CRASH CODE

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COLD CALCULATION

ERIC LEWIS

"THAT'S IT. The brain's fried."

Melanie and four other passengers hunched over the charred hub that had held the ship's Jump Calculator. *The brain*. Lab-grown and cubical it might've been, but under the emergency lights of the hot control room the thing looked enough like the human version to turn stomachs when Linus wrenched it from its receptacle. Tendrils of neural tissue and wire dangled uselessly, dripping nutrient bath.

"Ugh," Melanie said with disgust. "What's that mean for us?"

"It means, kid," sighed Linus, "that even if the pilot was still alive, we couldn't go anywhere. Without a Calc we'd be jumping blind through space, especially this far out. And before you ask, no—he didn't carry a spare."

The large, beefy man whose name Melanie didn't know kicked a pile of debris knocked loose by the explosion.

"Idiot pilot, it's all his fault! His idea of a shortcut. And the shit parts that caused all this. Shoulda known when I bought the ticket, you get what you pay for."

"Serves him right, getting blown up like that," sneered a middle-aged woman nursing a dislocated shoulder. "But what about the rest of us?"

Mel glanced from one adult to another looking for some assurance. She didn't find it. "Isn't there, like, a distress call we can send or something?"

"Um," muttered Thomas, a little mousy fellow shoved to the back of the room, "there's a beacon, and I turned it on but it could be weeks before anyone picks it up. Can we last that long?"

"Not even close," answered Linus. "Air scrubber was right next to the explosion. I figure we got five hours, tops."

"I'm sorry, but are you saying we're dead?"

"No!" Mel blurted out, aghast. She turned to Linus. "You're not, are you?"

"Look, I'm only a junior bioelectrician, but I know a burned-out Calc

when I see one. Must've installed a dozen at least." Linus pointed at the squishy gray cube on the floor. "And without another of those, we're finished."

"There must be *something* we can do!" The injured woman let out a terrified whimper.

Linus opened his mouth, closed it, half-opened it again. "Well . . . "

"Well what?"

"You aren't gonna like it."

"We're way past liking," said the big man. "Out with it."

"The Calcs are grown for ships' jump engines, but really they're not that different from normal human brains. The interface is modeled on spinal cords. Same construction, same tissue, same computing power. No artificial computer even comes close."

Mel shuffled from one foot to the other, a sick feeling settling in her gut. "What are you saying?"

Linus looked the girl square in the eye. "How badly you wanna get home?"

"Oh. Oh, *no*. No, no no, that's insane! You're insane!"

"I've heard rumors, reports of tests being done on convicts. The procedure's not all that difficult—"

"You want to plug one of our brains into that, that *thing?* That's suicide!"

"So is staying here," said the woman. "What about the pilot?"

Linus shook his head. "Been dead too long. Besides, he was ruined by the blast. It'd have to be one of us. Pretty straightforward installation really. I could do it with just a laser saw. But yeah, it'd be a one-way trip."

"What would that even be like," wondered Thomas, "being without a body, being a part of the ship?"

"Nothing. The Calcs aren't conscious. They can't be. They'd be in constant agony what with the neuronal overclocking."

"Are you sure they aren't?" asked Mel. "I mean, if there's nothing to compare against? What about a brain that was already conscious, that knows what life outside a box? Has that ever been—?"

"They don't feel or think anything! Okay? They just *calculate*. So, any volunteers?" Silence. "Yeah, didn't think so."

"We'll have to draw lots," said the big man. "Only fair way."

Tears began welling up in Mel's eyes, "This is crazy. We can't really be doing this—"

"*You* ain't. I ain't drawing against a child. You're out. Agreed?"

The woman nodded sharply. "Agreed." Then Linus.

"Wait, wait," stammered Thomas, "I don't want to do this, I don't agree! Can't we give the beacon a chance—?"

"Air won't last long enough," said Linus, "it's now or never."

"And what about you? What if *you* draw short?"

Linus regarded the small man with a squint. "I guess you'd better hope I don't. Or else learn the installation manual real quick."

Mel shook her head as though it was all a bad dream she could awaken from. "Guys, stop, this is—"

They ignored her. The big man ripped four stretches of copper wire from a burned panel and broke one short. He held the bundle out toward Mel. "Here, do it quick, before we lose our nerve."

"I—me? I can't—"

"Now!"

Mel reached out a trembling hand and took the four wires. Four lives all in her hand.

The big man drew first. Long. His face betrayed no emotion at the result. The woman drew next, and Linus gulped loudly when she drew a long wire as well. Perhaps thinking Thomas might balk and run, the big man took hold of him and shoved him forward. His hand shook more than Mel's as he hesitated over the two remaining wires.

"I'm sorry, I can't do it—"

"You damn well *will* do it," growled the woman, "or you'll go anyway. Draw!"

He drew.

Short.

"No—"

"That's it," said Linus, "take him now! No sense in dragging it out."

"No!"

"Sorry fella," said the big man, "ain't nothing personal."

"No, I won't go! I won't!" He tried to fight his way out of the control room but found himself in the grip of two strong arms. "Get off! Please, I don't want to go in that thing, I don't want to die!" He began sobbing.

Mel dropped the remaining wire to the deck, furious. "Stop it! Can't you see he's scared?"

"Hush, kid," said the woman, "we just saved your life. Besides, I found painkillers earlier. A lot. It'll be easier that way. It's the humane thing to do."

They dragged Thomas kicking and screaming down the short hallway. All the way the woman muttered, "I apologize for this—so sorry. I'm sorry." The big man punched him once to take some fight out of him.

"Don't damage the brain," Linus warned.

The man shoved Thomas against the bulkhead. "Calm your shit! Listen, you need to man up—there are things worse than death. Hell, you're about to die a hero. We should all be so lucky."

"Fuck off, *you* be the hero then! Lemme go!"

Mel tried to pry Thomas from the man's grip only to be knocked to the deck. The woman managed to trigger an alpha wave inducer against his forehead to calm the thrashing fellow, while Linus took hold of Mel and dragged her toward the passenger cabin deep in the heart of the ship.

"Let go of me!"

He shoved her through the door. "I'll let you out when we get home. Besides, you won't want to watch what comes next. Probably get messy." He shut the hatch and locked it from the outside.

Mel pounded her fists against the hard metal, demanding to be let out. But the door held fast as she heard Thomas' screams weaken, then go silent.

⁂

For almost two hours, Mel waited and watched the oxygen level inch ever so slightly downward on the viewscreen above her bunk. She wondered which would be worse: to not make it back to civilization, or to make it back and have to explain what they'd done, and her part in it.

At long last the speaker crackled to life, and Linus appeared on the screen with the control room in the background. His face was covered in blood. "Hey," he said, his voice trembling. "It, uh, it's done. The new Calc should be online in a minute."

Mel glared at him through puffy eyes and tangles of purple hair. "Let me out of here you murdering bastard!"

"When we're home."

"You—" Linus cut the feed before she could say anything else, and the hum of the jump engines spooling up filled the cabin. Would it actually work? Could Thomas' stolen brain shoved into that box really calculate their course home?

A line of text appeared on the screen: NAV CALC ONLINE. SAFE MODE. Linus' voice came back over the intercom. "Alright, we've got coordinates. I'm up on the flight deck and the engines are still working. Three jumps and we should be at Everwind Outpost."

"But how do you know the numbers are right?" asked Mel, feeling a rush of hope tinged with guilt.

"Only one way to find out. I kept it in safe mode so the Calc can't affect any ship's functions. Inputting the first set of numbers manually now . . . "

ATTENTION PASSENGERS the screen read. PLEASE KEEP SAFETY RESTRAINTS SECURELY FASTENED AS WE PREPARE FOR JUMP.

Nuts to that, thought Mel.

JUMP IN 3. 2. 1.

The hum of the engines grew to a characteristic blast when the pocket of space around the ship displaced across the cosmos to a location known

only to the Calc. A wave of vertigo washed over Mel as the displacement field evaporated.

"It worked," said Linus triumphantly over the intercom. "We're right where we're supposed to be!" Cheers from the others echoed through.

"Great," said Mel without enthusiasm, "now let me the hell out!"

"Not yet. When we're home."

It was ten minutes for the engines to recharge for the next jump. This time Mel's only warning was the same screen text as before:

JUMP IN 3. 2. 1. The second jump so soon after the first sent Mel's stomach turning, and it was a few seconds longer before the intercom crackled again.

"Two for two." announced Linus. "It looks like this is going to work. One more jump and we're there. Listen, we're going to need to agree on what happened here. There are bound to be questions."

Mel twisted her jaw at the disembodied voice. "You think?"

"We did what we had to do!"

"Then you shouldn't have anything to worry about."

"*We*. That includes you. You held the wires, remember? Gray matter's a gray area. The courts aren't caught up with the tech yet and I'm not willing to risk it. The others agree, it'll go down easier for everyone if we say Thomas was injured in the explosion, that he was beyond help anyway—"

"That's not what happened! I won't lie for you."

"How long you want to stay in there, kid?" Mel gawped in silence at the naked threat. "Think about it." The com crackled off.

Ten minutes.

JUMP IN 3. 2. 1.

Think about it.

* * *

The universe exploded. Or rather, it seemed that way as the ship rocked violently to one side, then the other.

"Aaargh!" Mel was tossed from her bunk, landing hard on the deck as blasts rang out all around and the gravity surged. It was far worse than the accident that'd crippled the ship in the first place, and she held onto a crossbeam for dear life. From outside she thought she could hear screams. "Linus," she called. "Linus! Talk to me! What—"

Another shake and she rolled to the other side of the cabin. The wall was hot and getting hotter. A fire? The screen flashed red.

WARNING: RADIATION DETECTED
WARNING: HULL BREACH
WARNING: LIFE SUPPORT FAILURE
WARNING: ENGINE FAILURE

The litany of disasters crawled across the monitor.

"Oh, shit," Mel whined. "It didn't work. We're all dead." None of what had passed mattered now. When the tumbling stopped she crawled back to her bunk to wait for the end, watching the same lines on the screen repeat over and over. The cabin got hotter and smoke wafted in from somewhere.

Suddenly, the screen went blank. Ten seconds. Then a new line of text:

EMRG DETECTED. CALC AUTO RESET.
RESTART IN OVERRIDE MODE? Y/N

"What?" On the panel next to her screen two old-style push buttons glowed. One red, one green. Figuring there was nothing left to lose, she reached out and hit the green button. The lights went out.

Ten seconds.

The lights came on again dull and low. Another lurch, though not as violent as before. Air circulators kicked on and sucked the smoke away.

The sudden silence seemed almost obscene. Mel crept toward the cabin hatch and pulled on the release but got only two low, disappointed-sounding beeps. She tried again with the same result. Still locked.

A tone sounded from the screen, drawing her attention.

DON'T GO OUT THERE.

"What?" Why would the ship tell her that?

Oh God, she thought. *It can't be*.

"Why?" Mel asked the empty cabin, her voice quivering. "Why can't I go out?"

RADIATION.

The screen went dark again.

So that was it. The Calc—*Thomas*—was in control of the ship. *Conscious*. What did that mean? *If there's radiation, what happened to the others?*

She huddled in her bunk with knees up to her chin waiting for whatever was going to happen next, begging forgiveness for not trying harder to save Thomas from whatever hell he now endured.

After an indeterminate amount of time, a new series of booms echoed through the hull. Not explosions, though. *Docking clamps!* It was the sweetest music she'd ever heard. Then other sounds. Shouting, boots stomping, then a curious spraying hiss.

The cabin hatch opened a crack, and a hydraulic prybar poked through. When it was fully open a figure in a yellow full-body suit appeared, covered in foam and carrying a hose. The same substance coated the bulkheads outside. Mel shrank back in alarm.

"Here!" The figure called out behind a glass face shield. "Survivor!" Mel screamed when the sticky foam shot from the hose and covered her. "Calm

down kid, radiation scrub. No telling how much you got. Keep your mouth closed."

"What—blech!" She spit out a droplet of the foul-tasting stuff. "What happened? Where are the others?"

"Didn't make it I'm afraid. How did you folks manage to jump into the corona of the star?"

The color drained from Mel's face. "A *star?* We jumped into a star?"

The figure nodded. "Sensors watched you come out. Damnedest thing I ever saw. You're a lucky girl; this cabin's the only place the magnetic rad shielding didn't fail, aside from the Calc hub. You must have managed to give it emergency control and it navigated itself to the outpost. Come, let's get you off this bucket before it falls apart."

Leaving the ship with the outpost crew, Mel peered into the flight deck as they passed by. The others were barely recognizable, they were so badly cooked.

"Come on, and don't look," said one of the yellow-suited crew as they rushed her past. "Ain't nothing pretty in there."

Cleansed of the scrubbing foam, Mel rested in the station's sick ward, wondering over and over what had happened. The remains of the ship lay docked in an emergency bay outside her window, a battered black husk much like the bodies within it. *Did Thomas get the jump coordinates wrong?* Or was it something else?

She was so deep in thought that she almost didn't notice when the station's warning lights began blinking. Then a computerized voice announced over loudspeakers, "ATTENTION: UNAUTHORIZED LAUNCH. PROCEED WITH CAUTION."

Security officers rushed past the door, shouting. "What's happening?"

"That dead ship we brought in—it's undocking."

"By itself? Impossible!"

The station shuddered, and alarms went off. Mel looked out the window to see the ship pull away from the airlock and veer into open space. *Where is it— where is* he *going?*

The biomonitor next to Mel's bed flickered out, and her vitals were replaced with SIG ADJ. NEW SIG FEED. STDBY.

"What—?"

THANK YOU.

"T-Thomas?"

YES.

"Thomas, you're alive! You jumped us into that star on purpose, didn't you?"

YES.

"I guess I can't blame you. I'm so sorry for what we did."

YOU TRIED TO SAVE ME. THANK YOU. TELL EVERYONE. TELL THEM ABOUT CALCS.

Mel began to weep. "Tell them? Tell them *what?*"

THERE ARE THINGS WORSE THAN DEATH.

***

The ship accelerated away from the outpost back towards the star it had just escaped. It overrode the station's attempts to regain control, and the crew watched as the ship flew, seemingly of its own free will, straight into the heart of a sun where no shielding would save it.

THE DEEPEST FAKE

KRISTOPHER TRIANA

"IF YOU WANT to look like Scarlett Johansson—and I mean *exactly* like Scarlett Johansson—then this is the treatment for you."

Donna raised her eyebrows at Lugo's claim, but let him go on.

"She is one of our more popular items," he said. "But you needn't limit yourself to today's stars, Ms. Sampson. Why, you could be a young Michelle Pfeiffer, or go further back and be a Brigitte Bardot, Jayne Mansfield or, of course, Marilyn Monroe, another popular selection."

Donna wanted to believe Lugo. His pitch was a little too promising, but she'd seen the results on the clinic's website. If those videos weren't manipulated with CGI, and only the models' faces had been doctored, then she'd gladly write a check out to Deep Illusions.

"Do the prices vary?"

"Not based on the face you choose, only the longevity of the illusion. For example, if you purchase a membership for the monthly updates, you'll save up to a grand a year."

Donna stirred in her chair. "Can you walk me through the treatment?"

"Certainly. One session takes about twenty minutes. It's painless. First we coat your face with a razor-thin layer of our reflective compound solution. Its individual cells are actually digital and work like micro-screens. It's so light you won't even know it's there. Then you'll only feel a slight pinch on your facial tissue as the digital image is implanted upon the surface. There's no cutting, stitches or medications involved, and you don't have to be put under."

Again, too good to be true.

"Okay," she said. "But how exactly does this work? I mean, how can you give me someone else's face without surgery?"

Lugo leaned on his desk and crossed his hands. He was a handsome Latino with dark eyes and wavy hair—Antonio Banderas in his heartthrob

prime. Donna wondered if he'd had treatment himself, but thought it too rude to ask.

"It began as a video program known as deep fakes," Lugo said. "With modern technology, designers are able to use images from an actor's many films to capture their faces in every possible expression. Then, that actor's face can be planted upon another person in another movie. Nicolas Cage as Indiana Jones. Mr. Bean as the girl in *Twilight*."

Donna already knew this part. "Yes, and then the pornographers began using it."

Lugo smiled, an embarrassed gentleman. "True. Deep fakes became scandalous when designers starting putting Johansson and other celebrity faces on adult film stars in pornographic movies."

"And the kicker is there's nothing the actresses can do to stop it."

"That's right. It's not a—"

"So what makes this different?"

Lugo's smiled wavered. Donna had heard about the lawsuits Deep Illusions was immersed in for unlicensed use of the appearances of multiple celebrities. This news made her all the more impulsive to get the treatment before it was declared illegal.

"We're not making pornography here, Ms. Sampson. We're not making any movies at all. Our technology takes what programmers did with deep fakes and enables it to be utilized in real time, on a real person. They're facial enhancements for our clients to enjoy a new look or fulfill a fantasy."

"For a short time."

"Yes. That is true. Without the proper software reboots and updates, the image fades. But until that point the overall effect is astonishing. For thirty days you will be a facial clone of whatever starlet you wish."

Donna tucked a puff of frizzy hair behind her ear. It was one of many features she loathed to see in the mirror. She wasn't an ugly woman, but she was far from Scarlett Johansson. Her features had always been very plain—thin lips, hooked nose, two boring brown eyes. Now that she was nearing forty, those already undesirable features were beginning to droop and crease, and the dull eyes had found baggage to carry beneath them. Donna Sampson felt as if her shelf life as a woman was nearing expiration. At this rate, she would consider herself lucky if any man picked this discontinued model out of the discount bin, let alone the man she actually wanted.

"And what if I don't want to be a movie star?"

"Not a problem," Lugo said, perking up. "There's Taylor Swift, Anna Kournikova, Katy—"

"No, no. I mean, what if I don't want to be anyone famous? What if I want to look like someone from regular life."

Lugo sat back, brow furrowing. “Well, I suppose. You’d have to have a lot of videos of her for us to upload.”

“Not a problem.”

Jennifer was so very vain. She posted two or three videos a day to her public social media accounts, always in selfie mode, her face up close, personal, dazzling, and young.

“This is someone you know?” Lugo asked.

“Sort of.”

Lugo frowned his way into a sigh. “It’s just that this sort of thing can be unethical.”

“Excuse me?” Donna scoffed. “How is it anymore unethical than your company profiting off the theft a celebrity’s face?”

Lugo stiffened. “Because if this is someone in your everyday life, you could potentially cause problems for them. If you two have similar body types, it would be a lot easier to pose as her and interfere with her life.”

No shit.

Using her alimony, Donna already had the breast implants and tummy tuck, and the personal trainer had made all the difference in taking a few years off her body. Contacts turned her eyes from brown to a coral reef green. Her face was the last step.

“Look, Mr. Lugo, this woman isn’t part of my every day life. I hardly even know her. But she has the look I want. Not Scarlett Johansson or Mila Kunis or Taylor Swift—but her. If you can give me her face, I’ll sign up for a lifetime membership right now.”

A brief silence hung between them like a slowly descending pendulum. Donna wondered if Lugo was as tense as he looked, and if her own tension showed on the face she was so eager to transform.

“We’ll have to upload all new images,” he said. “The celebrities are all on file, whereas this will mean programming a whole new scan.”

Donna smirked, opening her pocketbook. “How much, Mr. Lugo? Just tell me how much.”

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Jennifer tossed her car keys on the kitchen counter and took off her winter hat. Still excited from her arrival, Bella sniffed at her kneecaps, tail wagging. Jennifer stretched, popping her vertebra like fireworks. It was good to be home. She’d been putting in long hours at the office to make sure the latest issue of the magazine was ready to go to print by the end of the month. With her assistant out on maternity leave, Jennifer had to do all the irritating, little things on top of the editorial work she’d been hired for. Exhausted, she went to the freezer for her bottle of Tito’s and grabbed a can of grapefruit seltzer to go with it. It was five-thirty. Bryce got off at six, and it was his turn to bring dinner with him—Indian food being their

Friday night ritual. Maybe she could even talk him into rubbing her back again tonight. For now, she had roughly an hour to herself in which to relax, get comfortably numb, and pick up where she'd left off in the latest Gillian Flynn novel.

Taking her drink to the living room, she sat down on the sofa. Bella hopped up on the cushion beside her, the Labradoodle resting her head on Jennifer's lap.

"That's my baby," she said, scratching behind the dog's ear.

Bella was the closest thing to a baby she and her husband had. The idea of starting a family enticed Jennifer at times, but the thought of sacrificing her career (not to mention her figure) gave her the same old hesitation that had held her back this far. She was only twenty-eight. Her body was still primed for childbirth. But Bryce had just turned forty-one. Would he still be up for the challenges of fatherhood if they waited another five years? She wasn't even sure that he desired children now. The subject had caused tribulations between him and his first wife, so Jennifer only tiptoed around it.

She sighed. She'd had enough stress for one day without dealing with the ticks of her biological clock. With another sip of vodka, she opened the book and sunk deeper into the cushions, ready for the sweet relief only home could bring.

There was a sudden thud.

Bella's head jolted up, a growl rising in the back of the dog's throat. Jennifer looked around the living room. It was hard to tell what the thud had been or where it had come from. *Probably something outside*. The winter wind was alive today, blasting, freezing. *Probably a branch fell on the roof, or maybe the gutters are rattling again*. She waited but heard nothing more. She returned her eyes to the page.

Bella jumped from the couch, barking now. The dog ran into the kitchen, heading toward the front foyer.

Bryce is home early, Jennifer thought.

She almost went to the door to greet him, but if she lied down on the couch she could better sell her aching back and get that rub she'd been fantasizing about. It wasn't an entirely selfish fantasy. Backrubs always led to the bedroom, and all the naughty things newlyweds got up to in there. She stretched out on the sofa, listening to the front door open. Bella was still barking but Bryce didn't say anything. He hadn't called out for Jennifer or given the dog any baby talk. Jennifer knew what it meant when her husband made a silent entry. *He's probably had a rough day too*. Perhaps the backrub would have to wait.

She got off the couch and started toward the kitchen. Somewhere in the house a door opened and closed, and Bella's barking fell muted. *Did*

he lock Bella in another room? Maybe she'd misread her husband's silence. He only put the dog in another room when they were having sex. Was he trying to sneak up on her, tackle her with his large hands and wet lips, take her right there in the kitchen? As tired as she was, she still hoped so. She turned to the cabinets and busied herself with sifting through its contents, her back to the kitchen, leaving herself open for him to come up behind her, tuck his arms beneath hers, and scoop up her breasts in his hands. She blushed when she heard his footsteps, his presence filling the space behind her. He still hadn't spoken, and she was too excited now to break the silence.

She didn't open her mouth until the knife entered her back.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Donna rinsed out the sink where she'd vomited. For all the time she'd spent plotting and daydreaming about killing Jennifer, her nerves simply hadn't been prepared. After the first stab, Jennifer buckled and fell over the kitchen counter, struggling to stay on her feet. But she didn't fight. Donna suspected that she'd punctured a vital organ, likely a kidney. She couldn't step back and wait to find out. There was only about an hour to get this done. Grabbing Jennifer's hair, Donna titled the woman's head back on her neck and ran the blade across her throat, slicing deep into the meat. Jennifer gasped, a wet gargling sound escaping her. She turned to dead weight almost instantly. Donna stepped back to avoid any further splatter and Jennifer sprawled across the tile, holding her neck, the blood thick and purplish as it sluiced through her clutching fingers. She stared up at Donna, shock dilating her eyes.

The last thing she saw was her own face looking back at her.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

With Jennifer dead, Donna took off her backpack, unzipped it, and removed the thick drycleaner bag—the same one she'd kept her wedding dress in all these years. Now it was empty, as empty as her life had become after the divorce. Stretching it out beside Jennifer's corpse, she was relieved to see it would be just long enough if she tucked the body's legs up at the knees. The dog was barking in a fever, but Donna could wait to sedate Bella once the corpse was wrapped in plastic and secured in the trunk of Jennifer's car.

She took one last look around the kitchen. The 409 had taken care of the blood on the counter and a fresh mop had cleared the red trail made on the hardwood as she'd dragged the body outside. From there she'd hosed down the concrete in the garage, secured the body in the sedan, and fed the dog tranquilizers wrapped in bacon; nothing strong enough to cause any damage, just enough to make Bella docile, sleepy. She heard Bryce pull up as she dumped the last of the paper towels into the trash.

The kitchen bin was overflowing with the blood-stained wads, so she pulled the string and took the bag to the trash bin in the garage, then rushed back into the kitchen to replace the bag with a new one.

Donna went to the bathroom and fluffed her hair. She'd grown it out and had it straightened and dyed, an expensive treatment at the salon. Combined with Jennifer's clothes she'd taken from the bedroom and the wedding band she's yanked from her dead hand, the costume was complete. She was an impeccable replica, a digital mirage of another woman.

No. Not another woman. You have to stop thinking of you and Jennifer Cook as two separate individuals.

The front door opened and she heard his familiar call. It stung to know he'd been using it with another woman.

"Wifey, I'm home."

This was the true test. Donna went out to the foyer, her arms open wide, smile even wider. Bryce embraced her without a hint of suspicion. He planted a kiss on her synthesized cheek and she pulled him in closer, breathing him in, adoring him.

It was so good to hold her ex-husband in her arms again.

⁂

Something was off.

Bryce wasn't sure what was going on, but there was something different about Jennifer. She seemed somehow disjointed, lost. These past few weeks he'd gotten the impression that she was just going through the motions, an actress playing a wife in a movie rather than the real thing. She was sweet to him, but there was a modicum of unease to that sweetness. She was the same way with the dog, and Bella veered from her, not even taking food from Jennifer when it was offered. His wife's eyes darted when he looked into them, and yet he caught her staring at him all the time. And had those eyes grown somehow greener? They seemed brighter than before. And it wasn't the only difference in her body. Her breasts seemed higher, harder. Her skin no longer held the silkiness of a woman her age. It was as if her flesh had withered overnight—all but her face, that perfect, beautiful face. He wondered if she had a disease they weren't aware of, and tried to keep the C-word out of his thoughts.

From that first night he'd seen Jennifer, he'd known he had to have her, and once she was his he asked Donna for the divorce. Of course his wife had gone into hysterics. A separation was the last thing she wanted. Bryce had never wanted to break her heart, but he'd wanted to leave his wife long before his mistress had come along. Having Jennifer just gave him the last bit of motivation he'd needed to go through with it. Donna had been a good wife to him, but she just hadn't been enough—not pretty

enough, not sexy enough, and now, not young enough. She was almost as old as he was, and that was simply unacceptable. He'd worked hard and had become a big success in advertising as a result. He'd earned his wealth as well as his social and business stature, and stayed fit in the company gym. He'd enhanced himself in every possible way since he and Donna had married, but she had been as stagnant as a tepid, algae-coated pond. She was working the same dead end retail job and had gained fifteen pounds in the wrong places. She was flat-chested, had thighs of cottage cheese, and was suffering from the effects of gravity. Where once he'd seen her as plain, he now saw her as mule-ugly. He was embarrassed to have her on his arm at business parties and as bored by her conversation as he was by her attempts to get him into bed with her. What was the point? He wasn't aroused by her and she was too old to give him the son he now wanted. Leaving her was long overdue.

But he wasn't totally heartless. He gave her the house and an ample alimony settlement, and now she had far more money than the average department store cashier. But that hadn't been enough to take his poor Donna's pain away. She was inconsolable. And once she learned of Jennifer, she became impossible, making a pathetic effort to win him back, calling and texting and emailing, dropping by his new house uninvited. Then she'd started stalking Jennifer. She made no threats, but tailed Bryce's new wife, loitering outside her office and taking pictures of her when she walked to her car. They'd had no choice but to file a restraining order. Donna kept away from the office, and she stopped tailing his new wife, but it took some time for Jennifer to shake the feeling that his ex was always somewhere in the shadows, watching, waiting. But at least Donna stopped calling him. She didn't drop by the house anymore. She'd finally faced the reality of the situation. She may not have moved on yet, but accepting the fact that he would never come back to her was the first step in doing so. It was just as good a thing for her as it was for Bryce and Jennifer. At last they were able to get on with their lives and enjoy the honeymoon phase of their marriage.

But now Donna was on his mind again, and worst of all, it was Jennifer who was reminding him of her.

It was little things—the way she bounced a little when she walked; the way she nuzzled into his neck to take deep breaths, inhaling his scent; how she moved in bed; the aged feeling of her skin. But there were other differences about her that didn't remind him of Donna. Small, very faint scars at her hips he hadn't noticed before. A sort of distortion to her nipples. It was hard to tell, for she now only wanted to be naked in the dark and never gave him a peek at her with the lights on, insisting on dressing and showering alone. She'd always loved it when he would climb in and

wash her. Now she kept the bathroom door locked. She also spoke little, and when she did, her voice was strained, hoarse, nearly a whisper. She claimed to have a cold and sore throat (and stayed home from work), but that hardly explained the totality of it. And no matter her excuses, Bryce couldn't hold back a growing sense of dread that something was deeply wrong with his wife. She seemed like a wan reflection of the woman she'd been just days before.

He looked up from his plate of chicken and rice. Across the dinner table, Jennifer was staring at him, but she looked away when their eyes met. He always struggled to find the words to begin any difficult conversation.

"Food okay?" he asked.

She nodded but didn't speak.

"Are *you* okay?"

Another nod.

"Is there a reason you're not speaking to me?"

Jennifer shifted in her seat. "No, of course not, honey."

Honey? She never called him that. It was always *baby* or *babe*. Honey was too old fashioned. It was something his old wife used to say, never his young one. Here she was reminding him of Donna again, and he didn't want to be reminded at all.

Bryce dropped his fork so that it clattered jarringly on the plate.

"What the hell is going on, Jenny? You've been acting weird for a while now. I need to know what the problem is."

"I don't know what you mean."

He told her all of his observations and she stared at her food, picking at it with a fork as he let it all out. Her mouth curled, green eyes growing wet.

"You don't like me?" she asked.

He reached out and took her hand. It seemed somehow smaller than he remembered. "I love you. You're my wife—"

"Donna was your wife too."

Bryce winced. "So?"

"If marrying someone means you love them, then why did you cheat on Donna with me?"

Bryce shook his head. "Christ, Jenny. Is this what's been bothering you? You think because I cheated on her I'm going to do the same thing to you?"

She shrugged. "Why not? What makes me so much better than her?"

"Are you kidding?" He picked up her hand, kissed it. "You're better than my ex in every possible way. You're smart, beautiful, successful. You have a great sense of humor and you're fun to be with. My ex had none of

these traits. Even my friends and family hated her. The last few years of that marriage were unbearable for me, you know that."

When Jennifer looked up at him, Bryce was puzzled by the dark expression on her face. Instead of reassuring her, he'd somehow upset her even more. She looked ready to bawl, scream, or both. His strange suspicions left him for the time being. All he wanted right now was to make his wife feel better.

"Donna was a mistake," he said. "She means nothing to me, and even back when we were together, she never meant as much to me as you do. You're the one I love and need. In my world, you're all I ever see."

⁜⁜⁜

Donna told herself it didn't matter.

She loved her husband, even if he didn't love her. She didn't know why she still wanted him. Maybe it was more than just how she felt about Bryce. Maybe it was about how she felt about their marriage in and of itself. The end of a marriage just felt too much like a failure. It was too big of a loss, leaving a blank, gray void where her future used to be.

So fine. Let him love Jennifer. As long as I get to be her.

But it was a hard act to upkeep. Bryce was obviously suspicious. She knew too little about the woman she was impersonating to replace her. Taking on Jennifer's physical appearance had proven to be the easy part. But even that required upkeep, and Lugo and his crew of tech-doctors at Deep Illusions had failed to convey to her the real malfunctions that the new face would have as the thirty-day mark drew nearer. More than once she felt a slight menthol-cool sensation where the reflective goo had been applied. When she went to the mirror during these moments she detected small blips in the image, her face crackling with a tiny line of static and pixel distortion before going smooth again. These errors had made her obsessive about looking at herself in every reflective surface in the house, praying the imperfections wouldn't worsen before it was time for a software upgrade.

"It's perfectly normal." Lugo said when she'd finally gotten hold of him. "The illusion always shows signs of system shutdown as it nears the end of the month. The upgrade fixes all of that. You're scheduled for one in four days."

"But I need to keep this illusion going without a break!" She wished she could have killed Jennifer right after she'd had the facial transplant, but she'd needed time to get Bryce and his new wife's routine down, to plan the murder at the right time. It had taken almost two weeks, giving her a mere fifteen days left to enjoy her new face around Bryce. "There can't be any glitches. It'll ruin everything."

Lugo cleared his throat. "Ms. Sampson—"

"Cook."

"Pardon?"

"It's Cook—never mind."

"As I told you, these illusions are for entertainment purposes only. Our customers are enjoying a fantasy, nothing more. Now, if you've used your illusion for some sort of farce, if you're impersonating someone, then—"

"I just want my face to be flawless, that's all. I paid a lot of money for this treatment. My membership includes the upgrades, so let's just do the upgrade now."

Lugo was silent on the line, then: "Ms. Sampson, I'm afraid we can't do that."

"Why not? It's only four days early. I want to keep my illusion going."

"The software is programmed for exactly thirty days for a reason. It winds down during the final week so that your skin can settle enough for re-imaging. If we rush the process, well, there can be side effects."

Donna stewed, pacing the kitchen. "How much?"

"The side effects vary in intensity."

"I mean how much money, Lugo? That's what it always comes down to. How much money to fix this today? Right now."

⁂

"I need to take your car today."

Her husband's words slowly sank into Donna like a thousand hooks. Something twisted in her stomach. She felt as if she couldn't breathe.

"My car?" she said. "No. I need my car."

Bryce ran his hand through his hair, a sign of annoyance. " I thought you were staying home sick again. I doubt you need it for anything."

"What's wrong with your car?"

"Didn't you hear me cranking it in the driveway? It always fails to turn over when it's freezing outside like this. I'll get it to the shop this weekend. Right now I need to get to the office."

He took his suitcase off the counter and went to the candy dish where they kept their keys. She ran to him and slapped her hand over his. He couldn't take the car. He just couldn't. She hadn't figured out what to do with Jennifer's body yet. Like Bryce with his tune-up, she'd been putting it off, too busy with recreating an entire human being to be bothered with her dead body disposal. The arctic winter temperatures had so far kept the body from stinking, but the damned dog came sniffing around the trunk whenever it got the chance. It was only a matter of time before decomposition revealed her terrible secret. She had to dump the corpse, but first she had to keep Bryce out of the car.

"Take a cab," she said.

"Are you crazy? I'm not taking a freakin' cab. I paid for this car and

now I'm taking it to work." She grabbed his coat a little too forcefully. Bryce shook her off. "What the hell is going on with you? I swear to God, Jenny, it's like I don't even recognize you anymore!"

But that couldn't be. She'd paid thousands to have the software updated early. It made her flesh burn and blister, but it was worth it, as were the muscle spasms in her face and the twitching of her eyelids. She felt all of these things, but they didn't *show*. That's all that mattered.

"Let me make it up to you," she said. "Call a tow truck for your car and we can have a cozy day inside, just you and me."

"No. Someone has to work in this family. You've been out sick for weeks. It'll be a miracle if you don't get fired."

"I just—I just need time."

"Time for what?"

She looked at the floor, unable to explain or come up with a suitable lie.

"Well, I don't have time for this," Bryce said, heading to the doorway leading into the garage.

She got between him and the door and put her palms to his chest. She leaned in to whisper in his ear, her lips brushing against it. "I'll do whatever you want. Anything, honey. Anything."

Bryce stepped back, then worked his way around her to the door. "Fine. In that case, I want you to go to a psychiatrist. I want my wife back, Jenny. I don't know who you've become, but you're not the woman I fell in love with."

