

42 Sunrise at Coffi

By Raymond K. Paden

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Thomas sat alone upon the cold stone, shivering slightly in the chilly pre-dawn air of this April morning. The flashlight was turned off, resting beside him on the bare granite of Coffin Rock, and involuntarily he strained his eyes in the gray non-light of the false dawn, trying to make out the shapes of the trees, and the mountains across the river. Below, he could hear the chuckling of the water as it crossed the polished stones. How many times had he fished there, his grandfather beside him.

He tried to shrug away the memories, but why else had he come here except to remember. Perhaps to escape the inevitable confrontation with his mother. She would have to be told sooner or later, but Thomas infinitely preferred later.

"Mom, I've been expelled from the University," he said aloud in a conversational tone. Some small night animal, startled by the sudden sound, scurried away to the right. "I know this means you won't get that upgrade to C-3, and they'll probably turn you down for that surgery now. Gee, Mom, I'm sorry." It sounded so stupid. "Why?" she would ask. "How?"

How could he explain that? The endless arguments. The whispered warnings. The subtle threats. Dennis had told him to expect this. Dennis had lost his parents back in the First Purge back in 2004, and his bitter hatred of the State's iron rule had failed to ruin him only because of his unique and accomplished abilities as an actor. Only with Thomas did he open up. Only with Thomas did he relate the things he had earned while in the Youth Re-education Camp near Charleston. Thomas shuddered.

It was his own fault, he knew. He should have kept his mouth shut like Dennis told him. All of his friends had come and shook his hand and pounded him on the back. "That's telling them, Adams!" they said. But their voices were hushed and they glanced over their shoulders as they congratulated him. And later, when the "volunteers" of the Green Ribbon Squad kicked his ass all over

the shower room, they had stood by in nervous silence, their faces turned away, their eyes averted, and their tremulous voices silent.

He sighed. Could he blame them. He'd been afraid too, when the squad walked up and surrounded him, and if he could have taken back those proud words he would have. Anyone is afraid when they can't fight back, he'd discovered. So they taught him a lesson, and he had expected it to end there. But then yesterday had come the call to Dr. Morton's office, and the brief hearing that had ended his career at the University. "Thomas," Morton had intoned, "You owe everything to the State." Thomas snorted.

The light was growing now. He could see the pale, rain-washed granite in the grayness as it glowed. Coffin Rock was now a knob, a raised promontory that jutted up from a wide, unbroken arm of the mountain's stony roots, its cover of soil pushed away. There were deep gouges scraped across the surface of the rock where the backhoe had tried, vainly, to force the mountain to reveal its secrets. He was too old to cry now, but Thomas Adams closed his eyes tightly as he relived those moments that had forever changed his life.

The shouts and angry accusations as the agents found no secret arms cache still seemed to ring in his ears. They had threatened him with arrest, and once he had thought the government agent named Goodwin would actually strike him. At last, though, they had accepted defeat and turned down the mountain, following the gashed trail of the back-hoe as it rumbled ahead through the woods.

At home, he had found his mother and father standing, ashen faced, in the doorway.

"They took your grandpa," his father said in disbelief. "Just after you left, they put him in a van and took him."

"But they said they wouldn't!" Thomas had shouted. He ran across the yard to the old man's cottage. The door was standing open and he wandered from room to room calling for the grandfather he would never see alive again.

