gore is somewhat unpleasant.

Puck's bots never slow their pace. Pole's bot follows them away. Herc stops next to Red and his bot.

Red's TaFT-bot says, "Well?"

Chapter 07—Poor Puck

THE ON-DECK CIRCLE

Sock quickly springs back into the utility closet with his com unit on and ready. He slips his ski mask back on and waits poised in the official ready stance of the World Wrestling Federation. The closet door doesn't latch anymore, but it stays in place when Sock pulls it shut.

Red looks at his Taft-bot and says mechanically, "One: I will assume the braids and Pole's position of leader, ordering my cohorts to begin chipping away the hallway to what it really is: INFRARED. Two: INFRARED."

The TaFT-bot makes no move, so Red leans down to take the braids from... oh shit--no braids. Pole never had them; he ruled by virtue of his temporary YELLOW clearance.

While he is bent over, Herc drops a homing device in Red's pocket.

Red straightens up again.

The Computer says, "Good idea, citizen Red-R-MEE. I appoint you official team leader until such time as Pole-Y-OID-3 is able to join your group."

After a pause: "Oh, and citizen, since we all agree that the corridor is already painted black, why would paint-bots need to be sent to the area?"

Herc is busy writing something and stuffing it into an envelope, occasionally glancing up at Red and the sole remaining TaFT-bot.

ALAS, POOR PUCK

Puck looks back, terrified.

Puck uses his mutant powers to--

no, Puck grabs his plasma rifle and...

um, Puck uses his vast intellect to convince the bots that...

...aw fuck.

Eventually, the bots reach the Emotional Therapy room and take Puck inside. They drop Puck in the center of the room, weapons and all and take up positions on either side of the now closed door (there had been a third bot, but it did not come in).

Emotional Therapy is the size of a largish office-- about 5 meters square. A filing cabinet has been pushed into one corner with the drawers facing a wall, and a desk

has been pushed up against the filing cabinet. There are two chairs stacked on the desk. The rest of the room is empty, and the walls are covered with splotchy unidentifiable stains and brighter patches where pictures or certificates once hung. A whining hum comes from behind one wall. There is only the one door.

MR. FANTASTIC

As best as Puck's terror-seized throat can manage, Puck says "O massive and desire-fulfilling Computer, I beg of you, tell me how I have offended you so that I may mend my ways and atone for my wrongs.

"It was right to bring me here, for my emotions have become overwrought after being ordered by that traitorous Pole to incinerate a beloved fellow teammate. Look at the burdens I carry as pennance!"

Puck opens his coat and displays his armoury to the ceiling. "I carry this weight for my teammates, and I sweat for you, O Great Computer! Oh, please oh please oh please, I'm a good person inside, really! What do you want me to do for you? I'll hit my head on the floor! I'll shoot my foot! If you had a dick I'd su--" Puck thinks twice about finishing that one. "Oh please tell me how to prove to you that I'm your loving slave? Please?"

"Computer?"

"I want my test tube..."

The bots make no response. The humming behind the wall gets slightly softer and changes in pitch.

Near corridor QZ, Red smiles at the Taft-bot, turns his com unit to broadcast to all members of the party, and says, "Now that you have appointed me temporary team-leader, Computer, we don't need paint bots. Thank you, oh generous bundle of silicon."

"Attention all members of the team, I want you all to begin chipping away at corridor QZ to reveal the black paint. I'm going to PLC to get more necessary supplies. Sock-TES, if you are otherwise available, I would like you to escort me to PLC. I am hereby appointing you temporary deputy team leader."

Red attempts to plasticize the bone in his arm back together, but as soon as he tries, he knows he's screwed it up.

Red tries to get out of the grip of the TaFT-bot to make his way back to PLC. The bot releases him and walks away. Immediately, Red's arm falls to the floor with an absurd thud. Amazingly, the arm is still attached, and hangs out of his sleeve like a stretched piece of silly putty. Everything from the elbow down is on the floor,

but the portion the bot had been holding stretches grotesquely back up to the shoulder.

Herc, who had been watching back and forth between Red and the bot like it was a tennis match, now stares bug-eyed at Red's arm. Recovering quickly, Herc yells at the bot's back, "Good work Taft-- you disarmed him." To Red he says, "What can I do for you, my leader? I've had some experience. This exact same thing once happened to my friend Stretcharmst-R-ONG."

In his closet, Sock hears Red over the com unit.

Sock is torn: Pole said to wait here, but Red is a RED clearance officer... But Pole is YELLOW... But Red said he was team leader, now... But it could be a trap... but... but...

Sock has a headache forming behind his left eye.

Pole-Y-OID-3 is issued with instructions to meet his team at their current location near corridor QZ and take command.

URGES

"Red? Team leader?" Puck does a slow burn. "Hey, Computer, got some emotional un-adjustment here!!

When there is no response, Puck moves to the far wall to check out the humming. There is obviously some kind of very large machine working like the Dickens on the other side of the wall. The wall vibrates, and Puck can even feel a faint tremor in his feet when he stands over here. This wall has no vents, outlets, or other features.

Red looks down at his arm and screeches like an underdeveloped female clone. He quickly regains his composure and picks the dead arm up and ties it into a knot several times so that it is the length of a normal arm, with a lot of bows in it.

Red, turns his com-unit back so that it is not broadcasting to everyone and says, "That Taft-bot has a hell of a grip." He looks incredulously at Herc and says, "What can you do? How about follow my direct order, you sarisan pig! Are you pulling a Sock-TES on me? Go do as you were told."

Red spins around rapidly, his dead, knotted arm flopping wildly. He storms off to PLC.

As he leaves, Herc goes to start scaping and says, "Yes sir, citizen Red-R-MLESS." Red glares back for a moment and Herc starts scraping hurriedly with his pocketknife.

As soon as Red is out of sight, Herc rushes over and slips a homing device in Pole's pouch and then rushes back to keep scraping.

In his closet, Sock thinks, "Well, Pole said to hold my position, and it has not been proved that he has been relieved of command. I will simply have to call and ask for clarification."

Sock clicks his com unit on, brings it to his mouth and draws in a big breath as he prepares to speak...

He panics and thinks, "What am I doing?! Pole said to keep radio silence." He exhales and switches off the com unit.

Thinking very hard, Sock finally realizes, "Thinking! That's it!" Sock didn't get very far in his PSION telepathy training, but he'll give it a shot. Sock concentrates as hard as he can, trying to send a message to Red and Pole. He wants them to be suddenly very concerned about the utility closet in corridor QZ.

Sock resumes his ready position.

Red is suddenly very concerned about the utility closet in corridor QZ.

Pole gets a sudden uncontrollable urge to find something to sweep up. He instinctively reaches for his push broom but realizes that it is still with his last clone's body. The urge passes after a moment, but Pole's hands feel twitchy now.

POSING

Red arrives quickly at PLC. As usual, only Raven is about, so Red approaches her briskly. "Hello again, citizen Raven-B-OID. I really hate to trouble you, but I have some items that I need in kind of a hurry, if you'd be so kind."

Raven looks up at him doubtfully, but Red plows on: "I know it's not usually your job, but we are trying to remedy the situation so that your underlings may report to work. Wouldn't you agree that if I could get the three items in a timely fashion, that would be all the sooner you could go back to supervising instead of laboring."

Raven replies, "Of course, other than you yahoos, I get to sit around and catch up on my reading, but sure, 'You're order is important to me.' What have you got?"

Red says, "I need: Paint remover solvent with applicator, a high pressured power washer, and another red laser pistol with a gag-oversized laser site."

Raven shuffles off to the back to look, and Red begins pacing about importantly.

In corridor QZ, Herc stops scraping. He looks around and seeing no one, he checks his homing monitor. The little map it displays doesn't show room numbers, but Herc can clearly make out that Red did indeed go to PLC. Homing device #1 (Puck) is in a room off the hall near PLC.

Nervously, Herc slips back over to Pole's body and begins stripping off the YELLOW coveralls. He takes another glance at the monitor. No one has moved, so Herc decides to check the fit on the coveralls.

Herc begins to gain confidence once he has the YELLOW outfit on. He struts around a bit, dangerously whipping out his laser and feeling like James-B-OND.

He announces, "Herc-Y-LES reporting for duty, sir. Ready to root out commies wherever they may lurk." Carried away with his fantasy, Herc starts pointing at imaginary teammates and barking orders. "Red! Scrape that hall! Butt sniffin pet, eh? Who's the pet now, huh? How do you like it, you little butt sniffin pet?"

He whirls quickly and aims his laser, yelling, "Console this, Puck!" Then he makes laser noises with his mouth again, "PEEEEEOW! PHSHEEWWWW!"

Whirling again: "Pole, did you gather those paint supplies? No? PSSSSOOO! Try gathering paint with a laser in your ass. And where is Sock?" Herc puts his hands on his hips and looks around sternly. "Aha! Shirking your duty again, Sock. The Computer has no tolerance for traitors, you commie-loving mutant freak! PHSHHHOOOW! POW! KCHHHEEWW!"

He glances nervously at his monitor again, but then adjusts his pretty YELLOW uniform and says modestly, "What? Me? A hero? Oh, Friend Computer, you are too generous. I merely did what any loyal clone would do in the same situation. But I accept this promotion and hefty credit reward with pride..."

Herc is getting really nervous now. The monitor says Puck and Red haven't gone anywhere, but Pole could be back at any moment. (Or Sock, but who really gives a crap.)

In his closet, Sock can faintly hear someone moving out in the hall. The noises are a little way off, but someone is talking and yelling. Sock proudly notes that his ready stance never wavers.

SHI-WHAT?

Raven returns to the counter with some items. She looks very pleased with herself. She hands the items to Red and says, "Good luck."

Red holsters his new pistol, complete with oversized sight. The next item is a large tank with straps to wear on his back. The tank is labeled "Danger! Caustic Solvents!" and "Warning! Contents Under Pressure!" Connected to the tank by thick hoses is the last item: a Shiwalla--basically, a huge rotating scrubber pad mounted on a stick with hoses to pump out whatever's in the tank. The Shiwalla also has a big length of coiled hose--presumably to attach to a faucet and pump water in as well. The Shiwalla's handle has four controls: a button labelled "ON/OFF" a switch labelled "UP/DOWN" a slide control that displays blue when pushed one way and red when pushed the other way. It has ten hash marks along the side a dial that goes to "11".

Herc is becoming too worried. He keeps hearing things. He finally slips out of Pole's YELLOW uniform and carefully lays it back on top of Pole's body.

Herc rushes back to QZ to keep scraping. Every few seconds, he checks around the corners to see if anyone's coming.

Puck looks at the wall, and his hand creeps toward his plasma gun.

Then he stops to consider the wisdom of that action.

ARE YOU GOING TO REMOVE MY ANAL PROBE?

Red returns quickly to corridor QZ. He finds Herc right where he left him--chipping paint off of corridor QZ. Pole's body is still in the black corridor, but now it is laid out nicely. The YELLOW uniform has also been removed, and it is laid out neatly over the top of the body.

Herc sees Red approach and chips even faster. Red has a large tank strapped to his back which is connected to the Shiwalla he is carrying.

[The Shiwalla: basically, a huge rotating scrubber pad mounted on a stick with hoses to pump out whatever's in the tank.]

Puck is a little unnerved by the total lack of any adventure in the room. Nervously, he approaches one of the TaFT-bots and nochalantly asks, "So, stand around and look menacing often?"

Without movement, the bot replies, "Yes."

After several long minutes of thought on where to go, Pole-Y-OID-3 finally stands and heads out for OID sector's R & D facility.

On his way out of his room, he notes a card that has been slipped under his door. The card has a message

of sympathy and a picture of Herc holding a paint roller and staring away wistfully.

Pocketing the card, Pole gets himself to R & D. He brazenly tries to walk in and is stopped at the door by Ohmy-G-ODD--an armed guard. Ohmy says, "May I help you?"