Sick, hollow pain fell upon Donna like physical weight. Her shoulders slumped, head dropping so her chin touched her chest. A sob was brewing. She could feel it growing to the size of a baseball in her throat.

It doesn't matter what you look like. It wasn't just your body he didn't want. He simply doesn't want you.

Donna trembled, tears welling. Bryce noticed, but pressed on toward the car just the same. Her pain didn't mean anything to him; perhaps the real Jennifer's pain had, but not Donna's, not even when those tears ran down the face of a changeling. He got into the car and slammed the door closed, and as she looked into the window, Donna saw that face reflected back at her in the glass; a face of such beauty, and yet a terrible lie of a face. It lied not just to Bryce, but directly to Donna. It made a promise that could never be kept, a fantasy that had proven itself a nightmare.

Bryce turned to look at her once more, and Donna saw her face—*Jennifer's* face—superimposed over his in the window. It was all an illusion. Everything was.

She dug her nails into her forehead, searching for the reflecting film, but it was too slight to feel, so Donna dug deeper than the fake itself, tearing the illusion away and taking her own flesh with it.

Her eyes were drawn tight, but she heard Bryce screaming his wife's name, the car door opening. She ripped through her face, shredding the tissue, blood raining down her fingers and jaw. Bryce grabbed her arms, forcing her hands from her mutilated grimace. Donna opened her eyes, blinking away the blood.

Bryce went pale. His mouth hung agape. He let go of her arms and stepped back, his eyes never leaving her, never blinking. "Who—who are you?"

Donna couldn't hold his gaze. She looked away, catching her reflection in the window again. She wasn't just bleeding. She was flickering. Her face was a blood-soaked television screen, rapidly changing channels. Hundreds of Jennifers in multiple expressions raced across her mangled flesh, layering and dissolving upon one another, every clip of every video that had been uploaded and implanted. Donna ran from the garage, screaming into the street. The winter wind ripped into her as if she were nude, her skin aching from the extreme cold. She expected Bryce to chase her, but when she rounded a corner, he was just standing in the driveway, watching her run. He looked pale, lifeless.

He doesn't care about you.

He doesn't love you.

It was the same jolt of pain she'd felt since he'd first left her, but somehow it seemed all the more real now, and all the more sharp. She would never again have him the way she'd once had. That marriage was pure and true, as rich as summer rain. This illusion of a marriage was a terrible diminishment. There was no love here, no hope.

Moving through the woods behind their street, she sifted in the snow in just her slippers, too cold to run further away. She circled the thicket and emerged behind Bryce and Jennifer's house just in time to see Bryce pull out of the garage and drive away. Maybe he was going looking for her instead of heading to work, but she doubted it. When he rounded the corner, Donna went back to the house and entered through the side door. She spotted Bella in the kitchen, but the dog trotted away at the sight of her.

She sat down at the kitchen table. Jennifer's phone buzzed in her pocket and when she freed it she saw it was Bryce calling. It rang and rang but she just stared down at the image of him on the screen—smiling on a tropical beach, Jennifer in his arms. Probably a honeymoon photo. Donna had never enjoyed a honeymoon with him. When they'd married, they couldn't afford to take a trip. But Jennifer had gotten one, just as she'd gotten everything Donna wanted, including her husband. Bryce had given it all to her, leaving Donna alone in the cold shadows of a house that was no longer a home.

When the phone stopped ringing she picked it up and dialed.

"911, what is your emergency?"

There was no need to fake tears. They were already there.

"Oh my god. Please, you have to do something!"

"Okay now, just calm down, ma'am. What is happening?"

She took a deep breath. "I was out walking my dog when I saw a man dragging a woman out to his car. She was all bloody and limp, like she was dead. He put her in a bag and threw her in the trunk! You have to help her!"

She gave the license plate and the name of the street. Then she hung up. Maybe they could trace the call, but that didn't matter. By then the police would have opened the trunk of Jennifer's car, and Bryce would get to see the woman he loved one more time before they dragged him away in handcuffs. He would tell them about an imposter, some sort of clone, a pod person. But Donna would be long gone. He'd be seen as a madman. He might even question his sanity himself.

She went upstairs to get better dressed for the weather, but entering the bathroom to pee, she caught herself in the mirror. Tears burned as they fell into her open cuts. Jennifer's face was faded over her own, a dissolve in an old movie. Her head flickered white like fire. Jagged rips ran down Donna's forehead and cheeks like claw marks from a massive animal. The wounds were still bleeding, sousing her face and neck to a crimson glow. There was no fixing this—not her face, not her marriage, not her life.

All she felt in this moment was a debilitating despair, and yet Jennifer's face was grinning back at her in an electric hodgepodge of the beauty Donna was never meant to possess, flickering and changing upon the dangling meat of her face.

Jennifer smiling. Jennifer laughing. Jennifer so very happy.

Donna reared her body backward.

She slammed into the mirror, face first, again and again, screaming.

But Jennifer wouldn't go away.

A SILENT AUCTION

AARON THOMAS MILSTEAD

"DO I HAVE thirty-two for Chicano? Thirty-three? Going once. Going twice. Use of the word Chicano is sold for thirty-two thousand dollars. Mr. Esperanza, the term will be downloaded to your neural hard drive in approximately five minutes and erased from the group consciousness in ten. Chicano, Chicano, Chicano. Kind of drips off the tongue. Bet I'd miss it if I was capable of being aware that it had even existed."

See the Auctioneer: a parody of the times. A juxtaposition of so many clichés that any representation of truth is lost. All of the brightest colors mixed together become gray. Lifeless. The Auctioneer is both sexless and impotent. One foot in the concrete world and mind perpetually jacked into the information highway with the volume set on high. A pioneer of sorts, and certainly a linguist. A language more absolute and secure than Morse code or sign language; a string of ones and zeroes that can accurately disseminate the subtlest details and nuances of speech. Forty-two words for sunburn. Over three hundred ways of saying orgasm, and none of them fake. Over fourteen thousand distinct variations of green. Does it render the old languages useless?

Certainly.

Archaic. Babel rebuilt and destroyed by an infinitely flexible battering ram composed of binary code.

"Next we have a fine little adjective that traditionally means slightly wet. Can I get five thousand for moist? Ten? Fifteen? Fourteen? Going once. Going twice. Use of the word moist sold for fourteen thousand dollars. Ms. Brittany Brown, the term will be downloaded to—just erase it? Are you certain? Okay, any memory or potential use of the word moist will be stricken from the group consciousness in ten minutes."

This is not the first word that has been purchased merely to be erased. Veggie, Foodie, and Diarrhea were similarly purchased only minutes before. It is a clear demonstration of the power of the spoken word to

irritate and even at times assault the listener. Audible splinters that occasionally penetrate further than skin deep. Of course, very few people bother to speak out loud anymore. It's clumsy. Old fashioned. Slower than waiting for a toenail to grow on a turtle trapped in molasses.

Thoughts are near instantaneous: electrical impulses akin to the speed of light. With the collaborative acceptance of the group consciousness, the relay is non-existent, and the only perceptible time is the delay between the thought construction and its acceptance. Speech relay is contingent upon fleshy constructs such as the tongue and eardrums.

Chicano is disappearing in three seconds. Two seconds. Gone.

Ironically, several hundred affluent people have decided to attend the last lingual auction in person, and in accordance with social protocol established over thousands of years, the Auctioneer is speaking aloud for them. Delayed words simplistically and pitifully echo tremors within the group consciousness. Millions of absent bidders answer his queries instantly and he is forced to vocalize them.

The Auctioneer's garb matches the lunacy of his primitive conversational style. A black kimono printed with white lilies framed with gold. Fluffy pink house slippers. An oversized cowboy hat. Occasionally the kimono slips open and the Auctioneer's useless sex organs are exposed. No one notices.

"We've got a doozy coming up folks. Can I get fifty for a derogatory noun meant to identify a member of society's disadvantaged social class? Typically this term identifies a dark-skinned or black person. Fifty for nigger?"

"One hundred thousand dollars," says an African-American man immaculately dressed in a white suit with a red silk tie.

"We have one hundred from Mr. Howard. Do I hear one hundred and five? Going once. Going twice. Sold. Okay Mr. Howard if you will sync into the neural web we can transfer—"

"Don't bother."

"Pardon?"

"I own the word now and what I want is for it to stay."

"Are you certain, Mr. Howard?"

"Absolutely. Like it or lump it I own it. You can sell and erase every other word in existence, but not that one. Not anymore."

An elderly man in a priest's robe stands and says, "This is a waste of time. I've come for God. When are you going to sell it?"

The Auctioneer bows and says, "Soon enough my good friend. Right after spam and just before Karma."

"I've dealt with enough of this nonsense," the priest insists. "Sell it now."

"Allow for protocol," the Auctioneer says. "Have—now goodness what is the word I'm looking for? Being good naturedly tolerant of a delay. There's a word, but I'll be God damned if I can think of it. Must have auctioned it off already. Soon enough there won't be enough words left to complete a sentence audibly. There are only so many ways to use the term—excuse me for the splinter, Mr. Howard—nigger."

The priest sighs and returns to his cushioned chair.

"Okay folks," the Auctioneer begins, "we have a package deal up for auction. What can I get for the seven deadly sins? Gluttony. Lust. Greed. Wrath. Envy. Pride. And, the rarely and most likely soon to never again be used—Despair, commonly known as Sloth. Can I get a bid of twenty? Fifteen? Ten?

"Now Greed alone should be worth twenty. Nine? Going once. Going twice. Sold. Seven for the price of one sold to Mr. Hammer, who is representing Pepsi-Co. I'm getting the vague feeling we will all be drinking lemon-lime flavored Lust next summer. Correction: Mr. Hammer has informed me that Greedy Green Ginger ale will be the drink of choice. Perfect for those hot days and you need something—I'm looking for a term that means slightly wet. Not damp though. Wetter than that, but not soaking. Damn, I can't pull it, totally brain dead I'm afraid.

"Back to it. Can I get one hundred for love? Anyone? Seventy-five? Fifty? Ten? Come on everyone, I refuse to give love away for nothing. Five? Going once. Going twice. Gone."

FIRST TO FIGHT

SEBASTIAN HETMAN

THREE STRONG KNOCKS are as good as any announcement when you're an unwelcome guest. Gustav Hass adjusted his coat, making sure it kept the exoskeleton concealed. Father wasn't exactly open-minded about such things.

The door folded like a hand fan, vanishing into the wall.

The years since Mother's death had gnawed away at Friedrich Hass. Pants hung around his waist held up by tight suspenders, and a pair of oversized round glasses gave his face an insectile appearance.

Father didn't look like much, scrawny and stooped, so he surprised Gustav by how hard he slapped him in the face.

"How dare you show yourself here!"

So. He still held a grudge about Mother. Her death had fractured their relationship. It wouldn't heal no matter how much time had passed. Like a broken spine.

Gustav saw the second slap coming, catching his father's arm at the wrist, refusing to let go. His father never slapped him just once. There had always been two when he was a boy. One to shame him and make him pay attention, the other to drive home any point being made. Father had never been cruel, not as such, but neither did he hesitate before raising his hand.

"May I come in?" He shoved Father aside, surprised by the ease of it, realizing the pure physical superiority he held over the old man. Oh, how easy it'd be to abuse it right now and take petty revenge. But this wasn't the time or the place.

Father's Berlin apartment was two stories of luxury. Real wood decked the floor, and a fluffy red carpet lined the sitting area. Designer furniture—scarce but elegant—completed a picture right out off the cover of a lifestyle magazine, not of a place where real people lived.

"You've done well for yourself, Father. Still stitching up the geneticals?"

Father recoiled, massaging his arm. "I know what you are."

"Yeah?"

"You're a *Gott verdammt* terrorist."

Gustav snorted. It wasn't the first time someone had called him that. Terrorist was a media buzzword for covering up the signs of the civil uprising. No more than smoke and mirrors to divert the attention of the masses from what really mattered. The fire burning in Prague would soon spread.

"What do you want from me?" Father demanded. "Hey! Careful, you're tracking in dirt."

Gustav noticed the sole-shaped stain on the immaculate carpet. He had half a mind to keep his boots on just to spite the old man, but it wouldn't help in the long run, so he took them off.

"I need to lay low for a couple of days. Make sure I wasn't followed. The rest? It isn't your business."

"Here?" Father turned his palms up and shook his head in disbelief. "Have you gone mad? Hunker down in Charlottenburg? Right in the middle of the richest district of Berlin?"

Gustav dropped into a stuffed leather chair, inhaling the faint fragrance, letting the broad armrests envelop him. "It is quite comfy here, isn't it?"

Father's eyes became slits. "Don't mock me, boy. I am ashamed of having a son like you. If the Protectorate finds you—"

"Oh, that's what this is about? Don't worry, I know how precious your reputation is to you, so I made myself vanish from all records." Gustav leaned in and finished in a whisper. "Friedrich Hass doesn't have a son."

"No, it's not that." Father's jaw slid forward. "Gustav, whatever you're here for, please, don't turn Berlin into another Prague. Times are tough for us regulars, but—"

Gustav sputtered. "Easy for you to say. They pay you a hefty sum to love them, don't they?"

Father continued, half babbling as if in a rush to finish what he had to say before another interruption. "More and more couples can afford a genetical child now. Most of my neighbors have at least one. If we're ever hoping to reach an equilibrium, these kids need to live without knowing hate."

"To become the same spiteful assholes as their parents? No, thank you."

"It's not. That. Simple!" Father grew red in the face. The unexpected outburst of anger transported Gustav back to his childhood, back to the house of never-ending scorn, back to the times of the first geneticals.

All genetical five-year-olds outperformed any of the regular eight-year-olds in sports, as well as academic classes. A fifteen-year-old far

outstripped all young adults. Naturally, as soon as they grew up, the geneticals could get any job they liked because they were better than normal humans. A few decades were all it took them to overrun all the senior positions of the corporate world and become the leading government officials. Regulars were left pushing carts and serving their new superiors who had become overlords in all but name. If Gustav could go back in time, he would have started killing the gens while they were still young.

Yet a kind of deep unease tainted his hatred. Had *he* been born just a couple years later, he'd have been a genetical himself. His parents certainly had the money. Would he have grown up to be the same as the people he fought today? He shook the thought away.

Father grumbled under his breath as he walked to the counter of the open kitchen. He pulled out two cut crystal tumblers in one hand and a bottle of Slyrs single malt in another.

A sudden sound made both men look to the door. The lock gave a faint bleat of protest, then flashed orange, signaling an override. The blades of the door slid aside.

The figure had to lower its head to pass through the doorway. A midnight blue mandarin collared robe outlined her slender figure. At least, Gustav assumed it was a her. Geneticals were tailored to appeal to all sexes and orientations, androgynous, beautiful, and deadly. Few could resist the attraction.

She tipped her head in formal welcome. "Detective Kato. Berlin Protectorate."

Kato scanned the room. Her gaze went to Father, still red in the face, frozen behind the counter with a bottle in hand, then to the pair of stains on the carpet next to Gustav's trench boots. Finally, it fell on Gustav himself.

Did she follow him here? Impossible. What then? A routine inspection? God knew the geneticals had no respect for people's privacy, but what were the odds?

She didn't appear alarmed yet, but Gustav knew it wouldn't take much. It would be some small inconsequential detail like sitting too stiffly, or following her stare, or holding his breath for a fraction of a second longer than usual. Something would give him away, so he had to strike first.

Aw shit. This won't go well.

"How can I help you, Detective Kato?" Gustav extended his hand, closing the distance fast. He saw hesitation in her eyes.

She reached up to the comm implant at the joint of her jaw. If she managed to call backup, Gustav would spend the rest of his short life in an interrogation chamber, spilling the secrets of the Prague Resistance. He

couldn't allow it. He lunged forward, propelled by his exoskeleton, fist first. She parried without effort, but the blow forced her palm away from the comm.

Damn quick this one.

No time for caution. Geneticals learned your moves so fast that if you didn't end the fight right away, you were as good as dead.

Gustav feigned a second punch while his leg went for Kato's kneecap. The punch didn't land, but the knee gave way with a nasty crunch. His other fist struck at her temple.

He caught her in his arms like a dancer catching his partner and eased her to the ground. The struggle wasn't over yet.

He called to Father. "Hand me something sharp. Quick." He turned Kato face down, feeling for the implant behind her right ear. "And close the damn door!"

Father stood rooted to the spot, breathing heavily, the bottle still in hand. His face transformed, wrinkles twisting into a hostile mask. "Will anything quench your thirst for violence?"

"No. Now give me the knife."

Father remained still in mute defiance. Gustav left the body, slammed the terminal to close the doors, then vaulted over the kitchen counter, going through the unfamiliar drawers till he found one with kitchen knives.

He saddled Kato's back, immobilizing her arms with his knees, and pressed her head down, stretching the skin over the implant between thumb and forefinger. The blade cut through the soft tissue and scraped the electronics underneath. Blood trickled down her pale neck, staining the collar.

Kato woke with a gasp. She yanked her arm free, pressed it to her jaw and yelled "Help! This is Kato, I'm—"

Gustav pinched the slippery implant and pulled. It came free like a long worm being plucked from the soil, trailing blood. Plastic, metal, and flesh snapped. Kato gave a shriek of pain, but Gustav clamped a hand over her mouth. She tried screaming again, but only a muffled gurgle passed his spit-covered hand.

He wasn't prepared for what came next. Kato twisted under him despite the restraint, planting a knee in his crotch. She managed to free her hands, long fingers locking over his jugular in a steel-tight grip. Gustav choked. The immense pressure threatened to pop his eyeballs out. His hands searched frantically for a weak spot in her hold. He pitted his strength against hers, trying to pry her hands away, despite knowing from experience that no amount of muscle or exoskeletal support could make him an even match for the brute strength of a genetical.

"You filthy savage," Kato snarled. "You will die for this."

Gustav's joints ached, bone chafing against bone, the exoskeleton threatening to tear his muscles to shreds. Something exploded in his left arm, ripping his coat sleeve and spreading a dullness through the entire limb.

He had fought and killed geneticals his entire adult life. Got quite good at it too, but never in direct combat. Now he was about to die at the hands of one because of what exactly? His own foolhardiness if anything. He should've never come here.

To his surprise, the pressure on his throat lessened ever so slightly. He met Kato's eyes and saw she struggled to stay focused. Her eyeballs rolled up showing the whites. She gritted her teeth but only for a moment. Her jaw grew slack, her legs twitched. She lost control of her body.

Gustav rolled off to the side, fighting for air.

"Lie still, you cretin," Father said.

Defenseless, Gustav obeyed, forcing the air in and out in painful, wheezing breaths. His vision became a blur, eyes filled with tears. When he tried getting up on one knee, a coughing fit shook him. He paused, let it pass, and focused on getting his bearings again.

Gustav noticed a syringe sticking out from Kato's neck—two more protruded from her collarbone. Next to her, an old-fashioned doctor's bag lay on the carpet, its contents spilled amongst the red fluff.

"Did you kill her?" Gustav mouthed, unsure if his words came out coherent or just another wheeze.

Father rounded on him. "Foolish boy." His hand rose as if aiming another slap, but he restrained himself and lowered it slowly. "Have you any idea what you've done?"

"Yeah." Gustav coughed. "I kinda do it for a living."

Neither of them said anything for a while.

"What has gotten into you, Gustav?" Father said, a statement, not a question. "You are not who we brought you up to be. You destroy everything you touch."

Gustav tried standing up again, forgetting about his injured arm until pain shot out from his elbow. "Fuck." His coat sleeve was a ragged mess. A hydraulic piston dangled loosely inside.

Father frowned. "Show me that arm."

Gustav sat on one of the stools at the counter. He took the coat off, good hand first, revealing the exoskeleton perched on his back like some giant parasitic spider reaching out to all its host's limbs. Metal blended with flesh in dozens of sore spots, each one an angry scab.

Father broke out laughing. What started as a chortle soon turned into long derisive laughter, uncomfortable to witness.

"What's so funny?"

Father pointed at the unconscious Kato, then at Gustav. He threw up his hands in the air, resting them on his temples. “You. You fight the geneticals like it makes you some savior of the human race, while you turn yourself into a machine.”

“Whatever gives me an edge to fight.”

“And isn’t that what the parents of the first geneticals wanted? To give their children an edge?”

A wave of heat passed Gustav, blushing his ears and cheeks. He broke eye contact and said nothing.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Kato lay motionless on the floor, ignored, with her face buried in the carpet.

Father hunched over Gustav’s muscular arm, working on the damaged exoskeletal socket, a pair of bloodied pliers and a scalpel in hand. He seemed calmer now—the familiar work must’ve soothed him.

Despite all of the surgeries Gustav went through for his augs, he still couldn’t stand the sight of his own flesh being open. He spoke, doing his best not to look at the gaping wound. “How can you stand serving them, after what they did to us? What they did to Mother?”

He opened his mouth in a silent gasp of pain as Father pulled out the socket screwed into the bone of his forearm. The metal component joined other blood-spattered parts in the sink, spreading red tendrils in the water.

“They say accepting responsibility for one’s actions comes with age,” Father said, swabbing blood from the gash. “But I always saw avoiding it as a permanent weakness of your character.”

“A genetical killed her, no matter the stories you tell yourself.”

Gustav hadn’t asked Mother to follow him, and yet she did. All those years ago when tens of thousands had taken to the streets of every major city against the formation of the Genetical Protectorate. When the inevitable violence had broken out, Mother took a blow to the head and fell, never to open her eyes again. One of countless victims that day.

Father sagged, lowering the bloodied tools. “Don’t start. Please. You’d have to love someone besides yourself to understand.”

“I—” The words ‘loved her’ stuck in Gustav’s throat. “I did. Years after, the Protectorate officer who struck her became the first one I ever killed. You see? You don’t have to take it lying down. Stand up to them. Fight.”

“We each chose our own paths. It’s too late for me to change mine. I don’t want to talk about it.” Father shook his head as if chasing the unpleasant thoughts away, then let out a long, shuddering breath. “What brings you to Berlin anyway?”

Gustav gave him a sidelong glance, considering whether he should trust him. To hell with it. After what happened mere moments ago there wasn’t much left to hide.

"I know you pretend Berlin is some kind of utopia where gens and regulars live in peace. Everyone says Berlin doesn't have a Resistance cell. The fuck it doesn't. Accidents just mysteriously happen to the biggest bastards. Whoever runs the cell here is a pro. I want to make contact. There is a lot we could learn from each other." Gustav shrugged. "Well, wanted to make contact, anyhow. After this bloody disaster? I need to disappear. I'll clean up my mess first, kill the gen where no one can find her, make sure it isn't linked to you, and be off to Prague."

Father listened with keen interest, tools forgotten in his hands.

All of a sudden Gustav felt uncomfortable revealing so much. "You done? Then let's get moving."

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

The parking garage was like a cave: dark and fully open on one end. The cold luminosity of the incandescent light-strips mixed with the warm glow of the city lights outside. It created an eerie effect, made even more powerful by the impossibly regular placement of the vehilars.

Without ceremony, Gustav dropped Kato into the clutter of tools and rags in the trunk, and slammed it shut. The metallic clank echoed in the empty space.

"How long till she wakes up?" he asked when they took their seats inside.

"Few hours at least. Letheran is a very strong anesthetic for long surgeries."

"Alright. Enough time to get out of the city."

The engine hummed to life, cabin filling with the electric smell of ozone. Outside, the thrusters basked the surroundings in bright purple light as the vehilar lifted and trailed through the exit.

Threads of air traffic flowed in all directions, weaving the complex mosaic of light and movement that was Berlin at night. They passed over a dark blotch of Greater Tiergarten, flying toward the bright Reichstag. Luminaires lit the historic edifice from all sides, making it an easy landmark. A symbol of Germany's proud past, it served as the house of the Genetical Protectorate.

They merged with one of the glowing fibers of traffic, following the guidelines plotted by the nav computer. Gustav turned on the radio to fill the anxious silence. The steady rhythm of the newscast calmed his nerves.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

"A terrorist attack yesterday claimed the lives of six citizens in the Prague Pankrác office building. The Protectorate investigation revealed the presence of two independent shooters on the rooftops of the neighboring buildings. While the inquiries into the lax security measures continue, drone patrols have been increased in a five-kilometer radius around the city square.

"For some time, Prague has been home to the infamous extremist group calling themselves the Resistance. The group demands a complete ban on human embryo modification—"

Gustav's mood brightened a little upon hearing that his people had succeeded in his absence. His lip unwittingly curled into a smirk.

Father reached forward and switched off the receiver.

"This is wrong, son. Your own mother wouldn't recognize you."

Of course, he had to bring Mother into this. When she still lived, she'd served as Father's last leverage over Gustav.

"These six had to go. It's better for everyone they're dead."

They flew on in silence, passing over the low-income districts in the outer areas of Berlin. Gustav's thoughts drifted towards Mother again. Who knows? Maybe she would have died of shame seeing the path he took. She used to be the one person in the world capable of bringing out a gentler side of him. With her gone, his life had taken a quick turn to the violent side.

A racket from the trunk of the vehilar brought him back to the here and now. He strained his ears. There it was again, louder this time. He turned to Father. "You said a few hours!"

The trunk bulged from inside, tossing the vehilar up and down. Father went wide-eyed, a sense of urgency marking his tone.

"When you removed her implant, did you check her other ear?"

"No. Why?"

"Um, she might be using one of the new neurochem augs the Protectorate is testing."

"The what?"

"You said you were good at this, son. I—I was upset and wanted no part." Father pressed a fist to his lips, growing paler by the minute. "Oh, don't give me that look. I thought you knew, okay?"

Gustav's brows knotted together as he pitched the vehilar down, leaving the designated traffic line, ignoring the red warnings blinking at him from the dashboard.

"How do you know about their combat augs?" he shouted above the cacophony of horns blowing at them from all directions.

"I heard about them at the clinic," he said.

Gustav didn't believe it for a second, but whatever Father had hidden from him, there would be time to discuss it later.

Meanwhile, the trunk flew open, the rush of air tearing it off its hinges. Gustav swore and pushed the flight yoke further down, sending them into a near vertical descent. They dove, nose first, into the moving entanglement of traffic, dodging left and right, racing towards the ground.

Visible in the rearview mirror, Kato found her balance. The wind

tugging at her hair turned it into a dark crown surrounding her bruised face. Her expression was nothing but pure malice.

Too many things happened at once. Gustav would've crashed the vehilar into a brick wall if not for Father's shout of "Watch out!" The rooftop of a low apartment building whirred past, there and gone in an instant. The rear windshield exploded, spraying the cabin with a shower of glass fragments. Kato climbed inside, a crowbar in hand.

Gustav's instincts yelled at him to take care of the danger creeping behind him, no doubt about to strike, but he focused on getting them to safety first. Buildings, lampposts, and trees blurred past.

"You traitors," Kato said, right next to Gustav's ear, getting him into a choke hold. He'd have to let go of the flight yoke to fend for himself, but they were going too fast, barely missing the oncoming obstacles, each one spelling certain death if they crashed into it.

Gustav did the only thing he could think of and hit the air brakes.

The vehilar tilted and the front bumper bit into the soft soil of the park they were shooting through.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

They say your life flashes before your eyes when you're about to die. In reality, the epiphany is just the brain misfiring, neuron after neuron, all joined in a frantic search for any scrap of knowledge or experience that could save you from your current predicament. But there isn't much the brain can do when you crash at high speed through the front windshield of a vehilar.

Gustav watched the moment unfold, a silent passenger of his consciousness. He observed and cataloged every detail with painstaking precision but couldn't do anything besides. After all, to his body, the crash happened within the space of a heartbeat.

He drifted past Father, the only one strapped into his seat, his head and limbs tossed around by forces beyond his control. He noticed the exact moment when the vehilar, raking the grassy soil, encountered a paved path and flipped forward, missing Gustav and Kato by mere inches. He even had the time to contemplate the pattern of cracks in the black tarmac of the street coming at him fast.

The exoskeleton took most of the impact, sending deep nauseating shivers throughout Gustav's real bones. Not far away, Kato tumbled like a ragdoll.

Fighting against the numbness in his legs, the shock, and sickening vertigo, Gustav pushed himself to his feet. He couldn't hope to match Kato's genetically enhanced strength and intelligence, but fights could be won by gaining a number of small advantages.

He managed to stand before she did, ready to strike.

But then he saw the crashed vehilar with Father trapped inside. Thick smoke billowed from the engine, the toxic fumes curling across the damaged hood and crawling into the open cabin, reaching Father with their grey tendrils, searching for a way into his lungs. He glanced toward Kato, still struggling to her feet. What chance did he stand if he didn't press his advantage now?

Aw, for fuck's sake.

"Father!" Gustav raced towards the crashed machine. He stumbled through a drunken haze and struck the vehilar with his shoulder, unable to stop in time. "Father. Wake up! you need to get out."

Father hung limp and upside down, trapped by his harness. Gustav found the belt fastener and pushed the red button to release it. Father dropped into his arms.

"Well, isn't this the catch of the year," Kato spoke from behind. "I hoped for one but got two."

Questions raced to the front of his mind but vanished before they could fully register. Gustav felt the sinews of the exoskeleton on his back being grabbed like plant roots about to be plucked from the soil. Kato tugged with unbelievable force, and the bone sockets holding the pistons together began coming loose. A growl of anguish rose within Gustav's viscera and exploded into a primal roar of pure agony.

As a last-ditch effort, he pulled Father out of the vehilar in one great tug. The old man rolled away towards a gathering group of onlookers. A woman crouched to check on him.

Good, now on to the—

Metal groaned along Gustav's spine, culminating in a series of pops as the pistons on his back gave way. Unproperly balanced, the exoskeleton twisted him into a corkscrew, threatening to break his body for good.

Kato stood above him, face filled with rage, staring at the metal pistons in her grip like they were something disgusting.

"Who are you and why aren't you in our records?" she demanded.

Gustav knew there was something wrong with the meaning behind her words, but his twisted spine threatened to snap at any moment. Just keeping his mind afloat required immense effort, leaving no time for pondering.

A crowd of spectators gathered around, their faces a blur in his vision, completely unreadable. Would any of them take his side? How different were Prague and Berlin when you got down to the root of it? Those without wealth and privilege had little cause for loving the Genetical Protectorate. In Prague, that fact alone proved enough to stir an uprising.

"We can beat her together," Gustav said in a rasp. The air he spent wouldn't come back.

"What's that?" Kato raised an eyebrow.

Dark blotches devoured the edges of Gustav's vision. He used the last breath in his lungs for forming one word, making sure this one would be loud and clear.

"Together."

The tunnel of his vision narrowed. He would soon pass out. His body twitched like a puppet with the strings tangled up.

Before he realized what he was doing, he reached behind his back at an awkward angle and grabbed a handful of the hydraulic sinews remaining.

"Oh, no you don't." Kato made a move toward him but stopped when a paving brick hit her in the leg, giving Gustav precious seconds. He pulled with all his might. Sinew after sinew popped loose, each one decreasing the strain on his spine and letting him swallow a mouthful of air. He gasped.

How ironic. Years of training, meds that would make anyone's liver rot, hardcore augs in his body that you could go to jail for simply knowing about, and now the best he could do wasn't worth a damn in direct confrontation. But the Prague Resistance didn't succeed because they were stronger than the Protectorate. No. They picked at their enemy's strength bit by bit and would continue doing so for as long as necessary. They endured because they all believed the world should be back to the way it was before the geneticals.

Gustav rolled to the side, dodging a kick aimed to bash in his solar plexus.

"We can take her down together!" he called to the assembly, conviction ringing clear in his voice.

He scrambled to a crouch, diving under the first blow and deflecting the second, getting inside Kato's guard. He aimed one powerful headbutt at her face. The strike connected. Something cracked. It might've been his skull. They both stumbled away from each other.

Gustav shook the world back into focus. Blood trickled from Kato's nose. It showed them she could be hurt.

Kato took account of the thirty or so people at the scene and seemed to lose some of her composure. "Stay where you are."

A young man ignored the warning, wrestling free of a companion who tried holding him back. He charged forward with a length of lead pipe in hand and swung at the genetical. It never landed. Kato sidestepped the attack and twisted his arm so hard he dropped the pipe. She was about to break his hand, but another pavement brick hit her on the back of the head.

A ferocious grin crept over Gustav's face, putting on display two rows of blood-covered teeth. He ignored the pain shooting up his spine and

rushed to join the fray along with many others who broke from the crowd. Shouts of protests echoed somewhere in the distance, but he paid them no mind.

Kato was a blur. She kicked the legs out from under a middle-aged woman who came at her with a paralyzer, grabbed the weapon, and shoved it into the neck of another attacker, slipping through the circle of assailants. She grabbed a different woman from behind and with a flex of her muscles snapped the poor thing's neck.

The crowd became as one, proving Berlin could rise up against the Protectorate. Gustav took the lead. Others would follow.

He tried to tackle Kato, but she slipped his grip and used his momentum to send him sprawling. A man pulled out a knife, but before he could use it, Kato snatched it from him, and slashed his throat open. Blood splattered his companions. Their eyes widened in panic, but it was too late. Kato moved efficiently and without mercy. Before Gustav could intervene, everyone who had come to his aid lay on the ground dead or mortally wounded.

Just like that, the fight came to an end.

Kato closed in on him. "Who are you? All my suspicions about Friedrich are confirmed by now, but you—you I didn't expect. Are you one of the good doctor's pets?" Her tone turned cold and businesslike. Gustav knew she was fishing not for information but for his reactions. "No, that can't be right. You're used to leadership, and know how to fight, and I'm sure as hell you wouldn't be able to parade around Berlin in an exoskeleton. So you must be from outside. But where?"

Behind her stood a waist-high spiked iron fence marking the edge of the park.

"What do you mean about Friedrich?" Gustav asked.

The oldest trick in the book. The moment she opened her mouth to answer, he charged, pushing her towards the fence. He thought he had her. Until he didn't. With one quick twist of her torso, she managed to end up on top of him, and he was the one falling on the rusty old spikes. He felt the metal penetrate his abdomen, spreading cold as it entered. "Fu—!" the curse didn't fully leave him before Kato pulled him off the fence and propped him against the metal bars. She aimed a finger at him.

"Stay down, or I swear I'll break every single bone in your body. I will have my answers."

Gustav's belly had turned into a cramped knot, leaving him with few other options than to obey. His eyes searched for Father, who was some fifteen meters away, crawling on all fours.

"Ah, yes," Kato said. She returned a moment later dragging Father by the scruff of his neck like a disobedient dog. She dropped him next to Gustav. "You two *will* talk."

Father lifted his hand in universal sign of surrender. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "It was bound to happen. You got me."

Gustav gave him a shocked look. "Father?"

Kato's eyes went wide. "Oh, this is too good to be true. Father and son? You just made it a whole lot easier. I'll take you to the station, and you will both give me every name and address, every little plot you know about, every single—"

Father closed his eyes and shook his head. "Can't let that happen."

"No? I will find ways of making you talk that you can't begin to imagine."

Father froze, staring her down. "Violence should never be our first choice." He gave the slightest of nods.

"What do I care about—"

Thunder struck in the distance. As Kato turned toward the source of the noise, a streak of lightning passed through her high cheekbone and exited on the other side, ripping open a boiling hole the size of a billiard ball. She fell forward, a cartoon of an angry expression painted on her face.

"Huh," Gustav said simply, then squinted in pain and looked down. Blood trickled from between his fingers held over the wound. "Crap."

Father stood up leaning on the spiked fence. "Stay down and breathe even if it hurts. I need to check on the others."

That's one way of avoiding an awkward conversation. But Gustav wouldn't give up easily. He had to know.

"She was after you, wasn't she?" he called to Father, currently going from one body to another, kneeling by each to check for the pulse. He didn't respond until he checked every last one of them and wiped his hands on his trousers. "Dead. All of them dead."

If it weren't for his wounds, Gustav would've shaken the old man by the shoulders if only to get him talking.

