



# ACT 1





## CHAPTER 1

# THE ARTIFICIAL DETECTIVE

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**Date: Tuesday 10th of March, 2082**

*Booting sequence initiated...*

*Internal system check: All systems online...*

*Carapace integrity: 100%...*

*R.L. integrity: 100%...*

**CONFIRM ACTIVATION = YES**

*Loading EXPO25: 'THE DETECTIVE'...*

*Initialising...*

*Visuals online in 3... 2... 1...*

The Detective opened their eyes. Apertures whirred as they adjusted to the harsh sunlight, zooming and focusing.

The door to the travel crate had opened automatically. Visual analysis pieced together a burnt orange landscape beyond the crate, dotted with patches of silver-green foliage. Above, a brilliant blue dome, cloudless and vast.

With a smooth whir, the Detective lifted a hand and reached for the 'eject' button. The hand was shiny chrome, reflecting the colours of the world in concave. With a hydraulic hiss, the clamps around the Detective's legs and torso retracted. Wires disconnected and rattled into their sockets.

The Detective stepped forward, out of the crate. Their foot sunk into red dirt.

First things first – they had arrived, but there were several things which needed sorting out. Protocol required that the

Detective should settle on an external appearance. Suspects were most comfortable divulging information if they believed they were speaking to a human.

They opened the appearance generation program and a graphic appeared before their eyes, superimposed on the landscape. At lightning speed, they scrolled through the various options, considering the factors. The climate was hot and sunny, so skin with a higher melanin count would be beneficial in preventing UV damage. Regarding body shape, masculine was better for intimidation and feminine for persuasion.

Intimidation, while it could get results in certain circumstances, had a higher chance of leading to an altercation and consequent structural damage, which was to be avoided. The Detective chose female – at least for now. They could always change it again later.

With appearance chosen, the Detective stood still and waited while their selection became reality. Synthetic skin, released as a dark liquid, flowed out of ports to cover their body and slowly solidified. The skin was tough but flexible, soft to the touch. On a macroscopic level it was indistinguishable from real human skin, albeit oddly smooth and flawless. There were no scars, birthmarks, wrinkles or even hair.

It took about twenty minutes for the skin to solidify. During this time, the Detective stood perfectly still, arms outstretched and feet apart, a Vitruvian statue.

At twenty minutes on the dot, a tiny alarm went off, and the Detective moved again. Lowering their arms, they got to work on shifting their topographical plates, to better resemble a stereotype of the female sex. A symmetrical face, conventionally attractive. A slim body with modest curves, athletic, but not overtly built for power. This was, of course, a deception. Regardless of external appearance, the Detective's dense, electronically powered carapace meant they could deadlift over 250kg.

Next, was the name generation program. The Detective sorted the extensive list first by feminine names, and then by region, before sorting at random. The top name which the program spat

out was 'Callista Claw'. This name would do just fine.

The last step was clothing - but in this, there was little choice. The Detective opened a small hatch in the side of the travel crate, revealing a row of near identical outfits, in slightly different sizes and styles. The outfit had been specially selected by to fit in with the locals. Bright orange baggy pants, a sky-blue tank top and a jacket with bold black and orange patterns. A small alarm alerted the Detective that this outfit would not provide adequate camouflage in any natural terrain - but they ignored it and put the outfit on.

With the addition of boots, and an orange baseball cap bearing the logo of the Department of Sin, the setup protocol was complete. The baseball cap functioned both to provide shade against the sun's beating rays, and to hide the Detective's conspicuously bald head. Unfortunately, despite its other qualities, synthetic skin was unable to produce hair naturally, so until they could acquire a wig, the Detective would have to cover it up. Their courtesy protocols informed them that some people would find the perfectly smooth, follicle-free scalp 'strange and unsettling', which could be a major drawback, especially for missions involving stealth or subtlety.

On the other side of the crate, inside another small hatch, was an official Department of Sin badge, with the face and name of the Detective's new identity already displayed. The Detective stowed the badge in a special-made compartment in the side of their neck, before pausing, hand hovering over the door to the hatch.