It is very quiet in Sock's closet.

I THINK WE'RE ALONE NOW

Red approaches Herc and just watches. After a moment, he begins cheering and clapping and laughing wildly.

DAMN WALL

Herc immediately stops scraping and turns to Red and bows. This only causes Red to redouble his adulation and laughter. Herc continues bowing.

At R & D, Pole responds to Ohmy-G, "Absolutely Sir! Citizen Pole-Y-OID reporting at R&D to collect mission equipment for a mission to someplace called 'the outside' by Citizen Urly-B-OID! Sir!"

Ohmy replies, "Oh, sorry citizen--I was expecting a RED level troubleshooter team. It's been so long, we thought you guys weren't coming at all." Ohmy opens the door for Pole, who scoots right in.

Inside R & D: The room is huge and cavernous. All of the space is cut up with long counters, cubicles and makeshift partitions and walls. None of it is in any kind of pattern or order. There's a large blueish cloud hanging over the middle of the room. The air smells of vanilla.

Ohmy says, "We were told you guys could take anything you thought you'd need. Your team is required to take a minimum of four items for full field testing with complete functioning reports to follow."

There are so many areas, Pole could probably find just about anything he wanted.

In the utility closet, Sock continues to follow orders by standing in the dark doing nothing and carefully maintaining radio silence.

"Okay, okay, okay," Puck starts walking in a circle and clapping his hands in front of him. "Think, think, I've got to--" Puck stops, and a small electric bulb appears hovering above his head. He rushes toward a bot--

and stops. "Naw, that won't work." Puck sulks a bit, and then walks over and gets a chair down, and sits on it.

Puck contemplates the humming wall.

"Computer, I think this is a test that you are testing me with, and I don't want to fail this test!" Puck shouts. "How can I pass this test that you are testing me with?"

Puck stands up, picks up the chair, and throws it at the wall. It is a typical office-type swivel chair on wheels. It bounce from the wall and clatters to the floor with its wheels spinning. The back is now connected at a funny angle.

The bots react in no way whatsoever. The wall (solid metal painted black) has not even the decency to quiver for a moment.

SURPRISE

Moving quickly into the main development areas in R & D, Pole takes an immediate interest in the weapons development section. He listens to numerous pitches from the developers, most of YELLOW or GREEN clearance. They offer things called Multiguns, Personal Cleansing Systems, Pestbots, Rocketboots (stay away from these), the Pocket Fisherman, etc.

Pole volunteers immediately when offered the portable invisibility generator. It consists of a skullcap wired to a pair of thick horn-rimmed glasses. It also includes a false tooth that has a radio signalled on/off tongue switch for the invisibility. The techie that designed it, Trek-Y, allows Pole to test it out, and it works perfectly. Pole flips the switch and looks down to not see himself. Trek and a couple others nearby look surprised and cheer.

Pole also gets three "Foam Grenades." The tech explains, "This design is much improved over previous models. We won't see any more of the messes we used to have."

Noticing Pole admiring the powered exoskeletons and various battle bots, Ohmy-G suggests that Pole take one of the Mark IVa tankbot units--the latest version of the Mark IV tankbot that recently wiped out most of LAV sector. Something in Ohmy's tone makes Pole nervous, but Pole feels arguing would be unwise. Ohmy scoots off and tells Pole he will meet him at the door with the Mark IVa whenever he's done shopping.

Everything else is pretty damn scary, but four is the minimum, so Pole grabs the nearest harmless looking object--a featureless one foot black cube described as a "personal escape unit"--and heads out. He figures he can pawn this off on one of his flunkies and let them worry about what it does.

In Emotional Therapy, Puck's left eye begins to twitch. Puck sits on the edge of the table and idly spins one of

the chair's upturned wheels with his foot, as he mutters a little song--obviously one he learned in his test-tube days.

"The Computer loves me, yes he does he keeps me safe from death above and keeps me safe from wicked thought and keeps me doing what I ought The Computer makes me do my best and trains my clone when I digress and shoots me dead when I offend but only cuz he is my friend The Computer gives me things to do and gives me friends to play with too and gives me toys to share with them and then he takes them back again The Computer keeps me straight and true and shows me the right thing to do and kills those who don't toe the line the Computer is so fucking fine."

Puck clasps his hands and looks wistfully at the ceiling.

The bots on either side of the door make no motion, but one of them makes an audible sniffing noise. The Computer is very notably silent.

In the utility closet in QZ, Sock becomes convinced his little mind games aren't helping him. He risks breaking orders and cracks the door open slightly to peek out into the hall. He can see Red and Herc standing at the end of the hall talking. Red has a large contraption of tanks, hoses, and a big scrubbing brush strapped to him. Sock spots Herc looking in his direction and ducks back in, pulling the door shut quickly.

Red stops laughing, whistles once appreciatively at Herc and then pulls out a piece of paper and drops it in the SpeedyDeliv-R-EEE drop box. He smiles even more broadly at Herc as he returns.

Red turns the dial to 11, the switch to red, and the other switch to up on his Shiwalla. He motions for Herc to step out of the way and gives him time to do so.

Herc steps around behind Red to watch the action.

Red pushes the glass bowl down on his head firmly and turns the Shiwalla on. Red can feel the pressure building in his tank until he realizes he has passed the point of no return. The pumps start forcing fluid down the length of Red's rigid shaft, and he begins trembling in anticipation of release.

Then the eruption hits the end of Red's rod and just stops. The hoses are bypassing the rotating scrubber pad and trying to shoot out the end of the pole--which is blocked up. Instead of the torrential spray Red had expected, he instead gets an extremely fine mist which instead of actually shooting anywhere, just forms a little yellow toxic cloud around Red and Herc.

There is now a terrible hissing noise from all around and the smell of a week old unflushed toilet. Anywhere that

the mist contacts exposed skin, the skin starts to burn and itch like hell.

LOVE ALPHA COMPLEX STYLE

"Hey pal," Puck says amiably to the bot that sniffed. "What're you in for? Me, I don't even know. Yep, but I'm not complainin, see? Just thought that us in here should stick together, know what I mean?"

The bot responds, "I know exactly what I am here for. It is my duty to ensure that you complete your full course of Emotional Therapy."

In corridor QZ: Herc screams like a woman and runs south to the nearest bathroom.

Once inside, Herc throws himself into the closest shower, still screaming, and turns it on full, scrubbing and rinsing all of his exposed burning skin.

Red panics. He also screams like a woman, throws the Shiwalla to the floor and begins unhooking the tank harness as he runs around looking for a place to contain the mad mechanism. His eyes quickly find the utility closet, and the Shiwalla drags behind Red by its hoses as he runs for the door. The misguided scrub-brush is still spewing its noxious brew as Red unbuckles the last strap and shoves the entire contraption into the closet. Red looks around for something to brace the door with when he realizes two horrible facts: one-- there is still a strap around his leg holding him to this terror in the closet, and two--the latch on the utility closet door is broken, so he must hold the door shut with at least one hand to keep the dreaded Shiwalla from lurching back out into the hall. Red's eyes are stinging and his vision has become blurred. He seems to be having trouble catching his breath.

Red can vaguely hear somebody screaming nearby.

In the closet, Sock realizes that his orders don't say anything about screaming his fool head off for help. He's just about to do so when someone (it looks like Red) flings the door open in a screaming panic. The person has a hissing bundle of straps and poles and hoses which are shoved into the closet. The person slams the door again without noticing Sock.

The first thing Sock notices is that the contraption is hissing and spitting. Sock can feel a fine spray that smells like a used toilet that hasn't been flushed for a week. Wherever the spray touches Sock's skin, the skin itches and burns like hell.

Sock screams for help and in a panic, tries to back away from the thing. Of course he only hits the wall, and now he has the horrible thing between him and the door.

TANGLED

Pole leaves R & D. Outside the door, he meets Ohmy-G again. Ohmy is accompanied by the Mark IVa tankbot [looks exactly like the Mark IV from the last mission except it's only half a meter tall and a meter or so long]. The Mark IVa, also known as Marcia, says in a high squeaky voice, "Ready for duty, Pole-Y-OID." The two head out for corridor QZ. Marcia asks, "So, what's the mission?"

Panic overwhelms Sock.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAGGGGGGGHHHH!" screams Sock inside the closet as he charges the door with all his might. Red is holding it shut with one hand on the outside as he fiddles with the last strap, so the door flings open quite easily.

Sock screams, "Save Me!" and leaps into Red's arms with the tangled mess of the Shiwalla trailing and spraying behind him. Its straps and hoses flail about wildly as it continues to pump a fine and painful cloud of mist into the corridor.

Red says, "Uumph!" and staggers to his knees while trying to push Sock away.

Herc finishes rinsing himself, making sure to get the red goop out of his hair and walks back to QZ only to see Red on his knees with Sock in his arms, clinging to him with fear. The Shiwalla is tangled around them and is still spraying.

In ET: "But I'm emotional, man! I'm emotional! Can't you see?" Puck's outstretched arms and upturned palms encourage the bot to accept his point of view and let him out of the room without any further ado.

The bot says nothing but holds out its arms in supplication in a poor imitation of Puck.

LONDON BRIDGE

Pole addresses Marcia, "We are on a very important mission for our benevolent master, the Computer. We are to recover a cylinder from the 'outside' and bring it back to the complex. Unfortunately, our team has been infiltrated by unidentified treasonous activists. This being the case, you are directed to take orders only from me and my series of clone brothers. My authority for this is my yellow rank and my status as team leader." "Your first standing order is to record any suspicious behavior or treason you see and report it to me. Your second standing order is to defend me from any harm. Your third standing order is to never reveal the above, or that we even spoke, to anyone."

"Now get going... I'd like you to meet up with the team in corridor QZ and pretend as though we have never met."

Marcia rolls on ahead, and Pole decides to mosey off in another direction to approach the team from the north.

Back at QZ: Nearly blinded, Red rips the glass bowl off of his head. Through painfully bloodshot eyes, he gasps in disappointment at the Glass Bowl. Although tears of pain have been streaming down his face, some tears of betrayal and disbelief begin to fall as well.

The Shiwalla is flailing like an epileptic-bot on a fresh battery.

Red ignores somehow manages to ignore the Shiwalla as his face contorts into a mess of emotions: rage, shock, disgust, and sheer pain. He is on his knees, holding his glass bowl in front of him. He shouts in a voice ripe with torment, "What service were you, my dear, horrible glass bowl? So fragile and yet so strong. Did I not wipe you? Did I not treat you with a tender, gingerly affection? And for what? So you could lull me into a false sense of security? Were you simply waiting for an opportunity to allow irritants through your seemingly impenetrable glass facade? DID I NOT WIPE YOU ENOUGH?"

Red brings both hands down rapidly, the bowl smashing into thousands... no... millions of pieces.

Startled at his own violent act, Red can't believe what he's done. He frantically begins crawling about on the floor, wildly scooping up shards of glass and trying to piece them back together again in a desperate attempt to get one last look at his precious glass bowl. It is to no avail, however. The shards remain exactly what he has turned them into-- broken shards.

His hands fly to his head and begin grasping madly at his hair. He is covered in sweat and the burning residue of the Shiwalla. He gives a long, anguished shout-"GLASS BOWLLLLLLLL!"

Sock has merely been coughing and sputtering. He finally pulls himself up to a sitting position, barely able to see through his burning eyes.

Red and Sock both notice Herc standing nearby, they don't know how long he has been there. Herc seems to be writing something, and is talking to himself, "...rumpled uniforms...bloodshot eyes...unwashed...coated in sticky toxins..."

Now a small robot rolls up. A miniature tankbot. [It looks exactly like Mark IV from the last mission except that it is only a meter long.] It sits quietly in the black corridor at the west end of QZ.