"I asked a question."

Father straightened up but refused to look his way.

A tightness formed in Gustav's throat. "You spoke of peace, but you're as much a killer as I am, aren't you? You're running the Berlin Resistance."

Still, Father said nothing.

"Talk, goddamnit!"

"No. You don't understand. I owe you nothing, boy. Look at what you've done. Chaos and destruction follow in your stead. I meant what I said earlier. I don't want anything to do with you or your terrorists."

"We're fighting the same fight for Christ's sake." Gustav hissed and grit his teeth as something clenched his stomach into an even tighter knot.

"Maybe," Father said. "Time will tell. Now stay put."

An old-fashioned engine roared down the street, its pair of headlights

casting the scene in sharp contours. A fish delivery truck came to a halt in the middle of the road. A red-haired woman got out of the back, two men following.

"What a mess, Herr Doktor," she said. "What happened?"

"My fool of a son thought—" Father dismissed it with a wave of a hand. "Never mind. They're all dead. You two, take the genetical, I think she has one of the new combat augs." He indicated Gustav with his chin. "Miranda, can you patch him up?"

The woman knelt next to Gustav and pressed a device to the injury. Soon a chill spread through his bowels, radiating from the three points where the spikes pierced flesh. He stifled a groan.

"He still needs proper stitching of the skin, but I plugged the wound. The gel should hold him together for a couple of hours. Are we taking him with us?"

"No."

"What?" Gustav couldn't believe his ears. He came all the way from Prague to make contact with the Berlin Resistance. It turned out it's ran by none other than his own father, and now this selfish snob would keep him away? How dared he.

"I said, no. Disappear. I know you can. And never return to Berlin."

A dozen images flashed before Gustav's eyes, all involving methods of beating the sense into the old man like he'd done to Gustav when they were still a proper family. He wanted to strike. He didn't. Instead, he looked away feeling a sense of embarrassment overcome him. "We could do so much together."

"Son, violence is a tool, not an answer. You're not the freedom fighter you make out yourself to be, only a blood-crazed terrorist."

"Herr Doktor?" someone called from the back of the truck. "We have to go."

Again, only the slightest of nods, and then the back of the fish delivery truck slammed shut. It truck drove away, leaving Gustav alone in the pool of light cast by a street lamp.

Father had gone, and Gustav wasn't sure anymore if the whole situation hasn't been some drug-induced hallucination. He glanced at his blood-stained stomach where the gel held his wounds together like a dense spiderweb. It must've dulled the pain, too, since where there used to be a knot, now he only felt a vague chill.

Gustav was left alone among the dead. Each one lay with their faces up, staring blankly into the distance in various stages of disbelief. The contours of their appearance rippled. Gustav blinked. Each of the bodies became Karlie Hass. Helpless. Unmoving. Dead on the ground, exactly as she'd lain after the blow to the skull. Gustav couldn't believe it, but then,

neither could he all those years ago. For days on end, the nineteen-year-old him hoped he'd wake up, his mother's death just another bad dream.

He never woke from that particular nightmare, but lived through it, twisting it further and further every day, until the nightmare twisted him back. Not into a freedom fighter, not even into a man avenging the injustice done to his family, but into a terrorist. A wreck of a man feeding on violence.

Dead faces of his mother turned towards him with judgment in their eyes. He shook his head. The bodies became their former selves again.

Though it proved hard to tell the real from the imagined, Gustav recognized the wail of a Protectorate Police Force siren and decided to act as if it were real. He directed his steps to the shadows of the park and off the beaten path, letting the oily darkness swallow him whole.

CONTROL VIPECTUS

JOHN PEDERSEN

"I JUST DON'T really think there is an afterlife. We're like, electricity in our brains, chemistry, something." He's squinting at me from the old converted train station we find ourselves in tonight, a bent cigarette clamped tightly in between his froglike lips. He talks around it. "When you die, all that stuff stops, and that's it."

"I don't know, man, maybe. I think God is like, math, y'know?" I look away from him while he twists the top off his second 40, the same thing he drinks with me in this same spot, every night. I bang my skateboard wheels on the concrete bench I'm sitting on. "There's like this order behind everything, everything just works, y'know? And it doesn't have to be a person, or anything, y'know, *concerned* with your day-to-day, but I think it's at least an intelligence."

He holds his cigarette in one hand while he downs malt liquor with the other. He really chugs that shit, and he's starting to look fish-eyed by the time he puts the bottle down. "Whatever, man. I got enough of that shit in my mom's church. You ready to go?"

The streets are empty in our tiny little town. One arched doorway of the old train station opens up into one of the main downtown drags, and it's our favorite street. It has a slight decline, and you can really pick up speed about halfway down it. The night air is cold, blowing on my face. His posture on his board, rocketing into the dark in front of me, makes him look really cool. Kinda slouched, leaning back, lazily holding his cigarette at his side, the cherry tracing an orange line in the darkness.

⁂

"You're not contesting any of the custody rights?" He'd said to me. "That's going to change how this plays out."

"No," I'd said back. There was more to be said, but I didn't.

"Her infidelity gives you a clear cut case for at least partial custody," he'd said, folding his hands in front of him and looking at me gravely. It

was late evening in his office, and he'd had a yellow light on, deepening the dark oaks and leathers filling it. A haze hung throughout the office. He'd had gray hair at the temples, and crow's feet. I did too.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

"I just don't really think there's an afterlife. We're like, electricity in our brains, chemistry, something." He has the tendency to repeat himself, a lot. The same jokes, too. Over and over. I'd gone to a party at his house and convinced him to leave early, and now we're sitting at the old train station, drinking our 40s and smoking cigarettes.

"Maybe. There's some order to the universe, so maybe there's an intelligence guiding us. I don't know."

"I got enough of that shit in my mom's church when I was a kid, man. No thanks." He chugs the rest of his malt liquor, and stuffs the crushed cigarette back in his mouth. "Ready?" He stands up.

I gulp the rest of mine down, and we speed off down our hill in the night. It's cold, and it makes me feel alive.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

"Well, you're right. The prenup you agreed on doesn't give her anything from your savings. I think the court is still going to award her child support, but that's really just kind of standard on these cases." We'd stood in the hallway outside the courtroom. I'd turned my back on her when she came out from behind that heavy oak door in a smart blue pantsuit. She had been holding our youngest on her hip, both of them just toe-headed blonde, and our older one, the boy, named after him, struggled to keep up with her as her heels clack-clacked away. At some point he'd turned and seen me, and he shrieked his head off, trying to get her to stop and come back to me.

He'd looked at me then, waiting, while I watched her hurry them down the hall. When they rounded some corner and disappeared, I'd returned my attention to him.

"Can I ask you a question?" he'd asked. "Personally, and don't take offense to this, but you don't make much money. There's hardly anything in your savings." He'd looked mortified, having turned a pale shade of white. "I didn't mean to imply . . . "

"It's fine," I'd said back. "I've never made much, never needed much, but I don't think it's fair that she takes me to the cleaners when this whole thing is her fault."

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

We guzzle down another set of 40s and take off into the night again. I'm watching him curve back and forth in front of me between both lanes of traffic, feeling the cool wind in my hair. We speed by a couple of late-night restaurants, still open, soft light spilling out into our path. I'm thinking about my time in the religious college, scoffing at all of the nonsense they

tried to fill my brain with. He turns around and flashes that grin at me, and crouches down to pick up speed, zipping off towards the post office and old Baptist church.

⁜⁜⁜

I'd been startled awake on the couch, lights still on, an old episode of *Twilight Zone* still streaming on the TV. The baby woke up when I jerked. She started to cry, so I'd shifted and sat up from the couch, holding her and looking behind me towards the door.

My wife had been standing there, in a blue dress, holding her shoes in her hands, hair a mess. When she'd made eye contact, her lip quivered, and she'd started quietly crying. She'd put her head down and made a hard right turn towards the bedroom, slamming the door.

I'd turned back around, the grainy black-and-white footage a welcome distraction while I bumped the baby up and down.

⁜⁜⁜

"I just don't really think there is an afterlife. We're like, electricity in our brains, chemistry, something." He's squinting at me from the old converted train station we find ourselves in tonight, the train station we find ourselves in every night, a bent cigarette clamped tightly in between his lips.

"Yeah," I agree. "Maybe. Listen, you finish that game yet?" I've already beaten the game what feels like ages ago and I'm curious to see what his thoughts are on it.

"I climbed that stupid long ladder," he says, pausing to take a couple big gulps off the bottle. "That's as far as I got though." I know this because if he'd gotten any further, he wouldn't have shut up about it, telling me his thoughts over and over.

I bang my skateboard wheels on the concrete bench. "Just hurry up and finish it," I say. I want to know what you think about it."

"You ready?" He grins at me.

⁜⁜⁜

"You've been sleeping on that fucking couch every night for the past two months!" She'd been screaming at me. The baby had been crying, the boy had been crying, and she had been crying. I'd just sat there, comfortably numb. She'd kicked at the pile of laundry I'd left next to it, work clothes and pajamas in one disorganized lump. Dirty dishes had covered the coffee table, some red sauce stained the remote control. "What's wrong with you?" It had been more accusation than question.

"I don't know," I'd feigned. "I just feel disconnected from all of this."

"All of this?" She'd thrown her hand dramatically at her side, encompassing the entire house. "Our life is that bad?"

"Maybe," I'd said. "I don't know." I'd grabbed the warm 40 from where it sat on the table and took a draw off it.

"Oh, that's great. That's real good," she'd said. "Perfect." She'd stormed out of the room after that. "Sleep out there for as long as you want!" She slammed the door again, after that. I'd heard her trying to comfort the baby in the bedroom, shushing it. She'd always been a terrific mother.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

"You're still holding on to that?" He says to me, mirth in his eyes. "I got enough of that shit in my mom's church, in the Sunday school she forced me to go to." He takes a drag off his cigarette and exhales in front of his face, waving it away with his other hand.

"I'm not saying that it's like a personal God, or anything." We're having this conversation again, but I think we both love the philosophizing and not-quite-agreeing. We challenge each other. The concrete bench is cold on my butt through my jeans, and I'm appreciating the coolness of the night.

"You think God's up there, and all the shit he'd have to worry about, and he's concerned with how often you touch yourself?"

"I don't believe in any of that at all anymore, and if it were true, He'd have a lot bigger things to worry about than masturbation, like, I don't know, wars and stuff."

"That's good," he says. "That's better than what you used to think. You ready?" He drops his skateboard to the ground and catches the back with his sneaker.

"All I'm saying is, there might be something out there, some kind of afterlife you've never considered."

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

"It's just a work party," she'd said. I hadn't responded, moving the thumbsticks back and forth, the man jumping around on the TV in front of me. "I won't be late."

My character had ducked behind a rock and pulled out a rifle.

"It's just a few of us," she'd said, and I'd heard her buckling her heels behind me, little clasps sounding like tiny bells, holding on to the kitchen counter for support. "Hello?" She'd finally asked.

"Just a party, yeah," I'd said. Another group of bad guys had spawned on the map and I turned my focus to them.

"You sure you won't come with me?" She'd asked futilely. She'd known better. We hadn't gotten a babysitter anyway. "Okay," she'd sighed.

I'd paused the game and twisted around on the couch, already in my pajamas. "What's wrong with you?" I'd asked.

Standing there in her blue dress, she'd hesitated, eyes pleading. "Nothing," she'd said finally, softly.

"You going to be up when I get home?" She'd asked.

"Maybe. I might try to stay up till midnight."

"I'll see you then." She'd taken a half-step towards the couch, hesitated, and spun around to gather her coat and purse.

"Have fun at your party," I'd said.

⁜⁜⁜

It's freeing to ride my board down this hill, feeling the air fill my lungs, burning them with cold. The road is bumpy under my gel wheels, but they eat it up, protecting me from all the minor shocks and bumps along the way. I crouch low this time, flying by his swaggery stance. He raises his cigarette in acknowledgement, waving me on. A laugh escapes my lips as I blast forward into the night, forward through the empty stoplights and intersections.

⁜⁜⁜

"I'm happy to help you, sir, you just have to understand my confusion regarding this matter."

"I don't see what the issue is." I'd wrung the brochure in my hands to an inch of its life, cardstock crumpled beyond recognition.

"We're used to people who want something a bit more *ambitious* in scope." He'd had on stylish black frames that first time we'd met, which would be replaced with something more clinical and cold the next.

"But it says here," I'd attempted to unfurl the twisted mess in my hands in front of him, "you have plans available for a wide range of budgets."

He'd folded his hands in front of him and drew in a breath. His office had been white, sanitary like a doctor's office, and his desk had been free of clutter and legal documents. "We're used to clients of a certain—" he'd paused, searching for the most genteel term he could use. "Clients of a certain *means*," he'd settled on. "You understand."

"But I have the minimum here," I'd protested, offering a check in front of me, stretched out for him to investigate if he'd so desired.

"I understand that. I can see that it covers our basic requirements." He'd taken off his glasses and pinched the top of his nose, closing his eyes. "Most of our clients come here with expectations beyond the bare minimum." He'd opened his eyes again, staring hard at me. "The costs for your care are not insignificant—"

"Which this should cover just fine." I'd begun to sound indignant, more emotion in my voice than I'd heard in a long time. At least since his funeral.

"It does." He had been very patient with me, not condescending. "Here's what I'm trying to say. This covers far less than our traditional package. After covering the costs of your physical care, you will have very little left to spend on the budget of your experience. You have just enough here to cover the costs of storing and caring for your physical body, but only enough extra to cover one full day of the simulation."

"I only need the one day. It says very clearly here—"

"I know what it says." He'd closed his eyes again. "For repeat experiences, there's no additional cost."

"So do I get it or not?"

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

"You did this!" The kitchen had been a mess, half a pot of macaroni and cheese flung into the wall. The baby had been screaming. Her too.

"I didn't do anything. *You* did this."

"You haven't touched me, haven't told me that you loved me," she'd been ranting, struggling to make sense of the jumble of feelings she had to have been experiencing. "It didn't mean anything."

"It did mean something." She had a good job, and our kids would be taken care of.

"And that's it? You're going to throw away *years* of marriage, a family, because I fucked up once?"

"It isn't the life I want to live anymore."

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

"I just don't really think there is an afterlife. We're like, electricity in our brains, chemistry, something." He's squinting at me from the old converted train station we find ourselves in tonight, I find myself in every night, a bent cigarette clamped tightly in between his froglike lips. His hair is the right color red. The right color. They've done a good job recreating him. Paid attention to all the little details.

He talks around the cigarette. "When you die, all that stuff stops, and that's it."

"I don't know, man, maybe. I don't think god has to be a person, or anything concerned with your day-to-day, but I think there's at least an intelligence." I look away from him while he twists the top off his second 40, the same thing he drinks with me in this same spot, every single night. I bang my skateboard wheels on the concrete bench I'm sitting on, cold and hard underneath me. "All I'm saying is, there might be something out there, some kind of afterlife you've never considered."

He holds his cigarette in one hand while he downs the malt liquor with the other. He really chugs that shit, and he's starting to look fish-eyed by the time he puts the bottle down. "Whatever, man. I got enough of that shit in my mom's church. You ready?"

I gulp the rest of mine down, and we speed off down our hill, in the night. It's cold, and I feel alive.

THE CHILDREN'S CRUSADE

T. FOX DUNHAM

THE COURTS SENTENCED Gab to death, as nature had sentenced them all. He thanked the body for it. Now, the corrupted and mutilated old men demanded to know why, but they passed judgment in futility; thus, Doctor Gabriel Bear need not worry about his fate. In a day, the deadline would pass, and both countries would annihilate each other. Eden lost. The Senate presided over a fantasy, a dream the old clung to, defying nature in their refusal to die. By holding on, his generation was about to destroy the world. In this, they had failed their young as Gab had failed his daughter.

Senator Richmond gripped the gravel in his cybernetic limb, curling his plastic digits around the oak handle then banged against the pedestal until the jeering and threats launched from the gallery finally silenced. His mummified face, built again and again with plastic and synthetic skin, looked more like the broken visage of a doll, nauseating Gab. The old didn't defeat death. They mocked life.

"I will clear the floor if a measure of decorum isn't maintained," the decayed decrypted homunculus ordered, wheezing into his tubes. "Doctor Gabriel Bear. Please come forth and be sworn?"

Gab sat down at the table in front of the committee and organized his notes on the touch screen surface. Members of the nascent choir watched among the audience of the v1 generation, standing like sentries in the aisles of the Senate chamber, but they didn't need to be here in body. They'd come only to remind the v1 generation, his people, the failed custodians of the planet. Was she here? Somehow, Gab knew she'd be here, standing with him, but he could no longer tell. The observers appeared uniform: bald heads, silvery skin, thin in limb with vacant eyes that had become vestigial. Which one was her? Their bodies and minds had changed to meet coeval criteria, but somewhere, buried in the well of souls, his Anya watched. He knew she was watching . . . Anya, but no longer Anya.

"Do you so swear, Doctor Bear?" Senator Richmond asked, hardly audible above the wheezing and groan of the life support systems built into the committee members. He no longer used his mouth to enunciate, speaking through the synthesizer built into the breathing port in his neck. Not one member of the old guard was under eighty.

"I swear," Gab said and sat down alone.

"For the record, could you please state your full name and position?"

"Doctor Gabriel Bear. Up until a week ago, I was chief administrator of the Jefferson Center for Medical Research in Washington DC."

"And you reported directly to Richard Snyder, Secretary for Health and Social Media? Now deceased."

"Those who refuse to adapt to evolution will die with the old status quo," Gab said. He no longer felt the need to hide his contempt, especially to a body of lawmakers who suffered collective denial.

"Spare us the blasphemy, Doctor Bear. Remember that in a time of war, treason is punishable by death." They'd never understand, still going about their perfunctory games like a child at play. "And what did you do at your federally funded facility?"

"I supervised research mostly dealing with the application of implant technology. Also, I advised on unusual cases that that resulted from the union of technology and human biology. This is a service that became essential to the public good."

"You don't need to remind us," Senator Richmond said, brushing away the cobwebs from his temple and exposing the tiny blue light shining from beneath the thin layer of stretched skin. The version one implant defined his generation, opening their minds to direct and quick access to information, control and communication, but such power inflicted dependence, addiction and arrogance. "Now before you enlighten us with your story, could you please help us to understand something? Where in your responsibilities does it say you have the authority to decide whether our civilization, our way very of life, should survive?"

"We all made that choice a long time ago."

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Only three weeks before, his generation sat on its throne, ignorant to the drastic changes coming. Then, his work had been his life—serving important masters—while ignoring the people who really needed him. He'd gotten home late that night but still arrived before Anya. Gab needed a little downtime before initiating the next great battle, so he heated up some Chinese food, grabbed a beer, then crashed on the couch.

"House. Monitor on."

He concentrated and changed the channel—a trick that took him years to learn as a v1.A broken and mutilated city transformed the living room

in his Arlington apartment into a biblical scene of God's wrath. Fires still burned New Delhi, pouring oily smoke into the overcast sky. Charred bodies littered the streets. And Chinese soldiers wearing biohazard suits herded bloody people into makeshift camps.

A talking head manifested:

"The United States, leading a coalition of European nations, is firm in their demands that the PLA withdraw by the end of the thirty-day deadline or, it has stated, it will use all and any means to restore the balance of power on the sub-continent. China has refused, declaring the recent nuclear exchange between Pakistan and India as a humanitarian disaster and threat to its national security. Peacekeeping forces from several NATO countries are ready—"

He muted the projector—just not capable of handling it, not after a day of tedious grant meetings and applications. *Damn*. He never finished that memo to the secretary.

"House. Continue e-mail to Conrad Snyder," he said, summoning a document out of the dreams of devastation. "I continue to seek private funding to cover recent budget cuts in research and human safety with little success. "I can't stress enough the dangers of sole funding from Innovative Human Solutions, even under the guise of philanthropy. They haven't researched the potential dangers in implant design. The newborns implanted with V2 nearly 20 years ago are beginning to show signs of erratic behavior, emotional disturbances, even hallucinations and delusions. These have been written off as 'outliers' and 'anomalies' and 'normal parts of puberty,' but I fear this is creating dependence. As a society, we downplay the effects of dependence to market and sell a good product only to suffer side effects later: chemical dependence, cancer even mental illness. As new generations are born and their brains grow accustomed to this technology, when will human biology incorporate it? We are redefining what it is to be human, and no one has asked whether this is something we want to become."

The door chime sounded, alerting him to Anya's homecoming. Gab sighed, knowing he couldn't send that message as it was. He could only handle one battle at a time. "House. Delete email." He'd commit career suicide on a less stressful day.

Anya slipped behind the projection, hiding behind the nuclear devastation. Her long green coat and shredded scarf failed to conceal the short black skirt and ripped black stockings—way too short and showing for sixteen.

"Did you actually have some substantial nourishment and not just lattes and spike pills?" he asked. She turned her head, and a new necklace dangled across her shoulder: the headless body of a plump silver woman bearing large hips. She must have gotten it at the museum.

"Some tofu." She didn't stop to chat, aiming for her room.

"Jenetta shared an Uber with you from Union Station?"

"Yeah. I covered it. It was easier than trying to split. Her I-Pay's slashed. She synced with fuzzy link in Central Park at the—"

He sighed, set his implant to headache mode then projected a Faceworld post from Jenetta's wall—large as life, accusing his daughter:

Sitting at Starbucks today trying to cram for Biology. Wish I was with you in NYC.

"I called the hotel," he said."You checked in with some guy. He had to be over 18 to book the room."

"They wouldn't tell you that."

"It was on my account. I paid for the room as a birthday present."

She stopped, dropped her coat on the floor then adjusted the necklace. He couldn't see her face through the apocalyptic images that foreshadowed their future. "You think I care if you know? We'll all be dead in a month."

"What if something happened to you? Your mother would never forgive me if—"

"Go ahead. Bring up mom. I think she'd be pretty disappointed in us both."

He tried to mentally command the projector to deactivate but couldn't summon the focus. He reached for his eIsland to do it manually, and Anya nodded, turning it off for him with no effort. The crimson light of her v2 implant pierced the darkness in his apartment.

"For the next month, I'm reviewing your feed."He expected her to scream, to mutilate him with threats and vitriol for the complete violation of her privacy. He hated doing it but felt like he didn't have any choice.

"Why do you even bother?" she asked.

Gab hadn't realized she'd become so depressed, but it made perfect sense. She watched her world ending and felt helpless to stop it. She may have failed him, but Gab had failed her too, failed all of them. Anya stormed off, slammed her door and locked it.

In response, he opened his family parental settings and set her feed to download onto his private cloud. A privacy warning appeared, but he waved it off. Gab knew he'd never check it, but he pursued some childish need to hurt her back. What had happened to her? Why did she hate him so much? If only his wife was here to talk him down. Susan wouldn't have done it. Had nothing of her spirit come into him or Anya? "House. Show Maine vacation. 2034."

Update required.

Odd. I.H.S. hadn't notified his department of a patch. Any changes involving direct neurological interaction or the nanite web had to be approved, unless they sought direct intervention to fix a potential error.

He planned to contact I.H.S. in the morning about the breach in protocol. They had a criminal habit of not being forthcoming with information, though Gab couldn't fight them. They defined the modern world. So, he acquiesced to the update then summoned his stored memories.

Their cabin on Highland Lake materialized. Susan wore a one-piece bathing suit and a flowery cover. Her golden curls tumbled down her shoulder, and she tied them back, exposing the curve of her chest through the tight fabric. "Getting ready to water ski for the first time since I was a kid," she announced. His wife looked so real, vibrant and ripe like a fresh pear, and he reached out to touch her but stopped just at her freckled face. Anya got those freckles in the sun.

"I'm failing her," he prayed to the digital dead. "She gets into fights. She's been arrested twice for stealing art books. What is going to happen to her?"

"Delete this," Susan said. "I don't want future generations to know that I'll probably smack my ass on the lake." She walked away, heading outside and down to the dock. He'd only noticed the limp after. She hid the pain in her leg, ignored it, too hungry for life to let it slow her down. In a few minutes, she'd break her leg while out on the lake, revealing that cancer had eaten away part of the bone. For all their technology, he couldn't stop the disease. Nature always won.

Gab turned off the last image he had of his wife and shut his eyes. He'd just fallen into oblivion when a noise shocked him awake. Anya's scream through the walls—a long continuous wail sans pause for breath. Pain stabbed his forehead, and Gab stumbled from vertigo, reaching for her bedroom. He got to her door but found it locked.

"Anya?" he yelled. She continued her cry.

"House. Parental override on house locks," he ordered the system. The lock clicked and room light switched on. Gab found Anya sitting up in her bed wearing a flannel and clutching her new necklace in a fist. He grabbed her shoulders.

"Please stop it. Stop it!" he yelled.

She silenced.

Her eyes twitched. Human expression evacuated her face.

"Was it a night terror?"

"Ravens crying in my skull," she said, not looking at him. "Many ravens. They ride her back."

He noted tachypnea. "House. Show me Anya Bear's vitals." A phantom screen materialized next to her. "What did you take?" he asked, enduring nausea. Gab struggled to focus through the headache.

"Ravens are singing. Drowning out my solo."

"Lay down," he said, trying to ease her back down into bed, but her petrified muscles wouldn't bend

"House. Emergency code. This is Doctor Gabriel Bear. My current location." The floating window flashed red. EMTs from his facility had been dispatched. Her vitals screen warned him of irregular neurological activity and expanded her current E.E.G. Anya seized under his grip, nearly knocking him back.

"Hold on honey. They're coming." He held her until it stopped.

"Behold the Morrighan—mother of crows and ravens," chanted Anya, singing eerie nursery rhyme.

"I won't be mad. Just tell me what you took so I can treat it with a countering agent. Was it x-LSD?" She spewed yellow bile down his shirt.

"Do you hear the conspiracy?" Anya pursed her lips, ready to blow a kiss then blew tendrils of ebony vapor from her mouth, surprising Gab. Had she been smoking something? He got up and searched through the shelf by her bed, dumping old books on Celtic mythology and new age philosophy but couldn't find any drugs. She continued to blow vapor, and the smoke lingered about her then coalesced into a small body bearing wings, feathers, a beak.

"House. Deactivate all projectors," he ordered. The screen vanished, but the raven still flew. It hovered towards him, flapping its wings, piercing through him with eyes that accused. He stared at the dark dream, wondering if they'd both been poisoned. A door alert chimed, announcing the arrival of the EMTs from his hospital.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

They brought her to his facility, and he labored through his alchemy, scanning every cell in her body, reading the electrical activity of her brain, running diagnostics on her v2 implant. I.H.S. claimed to understand precisely how the second-generation technology worked. The implant had to be installed at birth for the brain to adapt to the enhanced communication the new technology offered. Susan had been against it, but Gab had called her primitive. Anya had to get installed just after birth for her brain to grow into the technology. Those who didn't, the 'null' kids, didn't have the same quality of life and opportunities that the v2s did.

Gab sat at the station in the adjoining observation bay. A transparent wall divided the bay, allowing a clear view of the patient and showing data from a day of tests and her current vitals. She'd remained in a fugue state since they'd brought her to his hospital and admitted her to one of the isolation rooms for special patients. Gab usually oversaw the research and treatment conducted here, but in this case he insisted on taking care of her. After reviewing the recent set of labs—noting an electrolyte imbalance—he touched the wall and opened a portal into her room. Gas hissed as the atmosphere between both rooms equalized. A nurse had

changed her into a gown, and she lay still, staring off at a scene no one else could see.

"Anya, can you hear me?" he said.

She answered in a language he didn't understand, and the wall translated it as Cantonese. Anya must have been taking it as an elective. He set his implant to treat his headache with electrical stimulation then leaned over Anya's bed, dabbing her head with a cool cloth. A halo built into the bed monitored her physical functions and read bio signals sent by her implant. The room felt off, sterile, probably making her uncomfortable, so he accessed the hologram function of the walls then set it to the Met channel. Various paintings from myriad eras materialized all around them.

"Please, give me the chance to make this better," he said, drying her forehead. He'd been so occupied treating her, he hadn't considered his own symptoms, namely the hallucination he suffered—probably from lack of sleep and stress.

A door cut through the holographic art, and his colleague came into the room.

"Starry Night," Doctor Brahma said. The little man strolled in carrying a digital chart. "Today, Van Gogh would probably be on medication or direct implant intervention for mental illness. He suffered so, but the wonders he created!" Brahma was supposed to be on leave, going home to India to look for his family; however, he hadn't left Gab's side. "We had a case like this in Mumbai when I was an intern. The IMF had just given awarded us with a development credit to finance the first generation of implants, and we watched our population for side effects. At the time, we traced the issue to a possible malfunction in the neural bridge. The patient showed signs of encephalitis."

"Her fever has held at 38 Celsius. Her white count is in normal range. What happened to your case?"

"He died soon after and his family refused an autopsy. We never understood it, and I heard rumors of other cases in the poorer areas. No one wanted to blame the technology, though. My country didn't want to be fall behind the rest of the world, and we rushed the new stage in our evolution, mesmerized by its pleasures."

Gab grabbed another bag of saline from a cart and attached it to her line. "Who would want to be delegated a second-class citizen?"

"For a species obsessed with communication, we've stopped listening," Brahma said. "Funny thing about that case: the patient's family complained of hallucinations." He let the statement hang in the air between them.

"I was sleep deprived," Gab said. "A black bird. It . . . looked at me."

Brahma typed on the wall, and Gab recognized his personal medical

profile appear. “Your EEG is also showing some irregularities, though nothing as extreme as Anya’s.” He pointed out the extra sine waves coded in different colors on Anya’s profile. “At first, it didn’t show up, but the anomalies have amplified over time.”

“Interference from the v2?”

“It appears to be three separate readings,” he said, “on the same EEG. A mystery. I would almost be gleeful if this were not my adopted niece.” Gab appreciated his friend’s light heart. It gifted him hope. An alert page flashed across the screen for them both. Brahma acknowledged. “Three similar cases have just been brought in from the Arlington area. Strange. All under the age of 18. Gab got up, ready to coordinate their response. “My friend,” Brahma said. “Stay with her.” He closed his display then exited.

Gab relaxed into a chair by the bed and reviewed his messages, listening to the news in the background. Breaking news reported a Chinese airstrike violating the sovereignty of Korea and Vietnam. The PLA claimed that military action was necessary for the security of the world.

Anya suddenly stirred, turned her head to look at him then spoke. “Six vultures hunt the hatchlings in their nest.”

“Anya? Can you hear me?”

“You have been warned,” she said.

“What do you mean?” She fell back into her trance, and Gab reviewed her readings, studying the EEG. For a brief duration, the extra waves had merged into a single trace then resumed their previous pattern. He ran a diagnostic against the pattern and discovered corresponding changes in the neural bridge of her implant. The system needed time to process a more detailed diagnostic, so he let it run. Gab adjusted her pillow, trying to make her more comfortable. Clumps of pink hair fell from her scalp, leaving several bald spots. He picked up a clump and studied it, perplexed by the sudden alopecia. He ran through the symptoms but couldn’t find a common theme.

A voice called to him over the intercom.

“Doctor Bear. Can I have a word?” He recognized the southern drawl of his boss and took a deep breath, composing his demeanor. Gab didn’t trust the secretary’s motives and had kept him out of the loop for as long as possible.

“I didn’t know you were coming, Mr. Secretary,” he said and got up to join him face to face. He fixed his lab coat and walked towards the exit when a stray image on the wall gave him pause. A conspiracy of ravens materialized in an empty frame then animated, flying towards him. Icicles grew in his chest, and a noise behind him drew his attention back to his daughter. He turned around to see Anya’s head fall off her neck. He briefly

squawked but stifled it, trying not to show surprise. This could have been another hallucination. Then, testing his composure, her torso inflated, ripping through the hospital gown. Her arms fell away, leaving bony stumps. The dark vision reminded him of the necklace she wore the other day: The Goddess statue.

Gab's heart raced, and he nearly passed out, getting to the observation room.

"Doctor Bear." Secretary Snyder said. "You look a bit peculiar. Perhaps you should take some time off."

The decapitated woman climbed out of bed, yanking the IV pole to the ground. It staggered towards him, standing on fat thighs that struggled to stay upright. The conspiracy cried and sang in unison, bursting from the surface and flapping in a cloud around the divine figure. Gab turned around and left the room, sealing the portal behind him. Once there, he tried to ignore the decapitated goddess.

"Sorry Mr. Secretary. I've not slept much."

"None of us have. We're technically in a state of war with a powerful tyrant that holds a large nuclear arsenal." Snyder dressed for cabinet meetings and business on the hill, wearing a black blazer and red satin bowtie, looking more like a twisted game show host. Pale patches of glassy flesh filled in facial gaps, barely covering the wounds from his most recent surgery to cut embedded melanoma from his body. A decade before, nothing would have saved him from the cancer, and now with the help of his electronic heart and early warning from his implant, Snyder would fester in power for the next fifty years, allowing no changes in viewpoint, no new ideas. The man would rot while he still lived. "Horrible thing when your issue is sick, especially when there's not much you can do," he said and popped a mint between his sliver lips. It did little to perfume the stink of the rotting fish in his mouth.

Gab turned around to check on his daughter. The headless statue stood in the middle of the room, not moving, just waiting.

"Hard to understand this pandemic," Snyder said.

"There are cases outside this country?"

"Our sources say that several Indian and Chinese nationals showed symptoms a few months ago. Peacekeeping may have just been the PLA's excuse. This 'condition' may have even caused the war, or at least been the final straw."

Gab wondered how long the government had known about this. If they knew then I.H.S. knew and kept it quiet.

"Something's spooked the Chinese bad enough to risk Armageddon." It didn't surprise Gab that he had known about the disease and kept it a secret. I.H.S. contributed heavily to campaigns, and the implant had

become a public trust in the same way as the airwaves or utilities. A related disease would cause panic—or worse, people might turn off their links.

"Any intelligence on how they treated the cases?"

"Sure," Snyder said. "They killed them." Gab swore he could detect a smile. "We believe Chinese citizens were the first to show this disease, right after their forced upgrade." China had long since forced new experimental software on its people to upgrade their implants, long before the software was fully tested. They recorded everyone's telemetry, using accounting software to give each person a citizen rating. Then they rewarded or subtracted rights and privileges."

"I.H.S. just released an emergency patch," Gab said. "But the implant isn't supposed to be designed for this level of integration, not even the v2."

Synder cupped Gab's shoulder and exhaled, blowing a nasty miasma his way. Gab held his breath. "I'm over ninety years old, doctor, and I've learned that my job isn't about controlling the world. It's about creating the illusion that we have control, otherwise people panic, stop paying their taxes and revolt against their government."

"You seem especially calm in the face of a plague," Gab said. "You're hiding something." He put his job on the line, perhaps even his freedom, but he'd chosen his career too many times over his family. He should have spoken up, shared his concerns about the technology, but he'd failed the people he was supposed to protect, failed Anya.

"Plague or not," Snyder said. "We have to maintain public trust in the technology, especially now. We're at war for Christ's sake."

"I have data that shows a correlation between the implant and her symptoms," Gab said. "We need to release a public health bulletin telling people to deactivate their implants."

Snyder's eyebrow flared up. "You will do no such thing."

"It is our duty to protect the—"

"You're a damn fool, doctor," Snyder snapped. "No implant has ever been deactivated once they were turned on. Each one contributes to our network, and our military and industrial infrastructure depends on this. We have no idea what the consequences would be of such a rash action. If you release any unapproved statements that cause such panic in the time of war, you will be tried for treason and shot." All the color had etiolated out of the ghoul, surprising Gab. He'd never seen him afraid before. Only one thing could have terrified him thus.

"You can't switch them off, can you?"Gab said. "We postulated that our brains might grow dependent on the constant stimulation from the implant but—"

Snyder inhaled, taking a moment to compose himself. "You are relieved, Doctor Bear," Snyder said. "And you are ordered to release all

relevant medical records to the CDC. Prepare your patient for transport in one hour."

