

HEADSPACE

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Paul Barrows

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HeadSpace

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Prologue

It was ninety degrees outside, but the air inside was chilly from the cranked up air-conditioning, and had that omnipresent clinical anti-septic smell that was almost a signature of places like this.

The quietness of the corridor was suddenly cut through by the metallic crash of a trolley making its way down the pale-walled expanse, and a burst of deep baritone laughter.

A large black guy was pushing the trolley, his hair was tied back into an avalanche of bleach-blond dreadlocks. Beside him was a petite, pale-skinned girl in her late teens or early twenties. She had short brown hair and carried a clipboard, and both of them wore lab-coats. The girl's coat was a little too big making her look child-like, and she'd had to roll up the sleeves. She seemed uncomfortable as though self-conscious of this.

The guy had stopped laughing now, and was shaking his head in amused disbelief.

“Ain't nothin' surprises me no more. Not in this place, man. I swear to God they messed up somewhere. Management should be down here with these guys...”

He let off another peal of baritone laughter.

The trolley clattered to a halt by the first of a series of steel doors.

“Okay,” he said. He'd stopped laughing now, and his expression was more serious. “This here's the firebug. So called for his—uh—predilection with combustion. Five years back, a lotta places started burning down in Pasadena. Our friend here got busted with a video deck full of

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live footage. He done them all, recorded the whole thing. Really got off on it, too.”

Inset at about head height was a slide hatch which the guy pulled swiftly open. He leaned into the opening.

“Hey Mickey,” he said, his voice sounded muffled by the interior. For a moment there was nothing, then there was a shuffling sound, and the thin figure of a male in his mid-twenties came into view.

“Attaboy, Mickey,” the guy said. “Candy time. Come get it, my man. Come chew this stuff down for a brother!”

He turned back to the girl. She looked bemused for a moment, but then remembered, jumping into action and awkwardly groping through the forest of small yellow beakers on the trolley. Finally she took one and handed it to the guy. He slid it through the hatch into Mickey’s waiting hands.

“Way to go!” the guy said, as he watched Mickey drink down the beaker’s contents. Then he slid the hatch shut and took hold of the trolley again. The two of them continued along the corridor, stopping at each door while the guy continued his introduction. Finally they reached the last, and he brought the trolley to a halt.

He seemed to pause, as if unsure where to begin.

“This guy’s fresh in,” he said finally. “LAPD brought him down last night.” He paused thoughtfully.

“So, what’s—uh—what’s he...” The girl trailed off uneasily.

“Well, in technical terms, he just plain bat-shit crazy!” His expression broke into mirth and he gave that laugh again.

He slid the hatch open and looked inside. Curious, the girl joined him and they both peered through into an interior that was lit by a single small window up by the ceiling.

The figure was sat in the corner, bolt upright. He’d been straight-jacketed. His pale face was partially obscured by greasy streaks of black hair, his eyes staring fixedly into space. His jaws seemed to be working,

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muttering something over and over, and a stream of spittle had worked its way down his chin leaving wet streaks down the front of his jacket.

“What’s that he’s saying?” she asked. She was on tip-toes chin wedged over the shelf of the hatch.

“Zhhrrrrnn...” It was almost a moan, syllables barely audible. “Zhhee..awwwn...”

“Beats the shit out of me...” he responded. The two of them listened as he muttered a variation of the same sound time and time again, his head bobbing rhythmically as though he were coughing up the sounds, or spitting them out.

“Sounds like...maybe a name. ‘John?’ ‘Shaun?’” she ventured.

“Or mebbe ‘Zion.’ Dunno,” the guy said.

“Zee...onn...Zirr...an...Zirran...” The word came clearer now, more decisive. It condensed like an old memory, the word cut through with a breathy urgency, grasped grimly by the act of repetition.

“Zirran!...”

1

Centre Point

By the time the sweeper team reached Centre Point, darkness was descending, and the sanguine glow of the western sky reflected ominously off the city block's silica face. Clovier headed the group up the flight of marble veneer steps. He paused momentarily to pass his wrist across a sensor in the door's steel trimming and then led them through into the main lobby.

It was a plush affair, a hundred square metres of polished stone surfacing interrupted only by the occasional cluster of leather chairs and a pair of glass coffee tables. Ornate vases stood about on ceramic plinths, and replica Rembrandts and Van Goghs adorned the walls. A broad staircase vanished off to the right, and on the opposite wall two indented, stainless steel shutters marked the building's two elevators.

A few security guards eyed the crew with evident disinterest, and then went back to talking amongst themselves, drinking cheap coffee, or watching the sitcom on the foyer screen. He marched over to an elevator and tapped a number into a keypad inset into its alloy trimming. A musical tone sounded acceptance and the doors slid elegantly open. There was more than enough room inside for the twelve of them, and they quietly entered, taking their places about the carpeted interior. Clovier tapped three buttons on the elevator's destination panel. They lit up in a cool shade of turquoise, and the doors quietly closed. The team stood uneasily as the lift glided smoothly upwards. Clovier was grateful that the synth had been turned off for the occasion—it would

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probably interfere with sensor readings. Either that or the on-site security found the drossy montage of randomised chords irritating, rather than soothing, as he did.

When the elevator reached the 58th floor it slowed and stopped with barely perceptible grace. Four men left, and the doors closed again, carrying the remainder to the next floor. Again, another four left, and the remainder exited on the 60th floor. Each floor was circled by one main corridor, its circumference a row of offices and conference rooms, its interior comprising four more perpendicular corridors converging on a central board room. The team on each floor split up and headed for a designated row of rooms, taking with them a check-list and sensor deck. One office at a time they would work slowly around the edges of the room, extending the probe across every wall, and listening through their headsets for the tell-tale signature of a device. Next across the floor in half-metre bands, then across the ceiling, and finally across all the surfaces of tables, chairs, and other fixtures, finishing off with the ornamentation that adorned the desks and walls.

Once each had finished their assigned row, they would work their way inwards toward the centre of the building, first covering the length of the adjoining corridor, and then moving into the main board room. Here an allotted segment of the room would be covered by each, except for the room on the 60th floor where all four operatives would independently cover the entire area.

The operation took little under four hours, and each in turn reported to Clovier over the com-link. Clovier sat at a desk and scribbled down notes as they reported in. Shortly, he picked up the mike, switched over to a scrambled frequency and tapped in a number. A moment later, a well-bred home counties accent oozed across the line.

“What’s the situation?”

“Not a lot. Two live fish-eyes on the 59th, and four acoustic taps. Two of the taps are in the floor space of the 59th, one’s in a desk ornament on the 58th. and another’s in the target room. The first three are pretty

crude—standard ELF transmission. The other’s a real beaut, though. Quantum-photoarray nanochip. They’d built it into a stud in the leather trimming on the desk. They’re practically invisible because of the detection auto-cutout, but we caught its cut-off signature on playback and zeroed it. It’s definitely the one we’re looking for, Aizu’s fingerprints are all over it.”

Clovier was clearly pleased with himself, and with good reason. There was nanotech material around now that could fill a room without even raising a twitch on standard monitoring equipment.

The Orlando summit story was still warm. It was attended by an army of top statesmen and politicians. The conference room was swept thoroughly by security forces, and the entire building was cleared and electronically cloaked. Two days later the entire meeting was broadcast on Pirate TV. A tie-pin of one of the delegates had been switched for a nanochip replica containing what once would have occupied a full mainframe. A few off-the-record comments during the meeting had cost the careers of six politicians, the president of the Bank of England, and the head of intelligence.

Clovier was one of the few counter-surveillance ops who could stay one step ahead of his opposite number. He was probably the best and knew it.

“Okay, leave the off-site video taps alone,” continued the voice. “Pack the others away in mufflers and replace them afterwards. What about remote surveillance?”

“No problem, 360 degree sound-proofing—floors, walls, ceilings, the works. There’s a sky-light on the roof, but we’ll be blacking that out too, and local air-traffic is being diverted.”

“Right. Go over the board room one more time, and you can call it a day.”

Clovier patched into the team on the 60th floor and ordered a re-scan, and then had the audio-bugs removed and packed away in a

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container. He dismissed the remaining team, and then took the elevator back to the lobby and waited.

By the time the entourage of executives arrived, it was almost midnight; the crowds of tourists and theatre-goers had begun to thin out, and most of the shops had rolled down their shutters. A sleek silver-blue limousine arrived accompanied by a familiar escort—two antique Harleys and an anonymous black Rover.

The occupants of the Rover exited first—a group of suits with crew-cuts and ray-bans. The biggest of them opened the rear door of the limo, and waited patiently as a tall gaunt figure struggled out onto the pavement. He wore a black velvet evening-jacket with epaulets and navy blue pockets, white shoes, and dark pin-stripe trousers which looked too big. His hair was long and grey and he carried a slightly gnarled walking stick with an ornate silver handle. Clovier recognised him even before he'd come into the light. His name was Jacob Randall, and he owned Yoto Nanotech.

The suits fell in around him and paced alongside as he slowly made his way up the steps and into the warm glow of the waiting lobby.

It had begun to rain by the time the second limousine arrived—a sleek, curvaceous, reptilian creature, its skin a pure polished silver cocoon. The obligatory Harleys pulled into the curb ahead, and their leather-clad escorts dismounted. There was no separate vehicle, instead, another group of suits emerged from the third row of the limousine, smoothly falling into position on the curbside. Simultaneously a driver dismounted and opened its middle door. Its occupant was clearly more healthy than his earlier counterpart, he stepped nimbly onto the pavement and paused momentarily to straighten his clothes. He was draped in a black full-length coat. Beneath it he wore a 10K leather double-piece, a thin strip of a Hawaiian tie, and crocodile-skin boots. His complexion was rugged and tanned, and his dark hair glistened beneath the neon. One of the surrounding suits quickly stepped forward and

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extended an umbrella, holding it awkwardly above, extending as much space as possible. Clovier knew him too: It was Maxim Delphi, head of Nova Cybernetics.

The group made their way quickly up the steps and into the foyer. Moments later they vanished into one of the elevators. Clovier took the other and returned to his makeshift base on the top floor. His phone sounded shortly, and he picked it up. A different voice was on the other end.

“Are all your men back in the lobby?” it said, simply. It carried the air of somebody who did not expect to have to identify himself.

“Yes...Sir,” he said. The word “Sir” felt awkward in his mouth.

“Then join them please, Mister Clovier.”

*

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Old memories hung in the air. Even though Lisa was gone, even though everything but the bare living essentials were packed neatly into boxes for the move that she'd put off for so long, the place still echoed with the life they'd had before. Like Jake, Lisa was still torn between past and present, and she straddled two cities, that same hunger for a better past clawing at her, foiling her attempts to tear away and start anew.

He didn't know why he'd come back here. He was just passing through, he told himself, he'd just dropped in to pick up a few more of that dwindling supply of things he'd left behind as an anchorhold to the life they'd had together. But he knew what he was really doing, and it felt as bad as it always did, kneeling by the grave of those golden years, the ghosts of bitter regrets calling to him.

It was nearly 3 A.M. by the time the door closed behind him and he left.

The flat was a poky slice of the continuous sprawling estate which lay across what once had been Richmond Park and Wimbledon Common. A winding maze of brick buildings, concrete walkways, and backroads

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stretched the best part of three miles, its walls strewn with gaudy streams of graffiti, and its pavements littered with broken glass and refuse. Piles of black rubbish bags punctuated the street corners, burst or torn apart by dogs, their contents spilling like bizarre entrails across the tarmac. The decaying husks of smashed phone booths stood forlornly about, picked clean of their contents, bare wires poking raggedly out of cement foundations.

“Tumbledon”—as it was now known—was the legacy of a string of urban regeneration projects marking the turn of the century, compact housing for one million citizens, and a final attempt to stave off the city’s growing population problem. The sprawl culminated in a string of iron fences which marked the start of the exclusive Borough of Kew, and a series of plush business parks which had sprung up in the wake of the Third Revival. The border of Kew shone in the distance. It was as if some surreal partition between night and day had been cast down at the borough’s edge, its streets flood-lit from a web of beacons, patrolled by private security firms, and watched over by countless electronic eyes.

He made his way through a maze of backstreets, keeping in close to the comforting cold glow of street lights, and listening out for voices or tell-tale footsteps in the shadowy paths that ran throughout the estate. But there was no sound. Only the occasional yowling of a panic-stricken feline and the metallic clatter of tin cans upset by foraging strays. Soon he arrived at the entrance of the web of underground passages that joined one half of the estate with the other, spanning beneath the Inner Circular Expressway that divided North Richmond from its southern counterpart. The entrance to the main walkway tunnel was dark and ominous, the usual blue-white glow of fluorescent strips entirely absent, leaving nothing but total darkness. He stopped for a moment and considered trying another walkway a few hundred metres along, but then left the path, climbed through a ragged hole in a mesh fence, and set off up a narrow dirt path that led up the embankment to the edge of the Expressway.

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He arrived, short of breath, at the hard shoulder and surveyed the scene. As expected it was practically empty, with only the occasional curvaceous wedge of a saloon speeding along the middle lane. He carefully crossed the five lanes of tarmac to the central reservation, and then made his way across the other side and down the opposite embankment. Approaching the path leaving the walkway's opposite end, the sound of shoe scuffing against concrete echoed from the tunnel's looming entrance, sending an icy jolt of fear through him. He stood frozen for a moment, staring intently into the gloom, his heart thudding; his hand instinctively sought out the comforting cold, pachmyr grip of the Colt 45 in his pocket. There were no more noises, and no-one emerged, so he quietly backed off up the path toward South Richmond.

Soon he arrived at the block he called home, a standard four-floor stretch of end-to-end apartment blocks. Outside it stood a battered tin sign bearing the title "The Swallows"; underneath, the word "sucks" had been daubed in dripping white spray. He went up a short stretch of paving to one of the building's doorways and pressed the doorbell marked with the number 49. Shortly, the intercom crackled and a female voice answered.

"Who is it?"

"Eve—it's me, Jake..."

"Where the fuck you been, this late? Don't you know there's a war on?"

The door buzzed and the lock opened. Jake pushed it open and climbed the three flights of ugly concrete stairs to his floor, ignoring the soft hum of security cameras as they turned to follow his infra-red ID. The front door was already open and Eve was in the kitchen in a cotton paisley nightgown dumping spoons of instant coffee into a couple of mugs.

The main room that composed the bulk of the simple four-room flat was a bizarre hybrid. An artist's workshop, a junkyard, and a lounge/dining room, were combined in a surreal sprawl. Half composed drawings lay on sheets of grey-white resik paper that littered the

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floor, and wire frame sculptures pasted with patches of plaster-cast stood amongst dried white splashes on bare floorboards. To the back of the room were piles of scrap metal—some were orderly sheets of aluminium or wire gauze, but others were twisted bits of casing that had once housed ancient household appliances. Close by was a grotesque sculpture—tin boxes, metal plating, chickenwire, bolts, nails, and smashed pieces of old X5 motherboards composed into a monstrous head—its stricken face with mouth open in a silent scream, cracked HandCam lens eyes staring lifelessly upwards.

At the front of the room on a square of faded blue carpet was a sofa and a few cheap furnishings, with the obligatory slim black square of a T.V standing on its broad-based plinth like some strange totem. In the corner, near the balcony door, was a big oak table with all of Jake's hardware. In the midst of piles of paper, coloured manuals, and electronic junk was a squat grey figure of a 348 workstation with a battered VR deck clumsily spliced into a piece of exposed board. Two of its ROM draws sat empty and open, and silver-blue disks were littered about amongst their plastic cases.

He slung his jacket onto the back of a chair and collapsed onto the sofa, putting his feet up onto a scratched Ikea coffee table.

"What war's that?" he continued, his voice raised to carry across the sound of the kettle.

"Where've you been? It's was right across the band softside: A couple of Angels killed a Headhunter. Now the whole Chelsea posse are coming over to cream anything with leathers and an attitude. You'd've been lynched with all that Industrial shit you wear."

"No bother. It was really quiet out. Anyway I was round at Spider's most the night."

There was the sound of pouring water and the brief tinkling of spoon on porcelain, and then Eve emerged with the coffee, her dark shoulder-length hair lit surreally by the yellow-white glare of the

kitchen light. She put the two mugs onto the coffee table and then curled up alongside Jake's splayed figure.

"What's happening?" she asked.

He sighed.

"Not sure. Word has it that some corp action is brewing. 2-Bit says there's a job on the way. Good work—big money."

A picture on a stained easel in the corner caught his eye. The blood-red depiction of a figure he recognised instantly lay across a bed. A leather jacket with chrome shoulder pads hung off one arm, and plastic trousers clung wetly to his legs, highlighted by the strip of a steel-segment belt. His head wore only the shadow of a crew-cut, and the glimmer of gold shone from a row of studs round the edge of his left ear. There was nothing overtly violent about him, just a cold indifference tinged with suppressed hostility. It was obviously a portrayal of himself, a dark echo of a person he knew all too well.

Eve caught the direction of his gaze and glanced away uneasily. This was obviously the kind of thing she'd usually hide away before his arrival. The sort of thing he'd stumble upon while rooting through cupboards for a long forgotten manual or a box of scrap IC boards he needed to pillage some obscure component from.

He sensed her unease by the shift of tension in her body and quickly looked away. Then he picked up his coffee and took a brief sip, welcoming the momentary distraction that it provided.

"Good," she responded, "we could do with it. Acom are starting to get shitty about the arrears. Mural money came through today, but that'll only get us a few weeks. When's it due?"

"Few days, maybe a week. He didn't let on much. Says it depends on some big corpshop deal—either way there'll be a slice coming my way."

Eve nodded. Then a look of concern crossed her face and she took hold of his hand, inspecting a bloody mark on one of his fingers.

"You've cut yourself..." she said.

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“Yeah,” he said. He saw the question on her face. “Broken glass.”

He pulled his hand away, rolled slightly and stretched to grab the plastic wafer of a remote from the coffee table, squeezing the power button in the same movement. The thousand mil screen burst to life, a blaze of sound and colour filling the room. Thick stereo chords of an orchestral sequence crashed out and he quickly lowered the sound. The blaze of the blue-steel insignia of the EBC faded to give way to a pan-in shot of a newsreader sitting polished and pristine. She read out the news highlights with the traditional expression of deadpan seriousness, and Jake listened obediently, hoping to catch some Corp-shop or anything on the local gang war. There was no mention of either and he switched over to cable, where a thriller was in full swing. A black bullet of a Porsche span and weaved across a stretch of forest track as a military helipod spat missiles that missed by a hairs breadth. The two of them curled up closer, slipping quietly into a world of immaculate, bronzed people with glowing white teeth and fresh designer clothes. A bright and sunny world, where everyone has a six figure salary, an expensive car, and a dangerous and exciting lifestyle, and nobody is poor, sick, or ugly. Unless they deserve to be.

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The void was lit up by a billion distant pin-pricks of light, as the diffuse glow of deep space opened up around her. Behind her was a vast, yellow ball of fire, the axis of our solar system, and she could just make out the crescent glow of Mercury flickering in the distance. Spinning round to face the pole star, she buttoned forward and the stars swam about and strobed in a silver blur, the yellow orb vanishing into a distant dot light-years behind her.

Ursa Major shone clearly ahead of her, and she adjusted her bearing slightly, accelerating towards the beacon of light just a degree or two away from the end of its tail. The constellation grew bigger and brighter,

and then twisted and broke up, a million of other stars appearing to fill vast chasms of space that opened between them. The pole star expanded gradually, and then exploded momentarily into a sea of fire that filled half the sky, retreating and then shrinking back into anonymity behind her. Ahead the stars became more diffuse, shifting outwards and occasionally rocketing past in a luminous blur to join the thickening band a million miles rearward.

She shifted view-point to face the way she had come. The familiarity of the sight hardly diminished the awe felt at the spectacle that lay before her. A billion stars shifting towards a focus and condensing into form, distilling a glowing web of light from the surrounding inky blackness.

A dazzling, stellar core was forming, surrounded by a less substantial collar of light, and she could now clearly make out that the cluster she had occupied only seconds earlier was actually a vast spiral arm extending from the heart of this gargantuan structure. Soon the galaxy itself had shrunk into a tiny glowing orb, and around her, in a deeper and darker space, distant dots of far away galaxies shone dimly.

She changed to a preset orientation, and headed out towards one of the distant glimmers. The glimmer grew into a vast nebula, and soon she was surrounded by a cloud of stars that composed a remote part of the cluster's outer region. Coming to rest close to another great yellow ball, she shifted position once more, and examined the readouts before her. Finally satisfied, she touched the control that began the sequence.

A stream of zeros on her instrument panel jumped into motion, a blur of motion at the right pushing out slower-moving figures towards the left. Before her the sun named S-7734, took on an animated appearance, its circumference now alive and seething with an inferno of activity. She moved closer until the body filled almost 180 degrees, standing like a great wall of light, its horizons practically invisible. Within it she could make out flickers and lightning flashes of intense

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blue-white radiation that made the surrounding yellow glare look almost dim in comparison. She retreated slightly as the activity became more intense, and watched as geysers of flame a million miles long gushed from its surface.

Soon she noticed that the orb was visibly contracting, its core changing from a dim yellow to the piercing blue white of the new fusion plateau. It continued to shrink and brighten until was only a tenth of its diameter, and then, with a silent implosion, it collapsed into a marble of blinding light, a spherical shockwave of radiation expanding from its surface.

The foremost wall of the sphere was just about to reach her, becoming thin and translucent, when the scene froze. The thermo-nuclear flicker of the newly born supernova was now just a flashframe still, and the spatter of light that had composed the expanding shockwave, was now an unintelligible frozen smear. A hundred metres before her was an opaque, marble slab bearing the legend:

“Error 0C3A: VArray SOL(002AE6)/Z out of range”

“Shit,” she said, though she was privately pleased that it had come this far without hanging. She hit the power button and the scene vanished into inky blackness. Then she unclipped the chin flap of her helmet and gently removed it, blinking in the neon glare of the terminal room as she shook her long brown hair back into place. Her face was beaded with sweat from the tight-fitting padding, and she wiped her forehead on the arm of her red denim shirt.

She knew what was wrong—a simple matter of freeing a few gig of memory space—and turned back to the workstation’s ample screen. It was occupied mainly by a window displaying a frozen picture of the scene she had just come out of, and she tapped its vanish control, watching it disappear to reveal the streams of code that lay beneath.

“Voice on,” she said. “Line six-nine-three. Edit replace six-four with two-five-six.”

The cursor on her screen obediently jumped to a place in the text and made a change.”

“Save...Voice off,” she concluded.

She didn't re-enter the Virtual Universe to check it, or even dry-run the routine on screen. Her entry window for Hubble was only ten minutes away, so she left the room and headed for a dispensing machine in the corridor. Sweeping her card down the machine's slot, she punched up a cheese sandwich and brew that called itself boeuf pottage. It was actually something similar to tomato soup, but with beef stock and fragments of flavoured quorn, and she sipped it unthinkingly as she looked out through the bank of slide-windows that spanned the side of the foyer.

Leeds at night was a tapestry of street lights, neon signs, and banks of glowing hi-rise windows. Even through the double-glazed exterior, she could make out the hum of distant freight traffic, recently loaded up from a local terminal, and making its way toward the M1. The distant horizon was already losing its darkness, tinged by a hint of yellow with the approach of a distant dawn. She took another sip of her soup, and then made her way down a corridor to the room that housed the satellite link.

Lisa Meyer was 14 months and one hundred and thirty-three pages into her Ph.D. thesis. “An inductive model of the aetiology and development of the Nova as a predictor of activity of the Orion Nebula Supernova Collapse” was not her first choice of title, but the Dean of the Faculty of Astrophysics, had handed it down to her on a plate, making it clear in no uncertain terms that a yes would guarantee her an easy and well-funded ride through a doctorate. She had said yes, and he had personally seen to it that NASA provided four hours per week access-time to Hubble, a privilege that many researchers would kill for. This was not as difficult as he had tried to make out; it was a subsidiary research arm of NASA that was funding the entire project,

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who made a fortune whenever any of its users hit upon some breakthrough in cosmology.

And she'd got lucky with the timing too. Only a few years ago the space program was collapsing under the assault of a growing band of "pure"-science critics. But, once again, space exploration had eventually found its way back into the public imagination. Their palates wetted by extravagant visions of a terraformed and habitable Mars, funds were poured back in, and a declining field of research found a new lease of life.

Lisa took her place in the padded blue chair before the terminal and logged in as she had done every Wednesday at midnight for the previous 27 weeks. The familiar graphic appeared, and she selected the coordinates of the patch of galaxy whose VR construct she had only just left. The familiar configuration of stars appeared in the display segment, with the dim pin-prick of the Nova nestling in the centre outlined by a grey rectangle. She zoomed in to full size and booted up a bank of sensors that would measure and record the emissions of a range of different types of radiation throughout her session. It could take care of itself now, so she left the flickering stream of readings to watch MTV on a nearby media station, settling into a comfortable long-backed chair, feet resting on a nearby desktop.

The elevator carried her up and up, soaring at impossible speeds, and then coming to rest with gut-wrenching swiftness. The doors opened and the carpeted corridors of the top floor lay before her, dimly lit from emergency lights in hidden recesses, their glow sending surreal shadows across the walls and ceiling.

She stepped forward and walked down the passageway, her breathing sharp and irregular, pin-pricks of perspiration cold against her face and neck. There was a sharp rustle and a hundred tendrils of shadow seemed to spring to life, writhing across the wall ahead, and sending an icy bolt of panic through her. But as she moved relentlessly forward her

tension subsided as she caught sight of the house-plant in an alcove nearby, eclipsing the dim light inset in the wall behind, its leaves wafting slightly to the flow of air from a nearby vent.

In the distance she could hear music by *Chaque Amour*, its soft and surreal jangling synth and monastic chanting echoing about the corridors, colouring and pacifying the air with its drifting, hypnotic chords, drawing her towards the corridor's end. The window loomed ahead, looking out onto a night city, a thousand lights glowing against a black and starless sky.

Then she realised, the lights *were* the night sky, a thousand stellar constellations against the black chasm of intergalactic space. Then the corridor was gone and she was falling into the infinity of space, plummeting towards the blinding light of a collapsing sun, a million stars about her uttering a piercing cry.

Lisa awoke with a start, blinking as her temporary confusion subsided. The sultry tones of *Chaque Amour* drifted from the set before her, but it was cut through by the electronic squeal emanating from her satellite link. Still disorientated, she made her way over to the terminal and surveyed the scene. A string of parameter errors were streaming back, and its coloured displays were either completely blank or else a dark blur of overloaded readings. She looked on in surprise and disbelief.

“What the—” she said, the word freezing on her lips.

She hit the refresh button and stared in bewilderment at the image. At first, like a familiar object in an unexpected place, she didn't recognise the scene before her. It was a green, light-intensified picture of a spatter of lines and squares. At first she figured that the satellite had been damaged by a meteor, and that she was looking at some smashed piece of circuitry that now obstructed the channel of lenses, but then recognition dawned. It was an aerial view of a city at night, the square roofs of buildings divided by an irregular web of lines which where

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distant roads. She could even make out the luminous tracings of streetlights that followed them.

And at its centre, surrounded by a thin grey rectangle, was the tiny square of a single building.

2

Rendez-Vous

When the call for his TransAt flight finally arrived, it was 4 A.M.. East Coast time. Elton DeVrides picked up his small black suitcase and made his way to the checkpoint. He briefly stopped to have his ID tag scanned by the waiting security officers, then they opened a gate to the side of the detector arch and let him through, standing at a respectful distance.

An air-conditioned hallway took him directly to the entrance of the small and exclusive jet, and a smiling hostess took his card as he entered its oval entrance, then led him down a narrow carpeted aisle towards his compartment. The door slid smoothly open with a touch of the entry panel, and she stood aside as he entered.

He put his bag into a luggage enclave, hung up his coat on an elegant brass hook, and settled down into the plush armchair as the compartment door closed with a soft hiss. Before him a grey screen was set into the dividing wall, and on a nearby peg there was an expensive pair of VR Raybans, virtually indistinguishable from the regular shades, but for the sheen of tiny projection chips set into the lenses, and the giveaway foam plugs that replaced the usual ear-hooks. By the arm of his chair was a sender unit displaying a small menu of TriD channels and the first few titles of a long list of movies.

He disregarded both, reaching over instead to a drinks dispenser and filling a tall glass with whisky and soda. Then he took a notepad out of his pocket, switched it on, and began punching his way through a set of memos.

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The warm sound of a bell signaled the jet's imminent take-off, and a warning light on the arm of his chair lit up with a "Fasten Seat-belt" message. He ignored it. These jets were smooth as ice, but if anything did go wrong, you could be pretty sure that it wasn't going to be anything that a metre of plastic strapping was going to rescue you from. Three tons of liquid propellant doesn't take kindly to hitting the tarmac at 500kph; accidents were rare but mercifully conclusive.

Behind the chatter of neighbouring screens dimly heard through the thin partitions he could hear the hum of the engines rise suddenly to a shrill squeal, and then the jet was in motion, accelerating smoothly but decisively up the dark stretch of tarmac towards the dim orange glow of the approaching sunrise. He looked out of the small circular window and into the gloom, tilting his head to cut out the cabin light's reflection. To either side orange lights flashed by, faster and faster, and the distant white mushroom of the flight control tower receded out of view. Finally the runway dropped away, leaving him momentarily nauseous from the shift of gravity, and the plane soared up, still accelerating, into a dark and cloudy sky.

He put his hand up to his greying temples and closed his eyes momentarily, falling back into the hypnagogic daze of the previous hour. Only two hours sleep and he had to make the red-eye. An urgent meeting—something was in the works, and word had just come through that he had to be in England for 5 A.M. sharp.

It hardly seemed like minutes since he had parked his silver-blue Wrangler in the drive of his Upper East Side Chateau, wandered in through the front door, and hit the replay button on his answering machine. He was tempted to leave it. To wait until a coffee or a sauna had revitalised his aching frame, but his instructions were specific. On this occasion he was lucky enough to check it straight off, otherwise he might have missed out on what little sleeping time he had been left with. The familiar rugged features of Hythe appeared on-screen,

obscured slightly by a poorly pasted Aizu logo. The message was short but sweet—meet up with Division 2 for intelligence update, first thing.

He cursed the absurdity which meant that in a world of direct TriD satellite link-ups and full-wall conferencing systems—technology that had made business travel almost obsolete—he still had to travel thousands of miles to do what he could just as effectively manage in his studio suite.

The fact was that face-to-face meetings were the only way of exercising any effective control over security. The maxim “Never broadcast secrets” made a century-and-a-half of communications technology useless. As fast as you could develop methodologies for coding frequencies and transmissions, they were being cracked by the thousands of skilled street hackers whose survival depended on it. If there was a flaw, it would be uncovered sooner or later—and usually sooner.

Encryption had lost its Grade A security ranking once it had been mathematically demonstrated that any code could be cracked with the right algorithms and sufficient processing power, and there was no shortage of either of these things. There were thousands of intelligent and over-skilled citizens who would once have ranked amongst a “middle class,” and who had now been swallowed by a thriving underworld which was the only means of support for the millions of ineligible who could find no way of getting In.

Even in an absurdly corrupt and top-heavy economy which saw to it that being Out meant having almost nothing, it never ceased to amaze even the highest ranking players the amount of resources and expertise that the lawless masses could still pull together. Like insects in a hot climate there seemed to be no way of getting rid of them; wipe out thousands, and thousands more would come to replace them. No matter how much was poured into campaigns against subversive elements, they would still somehow remain, and even the most brutal of clamp-downs with many hundreds of arrests seemed hardly even to scratch the surface. No sooner had one set of spy networks and pirate distribution

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cartels been broken up than another would piece itself together like some bizarre fragment of cellular life.

There was a slight rumble and a barely discernible jolt as the jet hit Mach One, punching through the compressed wall of air that had piled up before it. DeVrides opened his eyes again and looked out through the window. He could see the orange of the approaching horizon becoming visibly brighter with the ensuing dawn, geographical time surreally accelerated by the jet's motion. In little over 50 minutes, he would have passed through five hours, arriving at Heathrow at 10 A.M. GMT.

He took a long sip of his drink, rubbed his eyes, and then reached over to his coat, rummaging through a pocket and taking out a small sheaf of Dexedrine capsules. Pushing two out through their silver foil, he popped them in his mouth, washing them down with a sharp swig from his glass.

The rising sun was an orange orb, comfortably visible through layers of dark cloud. He watched it for a couple of minutes while it gently rose clear of the dim blue hue of the Atlantic horizon, and then went back to his memos.

Soon the bleeriness left him as the bite of the amphetamines took hold. His mind clear and alert, he punched his way through his remaining notes and then switched off, settling back into the comfortable chair. He switched on the screen and channel-hopped for a while, finally settling with a news show giving a run-down on the latest bouts of civil disorder.

Mobs of black, white, and Hispanic youths, incensed by news of withdrawal of subsistence allowance, were on the rampage in downtown L.A. In Israel, mobs of armed Jews had massacred hundreds of Muslims and fire-bombed mosques, while in France, a demonstration demanding the reinstatement of toll-free voting was declared illegal and brutally suppressed. Images of rioting youths gave way to footage of armed Arabs pursued down dusty tracks by jeeps of

hooded paramilitaries, and scenes of gilded domes gutted by flames and spewing thick dark smoke. Then there was brief shot of a near-deserted Pont D'Avignon in a haze of CS gas, and close-ups of placards lying strewn about, bearing the legend "VOIX SANS PRIX!"

By the time the weather forecasts had finished, morning was well under way. He switched channels a few times, passing through witless sitcoms, a pool championship, and a down-market chat-show.

The arrival of the hostess with breakfast came as a welcome surprise. The rush to arrive at the terminal in time for the infrequent supersonic crossing had left him oblivious to how hungry he was, and he gratefully unclipped the lid off the compartmentalised plastic container and eagerly tucked into its steaming contents.

It was a traditional English breakfast. Fried egg, real bacon, tomatoes, mushrooms, and fried bread, with freshly baked bread rolls, and foil-wrapped butter. A small pot of filtered coffee followed shortly, with a carton of milk and three varieties of sugar.

He mopped up the last remains of breakfast and wiped his mouth on a serviette, then poured himself a black coffee. He turned to look out at the scenery beneath and could just make out the expanding green wedge of the approaching British mainland. The cloud was now clearing, and only patchy stretches of mist obscured the strengthening sunshine.

A clock on the wall signaled 9.53 GMT, and his stomach hovered momentarily as the jet lowered itself to a new altitude. The sheen of the ocean surface abruptly gave way to the green-brown patchwork quilt of the English west country. Five minutes later the rural crazy-paving broke up to be replaced by the ugly grey smear of London's environs, nested into a tangled web of expressways and flyovers, and obscured slightly by the smog of forty thousand petrol-burning cocoons. There was another small jolt as the jet fell back beneath the sound barrier, and the bell sounded signaling to strap up for the landing.

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Again he declined, instead taking a sip of coffee and staring at the approaching districts of West London. A relentless spatter of grey tower blocks broken by sections of neatly ordered red roofing and green lawns that signaled the exclusive A-Bracket areas.

Shortly, the dark strips of Heathrow Airport's many lanes could be seen approaching. The jet slowed further, and the engines slowed to a low whine as it prepared to touchdown. He finished his coffee and replaced his notepad in his pocket, waiting patiently for the plane to come to a stop. A soft bump signaled touchdown, and the opening of the terminal walkway could soon be seen rumbling towards the left of the cockpit.

The jet came to a halt, the engines died, and there was a series of clunking sounds as the walkway engaged with the jet's entrance. A recorded message then told passengers to collect their luggage and disembark.

DeVrides got up, put on his coat, and took his bag out of its enclave. Then he straightened his suit, left his compartment, and made his way to the front of the jet, amongst the remaining handful of smartly dressed passengers.

The corridor he emerged into was cold. He had seen through the window that its end shutters were already open before it had docked, allowing the elements to displace the warmth of the air-conditioned interior. As he progressed towards a hall with a set of escalators, the temperature gradually rose, and he descended to an even warmer arrival lounge.

He walked confidently to the gate and presented his card to the waiting customs officers. This time, though, they took him aside and questioned him in the choppy lilt peculiar to London: Date of birth, place of birth, address, parental names—each of his responses checked off against the information on the display of their viewer.

Then he was asked to look, with his left eye, into the lens of a device mounted on a nearby desktop. There was a brief green flash as it

mapped his retina, and then a tone sounded acceptance. The tallest of the officers returned his card, taking on a more relaxed demeanour, and apologised for the stringency of the security checks. Then he opened a side-gate and let him through.

These Brits were really jumpy, he thought, but it was understandable. As the biggest airport in Europe, and the centre of international air traffic, it was a prime target for terrorist attack. Out of the current worldwide toll of 32 passenger aircraft blown out of the air by concealed bombs, 13 were down to devices smuggled through Heathrow airport, and it now ranked the most heavily guarded airport in the world.

He made his way through the channel of fencing towards the main lobby, and a short, stocky character in a pastel-green driver's outfit approached him. He had a tanned complexion and deep brown eyes, and was in his early thirties. His dark, glossy hair was swept neatly back beneath the cap he wore.

"Mister DeVrides?" he said, in soft and well-spoken English, "My name is Kader. Miss Fischer asked me to collect you; may I take your bag?"

He recognised the man from the picture on the fax that Hythe had sent, detailing, very briefly, his agenda. Aizu's obsession with security was evident even here; the fax consisted of only three lines of text and a grey-scale photo. It simply told him the location, departure time, and destination of his flight, and who would meet him there.

The purpose of the visit was tersely described: "Security matters."

He handed over his case and followed him across the large departure lounge towards the bank of glass doors.

About him he saw the breed of police officers specific to Britain's high risk areas. A dark blue beret stood in place of the quaint, domed hat that had been a fixture of policing here for over two centuries, but a miniature version of the helmet's tin-badge preserved part of its appearance. On one hip they wore a side-baton, and hanging from a shoulder strap was a snub-nosed 9mm Uzi, its long magazine curving

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forward through a wide arc. In place of the dark, silver-buttoned jacket was a simple woolen military top—a crested royal insignia on the left breast, and loose canvass trousers replaced their smart cotton counterparts. A thick wrist-band held the radio unit and panic button.

Clusters of them stood about in all parts of the hall, a thin veneer of calm disguising their wired reflexes, eyes always on the alert

The glass doors slid gracefully open and DeVrides blinked in the sunlight. Kader took a key-ring from his pocket and pressed a button. The boot of a polished grey Rover by the kerb before them hummed smoothly open and he put the case in, re-closing it with a light push. Then he opened a rear door and stood aside as DeVrides stepped in.

Finally, he got into the driver's seat, started the engine, and the vehicle glid gracefully into the road. The rush hour had eased and the traffic was fairly light, so there were no queues crawling to leave the airport grounds. They barely slowed for the barriers, and turned out onto a dual carriageway.

“Where are we going?” said DeVrides.

Kader paused for a moment before answering. “I'm afraid my instructions are to...”

“Security, right?” DeVrides interrupted.

“Yes, sir.”

The car accelerated off a roundabout exit and up a slip road onto the circular expressway. DeVrides looked out onto the scenery that the rising vantage-point offered.

About him were rows of attractive suburban houses with well-treated lawns and colourful lanes of flowerbedding, their roofs projecting a uniform gaggle of satellite dishes, tastefully shaded to match the surrounding slating. Beyond them, in the distance, were clusters of ugly, concrete, tower blocks, their sides blotchy and darkened from pollution and weather erosion.

As the minutes passed, the slums came and went, and were soon replaced by the glittering high rises of London's corporate centre. To the

south he could make out the glitter of the Thames, its banks bloated and held at bay by raised concrete walling.

Soon the vehicle left the expressway and made its way south, towards a glass forest of office towers. Traffic thickened as they passed through the corporate jungle towards Waterloo Bridge, the pavements awash with business types in expensive suits, the surroundings a mess of competing architectural styles.

Some of the buildings were anonymous, uniform structures of plate-glass and tubular chrome railing, while others emulated classical styles of 18th and 19th centuries, wide flights of stone steps leading to an open forecourt supported by clean white pillars, hints of ancient Greece, Rome, and even Egypt occasionally touching their features. Others were simple replicas or renovations of original Georgian and Victorian stone buildings, pristine and modernised versions free of the grime and ugly guttering that afflicted their predecessors.

All had one thing in common, the great expanses of shining plate glass that had so long ago superseded the ugly and awkward grids of tiny tiles. The uniformity of shape, however, was compensated by the variety of styles of shading and colour. Much was a standard zero-point opaque, but some were shaded a warm tint of grey or blue, or even reactolite. Others were mirrored, giving only great banks of reflections, many exuding a subtle tinge of gold or sapphire. The most affluent organisations had huge, semi-opaque LCD screens built into the lobby windows, displaying stock and currency prices or FT news channels.

The cluster of buildings broke up with the arrival of the huge grey expanse of the Northern bank of the Thames, ten million tons of concrete distributed along twenty miles of London's river banks, the old embankment now lying submerged and useless beneath the surface of the bloated river. They followed alongside it for a few hundred metres, past rows of bijou cafes and patisseries, and then slowed as they approached the bridge's opening. The display on a toll-barrier blinked as it verified their pass, then obediently raised its barrier.

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Crossing the river, DeVrides could see the immediate length of the river, and make out a few small pleasure yachts and passenger ferries. The only large ships were the permanently moored cruisers which now served as night-clubs or restaurants.

They emerged into a quieter part of town off the south bank. Gone were the vast office complexes and tower blocks, and in their place were a more modest selection of low-cut Victorian buildings, unchanged for two centuries but for the gaudy and modern facia of their ground floor displays. Shortly, the car drew up alongside a coffee shop in Lambeth Road called Le Papillon.

Before they had even fully come to a halt, DeVrides could make out the familiar form of Mary Fischer through its front window. She sat there in an innocuous outfit; a simple black dress topped with a pink jacket with big black buttons, its pockets and collar bordered red. A paisley scarf hung over her shoulder, and a pair of over-sized hairpins skewered a small black carton of a hat onto a tight bundle of dark hair. A large pair of glasses sat on the bridge of her nose, the fashionable, single-lensed type that join in the middle, its polished ebony frame glimmering in the strip lighting.

She looked good in the outfit, and you could almost have mistaken her for somebody a good two decades younger. The collagen enhancements and dermo tensors that so many women go for played a part in this, but her figure had yet to show the signs of over half a century of wear.

“This is it, sir.” said Kader. “You won’t need the bags. They’ll be dropped off at your hotel.”

Kader made to get up, but DeVrides signaled for him to stay seated, declining the customary door-opening formality. He got out of the limousine and crossed the pavement, stepping into the doorway of the small restaurant. Behind him, Kader pulled out and drove away.

Fischer sat with a small cup of dark, Irish coffee; she turned and smiled politely as he pulled up a seat and sat beside her. She took a

casual sip of her coffee, and wiped her mouth on a napkin. Then she reached over to pick up a bulky dark green shopping bag, and handed it to him.

“First of all, go to the mensroom and change into these. Put everything you’re wearing into the bag, including all the stuff in your pockets. Credit cards, wrist-watch, jewellery, the works.”

He obediently went to the mensroom and changed into a crisp new set of clothes that had come straight out of their packaging. He took off his Cartier and sovereign ring and carefully folded them into his old set of clothes, then he put them into the shopping bag and left.

She was stood waiting by the bar as he emerged. She took the bag off him and handed it to the barman, who vanished into a back-room. Then they left, walking briskly down the busy street. Fischer was quiet for a while, making only the occasional bit of small talk. How was the trip? Was everything okay at the N.Y. division? But then they entered a busy indoor precinct, and she led him up a few flights of stairs to one of its sparsely populated floors. In a remote corner of a huge clothing store, she finally came round to business.

“We can talk now,” she said, “Sorry about all the cloak and dagger gaff. Management are getting really spooked. The order’s out that all the top level talk has got to be done face to face.”

A few years ago DeVrides would have been horrified at the idea of wandering around a shopping mall for a secret briefing. But in a world rife with espionage, the worst threat to security was the very act of planning a meeting. As soon as the place is set, ingenious hi-tech surveillance can be put in place in anticipation. It was now almost impossible to guard against a pre-arranged meeting place being set up for covert observation, and the only answer was to have no set location.

There really was nothing to beat the ancient tried-and-tested post-war techniques. Arrange a rendez-vous, get an operative to check for tails and blow the whistle if anything takes the bait, otherwise hold the

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meeting on the move changing your environment regularly so nobody can get a bead on you.

“Its only a precaution,” she continued. “They won’t be onto us yet, but it keeps the spook shop happy.” She casually began leafing her way through a set of pastel blouses nearby.

“Firstly,” she resumed, “They managed to track down the devices we arranged. It would’ve been nice if they’d missed one, but we didn’t expect much else and it made for a good diversion anyway. Good News is the main item went ahead as planned, but the result is going to need some heavy processing to make any sense out of it. We’ve got someone to deal with that.”

She moved off across the room and DeVrides compliantly followed.

“More importantly is the intelligence reports we’re getting about stock movements over the last few days,” she continued. “There’s been some heavy buying into five big companies. Yoto Nanotech, Ultima, VR Global, Shimano Engineering. and Haber-Cartell. As you know these are all subsidiary companies of, or owned by, Yoto itself. What’s interesting though, is the companies who’ve been buying into them. Boss-Nike, Inca Biotechnology, Hass Chemicals and DSL Materials, have all increased their holding by a hefty percentage, and these are all pretty much under the rule of Nova.”

They stepped onto a deserted escalator and rose gently upwards.

“What we couldn’t figure, though, is what the biggest buyers are up to: Orion Industries, Casio UK, and DEH Transport all come under the Orion banner, and their share of the action accounts for almost seventy per cent. But intelligence did some serious digging around into the background of Orion’s head, John Warner, and guess what? Turns out that Warner and Delphi go back a long way, and I mean way back. They were close friends at Washington City High, related by marriage, and are still stuck into the same social crowd. What really makes it is that their official details cover up these connections: College, high school, and marriage records have been tampered with to disguise any

traces—obviously up to their neck in insider dealing. But we got lucky when we chatted to a few of Warner’s old school pals, one of the original year-books turned up, and bingo...”

They stepped off the top of the escalator and wandered into a furniture showroom. Casually they walked through an elaborate maze of scenery—idealised kitchens, bedrooms, and lounges, lay terraced about them like some habitation for some great, human zoo.

“So what d’ya figure,” said DeVrides, “A takeover bid?”

“Yup,” replied Fischer, “and a complete steam-roller job at that. The old buck-shot trick. Get hold of a controlling stake by disguising yourself as lots of independent interests. All the shares suddenly appear in the hands of one guy and the target company loses possession. Gets chewed up and swallowed whole.”

“So why meet up? If they’re plannin’ a sneak attack, the last thing they wanna do is draw attention to themselves.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. Maybe they thought they could buy them out in a face to face deal, then sink them the hard way if they don’t play ball. But they’d be blowing their cover and lose the element. It wouldn’t make sense. They’re up to something else, and we’ll know soon enough.”

“A takeover’s gonna be bad news. I take it you ain’t sittin’ on this.”

She paused thoughtfully as they wandered further through the store.

“No, of course. We’re going to blow the whole thing wide open. A discrete leak about Warner’s ties with Delphi should be enough. We’ll pipe the whole file to Randall’s security team just in case they’re dumb enough to miss the connection.”

They broke off conversation for a while, as they left the store and moved through the public walkways to a nearby bookshop. She resumed as they found solitude amongst a deserted row of bookcases.

“There’s some bad news, though,” she continued. “The NASA guy screwed up on the surveillance job. Didn’t check the schedule properly. Reckons he interrupted a session. He cleared up his footprints, but

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someone else probably saw the tap—might even have been tracking it. We've got the user's handle and we're onto them, but we better pray we get there before Nova or any of the other players get wind of what's going on."

3

The Net

Jez was nervous. He hated these breaks, they were dangerous. One screw-up and they were neck deep in shit. Matt had got hold of the site specs from a state system that a smart six-year old could have cracked. Two minutes on a dumb handheld he'd rigged up in a discrete call-box had got him superuser access to a citywide architectural database spanning two hundred square kilometres.

It was past 2 A.M. by the time they left the Golden State Freeway and headed off into a small Glendale estate north of Los Angeles. They quickly found the area they were looking for, and pulled their run-down old '42 Hyundai in a few hundred metres from a large fence-bound complex. Matt carried a back-pack, and Jez carried a small, black briefcase.

They walked past its main gates and along some back-streets bordering on the walled back yards of an up-market residential area. Matt was poring over a printout he had with him, and shortly took a sharp left that led them into a dark alleyway passing along the perimeter of the complex's outmost buildings. At this point there was no fencing, only the largely featureless wall of a two storey building that stretched a good two hundred metres.

Matt came to a halt by a small set of windows that were flush with the paving. He took out a torch, and inspected the frame. It was wired up to a simple foil circuit breaker.

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He passed the torch to Jez, asking him to hold it steady. Then, he took a small hand-held drill out of his pack, selected a needle-sharp bit, and made a small hole at both ends of the window through the foil strip. He pushed a rivet pin through either hole, clipped a wire across them, and broke the window, muffling the soft tinkle of glass with a towel. Reaching inside, he unlatched the window and opened it. They were in.

They both descended softly into a musty-smelling cellar. Matt shut the window gently behind them, and Jez shone his torch about. They were in a medium-sized storeroom whose sides were adorned by wooden shelves of copper tubing, metals sheets, and bundles of thick yellow material that looked like some sort of cladding. They made their way to the door, unlatched it, and set off down a narrow corridor bordered by military-grey walls. Soon they reached a corner where an office was set, its windowed exterior presenting a clear view of its contents. In the corner on a small desk was the semi-opaque, plastic wafer of a terminal screen.

Jez shone the beam of his torch over the unit, following the lead from the terminal to a set of sockets in a wall-panel.

“Yes!” he hissed, grinning and waving a fist in the air.

Military projects were the worst one’s to crack. Security was invariably pretty sharp, and all the usual scams had been closed off by the small army of Hackers and Net-freaks they had on the pay-roll as consultants. The few net-access nodes they could find were covered by a check-in protocol. An employee needed company authorisation for an external link to the main system, in the absence of which the gateway would be permanently off-line.

The only way of accessing it was to get to a terminal on-site, and this was no easy task for a defence-graded complex. The sensitive areas of the complex were permanently guarded by a security team and a forest of surveillance devices. A few of the outbuildings, however, were not included under this regime, such as the boiler room and maintenance

stores. There was, after all, nothing but a few materials, tools, and some cheap office equipment.

But there was the terminal. And a terminal meant a way into the system.

Matt carefully broke a pane out of one of the frames, put it aside, and climbed through the empty square onto a row of filing cabinets, clambering softly to the ground. Jez followed suit, crawled over to the wall-sockets and immediately began to set up his gear. He opened his case and took out a compact VR headset, unfolding it and setting it to one side. Then he unplugged the terminal connection and plugged his own unit into the socket. He put the headset on and booted his deck up, slotting his right hand into the BAT fitting.

The blackness vanished as the familiar scene jumped to life. He was hanging in a semi-translucent azure tube, which split into two ahead of him. To the right it became grey and opaque, terminating in the black square of a closed gateway that would otherwise have taken him soaring out into the glittering labyrinth of the Net. To the left he could make out a bubble of ten or so access nodes at the end of the pathway. He pushed his index finger experimentally about in the bat; up, down, left, right, forward, back, and the scene weaved about him as his construct obediently followed the movements.

Tapping a control on the deck, a grey slab appeared before him, following his movements as he bobbed along towards the entry plateau. On it were a selection of coloured crystal objects, some modelling screens, phone-sets, drives, or other single items, and others showing an elaborate frozen interplay between various symbols—custom-made glyphs representing state-of-the-art crackware. He flicked experimentally across the tool-pad, touching the shapes with a tiny white globe, and watching as they briefly shone. Then he was off again, soaring into the access area and coming to rest by the first node. He touched a blue crystalline emblem, it lit momentarily, and a duplicate appeared embedded on the node's circular face in a square of crystal, the ghostly hands of a clock spinning wildly round upon its surface.

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He darted between nodes triggering off different combinations of probes, greedily absorbing their return messages and setting off more, teasing and poking at every weakness, chasing every lead. The minutes passed, he gave up on a few of the nodes, and focused his attentions on the remainder.

Finally, one of the active probes sounded a note and lit up. He set off a permutation driver and hovered in anticipation before the node's active face, watching a display wheel off a blur of character-combinations beneath the clock's spinning hands. Finally the display froze, a chord blared, and the node's surface broke apart in an animated explosion, opening up a portal into a dazzling silver nebula. He was in.

Jez shot through the node and into the glare of the Shimano cyberscape. Its information lattice appeared as a great, non-euclidean sphere built up of pin-pricks of light, mostly silver, but with patches of metallic red, blue, green, or yellow. Each level was separated by a translucent shell, and individual segments of a level were divided by similar semi-transparent webs. Moving in one plane took you along a strata of information, through the contents of many segments occupying the same level, whereas another plane took you up through the segment hierarchy towards the system's root. The whole thing wrapped round on itself through all three dimensions, and trying to visualise its shape gave Jez a headache.

The segments were marked by silver squares, whereas the files within were clusters of spheres—some small, some large—that hung about in rectangular layers, each with its title and statistics printed neatly on its facing surface. Colour indicated the format—most were the silver of regular text or data, but reds and blues signified video and audio footage, and the greens indicated the VR-construct format that came with design and manufacturing specs.

Matt sat on the desk waiting uneasily, glancing occasionally out of a corridor window for the tell-tale beam of a torch, and listening carefully for the sound of approaching footsteps. He glanced down at

the cross-legged figure working the controls of the deck, his thinly shorn head occasionally twitching or leaning this way and that in response to the VR, his right hand adeptly working the BAT's gyroscopic mechanism.

Jez veered through level after level, soaring through the wispy partitions and zooming briefly in on clusters of the reflective orbs. Sometimes he'd jab them and their contents would come spewing out onto transparent screens that hovered before his eyes, then he'd go racing off again. Occasionally he'd rise up to the system root, turn, and go diving off in another direction, through shell upon shell of another segment, weaving through misty partitions and hunting through arrays of the multi-colour spheroids.

The minutes passed. Finally, he caught the green glow of a great sprawl of VR cells, and turned sharply about towards it. A square plaque bearing the name of the sub-segment glowed silently on the satin partition: "Eye-C/V2.1." Beyond it was a surreal forest of bloated green orbs, dotted with occasional smaller, silver globes. Bingo. He dived into the cluster jabbing cell after cell. Green wireframe objects appeared in a dozen glass boxes hanging before him, each spinning about an imaginary axis, and adorned by rectangles of text. Jez dug through them for a while and then, satisfied that he'd identified his target, activated a crystal on his tool pad.

The ghostly walls of the sector illuminated briefly and then dimmed, as a featureless slab appeared before him. It read "This is classified material. Do you wish to proceed with the transfer?"

Jez hit Yes.

The deck hummed briefly as the information sank in.

He hit the exit, pulled off the headset, and shut-down the deck, blinking briefly as his eyes adjusted to the darkened surroundings. Then he quickly packed away the kit and shut the case's lid.

He stood up and reached into his jacket pocket, taking out a small, red rectangle of card which he carefully placed face-up, on the desk,

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just before the keyboard. Printed on it was a plain black and white design depicting a many-armed Hindu Goddess dancing inside a wheel. A caption read: “Many Apologies For The Inconvenience” in elegant italic script.

“Mission accomplished, Lieutenant.” He grinned, his gold-studded teeth glittering in the dark. He picked up the case and pushed it through the empty frame of the office window, sliding through after it. Matt followed, and the two of them slipped quietly back down the corridor, into the storeroom and back through the outside window into the alley.

Seconds later they climbed back into the battered red Cobra. The headlights burst to life, and they pulled quickly away down the narrow suburban road, the electric motor whining softly up through the gears. Ahead of them, the glittering galaxy of LA’s metropolis, a seething hive of ten million people where they could vanish into anonymity, impervious to the corporate panic that would erupt when the theft was discovered.

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Jake could feel another stretch of gloom approaching. The tell-tale signs were all in place, the listlessness, the dull ache inside that nothing could relieve, and the morbid thoughts—replaying endlessly over past failures, mourning for all the could-bes that never were. But worst of all was the intense irritation, the feeling that there was something that he should be doing, something that would spell his way out of his misery, but which his very condition kept beneath the threshold of his awareness. Whichever direction he took to escape the feeling of restlessness, he still felt dead and empty as before, still looking for something that he couldn’t even recognise.

It was his visit to Lisa that had set it off, opened old wounds that he really thought had gone for good. Two years had passed since they had drifted their separate ways. Two years since the basic disagreements

finally put an end to a relationship that had always suffered from the psychological chasm that lay between them. She said he was paranoid, incapable of trust, that his outlook was dark and cynical. Sure you have to be tough, you have to watch your back, be careful. But imagine you're surrounded by enemies and you make it that way; they see the distrust in your eyes and send it right back at you. A self-fulfilling prophesy and a vicious circle. Put out some good energy instead, reach out a bit and they'll soon come round.

He guessed that was what he saw in her, that light of optimism that he just couldn't find inside himself. She was his opposite number, but ultimately the distance between them was just too far. It was his growing involvement in the vast underground Outculture that spelt the beginning of the slow erosion of their bond. She wanted In and he was increasingly committed to the Outworld. She wanted to make her way in life, go through the works, set herself up for a Real Job and climb the ladder. He wanted no part of it. He hated the whole sick, insane mess. A world run by power-crazed psychopaths whose grip was getting more brutal by the year. A world owned by a tiny elite, creaming off 98% of the world's resources, sustained by a huge, poverty stricken labour-force spanning the so-called developing world. An elite who lived lives of unimaginable luxury while hundreds of thousands starved away or fell to cholera, diptheria, typhoid, or AIDS—dying for want of a few bowls of rice, some fresh water or an inoculation. Every week the news flicks would show their dark, emaciated bodies, laid out in rows, taken away in lorries, and then burnt or dumped in mass graves.

Sure, she told him, it's a rotten system, but it's the only one there is. Go to war with it, though, and they'll bury you so fast it'll make your head spin. You've got to play by the rules. Work from within the system, go through the right channels. If you want to be a wheel, you get In, move into politics, and work your way up. Outculture means nothing but trouble. Don't get involved.

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The arguments had gone on forever, and eventually they'd begun to drift apart as they took their separate paths. Lisa spent most of her time on her research at Leeds, now returning only at weekends to stay at her shared flat on the commons estate. Jake spent more and more of his time hooked up to the Net, plugged into boards and talk zones across the globe, working his way into the Net's deepest and most exclusive niches, rubbing shoulder's with some of world's biggest hackers, info-freaks, and cyberspies, and he'd finally started to make some real money as a techie answer-man. If you had a problem, Jake knew someone who'd come up with the answer within a few hours, complete with specs and suppliers. He'd take a cut and pass the rest on to the brains.

Most of the work was completely legit, but some of it wasn't. Plenty of mouthpieces for big (but always anonymous) organisations clumsily poked around the cyberways looking for a name to do a job. Usually a bit of basic industrial espionage, sometimes safe, sometimes not. You could tell straight away by the specs and the target. Nowadays he'd come across quite a bit of stuff that was in his league, but mostly it was over his head or just too dangerous, and he'd either turn it down straight off, or else arrange a meet with someone deeper outway.

He still loved Lisa, despite the differences, despite two years of moving on. Despite Eve. The dull ache, the sick feeling, testified to his yearning to turn back the clock again, to make it all right. And he sensed that Eve knew, that she'd guessed how much time he'd been spending over the other side of the circular, that she'd noticed the recent fleeting stutter as he mentioned Eve's name, betraying that slip-of-the-tongue that is the undoing of so many unfaithful partners.

Not that he had been unfaithful. The clichéd "just good friends" stood just as it had since that dark September evening when he'd finally packed his belongings into a van and headed off through the thick smog to a run-down bed-sit. But his resurrected regrets left him with a feeling of infidelity every bit as uncomfortable as the real thing.

Jake tried to snap himself out of the morose mood that gripped him. He spent a couple of hours chasing some info for a local mouth, then dug into some of the more obscure pirate hangouts, catching up on news, and fishing about for word on any action. No news, and no sign of Shiva, Phantom, or 2-Bit. Only small players seemed to be hanging around, all the big fish seemed to be off-line, maybe hiding away somewhere else. But you could almost cut the tension with a knife, something big was coming. Something really big.

Eventually he pulled out, switched off his unit, and took off the cheap, LCD headset. The smell of incense was in the air, and he turned and looked through the doorway of their small bedroom. The room was dark but for a single candle which cast a yellow aura about Eve's seated silhouette. She was sitting cross-legged on the carpeted floor, her back straight and firm, her bare shoulders and arms ebbing rhythmically to her deep and regular breathing. About her, thin strands of incense smoke tumbled up into the air.

Seeing her there, his thoughts turned warmly to the memories of this mysterious new addition to his life. Sometimes fiery, sometimes so detached that he wondered desperately what was going on in her mind, she was always enigmatic and unpredictable. But that's what he liked about her, she had hidden depths like no girl he'd ever known; she was something that he just couldn't work out, a riddle, a puzzle that could take a lifetime to unravel.

At first he thought she was some kind of borderline crazy, that maybe she'd dropped too many psychedelics and got unhinged somewhere along the line. But he soon saw that she'd really did have something, that in some strange way she'd really got things figured out, and was well and truly switched on. On the Net she'd be the sort they described as being Into The Word.

Word on the Net wasn't just about information, or having a handle on things, it took on a deeper meaning too. Word was about having a real feel for what the Net was doing, about being connected to things in

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a deeper way. Not just what individual people and organisations were up to, and how their activity left its mark, but a sense of a greater whole that existed throughout—a pattern that would be impressed into the Net itself. There was an indefinable identity that some names seemed to have with the Net itself, as if they were extensions of some gestating cybernetic consciousness that was slowly evolving out of the vast electronic tapestry.

She had it, whatever it was. Sometimes he felt alienated and out of his depth, she'd be talking to him and she'd gradually move further and further into a different territory until he couldn't make sense of her anymore. Then she'd see that look in his eyes and quickly move back again, subtly excusing what she'd just said, rationalising it away into a form that he could get his head round. But he sensed somewhere what she was up to, felt like he was undergoing some kind of subtle initiation. Not into some weird individual fantasy, or some bizarre thought pattern that she alone had sunk into, but something that was profoundly real. From time to time he'd catch her with some vague acquaintance, a friend of a friend, or someone they'd bumped into down a club or dig-in, they'd be talking together in the same cryptic language. He'd hunt around for some angle, desperately try to give it some kind of context, looking for a way into the conversation. Then, as if they felt his discomfort, they'd throw him a lead, give him something to make sense of the whole thing, and he'd be in. But the conversation would have subtly changed, and he sensed that they'd tuned out of their real communication out of courtesy for someone who'd otherwise be left out.

He'd try to confront it directly from time to time. He'd tell her what he felt and ask her to open up and explain what she was trying to say. But every time they seemed to end up going round and round in circles, stuck in some argument, or else talking about completely trivial or inconsequential things. Eventually she'd break it off, lightening the mood with some incidental humour, and reassuring him that it wasn't really important.

Paul Barrows

He went to the kitchen, pulled a bottle of whisky out of the fridge and half-filled a small glass with it. Then he turned off the light, went back to the sofa, and sat quietly in the near-darkness, the dim, flickering glow of the candle sending twisted shadows across cluttered room.

He could hear the soft rhythm of her breath flowing slowly back and forth with almost hypnotic regularity. He took a sip from his glass and lay back, allowing the surrounding stillness to seep into him, its warmth stealing across him and dissolving all his tension. Looking across at her it dawned on him that she was in a Net of her own, an inner space that was as old as the hills and as deep as the cosmos. A Net that had been navigated since the dawn of human history; where there was no need for decks, headsets, or anything other than the world behind your own eyes.

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The plastic seat of the chair was cold. A sign that he was the first in today. As usual there was a knot in his stomach as he prepared himself mentally for another session.

Of course he didn't *have* to go through with it. Just say the word and they'd pack him onto that jet and back to his home town on the outskirts of Tennessee, where he'd work bars, or spend the afternoons sweating over a hot-plate in Burger King.

Fact is this is exactly what they were paying him for. Exactly what they warned him about. The fatigue, the headaches, the nausea and disorientation. But that wasn't what he'd been thinking about when the team of neurotechies briefed him before he was shipped in. He was thinking about the five figure fee—the equivalent of over two years salary—that he'd be getting for a few weeks work in some biolab; more than enough to see him through a good medical college. He was thanking his luck that it was him that was chosen out of over fifty others who met the specs.

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He'd quit telling friends what he was up to, he was sick of the lectures. They told him he was crazy, spinning the same old horror stories of unsuspecting guinea pigs reduced to dribbling imbeciles by clumsy neuroscopic probing.

Reuben wasn't stupid. He'd taken advice: He'd met with consultants and gone through the contract and insurance details with a fine tooth-comb, double checking it with a relative from the legal profession. It was all sound and fully legitimate. Inca was a top-notch outfit who'd pioneered the techniques they were using. The EMR fields they used carried no serious long-term hazards, the contract was water-tight, and the liability clauses included huge mandatory compensation for any long-term reactions.

