

The Cloud

Chapter One: **Somehow I Knew This Would Happen**

The digital rain poured down clear and fast, melting into the Cloud. I sat on a flat silicone circle that floated in thin air, above an unlikely flat metal landscape, head in hands, brain locked in overload.

Alone? You could say that. I was unable to interface with the Cloud, I couldn't even parse it, but it was there all the same, a stark octagonal orange world of terrible symmetry. Clean, soaring crystalline lines determined its limits. The traffic, an orgy of pulsing, chaotic fluidity, emitted a hum, barely below the threshold of human perception, the sound that an entire planet makes as it calls, answers, kills, loves, hangs up, searches.

The InTech team at the Outland Institute needed someone to volunteer, someone to physically visit the dimensional aberration where the Cloud existed, film the environment, and come back. I wasn't technically a volunteer, but through luck and a coin toss, I now had a chance to erase my tax troubles, a couple of DUI's, a bigamy conviction, and obtain a secure spot in a witness protection program. Yippee.

I'm not dumb. I do have a B.A. in Medieval Studies from Pottstown College, but my learning on information systems stopped at note-bearing arrows thumping into castle doors.

Apparently, my rap was convincing enough. I only had to kiss half a dozen asses and send one death threat. Me, Marston Tidwell, star reporter for the Bergen Bugle, the guy who twice faked his own death. Yeah, that's right, one bad customer. If I'm investigating you, you're toast. I'll find out what you had for breakfast this morning, when you last cheated on your taxes, who both you and your wife are currently screwing, and whether you would set off that three-inch penis detector they have at the entrance to the Bugle newsroom. For your information, I never set it off, but you know who did?

Never mind, it'll be in the book.

They placed me in a stifling, heavy harness covered with so many fine filaments it looked like a copper cocoon. Two cables trailed from the metal lozenge. One cord plugged into a wall socket and one connected to the usb port on a laptop. Oh, great. What's this, the sequel to Tron?

"This won't hurt a bit," lied the joker who pulled the switch, sending me into a maelstrom of subatomic identities.

I was reconstituted or rearranged on the other end. Isn't that the way it always works, though? At least there wasn't a fly in the suit with me. Ha! Or another person.

I felt pretty good, though. Energized. And wondering how the hell I was going to get back, having lost my commlink. The hand held device, my lifeline to the world, had disappeared en route. My video camera was nowhere to be found, and I had lost my clothing as well, but somehow was clothed. Well, sort of. I was wearing a cute little skirt, no underwear, an argyle sweater, one Birkenstock leather sandal, and a red Ferragamo high heel. I had entered the copper cocoon clad in my orange Bergen County Jail jumpsuit.

Someone, or something, sure had a strange sense of humor. Thus far, the Cloud wasn't turning out to be anything other than a weird nightmare, and without my commlink and camera, how was I going to take pictures and return? It looked like the mad scientists would have to take my word for it. If I could get back, that is.

About then I noticed that the Cloud had a familiar, overwhelming odor. It smelled like garlic. Not like your breath after a Sicilian pizza, no. More like a handful of garlic fresh from my SlapChop.

I stood up, testing the hard metallic landscape underfoot. Seemed sturdy enough. I started walking. Might as well earn my money. Maybe this could be my new book. Dollar signs flashed...for a second.

The cloud was changing color. What had been a deep orange was turning a hot red, the light bathed the interior of the octagon. I kept moving. The temperature began to rise, the air was warming.

A hundred questions crowded my thoughts. Was I being watched? If so, could they help me? Was there anyone else in this place? Am I gonna die here? Am I already dead? Shit, I need a drink.

I walked, watching the incredible interplay of visible information streams. Motes of brilliance flashed into being at places where the streams converged. Watching all this within the confines of the octagon was dizzying, confusing. I much preferred the chaos of my previous universe. At least it didn't make me nauseous if I stargazed or went sight-seeing. The air around me was getting warmer.

It wasn't long before I found my clothes.

She was wearing my jumpsuit, limping along, cursing at the top of her lungs.

"Who the hell are you!?" She was pissed, looked like she was going to hit me.

"Uh, Marston, they call me...Marston. Who are you?"