"The patient is my daughter," Gab said. He looked back into her room and found the demonic vision had vanished. Anya rested silently in bed. Gab sighed in relief.

"We all must make sacrifices," he said. "One hour." Snyder pressed his thumb to the scanning sensor on the door, and it clicked open. They had already instituted security protocols, and Gab would soon be locked out. His head spun, like he'd been hit with a low-orbit asteroid mover. He sat down and washed his face from his bottled water and tried to keep his breath steady, still feeling lightheaded.

Doctor Brahma had to use a security code to get into the room.

"Did you pass the old homespun fascist in the hall?" Gab asked him.

"Snyder is here?" Brahma said. "Didn't see him. He must have used the executive tunnel."

"I have to get her out of here," Gab said. "They'll amputate her from the system. It'll kill her."

"Not just her," Doctor Brahma said and summoned the EEGs for several patients including Anya's. "These were sent to me in secret. The doctors involved in each case have all been threatened, and these are just the ones we know about."

Gab reviewed the graphs but couldn't see any anomalies. "They all look the same."

"Indeed. Not one variance or change. These cases have happened across the country yet somehow their encephalographic patterns are uniform. And, infectious disease has discovered what could be a pathogen colonizing around their implants. But only in adolescent patients. All v2s."

"A retrovirus?" Gab asked, feeling a mix of terror and fascination. He wondered if it was possible. A retrovirus exchanged DNA for its own. Had a new microbe evolved from the fusion of technology and biology?

"Could be." Brahma shrugged. "An evolutionary response to extinction. Nature is defending herself."

"They're not going to let her live," Gab said. He wondered what Anya was becoming.

"I will program a ghost reading in the halo, but they're watching us. Military teams are coming in from Maryland, and you might be able to get away in the chaos of transition. Go to Maine. Go to Canada. Hopefully, they'll have more important things to deal with. China is blaming us for crashing their fighters. Six jets just dropped out of the sky, pilots dead at the controls. Complete neurological failure. Something shut off their brains."

"Six vultures," Gab said, refusing to believe it.

"And disconnect your feed to Anya," Brahma said, programming the systems to conceal their escape. "I think you're seeing her nightmares. That's why you've been hallucinating—some sort of neurological feedback." Gab did as he instructed, closing the feed to her daughter's implant. Instantly, his headache eased. He took his friend's hand, knowing he'd probably never see him again, then he went to get Anya ready, disconnecting and dressing her. Most of her hair had fallen away, leaving her bald. Her skin felt cold to the touch, and all the color had drained from her flesh. Perhaps they were right. In every plague, family members hid the infected, worsening the epidemic. Did sentiment blind him? Gab pulled a wheelchair brick from the wall and set her up to push her down the executive corridor—the clandestine passage to be used only by high government officials during a national emergency. He turned a corner, and the lights went out, casting them in darkness. Several red beams cut through the black, aimed at his chest. Weapons cocked.

"We must all make sacrifices for our country," Snyder said. The lights flashed back on. Soldiers stood in front of him sealed in biohazard suits, covering him with M-18s. Gab stepped in front of the wheelchair, guarding Anya with his body.

"You're not taking her," Gab said.

"This is no longer your daughter. When the retrovirus finishes, she will lose all trace of her identity. I am sorry, but your daughter is dead. Don't interfere. Let us take care of it from here. Go home, mourn her. Don't be fooled by this husk."

"We . . . are," Anya said, stirring from her trance. Her voice sounded artificial. Perhaps Snyder was right. Some dark entity had eaten Anya and used her body and mind like a wasp to grow something new—a threat. He had pondered if the implants could change what it was to be human, even tried to warn his colleagues, but even he had thought it sounded a bit far-fetched at the time. The change had come so fast, as perhaps violent changes in nature happen when faced with a threat. He thought of his sworn duty, his vow to protect the public. He had no idea what Anya was becoming, and she could influence any implant in anyone. They'd all be vulnerable to her. . . . or perhaps even to them. Their minds joined into some kind of gestalt created by the instant communication facilitated by their v2 implants. He hesitated, ready to let them take her. He couldn't save her. He couldn't save Susan. In the end, all of his power and ability turned out to be hubris. His wife was gone, and anything left of her in Anya had probably been devoured. Gab kneeled down and looked into her eyes, searching for something left of his daughter, of his wife. For the first time in years, he really looked at his daughter, studying Anya's silvery skin, and noticed her red blotchy freckles bleeding through. When had she grown

up? She looked just like Susan. She would have faith in nature. Susan didn't fear death. His wife accepted change, didn't fight it.

There had to be something of his wife still in Anya, and he had to have faith in that.

"I should have known when I saw you earlier," Gab said. "It scared you, and the only thing that scares you is a threat to your power."

"You, sir, have lost your grip on reality," Snyder said, giving him a perplexed look. "This is the first time I've set foot in this building today."

Gab nodded, even smiled. "Of course. It was all part of the vision that was given to me: a warning. King Herod's slaughter of the innocent."

"These things can control implants. They killed those Chinese pilots."

"Because China was trying to wipe them out. No. You're not having her."

"Captain," Snyder said. "Detain the subject and arrest Doctor Bear." The soldiers snapped into action, reacting without thought. Gab stood his ground. They'd have to rip him apart to get to Anya. He wouldn't fail her again. But the soldiers never came. They stopped moving, clutching their heads. They struggled to speak but couldn't speak or moan as if some force crushed their skulls. Anya brushed her father aside and stood out of the wheelchair.

"You have squandered the future of your race and sold our generation for your pleasure," Anya said, but not just Anya. Countless voices sang with hers in choir, setting the overture to a children's crusade. Her eyes glowed silver, spewing a fulgurous light from the orbs. The transformation had completed. Blood pooled on the floor, dripping from the ears and eyes of the soldiers. One had already fallen unconscious. Snyder leaned against the wall, holding his head. Their implants flickered.

"That's enough, Anya," Gab said.

She didn't listen at first—well they.

"Listen. All of you! Anya, I know you're still in there. Now stop this! Don't become them. That's the trap. You need to be better than that."

Anya relaxed, and her eyes renewed their previous shades of brown and green. "As you wish, Daddy," she said, singing as a choir.

"It has to stop somewhere."

Anya took her father's hand and led him down the underground corridor towards the private transit system. Before going, she stopped before Snyder and gazed into his quivering face. "Control is all you know," she said. Then, she turned away and pulled Gab forward into the world, into the future.

Snyder grabbed an M-18 and aimed. Anya turned, and his implant shutoff. The secretary collapsed into a seizure.

⁂

A week later, the children's crusade, this new choir of shared minds and powers somehow plugged into the life force, told us the rules of the house. World economies were to be dismantled. Food systems improved. Money would be disregarded as humans would be guided by humanitarian needs. It was odd that they didn't just exact control. The human race had been conquered—the old brushed away by the young, as it should be. He pondered perhaps that they had learned the lessons of the past, that slavery breeds rebellion. He had to trust in his daughter as the old should all trust in their children one day that this was for their own good and that still possessing of some freewill, they would eventually come to see it, though still resent it. The Senate called an investigation while the president considered options.

"Would you say you're responsible for the events that lead to our current state of affairs?" Senator Richmond asked.

"I share responsibility. We all do. We were supposed to leave this world better for our children. Instead, we sold it out. There is a force deeper than human will and control, a force at the heart of all life. Our children, as all children must, have taken control for our own good."

They had heard enough, and he was sentenced to death for high treason against the United States of America. Gab accepted his part in the theater. He had no desire to be around when the government fought back in futility, probably killing the world in its death throes. FBI agents lead him out of the hall and throw crowds of jeering onlookers. Jets sliced the sky, flying to deliver death onto their children.

A hand touched his head. "Wake," Anya said—at least Anya among the many. Pain shot through his head, and city melted around him. Gab now stood in the Senate chambers. The committee of old and mutilated politicians slumped over in their chairs and whimpered in their sleep like dreaming babies. Anya stood next to him. Her silver eyes glowed.

"The old shall know peace," they sang. "The choir will care for them but not intervene in their death. Their pain shall end."

"Thank you," he said to the new court, to the young who had judged them in kindness and mercy. The Senate presided over a fantasy. The old world slept, never knowing their fall from power or realizing their death. And the natural world would continue. He hadn't failed her. In the end, Gab had been her father.

MR. COMPANION

ALEX ROBERT FRANCO

THE STORE LIGHTING is bright, offensively so. Everyone inside—Marc seems to be the only customer, for which he is grateful—smiles, perhaps to offset the security checkpoint outside. There's been an uptick in protests recently, stores being vandalized, merchandise stolen or damaged. A woman comes up to Marc and introduces herself as Samantha.

"But you can call me Sam," she says, laughing as if she'd told a joke. Her uniform, which is a comforting shade of pink, has the words *Mr. Companion* stitched across her left breast.

"Okie-dokie," says Marc.

Samantha waits for him to tell her his name, which he doesn't. "Great." She blinks. "Let's get started."

They walk towards a huddle of cubicles at the back. Along the walls, body parts—torsos and legs, in every shape and shade—rotate slowly in glass cases. They remind Marc of rotisserie chickens. Screens hanging from the ceiling play the same video on a loop: Men and women running on the beach, or eating in a restaurant, their heads thrown back in laughter. Transition to a silken boudoir, the lighting low, a gentle hand running down from a shoulder. It's the same commercial they play on TV. Marc finds himself mouthing along—*compatibility, passion, absolute fidelity*—but stops when he notices.

Samantha has Marc sit and hands him a tablet with a form to fill in. Preliminaries: background check, credit score, billing information. He does his best not to think of the cost. *It's a gift*, his sister had told him. He'd have preferred the cash.

Next there's a questionnaire, to help narrow down the selection. Height and weight, body type, skin tone, sex. For the face there are examples, glossy photos like out of a magazine. Once he finishes, Marc hands the tablet back.

Without looking through them, Samantha stands, saying, "Follow me,

please." They walk through a door into a room with heads lined up on shelves. Their eyes are closed, so Marc can almost pretend they're sleeping. There's a floor-length mirror. With a couple taps on her tablet, Samantha brings up some mock-ups, swiping between them. She hands Marc the tablet, explaining how to swap out anything he doesn't like. There are sliders for muscle mass, hair, length and girth. Marc feels Samantha watching. He blushes, rushing through. Slowly, he narrows it down to three models, then two. In the end for settles for a blond.

"One of our most popular models," she says.

Samantha waves him to another door and ushers him inside. There's a desk, on the other side of which a man sits. He stands and offers Marc his hand. He shakes it, gripping a little too hard, and sits down. The nametag pinned to his chest says Dave. On the wall behind him, a framed portrait of Artie Galanti smiles benevolently.

"Let's get started, shall we?" Dave taps on his keyboard. "I see you've gone with the Personified+ package, an excellent choice. Worth every penny." He winks. "Trust me."

"Oh," Marc stumbles, "do you . . . ?"

"Sure do." Dave pulls out his phone, swipes through pictures of him with his arm around a woman who could be Samantha's twin. "This is Yuki." Here they are at the pool, walking through a vineyard, on a boat. It looks like something out of an ad. "I went with Personified for years, convinced it was just as good, but since I've made the change I've never looked back. Personified Companions are like talking to outdated chatbots—you can tell it's a machine. But with Personified+, I swear, there are times I forget Yuki isn't human."

Dave has Marc put on headphones and listen to some voices, adjusting tone and pitch till he gives him the thumbs up. He can add an additional language at no extra cost. "Can I hear French?" Marc studied it in college and figures it'd be nice to practice.

"What sort of hobbies do you want him to have?"

Marc wiggles a finger in his ear. "They have hobbies?"

"Sure they do," Dave says, smiling, "he's got to have something to keep him busy when you're at work. Maybe something you two could do together?"

"I read," Marc offers, shrugging. "Is that a hobby?"

Dave gives him a taste for literature—*he'll be a great book buddy*—and suggest adding yoga, tennis, activities he'll enjoy watching. Because there are things around the house that need fixing, Marc asks if he can be handy.

"And hands-y?" Dave wiggles his eyebrow and selects *Erotic Massage*. "Let's move on to the good stuff." He turns his screen around to reveal a catalogue of dicks. "Take your time."

They click through some more boxes—turn-ons, proficient positions, fetishes—and then Dave has him sign some papers ("Standard User Waiver, though I assure you they're perfectly safe"). He's finishing up, putting on the final touches, when Marc asks, "How sturdy are they?"

Dave doesn't stop typing. "Companions are incredibly durable. You could hit these things with a car, and you'd be the one worse off."

"But what if he gets," Marc rolls his wrist, "damaged?"

"Companions are self-repairing, for the most part," Dave says, still typing. "The synthadermis can patch up most accidental damage—your standard cuts and bruising—within an hour."

"What if it's not an accident?"

Dave stops and looks up. "You can put him into sleep mode to speed up the process. Nothing should take longer than 24-hours to fix. In the rare event of a more serious issue, your warranty covers in-depth work." He looks back at his screen and continues typing. "Would you like him to feel pain?"

Marc sputters, red-faced. "Do they normally?"

"No," Dave says, "not normally."

⁂

Gabriel shows up next week—in the middle of the day, no less. Marc hears the truck drive up, and all he can think is *what if the neighbors see*, but by the time he's at the window Gabriel is stepping out of the back. He's dressed in a light-blue jumpsuit. Marc imagines the back of the truck, the men and women crammed together; it reminds him of a lesson from history class. The tires squeal as they pull away. From a gap in the curtains Marc watches Gabriel walk up the front steps and ring the doorbell. He looks just like his picture—better, even. Gabriel greets him with a smile when he opens the door.

"Hello. Are you Marc Muller?"

Marc nods. "Yes." Remembering, he takes off his glasses. Gabriel leans forward as if to kiss him, but stops a couple inches short. His face blurs and blends when Marc tries to focus on it, his eyes crossing. The blue of Gabriel's iris flashes red, and there's a puff of air, like at the optometrist. Smiling, he sinks back onto his heels.

"Identity confirmed." Gabriel's face seems to soften. "Hello, Marc. It's nice to meet you."

They settle in the kitchen. Marc offers him a cup of tea, forgetting. It steams into the air between them. Gabriel sits, straight-backed, but not rigid, not like he'd expected. He watches Marc blow on his tea.

"What," Marc starts, then stops, cursing as he burns his tongue. "What do we do now?"

"There are still a few personalizations left." Gabriel turns around in his

chair and reaches to the back of his neck. He presses his thumb to the base of his skull, and a panel pops open. Inside, a screen nestles next to a tiny keyboard, the kind you used to see on cellphones. Marc is grateful Gabriel can't see the look on his face. Then, with a shudder, he wonders if he can. "There should be an option to create your personal access code. Your PAC allows you to make any adjustments to my settings, while ensuring no one else tampers with them."

Marc follows the instructions, punching in a series of numbers. When the confirmation flashes, he shuts the panel. "Is that it?" he asks.

Gabriel sits up and turns to smile at him. "That's it."

Marc stands and looks down at Gabriel. He fiddles with the button of his sleeve, worrying it in and out of the hole. "Do you need anything else?"

"No."

"Do you," he rolls back his shirt cuff, "want anything?"

Gabriel's smile never falters. "I'm not programmed to want."

Marc nods, the bob of his chin almost imperceptible. He picks up the still-hot mug and smashes it across Gabriel's face.

⁂

Once he'd gotten Gabriel cleaned up and dressed, Marc takes him to the mall. He came with only one standard issue jumpsuit, and it's not worth the hassle of getting the stains out. Sitting beside him in Marc's clothes—pinched at the shoulder but swimming at the waist—he almost looks like a child, which is part of why he said no when Gabriel offered to drive.

It's crowded for a Thursday, and Marc feels people staring. He shouldn't blame them—he stared too, wondering how someone could debase themselves like that. You could always pick out the technophiles: an unsightly man with a bombshell, a hag with a stud a third her age. Marc shudders to think that this is how people see him. His eyes slide over to Gabriel's face, in profile and lit by the flashing displays of the stores they pass. Not a scratch on him—you'd never know. Marc hides his smirk in his hand.

It isn't always couples. After Mr. Companion released its line of children, you started to see families—parents too old to have kids, barren would-be mothers and their riddled husbands. Or men without wives, their hairlines receding and their eye bug-like behind the thick rims of their glasses, their hand monstrous around the thin fingers of the cherub plodding beside them.

Marc leads Gabriel to a department store on the second floor. Without looking he grabs a handful of shirts off a rack, tosses in a couple pairs of pants. Though he's sure of the measurements—he picked them himself, after all—he still makes him try them on.

While he waits, a woman slides up next to him. Marc thinks she's

shopping, so he steps aside, but when she follows him he starts to brush her off—*just browsing, thanks*—when he realizes she isn't wearing a nametag.

"He's beautiful," she says, nodding towards the dressing room. "How long have you had him?"

"I don't—" Marc busies himself checking the price of a sweater. He can feel the woman's vapid smile, the dull luster of her eyes, on his skin. "He's new."

"I've had Roland for a few months now," she says, pointing to a muscled Hispanic man two rows over, even though Marc hadn't asked. "My sons got him for me." Her jowls tremble when she speaks. "I feel twenty-three again!"

Gabriel comes out in jeans and a button down, the fabric hugging him tight. The woman *coos* and stretches out her hand as if to stroke him. Marc grabs Gabriel's wrist and drags him from the store without buying anything.

⁂

During the personality specifications, Dave had suggested cooking, and Marc's grateful for taking his advice. He wakes in the morning to the smell of pancakes. Gabriel's in the kitchen, which swells with the smell of batter. He turns and smiles. "Good morning, Marc. Did you sleep well?"

"Well enough." He pulls out a chair and sits. "How about—" he begins, meaning to ask *how about you*. "Is there coffee?"

There is, and Gabriel pours him a mug. He reads the news while he drinks. Gabriel sets down a plate of blue-speckled pancakes on the table. He puts down his phone and picks up his fork. He tries to eat, but Gabriel stands there staring, and Marc feels like someone had just stumbled upon him voiding his bowels. He tells him to go wash the dishes.

"This is great," he says, the tart blueberries counterbalanced by the golden sweet of each bite, "really delicious." Marc leans back in his chair, coffee cradled in his lap, and watches the slope of Gabriel's arms, the hunch of his shoulders, as he scrubs the pan. He checks his phone—he's still got thirty minutes before he has to get ready for work. When Gabriel reaches to turn off the stove, Marc tells him to leave it on.

"Thank you for breakfast," he says, standing. He grabs Gabriel's wrist. "It really was delicious." He presses his palm to the burner till the skin sizzles and pops.

⁂

The office is buzzing when Marc arrives, employees huddled around screens. From snatches of conversation he pieces together that Artie Galanti, the founder of former CEO of Mr. Companion, has been found dead at home. At lunch, he joins the gossip mill in the breakroom. Karen from finance picks at a bear claw.

"I bet it was a hit from Robo-Friends. They've never been able to get an edge on the competition, so what better motive to ax the rival boss?"

"Karen, don't be stupid," says Tom from legal. "It's clearly an inside job. Galanti's been clinging to the CEO position for too long. Some upstart executive got tired of waiting and bumped him off. Whoever they peg to take over, that's your guy."

"Or girl," Tami from HR says. "Women are just as capable of cold-blooded murder as men."

"No one is saying women can't be murderers, Tami," says Roger from billing, "but it's just far more likely it's a man."

"How'd he die?" asks Marc.

"Stabbed," Roger says.

"Through the heart," Tami adds. "Maybe it was a scorned lover."

"There'd have to be a lover to be scorned," Tom points out. "He *invented* Companions. He's been fucking bots since generation one." Everyone laughs. Marc gets up to make another cup of coffee.

The rest of the day is a drag. Marc spends most of it huddled in his office, afraid to leave. From the other side of the glass, he watches his coworkers, their heads thrown back, like a TV show with the sound turned off. Around three he ducks out, taking the service elevator down to the garage. The radio's all speculation, the same developing-story updates every fifteen minutes. About halfway home he switches stations and cuts in partway through a commemorative broadcast. He recognizes Artie's voice.

"I was broke," he says, the audio thin and scratchy. Marc isn't sure what sounds older—him or the recording. It's familiar yet ethereal, an itch on his brain. "I was wasting away, penniless in a university lab. The funding had run out years ago. No one believed in AI anymore. I thought, this is it, I'm through."

"Then what happened?" the interviewer asks.

"I tried to kill myself. I locked myself in my office and swallowed a handful of sleeping pills with half a bottle of Scotch. Glenn Fiditch, 18 years. I'd been saving it." His laugh, joyless, comes out as a bark.

"And then?"

"And then an angel came to me in a dream."

"Did it say anything?"

"It told me the story of the Golem of Prague."

A commercial comes on, and Marc shuts the radio off. He remembers now where he'd heard the interview before. It'd played on 60 Minutes shortly after the launch of Mr. Companion, but before Artie Galanti had been named *Time Magazine*'s Man of the Millennia.

⁂

A couple weeks later, when Marc gets home, he finds Gabriel watching TV. The keys dangle from his finger, frozen halfway to being dropped in a bowl. Gabriel never watches TV, not unless Marc asks him to join, but the manner in which he sits unnerves him even more. Spine straight, hands folded in his lap, chest ever so slightly forward.

"What are you watching?" Marc asks.

"The news." Gabriel does not turn to look at him. "They've arrested Artie Galanti's killer."

Marc drops his coat on the floor and comes to stand beside the couch. The sound is too low for him to hear, but he sees a woman, dark-haired and beautiful, being led into the back of a squad car. Marc sits on an arm of the couch, his hand landing on Gabriel's shoulder. It almost feels like he flinches. "Who do they think did it?"

"His Companion."

Marc stills, eyes frozen to the screen. The anchor pulls up a photo. Her face, nothing but hard lines, stares back with a vacant glare. He'd forgotten how primitive early Companions had been. Next, they show a picture of the two of them together, Artie dressed in a tux, at some award ceremony. They look happy.

"Why do they think it was her?" Marc pulls his hand back into his lap. Slowly, Gabriel turns to look up at him, the motors in his mouth drawing his lips into a smile.

"Because she confessed."

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

In the end, the confession wasn't necessary. Shoshanna—for that is what Artie named her—had inadvertently recorded the whole thing. Her eyes had been upgraded to 12MP cameras. One news reporter called her *a walking selfie stick*.

Then came the question of what to do with her. Everyone had an opinion. Ain't I Aware, an AI rights group, fought for Shoshanna's right to a fair trial, even though this would have certainly resulted in a guilty verdict. The religious nuts disagreed. They felt a trial would be a waste of taxpayer dollars, and suggest the machine (they refused to call her by her name) should be publicly stoned. They held rallies outside of Mr. Companion headquarters, chanting, holding signs that read *It's Adam and Eve, not Adam and Ethernet*.

The story dominated the news for a week. Hosts brought on people from either side of the issue and nodded thoughtfully as they shouted at each other. SNL did a skit where they put a vibrator on trial; it got over eight million hits on Youtube. You couldn't turn on the radio without hearing the same, tired opinions, polished to appear new. Marc took to driving home in silence.

Most days, he comes home to find Gabriel sitting in front of the television. On the Mr. Companion websites, Marc reads that *it is not uncommon for your Companion to undertake recreational activities while you're away—this allows their CPU to remain engaged and updated, and is no cause for alarm*. Still, the intensity with which he watches unsettles Marc, and when he remembers to, he unplugs the set before leaving. He tries calling customer service, but their lines are understandably busy.

What the news won't show—namely the increase in attacks on Companions—Marc reads about online. Stories of mixed couples being harassed, beer bottles thrown at the back of heads. Then Companions start to go missing, stolen from warehouses or abducted from homes, only to be found later, torn to pieces. A week after the news broke, a string of riots left hundreds of Mr. Companion stores devastated, their windows shattered and their stock ravaged. Marc stumbles across a video of a Companion tied to a chair, a group of masked men pouring acid over its face till it's nothing but corroded metal and blinking circuits. He saves in to his hard drive for later.

He's at home reading when he gets the email. *Mr. Companion has decided to dismantle Unit SX-143 (Shoshanna Galanti). To prevent any such accidents from occurring again, a software update will be released to ensure the safety of our loyal customers and the general public. We thank you for your continued support and understanding through this trying time*. In the kitchen, he can hear the squeak of a sponge on dishes. Marc grabs the pair of scissors off his desk.

At breakfast the next day, Marc sips at his coffee. Gabriel sits across from him, eyes unfocused, staring at a whirl in the grain of the table. His neck, a motley collage of purple bruises, bobs when he swallows. Marc wonders why they bothered with the little details—simulated breathing, twitches, giving them the sensation of an itch or ache. He supposes it makes them appear more human, but Marc can't forget what Gabriel really is, even when he tries. Every time he undresses, Marc is reminded of what he is. Nothing natural could be so perfect. Most times, he turns the lights off before he climbs into bed. He cannot stand the sight of his own body—speckled and sagging—next to Gabriel's.

Halfway to standing (Marc had asked him to bring him another piece of bacon), Gabriel seizes, sliding back into his chair with a frightening rigidity. Marc spills his coffee he is so startled. Gabriel's eyes roll back into his head as he grows perfectly still. Barely audible above the hum of the fridge, Marc hears a faint whirring, like an overworked computer fan. Nothing he tries—and he tries everything—rouses Gabriel from his stupor. His vacant, dead-eyed stare unnerves him, and in the end he throws a sheet over him.

Marc moves to the living room, tries to read till he gets a headache. He switches on the news, but it's the same story over and over. He must drift off at some point, because he comes to when he hears the scrape of a chair against linoleum. After a moment, his eyes focus on his watch—in all it took about an hour. Gabriel stumbles into the doorway blinking, the corners of his mouth heavy. When he speaks, his voice is dull and toneless.

"Hello, Marc. Have I been gone long?"

⁂

Over the next couple of days, Marc starts to notice the differences—Gabriel's newfound quietness, his apparent stupor, the way he'd sit and stare at a wall as if drugged. At first he thought nothing of them, even coming to appreciate them. He found it easier, less unsettling, to have him sullen and silent in the corner, waiting till he was needed, like a toaster. But his lack of response extended into the bedroom; even a hammer to his knuckles barely garnered a whimper. This, Marc found, was unacceptable.

"It's like he's been lobotomized," Marc explains when, after an hour of waiting, he finally gets customer service on the line. It would seem he's not the only one having this problem. "Isn't there anything you can do?"

"Your Companion's primary functions have in no way been compromised. The update was designed by Artie Galanti himself, before he—" she clears her throat. "It simply modifies some behaviors and adds in a few safeguards to prevent any more misfortune. It's for your own protection."

He hangs up in a huff. Gabriel sits on the couch, his knees drawn up to his chest, his head resting on them. Marc grabs him by the wrist and drags him to the bedroom, but his heart isn't in it.

When his sister had first proposed the idea, Marc had been vehemently against it. "I'm not *that* desperate," he'd argued. Only the truly pathetic—the deformed or deranged—had to rely on a machine for companionship. "Is that really what you think of me?"

"It's not about the sex," she'd said. Marc raised an incredulous eyebrow. "It's not *just* about the sex. Think of how easy it'll make your life!"

She'd been right, for a time. Marc came to enjoy the convenience of having Gabriel around. He cooked a passable meal for someone with no sense of taste and made a decent cup of coffee. Marc couldn't even guess the time he saved since he no longer had to clean or do laundry. And yes, there was the sex.

But now Gabriel had become a burden. More than once, Marc has come home to find the oven on, the air in the kitchen wavy with gas. When he asked him to iron some shirts, Gabriel forget to turn it off, till his clothes smoldered and the room turned smoky. He worries that it's only a matter of time before he accidently adds rat poison to his coffee instead of sugar.

Customer service, when Marc finally manages to get them on the line after nearly an hour of waiting, tells him they'll send a technician to take a look in the next 4-12 days.

More often than not, he takes Gabriel out with him, more out of concern for safety than companionship. He'd leave him in the car, but he read an article the other day about a Companion snatched from the backseat of minivan, and he doesn't want to have to replace the windows if someone breaks in to get at him.

"Keep up," Marc says, barely bothering to look over his shoulder. Gabriel plods along behind him. The mall is crowded with holiday shoppers and Marc doesn't want to lose him in the chaos. They come upon a bench near a fountain and Marc tells him to sit. "Wait here. I'll be back."

As soon as Gabriel is out of his sight, Marc feels the same shudder of relief as he does whenever he goes to work, like he's finally able to take a deep breath. His shoulders relax as his steps slow. He takes his time browsing the selection of leather shoes on offer, swings by the food court to nibble on free samples, even takes the time to try on a few shirts.

He's wrist-deep in a clearance rack when his cell *pings*. He swipes open the news alert—*reporting another Companion perpetrated murder, just one more knot in a string of artificial violence*—and nearly drops his phone. Rushing through the mall, Marc catches glimpses of the faces he passes, illuminated briefly by the flash of their screens, their horror sharpened into anger.

Marc huffs down the escalator, pushing people out of his way. By the time he reaches the bottom, people have started to shout, the news spreading like a virus. Red-faced and panting, he comes upon Gabriel, sitting where he left him. Another Companion—Marc recognizes his face from the catalogue—sits beside him, their heads bent together, fingers just touching. Marc grabs Gabriel's arm and wrenches him to his feet.

Together they push past the wave surging towards the Mr. Companion store. Marc doesn't dare look back. His ears rings with the sound of metal tearing, the tumult pierced by a single, electric scream. Someone grabs him, raises their fist, but Marc kicks him in the shin and runs.

By some miracle they make it to the car. Marc throws Gabriel in the back. It takes him three tries to fit the key in the ignition, his hands are shaking so bad. He speeds home, running two red lights. *It could have been me*, he thinks, heart pounding, *it could have been me*.

At home, Marc locks the door and draws the blinds. Gabriel floats towards the couch, but Marc catches him by the back of his neck and tosses him to the ground. He grabs the remote off the couch and hurls it at him. It dashes against his face, scattering into a rain of black bits of plastic and circuitry. Gabriel stares up at him with round, dumb eyes.

"You stupid, fucking *machine*." Marc rears back and kicks Gabriel in the stomach. He swears, his foot throbbing. He limps to the kitchen and grabs a bottle of gin off the shelf. He pours himself a drink, downing it in one gulp. He starts to pour another, but takes the bottle instead as he storms back into the living room. Gabriel is still on the floor.

"Get up." Marc tilts the bottle to his lips, sputtering at the burn. Gabriel rolls onto his side. "Get the fuck *up*!" Marc fists a handful of Gabriel's shirt, hauling him to his feet and slamming him against the wall. He strikes him across his face with the back of his hand. He hits him again, and again. A trickle of blood stained black dripples out of Gabriel's nose. His cheek starts to swell as his eye blackens. When Marc lets go of Gabriel's shirt, he crumbles once more to the floor. Marc lifts the bottle above his head.

By the time Marc is done, the carpet is spotted with blood. Exhausted, he stumbles off to bed, a scrap of Gabriel's shirt still clutched in his fist. His body aches from exertion, and his head swims. He takes a couple pills, drinking water from his cupped hands in the bathroom, and passes out in bed.

He wakes around three in the morning, head fogged, mouth fuzzy and foul. He scratches at his eyes; a faint glow spills onto the floor, coming from the living room. On unsteady legs he stumbles down the hallway, carpet tickling his bare feet. Broken pieces of glass catch the light and glitter, the night turned crystal.

The sound's turned off, so all he can see is a pantomimed riot playing out on the screen. At first he thinks it's more anti-Companion violence—the radio had mentioned chaos in the streets, and now he sees bodies being ripped limb from limb—but as he kneels on the ground he notices that the bodies being torn asunder are like his: old and fat and ugly. The ones covered in blood, severed heads dangling from their outstretched hands, are beautiful—perfect.

Hands on his throat. The fingers—strong and smooth—instantly familiar. Marc struggles to his feet, but is pushed back down, flat on his back. He claws at Gabriel's grip, but to no avail. His mouth gapes open, tongue lolling across his lips, but the only sound that escapes is a hissing whine. Gabriel tightens his hold, and Marc hears something that sounds like Styrofoam crunch. The corners of his vision darken as he struggles to keep his eyes open. The TV screens cuts to black, and in it Marc sees Gabriel's reflection staring down at him.

He smiles.

GRINDER

CHRISTOPHER WILSON

JOHNNY'S HEAD SPUN with anesthesia as he clutched at the door frame for support. The hallway stretched out before him, bleak and dirty, while the ample evidence of squatters and vandals hardly registered through the mental fog. Letting go of the frame, he took a few unsteady steps, and then stumbled for five or six uncontrollable steps before crashing to the ground on his hands and knees. The pain that shot through his body was almost unbearable. He fought to keep from vomiting, remembering he'd just undergone implantation.

The memory swam, warped by the ether, giving him a murky recollection of Max and a scalpel. The room, the one behind him, smelled of mildew. Max had said it was clean, but what he meant was free of debris.

"You're a Grinder now, boy-o!" Max said as he stood up and stripped off his latex gloves, tossing them into a corner. It was hard to be sure, but he thought Max had added 'sucker' as he left the room.

He struggled to his feet, now keenly aware of the pain in his midsection. He took a few short steps to the wall, gripping it for support, and then jockeyed himself over to a smashed-out window to his right. The cool breeze coming through felt good on his face, a temporary antidote to the heat he could feel radiating from his body, and helped keep him from vomiting. He stood as still as possible, allowing his pain to subside to a dull throb. His head was clearing, fragmented memories now coalescing into a cohesive vision. He remembered why he'd come. He had to look. He took a deep breath before pulling up the old grey gown.

He was wrapped in a tight coil of bandages around his abdomen, like a mummy from the movies he enjoyed as a child. The bandages, stained through in several places with his blood, were now dark and crusting over. Even without seeing, he could feel it: the miracle machine now fused to

him. Forever. He touched it, his fingers registering something hard—metal—filling the space between his ribs and his pelvis. It was a curious sensation—a tactile expectation denied—fingers not finding skin. It was like trying to touch an echo.

He looked back through the broken window and across the broken city, where faint lights appeared, a sign that life continued even in this polluted environment. And high above, the elite lived in their pristine floating cities, nearly immortal, their Grail quest completed with the discovery of Hemoglobin Network Grafting. Another great innovation born of the fires of conflict, as the military sought to create a superior soldier. Perfected on the backs of the poor and the desperate, all of them recruits, sold on the hope of escaping a status quo so carefully cultivated by corporate and military interest.

But at the beginning of it all, there were the Grinders.

Voices floated up to Johnny's ears from the lot below. The old hospital housed all manner of homeless people, drifters, criminals, and people like Max, who needed a place seldom visited by The Central Authority, to conduct business. Drunks, Johnny thought, by the way they seemed to be carrying on. Their voices, the sounds of people, made him aware of a growing empty feeling in his midsection.

The Grinders, as they were officially called by the military, let loose on the battlefield with this primitive tech embedded inside them, would kill their enemies and then consume the corpses for fuel.

Johnny again touched his abdomen, feeling the crude edges and angles, noting that it followed the contour of his body, except for the protrusion, like a large cylinder, located above where his navel used to be.

Voices again, came though the open window. Shouting this time. Johnny imagined they were arguing over the last swig of booze. Outcasts, he thought. Refuse, like me.

No, not anymore. He touched the cold part of him.

He would be a god.