The chair was set into a white cocoon, a shell that surrounded the large reclining seat except for an opening at the front, from which the seat and its padded leg-rests protruded. He breathed a final sigh before settling back into it and awaiting the familiar voice through the pod's speakers.

He stared at the cream-coloured wall of the small, windowless room, its textured surface catching a broken reflection of the overhead strip-lighting. The square aluminium tunnel of a ventilation shaft was inset along the high ceiling, and the white, painted sandwich of an old radiator stood against the wall, extended tubing disappearing into the grey, tiled floor.

Finally the disembodied voice of Dr Richards filled the booth.

"Okay, Reuben. Time to buckle up..."

He pulled the helmet down from above him, the spring-loaded arm opening as he pulled it into place, the sensors hard and cold against the rear of his scalp. When it was in place, he secured it with the velcro chin-strap, adjusting it until the plastic buttons of its throat-mikes were comfortably settled above his larynx.

"Ready, Doc," he said.

Paul Barrows

For a while there was silence, finally the speaker cut in again, the sound of background noise filtering through.

“O-kay,” said the doctor, after a pause. “Everything checks out. Powering up...3—2—1...now.”

With the “now” came the familiar lurching feeling as fields from the RNS probes rudely grabbed at his cortex. In a fragment of a moment the cold glare of the scene about him was torn apart by a tornado of visual noise.

About him was a snowstorm of colour, a dazzling battle between thousands of vortices of light. Within and outside him was a kaleidoscopic torrent. Breathtaking structures of every shade and hue tore into one another, twisting about each other and knotting themselves into dancing embryos of newer form, or else rending each other to scattered shreds that would quickly be swallowed by the surrounding chaos. Pigments alternated so fast that they seemed strangely divorced from the tumbling masses which they formed, but every so often came isolated pockets of stability, where a cluster of activity—or the entire field—would slow, and crystallise into a complex but stable geometric form of coherent texture. But sooner or later, like a multi-coloured spinning top drawing to a halt, its shape would break up, as if it were only an illusion—the blurred motion of a deeper solidity that had still to unveil itself. The process would continue until it collapsed back into the background noise or became sucked into the activity of the surrounding phantasmagoria.

He tried to relax and flow with the onslaught of psychedelic static, to uncoil the knot in his guts that gripped him. It wasn't the relentless visual whirl that stressed him so much as the unthinkable spatial distortion. Elements that appeared simultaneously to be inches before his eyes yet miles away, the twisted euclidean curvature that created geometric impossibilities like some multi-dimensional Escher mural. Space twisted back on itself so that surfaces were simultaneously behind and

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in front of one another, warped through its own topography like a real-life Necker Cube.

The conflicting cues tore at his senses, his mind grappling to lend order to the conceptual insanity. He remembered the coaching and began to breath slowly and deeply, combing out the tension in his body and forcing his reluctant mind into an unconflicted, hypnagogic state.

Half a minute later he felt better, the temporary sensory panic had subsided, and the neurological cacophony no longer felt like a knife in his brain.

Eventually Richards' subdued voice came through.

"Everything okay?" he asked, softly.

"Yeah," Reuben replied. He swallowed, his throat was dry.

"Okay... We're trying some sigmoid variants, today. The usual routine."

There was the familiar pause as the technicians in the neighbouring lab prepared to jack in the relevant software.

"Get ready... First phase coming... now."

The dance stretched and jumped into a new plateau. It was now an inverted ocean of shallow ripples and spikes, flickering wildly towards him in fragmented sequences. Needles of blue, yellow and green jabbed out towards him in a surreal aquine collage.

Reuben paused to absorb the information.

"Uh... Lotta spikes again," he said. "Z-polarised, logarithmic or maybe inverse square. Only mid-range frequencies, though—red missing."

"Okay... how about this?"

The plane was suddenly alight with a blaze of crimson. It quickly dimmed and sank into a tri-chromatic hue.

"That better?"

"Yeah... full range now."

"Right. Next form coming up—"

The forest of flickering points suddenly twisted sharply, skewing to form a concentrated luminescent orb projecting that same fluttering landscape.

“Same form, but now its radiating from a point source.”

“What about coherency...is there any pattern?” came the voice of Richards, an urgent tone.

Reuben watched carefully, attending to any shape or rhythm.

“No, just looks grainy. Shaped static. It’s moving too fast.”

“Okay, try this—”

The pattern jumped again. The urchine knot of colour remained unchanged, but the dance had slowed a little. Now the shape seemed more to undulate, to drift leisurely through its motions.

“It slower, better defined now...can you get any better?” he asked.

Richards made more adjustments, and the shape jumped from one plateau to the next. The minutes passed and the session went on, calibrations were applied and results noted, but the relentless ebb of static remained.

An hour passed before they hit the breakthrough they’d been looking for. Dr Richards applied the forty-eighth variation of Q-form No.9 and tapped the engage key.

The shape was still there, and so was the static texture, but the drifting had slowed dramatically, now practically motionless.

“What about now?” came the voice.

He studied the form as it slid slowly through its transformations.

“That’s it...almost. Hardly moving now.”

The queasiness, the feeling of vertigo had almost completely dissolved. The scene had a stability and solidity he’d never encountered before.

“Right,” said Richards, “so it’s almost still, but no coherency?” He sounded alert, almost excited.

“Yeah...just a twisted mess. Scrambled.”

The scene flickered, and then jumped. The same pattern was now adorning the inside of a vast orb, its surfaces projecting thousands of umbilical strands towards a vanishing point at its centre.

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“Still zero shift, but no coherency.” He paused, licking his dry lips. “Looks like a pi-cube structure—alpha symmetry, central convergence.”

Richards was silent. He’d dispensed with the formality of announcing the calibrations. The shape slowly began to twist, and undulate within itself, tiny entrails of pattern flowing through one another. The strands emanating from the orb’s surface thickened and closed in, pulling the structure in on itself.

“Is it starting to resolve, yet? How’s it look?” Richards asked finally.

“Keep going—looking good.”

The tendrils of colour were beginning to take on coherency. No longer were they fractalesque knots of static; fragments of barely discernible textures, edges, and skewed planes twisted about one another, uncoiling, unwinding. Finally, with a stomach-churning lurch, the field collapsed in on itself, and his perspective jumped as the shape became empty space, and the pattern unfolded into a uniform image.

He was seeing something.

“Got it!” he said, “Yes! That’s it, hold it right there.”

“What is it? What’re you getting?”

He was a dot suspended in a vast chasm. Hundreds of metres to his left was a bundles of slick grey tubes, disappearing into the darkness ahead. His field of vision would occasionally jump, twitching off this way and that, sometimes vanishing as something momentarily blocked the view.

“I can see. Its huge, like its magnified or something. Mostly dark but there’s these big tubes—a string of them over to the left.”

“Excellent,” Richards said. “Just needs a few adjustments.”

There was a pause, and space was suddenly rushing inwards, his viewpoint panning outwards. The thick darkness of deep space receded as light swept across him. The chasm was now the outsized interior of a room, before him a monstrous section of screen—a gaudily coloured patchwork of lines, colours and textures surrounding

a spinning polygon. The vast grey tunnels were now recognisable as cables of wire extending off into the shadows.

“That it?” Richards asked again.

“Yes! It clearer now. Some kinda test card, but I’m still only getting part of the field. Mainly peripheral, upper left quadrant—I think. The screen’s bottom right. I can see walls to the left and a bit of ceiling.”

“I’ll see if I can centre it.” There was a pause. “What about this -”

The scene swam off and darkness descended as his vantage point panned off into the field’s perimeter.

“No! That’s the wrong way,” he said. “Going off-field...”

“Okay—”

The scene swam back, and his vantage point slid towards the scene’s centre. Suddenly his vision was ablaze with detail as he came into alignment with the foveal centre.”

“Yes, *there*.” Reuben said. The tracking steadied as his viewpoint began to bear off to the other side. “Back about five per cent and you’ve got it dead centre.”

The scene recentralised and settled, still but for the intermittent twitches as eyes that weren’t his own darted about the image’s focal point.

He was seated before a table in a small, dimly lit room. On the table’s surface was a slab of screen displaying a test-card, and nearby a small collection of objects. Occasionally the scene would vanish for a fragment of a second into redish-blackness as eyelids snapped down.

“Its all there, full-field. I can see fine. You want me to go through the check-list?”

“Go ahead,” came the response.

Reuben examined the scene’s details.

“There’s a screen with a test card. Standard colour-intensity grid with some kinda polygon rotating around in the middle. I think its a Kanuza triangle. There’s a load of other stuff there as well, by the screen: A stapler, a few books, a meter, a stuffed toy—some kinda reptile—and some

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coloured blocks. Its all on top of a desk, black wood or something, maybe plastic.”

“How’s the colouring?”

“Looks fine. Maybe a bit loud, but pretty much normal.”

There was a pause. Richards’ voice could be heard distantly as he muttered to other operative. Finally it came back:

“Very good, Reuben.” Richards’ voice was warm and relaxed now. “We just made history.”

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They met late afternoon at Sector 9, a club owned by 2-Bit’s cousin. A three-floor wing of a multiplex that played ice metal and grunge techno to packs of Goths, Punks, and Bondies. It was closed; the bar caged behind tarnished shutters, dust-cloths draped over the pumps, the pool table covered by a stained piece of wooden sheeting.

The walls about the dance floor were covered in an air-brushed sequence of apocalyptic scenes. Armies of mythical beasts clashing with panic-stricken occupants of burning cities, some of the creatures armed with spears and swords, others carrying machine-guns and rocket-launchers. More flew overhead in jets, bombers, and choppers, all a glossy black, adorned by flaming skulls and triple sixes.

The air carried a smell of stale beer, cigarette smoke, and marijuana, and thin slices of daylight shone through the edges of shuttered windows contrasting the yellow hue of the overhead strip-lighting.

When Jake arrived, 2-Bit was sitting with Chip in one of the semi-circular booths of worn seating, his steel-toed boots on the round, black table. His hair was a neat, square slab, tapering off down in a series of thinning lines, his thin, stubbly face adorned by a top-tinted eye-band. A plain white vest gave way to a pair of leather trousers secured by an italic aluminium belt; the leg-joints accentuated by the bulge of scuffed knee-pads.

At first he didn't recognise the petite figure sitting next to him in a plain pair of overalls. The lop-sided smile and distinctive voice made the connection.

"Hi, Shadow," she said, that slight hoarseness bringing instant recognition.

She'd changed her hair—the long, sandy locks shorn away to leave a crew-cut with a short rat's tail. But it wasn't just the hair. She'd had her face done too, finally taking a cost option she'd been offered by a Biocorp customer.

They'd done a good job, too. Chip hadn't been unattractive by any standards, but with the minor imperfections skillfully removed she looked stunning. The slight, avian bridge to the nose was gone, the result a perfectly formed girlish button, and the angular gait of the chin that over-emphasised her jaw and cheek lines had been sculpted into an elegantly proportioned curve.

It hadn't seemed so long since they'd run that credit scam, but now he realised that it was over a year since the two had spent a wet afternoon trailing between a string of auto-tills around Oxford Street, Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus, turning fake plastic into a wad of banknotes. Sessions over The Net tended to disguise the periods between face-to-face encounters, artificially accelerating people's change in appearance.

Jake smiled at her, and took an empty segment of seating next to her.

"How's business?" he said.

"*Comme ci, comme ça*. You know how it is," said Chip. Not good then, thought Jake.

2-Bit hadn't said anything. He just gave that quiet, corner-of-the-mouth smile that Jake had found so unnerving at first. It wasn't that he was unfriendly, he just didn't seem to be into the regular hello-goodbye conventions. When you met up he just acted like you hadn't been away, and when you were set to go he just finished what he was saying and watched you leave with a simple "Seeya."

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Now he spoke.

“...but it shall be improving very shortly,” he added, and gave that smile again.

“Yeah. Something’s going down,” said Chip. “Something real big. You felt the Word on the Net recently?”

Jake was relieved that his intuition was right. There was a particular feeling you got from the buzzing hive of Net-talk, a sense of some undercurrent, as though the electronic babble of millions of artificially enmeshed individuals was an entity in its own right. The more you got into The Net, it seemed, the more that alien sense—just on threshold of consciousness—nagged at you, calling up gut instincts and reactions that seemed to defy logic.

However firm and sure his impressions were, and however often they turned out to be right, though, he still found it impossible to trust something so intangible, always wondering whether it was just his imagination.

Worse still, was the realisation that a growing number of Netters were catching the same vibe, the dawning understanding that something they’d got marked as just a kind of cybernetic intuition went way deeper, and either denying or rationalising it. It permeated The Net like a living thing, but the reluctance to talk about it was always hanging in the air.

It was something you either felt or didn’t, and unless you already knew where someone was at, there was that paranoia about openly broaching a subject that would mark you out, and of the hostile rebuff that kind of talk could get you from the others. Like you were talking about spooks or something. The fact is that most of them just refused to see it, to even recognise any kind of impressions above what they could immediately see or hear. Others would seem to be more in touch with it but would then have him wondering if they really were talking about the same thing. Other times he’d meet someone and quickly find himself way out of his depth, freaked out by stuff that

sounded ominously familiar but came just short of hitting home some vital connection.

Other times it was him that was the cynic. Pulling himself back down to earth, pushing away the creeping sensation that there was so much more going on than he could even imagine, and writing it all off as a bunch of bullshit put out by a minority of screwed up zeebs. A shared delusion that collapsed into nothing as soon as you tried to pin it down.

Now, though, he was curiously resigned, free from that frustrating compulsion to judge everything. And Chip's comment had brought a warm glow of relief—assurance that his instincts really did know best.

"Yeah," replied Jake. "Corp activity's been weird. Nets full of holes; bits blanked out like they're holding a lotta stuff behind closed doors. And one shitload of trading—hundreds of billions changing hands. Assets jumping about all over the place."

He got quieter, his words becoming tentative, probing.

"Something else as well. Like the whole thing's about to shift. Like we're over a cusp and now it's all gotta change. No going back."

There was a silence, then 2-Bit pulled a cigarette out of its plastic carton, frowning as he lit up with an old Zippo.

"Spot on about the corp stuff," he said, the blue-grey smoke tumbling from his mouth. "Dunno about the rest, but there's definitely a weird vibe out there."

The serious expression fell away, to be replaced by a mischievous grin.

"Anyway, time we let you in on the action. You are going to love this!"

Chip was grinning as well.

"You know the rumours—I mean about the biochip? Well it's true. We got a military contact, and those guys are going apeshit. They've been onto it for years, and now they finally got it working. A parallel-processor grown from a myco-protein network. It's sorta like synthetic brain matter—an electrochemical lattice connecting billions of synapses. And it is *powerful*; it blows everything—and I

mean *everything* else—into the weeds. Makes a fullerene nanochip look like a slide rule...”

He was serious now, his whole demeanour taking on a new intensity. He tapped the cigarette into an ashtray inset into the table’s surface.

“In terms of power we’re talking a factor of 20,000 plus,” he continued. “Soon as it gets into production its going to turn the hardware market upside down. But that ain’t all.”

“Yeah.” Chip took up the story. “Remember that big push for DNI a few years back? All those problems the Neurotechs went on about? Well the biochip clears the way, most the theoretical problems have been cleared in a single sweep.”

Jake looked sceptical. For as long as he could remember the rumours had been flying around. The dream of Direct Neural Interfacing—rigging hardware directly up to the human brain. Every few years there would be a transient revival of interest, and a brief flurry as various R&D organisations queued up to peddle exaggerated claims that never really came to anything. Eventually the voice of legitimate academic wisdom—always the last to be seriously listened to—got through. The technological obstacles looked more and more daunting, and its plausibility took a nosedive.

“Hey, come on!” he said, cynically. “Don’t tell me you’re buying all that shit. Remember Falco...and Chrysler...and all those other psychotechie hype-merchants? You sure someone’s not feeding you Bad Word?”

They didn’t look upset. They wouldn’t have expected anything else. Extravagant rumours of some imminent breakthrough in neural interfacing were ten a penny, but they never came to anything. More usually they turned out to be castles in the air built by some academic fishing for a fat grant. So there wasn’t a Net-jammer around who didn’t take the dream of mind-jacking without a large pinch of salt.

Chip and 2-Bit still sat there, that fat grin over their faces like they were tripping on Heaven.

“Shadow,” 2-Bit put in between drags, “When was the last time we got burned on something this big? Who falls for that kind of sucker deal?”

2-Bit’s smile widened into a knowing grin.

Jake smiled. It was a fair shout. Even the crack about the rip-off deal he’d slipped up on two long years ago when he was still green round the edges. The Net was crawling with scammers trying to pass themselves off as names. Without sound knowledge of who’s who it was easy for the unwary to get taken by impersonators and their confederates. Jake had fallen for just such a ruse, laying down hard credit to a false handle for specs that never came. It was 2-Bit he’d sheepishly told about the burn, and who’d wised him up to how the scams ran.

Neither Chip nor 2-Bit fell for that sort of deal and he knew it. But it didn’t seem to make it easier to accept. He knew why, too. DNI was frightening.

“Okay,” Jake conceded, “so they’ve got the raw materials, the hardware that can process—uh—synaptical data, and *theoretically*, they can link it all up to get an interface. But what about tapping and stimulating brain activity. And decoding it all. You know how complicated that is: Trillions of neurons connected to trillions of others. No way! It’s Science Fiction, man...”

There was a pause. 2-Bit and Chip just looked at him with that same, predatory smile.

“That’s what we’re here to talk about,” said Chip. “You ever hear of a set-up called Project Prometheus?”

“Nope,” said Jake, after a pause.

“Started up about the time of the last push, fifteen years back. No big fanfare. Not like those operations in Brazil and Miami. Just a bunch of real big neurophysicists and cybertechies head-hunted and packed off to complex on the West Coast. Then a few years later they close down, like a lot of other outfits that lost funding. That’s what it looked like

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anyway. The brains behind it are all suddenly ‘retired’ but no one sees much of them any more.”

She paused. 2-Bit put his cigarette down in the ashtray, taking off his shades and wiping a bloodshot eye.

“Actual fact they’d been bought out by Inca Biotech. They kept the whole thing under wraps and moved it somewhere quiet. Couple of years later Nova suddenly come on the scene and take them over. You remember that. Ever wonder what a gigantic multinat like that would want from a poxy little firm like Inca?”

She didn’t wait for an answer.

“Anyway, couple of weeks ago Shiva gets some mouth asking after him. Real persistent and with big bucks behind him. Leaves a trail of credit a mile wide and marches straight into his space—you know how much doing that takes with Shiva. The guy’s cool, though—not a fed or anything—a Net scout for one of the Big Three. Turns out he needs a team to do some ‘research.’ He must be serious ‘cause he coughs up a 50K ‘deposit’ like it’s small change.”

“Shiva sorts out a meet with the guy for the full script. That’s when he hears about the project—that it’s still live, and getting results. Thing is no-one even knows where the damn thing *is*. It’s got security procs like a military operation—access to and from is by airfield. Even the jet’s navicom is locked so the pilot doesn’t know where he is.”

“So make contact with someone on site. Someone’s gotta know—”

“Why should they?” She gestured, hands out. “Everything they need gets transmitted, flown in, or dropped off in a plain cover truck. Just one pilot and one driver, both monitored. Only a handful of execs are free to come and go—and most of them don’t need to know either.”

“What makes this guy so sure that they’ve got something worth getting hold of?”

“Oh they’re sure, alright,” she nodded. “Anyway that ain’t the important thing. Fact is they’re sure enough to want this info very badly. And throw a lot of credit into it, too.”

She paused for a few moments. The hum of a passing truck could be heard dimly through the shuttered windows.

“The guy wants a team. So far it’s us, Shiva, and maybe Kaos. Figured it might be time for you to get your feet wet.” She smiled.

Jake knew his stuff, and had a handle on the basics. But as names go he was still a rookie, and that meant danger. There was nothing more hazardous for a growing Outworlder than that subtle transition between little league and big league. Small-time stuff was no big deal, slip up and you can still come out clean. But this was a whole new ball-park. Get into this kind of territory and you have to learn fast and watch your back with every move. One slip-up and you were in big trouble. If you were lucky it’d be a spell in some lock-up, but if others got to you first you’d be just another statistic: one of the hundreds daily found broken and bleeding by the roadside, cut up by muggers in an underpass, or splashed onto a pavement like an insect by a hundred-storey fall.

2-Bit stubbed out his cigarette and blew out a final stream of smoke.

“Question is, you in or out?” he said. “This is big, probably dangerous, gonna mean site work too. But a yes means 10K up front, another hundred if the info we get checks out. And maybe more action later on.” He raised his eyebrows and gave a tight-lipped smile.

Jake was sweating slightly, hot flushes around his face and neck. This was a lot bigger than he’d expected. He’d be in with some real names on a real job. This wasn’t just some small-time hack, credit scam, or software rip-off. It was big league stuff with big league money.

The ache of fear and the ecstatic rush of a chunk of credit bigger than he’d ever seen in his life strained at one another inside his mind. His stomach was churning.

The silence hung in the air like a solid thing, interrupted only by the angry buzzing of an insect sandwiched behind a shutter, pounding itself against the window-pane.

Finally he replied.

“Okay,” he said, “where do I sign?”

4

Genesis

Lisa was mad. She'd spent a full week trying to get answers from NASA. She'd spent nearly an hour getting hold of the Chief Sat Operative, being shunted from secretary, to assistant, to techie and back again. Finally she'd got through, and was greeted with an audio-only link, the figure hidden behind a blank screen with a simple "Video Off" message. Blank-outs really got her back up; sure, they usually had some excuse, like "security protocols," especially at outfits with defence connections, but mostly it just conveyed an attitude of aloofness, the disinterest and even arrogance of someone who felt above routine phone courtesy.

She had her own unit's video set to auto-send regardless. In these circumstances she hoped that a one-way video feed (rather than the usual no video-in, no video-out option) would just make the anonymous receiver feel stupid, or at least worry whether they actually did have their own cam switched off; she casually addressed the blank screen as she related the details of the unscheduled tap, doing her best to act as if it were an ordinary face-to-face.

The operative, called Mackowitz, said he'd look into and get back to her. She asked when, and he said later on in the day. No call was forthcoming, so she rang back late afternoon east-coast time, and was told by a secretary that all the senior operatives were at a meeting, but she'd pass her message on.

Next day she tried again first thing, and then again and hour later. Mackowitz was "unavailable" as were the others. Throughout the

Paul Barrows

afternoon she left several messages on their mail, fax, and page nodes, and finally received a reply through her terminal:

Dear Ms. Meyer

I have checked through the transmissions log and can confirm that there was no unauthorised interruption of your session of Sept 3. I suggest that you check your system for residual processes and examine your code for errors.

J.Mackowitz
Supervisor

She looked at the message incredulously. Since when did a software bug reconfigure every on-board device to receive terrestrial data? The following day she composed a short message giving a detailed explanation of the occurrence, insisting that it was an external interruption. She was tempted to mention that she had the entire session recorded, but a gut instinct told her to keep this card up her sleeve for later.

She dropped by to see the Dean, hoping that he'd be of more help. She was hit by the pungent smell of pipe-smoke as she entered the small cul-de-sac of corridor leading to his office. She'd always found it amusing how most senior academics seemed to sport some bygone quirk. A tweed suit more in place in the middle of the previous century, a bow-tie, waist-coat, or even a hat. But Professor Ashley was in the vanguard when it came to English eccentricity—only the hat was missing, and he'd leave great billows of the noxious smoke wherever he went, clutching the strange wooden gadget between thumb and forefinger like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Lisa knocked gently on the closed door, and was greeted by the usual exclamation. Entering, she was relieved to find the room clear of the

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usual noxious clouds. The lanky, grey-haired figure was sat at his desk leafing through a pile of notes, which he pushed aside as he greeted her, smiling with those ageing, yellow teeth. They exchanged pleasantries and, as invited, she settled into the plastic cushion of an armchair beside his sturdy, antique desk.

She recounted the story as she had done to the operative over the phone, and Ashley punctuated it with nods of the head as he sat back, arms crossed, behind the desk. When she had finished, he paused thoughtfully before checking through some possible errors she might herself have made. As outdated as his dress-sense might be, the Professor's technical knowledge certainly wasn't, but he eventually agreed that the session must have been interfered with from outside. He'd look into it, he said, and see what he could dig up.

The next day she dropped by to see him again about a different matter, and could immediately sense a tenseness about him. Richards was usually relaxed and easy-going, and could make light of the most serious issues. But this time he seemed quiet and strangely removed. After some routine talk about an application to use some of the faculty's more restricted equipment, he brought up the matter of the satellite session.

"Lisa," he said, a look of concern crossing his craggy features. "I've been in touch with a few of the operatives over at NASA. They insist that at no point in your session was there any access by any user other than yourself."

Lisa opened her mouth to protest, but Richards held up a hand and continued.

"Yes I know what you said, and I believe you." His expression was sympathetic, his eyebrows raised and his voice carrying a conciliatory tone. "But that is their position. Don't worry about the readings you missed during that session, you can extrapolate the figures later. As for the problem you had: Leave it alone. Just forget it." He looked her straight in the eye.

Lisa was tempted to play that last card. To tell him about the recordings, about the log she had of the entire session—or at least to just ask why. But there was something in his expression that told her he didn't want to know, and that as far as he was concerned that was the end of it. Instead, she smiled weakly, glancing down submissively, and agreed, quickly returning the conversation to more trivial matters. She could feel the weight that had hung in the air disappear within a few moments. Finally she made her excuses and left, her features dropping into a stony wall as soon as she left his sight.

As fond as she was of the Prof, she didn't like that last bit at all. She didn't like taking direct orders one bit, particularly ones with no explanation attached. Suggestions yes, advice yes, but she wasn't the blind obedience type. And she didn't enjoy being patronised like somebody's granddaughter. She'd known the guy over a year now, and that was the first time she'd got a vibe off him as weird as that.

As good-natured as she generally was, Lisa was fiercely independent and had a stubborn streak a mile wide. It meant she grew up fast in some ways, but those rare times when she had a bust-up all hell would break loose. Her mum used to tell her over and over again that kind of attitude would get her into trouble; one day she turned round and told her maybe so, but she wouldn't end up working phones for some blood-sucking insurance corp like *she* was. That had earned Lisa a hard slap in the face—the first and last time she ever hit her—but her mother never gave her that line again.

For the next couple of days she did her best to lose herself in her research, immersing herself in the mathematics of stellar physics, but the issue still gnawed at the back of her mind. She felt uneasy. Whatever was going on had a sinister feel about it, she felt like she had touched on a world she knew little about and cared little for. It smacked of the kind of secretive political machinery that Jake had always preached about. A world of deception, corruption, and subversion—a hidden power-play between faceless organisations run by untouchable individuals. For the

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first time ever, she felt a creeping sense of a hidden “they”, the cliché of the classic paranoid worldview which she held in so much derision. The “they” of a-thousand-and-one conspiracy theories, the classic Big Brother. A “they” that were running things secretly from behind the scenes, hiding behind a tapestry of lies and leaving a trail of cover-ups and perplexing inconsistencies in their wake.

When her next sat-session came, Lisa never took her eyes off the screen as the sensor readings poured through. She hoped secretly for a repeat of the previous week’s anomaly but none was forthcoming.

By Thursday she could no longer suppress her curiosity. The nagging compulsion to probe deeper returned time after time until she could no longer resist it. At one O’Clock that afternoon she packed away the bundle of printout and journal extracts that littered her desk and folded down the keyboard on the small, desktop terminal. Opening the bottom draw of her desk, she rooted through its contents until she came upon a case of disks, from which she removed an unlabeled, silver-red CD. She slid it into the machine’s draw and tapped the engage button.

Within a minute she’d booted up the replay interface and was perusing through the recorded display of the session of September 3rd. For the first twenty minutes of the session nothing appeared to be amiss—the image displayed was the familiar tight yellow orb in the constellation of Orion. She touched the fast-forward glyph, and watched as the seconds of the display clock blurred into minutes. Finally the orb exploded into a soft focus blur and shot off screen as Hubble took up a new position, and the lattice of a city at night swam quickly into focus. She released the control and the replay sank back into real-time. At the bottom of the display were a new set of target coordinates; she’d already noted these during the session, so she set about digging into the process logs, calling up screens of system data and watching them flicker through the details of the crucial session.

Again and again she rewound and then re-played the crucial moments, noting critical process signatures. Suddenly she had it: A single line out of

hundreds of others—a process triggered just a few milliseconds before the crucial moment. She scanned along a line of details until a user ID hung before her eyes.

“RSoames,” it read. Bingo. She had a name.

Finally she probed around into the process signature, hunting down specs and looking up codes in the documentation. Within half an hour she’d worked out the main elements of the sensor configuration: The process had reconfigured the instruments to bounce a tight maser beam off an area of the target and monitor the coherency shift of the resulting wave.

Lisa was puzzled. What could they be monitoring with a set-up like that? It couldn’t be a visual scan, none of the imaging sensors were being used; in any case you couldn’t expect to see anything useful from this vantage point. There were no transmissions being monitored on any regular frequencies, no remote devices being tapped, none of the kind of things you’d expect someone to use for regular surveillance. Just some kind of scanner beam focused on a few square inches of roofing.

The readings were fed into a 20 gig slot on the sat’s on-board RAM, to be relayed on to their final destination. Since her own session used the same area, her log would include a complete dump of the module before she’d signed off.

Scrolling through the log she quickly found the file where the data had deposited. The format was undeclared, it just contained a billion numbers end-to-end—readings from the mysterious maser scan. She sighed and sat back, eyebrows furrowed as she pondered the problem.

Finally she broke from her thought. It’d be something she’d have to sleep on. She tapped another glyph on her screen and a nearby printer came to life, spitting out a sheet of paper. Then she turned off the unit, removed the disc and put it into the breast pocket of her coat. She folded the printout and put it in the back pocket of her jeans, then set off to the faculty library.

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Once she'd found herself a discrete alcove between the many walls of bookshelves, she set about some calculations. The figures she had for the new target used the astronomical coordinate system, but she needed to pin-point the location precisely in geographical terms. Twenty minutes later she had filled up two sides of A4 with sketches and trig equations, concluding in a triumphantly double-underlined pair of figures: A longitude and latitude. Within a few minutes she was hunting through reference books in the geography section, isolating the map she needed.

It was London, England—a place she knew all too well. Soon she was comparing a section of street-map to the blurred printout of the satellite image. A perfect match. The target building stood at the intersection between Shaftesbury Avenue and New Oxford Street. It was one of the small cluster of sky-scrappers dotted about in this comparatively low-built area of London.

Lisa descended three flights of stairs to the foyer and made a call from a booth in the lobby. The worn recording on Jake's answering machine jumped into action, the familiar face swimming through the scratched, crystal screen.

She left her message and returned to the physics faculty to carry on with her work.

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Erhard Weiss surveyed the barren surroundings. Miles of dry, cracked earth were interrupted only by isolated rock formations and the occasional ravine. In the distance he could make out the outline of crops of mountains just beyond the horizon. The dust-track ahead stretched off into the horizon, its surface turning into a shimmering silvery puddle from the glaring sun.

He'd been offered a chopper to make the remaining fifty kilometres of the trip, but he'd declined. He preferred his entrance to be discrete.

He didn't want them to get time to put on a show, he wanted to catch it all first hand. No announcements, Delphi had said that specifically, just get over there and get the S.P. on the big development they'd been squealing about.

He hung onto the side-grip as the truck hit another pot-hole, its suspension rearing uncomfortably. It'd been an hour since he'd been directed to the cab of the fuel tanker bound for the base. The driver had greeted him indifferently in a broad southern accent and opened the cabin's passenger door, telling him to buckle up tight as they left town and headed east into the Nevada desert. For September it was very hot. The local forecasts had warned of a big patch of thin ozone passing across the mid-west, and Weiss had taken the precaution of smearing a thin layer of hi-factor barrier solution across his face and hands.

Half an hour later, the first signs of the complex appeared in the distance. The curved hemisphere of a radar dish appeared, bordered by an expanse of wire fencing. Behind it, within the perimeter, was a network of squat, grey buildings, joined by threads of concrete paving and tubular strands of tunneling. A few hundred yards ahead of them was a checkpoint. A uniformed guard was already leaving the nearby booth to meet them, an SLR hanging by his side from a shoulder-strap. The driver brought the truck to a halt before the barrier, and passed his and Weiss's ID card through the window to the waiting official, who took them back to the booth. Half a minute later, he returned, handing back their plastic cards, raising the barrier and flagging them through.

They continued down a smooth new stretch of tarmac to the main cluster of buildings, where the driver once more came to a halt. Weiss dismounted from the cabin carrying his briefcase and jacket awkwardly in one hand, briefly bid the driver farewell, and stood aside as the truck pulled off towards the rear of the compound. Then he put on his jacket, brushed his thinning brown hair, and entered the carpeted foyer of the complex's main building.

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The room was circular, as was the raised reception desk at its centre. About him, on the walls, were framed stills from prosthetic sports events, stylised pictures of cybernetic parts, and photographs of various remote commercial and military devices in action. Spanning the ceiling was a stylish honeycomb lattice, illuminated a warm amber from above. A receptionist sat behind the desk turned away from the small screen she had been watching and stood up to greet him.

“I’ve come to see Dr Richards, C-complex, 401,” he said, showing her his clearance card.

She took his card and slid it through a slot by a nearby terminal. A printer came to life and spat out a visitor’s pass, which she slotted into a plastic tag and handed to him.

“Through the red doors,” she indicated, “follow the corridor round. You’ll see it signed.”

He thanked her and left the foyer through the doors she’d indicated, obediently pinning the tag to his jacket pocket. Not that he needed directions. He’d only been to R & D a couple of times before, but it stood out clearly in his mind even with nearly a year gone by since his last visit. He followed the signs for C-complex down a string of corridors until he recognised the familiar grey walls of the RNSS labs, and soon saw the twin swing-doors with their familiar stainless steel caption. He walked in, slightly self-consciously under the eyes of a few lab technicians and project operatives.

The lab had changed since he’d last seen it. He didn’t know whether it was a fresh lick of paint, the added bulk of machinery and instrumentation that cluttered the room, or the intense new atmosphere of excitement—almost of urgency—that now seemed to hang in the air, that first struck him. But the sleepy and dreary ambience that often clung to a lab burdened with years of tedious research was now nowhere to be seen. There was instead a feeling of intensity that could only mean the arrival of a big breakthrough..

Stacks of processing and monitoring equipment stood about, with various operatives huddling about the main readouts, muttering amongst themselves in the obscure verbal hieroglyphs that were unique to the technical community. The main focus of attention was a single screen, about a metre long, that was hung from a wall above the cluster of machinery. It was occupied by a distorted graphic of some kind of test card, a regular sequence of lines and bars of various colours and shades, at the centre of which was a full colour graphic of a scene that was only vaguely discernible. It appeared to be a picture of some kind of country scene, a small group of vague figures huddled together in a rural setting—a picnic or maybe a village fete.

Towards the rear of the lab was a white booth, projecting the leg-rests of a large, reclining chair. Above the booth's plastic dome were dozens of sockets, into which were plugged large and bulky cables that threaded their way along makeshift ceiling-hooks to machinery at every corner of the lab. Before the booth was a softly lit board, upon which was the test-card whose blurred image the technicians seemed so fascinated by. He saw now that the scene at the centre did indeed portray a bygone picnic in the countryside. A smiling family sat about a large tartan blanket with plates stuffed with sandwiches, salad, and cold meat. It was a very old photograph; from their dress, hairstyling, and the ugly, chrome lump of a radio nearby, he figured that the scene was mid-twentieth century, a postcard-family from the fifties or sixties enjoying a day out in an idyllic rural scene.

He caught the eye of a young technician who was tapping on a nearby keyset, and asked after Dr Richards.

"Oh, *Greg*..." he said, "He's over there." He pointed to a short, stocky figure stooped over a scope at the far end of the lab, his face half-hidden by the rubber face-piece of a large viewer.

Weiss strolled over and stood by, waiting for him to finish. A minute later he was still completely immersed, so Weiss interrupted uneasily.

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“...Dr Richards?” he said. The figure pulled his head from the viewer and emerged blinking into the light of the lab. The expression on his round face was momentarily blank, but then it broke into a warm smile as recognition hit.

“Ah, Mr Weiss! Good to see you. Come on through,” he said. His perfectly rounded British accent still took Weiss slightly by surprise. Richards held his arm out and nodded furtively towards an office cubicle in the corner, and the two weaved their way between islands of equipment-laden benchtop and into the room.

The small, white-walled office was as messy as it had been before—if not more. The desk and every surface was piled inches high with paper, some of it packing dog-eared folders and files, but most of it loosely bundled in rough piles or scattered about seemingly at random. A small slice of a screen poked through the clutter on the desk, angled slightly back.

“Take a seat,” said Richards, signaling towards a black reclining chair adjacent to the desk. Weiss obliged and Richards settled into his own. As always, Weiss came straight to the point, something that had previously put Richards a little off balance.

“What’s the story then?” he asked.

Richards’ expression took on a more serious tone.

“We’ve cracked it. Most of it, at least. We really didn’t think we’d get past the NMR interference problem, but the Cambridge team found a way of subtracting it out. That just left us to crack the actual encoding itself.”

He paused a moment, eyes searching upwards as though mentally piecing together his narrative.

“We started with the visual cortex. Traced a Theta waveform carried by the optic nerve and spent nearly a year trying to crack it. We finally got it a few weeks ago—it’s a variation of the Sigma pattern, like the one you get in a hologram; we can reproduce it in another subject by hooking it into the NSI. Once we’d got the algorithm, it was child’s play to

work out how to actually record the neurally encoded data—but there are practical problems”

Weiss was hooked now. The disinterested slouch he usually took was gone, replaced by a posture that was keen and alert. This was obviously better than he'd hoped for.

“So you can record someone's vision, and play it back directly into someone else's mind, right?” he said.

“Yes, . . . well no, not record—yet, but we can plug one person's vision into someone else's brain. But that's no big advance on VR—nothing you can't do with standard gear. The real plus is that we'll be able to interface *every aspect* of perception. Not just sound and vision, but smell, taste, bodily sensation, the works. We're already working on the somatosensory areas—give it about three months and we'll have a patch for those too. Then we'll start on the gustatory and olfactory feeds.”

Though Weiss knew that this was exactly what Project Prometheus had been set up to achieve those fifteen long years ago, he could scarcely believe that all of its objectives were now in sight. When Nova had first embarked upon the global brain-drain to found the project, he had it marked as a dumb pipe-dream, a fantasy out of a hundred-and-one cheap sci-fi movies—an impossible dream destined to sink under the weight of countless scientific obstacles. But here it was, coming to life in front of him, with implications that almost defied comprehension.

“But what about the compatibility problems, the—uh—neural compatibility stuff you said about last time?” Weiss asked. “Different people have different brain structure—they're tuned into different frequencies, right?”

Richards held his chin in his hand and stared thoughtfully across the room.

“Yes, there are variations in the sigma-form characteristics, but they turned out to be fairly minor, and calibration is pretty straight forward—we might even be able to automate it. As for the localisation variation, that's no problem either—the forms can be traced individually.”

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“But you can only use it to interface *between humans*, right? You can’t actually record it yet. Will you be able to do that? And what about the mind-machine interface?” Weiss asked eagerly, the questions almost toppling over one another.

Richards sighed at this point. His posture seemed to sink slightly.

“This is what we’re working on at the moment,” he began, “but we’re hitting problems. Rigging one subject up to another is easy enough as we don’t have to decode the form, it only needs calibrating to the receiver’s characteristics. But decoding takes real processing power. About 200 billion calculations have to be made to process a single frame of vision alone. That’s what we’re doing out there.” Richards pointed to the gaggle of operatives over the other side of the lab.

“The test-card up there was decoded directly from a subject’s visual cortex. We recorded just a fraction of a second of cortical activity and now its being processed by a string of 8 series Crays. It’s taken five minutes even to get a thumb-nail sketch, and it’ll be another ten before we get an acceptable resolution. To get direct neural-computer interfacing, not to mention sensory record and play-back capability, we need real-time processing.”

“So get more computers...” said Weiss.

“No good. It’ll take a mountain of Crays to get that kind of power,” said Richards. “The problem is the nature of the information—not the amount. The brain is a parallel processing machine—non-sequential, you just can’t break it down into one astronomical string of calculations without losing real-time.” He looked almost apologetic.

“What’s the bottom line?” Weiss asked, simply.

Richards had anticipated the question, and answered before he’d even finished.

“It’s like I told you before. We need the new processor. The biochip. It has the parallel architecture, works like a neural network, and it’s the only way of dealing with that kind of information.” He paused and looked Weiss in the eye.

“Think about what we’re sitting on.” His voice took on a quiet, intense tone. “Human experience on disc, perception and sensation—maybe even thought and feeling. Perhaps even the whole mind. The soul of man converted to a stream of pure information.” He paused momentarily before continuing.

“And a direct interface between mind and machine—joining the Net as completely as if it were part of your own body. VR will be obsolete practically overnight. A whole new stage in human evolution. We can’t even begin to imagine the possibilities, Mr Weiss.”

For the first time, Weiss was quiet. You could cut the atmosphere with a knife. Finally he said:

“But you gotta have the biochip.”

Richards smiled.

“No biochip, no cyberspace,” he said.

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It was just three days after he’d joined up that the credit hit his account, and his feelings were still a miasma of contradictions. On the one hand the atmosphere had eased. The leasing outfit who’d been starting to step up the pressure over the widening payment lag had been silenced by a simple phone call and a 5K transfer—enough to keep them afloat for a good few months.

It’s true Eve would have dipped into that stack of buffer credit she had standing by, no trouble at all. And she wouldn’t have held it against him either. But Jake didn’t like being bailed out. He hated borrowing off friends—especially Eve—whatever the situation, and he knew that money was there for emergencies, not to bail out debt-casualties like him.

She’d asked him about the Job, and he’d been as evasive as he could be without alerting her suspicions. Not that he knew that she wouldn’t like it. He really wasn’t sure what she’d think about this new phase of his Outculture involvement, but Lisa was still preying on his mind, and the

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last thing he wanted was the risk of opening up a similar rift with Eve. So he decided to keep quiet for now, though he was acutely aware of how transparent he could become if he let his act of everyday ordinariness slip by the slightest notch.

This was the downside—the fact that he felt far from nonchalant. The sick feeling of tension was still in his stomach, and there were times when he felt like returning the credit and calling the whole thing off. But he could never do that. He could just see the looks on their faces now, could almost feel the indefinable barrier falling into place between them as they realised he'd gone yellow on them—that he was still an Innie at heart when it came to the crunch.

If you want to be a real name, the last thing you do is get a reputation as a Hokey—it's either in or out, any dithering and you've blown it for good. He'd never get another chance, especially one as good as this. It'd be suicide to back out.

He was glad to see that Eve didn't seem that interested though; she was happy to be told as much or as little as he'd let on.

At four in the afternoon, Jake hooked up to The Net to go in search of Shiva and Kaos. They'd be hanging about in the usual places—those little-known sub-sectors round the messier regions of the Web. A specific rendez-vous was too risky, so it was just a case of tracking each other down.

It was a quarter past by the time he caught their channel—a flash of the familiar scenery as he swept through the bands of U-Net that formed their occasional meeting place. The clumsy pastiche of gaudy textures thrown together in the semblance of rooms or bars suddenly gave way to an elegant and skillfully crafted construct: An ornate, paneled office walled by polished, oak shelves full of pristine volumes lettered in gold. A single round, Georgian table sat in the middle of a number of similarly styled chairs, their seats and back-rests covered in red leather and lined with brass studs. Inset in a nearby wall was a great, stone fireplace, its mouth aglow with burning coals, its marble

mantelpiece adorned by a wood and brass chronometer. Ahead, sashed windows looked out onto an immaculate garden bathing in the mid-day sun.

The quality of the scenery was seamless, and could almost have been mistaken for the real thing were it not for the blurred and inconsistent appearance of two of its occupants. They sat about vaguely superimposed on the furniture, their bodies a half-knitted expanse of video-textured surfaces, their eyes half-hidden behind the fine grid of tiny projection cells inset into their transparent plastic eye-bands. The illusion was good enough from the front—the face, arms and torso, looked mostly complete and almost natural, but as soon as you moved off a few degrees you saw that the remaining surfaces were incomplete, as if shadows of nothingness were cast by a frontal beam. The rearmost surfaces of the head, body, and arms were missing, leaving incomplete textural shells that allowed surreal, inside-out glimpses. Look at a figure from behind and you'd see the same image transposed on the inside of a human-shaped shell—contours bizarrely inverted like a warped cinema screen.

There was one exception. One of the three figures present blended in perfectly. Only the subtle polygonal texture of his skin and clothing betrayed the illusion—that the form was a C-Gen construct. It was Phantom. His animated form was the way it always was. A plain, black, plastic two-piece loosely draped over a classically proportioned form. His hair was a dark, streamlined swathe, swept back and glistening with gel, and his attractive—if pale—features were adorned with a translucent eye-band.

The other two were Kaos and Shiva, both dressed in casual slacks and the oversized gymsoles that were hip on the Western Belt.

They turned to face him as he appeared nearby. Their lips moved silently for a moment, but then the silence split and the air was alive with the hubbub of conversation as they cut him in on audio.

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“—ks like the newbie’s making an appearance,” Shiva’s voice broke in. He opened up that broad, golden smile.

“Welcome to the show, my friend,” Kaos said. “Some job for an intro. You really know how to pick ‘em—”

“Shut up, Kaos,” Shiva put in, sensing Jake’s uneasiness. “Don’t sweat it, Shadow. The whole team’s in on this and we’re all looking out for you. It’ll be a piece of cake.”

Phantom’s construct smiled and spoke:

“Yeah,” he said, the fine mosaic of triangles eerily following the contours of moving lips, his voice thick and resonant. “Chill, Shadow. You won’t regret it.”

Jake recalled the first time he’d heard that voice fifteen long months ago. The first time he’d been let in on Word of some of the deepest hangouts. He’d sheepishly stuttered his first greeting to the biggest name of all, freaked at how completely ordinary the guy seemed. Phantom was a legend, but unlike most other names his talent was utterly inconspicuous. Even with the top-spec construct he blended in with a perfect anonymity, and would barely be noticed if it weren’t for the recognition that hung to him like a social aura.

Maybe that’s how he’d stayed in one piece. His personality was a smoke-screen a mile thick; except you never even knew there was anything more than the quiet, calm, and easy-going facade unless he took the trouble to invite you into the intense and brilliant mind hidden beneath it. Someone once said that where most names stood out a mile, openly bathing in their reputation and cheerfully performing for anyone and everyone, Phantom seemed to *stand back* a mile. The only ones who got close were the ones he felt sure about, and even they only got to see the tip of the iceberg.

“Chapter one of some serious action is on its way,” Phantom continued, “Play it right and everyone comes out made for life. Pull up a chair, Shadow”

Phantom grinned and waved a gloved hand towards one of the immaculate antiques nearby. Jake drifted over and aligned his own seated form with one of the chairs. From his new vantage point he could see the finer details of Phantom's skillfully crafted construct. Unlike their own crude composites that were so clumsily pasted onto the virtual world, Phantom was seamlessly immersed. The light from the bay window behind cast his shadow over the table's polished surface, and Jake could see now that he was casually resting an arm on the table's edge. He and the others were just insubstantial sprites by comparison, data-ghosts clumsily projected from another world, glowing artificially and passing wraith-like through any VR surfaces that got in the way.

"You got the basic run-down," said Shiva, "now a few details. We're all in on this one—2-Bit, Chip, and present company. Phantom don't do sites. He'll take care of things this side. Target's Britannia House, Kensington: Nova's first UK base, but now most of it's storage space for records. Classified stuff—"

"The stuff we're after, right?"

"Yeah. They don't keep it on line—they've got a cold-RAM storage dump locked away in the basement. No power, and no other hardware attached. That's why the break in, and that's where you come in—you'll be giving Kaos a hand with the securitech side."

He glanced across at Kaos, the signal for him to take up the brief.

"Like I said," Kaos took up the spiel, "it's a bitch of a job. Nova's got a real hot security set-up, tight as hell. They practically run things. But it's not the place they'll expect a hit; the info they hold there isn't as hot as the Washington Base, but there'll be enough for us to work out where they're hiding the main operation. The building's pretty old, too so there'll be plenty of holes in the security blanket."

"How much you got on the site, yet?" Jake said. He was leaning forward alertly now, nearly forgetting the construct and stopping short of

dropping a casual elbow through the non-existent tabletop. Shiva spotted it and smirked.

“The usual—and some. 24 hour surveillance, AI cams all over the place, passive infra-red, and an on-site watch team. We know who kitted them out with the AI, it’ll be your job to get the specs and work out how to knock it out. I’ll deal with the IR and fix a route to get us round the watch.”

Shadow listened intently, trying not to let the fear at the back of his mind disrupt his concentration. He was acutely aware of the threat of invisible eyes and ears, and the fragile nature of privacy on the Net. It was a privacy that owed more to the Net’s sheer vastness and overwhelming complexity than the audio and video lock-outs used by the millions of Users to crudely define social territories.

The Net was constantly fluctuating, ceaselessly developing and re-configuring itself, with whole sections becoming practically unrecognisable within just a few days. This was the strength of the Net. The greatest power that Netties had was the sublime ability to lose themselves in the white-hot trans-global maelstrom of information exchange—to transubstantiate into a nebulous cyber-stream whose activities were all but buried under the noise of billions of others. You had to be pretty sharp to keep up with a scene even that you were in on; to trail one you didn’t belong to took some serious work.

Personal espionage on the Net was therefore almost unheard of. You couldn’t just bug the whole Net, recording the whole thing like a simple flick. The sheer volume was astronomical. And even if you could it’d take years to break the thing down and tease out the strands of individual talk.

But a determined spy could always find a way: A clever impersonation, a subtle infiltration, or a simple break-in and tap on some name’s line. Net invisibility was something that cut both ways.

This didn't bother Phantom and the others. They looked cool, comfortable as if they were sat at a crowded down-town bar on a Friday night.

"You'll get the corp details for the AI tomorrow latest," Kaos continued, "We need it cracked two weeks time. No later, got that?" Jake nodded. "Right," Kaos added.

"Piece-a-cake, fresherboy," Shiva said, grinning, "Told you we'd go easy on you." Then he was serious again. "You need any gear for the job," he continued, "feed it straight through to me, and you'll get it. Client's picking up the tab for any—uh—incidental expenses."

There was a pause. "Any questions?" Kaos said, finally.

"Just one," Jake said. "Who exactly are we working for?" He turned to Shiva.

Shiva looked away, as if considering something, before he answered.

"Guy didn't say—not often they do. They gotta cover their backs see. But these guys know the Net pretty well, got real sharp word, and with the way they do business I'd put my money on Aizu. The immersion was too slick for Yoto—they got some rookie VR programmer pushing out real tatty constructs. I don't figure Nova would hire us to hit one of their own operations so that leaves Mister One."

Quietness descended as their biz talk concluded. After a few moments, Jake spoke.

"You guys think this is for real—I mean—all the DNI stuff?"

Kaos had been waiting for the question. "Who gives a shit," he said straight away. "Someone does, and they're hell bent on blowing big bucks digging around for it. If we find something then lots more action for us. If 'Project X' turns out to be flop, we're still in the money. Even if we don't find diddly we still get a good slice of credit for the break. We're just the guys with the spades, they pay, we dig. So dig it."

"Zip it, Cynic!" Shiva laughed. "You said the same about gene crunching. Now you wanna design your own fuckin' pets."

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Kaos gave a reluctant smile. “Different league an’ you know it. Nettie DNI bullshit’s been round way too long for me to get all excited ‘bout the latest rumour, even if its putting black on my plastic. Sucker’s money flows twice as freely—don’tcha know.”

Jake looked to Phantom, but if he wanted to say something he was keeping a lid on it.

“Maybe,” Shiva said, “maybe not.”

There was a silence, then Kaos pulled himself to his feet.

“Gotta go, breth. Motion beckons.” He put up a forefinger and his image flickered and vanished.

There was a pause.

“Same here,” Shiva said. “Happy hacking.” He raised a hand in a farewell gesture and his image winked out, leaving Jake alone with Phantom’s slick construct. For a moment neither spoke. The silence was disturbed only by the soft, regular clunk as the chronometer’s pendulum swung back and forth.

“So,” Jake said softly, “how about you. You been following this long as anyone can remember.”

“The time’s they are a changin’,” Phantom said. Jake had heard the phrase before, mostly from old-timers. He didn’t know where it came from. Some dead poet maybe, he thought. “Too much motion on the R&D side. And secrecy too. Net’s fulla holes, neurotech holes mainly, but lotta corporate stuff too. Something’s going on. You see the holes Shadow?”

Phantom’s construct looked at him with those deep, dark eyes. He jumped internally as he remembered that those intense, hazel-rimmed pools were real eyes, the genuine articles staring out of the C-Gen’s hires mask.

“Yeah,” said Shadow. He was getting that eery feeling again. Like when Eve started talking weird. Goose bumps suddenly broke out, darting up his arms and round his torso, face, scalp and neck. “Been watching all the corp stuff and something real strange is in the air. Can’t put

my finger on it. Whole loada deals, interests all switching over, links breaking, new ones being made. It's sorta ominous—like the foreshocks of some kinda—uh—corpquake. Make any sense?" He looked at Phantom, trying to shake of the nagging, neurotic, yearning for approval lurking at the back of his mind.

"Betcha," Phantom said, his voice seemed heavier. "Word's starting to squeal something real loud. Something's happening, something big, and the only thing big enough to set of shockwaves like that is DNI. It's coming, Shadow, and it's only the beginning."

There was a silence. Through it came the chronometer's soft clunk and the barely discernible, distant babble of unlocked talk-channels.

"D'you really want this to happen?" Jake said finally.

Phantom smiled mysteriously. "This stuff scares you, don't it, Jake. Maybe you wonder why no-one else seems to be half as scared. Most are, so they just pretend it won't happen—easy enough to believe. The rest aren't scared because they're too dumb to see what it means. You know what it means, and you know its coming. So you're scared."

Jake had to hand it to him. Phantom was sharp.

"What about you?" Jake asked.

"Never really bothered me that much. Anyway I've had longer to chew it over, and now I'm kinda looking forward to it, kinda ready..." He looked thoughtfully away into nothingness. "When cyberspace true finally opens up I'm moving in. I got my reasons. Some of us really belong there, don't have a choice..."

He paused, and cocked his head, like he was considering something. Finally he turned and looked Jake in the eye.

"That's not all, though, is it. It ain't just DNI that scares you, its something else, ain't it?..." He smiled.

The eery feeling was back; that sensation of communication on a level he seldom experienced. Something about the look in his eyes. Goosebumps shot over his body again and he shivered involuntarily. He looked away from Phantom's gaze and then back again. The eyes were

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dark wells like doorways to another universe. Jake felt dizzy. His head was buzzing, his ears ringing. His body seemed to be electric with some inner energy.

The clunk-clunk of the old-style clock seemed to intensify, the seconds between them panning out into surreally timeless chasms. Something inside him was opening up, something that nagged at him for recognition. Something vast, dark and mysterious.

“...something about the Net,” came Phantom’s voice, now intense and ominous, imbued with some profound significance.

Phantom knows, he thought. He really knows.

“Yes,” he said, quietly, straining to keep himself visibly composed. The words seemed to come from somewhere else. They seemed to be speaking themselves through a soulless puppet.

“There’s something in there,” came the words from his own mouth, great slabs of syllables like cliff-faces crumbling. “Something alive...”

5

Handyman

Anton looked out of the window of his fifteenth floor apartment. It was getting dark, and the long shadows of a sprawl of tenements along Central Park West were slowly swallowing the solitary rural slice at Manhattan's heart. The rays of the setting sun glimmered off the distant lake's rippling surface, and the wind that swept in from the Atlantic whistled about the block's silica and aluminium skin and sent occasional distant groans through the building's steely skeleton.

Beyond the crystal colossus of the East Side skyline, the horizon was tinged with the inky blue of the approaching night, and a small scattering of starry pin-pricks could be seen shimmering dimly across the downtown smog.

Most would have considered the scene beautiful, even breathtaking. It was the kind of scene you never tired of, whose mystique might fade with familiarity, but would never quite vanish.

But Anton wasn't like most people. For him the panoramic scene was just an idle curiosity, and looking at it was just the routine examination of surroundings and absorption of local terrain data that came as second nature to him. But his behaviour gave none of this away. His casual gaze across the landscape and his serene, admiring expression convincingly portrayed a person gratefully drinking in the surrounding vista. Only an intensive psychometric evaluation, voluntarily undertaken, would reveal that Anton had virtually no identifiable emotional responses.

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In short, Anton was a psychopath. Even by the strictest definition. The criteria for this particular diagnostic term had subtly shifted and tightened over the years to accommodate the global propagation of machaevellian traits. Surviving in the modern world demanded behaviour previously regarded as immoral or pathological. Motives and actions viewed as brutal, callous, and self-centred were now just part of getting by, a means to an end for surviving in an increasingly hostile, Darwinian jungle.

By pre-millennial standards nearly twenty per cent of today's population would have been assigned to this category. The context dependant nature of pathology naturally demanded that stricter criteria be used for negative terms such as "psychopath" or "sociopath," as several of their defining qualities were now accepted as perfectly natural—even healthy.

Anton, though, was one in a million, a fact that might have been missed if it weren't for a set of psychometric tests used by a particular junior school in Princeton for a short while twenty-five years previously.

Despite the years, memory of this turning point in his life was still fresh in his mind. He and a gaggle of other seven-year olds sat wide-eyed in front of bright blue-framed screens tapping buttons on colourful keyboards as cartoon characters talked them through a series of "games." An hour later a supervisor approached him, smiled reassuringly and said that some people wanted him to do a few more someplace else. He liked the games so he didn't mind one bit when he and the supervisor were driven off across town to a strange smelling building with grey walls, strange equipment, and big, white, plastic machines at every turn.

There was another screen like the one he'd been using, but bigger and with better pictures, and a kindly, middle-aged lady smelling of patuli oil sat him down in a chair beside it, and strapped a helmet onto him that trailed a single wire out of the back. She plugged it into another monitor that came alive with white tracers, and laughed when he asked if they were going to fry him.

They didn't fry him, like he'd seen people do on old movies, but he got to see some other movie clips. Clips like the sort his foster parents wouldn't let him see; they'd switch over or—if it was late—they'd send him straight off to bed. There were lots of them: urban news and documentary footage with explosions, car accidents, running gun battles, and people lying dead or wounded and bleeding. Clips of wildlife flicks, yellowed plains of African wilderness, with zebras and other prey being stalked and torn apart by hyenas, lionesses, or wolves. Now and then, the frame would freeze and a cartoon animal would bounce across the screen and talk to him, asking him which people or animals he liked best, why he liked them, and what he thought about when they hurt and killed each other. He flicked through the responses without even thinking, quickly tapping the coloured boxes on the screen, greedy for the next sequence.

A few months later he was taken from his foster parents, assigned a guardian, and sent off to a British academy where he spent the following eight years. He was to find out later that he'd been enrolled in a covert Pentagon project. His tests showed abnormally high intelligence and authority-compliance, combined with abnormally low superego functioning and an emotional response quotient that was close to zero. It made him an ideal candidate for what was to be a brief flirtation with a process the Pentagon had dubbed Psyche Morphing.

The idea was to subject a number of suitable subjects to specific regime of conditioning, the objective being to produce personnel particularly suited for implementing certain types of highly sensitive military activity. In short, they wanted to produce a highly intelligent, reliable, obedient, and thoroughly ruthless killing machine.

The program worked—mostly. He was posted to Washington Military Academy at the age of sixteen, where he graduated four years later and took up a post with Pentagon Covert Operations. For five years he obediently engineered the deaths of a number of political figures in Syria, Iraq, Peru, El Salvador, Korea, Cuba and the Baltic States,

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until he finally went AWOL on a base in Singapore leaving two superior officers dead and a fellow Op with a hole in his liver.

They got him, of course, but there was no trial. Not with him. This was no legal matter, it was an experimental problem. Anton was vindicated anyway, on the grounds that the officers in question transgressed specific behavioural guidelines. Pentagon PsychOps knew fairly early that the process was based on an elegant psychological fiddle. The result wasn't so much a feelingless machine as a person whose feelings were hidden behind a rock-solid wall of defence-mechanisms, his humanity buried beneath a false persona.

Platoon leaders were a naturally sadistic bunch; seeing people suffer was where they got their kicks, and being faced by some kind of robot who didn't feel pain, who wouldn't show the slightest reaction to any amount of abuse and humiliation just went clean against the grain. A couple of them decided to make it their mission break him; they singled the guy out, spent weeks piling on every form of psychological and physical humiliation their sick little minds could come up with.

It looked for a while like they weren't going to make it. But finally, they hit the right combination and Anton's emotional dam-walls finally split and collapsed, the boiling, bloody venom of a lifetime's repressed fury bursting forth.

For the first time in his life, Anton had felt something. A red hot coil of rage coursing through him, biting through the numbness of his anaesthetised psyche. A wave of sadistic ecstasy as he cleanly broke DeBurgh's neck in a swift head-lock, turned, and pumped three 9mm bullets into Bucknall's stupid, gaping face before his buddy's body had even hit the ground.

The third casualty was an unwitting witness who made the mistake of drawing a pistol on him.

They couldn't court martial him any more than they could imprison a rogue guidance system that let off pot-shots at friendly planes. Of course

Paul Barrows

they couldn't. He was US Army equipment, engineered by the Pentagon, and like any equipment that wasn't treated properly he'd malfunctioned.

But they couldn't keep him either, not after that. It ran against protocol. They kept him under observation for a few weeks, dosing him up on Nitrazepam and feeding him subliminals while his broken defences re-integrated themselves. Then they gave him a medical discharge and discretely pointed him to some connections they had in the paramilitary division of one of the Big Three.

Which is where he'd stayed ever since.

He turned away from the slab of toughened glass that composed the eastern wall of his apartment and crossed the sparsely decorated lounge to a nearby doorway. Beyond it was a smaller room, inside which was a floor-bed with a crumpled, green duvet, a phone and a portable screen plugged into a nearby wall-socket. He lay down on the mattress and stared at the dappled, artex ceiling until he fell asleep.

Later he was pulled out of his slumber by the insistent, synthetic trill of the phone. It was darker now, and he had to grope about the surface of the nylon carpet to find the handset. The familiar voice greeted him.

"Code B," it said, "As planned," and hung up.

Anton dumped the handset back down and switched on the overhead light. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. Then he reached over and took the bottle of drops from his jacket pocket, leaning his head back and swiftly squeezing a drip into each eye.

He clenched his eyelids together momentarily, then opened them again. Time for work.

*

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*

Delphi's office was an opulent affair. A single, open-plan, top floor slice of the Reagan Memorial Building, white pastel walls inset with base-lit alcoves containing elegant sculptures or paintings. A wall of copper-lined bay windows to the front of the building looked out onto the

HeadSpace

East River with its ageing bridges bathing in the early morning sun. To the rear of the room was the polished black slab of the desk, a small display angled upwards from the surface. The glossy sheen of the seamless expanse of black-tile flooring was interrupted only by a small square of Moroccan carpeting at its centre, and gave the impression that the room's contents sat surreally upon the unrippled surface of an inky pool.

Delphi was scrolling through tables of elaborate statistics when the secretary's voice sounded through the intercom.

"Mr Lopez on the line..." she announced.

Delphi's stomach sank, and he braced himself for the worst. Of course it could be just a casual call about a minor detail of the arrangements, a loose end that needed to be tied, but his gut-instinct told him something was wrong.

He paused for a moment, mopped his forehead with a handkerchief, and touched the intercom panel.

"Put him through, Sasha. Protocol red."

A section of polished wall to his right came to life with the familiar tanned features, and he did his best to conceal any reaction he might have felt to the expression of cold hostility they held. After a pause, Lopez spoke.

"We have received some very disturbing news, Mr Delphi. An intelligence report. It puts you in an extremely poor light and Mr Randall is most upset." Lopez paused, keenly watching for a reaction. Delphi was a professionally composed picture of calm.

"And what might this report entail?" he responded. He leaned forward and put his elbows on his desk, hands steepled and brows slightly furrowed, concern combined with curiosity.

"In recent weeks Orion Industries and their subsidiary companies have been buying heavily into the Yoto group. So have you, Mr Delphi." He paused for a moment, his unblinking eyes carrying tiny, twin, trichromatic reflections of his own screen.

“This is not itself a major source of concern,” he went on, “but the report also suggests that you have close ties with one Mr Warner, ties that you have worked particularly hard to conceal—”

“This is not a suitable topic to discuss over air,” Delphi put in, calmly.

“—our channel is secure enough,” Lopez responded abruptly. He went on, like he was reciting a speech. “This is particularly disturbing when we assess the sum total of Nova-Orion holdings. The total is fifty point zero one per cent. Fifty point zero one, Mr Delphi. Should the totality of that stock suddenly appear in the hands of one interest they will have a controlling stake. Naturally we have taken steps to avoid such an eventuality.”

Lopez paused, watching.