Emotional Therapy: The anger in Puck builds and builds. He obsessively fingers his most dangerous weapons, and if the bots were attentive, they would notice a glint in Puck's eyes which would tell them, in no uncertain terms, that great violence was about to erupt and none would be spared, not even Puck himself.

Unfortunately, the bots are not terribly attentive. The one with supplicating hands turns to the other who assumes the same pose. Standing on either side of the door, they form a little bridge above it with their joined hands and begin bouncing a little in unison to some unheard melody.

Naturally, bots of this nature are incapable of displaying emotion, so it must all be in Puck's head, but he would swear that as they bounce, their legs flex in an almost mocking fashion--he shakes it off; it's all in his head--they're just ordinary bouncing bots.

I KNOW THIS LOOKS BAD

Sock stares at the new bot and then at Red. He cringes painfully at thoughts of his trip to Emotional Therapy. Sock's response is immediate: He screams at the top of his lungs, shakes off the damned Shiwalla, and darts back into the closet to resume his post, pulling the door shut behind him.

Red acts as if he's finally lost all sight in his eyes, and now he just blinks as he faces the tiny tankbot. Then, as if he has suffered irreparable brain damage, he smiles happily, claps his hands together clumsily and starts shouting, "Paintbot! Paintbot!"

Suddenly realizing something important, Red stops, stands up, yells, "The residue!" and runs into Corridor QZ. He begins rubbing his body all over the sections of the hallway still covered with white.

The Shiwalla is still hissing and spitting, and the noxious cloud has filled a long section of the corridor. In the places Red touches the walls, ALL paint just seems to melt away--white, black, some brownish primer--all of it, so that the bare metal shines from underneath.

Red continues blinking. He can see perfectly well.

From inside the closet, Sock shouts, "Somebody give me an order to come out!!!"

Sock hunkers down as best he can with his thumb in his mouth. He then turns himself invisible, and he doesn't even try to stop the gas that begins bubbling from him. Soon the closet is filled with the stench of Sock's invisibility.

Herc checks his monitor quickly, noting that Puck is still in Emotional Therapy (and Red is in QZ and Pole's body is on the floor in front of him--duh).

Herc rushes to the side of Pole's body and begins openly weeping. Crying, "Alas, poor Pole. How shall we ever suffer along without the power of your leadership?" Etc.

At this moment the new Pole arrives at the junction with corridor QZ.

Pole sees his previous body still on the floor. At first glance, it seems that all his possessions are still there, but then he notes that the YELLOW coveralls have been removed from the body and are now draped neatly over the near naked corpse.

Next to the body is Herc, kneeling and weeping, mourning the loss of a beloved leader. With his head in his hands, Herc yells, "Red, you just keep away from the body now! I will not let you plunder a fallen comrade!" Herc is soaking wet.

Next to Herc is Marcia, just sitting there and watching.

In corridor QZ, next to the utility closet, is an ugly mass of poles, hoses, and bristles that is pumping some type of ugly yellowish cloud into the hall.

Farther down, Red is rubbing himself against the walls, and everywhere that he has touched, ALL paint is gone--white, black, everything--with just the bare metal showing. Red's hands are bleeding. He is rumped and sticky looking. He has obviously been in some sort of scuffle.

Puck and Sock are nowhere to be seen.

Chapter 08—ET-Not for Wussies

WHAT DOES GAUSS MEAN?

Grumbling and stomping about, Puck suddenly remembers something and his eyes light up. He pulls out his weapons list and sure enough: Gauss Gun! Puck's not sure what it is, but it sure sounds like some kind of electromagnetic, anti-bot, superweapon of some kind.

Rifling through his arsenal, Puck finds it... or at least he finds what must be it. A short rifle with all sorts of unnecessary chrome and fins and flanges and such.

Puck holds it gingerly and begins polishing its age-worn surface. While still doing their mocking bounce, one of the bots turns its head and says, "Pardon me, citizen, but I am certain you are of insufficient clearance to..." and that's as far as it gets when the gun accidentally discharges in the bots' general direction.

There was no visible display of discharge, but both bots seem to have frozen in place.

IT BURNS WHEN I PEE

Pole approaches his dead clone's body. Reacting instinctively, Herc whirls on him, "Don't you dare touch him, you vul...Oh... it's you." Herc brightens immediately, "Thank goodness, you've returned sir!" Herc stands aside.

Pole gingerly picks up his coveralls off of his dead clone's body. He eyes the YELLOW uniform dubiously, and seeing nothing wrong he shrugs and begins putting them on.

Red sees what the residue is doing, and stops rubbing up on the wall. He keeps scratching and slapping at the residue on his body. He shakes his head back and forth while he grimaces and then runs out of corridor QZ at full speed.

As he runs, Red shouts into his com-unit to Sock, "Sock-TES, this is Red, as my last order as temporary team leader, I order you to communicate with the Computer and request paintbots to come paint corridor QZ black. The team is all yours Pole-Y-OID."

As Red passes Pole and Herc, Pole notices that Red's right arm is somewhere around two meters long and is tied into a bow so it will stay at a normal length.

Red winds up in the nearest restroom, standing under the showers. The ice cold water feels wonderfully refreshing. Red spends an extra moment or two picking glass shards from his skin, when he notices his right arm feels better. It seems to be wanting to contract back to normal.

Very authoritatively, Pole asks, "What's going on here?" He seems to be speaking to the team in general, but Herc and the mini-tankbot are the only ones here.

500?

Herc replies to Pole, "Well sir, after you died, I immediately began mourning. Then Red arrived with this experimental spray-scrubber thing which he obviously had no idea how to use. He carelessly set it off in the corridor causing the mess you see. I had to run and shower due to exposure to the toxic cloud, but then immediately returned here to continue mourning."

In Emotional Therapy: Woo hoo! Puck says "Awl righ-- I mean, sorry guys. Guys?" Puck investigates the frozen bots. Finding nothing out of the ordinary, he crosses under the bot bridge and passes through the doorway, because the door is, of course, not locked or otherwise unopenable. No, Puck has suffered too much for that to happen. Too much.

Puck suddenly feels remorse for the bots. To the bot that had the bravery to relate to a mere human, Puck gives a teardrop--that Puck carves into the bot's face with a knife. When he's finished, Puck caresses the bot's cheek with his hand, and coos "Don't cry, baby. It's just that we've grown apart. This had to happen. Shhh," Puck puts his finger against where the bot's lips would be if it had lips. "Don't watch me go." Puck goes.

In the bathroom: Red unties his arm and sees it hanging to the ground. He tries to push it back to its normal length with his other hand, but with no success. It just crinkles up.

Red suddenly realizes what he forgot. He grabs his arm just below the "break" and gives it a quick yank down, actually extending it a bit more. He then lets go immediately and the arm retracts to its normal size. The entire process is much like a primitive plush-floor-cleaning-bot with a retractable power cord, retracting its cord.

Puck ends up shortly at corridor QZ. Pole looks as if he's just finishing getting dressed. Herc is nearby and is soaking wet. With them is a miniature tankbot (it looks exactly like the Mark IV from the last mission except that it is only a meter or so long). Sock is nowhere to be seen. In the middle of QZ is a tangle of hoses, poles, and bristles that is hissing and pumping out a yellowish mist that now fills QZ. Most of the paint in QZ has completely melted away-- white, black, everything--and most of QZ is now bare steel. Red is just emerging from a nearby restroom.

Red emerges from the restroom and begins looking for the nearest confessional. As he walks towards it, he

pulls out his red cloth and begins wiping the air immediately surrounding his head, but doesn't touch his head. He stops when he realizes what he's doing, sighs, and puts the cloth away. He goes into the confessional. Red was soaking wet from head to toe.

In the closet: Squatting in his own fetid stench, Sock turns visible and gains the strength to respond. He switches on his com unit.

Over the com unit, Sock says, "Sir--Oh great and all commanding Computer--this is your faithful servant Sock-R... wait, wait, I mean Sock-TES reporting as ordered by Red. We are in need of paint bots--I'm guessing about 500--to paint corridor QZ black. Again this is by the order of the fish bowl-king Red. Please, with all of your great wisdom and power, send these bots to do the job that was not accomplished by your faithful servants."

The Computer replies, "Why does the corridor need painting, citizen Sock-TES?"

MMMMPPHHH MMMPPHHH

Red sits down in the confessional and pulls the curtain closed behind him. He says to the computer, "Hi, kind computer, may I talk to you? I have a concern about Puck, two concerns about Herc and twelve concerns about Sock. I don't have any concerns about Pole. Which would you like to hear first?"

The Computer says, "I would like all concerns alphabetically."

Outside: Sock steps out of the utility closet and replies to the Computer, "Uh, because Red asked me to ask for paintbots, and because the paint's all melting off the walls here."

The Computer then asks Sock, "I see. And what color is corridor QZ citizen?"

Sock looks around. Pole and Puck and Herc are all standing at the end of the corridor next to the tankbot. Red is not around. In the corridor, Sock sees that the Shiwalla is winding down, and the paint is almost gone everywhere in the corridor. It is now silver.

Pole has questions of his own. He addresses Herc, "Citizen Herc-R-LES, how did my uniform become seperated from my body?"

Herc replies, "I am not sure, sir. It was just laying on your body like that when I came back out of the restrooms."

"Okay. And why is Red-R-MEE wet?"

Herc looks puzzled by the question, but answers, "I cannot attest to what another citizen does in the restrooms. You would have to ask him."

"Then what happened to the corridor?"

"Ever since that experimental device went off, that cloud has been melting the paint." Herc thinks for a second and then adds, "And it burns if it gets on you."

"And lastly citizen, you were my deputy team leader, so why did Red-R-MEE assume command?"

Puck stares in amaze at the mess, and in more of an amaze that there aren't corpses and gore strewn around as well. He walks over to a bare wall and examines it, fists on hips. He emits a long, low whistle.

While Puck faces the wall, he concentrates on using his mutant power to make everyone hear Red yell, from within his confessional, "FUCK THE COMPUTER!!"

Red hears nothing, but the three in the hall hear muffled shouting from the confessional.

DO HE DECIMAL?

Red takes a deep breath and blows it out slowly and deliberately. He says,

"1: Ambush. I'm concerned that a previous clone of Puck's ambushed a previous clone of mine, and wonder if somehow someone hasn't undermined his genetic family.

2: Argumentative: Sock-TES willfully disobeys orders and, although he may have corrected this problem, argues and bickers over orders from a superior officer. I think his current "behaving" displays are nothing more than a facade.

3: Bowing: Herc has an unexplainable and illogical behavior of bowing at inappropriate and unusual times.

4: Chaos: Sock-TES behaves in an unpredictable and chaotic manner, often times leaving the party and the mission in a state of unnecessary turmoil.

5: Dramaticism: Sock-TES seems to overdramatize every event that occurs to him. He makes big deals out of nothing and cries and screams like a dingo-bot.

6: Durability: Sock-TES has proven to be very durable and long-lasting considering his atrociously treasonous behavior.

7: Fire (catching): Sock-TES caught fire. Granted, he was doused with a flame thrower, but I think it should be

standard policy not to trust someone who catches fire (especially if he then smolders and turns to ash).

8: Fire (starting): Sock seemed to start fires spontaneously. A mutant power or some sophisticated device that is obviously above red level? Immaterial. Either way it is treason.

9: Giganticism: Sock-TES is quite large. Bulky and awkward, wouldn't you say? I can't put my finger on it, but there is just something queer about a man who is so big.

10: Militarism: Sock-TES is militaristic in a subversive, and seemingly anti-computer fashion. He has taken to shouting dogma and slogans. I don't know the subversive meaning behind it, but I heard him once say, "Mountain move otta my way." I don't even know what it means, but it certainly sounds like subterfuge.