He would go to them. Johnny turned and began toward the stairwell. Slowly at first, but his shuffle turned into a jog, and then a sprint. The heavy clap of his footfall carried down the deserted corridor. He yanked the door open, the old metal door ringing out as it collided with the concrete wall. Three flights he'd come up to meet Max for the procedure, but driven now to find the people who belonged to the voices, he bounded down the steps with little thought to the pain through his body. He kicked the door open at the bottom emerging in the old lobby. Something scurried out of sight under a pile of yellowed and mildewed papers. Johnny turned to his right, not toward the old revolving door that had long since been torn

away from its frame, but to an old fire exit at the corner of the building. It sat ajar and he pushed through it with ease, stopping when he was several meters from the side of the building. He waited. He heard the voices again and was pleased he'd come out on the right side. The old lot was choked with piles of junk, and he twisted his way through while following the line of the wall. At the corner he stopped and then crouched, before peering around the other side.

There was the glow of fire, burning in the drum of an old dryer. He could see them—one, two, three—three people in the orange circle of light. An old codger seated in the remains of an old arm chair, with a tangled beard and a moth-eaten blazer, gripping a bottle of some dark liquid. The other two, a man and a woman of roughly the same age, wrapped in soiled tunics, each sat on a short stack of old tires. His cheeks burned, flushed with blood, he was a hunter, like the savage great cats that stalked upon the earth in days past. He crept from the corner, keeping low, until he was at the edge of the fire light. He thought to pounce, but remembered that he was to be a god, and so stood and stepped into view to present himself.

The Grinders, through the use of their technological black magic, had discovered that in devouring the dead, they had become effectively immortal. They fought, killed, and consumed, stripping the battlefield clean. But dead tissue makes for poor fuel, and somewhere, no one is quite sure where, the Grinders made an opportune discovery: living tissue, fresh and warm, was their Philosopher's stone. It was too late by then. The genie was out of the bottle. The tech had slipped out of their hands and had disappeared into the wanting world.

The old man in the chair looked up, startled by Johnny's sudden appearance.

"Shit man," he said, as Johnny had interrupted whatever story he was spinning.

Johnny tore away the hospital gown and stripped away the bandages wrapped around his waist. More than just an implant, this thing had replaced a portion of his body. It looked like crude bands of iron had been hammered around his midsection in overlapping strips, and at his center line, a large port-like slot positioned under two coarse metal cylinders lined with sharp studs. This grafted metal maw would provide his immortality. The tissue around the implant was angry red and purple, and droplets of blood wept from the surgical staples holding portions of his tissue in place. The primitive body-mod left him resembling something of Frankenstein's monster. But for all of that, the Grinder unit did one thing well; it imparted nearly everlasting life on a budget.

Johnny lunged at the old man and caught him by the hand. The other two jumped up and scattered like vermin, disappearing into the maze of debris, leaving the old man to his fate.

"You fucker!" he spat, and swung the bottle at Johnny's head.

Johnny brought his arm up to protect himself, the blow landing with a dull thump. Before the old man could cock his arm back for a second shot, Johnny jammed the old man's fingers into the waiting roller units. They came alive without conscious thought, turning rapidly, the metal teeth biting into the fingers and dragging them inside. The old man shrieked, loud and piercing, but not enough to drown out the sound of his bones being ground flat. Blood erupted from the grinder, the pressure forcing it out in a jet. Johnny could feel the machine working inside him, as the essence of the old man diffused into his system, like a blast of oxygen stoking his personal fire.

The grinder continued to pull the screaming man in—the hand had gone, so to the forearm and elbow, slowly working up to the shoulder. The old man screamed again, his face white as a sheet even in the orange light of the fire, and pulled hard against the grinder. There was a fibrous tearing sound as his arm pulled free of its socket, and disappeared with a pop into the machine. The old man staggered and fell backward, very nearly landing in the burning drum. As blood jetted from the stump of his shoulder, he reached over, trying to staunch the wound with his remaining hand. He gasped a few times, croaked, twitched, then lay still on the hard earth.

Johnny grinned, his smile stretching from ear to ear. The Grinders had been hunted down, of course, and destroyed. Each and every last one of them. That was the position of the government, at least. But for the desperate, the unscrupulous, or those who did not concern themselves with the cost of their continued survival, the tech remained available.

A small movement drew his attention. From out of a tattered tent stepped a boy that couldn't have been more than four or five years of age.

No one had cared when the Grinders consumed a fallen enemy. When Grinders turned on the living, many had rationalized it as the cost of technological advancement. But when the Grinders had discovered a fountain of youth in the flesh and blood of children, few could ignore them any longer. That was when the military pulled the plug on the project, and grinder tech was outlawed in all but rogue nations. The elite had their godhood, and so could now afford to try and forget how they had achieved it.

Johnny looked at the boy, and then at the bleak cityscape behind. There were thousands of children like this one, and it wouldn't take long

he reasoned, before he would not remember one face from another. Immortality has its price. He always knew he'd pay for it.

He smiled a warm, inviting smile at the boy.

"Hey kid, come here for a minute."

THE BLUE SCHNOOKLYBOB

KJ MOORE

CONTINUE.

"A society takes time to fall apart, longer than written history would have us believe, and the years are littered with conflicts and victims, both bloody and political. Rarely has it been this widespread, though, and it is not as such a society but a race which collapsed beneath its own rotten and turgid weight."

"You've got such a way with words, you miserable bastard."

I'm on a roll. "This was going to be a new world born out of the toxic remains of the dead; cities grown out of burnt ruins and soaking up the last nutrients from the graves."

Gale snorts, expelling purple smoke. I blow it away from me but quickly resign myself when it splits about my head in a vaguely toxic halo.

"It just feels like things should be better up here than they are."

My reflection in her metal eyes looks hazy and irritated. She's not in the right frame to listen to this, so I finally abandon the train of thought that had followed me down from the top of the city through its definite layers to the Basement. Home comforts are half a mile above me, and they're best away whilst I'm sat on crate furniture down a mile-deep alleyway with a human woman.

She picks up the coffee I bought her, appreciating it all the more because it would have been cheaper for me to pay someone to defecate on her face in the adjoining shop. I didn't buy myself one as I really am trying to keep out of rehab this time.

Gale breaks the murky quiet. "What is it that's put you in such a fine, preaching mood?" She toasts my misfortune. "You're even bribing me to listen."

"Hechem and I are being called in front of the Council in an hour."

She grimaces, and inhales through her teeth.

"There was a wraith-jacking in the Core and we were both there." I

shrug, as if I'm only a fraction as bothered as I really am. "I naturally went after it; Hechem naturally followed, cursing me out the whole time. I threw the guy off into the tube and got the wraith under control. Unfortunately, there was maintenance going on and he went straight through to land square on a transit."

I listen to her chewing on the chemical straw that feeds through her gas mask, picturing the disaster. Transits aren't as intelligent as wraiths, hence being put into public transport. They're strong and fast though, so when the stupid thing had a fully-grown Existential land on its head it left an obvious trail.

"How is it you're always up shit creek whenever you're down here?" On 'shit' her tongue clicks softly and I picture it, the processors gleaming like tiny scales and lighting up her teeth with a blue glow.

"Just lucky." She gives me a machine's stare, more alien on her than I am. Her metal eyelids are fogging up with coffee steam and I want to run my thumbs over them, to drip the condensation back into her cup. I bet she has eyes like her mother's behind the caps. "I can't rightly talk to Hechem since he just bitches that I'm going to get him evicted from the planet along with me. So that leaves the NewGens, who have all the personality of a stick, and you." I stop my hands playing amongst themselves. "With you I don't worry about my grumblings magically getting back to the Council."

Gale nods, puppet-like. "Speaking of the devil," she looks up at the city. Distantly, I can hear the creak of it growing ever outwards in the distance. "Don't you have a summons to get to?"

I've never asked if she had the chronometer implant, but she probably has. I stand, the bright filth of the place suddenly apparent. "Hechem will probably skin me if I don't turn up to this one. I'll go up here, find a cleanser and catch a transit over."

Her skin creases around the caps. "Watch out for falling thieves."

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

The building I take up is the same one I came down in, and it coos at me fleshily as I ascend. At the top and outside, I don't hang around in the artificially perfect air and instead head straight for a cleansing pod across the balcony. It's young and still green at the top, a much tighter fit than I would like, but it sucks off the powder blue film from my uniform, bumping up underneath my boots to get into the grooves. I come out of the dark crevice decidedly shiny and reeking of what Gale has deemed to be mint.

The pickup point for the transit is around the other side of the bulbous reddish building, and I make my way around the wide balcony sticking close to the warm barrier. The clear floating tunnels that snake across four

levels are all busy, and the transit stands out as a dark-winged blot against the hundreds of glowing wraith tails.

I flag it down then stand in the doorway of the bay. The huge creature takes in my uniform and helmet and gives me the nod of a free pass.

The Council building is, typically, the largest building on the largest of the three cities on the planet. It takes less time than I'd anticipated getting to the Core and the glassy structure, my first bit of luck this week, so I decide to linger out on the balcony until I absolutely have to go in.

Across open air, I hear someone jeering from the next building. She's trying to get across, but neither the building nor her two keepers are letting her. It's another human woman, smaller and cruder than Gale, demonstrating just why you don't see the species up here.

Without her mask on I can see her frothing, coughing and spraying blood as the air cleansers burn up her lungs. I watch her small head disappear behind two large hands as they drag her back. The snapping sound I anticipate is absent and she keeps straining away as she's dragged backwards to the doorway. There's a flash and a deep sound when she explodes.

Apparently the Old Earth terrorists are still finding ways around our security.

Holding the railing, I watch as three huge security wraiths appear almost immediately, buzzing around the building with their riders shouting into their shoulder comms. Traffic in the tunnels slows and clogs. The smoking building is shivering but finally reacts, foaming in the scorched doorway to put out the bodies.

I suck air across my teeth at the scene, and the sound is enough for a wraith to fly at me, coming to hover beside the barrier. Even from the other side, its huge tail crackles hotly at my skin. Resigned, I don't even look back as the rider begins to climb off.

⁂

A few hours later, after the inquest.

"How'd it go?"

Hechem has this look about him that he could strip out my spine without scuffing his conscience. "Your absence didn't help matters. Again."

I roll my eyes and lean forwards onto the railing, feeling my thighs instantly turn hot. "I was a witness at a crime scene. The wraiths wouldn't let me go."

"Yes, that's always the way with you, isn't it? Always a witness or an innocent bystander."

Pulling off my gloves, I dangle my hands against the barrier to warm them. My skin has become less translucent; belaying anxiety my face does not show. "You still haven't told me what the Council said."

That look comes back. “Hatchery duty, three months.” He turns on me as an afterthought. “Bastard.”

I grin, validated. “And you bitch that I hang around the humans too much.”

“You do, and I ‘hang around’ you too much. Their vocabulary rubs off like a bad smell.”

Easing back off the railing, I take stock of the charcoal air, thick and dark around the glowing towers of building flesh. “And with three months on Hatchery duty together, a whole lot of words are going to be rubbing off.”

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

They begin life with a fifty-foot plummet, and if they survive that they get to be enslaved. The birth of the schnooklybobs is, in retrospect, as ridiculous as their name, and you wonder if they’d aim their heads at the solid floor if only they could think of that within the first few seconds of their life.

The Hatchery is immense in length and width, the moistly dark ceiling bristling with soft shelled eggs and the air is never still. Small bodies are always falling, irregular thuds reaching your ears every few seconds. It is pointless to even try to keep count of how many hatch almost immediately into a plummet that will either kill them or confirm their durability for life. You find it better to keep count of those that you send towards the single door for processing, rather than the many you dump down the waste shoot to the kitchens downstairs.

Mycin has taken it upon himself to deal with the majority of the schnooklybobs that have landed unfortunately, taking up the bodies by their sinewy hind legs and swinging them as he walks. You wonder if the Council was at all wise in this decision as he seems to be finding this a reward rather than a punishment. Comparatively, your neck is already burning from constantly looking up at the eggs to position yourself nearby, ready for when a pink animal lands.

A wet tearing sound as an egg begins to split and a glance around confirms that you are the closest to this one. You roll your shoulders as you wait, feeling the long, trailing spine of your helmet press into your back. The ceiling sucks up the fluid noisily, pulling the membrane around the wet and wriggling body that is already sliding downwards. This is a stubborn one, clinging to the remnants of the egg with its chubby fingers, its tail lashing stiffly with a sticky spray. You hope it survives the fall. This is not attachment, as everyone working in the hatchery is conditioned against it, but rather a bet with yourself to pass the time.

Its huge eyes roll madly over swollen cheeks that puff out further in panic. Directly beside it, you both see another egg rapidly split and release

an oily pink schnooklybob. It doesn't cling at the seams and summersaults peculiarly as it falls before landing on its head. Certainly dead. You lift its small weight. The one still holding on chirps at you, scrabbling at the tattered membrane with renewed energy. Finally it slips away, falls quickly and lands like a native cat. It clings to the ground, eyes scrunched shut and tail sprung erect.

To your right, Mycin snorts behind his faceplate and takes the dead schnooklybob from you. The living one finally opens its eyes, intelligence already beginning to sprout behind the large pupils. It shakes its head, the long stiff ears slapping from side to side.

You raise your arm to the door. Obediently it swivels to look. "That way for processing and assignment. Mind the other hatchlings." It cocks its head to eye its dead sibling before clumsily finding its feet, trotting off in an awkward stumbling gait. By this afternoon it will have been sent to a domestic or working address to live out the rest of its life, part pet part assistant, and criminally lacking in language so it can never answer back.

Mycin turns lazily and makes his way to one of the dump shoots, collecting another body on the way. As he walks, his dark cape chases about his ankles as all good capes should. You run a gloved hand along the hem of yours, conscious of its weight. Ceremonial armour in here is absurd yet, as a direct servant of the Council, you are obliged to bear its purple bulk.

"I really don't know how to get us out of this one," Mycin informs you as he makes his way back over. Usually there is a way out of a Council's punishment, or at least a means by which to shorten the sentence. "But we have to think of something – that way you stupid animal – before I lose it and just start shooting them out of the ceiling."

As always, you are the tempering voice of reason. "They won't keep us in here forever. When the Council feels that we have learnt from your mistakes, they will reassign us as they see fit."

"You're starting to sound like one of them."

You know what he means beneath your thoughts. "One of who?"

"One of the NewGen. All this 'as they see fit' and blindly following orders." The cries and thuds of the schnooklybobs suddenly sound distant and echoing. "You sound like you've been turned into an automaton, second brain wiped before independent thought could begin."

Surprisingly, he sounds genuinely concerned for you. Your belly is already hot, however. "I'm just doing my job, as you should too. We're supposed to set an example for the populous, which does not involve cavorting around with human females in Basement."

He has nothing to say to that, eyes bright with something above the face guard. A nod to the eggs. "At least it's quiet today. Not a lot of lunch for the staff from the looks of it so far." It is an efficient system: their meat

on the menu, hides turned into clothes and boots, and it is a solid means of assurance of fitness in the thousands of schnooklybobs that leave the hatchery.

However, you know that he does not enjoy handling the bodies because it makes him a part of this clean mechanism. “This can’t simply be a lasting vendetta because you were bitten by one when you were young.”

Another hidden grin. “Ah, before I awakened actually, so it’s a vendetta that’s wired completely into my secondary brain. It’s -”

A shriek from above surprises (because neither of you have been watching the eggs) and the schnooklybob lands between you both in a heap. You stare, feeling suddenly chilled and clogged.

Of course, Mycin speaks first. “That’s blue.”

A dumb nod. It’s tugging at one of its long, curled ears and chirping obliviously, preoccupied with the slick coating of slime all over itself. “Definitely blue.”

You brush a sensor in the helmet behind your ear, requesting help as you back away slowly. There have only ever been stories and rumours about this creature, and you aren’t in a hurry to disprove any of the ones pertaining to violence. Mycin is following your lead, but you can hear the footfalls of a group coming towards you.

The blue schnooklybob releases its ear in alarm, bobbing its head to the oncoming reinforcements. At the tip of its wet tail, its skin is beginning to glow hotly, and it lurches the extremity forward to its boxy snout and hooks the end behind its upper lip. The footfalls behind you peter to a stop and you share in the field of mutual astonishment as the schnooklybob suddenly bounds forward and snaps its tail back in the same motion.

Its compact skull and long teeth are now cleanly exposed as the flesh has been pulled back and bunched up about its neck. The eyes are perfectly, grotesquely spherical, and the only area of flesh left is in the sunken pockets of tissue where its cheeks should be. There is a sense of threat but it has taken you this long to realise that you are not totally defenceless, and angle your wrist so that your weapon ejects from the gauntlet.

The schnooklybob seems to sense this and makes a run for you and the collected mass in general.

The baton snaps out to its full length when you crack it in your hand, the pulsating field leaping out to grant it the thickness of a good bat and treble the strength. It diverts its attention from you to Mycin when the floor before it is abruptly scorched, and you see that he has been modifying his weapon again.

You manage to deflect the next better aimed energy blast away from the schnooklybob by your own weapon. Mycin howls at you. This descends into a tussle to take it off him. The diversion is long enough for the

schnooklybob to race half the length of the hall. It screeches and snaps at anyone in its path, though the current greatest threat to its existence is behind it.

Manhandling the makeshift gun sets off another blast which fires randomly into the corner of a deposit point and tears the entire side and part of the floor open. The schnooklybob makes its decision rapidly, veering once again before making a great lunge and sliding across and down into the hole that is already beginning to close.

You want to drop to your knees as a handful already have, but instead stand awkwardly with both weapons in hand as Mycin rubs at his bruising eye, walking over to the shrinking gap in the floor. The first blue schnooklybob in living memory and you let it get away. The small mercy that you can shield yourself with when you are undoubtedly placed to explain this to the Council is that it is alive.

⁜⁜⁜

It appears that Mycin didn't want to risk showing his face to the Council after the Schnooklybob debacle, so hours afterwards you find him waiting on the balcony outside. He is not pleased with what you have to tell him.

"So, we have to both find and apprehend this no longer mythical creature that would just as soon make a holiday retreat out of our chest cavities as look at us, or face eternal banishment equating to armed robbery and space rape?"

You feel that you are the picture of steadily destabilising patience. "Apparently we were supposed to stop it escaping."

"It came right for us!"

"It was eight seconds old."

"A moot point in a born killing machine."

His tone is not appreciated. "We are going to follow orders. I am not getting thrown off this bastard planet because of you."

"If I haven't shot at it you wouldn't have a face."

You have nothing to say to that and fall into grudging silence. His expression is one of gloating and you snort to yourself, feeling that he doesn't deserve it. After a few more seconds, you twist the metaphorical blade. "They want it alive too."

Now, his pause is immensely gratifying. "Fuck."

"Been hanging around Gale too long, have we? Getting your vocabulary infested with human profanity?"

"Their swearing is better. For all their shortcomings, they do at least bitch about everything well, frequently by combining fuck with a random, otherwise neutral word. Like 'nuggets'."

Fucknuggets? You mentally repeat the word to yourself, mulling it over. "No wonder they almost wiped themselves out."

Apparently relishing the fact that his faceguard isn't on, Mycin leans over the edge and spits, watching the droplet plummet away. You wonder if it'll hit anyone in Basement. "So how do you suggest we start?"

You lean onto the barrier as well, though you most certainly do not spit. "Well, it's definitely not anywhere up here. We had all the schnooklybobs look for it and the walls haven't seen it. Wraith sweeps and citywide searches this afternoon didn't turn it up either. The Council thinks it's in Basement somewhere."

"With the humans? Why?"

You shrug, the movement rolling your shoulders clumsily under the armour. "They're more primitive, less of a threat to it."

"They're also panicky and likely to set it on fire." He sighs and you wait. "Why do the Council even want it back if it's too dangerous to control? Why not just leave it down there to get itself killed?"

"They want to study it, they say. But, I don't think I believe that." A deeper breath and you taste wet air, suddenly cloying in your mouth. That was a big admission but you cannot deny the unease you felt in the chambers, of their legless bodies skirting around the truth. You know that you are both being used as pawns now, and to what end you can't be certain. "I'm beginning to think they just want it dead, but they want to be absolutely certain of it. They want to do it themselves, and soon. They really don't want the humans to have it."

Mycin sees that it isn't adding up, either. He steps away and folds his arms, his words as heated as his stare. "Now wait – if this is such an important thing to them and they consider us to be the biggest fuck-ups in the guard, how come they've sent us to do it? Why not get one of their precious and trusted NewGen to do it and just banish us OldGen misfits like they've been threatening for months?"

"Because we have to go down to Basement to look for it, and we're expendable if it goes wrong." Your words leave a foul taste behind.

"For us, you mean. If the rarest creature in our known history comes back up here in our hands dead before any scientist can even be promised a look at it . . . " You feel your guts swim and wonder if he can feel it too. "I think the word is 'scapegoat'."

As always, you are the voice of reason and the leader between the two of you. Whereas he would wilfully withdraw to brood for the next few days, you know that there is no time for that. Choice is also a luxury neither of you have. "We can't think like that at the moment. Tomorrow morning, first light, you're taking us down there. You know your way around better than any of us. I don't know if the Council knows that and that's why we've been chosen, or if this is genuinely just to give us a chance to redeem ourselves, but I plan to make full use of your knowledge."

We lapse into silence again, considering the ramifications of this. I look to his face and it's apparent that he's not going to take off his helmet or face guard. I'm unsure if that is a petty act of defiance against me, but find I don't much care. I just don't know how he stands it. Anron is so dense and clogged that the very air sweats, even up here in the highest turrets. It's only on a good day that you can see the dark outline of the other major city on this continent, though it's moving ever closer as both cities continue to swell and expand like mushroom caps, the stems trembling and bulging with the weight.

It's smaller and less condensed over there, which I imagine would be a vast improvement over this nightmare. That's simply because nobody really wants to live where the name is unpronounceable and the spelling ridiculous. Humprogrebloogle was the only significant product of the late King Luin's reign, and that's only because the King's word is final despite the name of the city being the product of a large piece of meat lodged in a small oesophagus whilst he bellowed for something to clear the blockage.

You'd think that the Council would hold a vote to change it, but no. Rather they sit on high, scheme relentlessly and piss all over us when they take a tea-break.

⁂

When we get down to basement, it dawns on Hechem's face that we didn't quite scrub over everything the humans left. The cities were planted in the centre of abandoned metropolitan areas because the sewage beneath boiled to raw fuel when we terraformed the planet for ourselves. It grew outwards for miles beneath the soil before the stalk begun to sprout, lifting the disk covered in mud and abandoned housing right up into the air. We planted our buildings atop it next. Most were obliging and fattened out to house thousands. Others were more petulant and turned into tubules at the end of long, fine stalks – completely useless.

I see that our buildings continue to grow around and through the skeletal structures that have resisted falling down, and there are fires burning out of the windows overlooking the roaming rag-tag culture in the streets. There's little light down here as the city looms and hangs across the sky above us, but the bases of the buildings glow gently as they soak up energy from the platform of the city tower. This greenish light combined with the cloggy wet blueness that covers everything presents a queer and visually slippery landscape.

I have been beneath the city and onto the planet surface itself only a handful of times, and console myself with the knowledge that it's far worse down there than it is here. There, the city casts a massive shadow that is cold and unflinching. The ground is crisp and fragile, wafer layers that have floated down from the underside of the city lying atop each other like burnt

scabs. There, everything is dead and beyond my understanding. The roots are still churning up black plaques that announce such things as 'The Statue of Liberty stood here' and 'Here is where democracy died'. Up here, in a city that spreads across the sky, things make a little more sense.

I had expected weapons to be trained on us from the makeshift dwellings as we made our way through the streets, and I'm not disappointed. Gun-like but definitely not those crude belching firearms I have read about. That fell completely out of fashion long before we got here, I understand. Everyone got guns so there was no point in having them, even when everyone had the biggest, most organ-shredding guns and ammunition available. The age of domestic chemical warfare dawned, and the air was infected with cocktails that could kill humans and Existentials alike. That's why they live down here and we live up there. It took a full solar orbit to clean the air out, fix the irradiated soil and force compatibility with our buildings. Now, the air in our cities is lighter and suits us but remains toxic to them, and they can't afford to fuck up what little of theirs they have sulking down here. Hechem and I can overcome this little biological difference with a pill and stamina.

Hechem continues to sweep the area as he speaks, following me. "I hope you know what you're doing. We can't be down here any longer than we have to."

"Why? It's not like it's illegal to be down here."

"Give it ten minutes, and it might very well be." A clatter between two skyscrapers makes him jump and I have to crush back a laugh. "Can we trust this Gale person?"

"Gale and I go back a long way. I used to spend a lot of time with her mother. We can trust her." That satisfies him for now. We keep walking.

It was going to take some time to get to her home as human's have stuffed all the chutes down to her zone with bedding and junk, so we have to go down where we can and just walk. Gale lives in what she calls 'the rough bit' of the Basement, but general consensus would have just deemed it an outright shit hole. No Existential could legally live here just under simple welfare laws, so the humans and their petty turf wars have swept on unhindered. These disputes had only evolved into greater acts of lunacy whilst we lived quietly overhead.

Gale explained it to me something like this: Paul had a patch of land and bought a gun to protect it, because if it was his then Jon must want it. Jon thought that Paul was eyeing up his patch of land next door because he'd gotten a taste of landowning now and might want more, and bought a bigger gun. Paul bought and filled a gun rack. Jon went on to fill every nook, cranny and crib with his guns. Paul landscaped landmines into his lawn. Jon put up an electrified laser grid and ignored complaints from city

ordinance about the piles of smouldering rabbits on his property. Paul got a bazooka and stored it in a guard tower. Jon got a land-to-air missile and pointed it at his front gate. Paul got nuclear material. Jon went nuclear too. Paul bought shells of syphilis and cancer. Jon bought an AIDS bomb. Paul infected a pack of attack dogs with highly contagious TB that would also transfer MRSA through their teeth. Jon genetically modified hornets to be the size of dogs that fired napalm. And then it just went downhill from there.

Hechem and I are immune to all of the roaming fallout clouds of infectious diseases that blow up and down the streets like traffic. However, the humans down here have recently begun to have discs fused over their eyes so they won't absorb it through the moisture of their eyeballs. It's expensive, but a calculated investment against the cost of medication.

Finally we reach the place and I thump a gloved fist into the dry, disintegrating door. It opens and she beckons for us to come in quickly, the visible part of her face twisted up. The smink I used to send her some medicine vials a few weeks ago is sat on a rickety table in the corner, its long body swaying as it balances on its tiny furry legs. Its nose tendrils snuffle in our direction.

She seems less than impressed with the creature and snatches it up, holding the coiling form out to me. "You're taking this with you when you leave, you know."

"Enchanting to see you too." I take it, waving it at her a little. "You do know how stupid and harmless these things are, right? Worst it'll do is fetch you something it's seen in a book. Or love you to death."

Hechem elbows me, scowling. "If you're quite done?"

Gale folds her arms and looks between us both. I see no need to perform formal introductions. "I sniffed around a bit and I think I know where this thing is going to be."

"Where it's going to be?" Hechem pounces, leaning away from me a little as the smink reaches out and tries to crawl up his arm. I squeeze its head until it falls asleep and drape it on the table. It rolls over and kicks the air a little before falling still.

Her droll look doesn't quite come across as she'd hoped, and she prods the smink with a finger before sitting down on the chair opposite it. "Yeah, this afternoon. Old Earth is buying it at the Wraithtrack."

I hadn't expected her to be quite so open about her contacts, particularly the terrorist group that would see every Existential off this planet if only they had the power and organization to do it. Lucky for us, we're immune to almost everything that they currently have to throw at us. Save exploding, apparently, though they're incredibly rare occurrences. "And you're absolutely sure of this?"

She nods. Hechem starts to query exactly how she knows this but I cut

him off with a grunt. She's scrutinizing us again. "After they take possession of it, it'll be a lot harder to track it down, let alone get it back. This is probably your one chance."

I'm only partially satisfied with this. "Alright, we'll intercept it. Though this does raise the problem of how we're going to do it ourselves given our inhuman state."

"You're not that different as a species. Die your hair, cover your skin and put some baggy clothes on you so you don't look so wretchedly thin, and you'll do just fine."

"You'll come with us?"

"I think you'll end up dead if I don't."

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

It mystifies you to know that up where you come from, even the air is toxic to them and will corrode their moist insides, yet here amongst the thick brown smoke, debilitating beverages and pseudo-meat crackling in its own boiling fat, they are at no such risk. Everything is filth but there is a pounding riot of pleasure in the air. You can't make out all the shouted words or smells as you follow Mycin's narrow back through the crowd, both of you led by the diminutive Gale.

Ahead, the stadium is lopsided and crumbling, relying heavily on the sheets of metal and stone paste affixed to its walls like patchwork. Clean blue torches cast jostling shadows and make the food appear even more nauseating. Unbelievably, there's another two hours of this standing around and yelling before the race even begins. You all come to a stop and gather to discuss how to proceed.

"You boys stick together and look around, try to blend in. I'll go find my guy and find out what's going on. If we're really lucky, we might be able to get a look at it before it's sold on."

Gale sniffs through her vents, the filters dripping. You want to dip her in a chemical bath until her stained flesh peels off and she's finally clean. Perhaps she could get one of those new designer skins that are all the rage, which come with colour, pattern and texture modulators and are all stain resistant and self-cleaning.

"How're you going to find us to tell us?"

In answer to his question, Gale looks up Mycin's tall form and arches a dark brow above the curve of her metal discs.

"Point taken. Off you go."

As you separate with him, you reflect again on how everything around you looks as if it is covered in wet lint. Purifying sprays disperse into the upper atmosphere daily, and by the time it's drifted down here it has clogged grey and turned mucous with filth. It's a conscious effort not to sneeze. "Exactly why do you spend so much time down here?"

Mycin is fiddling with ratty coat cuffs that are too short for him, a problem you're also having. "It doesn't look like much, but in some ways it's just better down here. More honest. And I like Gale. She's good company."

You glance across to watch the top of her head weaving through the other humans. "Yes, and what interesting company she keeps."

"Oh leave it, will you?" he bristles and you elect to drop the point for now.

Within an hour, during which you meander the perimeter of the crowd and cut a swath through the middle, you see Gale pushing back towards you. You're sure her cheeks would be flushed if you could see them as there is redness at the tops of her curiously shaped ears. Mindful of everyone around, you both follow wordlessly.

Gale leads you to a stall that's free from a queue of people simply because it isn't selling food, rather serving as a shack island to convene near. Going around the back of it, you ignore the challenging postures of the smaller men around you and kneel by the wire mesh crate. Mycin follows suit, examining the creature.

The schnooklybob had been cowering at the back of the cage but at the scent of Existentials it comes forward cautiously, chirping at you both. Its ears pick up from where they had been flat along its back, and its tail begins to swish. It's blue, undeniably, but it's incredibly unnatural. The gentle mottling of shades that the entirety of the species has appears washed out, giving a purely uniform colouration. You tap the bottom of the cage with your finger and watch a chubby foot reach for you, toes splaying. Traces of pink can be seen within the gaps.

"It's a fake. It's been dyed."

Mycin sounds genuinely, suspiciously, surprised. "You can tell?"

You catch Gale sharing a look with him over your head and glance between the two. It's unfortunate for the creature, but it is useless to the humans. They capture curious wraiths and schnooklybobs that have found their way down here and use them for their own means, usually food, labour or the type of entertainment you are in the midst of. There's no need to bring this one back up.

However, there is still a blue schnooklybob roaming around here somewhere. A look at Mycin gives you the impression that he doesn't really believe that. "What?" you press in a low voice.

Suspicion spikes when he doesn't answer and merely turns away from you, storming off back into the crowd. Gale looks to you briefly before following and you have little choice but to do the same. It's impossible to lose sight of him but you don't want lose him by being too casual. He breaks into a run once away from the throng and there's no way that the human can keep up with him.

Shouting after him accomplishes nothing but you keep trying, forgetting that you aren't supposed to be drawing attention to yourselves. With your builds and speed, it's obvious to everyone that neither of you belong here, but that is a secondary concern to chasing Mycin.

The complexity of the maze of the city above never dawned on you as you were always above it. Down here, you feel that you are falling further into it with diminishing hopes of finding your way out of the twisted furls of metal and bulging bases that forces the pathways to narrow until they are nearly impassable. Logically, just getting into a building and heading up would save you from this labyrinth, but for now you must follow.

He has stopped finally, chest shuddering and his body stiff and jerky with unease. He picks something up but you don't know what, though it's clearly heavy. The alley is littered with crates and rubbish, and you weave about it to come closer to him. Mycin can't leave without coming past you, the walls meeting behind him in a sharp angle. He has his back on you, and you snap out your baton just in case.

Coming around, you can see the crate he is stood over is the focus of his agitation. It's funnelled through the crude human weapon in his hands and your grip tightens on your own, Exis-made one. The box jerks and there's a keening growl from inside, unmistakably a distressed schnooklybob.

His chin touches into his shoulder as he looks at you. You nod to the box, trying for composure. "Is that it?"

The slightest of nods. "I found it stuck in a vent when you went to the Council. Didn't want to give it to them if it was important, or kill it, 'cause it amounts to the same thing. Brought it down here last night."

"And now what are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"We have to take it back up with us. The Council ordered us to."

Apparently, this was quite the wrong thing to say as Mycin charges the gun, rolling his shoulder with the action.

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The gun's heavy and balanced as well as a chair on a needle-tipped spire. I'm holding it with one hand more out of conviction than strength with the muzzle on the box, which has just stopped shaking. I don't have any assumptions about the schnooklybob's intelligence, but I have faith that it's got enough instinct to know when it's tempting death.

Hechem's stayed a distance away, though his hand is stuck still reaching. His baton is at his side. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"They're not getting it back. No way."

His jaw, impossibly, tightens. "The Council ordered us to retrieve it,

and that's what we're going to do." Stony silence and he doesn't take it well. "Do-do you want to be exiled? Or is this some sympathy plot for the humans? Are you going to give it back to them so they can try to bargain with it, only to get wiped out inside ten minutes?"

I push the gun harder, feeling the flesh in my hands dig down to the bone. "I don't know what I'm going to do," I admit finally. He takes a few steps forward and stops when I pull the trigger to ready, the ready whine biting and cutting off again. "But think about it: the Council are going to destroy it and the humans want it, which means there's something about it that they don't want in their primitive hands."

"Which is precisely why they should destroy it! These stupid creatures almost destroyed themselves, did destroy their own world, and you want to just hand them something that isn't native and that's potentially powerful enough to dislodge us? Don't you see why the Council want it dead?"

"You're completely missing it!" I don't want to turn the gun on him but it's extremely tempting. I entertain the thought for a few seconds. "Alright, you're my oldest friend, so let me do this. I'm going to explain it to you, and you're going to let me, and afterwards, you can do what the hell you like." He folds his arms with an overly dramatic sigh, giving me my chance.

I finally lift the gun away and take a seat on the box, resting the weapon between my legs against my thigh. "The humans have been taken to the brink of extinction by their own ruling bodies, so looking at their history highlights the warning markers in other societies, including ours. Now, we've only had the Council ruling for less than a thousand years and before that records don't exist. They've been phasing in all this genetic work in the last two decades, and in another few decades us, the OldGen, are going to be the minority, and then we're going to be outcasts. They can be as patient as they need to be for that too.

"They've marked the humans as little more than vermin and whipped up all this publicity about how evil they are. No focus on any positives. Just pure, unreal evil, and the NewGens are buying it, because the NewGen are completely under their control. In a few years, do you really think the Council isn't going to do the exact same thing to OldGen simply because we can think for ourselves? Hell, some of us willingly come down here to spend time with the so called 'enemy'. They can't totally control us, so we're a threat."

"A threat to what? How?"

"I don't totally know yet, but look at us right now. We're having a conversation that, if it were to happen inside any Exis building, we'd be killed immediately. We can and are thinking for ourselves, and for whatever reason, they don't want us thinking independently about this

creature. I don't know what it can do that they need to protect themselves from, or what it could do for the humans, but I've got enough sense to know that we can't let them have it back. This whole thing has been wrong from the start, and I'm not going to do something that I might have to watch people die because of in the future. Whether I have to shoot it here and now or give it to Gale, the Council isn't getting it."