There was a note taped to the inside of it, handwritten, in a large, scrawling font. RED CLIFFS it said. There was a smiley face underneath.

The Detective took the note and put it away in a small evidence storage compartment in their right thigh. They would decipher its meaning momentarily.

Before that, there were several other establishing pieces of information to clear up. Where were they? Why were they here? What were they supposed to be doing?

In fact, there wasn't much that the Detective could claim to know in general. They could only remember being awake once before, a

few days prior, when they had completed a series of athletic and cognitive ability tests as proof of concept. The Detective knew they were a prototype – a ReadMe file that sat on their internal HUD had explained that much. In fact, they were the very first of a planned line of entirely cybernetic sin-seeker officers. Everything was cybernetic, from the tips of their ears to the tips of their toes. The only exception was their brain, which the ReadMe file explained had been sourced from a human organ donor.

So far, the fully-cybernetic line had displayed promising results – but they had yet to be truly tested in the field. Conceptually, the cyborg officers would be perfect to send into the most dangerous regions of the Last Nation, thus reducing the death and injury rates of human officers. But more data was needed before this change could be properly implemented.

The Detective was well aware that the fate of the program rested at least somewhat on their own success. Each mistake they made, no matter how small, could be a tick against them, another round of ammunition in the belt of those who opposed the program. If their case was a catastrophic failure, then there was a chance the entire program would be scrapped. But the Detective wasn't worried. They had been purpose-built to solve cases. They were literally the perfect sin-seeker. This wasn't a matter of pride, only cold, hard fact.

The looming weight of expectation was nothing more than a mere consideration, one minor factor amongst a thousand others. It was with cool confidence that they opened the case file program and examined its contents for the first time.

*Case ID: 6437876M*

*Date of Incident: Sunday March 8<sup>th</sup> 2082*

*Time of Incident: Between 11:00AM and 1:30PM (exact time unknown)*

*Location: Mildura – Millewa-Mallee Region, Victoria*

*Description: Multiple reports have been filed stating that the city of Mildura and its entire population have 'vanished without a*

*trace'. Detective dispatched in order to determine the truth and extent of these reports.*

*Prime Priority: Determine the existential status of Mildura*

*Secondary Priorities: <empty>*

The initial priority was simple enough. Was the town of Mildura where it was supposed to be? Had it really vanished, or had the locals fabricated the case and reported it for their own amusement?

The Detective opened their satellite navigation program and input 'Mildura'. They were not certain where the arrival crate had been deployed in relation to the city, but it surely wasn't far away. Logically, the ideal distance would be close enough to travel on foot, but not so close that the arrival itself would be observed. Taking into account the time of day, the landscape and the size of Mildura, it was likely that the crate had been deployed between ten and fifteen kilometres away, and thus the sat-nav loaded, and the Detective paused, examining the data.

They blinked, and then slowly turned around in a circle.

That was interesting. According to the map, they were currently standing on Mildura's main street.

It was possible the satellite navigation was wrong – after all, there were fewer satellites left in orbit these days, and their reception was notoriously patchy. But after comparing the view in front of them to several panoramic photos of Mildura in their files, the Detective was forced to conclude that this time at least, the sat-nav was correct.

So, where was Mildura?

The Detective stepped further from the crate and turned around again, scanning the horizon. Nothing but unbroken red earth and tough, scraggly eucalypts, in every direction. To the north, the Murray River twinkled in the sun. The only evidence of human existence was the crate itself and a set of vehicle tracks leading away to the south.

Well, that solved the prime priority. Mildura had, in fact, disappeared. Not one brick of it remained.

The Detective noted this down, and formulated a new prime priority: *determine the series of events leading up to Mildura's disappearance*. Then, after locking up the arrival crate, they plotted a course to the next closest town in the sat-nav.

Red Cliffs – the same place mentioned in the mysterious note. It was just over fifteen kilometres away. The Detective set off southwards, in the same direction as the vehicle tracks. If they were going to find out what happened to Mildura, first they were going to have to locate a witness.