11: Obedience: Sock-TES seems to have a problem with it. Related to one of my previous concerns. He appears to be doing fine now, but I have a hunch that it is a thinly veiled attempt to give us all a false sense of security. Then, wham, bang boom! You know what I mean.

12: Pouncing. Sock-TES pounced on me unexpectedly once when he leaped out of a closet. It was shocking and surprising. Strangely and inexplicably, something about it just seemed treasonous.

13: Radio Silence: Sock-TES was ordered by Pole to maintain radio silence, but then pounced on me, and started screaming. Although he was not broadcasting over his com-unit to other members of the party, he obviously was still broadcasting to you, the computer. Thus, technically, he did maintain radio silence and disobeyed Pole.

14: Sarcastic Greetings: Herc seems to leave them for every member of the group when they are first activated. While at first I felt genuinely pleased that someone was greeting me with such enthusiasm, upon reflection I realized that it was nothing more than a sardonic, ill-spirited message, meant to ostracize me from the mission-- separate me from meeting my goals and the goals of the computer. Assuredly, oh yes, you rest assured, that clone is an evil, uppity no-goodnick. Indeed, I think he is out to undermine all that I am really about. Sabotage my dreams and goals. Tear down the very existence that makes our visions of the potential of one day... He's bad and out to get me. Uh, I think he's a commie tool.

Well, those are my concerns, would you care for my analysis of the situation and the way these concerns possibly impact the mission?"

The Computer seems more upbeat than usual, "Yes, Citizen Red-R-MEE. I would very much like to hear your in depth analysis of your team's various behaviors."

It pauses, then continues thoughtfully, "But do you know, citizen, what it is that I find most amusing? It's the way all traitors eventually give themselves away with that one fatal slip." If the Computer could laugh, it would do so now. "You said you had twelve concerns about the INFRARED drone Sock-TES. TWELVE! You are the author of your own fate citizen."

Herc replies to Pole, "I would never have presumed to question your authority. It was the Computer who formally named Red as leader. Of course, I'm just glad that you're back. No one measures up to your inspired leadership, Pole sir."

Pole smiles and yells over his shoulder, "Sock-TES! The great and good Computer asked you a question!"

Looking up at Pole with big bug-eyed fear, Sock shouts, "SILVER! Oh glorious Computer! The corridor of which you asked me about just now when you were talking to me in the closet when I... uh... when... um... The hallway is now silver!"

Everyone is startled as two TaFT-bots come zooming down the corridor toward QZ. Sock, who had just stepped up with the rest of the group sees them, screams sharply, and promptly passes out.

The rest of the group just stares as the bots stop at the confessional, drag Red out, and zoom away with him.

The inside of the confessional seems suddenly confined and stifling. Red hears a chilling woman's scream from outside, and two TaFT-bots almost rip the confessional door off as they fling it open. Red's protest dies on his lips as the bots grab him. His breath rushes out of him as they haul him at what must be a good 40 or 50 kph back towards PLC.

Red hopes beyond hope that PLC is his destination, but of course, they stop short at a non-descript door marked "Emotional Therapy."

The bots heave Red ungraciously through the door while they remain outside. The door shuts behind him.

Emotional Therapy is the size of a largish office-- about 5 meters square. A filing cabinet has been pushed into one corner with the drawers facing a wall, and a desk has been pushed up against the filing cabinet. There are two chairs stacked on the desk. The walls are covered with splotchy unidentifiable stains and brighter patches where pictures or certificates once hung. A whining hum comes from behind one wall. There is only the one door. On either side of the door is a TaFT-bot. They face each other with their arms upraised and their

hands linked, forming an arch over the doorway. They do not move.

The only other occupant of the room is a third TaFT-bot that looms over Red where he sits on the floor. The bot is wearing a long black lab coat made of some very shiny material. It holds what looks like a red foam ball about 8cm across which it repeatedly tosses into the air and then catches.

I SUSPECT A TRICK

Herc watches as Red is dragged away. He starts giggling as soon as Red is out of sight. "Hee hee heh heh heh."

Pole gets Herc's attention and explains to him, "Clearly, in his infinite wisdom, our most mighty of friends the Computer cleverly ordered the promotion of Red to root out his treasonous behavior. But from now on, I'll be relying on you to be my second in command."

Puck looks very pleased with himself. He walks over to Pole and addresses him with his hands clasped behind his back (many would have claimed it was impossible for Puck to reach that far). "Citizen Pole," he addresses Pole, "during my brief stay as an honored and solitary guest of the Computer, I learned many things. One of those things is that the Computer has discovered you are hiding valuable and essential mission items inside your rectum. This is in direct violation of the Computer's No-Cram-It policy, issued not long ago, which states "No mission-critical items shall pass the portal of any clone's anus." Now, I'm going to be lenient on you. If you relinquish these items right now, I won't report you. So come on, give it up. Bend over, that's a good clone." Puck raises expectant eyebrows.

The tankbot beeps, and rolls a couple of meters into QZ.

Sock lays on the floor like an unconscious lump.

In Emotional Therapy: Red is dejected and beaten.

Red says, "I apologize Computer. The amount of treason and willful disobedience has confused and confounded me. Let me add my final concern:

Willful disobedience: Sock's willful disobedience overall is highly treasonous and entirely suspect. I believe he has made a concerted effort to keep me confused and off-balance, thus leading to my forgetting the final concern."

Red turns his com-unit on to broadcast to the entire party, but stops as the TaFT-bot before him approaches menacingly.

It holds up the red foam ball with a flourish. Then holds it up on its other side. Then it rubs its hands together, and quickly holds up empty palms to show that the ball has somehow disappeared.

Red is very confused, and then is even more so as the bot reaches behind Red's ear, and produces the foam ball again.

Red forms words in his head and tries again to speak, but the bot is not finished: it passes its two hands together and then quickly jams one into a pocket on its shiny coat while holding the other hand upraised in a fist.

The pocketed hand slides out, and the bot shows that it is empty. With the closed hand still raised, the bot asks in an odd accent, "Hand or pocket? Hand or pocket?"

UM, UM, UM, UM, POCKET?

Red squints his eyes at the taft-bot. He scratches his head and looks quickly at his feet. Suddenly, as if struck by inspiration from above he begins to shout in a voice with a weird accent that resembles the taft-bot's. The accent is distinguished and sophisticated sounding, yet still breezy, uncaring and condescending.

"Fuck you! It's in the pocket! It's always in the fucking pocket!"

The bot opens its upstretched hand to reveal the foam ball. The other arm backhands Red across the room, his body slamming into the door. The bot yells, "Fuck you! It's in the hand."

Red's back aches and blood is running into his eye. The bot does it's flashy routine again. Red, realizing the importance of this, follows the bots movements carefully and would swear the ball ended up in the pocket.

The TaFT-bot seems to taunt him: "Try again, mate. Hand or pocket? Hand or fucking pocket?"

WHO'S THE MORALE OFFICER, ANYWAY?

Herc carefully backs away from Pole and Puck. He stumbles into Sock, then Herc also faints, landing on top of Sock.

Once on the floor, Herc plants a homing device on Sock.

Pole responds quickly to Puck, "Puck-R-UPP, it is clear from your behavior that you are unhappy. Otherwise, we would not expect to see insubordinate behavior from you. Since happiness is mandatory and insubordination is treason, you have put yourself in quite a spot. However, as Leader, I feel it is sometimes better to help a troubleshooter rather than immediately sending him to

the termination chambers. With that in mind, I hereby order you to report to the morale officer for a pick me up as soon as possible.

"I do happen to have the equipment our preeminent and most intelligent friend the Computer asked you to request from me. This is CRITICAL mission equipment that you are expected to use wisely for the good of the team. It is my understanding that our friend the Computer briefed you on its purpose and intended use, so we will not discuss that now. I would like to point out that ANY discussion of this classified item with other team members is strictly prohibited."

Pole hands Puck a featureless black cube, about one foot to a side. It weighs surprisingly little for its size.

Pole continues, "In the future, Puck-R, I think it would be best if you addressed me as 'Sir' or 'Leader'. Be careful, Citizen. I'd hate to see you violating the 'No-Cram-It' policy you seem so familiar with." Then to Herc, "Herc-R-LES, please help Puck-R find the morale officer."

"That will be all."

PICKPOCKET

"Oh, okay, sure," Puck backs off a bit with his palms facing Pole. "I understand, Sir, if you want to ride the rocky road of insubordination, but I feel that as a member of this team, it is part of my duty to try to keep any other team member from carrying out any infraction of a rule, or at least to help cover up that infraction. It would certainly be easier on any one of us if the rest of us backed him up, don't you agree? And so you see, asking you to squeeze out the critical mission equipment was my way of helping you not be fingered by the Computer (so to speak) for violating its policies. A completely selfless motive! But if you want to keep it up there, hey, go ahead, I don't see how you can walk but that's your business, Sir."

Puck turns to Herc and bends down to help him up. On the way down, he accidentally drops the black cube onto the floor. It bounces on one corner and lands next to the wall. Puck drapes Herc's arm across his shoulders and holds him upright.

Herc stands and seems confused. He says, "Team Leader Pole, Puck said something about you bringing us new equipment, and then I sort of blanked out. Could you fill me in on my assigned portion of the equipment?"

Red wipes the blood away from his head. His accent is gone, and with all sincerity he says to the Taft-bot, "Before I give you my answer, let me just say, that the location of the ball and whether or not I properly guess the location is moot. What is important is that you have properly beat me back into my right mind and set me

back on the straight and narrow. And may I say, mission accomplished. That being said..."

Red bites his lip thoughtfully. His eyes dart doubtfully to the taft-bot's hand and then hopefully to the taft-bot's pocket. He looks to the taft-bots at the door for assistance, but they stand pat. He says, "...pocket."

[occ: the mind games are afoot. On the one hand, I know the routine-- if it was in the hand once, it will always be in the fucking hand. But you know that I'll be thinking that, don't you? So you'll put it in the pocket. However, I thought it was in the pocket, so you want to give me a little food for thought. Obviously my initial guess must be wrong because the trick is slight of hand. I think its in the pocket because he wants me to think its in the pocket, and that's how I'm fucked because its actually in the hand. However, that presupposes that robots are good at slight of hand. All that aside, I picked pocket for a very different reason-- hand got it last time, so pocket's due a hit, baby. Of course, chances are you didn't predetermine where the ball is and you'll just go with what you think is funniest. D'oh.]

The bot stands still, looking at the floor, until Red is just about ready to change his answer. Then, it pulls its hand out of its pocket and slowly opens it to reveal the ball. "Fuck me. It's in the pocket." The upraised fist has still not moved. The bot gazes levelly at Red. It seems to be emitting a low rumbling.

[The first one was arbitrarily in whatever you didn't choose. The second time, it was in the pocket all along, so your answer made a difference. How about that?]

GIFT HORSES

Pole hands Herc a grenade: "Herc-R-LES, this device is experimental and was assigned to you by R&D. Please be sure to test it and report back to R&D at the completion of the mission. Failure to return the experimental device or failure to test it constitutes treason.

Pole grabs the multicorder and points it at himself: Smiling, he reports, "Friend Computer! I have assigned testing of the black box to Puck-R and one of the grenades to Herc-R. I note this for the record to ensure the safe return of the reports and items to R&D. Both Puck-R and Herc-R have been briefed regarding the penalties they will incur in the event that they should lose the devices or fail to test them.

"Additionally, Citizen Puck-R appears to be exhibiting signs of insubordination and willingness to 'cover up infraction(s)' of your inspired rules. I have ordered him to meet with the morale officer for the dispensation of

appropriate medication or termination as the morale officer sees fit."

Pole holds the multicorder at his side without turning it off. It is unclear whether it was running before or not...

Over the com unit, Pole says, "Team members, Please report to the entrance of corridor QZ for immediate departure to the 'Outside' to complete our glorious mission."