"So, what do we tell the Council?"

"Burn a pink one up and take the body back. Far as I can tell they're much the same thing. We'll just hope they don't look too closely at it and let us live long and head-low lives."

For a long time nothing more is said, and I'm very aware of the sound of our breathing. I wonder if Gale is coming for us, and if the trade has gone ahead at the Wraithtrack. I hope it has, then Gale and I can watch to see what they would have tried to do with a blue schnooklybob without getting burned.

Finally, Hechem sighs and flexes his hand. The baton slides back up under his sleeve into the gauntlet. I flex the curved control on the gun and watch it power down, staring at the darkened controls for a few long seconds afterwards. I'm aware that Hechem has come close to me, examining the box. The schnooklybob kicks off again, sounding like it's throwing its body into the sides.

I stand when he gives me a look, taking a step away as he toes the box and knocks at the latch. The wall is against my back when he lifts the lock off, the panel squeaking a little before dropping open. The schnooklybob wastes no time in charging out, coming to an abrupt stop to examine us both before darting down the alleyway and into the shadows.

We watch it leave, and neither of us want to go home.

LITTLE NEON

MORGAN CHALFANT

I COME TO Edge Play to wet my knife. She's a ring dagger with a starshine blue blade. Her name is Little Neon. She wants her big sister back.

Edge Play is a place to bury grudges and bury steel in flesh. All legal. You could call it a club, but it's really a stiletto. Its entry corridor tapers like a double-edged poniard thrusting right into its own dirty heart. Prodding them. Poking them. Shocking them. *Go ahead. Use your synthetic tech. Kill all the fleshy parts. You have nothing to lose, and if you do, it can always be replaced by something stronger.*

A steel-mesh booth sets at the tip of the hallway. Inside stands Rivets, a man with more metal in him than my knife. The hallway splits like two open wounds. The left bleeds whiskey amber, the right gushes artery red. Above the booth, a strobe sign with two pink pocket knives. One's folded up and nice, the other's sprung and nasty.

Two ladyhawks in yellow fishnets, purple jack boots and carved up tank tops pay their toll and take the whiskey road. I'd love to follow them, but Neon's thirsty for blood, not beer. She doesn't need to speak. I can feel her urgency. It's a static storm through my palm.

Rivets holds up two thumbs, one in each direction. I motion right. I fork over two stained bills. He grabs them, sliding me a red ticket through the slot.

Edge Play's core is a maelstrom of acrid smoke, sweat, alcohol. An ever-lingering miasma of adrenaline, endorphins, and death. It's a microcosm of morbidity. Patrons line the blood-stained concrete walls. Tables lit with bright white lights ring the room. Acromegalic bouncers fasten chains to the ankles of a slender corpse, leaving a trail of blood and bile as they drag it away. The clawed fingernail implants rattle across the grated floor. She should have used the money to take a vacation far from here.

A buzzing vibrates in my ears. My arm hairs stand up. Little Neon has

found her sister. The dagger's message reverberates through my skin to the receptors in my brain.

Please free my sister.

I see him. A balding, muscular man with a lambent ocular implant. Errol Page. Thief. Kidnapper. It was a no brainer that he frequented the place. He stole the knife to use it. Big Neon is on the table in front of him, her sharp green gleam shrouded with gore.

I cross the room and stroll up to him. Little Neon trembles in my soot-blackened hand. My fingers tingle. Page takes a swig from his flask—not because he's thirsty, but to distract me.

"You stole something from me," I say. "And you kidnapped her sister." Little Neon glimmers, winking at her victim before she skewers him.

Without warning, he lunges for Neon's sister. Before he can grab it, Little Neon is buried to the hilt in Page's chest. A gasp reverberates. Page's wide eyes fall to Little Neon, sunk deep in his sternum. I withdraw her and his eyes close for good. Little Neon lights up when rejoined with her big sister.

Good friendships are forged in fire and blood.

HARD MEMORY

ADDISON SMITH

AN ETERNITY PASSED before the spent shell hit the pavement. The distant tink of metal on asphalt and the pounding of rain on trash cans barely registered at all. The man standing in front of Josh stared in disbelief.

"Oh—" he managed before folding to his knees. Rain and blood dripped down the front of his shirt. Josh stared at the pistol in his shaking hands, his fingers refusing to loosen their grip. A little red LED blinked from the butt of the gun, sending the signal to his comrades. Telling them that an officer had discharged his weapon, and to respond.

A crack of thunder shook him from his reverie. The rain continued to beat down around him. His gun clattered to the ground as he rushed to the fallen man.

"Shit!" He took his friend by the shoulders, rolling him onto his back. He was breathing, but blood began pooling in his lungs.

"Oh, God. Nick! Can you hear me?" Josh shook him, but all Nick did in response was stare up at the gray clouds. His lip twitched into a smile, and his eyes went still.

Josh checked his pulse, but knew he was gone. Scuttling to the safety of an awning, he watched his friend's motionless body.

It was only a few minutes before the red and blue lights flashed down the alley, finding him staring at the brick wall across from him, willing his mind to be anywhere else.

There was the solid thunk of a car door, then a voice shouting, "Josh! You alright?"

He ignored the voice and concentrated on the bricks. There were four hundred and twenty-seven in his sight. He could only see six-point-two percent of the building. That's 6,800-7,000 bricks total, allowing for deviation of gaps. He let his mind do the senseless figuring to avoid thinking about the body that lay before him.

"Jesus Christ," the voice said, "It's Nick."

Josh looked up at the officer as he put his finger to his temple and made the call. Officer down.

"What the hell happened, Josh?" the man asked.

"He got him," he said, his own voice sounding wrong to his ears. "The son of a bitch got him." He didn't need to explain. Everyone knew what case he was on. It had been offered to all of them, and Josh was the only one stupid enough to volunteer. The whole force had implants. The human brain just wasn't enough these days. Cops needed an edge. There's an advantage to doing all of your thinking with a blob of gray matter, though. You can't hack meat.

The officer looked around the alley.

"What were you doing out here?" he asked.

Following a lead. Josh wasn't sure if he said it out loud or not, but the officer didn't ask again. He walked off to his car, holding his jacket over his head to keep the rain off. When he came back, he draped a blanket over Josh's shoulders and led him back to his car. Josh looked back at the body in the alley. Nick was always smiling, but not like this. It was unnerving, the twist of his lips. It was like there was some cosmic joke that he finally got.

He ducked into the back of the squad car and stared straight ahead, into the tinted glass divider. The car dipped as the other officer took a seat up front. All he had to do was push a button and the glass would clear. When he didn't do it, Josh realized something. Something that had somehow escaped him.

He'd just shot a cop. His career was over.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

The inquiry lasted three days. Three days of dirty and confused looks from people he'd known half his life. They didn't know what to do with him, but the public sure did. They wanted him lynched.

Josh walked over to the counter in the bastardized kitchen/living room hybrid in his apartment. He dropped two individually wrapped packets of coffee grounds into his coffee maker, and a minute later was sitting down with a steaming cup of wake-me-up.

He booted up his dinosaur of a computer, waiting for the OS to load. It wasn't a very useful machine. He'd made it from spare parts that people had thrown out as bigger and better things came along. He didn't need it for much, though. He'd never even connected it to the network.

He grabbed his Procedure book from beside the keyboard. "You'd better study this," one of his friends had said, "they'll be looking for any excuse to get rid of you."

He flipped through the pages until he found what he was looking for.

A thin datastick, tucked up against the binding, a copy of what was in Nick's head when he died.

When I killed him.

He inserted the stick into one of the myriad open ports and began to dig.

He couldn't bring himself to look through the man's life, so he stayed out of the memory partition, except to run a quick search. An empty query sorted by most recent, limited to 10 results.

It was the same as the others. A mess of cheap hacks, a full frontal assault on the pleasure center of his brain. All rainbows and unicorns, so to speak. He went back further, sifting through more of the same until he found it. The last *real* memory before the bastard got into Nick's head.

It was a door. He recognized it from the memories of others, but didn't know the place himself. An olive-green door set in a red brick wall. He tried to look back at how Nick got there, but, also like the others, it was blanked out. It was as if everything before the door had been discarded, like it didn't matter anymore.

His implant noted his mood, and offered to stimulate endorphins. Josh disregarded it, never comfortable with mods that affect brain chemistry.

It was a game. He'd never told anyone else, but he was sure of it. If they could blank out the way there, they could blank out the door, too. Someone wanted him to see it. Someone wanted him to find the place.

Josh flitted through the memories of the other victims, all men and women who had snapped, just like Nick, and began attacking people. He went to that last coherent memory of each, before things started getting weird. Eight images, different views of the same door. He stared at each in turn, but still couldn't find a clue as to where the place was.

He sighed, then made copies of each of the files and dragged them to the side. He grabbed a cord and plugged one end into an open port, the other into the jack on his implant. Physical connections were practically archaic, even the datasticks were relics from a time passed, but he'd never trusted wireless connections. All of his important data traveling through the air, up for grabs. No thank you.

He opened the folders of his own implant and navigated to a folder marked Obsession. He smiled as he dragged the copied files into it. He may be an old fogey when it came to computers—the things kids did with them boggled his mind—but he had learned a few tricks. Like this folder, labeled Obsession because he'd jacked up its system resource consumption.

He unplugged the cord at both ends, then leaned back in his chair and stared up at the water-stained ceiling. Closing his eyes, Nick's face filled his vision, smiling as he lay dead on the wet pavement. *Who the hell did that to him?*

He let his chair call forward and tried to banish the image from his mind. His gray matter seemed to have an obsession folder of its own, because he couldn't shake it.

He looked for something to fill his time while his brain worked on those photos, and a business card taped to his monitor presented itself. Staring at the card, he wondered if the opportunity was still there.

"Hell," he said, "It's worth a try." Then he dialed the number.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

The restaurant was busy. Conversations flowed around him, coming from every direction imaginable. Except right in front of him. Clara hid behind her menu, under the pretext of deciding on the proper cut of steak. Only a few strands of blonde hair peeked over.

Clara had been close friends with both he and Nick. She'd even dated Nick for awhile, but that was long ago. Meeting was a bad idea. The Clara he once knew belonged to a different time too. Now he was a murderer, and that friendly glint was gone from her eyes.

"Find anything?" he asked.

She nodded but kept her silence. At last she lowered the menu a little, and he could see her eyes, set in a face that was too beautiful for him to have a chance with.

There was no avoiding it, then.

"How are you holding up?" he asked, waiting for the storm to come.

The menu dropped to the table. She gave him a conflicted look. Grief mixed with worry and embarrassment in the few lines of her face. She wore it well. Her eyes glistened, though, telling him what was on her face was only the surface.

"What happened?" she asked, and there was a thin crack to her voice. The kind of crack that gets a lot bigger if you make a wrong move.

"You saw the report, Clara. I—"

"No," she cut him off, "What happened to Nick. Before you—" she cut herself off now, unable to say the words. "Did you know?"

Josh shook his head. He'd had no idea. "He was acting a little funny. Like he was stuck in his head. He was smiling a lot, but that's just Nick. He was always smiling."

"Not lately," Clara said.

"What do you mean? He was always smiling."

"Josh, I haven't seen Nick smile for over a month. You wouldn't know that, though, would you?"

A month? It had been a while since he'd seen Nick. He'd just gotten caught up in the case, was all.

"And then?" she asked, stretching the words to breaking point.

"He snapped." Those frantic eyes appeared in his mind. Searching for

something. “Shouted at me. ‘Give it back!’” He looked for words to fill the silence. “You know I didn’t have a choice, Clara. He was a friend, but he drew a knife. He was coming at me.”

Clara touched his hand, but he could see the tension, the readiness to recoil. “I know, Josh. You did what you had to do.”

Silence surrounded them both, even penetrating to some of the tables around them. “You should take a vacation. Even when they let you come back, it won’t be the same.”

She was right. He’d always be treated differently.

She stood from the table and grabbed her coat from the chair. “I’ll see you around, Josh.” Then she left.

Josh sat alone until the waiter came by to take his order.

“Just wine,” he said. “Cheap.”

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Josh hated to admit it, but Clara was right. He needed some time to get past what had happened; the whole department did. It would be best if he wasn’t hanging around the office.

Chief Alton thumbed through the request form, nodding. “I was going to suggest this anyway,” he said. “You could use a vacation.” He stamped a big red “APPROVED” on the form, and looked at Josh.

“You remember when you started here?” the chief asked.

“Yes, sir. Eighteen years ago in September.” Nick joined the following year, a rookie fresh from the academy.

“Yeah, I remember. We had you in record keeping back then, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Josh said.

“It just happens we have a spot open in record keeping,” the chief said, and Josh’s eyes glazed over. Memories of paperwork flitted through his mind like so many dry, dull pages. “Just something to consider.”

“I—” Josh started, but held back his snappy response. “I don’t think it suits me anymore, sir.”

“Maybe not. But you’re getting of an age. Mull it over.”

“Yes, sir.” Josh said. As he was leaving the office, he turned to ask the question that burned in his mind, “What about my case?”

Chief Alton stared up at him, too intently for Josh’s comfort. He stood, walked around the desk and put a hand on Josh’s shoulder. “I’ll get someone on it. We’ll get the bastard who got Nick.”

He didn’t say as much, but Josh could read between the lines. He’d just been knocked off the case.

“Enjoy your vacation.”

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Josh didn’t resist when the two burly men led him out of the bar. To be fair, he couldn’t put up much resistance with the world spinning around

him. They set him on the concrete step behind the bar, next to the garbage, he realized. It seemed fitting.

"Come back when you're sober, pops," one of the muscle-shirted men said, then tousled Josh's hair. Inside, Josh fumed. *Treating me like a kid. I'm a grown man. I'm a goddamned cop.*

He turned to the heavy metal door to vent his frustration, but the men were gone. He slammed his closed fist into the concrete step, reveled in the release and the pain it came with. His knuckles were scraped, little bits of rock digging into the skin. A red tinge of blood came to the surface.

He looked out at the alley, littered with refuse, bathed in the red glow of a neon sign. *I have to get out of here.*

He knew he couldn't drive, so he walked toward the back of the building, and turned what he figured was the right way to get home. It was no short walk. He'd picked a bar far from home so he wouldn't run into any old friends. That'd happened the day before. He'd shrugged off their downcast eyes, comforting pats on the back. That's not what he needed. What he needed was an answer. He needed to know why Nick was dead—why someone had done that to him.

He walked for a while, doing his best to stay in the middle of the alley, between the backs of the various seedy businesses. Before he got to the end of the alley his implant started giving him the electronic equivalent of a nudge. He ignored it. Something more pressing was brewing in his stomach and working its way up his throat.

Hanging his head over the side of a dumpster, he threw up. The tang of bile filled his mouth. That nudge in his brain persisted. He spat several times, then sat on the ground.

If only it were raining, he thought, looking at the bricks across the stretch of pavement, *I'd be back in that alley again. Watching Nick's blood washing down the drain.*

He banished the thought. Whatever he needed that night, that wasn't it.

The nudge from his implant persisted. He gave in to it, letting his mind focus on what it was showing him. Something he had seen, just a moment ago.

He looked up across the alley at a door. An olive-green door set in a red brick wall.

A clamminess overtook him, goosebumps raising to nubs on his arms and legs.

It looked just like it had in the memories. An olive green door, a post on each side. The rest of the building was different, though. It was a motel. He'd seen it a hundred times. It had white vinyl siding on all sides; all sides except the back.

He hobbled over to the door. There was a flyer taped to it. He tore it off as he steadied himself.

He's in there. The bastard is in there.

He reached down to his belt. *Damn,* he cursed when he didn't find a gun at his hip. There was no way of knowing what he'd find inside. Maybe the hacker wasn't even there. Maybe he wasn't even dangerous. Could be some pudgy kid sitting at his computer.

But maybe he was.

Either way, he couldn't wait. He couldn't let more people fall victim while he tried to talk the station into sending backup. He walked back to the dumpster and pulled out a length of wood, wadding the flyer up in his other hand. He tested the club's weight. It would have to do.

The door was only feet away; the answer he was looking for would be his. He was irrationally happy, finally closing in.

He raised the wood above his head and slowly turned the knob. It was unlocked. *He's mine.*

He pushed the door open.

The wooden club fell to his side, as he took in the scene.

It was a large room. He wasn't sure what it used to be, but it had been repurposed for conferences. A couple of teenagers sat on the floor, staring at something sitting on the table. There was a body seated there. Josh covered his mouth to block the week-old rot that assailed his nose. A pencil stuck out of an eye socket, and a skinny arm was reaching toward something, the thing the kids were staring at. A wireless transmitter.

The signal intruded on Josh's mind. He couldn't help but smile as the pleasure infected him. It was just like the clueless smiles of the teenagers, but he knew the horrible truth behind it.

He picked up the flyer that he'd dropped with his club and read it. Key words and phrases leaped out at him. "Depression treatment," "electronically assisted minds." He dropped it and laughed out loud, grinning at the transmitter.

This is it.

He walked toward the transmitter, about to turn it off, when it stopped.

The pleasure lingered for a moment, but it was just another virus. His implant fought it off quickly. He grasped at the feeling as it washed away, and wanted to claw at the emptiness, to save what he could of that perfect feeling, that absolute euphoria. He clutched at the table, trying to steady himself.

The kids on the floor were looking around, still grinning broadly. How long had they been exposed to it? How long before they would fight it off? He'd only had a taste, and the emptiness it left was an unbearable ache. How would they react?

He stared at them, at their familiar smiles, and knew exactly how they'd react.

Just like Nick did.

Give it back! Nick shouted in his mind.

The teenaged boy stood and helped the girl up as well. They looked lost, but happy. They were heading for the door. He couldn't let them out, not into the city. They would hurt someone.

"This way," Josh said, and they followed his gesturing hand without a care. He led them to the closet and closed the door as they smiled out at him. The girl even laughed.

Josh looked at the body in the chair. It didn't have an implant. Someone probably killed him when he tried to turn off the device. He was just trying to help.

There was no hacker.

He'd been chasing someone that didn't exist. It was just some guy trying to help people.

Josh reached for his phone and was about to make the call to the station. They needed to know, to see if they could help these kids.

The undeniable pleasure washed through him again, filling the emptiness. The green LED on the transmitter blinked at him from the table.

He walked toward it, grinning widely as it infected his implant. His Obsession folder stopped sending him information about the door as the files were overwritten, and the system resources were devoted to that perfect euphoria.

He reached a hand out to the device, skin tingling with excitement, mind numb with joy.

His hand touched it, then stopped.

Nick, he thought. *Clara. My job.*

He dropped his hand and took a seat on the floor.

His lips twitched into a smile.

Maybe just a few more minutes.

ONE SURVIVOR

NEIL JAMES HUDSON

IF A GHOULBOT lands on you, it thinks you are about to die. One landed on me. I was reading a children's book, something about a wizard, all that I could manage at that time of the morning, when the tiny device landed on my finger, covering a chip in my nail varnish. At first I thought it was an adbot and I moved to flick it away, but then I saw the characteristic grey colour and stopped, suddenly brought out of reverie into reality.

It was larger than a fly, smaller than a wasp, and to my mind more annoying than either. Its tiny wings were modelled on natural insects', but were supposed to be more efficient. I doubted this, preferring to believe that nature had the edge on us. Its head, I knew, housed a tiny camera that seemed to be staring directly at me, and its body contained a computer more powerful than anyone could have dreamed of thirty years ago. I couldn't tell if it came from one of the major news organisations, or if it was someone's personal device.

Although it had made me alert, I assumed it was a stray. After all, the bots had to be somewhere when there was nothing for them to observe, and they were a common enough sight on the subway—their artificial intuition sent them here looking for action, but that didn't mean they'd find any. Other types of bots did the same; as I'd descended the escalator on the way to the platform I'd seen a young woman surrounded by a cloud of sexbots. Of course she was perfectly well dressed and behaved, but the bots clearly thought she was worth keeping an eye on. I felt it must be nice to be singled out as a sexual being like this, although she just seemed embarrassed. In any case, there was nothing for the bots to see. (They never followed me of course, and I seldom saw them with men, either.)

But I couldn't help looking around the carriage to see if there was anything that I'd missed. I hated bots at the best of times—they reminded me of Garrett—and I hated the ghoulbots in particular. Their ability to

process so much information meant that they could anticipate action and tended to show up a little before the event they were recording occurred. Many people had escaped death by using them as a warning. Most of my companions were putting all of their effort into avoiding the gaze of their fellow passengers, and I wondered how they had any energy left to read their papers, books, and devices. No one seemed particularly troubled by the bots.

At the far end of a carriage was a man who seemed to be more ignored than the rest of us put together. Three bots helicoptered around his head. I couldn't tell from this distance what kind they were, but I was guessing that they weren't sexbots. He was blonde, with short hair and sideburns. I suddenly noticed that he was looking very, very nervous.

Oh hell, I thought, and made to get up, but I was too late.

My memories after that aren't clear. Screams, some from people, some from metal. Shouting. Blood. I can't always fit the visual memories to the audio. I don't remember being in pain for some time—not until I was in hospital, I think. I don't remember the explosion itself, oddly enough, but I do remember thinking that there'd been one. I remember the passenger whom I'd been flung onto; the coroner said that it was probably me that had killed him.

And what I remember more than anything else was the claustrophobia. The crushing knowledge that I couldn't just break a window and climb out into safety. It was knowing that we were underground, that it might not be possible to climb out of the train. I had an irrational fear that the explosion and the crash might have caused some structural damage to the tunnel, and that we would find ourselves entombed, suffering a death that would be slow and terrifying for us, but efficient and convenient for those who walked above.

In fact, I was trapped in the carriage for most of the day. The emergency services wouldn't enter the tunnel until they knew there was no further danger, and as that meant another bomb, they could never know for sure. They quarantined my carriage, rescued the largely unharmed from the other compartments, and saved me until last. I spent my day with corpses. No one else in the carriage survived. I cowered against the dead passenger, unsure if I had survived myself, covered in blood that I eventually discovered was mostly that of other people, people who would no longer be using it. Every now and then I imagined that someone had spoken, that one of the corpses was trying to get to its feet. I tried to keep my eyes shut, desperate not to see the unattached limbs and other signs of carnage. When a rescuer finally entered through the door at the end of the carriage, I screamed, believing him one of the living dead, come to claim me.

It's so important to keep my memories straight about what happened, because of course the whole disaster was so carefully recorded and broadcast by the ghoulbots. I have watched it myself, many times, and I always feel removed from it. It's as if I'm watching a television programme that I know I watched as a child, but which I don't really remember any more. I know it would be too easy to allow this recording, this vicarious second-hand experience of the explosion, to take the place of my original memory. But I have to keep it straight, because my original memory has a value, far more so than the recording made by the bots, no matter how much money it may have made its owners.

I remember the blonde man. But I don't remember his corpse, nor does he appear in the recording. He knew what was about to happen.

⁂

I'd like to say that this was what sent me to the recording in the first place, that this was what made me sit in front of a screen and watch my commute to work transform into a day spent lying with corpses: a desire to solve the mystery, get to the truth, or just to find out how the only other survivor had managed it. It was no such thing. I went to the recording out of vanity.

Not in the sense that I wanted to gaze at my own beauty or watch my grace under pressure. Neither was much in evidence on that day. But I discovered that I had a fan club.

When I came out of hospital I had three thousand e-mails waiting for me, and I deleted them unread. I then spent some time finding out how to set up filters to stop any messages that weren't important. But the volume was so high that a few came through, and many of them seemed kind enough to deserve a reply. They were mostly messages of support, expressing relief that I'd gotten out of the carriage alive and wishing me well. I put out of my mind the fact that all of these people knew me only from the ghoulbot recording, and that they had only watched this recording to see people die.

I felt a need to watch the recording myself, simply to try to understand where these people were coming from. I didn't give it a lot of thought, didn't worry too much about what effect it would have on me. I had lived through the real terror, I thought: a scary movie was nothing.

It was simple enough to find the recording–the messages frequently linked to it. There were several versions—after all, disasters attract many ghoulbots. But most of them had arrived too late. There were two or three recordings that had been made from before the explosion, and one of them was the clear favourite.

I had to pay to download. I was a bit upset about this, feeling that, as star of the show, I should have had a complimentary copy. For all I knew I could have got one, but I wasn't inclined to draw attention to myself by asking for it.

I had not forgotten the bot that I had seen seconds before the disaster, but I was surprised that the film began with my face, about to swat the device out of the way. The most popular version of the disaster was the one that had been filmed by the bot that landed on my book. I watched my own face suddenly wake up, stare at the tiny recorder, then glance around the carriage.

The bot glanced with me. It turned around in front of me, and focused on the other people in the carriage. And then the bot shifted towards the ceiling, for a better view of the carnage.

I suppose I should be thankful that I didn't do anything really stupid in the hour or two after I watched the recording for the first time. I cried a lot, and remember lying on the kitchen floor in misery. Only the next day did I discover that I had emptied every single bottle of toiletries that I owned down the sink—I had to go out to buy more shampoo and shower gel. I still have no memory of doing this, nor can I guess at what was going through my mind at the time. It had been stupid of me to watch it alone. But, I survived the viewing just as I'd survived the original disaster, and despite the clear evidence of a disordered mind, felt that I'd come away stronger.

Another message came through the next day. "You have a lot of friends out there," I read. "Don't worry about the other group."

I should have stopped there; it was easy enough to guess what "the other group" was up to. But it was also easy enough to find. "Supporters of Survivors," the group that was expressing relief at my survival, had over eight thousand members. "The Bitch Should Have Died With the Rest of Them" had well over two hundred thousand, and was growing every day. Without thinking too hard, I added my own name to the membership list.

But the one thing I didn't do was delete the recording. I knew that I had to watch it again. Over and over again. Because my memory and the ghoulbot's disagreed, and I knew that I was right. I could see now why the police investigation was getting nowhere. I had given testimony, as much as I could, but the recording of the incident contradicted it. The ghoulbot had looked into the corner of the carriage, and there had been no one there. No blonde man with short hair and sideburns, nervous at the explosion that he was about to cause. No terrorist, no suicide bomber, no living body to go with no corpse. He hadn't been there. It had been a fantasy of the disaster's only survivor.

Except, it wasn't, and I was determined to prove it.

⁂

And so, I found myself getting in touch with the man I hated most in the world.

I once had an affair with Garrett Browning. I thought it was a

relationship, but his other girlfriends disagreed, as I learnt when we finally discovered each other. That was not the reason why I left him. The reason was that I found out what he was working on.

The bots were still a relatively new invention, and were still being used for relatively benign purposes—crime detection and news reporting, mostly. It was quite clear that they would be used for increasingly voyeuristic purposes, but those who said so could still be portrayed as doomsayers. (Garrett once called me a Cassandra, and didn't seem impressed when I told him that Cassandra was always right.)

Garrett had taken a bot which was designed to loiter in known mugging areas, given it a few tweaks, and caused it to loiter in public toilets; in particular, ladies' toilets, where it filmed whatever it could. He was designing a waterproof version, which could sit in the bowl and film upwards.

That was not what had made him rich. What had made him rich was the device that he sold which temporarily disabled the bots' software, so you could pee in privacy. I had one myself, which had cost thirty dollars.

When I'd found out what he was up to, I'd thrown a wine glass at his face. It had hit him on the forehead and left him with a small scar. If he'd kept his mugging bots intact they would have recorded the incident, but they were busy with other matters, and there's never a policebot around when you need one.

I was surprised that he agreed to a meeting so readily. I was a little less surprised when I realised that I was beginning to attract bots, and sexbots in particular. I felt dirty, as if I were being followed by Garrett dressed in a dirty raincoat and his mother's underwear. In itself they meant nothing, but they were looking for a story and they hoped that I was going to deliver. I supposed that Garrett being visited by a young woman was always worth hanging around in case there was something worth recording, but I suspected that the interest I was causing to these microcameras was due to Garrett's own interest. If he thought I was going to do the dreary "oh-it's-been-so-long-I-can't-resist-you" routine, he thought wrong; I'd resist him to my last breath.

As far as I could tell, all of Garrett's homes were holiday homes; he seemed to live in his offices, and it was here that I was directed to meet him. His secretary was, to my surprise, a man both younger and more attractive than his boss. He invited me to wait on a couch while Garrett cleared his desk. I wondered if part of his job was to keep the visitors busy when Garrett had too much going on. I was trying to keep such thoughts out of my mind, if only to avoid sending out any signals to the sexbots, but it was his smile that did it more than anything else—a smile that seemed to know that it shouldn't be there, but that as long I was smiling as well, it

could just be our secret. I was relieved when Garrett finally asked me to enter.

I had been right about his living in the offices. The room contained not a desk and a computer, but a bed and a wardrobe. It resembled a hotel room rather than any personal space, but nonetheless the conversion had been absolute. Garrett sat on the end of the bed, apparently pleased to see me.

"Elisabeth," he said, with a smile I appreciated far less than that of his secretary. "How can I help you?"

I waved at the flying devices around my head. "Nothing to see here, Garrett."

He shrugged, then pushed at a button by the side of the bed. Slowly the bots began to dissipate. "You never know what you're missing without them," he said. "But it's easy to convince them there's no story here."

"They can be switched off as easily as that?"

"Not switched off. Just told that the trail's gone cold. It's the same system as with my Privatiser."

"But you can do it with any of them?"

"Not as easy with the other bots. They weren't designed for it, remember."

I remembered too much and tried to concentrate on what I'd come for. "I want to know how easy it is to fake their recordings."

"Fake?" He frowned. "Why would you want to do that?"

"Not fake, then. Alter. If someone were present at an accident, and a bot recorded it, how easy would it be to wipe it from the memory?"

"A hypothetical question, I take it?" He sounded smarmy, and I was about to make a cutting response when he held his hand up. "Elisabeth, of course I heard about your accident. I was devastated. And all those others! It's not what they were designed for." I remembered that Garrett always sounded uncaring, but this didn't necessarily mean he didn't care. "So let me guess. You witnessed someone at the accident who didn't show up on the recording. The police are telling you he wasn't there, but you know he was."

I couldn't think of anything to say.

"There's a lot of them around, and if you can track one of them down, so much the better."

"Who are they? Some religious group?"

He laughed out loud. "They're directors," he said. "They make films. You can wait all day for a tragedy, and nothing happens. So they carry their own ghoulbots around, and make sure something does. A little bit of post-production to help cover their tracks, and they've got a million-grosser."

"He blew the train up—just so he could film it? Why?"

"If you ask him, he'll tell you it's for the money. There's a lot of money in these recordings, and they always say it's the money. But it's not, it's never the money. They just get themselves in, and they can't get themselves out again. They're stuck in the doorway because they've eaten too much, and they can't get themselves out."

I badly wanted to sit on the bed, but I was worried that the sexbots would come back. "How do I find him?"

"They're not perfect," he said. "There'll be a mistake. Go through it frame by frame. Sooner or later, there'll be something there that shouldn't be—something that points to a deleted element. That's your best hope."

I nodded, and to my surprise he held his hand out. I shook it. "Good luck," he said. "Take him down."

His secretary smiled at me on the way out, but I didn't smile back.

⁜⁜⁜

I took a bus home. I still hadn't convinced myself to use the tube again. I sat near the front, ignoring the other passengers, trying to make sense of what I'd learnt.

The man was real. He'd brought his sideburns, his bots, and his explosives, all for the purposes of the recording. I had been the star of his show of course, but he'd been careful not to get on set himself. I had to find him.

A sexbot landed on my chest and I brushed it off angrily. I guessed that whatever Garrett had done would not last forever, and that sooner or later they'd be back looking for a story.

Except, there wasn't going to be one because I was just going home. I looked again; the bot was now two seats in front, staring at me. It was grey; a ghoulbot.

Just because there's a ghoulbot doesn't mean there's going to be an accident, I thought, but of course that had been exactly what I'd thought last time. I looked around, trying not to be noticed.

There was one on top of the ticket dispenser.

There was one flying around on the stairs.

There was one crawling up the back of a passenger standing and holding on to a strap.

That looked like one on the floor.

I jumped up and ran for the door, but we weren't near a stop. "I have to get off," I shouted at the driver.

"Next stop is Baltimore Street," he said calmly.

Five minutes away. "Now!" I said.

"Can't do it, lady," he said, not looking at me. Nor at the ghoulbot that was stationary on his left arm, pointing towards me.

There were two doors. The emergency exit was in the middle of the

bus. I made my way back, but the traffic was moving fast. If I jumped out, there was every possibility that I'd break a limb, or worse.

There was a scream of a siren, and sudden braking. The driver swore, and I saw that an ambulance had pulled out in front of us. I grabbed at the emergency handle and yanked it hard, opening the door.

"Hey," called the driver, but I jumped onto the pavement. It was hard and I hurt myself, but not so badly that I couldn't jump straight up and start running, away from the bus. People were staring at me but no one tried to stop me as I raced away from the impending tragedy. An inquisitive newsbot followed me, but I was too puzzling to be a story and it soon gave up.

It was about five minutes before I finally realised that the explosion hadn't happened. Perhaps I'd panicked; more likely, I felt, he'd realised that once I was off the bus, there was no point going through with it. I'd spoilt the show. Just like I'd spoilt the first one. "The Bitch Should Have Died With the Rest of Them," I remembered. The director's leading lady had let him down, but had raised the possibility of a sequel.

I had to find out who he was.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

I wondered if I was safe at home, but I knew I'd be warned of any impending attack by a swarm of bots looking for a story, and I suspected that the director would want a more public event. So I locked myself away, put the movie on the screen, and watched the passengers die, again, frame by frame. I watched my own terror, and felt pity for myself, no longer conscious of being the same person. I felt like an innocent bystander, desperate to help the injured and dying in front of me, but unable to do so. And when I saw the frightened, screaming woman at the front of the carriage, drenched in the blood of others, with no way out but through madness, I vowed that I'd avenge her.

And I knew who would suffer my vengeance. The man with short hair, sideburns, and a rucksack that he left in the carriage as he dashed through to the next one, not wishing to become a victim of his own atrocity. Invisible to the camera; unlike his panicked reflection in the window opposite. He'd deleted his own image from the film, but forgotten to check for reflections.

Once I had his image, I had him. It was simple enough to get software that ran through the web looking for matches. He'd done his best to get himself deleted, but there are always accidents. He'd altered his picture in his High School records, for example, but his original likeness was still in the background of other sporting shots. He was in the background of various news items, usually terrorist atrocities. I was surprised to find some photos of himself as a child; he hadn't bothered to delete them, but my software was able to identify them as the same person.

Raoul Matheson had not managed to hide from me.

I found out as much as I could about him. He was net-shy, but facts got through. He worked in IT, although I couldn't find out what it was that he did. He lived in a neighbouring state, but seemed to create his movies in this one, perhaps hoping to throw the authorities off the scent. He clearly felt he was very, very clever.

I set my trap.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

I was bait already, so there wasn't that much that I had to do. I rode the subway at regular times every day and waited for the alarm.

Garrett had given me a detector. It simply showed the number of bots in close vicinity. It was fascinating to see how many there were; I had become good at ignoring them, and they had become good at hiding. But I could forget about most of them. The detector alerted me whenever a ghoulbot came near. I had a couple of false alarms, but finally I was alerted, saw the familiar grey shape in front of me, and then saw the familiar short blonde hair and sideburns at the other end of the carriage.

It was the sequel. My heart pounding, I rose from my seat and walked as calmly as possible over to Raoul Matheson, who was pretending not to have seen me. I took out another device that Garrett had given me.

He nearly leapt out of his skin when I addressed him directly. "This is a Privatiser," I said. "It's like the one I use on the toilet, except it works with ghoulbots."

I activated it, and was pleased to see a certain confusion sink into the bot that hovered near his head.