“You can see the distasteful conclusion that we are drawn to,” he continued, eyes never leaving Delphi. “But Mr Randall has generously granted you an opportunity to respond to these allegations before taking the inevitable action.”

Delphi was prepared for this moment, he’d played it out endlessly in his mind. He looked thoughtful, as if newly considering the well-worn train of thought that he had etched into his mind. After an appropriate pause, he licked his lips and began.

“I would ask you to consider just who your sources are actually working for, Mr Lopez. We are being set up.” He paused for effect. Lopez’s face remained cold and expressionless. “You know as well as I do that certain parties are taking a keen interest in our activities. They are most concerned about our relationship and can benefit immeasurably from just this type of slander and disinformation. This is pure fabrication, and a crude attempt at sabotage. Please consider this carefully before jumping to any premature conclusion.”

Mr Lopez paused thoughtfully for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was softer, and a hint of its prior warmth had returned.

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“Very well, Mr Delphi. I shall relay your response on to Mr Randall. My recommendation shall be that our sources are carefully checked before taking further action.”

The image vanished in a flash of static and the screen winked off, leaving only the glossy grey sheen of the office wall. Delphi leaned back, closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

The worst case scenario had arrived, but he'd been prepared for it. They didn't have very much time, though. The story would keep Randall at bay for only a few days, and then the knives would be out. It was a calculated risk and he'd lost, leaving himself cornered.

There was only one thing he could do, now. He'd hoped it wouldn't come to this, but there was far too much at stake.

Delphi reached across his desk and picked up a cream handset. He tapped three buttons and waited. The phone was answered instantly.

“Mr Dee,” he said, “I'm going to need a Handyman. The best you have.” He paused momentarily, brows furrowed as he took in the response.

“That will be just fine,” he concluded, and switched off.

* * *

The Orb was still quiet. Its walls carried a fanatical sprawl of biker paraphernalia. Race-trophies, promo-posters, and antique Angels denims behind plexi-glass, arrays of photos and stylised drawings of classic bikes—all exhaust and chrome trimmings, or modern-day monsters—200 Kilowatt road-rockets, segmented polycarbon and aluminium bodies crouching over thick, traction-polymer tyres. Coiled knots of reptilian power.

A handful of Grebs and Trancers were milling around the bar or sitting about in groups around the chrome-plastic toadstools that served as tables. The Grebs were the usual collective of tatty leather-clads, torn jeans, boots, and T-shirts bearing grunge and industrial logos. They sat about, talking and smoking, and taking occasional swigs from bottles of

Newcastle Brown, the table littered with rolling paper, lighters, and tobacco pouches. On a nearby sill were three matt-black helmets half-covered by a pile of leathers. One of the group—a stocky Latino with slick black hair in a long pony-tail—was at the bar ordering more beers.

The Trancers were in their own groups nearby. They wore oversize trainers and lightweight sporty threads, shiny track leggings and windowed vests that danced and rippled through multi-colour contours as they moved, like an oil-slick in sunlight. A couple of them had the black, ovoid slab of a sound system hanging from their neck on a piece of leather cord, Bose shoulder pads carrying more acoustic hardware. Like the others, they sat about talking and taking swigs from pint glasses on the table before them.

Jake sat in an alcove towards the rear of the room. Beside him was Spider, a tall, lanky character with long, sandy hair. His left ear was bordered by a long, even-spaced row of studs. He just wore black jeans and a paisley shirt, his jacket sat in a pile on a chair nearby.

“So you made a connection somewhere. You closed a circuit. What’s the problem? What is it exactly that’s eating you, my friend?”

Spider was sitting back against the red-felt lining of seating, arm draped congenially along the head rests, one foot up on an adjacent stretch where the seating angled off along a protruding section of wall.

Jake was pensive. Brows furrowed like he was trying to explain something that he had difficulty articulating.

“Trouble is I think I’ve got a real problem with this. There’s a lot of people who just flipped out somewhere along the line. Maybe they took too many drugs, got wrapped up with Hippies or religious cults. Whatever it is they suddenly start raving on about a lotta crazy shit you can’t make sense of, like they’re trying to convert you or something. This stuff just sounds way to much like that kind of flipped out rap—”

Spider smiled.

HeadSpace

“So you’re worried that maybe you’re flipping out the same way,” he said, “that your gonna take to hanging around malls raving about Jesus living in the Net or something, right?”

Jake laughed.

“Well, sort of. No, it’s more a case of wondering if I’m falling for some kind of illusion—”

“So you are worried about going crazy, then. Come on, Jake, you ever think that maybe those guys did stumble across something, maybe got a glimpse of something real big, real powerful. That maybe they just couldn’t handle it and went whacko?”

“Yeah, that makes sense, but that’s only part of it. I’m talking about handling this rationally. I can feel there’s something there, but when I try to pin it down it just vanishes. Then I start thinking, well, of course it ain’t there, don’t be stupid. How *can* it be?—”

“How can *what* be?” Spider asked.

“Something inside the Net,” Jake said, finally, “some kind of...” He paused frowning.

“Yeah?...” Spider said, urging him on.

“It’s like,” Jake continued, “I know rationally that the Net is just billions of nanochips connected by fibre-optics and Sat-links, that what we see and hear in there is just data pouring in through IO devices. But I can’t shake the feeling that somethings changed. It just seems realer, like there’s...something in there now. And I think a lotta guys softside are starting to catch the same vibe.”

“What’s the big deal?” Spider said shrugging.

“The big deal is that its fucking crazy, can’t you see that? Its all just hardware and binary bits. Just a lotta code. CPUs don’t have souls—”

“Neither do we, but it don’t stop us being alive.”

“That’s different—we’re human, organic...”

“That’s bullshit and you know it, Jake. Ain’t nothing holy about proteins and amino-acids. What you call ‘you’ is just a network of billions of nerve cells...”

“You’re saying it’s conscious?” Jake said.

“If a constellation of electrochemistry can develop self-awareness, then why shouldn’t the Net? See, you only have a problem with that ‘cause your philosophy is all messed up with western materialism. Now the Buddhists, they really know where it’s at. To them everything is alive, everything has a primal spark of being, a mystic essence. But it only develops an identity in highly evolved systems showing some kind of autonomy.

“But that’s only part of it,” Spider continued, “See, we’re talking about a whole new level here. To draw a neurological analogy, the Net is the equivalent of a web of dendrons and axons—those links between processing units or nerve cells. Thing is, we’re at a different level where *we are* those individual nerve cells, we receive incoming signals and fire off outgoing responses. And our own activity is, in turn, governed by another neural network—our own brains. As things stand we don’t really have much of an interface with this meta-network. We have far more communication than we do with each other in real-world groups, the links are a lot better and swifter, but we’re still hampered by the nature of our communication—that avalanche of psychic info still has to work its way through that crude bottle-neck of voice and gesture. We’re still talking about a mere Kilobyte—tops—per second.”

He paused, as if sorting his train of thought. Behind him Jake could see three Hippie types who’d just come in. Two girls not more than twenty and a skinny guy with a goatie and dreadlocks. They were laughing amongst themselves as they settled down around a table in the opposite corner.

“Its still enough, though, even with the inferior network, to start something. I reckon we’re at the evolutionary equivalent of some sort of transglobal jellyfish. Something pretty dumb, semisentient, but with a glimmering of self-awareness. A little bit more than a plant, a little less than an animal. A kind of Cyber-Gaia”

HeadSpace

“So you figure that’s the feeling we’re getting from the Net, right? Some sort of giant mind...”

“*Meta*-mind more exactly, but not even that at this stage. Currently, I reckon it’d be more like a hive-mind, a fragmentary gestalt gradually condensing as the network evolves—”

“So the bigger the Net gets, the more aware it becomes?”

“*Self*-aware. But it’s not so much a matter of the size. Although the number of connections will be a factor, the big issue is communication. VR’s pulled the whole thing together in a very big way, the level of immersion you get with this type of interface goes a long way towards boosting the density of data exchange. More importantly it’s starting to define a shape—a shared virtual dimension that’s evolving into what you might reasonably call cyberspace.”

“And what if they cracked neural interfacing?”

Spider laughed. It wasn’t derisive, it was a jubilant noise.

“Whoa!” he said. “Then we are talking about a serious kick-start for the big one. It’ll take time, but eventually something’s gonna happen in there, something too big for anyone to miss. But quite honestly my friend, we’d probably hardly notice it with all the other shit that DNI’s gonna bring with it...”

The bar suddenly went quiet as a group of five Skins filed in. They wore tight-fit denims and army boots and sported tattoos of flags or team emblems on their arms, neck and forehead. Two of them wore a black-and-white strip. They all looked pissed off. One went up to the bar while the others settled silently into a vacant booth opposite the Grebs.

The previously warm atmosphere was now cold and tense, and the few that were talking were doing so only in hushed tones. Jake could see everyone’s eyes darting around, trying to get a handle on the situation or mentally preparing an exit route if things got too unpleasant.

The barman quietly served the Skin at the bar, running his card through the till and then returning it with five bottles of Super K lager. As the Skin carried them over to the table, Jake could see that the

bearded figure behind the bar had turned his back, and seemed to be saying something into an object he held in his right fist.

Spider had turned to watch, too. Jake nudged his foot under the table to get his attention.

“Hey, what’s the beef?” he muttered.

Spider looked serious.

“You see the Skins?” he said under his breath. “They’re out lookin’ for some action.”

“How come?”

“Where you been? Angels killed a Headhunter.”

Jake looked back to the group. He saw now that all of them carried the familiar logo—a black skull in a circle—either as a badge on their strip, or else a tattoo on the forearm. He quickly looked away as one of them glared back at him.

“There’s no Angels here,” he hissed.

“There’s Grebs. Angels *are* Grebs—the original Grebs.”

“But these Grebs aren’t Angels.”

“It’s near enough for the Chelsea posse, or maybe you’d like to go lecture them on syllogistic reasoning...”

The Grebs were looking nervous now, and Jake caught the soft click and tap of ringed fingers closing around devices in jacket pockets.

The Skins were talking louder now. A scrawny character with a grid of ugly blue-green dots tattooed across his face was staring across at the Grebs. Beside him was the biggest of them—a vicious-looking gorilla with dead eyes and a scar running from the corners of his mouth across both cheeks. His front teeth were missing and he had a ring of studs through his bottom lip. Jake could make out a mess of dark scabs across the knuckles of his right hand, that sat loosely around his bottle on the table.

“Bloody stinks round here, ay,” the skinny one said, too loud. The muttering throughout the bar became more subdued, as attention secretly turned to the impending showdown.

“Yeah. Stinks,” said the Gorilla. “What d’ya think’s makin’ it?”

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No subtlety here, thought Jake. You could see the dialogue coming a mile off.

“Dunno, uh, . . . could be the bogs.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

The others had quietened down, now. They sat about expectantly, the edges of a sneer playing on their lips.

“ . . . then again could be a *greasy fucking Greb*.” The last three words were half-shouted.

The Grebs were doing their best to play ignorant, but they visibly stiffened at this. The Barman was watching carefully, now, making a show of wiping the pumps with a dirty red-check cloth. One of the Hippies in the corner muttered something to his companions and they all got up and quietly shuffled out leaving half-full glasses behind on the table-top.

The Skins waited a few moments, for effect, and then the skinny one carried on.

“Hard to tell, innit. I mean, they don’t wipe their arses or anyfing . . .”

A couple of them snickered nastily. There was a rhythmic *shick-shick* sound now, metal on metal, like a blade being rubbed against a table leg.

“Yeah they do . . .” the gorilla said.

The skinny one looked surprised, disappointed, like he’d spoilt the joke. One dumb bastard, thought Jake.

“Whaddya think the hair’s for?” the Gorilla finished. The skinny one let out a whoop and went into a paroxysm of stifled laughter. The others were snickering now, staring at the Grebs from out of the corners of ratty eyes.

Shick-shick

The Grebs were still pretending to ignore them, but the vibe was intense. Hatred was over their faces now, and they were close to breaking. One of them was whispering quietly to the others, lips thinned, jabbing the air with an index finger.

The skinny one quit laughing and settled down, taking a deep and messy swig from his bottle. His eyes lit up with malevolent glee as he thought of something.

“Naah...I’ll tell you where the stink’s really coming from,” he said. He wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his torn, white denims. “Look—one of them’s a fuckin’ *daigo*. Never seen a *daigo* Gr—”

He flung his arms up and ducked as the bottle exploded against the wall above them, sending a shower of frothy ale and broken glass all over them. The Latino was standing now, eyes blazing, as the others made a belated and half-hearted attempt to restrain him. The Skins were stunned for a moment but quickly recovered, jumping to their feet and piling raggedly out towards the waiting Grebs, knocking over bottles and shouting hoarsely. Jake saw now that the gorilla was wielding an ugly machete, and the others were producing chains and stanley knives from side-pouches.

As suddenly as it had appeared, the rage had vanished from their faces, and they had stopped dead half way across the room, faces falling into an expression of dumb fear. They were looking towards the bar.

Jake followed their gaze and saw the reason.

The barman stood with something pointed at them, one end tucked into his shoulder and the other supported by his left hand, which was wrapped around a moulded rubber handle. It looked, at first, like a small girder, or something else that might be used in the substructure of a building or aircraft. It was a sleek, square chunk of stainless steel, about three foot long and two-by-four inches thick. At its end were the mouths of two huge bores, an inch across, one above the other. The end of the barrel was neatly topped by an adjustable, matt-black end-sight.

It looked a bit like an elephant gun, except it was too big. Jake couldn’t think of anything that would need a gun that big—nothing that wasn’t extinct, anyway.

The Skins slowly began to back off, wide-eyed, amongst the clatter of dropped knives and chainlink, their hands raised submissively.

HeadSpace

“I got better things to do than wipe you off the walls, shitheads,” the bartender said. “Find the door...”

Jake saw that the bartender wasn't alone now. There were three others coming through from a dimly lit corridor at the back of the bar. He'd seen a couple of them before—they ran another bar a few doors downstreet. They were packing hardware now, holsters draped over shoulders, carrying 11mm pistols and magnum revolvers.

It was just a precaution. There were no police in this part of town, no security outfits on-call to deal with trouble, so the local clubs and breweries had improvised their own cooperative thrown together out of barstaff, shopkeepers and bouncers. Any aggravation and they'd just give a shout over a mike they kept handy in a back-pocket or on a chain round their neck.

The back-up wasn't needed this time, so they just stood quietly watching as the Skins filed back out.

The tension vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. So did the shotgun, and the hum of conversation quickly returned to its previous level. The bartender took a brush that was stood against a nearby wall and caught the Latino's eye. He didn't have to say anything, the Latino swiftly caught it as it was tossed at him, and set about clearing up the scattered shards of bottle, grateful not to have joined the Skins.

The bartender exchanged a few words with his visitors, following them out back as they left.

“You sure this was such a good place for biz?” Jake asked.

“Sure it is,” he said, casually. “Unless you wanna dress up for the trendy scene. Security's better here anyhow...”

He was digging something out of an inside pocket, now. It was some sort of package wrapped in blue plastic.

“And did you check out that hardware?” He laughed. “You don't see many of those out this way. Norwegian fisherman use it on trawlers up by the ice-cap. It's a whale-gun, only thing big enough to make a hole in

them. Bartender used to be in the Navy, picked it up off a wreck in a salvage operation.”

“You know the guy?”

“Know his brother—used to be on security when I was at Orion. Gives me back-up sometimes when I’m cold-dealing.”

He unwrapped the plastic and removed a small, white, cardboard box, about the size of a jewellery box. Opening one end of the box, he slid out a sandwich of white styrofoam, which he delicately separated. A folded wedge of bubblewrap was in one of the styrofoam hollows and he pulled it out, holding it up in front of him. Jake could see now that it contained the small, black wafer of a chip.

“Here it is,” Spider said proudly, “The Yoto 3-series AI. Cracked and ready to roll.”

Jake took the bag off him and looked inside. The familiar logo was on the chip, and beside it was the indented, white serial number: “IRCPU-03.01X.” This was the one.

“How was it?” he asked.

“Tough. CPU case was a bitch—booby-trapped to the nines. Had to pin-hole the board and inject silica polymer round the chip. Then we just tripped the burn-out and pumped coolant through till it was done. *Et voila!*”

“Checks out?”

“Course it does. Plugged it back in and ran it from cold. It’s twenty-four carat freeware, now.”

“Nice work, Spider,” he examined the seamless, mint exterior of the chip. There wasn’t the slightest burn mark or even a blemish of the thermal jelly that had encased it. “Very nice work...”

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Lisa sat before the screen in her poky, third floor room in the Physics Faculty building, poring over ribbons of printout and lining occasional

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rows of figures in red highlighter. She'd been there for three hours and it was approaching lunchtime, and she could already hear the distant chatter and laughter of students milling from lecture theatres and working their way over to the canteen. Through the window she could see them wandering along in cliques through the many paths that wound their way through the campus, bags or laptops slung over one shoulder, their clothing a scrambled mishmash spanning the entire subcultural range.

The phone rang and she hit the engage button, expecting to see Jake's solemn glare or the earnest features of any of the gaggle of astrophysicists she netmailed. In the event it was neither. The plain, pale face was that of an anonymous looking suit, mid-thirties, thinning dark hair sitting in a patchy crew-cut, eyes half-hidden behind a slim set of Sony reactolites. She searched her memory for a moment, trying to recall if the features were those of an old acquaintance, or someone she met only briefly.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Meyer," said the figure, his voice carrying a mild Canadian accent. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Samuel Kerr, and I'm part of the security team at Nova Cybernetics." He paused, as if waiting for recognition.

"Yeah?" Lisa said.

"A certain incident has come to our attention. A satellite anomaly that you, I believe, reported."

"Yeah...yeah, that's right," she said, before she could stop herself. The question crossed her mind as to whether she should be talking about this. But she'd tried all the conventional channels and been lied to and stonewalled out, and that made her mad. Someone was hiding something from her and she wanted to know what. This guy obviously knew something, so to hell with it, she was curious. It's not as if she had to tell him anything anyway.

"I imagine you got quite a cold reception when you brought this up with the regular Ops, and you're probably wondering whether you should be talking to me about this." He smiled. Damn right she was. "So perhaps I should explain the background of this incident." That pause again.

“Yeah, go on—” she said.

“A certain highly sensitive corporate meeting was arranged in London. A lot of people were naturally very interested in the proceedings, and did their damndest to wire the place in advance. They failed. We tracked all the devices down and disabled them—”

“*Your* meeting, right?” she interrupted.

“Yes. A rendezvous with the director of Yoto Nanotech. It was supposed to be an espionage dead-zone. We thought of everything, *reckoned* we had anyway. But looks like some smartass techie found a way through—a scan using a geostat satellite, the one you were logged onto that time.” He paused again, this time for thought. “So we are faced with a damage limitation situation. We’ve had a leak of some very sensitive information, and we need to assess its exact content so we can take defensive action. RAM dumps of your own session might give us the information we need, and we would of course be prepared to pay a substantial fee for any data you might have in your possession.”

Lisa’s mind span as she tried to absorb the implications of this new development. If what this guy was saying was true, she’d inadvertently stumbled onto a major piece of corporate espionage and blown it wide open. She was now in a position to rectify some of the damage suffered by the victim. On the other hand, she wasn’t going to be popular with the perpetrator, but then it was their own stupid fault for clumsily gate-crashing her own session.

Either way, she might well be in trouble, but only if anyone knew she had a recording of the scan. She hadn’t told anyone yet, not even the Prof, so there was no reason that they should suspect. Unless, of course, they knew something about the software she ran in her sessions, or had access to NASA intelligence, or had just given the possibility some serious consideration.

Then again if anyone already knew—or even suspected—that she might be holding back some highly sensitive material, she’d be in far, far, deeper shit.

HeadSpace

She was scared now, and beginning to wish she'd just kept her mouth shut about the whole thing. But even that might not have helped, she'd just been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

She tried to relax, and reassure herself mentally. Better to just come clean, she thought, let go of the data pronto, and put herself well clear of the picture. Then she'd be just nobody again—and maybe a few K richer, too.

Kerr just waited patiently, the hint of a smile playing on his thin lips.

“Okay, Sam,” Lisa said, finally, “I’ll level with you. Some of the routines I was running were logging every twitch of every device on that crate. I was kinda hoping someone would turn up to give me a run-down. Now I’ve got the picture and I want out. You can have the disk with my blessing.”

Kerr was chuckling.

“That’s fine, Ms. Meyer. All that remains is for us to arrange a meeting. One of our subsidiaries—Ultima Games—has an office at the Middleton Park Industrial Estate—”

“No thanks, Sam, I’d prefer to do this my way. Here, if you don’t mind. Ground floor foyer of the Geldof Building, tomorrow at 1pm.”

There was a silence as Kerr thought for a moment.

“That will be fine,” he said and hung up, the picture breaking up momentarily before blacking out.

Lisa sighed. The knot in her stomach had returned. Something felt wrong. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but something about his story just didn’t feel right. Well okay, maybe they had to disguise the truth a bit, skirt clear of sensitive information, but it was something else more fundamental. She struggled mentally to pin-point the feeling, finally giving up and letting it go when it just wouldn’t come. It’d come to her out of the blue some time later when she’d forgotten all about, as all threshold impressions seem to do.

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She really should be talking to Jake about this. Jake who was neck deep in this kind of shit. Jake who never carried a damn phone, filtered all his correspondence through that worn old tape at home.

She punched up his number on the phone again. The recording jumped to life and she hung up without leaving a message. It'd have to wait.

For the remainder of the afternoon she struggled to free her mind from the endless circuit of brooding, forcing herself back to the mundane task at hand until darkness began to fall, and the strip lighting above her jumped obediently to life. Finally, she pulled the printout into an orderly pile, stood up, and took her blue felt jacket from a hook on the back of her door. She had her hand on the handle, ready to leave, when she stopped, turned and went back to the desk.

She opened the bottom draw and took out a tinted plastic case containing the disk. The metallic red sheen looked more of a muddy brown behind the semi-opaque case, and she stared thoughtfully at it for a few seconds before deciding.

There was something she should do first.

The car park was aglow from a grid of overhead floodlights. It was nearly empty now, and only a few of the metal-plastic cocoons were left dotted about in the white painted grid, crouching like waiting predators. Lisa made her way across the concrete expanse to J23 where her red Spectra was waiting. She pushed the stud on her key ring and it lit up for an instant, issuing a subdued blip as alarm systems disengaged and the door slid open.

She jumped nimbly in and switched on the electrics, the dashboard lighting up into a luminous forest of green LED. Then she swung the rubber safety gate across her, engaging it in the socket over her right shoulder. The door slid shut and she jammed her foot down on the accelerator, the motor whining to life and propelling her out into the exit lane. She slowed as the arm of the automatic barrier crawled

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leisurely up, and then veered out into the road, accelerating off towards the overpass.

Soon she was cruising up the A58, the speedo needle tipping 150kph as twin streams of yellow neon poured past her on either side. Dimly lit by the remaining twilight she could make out the cluster of grey slabs against the distant horizon—the Brooklands estate that was her week-day home.

The anxiety was beginning to creep back, now, shaking off the numbness of the afternoon's immersion. The nagging sensation was back—the feeling of something she missed, something about Kerr that didn't ring true. She was still pondering this when she arrived at the ugly grey tenement holding her bedsit, and as the graffiti-sprawled aluminium shutters rattled open and she drove into the murky interior of the basement car park.

The bay was cold and smelt of damp and blocked drains, and her breath was a tumbling cloud of condensation as she punched the call button by the elevator and waited as the light on the indicator display winked its way through thirty floors. The feeling was starting to crystallise now, the nebula of discomfort condensing into ideas. One notion stood out, clear and sharp. A big inconsistency—loose ends that just wouldn't tie up.

How did Kerr *know*?

Not just about her, about the interrupted session, about the Sat surveillance, but the very fact that the meeting had been tapped at all. Whoever ran the tap had the cooperation of top-level NASA suits, and it was their job to keep it tied up nice and tight, to see to it that nothing leaked. It wasn't difficult to do this, but they'd somehow fouled it up anyway.

That wasn't it, though. There's ways they might have got to hear about the incident on the Sat. NASA could have a mole working for Nova—maybe someone who'd only been alerted once she'd started

howling about the session blow-out. But what was weird was how they'd connect it to the Centre Point meet.

Whoever arranged the tap would have to be high up, would know how to cover their tracks and remove any tell-tale traces of the covert activity. There'd be nothing left behind for anyone to get a handle on. It was just pure fluke that she'd been on at the time, taking readings, when the surveillance software cut in—one solitary foul-up. So even if espionage was suspected the target could have been absolutely anything. There wasn't nearly enough for someone to tie it to the target, so how could Kerr know?

Whichever way round she worked it out, something didn't quite add up, and it always came back to Kerr. Everything fit except for the phone call from Kerr. Now assume that nothing Kerr said can be trusted and what do you have? Her heart froze as the realization hit her.

There was a noise in the shadows behind her and an icy bolt of terror ran through her, a burst of adrenalin sending her heart pounding. A soft tone sounded as the elevator arrived and she scurried inside jabbing repeatedly at the button labeled '19.' The doors softly shut and her panic subsided as the elevator accelerated gently skyward.

Calm down, she told herself, it was just a stray cat or vermin scurrying through the drains. But the fear was still there, ice running through her veins.

The elevator rattled slightly as it came to a halt on the nineteenth. She dodged between the aluminium doors as they opened, and half ran down the stretch of corridor that ran up to the familiar front door. It was at the end of the row, at one of the tenement's corners. An adjacent window looked out onto a constellation of glowing windows on a neighbouring tower block and a thin, vertical slice of darkening sky.

She wore a plastic keyband round her wrist, and she waved it briefly across the surface of a sensor by the entrance, pushing the door open with her shoulder as a buzzer sounded and the lock disengaged. She quickly shut it behind her, breathing a deep sigh.

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Even before the lights flickered reluctantly to life, Lisa realised that something was wrong. It was that subtle, indefinable feeling of a foreign presence, the kind of feeling that New-Agers might call ESP or blame on a spirit, but which Lisa put down to the subtle bodily scent carried by everyone. It hung around their room and their clothes, where they were and where they'd been. No matter how clean or free from chemical fragrance they were, everyone had one.

There was one here now. It was a slight mustiness of the air, tinged with the faint smell of washing powder, boot-polish, and another smell that reminded her distantly of combustion experiments in a junior school chemistry lab.

There was no sound, but she knew he was still here, that it wasn't the scent of a recently departed visitor. Even as she fought through the descending wave of terror, pulling at the release lever on the doorlock from which Anton had carefully removed a vital component, she felt a horrific inevitability about these final moments.

The door wouldn't open, and she already knew it was too late. The voice that had remained silent finally spoke.

"You're early, Miss Meyer."

Shaking, she turned round and looked at the lean figure sitting in her armchair in the shadows at the rear of the room. He was dressed in simple black overalls and boots. His head was topped by a perfectly shorn brown crew-cut and his face was pale, a pair of old-style shades eclipsing both eyes in inky circles. On the floor by his feet was a small, dark case, like doctors sometimes carry.

"No-one can hear you," he said. His voice was soft, almost kind. Lisa was sobbing, now, her face flushed, wet eyes pleading.

"Let's make this easy for both of us," he said.

6

Deadlock

Isaac's apartment was a roomy portion of a low-lying apartment complex on the West Ditton estate. It was only a short walk from the Long Ditton Underground terminal, and two minutes after leaving the noisy transcultural tube-train, Jake found himself at the window of a security booth by the main gate. He gave the guard Isaac's name and apartment number and was casually waved through. The guard remembered him from his previous visits.

Isaac must be loaded living in a place like this, thought Jake. The estate was an immaculate and elegantly manicured affair, pristine buildings bordered by lush green lawns, trimmed hedges, and beds of dazzling, multi-colour flora. A spotless, picture-card paradise unblemished by garbage, dirt, or graffiti, and made all the more beautiful by the unseasonably sunny spell of weather.

The block where Isaac lived was elegantly titled "The Copses." The words were etched on a polished oak-section plaque by the entrance in rustic 19th century script. Jake didn't need to buzz him, the door was off its latch as it often was in good weather when its occupants liked to freely come and go from picnicking or sun-bathing on the lawn. He passed through a foyer that smelt of paint, and up one storey of a carpeted staircase to the first floor. There was a small stretch of corridor with one apartment on either side, Jake walked up to the door on the left and knocked on its glossy, mirror-like surface. The door came open slightly as he did so. He waited a moment but there was no answer, so he

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pushed it open and walked into spacious room that composed most of Isaac's flat.

The room was painted a cool shade of teal, with glossy white trimmings and skirting boards. The floor was thickly polished wood, a single circular mandala of carpet lying in the middle. The room was combo-style—bedroom, dining room, and lounge rolled into one. At the far end was a short stretch of corridor leading through to a kitchen and a bathroom. A large mattress lay in the adjacent corner with a crumpled dark duvet and pillows atop, beside it a small plastic dome that was a night-light, and a pile of magazines and paper-backs. On the opposite side of the room was a three metre wall-screen, before it a reclining sofa, a tray angled outwards from its arm carrying a single coffee cup. Covering the walls to one side of the room were a clutter of old pop-culture icons behind frameless plastic. Cinema posters of cult horror and sci-fi movies, old adverts for beer, perfume, and bygone technical goods—old TVs and pre-VR computers, thick boxes housing bulky old CRT tubes,

By the wall to the right was a large, squat desk that was home to a terminal box and a smaller screen. This screen was alive with graphics, windows of coloured shapes and acronyms set in elaborate 3D webs, a nova of glyphs joined by a lattice of light. The viewpoint would dart about, panning back, rotating the matrix and then zooming into a portion of the forest of representations. Occasionally the action would vanish or freeze as an other display window looking onto a different part of the net appeared, partially superimposed, or totally blocking one another out.

Isaac was nearby, as expected. Unlike previous times when he'd been sat in the chair before the terminal, now he was reclined in the sofa, legs just visible over padded foot-rests.

Jake walked round towards where Isaac sat, he was wearing a remote Yamaha headset, sleek polycarbon goggles held on by a plastic band that encircled his head, supports at either side hanging lightly onto his

shortly cropped crown. The foremost section of his fringe was long, and spilled over the black casing of the goggles. His fingers nimbly toggled the panels of a cream, plastic disc that he held under his right hand. As he approached, Isaac flicked up the visor and turned towards him.

“OhHi Jake,” he said. The light from the set’s projection cells cast twin dances of colour onto his temples just above the eyes.

“Don’t let me interrupt you—”

“S’okay, I’ll be with you in a mo. Getcha self a drink.”

He pulled the visor back down and continued. Jake wandered into the kitchen to where a row of spirit measures hung from the wall. He poured himself a Jack Daniels and went back through, sitting himself in a chair and perusing over some faded posters adorning the wall.

Finally, the screen went blank and Isaac pulled off the headset, tossing it, with the remote, onto a nearby table. He turned to look at Jake.

“Whereya been Zak? Couldn’t find you softside...”

“Been busy. Digging around. Lotta places you don’t find too easy...”

There was a pause where neither of them spoke. A nearby window was open and birds could be heard singing noisily in the distance, and there was the rustle of leaves as branches were upset by a gust of wind.

“What brings you here?” Isaac asked, finally.

“Am I wrong or is something brewing up Corpside?” Jake said, cutting straight to the point.

“Something most definitely is.” Isaac looked concerned, pensive. “Looks like The Big Three are heading towards some kinda showdown.” He pulled himself up out of the sofa and went into the kitchen.

“Why do I get the feeling that’s a bad thing?” Jake said, raising his voice. There was the sound of jars being opened and metal rattling against glass.

“Because it is.”

“How’s that?”

Water poured and spoon sounded on porcelain, and Isaac was back with a steaming cup of espresso. He settled back into his chair and held it cupped in his hands over his lap.

“You never got into Polycon, did you Jake?”

“Nope, I’m a Techie right through. Corpshop was never my thing.”

“Polycon,” Isaac mused. “Politics and Economics—get talked about like they were one thing, like they were a match made in heaven, bosom buddies. But they ain’t. Not by a long shot, and that’s why the big problem.”

Jake took a sip from his glass.

“You know how it works. Market forces, I mean. Idea is that it’s the best thing for everyone. The consumer gets the goods they want at the best price. Those who make the best quality goods at the cheapest price thrive while the ones who can’t sink. Survival of the fittest, and the whole show is theoretically driven by your ordinary Joe public.”

“Supply and demand, right?”

“Right. Problem is that it only works if corporations play it fair and clean, if there’s no hidden agenda, no disguised monopolies, price-fixing, and political corruption—the kind of activities that are definitely not in Joe’s interest. Hence regulation. We have democratically elected officials who have the power to intervene. Theoretically, they see to it that power is kept in the hands of the consumer, and that commercial interests always take second place the interests of society as a whole.” Isaac raised his mug to his lips and took a sip of the steaming coffee.

“Yeah right,” Jake said sarcastically. He toyed distantly with his glass, watching the slivers of ice bob lazily about.

“Well, *theoretically*...”

“So how’d we end up here?” Jake asked bitterly.

“Money,” Isaac said tersely. “Commercial success means money, and money means power, and you just wouldn’t believe how quickly social ideals evaporate when very large sums of cash become available to anyone prepared to give morals a second place. This wasn’t such a problem

Paul Barrows

when there were millions of companies, all very small, and none of them with the clout to hold any influence, but it started to get a bit tricky when they got very big and very rich. First it was the petrochemical and manufacturing corps, then it was the pharmaceutical industry. Before you know it, the U.S. were invading tin-pot Middle East states over a few oil-wells.

“There were big regulation clamp-downs at the turn of the century—everyone squealed real hard and politicians tried to reverse the tide of commercial corruption, but they didn’t last very long under the sheer avalanche of credit these guys had to play with. Anybody in the way would be bought out. Soon politicians were just corporate gophers, and the whole government business was just a big trough for the lucky elected to get their snouts stuck into.”

“So what kept things from collapsing back then?” Jake asked.

“Public opinion. There were still plenty of radicals and would-be revolutionaries who made it their mission to expose the source of the stink for all to see. Some of these evolved into organisations funded by their targets’ opposing interests. See, when it came down to it, public opinion still counted. They’d pulled out the middle men; everyone knew you couldn’t change things by getting rid of politicians, but you could change things by consumer power, by supporting or boycotting the products corps need to shift to stay afloat. So a new strategy developed, which was to mobilise public opinion against those involved in actions that the public and their pressure groups disapproved of.”

“So it worked—sort of. Consumers still ran things. What went wrong?”

“Yeah, it did work, for a while,” Isaac continued. He was on a roll now, sitting alertly forward and looking intently into Jake’s eyes, hands gesticulating enthusiastically. “But like most 20th century strategies it was unsustainable. See, this kind of scene relies on an even distribution of power across many competing interests. It therefore relies on none of them ever actually winning. They knew that gradually corps would grow and amalgamate, that lots of little businesses would die out or be

absorbed, but they never really thought about where it was all going. They never really thought that the big corp-race would ever actually end.

“The big fish, of course, realise that the media is the key to public opinion—and therefore to power—and so in the mean time they’ve sunk billions into fighting each other for the biggest slice of the pie. As soon as the balance of power gets lop-sided, the whole buggy starts to rock. Suddenly certain organisations get too powerful to be attacked. With the balance of power goes a depletion of resources to reactionary factions acting as a watch-dog and with it the high level media-access necessary for publicity.

“So we have a very unstable situation that only works because of the inertia that exists while the corps all duke it out. As soon as winners start to appear, the whole order begins to collapse. When the whole commercial show has been sucked into one transglobal corporation, what d’ya think’s gonna happen then?”

“I don’t get it.” Jake frowned, touching his brow. “We’re pretty much down to the Big Three already and there hasn’t been any big collapse So how’s only one blood-sucking corp gonna be that different from just two or three?”

“Like I say it’s not the number of corps so much as the balance of power between them. As the numbers become fewer, the imbalances between them start to get magnified. We’re starting to see that now; things are starting to slide but the system still basically works because of the inherent rivalry. Public campaigns can always find funding because there’ll always be vested interests who can use them take the moral high ground, public interest will still have the resources and media access to hold a pull on things. As soon as a winner starts to emerge, though, the system collapses and public interest leaves the equation. No public opposition will survive because there’ll be no-one left to back them, and no rival media to give it a voice. Because there’ll be nothing left to oppose them—no-one left to expose them and undermine their image—then anything goes. There’ll just be a transglobal monopoly

accountable to nobody but themselves. No need to maintain moral pretences, no need to waste valuable energy and resources tryin' to beat opponents. Then there'll only be one thing left to beat..."

Isaac raised his cup and took another gulp of coffee.

"Us, right?"

"Not just us, not just all the Outers, but anyone who doesn't serve a function. Think about it. Try to get a real handle on what the purest and truest commercial ethic really means. Profit and nothing else. It doesn't just mean *making enough*—it's not about meeting basic financial needs. Needs don't come into the equation and enough is never enough. It's about the raw, demented pursuit of *everything*. All the resources, all the power—everything for them and nothing for anyone one else.

"What do you think's gonna happen to that majority that don't happen to be of any use to this corporate machine. They'll be obliterated, subtly 'phased out' to make way for the wholesale liquidisation of the world. Every last drop is gonna be sucked out of this Earth and turned into crap for an increasingly small, blind, and dumb minority of consumers. And then even consumers won't be needed. There'll just be an insatiable corporate monster tearing its way across the earth swallowing everything in its path. Turning it into a playground for a tiny overclass of astronomically rich individuals."

"Do you really think it'll get that far?" Jake put his empty tumbler down on the floor beside his feet. "That people will just sit back and let it all happen?"

"Do you know how many people actually understand that there's a world out there?" He smiled quizzically, head tilted to one side. "A world with real people just like them? News just isn't reality to people, its another show to go with the VR and TriD. They don't want reality any more. Can't see why they need it. Reality's cold, vicious, and dull, why should they take it when there's plenty of better worlds waiting behind some goggles? They think they're safe, that they can shut it all out and hide from the shit that's really happening. It's worked so far so why

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shouldn't it go on the way its always been, they think, so who cares? As long as there's plenty of cheap headgear and consoles about..."

Isaac seemed to sink slightly in his seat. When he spoke again his voice was softer, almost a whisper.

"I'd like to think that we'd pull together in time to do something, but chances are just too slim. Too many media zombies and cade victims. Most the world's just living one long electric dream." He turned to look at Jake. His face carried a sombre fatalism.

This bothered Jake. It wasn't like Isaac to talk like this. He was usually the optimist, always quick to tease an upside out of the worst of situations. Things must be bad to get Isaac sending out such bad vibes, he thought.

"This doesn't sound like you, Zak. What's happening?"

"Like I say I've been doing some hunting around. Getting Word on corp motion. Something's brewing up on Biznet. You've guessed that already. Couple of months back a meet was arranged—real quiet and unofficial—between a couple of the Big Three. Delphi and Randall. Security was tied up tight as you could get and the whole thing stank of some kind of deal.

"Now Nova's been trying to get a neck-hold on Aizu for as long as you or I can remember, but it's been basically deadlocked. Nova never really liked the idea of alliances, never clubbed together with anyone else. Bad idea, too; they took a real kicking over the Kodak-Nike alliance, nearly got sunk over Black Friday, but looks like they're finally changing pitch..."

"And they found someone who'll trust them?"

"Biz types got short memories for grudges when a chance like that's handed to them on a plate. Anyway Yoto are too big to make good bait for a raid. It's too elaborate for a simple takeover, I reckon they're figuring on breaking Aizu and sharing the pieces between them."

"If you suspect them, won't Aizu?"

“Suspicion alone makes for a poor defence strategy. They won’t have a clue where to start unless they’ve got intelligence. Maybe they have, in which case they’re working on a counter-attack. Either way the deadlock’s starting to break. This is a house of cards we’ve got here—just one little breeze and the whole lot collapses. whichever way it goes it don’t look too good.”

“Why now?” said Jake, probing. “The stand-off’s been in place over twenty years. If Nova really are moving in then what’s triggered it?”

Isaac looked up at the ceiling and blew hair out of his eyes.

“Aizu’s been doing some military work. They’ve had some project going, growing chips out of protein—”

“The Biochip?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. Heard they got it working, and apparently it is one hot-shit piece of hardware. They reckon it’s gonna add a string of zeros to processing speeds, reckon they can make real AI out of it. Lots of other stuff too—it’ll turn the market upside down and naturally the competition are a little concerned.”

“So this is what it’s all about, right? A big hardware breakthrough that’s gonna tip the balance, give the lucky winner the edge and leave the competition well behind. And the biochip’s the key...” Jake was testing now, probing Isaac’s intel.

Isaac paused. Jake waited hungrily for his response.

“Yeah. But—well—it’s not only about the biochip. It isn’t common knowledge, but Nova have probably got something up their sleeve. Just rumours, really, but enough to make you sniff some kind of undercurrent. Word has it there’s been a development on the DNI front. Been digging around for a name but no luck—”

“Try *Prometheus*. The Prometheus project.”

Isaac was surprised. Jake grinned. This was the first time he’d been a step ahead of Isaac on any corp intel.

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“I’m impressed, Jake.” He smiled. “Digged real hard to crack this one but couldn’t get a hold. You’ve been drafted in on a job, right? Got any more on it?”

“Fraid not. You’re wise as I am now. We’re gonna be doing some—uh—intensive investigating soon, though, so I’ll keep you posted.”

The conversation drew to a halt. Only the incessant clatter of bird-song and a whoop of laughter from a couple outside on the lawn disturbed the silence. Isaac finished off his coffee and dumped the mug by the headset on the table nearby.

Finally Jake collected his thoughts and continued.

“I dropped by for a reason. I need to pick your brain about something...”

“What’s that?”

“Got word of some kinda espionage set-up. Friend of mine’s an astronomer—does work with orbitals. She did a session a few weeks back and got blown out by some surveillance tap. Reckons they fouled up big time, because instead of looking out spaceway she’s suddenly taking in gigs of EMR readings from a scan on some city block. She makes a scene but NASA suddenly gets memory loss about the whole thing. Wants a bit of intell on, well, just who the fuck she’s dealing with here...”

“A tap—on a comsat? When?”

“Uh...3rd of September, 1 till 5 A.M. GMT.” Isaac jumped like he was stung. The relaxed and cheerful expression was gone. He looked startled now.

“New Oxford Street, right? London...”

“Yeah—” Jake felt an inner jolt.

“Jesus, Jake... When was the last time you heard from this girl?” Isaac’s voice was thick and ominous, his expression dark and troubled. Fear was in the air now and Jake was suddenly dizzy. He had that nauseous feeling when you suddenly realise something is very wrong, that sickening jolt that comes when realisation hits. His head was spinning and his legs suddenly felt weak. Cold flushes ran across his back and forehead.

“What do you mean, Zak?” His words felt strange and distant. Panic was closing in on him, hot and stifling, threatening to overwhelm him. He fought it off. “What you talking about?”

“Chrissakes, Jake—That’s the place. The fucking Aizu-Nova meet.” Isaac barked, impatience turning to anger. “She could be in big trouble, Jake. You better get hold of her, fast. Get the phone...”

Jake jumped up and went over to the wall unit.

* * *

Lisa’s flat was warm and dark. A screen on the table babbled manically, an American gameshow in full swing. The blinds were drawn, but the afternoon sun found its way through the narrow gaps between metal slats, sending a grid of light across the dim interior.

The tone sounded from the wall-unit. It continued intermittently for a few seconds before the unit jumped to life and began to run through a recorded message. It disconnected again almost immediately and fell once again into silence.

A few seconds later another tone sounded. This time it came from where Lisa sat before the screen. The tone was thinner and higher in pitch, and came from a phone on Lisa’s cold wrist.

The tone continued for some time, but nobody was there to answer it. Lisa was motionless in the chair as she had been for nearly sixteen hours, eyes staring sightlessly at the tumbling images.

She was dead from cardiac arrest, but her body was otherwise virtually unscathed. A tiny, near-invisible pin-prick in the nape of her neck was the only trace of the micro-injection that had induced what would eventually be put down to a congenital heart defect. The lethal compound had long since broken up into a number of naturally occurring pollutants, and such a small abrasion to the skin could have been caused by any number of things.

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Ten minutes later the tone had stopped. Leaving only the stream of jabbering voices, laughter, and applause from the set on the table, and the distant steely whine of elevators rising and falling.

* * *

Jake shot through the labyrinth that was the Net's root layer. He found the AcaNet gateway and veered through it into a gleaming blue plateau that was the inside surface of a vast virtual orb. It was aglow with the radiance of tens of thousands of inset gems, each of them the entrance to the local area network of a College or University campus. He panned into the UK segment, raced across the surface until he found the Leeds node, and dived into its crimson portal.

For a moment he was awash in a sea of pink light and then he was through, a wall of darkness before him. He steadied himself and looked about, eyes adjusting to the sudden change in brightness. He was inside a huge dark tunnel, its charcoal-grey surface illuminated dimly by a thin scattering of ovular lights, each carrying a single string ID silhouetted against its surface.

He thought of Lisa and the fear was back, clawing into him. He tried to reassure himself. Lisa's okay, Zak's just over-reacting, he thought. Then the sound of the unanswered wrist-phone purring endlessly came back to him and the thin cushion of relief was gone again.

He span towards one of the nodes at random and engaged. The node carried the word "Catch-66." The light turned red and he spoke.

"Hey, Catch, I need to talk to someone urgent—"

"Who're you?" came the reply. It sounded like a young guy, maybe nineteen or twenty, his accent an Anglo-American mish-mash. The tone wasn't friendly.

"I gotta talk to someone from over Brooklands, it's urgent—"

"I said who *are* you, buddy?"

"Name's Shadow. Friend of mine's at Brooklands—"

“You study here?”

“No. Look, I’ve got a real problem here. G—”

“We’ve all got problems. Use the Seption-Quiry node—”

“It’s an emergency, dammit,” Jake flared, “could you just tell me—”

“So call the Police—”

Jake snapped. “Fuck you, you arsehole!” he shouted.

“Fuck you too.”

He disengaged, span off, and hooked into another on a segment towards the end of the row. “JimGiz,” read the title. A voice came before he had chance to speak.

“Hello there...” said the voice, the emphasis was on the “lo.” It was another guy, maybe a bit older. His voice was warm and tuneful and carried a hint of a Mancunian or Liverpuddlian accent.

“Hello, Jim. Got a problem. I need to talk to someone from over Brooklands way. A friend of mine there might be in trouble.”

There was a pause.

“Okay—uh...”

“Shadow...” Jake prompted.

“Okay, Shadow, come on in. Think I might be able to help...”

The node vanished and he was floating in space. About him were hundreds of multi-colour fragments, some assembled into chains and circular structures, others lying loosely scattered in the air. The larger chunks were hooked together into the beginnings of a spiral structure.

Jake recognised the graphic. It was the beginning of a DNA molecule, modeled out of huge coloured building blocks that were its atomic constituents. Carbon, Hydrogen, Oxygen and Nitrogen lay scattered as coloured polygons, each with angular indentations that were its bonding sites. Some were alone, but most were mated to other blocks in larger structures that were amino-acids, these in turn forming protein strands within the larger spiral structure.

In the midst of this was the guy called Jimgiz. He was a chubby, dark-haired guy dressed in shorts and a baggy green shirt. He was stood

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among the pieces holding a pointer. He seemed to be muttering something to an invisible partner. A few moments later he stopped and turned to Jake.

“Yeah. Alez is out that way. He’ll be along in a minute. What’s the story?”

“Someone I need to check up on. Real urgent. Sorry to—uh—disturb the work.”

“No problem.”

There was a silence. A few moments passed, and Jake was about to say something when a lanky character with long brown hair appeared. He wore a leather vest and baggy white judo trousers. The newcomer adjusted his goggles and squinted through at the scene.

“Wassa bother?” he said. He looked round at Jake. “You got someone local, right? You want me to pass a message?”

He looked like he’d just woke up, or maybe he was stoned.

“You’re at Brooklands, right?”

“Yeah?” He was stifling a yawn.

“Which block you at?”

“Uh...C-Block.”

“Great. Friend of mine’s at 19F. Could be in trouble. Name’s Lisa—won’t answer her phone. Could you check up on her?”

“Sure,” he said. He rubbed a hand through his hair. “Gimme five minutes.”

He pulled off the goggles and reached across to something out of virtual space. His construct vanished.

A few minutes later he was back. He looked a little out of breath, now, but he was more awake.

“Rang a few times. Knocked too, but no answer. Funny thing is TV’s on. You can hear it. This serious? You think she OD’ed on something?”

“Not exactly...”

“You want me to get security?”

“Yeah.” Jake said gravely.

“That bad, huh.”

“I hope not...”

He pulled off the goggles and vanished again.

Jake hovered uneasily around the frozen explosion of molecular jigsaw pieces. Jimgiz had turned back to his work. He was looking away at something off VR, bending slightly and peering over the top of the eye-band on his headset.

Twenty minutes passed. Jake waited numbly, Lisa’s face in his mind and the throb of anxiety biting deeper. Finally Alez returned.

His expression told Jake all he needed to know. Alez was pale, sweaty and panting, his eyes glassy and wide. Jimgiz looked across at him, startled, his mouth hung open slightly.

“Shit, Alez, you okay?...” Jimgiz said.

Jake’s heart froze as the nightmare descended. Alez spoke but it barely registered. He already knew.

“Jesus, mate!” His voice was husky, almost a croak. “You better get up here...”

* * *

Fischer sat at a table of The Hilton’s ground floor restaurant. It was still early, and only a few of the surrounding clutter of tables were occupied. She picked up her elegant conical wine glass and took another sip of cool Chianti, observing the surrounding decor. The room was an affluent chandeliered affair, walls a creamy shade of royal blue contrasted against pure white skirtings and trimmings, and beneath her feet was a thick, lush carpet of a darker shade—marine or navy blue. From the high ceiling hung two crystalline forests of lights, their tiny neon studs flickering yellowly to imitate the warmth of their candle-laden ancestors. Three waiters stood nearby, immaculate bronzed models in cream jackets and bow ties.

She looked at the gold-trimmed grandfather clock that stood by the end-wall. It’s hands read a quarter to seven. Sharpe was late. He’d said

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six-fifteen, but it was no cause for concern, he wasn't renowned for his punctuality. She was still nervous, though, but for other reasons. A lot was hanging on this, a lot of research and a great deal of very hard work had gone into the operation, and some very difficult obstacles had been surmounted. It hadn't been without its slip-ups either. Mistakes had been made which could have jeopardised security—leaks had occurred now, and even their best efforts couldn't prevent the slow osmosis that would eventually break the secrecy.

And all of it was hanging on this outcome—this meeting meant the difference between success and failure and all the devastating repercussions that this would have. She hated hanging on like this; they'd either got it in the bag or they hadn't, and the sooner she knew which way it went the better.

She pulled herself out of her brooding, taking another sip of wine and immersing herself in the sensation of its cool, fruity bite. Then she picked up the folded plastic menu and began to peruse over the elegant script. A few moments later she caught the eye of a nearby waiter and he obediently scurried over, pulling the pen out of its holder on the black slate he carried. Fischer made her order and the waiter's slate issued a soft tone as he tapped a checkbox somewhere on its surface.

Five minutes later the waiter returned with a silver tray which he gracefully placed onto the table. Upon it was a broad glass with a salad and seafood cocktail in a pink dressing, its surface delicately laced with the leaves of some exotic types of lettuce. He placed the glass in front of her with a single thumb and forefinger, took the tray, and withdrew with a smile and a brisk nod of the head.

She picked at the dish for a while, dissecting the tang of the dressing. Tomato puree, mayonnaise, fresh pepper, paprika, a few herbs, and just a hint of lemon juice, she decided, along with an undercurrent of a taste she couldn't quite place. The clock had recently chimed seven when she saw Sharpe's familiar figure arriving through the large glass doors of the building's entrance under the suspicious eyes of the door staff.

He was tall, and his dark wiry hair greying slightly at the temples was swept back into the small button of a pony tail. He was in casuals—way too casual for a place like this, she thought—but then like many techies he sported that quirky indifference to occasion and appearance. He wore scuffed boots, black denims with kneepads, and a long black coat that looked about twenty years old. His only concession to formality was a plain black tie visible against his olive-green shirt. He exchanged a few brief words with the receptionist, flashed some ID at her, and was finally directed through the wide arched entrance to where she sat. As he approached she saw that he was wearing combo spex, the newer unrimmed type, a single band of polysilicate curving about his eyes, supported by a rubberised notch in the middle. Only the tiny sockets along by where it hooked over the left ear marked them out as anything but regular reactolites.

He smiled at her and pulled up a seat without being asked. A waiter approached instinctively, pen at the ready.

“Double Sky. No ice.” Sharpe said straight away, his voice deep and smooth. The waiter left.

Fischer felt better already. His mood was good and that can’t be a bad sign, she thought. She finished her mouthful and took a final sip of wine, draining the glass. Then she reached for the bottle.

“You sure you won’t join me?” she said, indicating the fresh glass lying inverted by his cutlery. “It’s a ‘24, an excellent year...”

“Wasted on me, love.” Sharpe put up a hand and smiled. “All taste the same to me. I’ll stick to the hard stuff.”

She topped up her own glass and went back to her food.

“The menu—” she said, as an afterthought, putting down her fork and reaching for the plastic-coated wedge and passing it across to him with her free hand. She regretted it almost as soon as she’d done it. She was fussing over him like someone’s mother. She was nervous, though, twitchy, and she got this way when she was nervous.

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“I’ve eaten already. Thanks all the same,” Sharpe replied, pleasantly. If he saw her discomfort he didn’t show it. “I won’t be staying long. Oh, and incidentally, sorry about the delay—”

“That’s okay.” She put down the menu.

“I’ll get straight to the point,” he said. Fischer tensed slightly in anticipation, a pang of anxiety shooting through her. “The signal you got wasn’t good by a long shot. Not surprising given the range—lot of static, lot of interference, lot of noise and muck and breakup. Sounded like a big tin-can full of food-mixers and radios on different stations, and somewhere in the middle there’s these guys muttering to each other in a blizzard.” He chuckled.

The waiter arrived and swiftly planted his drink before him, quickly withdrawing. He picked it up and took a swig of the blue liquid, smacking his lips in appreciation. Then he did a double-take, looking back at his glass. The smile fell off his face and he frowned. Fischer looked across, anxiously.

“Is something wrong?”

“Ice...I said no ice,” he muttered. “No ice, I say, so he puts ice in it...” Fischer made to flag down a waiter but he lifted a hand and shook his head, putting the glass back down on the table top.

“Anyway,” he took up the story again, “point is it was enough. Most the background was regular phase-shift so we could just subtract it out. As for the rest, well, that wasn’t so easy. Irregular interference is always a problem but now we’ve got ways of dealing with it. There’s a new generation of intelligent filters come out, very powerful, very smart—I mean, these things can pick out a fart in an earthquake.” He gave that chuckle again. “So we had the tools, the rest was just a matter of hard work, twenty gig of sound we had to clean byte by byte.”

“So it *is* recognisable?—” she pushed, hungry for a result.

“Course it is. Quality isn’t too hot, and there’s a few white-spots we couldn’t help, but it’s ninety-nine per cent crystal. In the bag, dear, just like you wanted.” He pulled something out of a pocket. It was a large,

Paul Barrows

brown, padded envelope, which he opened. Inside it was a CD and a neatly bound folder. He handed the folder to her, and she greedily took it.

“A transcript hardcopy...” he said. She flicked through the pages. It was thick with text, solid paragraphs of dialogue filling every page. Scattered thinly amongst it were small areas of bracketed notation, where ambiguous words were presented as possible alternatives.

But it was there, she thought, elatedly, relief running through her. They’d done it.

7

Corpquake

The car was a squat, low-hung sports. It looked on the face of it like just another weird custom-job, but beneath the smooth matt-black exterior it was anything but ordinary. Its customised military titanium shell hid a state-of-the-art x-type Zaphyr, awesome V-40 turbines delivering a solid Gigawatt of kinetic juice to metre-wide slabs of rubber treading. AI suspension scanned the terrain ahead mapping out the tiniest crevice and fragment of gravel and making minute adjustments to suspension hydraulics, gliding like an ice-puck over the roughest of terrains. It had auto-cruise and collision-avoidance, and the makers boasted that it was impossible to crash it or hit anything while the AI was engaged.

The windows had adjustable bi-lateral toning. At the moment they appeared pitch black, but from the inside they were clear as crystal, a mono-molecular film of anti-glare adding to the impression of slabs of empty space. Unlike the regular models, these were made of an arachnomesh silicate—very strong, very bullet-proof.

Currently it was gliding noiselessly along a northbound section of the San Diego freeway, the interior was filled with the soft bubbling and throbbing of ambient music playing on a local radio station. It was ten-thirty P.M. and the sky was a misty cloak of grey-blue, the full moon wrapped in a huge halo. The stream of orange lights that ran off ahead of him into the hills and the lights of a scattering of other

vehicles carried a similar halo as rays refracted off the thin mist that had condensed in the cold night air.

The vehicle carried a single occupant. The conditions were perfect, he thought, and smiled.

He tapped the auto-cruise panel and it lit up a cool shade of green. Then he left the wheel and turned round towards the rear of the vehicle, reaching across and taking a map off the back seat. He studied it for a few moments, examining a few markings, and then put it down beside him.

Ahead of him to his left the Santa Monica Mountains were approaching, and the road ahead was climbing slightly as it made its way towards a more distant stretch of the range. It wouldn't be long now.

The road curved off to the right and ran through a pass between neighbouring mountains. A few minutes later he saw the turn-off he wanted and took the wheel again, a soft tone sounding as the autocruise disengaged. The road narrowed to two lanes and darkness descended as the freeway lighting receded into the distance and eventually vanished behind hills and stretches of copse, and then he was winding his way through a forest, headlights casting eerie shadows into the trees. Ahead of him a hare darted across the road, weaving crazily about in panic and then vanishing into the verge across the way, crashing through ryegrass and weeds and off into the darkness of the trees.

Moments later the forest thinned out and vanished, giving way to fields bordered by barbed wire or rickety wooden fencing. Then he was over the brow of a hill and suddenly bathed in the glow of a constellation of distant lights in the valley that lay ahead.

The panorama before him was San Fernando Valley. Over to the left was the glowing corporate constellation that was the Yoto Nanotech Headquarters, twenty square miles of neon-lit multiplex and concrete paving surrounded by fencing, surveillance cams, and armed-response platforms. At regular intervals across the sight he caught the glitter of

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radar units—a single horizontal slab of a receptor spinning swiftly about a central axis.

In the midst of the ad hoc clutter of low-lying depots and factory units was the main building. A three-pronged vertical slab of office block maybe 500 metres across, a multi-layered sandwich of glass and white paneling bordered by great lengths of chrome tubing that were external walkways and elevators. It was tapered gradually upwards towards where each of its arms met in the middle, giving the impression of a skeletal hi-tec pyramid. From above, it appeared like a blunt-edged shuriken, slabs of block widening as they met in a thick circular ganglion at their centre.

Towards its top was the conical rotunda that he knew was the executive layer: directoral suites, board rooms, and a lavish restaurant. A slice of this section was aglow now, as he expected.

His heart was beating faster, his mind sharp and clear as it rode the adrenaline rush. He switched over to autocruise and grabbed a set of Nikon goggles that were clipped onto the dash, slipping them quickly over his face.

The scene ahead was much the same. Then he took off the autocruise and killed the lights, tapping the engage button by his temple. Suddenly it was broad daylight. It was an odd, misty, shadowless daylight that seemed to emanate from all about, the surrounding countryside aglow with an inner luminescence. A soft mist hung over things, bleaching colours and giving the world a yellowy hue.

The road ran off up to the north and he slowed, pulling off down a narrow side-road that ran alongside nearby farmland. He felt the suspension rise smoothly into a resilient cushion as he set off down a dust-track along the side of a hill towards an outcrop of rocks a kilometre away, wheels adeptly bobbing over stones and ridges. He was moving lower down the embankment now, closer to the perimeter fencing and surveillance posts. This was the area that got him closest to the HQ. He

was now about level with the top of the central building. It loomed sharp and clear about two kilometres distant.

He pulled in close to the rocky outcrop and left the car. The air was damp and smelt of grass and wet leaves. He went round to the back of the car and tapped the keyring remote. The boot whirred open, a section of the surface sliding seamlessly open to reveal a large cavity. Inside was an aluminium carry case.

He pulled it out and took it back round by the nearside door, placing it on the roof and flicking back the catches. The lid sprang open in a smooth, soft-eject motion, revealing two matt-black shapes inset in grey foam. The largest was a long, slightly squared tube about three foot long. Two rubber grips poked out from its body, one below—a simple protrusion like a bike throttle, and another further back extending from its side—a thick U-shaped handle firmly gripping the back end. He slid the tube gently out and rested one end on the top of the car.

The second part was a small flat box with a socket extending from one side. A thin lead trailed from its other side, the housing of a small steel connector at its end. He took the unit out of its foam pocket and pushed it firmly against the body of the tube. There was a solid crunch as the two units engaged. He pulled at the top of the second unit and a segment folded cleanly upwards from the main body. Its surface jumped to life, glowing LCD displaying system BIOS data.

He perched one end of the tube on his shoulder, steadying it with his right hand. With his left, he took the lead that hung from the other side of the screen's base-unit and plugged it into a socket in his headset.

The view ahead was suddenly awash with stream of alphanumeric. A ragged dance of technical jargon tumbled out of the ground one hundred metres ahead and raced jerkily into the sky. It froze momentarily and then vanished. Then the scene burst into a dance of luminous wireframe.

The base ahead, its buildings, outposts, pilons, and sub-stations were outlined in a multi-colour threadwork of light and labeled with

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symbols and acronyms. A thinner lattice outlined overhead cables and sat terminals, and another network showing underground power lines extended into virtual space beneath the physical ground of the base. At the scene's focus were a set of concentric spheres converging on the apex of the blue-traced pyramid. They were skewered by three silver cross-hairs marking the band of glowing window-panels.

A long dotted arc was traced from the end of the launcher to the apex. It weaved widely round and down into the valley, rubber-banding this way and that as he experimented with the controls. The arc twisted further round the valley walls, and then shallowed and shortened, taking a more direct trajectory across the base. He toyed with the beam for a while longer before settling on a steep medium-deep arc that bordered a cluster of rocks and followed a shallow ravine round by the east of the base, before climbing sharply over the fencing past an observation tower and then in a swift shallow curve to the target's centre.

He couldn't believe it would be this easy. He knew the equipment he held was way ahead of anything that had come into his hands before. He was no techie but he recognised a megabuck spec-list when he saw it. It was a clutter of state-of-the-art nanochips and AI slaves, each of them costing about a year's salary. Even so it seemed too good to be true, so he was automatically wary, ever on the lookout for the catch.

Sure the explanation had been plausible. The heart of the unit had been ripped off a few weeks ago from one of Yoto's own defence outfits just out of L.A., they'd said. Yoto hadn't been expecting the hit and it'd be months before they updated their defence network to deal with their own stray brainchild. They'd put the hit down to a terrorist group or rival hardware corps, so there was no reason to think it was going to be used on themselves.

So they were exposed. Just for a while, but long enough.

But he wasn't used to such a straight-forward job. It was money for nothing. No meticulously planned operation, no backup or assault teams, no infiltration or sneak military manoeuvres. Just him and a

piece of equipment that was the culmination of two hundred years of militech evolution.

“Just press the button, and bammo...” they’d said.

Of course there was a catch, though. There always was, and he’d twigged part of the downside as soon as the word “Yoto” got mentioned. Yoto was very big—number three worldwide. They owned about 5% of the world’s surface area and were neck deep in military connections. No corporation took kindly to armed assaults on their installations, but Yoto were particularly given to ruthless retaliation. Plenty of Outworld hackers or Corp-spies running a simple rip-off job turned up dead in the hills—bodies broken and bleeding from a thousand foot dive from a helipod. The lucky ones just got turned loose—thrown out of a car onto a ghetto sidewalk with bleeding stumps where fingers had once been.

Yoto took discipline seriously. But, like they said, if he did his job properly and got out fast there wouldn’t *be* any Yoto. He’d vanish and leave it dead with a bullet in its corporate head—no reprisal, no repercussions.

If it worked...

A very big if, which was why the astronomical price-tag. If it was just a half-assed have-a-go op then he’d spend the rest of his probably short life-span running from any two-bit would-be mercenary who saw the size of the price on his head.

Then even if the op went down as planned, there’d still be the knee-jerk retaliation. Even with all hell breaking loose on-site they’d still be backtracking for a bead on him, mobilising a response team to take him out.

It was strange, but these thoughts and the throb of fear they brought actually made him feel better. This was the real reason for multi-million dollar tag that came with this particular run. This was the catch. It might seem simple—if everything went as planned it *would* be—but there was no room for error. It was a one-shot deal—blow it and he’d be lucky to survive the week.

HeadSpace

He carefully inspected the neon arc that extended towards the glowing edges of the main building. He could vaguely make out a few distant figures silhouetted against the illuminated band of windows towards its apex, and distantly he remembered that these were people, people he was about to kill. He shut the thought off as quickly as it had arisen and made his final checks.

The clock on his display read 21.13. He was nearly ready now. Just a short wait. He knew that he wasn't the only one observing the scene, that distant accomplices were watching his target very closely, poised to raise the alarm and call off the op at a moment's notice. Minutes passed but the com remained silent, and finally the time arrived.