Outside of Emotional Therapy, Red can hear the sounds of many machines being moved.

BLACK LIKE ME

Red says to the taft-bot, "Don't take it bad, sir. After all, you got to beat me like a dirty dog-bot and now I've learned my lesson. I'd say that's a victory."

Red clicks his com-unit over to broadcast to the whole party, "Pole, this is Red. I'll be just a few more minutes in Emotional Therapy, then I'll be right there."

Red begins walking to the door out. He begins to bend backwards (but not awkwardly so), while walking out the door. He's careful not to touch the two taft-bots with their arms arching over the door.

Out in the hall, Red catches the tail end of a fleet of paintbots. Each is over a meter and a half tall and cylindrical, looking like tall silver wastebaskets on treads (with arms and sprayers of course).

Red continues on to the entrance to Corridor QZ, following the bots.

Puck drops Herc and gets in Pole's face. "You have apparently forgotten, oh glorious team leader, that our current mission to paint the walls is not finished. I hope you weren't thinking that the Computer would overlook this omission of duty? Hmm, I call into question your fitness to oversee the will of the Computer." Puck backs off and shakes his head in shame. "Well, team leader, go ahead and lead. We'll follow ya!" Puck grins a soulless grin and ushers Pole into action with a sweep of his arms.

Sock moans and sits up. He looks nauseous and he rubs his head.

At this point, the action is interrupted by a fleet of paintbots arriving and sweeping into corridor QZ. Each is over a meter and a half tall and cylindrical, looking like tall silver wastebaskets on treads (with arms and sprayers of course).

The paintbots fill corridor QZ and begin painting everything black with their noisy hissing sprayers.

Red is following them, and joins the group quietly as the bots keep working.

The bots seem to have run out of workspace though, so some paint the Shiwalla. Some move into the closets and bathrooms. Some approach the team and begin painting them.

Chapter 09—Debriefing Fun

HI KETTLE--THIS IS POT

Puck gapes at the paintbots (but pulls his tongue in before it gets painted black). He looks at Pole. "Umm...."

Pole had many other things to say, but now feels that they're really moot. Pole screams like a woman and runs away from the bots at high speed.

Pole's goal at this point is to start heading "Outside," but it now occurs to him that he's lived in OID Sector all his life and has no clue where Outside might be. He pauses about 20 meters down the hall and notes that he's not being followed. Pole decides to wait at this safe distance for a moment.

Red hits the switch on his laugh track.

Once again, that maddening laughter and applause breaks out from all directions. This time, the laughter is especially intense as if something unbelievably funny just happened.

Herc bows doubtfully, but seems really concerned about the half dozen bots that are now unloading their supplies on him.

One little known fact about paintbots: they don't know when to stop. More precisely, they generally don't stop until they run out of paint. When they return for a refill, someone there decides if they need to go back. Now, since you normally never have more than maybe a dozen bots on a job, this is usually no problem. At worst, maybe you waste a few liters of paint. When you request 500 though...

Soon enough, 500 freshly painted (and empty) paintbots start back to PLC for a refill. They leave behind a very very very black hallway and a very black troubleshooter team (except for Pole standing a way off--he only got a few spots on that nice YELLOW uniform).

It seems that corridor QZ is finished, but it is also filled end to end with about an inch and a half of black paint--a dark, oily paint soup.

The laughter continues, coming from everywhere at once.

Looking down, everyone notes that Sock passed out again during the mad bot exodus, and he is now slowly drying to the floor.

BURDENSARING

The laughter dies.

Herc stops his half-hearted bowing and runs to the bathrooms again. He says, "Be right back."

Herc showers like crazy with water running black down the drain.

Red bends down, a half-tear beginning to glimmer in the corner of one eye. He picks up Sock and begins to carry him out of Corridor QZ to where Pole is standing.

Sock is extremely heavy and far too bulky for Red's wiry frame. Despite his best efforts, Red drops Sock on his head.

Red shakes his head and decides just to drag Sock by his left boot. Red says to Pole, "Are we ready for the outside, sir?"

ALJ-O-LSN

Puck blows paint off of his lips. Little black paint bubbles drool down his chin. Puck grabs the black cube (now painted black).

Seeing the rest of the team, Puck skids his stubby body into a run, and then gets down on one knee and slides to a stop in front of Red. Puck puts his arms way out to the sides and thrusts his chest out. "Mammy! Mammy!"

HEAD LIKE A HOLE

Red looks at Pole expectantly.

Puck looks at Pole expectantly.

Herc emerges from the bathroom. He has rinsed most of the paint from his skin and hair, but his coveralls are still soaked in black. Herc stands in the bathroom door and looks at Pole expectantly.

Sock lays expectantly with the side of his face in an inch of paint.

Bristling with tiny little gun barrels, the little tankbot rolls slowly toward the group. The tacky drying paint is obviously gumming up its treads.

The bot pipes up in a high pitched voice, "Hello YELLOW stranger. I assume you are team leader. I am ready for our mission. I am the Warbot model 425 Mark IVa, the greatest line of personal war machines ever created. My neutronium steel armor can somewhat impede any weapon known to clone. I am capable of firing 20 tactical slugs per minute. My Gigagun has trans-building firing capacity. I am powered by the latest in fragile fission engines. I can really motor on smooth or even marginally rough ground. There is no molehill I

cannot climb. There is no toe I cannot face. I hope there is no sea. I cannot swim." All of this is delivered in the utmost of high squeaky overconfidence.

It pauses, "Call me Marcia."

MAKE IT SO, NUMBER ONE

Pole faces the team with the multicorder aimed at them. "I'm glad we assembled so rapidly. With our weapons tested it is now time to carry on with our mission to the Outside to glorify our omniscient master, the Computer, and bring greatness to Alpha Complex!"

He focuses the multicorder on Red and says, "Citizen Red-R?-MEE, I appoint you our navigation officer! It will be your responsibility to lead us to the site Urly-B-OID directed us to, by the most expeditious means, so that we may recover the cylinders and wrap ourselves in glory! You will be responsible (subject to the approval of any higher ranking team member) for all decisions related to our general direction and the forward progress of the mission. Do you feel ready to accept the responsibility and able to faithfully execute your new mission?"

FAST AS FAST CAN BE

Red salutes Pole sharply and quickly. He shouts, "Aye aye, captain! Come on Marcia!" Red suddenly and unexpectedly darts down corridor QX.

Red makes it down QX and hangs a right.

EXIT STAGE LEFT

Pole says, "Exit stage left." and zips after Red.

Marcia and Herc had both been waiting for Pole's cue, so they follow. Puck heaves a big sigh and jogs along behind the others. Paint splashes up weakly around everyone's feet as they run.

Red rounds the corner first and smack into a very familiar squad of GREEN clearance IntSec troopers. Everyone else stops right behind him.

Fun-G, the IntSec squad commander, says, "Well, there you are."

Sock continues snoozing in the muck.

HELLO NURSE

Red says to fun, "Hello sir. As you know, my name is Red, and I'm happy to be the first, and most punctual, of

my cohorts to report. I'd like to tell you that Sock-TES, a member of the team, has been rendered unconscious through a feminine and vulnerable fear of his environment. Anywho, the point is that if his GREEN level escort is still around, maybe he can drag him here. You know, I would, but Pole-Y appointed me team navigator and I had to get here as quickly as possible. Heh." Red realizes he's babbling incesently.

"Hey guys!" Puck chuckles amiably. "How's, uh, what's... ah, going on?"

Pole clicks his heels together, tries to salute, can't remember how and accidentally hits himself in the testicles.

At the same time, Puck kicks the back of Pole's knee.

Pole stumbles and falls forward. He is using both hands to protect his groinage and falls forward on his forehead. Ouch.

The GREEN troopers match up again one per troubleshooter. One goes to fetch Sock who is finally awake again (but a little groggy). Fun-G says, "Complete screw-up back at dispatch. Some idiot mixed up the orders. Once we had her terminated, we got everything sorted out. You guys were supposed to be taken to some access hatch." They begin to march everyone off again. Marcia follows closely.

After 20 minutes of jogging through numerous little used INFRARED tunnels, the team finally winds up back at the briefing room door. They are now sweaty and exhausted and glad to stand still for a minute, but they're pretty sure this doesn't lead Outside.

Fun-G calls his troops to order to move out back to HQ.

FIRST

Red opens the door to the briefing room. Kosmik-V-OID is sitting inside behind his desk.

Red hits the switch to his laughtrack.

Hysterical laughter echoes through the hallway. As usual, its source is unclear.

AFTER YOU

Red steps aside from the door and gestures for Pole to go in. He says, "Right this way, team leader."

SECOND

Puck runs in and says "Hello Sir!" to Kosmik. Puck promptly takes a seat. Puck whistles to get Red's attention, and when Red looks, Puck snaps his fingers and points testily to the seat next to him.

Red sits by Puck.

Seeing that no one has been shot yet, Pole, Herc, and Sock file in after, and they all sit.

Kosmik-V surveys the team carefully, noting the ragged parkas, the sweaty brows, the mussed hair. He looks at the wet spot on the floor where Herc is slowly dripping dry. He looks at Sock and Red's bloodshot eyes and the seeping scabs on Red's palms. He makes no comment on the fact that four of the five team members have been painted black.

"Good work, clones." he says. "You completed your mission much more quickly than I had expected. Certainly, we'll have to tidy up later, but those are just details. Now is a time for celebration."

Kosmik pulls up packages from below his desk and passes one to each member of the team. "I think you will be very pleased. For meritorious service in honor of our beloved friend The Computer, I hereby grant all of you full promotion to ORANGE clearance."

He sits back down, "You'll find your new uniforms in those packages. I hope they fit." He leans back in his chair and puts his feet up, beaming at the team.

HOO HAH

Red tilts the top of his package towards Puck and opens it. An ORANGE jumpsuit slides out onto Red's lap.

Herc and Sock waste no time in opening their packages, and Herc begins changing right away. "I am Herc-O-LES," he announces proudly.

Pole looks very misty eyed as he fingers the package in his lap.

Kosmik continues smiling happily.

YOU ASKED FOR IT

"Oh boy!" Puck stands on one leg to get the suit on, but falls over onto Sock. "Sorry, sorry," Puck apologizes insincerely as he gets up. One of Puck's grenades has dislodged and lands in Sock's lap. It still has the masking tape on it.

Red puts on his Orange suit, mumbling to himself, "Red-O-MEE? Hmm?"

He looks at it and says, "Strangely I feel as if some kind of stigma has left me."

Pole hasn't gotten up, but he now stares and the ceiling in a pained and fearful way and says, "Geez, let's have it already."

Kosmik sits up quickly and looks at Pole. "Thank you team leader--that reminds me: All of you will find your credit balances up by 500 credits as a reward for your good work."

He pauses, "Except for you Pole--for your decisive leadership, you are awarded a total of 775 credits. I wish it could be more, but the budget for this was limited."

He leans back again. "That wraps up my portion. I'll let Urly-B take over the actual debriefing segment."

Kosmik touches that control on his desk again, and as before, the steel wall slams down, leaving the team alone again and the room considerably smaller.

After about two heartbeats, the door opens and in walks Urly. He seems grouchier somehow. "Well there you are," he snarls, not looking at anyone in particular.

THIS SORT OF THING AIN'T MY BAG, BABY

Puck-O-UPP sits back down attentively, but eyes the grenade in Sock's lap. "Um, you gonna use that?" Puck asks, pointing to the grenade. Puck grabs the grenade by the tape and retrieves it.

Sock seems awake, but does not react to Puck in any way at all.

Red-O-MEE looks expectantly at Urly. Nothing in his look is presumptuous, however, more like eager to serve the computer.

Urly looks at his clipboard, "OK, we'll save the mission itself for after. Let's start with the equipment. You can just pile all issued materials here next to me. Specific items of interest which require verbal explanation if not returned:

"Sock--nothing.