"Tracie Garcon, goddammit. I'm the InTech project guide." She stared at me. "You're wearing my clothes."

"Whatever." She was irritating me. I was in no mood.

"Wait," she spat. "Didn't they tell you?"

"Tell me what."

"That you aren't the first."

"Look, all I'm here for is to take pictures, send a signal, then get the hell out. Something went wrong."

"Obviously." Her tone had changed.

I took a good look. Redhead, long legs, lips to die for. Beautiful when angry. You know the type. I needed to know more.

"If you're the project guide, then can you guide us out of here?"

The reaction was totally unexpected. She sat down and started to cry. "I....I....don't know!"

I walked to her, tried to hug her. She pushed me away. I backed off for a minute, stared at the fantastic structure overhead as it began to morph into a deep purple.

"Let's get going," I ventured. "Maybe we can find a way out."

"There is no way out without a commlink," she replied. "Just the same, there's nothing

going on in this sector. I say we head that way." She pointed toward a far corner of the octagon.

We picked ourselves up and started off, trudging, quiet.

It could have been hours, a day, a day and a night that we walked. She spoke little at first, and I didn't want to antagonize her, so I remained silent as long as I could.

"Tracie."

"Yes."

"Tell me about the Cloud."

She relaxed. The tension drained from her shoulders.

"Well, it's a simple concept. It's a paradigm shift where details are abstracted from the users who no longer need knowledge of, expertise in, or control over the technology infrastructure in the cloud that supports them. It completely virtualizes the user's resources. You don't need a computer anymore, just a device to access the cloud, where the virtual resources are."

I must have appeared to her like some slack-jawed idiot. This was some heavy shit.

"Don't worry," she added. "You'll be able to buy *The Cloud for Dummies*."

Sounded strange. You mean I would have no control over or even own my own computer? We walked a bit more, while I turned this over and over in my mind.

We crested a steep rise, and there, on the downward slope we came upon the motorcycle. It was sitting there abandoned, a flame blue pearl ElectraGlide with the keys in it. Tracie gestured toward the bike. "Can you ride this hog?"

"Sure."

"Let's go."

She climbed onto the seat behind me. I started the engine. It thrummed with that throaty syncopated growl you just don't hear much any more.

Sweet.

We rode in what we thought was a straight line for an hour or so and pulled up to a box we

had seen from a distance. Chinese characters marked the wooden sides. I pulled off the top. It turned out to be a cache of dried food and bottles of water.

Tracie took one look. "These were left here by the others."

"What others?" I asked.

"Chinese hacker group. Guy named Hap Ning."

I was intrigued now. "How do you know this?"

"It started last year. We thought our physical access to the cloud was proprietary. We didn't reckon on the Chinese teaming up with the aliens."

"Aliens?!"

"Yeah. They've got faster-than-light travel, but still computing with our equivalent of Windows 7. They need cloud technology to... to..."

This was getting more interesting by the minute.

"To what?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe, take over the cloud?"

"How the hell could they do that? It's just a big glob of information, right?"

"No. It's how we run our planet and its systems, water, agriculture, commerce, energy, security. Maybe they're just here for the coffee."

My head was starting to spin. "You mean the aliens could sabotage the Cloud? Oh, and why would the Chinese be partnered with them? No, don't tell me."

She shrugged. "OK, I won't." She began to pile the food and water bottles in the bike saddlebags. "We're gonna need this."

I helped her empty the box, then took a long drink of water. Tasted good. It was the first water I'd had since I'd been in this place. We got back on the bike. Tracie tapped me on the shoulder, pointing to the far horizon on the left. I headed in that direction, wondering how far the gas we had would take us. Tracie put her arms around my waist, and scooted up tight, her lips on my

neck. I couldn't say anything, just gunned it.