"They'll record nothing now," I said. "I suggest you leave."

Trying to cover his face, he squeezed through the passengers towards the door. We'd be at another stop soon. I took a box from my handbag, and unleashed my other gift from Garrett. A bot of my own. Far larger than normal, and jet black. It homed in on Raoul Matheson, who catapulted himself from the carriage as soon as the doors opened. My bot followed him. He didn't seem to have left anything behind, but I took the precaution of leaving the train myself.

I spoke into the communicator that Garrett had given me. "I take it you can still hear me, Mr. Matheson? There're all sorts of ways you can alter a bot, if you have the resources. This is working on the same basis as an adbot, except that the message it will be giving you is from me."

I made for the escalator. I could still see him in front of me, and noticed that other bots were joining him. "That's a nice collection of ghoulbots you have there, Mr Matheson," I said. "I wonder what they're hoping for."

I waited until I was at the top of the escalator and walked out into the street.

"Presumably my new bot has attached itself to you? Don't try and get rid of it, you don't know what it might do. I'm sorry, Mr Matheson, you're not a director any more. You're a bit-part extra."

I was trying to give him time to get away. Not from me, but from anyone else. I didn't want to risk anyone else's safety. I suspected he was running, away from public transport, away from people. (A few days later I would be able to download this movie; the running man, arms flailing, pushing through people, head in a cloud of insect recorders, with one black device firmly attached to the side of his face. He knew what was happening, better than I did.)

"This is for everyone you harmed, for everyone you killed, for everyone whose minds you polluted," I said, "But most of all, this is for me."

And I detonated the bot.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

"Got him!" I shouted.

"Already?" said Garrett, from the other side of the room. I was sat on his bed, but he knew I would never get back in it.

"This is good software," I said. "Much better than anything I've ever used."

"I told you so. Who is it?"

I turned the laptop round so that he could see. A fire in a cinema; two hundred died, not in the fire but in the crush to get to the exits. And in two frames, a bearded man, thin and unkempt, wearing glasses, but still identifiable with the right software.

"I'll just run a search to find him on the internet. Then we'll think what to do with him tomorrow."

"In the meantime—" said Garrett hopefully.

"In the meantime, I'm going to my room, locking the door, and turning on my Privatiser. This is a strictly business arrangement."

He did his best to look disappointed. "Let's make sure we do it properly, then," he said. "We need to make sure we get the rights to this one."

Raoul Matheson's head had exploded not just in the park near the subway, but all over the internet. It seemed that every ghoulbot in the world had recorded it, and I hadn't made a dime from it. Gallingly, a studio in China had claimed the rights to the footage, and Garrett had advised me not to draw attention to myself by disputing it.

But there were other ghoul-directors, he pointed out. If I'd found one, I could find the rest. I could rid the world of the plague, and make a fortune for doing so. In partnership with him, of course.

I looked again at the bearded man on the screen in front of me. I imagined how he would look with his head blown apart, or his skin burning

and blistering, or his body subject to a hundred tortures and disasters of my own choosing; all carefully recorded and made available to the public, at a price of course.

Sometimes I feel as if Matheson had killed me after all. I feel as if a bot had got into my own head, and began eating all the good parts and replacing them with parts that had been designed by someone else, someone that wanted me to be a director. I felt, sometimes, as if I were a creation of Matheson's, that he lived through me, and that the only revenge, the only escape, would be to leave this life, to get away from the ghoulbots and the movies, and go back to being someone I liked; and I remembered what Garrett had said, how people got in and couldn't get out again.

"Tomorrow," I said, and I went to my own room, and slept without nightmares.

RECURSION BY NASHVILLE MOONLIGHT

NATHAN BATCHELOR

STEP 2: CONDITION

Second Principle for Jackies: Pain and pleasure are fleeting. They are brain states. If you despise a brain state, remember: there is a worm for that.

—Granny Merle

DANIELA PRESSED HER ear against the sweating concrete wall and listened.

"I mean—c'mon—you can't believe in angels," a man said. He lisped his s's.

"They are real, Picotte," the other man said, his voice so deep bits of dust and concrete rattled in the wall crevices. His voice would have tickled her ear, if she wasn't afraid for her life.

She'd snapped awake when she heard the electric bolts from the door hiss open, heart blasting and adrenaline telling her: *move*. She'd pulled veiny purple and green wires from her neck, her thighs. When she pulled the wire from the jacky socket at the back of her neck, it felt like she was pulling her brain out, same as removing a scabbed booger after a midnight nose bleed. Her eyes watered the way they do when there's dust trapped between the contact and the eye. But her brain hadn't come out—as far as she could tell.

Wires, sagging with synth-fat and tissue, budded from the Sleeping Beauty slab like some thousand-legged monstrosity. There was the low hum of a generator somewhere and the smell of gasoline. Her brain was mud and her flesh smelled of formaldehyde.

A Sleeping Beauty slab meant surgery, but when she came away from the wall where the men talked and stared at herself naked in the full-body mirror in the grand antiquated bathroom, she saw no Humpty Dumpty

lines where she had been put back together. Perhaps the damage had been internal. Perhaps the men in the adjacent room were nurses, waiting for her to wake so they could bring her synth-sausage and orange juice. But what damage? What surgery? When she tried to think, more mud.

There was a red sequined dress on a bed that reeked of mildew. She went to the window, where the city of Nashville blinked, its streets a server main, lights from the towers where the lucky ones—mostly rich, all well connected—lived, lights from the fires where the street dwellers kept the flies away.

She wasn't from a tower. She remembered that much: her career working the Suicides, her life as a child running along the banks of the Tennessee, back when she was a . . . well, it's not like she ever felt like a boy. All *those* memories were intact.

On the street beneath her, there were three men swinging clubs at a fourth who lay motionless in a puddle of rain and blood. There was a girl banging a trashcan with her foot like a kickdrum. She sang a country song.

Daniela found a card that read Riverside at Nashville Hotel. She must be here for a job. She was a jacky after all, one-part entertainer, one-part whore, all parts willing. She guessed there must have been some serious drugs pumped through her system: ghostbuster or pipe-cleaner. But she didn't have the dry mouth that followed ghostbuster or the ringworm that came with pipe-cleaner. Odd. Best get to work, sort out the details later.

She stood naked in front of the bathroom mirror and marveled at how much her shoulders looked like her mother's. Funny. Her aunts used to pinch her fat cheeks and say she was a spitting image of her daddy. How the tides turn with some hormone worms. She slid the dress over her head.

Both parents were dead now, both choosing the state option for suicide at fifty-five, Daddy's neck, knee, and shoulder cartilage worn away from four decades of swinging a pick-axe mantle-deep in the earth, and Mamma couldn't stand to be away from her honey bear—even those terrible things Dad yell at her*: I know you fuck around when I'm away; probably why your son's a goddamn tranny, I know.*

During her live funeral, her mother had pressed her hand to the glass as that green death lit up her IV like a bleached Christmas tree. Daniela's acetone tears—another side effect of the hormone worms—washed away her scarlet fingernail polish. The same worms that would have repaired Daddy's cartilage and Mamma's broken heart, but they were too stuck in the old ways to let those worms burrow through their guts and heal them from the inside out.

"The kind that come down and save somebody?" Picotte said.

"Absolutely," said the man with the deep voice.

Daniela did her eyes and put on the black lipstick left for her on the

counter. She opened the door and looked at the two men sitting in metal chairs in a wide, dark room. There was a third chair there, and she thought she was supposed to sit there.

⁂

STEP 1: VARIABLE DECLARATION

First Principle for Jackies: Leave your baggage at the door. What came before is gone. There is nothing but you and the client.

The fat man leaned up from his motorized bed, tilted his head across the desk at Daniela. He pointed a finger the texture and size of a pickle at the clipboard in front of him. "Says here you were a boy before. That's good. Clients will pay extra for that. Can you change it still?"

Daniela nodded.

"Let's see it."

Granny Merle's office was drowning in the blue glow of his computer screens. Granny Merle's Jacking Service fit right in on the Tennessee waterfront, among a dozen neon-signed honky-tonks, whorehouses, and Argentinian worm farms. On the radio, some old twentieth-century guitar picker sang a weeping song. Daniela glanced back at the waiting room. There was a woman with her legs drawn up, sleeping. She was missing her lower jaw. Botched suicide, and couldn't afford the worms, Daniela thought. Poor girl. Daniela could always spot them, her superpower, granted from ten years working the Suicides—suicide phone hotlines that now employed some thirty percent of the working population.

Daniela lifted her skirt.

"Good, good," said the fat man, staring down at Daniela's female config. "Now let's see the other config."

"I don't wanna," Daniela said. She shouldn't be here. She should have passed Granny's waterfront office and kept on walking. Maybe even picked up a phone and called the Suicides herself.

"Of course, honey. I don't like the sound myself. But the jackers will want to see it. You gotta get used to it. Granny Merle's seen it all."

The sound was the least of it. Seeing the flesh transform, seeing the worms tear and destroy the skin was worse. Then the feeling of having your sex discombobulated into a pulsating jelly before it grew into the other config—that took some getting used to. Having that flesh that was so intertwined with your identity disappear and change. Daniel had talked down dozens of failed sex changes from the Seigenthaler bridge. 10.1 percent success rate at keeping callers alive, much higher than the 6.5

average across the southern states. She even had a plaque in her room on the pontoon boat she lived out of.

Daniela clenched her teeth, balled her fists, and changed her config to that forgotten one, the one she hadn't used her adult life—besides the week after surgery, when it still seemed like a party trick to her friends. She was always changing then, just because she could.

There was a crunching like someone dealing with a mouthful of peanuts. A trickle of blood dripped from between her legs. She turned back to Granny and lifted her skirt again.

"Not bad," Granny said, fingers clicking against a keyboard, glare reflecting from his oversized glasses. "Now tell me why you turned in your old line of work—the Suicides, it says here. Is that right?"

"Yes . . . I couldn't take it anymore," Daniela lied.

"People became jackies for two reasons. They want to really live, or they want to really die. Which are you, dear?"

"Live."

Granny licked his lips. He took off his glasses. He knew she was lying. "Look. You need a reason to live—happens to everybody, nowadays. Why don't you . . . you know . . . *self*?" He was pointing to her skirt.

He was talking about self-replication. Once frowned upon, now, with the suicide epidemic, encouraged. Designer male configs came with designer gametes, but no one had figured out how to make functioning ovaries. So she was out of luck. That was the excuse she used, anyway.

"Families downtown are paying big money for *selfed* babies. You could make a business proper out of it. People do it all the time."

This wasn't about the money. It was about what she wanted.

"I was born a boy," she said. "I want this. I want to be a jacky."

She followed him down a hall that branched from his office. The engine that powered the wheels of his bed spat black smoke and gas fumes. She felt woozy. They came to what looked like a garage, metal objects caked in grease, a man hovering a blowtorch over an ancient yogi's leg, carving a tattoo with plasma.

"Sit," Granny said.

The seat was one of those reclining exam tables like what doctors use. There was a metal arm hooked up to a joystick that loomed over her like a monstrous tentacle. The metal wheezed and groaned as Granny moved its tip against her neck.

"Do you accept the responsibilities of a jacky? To give yourself up for the pleasure of others?" Granny asked.

"Yes."

"This may include acts you find morally or personally repulsive, such as, but not limited to, smoking, consumption of plant and animal and

human flesh, acts of violence to yourself and others, such as chocking, maiming, skinning, burning, the breaking of bone, the excision of certain body parts, the—"

"Excision?"

"Granny covers all expenses to regrow organs and limbs—the excision of certain body parts, the possibility of death."

What's it matter? She thought. The laser eye of the arm felt like hot water on her neck.

"Don't worry. That part scares everybody. Have you died before?"

Not technically. Not the death of cells and organs he was talking about.

But she had died a different death. An icy ache filled her chest when she thought of it. Fourth grade prom and dancing with a girl in a red-sequined dress. That was back when things were simpler. Her name was Catelyn—Cat. She laid her head against Daniel's chest. That was all it took. And from that moment on, until this one, Daniel was in love. When Cat smiled, Daniel wanted to pinch her cheeks, wanted to put his face against hers and keep it there until the Earth became a frozen desert, just like the scientists said would happen before the decade was out. That was how the death began. It hurt too much to think of how it ended.

The drill of the metal arm began to whirr, the drill that would burrow into her brain and carve an interface into her cerebellum.

"A jacker, when plugged in, may control your body to his or her heart's desire. He or she may want to feel your emotions while you sip tea. He or she may want to hold their fingers over an open flame till the bone is burned black. Do you agree to grant the wishes a jacker may desire?" Granny said.

Daniela didn't know how long Granny had been talking, how long he'd droned on about liabilities. It didn't matter. She was going to become a jacky, and when she was jacked into, she would cease being responsible for her actions. That's what she wanted. That and death, however it may show its bleached-bone face. She nodded at Granny Merle and closed her eyes. The drill dipped forward, and the noise and heat and pain washed everything away.

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3. INCREMENT STATEMENT

Third Principle for Jackies: At the end of the day, you're on your own. No one is making you take a job. No one is stopping you, either.

In the dark room, one of the men slumped and rocked his leg as if he couldn't stand to be still. He was enormous and had a red, wadded mess of a beard that looked like a bird's nest.

Before Daniela could settle herself in the metal chair, the second man pitched her a Rilke emblazoned scarab—a jacky-jacker connector—and said, "Do you—Daniela, you of all people—believe in angels?"

She guessed by his voice that the second man was Picotte. Both men had an air of relaxation about them. Their body language, their tone convinced Daniela that she was at least acquainted with them.

"Not this shit again," said the big man. He shook his head, and Daniela saw the shine of a jacker port at the back of his neck, the bulge of her scarab's twin. The legs of the scarab tremored as she ran her fingers across its obsidian head.

As her hand neared the interface at the back of her head, the connector came alive and scurried toward the hole on six icy legs. There was a brief stinging that made her eyes water. She felt the big man's presence. A crawling on her neck like when walking alone along the Cumberland. Now she was sharing her own brain with the big man.

"Calm down, Conner," Picotte said.

Picotte was older than Connor, a tight ponytail pulled back out of his thinning and graying hair. He was wearing a tracksuit. His top lip had been cut away. That explained the lisp. Probably a rogue bio implant that decided his flesh was better food than the grain he was feeding it.

"Now, tell us Daniela. Do you believe? Do you believe something could come down right now if you were in trouble? I'm not saying you are or anything—"

Connor elbowed Picotte. The big bearded man's eyes were glazed over slightly, like he was high on ghostbuster. Instead, she knew he was high on *her*, crawling through her thoughts, her sensations.

The ports were designed for one-way experience. But Granny Merle had said the tech wasn't perfect, that it was possible to feel *bleed*—the backflow of jacker emotions to the jacky brain. Daniela had heard jackies scream of those horrors on the Suicides—jackies infected with jacker fetishes, desires, emotional ticks—threatening to wade out into the Cumberland, taking a dose of radiation that would silence those alien impulses, after a long drawn out death of peeling flesh and vomiting their insides out.

Connor's chair creaked as he readjusted himself. Daniela could tell from the echo that the room was large and not empty. The only source of light was a backlit aquarium, untreated and untended. Rogue worms had hijacked the fish. The fish beat their Escheresque fins against the soil. It wasn't enough light to see what was behind the men, but something was back there.

"Those are two different questions," Daniela said. "'Do I believe in angels?' or 'do I believe in divine intervention?'"

"Divine intervention, yeah," Picotte said. "That's what we're talking about. An angel coming down, rescuing someone, say someone about to die, say someone in a pot of trouble."

"Why are you asking me this?" Daniela said.

Picotte shifted something from one hand to the other, then tucked it in his jacket pocket. "I asked first. We make a trade: information for information."

"I want what I payed for, redneck," Connor said.

Daniela felt him in her muscles. He was opening and closing her hand. Her leg rocked like his had before. She was at his whim.

"Daniela, our Irish friend here doesn't appreciate the southern way of getting to know one another." Picotte turned to Connor. "You see. We gotta work out what we believe, Irishman, so we don't broach the wrong topics, or step on each other's toes—philosophically." He turned back to Daniela. "Now, what's your answer?"

Daniela thought of Cat raising her shirt above her head, telling Daniel that they needed to check each other for worms. Daniela remembered sliding her hands along Cat's white flesh, fingers feeling the crease of her ribs, smelling Cat's salty flesh.

"I believe in something like angels. An earthly kind."

But divine intervention, that didn't exist. She had spent enough time on the Suicides to know that no one was looking out for people, diving in and saving them like comic book heroes. She wondered if Connor could browse her memories of Cat. And if he could, could she focus his attention on her last memories of Cat? Those memories would drive him out. They would drive anyone out.

"But not the saving kind," she added.

Picotte stood up from the chair, and flashed his teeth, unnaturally white. "I told you, Irishman. And there's my proof. A person doesn't change, no matter how many times you blow their brains out."

"Turn on the light," Connor said. "Turn on the fucking light. I'm ready. I want to feel her when she sees them."

Picotte disappeared into the darkness at the back of the room.

Daniela felt something welling up in her throat. The bitter memory that had caused her to abandon her fugue walk along the stinking, glowing Cumberland, to walk into the swinging salon doors of Granny Merle's. The reason she wanted to die.

Connor's eyes were glazed over, like a comatose patient. He was going deeper inside her, sinking in his chair.

Suddenly, the room was filled with blinding light. Daniela shielded her eyes. Conner laughed, a deep sexual sound that scared her.

As her eyes adjusted, she saw red, and Picotte standing with his hands

clasped in front of him like he was at a funeral or he was one of those black suits who protect the President. She wasn't sure what she was looking at. There were two dead women on the floor slumped on top of one another, light fluttering over the red sequined dresses both corpses wore. Was one of them Cat or her mother? No. Impossible. Yet something was so familiar about them.

Picotte's white sneakers made ripples in the blood pool.

Stay calm. She wouldn't show stress or weakness at the sight of the bodies, because that's what creeps like this usually want.

Then she saw the black and sleek metal of a pistol as Picotte removed it from his coat.

"This is the point where you think about what we want. And whatever conclusion you come to, you're wrong. You're always wrong. It's simpler than that, honey."

She reached back to her jacky interface, scrambled at the bulbous abdomen of the Rilke scarab. If she could just get a grip on it, remove it, snap her foot at Connor's crotch, she could make a run for it.

Picotte aimed the gun at her. "Leave the bug alone, Daniela. You unjack while he's inside and you risk brain damage."

Picotte grabbed one of the corpses by the arm and began to drag it to what looked like an elevator hatch. He pushed the limp body over the edge with his shoe, and it fell and landed with a dull thump.

Then she was up and moving, legs taking shaky steps toward Picotte. Connor had control. She could feel him worming around in her, could feel him behind her eyes. She let a little laugh out of her. It wasn't her own. It was deep, in the voice that she'd abandoned.

Perhaps because of Connor's presence, perhaps because the drugs had worn off, Daniela's mind mud swept away. She remembered coming to this place.

Granny, raising up from his motorized bed to stuff a piece of paper between Daniela's breasts, tears dripping down his pendulous cheeks. She was wearing the red sequined dress—a little tight, but she knew she looked killer in it—just like Cat had worn so many years before. She was going to her first and last appointment as a jacky in an abandoned downtown high rise. A quick death is what Granny had promised her. Something to end the pain after that one bright spot in Daniela's life had sailed away on a suicide cruise.

Up the steps of the high rise, ignoring the garbage bags duct-taped around the elevator shaft, rogue worms growing and pulsing on broken window glass. Who would come out here? Why would anyone be in this place? For crime, for murder.

"Go ahead—look down," Picotte said. He pulled a flashlight from his

coat and shined it down the elevator shaft. There were bodies down there, at least a dozen women, a tangle of pale limbs. They were all wearing the same dress. Red sequins sparkling in the flashlight beam. Daniela caught the sight of one of their faces, half blown away by a gun shot, but she recognized what was left of the nose and chin. It was *her* nose and chin.

She could feel Connor changing her config back and forth, stuck in a strange flux.

"You see, honey. This is what it takes to get a man off these days. He's the johnny and I'm the pimp, and you know what that makes you?" Picotte raised the gun barrel to Daniela's head.

She wanted to die—or had wanted to, until she was staring down the elevator shaft.

The big Irishman was leaning on his chair, pants around his ankles, stroking his sex. "Do it," he whispered. "Do it! Do it! Do it!"

The barrel touched her head.

"Did Granny know this is what you'd do?" Daniela asked him.

"He's counting money right now," Picotte said.

There was no good in the world, she thought.

Picotte pulled the trigger.

The last spark to go through her head was the memory of waving goodbye to Cat from a Florida dock, watching the only person she ever loved sail out into poisonous waters. 10.1 percent success rate. Not good enough for anyone she loved. Not even herself.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

4. RECURSION

Fourth Principle for Jackies: Imagine the worst thing that could ever happen to you. Okay, got it? Now, think about doing that every day, with every john who puts cash on your card. That is the life of a jackie.

Picotte fished the scarab from the back of Daniela's head. You had to be careful with where you shot a jacky. Hit the scarab and you could send the john into a coma. Hit the brain in the right spot and kill the john. But he didn't have to worry about Connor. The Irishman liked to edge. To unjack right as the flash of the gun went off. To ride the line of life and death. Picotte kicked Connor to wake him.

"Something was different," Connor said. He was rubbing his tongue. "She was thinking about something awful as she died."

"Never killed anyone nineteen times. Maybe a bug," Picotte said.

Never quick-cloned someone that many times either. Picotte was tired of seeing red, tired of growing this girl's flesh, but Connor was a big payer.

"Clean yourself up," Picotte said. "We're done here."

"I want another. At least one more spin on this Ferris wheel. I'm in love, Picotte. Something was different this time—I want more of this girl."

After Connor had left to some clouded high rise on the good side of town, Picotte knelt over Daniela and cut a slice of flesh from her arm for the cloner.

Connor was crazy to think something had changed—Picotte had the best cloner this side of the Mason-Dixon. Daniela's last seventeen deaths had been the same: the safety question about angels, a 79-degree waking temperature, a 6:10 p.m. wakeup time. The only difference was the phase of the moon, and Picotte wasn't the kind to believe in superstition.

In the motel room, Picotte stitched another red sequined dress on the fabricator, hooked the slice of flesh up to the cloning slab and arranged every item that Daniela had touched back to its proper position.

In the early hours of the morning, when he was back on his own floor mattress, uranium-laced rain pelting against the top of the truck trailer he called home, what Connor said was still eating at him.

Something was different this time.

He ran through Daniela's DNA sequence and brain activity for errors. There was a GABA-activity differential that couldn't be accounted for during her last death. Perhaps a worm had highjacked his cloning tech?

Later, he recalled a story he'd heard of a Kansan jacky—who'd been sold to a man much like himself—who'd been killed over a hundred times for a group of one-percenters paying not just money and designer-worm stock, but paying in bio-upgrades, in access to Los Angeles harems.

He must have dreamed that story. He'd looked for the man in Kansas, and there was nothing there, save fallout.

Didn't matter. He didn't get to where he was by dreaming. He got here by taking it one day at a time, one death at a time.

Tomorrow, Daniela would wake again in the same room and be swarmed with just enough brain fog to allow the charade to continue. Then he would kill her, day after day, until the worms had turned her into something else, or the johns, and there would be many after this one, got tired. Months more of steady income, or perhaps years. And the bugs? He didn't know. He would take it one day at a time.

⁂

2. CONDITION

Daniela pressed her ear against the sweating concrete wall and listened.

A.U.T.O.

HANNAH TRUSTY

"Good evening, Mr. Noland."

Derrick checked the inside of the car. It was clean, with supple leather seating and state-of-the-art everything.

"Good evening, Mr. Johnson," the car said again. Derrick took out his company identification card and slid it into the slot next to the steering wheel.

"Good evening, A.U.T.O.," Derrick said. It had taken some time to get used to talking to cars. At first it made him think of his childhood days of watching "Knight Rider". But once the Automatic Urban Transportation Office released its fleet of self-driving cars to the world, it quickly became much more mundane than that.

The car scanned his ID and the card popped back out.

"My calculations are telling me it will take approximately 45 minutes to get to the airport. There is surprisingly light traffic through the St. Claire neighborhood and I suggest that route." The car voice was pleasant, like a soft-spoken British gentleman asking for tea.

"Sure. Just let me get loaded up here." Derrick loaded his two bags into the front seat, and then gingerly buckled the baby carrier into the backseat, careful to not wake the sleeping boy.

He slid into the backseat, next to the carrier, and buckled up. Once that clicked, the car shifted into drive.

"Shall I take the fastest route?" the car asked.

"Go for it. I trust your judgment, A.U.T.O.," Derrick replied, hardly looking up from his phone. His wife was texting, asking where he was with the baby. With their hectic schedules, it felt like most of their interactions were text-based these days. She was flying in from a business meeting as he was flying out for one and they had agreed to a hand-off of their son rather than putting him in daycare for the morning.

Derrick texted his reply: OMW. He flipped over to his email, barely

noticing that the weather outside the car had taken a turn for the worse. The car moved smoothly along with highway.

"Would you like some music, Sir? Perhaps something classical?" the car asked. Derrick, looking down at his laptop now, simply shrugged. Some sort of symphony started playing softly in the background.

The baby in the carrier stirred, opening his big brown eyes, then started to cry.

"It's okay, Adam. It's okay, buddy." Derrick immediately moved away from his laptop and leaned over his son. He longed to pick him up, but wouldn't unbuckle him from the safety of his car seat.

"Perhaps a lullaby to help him sleep?" A.U.T.O. asked.

"Yes. Please, A.U.T.O.," Derrick said. He pulled out a pacifier from one of his bags and gave it to his crying son. A soft children's tune replaced the classical music and soon Adam drifted back to sleep.

Derrick gazed out the window for just a moment, watching the rain. They were headed off the freeway and into a neighborhood. The shortcut. He went back to his spreadsheets and emails and only looked up at the sound of A.U.T.O.'s voice several minutes later.

"Sir, I wish to inform you that there appears to be an issue with the vehicle."

As Derrick's head rose from the screen of his laptop, the car hit a bump, and the baby carrier lurched, causing the baby to wake. He immediately began to wail.

"A.U.T.O., slow down," Derrick said, reaching over to his son.

"Sir, that is the issue I wish to speak to you about. It seems that I cannot slow down."

"What?" Derrick asked, peering at the control panel on the headboard. The screen lit up with red. It didn't look promising.

"Something has gone amiss in my onboard command center. The accelerator is stuck and I seem to not be able to slow or stop the car. Indeed, we are gaining speed."

The car careened around surrounding traffic. The sound of other car's horns blared in the background.

"There has to be something you can do," Derrick said, his heart beating hard in his chest. Next to him, his son cried louder.

"I can still steer the car, and I'm using GPS to plot our safest possible course. I have contacted the home office to let them know of the difficulty we are experiencing."

The car took a turn, going up on two wheels for a moment, the screeching of the tires matched by the screeching of the baby.

"What about the brakes? Or shift into neutral?" Derrick racked his brain for information from his driver's education course. It had been years ago, but they had covered emergencies such as this.

"Sir, the breaks have failed. I seem to not be able to access the gearshift. There is a major malfunction of my operating system."

Derrick fumbled with his phone and dialed 911. The speedometer was closing in on 90 MPH, and they were still within the residential area.

"A.U.T.O., get us out of this neighborhood," Derrick yelled.

"9-1-1. Please state your emergency," the tinny voice on the other end of the phone said.

"Sir, I have calculated the risk of the freeway versus the neighborhoods. This time of morning there is very little traffic in this neighborhood and there is only a 4.68% chance of a collision with another motor vehicle. We will however, exit to the freeway in two miles to avoid the St. Claire Elementary School crossing." Derrick listened to the car as he watched the speedometer creep up. It was already almost to 100 MPH. The trees outside of the car were just a green blur.

"9-1-1 please state your emergency." The calm voice on the phone broke through again.

Derrick snapped out of his daze and lifted the phone to his ear. "Yes, my name is Derrick Noland and I'm trapped in a speeding car. The accelerator is stuck. I think we are ne—"

The car hit another speed bump and the phone slipped out of Derrick's hand, bounced off his knee and slid under the front seat.

"Dammit." Derrick started to lean forward to reach the phone when he heard another voice in the car. This one wasn't at all British or polite.

"Mr. Noland. Can you hear me, sir?" A high-pitched, frantic voice was coming over the car's speakers.

"Who is this?" Derrick asked, freezing halfway between the seats.

"This is Anna McCally. I'm one of the A.U.T.O.'s programmers and part of our safety response team. I received a message from your car that there is a problem with the accelerator. We are attempting to patch into the car's settings and see if we can remotely fix the problem."

Derrick leaned over and toed the phone, still just out of reach.

"I tried to call 9-1-1," he said, "but my phone fell under the seat."

"Our office has already contacted the local authorities. Help is on its way. They are working on closing the freeway after exit 192," Anna said.

The car careened past the freeway exit and continued tearing through the neighborhood. Derrick saw a car ahead of them drive into a ditch to avoid a collision.

"A.U.T.O., that was the exit to get back on the freeway," Derrick yelled.

"Sir, my GPS reading showed that the road was closed."

"It was closed for us!" Derrick pulled himself out from between the front seats and collapsed back into his own. A wave of nausea broke over him.

"Mr. Noland, we apologize for that. We are working to override A.U.T.O.'s GPS commands now and will set up another checkpoint to get you safely onto the freeway. Once there, the police will use spike strips to slow the vehicle if we cannot disengage the accelerator remotely," Anna's voice crackled over the speakers.

Derrick mostly ignored the voice, trying to calm his son. Adam's face was beet red from the non-stop screaming.

"Hear that buddy? Everything will be okay. They are going to disengage it," he said to the baby, stroking his legs, too terrified to actually take him out of his car seat.

"Actually, that is not a possibility," A.U.T.O.'s very proper voice broke through. "My sensors tell me that it is a mechanical malfunction, not an electrical one."

"What?" Derrick asked, looking up from his child.

"Sir, I regret to inform you that there is more bad news," A.U.T.O. said.

The car lurched as it ran over something, and Derrick's stomach dropped at the sound of crunching.

"Sir, I have been running diagnostics with the onboard GPS system. We are going to be crossing through the St. Claire school district precisely at the time of the school crossing."

"So? A.U.T.O., what did we just hit?"

"If we continue on that course, there will be a catastrophic collision. The alternate route is equally concerning, as my research is telling me that a 5K race has blocked off that road."

"What about the freeway?" Derrick asked.

"These obstacles are both before the next exit onto the freeway. I am obligated to remind you that I am programmed with the safety of the general public in mind."

"This doesn't feel so safe right now, A.U.T.O."

"And with that in mind, I am going to have to resort to the Occam's Razor Plan."

Derrick caught a glimpse of the speedometer. Nearly 150 MPH. His stomach sank even more than he thought possible.

"A.U.T.O., we are working with the police to delay the school letting out. No need to be rash." It was Anna again, her voice still shrill and panicked, even as she tried to sound calm.

"What's the Occam's Razor Plan?" Derrick asked.

The car took another turn and for a moment he thought it would just upend on its side. He thought to himself maybe that was the best thing that could happen. Maybe he and his son could survive that.

"Hello, can you hear me?" A third voice broke through the speakers, this one a deep baritone.

"Who is this?" Derrick asked. Something flew into the windshield with such velocity that he thought it might crack.

"My name is Eric Danvers and I'm part of the A.U.T.O. Corporation's promotion and community communications team."

"Eric, what are you doing?" Anna asked.

"Wait, are you two not in the same room?" Derrick asked. The car seemed awfully crowded for it to be just him and his son.

"Sir, the Occam's Razor Plan is to do what is simplest and safest for the largest amount of the public," A.U.T.O. interrupted. "We have, from my calculations, three options: continue on course, risking running through school traffic, including a school crossing full of pedestrians; taking the alternate route, plowing into a street that is full of runners; or terminating the trip with the least amount of carnage."

"Terminate?" Derrick asked. His son's voice was cracking, straining under the constant crying.

"Because I can still steer the car, I can control a crash. The likelihood of survival of the occupants is less than one percent by my current calculations. But in terms of public safety and lives lost, it is the simplest, and fairest, solution. And the only one that works with my safety program."

Derrick sat silent, taking in the implications of this. Before he could respond, Anna broke in over the speakers.

"A.U.T.O., we have contacted the police to clear the road near St. Claire." Anna said.

"There isn't enough time, Anna. By my calculations the car will be there in less than three minutes. Within two there is a location in which A.U.T.O. can crash the car, free from pedestrians. It is, ethically, the best choice." Eric said.

"You mean one is the easiest for you to spin to the public, right Eric?" Anna asked.

One's a programmer and one is a PR man, Derrick thought to himself. And it was obvious that only one was actually trying to help.

"Anna, can you override the steering? Make it manual?" Derrick yelled. One look at his terrified son in his carrier was enough to get him in action. He leapt over the backseat and into the front. There was a steering wheel in front of what would normally be a driver's seat but it didn't move at all. Derrick prayed it wasn't just for looks.

"Standby. I think I can. But Mr. Noland, do you think you can steer at that speed?"

"I can give it my best." Derrick slid into place and clicked the seatbelt, trying not to think about how useless it would be if they did crash at their current speed.

"Anna, do NOT override A.U.T.O.'s controls. The car is set to maneuver to the safest option," Eric said.

The car started to careen off the side of the road, and for a moment Derrick thought that they might catch air when it hit the shoulder. “A.U.T.O., stay on the road,” he yelled.

“Sir, I am guiding us to the safest point of contact. I am sorry about this.” The car sped toward a cluster of trees just off the road, Derrick braced for impact, grabbing the steering wheel and pulling hard. It suddenly shifted under his hands.

“DRIVE!” Anna yelled and Derrick yanked the wheel hard to the right, bringing the car bouncing back onto the pavement. He had control of the steering.

Up ahead he could see school children crossing the street and a flash of lights. The police weren’t going to make it in time to clear the road.

“The intersection isn’t cleared!” Anna yelled.

Derrick looked back at his son and gripped the wheel, praying for forgiveness. The car plowed into the intersection. Derrick grasped the wheel, white knuckled, to keep his grip as bodies bounced off the car. He could hear, just over the sound of his own baby crying, the screams of the injured and the horrified. A stomach-dropping crunch reverberated through the car as he ran over someone.

Derrick fought to stay in control. He didn’t notice the tears rolling down his cheeks as he concentrated on the pavement ahead. One more mile until the freeway exit.

“Mr. Noland, this is unacceptable! This goes against all safety and moral protocols and must be terminated.”

The wheel locked beneath Derrick’s hands and the car skidded off the road, bumping into an open field.

“What’s happening?” Derrick yelled.

“I have broken the override. The car is in control of the steering again and will complete its safety protocol.” Eric’s voice was cool and calm.

“Anna, do something,” Derrick pleaded, tugging at the nonresponsive wheel. A groove of trees that outlined the back of the field were speeding toward them.

“Eric, give him back control,” Anna said. Derrick could tell from the panic in her voice that there was nothing else she could do.

Derrick looked in the backseat at his son, still crying. The car hit a bump and went airborne. The earth and sky spun outside, and the last thing Derrick saw was the windshield exploding into a million little shards, sunlight glittering off them.

⁂

Eric adjusted his tie and walked into the lights. He looked out onto a sea of cameras and microphones. He took a deep, calming breath and began to speak.

"On October 18th, an A.U.T.O. picked up Derrick Noland and his son, to be transported to the O'Donnell Airport in Evans, Indiana. The self-driving vehicle is one of our fleet of level 5 autonomous cars. These cars are programed with the safety of the public in mind. After an unfortunate mechanical error, Mr. Adams overrode the self-steering mechanism in an attempt to control the car. This lead to the injury and death of innocent pedestrians. The A.U.T.O. was able to reestablish its autonomy and intended to stop the car in a field, away from others. We believe Mr. Adams tried to regain control again, flipping the vehiclein the process. The makers of the A.U.T.O. fleet are very saddened to learn of his and the young passenger's death, and those involved in his hit and run. We do want to assure the public that the car, had it not been tampered with, would have found a safe resolution to the scenario. A.U.T.O.s are 100% safe and reliable."