"Red--Propane stove. Glass bowl. 2 cans with pull top rings not containing beans. Concealable laugh track with Bose surround sound.

"Pole--Yellow uniform. Invisibility generator with R&D report. Foam grenades with R&D report. Mark IVa Tankbot with R&D report. Personal escape device with R&D report. Army issue locator used to find cylinders.

"Herc--Magic 8-ball. Silly string. 10 homing devices with homing tracking system. Grappling hook. Inhaler.

"Puck--2 laser rifles. 3 stun grenades. 1 hand flamer. 3 ice guns. 2 tanglers. 1 stun gun. 1 semi automatic slugthrower. 1 hand plasma generator.

"These are only the most pertinent items. Those not mentioned, must still be turned in, and ALL equipment will be accounted for."

HA, HA... HA... SIGH

Red begins pouting profusely.

Red hits the laughtrack switch.

Laughter starts to roar, as always from nowhere. While the laughter is still continuing, Red pulls a small device from his mouth, and a slightly larger device from his belt. When he does this, the laughter begins to warble and warp. Red puts the devices on a desk near Urly. He also places a digital clock, several grenades, and his cane on the desk.

He says to Urly, "Sock blew up the propane stove. It was a convoluted story involving intrigue, mutant powers and possible traitorous activity. I've already briefed the computer on it. Let me gather the rest of my equipment."

Red goes back to his seat and pulls out an unlabeled can with a pull top, seemingly not full of beans. Red looks worried and pulls open the top hoping to find inside another unlabeled can seemingly not full of beans.

To Red's surprise and horror, the can is actually full of beans. (Okay, so he's not really surprised at all.)

Happy to comply, Sock-O-TES smiles a giant smile and adds to the pile his INFRARED coveralls, the winter clothing (now shredded, bloody, and stiff with black paint), and his putty knife. Sock hurries back to his seat.

Urly checks off various things on his clipboard and taps his foot impatiently as he waits on the rest of the team.

WHERE DO THEY KEEP ALL THIS CRAP?

As Sock sits there, it finally hits him... a small tear rolls down his cheek. He slowly stands up as if a beam of hallowed light were on him... "This is the greatest moment in my little insignificant life, and I would like to begin by saying thank you to the all mighty and all knowing Computer whos deep wisdom (sniff sniff) bestowed this great honor upon me. Next I would like to thank Red whos Shattering glass bowl speech gave me

the will, (sniff sniff) the courage and strength to fight on. Next for the insight and supportive role of Herc who taught me the meaning of (sniff sniff) second best... (gulp sniff sniff) | | | | ca-ca-cant tell y-y-you what this means to me..." He breaks down into a blubbering mess with his hands on his face as he sits back down in his chair.

Red stands back up and puts a packet of pocket tissues on the desk next to Urly. He pulls one out and wipes a tear away from his right eye. He puts the used tissue on the desk then unfastens his gag-oversized-laser-sight and puts it on the desk. He puts the the can on the desk and says, "I inadvertently put beans in the can. My cape, the other can and the glass bowl were destroyed in the same incident as the propane stove by Sock." Red then puts his winter clothing, chapstick, mess kit, ski-goggles, snow-shoes and canteen on the desk.

Dejected, Red sits back down next to Sock and begins whispering to him.

Red whispers to Sock, "Listen, buddy. We need to talk. I've noticed that you have finally risen out of the doldrums of your infrared rank into the worthy rank of orange. But let me ask you this, my brother: Why can't we all be orange? Why do we delineate our society between Infrared and Red? Red and Orange? Orange and Blue?

Our modern alpha complex that has sprouted from the ruins of feudal society has not done away with these class antagonisms. It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.

Our epoch, the epoch of the computer, possesses, however, this distinct feature: it has simplified class antagonisms. Society as a whole is more and more splitting up into nine great hostile camps, into nine great classes directly facing each other -- the infrared, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet and ultraviolet."

Sock finds this very interesting, but suddenly he realizes--O crap--Red's some kind of Commie or something! Oh no! And now Sock's infected with it. He actually understood what Red was saying. He starts to worry again, "How can I explain this without them thinking I'm a Commie too? No, no, play it cool. Let's think this through. Maybe I just worry too much."

Sock is suddenly sweating profusely.

Herc stands and approaches the pile of stuff in front Urly. Reaching into the pocket of Sock's old nasty parka, Herc plucks out a homing device. Looking rather embarrassed, Herc then approaches Puck, Pole, and Red in turn, and with a quick "Excuse me." or "So sorry."

he reaches into pouches and pockets and removes a homing device from each of them.

Herc piles the homing devices along with a half dozen more from his pocket in front of Urly. Dropping the hand held tracking unit with them, Herc says, "All accounted for."

Herc then adds to the pile: his full set of winter clothing, a frostbite manual, chapstick, a tent, canteen, mess kit, ski goggles, snow shoes, propane lighter, electric socks, two pairs of sunglasses, two knives, a box of sympathy cards, laser barrels, a box of red bouncy balls, grappling hook, a fur-lined checkered hat with ear flaps, seven grenades, an inhaler, silly string, and one magic eight ball.

Herc sits back down.

Red finishes whispering to Sock. He pats Sock on the back and says, "Well, I guess that decides it then."

Red stands up and walks next to Urly.

Red mutters something about everyone acting slow and how he's the only one doing anything.

Red says to Urly, "Sir, you'll be happy to know that we've accomplished our mission perfectly." Red faces the group and gives a slight wink that Urly can't see. His face is serious and he emphasizes his words carefully.

"As we all know, when we accepted this mission, failure was not an option." Red laughs, "Obviously, if we had not retrieved the cannisters, certainly we would all be executed summarily and our future clones would be transferred to Violet ass-wiping duties." Red laughs more, "I mean, if we hadn't even gone outside, there would be no question that we would be tortured painfully and fed the entrails of our remaining clone-brethren. Ha, ha, ha. But, obviously that is not the case here, Mr. B-IOD. We went out, found the remains of the vehicle, retrieved the cannisters and brought them back here for you."

"You'll be happy to know, Mr. Urly-B-IOD that Pole was properly concerned about the importance and sensitive nature of the cannisters and immediately took possession of the cannisters upon their discovery. He was so concerned that he would not allow any of us access to them until we could return here and he could give them to you himself."

Red turns to Pole and says, "Pole, all that's left is for you to give Urly the cannisters and we can all enjoy the satisfaction of knowing that we've accomplished the wonderful purposes of the computer."

ANALLY SPEAKING

Herc nods enthusiastically and says, "That's right. Hey Puck, didn't you say something about Pole trying to hide important equipment in his ass?"

The rest of the team looks expectantly at Pole.

Urly now takes note, "Ah yes, the cylinders. You returned so quickly, I feared you had been unable to retrieve them. I'm glad to know they are safely returned. There could be commendations in this for all of you."

Urly stops working with his clipboard and hands forms and pens to each team member. "While Puck and Pole finish returning their stuff, you can start working on the debriefing questionnaires."

Urly looks around the room as if seeing the team for the first time. He blinks and stares in disbelief. "Where did those uniforms come from? Don't tell me you scavenged uniforms off the crashed Vulture team. Do you know the penalties for impersonating higher clearance citizens?"

For anyone who looks at the questionnaires, the questions are:

- 1) Do you feel the team adequately met its mission objectives? (explain)
- 2) Who was the most valuable member of your team and why?
- 3) Who was the least valuable member of your team and why?
- 4) What single act of treason by a teammate most surprised you?
- 5) What could the Computer have done differently to ensure that your mission went more smoothly?
- 6) What do you feel would be an appropriate punishment for your own failures and shortcomings on this mission?

CAN'T WE KEEP SOME OF IT?

Herc quickly strips off his ORANGE uniform and throws it on the equipment pile. Herc looks very hurt and confused. He walks away from Urly shaking his head. He looks like he's going to cry, and he's mumbling to himself, "First you're orange, now you're not orange, paint the hall, don't paint the hall, i'm so confused."

Herc sits on the floor in a far corner to work on his questionnaire.

Herc's answers: 1) We completely fulfilled all mission objectives by successfully returning with the cylinders.

2) I was the most valuable team member. My quick thinking in all situations helped ensure success.

3) All team members were valuable. If anyone had failed to perform their duties, I would have reported this.

4) I did not witness any treason on this mission, for if I had, I surely would have reported it.

5) There is nothing the Computer could have done differently. Everything went perfectly and we were successful.

6) I don't feel I had any failures or shortcomings, so I don't need any punishment, but if the Computer feels I have done something wrong, then I would happily accept whatever consequence the Computer felt was appropriate.

Pole seems a little worried. He says, "Uh, just a second. I'm sorry. I have perfectly good answers for all of this. I can explain."

Red answers Urly, "Pole, while temporarily yellow, promoted us all (including himself) to orange. He was very proud of how we performed."

Red sits down and fills out his questionnaire.

Red's answers: 1. The team adequately met its mission objectives. We carefully pondered the mission the computer wanted performed, and went out and carried it out perfectly. We accomplished everything and forgot nothing.

2. The computer was the most valuable member of our team. The computer is all-knowing and omni-present, and accompanied us in our hopes and our com-units. Hail computer!

3. Sock was the least valuable member of the team because he exploded a propane stove under suspicious circumstances. It was a total disregard for the safety of the team and for the value of the computer's property.

4. The single most treasonous act occurred when Sock exploded a propane stove under suspicious circumstances. Also see answer to number 3.

5. Nothing. Everything went as smooth as possible and that was all due to the computer.

6. As discussed above, the mission was completed perfectly. Thus, I don't think I have any shortcomings or failures that deserve punishment. However, Sock, for exploding a propane stove under a suspicious

circumstances deserves whatever horrible punishment the computer deems appropriate.

Puck seems to have zoned out for a little bit, but he snaps to and rises to shed some weight. He puts down 2 laser rifles, 1 hand flamer, 3 ice guns, 2 tangles, 1 stun gun, and 1 plasma gun (he looks longingly at that last item before relinquishing it). As he draws a semi-automatic slugthrower out of his jacket, he accidentally triggers it somehow-- obviously a small flaw in the weapon's design, for Puck's tremendous talent and bottomless experience with weapons would never permit him to make such a mistake. The shot caroms off the floor and into the equipment pile, hitting something inside with a hollow metallic "thwimp."

Puck puts down three grenades, which leaves him with one grenade, three laser pistols and the gauss gun all strapped into his bandoliers.

Puck runs his hand longingly over the mass of weaponry as he returns to his seat. He pulls out his questionnaire and stares at the ceiling.

Sock is still staring obsessively at Red, but now he is also protectively clutching his ORANGE coveralls.

Something inside the equipment pile is hissing faintly.

Urly is now very, very agitated. "Puck-R-UPP, your behavior is inexcusable! Discharging a firearm in a briefing room in front of a superior officer is unacceptable! Flaunting your failure to turn in all assigned equipment only compounds your mistake!" Urly is turning very red.

SOCK, MAN OF ACTION

Red stands up and hands his questionnaire to Urly. "There you are sir." Red sits back down next to Sock and extends a closed fist.

Red whispers to Sock, "Are you with me brother? Do you desire more?"

Pole stands and approaches Urly, saying, "While citizen Red-R's story is certainly very interesting, I would like to mention that it has some factual problems I would like to discuss.

"First of all, as the multicorder clearly will show when we view it, I was supervising testing of the weaponry we would be using during our mission in corridor QZ before moving out. Red-R must have become separated from the group at some point and recovered the cylinder, because when we completed testing our equipment, he (as navigation officer) led us back here to be debriefed."

"While I am very proud of Red for recovering the cylinder, I must question his statement that I possess it, because as the multicorder clearly will show, Red never led me to the outside as I requested (is this treasonous, I wonder?) nor did he turn the cylinder over to me."