Chapter 2: Tiki Bob

It was simply by chance that Tiki Bob was reduced to a binary sum and projected into the octagonal universe. One minute he was playing Old Maid and drinking beer with his friend B.L., and in the blink of an eye, when he turned on his custom-built massaging easy chair, he was transported to this place. Everywhere he moved his massive wooden body, the building block walls around him silently shifted away, their terrible moving symmetry clean and precise. As he inched forward, the walls separated to allow him through, closing in behind him. When he stood still, the octagons that made up the walls glowed, a dull bit of light that pulsed in time with his heartbeat. He looked up and could not see the end of the structures. He stretched out a long woody hand, a hand that could feel into the future, and found the end of the walls. He walked out into a vast flat plain with eight sides that met at a ceiling that was so far away it didn't make sense. The patterns of huge electromagnetic fields pulsed. His senses tingled.

Tiki Bob wasn't at all happy about this. The play of intense light overhead hurt his eyes, and he found himself weak and exhausted. He tried to summon up his power to manipulate space and time. Usually, all he had to do was think about it, and he was transported there. When he needed an object, no matter where it was, he could summon it, and the object would transport to his vicinity.

When he tried to go back in time past his starting point, nothing happened. Could it be those gargantuan fields of energy and flux that flashed overhead?

He decided to summon up an object, his car, the Tikimobile. Everyone on the streets of East Hell had seen the Tikimobile at one time or another, it was his prime transportation when he simply had to run to Walgreen's or Starbuck's. He thought about the car, his brain feeling every cell and fiber of its wood body.

Nothing happened. At least, not at first.

He waited a bit, then resigned, started walking. With a crackle and flush of pink wind, a hole

opened up in the air near him and pushed out its contents onto the silicon earth. It was a motorcycle, engine still warm. Pearly blue paint, lots of chrome, it looked like a show bike from Lowrider Magazine. The only thing missing was the girl. And Tiki Bob did love the girls.

Tiki Bob was nearly eight feet tall, too big to fit the bike comfortably. He was going to need to make some alterations. He scowled and concentrated until the bike slowly began to enlarge. There. He mounted up, turned the key, the engine fired and he rode away. Fifty yards into his journey, a hole opened in the still air, and another identical Harley Davidson Electraglide popped out. Then another, fifty yards further. He pulled over, cut the engine.

He stretched out his arm, trying to feel the hole in the air. There was no there there. He pulled his woody appendage back and stood silent, thinking.

This was a situation Tiki Bob wasn't used to. He was definitely not in control of things. Usually, he could just snatch some asshole and send him to September the fifth, 1714, the court of Louie XIV, dressed in a tutu, singing *Happy Birthday Mr. President*. He did that to the Mayor of East Hell once. Just as the guards approached with drawn swords, he snatched him back from sure death, and dropped him into a Pink Floyd concert in San Diego in 1972. Someone handed his honor a joint. He took a hit, and immediately was transported, still in his tutu, to his office building during a City Council meeting, smoking doober in hand, exhaling. The Mayor and his henchmen left Tiki Bob alone after that.

This, however, was different. He tried to send out a mental message to his friend B.L. If anybody was capable of assisting him, surely B.L., a.k.a. Satan, could.

Nothing. He turned in a new direction, screwed up his big woody face and directed all the mental energy he could.

Nothing.

He hopped on the bike, started it up, and roared off in the direction he was pointed. His intellect was now being fully challenged. He kept adding two plus two and coming up with six. He went into tiki-god mode, his brain, an organic hypercomputer, assessed the environment, the recent history, and searched its internal database for logical solutions. It rebooted several times, momentarily disconnecting Tiki Bob from reality.

The ground underfoot rose gently, he let the bike nose into the down slope direction. The overhead show was now turning violet, bathing the landscape in soft electric strands. He continued his drive setting his sights on a far edge of the immense octagon. His internal circuits were now ineffectual, off-line. All he could do was ride, looking for anything. Anything.

Chapter 3: The Coffee Run

Guardmaster Footh sat at the helm of his freighter, caffeine coursing through his external polyps, edgy, excited. He was preparing for the next Earth coffee run, reading down the preflight checklist with BoBo, his first mate.

"Hydromatic equalizer on."

"Check."

"Blue blinker blinking"

"Check."

"Planet atomizer activated."

"Check."

"Windows closed."

"Check."

"Parking brake on."

"Check."

"Cash or..."

"Check... Hey, wait a minute!"