As they headed south, the Detective kept an eye out for any wreckage or debris. At this early stage in the investigation, any sort of evidence was welcome.

Oddly though, there was nothing. No remains of buildings, or rubbish, or people at all, only unbroken bushland, buzzing with insects, twitching with the furtive activity of small lizards and birds. It was as if Mildura had not only vanished, but been wiped from existence. The land here was undisturbed, pristine, restored to a pre-colonised state.

The lack of evidence, however, was a certain evidence in itself. It ruled out most natural disasters – fire and flood left clear debris, while diseases and bushranger raids affected people, not structures.

This left supernatural causes as the obvious answer – a Portent, or maybe P.I.U.S.

There were currently eleven Portents officially on record, each of them an anomalous force of destruction, perfectly capable of flattening an entire town within minutes to hours. But as the Detective scanned through their files, they couldn't help but conclude that none of the known eleven quite fit the profile.

In the past, Portents had razed towns through a variety of means, including extreme weather events, instantaneous mutant tree growth, transformation of all structures into the Sydney Opera House, transformation of all civilians into 'birds', and thermonuclear detonation – but none of them had caused a town to just disappear. This meant that either one of the existing Portents had suddenly developed new and interesting abilities – or, more



likely, a Twelfth Portent had appeared.

If true, then this was an alarming turn of events. If there really was a new Portent roaming the countryside, deleting towns in its path off the map, then everyone needed to know about it A.S.A.P.

The only other possibility the Detective could think of was that P.I.U.S. had caused the disappearance. Portent-Induced Unreality Symptoms – or more specifically, the people who wielded these strange abilities – were capable of things that were considered impossible in polite society. It wasn't completely off the table that one or more of them had somehow, accidentally or deliberately, caused Mildura to vanish.

P.I.U.S. abilities were not usually powerful enough to achieve something on this scale though, especially not accidentally. And the Detective couldn't begin to fathom what sort of sociopathic sinner would deliberately do something like this.

Currently, there was no evidence for either of these conclusions – but it seemed much more likely that a Portent was responsible. Either way, the faster the Detective solved this case, the better. They increased their pace from a powerwalk to a brisk jog. A small alarm warned them that their battery would run out at 11:00PM if they persisted with their current activity, but they ignored it. They were confident the closest town was well within reach.

\* \* \*

After jogging for twenty-two minutes, the Detective finally spotted evidence of human activity. It was an old, burnt-out car husk, extensively rusted, with plants growing out through the empty windows. Beyond it was a field of grape vines, that looked as though they had been recently tended to.

Pausing, the Detective noted the year, make and model of the car before deciding this was extraneous information and discarding it. More interesting were the grape vines and the fact that a few metres beyond the car was a tarmac road.

The road was in bad repair, cracked and crumbling at the edges

- but then, this wasn't unusual for roads outside of Greater Melbourne. It had been over thirty years since the roads had been properly maintained. Still, the Detective frowned when they saw it. Badly kept roads only increased noise level and subsequent risk.

The state of the road wasn't what was interesting about it though. It wasn't even the fact that the tire tracks from the arrival crate led here. What was most fascinating was that approximately ten metres to the north of the car husk, the road abruptly crumbled away into nothing.

The Detective moved closer, crouching down and running their hand along the edge. The road was there - and then suddenly, it wasn't. A prickly shrub bobbed in the wind just centimetres from the end. Further along was an entire sapling, six to ten years old.

On either side of the road, the transformation from tidy agricultural land to wild bush was just as abrupt. It was as though the road and fields had been stripped away, not only in space, but time as well.

The Detective thought for a moment, and stood up, staring east, and then west. Accessing the sat-nav again, they searched for other nearby roads.

There was a dirt road to the west, 5.2 kilometres. The Detective immediately set off towards it.

It was a detour in the wrong direction - but could potentially serve as valuable evidence.

Sure enough, after finding the road and following it for a short distance, the Detective found it similarly unnaturally truncated. With two points of data available, they formulated a rudimentary hypothesis. It wasn't just Mildura that had vanished - it was a specific radius of effect. To be exact, a radius of around six kilometres, centred on what satellite data informed them had once been a weather station.