"Further, as an agent for Internal Security," Pole shows his credentials and everyone gasps, "I have been assigned to root out treasonous behavior on this very important mission. My report will show that Citizen Red brought us to this room where we were asked to change into these Orange level troubleshooter uniforms. Since I carry the brevet rank of Yellow, I felt that donning an orange uniform in order not to call attention to my status as an agent was the correct course of action for me. I also have given a battlefield promotion to citizen Puck-O-UPP to Orange level rank due to his exemplary performance as my deputy IntSec agent." (more gasps)

"The questions I have for Red-R-MEE and Sock-R-TESS are very serious and I believe need to be kept in the record." Pole raises the already running multicorder to his shoulder and points it at Red: "Where did you get the Orange uniforms and who promoted you? Where is the cylinder that you recovered?"

Puck's answers: 1) The team met its mission objectives in the most complete and meaningful way possible. None were spared in our attack upon the failure of our mission objectives. Glory to the Computer through our absolute destruction of obstacles and impediments toward the accomplishment of our mission objectives.

2) The Computer was the most valuable member of our team.

3) Red, Pole, Sock and Herc were absolutely useless to me during this mission. I found their presence to be odorous and irritating.

4) All treason surprises me. How could someone not fully love the Computer? It makes me want to cry.

5) I am offended at the doubt this question casts upon the actions of the Computer. I will report slightly treasonous questionnaire to the Computer.

6) I should be forced into a higher rank and train with peers at that rank, long before my own personal and emotional development could handle such a promotion.

Puck responds to Urly's questions: "But, gosh, sir, I do believe I have returned everything you required me to return. And I'm very sorry about that weapon discharge--it was obviously an equipment malfunction, perhaps

incurred during Red's fierce (and unauthorized) pummelling of Sock. Please forgive me."

Urly's eyes get wide, and he turns even redder-- he's just fuming, "Wha--? You--! How dare you be so openly defiant! I very clearly stated that ALL issued equi--! Oooh!" He stomps up to Puck and grabs him by the bandoliers. "You little punk!"

Herc, however, has just been staring at everyone in disbelief. He screams and flings himself out the door.

It turns out that the hissing within the equipment pile was actually Puck's plasma generator which was punctured by a stray bullet. It explodes with the force of a thousand suns--well, OK, maybe not that much, but enough to instantly incinerate everyone and everything within the briefing room.

Herc, as the only one to recognize the impending danger is saved from instant incineration. Instead, he is flung across the corridor by the force of the blast, his body shattering against the wall. His pulpy remains are THEN incinerated by the wash of hot plasma that fills the hall.

Chapter 10—The End

THERE'S MORE?

Sock-R-TES, Pole-R-OID, Puck-R-UPP, Herc-R-LES, and Red-R-MEE are all newly issued.

Each is equipped with Red coveralls, Red reflex armor, a standard com unit, a notepad, and a pencil.

Herc also receives a "Most Improved Camper" award for the astute observational skills of his previous clone. He also gets a greeting card.

In the card is a picture of Red with a "Welcome Back" message. Pushing a button in the card activates an audio message.

They are sent to the same briefing room as before. It looks much the same except that the walls now seem blistered, and all the furniture is gone.

Urly-B-OID-4 is waiting for them. He has a new set of questionnaires.

Everyone grumbles and glares at Puck as they file in.

Sock mutters to Pole, "I think it might of been Puck who had the cylinders."

[For those who had already completed the questionnaires, I will assume that your answers will be the same unless you tell me otherwise.]

HERSHEY SQUIRTING

"Hey, what?" Puck-R-UPP-4 notices the hostile glances and is afraid.

Red says loudly to Sock, "Yeah, well it must have been either Puck or..." but Red is cut off mid-sentence.

In a blur, Pole grabs Urly's laser, knees him in the kidney and holds the gun to his head. He shouts, "Nobody Move!"

"Citizen Urly-B-OID, as a representative of Internal Security, it is my duty to place you under arrest for destruction of computer property, including all of our previous clones, by causing the plasma explosion."

To the team, Pole says, "I believe each of us should complete a new mission debriefing form now that this traitor has unmasked himself..."

"What do you say, team?"

Due to a judicious and well-deserved use of Puck's mutant power, Pole now embarrasses himself [screw

just the sound and smell-- Puck is going for the full on sensory onslaught with tactiles and visuals]:

Pole can feel some enormous pressure on his gut.

Pole rips out a very long, very wet, very chunky-sounding fart. He seems very surprised by it and looks down at his coveralls. A nasty brownish stain has formed at the crotch and is slowly spreading down one leg. The odor is enough to put Sock to shame, and Urly looks extremely ill.

Pole can feel it running down his leg.

HE WHO SMELT IT...

In a blur, Red grabs his own Red laser from his belt, doesn't knee anyone and holds his gun out, pointed straight at Pole's head. He shouts, "Nobody Move!"

Red shouts, "Citizen Pole, as a representative of the armed forces and as a responsible member of the Alpha Complex Community, it is my duty to place you under arrest for damage of computer property-- injuring Urly-B-OID, threatening the life of a superior officer, and violation of every applicable hygiene rule in the book."

To the team, Red shouts, "I believe each of us should fire sporadically at Pole until one of us kills him now that this traitor has unmasked himself..."

Red looks down and sees that his pants are still clean. He shouts, "What do you say, team?"

Pole himself, loses another fart and the lumps in his pants indicate that something unmentionable may be about to drop out of his pants leg.

CORRECTION

[As someone astutely pointed out, the new team was not issued any weapons, so the "gun" mentioned above is obviously just Red's finger pointed menacingly at Pole.]

Herc stands next to Red and points one hand gun-fashion at Pole. "I'm with you to the end, Red," Herc says. He then puts up the other hand, "Heck, I'll use both guns." [And believe me, this is no bluff--Herc is more than ready to start the laser noises with his mouth if anyone tries anything funny.]

THE END

Sock faces down Pole with a cold hard stare, "Go ahead and shoot him. Then you'll be a fugitive from the Computer forever. You must go through the proper channels to indict anyone. This is suicide, and you know

it. So what it going to be? Drop the laser, or Herc will be forced to use his weapons of mass destruction. Come on, you know you can't win here. Give it up before we make meat helmets out of you."

Sock is trying to heat up Pole's crotch with his pyrokinesis--not much though--just enough to make him uncomfortable.

Red shakes his head, holsters his finger and says, "We'll need bigger firepower, boys." He pulls out an imaginary bazooka from his belt, rests it on his shoulder and holds it around the barrel with his right arm. His left hand is on the imaginary trigger and Red closes one eye as he squints through the imaginary sight.

Already a step ahead of him, Herc was busy pulling out his imaginary heavy caliber semi-automatic assault rifle. Herc braces the imaginary stock against his hip and brings the gun to bear on Pole.

Urly is struggling weakly and looks very angry and scared. Each time he tries to protest, Pole tightens his grip a little, choking him. Urly looks close to passing out.

Pole locks eyes with Red and says, "It is very unfortunate that you feel the need to join Urly in his treason, Red-R. I fear you must also join him in death."

Pole squeezes the trigger, and Urly dies instantly with a smoking hole in his head.

Pole drops the body and shouts, "Puck-O, Herc-O, Sock-O, don't be foolish! The traiters have shown themselves! Glory to the..."

He is cut off as Herc and Red open fire with their imaginary weaponry.

Sock's lame pyrokinesis effort finally kicks in beyond anything he could have imagined.

Pole is in complete shock as the imaginary arms blast him backwards into the wall where he suddenly explodes and his remains burn to the ground.

Red and Herc stare at their imaginary weapons in shock, and then with a shrug, they both re-sling their weapons and congratulate each other enthusiastically.

The arrival of Urly-B-OID-5 is only a formality. Having already destroyed the traitor who caused the unfortunate loss of the cylinders, the remainder of the team can finally relax and enjoy the fruits of a job well done.

After that final horrible display in the briefing room, Red and Herc bullied Sock into registering a pyrokinesis mutation to explain Pole's death. Sock agreed only because it allowed him to take credit for destroying one of the vilest traitors in complex history. As it turns out,

Pole was NOT from Internal Security. In fact he wasn't even from Technical Services as he had first claimed. He was really a janitor from HPD&MC here in OID sector. How he ended up as a troubleshooter, no one knows.

No one is promoted from this (although Sock gets to stay RED), but everyone, including Pole's later clones, do find the credit bonus Kosmik mentioned.

Appendix—Characters

Herc:

You are Herc-R-LES-1, a RED level troubleshooter in service to the Computer.

Herc looks exactly like Steve Buscemi--bug-eyed and creepy looking. He is a toadie. His first task in any situation is to find the person in charge and begin kissing their ass. By bottling up all of his anger and frustrations, Herc makes himself very tense and edgy. Occasionally, this built up emotion will release itself, and Herc will either do something extremely bizarre and out of place, or he will have a sudden burst of irrational anger over something little (usually not related to what got him mad in the first place).

Herc is a member of the CPU service unit. CPU stands for Central Processing Unit. CPU is the central beaurocracy in Alpha Complex, and is in charge of creating all the rules and regulations everyone has to follow (not to mention inspections, we love inspections).

Herc is a member of the secret society Knights of Humanity. The Knights believe that their order of pure humans are destined to rule Alpha Complex. They hate mutants and they hate intelligent machines. They don't believe Computers and robots should be destroyed, but rather that they should be put back in their place and be made to serve mankind again. Mutants are just freaks, though. All mutants should die, whether they register or not.

Herc is a mutant with the ability to become magnetic. This allows him to stick to stuff like walls and ceilings. It also allows him to screw up computers and robots and disks, etc. Sometimes, he can make a metal object magnetic by holding it. Herc is ashamed of being a mutant, but since his power is so useful in working against the Computer, he figures it can't be all bad and he just hides it from the Knights.

Herc has some skill with lasers. He knows a little about electronics and robots (basic operation and repair--that kind of thing). For treasonous skills, Herc is pretty skilled at bribery and forgery.

Herc carries:

- 1 Set of RED coveralls
- 1 Utility belt with fanny pack
- 1 Laser pistol
- 3 RED barrels for laser
- 1 Notepad
- 1 Pen
- 1 Set of RED reflec armor
- 1 Com Unit I
- 1 Electronics toolkit
- 1 Taser

- 1 Jar of "Flubber"
- 3 Happy choco-bars
- 1 Laser pointer
- 2 Pills (Herc was told that these would heal wounds)
- 10 Meters of synthrope
- 1 Grenade
- 1 Decoder card for translating messages from the Knights

Pole:

You are Pole-R-OID-1, a troubleshooter in service to the Computer.

Pole is a non-descript clone of medium height and build. His only outstanding feature is his hair which is bone white and kept in a short buzz cut. His hair has been criticised, because people think he bleaches it to pass as ULTRAVIOLET, but it is natural, so he is allowed to keep it.

Pole is rather bitter and competitive. To him, everything in life is a competition. Everything is win/lose--in every interaction with someone else, there must be a winner and a loser. If the other guy walks away happy, then Pole somehow lost. This is unacceptable. He resents all authority. He hates taking orders, because he hates giving his superiors what they want. But he's not stupid--he knows that life is cheap, and he responds to fear for his life and well-being. He'll do what he's told . . . for now.

As fits his nature, Pole is a member of the Illuminati, the most secret of secret societies. Their goal is ultimate power, and they infiltrate other groups up to the highest level to rule and manipulate without anyone knowing where the true power lies. So far, Pole's only contact within the Illuminati is a hooded clone known only as "Seeker" who shows up with information and mysterious orders. Pole does exactly as told, but dreams of the day he can contact higher Illuminati levels and take "Seeker's" place-- preferably after cutting Seeker's throat.