Footh chuckled, nearly cracking his bony carapace. *Heh, heh*. He caught BoBo on that one every time. He was in a good mood. Sales were up, and he felt like the king of the known cosmos. He needed to head for Earth and pick up a load of coffee. There were a couple of stops first, to see how his espresso machine factory and Starbuck's franchise on Quadrilla Prime was doing. But first, time for another cup of black gold. He set the coordinates for Garlock's, the roadhouse near the

corner of his system, a twenty minute trip.

"Prepare to get underway."

"Aye-aye, sir!"

BoBo turned a large dial pointer to a Kauffion integer, computing the faster-than-light jump to Earth's quaint little moon.

"Ready sir?"

"Ready."

BoBo pushed the stick forward, activating the drive, and the vessel rose from the ground. Footh disappeared.

One moment he was strapped into his jumpseat, and the next he was gone. Alarmed, BoBo throttled back the drive and activated his commlink.

"Caffeine Ride calling Caffeine Leader."

There was only silence. He reset the autosearch function and pressed the any key.

There was no response from Footh's tracking implant.

"Caffeine Ride calling Caffeine Leader...Come in Caffeine Leader."

Chapter 4 : Meetup

We weren't exactly prepared when the unlikely rider appeared, jetting across the silicon toward us. We pulled up, got off the bike. As the solitary figure came closer, alarm bells started going off in my head.

This particular biker didn't exactly have the familiar outline of a human being. Whatever "it" was, throttling that Harley down, human it was not. A red unitard-wearing biped with bumpy scales and huge puppy dog eyes is the best description I could find. The creature wheeled the twin of our ride up to within talking distance, then dismounted. It took a second till I could find my voice.

"Who or what the fuck is that?" I didn't really expect Tracie's glib answer.

"Oh, that's Footh." She seemed a little too nonchalant at that moment.

"Footh?"

"Yeah, that's his name. He's from Quadrilla Prime."

"Quad....he's, he's..."

"Yeah, he's alien. He's just here for the coffee."

What? Alien? Coff..? I tried to man up and do something with this sudden information. But what? The alien didn't appear to be armed. Tracie had a smile on her face. I didn't relax. Footh walked over to us and spoke.

"Tracie, what is this place?" His voice was smooth as 20 year old scotch. On the carapace that protected his neck were several polyps that constantly shifted colors, I found out later, depending on his mood. Right now, they were almost black.

Tracie looked at me then answered. "Footh, this is the Cloud!"

Footh's polyps turned a sickening shade of mauve. "And who is this?" He motioned toward me with one bony claw.

"My friend Marston."

"Well, Tracie and My Friend Marston, how did I arrive here, and where is the way out!?" His voice rose and his polyps glowed cherry red.

"Footh, we don't know. We're stranded, just like you." Tracie stared up at the vast octagonal canopy overhead as it shifted colors to a deep indigo lit by a billion moving flashes. She put her hand in mine. Footh's polyps faded to orange.

"We're trying to find our commlinks," explained Tracie. "It's the only way to activate the T-Device."

"What the hell is a T-Device?" I asked her.

"That copper cocoon they wrapped you in. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah." "I asked then the obvious. "How the hell do you know this...alien?"

"Oh, he and his friends have been visiting us for a couple of years. My office deals with extraterrestrials almost exclusively."

I couldn't accept or fathom this, but reality spoke its one word, "Believe."

Chapter 5: Things Get Complicated

We were a sorry looking collection, me, shoeless, still in the sad rags I came to the Cloud in, Tracie, who I didn't know from Eve, but whom I decided I needed, and this, *this alien being* with the radio announcer's voice and his superior attitude. He was telling us how well his StarBuck's franchise on Quadrilla Prime was doing and how many daughter/wives he owned, and how his quarterly earnings were paying for his new Luxo CS. He turned his unblinking eyes on me. And stared.

"And what have you done lately, my friend Marston?"

"Well, I successfully completed my community service, and...."

I didn't have a chance to finish.

A black circle appeared in the air near Tracie and then disappeared. The pervasive garlic smell in the air changed to that of a stagnant lagoon with hundreds of dead rotting fish lining the shore. This couldn't be good. We heard the engine, then saw something unbelievable. I could swear I was looking at a motorcycle riding giant tiki, just like the one outside the Cucaracha Club in North Bergen. I grabbed Tracie and pulled her to me. She pushed away.