Interesting.

The Detective marked the hypothetical radius on the map, then turned and headed back the way they'd come.

\* \* \*

As they approached the town of Red Cliffs, they saw that someone had set up a hay bale roadblock across the highway, wrapped in brightly coloured plastic and festooned with weak relics. Two young men were leaning against it, smoking cigarettes. They hadn't noticed the Detective yet.

The Detective came to a stop, eyeing the men from a distance. It was clear they were on guard duty. Their relaxed pose and narcotic indulgence indicated that they had been here for many hours without action. If they were bored enough, it was possible they would attempt to pick a fight with a stranger.

The Detective filtered through multiple lines of approach, before settling on the straightforward. It was likely that the guards were here due to the Mildura incident. They would be wary, but not immediately aggressive, if the Detective didn't appear as a threat to them.

They resumed walking, settling into a slower, casual pace. When the men saw them, visibly tensing up, they waved a hand in friendly greeting.

The two men watched in silence as they got closer. Then, when the Detective was about ten metres away, the one on the left raised a hand, indicating the Detective should stop.

The Detective did so, and arranged their face into a 'friendly smile.exe'.

*Hello, they said in sign language. May I pass?*

The man on the left, who seemed to be the older of the two, dropped his cigarette, grinding it into the cracked tarmac.

*Who are you?* he signed back.

The Detective paused and decided there was no clear detriment in telling the truth.

*My name is Detective Claw. I am from the Melbourne Department of Sin.*

The two men looked at each other in surprise.

*Melbourne?* the left one signed, and then grinned. *How's this weather we're having, eh?*

*I could really go for a latte,* the other one signed.

The Detective stared at them blankly as they both shook with stifled laughter. They suspected that the men were making fun of them, but weren't familiar enough with local culture to understand the reference.

*I am investigating the disappearance of Mildura, they said briskly. I do not have time for jokes.*

The men glanced at each other again. Their expressions had become more serious.

*Go on in, the one on the left said, and pointed to a narrow gap between the hay bales.*

As the Detective moved to pass through though, the man on the right signed for them to wait.

*Is it a new Portent?* he asked. There was fear in his eyes. Clearly, the Detective wasn't the only one to have deduced this possibility.

*I do not yet know, the Detective said.*

*Probably though, right?* the man continued. *Do you think it will come here next?*

*I don't know, the Detective said again. I have only just begun this investigation.*

*So you don't know anything?* the man said. *What it looks like? How fast it moves? Whether it flies, or crawls, or burrows?*

*I don't know if it exists, the Detective said. It is hypothetical at this time.*

The man nodded, sending a nervous glance down the road.

*I guess we'll know it when we see it, he signed unhappily.*

*If you keep your noise a minimum, the Detective said, it's unlikely to come here. Even if it does exist. Statistically, your chances of survival are high.*

The man did not seem particularly comforted by this knowledge.

\* \* \*

Red Cliffs was a small town, an auxiliary of the much larger Mildura, little more than two rows of shops just off the Calder Highway. Most knew it as a refuelling point for food and solar power, a brief

stop on the way to somewhere else. Otherwise, their main claim to fame was a large relic, an antique tractor known as Big Lizzie, on display at the centre of town.

The Detective paid no attention to Big Lizzie as they went by, hurrying on through the fresh produce market. It was closed for the day, empty stalls silent, small rows of colourful banners and flags hanging limp in the late afternoon heat. Locals turned to look as they passed, watching the Detective with suspicious eyes.

Beyond the produce market was the sin-seeker station, blue and white chequered sign hanging over the street – and this was where the Detective headed. Before initiating their own investigation, it would be useful to see what information the local authorities had already gathered.

It was just after 5PM, which was technically after closing hours. But peering in through the front window of the sin-seeker office, the Detective could see someone inside. They waved to draw attention.

A woman was sitting behind the front desk, frowning at an ancient, boxy computer monitor. A mug was half-way to her lips. Startled, she placed it back down and gestured for the Detective to come in. The Detective did so, carefully and quietly closing the outer door before they opened the inner one. As they went through, they quickly scanned the soundproofing, to make sure it was up to regulation. It was.