At Seeker's orders, Pole also joined the Free Press secret society. Free Press believes that the public has the right to be informed, and it is the duty of the Press to seek out and publish all the secrets that the Computer and the High Programmers would like to keep from us. Free Pressers, though, will sometimes keep secrets for a price--their specialty is power through blackmail. Pole loves this, and is a natural at it.

Pole's next goal is to infiltrate the Commies (this is his own idea, not Seeker's). Being a Commie sounds like so much fun, and would piss off everybody.

Pole started his career as a janitor with HPD&MC in the OID sector. With his interest in Free Press, he infiltrated Tech Services to get ahold of some good audio-video equipment. Back at HPD&MC, he began to pass himself off as a filmmaker doing educational and patriotic propaganda films. Now he's stuck taking orders from both organizations, and neither HPD&MC or Tech knows he works for the other. His big fear is that one day, someone will notice that he hasn't showed up for his cleaning duties in several months. Pole is looking for some way to sign on with Internal Security so he can cover all this up and have a good excuse.

[HPD&MC stands for Housing Preservation & Development and Mind Control. They handle janitorial, menial maintenance, and all media.]

Pole is a mutant with the ability to move at hyper speeds. He's not sure of the limits on this, but when he's in top form, he often moves faster than the eye can follow. Time usually slows for him then, and at peak performance, it seems as if everyone is frozen around him. The faster he moves and the longer he sustains it, the more exhausted he is afterward. Once he comes out of hyperspeed, he is reduced to lying on the floor panting and/or sleeping--sometimes for up to several hours--before he is ready to go again.

Pole has no real combat skills, and is not that coordinated. He is a wiz with communications equipment. He knows a little about chemicals in general (from his cleaning experience). His blackmail, intimidation, and con skills are pretty good.

Pole carries:

- 1 Set of RED coveralls
- 1 Utility belt with fanny pack
- 1 Laser pistol
- 3 RED barrels for laser
- 1 Notepad
- 1 Pen
- 1 Set of RED reflex armor
- 1 Com Unit I
- 1 Multicorder II (with programs for audio, video, radar, infrared, and radio. Any two may be used at once in record mode.)--bulky like a large video cam
- 1 Digital color camera (downloads to the multicorder)
- 1 Miniature tape recorder
- 3 Music tapes (You can choose titles)
- 1 Tape of Pole loudly singing patriotic songs (Pole plays this near his Com Unit when he wants to cover a secret conversation)
- 1 Liter bottle of bleach (treasonous-- INDIGO clearance)
- 1 Putty knife
- 3 Stun grenades
- 1 Push broom (Pole carries the 1.6 meter handle and keeps the detached collapsible 1 meter head in his bag)
- 1 Photo of the Golden Gate Bridge (treasonous)

Puck:

You are Puck-R-UPP-1, a RED level troubleshooter in service to the Computer.

Puck is shortish, stoutish, baldish and wears glasses (HAHAHAHA--I stuck you with George Castanza anyway--HAHAHAHA). Puck's dream is to live the good-life. He looks around and sees that everyone has a bigger piece of the pie than he does. All he wants is his due. He is generally angry, jealous, and bitter.

Puck's service group is PLC. Basically, he has been a second-rate shipping clerk for too many cycles and wants a way out.

To this end, he joined up with a group calling themselves The Smithereens. The Smithereens are not actually a secret society, but a program group. Program groups are essentially the work-force and power base for ULTRAVIOLET level high programmers. The particular programmer that The Smithereens work for is Monty-U-BRN-4. Monty-U is the Director of PLC for the 68 sector Western Service Area. He is extremely powerful, with mysterious agendas for bringing more power to himself. The Smithereens serve him in hopes of currying his favor and riding his coattails. Puck has met Monty-U once and can't stand him.

Puck also got to work directly for Smithers-I-NUK-5 once (the clone for whom The Smithereens are named). Puck heard that Smithers was a member of the Sierra Club, so he went and joined the group in an attempt to suck up. Turns out, Puck didn't realize how many different Sierra Club groups there were, and he never got to see Smithers in a meeting. The group he joined is rather militant, and Puck is afraid to quit.

Sierra Clubbers believe in the beauty of the natural Outside world, and believe that mankind should leave Alpha Complex and learn to live off the land. To this end, they seek to find routes to the outside, educate the populace about the outside world, and when possible, bring nature into Alpha Complex. Puck finds nature repulsive, and living off the land is the absolute last thing he wants, but the Sierra Club does provide good contacts and information, so he attends the meetings and goes along with it.

Puck's skills mostly involve number crunching and paper pushing. He also has decent vehicle operation and maintenance skills, and is pretty good with computer operations (data search, data analysis, etc.) Puck is a non-stop butt-kisser and a habitual liar, and he is very bad at both activities. Through the Sierra Club, he has better than average knowledge of the Outside world and ancient cultures and actually knows a little something about basic Outdoor survival (Computer forbid that he should ever have to use it.)

Puck's mutant power is the ability to project illusions into the minds of others. The illusions can affect all of the senses and only work on people--robots, computers, and all recording devices are unaffected by the ability. Puck has always been scared to experiment with this, so he doesn't know its limits. He is most adept with audio illusions. Usually, he affects everyone in the area, but sometimes, he can target just one mind. Also, each person may interpret the illusions slightly differently, so Puck may not know exactly what another person saw or heard in the illusion. Illusions are very draining for Puck. He can do absolutely nothing else while projecting them and often becomes oblivious to changes in his immediate surroundings.

Puck carries:

- 1 Set of RED coveralls
- 1 Utility belt with fanny pack
- 1 Laser pistol
- 3 RED barrels for laser
- 1 Notepad
- 1 Pen
- 1 Set of RED reflec armor
- 1 Com Unit I
- 1 Gas mask
- 20 Dr. Peppy pills
- 1 Personal hygiene kit
- 1 Roll of duct tape
- 1 Penknife
- 1 Set of night-vision goggles (GREEN clearance)
- 1 15cm bar magnet (INDIGO clearance--very treasonous to have)
- 6 Dead bugs in a jar (uses this to impress the hell out of other Sierra Clubbers)

Red:

You are Red-R-MEE-1, a troubleshooter in service to the Computer.

Red is a cartoonish character. He is tall and gangly with a vivid shock of red hair. He is outspoken and generally very sarcastic, using exaggerated movements in almost everything he does. Very Jim Carrey-esque. Think of Jim Carrey in Ace Ventura, or The Mask, or Liar Liar, or... OK--well, anything. He's only got the one character.

Red is a member of the Alpha Complex Armed Forces special operations, undercover service. Red is very proud of his armed forces membership, but nobody knows that's where he's from. He is actually undercover right now and is posing as a lab technician for Research and Design. The army suspects that R&D is working to develop super- weapons for the sole purpose of rendering the army obsolete. Right now, Red is only an observer, and he reports back to his army superiors on a secured wristwatch com-link. He expects to be called on to sabotage R&D efforts.

Red is also a member of the Communists. He is well versed in Communist Propaganda and will attempt to use this on unsuspecting clones to convert them to the Communist cause. So while Red is very proud of his Army service, his loyalty to the Commies always comes first. This may seem like a conflict, but Red takes all of his roles seriously (lab tech, soldier, Commie), and whatever the situation requires of him, he will play with all his heart. Red doesn't see the conflict.

If you haven't guessed, Red is a skilled actor and a first rate bull-shitter. A true con-artist. When he can, he will put on new roles like Axl Foley in Beverly Hills Cop or Fletch in...well, Fletch.

Red carries a laser, and is proficient in its use. His real combat specialty, though, is unarmed. Wrestling, pugilism, kickboxing--whatever the move, Red can probably pull it off with a certain measure of comic grace.

In his lab tech cover, Red has also had some training in basic robotics (operation/repair/ some programming).

Red is also a mutant. He has the ability to make his body extremely plastic, and can change shape to fit almost anything. This is very handy for flattening out to slide under or around doors. Hiding under rugs to eavesdrop. Stretching his limbs many meters to get those hard to reach places. This is usually pretty reliable, although it has backfired a few times. Once, he became just a puddle, and slipped down the shower drain. It was 7 hours before he pulled himself together and was able to crawl out of that recycler chamber.

Experiment with this and feel free to ask about limits.

Red carries:

- 1 Set of RED coveralls
- 1 Utility belt with fanny pack
- 1 Laser pistol
- 3 RED barrels for laser
- 1 Notepad
- 1 Pen
- 1 Set of RED reflec armor
- 1 Com Unit I
- 1 Set of brass knuckles
- 23 Pamphlets entitled "The Communist Manifesto for Dummies"
- 2 Regular grenades
- 2 Smoke grenades
- 1 Grenade that Red was told contains "Mustard Gas"
- 10 Meters of plasticord
- 2 Packs of Ever-Chew bubble gum
- 1 Encoded special army issue wristwatch com-link
- 1 Cheap plastic "Junior Trotskyite Commando" star
- 1 Folding shovel (this is kind of bulky and YELLOW clearance)
- 1 GREEN inkpad (Red doesn't have any stamps for it, but is always looking for some)

Sock:

You are Sock-R-TES-1, a troubleshooter in service to the Computer.

Sock is a big, big man. His stands about six foot six and is built like a bear. He has a fairly bushy beard (beards are not strictly regulation, but R & D isn't real strict about appearance).

When it came time for Sock to join a service group, he cheated on his aptitude test. He cheated off a really smart friend. After he and his friend were questioned, the friend was executed for cheating, and Sock went to join the science geeks in Research and Development (R & D). Because of his test, everyone thinks that Sock is the most brilliant scientist ever, when actually, he doesn't know his ass from a test tube, and he's been faking his way through ever since. Sock hates it that everyone thinks he's smart, but he can't get out of it without being executed.

Sock is a mutant with the ability to become invisible. Being invisible is pretty easy and doesn't take much energy, but it makes Sock gassy, and he gets the farts real bad if he's invisible too long.

Sock joined the secret society PSION. People in PSION are all mutants with mental powers. They think they're going to rule the earth some day because mental powers make them better than everyone else. Sock thinks they're a bunch of stuck-up eggheads, but he joined up to impress his science friends so they wouldn't catch on to him. He does what they say, but he's not happy about it.

PSION provided training for Sock to develop new powers. The only thing that's happened so far is Sock has pyrokinesis. He can set things on fire with his mind. It doesn't work so good. Most times nothing happens, and even when it works, Sock can never tell if it's just going to heat up a little or if everything around him is going to burn to the ground.

Sock's other secret society is the Sierra Club. If his R & D and PSION buddies knew he was in the Sierra Club, they would probably shoot him, but Sock loves it. The Sierra Club believes that everyone should get back to nature. Everyone should move Outside and live off the land without any walls or rules or science. This sounds like heaven to Sock, and he never misses the weekly meetings. Sierra Clubbers are always trying to find stuff from Outside and try to bring nature inside to Alpha Complex.

Sock can talk tech and make it sound good (together you and I can make this sound convincing when you need it), but doesn't really know anything about science. He does know a bit about the Outdoors and outdoor survival plus some stuff about ancient cultures before

the Computer. Due to his size, Sock is a heck of a hand to hand fighter, but doesn't do so good with any kind of weapons. Sock is a pretty good forger and can fast-talk his way out of most things.

Sock carries:

- 1 Set of RED coveralls
- 1 Utility belt with fanny pack
- 1 Laser pistol
- 3 RED barrels for laser
- 1 Notepad
- 1 Pen
- 1 Set of RED reflec armor
- 1 Com Unit I
- 1 RED lab coat
- 1 Beaker of acid (at least, I think it's acid)
- 1 Beaker of red dye (maybe)
- 1 Small bag of real dirt from Outside
- 1 Butane lighter
- 1 Liter bottle of butane to refill the lighter
- 1 Large knife
- 2 Stim patches
- 1 Dictation machine
- 1 Ball of string
- 1 Magic 8-ball (very treasonous)