At the turn of 21.20 he held the launcher steady and gently squeezed the trigger. For a moment he thought nothing had happened, and was about to snatch at the trigger again when there was a solid recoil against his shoulder and a dark shape rocketed off across the hillside, the dotted VR trajectory-line turning red in its wake.

For a moment the shape seemed to run out of energy—about to pitch out of the air and go crashing into the undergrowth, but then tiny jets erupted in a spurt of blue flame and it accelerated off towards the side of the basin.

At this very moment the Yoto defence network jumped to life. Blinding crimson-white beams flickered from posts all over the complex, a staccato of thudding and popping and the hiss of fried air, each of them jabbing out at the missile's path. He couldn't see it hardside any more, but it was marked out on VR as a white star that bobbed along its flight-path, occasionally darting this way and that.

Sparks and clouds of dust and rubble burst on the bank behind it as the beams missed their mark, leaving a scorched and burning line along the hillside. Then they were silent again as it dipped into the ravine and flew along close to the ground.

Even as he watched open-mouthed, he knew that he should be going. That he should fling the case and its launcher into the boot and leave

now. That they'd be backtracking its path and zeroing his position as he stood watching. That even the few seconds it took to see the conclusion could cost him his life.

But he couldn't do that, this was just too big. History was in the making. And he was already hooked...

He'd seen far dumber defence set-ups repel an attack like this in the blink of an eye. There'd be the muzzle flash, a faint pop, and a wisp of smoke as the missile took off. There'd be a brief flash as the jets ignited and then it would explode in virtually the same instant as slugs of superhot plasma cut it apart, burning shards tumbling out of the air leaving a stream of oily smoke. Just a brief burst of tracers from one—maybe two—turrets was all it took, and it was all over.

But this was something else.

He didn't quite understand the militech side. He'd heard that it was down to some kind of optical dispersant, a camouflage that threw off the defence AI. He'd briefly caught sight of some kind of vapour trail as it shot off across the grassland—a sort of neutral glitter that covered its surroundings in a haze of confused shapelessness. Whatever it was it worked damn well. The missile was still going and not a scratch on it.

Now it was emerging from the gulley, greeted by another hail of dazzling bolts. It arced round sharply towards the apex and accelerated. Most of the towers became silent as the main HQ fell across their path, but three turrets to the south carried on relentlessly, trying to catch the invisible dart in their cross-fire until the last moment, when a blur of scattered light plunged through the side of the rotunda.

He watched in dumb awe as a single blast rang out that would re-define the entire corporate landscape.

There was a burst of electric blue fire that was instantly followed by a bigger explosion. A vast yellow fireball burst out of every side of the building's apex, curling upwards in a ring of fire that tumbled up over its narrowing sides. From this distance there was an obvious sound-lag;

HeadSpace

the roar of the blast, the crash of tumbling partition walls and breaking glass reached him a full second after the actual impact.

In a few moments the fireball had dispersed. The sterile neon slit had vanished—replaced by a gutted hole, and the glow of the inferno had faded to the yellowey flicker of the scattering of small fires that were taking hold. For three floor in either direction, windows were shattered or empty, and the sides further up were charred and blackened by smoke. He saw that the uppermost section of the building had sagged; it was leaning slightly to one side, its frame visibly detached from the VR wireframe that glowed around it. In the distance, to either side of the complex, were burning and smouldering lines of scorched earth along the hillside.

And he could already hear choppers...

He snapped himself out of his trance. It couldn't have been more than a minute since he had softly squeezed the trigger on the unit, and already the distant thud of helipods could be heard. These guys were fast. He kicked himself for taking up so much of his margin.

He yanked the lead out of the side of his headset and slung the launcher tube and its case into the boot, slamming the lid shut. Then he swung himself into the driving seat, pulling the door shut and slamming his foot down on the accelerator in the same motion. The Zaphyr span round in a tight circle and sprang forward, accelerating swiftly up the dust track.

He peered through the synthetic daylight to his right and could make out the distant dot of a military pod appearing over the brow of the hill. It was still some way off.

The main road was up ahead, and he tore off into it with hardly a glance, jerking the wheel round to the left. He felt the suspension sink and dip forward as he swiftly accelerated to 200kph, weaving past a couple of crawlers in the nearside lane, the wail of their horns receding into the distance.

The choppers were closer now. They hung in the air like armour-clad beetles, silvered eyes reflecting the orange neon stream of the approaching freeway. He couldn't tell from the goggles whether they were lit-up like regular air-traffic but he suspected not. Like himself they were probably shadows slipping anonymously through the night, invisible to all but a select handful of night-sighters.

The freeway was upon him and he accelerated up the sharp curve of the sliproad, centrifugal force pulling at him. His eyes flickered between the trickle of traffic and the airborne predators in pursuit barely a kilometre behind.

He was on the straight now, five lanes of smooth black tarmac running off into the horizon ahead. He hit the autocruise, pushing his foot down on the accelerator. The figures on the readout rose swiftly through the two hundreds, passing the 300kph mark and settling at just over 310. The chassis had sunk lower, now, nose tipping aerodynamically, rubber treads reaching out from extended wheel axles and biting firmly into tarmac. Inertia snatched at him as the Zaphyr weaved sharply from side to side AI sensors adeptly manoeuvring him past the vehicles that were thinly scattered along the interstate.

He looked over his shoulder through the rear screen. The choppers were lagging, now, the growing air-wall holding them back. He watched as they sank back further, heart pounding as he prepared for the inevitable. If he was unlucky they'd strike before they lost too much distance, but he was counting on margin of confusion as the pilots twigged that they were actually being outrun by him.

One of the choppers had sank well back into the distance and was barely visible, but the other was still less than a kilometre behind. It was falling back, though, and he stared intently at it, poised for the signal.

Finally it came. Sooner than he'd hoped, but not too soon. A flash of light and a puff of smoke as a missile dropped from one of its wing tips in a burst of oxidised propellant, then it was igniting, racing towards him.

HeadSpace

Even as the rocket was dropping away he was slamming the accelerator to the floor. The G-force was on him like a solid weight, pushing him back into the seat. He stared through the rear view at the fiery eclipse as it made its way towards him, steadying himself as he was jerked back and forth out of the path of red blurs of rear lights that shot towards him from ahead. The readout crept past 350, and alarms sounded from the instrument panel, half a dozen display segments blinking red; a soft synthesised voice said something that he couldn't hear over the scream of the turbines.

380...

His eyes were glued on the approaching shape in the rear-view. It was coming at him fast, but not fast enough—he hoped. Sweat was trickling down the seam between the headset and his cheek. He ignored it, afraid even to momentarily lose sight of the projectile. Not that it really mattered anyway. It's not as if he had to do anything but keep the accelerator floored, to drive down the velocity differential between himself and the missile as much as possible, to give the tweaked on-board collision avoidance a chance in hell of getting round it.

It was low enough now to be visible on his scope, a tiny white pixel-cluster rapidly approaching from the rear. Relief fell on him as his worst fears were abated—the sensors had picked it up.

400...

It was nearly upon him. He braced himself.

The car lurched to the right so sharply that a stab of pain sang out in his neck. A blaze of light shot past mere inches from the farside window, and then the missile was ahead of him sailing blindly off into the distance. He watched it as it weaved off to the right and then out of sight behind a cluster of trees.

A moment later a dull thud rang out and a plume of smoke erupted from a distant field.

He sighed and closed his eyes momentarily. It was just like he thought. The copter missiles were dumb, one-shot deals designed for

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slow moving targets. One lock only, no second approach. If they miss, they lose their lock and keep going till they hit something.

His eyes fell back on the rear-view. The remaining chopper was a distant dot silhouetted against the light-intensified sheen of the night sky.

He eased off on the throttle and the scream of the motor sank into a whine. The alarms cut out, and the Zaphyr slowed to a leisurely 250.

A grin broke out over his wet face. A piece of cake, he thought.

A few hundred metres behind him, just out of range of his scope, a second missile fell out of the air and tumbled uselessly along the tarmac, its fuel supply finally exhausted by the ten kilometre pursuit.

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The Horowitz-Castell Construct was one of the most elaborate and RAM-hungry models on the Net. A seething metropolis situated at the heart of the Net's corporate orbital, it was experienced daily by tens of millions of executives, share dealers, accountants, insurance ops, bankers as well as a hundred-and-one different varieties of financial bookies, sharks and credit-scammers.

Like all other real-time VR projections, the shape it composed was a vast ad hoc sprawl of multicolour units congregated together in groups of every imaginable configuration. From the distance the HCC was just a nebulous blur of colour, like so many different clouds of fluorescent paint-spray suspended surreally in an inky void.

As the casual observer approached, though, the nebulous blur of colour would slowly pan out, condensing into a diffuse tangle of complex form. A tiny threadwork like a 3D roadmap or some anatomical model would begin to unfold, countless tiny capillaries holding together a constellation of nodes. The structures would be regionalised into colour-coded masses, all deeply entangled within one another, and all ultimately inseparable from the mycelic threadwork binding them

together. Towards the heart of each of the regions the colours would darken, the nodes would become more bloated and the tiny vessels would expand into an ugly arteriolar mesh. The semi-translucent surface of the tubing would display a textured pattern of pastel shades that was animated to show an underlying flow, an abstraction of raw financial resources pumping throughout the structure and beyond.

At the heart of each region was the core, a great globular expanse fed by a few of the huge arteries. It undulated softly in and out, waxing and waning to the omnipresent pulse of countless billions of credit.

The cluster was a vast interconnected sprawl, but colour divided the bulk of it into three main segments that marked out the respective empires of the Big Three. The remainder was a neutral grey-white that was composed of tens of thousands of far smaller nodes, a snow-storm of small-time independent interests struggling to stay afloat amidst their larger counterparts. Every week a little more of the grey would be swallowed up by blue, green, or magenta; every week the coloured cores would become fractionally larger as the greys gradually shrank, eventually vanishing or being absorbed by their larger neighbours.

Apart from the gradual, creeping drift of the construct's lifeblood towards the gaping singularities that were the Big Three, the HCC had been in a state of stability for nearly thirty years. It was interrupted only by the occasional ripple of a big takeover or the collapse of a major operation, and the aftermath as receivers and insurance probes descended like vultures round a carcass.

But now there was change. It was very fast by HCC standards and very big.

The magenta cosmos that was the Yoto Nanotech complex took up a huge segment of the HCC. It was the smallest of the Big Three, comprising only a fifth of the coloured smear, but its core was nearly as replete as its two bigger brothers.

A drastic change was underway now. It began on the afternoon of November the 2nd at 3 A.M. Eastern Standard Time. A small but

strategically important company called Nexus VR Engines was suddenly swallowed by the crimson orb of the Bose-Nike alliance. Nexus had enjoyed a very close relationship with the communications giant Silica FibreOptik, and unknown to most was party to some very sensitive information about Silica's corporate anatomy. So it came as a genuine surprise to Corpworlders when Inca, Casio, Shimano Engineering and Hass Chemicals suddenly extended icy tendrils and began to latch onto some of Silica's surrounding subsidiaries.

A brief scurmish was relatively common. A half-hearted takeover bid, or just a few experimental parries to size up the opposition was all part of the scenery on the corporate landscape, and usually they didn't come to much. In fact the bigger the clash, the less likely it was to come to anything—a couple of multinats might spend a few hours jostling with each other and fighting over the pieces of some collapsed national, or one might make a clumsy attempt to get a grip on the other strong enough to pull it down. Like a couple of growing tiger-cubs they'd refine their predatory skills in a none-lethal way, sharpening their claws and waiting for the days when they'd be big and powerful enough to take down a real kill.

This was different, though. This was for real. The Nova cluster was shifting and changing now, its nodes becoming denser packed, the core bulging and contracting like a great piston. The crimson hue became darker and its threadwork began to bulge, sending great floods of vital fluid towards the cluster that was currently clawing at the small tangle of magenta.

Everyone knew what to expect. The Yoto cluster would take on a similar posture, and send a flood of resources to its threatened region. The purple orbs of the Silica cluster would grow and darken, then tear themselves free and withdraw back into the heart of the Nova cluster, a solid wall of magenta closing behind it.

But this wasn't happening now. Something was wrong. Yoto was unresponsive, motionless. Even before news filtered through, it was

obvious that something was amiss, and the corporate world descended into hysteria. All over the globe suits were rudely awakened or pulled away from business by frantic emergency calls. Half a million noses grabbed their decks, and the HCC was suddenly a hive of activity as the ripples of the attack passed through every speck of the corporate cosmos.

With its higher functions gone Yoto was leaderless, comatose, capable only of the routine metabolism that was the bulk of its everyday activity. But within half an hour there were twitchings from Yoto as frantic re-organisation revived some vestige of autonomy. The Yoto construct, dazed and sluggish, made an attempt to consolidate and build its defences, but it was too little and too late.

The aquine cluster had absorbed Silica's peripheral structures and was now extending ugly tendrils towards the primary node. Yoto's core pumped a wave of magenta into its surrounding structure, and a stream of nodes bulged and contracted in synchrony, carrying a bloated wall towards the ailing Silica core. But Silica was too far gone. With a final ripple it was swallowed by the cluster of Nova nodes.

Yoto was in its grip, now. A solid ganglion was extended into the part of Yoto's guts that had been its coms centre. A casual observer might think that the grip was a weak one, that it could easily be shaken off by swift retaliation, but a closer look at the intrusion would show how fatal it was. Silica Communications was still intact, and so was the elaborate infrastructure that carried information through every junction of the Yoto empire. Except Nova now owned it.

Yoto had just lost possession of its own nervous system.

It was only a matter of time now; the fall was inevitable. As the West Coast midnight came and went and the distant East Coast dawn began to creep up the collapse raced ahead. The magenta glow of hundreds of thousands of nodes on Yoto's outer regions were slowly winking out to be replaced by the dark Nova azure. First it was the small, far flung, budding operations of Nepal, Tibet, the Amazon Circle, India, the Antarctica

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and Siberia. Their nodes were tiny bulges at junctions between clusters of threads, pin-pricks of light that were quickly swallowed in the parasitic progression.

Then it was the bigger setups deeper down. Restaurant franchises, Burger chains, Cinemas, Media and Module centres, Vid shops, Mini-markets, Hardware stores, and other small outlets for hundreds of products spanning every city of every continent from New Zealand to North Dakota. The front slowed fractionally as it paused to digest these larger nodes, its pace slowing more as they grew bulkier.

Soon it was grinding its way through the big nationals; the Tech firms, Software houses, Coms Contractors, Power Gen operations, Cable stations and Hypermarkets. There were fewer of these but they were bigger and more bloated, and they took longer to absorb. Within a few hours the Yoto segment was a shrinking lavender fire being slowly extinguished by the amoebic mass that now completely surrounded it.

Momentum was picking up, and the thick wall of MultiNats surrounding Yoto's heart was now starting to fall. The Oil and Mining companies, Refineries, Pharmaceutical companies, and Engineering and Manufacturing Industries; they were slowly collapsing, unable to resist the apocalyptic power of Nova's relentless progress. Then the Nova core was sending out thick creepers that plunged through the central cluster and into Yoto's own shrinking centre. There was a brief struggle as Haber Cartell and VR Global fought a short-lived retaliatory action, but then the core collapsed.

Yoto's bedrock industry—the great stretches of multi-billion dollar factories and nanotech facilities covering vast tracts of Silicon Valley—was finally lost.

Yoto Nanotech's corporate centre was now an elongated extension of Nova's own core, retracting slowly back and pulling with it the surrounding network, absorbing and assimilating the structure of the conquered empire.

HeadSpace

Now there were two.

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The room was small and dingey, barely a six foot slot in a slab of bedders that ran down one side of a cracked tile corridor on the Sleep E-Z's second level. The floor was a single slab of cheap blue-grey carpeting, clumsily cut around tubes of old piping. The wall was covered in stained yellow wallpaper, its pattern a sickly floral montage. A wardrobe and chest of drawers was inset into the wall on one side, beside it a slab that served as a tabletop and a grey plastic chair that was tucked beneath it.

A single window looked out onto a deserted road.

Most of the room was occupied by a bed-base, upon it a plastic-wrapped mattress covered in a thin cotton sheet. On the other side of the room a cheap screen covered in a thick slab of perspex was bolted onto the wall, and up by the top of the bed there was a sink with a single tap. The wall-paper was peeling away where it met a white plastic outlet.

And there was the phone. A standard white slab fixed to the rear wall, a single stainless steel slot on its right side.

Currently the slot was occupied by a hundred-credit Comcard. Nearby it Shiva was working the controls of his expensive industrial Nahami deck.

Another figure was sitting on the bed in yellow jeans and a red biker jacket, looking out onto the nearby street. There was nothing there but he kept looking anyway. Occasionally he'd turn round to glance at Shiva's cross-legged figure, and then turn back again, head slightly up-tilted, brows furrowed, eyes narrowed to twin slits.

Shiva was cruising the Atlanta arm of Nova's huge South-Eastern segment. A routine hook-up to the Shuttle Xpress bulletin board at Anniston Airport got him through the thin layer of electronic skin that separated him from Nova's local matrix. That was the easy bit, the

difficult part was negotiating his way into the deeper strata, through to the wide-area and global segments.

At least usually it was. Shiva was instantly unsettled by the stillness that hung in the air. The usual thick bustle of activity was gone, the constant appearance of security traps and Ident checks that he was ready for just didn't appear.

It bothered him. Something was going on here. It's true that the gateways he was poking through didn't hold a lot of heavily security-graded stuff. Mostly it was routine admin data—personnel records, performance statistics, and supplies inventories for a thousand-and-one small-time operations.

There'd have to be a serious run-time drain somewhere, he thought. Maybe there'd been a local break in power. No, if it was power, chances are the whole segment would be off-line. This looked more like a run-time seizure—a diversion of resources elsewhere. Weird, he thought. Run-time diversion was a last-ditch thing, an emergency measure.

He knew that this was the last thing he should be thinking about. He should be counting his blessings that the job would be such a breeze. He should be making his way through to the target and hunting down those specs.

But he was curious now, so he pulled away from the outlying layer and started to dig his way deeper into Nova's matrix. He eased his way effortlessly into the transglobal shell and coasted towards the surface of the VR microcosm that held the thousands of gateways leading through to Nova's intermediate corporate layer. He'd been this way plenty of times before, and he'd always managed to find a vital transient crack in its ample layers of defences. It'd be small, but with effort he'd prise it open just far enough to push through that single bitstream thread, then he'd be in.

This time it felt different. There was something unyielding about the smooth surface that separated him from the inner orbital. He couldn't put his finger on it; something subtly different about the visuo-auditory

HeadSpace

CGen mish-mash that composed the Net's construct. It could have been a darker hue of its surface, it had a depth to it he didn't remember, and there was a barely perceptible change in the flicker-fusion of the visuals. Or it could have been the stillness in the air. The usual static of Net traffic now seemed somehow distant, and there was a basey undercurrent, a barely perceptible throbbing like a distant eruption.

He hooked into the surface, teasing and probing, exploring the elaborately layered skin. It was tougher than it normally was, but Shiva wasn't one to back off. He was stubborn—the less it moved the more he pushed, until something gave, and mostly it was the thing he was pushing. So he struggled on, invigorated by the unexpected prospect of a real challenge. Even while the voice at the back of his mind was nagging at him to get on with the job, to quit the dumb habit of making more trouble for himself.

But he needed trouble. Getting to be a Bit-Surgeon of this league was every Jammer's dream, but the thrill of those first big breaks, the long, slow refinement of the art, and the kick of achievement and Netwide fame eventually leveled off into boredom and irritation. Expertise made the ride too easy, and there was always the omnipresent lure of the joy-ride, the thrill of motion for its own sake. In other words, trouble. Not that there was a lot of danger. After all that's what the crappy Sleep E-Z and the watch was for. Probably unnecessary but the paranoia had been upon him of late, the fear of the trap. One moment you were on a routine job, next the air would be alive with the tinny scream of a Fed PA as an army of paras with itchy fingers stood by ready to send a stream of lead tearing through the doors and walls. Not that that had ever happened to him, but he had memories of friends who'd met that fate. He didn't know if they were still alive, he didn't really think about it—there was no point. They were just gone.

Something was giving now. He'd got his hold on a minute flaw in the electronic lamina and was prising his way through. Suddenly he was in...

It was unlike anything he'd seen before. The piercing howl of noise and the dazzling storm of colour tore at his senses. He could still make out the basic structure of the Nova East-Coast Segment but it was awash with noise, its stellar fabric slowly twisting within itself. A moment later the space around him thickened and pulsed.

Then a boiling blood-red glare searing his eyes, an explosion of sound and blackness. His headset was dead.

Shiva was stunned. He'd just been blown off the Net. That had never happened to him before. In fact he couldn't remember when he last saw that kind of firepower. This is what happened when you took on an outfit like Nova while it was in a full-blown defence posture. Something big was going on.

He had half a mind to get out then, to slam the lid on that neat deck that still smelt of the press and fresh bubblewrap and haul anchor. But he figured that with so much shit currently hitting the fan in the East Coast Segment, Nova had no interest in a rogue bitstream that had lasted all of five seconds. He had the watch, anyhow, a sharp-eyed street cowboy for a bunch of back-street wire-taggers. They wouldn't be easy to pin-point either; the phone's com-cable was a serial that ran through every room in the block, and they were well-placed for a number of quick exits.

So he jacked back in, carefully working his way through the filters until a searing matrix of light shone out across the segment. At every junction was a cluster of colour-coded symbols.

He glanced across them.

Corp-war, he thought.

He hit a control and suddenly he was hurtling into a point in space ahead of him. The tiny jewel of colour that was the microcosm of the HCC construct rushed outwards and swallowed him.

It was like looking out the window one day to find the roads snaking about, the street blocks twisting and morphing, splitting apart and re-combining with each other, the ground undulating ponderously across

gigantic ripples, concrete and earth transformed into thick treacle. The HCC had spent twenty years establishing its own distinctive geography, its own landmarks and terrains. Now in the space of just a few hours, cataclysmic forces had lain it waste.

The Yoto empire was gone. The vast expanses of lavender fire that covered over a quarter of the HCC had vanished. In its place was an ocean of crimson. The great crystal metropolis of the Nova empire was still in a semi-liquified state, its boundaries creeping slowly like volcanic lava. Shiva had to look real close before he could make out familiar landmarks that had once been the flesh of the fallen MultiNat. He could barely make out the Nanochip cluster and the surrounding sprawl of components manufacturers—Dahei, Hass, Yamaha. They were nested amongst what had been their Nova counterparts. Beyond it was the emerald constellation of Aizu's matrix, it looked different too, more rounded, the colours thicker and darker. Whatever was going on, it wasn't finished yet. Something was happening.

He panned back, pulling towards the axis of the matrix, viewpoint sweeping into a northern segment offering a better picture of the action.

It was clearer now. The vessels around the periphery were thick and bloated, the nodes bulging like over-ripe fruit. The Nova circumference was the same, shady and opaque; it seemed to breath, expanding and contracting with the fiscal currents that pumped through its corporate metabolism. Tiny tendrils were extended from Nova's exterior, a mycellic web of fibres probing and exploring the expanse of Aizu's outer surface.

The minutes passed. The fibres were now a forest. Thousands of snaking fingers clawing away. Finally a solitary strand got a hold, bulging into a fleshy entrail. The other strands instantly coiled around it, thickening it into a limb. Aizu's dermis thickened and pulsated; nodes clustering and combining into a solid emerald wall. The probe was being squeezed as the wall closed in, its penetrating section strangled and bulging. Finally it was sliced clean away, its stump withdrawing, disintegrating again into a forest of snakes.

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It went on for a while. Attack after attack grappling for a hold on the surface, then being deflected by Aizu's defences.

They weren't going to make it. Aizu had been ready from the word go. Once you lost the element you could be sure of a stalemate.

Soon Nova accepted defeat. Reluctantly the last tangle of probing threads withdrew behind its aquaine wall, and the construct settled back into the regular cycle of soft pulsating and gentle undulation that was the HCC's corporate heartbeat.

8

Rubicon

Whenever Jake woke it was into a miasma of pain. Recently it had begun to break, not to vanish or dissipate, but to transform into a force that was no less malevolent but somehow easier to bear.

It was happening in waves. Every so often the chasm of emptiness inside him would start to break, collapse under its own weight like it had reached critical mass. Then it would ignite, a visceral tornado of pure blind hatred inflaming him, with a surge of adrenaline that made his head thump and tinged his vision with red.

Vengeance screamed at him, violent fantasies clawed, satisfying in warm fiction the thirst for justice that reality wouldn't permit. He drank in the fantasies, gorging on the murderous orgies of vengeance for Lisa. They sustained him, warded off the bite of pain that little bit longer. But he eventually awoke as every sleeper did, and the cold cruelty of his world bit into him again.

But the echo of his wrath somehow gave him strength. Between the agony of despair and the white hot fury, the rage brought a blissful release. The fire that ran through his veins gave him purpose, holding off the sea of black emptiness that threatened to swallow him, cushioning him from the blow of the gut-wrenching loss.

Jake had been lying there all day. he was sprawled out on the mattress, curled up facing the wall, the duvet wrapped around his torso and shoulders in a crumpled pile. He'd got up only to use the bathroom

and—every few hours—to microwave a junk snack that he quickly chewed up, chucking the wrapper into a waste pot nearby.

There were two whisky bottles by the bed, one toppled and a second standing half full. A small glass lay by the bed, holding an inch of the amber liquid.

Eve watched him quietly from the sofa, thinking.

It had been on its way for a long time, she'd known. It was a time bomb, a delicate balancing act waiting for something to come along and topple it, and now at last it had come. She'd thought long and hard about how to deal with it when it finally happened but none of it had made it any easier now that it was here. And she'd known it'd be that way, too.

No amount of preparation could make it any better, it had to be played by ear. There weren't any recipes for dealing with this kind of stuff, it was too deep to deal with by formula. She was on her own.

The evening came, sending orange slivers of light down the wall by Jake's figure. He was stirring now and Eve went over and sat beside him on the mattress. She put her arm gently on his warm shoulder.

"Come on Jake, time to talk."

Jake didn't respond. He just lay there for a few moment. She looked over to see his face. His eyes were open, but he was staring through the wall into space. So she just lay down beside him. Finally he spoke.

"Nothing to say..." His voice was barely a whisper.

"Say it anyway," she said, squeezing his arm.

There was another silence. It could have been seconds or minutes. The distant breathy hiss of traffic on the orbital was punctuated by a screaming siren; its wail faded into the distance and was gone.

"No-one can stop it," he said, "It's all over."

She felt like asking what, felt like pushing him for more but she knew it wouldn't be productive. It'd only disrupt things. Let him go at his own pace. He seemed to be thinking.

HeadSpace

“You know all those movies,” his voice was soft, pensive, “like how it was in the old days, before the turn? When it was all neon lights and bulby screens and boxy oil-burner cars?”

He didn’t wait for an answer.

“All the technology back then, it was just starting to come together. Computers were still big yellow crates, but they were getting smaller, faster.” Jake seemed to be coming to life, now, his eyes lighting up with nostalgia for times he’d never seen. “They could see where it was going and they were really excited by it. See, they were all part of something then: Whoever you were, whatever you did, you were part of a system like a big family. It looked after you. Get sick, they’d treat you in hospital. No work and they’d give you cash till you were back on your feet. Any trouble *anywhere* and the police come round and sort it all out. It’s like everyone was in a big club. So it’s like technology *belonged* to them, like the whole tech-revolution and all the stuff that was happening was *theirs*. It was for everyone.

“Sure they had problems but they were so optimistic because they reckoned technology would come and save them. Technology would look out for them, do their work, cure them when they got sick, amuse them when they got bored. They thought Utopia was just around the corner in the good ol’ twenty-first. *Their* technology would sort it all out.

“Except technology didn’t belong to them. It never did, and never would. It belonged to the people who controlled it. Course those guys were happy to keep the illusion going, keep people kidding themselves that technology would free them from drudgery, give them all a life of leisure. But it wasn’t freeing them, it was replacing them, and by the time they realised this it was too late.

“It’s the same old fucking story—a bunch of scumbags find a way to get hold of the levers. They get control and make everyone else into slaves. But this time its worse. In the old days they needed help to keep the machinery running, they *needed* people. It’s different now, don’t

need nearly so many to oil the machine. The machine can just about run itself.

“They don’t need people any more, Eve. So they’re cutting them off. Leaving them to scavenge like rats, living from the crusts they drop and trash pulled out of their bins. It’s gone bad. Somewhere along the line everyone just stopped giving a shit, and now they’re just letting it happen.”

Eve paused. This was going to be tough. Jake had a real fire burning over this. He had more than enough fuel, too.

“This isn’t about politics, Jake. Come on. Talk to me—” she said, pleadingly.

Jake turned to face her. His eyes were half-closed, dead, his expression a mixture of pity and contempt. A shiver passed through her.

“You don’t get it do you? You don’t understand. There’s a bunch of genocidal maniacs taking over. No rules any more, Eve,” he was louder now, more frantic “anything fucking goes, or hadn’t you realised? Life’s kinda cheap, Eve, people get squashed like ants—”

“—Like Lisa, right?” she cut in. She looked him in the eye. Jake had stopped dead, the rising rage gone from his voice. “This is what it’s really about. Lisa,” she said softly.

“I tried to make her understand.” Jake clasped his hands to his forehead and sighed deeply. “She just wouldn’t have it. She always—she always just pushed away the bad stuff, just ignored it. She couldn’t understand the danger, she just wouldn’t see what was happening—”

“She didn’t want to get involved,” Eve put in, “She didn’t want to get mixed up in the Outworld scene.”

“That’s the problem. You *have* to get involved. That’s why there’s a problem. Too many people burying their heads in the sand...”

“Getting involved doesn’t mean a head-on confrontation, Jake. Outworld’s a lot of trouble. There’s other ways of dealing with this—” Jake looked stunned. He was ready for anything but contradiction.

“Like living on your knees, right?” He said. He snatched a glass from by the mattress and poured a slug of whisky into it.

HeadSpace

“No,” she said, defiantly. “Like doing something to wake people up to the problem. Putting round an awareness.”

“Oh. Right!” he said, insincerely. “Like sending out them mystic vibes, right? A bit of flower power, huh?”

“No,” she said, quietly.

“That’s the reason we’re in this mess in the first place, Eve. Too many dweebs with their head in the sand. This isn’t just going to go away. You’ve got to make a stand, do something to reverse the tide. You can’t just sit back and let things happen.” Anger was back now, his voice taking on a sarcastic sing-song quality. “There’s too many fucking airheads who think it’ll just all sort itself out, Eve. People, people like you who just watch the world go by, people who don’t look, don’t think, don’t see things coming—just let it all happen.”

Lisa was struggling to keep herself calm now. He was hurt, she reminded herself, hurt and mad and letting it all out on her. But the seed of her rage burned at her, calling for a voice. She could’ve told him what a dumb pathetic hypocrite he was, what a stupid shallow pretense his Outworld posturing was—lone revolutionary striking out against a cruel and corrupt regime, a single voice of righteousness battling to save the world from calamity.

If he was so fucking holy why was he begging for the chance to get payrolled by the very people he detested? He was no better—what he wanted to be part of was just a twisted mirror of the world he claimed to fight; millions of hi-tech freaks and drop-outs crawling over each other to the top of a fatter and more dangerous pile. He wanted just what all the people he hated wanted—money and power, and the phony political rhetoric just belied a jealousy for them that he couldn’t admit.

She struggled to suppress these thoughts, to avert the self-destructive spiral that Jake’s pain screamed out for. She made herself to let it go, she had to end it now, had to break him, but that line wouldn’t get them anywhere. An opening was there—a big, gaping, cruel opening, but it would do the job.

“Just like *you* didn’t think, Jake. Just like *you* let Lisa die...”

She saw she’d hit the mark, saw it in the way his eyes widened just for a split second, terror flickering beyond. And she felt no cruelty, just compassion and the desperate need to stop it all now.

“No!” he screamed at her. His face was suddenly contorted with rage. “You bitch!” He flung the glass across the room. It smashed into pieces and scattered across the floor-boards. Then he broke, collapsing spent into the mattress, sobbing.

Eve waited a moment and then crawled across the sheets towards him. He smelt of alcohol and stale sweat. She put her arms round him and held him tight until the shuddering had stopped and his breathing steadied.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, “it was the only way of getting through.”

“It—It’s all my fault. I should have—”

“No Jake. You couldn’t have known. There was nothing you could do...” He was quiet, stifling the sobs to a gasp, but she could feel the cathartic shaking begin again. She held him tighter, smooth cotton over hot damp skin. A warm tear splashed against her forearm.

“I wanted to believe her, I really wanted her to be right. Kept saying I was just paranoid, that I shouldn’t think this way. She had so much...I dunno—it’s like she made things right just by keeping the upside going. She said I was just bringing myself down, screwing myself up by looking at it like this—”

“She was right to think that—”

“But *I* was right. This proved it—”

“You were both right, Jake. She wanted to keep the upside, but she kept hiding from the downside. That was a mistake because she couldn’t see the danger. But she was right not to dwell on all the bad stuff going on. Sure it’s something you’ve got to be aware of, but *you can’t let it eat you up.*” She looked him in the eye.

“You see what this is about,” she said.

Jake was silent.

HeadSpace

“You see what’s happening. Look at what your doing to yourself. Sure things might be bad, sure they could get a whole lot worse, but you can’t let it get to you. This crusade you’re on—this whole thing—has been dragging you down for as long as I’ve known you. It’s destroying you Jake.” She put a hand in his forehead. “Please...let go of it.”

“I can’t...I can’t just give it up—”

“I don’t mean give it up, I mean let go of it—inside. Sure, do what you have to do, be part of something to put it right. Just don’t let it burn you up—”

“You gotta have that fire though, Eve. You can’t just be numb to it—you’re not really living it if you just push it away. You can’t close your eyes—”

“That’s not what I’m saying. It’s okay to see it, to be aware of it. It’s okay to have that passion. But its what you *do* with that vision, it’s how you handle that fire. It’s hurting you Jake, *you’re* hurting you. Let go of it, just stop it—inside yourself...”

Jake was quiet now. Pensive.

“It’s not easy,” he said, finally. He sighed, a spent, deflated sound.

“It’s never easy,” she whispered, and hugged him. “You know it’s right...”

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“Yeah...” The voice was hoarse and cracked. Jake’s eyes were blood-shot pools sunk in grey shadows, staring through the screen at her.

“Jake. Shit—I don’t know what to say...we’re all real sorry—” Chip said.

“Thanks—forget it. Nothing to say...” Jake put in.

There was an awkward pause. She wanted to talk to him, to reach out, but his eyes told her that wasn’t on.

“We did some digging,” she said finally. “Phantom got a one-to-one with someone real high up at Aizu. Not so difficult—it’s them we’re doing the job for. That’s official now. Point is they’ve got the goods on Lisa.

“You already know about the Nova-Yoto meet. It was big news corp-side and a lotta people wanted to know what the deal was. Aizu got there first. They’d got intell on the meet months ahead and smelled a takeover, so they rigged up some long range surveillance—a satellite scan. Something got fouled up and Lisa ended up shadowing the process.

“Aizu covered their tracks, but they didn’t know about Lisa until it was too late. In the mean time Nova got word that they’d been hit and started poking around NASA for a lead. Lisa’s name came up and Nova sent out a handyman. Either they thought she was fronting for the spy—not likely, but possible—or else they were just looking for some softcopy. They wanted to see what had got out.

“But why...Why’d they kill her?” Jake coughed up the words. His expression looked sick now, his eyes were pools of stagnant loathing.

“Once Nova had got wind of the tap, that gave them the edge. But they’d only keep it if no-one knew they were wise to it. They wanted whatever Lisa had on the op, but once they’d got that, they were left with a loose end. No one could know that they’d twigged to the tap—they had to play ignorant to keep the advantage. She was making a noise about it, drawing attention. If others got wind of the tap then Aizu would lose confidence, start sniffing that word was out. Nova had to keep a wrap on it. Lisa was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“They didn’t have to kill her...”

“No. There’s other ways, but it makes things more complicated. It always makes things more complicated when you give a shit. These people don’t give a shit. It was the simplest way, so they killed her...”

“You make it sound like that makes it okay,” his voice was soft but rage was rising, “like she was just some insect—”

HeadSpace

“Jake!” she cut in pleadingly, “I’m sorry. We’re all really sorry. This is terrible. There’s nothing I can say...I’m just giving you the story. You’ve got a right to that.”

Jake’s anger had gone now, and the blank numbness was back. He was quiet for a moment.

“It wouldn’t be so bad if...I mean, worse thing is *it didn’t make any difference*, Joe. After all that, Nova failed. Even when they twigged to the tap, even when they had the edge they didn’t take Aizu out...”

“That’s not true, Jake. The tap might have screwed up the Aizu hit, but if they hadn’t known, they’d have been eaten alive. Plan was Nova and Yoto throw together a sneak attack on Aizu, break ‘em up and split the proceeds: that’s why the big hush-hush—they were finalising the deal, sorting out the war-games. Problem is Nova were going for the double—first Aizu then Yoto. Aizu didn’t have the full intell then, but they smelt a rat. And mean time they’d been digging—sussed that Nova were planning to cross Yoto and leaked the goods. By the time Aizu got the full SP on the attack, Yoto’d got cold feet and Nova were set for a real kicking from both of them. As it was they tipped Aizu’s hand, sniffed the Intel, and fell back on another strategy. They saw their chance and took out Yoto. Saved their ass.”

“They still...I dunno, they didn’t come out well enough, for that kind of edge—”

“Not much of an edge left by the time Aizu finished dancing on their head, but it got them out of deep shit. Anyway Aizu probably found other ways of using the intell to do some damage...”

There was silence again. Joe felt awkward, didn’t know what to say. Finally she spoke.

“You don’t have to do the Nova run, Jake. It’s okay. Give yourself some time...”

“Got more time than I can handle. It’s still on...”

“No, Jake...”

“Yes.” His voice had a desperate edge. “Please, Joe. I’ll be okay. I need action, gotta move or I’ll get sucked under...”

She looked at Jake. He looked bad but maybe he was right. He needed this to pull himself through, a line to hang onto.

“Okay,” she backed down. “Just one thing. No hidden agenda, no vengeance trip. Keep this out of the job—we’ll settle it later. Deal?”

“Deal...” he sighed.

Chip smiled.

“Hey! Hang on in there, Shadow...” She put up a fist, palm forward, thumb out.

He smiled back, wearily.

“A bientôt, Chip...” He returned the gesture. A flick of static then the screen went blank.

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Sebastian usually delegated the AI sessions to one of the senior Ops. It wasn’t really necessary, the formality was a hangover from when even the smartest AIs had to be dealt with in a pseudo-english idiot language. Those days had ended two years ago when they rigged up a string of neural nets and lexicon engines to make something that could learn the language from scratch.

The result was weird. It was a stilted and clumsy communication at first, full of grammatical errors and awkward re-phrasing requests, but, with a constant diet of dialogue from hundreds of operatives it got better very fast. No one was really expecting it to get so good, but it did. And with the communication problems gone, they were starting to realise how smart the AI really was.

Previously they’d looked at the system as just another dumb box—an overgrown number-cruncher like all the rest. Because it was an AI, they’d given it a pet name Al, from the easily misread print that adorned

HeadSpace

the grey crate housing its net-stack. They referred to it as “he” and made all the kind of lame techie jokes that go with it.

When it learned to talk, that all changed.

It gave them the creeps—it was just too real. The corny speak-and-spell voice synth with its choppy sound and crude intonation had slowly—almost indiscernibly—transformed into a smooth and self-assured sound that was almost indistinguishable from its human counterpart. Only the slow, virtually changeless pace of its speech and a slight flatness to the tone marked it out.

The ops gradually stopped referring to it as he. It wasn’t a joke any more. The presence of AI seemed to violate some unspoken taboo, and the ops began to slowly commit it to a mechanical Coventry. First of all the open-feed policy went. When AI was learning, they allowed it a constant feed so it could constantly monitor conversation throughout the labs, to pick up vocabulary and refine its own speech patterns. Now it was too much like being listened to, so they’d switched off the external mikes. Next they switched off the speech synth, confining AI’s utterances to screen output.

Finally they switched off the voice interface, imprisoning AI once more behind the plastic keyboard. It helped them think of the AI as just another program.

Sebastian was now sat in a booth that had recently been set up as a terminal for communication with the machine. A comfortable reclining chair sat before a screen inset in the aluminium paneled walls. One of the chairs arms held a curved wedge of keypad, into which Sebastian quickly typed a string of characters. They appeared on screen in tall cyan type as a row of hashes.

A couple of LEDs flashed briefly then the screen cleared and a paragraph of system messages appeared. He tapped the keyboard again and paused. More flashing LEDs.

Finally he spoke.

“Hello AI,” he said.

Paul Barrows

There was a pause, and then another line appeared.

“HELLO.”

He'd activated the voice key. It was stupid to let it go to waste, whatever the Ops thought. But he kept the screen output. It was quicker to read than listen to Al's ponderous monologue.

“Do you know who I am?” he asked.

“YES. YOU ARE DR. DENROY SEBASTIAN, DIVISION HEAD OF SECURITY OPERATIONS,” came the text.

“That's right,” said Sebastian. Even without the voice synth he found the natural language interface eerie. “Last week I set you a task. Do you remember that?” He was falling almost unconsciously into the habit of speaking like he would to a five year old child, or some retard.

“YES. YOU ASKED ME TO MONITOR WORD USAGE ON THE NET.”

“Which words?”

“YOU ASKED ME TO MONITOR USAGE OF THE WORD ‘PROMETHEUS’, ALONE AND IN COMBINATION OR PROXIMITY WITH THE WORD ‘PROJECT.’ YOU ALSO ASKED ME TO MONITOR USAGE OF THE WORD CLUSTER ‘NEURAL INTERFACING’, ALONE AND IN COMBINATION WITH THE PREFIX ‘DIRECT.’”

“Yes. That's good. What are the results of your study?”

“THERE WERE 854 MENTIONS OF THE WORD ‘PROMETHEUS’ ALONE. THERE WERE 93 MENTIONS OF THE WORD ‘PROMETHEUS’ PREFIXED BY THE WORD ‘PROJECT’ AND 124 INCIDENCES OF THE WORD ‘PROMETHEUS’ IN PROXIMITY WITH THE WORD ‘PROJECT.’ THE WORD CLUSTER ‘NEURAL INTERFACING’ HAS APPEARED 17,591 TIMES ALONE, AND 8,420 TIMES WITH THE PREFIX ‘DIRECT.’”

“Over what period?”

“THE DURATION OF THIS SAMPLE IS CURRENTLY FORTY-EIGHT DAYS, NINE HOURS, AND FIFTY THREE MINUTES.”

“And what are your conclusions?” He was testing now, probing for limitations in Al's AI engine. There was a pause.

HeadSpace

“WHAT CRITERIA DO YOU WANT ME TO USE TO ANALYSE THESE OBSERVATIONS?”

“Has there been an increase in these measures?”

“THERE HAS BEEN A STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN ALL OF THESE MEASURES THROUGHOUT THE SAMPLE PERIOD. DO YOU WANT A MORE SPECIFIC ANALYSIS?”

“Yes,” Sebastian replied. “Use of the word ‘Prometheus’ and ‘Project’ in combination.”

“THE INCIDENCE OF THIS HAS RISEN FROM 0.42 TIMES PER DAY AT THE BEGINNING OF THE SAMPLE PERIOD TO ITS PRESENT RATE OF 5.3”

“What proportion of total Net activity does this sample represent?”

“I MONITORED 1,576 PUBLIC SITES. THIS REPRESENTS ABOUT 0.0016% OF TOTAL NET ACTIVITY.”

It was out, Sebastian thought. Even the closest guarded secret has a habit of finding its way loose given enough time. They needed to act fast, now.

“We attempted a Hicks manoeuvre on a competitor. It was not successful. You calculated that the probability of success was over 98 per cent. Why did it fail?”

“THE SCENARIO UPON WHICH I BASED THIS PREDICTION DIFFERED FROM THE ONE I ENCOUNTERED.”

“How?”

“DEFENCE LEVELS AT THE TARGET SITES WERE SUBSTANTIALLY HIGHER THAN THOSE FORECASTED.”

“How do you account for this?”

“THE SCENARIO ENCOUNTERED WAS RELATED TO OUR STRATEGY.”

“Clarify.”

“THE DEFENCE CONFIGURATION ENCOUNTERED WAS A SUITABLE ANTITHESIS FOR THE STRATEGY ADOPTED. IT WAS AN UNSUITABLE ANTITHESIS FOR 99.6 PER CENT OF THE

POSSIBLE INVASION STRATEGIES. THEREFORE THERE IS SIGNIFICANT LIKELIHOOD THAT THE DEFENCE CONFIGURATION WAS CAUSALLY RELATED TO THE STRATEGY ADOPTED.”

Sebastian paused as he untangled the verbiage.

“You’re saying that they knew...”

“THIS SCENARIO IS VERY UNLIKELY WITHOUT A MEDIATING INFORMATION EXCHANGE.”

“Right,” he said. So they’d been well and truly had. All the bluffs and diversions and phony intelligence to draw their fire just hadn’t cut it.

When it came to the live show it had to be good. But time and time again the security had got compromised, so they’d had to re-schedule, switch plans, throw out more red herrings, until they were sure—really sure they’d gone without detection. But even this hadn’t been enough.

Christ.

God knows how they’d got hold of this too, but they’d found a way, he thought. His feelings were split between anger and admiration.

“What next, then?” he said.

“IN WHAT RESPECT?”

“What’s their next move?”

“THE CURRENT OBJECTIVE SHARED BY BOTH NOVA CYBERNETICS AND AIZU IS EXCLUSIVE CONTROL OVER THE EVOLVING DNI TECHNOLOGIES. AIZU HAVE THE PROTEIN-BASED NEURAL UNIT NECESSARY FOR PROCESSING REAL-TIME CORTICAL DATA, BUT THEY DO NOT HAVE THE INTERFACING TECHNOLOGY TO EXTRACT OR INDUCE THOSE DATA. IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT THEY SECURE CONTROL OF THIS TECHNOLOGY. THE NEXT LOGICAL STEP IS TO OBTAIN INTELLIGENCE PERTAINING TO THE LOCATION OF THE PROMETHEUS PROJECT.”

Obviously, Sebastian thought.

“And how can they do this?” he said quietly.

HeadSpace

“THIS INFORMATION IS HELD BY EIGHT CORPORATE AND R&D STAFF INCLUDING YOURSELF. IT IS ALSO STORED AS COLD-RAM IN A NUMBER OF SECURE STORAGE FACILITIES AT NOVA SITES. THE INFORMATION MUST BE FORCIBLY EXTRACTED FROM EITHER OF THESE SOURCES.”

“What are they most likely to do?”

“I CANNOT EVALUATE THE LIKELIHOOD OF DISCLOSURE OF THIS INFORMATION BY THE FIRST ROUTE. BASED ON KNOWN OPEN INTELLIGENCE AVAILABLE ON THESE SITES I CAN CALCULATE AN APPROXIMATE LIKELIHOOD OF EACH OF THEM BEING TARGETED.”

“What are these likelihoods?”

A list appeared on screen. By it a column of percentages.

“Hardcopy,” he said. A printer nearby hummed and spat out a sheet. He snatched it up and folded it, slipping it into a jacket pocket.

* * *

Jake felt nauseous and his head hurt, a souvenir from excessive drinking. He blinked in the morning daylight and went out to the hall. He was about to step into the bathroom when he noticed the brown envelope lying on the floor near the front door. Hard-mail—he didn’t see much of that these days.

He picked it up, and felt something hard slide inside it. He tore the perforated end of and looked inside. There was a piece of paper and a small silver disk. He pulled out the paper and unfolded it.

Hey Terraboy.

Something weird’s going down on the Hubble comsat.
Wound up shadowing some kind of spook-shop party.
Official word is nothing happened, no-one knows

Paul Barrows

nothing, and now someone's giving history a skin-job.
Maybe you could look into it. This is just your scene.

Here's some readings the sensor array picked up. Looks
like garbage to me, but maybe a bit-head can crack the
format.

Stay Kicking.
Lisa

The letter had been diverted half way across the country by an OCR
error, and had taken over two weeks to get to him.

He looked at the disk numbly—this is what they'd killed her for.

He spent a full day trying to crack the contents. It was just so much
noise, but within it were distant murky echoes of coherence, so he
started running it through filters. Most of them killed the signal off
completely, but a few stripped out the worst of the noise, bringing the
distant sounds closer to the fore. But the signal was too deeply buried
for him to reach, and the best he could get was a strange rhythmic basey
noise, unintelligible murmurs fighting through a storm of static.

Voices.

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The call came at 2 A.M. Wednesday.

The soft spattering of rain against the window and the moan of wind
was cut through by the squeal of the phone. Jake was floating in a warm
miasma of semi-consciousness when the noise jolted rudely through.
He reached over to the set and punched the engage.

Chip's image swam through the display, cold and business-like now,
urgency written all over.

HeadSpace

“Something came up. The job’s been brought forward. They want us to go in Sunday night. You gonna be ready?”

Jake paused, chewed it over. They’d just knocked three full days off his dead-line.

“Shit Joe...”

“Offer still goes, Jake. We can get someone to finish for you if the schedule’s too tight.”

Jake sighed. “No, s’okay. I’m on top of it. It’ll be done...”

“That’s good. You got any problems, just punch me up. I’ll see you Sunday, Leicester Square. Usual place.”

“See you there.”

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Jake carefully took the chip out of its styrofoam packing and gently slid it into the grid of tiny holes inset into the plastic base of the chipset interface. He tapped the engage and a flood of disassembled code flashed across the monitor.

He grappled with the code for a full five hours before he realised how hot the Yoto software engineers were. They’d used psycho-engineering in their design process. The chip carried multi-layered process-encoding, the actual code hidden beneath a knot of algorithms specifically designed to scramble the thinking of anyone trying to crack it. It worked, too.

He struggled on with it but time again he just came up against a brick wall. He had some software that helped strip out some of the outer layers, but the more impenetrable deeper segments still held up the same barrier. A few more hours and he was starting to get mad, full of doubts. Maybe he just wasn’t cut out for this, maybe he didn’t have the basic metal for this. Cracking this took real brilliance, real genius.

He kicked himself for thinking this way. It wasn’t about being able to do everything yourself, it was about knowing how to get a job done. If

you can't do it yourself you use a tool. That might be software or it might be someone better suited. Either way he couldn't do this without help, he needed something to get him through those remaining layers of tangled processes.

Covent Garden was a single ground-level plateau set amongst a forest of office blocks and skyscrapers. Around its perimeter great slivers of silver held banks of floodlights that bathed the square in a cold neon glare.

A single structure at its centre housed the marketplace, a single domed roof covering a maze of bijou shops and market stalls where traders sold leatherwear, cheap Japanese electricals, and mounds of souvenir bric-a-brac carrying prints of Tower Bridge, Big Ben, and red-tuniced soldiers with bearskin hats and rifles. Darkness was descending now, and the colourful flocks of tourists that filled the square throughout the afternoon were becoming sparser. A few vans were being loaded up, stalls were being disassembled, and the sound of metallic crashing could be heard from indoors as the first of many shutters were noisily closed.

Bordering the square were rows of recognisably pre-Victorian buildings. A few held coffee bars and cake-shops on their lower floors, while others carried back entrances to pubs or wine-bars. What had once been a museum or exhibition hall now spewed a clutter of round tables where waiters served coffee and croissants to elegantly dressed couples.

On the adjacent side of the square was a colourful knot of noise and colour. Packs of Teknos and Trancers who had spilled out from Soho, Carnaby Street, and Camden Town were standing outside a bar with pints of Snakebite and coloured cocktails. The air about them was thick with skunk.

A couple sat on the yellow stone wall, feet wedged against the backs of a steel and cement patio table where the others lounged. Two of them had the hallmarks of hard-core. They were tanned, crew-cut Aryans with nylon gymsuits and chrome-leather webbing. Velcro flaps in the

HeadSpace

webbing exposed plastic slivers of control surfaces housing a few simple push-buttons for wafer thin audiovid units.

Completing the ensemble was the cochlear by-pass that was the hallmark of a bone fide audiophile. Behind each ear the black circle of a 1.5 mil jack socket that fed microphonic potentials direct to the auditory nerve, by-passing that clumsy knot of bone, fluid, and tissue. “You ain’t heard till you’ve heard it *direct*” went the Ads. At the moment the sockets were filled with small matt buttons that were hi-res mikes.

A girl sat crouched by the wall a short way away from the group. She wore coloured leggings and a short velvet dress; her red hair spilled out in pigtails. She was putting the final touches to a reefer, her head twitching sideways as she tongued the rizzla and rolled it shut. He’d seen her around, an occasional but familiar figure in the local scene for the last few months.

More important he’d seen her around Lazlo. He didn’t know her name but she’d have noticed him—another of many fleeting, experimental glances darting out at her, fishing for eye-contact.

He went over to her and knelt down.

Her head twitched up instinctively as he approached. A blank expression gave way to a glimmer of recognition and a cautious smile. Her eyes struck him straight away; he’d never seen them this close. She’d had them coloured—her irises were black and orange flecked, a radial leopard skin pattern emanating from the pupil.

“Hi, uh...seen Lazlo about?” he said.

“Who wants to know?” She was smiling, playing hard to get.

“I do. Name’s Shadow, you’ve seen me about...”

“Seen lotsa people...”

“You wanna dial him up personal,” he said, suppressing the first stirrings of impatience, “tell him Jake wants a word?”

She looked at him for a moment, as if weighing him up, deciding if he could be trusted.

“Nah...” she gestured towards the pub. “He’s inside on the Killer machine.”

He could see the screen through the window in the back of the booth where Lazlo was sitting. It looked out onto the virtual panorama of a high-tech battlefield. Helipods and jump-jets whirled about spitting rays towards him while chrome-shelled beetles of tanks and AP carriers crawled along the ground below.

The viewpoint pitched and yawed, while Lazlo hammered the fire buttons on the control arm with his thumbs sending missiles tearing off into the distance. Many missed, but a few found their mark, a jet disintegrated in a burning fireball, sending a crash of thunder vibrating through the booth. The wreckage span into the ground, tearing a hundred foot rut in the earth and scattering burst and broken bodies of ground-soldiers. There was a dull thud and the sound of distant screaming.

Finally alarms blared as he took a hit and the earth flew up towards him. There was an explosion and a hoarse scream. Game Over.

Lazlo swung himself out of the booth and grabbed a half-full glass off a nearby ledge. He was thin and pale with traces of acne and wore a black vest and baggy jeans. His hair was long and black and held in a pony-tail by a silver clip. He did a double-take before he noticed Jake.

“Long time no see...” he said.

“Yeah, need a word...”

“OK...” He signalled for Jake to follow him, crossing to an empty alcove further away from the bar. He sat down and Jake took a seat opposite him.

“What you’re poison, then?” said Lazlo.

“Something a little exotic—”

“Blaze? Lexxies? Stark?...”

“No—none of that street shit. I need a quality smart drug—cortical stimulant, performance enhancer. Di-methyl cortizol, PCZ—something like that.

HeadSpace

Lazlo whistled. “Shit, you really pick em. That’s pro neurotech equipment. You wanna shoulder with some specialists?”

“Ain’t got the time. It’s urgent. Need it tonight. Tomorrow latest. Can you help out?”

Lazlo looked away across the room, and took a swig from his glass. He was considering something.

“Someone’s got a machine. Might be able to cook some up, but it’ll cost. I’ll see what I can do.” Lazlo got up and slipped through the crowd of bar-hangers, leaving through the front entrance.

A machine. Jake could scarcely believe his luck. He’d heard of them—multimillion pound chunks of industrial biochem equipment. He saw a picture of one once; a grey box the size of a desk concealing the glass and metal entrails of a miniature chemical production-line. A forest of Silica tubes projected from its top carrying raw chemical ingredients, and beside it a simple screen and keypad. He’d never heard of one making it to the street but he could see the appeal. It’d pay for itself ten times over in a month.

Maybe he’d mis-judged Lazlo. The guy had some serious contacts.

He was back within twenty minutes. His expression said business was on.

“They’ll do it. Get the formula and they’ll synth up a gram for tonight. Price is six hundred.” More like four hundred, thought Jake, with two hundred commission for Lazlo. But he wasn’t going to haggle.

“Fine,” Jake took out a pen and sketched out a molecule and string of chemical acronyms onto the back of a till receipt. “What’s the arrangement?”

“Drop by here. Call it 1 A.M.. I’ll deliver.” He grinned. “To your door, just like pizza...”

“Right.”

Lazlo waited. There was an uneasy silence then he spoke. “Uh—you got the money?”

“Cash on delivery, Laz.” He smiled. “Just like pizza.”

Lazlo came when he said he would, wet and breathless from a down-pour, the greasy smell of a take-away hanging around him. He quietly took a seat next to him and slid a tiny plastic jar out of his pocket. It was brown and translucent, and he flipped the lid up and passed it to Jake in one continuous motion.

Jake passed the container under his nose, caught the faint acrid smell, and flipped the lid shut.

“You got the stats?” he asked. Lazlo returned a blank look.

“Any printout, paperwork...?”

Comprehension fell and Lazlo dug a sheet of light blue printout from his pocket. It was crumpled and slightly damp. Jake took it and glanced across it. A chemical schematic and some statistics told him all he needed. It checked out.

Lazlo waited expectantly, thumb and forefinger clenching unconsciously. Jake passed a roll of notes across to him and they vanished into the folds of Lazlo’s Jacket.

“Happy cruising,” Lazlo said. He stood up.

“You not staying for one?” He indicated the half-empty glass before him.

“Gotta tie up some business. Ciao—”

“Next time round then—”

Lazlo put up a hand and left.

* * *

Bodily sensations deepened and intensified, nerve-endings tingling as the first traces of psychotropics found their way through the blood-brain barrier. He could detect subtle under-currents, like channels of energy circulating his head, throat, and solar-plexus. The feeling made him uncomfortable but it was a peripheral side-effect that was soon overshadowed as the drug sank deeper into his cortex.

HeadSpace

It was happening now, a flood of neurotransmitters took hold and the miasma of mental fogginess was cut through by a needle sharp clarity. His mind was a floodlight, penetrating and illuminating every corner of his sensorium. The room was aglow, the overhanging neon pure and bright, the clutter of equipment spread about him looked like some cultivated artificial landscape, the chaos imbued with a sublime order.

He turned his mind to the task at hand, powering up the chip scope and flicking on the monitor screen switch. The code span across the screen as it had a hundred times that morning. The structure of the software and recall of his earlier clumsy probings shone out in his mind, but where before he could barely hold a single fragment of the structure before it would spill out of short term memory, now great chunks of it sat together simultaneously, sustained by his chemically boosted focus.

He toyed with it, pulling it through filter after filter, playing with as many viewpoints as he could conjure up. Finally he settled on one of them, teasing out the shape of the binary strand by strand. He set the strands out side by side to get a single slice, then layered the slices into a solid form.

The distant glow of dawn was creeping up by the time he cracked it. He was all set to reach for that remaining half-gram of chemical genius when the fragments finally pieced themselves together in the embers of the cortisone rush. He had it—a cathartic blaze of insight and the shape formed in his mind. An elaborate topographical knot like the symmetry of a thousand-petaled rose bud. The code spiralled round from the core, up and down as it spanned the surfaces of hundreds of concentric spheres, then back in again, passing over a reverse side set in imaginary space.

It was a double mobius—a geometric impossibility that couldn't be cracked in less than four dimensions. Any 3D constructs ended up scrambled or fragged-out with half the code missing. Clever, real clever.

The rest was child's play. He ran through the naked code looking for the usual back-door, that privileged way-in that most coders hooked in there for kicks. The Yoto AI was no exception. There was a simple binary reader built into the eye, that would respond to a stream of light pulses. A cam-feed hook-up turned the subliminal flicker of overhead neon into regular bands of zeros and ones. Another half hour and he'd dug out the key—a hundred byte sequence of ASCII that would trigger off a suspend process, making the AI effectively blind until it got reset.

He burnt the sequence into a chip and wired it up to a rectangular slab of Halogen tubing. When he pressed a button, the slab would light up, the flicker of the code sequence hidden behind the illusion of continuity.

He tried it a few times. Adjusting the timing until a green LED on the chip's surface obediently winked out. Then he fit the components into a polycarbon case about the size of a small flashlight.

He took it across the room and repeated the experiment a few more times from further back. Finally satisfied he powered down the scope and put the device into a drawer.

He sat back in the sofa, closed his eyes and sighed.

The air felt good in his lungs, nerve-endings still alive with the endorphin rush, thoughts cool, sharp, and clear as ice

He saw the headset by the terminal, silver-blue visor open skyward, the padded interior beckoning, virtual space quietly calling to him.

* * *

Spider was there. He smiled.

There was something enigmatic about his expression. He looked intoxicated, riding a high. His eyes were alight. The inhibitions were gone, the coldness that sometimes hung about him had vanished.

“Hiya Jake! You look kinda—uh—different, tonight.”

“Yeah, Spider. Had a job to do. Needed to cut some more head-space...”

HeadSpace

“Still cruising...”

“Yeah. You?”

“Doing a bit of investigating. Something happening. Takes a chemical edge to see it properly...”

“You mean the Corp action?”

“No,... Yeah. I mean, they’re connected but it ain’t just that. I’m talking about the other stuff...” He smiled

“You mean...”

“Yeah,” Spider put in. Jake smiled with recognition. He suddenly felt warm, comfortable. The bite of loneliness had gone, but with in its place the edge of frustration, confusion, a touch of doubt. Were they dealing with the same thing or just talking cross-purposes?

“You feel the change Jake? It’s small but it’s there. The vibe’s stronger now...”

Jake suddenly felt self-conscious. Like he was being called upon to exercise some mystic talent.

“Uh. I’ve kind of lost it right now. It’s just VR to me.”

“No problem, Jake. Just need warming up. Let’s take a stroll.”

The walls vanished and they were stood on a solitary square of flooring suspended in the cosmos of the transglobal Net. Vast expanses of intricate interconnected structures extended off in every direction, fading into distant nebulae of colour that seemed to cloak The Net in a huge aura. They were heading to the heart of the structure now, ploughing deeper towards the centre of the virtual universe.

Finally they leveled off and steadied. The crystal cosmos around them was rotating slowly. Or maybe they were rotating within it, he couldn’t tell.

“Look around you,” Spider said.

“I’m looking...”

“Now listen to it... Catch the sound.”

It was distant, almost like white noise, static, but it was composed of the combined babble of hundreds of millions of people combined with

thousands of other sounds. A clutter of drifting dissonant melodies, a clatter of gunfire and explosions and the earnest babble of newscasters, the whine of traffic, the roar of jet engines. A distant hiss like the wind or the distant crash of water on rocks. All barely recognisable or distinguishable from one another.

It was like a vast hive, a compressed planetary microcosm, the distilled essence of global humanity.

“You hear that? That’s the whole fuckin’ planet you’re listening to.”

The more distinct sounds in the foreground were receding now, sinking back into the surrounding clutter. The noise was louder, now, too, rising to a subdued roar.

“Get into it Jake. get really into it. Not just the sound, the whole feel of it. Everything. I want you to get this...” He looked serious now.

“The whole thing, everything you can see and hear, it’s all one thing Jake.” Spider’s voice was soft, intense. “But only if you get it. Let it take you, let it pull you in...”

Jake concentrated, tried to pull it all together, to make the sound join into a single entity. It sounded bizarre, like the steely whine of alien machinery.

“Just sounds like...sound. Weird but just sound.” He looked at Spider, shrugged.

“Not just the sound. You’re just listening, Jake. Let go of your ears, let go of your eyes, just feel it. Listen here.” Spider put a fist on his chest. He was breathing deeply sucking in the air.

Jake closed his eyes, relaxed, let the sound swallow him up, tried to re-capture that sensation he’d got so many times before.

Something was different.

The sound opened up. Behind closed eyes Jake was dizzy, the darkness was spinning. He opened his eyes to steady himself. The sound hadn’t changed but it felt suddenly more vibrant, more alive. Something was in there.

HeadSpace

Now he could hear it. Like a harmonic, a chord, a focal point. It was carried by the noise but it wasn't in there. It was between the sounds. A sound that wasn't a sound.

Spider smiled. "Ahhhhhm" he sang. An even, steady note that was exactly in tune. "You got it?"

Something clicked when Spider did this. The noise swallowed him. He could feel it inside him, like harmonics of energy circulating his throat and solar plexus.

"Yeah," whispered Jake, afraid to break the spell.

"But it's still just the sound, right?" Spider said. "Now look around..." He gestured to the myriad coloured matrix rolling around them. "See it, Jake..."

Jake kept hold of the sensation, let the chord fill him, gazed at the glittering panorama. There was an undercurrent to the sound now, a thundering basey vibration that hit him in the pit of the stomach. The sound was the roll of the cosmos about him. The clouds of glimmering pin-pricks and the incandescent threadwork all sang their own individual notes, harmonics weaving and dancing. Throughout the nebula currents danced in every direction, waves of light spinning and whirling, disintegrating and re-forming into dazzling new patterns.