With the airlock closed behind them, they opened their mouth and tried out their vocals for the first time. ‘Good afternoon,’ they said, in a randomly selected feminine voice.

‘Hello,’ the woman responded and she glanced pointedly up at the clock. ‘It IS closing time, so unless its urgent, I’d really rather you came back tomorrow.’

The Detective scanned the woman’s face. Late thirties to mid-forties, Caucasian, square jaw, with blonde hair tied tightly back in a cropped ponytail. Her face was not in any sin-seeker staff register they could find – but this wasn’t unusual. Outside of Melbourne, the strict bureaucratic systems quickly broke down.

‘Am I speaking to a member of the local sin-seeker force?’ they asked.

‘You are,’ the woman said dryly.

‘Good,’ the Detective said. ‘My name is Detective Callista Claw. I have been sent by the Melbourne Department of Sin to investigate the disappearance of the town of Mildura.’

They produced their ID badge from the slot in their neck and placed it on the desk in front of the woman. Frowning, she looked down at it, then up at the Detective again.

‘Well, fuck me, you’re not what I was expecting,’ she said.

The Detective blinked. ‘You... were expecting me?’

‘Yeah,’ the woman said.

She reached over to where a battered mobile phone sat on the desk and tapped in a number.

‘Hey, Tank,’ she said into the phone. ‘The *cyborg* just walked in. Yeah. Go and tell Bill, will you? Oh, he’s there? Okay, well tell him his cyborg is here in the office. And tell him they look freakishly human. Really tall, and you can kind of see it if you know, but still, I had no clue until they slapped their ID on the desk! Yeah! Tell Bill to hurry up.’

She hung up and looked at the Detective again. ‘You ARE the cyborg, right?’

‘That is correct.’ The Detective frowned.

‘Fuckin’ hell,’ the woman said. ‘That’s really incredible. Sorry - I was expecting some sort of tin-can looking thing. Not -’

She gestured vaguely.

‘Who is Bill?’ the Detective asked.

‘Oh, you’ll see,’ the woman said. ‘He should be here in a minute.’

‘And who is Tank?’

‘Tank’s the other half of the Red Cliffs sin-seeker force.’

‘There are only two of you?’

‘Yep,’ the woman said. ‘This isn’t the big city anymore, Detective. Speaking of which - we’re not going to be able to help much with the Mildura case, I’m afraid. It’s not that we don’t want to share information - we just don’t have any information.’

She slapped the side of the monitor in front of her. 'Bloody thing crashed yesterday. Blue-screen-of-death, the works. I've been trying to fix it, but I'm no wizard. It gets better too - Red Cliffs has a tech wizard, but he's not here anymore. Guess where he went. Eh? Go on, guess.'

'From context, and the implied irony, I am assuming he was in Mildura when it vanished.'

'Yep! Mildura! So yeah, R.I.P to him, and our computer. One of the last working ones in the entire town, too.'

'I might be able to fix it,' the Detective said.

'Oh?'

'It isn't my primary purpose,' the Detective said, 'but I am capable of rudimentary electronic repair.'

'Alright, have a look, then. It's worth a shot.'

The woman moved aside, making room for the Detective to fit behind the desk. 'I keep trying to restart it, and it's not working,' she told them.

The Detective thought for a moment, eyeing the screen, which was displaying nothing but an analogue sad-face emoji. While mentally going through a list of possible problems, they pulled open the top of their right ring finger, revealing a USB cable. The officer watched sceptically as they plugged it into the computer.

As they began methodically diagnosing the issue, the airlock opened behind them, and two men came in. The first was a broad East Asian man in a sin-seeker uniform and crew cut, nearly as tall as the Detective was - probably Tank, the Detective guessed. The second was a short, somewhat rotund South Asian man, wearing canvas shorts, a Hawaiian shirt and a bowtie, each in a different bright colour. His hair and beard were several weeks past needing a trim, and he was carrying a large clipboard. It was likely this was Bill.