"Easy, now, it's Tiki Bob," she looked at me like I was some kind of idiot.

"That's what I was going to guess. Right. A giant Tiki. On a freakin' motorcycle."

"I'll explain later," she actually looked at me sympathetically. I couldn't tell, but hoped it was genuine.

This Tiki Bob was still twenty yards away when he reached out a long woody arm, stretching it to where I stood, and thumped me on the forehead.

"Ouch! Fuck!"

"I get a little angry at people sometimes." His voice was normal, but his big wooden body, covered with intricate carvings was seated on another Harley that was somehow...bigger than mine.

"Well, I'm getting a little angry now too!" I yelled. I didn't care. "I suppose you're here to rescue us?"

"No."

"Don't fuck with him," warned Tracie. "He can manipulate space and time."

"I wish I could," said Tiki Bob. "But here in this place my powers are limited."

Footh weighed in, sucking up. "Guardmaster Footh of the Kauffion Empire, at your service." He extended his bony claw, Tiki Bob took it in his long wooden nightmarish fingers.

Footh spoke. "You don't by any chance have any coffee on you, do you?"

"No."

Footh's polyps were turning black again. "I need coffee, and soon!"

"We need to get moving," I ventured. "We need to find our commlinks and get out of here."

All concerned agreed, and we mounted up and went spinning over the silicon prairie. We rode in one direction until overwhelmed with fatigue, we stopped and reclined under the fantastic display that was the Cloud.

Chapter 6: Tracie and Me

I awoke to an eerie silence. The usual barely-minimal hum from the Cloud was gone, and a large dark patch was visible in one corner of the far-off ceiling. Tiki Bob was up and scooting back toward the campsite.

"What's up?" I asked in my least reporterly tone.

"What's goin' on?" replied Tiki Bob.

A bit unnerved by this little word play interlude, I pointed to the black patch. "What's up with *that*?"

Tiki Bob smiled, then did an incredible thing. He turned to one side, reached one wooden finger straight out, and drew a solid black circle in mid air. At the same moment, an identical black circle appeared nearly thirty feet overhead. Tiki Bob thrust his woody arm into the circle in front of

him, smirked maliciously, and then laughed, a deep, sonorous chuckle. His extended arm and hand now dangled from the black circle above us. Open mouthed, I watched as his arm stretched down, down, towards me. The elongated fingers stopped at eye level, paused, then reached over and thumped me in the forehead.

"OWW!"

Tiki Bob howled, withdrew his arm, then answered my original question. "The Cloud has experienced a major outage."

I turned, head still smarting, and walked back to the others. Footh was standing on his head, mumbling to himself. I didn't ask.

Tracie was up. She motioned towards Footh. "Morning meditation."

"Oh...ok. Uh, Tiki Bob says the Cloud is experiencing an outage."

"I know. I see it." The orange ceiling outside the black patch was changing, darkening, no longer as brilliant.

"Is it bad?" was all I could think to ask.

"How would I know?" She scowled. "The manual didn't cover this."

"Well, that's just fucking great," I muttered, then added, "so, are we gonna get out of this place any time soon?"

Tracie ignored me and sat down with one of the food boxes. She tossed me a water bottle and rummaged in the box. She pulled out a Hershey Bar and unwrapped it.

"Want half?" There was a funny little smile on her face.

I was starving. "Uh...sure."

"Then come and get it." She broke off a piece and put it between her teeth.

Now, it had been a long time for me. Work always seemed to intervene in any possible relationships, and my sex life had been, well, inconsistent. The absurdity of the immediate situation wasn't lost on me, "But," I thought, "*This moment would never, ever, happen again.*" I floated to her, scooped her to me, and took a bite of the chocolate in her teeth. Her teasing eyes were the deepest green I'd ever seen, especially up close, like this, and they never left mine.

We nibbled the chocolate, lips and bodies close, then as if cued by some other worldly director, came together in a desperate, yearning, Level 5 liplock, and stayed that way, unable and unwilling to release our tight grip on one another.