The air thickened. It seemed charged, like static was building up. Everything about him looked sharp, brilliant, edges carrying thin halos of colour.

Suddenly the chord was all about him, the dance of glittering fire *was* the sound, vast, awesome, earth-shaking. The noise span and whirled, breaking into waves of visceral shards that tore through one another. Everything within him and about him was ablaze with silver fire.

He looked to Spider.

Spider laughed. He held up his hands, swept them around tracing the contours of the motion. "Yeah, That's it! That's the one..." he was almost shouting now above the roar.

Numb disbelief began to nag at Jake, the embryo of thick primeval panic forming in his mind. He forced it away determined to let the experience take him, following it deeper. Energy was building up, pulsating aching, ecstatic energies pouring through him. He was gorged on it, overflowing with its presence.

He looked to Spider for confirmation, barely believing that he wasn't just falling to a hallucination. Spider's eyes met his and he nodded.

"It's real, Jake." Spider said.

"What the hell is it?" Astonishment and a touch of fear was written over him.

"Shit, Jakey. Here it is. You tell me." He laughed, then seriousness fell. "It's what you been looking for, you know that. Let's not get analytical, that shit kills it dead. Just go with it..."

They turned back to the Nexus. Jake felt for the core again and it took him, waves of energy harmonising and intensifying. His ears were ringing and a new edge was there—a distant piercing harmonic, etheric and vast as space. It danced over his skin sending waves of goose-bumps rolling. His hair was on end.

He felt deeper, probing for the soundless note, the invisible light at its very heart. He caught it for a moment, consciousness snagging the edge of the abyss, but then losing it almost instantly. He backtracked and felt for it again, honing cautiously in as the crescendo rose again, towering about him. He was nearly there.

He felt for it, touched it then grabbed.

Before the impulse had taken him, something inside told him this was the wrong thing to do. But it was too late. There was a soundless snap, like something breaking free, then it was gone.

He looked about. The construct was just the same by all appearances but something was suddenly missing, the intangible essence had departed. Now it was just CGen. Just retinae swallowing photons, chaotic noise running through cilia.

He turned to Spider.

HeadSpace

“It’s gone,” he said.

“When?”

“I felt it. Tried to get through. It just went”

“You tried to force it, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well. It don’t work that way. When you reach that point, near the—uh—peak, it all kinda switches round, like you’re in negative space. The gears all reverse. Grab it and you loose it. Let go of it and you’ve got it again. You gotta let go, kinda...dissolve into it. But there can’t be any *you* doing it, it’s gotta happen by itself. Gotta let it take you...”

“Yeah...yeah, I get it.”

“Way to go, Shadow. You’ve crossed the Rubicon now—not many surfers get this far. The rest is down to you.”

Jake was numb, confused. The walls of his world had just fallen down, and he was staring into the trackless depths of a universe he didn’t recognise.

“Spider, you sure this isn’t just—”

“—the high? Yeah. This stuff’s real alright, but it’s one of those things just on the threshold of consciousness. The chemical kick just gives you that little bit extra to break through...”

“Didn’t know it would be like this. Never would’ve believed it...”

“You never do. Think it’s just like anything else. But it ain’t, Jake, and don’t you forget it.” Spider hadn’t moved, but he seemed closer somehow. Behind the mesh of the eyeband, dilated pupils shone. His voice was soft but solid as ground, not a trace of doubt in what he said.

“And it’s getting stronger, Jake.” Spider said, “More and more people are catching it. A doorway’s opening up, Jake, and it’s coming through...”

9

Intell

They were all there, the whole board; six men and three women sat round the oval ebony slab in the director's suite. Some of them were red-eyed and tired from jet-lag, where a cruise or break at a Villa or private island had been broken off. Tension hung in the air like thick static.

Sebastian held a ring on his right hand between his thumb and index finger, half aware that he was turning it round and round in the groove it had bitten into his skin.

"So we move the whole project out—" he said.

"That's a military operation by itself," Weiss cut in. "Do you know how much hardware there is? Do you know how long it took to set up? Feed-stack alone's like a heap of spaghetti. It'll take weeks minimum to tag the set-up and shift it, and we don't have that."

Delphi was silent. Head propped by elbows, hands grasped and thumbs again his chin.

"But we can still shift the project core, right?" Sebastian countered. "The classified stuff, the basic equipment—"

"Sure. But then we break up the project—it comes to a halt. This is a critical phase. We've had a massive breakthrough but we've gotta keep up the momentum to finish off."

"But I thought you'd done it. You got it working, right?" Sebastian said, sensing discrepancy in Weiss's story.

"Yeah, but it ain't that simple. We've decoded the basic structure of the sensory areas, but calibration's the problem. Every subject's slightly

HeadSpace

different. Soon as we wire up another, we gotta tweak it in twenty different ways before we get a full jack...”

“...that ain’t a problem.”

“No, but the yield rate is, Mister Sebastian.” Impatience bit into his voice.

There was a pause.

“Yield?” Sebastian asked softly.

“It was all in my report,” Weiss sighed. “We had high hopes when we cracked the Sigma-form, but it turns out that it isn’t as generalisable as we’d hoped. The form we found in subject 23 does not exist in most other subjects—not even the variants.” He looked Sebastian in the eye. “*Three out of four subjects we can’t jack in at all.*”

“Shit.” Sebastian said.

“It looks like the Sigma-form we found is only one of several cortical encoding variants,” Weiss went on. “What we have is a neurological format used by about twenty-four per cent of the population—it will not work on anyone else. We’ve still got to find the other variants.”

Sebastian was silent for a moment, eyes staring fixedly downwards.

“We better leave it intact, then.”

“Yes.”

Eyes turned towards Delphi as he looked up and glanced across the table, straightening his posture slightly.

“This is a time for caution, Gentlemen, not panic. We know they’ll try and sting us for intel, but there’s only so many places they can get it. We’ve already tightened security all around, and now we know where they’re most likely to hit.

“But we have another very good card in the pack. We’ve got a handle on the some of the big names in these operations and a million eyes on the look-out. Soon as they show up, we’ll have our pointer. For now, though, we cover the two contingencies that Al gave us, send out a couple of MRUs to stand guard. He figures the odds run at 91%

between them, and I'll lay a billion bucks on those little shits walking right into it..."

Delphi looked around at the assembled group, scanning their expressions. "How's that sound to you, Mister Sebastian?"

"That's...adequate," he said reluctantly, "but what about the project site? If we can't move the whole op we should at least fortify it. What's the contingency plan if—"

"If they snatch the intell then we bale out," said Delphi, "Just pulling the guts of the project is simple enough, right?" He looked to Weiss.

"Right." Weiss said.

"And we just set up somewhere else. Maybe a few weeks disruption, but we're back in business. Any case it's a very big If."

"But shouldn't we fortify—" Sebastian began.

Delphi was dismissive. "We've already posted extra teams. If there's any trouble then we send in more. But right now we keep our best players for the MRUs. When these guys turn up we've gotta have them, we can't let them slip through. That is our priority."

Sebastian backed off. He wasn't happy but Delphi was pulling rank now. It was going to be done his way.

Too risky, thought Sebastian. They weren't covering their backs enough. A picture came to mind of a chess board, sides now uneven with a strong offensive from the white side cutting a swath through a diminishing cluster of black pieces. At this point the winning side would start to be taken by the euphoria of an impending conquest. If this wasn't strongly resisted it would disrupt their judgment; they got reckless, dismantling their defences and sending all their pieces to join in the attack—a disorganised offensive clutter fuelled by blood-lust, breaking the stability of the side and exposing all the pieces to more danger. Soon the tables would turn, the weaker side would consolidate into a stronger formation. Awakening to the weakness of its would-be victor, Black would see an opening and pin down a poorly defended

HeadSpace

King, quickly picking off pieces as the White attack turned into a clumsy and scattered defence.

Maybe Delphi was right, maybe he was just being paranoid and overly cautious. He just had a bad feeling that he couldn't shake.

So he'd concentrate on the contingency plan, prepare a swift bale-out option so they could rescue RNSS—and Nova—if it came to it.

Delphi looked down at his display.

"Last on the agenda—"

"The biochip," finished Weiss.

Delphi looked across to where a wiry oriental sat, stiff and upright.

"I gather Mr Lee is dealing with that side of things..."

All eyes turned to him. His face remained expressionless.

"Basic intelligence in this matter is not a problem," he said finally, the words fighting through a strong cantonese lilt. "The production requirements for such a device make necessary some specific environmental constraints. Clean room. Sensitive Biotech Equipment—very difficult to move. So is very likely to be one of only three or four sites. We can know for sure in very short time."

"So security's gonna be tough, right?"

"Of course. More specific information will be a problem. Contacts in Shang Hai rumour that Triad all working for Aizu, now. Make espionage very difficult. Anyone snoop about on Aizu territory lose fingers or eyes. Difficult to enlist help."

"Can't we buy off some Triad?"

Lee smiled. He didn't smile very often.

"That is unlikely. Triad code very strict," he said simply. His eyes said the rest.

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Rain rattled like gravel on the carrier's roof. Kaos was at the wheel, eyes alert, wrists slipping tension through to the steering as he sped up the farside lane on the charcoal mirror of the M25.

Shiva sat in the front passenger seat. There was only one passenger rearway: A male, mid-thirties with a dark crew-cut topping an expressionless face. He wore civvies, but something about his posture gave away the fact that he belonged in uniform.

He was the protection, the raw military savvy that looked after the survival angle. He watched backs, cased out terrain, and sniffed out potential trouble before it got close enough to get lethal.

Not that he was usually needed. Most times his type usually wasn't, but like a good insurance policy he was well worth laying down a percentage for.

"Shadow better have this shit cracked," Kaos muttered, half to himself.

"Chill out. He's good for it..." Shiva was slouched in his seat, a foot up on the dash.

"Better be. Still, he's got guts following through with all that mally he's dealing with."

"Tough rap..."

"Fuckin' tough. Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time..."

"Yeah. Runs deep, too. He'll want it settled."

"Later, though. Enough shit about already. And you can count yourself out as well," Kaos snapped. "Fuck, Jez. You and those fucking calling cards. Ten outta ten for style, zero for self-preservation—"

"Yeah, yeah," Shiva put in. "Outta my ears, Matt. Anyway what can they prove—"

"They don't have to prove anything—"

"—any asshole can leave a card. Any card"

"Not so many assholes can pull those kinda jobs."

"OK. It was...risky."

"You betcha."

HeadSpace

“Occupational hazard. Name-building comes back on you sometimes...”

“Yeah, right...” Kaos said—a hint of sarcasm. He let it go.

Quietness descended. There was only the subdued babble of the radio, the hiss of tyres on wet tarmac, and the whine of wind and rattling of raindrops through the chassis.

Finally they slipped down an exit road, easing of the juice as a roundabout approached.

They took an exit and cruised down a smaller A-road towards the City, the local urban sprawl quickly thickening and piling upwards.

“Think Jake can hack it?” Kaos said.

Shiva paused before he replied. “This Shadow thing eating you or something?”

“No...no big deal or anything. Just, well, he’s kinda weird sometimes.”

“Lotta people are kinda weird. Bottom line is can you trust him...”

“Yeah, it’s not that ..”

“Then what?”

Kaos was silent for a moment.

“Just...sometimes the way he talks. You’re talkin’ to him then suddenly he’s somewhere else, off in Christ-knows-where...”

“So you lose touch with him...Shit, we’ve all got our own wavelength, sometimes you gotta work at it to stay tuned in.”

“I just don’t get him sometimes, don’t see where he’s comin’ from. Bothers me. When you’re on a job with someone you wanna know he’s alright...”

“Different folks, different strokes, man,” Shiva said impatiently. “Get off his case. If you can’t figure him out then its your fuckin’ problem. Long as he don’t give you shit then what’s the big deal?”

“Hey, chill *out*...” Kaos said.

Kaos was quiet. He'd forgotten about the way Shiva got about people sometimes, and he'd underestimated the respect Shiva had for the guy.

"Only thing you can do is trust your instincts. Jake's okay and you know it, so cut the digs." Shiva pulled the map off the dash and turned on the display. "He's a little fucked up is all. But he's right on top of it, don't you sweat it."

Soon the sides of the road were punctuated by the cliff faces of glass-alloy architecture that signalled the fringes of the corporate enclave. Even from here they could see it jutting into the skyline, the outline of the vast human ant-hill composed of hundreds of silica, aluminium and stone-clad towers. It spanned from Euston to Bethnal Green, swallowing Finsbury and the outskirts of Shoreditch with its northern segment, its southern periphery arcing across New Oxford Street, Holborn, and Liverpool Street. Beyond them, almost swallowed up by the city's skyward climb was the once-proud Millenium Tower, now just another of a dozen gleaming edifices competing to reach the clouds.

The domed silver turtleshell of St Pancras was to their left, sun reflecting off its re-fabbed housing, illuminating the shadowy channels of nearby in-roads.

A route running through a clutter of flyovers took them west over the city towards Regents Park and through to the capital's low-lying heart, where only a scattering of slivers and coms stacks around Centre Point disrupted the preserved old-world ambience of the West End.

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Three of them were on observation duty. One was kosher military—red stripes emblazoned on khaki short-sleeves. The others were part of

HeadSpace

the paramilitary team that Sebastian liked to have at the scene. They were reliable.

Stripes was currently gazing through a pair of Nikon binocs at the block across the way. He wasn't paying too much attention to the main doors of the target. He knew that the chances of them launching a full frontal assault was pretty slim. If they couldn't find a discrete access point round the back, then they'd pick a neighbouring building and roof it across, or else slip through the underground maze of sewers and viaducts and bust through a grating and into a basement.

The back of the target was being watched by a second team, and the subterranean make-up pretty much discounted a sub-crash. The building was new and alarmed from every which way. He was covering the street out front where they'd more than likely hang out to case the territory before they made their move.

No sign yet. None of the tell-tales of repeated visitors who did nothing but park and watch, maybe wandering up and down street a few times on the pretext of searching out an address for a delivery. That wasn't unusual. Nine times out of ten crashers got beaded just from working on footage from street cams, so the clever ones kept all the intell work off-site.

And these guys were clever. A rag-bag of underworlders who got roped into big industrial hits like the rip-off that sank Toshiba and brought West Coast Fusion Electric to its knees. More recently they'd cracked a loop-hole and strolled off with specs for a particularly hot piece of militech equipment. The hit wasn't such a big deal, but it had a pivotal role in a critically executed offensive that he figured was a work of sheer, ruthless genius. The consequences of this were now legendary.

Ordinarily the activity of these characters was tolerated. After all they were highly skilled contractors, and their indifference to conventional channels made them extremely useful. None of the really

big players wanted the big underworld names out of the equation because they were just so damn useful to the kind of people who could afford them—e.g: themselves. That would be like pulling that spiritless chess-gambit: Queen for Queen. Take one of these players out and you've just trashed one of your own. So even when you were being screwed over by these guys you tended to go easy on the trigger-finger, cause everyone was secretly looking forward to the day when they'd be ahead enough to be able to payroll the whole lot of them for good.

Except the game was changing. Someone was ahead now, and the balance of the game had been upset enough to make any interference very undesirable. When that happened it was sometimes nice just to simplify the game a bit, move a few factors out of the equation to minimise the chances of the kind of chaotic reversal that sometimes comes out of the works. So it was Queen for Queen now, Knight for Knight, Bishop for Bishop, and so on.

Time to clean up the board.

* * *

Chip knew he was looking at her—nervous glances thrown out of the corner of spectacled eyes. The bug had sat next to her five minutes earlier, short and greasy haired, he was wearing the patchy incoherent mess of styles that spelt “geek.” New rubber Nikes over white socks with faded purple jeans covered in pockets, a plain white shirt showing through the flaps of a brown suede jacket that might have looked hip ten years ago. He was munching his way through a bag of pastachios, breaking apart shells and piling them next to him on the seat, considering his next move. She casually ignored him, careful to skirt well clear of eye-contact, eyes settling on anything except him.

She crossed her legs and inclined herself subtly away from him, putting on a pretense of spotting something interesting off across the

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mall, considering whether she should just move off and return when he'd gone.

In her peripheral vision she could make out his head turned towards her, more boldly now. Take a hint, she thought, please just take a hint.

"Hi...uh," he said, just a touch of a quiver in his voice. "That's a real nice shirt you got there." He grinned, exposing long yellowed teeth. Jeez what a creep, she thought.

"Thanks," she replied, coldly. She flashed a smile and looked away. She could hear him sliding further over towards her on the bench. Shit. Acknowledging his existence got taken as a come-on.

"I was uh wondering, if there's any theatres round here," He was enthusiastic, now, like he'd scored big-time, "I know there's some—ah—further in, but are there any round here?"

"Dunno...sorry," she said, careful to avoid his eyes. She shifted away slightly.

"Or maybe a museum. A cafe perhaps?"

"No." She shook her head.

He paused, working on the start of another dumb thread. She thought of just turning round and telling him to get lost, but that would've been unkind. Unkind wasn't her style, she hated that kind of foul-mouthed street trash mentality, and as much as socially inept dweebos like this just begged for abuse there was always a smarter way round things.

"Only places round here I know are prisons," she said dreamily.

"Huh?"

"Yeah. Pentonville, Holloway, Strangeways, Broadmoor. Kenton's got a Max-Security Facility. Seen them all..." She turned towards him and smiled warmly.

"Uh .. you mean you been—like—in prison." Bug said, eyes wide.

"Yes, but—" She laughed girlishly, fake embarrassment at the innu-endo,"—just visiting, you know."

A shadow of disappointment passed over his face, but only momentarily.

“Uh...who’d you visit, then?” Chip was enjoying this. She felt like the second half of a perverse double-act, leading her witless partner towards the punchline.

“You ever hear of Danny MacLeod?” she asked.

His features lit up with that same look of dumb awe. “You mean the murderer guy!”

“Yeah.” She said it like they were talking about a folk-hero or a teen heart-throb. She smiled warmly again. “He killed *three* people, you know. With his bare hands.” Her eyes were alight, wide with excitement.

“He a psycho?” Bug asked.

“Naah. He didn’t mean to—like—*off* them but, he’s got such a bad temper and I guess he just doesn’t know his own strength. These guys were hitting on his girl—his ex now. Jealous streak a mile wide. When he saw how those guys came on he just flipped big-time.”

A trace of anxiety passed across Bug. She was getting through.

“Why you—uh—visit him?”

“Well,” she sighed and squirmed a little. “Soon as I heard about it, I started writing to him. I dunno why, I guess death sorta turns me on, I mean you musta wondered what it would be like to, like, *off* someone?”

She didn’t wait for an answer. “So things went from there. I visited him a couple of times, and then some more. And then, over the years, well...” she giggled, “...something just kinda grew.”

Dumb horror was on his face now. “No shit!” he said.

“Yeah. Last week his parole got through, and he said maybe we should move in together when he got out.” Bug had heard enough, he was fidgeting uneasily.

“Of course I had to say yes,” she gushed, the bimbo act well established, “And so here I am. It’s his first day out so I booked a couple of seats at a restaurant near here—The Tratorria, you mighta heard of it,

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real quality place. He got out, oh,” she glanced at her wrist, “an hour ago, so—”

It was enough. He might be dumb enough to swallow the story, but he wasn't such an asshole that he couldn't see where it was going. He stood up.

“Gee, uh,” he interrupted, “it's been real nice talking to you but, uh, I have to go.” He flashed those yellow teeth and went.

* * *

The first of the Christmas decorations were up. Further up the mall a twenty foot fake fern stood over a scattering of malted green and silver tinsel, and shop windows held holograms or animations inset in silica slabs—sleds and reindeers, gift-wrapped boxes, and laughing CGen Santas; fragments of a 16-colour pastiche encompassing the string of silica facades that ran round the mall's perimeter.

She was where she said she'd be, sat on a ring of beige plastic seating on the mall's ground floor. He hadn't recognised her when he took his first distant glances from the thread of escalator that descended from the second floor. Chip had long black hair now, fake locks hiding the crew-cut, transforming her totally. Raybans of fine alloy lattice were perched on her nose.

She had a bag with her; it was small and black, and hydrotex coated. It was a medikit in plain clothes.

She raised a hand as she spotted him, standing up as he approached. She hugged him and smiled.

“You look...better,” she said.

He still looked rough, haggard, but it was an improvement on the few days before when she'd spoken to him.

“Yeah.” He smiled.

“You eaten?” she asked. He shook his head. “Let's get something, still some time to fill...”

They found a burger bar by a string of food counters at the other side of the mall, Jake took a seat round a gaudy yellow tables near a fountain while Chip picked up the orders. She was back within as minute with napkins and a couple of bright polystyrene boxes, which she dumped on the tabletop. She sat beside him and slid off the shades, lying them on the table beside the packages.

“When are the others coming?” Jake said through a mouthful of Burger.

“They just got in from LA. They’ll be bringing some muscle—”

“You mean a grunt? No-one told *me*. What do we need back-up for?”

“Cool it. Shiva’s idea. A precaution. The Yoto crash upped the stakes, and this is just the kinda move they’ll expect. They’ll be sniffing for trouble and we’re it. Better safe, right?”

“Yeah,” Jake said. A precaution, like the bag.

There was a pause. Chip seemed to be thinking, considering something. Finally she finished a mouthful and looked across at him. Today her eyes were a bright marine blue. He couldn’t remember what colour they really were, they changed that often.

“How you doing?” she asked. Her expression was serious, a little sad.

The question took him by surprise.

“Okay,” he muttered, a sudden stiffness taking him. He knew what she was angling at but he wasn’t so sure he wanted it. He’d managed to get a hold over things, carefully walling away the coals of his pain. Last thing he wanted was to start picking away at the mortar, to bring the whole edifice crashing down. Not now. Not before the job.

He sensed that she’d considered this, that she was poised to snatch away from the topic at a moment’s notice.

“It’ll get settled, Jake, it’s best to see to it later. Not just because of biz—for you more than anything. Because believe it or not you don’t feel this way for good. You can end up doing stuff you really regret—stuff that leaves you worse off than before. It happens, Jake. I know it’s hard to hear this right now, but you’re not the first and you won’t be the

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last. And when it comes to it you just might not feel the same way when it's eye to eye.”

“How would you know?” he said. He was careful to keep that patronising edge off of the question, that subtle emphasis on the “you” that spelt the difference between a put-down and an honest question.

“It takes time for that demon to burn out, Jake. Don't tell me you don't know what I mean. You want them dead, don't you. You think about it a lot. You hate them so much it hurts you. The hate eats at you, screams at you for justice, and maybe it frightens you how bad and how strong and how sick that feeling is.” She spoke softly, looking down into empty space. “But it passes—not all of it, but the worst. And what's left is just you, and that's when it's time to settle scores.”

He waited, conscious that she hadn't answered his question.

“Of course you might still kill them anyway, but then at least you're sure. Nothing worse than executioner's doubts...” She took another mouthful of burger and chewed it thoughtfully.

“No,” she said, reading his mind, “I haven't been this deep in. Nearest I got was when I was a kid. Dad sent me to a convent when I was eleven. All-girl scene. Bunch of little shits made my life hell. A few of them thought it'd be fun to spike my drink with some shit they stole from the infirmary. O.D. took out my liver and damn near killed me. Insurance got me a synthed-up replacement, but Dad pulled me from the place because they hiked up the premiums after that. Anyway before that I was all set to kill them; planned the whole thing out in my mind. Even got all the microjects to do it—stole them from a cardiac kit while Sister went off for her fix. Didn't get the chance when it came to it, but sometimes I wonder if I'd really have gone through with it...”

The coldness had departed and Jake suddenly felt close to Chip. She didn't open up that often, but when she did it was with a frankness that hit straight home.

She swallowed another mouthful and continued. “Point is, hate’s just a distraction. It’s not the real problem, it’s just a disguise for the pain. Seems easier to stoke up the hate than deal with the pain, but it’s usually a bad road to take. It always comes back to the pain—you’ve gotta face it, you’ve gotta deal with it. It’s the only way of making yourself whole, only way to be free.” She looked at him with a look he’d never seen before, a kind of fatalistic sorrow. “Run away from it and it’ll tear you apart...”

She paused thoughtfully and ate some more. When she spoke again her voice was colder, business-like.

“Something else you should know.” She paused to swallow food. “Shiva’s in some sort of shit. His cover’s blown—the Feds are after him.”

“How’s that?”

“Calling cards.”

“What?”

She didn’t reply. Jake looked up at her. He couldn’t see her eyes through the alloy strip, but she seemed to be gazing over towards the patch of mall by the entrance where they’d met up.

Jake followed her eyes and saw it too.

“Talk of the devil...” Chip said through a mouthful of burger.

It was Shiva. He was strutting across the far end of the mall forty metres distant. He wore a glossy grey jacket, military camgear-slacks and boots. A white T-shirt carried an animated sequence that he couldn’t make out from here. He stopped and milled about, impatiently scanning the surroundings.

Chip wiped her mouth on a napkin and finished her mouthful, standing and picking up the bag. Jake took up the cue and joined her, following her over to where Shiva stood. They were half way to him when Shiva spotted them, that big gold-studded smile breaking out as recognition dawned.

“You’re early,” she said. Something about the way Chip said this told Jake something had changed.

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“We got a schedule to keep, right?” Shiva said. That grin again, like he’d cultivated it to show off that dental work.

Jake could make out the design on the shirt now. It was a surreal CGen animation set in LCD mono—a Medusa head with hundreds of snakes twisting around one another. The electroplastic film on the shirt was worn, sending needles of dead pixels flickering across the sequence.

“Right.”

They followed him in silence, leaving the mall and following a maze of walkways and narrow backstreets. Soon they came to a litter-strewn alley that passed between two red-brick terraces. It took them past a row of plastic skips to the back entrance of an old NCP stack, ten storeys of ugly grey concrete slabs housing six hundred parked cars.

A fire exit with flaking green paint on aluminium paneling was propped open an inch by a crushed coke-can. Shiva slipped his fingers in the crack and heaved it open, passing through and holding it back for Chip and Jake. It took them through to an arc-lit staircase that stank of stale cider and urine, which Shiva paced up two at a time.

Eventually they took a door on the ninth floor and made their way through the near-deserted lot to where a shiny, gloss-black carrier with tinted windows crouched. Its sides bore a commercial glyph and the legend “LekTrix Auto Repair” in bold sans serif.

Shiva tapped twice on the roof and slid back a door towards the rear. Chip swung herself through and dumped herself in a seat and Jake followed. 2-Bit and somebody Jake didn’t recognise were sitting opposite.

Shiva went round the other side and climbed into the driver’s seat.

“Shadow, Chip, this is Ribs,” he said. Ribs nodded across at them. “He’s backup, case of heat. You know the score—they’re waitin’ for a move like this and security’s up. Don’t sweat it, though, we set up some neat diversions—left footprints all over the Manhattan matrix and

busted open a big streetplan database in Pasadena. I don't figure on them twigging that it's a snow-job, but there's a risk.

"Team looks like this: 2-Bit's on lookout, he'll have a patch to the Net and the local Terrain, and we'll all be twigged up to him. Phantom's Netside watching Nova coms real close. Any squeak of trouble and we pull out. Chip's on-site lookout and medic, Kaos takes care of kit-ups, site-bust and infra-red, Shadow sorts out the AI cams and gives me a hand with the system tap. And Ribs—he's just there.

"Any questions?" Shiva concluded. A pause, then he turned back to the wheel. "Let's go..."

The carrier motor whined to life and Shiva pulled away. They wound their way down through the concrete maze of the auto-stack, through a barrier, and out onto a labyrinth of narrow backstreets. The camber of the road trapped huge oily puddles along by the pavement, and the carrier's underside vibrated noisily as wheels sliced through water.

The backstreets gave way to the open expanses of Hyde Park which quickly vanished behind Victorian terraces as they cut through more narrow byways towards Kensington. They worked their way through a tight grid of shadowy backroads until a clutter of recently re-furbished and stone-blasted blocks came into view. They stood either side of a narrow, pot-holed street of what had once been a residential area. In places slabs of terracing had been torn down to make way for newer commercial stacks and three storey auto-parks for local Sloanes.

Maas Biolabs was one of the newer blocks on Queens Road, a shiny black tower like a giant hi-fi. It was one the many corporate conquests Nova had to their name, this one a swift buy-out as they pushed their empire into nerve-engineering twenty years back. All four floors were only dimly lit by security lights, but the lobby below shone out like a spotlight in the approaching dusk.

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HeadSpace

Sanchez span back a couple of frames through the sequence as recognition dawned.

It was him okay, no question at all. Real stroke of luck he'd been picked out by the AI, too. The shot quality wasn't too hot, and the lighting could've been better. But he had distinguishing features that made the job a doddle for even the dumbest of recognition simms.

The face could've been any of hundreds of others—he had those kind of features. Add a wig and some facial hair and he could be any one of thousands who fell into the clumsy feature-recog band that was being uploaded onto practically every surveillance cluster in the northern hemisphere.

But those teeth, that row of six gold stars inset into the upper incisors and canines was one dumb giveaway if he ever saw it. A fugitive with that kind of ornamentation was fishing for trouble.

Sanchez was well up on recog. He'd spent many of the duller hours that composed much of his duties slowly assembling in his mind what he figured was a fugitives how-to bible on the subject of evading public detection by the millions of semi-intelligent eyes that sleeplessly scanned millions of public streets, blocks, and malls.

First rule was to change what you can—to depart from the “you” prototype as sharply as possible. Change the hair colour and length. Grow or shave facial hair, change eye colour, and maybe even a bit of plastic surgery on the nose and jawline. But, most important—and he figured this would surprise a lot of people—is to lose the jewellery, or (if you don't wear it) to gain lots of it. What he knew is that biometric research has show that facial jewellery is the stablest personal identification cue, and the one least likely to be considered in those wishing to change their appearance.

So it had a pride of place in the pattern-matching algorithms that daily siphoned millions of the fleshy ovals, snapshotting them from a multitude of angles and matching them to the characteristics of thousands of known felons. Any correspondence above a certain threshold

would be shot off through the Net to operatives like Sanchez who verified them manually.

So they formed an equally major part in his day-dreams of the fugitive-master genius, for whom experimentation with all manner of exotic facial metallics figured prominently.

Teeth studs weren't that rare, but they opened up a new avenue of vital clues—number, size, shape, and composition all conspired to pinpoint an individual. And this guy, Sanchez thought, might just as well have had a barcode tattooed across his forehead.

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“So you overwrite the card with your image. Yeah I get that, but what about the retina scan?”

“The retina template's on the card, right? So you overwrite that with—”

“—your retina image,” 2-Bit put in, “but that's what I don't understand—”

“No, not my regular retina image,” Shiva said, “a concentrically distorted version, that way it doesn't set off a match on the Fed filters—”

“But the retina scan still gets your regular image...”

“Wrong.” He tossed a white plastic snap-case across to him. 2-Bit caught it neatly in his left hand.

2-Bit opened the case, inside were a pair of contact lenses. He picked one up and held it up to one of the strip-lighting along the carriers roof. The image was subtly distorted, a series of gentle ripples passing out from the centre. Shiva grinned as 2-Bit put the picture together and recognition dawned.

“I get it.” He smiled. “Not bad. Not bad, at all.”

“Yup,” Shiva said. He blew his nails and rubbed them on his shirt.

Kaos looked over at 2-Bit and grinned.

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“Shoulda seen him at the ‘port, though,” he said. “Dweeb couldn’t see a damn thing. Nearly walked through a window. Très cool...” He ducked as Shiva made to cuff him across the head.

Darkness was falling. Silence settled and Kaos looked at his watch.

“Time to set up,” he said.

“Okay. Twig up first,” Shiva said without turning. He was looking out of the tinted windshield of the carrier.

Kaos pulled an earpiece and some throat-mikes from the coms case, clipping them quickly on. Then he picked up the bag with the Eyes, slid the carrier door open, and swung out, slamming it shut behind.

They were parked at the intersection at the end of the street, where Queens Road met with a grid of urban backroads. A little further up was an alley that ran between what had once been the slab of domestic terraces and those of its neighbouring road. What had been a string of back gardens were now walled lock-ups and garages, or else they were swallowed up by solid slabs of newer buildings. The whole row nestled beneath a forest of razor wire, spiked railings, or broken glass, rusty nails, and blades set into slabs of cement. Tiny red LEDS winked in the darkness, warning of the clutter of PIRs, surveillance cams, and booby traps that awaited any intruders. This was where they were all headed, thought Kaos. Nice.

This was the first point. A lamp-post across the road offered a view of both Queen’s Road and the alley mouth. He leaned against a road-sign and tore open a velcro flap on the kit bag. A row of slots on a flap inside held the Eyes.

The Eyes, or RVAs, were compact slices of optical technology which transmitted twin hi-res images. The eyes themselves were two tiny crystals nestled in a film of electroplastic circuitry. They were set 80 mil apart, which was slightly larger than the average intraocular distance, but gave better stereopsis.

Set in flexible sheet plastic, the units could be discretely attached to a surface in any number of disguises. In this case they were concealed behind a set of oval Vanjy stickers. Tall halo-effect white letters on a black background declared “JESUS LOVES YOU.” The eyes looked out from a couple of tiny holes in the first “U” and the last “O.”

He picked a thicker section towards the bottom of the post, where the girth was greater and there would be less curvature. This was partly to avoid tearing the sensitive circuitry, but mostly to avoid the head-splitting bird-eye effect of diverging images. He carefully peeled a plastic film off the back of the first and stuck the sticker gently but firmly to the cold silver surface.

Next stop was up Queens. He crossed over to the opposite side and began looking for suitable sites. The flaking red-exterior of an old post-box gave an upstreet view of Maas that covered the neighbouring sites, and the plastic shield of a call booth further up provided a downstreet angle. At the top of the road was a junction to a busy and well lit route that headed out west to the circular. He put another on a roadsign that covered the junction.

The last was the trickiest. He needed a view of the Maas lobby, close as possible. But he couldn't get too close or noses would start twitching. It was risky doing this anyway, but anything that upped their chances of twigging trouble quick was worth it. Even if it gave them trouble to twig.

He thought about it as he strolled back downstreet and finally settled on a plan of action. He slid the backing off the final sticker and palmed it face down. As he passed the Maas foyer steps he slapped it swiftly onto the side of a van parked outside.

They didn't have to wait long before Ribs started spinning yarns. Chip had been told about the kind of bullshit Ribs came out with, but this was the first time she'd sat through it.

HeadSpace

Most the people she knew just waited in silence. Maybe a couple of questions to iron out a final detail, maybe cover an angle they hadn't thought of before. But not Ribs, he just talked, like he couldn't stop that mouth of his from broadcasting the narrative going through his head.

So a long stream of jivey talk filled the carrier. Old anecdotes, observations, and an endless supply of stories about when he was in the marines, all of them a tissue of exaggeration, drama, and half-truth, and told in that thick brooklyn lilt. Some of them were pretty believable for a while, and they'd start to take him seriously. But then he'd throw in some supernatural overtone, like divine intervention—an AK67 slug stopped by a St. Christopher pendant—, or voodoo magic knocking out copter engines and sending troops mad in that Haitian Coup D'Etat; then the atmosphere would break back into scepticism.

Shiva, two-bit and herself just listened, occasionally throwing in a question or sarcastic quip which he eagerly snapped up to spin out the story further.

It was easy to take the piss with Ribs, he asked for it every time he opened his mouth. But once you'd known him a while you got to realise that the guy really had been through hell and back, that maybe the veneer of fictionalisation was a way of distancing himself from the nightmarish reality. Shiva saw him with his shirt off once; he'd never seen so much scar tissue in the same place.

Few fond memories for Ribs, best he got was from polishing up the highpoints and spinning them into bar-table yarns he could use for ever.

Shiva had let him in on the game, given him the basic SP. Ribs was no psychotechnic but he wasn't dumb. There wasn't anyone alive who hadn't caught at least a dozen DNI documentaries, and he had an opinion cooked up and ready to serve like he did on most topics.

"I don't buy all this shit." Ribs had a bag open on his lap. He was cleaning up a blue-steel component with an oily rag. "All these techies sayin' 'Oh yeah we're gonna plug our head's right into the Net', and maybe that we'll all get stored in RAM so we can live forever

in whatever bullshit fantasy we want. I don't buy it. Okay maybe we'll get some neat way of jacking our senses in—like VR but better—but that is as far as it goes.”

“How so?” 2-Bit asked.

“Cause the rest of it, deep down inside it's—like—the human soul, man. You can't mess wit' it. See there's more to us than just our brains, man. The mind, dig, belongs to a—uh—higher dimension...”

2-Bit laughed. “You're crazy, man.”

“No shit. Look, all that stuff about our mind bein' just a buncha nerve-cells, it all sounds real smart an' all. But there's just one problem: If we're nothin' but a lotta nerves then why we conscious? See, man? Consciousness, dig, that's the one thing that screws up the fancy little theory. Technology can't explain the fuckin' *soul*, man.”

“But if we've, like, got a soul, then where's it come from? What's it mean?” 2-Bit asked.

“From, like, a higher reality, man. A spiritual plane. It's like all o' this is a cosmic test. We're put here and kidded that—you know—nothing matters and we all gonna die anyway so what the hell. We don't get told about The Grand Plan or nothin' otherwise that'd spoil it an' we wouldn't be makin' a true choice between Good and Evil.”

“The Grand Plan...?” 2-Bit said, he gave Ribs look of amused scepticism. “O-kay...”

“Yeah. The Grand Plan—an' this is the cool bit—is that we're all put through a lotta trials, a lotta tests that we gotta pass to if our spirit's gonna go on to the next stage. We gotta like refine our soul to perfection before we can re-join with the Godhead, man. An' there ain't no cheating, or bunking out by dyin' or nothin' cos you just reincarnate and get to re-sit the whole fuckin' show.”

“Reincarnation?” 2-Bit laughed. “Christ Ribs, you're kidding me. You believe in that shit?”

“Yeah, man. They proved it y'know. We all got deep memories of our previous existences upon this Earth—”

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“You said we don’t get told about the plan,” 2-Bit said, smiling. “Kinda blows the game if we get to remember some previous existence...”

“Yeah. But they just clues, so people are reminded of their truly spiritual nature. It don’t prove nothin’”

“You got that right.” 2-Bit was laughing. “Shit, what about population growth, where’s all these new souls come from every generation?”

“From the animal Kingdom, man. You think we start off as advanced species like humans? No way. We start off as—like—a worm or an ant or somethin’ and work our way up...”

“Come on,” said Kaos, joining in the fray, “how do they work it all out? See according to this big plan, you gotta have a constant number of souls on this Earth. And for every discarnate soul hanging around you’ve always gotta have a body waiting. What if there’s a war, and like, millions get nuked or something?”

“It’s all in the big plan, a whole bunch of people and animals and shit get born for the souls to live in. Anyway there’s always a gap between lives, you dig, so they can kinda hang around and wait if they need to...”

2-Bit and Kaos were choking back laughter now.

Ribs was angry. “Well fuck you, man. You think you’re so damn smart. I’ll tell you, God is up there right now laughin’ his merry ass off about the one he pulled on you assholes. Fuck you.”

“Hey stow it guys,” Shiva said. “We got work to do.”

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Atmosphere at the watch had thickened. The van had been there nearly half an hour now, parked up by a junction at the end of the road. Figures could be seen peering restlessly down the street, like they were waiting for something. One of them had left the van twenty minutes previously and walked briskly to the end of the street, he was carrying something Stripes couldn’t quite make out; it might’ve been a pad or a

scrap of paper. Then he'd walked back and climbed into the van. Now he was wrapped up in a discussion with the driver, gesticulating as the talk got more heated. One of the paras turned to him.

"What do you think?" he said.

Stripes didn't turn away from his binocs. A few seconds passed before he responded.

"Move in," he said flatly.

The para put a com to his mouth and barked a code, then joined stripes at the window.

Moments later a matt black carrier was racing past them towards the junction, silent but for the hiss of rubber on old tarmac. A cloud of road dirt erupted as it slammed to a halt ahead of the van, skewed sideways to block the street. A slide door opened and four balaclavad figures in urban camouflage leapt out. At the same time an identical van rounded the corner of the junction and stopped, boxing their target in. Three figures burst out of the second van and joined the first in surrounding the vehicle.

From here, Stripes and the others couldn't hear the noise but you could see that the head of the team was shouting through a PA.

The two guys in the van slowly raised their arms and stepped out of the vehicle, where they were shoved to the ground and brisked. Another troop pulled open the back of the van, while two others crouched nervously with uzis at the ready. They seemed to relax as the door slid to a halt and they approached the opening to take a closer look.

As the body-search finished, the other troops seemed to relax too, dropping the muzzles of their weapons downwards and standing idly about.

When Stripes' ear-piece crackled to life it was just a formality—the scene said it all.

"Plexi-glass..." said the voice.

"What?"

"In the back—Plexi-glass...sheets of it. They're delivering stuff to an aquarium, 'cept they can't find the drop. Story checks out."

HeadSpace

Stripes sighed and wiped his sleeve across his forehead.

“Get them out of here,” he said.

He leaned on the sill, squinting in the hot California sun as he cast his gaze across the tarmac. Hazy patches of silver mirage glittered off the baking surface and a cushion of shimmering air sent distorted ripples across the distant stretches of city-scape.

* * *

Sebastian recognised him straight off. Picture-res wasn't too good but it was him okay. One of the sharpest techies to hit the Outworld, connected—it was rumoured—to over half of the big data-busts this decade. Went by the handle of Shiva, real name unknown. He knew this because he'd got a nose to seek him out personally just a few weeks back. They'd had him on the pay-roll for a highly unofficial job out West.

Looks like he was in trouble, too. He'd gotten just too damn cocky, taken to leaving calling cards at the scene. Stupid. Especially with that L.A. hit.

Now he was on the Fed priority register of wanted felons. A fugitive with every image-cruncher in the developed world carrying his visual etched in heat-RAM.

He'd been picked up on a cam in a mall near Leicester Square, London, England just forty-five minutes earlier. A check revealed that he'd taken the New York—London TransAt two hours earlier using a hacked ID.

This bothered him. The guy should be lying low. Either he was just plain dumb or he was mixed up in something big enough to make him take those kind of risks.

“What the hell are you doing over there,” he hissed, “just what are you up to?”

Something smelt very wrong here. It didn't take long to figure out what.

Paul Barrows

“Shit,” he said, and punched up a screen. A map of London appeared on the wall, an arterial mesh of streetways dotted with corporate glyphs. He ran a filter across it and all but one remained. He pulled the printout from his pocket and hurriedly unfolded it.

T4:5.2% Maas-Biolabs@Kensington::LON. ENG.
 Subsid. Nova Prosthetics.
 Logistic AF: 3.3>>DefCon:4.1>> SecInt:6.4>>
 ^Intell struct: wwl-13-45-09

Circumstantial evidence, part of him said. So Shiva’s in London, maybe he’s doing a job, or maybe he’s just running. Could be anything.

He didn’t believe it. His gut instinct said that the little shit was up to his neck in this. And on the wrong side too. It might not be too late to set up a unit there. Even if it was, there was still the Feds—he could use them to reel them in before they crawled back under their stones. Once he’d got a bead on them he could take it from there.

He punched up an alert and got on the phone.

10

The Hit

The three of them wore loose-fitting jumpsuits and the usual headgear. They would've looked like any other security at Queen's if it weren't for the outsider insignia on the upper arm and the oversized holsters. No ancient, standard issue 357s for these guys, they were packing top-of-line militech gear, probably some fully-automatic Taiwanese carbon-fibre piece—the sort you'd see photoed in a moody soft-focus on the pages of gun mags.

They were the extra help, a trio of ops drafted in from Apollo Security. For the first time in Kurt's four years there, they'd raised the condition. A cheap colour-coded placard that probably dated back to the previous century was hung on the wall by the entrance to the foyer. After the heading "Security Condition:", a pair of plastic pegs supported a small stack of signs, the foremost of which displayed the present state. The familiar "BLACK" had now been obscured by another slate that read "BLUE." Just in case you couldn't read, they'd even done the letters in a dark military shade of crimson. It was brighter than the previous one, which had become yellowed from a combination of sunlight and cigarette smoke.

Kurt took another swig of coffee and looked through the pane that stood between reception and the rest of the foyer. He could see one of them now, a stocky ginger-haired guy in his late twenties. One of those ex-marine types. Pacing about self-consciously, keen to be looking busy but not entirely sure how to fill his time. Kurt knew how to fill time, that

was what a security job was about. Just being there in case, even though “in case” usually never came. So he read a book, took a stroll through the building and stared out of a window at the distant glittering clutter of London’s skyscrapers, or hopped through some of the hundred-and-fifteen cable channels wired up to the screen in the lobby desk.

Kurt brushed his jet hair out of his eyes and looked across at the readout. A grid of squares gave a status readout for the hundred sectors that the building had been divided into. They were all green, status readouts hovering about the zero mark, with the occasional flicker as an insect flitted across the path of a PIR somewhere in the building. Most important were the bottom rows representing three sub-basements that led down to the cold storage facility. Some suits from Nova put out word to tighten the watch on cold-RAM. As usual they didn’t say why, but this was the first time they’d sent extra muscle, so whatever it was had got the guys upstairs spooked.

The Apollo team had been here a week now, and in all that time they’d said practically nothing. Some outfits were like that, if you didn’t share the badge then you were out, especially if they were from a big slick outfit like Apollo where they got names like “Containment Specialist” and “Defence Supervisor.” They’d just given him a “hi” and a tight smile as they collected their clearance, or abruptly radioed through a cancel when a card jammed and an alarm got tripped.

So he left them to it. Every so often one of them would trail down through the basement to give it the once over then come back cursing at how damn cold it was down there and ask why in hell there was no visual feed from the AIs. By the third day they’d cut down the trips to once or twice in the whole night.

Kurt thought they were wasting their time. The place was covered from every angle by image-crunchers, and they were sitting right by the only entrance. Only other way in, he figured, was to burrow through solid earth. The others were starting to think this too, that’s why the skimping and corner-cutting with the visual. Anyone could see how

HeadSpace

tight it was down there. It was just a big hole in the ground—as long as you stood round the edge it was secure. But orders were orders, and if anything did happen down there it would be their asses.

* * *

They suited up. The gear was a matt blue boiler suit that looked like gortex but smelled weird. Separate gloves and boots went with it, and a hood with a translucent yellow face-piece that velcroed round the collar completed the ensemble. It was for insulation—thermal shielding that would make them invisible to infra-red. They kept the hoods off while they wired up the radio-mikes and coms and clipped on night-goggles, then they slipped them down over their heads as 2-Bit made a final check outside and slid open the door.

The backstreet was lit only by the dim neon of distant streetlights, the scene tinged yellow by the hoods' facepieces. Ribs and Jake left first, followed closely by Shiva, Chip and Kaos. Jake was empty handed, while the rest carried shoulder-bags of various sizes. 2-Bit slid the door shut behind them and the group quickly slipped into the alley.

A couple of dirty security lights cast a dim glow over the row of backyards. The clutter of PIRs that would ordinarily kick a brilliant spotlight to life remained undisturbed, oblivious to their passage, and they passed deeper into the gloom. Finally they reached their target, a dank concrete staircase leading down to a basement door. Nearby, a stream of water from a leaking drain-pipe tumbled off a wall and splattered against cracked paving where tufts of weeds fought through. They passed quietly around it and down the staircase to a clearing before a large iron door, where a pile of shiny black bin liners sat with contents half spewed across the flagstones. The air smelled of wet trash with a stronger odour behind it—paraffin or turpentine.

Paul Barrows

The gloom turned to darkness and Kaos tapped the push-stud on his right temple, blinking as the surroundings lit up in the cold glare of a diffuse silvery light.

2-Bit slipped on the headset and punched the first button on the remote. There was a flick of static and he was suddenly over the other side of the road, across from the van and looking into the alley mouth. He could dimly see his own figure slouched in the driver's seat.

The momentary wave of disorientation subsided and he flicked to the next channel.

Now he was closer to the ground staring up-street out of the flakey paint of that old post box; the Maas foyer was left across the way, and beyond that was the junction at the top of the street.

A flick of static and he was at the junction, lower still. A shapely pair of legs passed his field of vision and crossed the street. Nice, he thought. He was looking westwards across the entrance to Queens Road, a dribble of traffic hissing past on the main route.

He flicked again. Now he was back down the way he'd come, the plastic hood of a call booth giving him an eye-level view downstreet. Maas was over on the right, and further down was the post box that was his other peep-hole.

And finally...flick of static...the Maas lobby. He was down by the curb, skewed vision gave him lop-sided view of the steps and the lower half of the lobby. He could make out the torso and legs of somebody standing in front of the reception desk. Shit...

It'd have to do.

He switched over to audio and patched Kaos.

"How's it going, my friend?"

"Not so bad..." he whispered between gasps. Kaos was kneeling down by the door, eye-piece wedged into the viewer of a piece of kit that was probing the innards of a seven-lever mortice lock. His knees were wet and hurt from where gravel dug in. Two minutes passed and he had

it: He hit the trigger and the unit gave a solid thunk as the lock disengaged. He stood and slid the probe out, packed it away in its case and then pushed the door gently open.

The interior was midway through a major re-fit—all concrete, half-plastered walls, and bare vent-ducts. What had been an old library had been stripped out to make way for what would be another com-station.

“Stage One check...” Kaos muttered. There was a pause and then his ear-piece crackled to life.

“Roger, Kay-One. All clear upside...” came 2-Bit’s voice.

Kaos walked in and the others followed. He made his way over to the far wall where he dumped his bag. The others stood by while he struggled to release half a dozen units from pouches inside. Some were small, and some were large and wrapped up in cable. He uncoiled two of these and began slotting them together, then he pulled a measure out of his pocket and slid it along the far wall until he’d got the reading he wanted. He drew a notch with a marker, and then picked up one of the larger units—an olive green slab with two rubber handles that trailed a red and black chevroned power-lead.

He held it firmly to wall by the mark he’d etched and flicked the trigger.

Jake winced involuntarily as the machine gave of a sharp squeal, but the noise quickly softened to a distant throb as the noise-reduction kicked in.

A plume of plaster-dust sprayed out of the exhaust, quickly turning into the crimson gush of vaporised brick. He slid the cutter gently towards the right for half a metre and then began to work downwards. After twenty centimetres he slid it back over to the left, and then upwards again to complete the fourth side of a rectangular slice through the wall.

He disengaged the cutter and put it down. Then he picked up a pair of jemmys and signalled to Jake with a nod of the head. He passed one of them over to him and began prying at one end of the slab. Jake followed suite at the other end and the wedge of brickwork began to ease

slowly out of its slot. Five minutes passed before the two of them pulled it free and heaved it, gasping, to the ground.

The slot in the wall was pitch dark, even with the amplifiers. Kaos picked up a glo-light and shone it into the interior. The beam fell onto a cluster of thick steel cables that ran up a shaft, and, beyond it, twin aluminium shutters set into the far wall. He was looking into the interior of an elevator shaft.

Kaos picked the cutter up again, and they continued taking the wall apart, cutting another six slabs out of it until they'd torn a hole big enough for a single person to clamber through.

A com beeped and 2-Bit switched to a slot of Net-space on the unit.

Phantom was there—just his head this time—floating a metre ahead of him in an inky nothingness. Run-time pressure was off so the face was crystal clear, hi-res realism marred only by the too-perfect plastic sheen of a texture-mapped skin free from blots, blemishes, or stubble.

“How's it lookin'?” 2-Bit asked.

“Looks good,” Phantom said. “Seems like they fell for it. Nova spooks been chasin' red herrings across the States. Set up a couple of jumps, too—”

“How long till they twig?”

Phantom paused. “Be a while yet. I figure they'll give it a week before they get sniffin'.” I'll eyeball the traces and get back if there's action...”

“Sure thing.”

Phantom flashed a row of toothpaste ad teeth and vanished; 2-Bit flicked back to the surveillance grid.

Jake looked nervously into the interior of the shaft. Kaos was hanging from a service ladder by a harness, cracking open a circuit box on the adjacent wall.

Blue sparks pierced the dark, burning scattered after-images onto his vision. He looked away, turning back to where the others were waiting.

HeadSpace

A minute later a soft clatter resounded from the shaft, followed by the hum of the elevator. Jake looked down and saw the distant square of the elevator roof rising towards them. When it was a couple of metres below, there was another flash of sparks as Kaos cut the power and then flicked it back on briefly to bring it flush with the floor they were standing on.

“Okay,” Kaos said over the com, “hop on board...”

Jake went first, testing his weight on the elevator’s roof with one foot before gently stepping on. The air in the shaft was colder and a musty smell stang his nostrils. Chip went next, followed by Ribs and then Shiva. Finally, Kaos detached himself from the harness and stepped off the service ladder to join them.

“Here goes—” Kaos said, then pushed a button on a remote he’d strapped to a wrist. The elevator shuddered and then jumped to life, motors whining as it began its descent.

“Hey, 2-Bit—” Kaos said. A moment later the com crackled.

“Uh...yeah?” 2-Bit said.

“Everything cool?”

There was a pause while 2-Bit jumped channels on the deck.

“Out here it is. Phantom’s netside casing Nova coms. He’ll shout.”

Aluminium shutters that were the entrance to sub-basement 2 rose past them, followed by another pair. They arrived at a third and 2-Bit jammed his thumb down on the remote. The elevator cut out and came to a soft halt two inches short.

Kaos pulled something off his tool-belt and began pulling away at a wiring loom that fed through the wall to the entry panel. A minute later he turned to Jake.

“You ready with the gizmo?”

Jake reached into his pocket and pulled out the unit he’d made a week earlier. He’d added a flash unit and charger to hike up the range, but apart from that it was the same.

“Better switch off those goggles, guys...” Jake said. He tapped the button on his eyepiece and his surroundings winked out into pitch darkness.

“You ready?” Kaos asked.

“Okay, hit it—”

Another flash of arced wires briefly lit the shaft as Kaos shorted the entry circuit. A motor hummed and the shutters slid gracefully open. The glow of security lighting from Sub-basement 3 spilled through. Jake squeezed his eyes shut and pushed the button on the unit.

The strobe blazed, forcing a flickering pink haze through closed eyelids. A tone sounded from somewhere in the gloom and Jake eased his thumb off.

Jake opened his eyes.

“Done,” he said quietly.

There was a series of soft clicks as they switched their goggles back on, and the scene was lit up in that yellowey night-sight glow.

“Stage 2 Check,” Kaos said.

* * *

Anton awoke with a start. There was a knot in his guts and he was damp with perspiration. There was a moment of confusion as the last fragments of a dream fell away, then relief as he remembered where he was.

He’d checked into the London Hilton one week ago. The call came two days later—no visual, just a women’s voice telling him he’d be on standby until further notice.

Then news filtered through of the Yoto crash. Shots of corporate panic in Wall Street and the stock exchanges of a dozen other countries, riot police in Tokyo launching gas canisters as thousands of workers went on the rampage as liquidation threatened the downtown silicon operations.

HeadSpace

He was usually on hand in times of upheaval. Usually called upon to implement a minor erasure that would keep developments on track. Now was a period of particular instability—the deadlock was finally broken and a big winner looked set to come on the scene.

Hopefully it would be his current employers. They'd suffered setbacks but now it was starting to look like they would have the whole show in the bag. Just that last missing link to complete a technology that would turn the whole damn world upside down. He welcomed these thoughts, let the warm embrace of everyday reality carry him away from stifling horror that swallowed him as he slept.

It would happen every few months; the nightmare would be back. The inconsequential drift of disconnected narrative he swam through in his sleep would suddenly be swallowed by thick terror. A fear as black as night, cold and vast was stalking him—a horror that would only manifest as that same twisted clutter of images..

It would be sunny, the air hot and humid. He'd be in a field of flowers, a thick musty smell of perfumed death clawing at his nostrils and the taste of metal in his mouth. He'd be running, on earth that felt like spongy plastic and the flowers would seem to grow, closing in on him. Then he'd realize—the flowers were metal, petals of brass surrounding a huge glassy iris of deep violet, whose every fissure would grow dark and glistening then suddenly send gouts of blood tumbling down a chain-link stem.

Then the blood would be spilling from his mouth, dripping down his chin, and in one of the glistening gems he would see his own face, mouth open, bloated and distorted, issuing that high-pitch gurgling squeal that would send a final bolt of terror through him that tore him from his sleep.

He'd wake drenched in sweat, the taste of metal still in his mouth and that smell in his nostrils—new leather and plastic and that musky choking scent.

A perfume...

*

*

*

The storage dump was a room about the size of a high-school lab. A string of anonymous grey units clung to the walls, and four more of them huddled together in blocks across the floor. Even through the suits they could catch the hi-tech smell riding the cold air—that perfume-y scent of polycarbon tinged with a faint musty edge of hot circuitry and burnt dust particles.

The floor was a glossy black pool of tiling that mirrored the glitter of tiny LEDs scattered across the units’ panels and the slabs of surveillance kit on the walls. To the left was the mouth of a corridor that led off to the stairwell.

“How’d we know if it works?” Ribs hissed.

“If it doesn’t then we’ll know pretty damn soon.” Jake said.

“Great,” Ribs said after a pause. “Just great.”

Here goes, thought Jake. He stepped quietly out onto the floor of sub-basement 3, tensing for that sudden scream of realisation from the AI alarm system. It didn’t come. He breathed a sigh of relief.

The others shuffled out after him and Kaos passed, making his way over to a wall-unit on the right hand side of the room. He dumped his bag on the ground and knelt down, unzipping a segment and wrestling more equipment from inside. Shiva joined him, pulling a length of black cable and a set of chrome sockets from his own.

“Get over here, Jake.” Kaos said. He was pulling a grey foam collar from around a big slab of equipment about the size of a regular base-unit. It was the RAM-sink, two hundred terrabytes of free space that would shortly be jacked into the guts of the Nova storage dump.

Jake went over and squatted down beside him.

“Get this thing on line,” Kaos said. He turned to one of the four units set into the floor and began pulling a panel off the front. Jake switched on the sink, flipped down a keypad and set to work.

Shiva and Kaos muttered together as they probed at the mainframe’s innards. The panel was off its hinges on the floor beside them, and a

HeadSpace

tangle of cables and converters was strung across the floor between them, the end of them hooked into the side of the sink.

Two minutes later a tone sounded from the sink and a string of glyphs winked up on the display. Jake moved aside as Shiva scrambled over to it, took hold of a cable and hooked it up to one of the sockets that hung out of his hood. Then he flipped down another panel on the sink's side and wedged his fingers into the BAT.

He sat in that same cross-legged position he always went for, eyes staring into the virtual gateway of the RAM dump core, head lolling involuntarily as his fingers worked the mechanism.

* * *

There was nothing on visual, just the voice.

"This is Gibson. Patch me through to McAffrie," it said.

Gibson was the boss, the *big* boss, so Kurt yessirred him straight through. McAffrie was the stocky ginger guy, he remembered, and he put the voice through to one of the new numbers on the list that was tacked to the board above his desk.

Then he leaned back into the chair, thumbed the remote for the screen, and the air was once again alive with the frantic babble of a talk show.

Ten minutes passed before he caught sight of the Apollo team. McAffrie and the others were down near the end of the corridor that led to the stores and a tiny rec room. They were talking earnestly amongst themselves.

After a minute they hurried over to the lobby area, where McAffrie strode over to the desk.

"Turn that off," he said simply. Kurt thumbed the remote and the screen winked out.

McAffrie reached across to where the ageing placards were piled, pulled one out and hung it on the hooks over the other.

It was scarlet with bold white letters.
“RED,” it said.

* * *

It was an easy crack, like he thought it would be. In a set-up this tight they tended to get complacent about details, figured the chances of getting in were too small to go a whole bundle on system locks. The security was old and weak and hadn't been updated in years. The only tough part was deciding which of the holes would be quickest to get through.

He took the one that sprang clearest to mind. The big well-trodden path you could follow with your eyes shut. He buried a virus in a bit-stream and shot it into the core disguised as an authorisation sequence. The CPU ran a validation scan and bounced it, but not before ancient sub-processors latched onto a code signature and kicked the virus to life.

About ten nanoseconds after the core came back with an entry lock-out message, the virus had killed off all the doorkeeper processes, and Shiva was free to stroll through the gateway as a super-user.

It was only a matter of minutes. Seconds later a tone sounded and a display jumped to life on the sink. A sliver of green was slowly eating up a grey wedge of status bar, while the digits of a very large number blurred steadily upwards.

“Done,” Shiva said. He unclipped the feed from his goggles and disconnected the deck from the mainframe, cramming it back into his bag. “How's it lookin', Toobie?”

“All clear, Mr S.,” 2-Bit's voice said.

The green bar crawled steadily onwards, ten per-cent turned to twenty. Kaos and Shiva waited nervously while Chip stood and paced about. This was the longest part—the wait as terrabytes of data trickled through a single fibre-optic feed.

HeadSpace

Ribs was relaxed but alert, his glance switching between the gaping mouth of the elevator shaft and the doorway to the stairwell. He figured it would be a toss-up between the two if it came to it. Some plod might just blunder in on a routine eyeball, but if they were wise to the hit already, then they'd be more subtle.

The shaft they'd knocked out wouldn't work, but Kaos had fixed it so it would look like a malfunction. The other was a different matter. It'd work, but there was a lockout on sub-basement 3, and if anyone tried to get down that way they'd sniff trouble.

It wasn't likely they'd use the elevator though, security teams usually get told to take the stairs otherwise they miss too much turf, and even if they did use the elevator he'd hear it clear as a bell through that yawning hole.

If they already knew, though, then that'd be different. Maybe they'd slip down the shaft they'd knocked out, or fix the second elevator and use it to deliver a surprise. It was anyone's guess. But lift shafts made him nervous, and his eyes kept returning to the electronically enhanced twilight of that big brick well they'd busted through, ears alert for a tell-tale shuffle or clatter of unseen enemies slipping nimbly down the service ladder.

He looked back to the sink. That sliver of green was close to the end now, topping the ninety per-cent mark and creeping towards ninety-five.

Then it happened the way it did sometimes, alarm bells going off in his head, responding to some subliminal change he couldn't pin-down. "The sound of something you didn't quite hear," they used to call it in the marines. Goose-bumps washed over his body, and a surge of adrenalin took hold, muscles tightening to respond to an unseen threat.

So even as the ruby glitter of the laser-sight darted across the floor, up the wall behind them, glistening briefly on his suit and then Chip's, Ribs was falling sideways, sliding and kicking Chip's feet from under her.

Then the noise shattered the air, the flicker of automatic fire surreally amplified by the goggles, a blinding staccato blaze echoed by a dance of sparks as rounds thudded across the wall and floor nearby. The sink jumped and a shower of sparks spat off a corner as a ricochet caught it.

An alarm screamed and neon panels across the ceiling winked on as the infra-red got tripped.

Ribs was belly down on the floor behind the mainframe unit Shiva and Kaos had ripped open. Chip and Shiva were huddled nearby while Kaos and Shadow had ducked behind its neighbour a couple of metres to the right.

Ribs ripped the velcro flap off his holster and pulled the stubby wedge of the blue-steel Sauer out into the open, flicking off the safety with his thumb and pulling the slide back with a soft click. Then he shuffled over to the edge of the unit and peered round.

The guy was stood in the shadows of the small stretch of corridor that led through to the staircase. Ribs wondered how he'd got through the door so quietly. He was half-hidden behind the corner of the corridor entrance, standing with his back to the wall. The had the muzzle angled upwards, his head twitching from side to side as goggled eyes darted about in search of motion.

Ribs knew he'd been spotted even before the figure tensed and brought the muzzle down again. He ducked back just as the air split with another blast rapid fire, rounds tearing into the side off the mainframe and the wall behind them.

Time to stop this shit, he thought. He pulled off the hood and tore the goggles away, dumping them down nearby. Then he crawled past Chip and Shiva and carefully edged round the adjacent side of the mainframe unit.

He peered round the corner towards the doorway. The view was blocked by another mainframe unit closer to the corridor mouth, and he shuffled quietly over the floor in between until he was up against its

HeadSpace

side. Then he edged to the left-hand corner until he was sitting flush with it, his back against the beige panelling.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, holding the Sauer up to the vertical. Then he eased up to the corner and peered round again.

He was in a good position. The guy with the piece wouldn't be able to see him from there—his face was hidden by the corner of the corridor mouth. But he could see the guy's shoulder and arms, and that ugly matt-black uzi angled slightly upwards.

Ribs stood up swiftly but quietly, aimed the bore of the Sauer and fired. A single thud shook the room and there was a hoarse scream and a rattle of metal on tile. A spent case jangled tunefully across the ground and bounced off a tin panel.

Ribs darted up to the wall by the corridor mouth and eased carefully round.

The guy wasn't very old—maybe nineteen or twenty, he was wearing a blue jumpsuit and clutching at a bleeding rag of torn flesh and bone that had been his hand, a look of dumb disbelief on his pale face. Nearby him was the wrecked automatic, a split magazine case spilling fresh rounds across the tiles, part of his hand still wedged round the trigger-guard.

Ribs walked over to him and kicked the remains of the uzi to the other side of the room. The terror-stricken kid looked up at him and started to scramble away.