'Hey, Wombat,' the man who was probably Tank said. 'Is that...?'

'Yeah,' the woman said. 'Doesn't it look like a real person?!'

The Detective ignored their excited chattering, focusing on the task at hand. The monitor was broken beyond their capabilities of

fixing – but the actual computer was still accessible. With a few tweaks here and there, they quickly located the files stored inside and saved them locally onto their own currently empty multi-terabyte internal hard drive.

‘I have identified hardware which requires replacing,’ they said out loud.

The two sin-seeker officers seemed somewhat unnerved, but not overtly scared of, the Detective, which the Detective noted was within standard response parameters. The rotund man, however, was not showing any signs of trepidation. On the contrary, he seemed quite happy to see the Detective, with body language indicating that he not only recognised them but was reasonably familiar.

‘You are Bill?’ the Detective confirmed, once they’d finished explaining how to fix the computer.

‘Yep!’ Bill said cheerfully. ‘That’s me!’

‘It seems you know me, but I do not know you,’ the Detective said.

‘Yeah,’ Bill said. ‘I helped build your body! But I suppose you wouldn’t remember that?’

‘No, I do not.’

‘Well, I was there. And now that you’re all growed up, I’m here to keep an eye on you, ha ha.’

He went in to give the Detective a friendly punch on the arm, but with lightning speed, the Detective caught it on their palm.

‘Keep an eye on me?’ they said.

‘Yes. I’m going to watch you while you solve the case,’ Bill said. ‘Since you’re a prototype and all, they wanted someone to follow you around while you work. Make sure you don’t go rogue and decide to kill all humanity, ha ha.’

‘Why would I do that?’ The Detective frowned. ‘My purpose is that of all sin-seekers: uphold the Survival Act and ensure the preservation of the human species into the future.’

‘It was a joke,’ Bill said. ‘But I’m glad to hear it! By the way, did you see my note? I assume you did, since you’re here?’

‘Your note – I see,’ the Detective said. ‘Yes, I saw it. How closely are you going to be observing me?’



‘Very closely!’ Bill grinned. ‘From now on, I go everywhere you go, and do everything you do. We’re gonna be partners in crime-solving! You’re Sherlock, and I’m Watson!’

‘Okay,’ the Detective said, blank-faced. ‘If we are partners, then I suppose we must share information. What are your current hypotheses regarding Mildura?’

‘I hypothesise that the sucker is gonzo,’ Bill said with a grin.

The Detective stared at him for a moment, then turned to look at Wombat and Tank. ‘Do you have any hypotheses regarding Mildura’s disappearance?’

‘Nothing concrete,’ Wombat said. ‘We know it disappeared on Sunday afternoon, between 11 and 1:30. Seems like no one actually saw it vanish though, not even from a distance. There were no explosions, earthquakes, bright flashes of light, nothing. It was just there in the morning, and then in the afternoon, it wasn’t.’

‘First we heard of it was Sunday evening,’ Truck added. ‘A truckie came in and told us Mildura was gone. Thought he was pulling our leg, until we went and saw for ourselves.’

‘I spoke to a man who seemed to believe it was a Portent responsible,’ the Detective said. ‘Is there any evidence to suggest this is true?’

‘Just speculation.’ Wombat shrugged. ‘But I mean, what else could it be?’

‘I agree that a Portent is the most likely suspect,’ the Detective said. ‘Although the incident profile does not match any of the known eleven. Have there been any Portent sightings reported recently near here?’

‘Actually, yes,’ Wombat said. ‘A bunch of ’em, just within the last six months. The Eighth came particularly close back in December, only just missed the town. Only one person got caught in it fortunately, but he’s in bad shape. Still alive, but, you know. He probably won’t ever be the same.’

‘Is he displaying P.I.U.S.?’

‘Non-active P.I.U.S., yes,’ Wombat said. ‘The Mildura Sanctuary’s been monitoring him. Well... they were.’

‘What is this man’s name?’ the Detective said.

‘Liam King. We can give you his address if you want, but I doubt he’ll have much to say. He’s been bedridden since the incident.’