Footh stopped his mumbled meditation, rose to his feet and stared at us. Tiki Bob ignored us as he practiced drawing more black circles in the air and reaching into them, searching.

On the near horizon, a black car appeared, moving slowly. Wrapped in a delectable sweetness, I scarcely gave it a second look.

Tracie pulled away, our scant moment broken, when she saw the approaching vehicle.

"Fuck, it's them."

"Who is it?"

"Chinese hacker gang."

I tried to be as nonchalant as possible. "Hey, aren't those guys Footh's friends?"

"I don't know."

"Well, keep alert and let's see if *they've* got a way out of this place."

The car was close enough now to see clearly. It was a midnight black electric Luxo Z400, all the windows tinted purple. The car slid to a halt when Footh took a step in its direction. The Luxo sat there, silent, parked on the silicon path. We watched as Footh fearlessly strolled over to the passenger door and opened it up.

"Would you gentlemen by any chance have any coffee?" he asked, his antenna quivering.

Chapter 7: The Foo Tang Clan

Singapore's street traffic never, ever, stopped, the sound of passing jitneys and screaming ricksha drivers mingled with the blast of bus horns and truck engines. The sole place of solace from the constant barrage was the temple that stood silent on the edge of Ang Mo Kio Park. Within its grey stone structure, Chi Li Dong, the Foo Tang Clan enforcer, was ushered into the inner sanctuary. Foo Tang, the Man, entered from another door. His green silk robe brushed the marble floors as

he walked. The robe had a pocket protector, and he stared over the horn rimmed glasses perched on his nose. He walked up and embraced Dong.

"Mr. Dong! Thank you for coming. How is your family? A cup of tea?"

"You are welcome, master, and the family is very well, thank you." Dong semi-bowed, then followed Foo Tang over to the ornate table and chairs. Tang poured hot tea from a gold plated teapot into two tiny white ceramic mugs. They sipped in silence.

Tang put down his cup and clapped. Two black robed servants appeared. One took the teapot, the other took the cups. They bowed and backed out of the room.

"Now, what's this nonsense I've been hearing about the Green Clan Hacking Team beating us to the Cloud?"

Dong appeared contrite. "Master, it is true. After much investigation, we have determined that the Green Clan had a man on the inside at InTech. We are still tracking his every movement, and expect to make our move soon.

"It has been called to my attention that there are others in the Cloud as well."

"Personally, Master, I have no information about that, but I promise you that I will find out."

Tang waved one hand impatiently. "You will find this problem and fix it."

Dong stood up. "I will guarantee this, master."

"Very good. You may leave now."

Dong bowed and scraped all the way to the door. Outside, in the misty early morning air, he realized he was sweating profusely. He hailed a three wheeled cab, and instructed the driver to proceed to the airport.

Six hours later, Chi Li Dong stood under cloudy skies near a crumbling factory in a dilapidated industrial area of Beijing. Somewhere in the complex, Zi Zhu Diao, the Dance of the Golden Snake was playing, one lonely string crying into the silence. A man ran, pushing a wheelbarrow with one chicken in it down the walkway, hurrying away from an unseen threat. He looked back over his shoulder at Chi Li Dong as he ran, the chicken squawking furiously.

Dong pushed the button, while the overhead camera scrutinized him. At the same moment, a long black electric Luxo Z400 with darkened tinted windows pulled up. Three unsmiling men in sunglasses and checkered suits stepped out. Dong's Cloud team was here.

They entered the door and walked up metal stairs to a tiny office on the catwalk. A man wearing a monocle spit in a rag and carefully polished the small square metallic grey box on the cluttered workbench. The man stopped, muttered something in Mandarin, wiped his sweaty brow, then placed the box on a yellow satin pillow.

Chi Li Dong spoke. "Mr. Ying, your artistry is impeccable." He inspected the box on the pillow, then picked it up and handed it to Lester, one of his crew.

"Thank you master. Here are the operating instructions. You must follow them explicitly, or you will either fail to access the cloud physically, or you will become stranded in the cloud, unable to return."

"Thank you Mr. Ying. The money will be placed into your account immediately."