“Don't worry, son,” Ribs said. “I ain't gonna kill ya. Fuck up my karma—”

Shiva and Chip were still huddled by the mainframe, across from them were Kaos and Jake.

“Hey Ribs,” Shiva said. “Everything cool?”

“He can't hear you,” came Jake's voice on the com, “he pulled off his hood...”

“Shit,” Shiva said. He shuffled over and peered round the corner. Ribs was standing in the corridor; some guy in blue was huddled up on the floor nearby. Shiva pulled up his hood and shouted across.

“Ribs. You ..?”

Ribs turned a little when he heard Shiva, but then he caught something out of the corner of his eye. Through the glass doors at the bottom of the stairwell something glittered. It was the glint of something cold and hard and shiny being levelled, and even as Ribs was twisting and throwing himself back into the room, he knew it was too late.

The glass pane exploded and automatic fire ripped across him, pain singing in his chest

Then he was on his back, nerves ablaze and vision swimming, going dark...

The figure was short and stocky with short-cropped ginger hair and pale skin; he was in his mid-thirties. He stepped through the hole left by the shattered glass and muttered something over a com-link. Then he stepped over Ribs’ bleeding body and made his way over to the units that Shiva, Kaos, Jake and Chip were huddled behind.

Over the com 2-Bit was shouting their names, barking the same questions at them over and over again.

The figure cautiously moved into view, uzi levelled and trigger finger at the ready, relaxing slightly when he saw that they were unarmed. Then he paused for a moment, headed tilted slightly. He was listening to something.

Finally he responded.

“All of them?” he asked.

An answer only he could hear came and he stood back and raised the muzzle again.

Chip clung onto Shiva and closed her eyes. Jake and Kaos just looked up in dread and numb disbelief.

HeadSpace

Jake was wishing to hell he'd brought his .45 along despite the order to leave it behind.

Chip's mind was a storm of emotion—terror and love and grief washed through her; the sour taste of old regrets and the warm glow of fond memories danced about in a bitter-sweet tango—fragments of her life's narrative congregating for a final appearance.

Shiva didn't think anything; he'd gone through this in day-dreams, rehearsed the feelingless, thoughtless wall he'd become. He stared into the space behind his eyelids and thought of nothing.

Kaos was numb, shock taking hold like a plunge through broken ice. He thought distantly of a date he had lined up with a girl from Paris, and the adolescent thrill that played on his mind in idle moments as his imagination span out the possibilities. And over the com 2-Bit's holler-ing went on, calling them, pleading with them to answer.

In a second that seemed like an eternity they waited for the blaze of noise and pain that would end their lives.

A single shot boomed. A case jangled on cold tiles.

The uzi fell from the ginger guy's hands and clattered onto the floor. For a moment he stood there, eyes lolling and mouth working like he was trying to say something. Then his knees gave way and he keeled over before them, a wisp of smoke curling up from a large and ragged hole in his back.

Shiva scrambled from behind the unit and looked across the floor.

Ribs was lying on his side by the corridor entrance. The front of his boiler suit was dark with blood; the chestnut skin of his face was wet with perspiration, his breathing shallow and laboured. A smoking Mauser was in his right hand.

"Jesus...Ribs! Chip get over here," Shiva shouted, scrambling over to his side.

"Ribs," Shiva put a hand on his arm, "Talk to me, man..."

Ribs grimaced as a spasm of pain bit in, then he opened his eyes.

"Th—the other..." he gasped.

“What’s that?”

Ribs turned his head and looked toward the corridor. Shiva followed his gaze. The corridor was empty, the white tiles awash with glass fragments and daubed with blood. A long smear of crimson led to the door panel, like something wounded had dragged itself out.

“He’s gone, Ribs. Don’t you worry about that—”

Chip had dumped a medikit bag beside them and was pulling things out of its side-pockets.

“Gimme some space,” she said.

Shiva moved aside and Chip knelt down beside him, rolling him gently onto his back. She rolled his sleeve up and pinned a couple of micro-jects to his forearm, then began cutting away at the front of his suit with surgical scissors.

“Oh Jesus...” she said. Now the bulky fabric of the boiler suit was clear she could see the damage better. A khaki T-shirt beneath was drenched in blood, there were four—maybe five—holes punched through the material in a ragged line across his chest.

“What?” Shiva asked.

“Chest shots...at least four.”

“Yeah, but did they get through?”

She gave him a look of dumb disbelief, then began cutting away at the fabric of the shirt. Shiva pulled the Mauser out of his hand. “I’d better take this,” he said, and bounded over to the corridor mouth.

There were four holes in Ribs’ chest, a fifth bullet had just winged him, passing cleanly out the back of his pectoral on his left side. A sixth was lower down, in the abdomen.

And he’s still alive, she thought, he’s still alive. This can’t be possible.

Then she saw: Through coagulating blood in those fleshy holes the glimmer of metal. At first she thought they were bullets—slowed by a flak jacket and embedded in the flesh. She tore a surgical cloth out of its sterile wrapping and pressed it to one of the wounds, then looked closer. A metal surface glimmered—some sort of implant.

HeadSpace

She wrestled the scanner from the medikit, flicked it on, and ran it across his chest and abdomen.

Against the light and medium half-tones of internal organs and skeletal structure, a great dark slab appeared on the viewer. It was a huge implant, aluminium or titanium body armour that extended round the upper torso encasing the rib-cage and shoulder blades.

It was intact, too. A couple of the slugs were caught up in flesh where they'd ricocheted, but the others had been spat cleanly out. Only one remained, that messy abdomen shot where a single slug had torn a path through a kidney and embedded itself in the wall of his lower back.

2-Bit screamed at them over the com, his voice hoarse and panicky. "Where the hell were you? What the fuck is going on in there?"

"We had a problem," Shiva said. He stood by the corridor mouth, uzi pointed nervously toward the door.

"Pull out now. Get the fuck out of there!"

"Kaos," Shiva said. "Grab the sink and get the damn elevator. We're going. Shadow, give us a hand over here..."

Kaos was already stuffing equipment into zip-ups. He slung a couple of bags over his shoulder and staggered over to the elevator entrance, dumping them on the carriage roof.

Shiva looked down at Chip. She'd just finished dressing the wound on his abdomen. She glanced up at him briefly.

"He needs attention but he'll be okay," Chip said, relieved. "He's got an implant—body armour."

"You mean you didn't know?" Shiva said, his attention still on the stairwell entrance.

"Should I?"

"Why d'you think they call him 'Ribs?'"

Shiva backed away from the entrance and knelt down by Ribs, hooking one of his arms under Ribs' shoulder and signalling Jake to take the other arm. They struggled up, Shiva still pointing the uzi that hung off

a strap over his free arm, half lifting and half dragging him to the mouth of the elevator shaft. Chip zipped up her pack and followed.

2-Bit slammed the van into reverse and spun round into the alley mouth. He pulled to a halt a few metres short of the abandoned works.

He switched the goggles over to remote, flicking through five sets of Eyes.

Nothing yet.

He kept watching, nervously flicking from one channel to the next, on the look-out for one of those spook vans that always looked the same. The wail of the alarm over the com was more distant now, and he could hear panting and Shiva's subdued muttering, and a deeper, more ragged gasping.

"Come on. Come ON..." Kaos murmured.

He was at that junction up at the end of Queen's where those legs had been. The traffic was quieter now. In the distance a big grey van was heading toward them in a hurry, a van like the ones used by a-hundred-and-one military and security outfits.

For a moment it looked like it was going to keep on going, past the junction and off towards the ring-road, but at the last moment it slammed on the brakes and threw itself into a sharp turn that sent it swaying into the entrance of Queen's.

It had no plates and the windows were blacked out.

He flipped up the eye-piece and looked frantically to the staircase.

Nothing.

Then Kaos appeared, hurrying up the steps into the alley, bag slung over either shoulder, hood hanging off, face and hair wet with exertion. He winced from the glare of light that washed down from neighbouring security lamps, and ran round over to the side of the van, heaving open the slide door and tossing the bags in.

Chip and the others followed, Jake and Shiva were carrying Ribs by the arms, while Chip had hold of his feet.

HeadSpace

They staggered over to the slide door and lowered him gently into the back.

2-Bit switched over to the Eyes.

The van had slammed to a halt before the Maas lobby. Rear doors burst open and a crew of armed men in black leather overalls, cluttered equipment belts and slim fitting full-face helmets spilled out onto the street.

Kaos heaved himself over into the front seat and Shiva slammed the side door.

“Go!” he shouted.

2-Bit flipped the eyepiece and slammed the van into forward gear.

They took a right turn away from Queen’s, passing swiftly through the grid of backroads North-East until they reached the comforting neon halo of the inner circular.

The van raced up a slip-road and joined the west-bound carriageway, an anonymous tin sliver amongst the thousands of other metal corpuscles that flowed ceaselessly through London’s concrete arteries.

“That was nearly a fucking wipeout!” Kaos shouted, “What happened in there?”

“How the fuck should I know,” Shiva said quietly. He was pale, beads of sweat around his nose and brow. Delayed shock seeping through. “They found out. They knew.”

“No shit!”

He turned on 2-Bit.

“You were the eyes, what happened?”

“Nothing this side. It was all cool out here like I said. The goons must’ve been there already. On site security.”

The cabin fell quiet. Only the hiss of tarmac and Ribs’ ragged breathing from the back.

“Must have twigged while we were in there,” Jake said. “If they knew before, they’d have been waiting...” He wondered if Kaos was thinking

the same thing. That maybe they missed something, maybe they screwed up and tripped something off when they busted in.

Kaos punched a number into the dashboard com. A tone sounded for ten seconds before the screen jumped to life. Phantom's CGen looked out at them, the expression was serious.

"You all make it?" he asked.

"Just about," Kaos said. "Ribs took a few slugs, but he'll pull through. What the fuck happened?"

"They zeroed you," Phantom said. "Shiva's a grade 2 felon, now. They got his make all over the grid."

"Why didn't we know?"

"He just got upgraded—Saturday midnight."

"Shit," Kaos spat.

"There was a call-out an hour before the job. Some local feds swooped a mall nearby, missed you by just a few minutes. Of course news got through to Nova pretty quick. They got eyes in their asses over this; been working real hard to pin down the names. Soon as Shiva got marked, it blew the game wide open."

Jake felt relief. Relief that he was off the hook and shame that he was worrying about his own ass. He hadn't screwed up on the AI, and Kaos hadn't tripped an alarm. It was Shiva—now a wanted fugitive—who'd been rumbled by some street eye before they'd even started the job.

"Who were the dumb-ass Rambos?" Kaos asked.

"Just a couple of hired plods. You're damn lucky you got outta there before the professionals showed—"

"Right..." Kaos sighed.

"Did you get the sink?" Phantom asked.

"Yeah, yeah. We got it. Most of it anyway. Unit took a shot—core might be damaged. But it's there.

"Okay," Phantom said. "You know what to do." Phantom's face vanished and the screen broke into static.

HeadSpace

“Hey!” a voice said, little more than a gasp.

The voice made Shiva jump. He looked round towards where Ribs lay. He was awake, eyes open and searching round to where Shiva sat, a pained grin forcing its way through a face like polished wood.

“Don’t try to talk. Just rest,” Chip responded. She inspected a readout she had rigged up to his arm.

“Shiva,” Ribs gasped, insistently.

Shiva knelt down and crawled along to where Ribs was lying.

“I hear you Ribs. What is it?”

He was quiet for a moment, as if catching his breath.

“I got something for you -” Ribs pulled back the velcro of one of the pouches circling his jacket and slid a hand in. A moment later he took it out, clasping something. He reached out to Shiva and pushed an object into his waiting hand. It was cool, jagged and metallic.

Shiva opened his hand and looked at it.

At first he didn’t recognise it. It was a twisted piece of scrap metal, slightly split, housing a leaden smear of magma. Then he made out contours, a pattern and shape to the fold of shrapnel.

It was a Saint Christopher, the mangled lead pellet of a military slug nestling in its crumpled skin, where it had just fallen short of tearing through.

One of Ribs’ stories. One he’d never believed.

Ribs’ chest was shaking slightly. A deep chuckle rolled out from the back of his throat, coming in waves until the trickle of analgesics from a fresh row of microjects clinging to his arm took hold, and he drifted back into a chemical half-sleep.

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From the distance the Finchley Industrial District looked like the fading embers of a woodfire in a patch of muddy wasteland. As they

approached, the embers panned out into the orange slits of security lights scattered throughout an uneven architectural detritus.

They didn't need to stop and punch the com button of that screen by the entrance; those huge steel gates were already swinging smoothly inwards as they rounded the last corner of a set of freshly laid roads by the new complex.

A bevelled concrete ramp took them down into a tunnel that ran under the complex, and a narrow road lit by a long slit of pink neon led them to a set of grey service entrances set into arches along the sides. It was old brickwork, like the complex was built over an old factory or the remains of an ancient railway station.

A sterile glare spilled out into the pink half-light of the tunnel. 2-Bit slowed and turned towards its source, driving through an arched entrance and into a basement service area.

Half a dozen overalled people were waiting, with a couple more suits nearby. They descended swiftly on the van as it drew to a halt. Behind them a metallic crash sounded as sliding doors slammed shut behind them.

The door on the van opened and three green-clad medics gently lifted Ribs onto a trolley, wheeling him quickly away. Shiva took hold of the sink and climbed out of the van, handing it to the nearest of the waiting technicians. He took it to a worktop nearby, the others joining him to inspect it.

Shiva went over to one of the suits, an attractive but cold-faced woman. At a glance she looked in her mid-thirties, but there was a subtle edge to the skin texture around the neck and jawline that told Shiva's trained eye that the youth was artificial. She turned towards him as he approached.

"Sink's damaged," she said matter-of-factly.

"So's Ribs," Shiva retorted. "It's nothing serious—you'll fix it."

For a moment she didn't reply. She just looked impassively towards the worktop where the techies were huddled about the unit.

“Okay,” she said finally, her eyes still fixed on the team, “Soon as we verify, I’ll authorise the credit transfer. Leave the van, a driver will be here shortly. He’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

Shiva turned and went back to join the others.

Midnight found them at a hotel in Islington. It was a good hotel with a string of stars. Its interior was expanses of varnished antiquity and tastefully modernised versions of period furnishings. It was manned by solemn looking staff in crisp black and white uniforms that pampered them, taking their coats and luggage and politely ushering them up an ancient elevator, and through expanses of broad oak-panelled corridors carpeted with a thick crimson pile to where their rooms were.

Kaos joined Shiva in his room, pouring himself a double-shot of something from the mini-bar and settling into a large arm-chair.

“I can’t believe I’m giving you this same damn lecture...” Kaos said.

“Then shut it.” Shiva snapped.

“You remember what happened to Fresko?” Kaos went on, ignoring the remark. “Little guy, big mouth, thought he knew all the moves. Except he was more keen on building the reputation than earning it. In the end it worked, he got known but the whole thing was kinda cosmetic. He’d start rumours, spin stories, and take credit for jobs the real perps had sense to shut up about—”

“I know the story...” Shiva said between clenched teeth.

“Yeah,” Kaos snapped, “but I’m gonna remind you one more time.”

“Anyway,” Kaos went on in that sing-song story-telling voice, “This guy was fishing for shit from all sides. He’d made a reputation that was bigger than he was. He’d foul up jobs they thought he could do, and piss off the real names, but worse of all he’d got in too deep too quick to know how to handle the kind of heat that a big name gets. He was still basically green, a skilled rookie in a world of people way bigger than he was. Were *you* surprised when you heard the news, Jez? When they found that freeway smear a mile long...”

“No.”

“I didn’t think so. The only thing that surprised me was that a customer didn’t get to him first. He was just lucky I guess. Anyway the point to all this is that you are all set to take the same route. You are drawing more flak than you can handle, I don’t wanna be the one tell you’re old mom, your brother, and that cute little piece of ass in San Diego—yeah I know about her—that you got wasted.”

“That’s my damn problem,” Shiva said.

“*Our* problem,” Kaos exploded, “Our fucking problem. We nearly got our asses blown away in there and it ain’t gonna get any easier while we’ve got you around.”

There was a silence. He was right and Shiva knew it.

“So what next?” Shiva said after a pause.

“You hole up somewhere. You keep your damn head down while I sniff out the news. Soon as you go inactive for a while they downgrade you. Give it a few months off-line and the feds’ll have bigger fish to fry...”

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Spencer worked in R&D. Spencer was really into mathematics, and a specialist in a field that most people hadn’t heard of called “Matrices theory and dynamics.”

Something had got him really excited a few weeks ago, but like most things that got mathematicians excited it got ignored because mathematicians usually aren’t that good at explaining what their discovery means. Most people figured that since these guys get excited about a lot of things that usually don’t mean a hell of a lot in the real world, then their manic ramblings should just be politely heard, humoured with the fake comprehension that most corporate types have honed to a fine perfection, and then forgotten.

HeadSpace

This was no exception of the managerial echelons of R&D, where his persistent softside mail-drops were quickly binned or left unanswered.

So the thing that had got Spencer so excited was quickly diffused by corporate inertia and indifference at every level. Spencer's weak attempts at persistence cut no ice, and the matter was forgotten. Almost.

Just as the bitterness and frustration at the ignorance around him was starting to settle in his gut, there was a development. Developments of this sort were very unusual in a corporate culture like this, but on this occasion fortune had smiled. Ironically it was a barbed comment made by one of Spencer's supervisors who'd taken a particular disliking to him that had made his break. The comment was overheard by a senior Security Op who was chewing over the global increase in border breaks.

By a fluke, this particular op was an initiate of the kind of advanced scientific hieroglyphs that Spencer was fluent in, and was conversant enough in the obscure roundabout musings Spencer took for explanation to realise that this guy had discovered something important.

Spencer had been studying an advanced form of matrices, matrices so huge and detailed that most people called them bitmaps. He'd suddenly started speculating about a particular breed of these images that were synonymous with basic human identification. What he'd suddenly realised was that the processes that daily sifted and matched billions of the corpuscular roadmaps had a vital flaw.

A few minor distortions would throw the match completely off-whack, and this got him thinking along a different track. He thought about an article he'd seen on cable about a puzzling and alarming global trend they'd dubbed "moling." Molers were a statistical peculiarity amongst the travelling population. If you were to look into a regular traveller's motions, you could trace them in a comfortable, logical sequence from airport to airport across the globe, courtesy of those units where ID got swiped. Moles, though, were different. Officially they'd hadn't moved. They ought to be just sitting tight in one country, and yet they left subtle traces that told a different story. Credit cards

and other IDs would leave tell-tale beads across the globe, and there'd be vidcam footage to back it up—a handful of characters who would mysteriously pop up in random spots across the globe and then vanish again. They'd be in a bar in Prague, then a parking stack in Hong Kong, then a mall in Rome, Paris, or New York. All this without going anywhere. Officially.

Unofficially was a different story. Sure a desperate fugitive could hire a boat, plane or pod to slip un-noticed out of the country, but this only accounted for a tiny fraction of mole activity. The facts pointed to a more disturbing picture—that these guys were slipping anonymously through the arteries of global air-travel much like any other Joe. This was worrying, because legit border control was meant to be one hundred per cent airtight.

So someone had thought up a scam, and the Outworld was catching on.

But he'd cracked it, and better still, the little clutter of symbols he'd got triple underlined on his notepad meant more than just closing off the scam, they could go through the records and ID every single one of them, mapping their movements into a lattice of big bright lines.

Spencer took another look at the glyph in his in-tray, touching the screen gently and watching with pride and satisfaction as it panned out into a message with a dozen similar gems below. It was personally signed by Denroy Sebastian, a corporate legend whose face could be found peppered across hundreds of promos, documentaries, & TV interviews that were neatly stacked away in the reference sections of every PA server on earth.

The message was a personal order to suspend all other activities and to immediately begin testing the process. Included with the message were a handful of databases, classified material—one-hundred-and-thirty thousand images. Panned out like this they looked like a vast, uniform mozaic

HeadSpace

of amber discs dotted in an inky blackness. They stretched off-screen in every direction.

Barely discernable on each of them was the amber-pink blur of a unique scarlet threadwork.

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Eve was asleep when Jake arrived back at the tenement. The shrill tone of the door-lock and the sound of feet in the corridor woke her, and a momentary anxiety was over-taken by relief as comprehension settled.

The tension she felt had eased. Jake was still not himself, still haunted by the spectre of tragedy, but he was back from the brink.

Sure she had worries about the job. Sure she realised that Jake was getting deep Outworld, but she sensed something behind it now, thin and distant at first—barely a suspicion—but grower stronger. It startled her but also gave her a cold thrill, that buzz she got when she made one of those big connections.

It was a yearning, a vast hunger; not the defeated suffering of the starving, but a solid wall of grim determination, the single-minded pursuit driven by a desperate need for something.

As he strutted into the room and dumped a bag, slinging his jacket onto a chair, the sense was overwhelming. There was an aura about him, he radiated a new energy and strength.

Part of it was the euphoria he was still riding from pulling off the job, the blissful release from that tension and fear he'd been living under through the worst time of his life.

And part of it was the money. He'd been careful not to let her forget about the money because he knew how she felt about how deep in he was getting. But a hundred thou is a lot of money for a night out on some industry rip-off.

But that wasn't all it was.

Paul Barrows

Jake turned to her and smiled. It was a real smile, not a withering half-smile imprisoned by self-pity or fatalism, but a sincere expression that brought a sudden warmth and blissful nostalgia of their first weeks together. There was still sadness there, and pain, but no sign of the parasitic selfishness that grief's twisted edge can bring.

She climbed to her feet and hugged him, shivering as the chill of his clothes bit into her naked skin. He put his arms around her waist and they held each other tight.

"Please Jake..." she said at last, and he could feel her trembling against him.

She didn't have to say anything, there was no need to voice the fears she carried. Jake knew, and for the first time he realised how much he loved her, how much he wanted to protect her from the deadly world that was creeping up on him.

Standing here in a bare-boarded room, the amber dawn creeping through the blinds and the smell of laundry and water-paint in the air, it was all suddenly so clear. There was more at stake now. More than just his own life and a widow's grief to contend with. Because the trouble you messed with wasn't just your own business, it never was. Danger is contagious, and it would always find a way to spread, passing from person to person like a black osmosis.

Maybe it was the icy memory of that fleeting moment where death passed within a hair's breadth that had opened his eyes. He didn't really care. All he knew now was that he couldn't ever let her come to any harm, not from anything.

"It's okay," he said, "I'm through with this. We made our stack—I'm quitting."

"I'm not asking you to throw in the whole game. I just want you keep out of the deep end. I'm just scared."

"Yeah," he sighed, "Time to back off. Just small time from now on."

She hugged him hard with relief and gratitude.

HeadSpace

A small and distant part of Jake writhed in shame and anger. He felt like a coward, a cop-out. He could already see the look on their faces when he told the others, could hear the furtive whispers behind his back. Shadow—could've gone big-time but yellowed out after the Nova hit. Near-miss broke his nerve.

He shook the feeling off, settling back into his self-assured resolve. The team and the other names would understand, if they didn't then to hell with them. They could say what they damn well wanted.

* * *

Thirty-six hours later a fleet of stealth jets approached a stretch of desert two hundred miles south-east of Vegas. Its payload was fifty canisters of the nerve toxin TST-4, one hundred and twenty-eight armed troops and a handful of jeeps.

In the dead of night it was invisible to the eye, and didn't raise a twitch on radar until the soft hum of muffled turbines was audible to the scattering of personnel hurrying around the floodlit interior of one of the hangars.

Even as alarms were sounding and huge grids of halide were sending a blaze of light into the sky above the base, canisters were falling, alloy sides glittering in the light. They landed soundlessly in the grass or clattered noisily off iron roofing, each off them erupting a jet of odourless colourless gas.

The second sweep had the jets slowing, turbines upturned, to hover gently over the grounds of the base like huge metal predators. Then they were landing one by one, coming to rest on the runway by the hangar or on nearby stretches of lawn, the whirr of the engines slowing to a deep idling thrum that resonated through nearby windows and door panels.

Gates at their rear swiftly lowered, and dozens of shadowy figures spilled out quickly adopting a defensive formation, and then slowly

fanning out towards where the hangars and main research facility was located.

There was practically no resistance. Those who hadn't already been sleeping were slumped about in the hangars and labs. They were surrounded by trolleys laden with hastily loaded equipment and piles of half-wrapped cables and wiring that they'd been busily loading into one of the bays. Only a few shots rang out deep within the building as a scattering of security personnel who'd managed to don breathing gear fought a brief, losing battle.

Nova Corp had done a good job. The response had been swift, and dismantlement of Prometheus had gone ahead with ruthless efficiency. Records showed that one plane-load had already been despatched, another was waiting in the hangar ready to load a clutter of plastic plats stacked with alloy boxes.

It wasn't enough. The job was bigger than anyone anticipated, and in the chaos to pull the core out of the project mistakes got made. Red-coded items meant for the first shipment didn't make the deadline, others got mixed up with lower priority items. Even if they'd got the prototype out in time, they wouldn't have been able to manage the stacks of classified data chaotically distributed throughout the facility. Just one mislaid tape would have blown the technology wide open.

Specialists coordinated the acquisition, quickly narrowing the sprawl down to a handful of containers. Safes and security rooms were cracked and piles of tape and discs were swiftly shuttled with the other equipment to a carrier's waiting storage bays.

There was more than enough here to put the picture together. Even with four fifths of the prototype missing, Aizu would painstakingly sift the data. Huge decryption machines would break the VGP wrappers, converting meaningless binary noise into expanses of slick technical documentation, video footage, and glittering VR constructs.

HeadSpace

One hour later, one hundred and twenty-six men slipped back into the bellies of the jumpers, taking with them six tons of equipment, a stretcher, and two body-bags. By the time the military arrived, responding to an automatic distress-call sent off by the base's aerial surveillance, they were half-way across the pacific.

* * *

The story made itself across the Network like it always did. An embryonic fragment of narrative, vague and sketchy in detail at first, but which would quickly expand in size and detail, replicating as its echoes passed from newsdesk to newsdesk.

It would evolve like some semantic life-form, soon embellishing itself with blurred clips of handcorder footage and failed interview attempts, each variation spawning new strands of speculation and conjecture that would either dwindle and vanish into obscurity or else take hold and flourish into newer dramas.

Softside, coloured glyphs housing chunks of sound and vision would recursively duplicate and shuttle the item to a million nodes, a clutter of updates quickly following on their heels. At first it was a nuclear installation under attack from a right-wing terrorist faction. Then it was a biochemical research facility, being invaded by a handful of Cuban mercenaries. The bio outfit story held, but speculation about the identity of the attackers continued, Cuban mercenaries giving way to an underground doomsday cult allied with a breakaway splinter of the Chinese Republican Army. Then the Arabs were back in the picture, Islamic fundamentalists stealing secrets for a biological warfare drive.

For a while the story in all of its forms rode the wave of public interest, but it fell short of reaching that critical mass where some opaque membrane of secrecy would finally be penetrated, allowing the full truth to flood out to be devoured by a hungry public.

Paul Barrows

It sank as these dead-zone stories all did, a fading and soon to be forgotten question-mark, its bursts getting briefer and more intermittent like the closing minutes of a firework display.

The few in the know watched with interest, dispassionately comparing the distant cocktail of fact, speculation, and chinese whispers to pieces of their own reality. The rest watched and then forgot, another drama slipping into a well of disused episodic fragments deep in their memories.

11

Tiph'reth

The King's Head was busy for a Tuesday. It was one of Spider's favourite hard-side hang-outs, and Jake had taken the short walk through a mist of fine rain in the hope of catching him amongst the crowd of characters he was often to be seen with at the atmospheric back-street hideaway.

They were upstairs like they usually were, a weird collection of Hi-tech New-Age oddballs. Zodos, Wikkans, Chaoists, Hippies, and other denominations sat around tables talking earnestly, or stood pint-in-hand chatting and laughing over anecdotes.

Some of them looked just like your ordinary Joes, while others were dressed dramatically the part, flaunting pago-gothic accoutrements—silver pentagrams, ankhs, chaospheres, and other esoteric symbols hanging off thick chains around their necks, fingers cluttered with rows of rings.

Spider wasn't there, so Jake stood about uneasily, finally buying a drink and sitting himself on a stool by the bar. He sipped on it and looked vacantly around the room, passing the time by idly watching.

On a table nearby two women and one guy were sitting, all in their mid-twenties. The guy had shoulder length brown hair and designer stubble. He wore mirror shades whose surface shimmered in oily multi-coloured ripples. He was talking busily to a blond girl in a black plastic vest, tie-dyed lycra leggings, and bright blue Pirelli boots that looked

like they'd come straight from the box. Both of them had a collection of rings and pendants, their ears ringed with rows of studs.

Another girl sat nearby. She wasn't taking part in the discussion but she listened attentively, occasionally glancing around as if looking out for someone. Her long wavy hair was that slightly blue tint of silky black that came out of a bottle. A round face was softly made up—black eye-liner and gold-sheen lipstick, and she wore plain blue-jeans and a faded "Glastonbury '44" T-Shirt with a long-dead display patch peeling at the corners.

She glanced across at Jake a couple of times, and frowned gently to herself, as if trying to recollect something. Their eyes met a second time and Jake gave a polite smile, grateful for a break to the uneasy isolation.

Finally she stood up. There was a brief exchange with the other two, her hand pointing vaguely towards the bar, then she walked across to where he sat.

He smiled casually at her as she approached, curious.

"Jake, right?" she smiled to reveal incisors that were slightly crooked.

"Yeah?"

"I seen you with Spider."

"Right."

"Name's Mandy." She put out a hand. Jake took it and she squeezed gently. "Mind if I sit down?" She pointed to the seat by the table.

"Go ahead."

She swung herself gracefully into the seat. There was something alluringly feminine about the way she moved that didn't quite sit with the tomboy image—as if she'd look more in place in an evening gown and jewellery.

"Maybe you think these guys are just a bunch of crazies," she said, placing a small black handbag on the table. "And you'd be right about some of the cases that hang about here. Do you know how many reincarnations of Elvis there are walking about on Earth today?" she said with mock seriousness, then laughed.

HeadSpace

He smiled. He didn't like to say what he thought about some of the stupid beliefs people hung onto in defiance of all reason. There were a lot of screwed up people clinging onto a lot of crap and getting upset when you pointed out how badly it stank.

On the other hand some of these guys were okay. The veneer of supernaturalism was just dressing for basic common-sense, mystical clichés and buzzwords thrown around to glamorise something that was really pretty ordinary.

“Well,” he said cautiously, “let's just say I kinda switch off soon as they get onto the stuff about archangels, demons, and the rest...”

“Right. But then what you gotta keep in touch with is what they're, like, *really* saying.”

“How d'ya mean?”

“Well. On the one hand you've got your basic head-case or liar. Talks about magic incantations, energy beaming out of finger-tips in luminous rays, spirits that condense into physical form like in some stupid horror movie. Those sorts are just morons looking for an audience. They'll find plenty of suckers to sap up their spiel—”

“And on the other hand?”

“On the other hand you got the others. When they talk about energies, spheres, spirits and demons, it's like a code, a language you use to explain stuff that normal words can't quite get hold of. See, esoteric sciences are badly misunderstood. Most people think it's about cooking up weird practises and living in some stupid fantasy land—and there's plenty who play it like that. But that's not what it's really about.

It's all really just about getting deep down inside the nature of things. Not in the way the scientist does, not through looking outwards and dissecting it all. Here you go the other way—looking inwards, exploring the universe of your own consciousness. The path of the mystic.”

“So why not just talk about it in plain English?”

“Because when you describe experience, every-day words can only take you so far before they get vague, fuzzy. When you get into deeper

levels of consciousness, normal language gets strained, doesn't work too good. Then you've gotta work real hard just to catch a flavour of what you mean. So you've gotta use a new language—one that can put across more abstract ideas.”

“Couldn't they use a language that's a bit more innocuous?”

“There isn't just one language, there's loads, and people just kinda mix and match as it suits. And I guess it kinda adds to the fun, adds a bit of drama slipping in some weird mediaeval stuff. And don't forget that it's us guys who're using the terms as they were meant. If modern culture's so hot on stupid literalism it ain't our fault. Anyhow the language is the first initiation, shuts out most the types who don't get it.”

“Pulls in a few too, I bet—”

“Yeah right, the one's I said about. But you spot them pretty early, and they're kind of a challenge, too, because some of them are nearly ready...”

She tailed off, and looked away thoughtfully, picking up her glass and taking a delicate sip.

“Ready for what?” he asked, after a moment.

She gave him a tired look, like he was being facetious, asking stupid questions.

“For the next stage,” she said. We're all evolving, Jake. Don't think that evolution stops at Darwin. There's another sort of evolution we're going through.

“Way it starts it's like a calling,” she continued. “Something inside suddenly wakes up and you've got this hunger that nothing can satisfy, a lot of questions that you just can't answer. So you go chasing blindly around looking for that something, looking for anything that can feed that hunger, until finally you find a path.” Her voice was soft, intense. “Reason why you're here isn't it Jake? You've started. It stands out a mile...”

Jake jumped internally. For a moment he felt she'd hit on something, before earthy cynicism descended.

HeadSpace

“Maybe your right, but I wouldn’t put it so dramatically. We’ve all got things to work out. All got questions we want answering...”

“But it’s the *kind* of questions, isn’t it?” she said.

She was silent for a few moments before she continued.

“Spider talks to me, you know. Talks to me a lot. Things he does, people he meets, shit he’s going through. Except something’s really got him fired up recently. About the Net. Something’s going on. Something big.”

“Yeah,” Jake said.

She looked at him quizzically.

“Do you know what it is.”

“Not sure. Something’s going on but I’m kind of out of my depth.”

“You thought maybe Spider might help you straighten things out?”

“I guess so...”

“That’s why you’re here. I think I might be able to give you a handle on things. At least I’ll give you the story the way the Pagan set see it, and you can take it or leave it.”

She took another gulp of her drink.

“You ever hear of emanationism?” she asked.

It rang a bell from way back. Brought back a glimmer of old memories of long hours sitting amongst rows of fold-up screens in the classroom. “Some kind of religious thing, right?” he said.

“Sort of. It’s a cosmology. It’s a picture of universe as a hierarchy of layers of energy or consciousness. The energy starts from a—uh—divine source, a perfect unity, but then it gradually devolves, disintegrating into an infinite number of fragments. But these fragments are all working their way back, trying to re-capture the original union. It’s like evolution: Atoms group into amino acids and proteins, proteins group into cells, cells into organs, and organs into organisms. The consciousness gradually pieces itself back together, slowly working its way back up the pyramid to the source.

“So what’s the next stage? Where can we go from here? Sure some people think we’re gonna go on getting smarter, maybe turn into bald

things with huge craniums, but I figure this is the end of the line. Only place to go is to jump to the next order of magnitude.

Jake remembered the spiel Spider gave him.

“Like, joining with a ‘meta-self’?” Jake said.

“That’s the one. The big jump from individual consciousness to higher awareness. It’s been something we’ve been doing in a limited form for millions of years, In one way or another we try to do it by immersing ourselves in a greater whole, we structure ourselves into the groups, societies, and civilisations that take us that little bit closer to the Big One.

“So we’re already there, right? In a way we’re already onto the next stage.”

“In a way, yes. But the *gestalts* of human groups are fragile. It’s like we’re not properly connected most the time, the links are just too fragile to allow us to properly make the jump. Sometimes it works, we’ve all been there: You’re with a bunch of people, maybe at a party or a gig. It’s all starting to happen and things are on a roll when suddenly it—it just changes, the atmosphere kind of reaches critical mass and something just wakes up. You can feel it in the air, like a charge, like static. Only it never lasts that long. Sooner or later it burns out or something happens and it just breaks apart. Everything’s the same but suddenly something’s missing.

“Yeah,” whispered Jake. That weird experience was still fresh in his mind.

“For centuries we’ve been trying to make that jump, time and time again, visionaries and messiahs and cultural icons have been trying to build that union, make it so strong that it can hold itself together for good. In ancient times it was the Buddhas and Christs, now its the statesmen and pop culture icons. They’ve been the go-between, the channels that have opened to plug is in to the collective, but it’s never worked because the social fusion just isn’t strong enough. Hold itself together for a while but then goes off whack again and disintegrates.

HeadSpace

“Problem is in real-world interactions we’re just not tied in enough, there’s just not enough data exchange to really maintain that fusion so we’ve not been able to make the jump before, but now it looks like we’re finally going to do it. Cyberspace is the gateway, the bridge we’ve been waiting for, the glue that can hold it all together.

“Unlike the ‘real-world’, you can actively configure your data-input, rig yourself up to however many channels you want at the same time. Suddenly we’re not limited by reality, we can configure it to spread our sphere of awareness as far as we need, simultaneously plugging into activity all over the globe. Suddenly there’s no restriction, space just isn’t there anymore in any real sense.

“This is where it links in with emanationism. According to the Kabbalah the transition from physical reality to the divine source takes the form of four stages or *spheres*. The first and lowest, *Malkutt*, is the world of sensation, the purely physical level. While at the other end is *Kaythir*—divinity, pure being. For heaven and earth to fuse, goes the myth, the two must be joined by the awakening of the spheres between them.

“Just above *Malkutt* is an etheric world *Yehzod*, where form breaks down into a sea of images. It’s like a mental dimension, a web of disembodied information—sometimes it’s called the *astral plane*. The final and most important sphere is the one between the *Yehzod* and *Kaythir*. This is the point where the circuit is closed, the sphere of transubstantiation where matter and spirit join. It’s the sphere of the messiahs—the Buddhas and Christs, where that fusion gets made between the others. It’s called *Tiph’reth*.

“Before, we couldn’t bridge that gap. When we tried to evolve by jumping to the astral it just got too diluted. We were just swimming around in vague fragments of collective consciousness, getting lost in our own imagination. The connection just wasn’t there.”

“But how does hi-tech help?”

“Don’t you get it, Jake? *Yehzod is information*. Human-kind just built the astral plane out of software, and now we’re rigging ourselves up to it. We’re finally doing it—we’re moving to the next level!”

She was on a roll now, grateful for a listening ear, but she could sense Jake’s ubiquitous air of cool ambivalence, that sceptical edge that held him back.

“Yeah, I know what you’re thinking,” she said pre-empting, his reaction. “Maybe I’m getting carried away here—‘nice theory, but where’s the evidence.’ First off, we know there’s something going on in there, right?” She gave a knowing glance. He nodded. “I know you know that—let’s just leave it at that. We also know that we’re not the only ones. We’re not, like, just wearing some stupid delusion. And like I say a lot of the kinds of guys I hang out with have been having some really odd experiences. See, that buzz you get sometimes, when the air goes electric and something wakes up. It’s happening softside. But the way it’s happening is big, and I mean *really* big. Tapping into that buzz is a way of life for these guys but this stuff is just too much.”

“You’re right,” Jake said. “Spider showed me something. It was damn weird. Scared the hell out of me.”

She laughed, like he’d just cracked a big joke.

“You ain’t the only one,” she said, suddenly serious again. “I got a story for you.”

She paused while she took a plastic pouch and a packet of Rizzla from her pocket, laying them on the table and pulling off a sheet of rolling paper. She plucked some tobacco from the pouch and spread it along the fold of the Rizzla.

“For the last year or so,” she continued, her eyes not leaving the table, “a bunch of construct artists have been cooking up a GVE—some neat Pagan scenery for ritual group-work, meditation, and all that kinda stuff. When the GVE came on line in June, a couple of local sects thought they’d have a race to see who could ‘get results’ quickest.”

HeadSpace

She picked up the paper with its line of tobacco and began expertly rolling it between her fingers.

“The first bunch are an off-shoot of the Golden Dawn. They’re hardcore traditionalists who normally do everything by the book, but they decided to take it softside because they didn’t want some bunch of half-baked dark-siders to get there first. The competition were a group of Chaoists—drop-outs from an O.T.O chapter—some British, the rest from California. They’re mainly kids, more image than substance but they’ve got a couple of smart leaders who got things moving.”

She licked the paper’s edge and sealed the rizzla shut, then she slipped it into her mouth and sparked it up with a brass zippo. The smell of lighter fuel was quickly overwhelmed by the thick scent of tobacco smoke.

“So they both launch themselves right into all that stuff they do, and whaddya know, things start to happen.” Smoke spilled out of her mouth as she spoke. “There was a lot of the usual bragging, and bullshit stories about cybernetic invocations and net-whiteouts, but the basic news was that weird shit was starting to happen softside. They’d unlocked some powerful forces, and the rush just kept driving them on.”

“Course the dark-siders got burnt first. Playing with fire is their ethos. Throwing a spanner in the works and watching the sparks fly, anarchy, chaos—that is basically their trip. Problem is they had no idea just what they were fucking with in there.

“The GVE started going weird. They’d designed it to be configurable, made it so it would shift and change in subtle ways, made it so it tied in randomly to the kind of sounds and gestures you made, even the expression on your face. Stories started coming out of full-blown transformations, visions of scenes that no-one ever coded—phantom figures, voices from nowhere. Real creepy stuff.

“Sure, maybe the programmers left in some latent construct libraries or extra code as a stupid wind-up, or maybe the users got tranced out enough to get hallucinating. It doesn’t really matter. Fact is they found

one of the Chaoist priests catatonic in a church in Seattle; he was naked in a chalk circle, covered in salt. He's in a nut-house now, screaming about demons in the Pagan GVE."

She took another drag from the crumpled roll-up.

"Then a girl called Lucy had to have her wrists sewn up. One guy died from a trunk overdose, another got his stomach pumped but needed a new pancreas. A couple more trashed their VR decks and vanished, and another three just left the order and cut off their coms. The rest won't talk about it."

"What about the other bunch?" Jake asked.

"The Golden Dawn guys? They were trying push out results in the same way. They went through the motions, and pretty soon they were getting some action. Except they backed off real quick because—well, something was wrong."

"What was it?"

"They reckoned they were getting bleed-over from the Chaoist activity. The GVE stores impressions of everything that goes on in there. It's designed that way, like a neural net. They tried to flush the construct but it didn't work too well. Holographic data is kinda hard to scrub. After a while one of their head adepts started freaking out big time. Said the Chaoists had opened a channel to the *Qliphoth*, kind of like a doorway to hell. A bunch of them got it into their heads that the only way of getting rid of it was by killing off the Chaoists' remaining priest, a guy they called Szandor."

She took a couple of puffs on the crumpled cigarette.

"A couple of their Neophytes went over to LA to take care of it. They climbed a fence and broke into his apartment at three in the morning. One of them got chewed up pretty badly by some kinda wolf the guy keeps as pet. The other got blown away by a .357 magnum Szandor keeps handy. He'd tried to stick Szandor with a ceremonial dagger."

"Jesus," Jake said. "But I'm not so sure this says a lot about the soft-side buzz. They just sound like a bunch of fucking lunatics to me."

HeadSpace

“Maybe so. But they were a bunch of completely harmless lunatics until they started messing around in the GVE. Whatever they’d seen in there sent them onto a serious burn-out.”

Silence descended. It was one of those uneasy moments where all the conversations in the room seemed to pause or go quiet; a couple of noisy exceptions would be caught out and suddenly break off self-consciously.

“How come Spider didn’t tell me this,” Jake asked.

“He probably didn’t want to freak you out. Didn’t want to get you worrying about a bunch of stupid rumours. Last thing you want when you’re looking into this stuff is fear. Fear’s the real enemy. Feed it and you bring it to life, make it real.”

“So isn’t ignorance better? Maybe Spider was right...”

“Maybe so. But I’m just really into the truth, and that’s how it is. Anyhow ignorance can be just as bad, look what happened to those guys. If there’s danger there it’s better to know about it.”

Jake paused thoughtfully for a moment.

“Can I talk to any of these guys?” he said finally.

She looked at him curiously.

“Like I say, most the casualties stay off-line. There’s one guy local though, went to my college years back, before he got mixed up with the Chaoist set...” She took a biro out of her purse and scribbled something down on the back of a receipt.

“Damon Fletcher,” she said, and passed it to him. “Tell him I sent you—maybe he’ll talk to you. Don’t expect too much though. He’s crazy...”

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Shiva took a break.

L.A. is the last place most people would go to take a break. A city of eight million people that was always teetering on the edge of war with itself, where gangs of sick yahoos cruised the endless suburbs looking

for some poor slob to rip-off, run down, or—if they'd had a bad day—to blow away with a sawn-down and silenced twelve bore.

It was a place where the few who walked the streets at night were afraid to stop, eyes constantly on the lookout for the next weirdo to cross the street and shuffle toward them, or for the tell-tale red-bead of light darting around on bill-strewn walls. But it had a special place in Shiva's heart. It was the city he grew up in, the place he'd acquired his taste for danger, the thirst for that cold chill where terror and ecstasy meet on the crest of an adrenalin rush. The place where he'd cut his hi-tech teeth in his embryonic years with a string of system hacks and soft-lifting escapades.

But—as Shiva was always quick to point out—L.A. wasn't all that bad. Once you got out of the sprawl of downtown and central, out towards the sleepy coastal towns the urban paranoia evaporated into soporific tropical bliss. Even the cops relaxed, beach-shorts and vests replacing the para-military downtown outfit.

And there was June. June Diamond who he'd stumbled into on a drunken night out in San Diego. She was the perfect picture-card babe, everything that most guys wanted in a female form, with a personality that seemed almost custom-made for Shiva's combination of intelligence, narcissism, and recklessness.

She was the real reason he'd come back. It would have been safer to lie low in Britain, to dig in and wait until the heat was off before chancing a trip home. But even with onset of the mellowing climate shift, British weather lived up to its grim reputation, and the endless spate of cold wind-swept and rainy weather turned his thoughts yearningly to home. Glamorised memories of the idyllic stretches of Pacific coast-line goaded at him. Malibu, Venice, and Long Beach—the great expanses of yellow sand lined with palm-trees, lawn and stretches of bladeway. Finally it was the image of June—with that silky blonde hair caressing her shoulders, that drop-dead smile, and those dark saucer eyes—that broke his resolve to stick it out East of the pond.

HeadSpace

But he wasn't stupid. the echoes of Kaos's words were still strong in his head, and those alarm bells he'd set in motion still rang loud. Because Kaos was right, and it was only his stubborn independence that had kept him so oblivious to the danger that was closing in on him. That stupid egotistical streak, the thirst for recognition and status— Shiva The Destroyer, Net God, terror of corporations and conqueror of a thousand gateways.

His teeth still ached slightly, and he rubbed a finger across their front, still taken by the novelty of the bare, smooth, freshly polished enamel. A precaution, along with the short beard, light blue irises and receded hair-line he'd Immaced out three days before. Fresh ID and retina distortion lenses got him back onto the airways, back home, and back into June's waiting embrace at LAX.

He hired an apartment on Venice Beach where they whiled away the weeks bathing in the warmth of the Honeymoon glow that still hung about them. They'd eat pasta together, they'd talk and laugh, and go for walks along the near-empty beach, the distant glow of the January sun taking the chill off the cool winter air. Other times they'd go downtown to take in a movie or check out one of the new upmarket restaurants, and then taxi down one of the hipper nightclubs, where they'd drink a string of cocktails and play dance-floor games.

Other times still they'd stay in and call up a couple of movies. Or they'd go virtual on that cool new deck Shiva bought, and chase each other around a fictional world taking pot-shots at each other with chunks of over-size weaponry and battling with hideous creatures, laughing and shrieking at the CGens' gruesome realism.

It was only now, sitting on the patio staring out at the sea where a couple of wet-suited kids were buzzing around the surf on jet-skis, that a melancholy feeling was settling. He knew that times like this never lasted, that they were transient things, fragile as gossamer thread, and that soon the dream would be over and harsh reality would bite back in.

Thoughts of immortalising this life were short-lived. The money would dry up eventually for a start. Sure he had plenty at the moment, but it fell far short of the critical mass where money would spontaneously grow, accumulating by some strange fiscal gravity until interest alone would make it grow faster than you could reasonably spend it.

But it wasn't just the money. Sooner or later the magic would die and things would go stale, routine and the first stirrings of tedium taking hold. Before long the lure of that glandular buzz that only real danger can bring would beckon again.

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Jake and Eve got out of the Richmond Park ghettos and found a neat three room apartment close enough to Kew to feel the upmarket presence of the nearby neighbourhood. Here, they were just in range of the PS system that watched over the affluent inhabitants, but fringe enough to be down-scale of the four-figure rents you'd get inside the formal perimeter.

The PS helped. The PS said security, the PS said that everything happening around you was being piped hi-res and cut into silver in some distant vault. You were on record here, and that felt good. The street-gangs and psychos and drugged-up yahoos tended to stick to off-limits.

Jake did his best to return to that shadowy fringe area between legit and Outworld. He cut deals and played match-maker for noses looking for a name to do a job. Mostly he just played go-between—the ageless entrepreneur taking a cut for getting a face to match the specs. But old habits die hard, and when he knew that he was the best guy for a job he'd go in himself.

It was all strictly soft-motion, though. He'd weave his way across the Net's binary labyrinth, adeptly slaloming those one-dimensional bit-streams like an electronic missile, cutting through layers of encryption to bust into some server half-way across the planet. He'd

HeadSpace

find his mark with ever growing ease, quickly off-loading a half-terabyte slab of some commercially sensitive buyware. Then he'd be gone, leaving a neat dead-end in the fading warmth of a call-booth or a discarded vodaphone.

Lisa's face haunted him, though, re-kindling his resolve to find the answers. He'd managed to hack a couple of PS dumps for footage spanning that cluster of city blocks in Leeds, but they were soft-RAM and only held a month or so of video before the over-write bit into earlier footage.

He always came back to that single two-inch disc that had dropped out of that brown envelope with that scribbled note. It lay on a cluttered desk before him, and he stared distractedly at the rainbow fingers of holographic interference that needled through the virtual space of its silver surface. The answers were there, he knew it. The key was buried somewhere in the expanses of undecipherable noise coded into that molecular film.

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It seemed fitting to have this conversation in the shadow of Centre Point, where it all began, so Jake chose one of a row of booths in Tottenham Court Road tube station to make the call. He slotted a lead from his deck into the auxiliary socket on the side of the terminal, and fired it up. He had to try three booths before he found one that worked on auxiliary, where the socket wasn't blown or bunged up with chewing gum.

The headset display lit up and the Netscape logo was rotating before him in virtual space. He shoved his AT&T card in the slot and hit the engage, quickly navigating his way to a grid of pirate hang-outs where Outworlders could be found talking tech or haggling over prices for ripped-off gear.

No sooner had Jake's logo flashed up on the user list than Phantom's CGen face appeared before him.

"How's it sitting?" he said.

"Sitting steady, Phantom. You got news?"

"Not much. Mostly rumours."

"I heard rumours too," Jake said. "Like Nova never knew about the Aizu tap."

"Just rumours, Shadow. Rumours that Nova might well wanna put around as a smokescreen."

"But what if they're true?"

"Don't make much difference."

"But—"

"Yeah, Shadow, I know what you're thinkin'. If Nova knew about the Aizu tap then why'd they get so badly reemed when it came to the big push? How come Aizu were ready for them?"

"Yeah..."

"Because it ain't so simple as one Big Plan. In Corpshop action you've got a whole lot of tactics going on. Bluffs, diversions, fake moves made just to draw fire. They set up a meet, okay. They make it tough enough to make it look serious but with just enough of a loop-hole to make it look like an oversight. Then they leak it so it looks like it came from a mole on the inside."

"You sayin' the Centre Point meet was a bluff. The comsat job was part of that? No way. It was too elaborate, it was a stroke of damn genius—"

"No. Not the Centre Point job. But there were others. Before that. They'd hold a meet and draw up a strategy. Then they'd send out feelers, sniff out for echoes, get a feel for how the opposition were breaking through. Then they'd run another bluff. All the time they'd be testing, looking for weak points in the enemy's intel. Finally, when they thought they'd licked it, they'd go live."

"But Centre Point was the live show, right?"

HeadSpace

“That’s the way they had it figured, but point is that ain’t the way it always goes.”

“Nova got twigged—”

“Yeah, and they’d be looking for evidence that word was out. We don’t know if they knew—”

“But the hit failed.”

“Yeah, but all we know is that Nova came up with the Hicks Manoeuvre, that Aizu rumbled it and were ready. We don’t know when they drew that up. That could have been later, after they got wise to the comsat job.”

“—Nova switched plans and Aizu twigged to that, also?”

“Yeah, maybe. Point is we don’t know what went on next. Just because Aizu rumbled the Nova hit doesn’t mean that Nova didn’t know about the comsat. The game could’ve gone on.”

“Yeah,” sighed Jake, defeatedly.

“I know you want results, Shadow,” Phantom said sympathetically, “believe me I been digging. But it’s just too early to say. Sometimes you just gotta give things time. Things got a habit of crawling out of the woodwork once the heat’s off.”

“Yeah. I just don’t want the trail to go cold...”

“Right. But when it comes down to it it’s down to chance like anything. Like I say things got a habit of breaking out later down the line. But that ain’t always so. I know you don’t wanna hear this right now but a lot of these things just hit a dead end, and just maybe you’d better get set for the worst...get ready to let it go.”

Phantom was ready for the reaction, he could see a subtle change in Jake’s eyes, the reflected glint of an inner flame of rage. When Jake spoke it was with forced evenness.

“You’re right, Phantom, I don’t wanna hear this right now. I’m not going to let go of this. There’s a way in, there always is, and I’m gonna find it. Gonna break this open if I’ve gotta to comb through every damn byte on the Net.”

Paul Barrows

“Then what?” Phantom asked.
“Uh?” Jake was thrown by the question.
“Say you find who did it. Then what?”
Jake wasn’t prepared for this.
“I don’t know,” he said.

* * *

“Who’s ‘at? Whaddya want?” The muffled voice was shrill and panicky, close to hysteria.

“Damon...My name’s Jake. Mandy sent me. Says you’d talk to me?”

There was a silence.

“Mandy, huh.” The voice was calmer now.

There was a sound of bolts being drawn, then a key rattled in a deadlock and the mechanism thunked home. The door squeaked open a couple of inches and a pale rodent-like face peered through over a stretch of chain-link.

“Ya got a phone wi’ ya?” He asked furtively.

“No.”

“Deck? comlink? sound-system?”

“No. Nothing, really.”

He looked at Jake suspiciously for a moment and then closed the door.

There was a rattle of chain-link on wood and then the door opened again, about a foot this time.

“Okay, get in.”

Jake stepped into a front room that was dimly lit by half-drawn blinds. The room was a tip, the floor and a single sofa scattered with open books, pages of hastily scribbled notes, and photocopies streaked with pink highlighter. The wall was strewn with pictures and posters—mainly fantasy scenarios or promos for cult movies like *Whiplash* and *SkySurfer*. An old mantelpiece was covered in brass and steel ornaments and a forest of half-burnt candles sitting in a multi-colour slick of

HeadSpace

melted wax. More of the pieces covered sections of a cheap Ikea shelving stack that weren't already heaving with paperbacks.

The room was cluttered, but there was still something empty about the place; it was only a moment before what it was dawned. The screen and video deck that usually sat on its plinth at the focal point of the living area was missing. In its place was a Calor-gas stove. There were no hi-fi decks, no keypads, headset, or even a cheap portable radio. Bare wires hung from where a phone had been torn from the wall, and there were two empty sockets where Halon bulbs usually hung from fittings in the ceiling.

There was a smell of paraffin in the air, which Jake put down to an ancient brass, fuel-burning contraption that was on the floor near the mess of paperwork.

A closet to the rear of the room was partially open, displaying the fate of all the hi-tec fittings. It was all piled up high like so much junk, a film of dust already gathering. Some of it was smashed or torn apart, exposing silvery green wafers of PCB. The rest of it was just tidily stacked.

Damon flipped out big-time, thought Jake. Regular born-again Luddite.

Damon shut the door behind him and slammed the bolts shut. Only when the door was deadlocked did he seem to relax.

"I tried buzzing—your com don't work." Jake said, looking to the panel by the door where the display and speaker sat. The panel was off, and there was an empty socket where the fuse-block went.

"Course it don't work," Damon said contemptuously, "I ain't stupid. He ain't gonna get to me that easy..."

"Who?"

He looked at Jake wide eyed.

"*Him*, man. *Him*," he said urgently, "He gets everywhere, man. Phone lines, cable-network, even the fuckin' airwaves, man, even through the fuckin' *air*. But we're safe here, don't you sweat it..." He grinned conspiratorially.

"What's—uh—he want?" Jake asked.

“Phone went first,” Damon went on, without answering, “That little white wire leads him straight to you—you might as well invite him into your front fuckin’ room. But then he found a way through the cables. When I pulled the plug on that he took to the airwaves, riding the back of those itty-bitty EMR vibes.” He grabbed a packet of Marlboro off a table-top and pulled a cigarette out with shaking hands, putting it between his lips and lighting it up with a match.

“So the receiver had to go.” He took a long drag of the cigarette. “Thought I’d be safe with video—silver’s self-contained see, no way for him to get in. But then I got to thinkin’. He’s real smart, he can replicate himself, and when they were recording those things, like at the factory, he’d be copying himself right into them as well, hiding in the images, waitin’ to come out again. So no video, no recordings...

“But then there’s the power grid. Can ya believe it, fucker took to the power grid. I could feel him in the kettle, the hydro, the fryer, the microwave. It was *his* light filling the room, him pushing the numbers round on the clock. It all had to go.”

Damon dumped himself onto the sofa and took another drag on the cigarette. Jake stood about uneasily.

“This is about the GVE, right?”

“What?” Damon said, frowning. He gave that patronising glare again, like Jake was some kind of idiot.

“This—thing that you think’s after you—”

“Think? *Think?*” he shouted. “What the fuck is this ‘think’-shit? You can leave ‘think’ right out of this, because you and all these other morons don’t know shit. I mean—I *know*, okay. I *know*. I seen shit you wouldn’t believe so don’t you judge me—”

“Yeah, okay—”

“You fuckin bet. I mean, there is a whole dimension out there that you couldn’t even...” He waved his hands around, struggling to find words, “...I mean, the concept is just—like—so completely beyond...”

“I know what you’re saying, I really do. I seen things too—”

HeadSpace

“Like what?” He sneered.

“Like that big gateway you been trying to break through,” Jake said quietly. “Like when it all lights up, its all crisp and fresh and alive. Then the energy comes through, sets your skin crawling, puts your hair on end like static. And you know this is it, this is the big one. It’s solid and still and so powerful, ecstatic, like you’re riding the axis of the universe. Feels like anything’s possible. Am I getting close?”

The sneer had faded from Damon’s face, and he was staring intently into space.

“That’s about as far as I’ve seen, Damon. But I think you guys went further, saw something in there that scared you out of your mind. Talk to me...”

He was silent. He just sat there, so still that Jake thought that maybe he’d gone into some kind of trance. But then he spoke.

“We’d done it a hundred times hardside. First time we ever tried it in the GVE. It was perfect. Beautiful. Like we were all one. Then we tried to reach out, go through...”

He was quiet again, eyes still fixed on empty space. A tube of ash fell from his cigarette onto one of the pages scattered about near his feet. There was a frown on his face, like he was struggling to recollect.

“And then?...”

“Then. I dunno. For a moment there was a light, a silver light. Then something seemed to block it. Then its like everything twisted, stretched, got sucked to a point. It all went black. Next thing there’s this thing. Black, evil, smothering us. It was him. We were trapped, couldn’t move. It’s like we were there forever. We knew what was going to happen to us, knew there was no escape. Could feel it before it even happened. Then it came...”

“What was it. Did it hurt you.”

“Something horrible,” Damon’s voice was starting to crack. “Screams. Terror. Burning. Like—like a million souls screaming. Forever. Begging to die, begging for release. And a word over and over again ‘Zirran’

Paul Barrows

“He took me and made me part of him. But I escaped. At the end of eternity I pulled off the headset and killed it. But I knew I couldn’t ever really escape, I never did really. I’ll always be there.”

Damon started to cry. “*Zirran...*” he whispered as tears rolled down his cheeks. “*Zirran.*”

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Something about the way Kaos looked at him made Jake uneasy. It was like the guy was looking at him across a hundred miles—an awkward coldness hanging about him as he spoke. There was that uptight feeling you get when you’re with a particular kind of person—that heaviness of the atmosphere that comes when two completely different and incompatible people share the same space.

Jake didn’t dislike Kaos. He just knew that the guy found him weird, and sensed that Kaos knew that he knew this. It was partially his own fault for being so openly into the taboos of Net Voodoo culture. He was well aware of the amount of flakes and cranks he was rubbing shoulders with, and that this kind of reputation provoked some bad reactions.

And in just the same way that eccentricity gives people like Kaos the creeps, Jake got a similar reaction from the kind of dull bland uniform ordinariness that some people radiated like a negative charisma. He’d always found something pitiful about the obsession with conformity that so many hid behind. It smacked of sham, cowardice, a fear of being yourself. If you didn’t even have the guts to stand up and be counted for what you are, then you’re not living life, you’re just a spectator.

Even though the outworld lifestyle Kaos had chosen was anything but ordinary, he still felt this kind of gut-reaction to Kaos. There was something about the guy that just felt shammy. Like the Kaos he put out was just there for show, a glossy front-piece for something he kept carefully hidden.

HeadSpace

Not that he didn't trust him. It wasn't the sort of feeling that made him sniff a mole or some kind of plant; he knew Kaos's credentials were good. It was just one of those intangible clashes of character that made him feel uneasy when he was alone with the guy.

"There you are—" Kaos said. He was looking through a window that had opened up in the UKNet cyberscape. No immersion, just a regular phone call.

"Kaos..." Jake said. "Long time no see. What gives?"

"We got action. A meet's been called. Phantom says you really wanna hear this."

There was an awkward silence. Jake remembered the promise he'd made.

"It's okay, Shadow," Kaos said, reading his mind. "We know the score. Just come listen. Ain't no-one twisting your arm if you're Out." He said it in a bland, matter-of-fact way. There was no hint of the derision Shadow had been afraid of.

"Okay," Jake said after a pause.

"Janus Way. 8pm GMT," Kaos said. His image flickered and broke up and the window swiftly shrank to a point in space and vanished.

12

Sensorium

The Temple of Aurak was one of a constellation of role-play fantasy scenarios that stretched across hundreds of levels of a twenty-year-old mythical underworld. It was a slick, newly-coded affair using the latest libraries of real-time natural-world algorithms. Rodents scampered between fissures in a stone clad floor, gusts of wind whirled through the cavern's catacombs sending dead leaves tumbling along, and occasionally a bird or some fictional avian creature fluttered noisily past.

It was still under construction so it wasn't publicly on-line, and made a good private space where they could talk shop without fear of disturbance.

They listened to Phantom in silence, eagerly absorbing the news everyone was waiting to hear. He told the story in that level, dispassionate monologue, describing what corp-shop minimally termed The Acquisition.

The Acquisition meant that the crucial ingredients for the long awaited breakthrough were all in place. The customer had a basic neural jack—a technology that would allow a direct mind-to-mind hook-up. They'd got rudimentary record and playback, the quintessence of human experience cut into silver and stored, to be re-lived in every detail by a suitable recipient.

"You gonna take it?" 2-Bit asked.

"No fucking way," Kaos said. "No way am I having some fucked up biotech prototype screwing with my head. Not for anything. You want your brain microwaved then go right ahead, but you can count me out."

HeadSpace

He turned to Shiva.

"I'm in. If they can use me then fine," Shiva said.

"Yeah, me too," 2-Bit said. "Any case let's see if we've got the profile. seventy-five per cent chance we don't match up, right? If any of us have got it then we can at least think about it." He looked to Kaos.

"Nothing to think about," Kaos said. "Forget it."

"Suitcha self," 2-Bit said. He turned to Chip. "What about you?"

"I'm a medic, not a techie. Spec says strong tech savvy. That's me out."

"Yeah, too bad," he said, remembering. He could see the disappointment on her face.

"Real sorry, Chip," Phantom said. "Pushed for you but they wouldn't buy it."

"C'est la vie..." she said.

Phantom turned expectantly to Jake.

"Your call, Shadow my man."

The story was much as he'd expected. He'd gone through the decision in his mind, weighing up the options, listening to that endless dialogue between opposites. But it always came back to that hunger inside him. Something told him that this was the way, that the answers he was looking for were in that machine. Against all his better judgment, despite his promises to himself and Eve, he just had to do this. He had no choice.

"I'm in," he said, before his mind had chance to take him through another cycle of endless arguments.

"So," said Phantom in summary. "That's Shadow, 2-Bit, and Shiva who're on for the full show. These guys want things in motion pretty fast so we're talking 48 hours to ship out. So standby, don't go anywhere. I'll be in touch. Okay?"

"Just one thing..." Shiva said.

"Yeah?"

"Where we goin'?"

Paul Barrows

Phantom paused, like he was in two minds whether to answer. “Shang Hai,” he said finally.

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Away from the clutter of downtown skyscrapers they could make out the crystal blue expanse of the Huang Pu river snaking through the town. The low-lying patchwork of concrete, glass, and red-brick suddenly gave way to the squat clutter of tightly packed wooden buildings that was the old town.

Jake’s stomach lurched as the maglev hit a bend, then they were crossing the river and heading southwards towards Songjiang.

They left the maglev at Songjiang North, where they were taken to the yellow cocoon of a waiting autocab. Their escorts got in the front and Jake and Shiva took the back seat. One of the men said something in Mandarin to the console; a synthetic female voice replied, and the cab swiftly pulled away into a road heading west.

