

## The Network

(A Short Story by T. U.-P.)

Late the next morning, Darryl awakens in the same dark nook of the cavernous 'Oasis'. Letting his eyes adjust to the low light, he is hit by a wave of anxiety before he finds his bearings and realizes he is neither back in Skeltopp or under an underpass in some remote part of Trench Megacity.

"Our newbie is finally up! Good morning Sleeping Beauty!" A voice says from a dank corner of the same grotto-like chamber.

"Good mornin'!" Darryl replies with a slightly fatigued yawn.

"Come have some coffee to wake up! It's Angela's special, ground for us and everything!" The same man says adjusting an old pair of glasses tied together with think electrical tape.

"What's the weather outside like today?" Darryl asks.

"You're lucky you found us when you did! Bobo checked the weather at 5am this morning like he usually does and the white stuff was really coming down. Looks like we're in for a real squall today!"

"Can I have a peak at the internet you guys are connected to? Been so long after all those days being stuck in the MindFrame at Skeltopp. Made me forget all about the World Wide Web and and how I used to have fun surfing it..."

"Sure thing. We've got a self-serve portal in the next room. It is a bit chilly in there though. I would bundle up. We'll find you some clothes to change into."

"Thanks."

After getting a few new layers to change into, Darryl goes to the small computer station where another man with a long braided beard is conversing online with a faraway ally. The man turns to him saying hello and instructs him on how to connect to the internet.

"I take it it's been a long time since you last explored the web. Things may have changed but you'll be connected soon enough. Just double click that small dark blue icon and use your mouse and keyboard to do the rest!"

"Thanks! You can actually talk directly with others directly through the keyboard?" Darryl inquires curiously.

"Of course. They call it a chat. Right now, I'm talking to an ally from Getz Ravine... There's a whole colony out there like us. They aren't Skeltoppers though. In their case, they are fleeing being chemically registered from places like \_\_\_\_\_."

"How far is Getz Ravine? I've never heard of it."

“Well you see, it’s not really on a map or a grid in a conventional way. The old ravine is at least three hundred clicks away. The colony is said to live underground on the edge of the \_\_\_\_\_ river valley. Like us, they’ve learned to keep their outpost hidden. They wish they could welcome more folks but they always have to make sure no one goes there who can be chemically tracked.”

“Are they part of the network with folks like Angela?”

“I suppose they are. We’re all kind of running from the same big machine...”

“I hear they can pinpoint your location on a map with something called ‘neuro-tracers’. They say that’s how they can find you if you flee after being registered.” Darryl adds.

“You ever been registered, bro?”

“No, just been on ‘corrective’ pills for MindFrame research. When I fled Skeltopp, they had to follow my tracks in the powdery snow.”

“I’ll try to get you connected with my online buddy from Getz. I can tell you’re curious about that place.” The man tells Darryl before shifting back into his conversation on the chat line.

After about an hour spent learning how to surf again online, Darryl sits down for a meal in the warming cavity by the same fire pit. As he mingles with other ‘Oasis’ folk, he strikes up a conversation with a woman seated on a log just across from him.

“I hear you’re curious about Getz. I actually relocated here from Getz about a year or so back.” She says with a wise and insightful tone of voice.

“Really? Is it tough to find the place? I hear Getz is not even on a regular map these days.”

“If you’re really keen on risking it to get there. I know more or less how to get there.” She replies.

“Thanks. My name is Darryl by the way. Was it hard to find this place?”

“Hi Darryl, I’m Cindy. I got in touch with Angie when I got off the ferry. The weather wasn’t as snowy outside when I found this place. It was spring when I came upon the culvert that took me inside this place and I’ve been here ever since.”

“How do they keep getting supplies here? Angie can’t always be there to deliver stuff when we need it.”

“Funny you should ask. This Tuesday, it’s me on ferry duty. That means it’s my turn to go shop along the waterfront back in Trench. We have a whole system to be discreet and avoid being tracked here as well.”

“How does that work? And where do the funds come from?” Darryl asks.

“Our beloved Angie takes one person a week to escort her on the ferry as an acquaintance of hers. This takes dressing up a certain way. She also helps that person carry the load back on the ferry at a set time each week. As for the funds, her late husband, who had quite a fortune in the financial sector was sent to Skeltopp and later died there. Ever since, Angie has been our big sister and has saved quite a few souls across to Providence with her generosity.”

“I think I’ll stay here for a few months and test the waters to get to Getz Ravine. I have a feeling that colony life may suit me better. Maybe you can help me plan my way there.”

“Sure thing Darryl.”

“Thanks Cindy.”

The End...