‘I would like to confirm all recent Portent sightings with eye-witnesses,’ the Detective said. ‘If there is a new Portent somewhere in the area, then chances are *someone* has seen it. It’s possible they misreported it as one of the known eleven. I would like to interview them to make certain.’

‘Well, I’d give you a list of witnesses,’ Wombat said, ‘but again, the computer is a bit fucked.’

‘Don’t worry – I have already obtained the list of witnesses,’ the Detective said. ‘I have arranged them alphabetically, by date of incident, by Portent witnessed, and by vicinity of their home address, starting with those nearest. I have decided that those that live nearest is the most efficient method to quickly talk to as many witnesses as possible. I shall visit all of those nearest in order of date of incident, before widening my search and continuing in the same pattern.’

‘Oh,’ Wombat said. ‘Wow.’

‘When do we start?’ Bill asked enthusiastically.

The Detective looked outside, to where the sun was setting.

‘Tomorrow morning, 6AM,’ they said. ‘In the meantime, I must recharge.’

While Tank and Wombat clocked out for the day, and Bill began making himself dinner in the break room, the Detective moved to the back wall and took off their left boot. There was a small hatch at the base of the ankle, which when opened, revealed an orange electrical extension cable. They attached it to the wall socket and then stood upright, perfectly still. The electrical connection triggered a diagnostic test. A report informed the Detective that all systems were online and functioning perfectly, although their coolant was already running a little low.

Fortunately, the coolant they used was just water and was very easy to top up. With no other issues reported, the Detective externally shut down for the night.

Internally, they began a deep analysis of their current findings and a resulting action plan for the following day.

Within the last six months, there had been four separate Portents sighted within the region – in order of date, the Fourth, the Fifth, the Eighth and the First. The Fifth and the Eighth both had plenty of witnesses to choose from. The First, as usual, had no surviving witnesses from the actual event, but plenty of witnesses of the aftermath. The Fourth, however, was more of an issue.

There was only one reported witness of the Fourth, and it had been made at the Mildura relixorcist office.

The witness in question was a minor, a sixteen-year-old girl called Quinn Kelly. There was no home address listed in the paperwork, but considering where she'd made the report, the Detective thought it was likely that she had since disappeared off the face of the Nation.

The Detective mulled over this issue for a few minutes, before deciding that there was no helping it – they would have to ignore the Fourth for now. They simply did not have the spare time to hunt for a witness who was probably dead.

That meant the first Portent sighting they would investigate was the Fifth – and fortunately, a key witness of the Fifth's recent activity lived only twenty kilometres away. Internally, the Detective smiled in satisfaction. If things went well, then they should have their first witness statement completed before the sin-seeker office opened at 9AM the next day.

**DOCUMENT 1: THE SURVIVAL ACT**

The Survival Act 2052 and related regulations aim to preserve the human species into the future, following the cataclysmic event commonly known as the Apocalypse, Armageddon, Judgement Day, or the End of the World.

The purpose of the Act includes:

- Preserving the lives and livelihoods of citizens of the Last Nation (formerly known as Australia).
- Promoting safety, longevity and freedom from suffering for current and future generations.
- Preserving the culture, history and technological advancements of humanity for the benefit of current and future generations.
- Providing guidelines on how to continue living with minimal disruption in the post-apocalypse.

‘This Act may be the most important for our Nation in its history. The World as we knew it is no more, but against all odds, the Nation still stands. But we stand upon a knife’s edge. Humanity is on the brink of extinction, and if we do not work together to ensure our own survival, then we will die, not just as a people, but as a species.

If we are to survive the next fifty years, then the Survival Act must be followed by everyone, supported by everyone, and upheld by everyone. This Act is not just in place for the purpose of maintaining law and order, but for keeping us alive. To break the tenants of the Act is to directly compromise our future. I cannot stress this enough. To fail the Act is to fail your Nation on a basic, moral level. If you break these laws, you are not just a criminal - you are a sinner.’

- **Deborah Lonsdale, Premier of Victoria, 2052**