"Uh, master. I was hoping that perhaps we could discuss an increase in my fee. Times are hard, and I have a family...."

Dong cut him off. "The fee is reasonable. It is what we will pay, no more." He pulled a pistol from his waistband, chambered a round and sighted down the gunbarrel. "Do you understand?"

"Yes master, I understand," Ying was bitter.

Dong and his crew, Lester Yang and Eu Chin boarded the sedan and drove off. Ying cursed them under his breath.

The Hackers Show Up

Footh was in ecstasy. One of the three that had driven up in the Eluxo had produced a bottled Starbucks Frappacino. Before Lester would let loose of the bottle though, he requested, and received, a promise of a management job at Footh's newest Starbuck's franchise on Quadrilla Prime.

Footh drained the bottle, belched, then threw the empty to the ground. Tracie and I watched this little scenario play out before us. The apparent leader of the three men in the car walked over to us and held out his hand.

Tracie held back, Tiki Bob was still occupied with drawing circles in the air. I extended my hand.

"Marston Tidwell. And you?"

"Chi Li, just call me Chi Li. My associates are Lester and Eu."

"Not me," I retorted. "I'm not your associate."

"No, Eu," he repeated, then motioned a smiling, checkered suited young man forward. "This is Eu Chin, my technical chief." Eu bowed, stiff and formal. "Now then, what has brought you and your interesting...associates...to the Cloud?" His voice had turned smarmy and condescending.

"I was about to ask you the same thing, Chairman Mao." I had decided I didn't trust or like this dude. I caught a movement in the corner of my vision. It was Lester, pulling a nine millimeter from his white leather belt.

I grabbed Tracie, pulled her close. She pulled away and spoke.

"I'm Tracie Garcon, the InTech guide for this sector, Mr. Chi Li or whatever the hell your name is. And...I want to know just what you and your hacker crew are doing here, how you got here, and who you work for." She wasn't the least bit intimidated.

While this conversation was going on, Tiki Bob had stopped his incessant black hole search and was edging slowly toward us. Lester nervously fingered the nine millimeter. Footh was busy rummaging through the interior of the Luxo, apparently looking for more coffee.

The darkened patch in the overhead display was darker now, the outage in the cloud was spreading. Tiki Bob reached out and drew another circle in empty air.

"We are the new owners of the Cloud," pronounced Chi Li Dong. "And as your new employer...heh ha..." He started to giggle. "I've always wanted to do this....YOU'RE FIRED!!"

I pulled Traci behind me. She didn't protest. Lester now had the nine millimeter pointed in our direction. I noticed his gun hand was shaking. I tried to reason.

"Wait! we didn't come here of our own accord! We're just stuck here! We wanna go home!"

Lester just smirked while Chi Li thought it over. Eu stood by, bemused. Chi Li took too long, though. Tiki Bob reached up into his new black circle. Another identical circle appeared over the

Luxo. Tiki Bob's wooden hand came slashing through, thumped an unsuspecting Lester in the forehead, ripped off his trousers, exposing his rubber ducky boxers, then snatched his weapon, pulling it up through the hole, which promptly disappeared. This happened faster than thought, everyone observing stood dumbfounded as Tiki Bob played with the weapon. He pointed it at the hacker crew, the twirled it round and round, simulated blowing smoke from the barrel, then fake holstered it. He was obviously enjoying himself.

The hacker crew, led by Chi Li, rushed the Luxo, piled in, slammed the doors. Chi Li stuck his head and arms out the window. He held out two small metal briefcases.

"Oh, by the way, look what we found!" He laughed that creepy, sinister chortle. I recognized the cases immediately. They were our commlinks. The car sped off in the direction of the ever darkening outage. I started to breathe easier. My relief was short lived, however.

"Where's Footh?" I asked, then answered my own question. "Dammit, he's still in the car!" Still looking for his stupid coffee.

"You ok?" I clutched Tracie tightly, she was trembling.

"I'm ok."

Tiki Bob mounted his oversized Harley, cranked the starter and roared off across the silicon prairie in the direction of the fleeing hackers, one big wooden knuckled hand on the handlebar and holding the gun in the other.