The traffic was thick at first, fleets of bicycles and mopeds bustling about in the suburban rush-hour, but it quickly thinned out as they headed into the semi-rural expanses west of the town. The cab plodded on at the steady 50kph that was the legal limit for all automatics, until the distant clutter of an industrial complex appeared on the skyline. It slowly grew as they approached, engulfing the setting sun. The air above it seemed to ripple as thermal currents sent shivers of refraction across the sunset.

Even out here in the expanses of farmland and quarries south of Shang Hai, space was still strictly rationed. The complex was a tight vertical cluster of tubular buildings that wouldn’t have looked out of place amongst the string of refineries on the Hangzou rim. They were tied loosely by a threadwork of walkways, most at ground level, but a few jutting out of floors above to meet at a suspended apex in a starfish formation. It

HeadSpace

reminded Jake of a sprawl of boilers or industrial equipment, surreally magnified and fleshed out by architectural imagination.

A tall, white gate slowly slid aside as they approached the main entrance, and two guards looked on with disinterest as the cab drew past and pulled in by the forecourt of the main lobby. They were quietly ushered down a gantry through a series of detectors, then pass-keys were swiftly attached to their wrists. A glass walkway took them towards one of the smaller buildings that was the research facility. It was broad and tubular, maybe ten storeys high with a domed roof. The sterile glossy white sheen of its exterior was interrupted only by narrow rings of tinted glass spanning each level. Three small shafts in glittering stainless steel ran up its exterior. Two were on either side, and one larger one was at its front, a long silica streak running down its length reflecting the amber glare of the sunset. This main column was ahead of them, meeting up with the end of the walkway.

The entrance to the facility was a narrow, double-doored gantry like an air-lock. The second door wouldn't open until the first had closed, and there was just enough space for a single person, preventing "piggy-back" security breaches. They passed through one at a time, one of the guards leading before them and the other following behind. Inside the column was a large spiral staircase. Ahead of them was another of the security doors and to the right the staircase wound upwards. The steps were polished wood, the supporting steel framework was a dark green to match the surrounding walls. It was lit softly by a single strip of halon that followed the underside of the banisters. To the left the staircase continued downwards, terminating one level lower.

The first guard turned left and descended the staircase, and they followed, queuing as they did before to pass through another of the security doors into the heart of the building. A short passageway met with a curved corridor that circled the inside of the building, separating it into a perimeter and core layer. The perimeter was sliced neatly into a string of rooms that offered brief glimpses through glass-paneled doors. The

inner layer had fewer doors, and Jake could make out the interior of what seemed to be one huge room within. It was a lab of the sort he'd seen a dozen times, cluttered with equipment and with expanses of thick cables hanging from the ceiling.

They reached a door in the outer wall about one third of the way along, and the guards stood aside signalling them to enter.

The room was an office. It was large but sparsely decorated in typical chinese style. The decor was all wood, gold and deep reds. An angular paper lampshade hung from the ceiling, and bamboo blinds draped before a fake sub-terranean window cast a grid of light over a plain wooden desk with some paperwork, a brass Buddha and the obligatory fold-up screen.

Behind the desk was a suited chinese man in his forties. He was short and stocky with dark shiny hair tied back into a bob. Beside him stood another man. He was tall, West-European, and pale. His eyes were hidden behind an expensive silver-rimmed pair of Nikons and his head was covered in a short sandy stubble. He too wore a suit, which he didn't look comfortable in.

The oriental man stood, gave a swift bow, and then sat again. Shiva and Jake returned the gesture awkwardly.

"Welcome gentlemen," he said. "My name is Kyoto. I am Head of Research at this facility. As you know this is a highly sensitive project, and security arrangements here must be observed." The words sounded stilted, rehearsed, like some legal caution or the spiel of a cold-calling salesperson. "There can be no communication to or from this facility for the duration of your stay, though you may terminate your participation in this project at any time as stipulated in your contract."

"This is Mr Christie," he nodded towards his companion. "He has been put in charge of security at this site. It is his business to monitor the activities of our...guests. Please do not be offended by his presence."

Christie gave a cold, thin-lipped smile that gave Jake the creeps.

HeadSpace

The formalities were swift. A couple of signatures, temporary picture IDs swiftly spat from a franking machine, then Christie was escorting them silently to an elevator and up to the first floor.

This floor was much like the basement level they'd just encountered, except the central section—like the periphery of the building—was segmented into a row of rooms which were laid out in a typical hotel style. Christie didn't leave the elevator. He indicated the room numbers on their wrist-keys, thumbed a new destination into the elevator, and then left.

* * *

The guy was the kind of geeky academic type you see hanging around in labs earnestly checking obscure pieces of equipment and scribbling technical hieroglyphs on a pad. He was quite young as they go, barely out of his twenties, but he was working hard to carry the demeanour of someone ten years older.

He didn't look comfortable standing at the front of the room. The rag-bag of characters he faced were obviously not the sort he was used to dealing with. Not that they looked much different to the kind of undergrad student rabble he'd dealt with often enough. Maybe they were a little older, a little more serious-looking, with the faint edge of an air about them—a chilling fatalism of a deadly world that was a million miles from the numb, domesticated tedium that was his own home.

But it wasn't looks that were the issue here. He knew who they were, realised that his current audience were a hit-list of some of the most wanted Outworld subversives in the world. And they weren't just dangerous criminals, but well-educated and very smart criminals, a dark and street-wise echo of the squeaky clean and legit world he came from.

They were a far cry from the laboured stereotype of the dumb street-punk.

So he fidgeted nervously with the remote as he ran through the presentation, thumbing a button every so often as he stumbled through a description of the interface.

“The NMR array maps the—uh—visual cortex, auditory cortex, and the somatosensory areas, in the occipital, parietal, and temporal lobes, here, here, and—uh—here...”

A hologram of a translucent brain the size of a pumpkin was hovering above the projector of a suspended image unit. Regions of it lit up blue as he thumbed the remote.

“The passive array only maps neuroelectric topography, feeding this data through to the buffer for recording or real-time transfer, but another array based on active sub-quantum field induction—the “SQUIFI”—actively induces patterned activity in the—uh—host cortex...”

Nine men and three women sat quietly, watching and listening while he went through a description of the equipment they’d be testing. When he’d finished the short induction a few of them asked some intelligent questions. He gratefully answered most of them, but apologetically skirted questions covering more sensitive areas that had been designated confidential, relieved at the casual, matter-of-fact way they took his refusal.

Then they were led back to their quarters again by the guards who’d brought them thirty minutes earlier.

That wasn’t so bad, he thought. Not so bad after all.

* * *

By the second day the induction was over and they’d moved over to a more casual regime as the trials began. They were no longer confined to their quarters on the first floor. Instead they were free to stay on the basement level where a canteen and leisure room gave the clutter of

HeadSpace

participants a place to while away the many hours—sometimes days—between sessions.

An auto-vendor gave them whatever they wanted to eat or drink, while a screen in the neighbouring room gave played them any movies or TV they wanted, and a couple of VR booths offered the usual diet of bloody wargames.

Jake tried to relax, but his first trial was due at three P.M., so he just sat restlessly at one of the tables in the canteen, wishing to God the auto-vendor stocked alcohol. The feeling reminded him of the one he got as a kid going to the dentist or turning up for some medical makeover. A knot in his guts, dry mouth, and the raw buzz of nerves as a trickle of adrenalin softly pulsed into his blood-stream.

Finally the time came and he was soon being escorted through to the cluttered lab where a handful of characters were milling around like mechanics on their lunch-break.

A chair was in the room's centre, a big, black adjustable like the ones those dentists used, except this one had a long plastic spine that spilled cables and electrical feeds across the floor to the clutter of surrounding machinery.

They escorted him over to it and gestured to him to take a seat. It was raised slightly on a plinth, and Jake had to step up onto it to reach a sitting position. The plastic coating of the chair was cold, and creaked as he settled rigidly into it, suppressing a shiver.

A serious-looking oriental man approached. He was in his late forties, his inky hair flecked with silver at the temples. An optical gadget was attached to a skeletal headset that sat firmly round the top of his head. There was an orange label on his coat with three cantonese pictograms. Beneath them were the words "Dr. Hiriaki."

"Just lie back," he said, with only the trace of an accent colouring the words.

Jake lay back uneasily into the chair's cool embrace. There was a vertical runner at the head of the chair, and the technician reached up to

slide down a unit hinged onto a beige hemisphere. More cables spilled from the back of the unit. He swung the hemisphere down into position and gently slotted it over the top of Jake's head.

Jake felt the metallic coldness of hundreds of blunt probes touching his scalp. The man touched a switch and the helmet hummed as servomotors engaged, adjusting the dimensions of the array until his scalp was in a tight metallic grasp.

"First of all," Hiriaki said, "we are going to take some readings. We will know soon if you are compatible."

He made a few more adjustments to some devices rigged up to the chair and then left, joining the other technicians in the corner. It was only a couple of minutes before the buzz of chatter amongst the lab crew took on a new note. It was alert, even excited. Hiriaki returned and told him the news.

He was given the contractual spiel, offered the get-out, but he'd already made up his mind. Hiriaki had brought the paperwork on a clipboard, and Jake casually scribbled his signature on a dotted line by a large blue X.

It was like those moments between sleep and waking, the strange sensation of floating disembodiment that he sometimes passed through briefly as his body-image re-condensed.

Except this time it was a surreal reversal. He suddenly felt light, weightless, his sensations fading into a uniform haze of cold numbness. Arms, legs, face, neck, torso, were a ghostly cloud, drifting, distorting, then converging into a confused miasma of disconnected skin-surface.

And his vision was gone, the blackness of the eye-covers was replaced by a sightlessness deeper than mere dark. The clatter and mutter of lab-operatives was distorting into a tinny rattle, growing thinner and more distant, until it was washed away by a squeal like tinitus and a throbbing hum that pounded his bodiless mind.

HeadSpace

Then there was a crash like thunder, and blaze of blinding light as a million fragments of colour fought one another. Disconnected scents and tastes flashed through his awareness, like a crazy fast-forward replay. A smell like musty cellars, a choking perfume then the sharp chemical bite of paint or solvents. A hundred kitchen odours layered with that ubiquitous polycarbon scent of clean rooms with fresh fittings, tangs of detergent, exhaust fumes, and a sickly stench that made him want to retch. Sweet, sour, and bitter tastes were a visceral blur, candy sweetness riding the back of a warmer savoury note.

Shards of ice danced over his formless body, punctuating the ebb and flow of cocoons of texture and temperature. One moment a cold wet blanket like latex or that play-slime kids buy in plastic tubs, then a warm free-fall through cotton wool that would turn crisper and harsher until it was like dish scourer.

Then came the jolt. It was the psychic equivalent of a plunge into ice water, the flicker of sensory noise suddenly torn away by a cold visceral blast of sensation. For a moment he was thrown about in a sensory hurricane, but then the onslaught stabilised, coherency fighting through, patterns of sound and sight and touch condensing from the maelstrom.

Echoes of tinny noise became voices, the rainbow haloed geometry settled into vision. Pressure settled on his back and legs. He was somebody now, somewhere.

“Okay...yeah I got that. We’re go—” A voice said close by.

Eyes that weren’t his darted across the legs and torso of a thin body that was sat in a large chair. The polycarbon slice of a screen was before him, a test-card animation in full flight. His scalp felt itchy and uncomfortable, something hard biting into the sides of his head above his ears.

A throat contracted and swallowed. A larynx vibrated.

“Uh...what?” The voice was deep and slow. Kind of stupid sounding. Eyes flickered round to where the lime-green sleeve of somebody just out of range was hovering.

“You’re live,” said the voice, impatience biting. “Check One—the Card. Central fixation...”

* * *

“You make it?”

Jake nodded wearily.

“You look rough...” The guy opposite him was about the same build as Jake but a little shorter. He wore white ice-wash jeans and an olive two-tone shirt. A wave of long sandy hair hung over one eye, an inch of silver ear-helix threaded the top of his right ear. He was tucking into a plate of mixed grill on a tray in front of him.

“Yeah.” Jake took a swig from the glass of fruit juice he had before him.

“You get that first couple of times,” he said through a mouthful of food. His voice carried the same soft, west-coast lilt as Shiva’s. “Nerve-lag. The jack messes up your endorphin balance.”

“Explains why I feel like shit.”

“It passes. Name’s Pilot,” he said, finally introducing himself.

“Yeah, seen you around softside—Shadow,” Jake said, and stuck out a hand. Pilot took it in a thumb grasp and shook it briefly.

“Not as many in today...” Jake said, surveying the four others who sat over on the other side.

“Six drop-outs, I hear,” Pilot said through another mouthful.

“Couldn’t jack, right?”

“That’s it. If they can’t latch onto that golden brain-wave, they kick ‘em out with a few K in their pocket.”

They were quiet for the moment. There was only the mutter of a screen nearby, the clack of cutlery on plastic plates, and that omnipresent sub-sonic threshold hum of downtown traffic.

“You eaten?” Pilot asked.

“No.”

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Pilot shoved another forkful of grill in his mouth. “You should getcha self some of this. It’s good. Real meat, none of that synthetic crap.” He slapped his lips appreciatively.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Oh yeah, right,” Pilot said, remembering the intense jack-sickness he’d got the first time he was plugged in.

He swallowed another mouthful of food.

“Say,” he said, wiping a hand across his mouth. “What happened to that buddy you came with? He make it?”

“Shiva? Dunno. He was still in line when I was done. He’ll be through later.”

Jake stared blearily at the amber liquid in his glass. Vibrations running through the floor were sending ripples dancing across the surface.

“So how many more of these head-jacks they got planned for us?” he asked.

Pilot looked up, confusion crossing his face for a moment. Then recognition fell and his face lit up in a big grin.

“You mean they haven’t given you their little talk?” He laughed, looking quickly about before moving up closer to Jake, leaning toward him secretively.

“Have you any idea what these assholes have planned for us?” Pilot said quietly. Then he laughed again, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Sure,” Jake said. “They wanna cut human experience onto silver. They want full record and playback of everything going on up here,” he tapped his temple, “—all five senses.”

Pilot shook his head. “That’s just the beginning, man,” he gave that laugh again. “They’ve got something else planned...”

“What?” Jake said.

“Think about it, man!” he whispered. “They’ve got a neural jack. You know what that means...”

Recognition dawned and Jake’s mouth fell open.

“No way!”

“Yes way, man. They wanna plug someone into the Net. No VR, no fuckin’ gloves or keyboards or any of that other shit. A pure, direct, Mind-to-Net interface.”

“Holy shit—”

“That’s where the *power* is, man. A human mind linked up to the Net would be, like, a *God*. Nothing you couldn’t do in there. And whoever controls the Net...That’s what this is really about, man. You musta known it was coming...”

“But this soon. Christ. I thought this was just the start. They only just got this working, they—they’ve got years to go before they’ve even got any idea—”

“Yeah, which is why they need guinea pigs, man. Saps like you and me to go in there, case it out.”

Jake just sat there, reeling internally from the revelation. Sure he knew it was coming, sure it was the obvious next step. But something inside him told him that this just wasn’t possible, that it was still the stuff of fantasy. Even after he’d spent a full hour rigged up to a miracle of cyberneurology—directly jacked to the sensory world of another human, it somehow seemed unreal, dream-like. It was all happening so fast, the pace of events too much for him to take in.

Now the sheer hugeness of this was hitting home. DNI was happening, after all those years of rumours and false alarms they’d finally made it work, and he—a nobody from the slums of Romford—was part of it.

“Jesus. This has gotta be risky...”

“Yeah,” Pilot said, scooping up some more food with his fork, “most likely is. But ain’t no-one twisting your arm if you want out. And once you heard the figures they’re talkin’, most likely you’ll want in.” He held up a fist, rubbing thumb against forefinger. “We are talking dollar sign—phone number.”

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HeadSpace

Kyoto was at the head of the table, his dark Asian features barely visible in the room's dim lighting. To either side of him were Tarratt and Cortez.

Tarratt was thin and intense looking, always shifting posture and clutching a worried face or running fingers through his thin sandy hair. Cortez was shorter and more solid looking, his demeanour was one of reptilian coldness. His hair was dark and slicked back, and a close-cut Mephistophelian beard followed a neat contour across his jaw-line. His hands were loosely clasped together on the table-top.

"With all due respect," Cortez said, "S-Zero-One was hardly a suitable candidate. We've gone over this before—"

"But that kind of trauma...?" Tarratt's voice sounded shrill beside Cortez's impassive monotone.

"It doesn't surprise me. He wasn't a native. He had no way of assimilating that kind of information. Garbage in, garbage out."

"But Jesus, look what happened. Guy's a basket case..."

"Let's not be dramatic—"

"Dramatic? Have you seen the diagnosis?"

"It's too early to draw conclusions—"

"Coma, Catatonia, third degree psychosis. We're not talking about a damn headache."

"He could still make a full recovery—"

"I talked to the chief shrink..."

"Please..."

"...do you know what he said? 'You can't sew a broken egg back together.'"

"That was unprofessional. He is still formally under diagnostic observation."

"Jesus..."

When Kyoto spoke it was with the soft voice of someone who was used to having people's undivided attention.

“Mister Tarratt, I think Professor Cortez is more qualified to offer a balanced evaluation.” Tarratt looked like he was about to say something, but then he relented, glancing down.

“There are a number of factors that are responsible for the failure of the trial with the alpha release. Firstly, this was a very early prototype. When we tried the full extro-organic interface, we got massive synaptic feedback. It was an unfortunate hazard that we could not have anticipated, but which can easily be rectified with the benefit of hindsight.”

“And how many more unfortunate hazards might there be just around the corner, Professor?”

Cortez ignored the question.

“...However this difficulty was a symptom of a more fundamental problem which I have continually warned about. Before we even thought of attempting this kind of interface, we should have properly refined the cortical mapping technology . It was just far too primitive.”

“But the acquisition changes all this—” Kyoto said.

“Yes. The mapping technology of the new interface is very advanced. Ten years ahead of our own work. We’re now in a far better position to build a successful link.”

“But the technology is not the only issue, am I correct?” Kyoto was leaning forward attentively now, elbows on the polished glass surface, hands steepled.”

“Yes, which brings me to my second point. As I just mentioned, S-Zero-One was not a native. He was completely ill-equipped to make sense of mass data-exchange at a global level.”

“We need proper *surfers*—” The sentence sounded clumsy through Kyoto’s japanese accent.

Cortez winced at the outmoded term. “That is correct. It is the consensus amongst cognitive specialists that the only hope of a meaningful neural interface is if the subject already has in place a mental model of the host system. It’ll just be garbage otherwise, indecipherable noise.”

“I can’t believe you’re prepared to go on with this after what happened,” Tarratt said, “It’s still too early, we don’t know enough about this technology. There could be dangers we’d never imagined—”

“All pioneers face danger, Tarratt. S-Zero-One knew exactly what the risks were and he chose to take them. The new RNS will take care of this kind of problem—”

“But this is still illegal, damn it! None of this stuff has been passed for use on humans, none of these experiments have been cleared by any official ethical body.”

“Tarratt!” Kyoto shouted. “Do I have to remind you what is at stake? This is the biggest technological breakthrough in the history of humanity. Whoever gets this working wins the whole game. It is as simple as that. This is survival, there is no room for this bleeding-heart liberal crap. Ethics is not a consideration.”

The room was quiet. If Cortez had said this, Tarratt would have erupted into frantic argument, but Kyoto was a boss, a very big boss.

When Kyoto spoke again, the cool professionalism had returned, as if his outburst had never occurred.

“Professor Cortez, I understood that the new technology solves everything, you have the interface you require, and it works. Why is the extro-organic link still a problem?”

“The RNS enables us to decode and re-encode sensory data. A mind-to-mind jack is easy, record and play-back is easy, because we’re just dealing with human encoding. We just replicate one subject’s cortical activity in a target mind. But the mind-to-Net jack is a whole different kettle of fish. The Net is electronic activity of a different species—the host ‘mind’ is completely alien. We don’t know what will happen when it is rigged up to the human sensorium. We don’t know what it will feel like or look like, or whether it’ll make any sense at all.”

“Which is why you want natives...”

“Yes, if there’s any chance of making it work, we’ve got to have subjects with strong savvie—serious techies. Because only they have a hope in hell of making sense of what the RNS will be feeding into their heads.”

* * *

It wasn’t long afterwards that Shiva turned up. Christie was hovering around him in that creepy way he did, so even before he saw the packed duffle-bag slung over Shiva’s shoulder he’d guessed the news.

Shiva didn’t make it. They’d latched onto a weak signal, and they’d stuck him in the rig to try for a result. But the pattern was too weak, scrambled. After twenty minutes of visual garbage, they gave up on him, unplugged him, and turned him out with a smashing headache and a big roll of high-denomination bills. He said his goodbye and split.

By Thursday Jake had been put through the interface four times. This was more than the others were getting so Jake figured that they had a special interest in him. Today was free though, the schedule completely empty. Like the two others who remained once the trial weeded out the non-compatibles, he was left to mill around idly in the rec-room where they swiped up movies and collected snacks from the auto-vendor.

They’d put aside the whole schedule for Pilot. He’d gone for it, taken that phone number figure they’d waved at him and now they were finally doing it, direct-wiring him softside.

The other two were splayed back in armchairs in the screen room taking in some new Hollywood flick—a thin, long-haired guy, and a neatly dressed red-haired girl with large round glasses and silver spirals dangling from her ear-lobes. He didn’t know either of them, and they never said much to each other. They just sat around in shared boredom, doing their best to fill in the time they’d ordinarily spend behind headsets cruising through a tapestry of spaceless worlds.

It was 2 P.M. when they heard it. It was a howling, a long peircing wail that barely broke for breath. For a moment Jake thought it must be an

HeadSpace

animal, but then he recognised the familiar human undertones and his blood froze. The three of them glanced at one another and then jumped up, hurrying through the door to the main corridor.

Down by a lab entrance the scene was one of commotion. Four ops were pulling a trolley through one of the lab side-doors, two of them were struggling with a figure that was half-strapped onto the top of it. Arms were flailing about and the ops were shouting to one another above the relentless noise, pinning him down as they tightly fastened buckles across his upper arms.

Christie was with them, and he made quickly towards them as they approached, cutting off their path.

“It’s under control,” he said.

“What’s happened?” Jake said.

“It’s under control,” he said again, like a recording.

The ops were on the move again, heading down that side-corridor towards the elevators. As the team hurriedly passed they caught a brief glimpse of Pilot. His face was a distorted mask of terror, wild eyes staring madly out of an ashen face, a cluster of microjects pinned to the nape of his neck. His mouth was wide open and he was still screaming, his voice hoarser now, slipping down to a moan as the tranquillisers took effect.

The noise faded into the distance, losing itself in the echo of footsteps and the clatter of that trolley, until finally the elevator doors sliced the sound cleanly off.

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The delta got him back to LAX in three hours, late afternoon quickly slipping into midnight blackness as terrestrial time made its way to 1 A.M. Unloading for the small supersonic was swifter than the bulky mass transit affairs, so Shiva was quickly through ID control, making his way through the expanses of corridor to a ground level freeway

pickup point. The freeway was the base level of a stack of roads heading north to downtown. It was lit up in a warm amber, and the cool air was a sharp contrast to the hot Shang Hai sun. The pick-up strip was mostly empty, only a couple of parked buses and a small group of tired suits wandering along, necks craning, in search of something. No sign of his cab.

He dumped his bag on the sidewalk and leaned forward, pulling back the lid of his eye and carefully removing the lenses—left eye first, then the right—and then slipping them into a small, plastic bottle, blinking and adjusting to vision free from rippled distortion.

Because of that hit of Blaze he'd taken, the light hurt his eyes, so he quickly pulled some shades out of a jacket pocket and slipped them on.

They called it Blaze because of its curious optical side-effects. The hyper-sensitive retinal firing threshold it induced bathed everything in a silvery light, offering unique night-vision but making daylight painful enough to necessitate shades. Because of this, street slang gave it names like Catseye and Nightsighter, and it had found its niche in club culture, street-gangs, and military pharmaceuticals. Shiva had taken one just because it was a good upper that could cut through the massive jet-lag he'd got. Then he waited.

He hadn't been waiting long when the beetle-like shape of a carrier came into view. They didn't have cabs like that, so he relaxed and took a look in the other direction, but the road was empty.

Maybe if the carrier had slowed more gently they'd have got him unawares, but the abrupt screech of tyres tripped Shiva's alarm. Even before four sets of doors were swinging upwards like the wings of some giant insect, Shiva was high-tailing it off across the road, hurdling the central barrier, and darting off up the other side.

A muffled thunk of some device discharging echoed about the concrete enclosure, and a searing pain sang out in Shiva's back. They'd shot him.

HeadSpace

He kept running, allowing himself a single glimpse over his shoulder at his quarry. There were four of them, well-built paramilitaries in navy blue boiler suits and headgear with flip-down visors. They were about fifty metres behind; two of them were hopping over the barrier and making their way over to his side of the road, while the others were jogging along the other side. One of them carried a pistol with an over-sized muzzle. They seemed leisurely, un-hurried, like they already had him.

He turned down an alley between blocks and ran through to a deserted car-park. Trash from a clutter of drums was blowing about in weird eddies, and he paused momentarily, eyes darting about, before running across to where another alley led off to the left. A cold numbness was spreading up his back and he felt suddenly exhausted; he tripped over an uneven section of quake-damaged surface and staggered momentarily, before regaining his balance and launching himself onwards.

He felt dizzy, his ears were ringing, and the cold numbness had become a blanket of creeping blackness, engulfing him. The floor felt spongy and his path was suddenly blocked by locked wire-mesh gates. He reached out and grabbed the fence, but his fingers wouldn't keep hold and he stumbled, collapsing into a pile on the ground.

Behind him came the sound of footsteps and approaching voices, and a fresh burst of adrenalin cleared some of the heaviness that tugged at him. He summoned his remaining strength and pulled himself to his feet, launching himself at the fence. His fingers got a grip, and he managed to find a toe-hold and pull himself halfway up. But then that muffled thud sounded again; another needle of pain sang out in his shoulder and he was falling.

For a moment he lay there on the concrete in a sea of pain, voices about him mumbling indistinctly, a foot prodding his side experimentally, then blackness engulfed him...

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Jake didn't sleep too well that night. He regularly woke, hot and damp with perspiration, a fading dream leaving an icy chill inside him. It had been a dark and claustrophobic dream, the atmosphere thick with anxiety and the sense of being hunted. It teetered on the edge of nightmare, just falling short of that plunge into full-blown terror. And just when he thought he'd escaped and that ecstatic breeze of cool relief was licking at him, he'd hear the noise that would chill his blood; that barely human howl of bottomless terror, echoing down narrow corridors. Then he'd see Pilot's face, that yawning black catharsis twisting his features into something monstrous and he'd be jolted awake, memories of the dream melting quickly away into grateful oblivion.

It was an alarm from the wall-unit that finally awoke him, its peircing squeal tearing him reluctantly from a finally peaceful sleep. He clambered out of bed and hit the cancel, looking bleary-eyed at the message on display.

Kyoto wanted to see him.

This didn't surprise him. It'd be tough to get anyone to stay on the project after what happened to Pilot.

He'd already packed his bags, this was as good a time as any to hand in his notice.

He took the elevator down to the basement level. The place seemed deserted; a couple of cleaners and lab flunkies were hanging around the lab, but as he passed the rec-room he saw that it was empty and unlit.

Kyoto was waiting for him in that office where they'd first been introduced. He was wearing that carefully cultivated look of serene authority that these types had down to a tee, but something about his posture betrayed the apprehension he felt. He signalled to the chair as Jake entered.

"The others are leaving..." he said, before Jake had even got seated.

"Excuse me while I'm not surprised," Jake said sarcastically. "I won't be sticking around either."

“Please give me the opportunity to reassure you that precautions will be taken—”

“Right,” Jake said. “You took precautions with Pilot.”

“It’s always far easier with the benefit of hindsight. There were warning signs. Signs we could not have identified until an unfortunate incident like this took place—”

“You’re wasting your breath,” Jake said. “Like I say, I just came down to tell you I quit...” He stood and made to leave.

“How does twenty million dollars sound?” Kyoto said levelly.

Jake stopped dead at the words. Sure he knew they’d up the price, but he never thought it would be anything like this. He re-called Pilot’s grin as he slipped the word to him, Dollar sign—phone number, he’d said.

“It is a lot of money, isn’t it?” Kyoto said, scenting victory. “I bet you couldn’t even make a tenth of that in your whole life...”

Jake turned to face him.

“Why me?” Jake asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb,” Jake said impatiently. “The others wouldn’t turn down an offer like that. Nobody would. You never made this offer to *them*...”

“Yes,” Kyoto said.

“And there must be thousands of others out there you could just haul in. So why me?”

“Your case is different.”

“How so exactly?”

Kyoto was quiet, like he was wondering what to say.

“Is there something here that maybe I should hear about?” Jake dumped himself back down in the chair.

“Firstly,” Kyoto said, “time is running out. We don’t have very long before Nova catch up with us and build their own interface. Every moment we spend trawling for new recruits puts us in greater danger—”

“...and secondly?” Jake prompted.

Paul Barrows

“Secondly, recruits were not chosen simply on technical ability. All of them were carefully screened. They all possess a neurological make-up that makes them particularly suitable—”

“The sigma form? But they couldn’t all make the jack—”

“No, they couldn’t be screened for the sigma form until they got here.”

“So what’s this other...factor?”

“The first thing we did when we found subjects who had the sigma form was to study them. It soon became evident that there are very great differences in the quality of the interface achieved with the current technology. There are fundamental biological differences that we have good theoretical reasons for believing will affect the success of a full extra-organic hook-up. I won’t bore you with the biochemistry of these factors, but suffice to say that you score as close to a full house as we can reasonably get.”

“So I’m the prize guinea pig, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you want me to risk ending up with my brain turned to cream-cheese like Pilot?”

“Pilot was heavily traumatised but no real damage was done. We’re confident that he will recover. You do have good reason to be concerned, but like I say we have learned lessons. We can put new safeguards in place.”

It didn’t take a lot of thinking. Kyoto was right, just this one job and he was made for life. He could live quite comfortably on the interest alone. Even though part of him continued to scream that he must be crazy, that he should drop it and get out while his mind was still in one piece, Jake had pretty much made up his mind. Even though he smelt a lie in the warm reassurances over Pilot, the scent of whitewash strong in his nostrils, the pull of that vast financial gravity was irresistible. He just needed one concession.

“I’ve got a safeguard of my own...” Jake said.

HeadSpace

Kyoto looked at him, the question written on his face did not need to be voiced.

“I want my own medic.”

“We have the best possible specialists here—” Kyoto began.

Jake cut him off in mid-sentence. “But nobody I trust, Mr Kyoto. Those are my terms, you can take it or leave it.”

“Very well,” Kyoto said at last. “Give me their details, and I’ll have them sent for.”

Jake was already pulling a plastic wafer from his wallet.

“The name’s MacIntyre,” he said, tossing the card onto Kyotos desk, “Chip MacIntyre.”

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The awakening was slow, the shift from sleep to consciousness a gradual rise through layers of delirium to some semblance of awareness. His head thumped rhythmically, bursts of purple light dispelling the fleshy darkness of closed eyelids.

Memories grudgingly condensed, the confusion subsided and understanding dawned.

He was alive. That was the important thing. They’d hit him with some cocktail of tranks, but he was alive.

For now.

He opened his eyes and looked around. Blurred images swam around, disjointed by the lazy stereoptic fusion of his drugged vision. He was lying on some kind of bunk, a hard shelf thinly padded with foam. Dim neon nite-lite illuminated the features of a spartan room. There was a shelf by the head of the bunk and a toilet in the adjacent corner, the nearby wall scrawled with a spider collection of biroed graffiti. Opposite him was a big iron door covered in stained and flaking beige paint. By it, a small screen was inset in the wall, buried behind a thick layer of plastic.

It was a cell.

He rolled over and his foot snagged on something that dangled from the bunk. It was a cord, and he could feel it tugging at something hard clipped around his ankle as his feet clumsily floundered about.

Shit, he thought. Oh shit.

He was suddenly tired again, the cocktail of psycho-pharmaceuticals still throwing up waves of delirium. Sleep beckoned again, and he gratefully sank once more into nothingness.

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It was the same whenever they gave him a job to do. There'd always be some tedious preliminaries, the usual rag-bag of explanation and self-justification. He'd sat and patiently listened as he always did, until the superfluous prelude was over and they got onto the practical essentials.

It's true that the briefing did much to satisfy his natural curiosity, but it was an indulgence that he felt was always taken too far. There was always an edge to the monologue that he found odd. There was a peculiar obsession with justification, a strange need they always had to distance themselves from their own orders; it was as if the notion of human death posed some kind of difficulty, bringing to the fore odd conflicts and psychological resistance.

But then he realised that his immunity from this peculiar human malady was something that made him unique, and the renewed realisation of what a narrow world these people inhabited brought a feeling of quiet superiority. He was truly free, unfettered by so many of the childish and sentimental values that shackled them to such a limiting existence.

The history of this particular assignment came to mind as he walked quietly up the staircase and on through the security door to the carpeted curve of the first floor. The target was a defector, so they said.

HeadSpace

He'd occupied a senior position in R & D for years but had recently been causing difficulties. As the pace hotted up it brought new pressures, new challenges that demanded some extreme solutions, and not everyone was up to it. This guy was one of them. He'd turned into a malcontent, started making waves, stirring up trouble. So it wasn't long before the corporate spooks were alerted, tagged him as a potential subversive for surveillance.

Nothing came up for a while, but then some illegal transmissions were registered. He'd opened an unauthorised external line that threaded through a cable network to a station in Tokyo where it was bounced off a three orbitals before dropping to earth on the U.S. west coast. He'd covered his tracks well but it was only a matter of time before they traced its destination. The results came as no great surprise—he was switching sides.

So they'd resigned him, resigned him in that particular way that offered a solution to the many difficulties that people like him posed, a way that solved a whole heap of problems in a single stroke.

He moved silently down the corridor until he reached 1-01. The door pushed open with a soft click as the lock scanned and cleared his wristband, then he slipped quietly inside.

The darkness tripped the amplification circuit on his shades and the room was lit up in a shadowless phosphorescence. He slipped his hand into his pocket and took out the cold, heavy oval form of the needle-gun, his thumb settling instantly into the concave moulding of a pachmyr button on its surface.

A sleeping figure was in the bed by the drawn blinds of the window, his back turned towards him. He was motionless and undisturbed, the sound of his breathing slow and rhythmic, and the figure took three steps towards him. Then he lifted his arm and pointed the needle-gun. He pushed softly on the button and a pin-sharp bead of green light blazed, waving around across the bed-sheet until it found a patch of exposed skin on the back of the prone figure's neck.

Paul Barrows

He gently pulled a slider on the back of the device with his finger nail and the the bead suddenly turned a blood-red, a soundless warning buzzer gently tingling his thumb as the setting switched from phenothiazine to a deadly cocktail of necrotol derivatives.

He steadied his hand and squeezed...

There was a sharp pneumatic hiss and the familiar ripple of recoil as a tiny sliver of chemical-laced steel shot through the air and buried itself in flesh.

There was a thin gasp, then the regular pace of soft breathing resumed.

The figure stood there quietly as the breathing became shallower and slower, until finally it came to a stop with a last, soft, deflated sigh.

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Shiva didn't know how long he'd been asleep when the glare of neon and the crash of the steel door tore him from a string of uneasy dreams.

Shiva looked up. The guy standing before him was, in his late thirties, tall and well tanned, sandy hair bunched back into a short pony tail. He wore an immaculate pearl suit over a black high-collared shirt. A pair of silver rimmed shades were hooked in his shirt pocket. He stood and looked round at the dingey room.

"Quite a place you've got here, Mister uh...?" the guy said in a crisp English voice. He put on a show of struggling to remember and waved a hand, prompting him.

"Shiva." Shiva said after a suitably long pause. He slowly pulled himself up into a sitting position on the edge of the bunk.

The guy broke into a wide plastic-coated grin, radiating false charm and good-naturedness. "Mister *Shiva*."

"Just Shiva," Shiva said.

"Right you are, *Shiva*." He grinned again and gave a conspiratorial wink—the regular whacky-guy.

"And you are—?" Shiva asked politely.

“Call me...*Kali*.” He said the word in a comical Asian accent, flashing those teeth for a third time.

Smart, thought Shiva. Fucker knows some Hindu mythology. *Kali*—*Kali* who plays the tune while Shiva dances.

Whacky-guy put on a suitably exaggerated thoughtful expression, sighed and launched into a contrived musing.

“You have no idea how much trouble we’ve had putting a name to that snappy moniker of yours. Mind you, I expect a guy like you has lots of names, right? I expect names are like fresh underwear to high-flying cybernauts like yourself—”

“If you got a point, then spit it out,” Shiva said impatiently.

The expression of cheerful bonhomie slid momentarily but quickly re-aligned itself. He sighed and looked thoughtful.

“Yes I do have a point. Oh yes indeed.” That grin again.

“The good news is that the guys upstairs want you alive. At least at the moment they do. See, they just can’t seem to make up their mind. You know...one moment they wanna kill you, then they wanna keep you alive, then they wanna kill you again.” He chuckled. “Such a complex relationship we have with you guys. On the one hand you have done some excellent work for us, for which we are eternally grateful. On the other hand, though, the competition hired you to fuck us over quite seriously, and fuck us over you did. This did not please us greatly. But now the pendulum has swung back, and it looks as though you are now in a position to make amends.” He smiled benevolently.

“And just how might I be of assistance?” Shiva said, taking on that same veneer of English politeness.

“We have a problem.” Whacky guy steepled his hands together and gazed distantly skywards. “Some equipment prototypes that this corporation spent nearly five hundred billion dollars developing over the course of twenty years appears to have gone astray.”

“That was careless,” Shiva quipped.

“Curiously enough it appears to have fallen into the hands of our old friends of the Aizu empire, who are now rigging it to some of their own technology to make it all work. This is not a happy situation.”

“So what’s this gotta do with me?”

The guy put a hand into his inside pocket and took out a small envelope. Then he reached inside it and slid out a sheaf of photos, quickly snatching them up and holding their faces to his chest. He fanned them out dramatically and smiled.

“First of all we have the Ace of Spades.” He pulled off a photo and tossed it onto the shelf by the head of the bunk.

Shiva picked it up. It was a photo of Shadow, a blurred lo-res image of him stood in that Mall in central London.

“This gentleman is quite a celebrity over at Aizu. A regular prize guinea pig. Don’t pretend you don’t know him.” He threw another photo next to the other. It was himself talking to Shadow in the same Mall, a frozen laugh on his face.

“We’ve got the Queen of Spades...” he threw another photo down. It was the same scene from a different angle, and centred on a petite, short-haired girl in her mid-twenties. It was Chip.

“The Jack of Spades...” An older picture of Kaos. He was walking along a street in shorts, a T-shirt and shades. A beach, part of a palm tree, and some seaside stalls were behind him. Some coastal resort in Florida or California.

“And of course your good self.” He gave a predatory grin. “I’ll wager that these three little spades joined you to do some digging in a certain borough of West London.” He paused for a response. Shiva said nothing.

“It doesn’t really matter,” he continued. “The fact is that our Ace is going to help us settle the score. Which is where you come in. You, Mr. Shiva, are going to persuade our Mr Shadow to switch sides.”

“And what makes you think he’d do that? You guys ain’t exactly popular with him.” Shiva said, staring him in the eye.

“And why, pray, would that be?” the guy asked softly.

HeadSpace

“Does the name Lisa Meyer ring a bell?”

“I’m afraid not,” he said swiftly, returning Shiva’s stare. “But we’re digressing. He’ll switch sides because of the consequences if he doesn’t. We’ve got you, and we’ve got a bead on the rest of the family.”

“So you don’t need a messenger boy. Tell him yourself,” Shiva snapped.

Whacky guy sighed and picked a piece of lint casually from the arm of his suit.

“We could. But the personal touch is so much more effective. A little encouragement can make all the difference. And anyway, we have a couple more trump cards. The Queen of hearts...” He threw another photo down. It was a shot of Eve against the grey and red-brick background of a dingey housing estate.

“And finally, the Queen of...” He threw the last card down. “Diamonds!” he said, with a grin.

An icy bolt hit Shiva. It was June. June in that cute red top and those denim hot-pants. She was laid back on a sunbed on the patio of that Long Beach apartment they’d hired, a glass of something yellow nearby.

He looked up at whacky guy’s smug grin and rage descended. Shiva launched himself off the bunk and lunged at him, punching wildly. For a moment he had a grip on the arm of that suit, but then whacky guy tore away from him, and only a couple of the frenzied blows landed home before the short tether of the anklet cable sent Shiva sprawling.

The guy’s sunglasses had come lose from his pocket, and they clattered across the tiles as he staggered out of range panting. He put a hand against the wall to steady himself and then straightened up, composing himself again. He straightened his jacket and tie and looked blackly down at where Shiva was clambering to his feet.

“Come come, now, Shiva. I’m surprised at you,” he said evenly. “This is a rough game—you know how high the stakes are. We weren’t going to get what we want by just asking politely, were we now?”

Paul Barrows

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and dabbed thoughtfully at his lower lip, staring at the crimson smear it left on the white cotton. Then he went over to pick up his shades were they'd fallen. There was a silence while he inspected the lenses, polished them and replaced them in his shirt pocket.

"You'd really do it, wouldn't you?" Shiva said, disgust welling over.

Whacky guy straightened his tie and collar and adjusted his jacket.

"This isn't about what *I* can or cannot do—you know that. This thing is in the hands of forces way bigger than you or I. Forces that can chew you up and spit you out without a moment's thought." He looked thoughtful for a moment, even sympathetic. "There won't be any need for any unpleasantness. You'll do what we ask because you have to."

He was right, Shiva thought.

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It was 7 P.M. when Jake discovered the message left on that screen in his room. It was Chip—she was coming. She'd been booked in on the 1100 London-Shang Hai flight, ETA 2000 hours.

Jake felt a warm thrill. Deep down he knew she'd come but he'd still had concerns. Maybe she'd be unavailable, off on some jaunt with her phone switched off. Or, worse, maybe she'd bottle out, hear some rumour and steer clear.

It'd be good to see a friendly face. The place was nearly empty now. The others had checked out the morning after Pilot was taken, and only three or four newer recruits were lingering about, waiting nervously for the preliminary tests.

He called the number they'd left him at half eight and the familiar face looked wearily through at him, a smile lighting up her pretty features as recognition fell.

"Shadow..."

"Hi," he said. "Thanks, Chip. I owe you one—"

HeadSpace

“Forget it,” she said dismissively. “You I should thank—” Jake remembered the disappointment on her face when she heard she didn’t make the profile.

“How long you been in.”

“Just got in. I’ll freshen up, then we’ll talk,” she said. There was something in her tone, a subtle edge on her voice that rang alarm bells. “Drop by in twenty minutes. I’m in 2-18.”

Chip’s room was just five doors along from where Jake was staying. The door was slightly ajar, so Jake walked in. Like his own, the room was warm and lit in a soft bluish day-glow. A plastic hold-all and a black medic’s bag was lying by the bed, and nearby it clothing was scattered across the carpeted floor. A short silver-grey jacket was on a wall-hook.

The sound of a shower was coming from the adjacent bathroom. The door was slightly open, a sliver of neon brightness that spilled small curls of steam along the adjoining ceiling.

“Chip?” he said.

“Come through...” came Chip’s voice through a porcelain echo.

Jake pushed the door open and walked into the bathroom. The shower cubicle was on his right, and he half expected to see the cloudy pink blur of her naked form through the frosted glass as he entered but there was nobody inside. He stepped through and pushed the door behind him. Chip was before a mirror by some basins, drying her hair. She wore only a brief pair of pale blue panties, and the raised arms of her reflected image exposed the length of her bare torso, drawing his eyes instantly to pale nipples on small white breasts.

He looked away awkwardly, and was instantly angry at his embarrassment.

“We’re in deep shit,” she said quietly. She didn’t take her eyes away from her reflection. “It’s the Nova spooks—they’ve got Shiva...”

“Oh Christ—” he exclaimed.

“Keep it down,” she murmured between her teeth, “this place is live...”

Explains the shower, he thought. Plenty of noise.

“They know everything,” she said. “The hit...names...the works. And they’ve got tabs on this operation—everything...”

“How the—?”

“Fuck knows. Its not important now.” She tied the towel around her head, and pulled a cotton gown off a rail under the mirror.

“What do they want,” he asked.

“What they always wanted.” She turned round to face him, briskly sliding on the gown. “What everyone wants. They want DNI.”

Jake gave an incredulous laugh.

“Off me? How the fuck do they figure that? They think I can just heap all this shit into a truck and drive out?”

“No. But if you can make the neural jack, you’ll be dynamite. And first thing Aizu will do is get you to sink Nova. This is their insurance.”

“They want me to defect...”

“Yeah. They’ve got you, Jake. They’ve got us all...”

There was a silence.

“And what if I don’t make the jack. What if they take me off in a basket, like Pilot.”

She looked up at him, and for the first time in all the years he’d known her there was a glitter of fear in those emerald eyes.

“I don’t know,” she said blankly.

He gave a long sigh and leaned back against the tiled wall.

“Did you tell the others?” he asked finally.

“The call came while I was on my way here. They played a tape of Shiva, told me to pass it onto you. I got through to Kaos but couldn’t get the others. It’s no use anyway...we don’t know how close they are to us, who else they’re watching. We don’t know who to warn. And then there’s Shiva...”

HeadSpace

“I need to hook up, gotta go softside—” Jake said through clenched teeth, frustration welling.

“I tried that already. Place is shielded. Kinda wondered why they let me keep the phone...”

They were quiet again. Both of them thinking fiercely as the shower sprayed noisily. The steam in the room was thickening, the damp heat bringing both of them out in a sweat.

“You should go...” Jake said at last, putting a hand gently on her shoulder.

“No...”

“Yes! You’ve got to warn the others—”

“Kaos will spread word. But that’s the best we can do out there and it won’t be enough. Only chance we got now is with the full jack, and you need me here to make sure those assholes don’t kill you in the process.”

“It’s too dangerous—”

“Don’t fucking patronise me, Shadow,” she snapped. Then her eyes softened and she put a hand on his arm. “We’ll stay here and try to pull this off together, give Nova what they want. If that fails, then we split and get everyone to go underground. Everyone. Then we just pray Nova back off.”

“They’ll kill Shiva...” Jake said. He looked her in the eyes.

She looked away. “I know,” she said.

*

*

*

Jake had spent the previous twenty-four hours preparing himself for this moment, fighting off that wall of thick anxiety that was closing in. The core of that fear was never far away; it shone through a dozen fragments of his recent life. The dark paranoia of Damon’s cracked mind, the blind terror in Pilot’s eyes as they wheeled him off to be airlifted to some psycho ward. And then there were the rumours, archetypal Net Voodoo that teetered on the fringe between reality and fantasy—whispered allusions

to sinister presences softside, hellish netherworlds gestating in a vestigial cyberspace.

The moment he'd shared with the others in that refrigerated basement at Queens seemed tame in comparison. There were some things worse than death.

The technicians didn't help either, that quietness and those furtive half-glances made him feel like a condemned prisoner. Was it just paranoia that made him feel like there was an unspoken fatalism—a sense that they were just awaiting the inevitable?

He took hold of himself mentally, wrenching himself out of the emotional spiral. They'd got safeguards this time. They knew the warning signs now and they could shut down the matrix and pull him within a few seconds.

He lay back in the chair and sighed deeply, doing his best to force some of the tension out of his body.

Hiriaki came over and set him up, sliding the cocoon of the RNS matrix into place over his scalp. Servo-motors whined and engaged, studs tightening across his scalp.

Jake closed his eyes and exhaled deeply, blowing breath out until lungs were spent, then sucking air slowly back in again.

"We'll be monitoring the EEG very closely." The voice came from just behind him to his left. "There's autowatches for those delta spikes and the other warning signs. Any problem and they'll trigger a shut-down." Then the sound of footsteps receding as Hiriaki went back to one of the displays.

"Hey, Shadow!" The voice took him by surprise. It was Chip, he hadn't heard her approach. He opened his eyes and smiled up at the familiar face.

"You watch yourself in there," she said. "And don't sweat it, I'll pull the plug if your bio-signs get too crazy."

"Yeah," he whispered. She turned, about to make for one of the consoles.

HeadSpace

“Hey Chip,” he said. She stopped and turned back to him.

“Thanks...”

“Forget it...” She smiled and vanished from his view.

Jake closed his eyes again and lay in the amber twilight as the footsteps receded and the muttering of technicians continued. He thought of the look on Eve’s face when he left, felt that needle of guilt of the betrayal of his promise. Sure he’d stuck to his word, but he’d turned his back on the spirit of the agreement. He was in no physical harm here, he was sure of it, but there was a real and more sinister danger than just physical threat. He just had to do this—that insistent hunger for the nameless thing that pushed him relentlessly on gave him no choice. Idle flashbacks lit up his restless mind, fragments of his life passing dreamily before his mind’s eye—the airport, the trip on the maglev, a forest of umbrellas in downtown Shang Hai and that jungle of neon pictograms scattered with slivers of familiar english sound-bites.

Then he was drifting, floating, and he realised that the holographic dance of sub-molecular forces spilling invisibly from those electrodes was once again taking hold of his mind.

The bodiless haze was back, and he was enveloped in a pink directionless nothingness. A stachato dance of sensory chaos descended, a river of disconnected smells, tastes, and textures washing over him. Then the haze was torn away and a crazy jeweled hurricane of colour and geometric impossibility was upon him, with a thunderous roar that danced crazily across the spectrum of pitch and form.

It wasn’t like last time, where the storm was suddenly cut through by the clarity and order of a familiar sensorium. Instead the hurricane seemed to be settling down, the onslaught fading slowly into a neutral blur. Colour, sound, scent, taste, touch—all were blending, settling into a crisp silver blanket of sensory fusion. It was a noise that was the scent and taste of the rush of cool air.

Sensations were disembodied, channels of experience bleeding into one pure sharp stream of visceral data. He was a split point of consciousness, a

dot at the end of a funnel fed by a forest of receptors. He was a fragment of retina coated with cochlear cilia, fused to the warm taste-smell-touch matter of mouth and throat.

It was difficult to judge how much time was passing. He wondered if this was it, if this was the full jack or whether he was just free-floating in the white noise of the RNSS. The motionless fall through formless sense data continued, and he was beginning to think that it would never end when he felt something. It was like the sensation he'd got when that first sensorium took hold of his mind, the bite of cohesion and form as he played host to the thoughts of another's mind. But there was no sudden glare of light and sound, just the sense of something else out there. It was small at first, hardly discernable, but then as if by some reversal of perspective it was suddenly a breath-taking vastness opening up about him.

He didn't know what it was, could make out no form or structure or anything that he could make sense of, there was just the sudden sense of bottomlessness, of unfathomable distances stretching out in all direction. The thing around him was like the dancing surface of clear water, full of chaotic pattern and form, alive with phantom activity, playing out the illusions of a reflected light. It seemed to snare him, drawing him into its hypnotic phantasmagoria. The noise and his thoughts were absorbing one another, his mind becoming one with the flickering cybernetic cascade.

Out of the miasma, something was emerging. Form was cutting through, the rippling of the ether steadying to offer glimpses of something within. It was indistinct at first but it quickly crystalised, springing vividly to life in the mind's eye. Snapshot fragments of visual narrative momentarily flickered out of sequence before settling into continuity.

Before he realised what he'd done it was too late. The slab of chrome-edged glass was lurching, toppling off a steel-mesh shelf.

HeadSpace

It's journey towards the unyielding oak slabs can't have been more than half a second, but in that moment of heightened awareness time was strangely expanded. It seemed to coast lazely downwards, its spinning face momentarily glaring him with the reflection of morning sunlight...

The vision was clear, but there was something dream-like about it. It seemed disembodied, as if dispassionately observing itself, free from the reflected interpretation of the seer. Then, as suddenly as it had appeared it was gone, swallowed up by the psychic ether.

"Got you!" It was a girl's voice, cut off by a peal of childish laughter. Jake threw himself to the ground, eyes darting across the cluttered terrain. He couldn't see her, she was hiding somewhere. Behind one of the trees or lying in a ditch. The air smelt damp and mossy and he was still panting from the sprint through underbrush and piles of dead leaves.

The fragment burst to life with no warning, bringing a warm wave of nostalgia.

He was exposed here in the clearing so he darted off into the comforting shade of a tangle of nearby bushes. His body was small and light, senses clear and pin-sharp, his mind alight with an energy that was clean and fresh. Another of the lazer bolts shot past him and burst into a crude scattering of pixels as it hit a tree.

"Missed!" he whooped in a childish falsetto and threw himself down deep in the shade of the bushes. He scrambled round so that he was facing towards where the shot had come from, outstretched arms clasping the handle of the plastic BanDai Kwazer pistol, finger poised on the trigger...

The part of Jake that wasn't absorbed in the re-play looked on in confusion. Was this it? Was there nothing more to the jack than a random free-fall through reanimated memories?

The scene melted away into the ether.

Long triangles of glass leapt as one, spinning momentarily before clattering down again, bouncing briefly across the oak slabs before gravity sapped their momentum and they came to a stop with a soft clink...

Paul Barrows

It was just a fragment this time, barely a fraction of a second of heightened awareness.

Where was the Net? This wasn't what he'd expected. There were no glittering cybernetic landscapes, no surreal nebulae of information stretching out in every direction. Where was...

The entrance to the main walkway tunnel was dark and ominous, the usual blue-white glow of fluorescent strips entirely absent, leaving nothing but total darkness. He stopped for a moment and considered trying another walkway a few hundred metres along, but then left the path, climbed through a ragged hole in a mesh fence, and set off up a narrow dirt path that led up the embankment to the edge of the Expressway...

It came again as a flash, a sudden clutter of narrative compressed into a single moment. It had barely faded when another scene burst to life around him.

There was a rustle in the underbrush and he caught a glimpse of her as she raced through a sun-lit clearing, her ash-blond hair spilling from the back of the grey plastic helmet. Then, before he'd got any shots off, she was gone, racing through a gap in thick shrubbery and down over a steep verge.

He scrambled upright cursing and followed her path through the shrubbery, the plastic barrel of the pistol held upwards in readiness. As he approached the grassy verge he threw himself down again and began crawling towards its edge.

He brushed aside a portion of the long grass and the familiar panorama opened up below him. To his right was the processing plant, a squat ugly sprawl of concrete geometry fenced off from the surrounding countryside by aluminium mesh topped with glittering razor-wire. An aquaduct ran from the adjacent side and down a steep hill before him where it met a shallow stream that wound off into the forest.

The duct was like a concrete staircase, bordered by five-foot walls of cement pre-fab. Water from a red porcelain pipe at the top would spill down through a series of plateaus until it joined the stream, and Jake remembered the games he'd played there, where he and his mates would

HeadSpace

toss sticks and bits of old trash in at the top and watch them tumble down, shouting and cheering encouragement at their own pieces of flotsam.

His heart skipped a beat as he suddenly caught sight of her. She was standing close to the bottom of the hill where the mouth of the duct met the stream. She had her back to him, he realised with excitement—this was his chance.

He got to his feet and quietly descended the steep side of the verge until he was within fifty feet of her. then he lay down in the grass and took careful aim...

The first stirrings of worry; Dark clouds of memory were collecting, ominous rumblings of a storm on the horizon.

He looked down at the shattered picture. It was a photo of him and Lisa on a beach on the Costa Brava two years earlier, tanned and healthy. They were laughing and holding up an outsized cocktail tumbler full of blue liquid with a forest of fruit segments and paper umbrellas.

The glass was shattered in a jagged hundred-fingered star that was centred on Lisa's left eye, and fragments that had escaped from the chrome frame littered the surrounding floor...

A pang of remorse like a fork of lightning through his heart. No, not this...

The figure was short and stocky with short-cropped ginger hair and pale skin; he was in his mid-thirties. He stepped through the hole left by the shattered glass and muttered something over a com-link. Then he stepped over Ribs' bleeding body and made his way over to the units that Shiva, Kaos, Jake and Chip were huddled behind...

A new narrative. And a new bite of fear, fresh and raw.

Approaching the path leaving the walkway's opposite end, the sound of shoe scuffing against concrete echoed from the tunnel's looming entrance, sending an icy jolt of fear through him...

The scene melted seamlessly into another.

The synthetic stereo scream of the ray-gun rang in his ears, and a burst of sapphire bolts shot out towards her. His elation vanished as the bolts

Paul Barrows

passed straight through her, still visible soaring off into the superimposed virtual space beyond.

She'd left the game.

An indignant rage welled up in him. He jumped up and stomped towards her. He could see now that the visor on her headset was raised.

"Angie!" he shouted. "You've spoilt it, you've spoilt the game. What did you turn it off for?"

She didn't move. She just stood there staring down at the mouth of the aqueduct, her shoulders trembling. His anger faded as the first stirrings of anxiety crept up on him...

"Angie?"

No, not this...

But then, mercifully, the vision fell away to another.

Needles of glass were scattered over the floorboards. He knelt and began picking them up. One of the slivers had lodged itself in a crack in the boards, invisibly pointing upwards. A sudden bite of pain sang a scarlet scream as it speared the flesh on his middle finger...

It faded...

A cemetery in Islington. A newly carved headstone, pale and unweathered, a pile of wreaths scattered before it. The flowers still fresh and bright, glistening with a mid-morning dew, but the scattering of condolence cards were now illegible rivers of ink from an overnight shower. He was alone there, he wanted it that way. He couldn't be part of the awkward social clutter of friends and relatives most of whom would only ever meet briefly at these somber death rituals.

Then the yawning cavern opened, the vastness of a sorrow he could barely comprehend reaching up from his stomach and taking hold of his heart. He felt like he was losing his mind. Grief thick and hot and claustrophobic choking him...

Flash...

Over the com 2-Bit was shouting their names, barking the same questions at them over and over again.

HeadSpace

The figure cautiously moved into view, uzi levelled and trigger finger at the ready, relaxing slightly when he saw that they were unarmed. Then he paused for a moment, headed tilted slightly. He was listening to something.

Finally he responded.

“All of them?” he asked.

An answer only he could hear came and he stood back and raised the muzzle again. And over the com 2-Bit’s hollering went on, calling them, pleading with them to answer.

In a second that seemed like an eternity they waited for the blaze of noise and pain that would end their lives.

A single shot boomed. A case jangled on cold tiles...

Flash...

He stood frozen for a moment, staring intently into the gloom, his heart thudding; his hand instinctively sought out the comforting cold, pachmyr grip of the Colt 45 in his pocket...

Flash...

She couldn’t have been more than twenty-five. Her eyes stared sightlessly upwards; dark shoulder-length hair and the torn remainders of clothing drifted back and forth to the current of the stream. Her face was swollen and covered in dark bruises, and there was a deep hole smashed in right side of her temple, a lining of pink flesh surrounding a mess of broken bone and grey matter.

He remembered thinking that she didn’t look real, her clothes and skin were shades of grey; she was like one of those antique photos, “black and white”—no colour. Then the pink flesh and polished brown sheen of bone fragments caught his eye again and nausea washed over him. A sickly sweet taste rose in his mouth and he dropped to his knees and vomited into the grass...

Flash...

The cut was small but deep; the glass had speared a small vein and blood flowed swiftly down the tip of his finger, falling in a string of droplets

Paul Barrows

that splashed across the picture. It left crimson pools that tinted sand and sky and smiling faces...

Each of the narratives were tightening, drawing in on a single moment of black epiphony, a moment where a yawning chasm was opening up to swallow him.

...it was too late. The slab of chrome-edged glass was lurching, toppling off a steel-mesh shelf...

...the sound of shoe scuffing against concrete echoed from the tunnel's looming entrance, sending an icy jolt of fear through him...

...In a second that seemed like an eternity they waited for the blaze of noise and pain that would end their lives...

...a sliver of glass tore into the flesh of his finger, and a razor-edge bite of pain sang a scarlet scream. Lisa's face behind broken glass, a spider's web in shattered silica converging on Lisa's smiling face...

...He felt like he was losing his mind. Grief thick and hot and claustrophobic choking him...

...nausea washed over him. A sickly sweet taste rose in his mouth and he dropped to his knees and vomited into the grass...

Tighter and tighter, drawing together, focussing on that moment.

...too late...

...icy jolt of fear...

...that would end their lives. A single shot boomed...

...bite of pain sang a scarlet scream...

...Grief thick and hot and claustrophobic choking him...

They switched between one another until they blurred weirdly into a flickering merry-go-round. And through the blur came a vibration, a chord like a fist squeezing his heart.

Now he understood, and a fresh bolt of terror hit him. This was the thing that they'd talked about in hushed voices, the horror that had leaked through to the pagan GVE. It was the thing that had sent Damon and those others crazy with fear, that had managed to spread its sickness even through the primitive sensory phantom of VR.

HeadSpace

The thing was a simple raw experience that crossed every modality. A pure blazing primeval kernel of terror and pain that shone through fragments of his own memory. It was the hungry monster that invades our worst nightmares, the blackened limitless evil that feeds on our darkest moments. It was a searing blaze of pain, a blinding light that burnt the eyes; it was a deafening cacophony of dischord, a burning acid taste that stung the throat, and a sickening stench that made him want to retch. It was a song of blackness and emptiness and bottomless horror, a suffering that could never be conquered.

It was hell, and somehow it was here.

The panic welled up in him. I'm trapped, Jake thought, I'll never get out of here, I'll be here...forever.

"I'll always be there."

Damon's voice, barely a whisper.

"Run!" a voice inside himself shouted.

"Pull out now. Get the fuck out of there!"

Kaos's voice rang out through the com.

Jake tore himself away and ran. Ran down a darkly lit corridor lined with metal doors. A scream of outrage behind him as the black nexus receded into the distance, then it was gaining on him, its choking blackness pawing him with soft fingers. There was a door at the end of the corridor, just visible. If he could only get there in time...

It was almost on him, he could feel its deathly chord descending on him again. Then the door was before him. He pulled it half open, slipped nimbly through the gap and slammed it behind him with a metal crash.

Safe. Relief settled on him. He breathed deeply.

"Safe."

A voice behind him.

"Sa-a-a-fe."

Another icy bolt through his heart. He turned slowly around, unable to resist.

Paul Barrows

The two figures were barely recognisable. Their clothes were filthy, their hair matted and dirty. Each sat on the padded floor of the cell, each was manacled to the wall by a long chain attached to a stained strait-jacket. They were both drooling and grinning, mad eyes staring up at him.

The one on the left was Pilot, the other was Damon.

“*Sa-afe*,” They whispered.

Jake cried out, wheeling back in horror.

Run! Keep running! Don’t stop, the voice inside shouted.

But then there was a new voice. A thin small voice of reason fighting through the hysteria, quashing the flames of panic. A strange calm passed over him.

And then what? it said

Keep running...

And never stop?

No. Just run.

Forever.

Forever.

Can’t run forever. Time to stop, time to turn...

The scene vanished, and the void returned. He could sense the hideous presence returning, but it was no longer the eager predator descending on its helpless prey. It seemed unsure of itself.

Suddenly, a flicker—a glimmer in the darkness.

He could feel it, dimly but distinctly, the light he’d been looking for. It was there like it had been all along but it was obscured, eclipsed by a blackness that could only conceal it. Except like any eclipse there was a thin halo, a golden radiance betraying its presence.

A glimmer. A flicker as a solitary beam fought through, and Jake latched onto it with all his might. Caught it...

For a fragment of a second he had it, a blaze of energy coarsed through him, rivers of ecstasy flowing over him. Air fresh and crisp blasting through his soul, cleansing him.

HeadSpace

“Tiph’reth”

A breathy voice like wind through leaves, consonants that sparkled like dew. Then it was gone.

But it left something. A fire inside was re-kindled, a new strength fought through. He held onto it with all his might, it was his only chance.

“Remember...”

A distant whisper, almost a sigh.

He remembered the blazing presence of the Nexus. The feeling of blissful release, sheer power. He listened, sending mental tendrils out, probing for that note.

Chip was sitting there in that mall, munching away at her burger. Then she was speaking to him between mouthfuls.

“It always comes back to the pain—you’ve gotta face it, you’ve gotta deal with it. It’s the only way of making yourself whole, only way to be free.” She looked at him with a look he’d never seen before, a kind of fatalistic sorrow...

Except it wasn’t really sorrow. That glimmer in her eyes was the one he’d seen so many times before. He’d seen it the eyes that hid behind Phantom’s CGen mask, in Eve’s enigmatic glances. They were like holes in space, portals to infinity. They shone with a stillness, a wholeness, an immense peace.

“Run away from it and it’ll tear you apart...”

The words seemed to fill the universe. Then a thunderous roar engulfed him, sweeping him away, faster and faster towards the blackness he had tried so vainly to escape.

As he soared into the black nexus, a wall of repulsion was collecting before him, tendrils of terror desperately condensing into thick molasses. But an irresistible force drove him on, cutting him through as it thickened like a supersonic shock wave, compressing into something that was almost solid. The presence was choking him, seeping into him through every pore. It was a hurricane of blackened energy, a typhoon of horror gorged on terror and pain.

But from deep within it came a distant cry, the plea of something that was almost human.

Help me...

Free me...

Join me...

The thoughts came as one—a seamless flash of awareness, spurring him on hungrily.

Still he was accelerating, tearing through layer upon layer of the entity's skin, heading for its core. The warmth of friction rose to a crimson heat, the roar of sound rising to an ear-shattering scream. Light and noise and blazing pain rose to a crescendo, and Jake screamed soundlessly...

There was jolt, a feeling of something tearing away and then he was falling, crashing to a halt amidst the familiar sensory flow of his bodily form.

"Jake..." The words seemed strange, dream-like, as if they came from far away.

"Jake?" He ventured to open his eyes and cold neon bit into his retinae. He was back in the chair. His body was drenched in perspiration, his head throbbing and his heart pounding. Chip's face was looking anxiously down at him.

"What?..." he gasped, disorientation giving way to frustration. He'd been cut off. "You pulled me..."

"Your bio signs are getting real scary. Neuro-transmitters screwed up, ANS activity through the roof—"

"Get me back!"

"Jesus..." she whispered. "You sure?"

"Yeah." He forced a smile. "It's under control. Nearly there..."

She paused, as if making a tough decision.

"It's okay," he said. He took hold of her hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "Trust me..."

HeadSpace

“Okay. A little longer. But if your ECG red-lines like that again, I’m pulling you out before you go into arrest. You watch yourself in there. Please.”

She turned away and signalled to somebody. Then the vision faded. He braced himself for the return...

Agony tore at him again. He was plunging through molten lava; his flesh was alight, burning and falling in carbonised chunks off bleached bones that quickly blackened and crumbled to powder.

He blacked out. Peace, darkness.

Then he was coming to.

A dim twilight glow, a yellowy hue surrounded him bathing him in a shower of ecstasy.

In the cathartic climax, the hurricane had broken. The sickness that had turned a vestigial awareness into a holocaust of dischord was burnt out and dying, a constellation of embers slowly dancing a final tango. Within it was a new presence. A glittering core unravelled into a nebula of shards that lured him beckoningly, offering their reward.

He opened himself to the presence and let it play on his mind. For a moment there was only a dream-like jumble as the fragments fought for prominence, then an impression emerged from the confusion.

“*Zih-ran*”

A voice, a disconnected jumble of syllables superimposed. A solitary word drifting out of the confusion.

“*Ess-Szz-irr-uh-on.*”

The jumble came again, clearer now. Fragments of a scene were struggling to come together. A smell of hot electricals, a cold plastic embrace. Beige walls and glass partitions. A face...

Hiriaki turned around and approached him carrying a plastic ID tag. “You are...” He reached over and clipped it onto the pocket of his suit.

The scene blazed vividly to life around him, pieces of a visceral puzzle at last collapsing into place. Understanding finally dawned.

Paul Barrows

“...S-Zero One.”

For a moment the image of those three red digits behind glistening plastic hung before his eyes, then the memory he'd never had was gone.

The presence was still there, closer, now, permeating him like a ghostly cloud.

Four children to support, and a wife who'd taken to fits after a hit and run had left her with brain damage. Life was tough on a grade six salary, and he'd never have quite enough to make it all add-up. But money was, after all, the root of all evil and temptation was all about him, the lure of avarice and decadent material pleasures were everywhere in this lost and Godless world.

The Lord would provide. He believed this with a passion that kept his heart alight through all the trials that life offered, so when a supervisor took him aside and asked him if he'd like to earn a little extra cash he realised that his manna from heaven had come.

The impression was sudden, like a bolt of lightning unveiling a new stretch of mental terrain. This time, though, it was a foreign land, a section of an alien plateau lit up in a snapshot of a life that wasn't his own.

They did tests on him, attaching gadgets to his scalp and taking readings. They kept asking him back until one day they declared they had a very big test they wanted to do. They said it was a little dangerous but that it would only take thirty minutes. Then they told him how much money they would pay him. He'd never dreamed that he could ever be worthy of such a sum, and in his elation he accepted immediately. But the elation quickly turned to a knot of guilt. He had been corrupted, seduced by riches.

The sense of forboding grew. They put him in a big chair and attached more of the devices to him. He wanted to cry out, to change his mind, but it was too late. Suddenly he was blind and deaf and dumb and something was clawing at his mind. Terror descended and he realised that he had been tricked. It had been another test, a temptation put before him by Satan.

HeadSpace

Then the flames came, his nerves burning with an agony he never thought possible. This was the wrath of the lord, his just retribution for failing. He was damned, his soul belonged to hell where he would burn for all eternity. He soundlessly screamed a final peircing note, a note of loss and terror and anguish at the hands of a black and hideous evil.

As the fire blazed through his dying mind a final image flickered. His own body pinned to a burning crucifix, his bleeding scalp pierced by a forest of chrome-ended wires.

Again, the thoughts were a sudden flash, a psychic constellation where sequence was compressed into a single moment.

The memories tumbled about in nothingness, a frozen replay endlessly running through itself. But even as its threads ran through Jake's mind it was fading, dying embers of the tormented engram losing momentum, disintegrating, sinking into the nothingness.

The monster was dead.

Now there was peace. And for the first time he could clearly sense what had been all but drowned out by the entity. A glittering omnipresent ocean of electric impulses, beckoning.

But before he could answer its call, exhaustion was suddenly settling on his mind like a solid weight, infusing him with its warm darkness...

"Jake?" Chip's voice fought through to him, pulling him reluctantly into consciousness.

"Jake!" she said, more sharply.

"Mmmm?" he muttered.

He felt fingers pulling back his eyelids, then the glare of the neon overheads stabbed into his eyes. Chip's concerned face was staring down at him.

"Talk to me."

"I'm okay," he sighed. "I made it. I just gotta sleep..."

Paul Barrows

“You’re in neural shock, you crazy bastard. We gotta get those delta-spikes under control, so you stay awake until I give you these shots else you might not wake up again. Then you can sleep.”

“Right...” he said. The heaviness was already back, but jabs of pain cut swiftly through it as Chip pinned a row of microjects along his inner arm. Then he was being man-handled onto a trolley and wheeled out of the lab.

“You’ll be okay, now,” Chip said. “We’re taking you to your room. I’ll put you to bed and keep you under obs for the night. You better not be wearing anything weird or you’ll never live it down...”

But Chip’s voice was receding, and Jake slipped into the welcome, peaceful embrace of quiet darkness.

13

Nexus

As usual, Christie accompanied Jake through the restricted parts of the building where he had no access. Those expensive Nikon shades Christie wore were off right now, revealing for the first time blood-shot eyes ringed by dark shadows. He escorted him quietly to the elevator, and up onto the tenth floor.

The set-up on this level was different to the others. There was no central area walled off or segmented into smaller rooms as on the other levels; in its place were four supporting pillars and two rows of dimly lit display cabinets. Like the floors below the circumference was divided into a string of rooms, but these were larger plush looking affairs concealed behind skirting-trimmed walls and oak doors with polished plaques and brass handles. The curve of the periphery was, as before, interrupted by short corridors leading to two banks of elevators and the main stairwell, but on this floor they terminated abruptly in a wall separating the rear third of the floor; at its centre was a large double-door set in an ornate and darkly varnished frame. This was Hythe's office.

When they reached the entrance. Christie stood aside and nodded expressionlessly, signaling him to enter.

The office was an imperial throwback, a wooden-paneled museum-piece adorned with brass busts of military figures, British flags, and royal crests. Towards the back of the room was a vast antique desk, behind which a middle-aged man was sitting stiffly. Behind him was a large bay window adorned with red velvet curtains, and to either side were portraits

of the King and Queen. Further round the walls were crested shields and swords, and elegantly mounted antique rifles and automatics.

The figure behind the desk was about sixty. There'd been no attempt to cosmetically conceal the cragginess that was advancing across his features, but he looked fit and leanly built, and his black hair was short cropped in a conventional military style.

There was a seat before the desk and he took it automatically, waiting patiently for him to say something.

"You're the first to make it. The first ever..." Hythe's voice took him by surprise. It wasn't the smooth English voice he'd been expecting, it was a strange anglo-american hybrid. Maybe he was ex-pat, or perhaps he'd spent his life split between the two nations.

"Yeah." He couldn't think of much else to say.

There was silence for a few moments, silence except for the quiet mechanical ticking of an old time-piece.

"The thing that—that got to the others. What was it?"

It was the billion-dollar question. The one they were all just dying to ask. Hythe obviously wanted to be the one to ask it.

"I don't know," Jake lied. "It was...like a some sort of gatekeeper. It's...something I can't explain..."

"Is it still there?"

"Yes. It'll always be there. I was lucky—I found a way to get past it."

"You've...beaten it?"

Jake frowned thoughtfully. "Yeah, I guess I have."

Jake was drawn into the deception automatically, without thinking. There were so many reasons right now that he had to keep them hooked. It wasn't just that this thing was the only chance they had of getting out of this mess in one piece, of getting everyone they knew out of the firing line. It was something else, almost a greed, a possessiveness for the universe he'd broken through to. He'd paid the price, he'd risked his own life and sanity to exorcise the demon Aizu had unwittingly summoned. Now he would have his reward—to pioneer cyberspace.

And they'd let him too. In fact they'd get down on their knees and beg him to, use any means possible to make him, anything to get him back inside and working for them. He was the ultimate weapon.

"Mr Shadow. You realise that the world is under a very grave threat. You are aware that the Nova-Yoto takeover puts Aizu in a very precarious position. This is the final round of a war that has gone on for almost a century, and the outcome will be decided by that device."

Jake nodded.

"I know what you're thinking, Mr Shadow. To the Outworld corp-shop is just corp-shop—no good or evil, just those who pay you and those who want to kill you. Fickle allegiances that might reverse from one day to the next. But things aren't always what they appear. There are rules to the game, principles, gentleman's agreements that set boundaries for our behaviours. Yes, even for corporations.

"Nova, however, have thrown out the rule-book. In their desperation to win the war they have—as it were—decided to drop the Geneva convention, and are now resorting to highly illegal means to get what they want—"

"Ripping of their prototype isn't exactly above board..." Jake said, derisively.

"Yes," Hythe conceded, with a gesture of submission, "the fight's getting dirtier, and some—uh—underhand tactics have been used on all sides. But let's put this into perspective. Nova had the entire Yoto board assassinated in a missile attack. To get where they are today they have been systematically murdering their way through a series of takeovers to secure themselves poll position in the global market. Anybody who gets in their way has been ruthlessly eliminated. These are the kind of people we are dealing with."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"You know damn well," Hythe said impatiently. "We've looked into your background, Mr Shadow. We've studied your profile very carefully. We know what makes you tick. You are immensely cynical of and hostile

to the corporate world, and extremely suspicious of the economic forces that are shaping the planet. You want desperately to change the system and yet have no idea what to replace it with..."

"Do you have a point?" Jake snapped.

"Yet you also depend on the system you so despise, effectively employed by the very people you deride and distrust. The corporate war horrifies and disgusts you and yet it is your bread and butter, the source of your very livelihood. You deal with this contradiction by an act of symbolic rebellion, making yourself an outsider, an Outworld crusader. By distancing yourself you excuse your complicity. By refusing to align yourself with anybody, you maintain an illusion that you are fighting a system that you constantly collaborate with. You are a mercenary, Mr Shadow."

Jake was suddenly angry. Angry because Hythe had touched upon the things he worked hard to hide from himself, angry because he was right. He pulled himself out of the chair, and marched towards the door. "I've heard enough."

"Please, Mr Shadow, I'm coming to my point." Hythe's voice was suddenly warm, conciliatory. Jake stopped, paused, then returned reluctantly to his seat.

"The point is that we all have our contradictions. We are all forced by circumstances into compromising our principles. We are not so unlike one another as you would pretend. We may not be entirely innocent, but before you judge us just take a look at the kinds of people we are up against. We know about Lisa Meyer. We know about what they did to her when she shadowed our surveillance. I guess they figured she was part of the operation."

The remorse was back, washing over him like a wave.

"They didn't have to do that," Jake said, "even if she had been mixed up in it. There was no point..."

"Yes," Hythe said, sympathetically. "But they did. That's the kind of people they are. And that's why they can't be allowed to win."

HeadSpace

They didn't speak for a a full minute. Only the roar of a distant jet and the hypnotic clunk of that old timepiece disturbed the silence.

"Okay," Jake said. "I'll do what you want, but first let's talk phone numbers..."

Hythe seemed to be prepared. He took a pen from his pocket and wrote something down on a pad on his desk-top, sliding it across to Jake. Jake looked at the figure.

"Half in advance."

"You've got it."

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As always the chair's cold plastic embrace sent an involuntary shudder through him, but he knew somehow that this would be his last time. And even though he still had a knot in his gut, even though he was caught in such a deadly dilemma, he felt a curious thrill, a rising of anticipation for the coming adventure.

He'd risked his life to clear the way, he'd put his sanity on the line to neutralise the hideous presence and open the door to cyberspace, and now he was reaping his reward.

He would be the first.

Before long, the RNS array was tugging at his synapses, pulling him back into the electronic metaworld. Around him was darkness, the peaceful inky blackness that was left with the collapse of the engram. But he could sense something beyond it, a rushing storm of energy separated from him by a psychic membrane as insubstantial as a thought.

He gently pushed it with his mind, watching as it lit up slowly, the blackness suddenly suffused by billions of tiny pinpricks of light. Then the pinpricks were growing, spreading, bleeding into one another, filling his universe with a soft silver glare and a rising tinny noise, the rush of an electric breeze through a silicon forest.

He felt it all about him. Cyberspace. A dimensionless space—both unimaginably vast and infinitesimally small. It was a void pregnant with form, a crystalline lattice of invisibly fine strands pulsating with currents of liquified information. The perspective was too vast, the currents too finely blended to identify, so he focused his mind, thought himself into one of the tiny vessels.

It was like a full zoom into a pin-point on some fractal tapestry, a nebulous blur of colour suddenly exploding into a blazing kaleidoscope of activity. He only had to think, to cast a brief tendril of attention towards one of the countless threads and an avalanche of data would explode into his consciousness. At first there was a brief moment of confusion as his mind sought out coherency in a knot of noise and garbled colour, data unravelling and organising into orderly arrays across his cortex. But as he switched between them the transition became swifter as he came to recognise their electronic scent, adeptly adjusting to their format.

Some of them were just flatland slabs of a transmission, phone calls, PS channels or TV shows, simple grainy images awash with lo-res distortion or slick panoramic spreads with smooth audio overlays like cinema. Others were immersive constructs, piped tri-D stations and VR feeds to a million softside hang-outs.

There was so much freedom here, the simple act of will could reshape his cybernetic cosmos, a tapestry of information weaving itself around him with his every thought. He thought of PS, the surveillance network that ceaselessly scanned urban centres across the globe, and suddenly he was a point of consciousness behind a million electronic eyes, shifting between them at will, or allowing a selection to float about in his field of vision. He thought of the phone system and he was surrounded by a sphere of pin-pricks, the ends of one hundred million fibreoptics that glittered with the colours of microscopic images. He thought of the familiar VR landscape and suddenly thousands of the familiar texture-mapped gateways surrounded him.

HeadSpace

He threw himself into VR, blazing across the labyrinth of UKNet and across the atlantic rim to the glittering cosmos of Liberty TransState. He passed ghostlike through gateways, pausing with momentarily interest at the soft sensation of resistance that tugged weakly at him as he passed through the DEFNET gateway that led to the core of the global matrix.

It was true. He could do anything here. The most sophisticated security was just a thin membrane that tugged weakly at him as he approached. He only had to push gently and he was through, sliding past into prohibited territory.

He quickly tired of the crude VR labyrinth and let it go, returning to the spaceless miasma of his new world.

The thrill began to fade, and in its place came the nagging unease. They were waiting, waiting for him to destroy Nova. He knew that he couldn't do this. Nova spooks would kill them all—first Shiva, then the others. But if he crossed Aizu like Nova demanded then he'd get the others off the hook but he and Chip would be killed. And Zak's words rang in his mind, the apocalyptic warnings of global tyranny if the deadlock broke. If he sided with either of them, he'd topple the balance, plunging the world into a new dark age. Hythe's reassurances—to choose the lesser of two evils—didn't cut any ice.

What if he did nothing? What if he just feigned a problem, bought some time? But he'd still be taking a chance with Shiva and the others, taking a chance that Nova would back off when the attack never came, content to still be in the game. It was just too risky.

He kicked himself for being so stupid, so caught up in an illusory helplessness. He could do anything here...

Find the others!

Warn them!

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“Shadow?...That you?”

The screen by the door had come on. An ill-defined face was peering through a hailstorm of grey noise.

“Yeah.”

The voice that came was Jake’s, but its tone was strange. It was tinny and multi-layered, awash with synthetic distortion.

“Christ, Jake... where are you?”

“Don’t even ask. I haven’t got much time so talk fast.”

“They jumped me at LAX. They know everything about the hit. They got photos. Everyone. They know about Judy, too—my girl. Said they’d hurt her. You’ve gotta warn her, Shadow, tell her to get the hell out fast. Tell everyone. Kaos, 2-Bit, Eve. No-one’s safe now...”

“Yeah I know. I got the tape your friends put together. I’m onto it...”

“And...Shadow?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you get me out?”

“I could open the door, but you wouldn’t get far. Sit tight I’ll get some help...” Then the face sank back into static and the screen winked off.

* * *

It was 8.20 A.M. when the squeal of the phone tore Eve from a deep sleep. She tossed back the duvet and clambered out of bed, grabbing a Kimono off the back of a chair and hastily slipping into it as she made her way through to the lounge.

She jabbed the engage button on the unit and looked expectantly at the screen.

“Hello?” she said.

The screen was just dark static. She waited a moment before impatiently hitting the off switch, and turned back to the door.

“Eve!”

HeadSpace

The voice was breathy and deep, it called to her from nowhere. She let out a cry of surprise and span around, eyes darting about for the unseen intruder. There was nobody there.

She stood frozen, heart pounding, waiting.

“*Eve...*” the voice came again. This time she could hear where it was coming from. It seemed to emanate from the rear of the lounge. She stepped cautiously towards it, eyes seeking out clues.

On a squat chess table by the far wall was the shiny ebony square of that new holodeck Jake had brought just last week. It was one of the new types, no bulky plasma tank, just a sleek state of the art projection system discretely tucked into a thin polycarbon slice.

She realised that a green LED on its front was lit. It was switched on, and it was only now that she noticed the faded cloud of silver hovering above the deck. It was tuned to dead air, a dark cloud of monochrome seething with a dance of static needles.

She walked slowly towards it, spellbound.

A shape was cutting through the noise, a cottony shadow that swiftly condensed into a silvery balloon. Then it was elongating, its mercurial surface warping, melding itself to contours of a form. Its front flattened out, the base coming to a rounded point. Midway up, shallow pools sank into either side of the centre, moulding itself into eyes, cheekbones and a nose. Then detail tightened, the thin shells of ears and subtle shape of lips melting into place.

Eve’s mouth fell open.

“Jake—” she gasped.

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Heather was a gofer, a mail-room dogsbody who shouldered the few tedious tasks that weren’t automated. Every day was the same. She’d take the pile of requisitions that a printer busily spat into her tray, push a trolley out to the vast cold expanses of the storage warehouse and

work through them, hunting down each of the items on the request sheets by an index number in large Arial script in its corner.

Once the items had been bundled into their respective batches and loaded onto the trolley, she'd push the thing through every sector of the building, delivering each of the parcels to their destination. Then she'd go back to the mail-room and pick up another pile of orders and start all over again. She'd do maybe six or seven rounds a day.

The supervisor was called Charlie. They didn't know his surname, but everyone on the floor called him Chuck Farley because he was an asshole. She tried to avoid talking to him if it was possible, but there was something real funny about one of these orders, something that maybe he ought to see.

She could see from his expression that he was in a particularly shitty mood today. He looked at her wearily as she approached his desk.

"It's about this request. It's for level G..."

"Yeah?" he said, uninterested.

"Well, isn't that where they keep the..." she said, then trailed off as his expression darkened, eyes blazing prohibitively.

"...the what?" he asked, accusingly.

Like a putz she'd walked right into that one. Level G was restricted, and its designation was classified. Officially they didn't know what went on in there, officially nobodies like mail-room parcel pushers had no business knowing about stuff like that. But unofficially was a different matter; rumours got around, gossip put about all the dirt on places like level G.

But officious assholes like Chuck didn't go for that, and she backed off as soon as he switched on that steely glare.

"I only thought I should mention it—"

"It isn't your job to think," he said nastily.

"It's a Grade One—" she said desperately, a last ditch attempt to cut through. It cut no ice.

HeadSpace

“Are the details complete?” he asked, his voice falling into condescending motherese.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Has it got the authorisation code?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Then it’s a valid requisition order,” he said impatiently. “And what do we do with those?”

“We deliver them...” Or rather I deliver them, she thought, while you sit on your fat ass sinking coffee. “Okay. Fine, I’m gone.”

She hurried off, returning to her trolley to finish the round.

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Shiva was lying on his bunk staring at the ceiling when a noisy clatter came from the door. At first he thought maybe that sleazy shit had come back to gloat a little more, which puzzled him. Whacky guy had got what he wanted—Shiva had woodenly played out the hostage performance for the tape, and that was that.

For a moment he thought that maybe there was a more sinister reason for his return, but then he realised that it wasn’t the door opening that was making the noise. There was a metal hatch midway up the door, and someone was sliding it noisily back. A moment later a package was being shoved through the opening. It slid down an incline on the inside of the door and thudded heavily to the ground. Then the hatch slid shut again.

He swung himself into sitting position and stared at the rectangular box as the sound of foot-steps and the soft rumble of a trolley receded into the distance. It was about the same size as a shoe-box, and covered in that coated bubblewrap they made jiffy bags out of.

Because of the ankle-cable, he had to kneel down and stretch towards the door to reach the parcel. He tried to pick it up with just one hand, but it was too heavy, so he slid it along the floor until it was in the range

of his other hand. Then he hauled himself and the parcel back onto the bunk where he dumped it into his lap and began to greedily tear at the tough wrapping.

A block of polystyrene was inside, its lid held on with a strip of clear tape. He yanked it off to reveal the contents.

“Holy shit...” he whispered.

The moulded interior held a brand new Casio 9mm semi-automatic pistol—a fat slab of toughened military polycarbon resin. Alongside it were two thick, pre-loaded magazines nestling in their niches.

There were two other items in the box. A roll of plastic sheeting turned out to be four dozen pheno-barbitone microjects, each nestling in its own sterilised plastic compartment. A small plastic clip-shut sleeve contained a card. It was a pass-key of the old-fashioned slider-card variety. In it was a slightly blurred photo of himself; it was a freeze-frame from some video footage taken from God-knows-where.

Shiva’s surprise turned to glee and a low chuckle escaped from his throat.

“Nice work,” he muttered. “Very nice work indeed...”

* * *

A weight was off his mind. He’d done it. He’d slipped into the Nova core like a ghost, quickly pin-pointing the spook repository. The thing they called AI had done the rest, obediently assembling the reams of ASCII into a concentrated semantic stream, chunks of pure knowledge blazing across his mind and settling into his synapses as solidly as old memories. A fraction of a second later the feed had stopped, and ecstatic realisation hit him. Suddenly he knew. Everything Nova had on them; the process of hundreds of facts slowly piecing themselves together in the Nova intelligence core sat in his mind as if he’d witnessed it, hours of studying files and images and amassing biographical data settling in his synapses as counterfeit memories.

HeadSpace

Everything Nova had.

The hit-list was short, pretty much everyone he'd thought. It had been child's play to get through to them, to warn them, tell them to drop everything and hole up somewhere until it was safe. Just Shiva left now. But he'd put the wheels in motion and it wouldn't be long.

He just needed a little more time—time to figure out what to do.

But how much time did he have, how much longer before they smelled a rat and pulled him? He knew time was different in here, he knew that what had seemed like hours caught in the grip of the black nexus had only lasted little over ten minutes, but how long did he have to decide what to do?

Why do anything? Why not just run—cop out and pass the buck? He could do that—just buy himself some time until Shiva was free then quit the project. But he couldn't let himself do that; something inside wouldn't leave him alone. Somewhere here were the answers to the questions that tormented him.

Tiph'reth

That breathy whisper, replayed itself in his mind as if summoned. For a moment he almost let it pass as just a random memory, then a deeper significance hit him. It was that same thin inner voice that had called to him when he was in the grip of the nightmare that had claimed Pilot and the others.

He calmed his mind and focused on the source of that feeling, reaching out for that distant note. Something inside opened up and cool tendrils of energy surged through him, bringing a crisp clarity to his senses.

Lisa...

He wasn't sure if the thoughts came to him spontaneously, or whether they were being influenced by the presence. A constellation of connections was lighting up in his mind. Pieces of a visceral jigsaw were coming together.

“Like Nova never knew about the Aizu tap...”

“Just rumours, Shadow. Rumours...”

Paul Barrows

“...they didn’t come out well enough for that kind of edge...”

“...If Nova knew about the Aizu tap then why’d they get so badly reamed when it came to the big push? How come Aizu were ready for them?...”

All those little things that never quite seemed to fit, all surrounded with clusters of excuses and convoluted explanations. It was just too much like how it got with a big lie—the more you tried to stitch it into the reality, the more obvious and ugly those seam-lines between truth and fiction got. So many loose-ends needed to be weaved into an ever more complicated tapestry.

And now -

Suddenly he knew...Everything Nova had.

Everything except for Lisa. If Nova ordered the killing, there’d be a trace in the Nova core. They’d have intelligence, records. No matter how small, there’d be a trace. Somewhere.

But there had been nothing.

They knew nothing about her.

It was a simple conclusion, but it sent an icy chill through him. This one fact would change everything. Take away the premise of Nova’s complicity in the Centre Point tap and the whole stack of cards came tumbling down. A more sinister picture was piecing itself together.

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What a lot of people didn’t know was that Shiva was a first dan in Karate. It was one of the very few things he didn’t brag about—he preferred it to be a surprise.

It was pretty rare for anyone he actually knew to learn about this. The big surprise was usually on some street punk with a .38 who thought maybe Shiva could fund his next fix, and who suddenly found himself on the floor with a broken arm, cracked ribs, and maybe a fractured skull, with his own revolver shoved in his mouth.

HeadSpace

When the locked buzzed and Whacky Guy slipped into his cell it was the last thing he expected. One moment Shiva's prone figure was lying on the thinly padded shelf that passed for a bed, the next he was flying up towards him.

He didn't even have time to pull his gun, let alone let off a shot, before he knew it his feet had been kicked from under him and he was on floor, his face pushed into the cold tiles, the muzzle of a pistol pushed into the back of his neck.

Shiva hadn't damaged him—yet. He was surprised to find that by his own standards he'd been pretty gentle with the guy. In fact he suddenly realised that he didn't, in fact, hate him at all. Whacky Guy wasn't evil or malicious, he didn't bare Shiva any personal ill-will. Like Shiva he was just a pawn of forces that were starting to get out of control.

Not so long ago these guys were his employers, and in a different world he'd be working for someone like him. In fact he'd probably kinda like him.

“Okay you little shit, it's time to talk,” Shiva hissed. The enraged psycho act came naturally, but he didn't really have his heart in it.

“You'll never get out,” Whacky Guy said levelly. He was calm, unruffled. A lot of guys crapped themselves when stuff like this happened. Big security tough-guys—so used to being in control—often just cracked as soon as the unthinkable happened and someone else got the upper hand. In shock they'd start blubbing or begging, telling you about the size of their family, all those kids they had—the younger the better.

Whacky Guy was ice cool, though, and the spark of grudging respect Shiva had for him burned that much brighter.

“Wanna bet?” Shiva said.

Whacky Guy paused, putting two and two together. He could see his own gun lying on floor across the cell, where Shiva had thrown it. The one digging painfully into his neck must've been from somewhere else. And if he could get a gun...

“An inside job...” he said.

“It ain’t important,” Shiva said, “I’ll be leaving shortly, but before I go I’ve got a question for you. The correct answer means you can live...”

Whacky Guy didn’t say anything.

“Who ordered you to kill the girl?” Shiva snapped.

“What girl?”

“The girl who shadowed the Centre Point deal. A girl called Lisa Meyer.”

“We don’t know about any girl. We didn’t do anything.”

“You’re lying!” Shiva shouted. “I’ll count to three...”

“It’s the truth,” Whacky Guy said calmly. “Aizu stitched us up. We only figured out about the tap when the takeover hit failed...”

“But you knew about the Tap, word was about...”

“Of course we’d say that—anyone would. We couldn’t let word get out that we’d been screwed so badly. We have an image to think of...”

“This is bullshit, more bullshit,” hissed Shiva. “One...Two...”

“Cut the crap,” Whacky Guy snapped. “You are a wanted, violent fugitive, who is holding a gun to my head. I will be forgiven for telling you absolutely anything you want to know, and that is what I am doing. Take it or leave it.”

Shiva was stunned by the outburst. Christ this guy had guts. Or more likely he knew what made Shiva tick. It’s like he thought—him and Shiva were just different sides of the same coin.

And he was telling the truth.

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The disc...

The image of that silver surface with its holographic rainbow needles jumped into his mind’s eye.

The answers were there, he knew it. The key was buried somewhere in the noise coded into that molecular film...

HeadSpace

“...all we know is that Nova came up with the Hicks Manoeuvre, that Aizu rumbled it and were ready. We don't know when they drew that up. That could have been later, after they got wise to the comsat job...”

Chip's words came back to him. This was the key. If Nova planned the Hicks Manoeuvre at Centre Point then they can't have known they'd been tapped, otherwise they'd have switched plans.

In an apartment a few thousand miles away a green LED winked to life and a drive head swiftly pulled forty gigabytes off a rotating film of silver alloy, shooting it down a fibre-optic and into the heart of the Net. A second later it was circulating the auditory centres of Jake's cerebral cortex

The noise he'd first heard through the speakers of his deck those weeks ago filled his head. A tinny roar of countless layers of sound competing against one another. But now he could probe his way through them, stripping the chaotic textures away and discarding them, homing in on that kernel of coherency buried within.

A basey blur of voices emerged, swimming in a thinning wail of static. Then they sharpened, becoming crisper as the sonic storm subsided and sank to a breathy hiss.

He quickly found what he was looking for, the simple act of will drawing a few key sequences from the session.

“You fed it through that neural net, right?”

“The A.I., yeah.”

“What's it figure?”

“Al figures on a Hicks manoeuvre.”

“Probability?...”

“Uh... ninety-eight per-cent.”

“Margin?”

“Plus or minus two.”

“That's good.”

“Real good.”

So it was true.

The Hicks manoeuvre is what they settled on at the Centre Point meet. It was the big plan, the live show, and Aizu had busted it wide open with that neat comsat tap. Nova never got wise to it, so when it came to that ambitious bid to clean up the board, Aizu had been ready for them.

It really was as simple as that. Nova had never known about the tap, or about Lisa, they'd never sent round some mercenary to put her out of the picture.

And if Nova hadn't done it...

Whole sections of an ugly picture were sliding together, falling into place. The process had momentum now, it carried him on like it had a life of its own. Like those last few pieces of a jigsaw, the process was swift and unyielding, carried on by a logic that was so transparently simple.

He remembered when he'd hacked those PA repositories, searching through thousands of hours of footage in hope of finding some grainy fragment that would give him a lead. But the older archives were gone, over-written by fresh footage.

The PA core blazed to life in his mind, and he was suddenly soaring around a snaking multi-channeled helix of microscopic images. The older footage was gone. But like all data, traces would have been left. Copies would have been taken, countless duplicates of various fragments would have swiftly peeled off and vanished into the Net.

It was just a matter of knowing where to look.

September the 14th of LE137 was an uninterrupted ribbon of blackness. Then tiny slivers of light were bursting outwards from points along its surface, tracing out old transactions, seeking to re-claim scattered fragments. Slowly slices of the helix lit up with the familiar trichromatic blur, and as more needles of light danced across the surface the blackness became an intermittent patchwork of recovered data. Even before the recovery was done he was greedily reaching out, running them through his mind, searching, praying that there was enough.

HeadSpace

The Leeds city-block swam through grainy PA footage. Clouds rushed across the sky and cars darted crazily through surrounding roads as he fast scanned the sequences. As the sun sank towards the horizon, he slowed as a familiar streak of colour was swallowed up by the block's garage entrance.

Lisa's car.

The footage broke up after this, disintegrating into intermittent sequences, so he switched channels to a shot from lower down that covered some parking spaces out front.

A figure emerged from the lobby, walking swiftly to a white Honda. He carried a briefcase and his face was hidden by the hood of a black leather coat and a scarf that was wrapped around his neck and lower face. But there was a small sequence where he was facing the camera as he got into the car and prepared to drive away.

Jake was expecting this to be one of many suspects, the first of a cluster of leads he'd trace to make the final connection. He couldn't have been more wrong.

Briefly, just briefly, the figure turned. The re-play slowed and a magnified image hung in front of him.

The shades were meant to disguise him, but in fact those expensive Nikons only made him more recognisable.

It was Christie.

A moment of idiot disbelief and denial found voice in his mind.

What's he doing here?

As if there were some perfectly innocent explanation. Anything that would take away the blow of this final repulsive punch-line.

He clung momentarily to a last, single thread of disbelief, until the relentless truth overwhelmed him.

Rage surged through him, the disembodied electrical miasma he had become collapsing into a tornado of liquid fire. Every fibre of his being screamed a soundless scream, a bottomless cry of grief and rage and

blind hatred, a cry that sent geocentric waves of static and electrical surges rippling across the face of the planet.

* * *

Kyoto answered his phone straight away, those narrow eyes looking dispassionately through the screen. He didn't say anything, his look giving the unspoken question.

"There's something I want to know about the interface."

Over the last few days he'd had a bad feeling about something, a nagging doubt had grown in his mind that something was wrong.

He let it go at first, but the feeling continued to grow. Somewhere along the line he'd made a mistake, a miscalculation that set off alarm bells in his mind.

"Go ahead," Kyoto said.

"We put contingencies in place to protect us from a potential attack from a user..."

"To offer limited protection, yes."

"How...how much power does somebody hooked up to that thing have?"

"We've gone over this before. We just don't know that, yet. That's exactly what this study is for. To show us what can be achieved. We've addressed all the security issues you raised. Your own intelligence profile rules out the possibility of this kind of sabotage."

Hythe realised he was perspiring.

"We have a lot of highly...sensitive material which we do not—"

"That has been addressed. Sensitive storage facilities are off-line for the duration of the trials. This will offer limited protection.

"Limited..."

"Can I take it, General, that there is an issue here that we were not privy to?"

HeadSpace

“There are sensitive covert issues that cannot...” Hythe began, reciting another of those spook-shop clichés

“...that are, I take it, of material relevance to the execution of this project.” Kyoto’s interruption was barbed.

The lights in the building dimmed fractionally and a burst of static licked across the phone screen. Kyoto’s distracted look told Hythe that the same had happened at his end. A distant paranoid inkling sent an icy chill down his spine and brought a fresh wave of perspiration.

“If you want my opinion, General,” Kyoto said levelly, “where S-zero-three is now, he’s probably the nearest any human will ever get to being a God. Right now I wouldn’t like to have anything to hide...”

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The Pentagon in cyberspace was weird, a multi-billion dollar security wall giving it a ghostly and amorphous quality. When he reached out to connect, it neatly sidestepped him leaving him grasping at dead air.

Like trying to swat a fly.

A neat trick, but it wouldn’t be enough. Like any fly, all you had to do was chase it into a corner, trap it somewhere where it had nowhere to go. The fabric of the Core U.S. intelligence matrix let off an angry electronic squeal as he found his mark and cut swiftly through, but it was silenced by a single thought.

Then he set to work.

Forty-six seconds was all he needed. Not only did he know all he had to know about Luciano Claudius Anton, but he had an insurance policy. Like any piece of military equipment they’d put on a fail-safe, a back-door they could use in an emergency. Anton had an achilles heel that even he didn’t know about.

So his hand was getting stronger. The danger was past, and now he had a real choice. But it was one he didn’t relish. Jake had spent most of his earlier life bitching about “the system,” spinning half-baked revolutionary

ideas and dreaming of some panacea for the world's problems. Now he was in the driving seat, what he did would change everything. He finally had what he'd really wanted in his naive youth. Power.

But it didn't feel good. There was none of the exhilaration of some newly elected emperor. There was just fear, a yawning vertigo of the vastness of a responsibility that had been thrown upon him by blind chance.

But when it really came down to it, he didn't want this decision. He just didn't know what to do.

Sure you don't.

That voice from inside came again. This time he recognised it instantly.

So ask someone who does...

He smiled inwardly, closed inner eyes and reached out.

Nothing came for a moment but then he felt himself plunging, condensing, solidifying into a familiar form. His flesh greeted him with an avalanche of sensations that seemed strange. Cool wetness of perspiration on his scalp, the embrace of spongy plastic chair.

What's happening?

He felt a tugging at his head, and opened his eyes to see Chip earnestly pulling at the clasps of the helmet.

"What's going on, why did you pull me?"

"We gotta go..." she said. The helmet was off and she was grabbing his hand and helping him to his feet.

"What—" he began, pulling himself limply to his feet. He felt unsteady, shaky. He looked around. The lab was empty, none of the operatives were anywhere to be seen. A couple of notepads were lying broken on the floor and papers were strewn about in the aftermath of some recent commotion.

"Come on!" came another voice from behind. He turned to see Shiva standing nervously by. He was covering the door with the thick plastic muzzle of a Black & Decker semi-auto.

HeadSpace

He came over and took hold of Jake under one arm, and together they half-carried him out the lab and along the corridor towards the stairwell. His half-open eyes widened as he saw a figure strewn across the floor near the exit. It was lying in a puddle of blood, the nearby wall daubed with pink smears. A small Beretta was lying nearby.

It was Anton.

“You...you killed him?” he heard himself ask.

“Him or me...” Shiva said dispassionately.

They made their way up to the ground floor and a set of security doors that took them out to a freshly tarmaced road. A black van like the one they’d used in London was waiting. Chip opened the passenger door and they bundled Jake in, slamming it shut behind him. Then Shiva jumped into the driving seat and Chip took a seat behind them.

Shiva kicked the van into gear and they accelerated through the complex until they reached a smaller exit. He slowed to wave a card across a sensor, and the gate slid aside to let them through.

The wail of sirens began as they pulled off into the road that wound off north towards the angular expanses of the Shang Hai skyline.

“What’s going on? Why’d you pull me.”

“You were in deep shit, Shadow boy...” A voice from behind said. It was Spider.

“But it—it was under control...”

“The fuck it was,” Shiva spat. “Whatever you did in there, someone woulda killed you for it. And did you think your pals in there were just gonna let their star subject take off...?”

“Had to bust you out,” Chip said.

“I—I don’t understand,” Jake murmured. He was confused, everything seemed wrong. “How’d you get here, Shiva. I just got you busted out of that complex in Silicon Valley...”

“One good turn...” Shiva gave that gold-studded grin..

“...so how’d you get here?”

“Shadow, your head’s still pretty scrambled from the RNS...”

“So explain!”

“How long do you think you were in that thing?” she asked. “Thirty minutes? An hour? Two hours, three...?”

“I don’t know.”

“Try fourteen hours...” Spider’s voice came from behind.

“A lot can happen in fourteen hours Jakey-boy.”

“No,” Jake said. “No...something’s not right. What’s Spider doing here?”

“Thought I’d come along for the ride...”

“No. Shiva, stop.”

“What?” Shiva said in astonishment. “We’ll have every freelance butcher in Shang Hai on our ass in about thirty minutes...”

“Just stop!” Jake shouted.

Shiva slammed on the brakes, bringing the van to a skidding halt. Jake opened the door and clambered out, staggering to the verge. He dropped to his knees in the long grass and stared at the ground. He grabbed some of the grass and felt its cool waxy strands passing through his hands.

Behind him he heard the side door slide open and somebody jump out to join him.

“Jesus, Shadow! Have you gone clean out of your fucking mind?” Shiva shouted through the window.

“Jake,” Chip said. “The jack’s messed you up. You’re not thinking straight. Come *on*.”

He looked around. The van wasn’t just like the one they’d done the hit in back in England, it *was* that same van. He looked at the road and the sky and surrounding flatlands. They were crisp and vivid, but the feeling was still there.

He remembered once having a weird dream, he was in a bar in Newcastle talking and joking with someone. Then he realised the guy he was talking to had been dead for a year from some new virus, that it couldn’t be real—must be a dream. But he’d looked at the bar and people,

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held the bottle he was drinking from up real close so he could examine the detail of the familiar label, see where a small section of the corner had got torn in transit, read the smallprint at the bottom. It was too real, too vivid, he'd thought, there was no way he could be inventing this. So he'd figured the guy must be alive after all, that it must be real, and got suckered right back into the dream.

But there'd been a quality to it. An intangible sense that he recognised. He stood up, energy returning as the confusion subsided.

"Okay, let's cut the shit," Jake said.

"Jake, you're not well... We'll deal with it later."

"I mean it," Jake said. "You can drop the act now—I know what this is. This isn't real. I'm still at Aizu with my head stuck in that machine."

She looked at Shiva, unsure.

Shiva grinned back.

"Oh—and by the way, Shiva had his tooth studs pulled," Jake said returning the grin.

"Aw shucks," Shiva exclaimed good-humouredly, slapping his leg. "He figured it out!"

Spider climbed out of the van, and Shiva came over to join them.

"So just what is going on," Jake asked.

"Don't ask me," Shiva said. "It's your fuckin' mind..."

"Or is it?" Spider said.

"So you're all a figment of my imagination—" Jake said.

"...reconstructed in cyberspace from your memories," Spider added.

"I was gonna say you read my mind, but under the circumstances—" Jake quipped.

Spider laughed and Shiva grinned. The studs were gone now.

"So just what is the point of this?" Jake said.

"Like I say..." Shiva began.

"...it's my mind, right?" Jake cut in. "I can see this isn't going to be easy."

"Come on," Spider said, "you got this far, you can figure out the rest..."

"Okay. This all happened about the time I was calling—"

“Calling what?”

“I’m not sure...”

“Therein lies the problem.” Spider said.

“You’re nearly at the next step,” came a familiar voice. It was Eve. Suddenly she was standing next to the others. “So near. In order to communicate with me you have to operate on the same level. This is an exercise that a higher level of your consciousness has developed to help you to cross over, to break through to our level.”

“‘our’?... ‘me’... just how many of you are there?”

“Yes. You’ll note that I’m—or should that be ‘we’re’—being vague about that point, but as frustrating as this may be to you this is all just part of the exercise.”

“I can’t be doing with all this mystical shit...”

“I’m afraid,” Spider said, “that this mystical shit, as you so eloquently put it, is exactly what you have to be doing with. You have a problem that needs dealing with, and you wish to delegate it to a higher force.”

“So you damn well better learn to speak da lingo...” Shiva said, “Time to get metaphysical...”

“But we’re talking now, I’m already communicating with you, just what the hell more do you want?”

“Okay,” Spider said, reasonably, “Okay. So we’re communicating. So Jake—what’s the problem?”

Jake tried to think of what to say. A thousand words fought to be said, a million ideas cried out for his attention, clambering over one another.”

“It’s...I...I just don’t know what to do...” he said, deflatedly. He looked up at the others. There was none of the nasty triumphant glee he’d expected, they looked sympathetic.

“Long story, huh?” Chip said. She had a look in her eye. Sadness. Sadness and compassion.

“Kinda hard to explain, right?” Shiva said.

“I mean,” Spider said, sympathetically, “just how the hell do you begin, right? How do you explain stuff like this? How do you put all of your

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life's experience of your world, all of the problems and wrongs of your world—all of the dilemmas you face—into just a few words?"

"It just can't be done, right?" Chip said.

"And how," Spider went on, "from all of this, do you come up with The Right Thing To Do. How can anyone trust themselves with a decision so huge?"

"I mean," Eve said, "it would take—like—a God to take care of a move like this. Which is why you came to me. But you can't connect, your prayer won't be heard until you truly understand what you're trying to connect with."

"Think of a time, man," Spider said, launching back into one of his engaging monologues, "way back billions of years ago in the evolution of life, the jump from cellular to organic consciousness. Suddenly billions of billions of cells became part of a higher synthesis, through some gestalt alchemy something—else—woke up..."

"I know this stuff..."

"Yeah, man, but you haven't really *got* it. I mean *really got* it..."

"How...whaddya mean?"

"This...this *thing* you're looking for. You *know* but you still don't *understand*."

"That's right," said Chip, "you're nearly there but you need a hand."

"We understand what it is, let us help you there."

"So go ahead, show me," Jake said impatiently

"We can't, not in that sense."

"But you just said that's what you're here for..."

"Yeah, but not 'you' in that sense."

"What other damn sense is there," said Jake, frustration welling.

"You're talking in riddles again..."

"Who's 'us' Jake," Chip said softly.

"Like you say, we're not real," Spider said.

“We’re just figments of your unconscious mind trying to communicate with you...” Chip continued. “In a sense, you’re just talking to yourself. So what needs explaining?”

“Pretty dumb, huh?” Shiva said.

“Except you know what we are.”

“You’re...the Nexus...” Jake said.

“We’re trying to show you...trying to connect with you,” Shiva said.

“We *are* the thing you’re looking for. We are the Nexus, we are what Mandy calls *tiph’reth*. We take on these familiar forms, clothing ourself in your memories.”

“Remember...” whispered Spider.

“But even in what you call the real world these things are still illusions,” Eve said.

“A figment of your own mind,” Chip added.

“Except it’s not really *your* mind at all...” Eve said.

“No. You don’t *really have* it. You only *think* it’s yours because the mind thinks that there *is* a ‘you’ to have it.”

Something jolted internally. it was like an ancient memory, a face recognised from aeons past.

“No...me...” he whispered.

There was that creeping feeling of unreality again. That eery sensation was back, a chill of distant recognition passing through him.

“This essence is not yours alone,” a voice said, it sounded like all of their voices blended into a surreal hybrid.

He looked about him but he couldn’t seem to focus. Space seemed confused, disjointed. He saw the others there but they seemed indistinct, sometimes separate, other times blending, merging, a single figure flowing through from one shape to another. He was there too, looking at himself through the eyes of the others.

“It’s ours,” something said.

“*And* yours,” something else said.

“*And* mine.”

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He wasn't sure who was saying things now, or even if anything was being said. Words and thought seemed to merge into a uniform, modeless blur.

"But these ideas are just vectors, directions in a uniform medium..."

"It only *thinks* there's us..."

"Really there's only...*it*."

"The Nexus..."

"*Tiph'reth*"

"*It* is beyond these things."

The ideas span in a rising crescendo of energy. The strange depersonalisation he'd felt with his first disembodied moments in cyberspace was back, the fabric of the matrix dissolving the walls of his ego.

"not...separate..."

"no distinction here..."

Everything seemed somehow disengaged. He felt like a distant memory, receding...

"I..."

"You..."

"We..."

"Nexus..."

The ideas were blended, a symphony of paradox riding the crest of a tidal wave of energy.

"...am..."

"...are..."

They thundered like vast chords of primeval thought, Godlike and omnipotent. They tore about themselves like a typhoon, faster and faster, tightening, coalescing and blazing into a clear uniform light.

"...you."

"...me."

"*Tiph'reth*."

The circle was closed.

The universe shattered.

Something awoke. Distant memories of a thing called Jake echoed in its new-born mind.

The connection had been made.

It knew what had to be done.

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Hythe stormed out of his office and into a waiting Elevator. He barked a command and it sank swiftly to the basement level. He took a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and dabbed at the beads of sweat on his forehead. The years of relentless success had bred a self-assuredness and confidence so rock-solid that the feeling he now had was almost alien. The air-conditioning was in good order he thought, so why was he perspiring? It took a few moments to recall.

He was afraid. That was it.

He'd made a serious miscalculation, and now ugly cracks were suddenly appearing in those great solid dam-walls that held his life in place. Christie was waiting for him at the lab entrance like he ordered. He felt better with Christie around, reassured in the way that someone with a big, mean dog feels.

There were four operatives in the lab today, not including that med-girl Jake wanted in. Behind them the wall-screen displayed a rotating knot of coloured geometry alongside a row of statistics.

They turned to look as he burst in, Christie following closely behind.

"Hiriaki," he barked. "Just you. The rest, get out."

The others looked at him bemused.

"Now!" he shouted. They dropped what they were doing and left. Only Chip remained, sitting by Jake watching his vital signs on a display.

"And you," he shouted at Chip.

She looked coolly round towards him. "I'm the medic. I leave when he leaves."

HeadSpace

A black look crossed Hythe's face. For a moment he looked like he was going to force the issue, but then he dropped it, turning to Hiriaki.

"Shut it down," he demanded.

Hiriaki looked at him in surprise.

"Okay," he said. "I'll start the Exit sequence. He turned back to the panel and touched a few touch-screen squares in sequence. They winked out and a status bar jumped to life and began to fill out in slow, jerky steps.

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The neural dance withdrew from its brief synnergistic union with cyberspace, firing patterns settling into genetically encoded bio-survival sequences, a cluster of behavioural algorithms and memory sequences condensing into something that called itself Jake.

Memories of being something greater than human briefly hung in transient confusion and then vanished like earthed static as ego boundaries solidified and consciousness walled itself once more into organic individuality. But it had left traces, a dew of understanding amidst fragments of alien imagery.

DNI was free. The tug of war was over, the secrecy destroyed in a single act of altruistic anarchy. In his mindseye the Prometheus core—a glistening multicolour diamond—had broken into shards, reforming and slotting together as links of chain that twisted through a great spiral helix. Then it was peeling itself into two, each strand duplicating its lost counterpart and dividing again, on and on...

Then another cluster of images came to him. A projection, an animated fast-forward of the Horowitz Castell construct. The great expanses of crimson and scarlet were suddenly retracting. Like two vast tumours in remission they were shrinking, become thinner and more anaemic, their nodes and vessels deflating from bloated arteries to spider vessels.

And around them, rising from the grey plateau was a dazzling rainbow mosaic of newer colours, a seething mandelbrot forest of tendrils rising to swallow up the great expanses of two falling empires.

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Hythe had regained some of his composure, donning a forced calm and an expression of phony innocence as Jake came to. He looked on nervously, searching Jake's damp features for any tell-tale sign of the catastrophe he dreaded.

Jake's eyes winked open. His ashen face carried little expression.

"It's over," he said quietly, barely a whisper. He sat up and clambered stiffly out the chair.

"Wha..." Hythe uttered.

"It's over for both of you. There won't be any winner." The tone of Jake's voice told Hythe all he needed to know. It was cold, dead, indifferent. He knew.

"What have you done?" Hythe said, the fury returning. "What have you *done*?"

"What had to be done." He turned to Chip. "Come on, Chip. We're going..."

"You really think you can just walk away?" Hythe said, his voice trembling. He was pale, wide eyes shining with rage. "You think we're going to let you just flush twenty-five years of research..."

"It's out of my hands..."

"You little..." Hythe snarled, he was scarlet with rage. "You are getting back in..."

"It's too late," Jake said calmly. "The matrix got infected with a virus. It was pay-loaded with the DNI data core. It latches onto Net traffic and copies peel off at every node. It'll go on replicating until it's everywhere..." Jake turned and walked towards an exit.

"Come on Chip. Let's go..."

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“An...” Hythe hesitated, “Christie! Stop him.”

Jake gave Hythe a stare, deep and dark.

Christie stepped forward and took something small, dark and ovoid from his pocket. He didn't feel well, he was dizzy, nauseous. The first stirrings of an old feeling were rising, a feeling that visited him in the twilight of his nightmares, a feeling like icy tendrils that clawed at his insides. A feeling that echoed from long-forgotten memories carefully buried by pale-suited men with syringes of potions that brought peace and grey emptiness.

His eyes were drawn to the screen. The coloured gossamer lattice of the Net was gone. In its place was a flash-frame dance of colour, a flickering sequence of images that hovered just beneath the threshold of consciousness. Then they were slowing, the tri-chromatic miasma of half-form slowly condensing into a horror as old as time.

Ancient memories were awakening, deeply buried constellations of awareness flickering slowly to life. The thing that sometimes woke him with a shout—only to retreat into fading psychic embers behind the chill of perspiration—was here. The hidden embryo of his sickness was calling out to him...

He was very young. His body light and free, senses fresh and vibrant. He was wrapped up in warm clothes, blue mittens on strings dangling from sleeves. There was a smell of leather and plastic and the giant form of mama was towering over him with that omnipresent smile, clipping on the restraints that held him into the back-seat of that big, green car.

Then they were driving through festive picture-card scenery, tracing their way along dark seams of tarmac bitten into the deep snow, winding through the frozen expanses of forest and farmland.

There was something in the distance. Twin slits of light peering through frozen mist, the roar of a huge deisel engine as the cliff sides of a motorised leviathan lumbered into view. Then suddenly it seemed less sure-footed, a shudder running through its frame as rows of tyres lost traction,

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slipped...Its articulated head was twisting, wheels locking up as it swung towards them and folded, swallowing them like vast metal jaws.

Suddenly there was an explosion of impacted metal and broken glass and his world was spinning end over end. Whiplash tore him from his restraints and sent him crashing from seat to ceiling to floor as the car tossed itself over and over. Explosions of pain finally settled into a continuous note as his world jerked to a halt.

He was at the front lying across mama's lap, legs wedged between the seats. The roof of the car was low, crushed in, and there were holes in the windscreen and roof where a dozen steel rods had punched through skewering the front seats and their occupants. Above him was a mess of torn flesh that had been mama, and gouts of blood were spattering over him, drenching his face and neck in warm stickiness, a metallic taste in his mouth.

A pendant she wore that had always fascinated him was dangling above him before his eyes, a glassy stone of deep violet nested in a circle of brass petals. Except now ribbons of blood were coarsing down the chain-link, flooding the iris and its brass surround. And reflected in its glistening surface was his own face, mouth open, bloated and distorted, issuing that high-pitch gurgling scream.

That brass pendant with its fake stone was filled the expanse of the lab's wall-screen. It swung from side to side in a lazy time-lapse, ribbons of crimson spilling across it. Christie, a.k.a Anton Weiss, just stood there, his face white and bloodless, eyes staring, mouth working and throat convulsing like he was struggling for air. Then he fell to his knees, the needle-gun falling from his hand and clattering onto the tiles.

Jake looked dispassionately on. He could hardly believe that this was the nemesis he'd sought, that this pathetic creature gagging and clawing numbly at the tiled floor was the evil monster he'd created in his dark fantasies. He felt for the rage that always clung to his insides, but it was nowhere to be found. Looking at the shell of a broken mind lying before him, Jake felt none of the blind hatred he'd expected, no urge to swiftly

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put a bullet through his head, or to kick and thump him into a bloody mess. The echoes of the matrix still rang in his mind, a thousand fragments of Anton's biography pulled from the Pentagon matrix had sunk into his cortex as surrogate memories—suddenly it felt like he almost knew him. He felt...pity.

"Shadow?" Chip said uncertainly. She put a hand to her mouth. She looked confused, vulnerable, like a child.

"You bastard. What have you done to him!" Hythe shouted.

"Just taking advantage of a back-door engram those CIA PsychOps left in place."

"For God's sake stop it. You're destroying his mind—"

"Shadow...What's going on?" Chip said, louder, looking for an opening.

"It's too late," Jake said.

"So this is your revenge...?" Hythe snarled.

"Quite the opposite. I'm doing him a favour. Anton was a monster. He can be human now."

"Chip," Jake said, finally responding to her. "This is the scumbag who killed Lisa." He signalled to where Anton was sprawled. "He's a psycho engineered by military intelligence. General Hythe over there uses him to murder anybody who gets in the way."

"You...you had no right!" Hythe yelled hoarsely. He was apoplectic with rage, spittle flying from his lips. "You're nothing, you can't make this kind of decision—"

"Rights?" Jake hissed, his face twisting in disgust. "Don't talk to me about rights you hypocritical piece of shit. What about the rights of people like Lisa, and all those other poor saps you had slaughtered? What about the rights of S-Zero-One?"

"Jake, come on..." Chip interrupted, she was pulling at his arm, "Let's get out of here. While we still can."

For a moment Jake resisted, tried to snatch his arm out of her grip, but then he seemed to come to, the urgency of their situation settling

home. Others would be coming as soon as Hythe came to his senses and made for a com-link.

They made for the door. Chip nervously looked back one more time as the door slid aside, made to turn away again before doing a double-take, her eyes widening in fear.

Maybe if she hadn't sent Hythe that last glance it would have been a very different story. If Jake hadn't had the split second it took to turn his head and catch a glance of the tiny silver bore of that snub-nose revolver, if he'd never had that fraction of a second's grace to jerk instinctively aside just ahead of the deafening noise then maybe he would have been dead before he knew what hit him.

It felt like someone thumped him hard in the shoulder, the impact sending him spinning in a circle and tumbling down towards the tiles near Anton. Then everything went into surreal slow-motion. Another shot rang out, the reverberating thud so loud he could feel it through his bones, and his eyes suddenly settled on the black ovular form of Anton's needle-gun. It was lying where it had fallen nearby on the floor. For a moment, Jake didn't know what it was, but then circuits deep in his mind jumped to life, old memories of something he'd never done suddenly bursting to life, taking control of him.

He seemed like a spectator looking on in bewilderment at some third-person act of skill and dexterity. With a flick of his feet, his tumble turned into a flying roll that brought his hand to rest on the suddenly familiar form of the needle gun. Another turn brought him face down behind Anton, where his thumb activated the device's bead..

A red dot flickered about on Hythe's suit, then his index finger slid a catch and the dot turned orange. The pistol rang out one more time and his thumb squeezed, the device juddering in his hand as it spat a single sliver of toxin coated alloy.

Hythe's mouth dropped open and for a moment he stood there, a ghastly look of astonishment on his face. Then his legs gave out and he fell limply to floor.

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Jake sat there numbly, looking on in disbelief.

“Shit,” he said weakly. Then Chip was at his side, tearing at the buttons on his shirt, yanking it down over his shoulder.

“What—?” he said dazed.

“You’re hit,” she said.

He looked at his arm in vague surprise. He didn’t feel much but there was a warm stickiness further down his arm. The azure paisley of his sleeve was soaked in a slick of dark redness. He looked bemusedly at it as Chip pulled out a scanner and inspected the wound, wondering at how different blood looked in large amounts, that indigo blackness it carried.

“It’s okay,” she said, after a few moments. “Missed the artery, ligaments, bones. Just a flesh-hole.” Jake winced as she mopped up the wound and wrapped a length of dressing tightly around the top of his arm.

She helped him to his feet.

“What shall we do with this—this piece of shit.” She turned round to where Hythe was lying and kicked him hard in the ribs.

“Let’s put it in the hands of fate...” Jake walked over to where Hythe’s body lay and began heaving it up with his good arm. “Help me with this...”

“What are you doing?” She joined him, taking his other arm and pulling him up into a sitting position.

“I know you can hear me, Hythe,” Jake hissed. “The needle-gun was set for a Curacene toxin, see? It’s this great nerve-agent that completely paralyses you while keeping you fully conscious. Neat huh? Anton, see, I don’t blame Anton. I mean, he didn’t have a choice. He was just doing what those CIA butchers programmed him to do. But you—you knew exactly what you were doing.”

“What are you doing?” she asked again.

“I just invented a new game...” he said, panting. They dragged his body to the chair and dumped him in it, hastily securing him with straps that were attached to the arms and back. “...Shang Hai Roulette.”

“Hiriaki. Wire him up. Get Pilot’s tape. I’ve got something I want our pal here to see...”

Hiriaki came forward from where he’d been standing nervously by the main console and connected up the headset. Then he went over to a cabinet and took a tape the size of a large book and slotted it into the console. At this point he seemed to hesitate.

“Do it!” shouted Jake.

Hiriaki glanced up at Jake, then he keyed in a sequence that brought a panel of readouts winking to life in fast succession. His hand came to rest on a circular button that was flashing crimson and he seemed to pause once more. Then he touched it.

A green “>“ lit up and tiny motors whirred to life...

Jake led the way. She thought they’d be heading for the exit by the main stairwell, but instead he turned down one of the short corridors towards the elevator bank and stepped through waiting doors. He touched a button marked R and the elevator swiftly ascended. Their wrist-keys were meant to restrict them, she thought distantly—he’d done something to his clearance. When the doors opened, they were in a small enclosure by a stairwell that led out onto the roof. A scream of turbines could be heard as they approached the exit door, and blast of wind and noise greeted them as she followed him out onto a landing pad. A jumper was waiting, its four thrusters vertical, awaiting lift off. The pilot turned expectantly towards them as they approached.

Jake walked casually over and up the gantry. She followed and they took seats in its warm interior, quickly strapping themselves in as the hydraulics whirred and the gantry swung up in to place, interlocking with the doorway. Then the thrusters rose to a scream, and G-force

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pushed them back into their seats as the vehicle launched itself up into the air and south towards the brown-green expanses of rural flatland.

“You ready to give me the run down?” she asked.

Jake didn’t say anything for a while. He just sat staring out of the window into space. Finally he spoke.

“Pilot wasn’t the first...” he said.

“But he had to...I don’t get it, who—?”

“Aizu had an earlier prototype. About a year back.”

“But they didn’t have RNSS then, how could they build a jack?”

“They couldn’t. But they thought they’d try anyway. Even without RNSS they figured there was a chance they could hack it. They found some sap who’d try a random neural splice. They put together a primitive hookup, no decoding, no signal modulation, just a random nerve-to-wire feed-through. Not only did they destroy his mind doing it, but they screwed up the matrix, turned it sick...”

“The jack left pieces of his dying mind embedded in the Net. The matrix turned sick, and passed the sickness anyone who tried to connect with it. Pilot wasn’t the first. There were a bunch of Pagans, too; they put together a GVE, tried to tap into it. Same thing happened to them, but not as bad—”

“But they didn’t have—that machine,” Chip said.

“The machine’s like an amplifier. It connects you in totally, makes you part of the Net. But it’s still the same Net that you’re connected to through VR. Since VRs so primitive in comparison, it’s pretty much out of range of the Net’s higher dimensions—true cyberspace—but not completely. It kinda leaks through to VR, as glimpses, intuitions picked up by people with a particular sort of perception. Then it gets distorted, turned into rumours and superstitions—Net Voodoo.”

“So it was true, kind of.”

“Yeah. Something happened in there. It’s been in the making for a long time, but now it finally happened...”

Jake suddenly looked distant, a million miles away.

“What?” she asked, finally.

“It’s alive now, Chip,” he said, and for the first time he didn’t feel stupid saying it. “It just woke up, and nothing will ever be the same again. Nothing...”

Chip was quiet again. She could believe it. She was still dazed, knocked back by what was happening to them. They’d been whisked away like magic. She knew without asking that mechanisms had been put in place—that they’d be swiftly and discretely relayed to wherever they wanted, passing along a path paved by some carefully crafted binary mozaic in cyberspace.

The impact of what was happening was finally dawning, filling her with wonder, dizzying vertigo, and more than just a little anxiety. Christ. What had he done.

“You’re convinced that it’s a good thing,” she said, “Like this—change—is some messiah that’s gonna save us all, right?”

“Only if we get it right. This is big Chip, way bigger than anyone can understand right now. It’s too big for anyone to own, too dangerous...”

“But it wouldn’t have been a secret forever anyway,” Chip protested, “the technology would’ve got out eventually. Information won’t stay locked up anymore—”

“I’ve seen what that thing can do. Nothing can touch it. Maybe it would have got out eventually, but by then the damage would have been done.”

Both of them were quiet for a moment. They just sat, staring distantly at the scenery that rolled away beneath them.

“That was one hell of a decision you made,” Chip said finally, “I hope it’s the right one.”

“I didn’t make a decision, Chip. It made itself. That’s the way it had to be...”

“They’ll kill if they catch you. You know that.”

Jake smiled. His eyes shone with warmth and humour, but they were tinged with something distant and alien, almost frightening. There was

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a glimmer that told of sights she couldn't imagine, of a world beyond a horizon that human consciousness was slipping inexorably towards—a vast new universe free from the prison of individuality, maybe even beyond mortality.

“Yes,” he said. “But first they’ll have to catch me.”

Jake slept. In his sleep he dreamt of a blue-green orb suspended in the tractless depths of space, of tiny sparks of life multiplying, spreading, growing brighter, and then suddenly bursting into an explosion of activity, weaving a million webs, covering the surface in an ever thickening lattice of steel and glass-fibre gossamer.

And then this terrestrial cortex was itself starting to glow, brighter and brighter, until it tripped some critical mass and blazed to life like a budding supernova.

Then the scene panned back, further and further, until this blazing orb was just a tiny dot amongst a million others, who even now had sent out the first tentative tendrils, weaving themselves inexorably together with tiny slivers of data that blazed invisibly across interstellar space.

About the Author



After graduating in Psychology at the University of East London, the author went on to specialise in Artificial Intelligence at the University of Leicester. After a period of academic research, he moved to the United States, where he now works in the IT industry. His first book *Beyond the Self* was published in 1997 in Britain by Janus Publishing Company. *Headspace* is his first work of fiction.