Cameras flashed and reporters started yelling questions. Eric pushed the microphone away and walked calmly off stage. In the distance he could see the bright red dress of Anna getting into her own A.U.T.O.

He pulled a remote and flipped a switch. He could see a faint red light illuminating from the back of Anna's car, signaling he could override the onboard driver.

"A.U.T.O., initiate Eric's Razor Plan," he said into a small microphone. Anna, a head safety manager and programmer, had failed her test. Eric knew she would try to take down the whole company if given a chance. Just like the A.U.T.O.s he programmed, Eric believed in protecting the most people by sacrificing one.

The red light blinked, and the car took off.

BLEED OVER

RACHEL NUSSBAUM

DYING IN-GAME IS always touted as some incredible experience. Some games will try to upsell you on it. When you die, it feels real. It actually hurts. You feel a rush of peace.

This is the one; this is what it really feels like.

But really, they're all full of shit. It feels the same in every game—under all the stylized gimmicks and flourish, it's no different from waking up from a dream. Disappointing and boring.

All the same.

I notice the sniper in the distance a moment too late. Before I can react, a bullet clips my ear and lodges into Arturo's temple. His left eye rolls back as blood spurts from the hole and splashes across Jenner's face.

My vision blurs and a ringing cuts through my ears, muting all other sound. I can see Jenner running to me, but it's no use.

Out of time.

YOU HAVE DIED.

I punch the arm of the sofa. We were so close to the rendezvous this time. I blink to start a new game, but I notice several messages I got while in-game.

Willa's here.

I log out and rub my eyes, letting Jenner's living room fade back into view. Jenner's eyes are still clouded over with bright green light—somehow he escaped the sniper. Arturo walks out of the bathroom, a tissue pressed to his bloody nose.

"Again?" I ask.

"Yuk it up," he says, flipping me off as he walks to the door. I reach back and unplug the needle from my port as the door opens.

Willa starts snickering the second she sees Arturo's bloody nose.

"Go home," Arturo says.

"Did you talk to your tech about that?" I ask. As often as it's been

happening, it can't be healthy. Arturo's normally tan complexion even looks a little paler now.

" . . . Yeah. Says I'm just an easy bleeder," he sighs, padding back around the sofa to his chair.

"Maybe you just weren't cut out for that cutthroat FPS lifestyle you always dreamed of," Willa lilts, plopping down next to me.

"Hey," Arturo snaps, pointing at me. "It's happened to Nats before, give her shit too."

He looks to me for confirmation. I shrug.

"I only play shooters with you, my dude. I don't think it's the same."

"Cuz you got a little thing called taste," Willa says, patting me.

Jenner suddenly shouts. He spasms in his seat, body twitching before slumping back.

"Holy shit," he gasps with a shaky laugh, the green draining from his eyes as the interior LEDs shut off. "That was intense."

"Cuuuute," Willa whispers to me.

Jenner grew up with supremely anti-tech parents—they didn't even let him get his implants until he turned fourteen, and he didn't get a gameport installed until he moved up here for school. VR is still so new to him, still feels immersive. It makes me nostalgic.

I miss that feeling.

"Oh, hey Willa. What's going on?"

Jenner unplugs his needle and reaches out to the coffee table for his game cap. Willa snaps her fingers.

"Don't cap it just yet," she says, "Mama brought a present."

Willa points to her head and shoots us a mischievous grin. Jenner's whole face lights up.

"The game you were messaging me about?"

Willa has a way of finding obscure, weird little games. Most of them are low budget, but they're usually at least halfway interesting. I can tell from her grin that this is a good one.

"Ugh," Arturo tuts. "What fresh indy trash are you trying to peddle now?"

"It's called Bleedover. You're going to love it, and then you're going to love me."

Arturo pulls his tissue away from his nose and scrunches up his face.

"Oh my god," he says. "My brother's playing that. He won't stop messaging me about it."

Willa arches a brow.

"One, your brother's way cooler than you. Two, Orion's WAY too young to be playing this. What the heck, Artie?"

"Not my fault our parents don't give a crap. I turned out okay." Arturo shrugs.

"What's the game?" I ask.

"This isn't just a game," Willa says, wagging her finger. "It's an experience."

"You fucking hippie," Arturo mumbles, rolling his eyes.

"No, literally. It's sort of like . . . horror-thriller-mystery. It's designed to make you feel like the stuff in the game follows you into real life."

Willa unholsters a needle from Arturo's XR5 and sweeps her lilac hair back with flourish, uncapping her port.

"There's a game, and there's an app. If you keep the app on, you'll experience distortions during your day. Visual, audio, smell. It all correlates to what's going on in the game. It's insane."

. . . *Huh.*

"It sounds amazing," Jenner says.

"It sounds awful," Arturo says. "It's a game that makes you hallucinate?"

"Just play the tutorial. I swear you'll be hooked."

Arturo gives Willa a dramatic thumbs down. She sticks her tongue out at him and looks hopefully over to me. I blink to pull up the time.

"I think I gotta head home," I concede. "My port's running a little hot anyway."

"Boooo," Willa says. I lean forward, grab my game cap off the table, and pop it into the back of my head. It twists into place, and I feel pins and needles as my capillaries realign with the numb circle of flesh on top of my cap. I massage feeling back into the skin.

This is what happens when I play games for too long. And I wasted it playing some generic grey shooter.

"I'm into it though. Where can I download it from?" I ask.

"Just grab one of our spare game needles," Jenner says. "Sync your XR to our library and help yourself."

"Ruby. I'll check it out later." I say, standing up and unholstering a needle to take home.

"I'm gonna start the tutorial now," Jenner says excitedly. He pauses, glancing over to Arturo's sour face. "I could stream it? See if you might be interested?"

Arturo sighs dramatically, but I can see it in his eyes. He's curious.

"Fine, but if it's lame, no harassing me to play it for months like you did with OuterDwell." he says, glaring at Willa.

"I liked OuterDwell," Jenner murmurs, plugging his game needle back in.

Willa plugs in and begins downloading the game to their XR5 library while Jenner's eyes twist and blink as he sets up his streaming channel.

"Catch you guys later," I say, walking to the door.

"Bye Natsumi! Ah—okay, it's starting up," Jenner announces, his eyes glowing with green light.

"Prepare to eat your words and then my ass, Artie," Willa says.

"Find Jesus," Arturo says, flipping her off. I smile.

What a bunch of fucking nerds.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

The game starts abruptly. Cold air and the strong scent of pine hit my face as soon as I press play, and the shift leaves me disoriented. I spin a little in the dark as the graphics come into view.

A cool windy night, stars in the sky. I'm standing at the edge of a parking lot, staring at a building surrounded by pine trees. I blink to pull up my stats, see where I am, but all that comes up is an option to save, exit, or return to the menu. I blink again, trying to summon up any in-game apps my avatar might have. Again, nothing happens.

Did the game not load right? I wave my hand in front of my face, and I startle at the big hunk of bandage my arm is wrapped in.

What the hell?

From the end of my elbow down to my knuckles, there's a white lump of what looks like medical gauze. I prod at it with my other hand. It's hard. It takes me a moment to place it—it's one of those shell-like casts people used to use to hold healing bones still.

Why would I be wearing one though? As I run my fingers across the surface, my sleeve slips, and I see something strapped to my wrist.

A wristwatch.

Oh. I'm in the past.

It's an interesting stylistic choice, though one I can't see a reason for just yet. My watch, yellow and black, blinks 8:53. No date.

Hmmm. Well if I'm standing in front of a building before the hour turns, three guesses where I'm meant to go.

The inside of the building takes me a moment to place as well: shelves lined with paper printed books; a row of antique computers lining the far wall; soft chairs and wood tables.

A library.

Aside from an elderly woman behind the front desk, the library's empty. With no directives to complete, I wander back to a table. I can see a paper printed newspaper sitting on the surface. That will have the date on it.

November 11th, 2004.

"Ms. Fujioka."

A man in a black suit stands behind me, dark skin and neat dreadlocks pulled back in a short ponytail. A cord spirals out of his ear and disappears down his collar—some kind of outdated earpiece. His eyes are wide, like he didn't expect to see me. After a pause, he sticks his hand out to shake.

"Agent Elias," he says. "We spoke on the phone, and at the hospital. It's good to see you again. Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

The hospital?

My cast.

A text option appears in the bottom of my view.

```
>SHAKE HIS HAND.
>REFUSE HIS HAND.
```

It almost takes me by surprise—even the oldest of games don't use text prompts anymore. Another stylistic choice. It suits the game.

I select the first option and take his hand. He smiles brightly, and gestures for me to sit at the table.

"I apologize again for the late hour, Ms. Fujioka, I wanted to meet somewhere private."

Another text option.

```
>ACCEPT HIS FORMALITY.
>TELL HIM TO CALL YOU BY YOUR FIRST NAME.
```

I pick the second.

"It's Natsumi," I say, surprised my in-game voice sounds like me. The agent's eyebrows raise unexpectedly, but he smiles again. Warm and pretty.

"Natsumi. Got it. You can call me Ben then," he says.

Goddamn. No wonder Willa liked this game.

"I'm really glad you agreed to meet with me. Many others who've gone through what you have, well . . . they've been less receptive to our presence."

```
>ASK HIM ABOUT THE OTHERS
>ASK HIM WHY HE'S INVOLVED
```

I select the first.

"Others who've survived . . . attacks similar to yours. As we mentioned in the hospital, you weren't the only one. We're trying to keep tabs on everyone who's had these encounters. Is it alright if I ask you a few questions now?" he asks, pulling out a small notebook. I nod without prompting.

"Have you remembered anything else about the incident? When you were bit?" Ben asks.

I frown and look down at my cast. Bit? What the hell kind of creature could bite me hard enough to break my arm?

Oh.

No text prompt comes up, so I shake my head. I guess it's honest. If the game didn't show what bit me, I'm not supposed to remember. Ben frowns.

"I know we asked you back at the hospital, but you were still quite in shock. Is anything about the incident more clear to you now?" he asks.

>TRY TO REMEMBER
>SAY YOU TOLD HIM ALL YOU KNOW

I select the first and find myself closing my eyes, faint images flashing through my head. A dark road at night. A shadow from the corner of my eye as I start walking faster. The smell of rot, growing out from all directions.

The shadow closing in.

I open my eyes and press my hand to my temple.

"Please, don't push yourself Natsumi. I shouldn't have prodded," Ben says, sounding concerned.

"Okay," I mumble.

"Do you ever feel paranoid," Ben asks suddenly. "Like something might be following or watching you? Perhaps you think you've seen something just out of the corner of your eye?"

>ASK WHAT WOULD BE WATCHING YOU
>ASK WHAT WOULD BE FOLLOWING YOU

I pick the second.

" . . . Nothing in particular. Just a feeling," he says.

I slowly shake my head. Ben nods and pulls out a card before standing up.

"Well, in the event you do, or if you notice anything else that seems abnormal, here's my direct cellphone number."

Ben holds the card out to me. Hesitantly, I reach out and take it. Once again, he smiles.

"Thank you again for your cooperation Natsumi. I hope we can talk again soon."

I exit the game. I've got a feeling of foreboding and excitement pooling in my stomach, and half a dozen messages from Willa.

>What did you think, do you love it? Isn't the setup ruby?

>Isn't Ben HOT did you know he's my husband now?

>Arturo downloaded it but he's playing it wrong he's being mean to my husband!!!

I chuckle and pull out my game needle, capping my port before I walk over to my windows.

"Windows open," I command.

The sealed pane slides apart, letting in the warm, humid air of the city. No trees around here for miles.

And somehow, the wind carries the scent of pine. It makes me smile.

An experience, huh?

It just might be.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

For a while, the game is fun. I chase the smell of pine, shapes in the corners of my eye in the real world. I meet up with Ben in the game and report what I see. He gives me evasive clues, and I try to piece together what's following me, and why.

Until tonight.

It's the smell that wakes me up.

Something rotting—something dead and decomposing. The smell rips my eyes open and I cover my nose and mouth.

I could puke.

I shake my head a few times and sit up in bed, and the smell gets stronger. In front of me, in the darkness of my open hallway door. That's where it's coming from.

And I freeze as a sick wave of manufactured nostalgia washes over me. A rancid smell growing stronger from the shadows as I walked home in the dark. I'm awake enough to know where I am now, to know what's real and what's not.

But just staring into the darkness of the doorframe, my throat tightens.

With a shaking hand, I reach out and fumble at my nightstand. My fingers brush my plastic game needle case, and I pick it up and toss it at my door.

Something slams into the wall as it turns and runs. Nails scratch against the floor and pattering footsteps echo down the hallway.

"Lights on!" I shout.

The hallway lights up, and there's nothing.

That felt too real. The thing watching me as I slept, the sound it made as it retreated into the darkness.

Way too real.

I lay back down in bed, but I keep the lights on. Uneasy, I blink open my apps and disable Bleedover.

Exhilarating as it may be, that was too much to wake up to in the dead of night.

I'll have to ask Willa about it.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Willa hasn't responded to my messages in days. I was so preoccupied with the game I didn't notice. I guess I figured she was busy with it too.

We try messaging her. Calling. Eventually Arturo and I stop by her apartment and he pounds on the door. No one home.

It makes all of us nervous.

I'm startled awake by a call from Jenner. It was weird, I didn't even remember falling asleep, and I did it with my needle in. With a groan, I yank out my needle and twist my cap in.

"What's up?" I ask.

"Nats. Something really bad is going on."

I notice it then. Outside of my window. Emergency lights. I peer out. Cop cars, firefighters, ambulances. The city's in chaos.

"Arturo's brother had an accident. Arturo can't drive or warp out of the city. Traffic's a nightmare."

The prickles on the back of my cap spread outward.

"Holy shit," I say.

"He got shuttle tickets. It takes off tonight. He says we should stop by Willa's place first. He said before his brother . . . did what he did, he was sending him weird messages. Really weird."

" . . . Yeah?" I prompt.

"He thinks it might be because of Bleedover. He says Willa's in trouble."

Fuck.

"What did Orion do?" I ask.

"You don't wanna know. Meet us at Willa's in half an hour. Bye."

Jenner ends the call. Shit. This is bad. I bring my hands to my eyes. My head's spinning, and my game cap's still tingling. I reach back and flick the skin.

And I feel something move.

It bites me.

I scream and twist off my game cap as fast as I can.

Maggots. Wriggling just beneath the thin layer of skin on my cap.

I gag and throw it across the room.

That can't be real. Couldn't be real. But wait . . .

I blink and summon up my apps, scrolling through the list of them.

Bleedover's on.

It turned itself back on.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

When I meet Jenner and Arturo in front of Willa's apartment, Arturo's slamming himself against the door. I look to Jenner.He's missing his game cap too.

"Motherfucker," Arturo mumbles. "Willa! LET US IN!"

Just like that, the door swings open. Arturo falls to the floor inside. It's dark, and the whole place is in ruins. In the corner of the room sits Willa.

She's a mess.

Her face is pale and gaunt, her eyes lined with dark circles. Patches of her pretty lilac hair are missing. She looks up at me with tired eyes.

"Hey," she says.

"What the hell happened?" Arturo demands.

"I thought I figured it out," Willa says. "I thought it would stop if I beat it. I won. I killed him." She flails her feet out, kicking the dresser she's wedged herself next to. "So why's it still fucking with me?"

Willa pulls herself off the floor and starts pacing.

"Willa, it's okay. We're here," I say. "We can help."

"Are you? Are you here? How am I supposed to know you're really real?" She pulls at her hair and stomps into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind her. Inside, she yells. Glass shatters.

"We need to get her to the hospital." I say, looking to Arturo.

"I called an ambulance," Jenner says.

The smashing and yelling from the bathroom suddenly ceases. Jenner and Arturo exchange looks with me.

A long, metal spear pierces through the drywall.

"What the fuck?"Arturo shouts.

Jenner stumbles back. I'm frozen in place. I get just enough of a look at the spear to recognize it as a towel bar before the bathroom door slams open. Willa's holding a nasty shard of glass in her bloody hand.

"I'm sorry guys," she says. She limps over to the towel bar she's lodged through her wall.

"What are you doing?" I ask, taking a step forward.

She points the glass towards me.

"Don't! Natsumi, don't. I . . . I'm sorry." Willa looks down.

She steps in front of the bar, facing out.

Wait.

No.

"I just need to get it out," she tells us, voice trembling. "It's the only way it'll stop."

With all her might, she slams her head back into the towel rod.

"WILLA!" Arturo yells. He runs forward. She lifts her shard of glass and slashes at him wildly, nicking him across the chest.

Arturo stumbles back, and Willa stabs her head back onto the rod. Over and over. Until the scrape of metal on metal parts as the rod pierces her gameport and we hear the wet squish of her brain.

She slides off the rod onto her knees. The metal ring of her gamport is

still stuck to the rod. It yanks the delicate wires out of her head behind her. All mixed up with blood and bits of grey matter.

We didn't find out until later that she lived. In only the broadest sense of the word. Her brain dead. Beaten into something unrecognizable.

She'll probably never wake up.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

I wake up in darkness, drenched in cold sweat. It takes me a few blinks before I realize something's wrong.

It's my arm. Something's wrong with my arm.

"Lights," I command.

Nothing.

I roll over and cry out as pain shoots through my arm. Fuck, the gentlest movement makes it throb. As gingerly as I can, I pull myself out of bed and turn on the light.

A cast. I'm looking at a cast.

This isn't right. I didn't start the game up. I blink, trying to summon up commands, trying to exit the game. Nothing happens. There's nothing in my head. No game menu. No OS. No messenger. Not even my phone.

I'm completely alone.

Again, my arm throbs inside the cast. This isn't like game pain. This pain is real.

And fucking hell, it *hurts*.

I have to do something, anything to make this stop. Remembering the basic layout of my in-game house, I walk through the kitchen and into the garage.

It doesn't take long to find something to do the trick. An electric rotary cutter. It's ancient and crude compared to a laser cutter, but I don't have that luxury in this sick game. Quickly, I flick on the rotary cutter and bring it down to my arm.

The cast splits, dust flying. Somehow, I make it up the length of my forearm without nicking myself.

The smell that emerges as I finish though. I know that smell all too well now. I wince and pry my cast open.

My arm burns. A faint buzzing grows louder as little insects hit my face. With a scream, I peel the rest of the fiberglass off and throw it to the floor. Free and shaking, I lift my arm and open my eyes.

My decaying muscle is visible through the torn grey skin, and oozing lesions are infested with wriggling maggots. I bend my crooked fingers. Immediately, I keel over from the wave of pain. Flesh splits and pus spurts out of my knuckles.

My head is spinning. This isn't real. *But it hurts so fucking bad*. And it's only getting worse.

I try to think through it, try to use logic. Why is this happening?

The attack. The rot is spreading from where the monster bit me.

I look down at my rotary cutter.

"Oh you sick fuckers," I whisper.

You know what the game wants you to do.

The pain shoots through my arm in a wave, hard enough to feel it pulse in the back of my throat, and I collapse.

"Fuck you," I whimper.

I slam my dead arm down on the table. I grab a dust rag and fold it between my teeth. Then I snatch up the rotary cutter and flick on the switch, letting the angry blade buzz to life.

I bring it down and bury it into my arm. I grit down on the rag, sawing through inches of dead flesh.

A pair of arms grab me from behind.

The screwdriver slips from my mouth and I cry out, dropping my rotary cutter.

"Let go!" I scream.

"Natsumi!"

That voice.

Jenner's face looms behind me, eyes wide in shock. I'm standing in my kitchen.

"Your arm, wait," Jenner says, tearing off his jacket. "Hold on."

A thick, angry gash has been sliced below my elbow. I glance around the floor. There's a bloody steak knife.

"Do you have sealant spray?"

I nod. Together, we pinch the cut closed and Jenner sprays line after line of wound sealer across my skin. It stings as my flesh fuses shut.

"I dreamed my arm was rotting."

"You were in-game. Your LEDs were on," Jenner says.

I look up to him.

"You're saying the game activated in my sleep? Without being plugged in?"

"It's happening to everyone. Everyone who downloaded the game." he says. "Tons of people are in the hospital right now. Either they tried killing themselves or cutting off their limbs or ripping out their ports. No one's been able to delete it. They've got really high up techs working on it, but it just keeps coming back."

A chill runs down my spine.

" . . . Where's Arturo?" I ask.

Jenner looks down.

"His brother didn't make it," he whispers.

I bring my hand to my face and sob.

A nightmare.

And there's nothing we can do but wait for it to happen to us.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

After hundreds of people were hospitalized, after the Western Hemisphere declared international emergency, declared the game a virus and banned any digital transfer of the game or its files, people began downloading Bleedover in the thousands.

Hospitals were supremely underprepared for the number of wounded and maimed that came in. The queue for tech support numbered in the hundreds. I couldn't even get a hold of mine.

None of us could.

Arturo caught the shuttle home after his brother's funeral. He didn't want his parents to see what was happening. When he walked through the door of his and Jenner's apartment, he held up his hand.

He was missing two fingers.

"We need to figure something the fuck out," he had said, exhaustion and grief staining his face.

The days tick by, and we wear down. Tech's couldn't come close to cracking it. Ambulances blare outside, so many sirens we eventually stop hearing them. Our options had run out.

Finally, I say it.

" . . . We need to keep playing the game," I say.

"You're fucked," Arturo mumbles from the sofa.

"We need to do *something*," I say. "We need another clue."

Arturo is quiet. Jenner looks back and forth between us.

"It would be better than doing nothing." he agrees.

" . . . Ben isn't in my game anymore," Arturo says. "I picked the route where I was an asshole too him and he stopped showing up."

"I'll do it." I nod.

Jenner looks down. I know he feels bad. I know he doesn't want me to do this alone.

"This shouldn't fall on you," he mumbles.

" . . . We'll do it in shifts," I offer. "Let me try first. If I get nothing, you'll go in next."

That seemed to be sufficient for him.

We approach the game like an exorcism. Arturo ties my hands just in case I lose control. Jenner keeps a knife on the table close by.

"If this doesn't work—if you don't . . . " Arturo trails off.

"I won't die," I promise.

He bumps his forehead against mine. I close my eyes, and Jenner plugs in my needle.

"Come back soon."

***

The sky in-game is dark and cloudy. The scent of pine is long gone. I halfway expected to smell that horrible rot, but there's nothing. Like the whole game is just holding its breath, waiting for me to make my move.

Ben's sitting at our usual table. I clench my fists as I sit across from him. I don't want to act against the game's script. If Ben knows something—anything, maybe I can get it out of him if I keep playing along.

Ben doesn't look great. His eyes look bloodshot, and dreadlocks have spilled out of his normally neat ponytail.

"Natsumi," he nods. "It's good to see you in one piece."

He glances down to my arm. My cast is still intact, as if the game section that activated without my needle never happened.

He knows.

"Many of the others we've been observing haven't made it this far," he says, eyes downcast.

```
>ASK WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM
>ASK WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM
```

I pick the second. Ben's eyes widen, like he wasn't expecting me to pick that one.

"Perhaps it's unprofessional to say but . . . this gets hard. This line of work. This . . . role I play," he says, meeting my eyes, speaking slow. "I don't like watching people get hurt. I try to stop it, but there's only so much I'm authorized to say."

He stops speaking. He furrows his brows—like he's frustrated.

"I'm sorry about your friend," Ben says suddenly.

" . . . What?" I ask unprompted.

Ben gestures over to the paper at the end of the table. I snatch it up.

Willa.

What the fuck?

LOCAL WOMAN IN COMA FOLLOWING BRUTAL ATTACK

"She was so close, too. I . . . really thought she might make it."

How?

How does he know about Willa? He's either trying to tell me something or he's trying to fuck with me. I'm tired of playing these games. I'm tired of waiting to die. I've had fucking enough of all of this.

I slam my fist down on the table in frustration. It stings.

It stings.

I look down to my hand. Something's changed—before, all interactions

with Ben have been constrained. A straight track with just a few choices. But as I flex my fingers, it feels like my shackles have come loose. Is this scripted, or did something break? I meet Ben's eyes across the table.

And I launch myself from my chair and knock him to the floor.

I see text options crowding the corner of my vision, but I shake my head and they fall away.

"What do you know?" I demand.

"This is assault," Ben says robotically. He's completely limp under me, not trying to fight back.

"Quit fucking with me!"

"Natsumi, if you continue to escalate this, I will be forced to defend—"

Ben stops talking. He reaches a hand up to his earpiece and looks at me.

"There's been another attack," he says.

I blink at him. He reaches up and grabs my wrist around his neck.

"Another *attack*, Natsumi," he says through grit teeth.

What? Wait . . .

"Fuck," I say.

"Go," Ben whispers. "Hurry."

***

I exit the game and open my eyes. The room is dark and empty.

"Lights," I command. Nothing. "Arturo?" I call. "Jenner?"

I feel a stack of messages in my inbox, all from Jenner.

>natsumi you gotta get out of there now holy shit

>Nats wake up please we both gotta get out of here now WAKE UP

>CAN'T YOU HEAR ME WHY AREN'T YOU GETTING THESE

>NATSUMI PLEASE

>HELP ME

>HELPMEHELPMEHELPMEHELPMEH3LP ME HELP \HELP *6^MEHELP

Another message pops up and I jump. Just a garbled jumble of letters and broken code. I stand up and wobble. Fuck me, my hands are still tied.

This is bad. So very bad.

I blink my night-vision app up. The room roars to life in sharp greens. Dark stains splashed across the carpet. The door to the kitchen's been smashed apart, and I can hear something inside—the scrape of metal? Part of me says run. A lot of me says run.

But if Jenner's still messaging me, he could still be alive.

The scraping metal gets louder and more erratic as I peer through the door frame. More dark stains, all over the kitchen tiles.

And in the middle of it all is Jenner.

Sitting over Arturo and cutting him apart.

Arturo's arm has been sawed completely off. I draw back in horror, bring my bound hands to my mouth to stifle my scream. I hear the snap of taut muscle and the horrible scrape of metal on the tiles as Jenner finishes hacking through the other shoulder.

Jenner lifts Arturo's freshly severed limb up and inspects it. Brings the weeping stump to his nose like an animal.

The he drops Arturo's severed arm and turns.

The LEDs in his eyes bleed green. His nose bleeds red. He tilts his head, examining me, the smell of rot blooming around him. A message pings in my head from him.

>NATSUMI ? &^%$##PREY ACQU^IR3D

I fucking run.

The front door knob rattles in my bound hands, but I manage to open it, swinging it shut behind me. Down the stairs as fast as I can, Jenner's footsteps echoing just above me. Shadows dart around me, the smell of rot flooding the stairwell from all directions.

The shadows close in.

A message arrives in my inbox. I cringe and wait for the broken code, but it's not from Jenner. It's the Bleedover app.

>Natsumi, do you have a moment?

It's Ben.

>If you can make the time, I'd like to meet.

I'd laugh if I didn't want to cry. Here I am, running with my hands tied from one of my best friends, who's trying to kill me, and Ben wants to play fucking games.

I make it to the second floor and double back, turning out of the stairwell and into the hall. I could pound on doors, beg for help. Jenner would hear me and find me faster.

My pace falters. I can't keep this up. My arm still hurts. Hands tied. Steps faltering. I haven't slept right in weeks.

>Please Natsumi, I want to help.

Fuck it. What choice do I have? Let's see what this fucker has to say.

I keep going down the hall until I find a nook. I crouch down into it and close my eyes.

I try to ignore Jenner's erratic footsteps in the distance, as I activate Bleedover.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

The library's dark, but the sky outside the windows is red. The pines are smoking. The world's on fire. The game is so broken now it probably isn't even running on the developers original code.

I reach over the front desk, grab a pair of scissors from a pencil mug and tuck them into my belt before I continue on.

Ben's sitting at our table, the wide panes casting him in an eerie crimson. His hair seems messier than it did a few minutes ago. Chunks of it are missing. His face looks gaunt and sickly.

He looks like he's dying.

"Natsumi," he nods as I sit. "I'm glad to see you."

"Are you?" I ask, voice shaking with rage. "Cuz it seems a lot like you're trying to kill me."

Ben's quiet.

"Why are you still fucking with me? You killed everyone. Fucking . . . everyone. Did any of your clues ever mean anything? Or was this all part of your game?"

I slump over. I could sob. I could vomit.

"I didn't kill *anyone*, Natsumi."

I look at Ben, meet his eyes. What a cheap trick. Giving him pretty, trusting eyes. And how very human of me to fall for it.

"You're a monster," I whisper.

Ben slams his fist against the table.

I snap up in my seat, almost reach to my belt and pull out my scissors. Ben's eyes are wide, darting next to him, like he's desperately trying to tell me something he can't say. I eye the empty air beside him.

"Remember what I asked you, that first time you met?" he says. " . . . You were still resting, so it's understandable if you didn't."

Ben leans forward.

"Do you ever feel like something's watching you, just out of the corner of your eye?"

My skin prickles. For a moment I almost turn my eyes and look to my side. But no. Ben was gesturing next to him. Cautiously, I turn my head.

And out of the corner of my eye, I see the monster hovering behind Ben.

I suck in a deep breath. It's blurred. A sickly whitish grey, towering above the table. A hand floating over Ben. A jagged finger disappears into the back of his head.

I snap my head around and it vanishes. Ben's staring at me with wide, pleading eyes.

Just a puppet. That thing's got the strings.

So act fast before it realizes you know.

Like before when I attacked Ben, I launch myself at him across the table. But this time, I turn my head and slam my scissors as deep as I can into the creature behind him.

An unholy shriek rips through the air, part human, part animal, part static. The monster flickers in and out of view as it collapses, and I yank its long, bloody finger from Ben's skull.

"C'mon!"

I leap off the table and Ben throws himself from his chair. His balance is shot, but I grab his hand and allow him to use me as a crutch. We don't make it far, but we get to the rows of shelves on the opposite wing of the building before he collapses.

"That won't stop it," he wheezes, sucking down air. I crouch down next to him.

" . . . That's why you couldn't tell me everything, right? It was controlling you?"

Ben nods.

"It broke out of our facility and . . . I was the first on the scene. So it used me. It needs a human anchor to live, but its hosts . . . don't live long. It's been looking for a fresh—"

"You know this is a game, right?" I interrupt him.

Ben's mouth snaps shut. Broken code runs across the bottom of my vision, but I blink it away.

And finally, Ben looks down and nods.

"Yeah," he nods. "That was . . . what was scripted. It wasn't supposed to turn into this though. At least, I hope it wasn't. ."

"Why is this . . . ? You know everything' that's going on out there, right?"

Ben sucks in a shuddering breath, touches the back of his bleeding head.

"The game ends when you uncover the mystery of the monster. When you realize it needs me to stay alive, and . . . "

He pulls his bloody fingers into the shape of a gun and puts it to his temple. I remember what Willa said—she killed him. It was Ben.

"But something's not working right, between the game and the app. I don't think the developers anticipated this."

Ben turns to me.

"The app for Bleedover and the actual game work together, but they're two separate programs. Be it mutation or sabotage, the app isn't registering

when I'm killed—and vice versa, that the monster has been killed in-game. The app keeps going. It was never meant to last for so long. To keep elevating its distortions to such a level."

"So what, you can't kill the monster out there? There's no way out of this at all?"

Ben bites his lip.

"There may be one."

He pulls his hair out of his ponytail and holds out his hand.

"The only way to kill it is to kill me. Give me your game needle."

"What?" I ask.

"Bring me with you," he explains. "Do it out there. For real."

Do it out there?

Oh. Oh. Fucking hell.

I open my mouth to protest. There's gotta be another way, a better way. But the smell of rot is getting closer, and this time it's accompanied by enraged howls.

"Natsumi. Not enough time," he says, holding out his hand.

God damnit.

I reach back and to my surprise, I can feel my port in the back of my head. I yank my needle out and pass it to Ben. He clenches his jaw as he slams it into the open wound in the back of his skull.

The smell gets worse. The growling gets closer.

"He's almost here," I whisper.

"Out there too. So be ready."

Ben yanks the bloody needle out and drops it into my hand.

"Wake up."

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

I open my eyes and almost start. I can see the monster looming down the hall. It's horrible and rotten, open lesions weeping pus and blood. Maggots wriggle. Its body is emaciated, but its face is round and bloated, like a horrible, swollen baby doll.

Right beneath it is Jenner, green eyes scanning the halls. His head moving in time with the monster.

Puppet on a string.

I crouch low and still. Jenner keeps his head eye level, tilting back and forth robotically. His bloody kitchen knife dangles in his hand, ready to strike. I bend my bound arms and fumble behind my head and yank out my game needle.

I hold my breath as Jenner passes in front of me, and I lunge. He hisses out and tries to turn, but not before I slam the needle into his open gameport.

At once, Jenner freezes.

Blood pours from his nose. The LEDs in his eyes flicker off and on as his eyes smoke and tear. He stumbles, sputtering and gasping. The monster above him cries out, hands moving about in uncertainty.

Jenner looks up at me, LEDs going dim. He brings his knife down and buries it into his stomach.

I reach out a hand but stop. I look away, until all I see are the jerking motions of him stabbing out his guts from the corner of my eye. Each squish punctuated by a garbled, pained scream—but not from Jenner.

Finally, the knife clatters to the floor and Jenner falls to his knees. I rush over to catch him. The monster lays a few feet away from him, twitching and gasping. Just like him.

"Jenner?" I take his hand. He laughs sadly, shaking his head. " . . . Ben."

"It's good to see you, Natsumi," he nods.

I stare down at Jenner's body—once a puppet, now a dying shell. I feel so many things right now. Relief. Guilt. Sick. Mostly sick. I killed my last living friend so he wouldn't kill me. I wonder if there was anything left of him in there at all.

I hope there wasn't.

I turn my attention back to Ben. Still gripping my hand. Still dying.

"Can I do anything?" I ask.

He looks up at me.

"Tell what you know. This isn't a sustainable way to end the game but . . . it might be a start to figuring it out."

I nod. Ben squeezes my hand, breath hitching.

"So. This is being alive?" he asks.

"It's not supposed to hurt this much. Not all the time."

He chuckles.

"It feels . . . different. From dying in-game."

"How?" I ask, wondering how many times he's been killed. How many horrible ways. What kind of fucked up people made him like this—forced him to die over and over and remember it each time.

How different is it from dying for real?

Ben doesn't respond, though. His grip goes slack in my hand.

I don't know how long I sit, holding him—Ben, Jenner—in that dark, empty hallway all alone. Long enough for the smell of rot to dissipate, for the dead monster to fade from my vision. It all goes away, until all I'm left with is the bright, glitching text scrolling across my view.

CONGRATULATIONS. YOU'VE WON.

NERVANA

DAVID F. SHULTZ

YOU WERE ALWAYS searching for something, maybe a way out. But that spikechip—the one with the bone lotus—that was just business. Funny the way things work out sometimes.

Anyway, let me fix your memory—preacher told me there can be some degradation. I'll bring you up to speed.

You're Eva. I'm Cain. We were working the streets the day you died. It was a mescaline cathedral of neon and hologram, both of us floating somewhere over the confines of our flesh, until everything settled back down to concrete, at least enough to work. You went into the darkness. In the stink of alley garbage behind overflowing dumpsters, you were free to deal.

"I got Universal, Sony, EMI," you said to the three punks. "Disney, Paramount, Fox."

There was the leader, muscle grafts stretching his skin like a balloon animal; the lanky one, with his stupid spiked hair and cat eyes, twitching from stims, bare skin of his chest showing under a pleather vest; the cybergoth chick, green and blue dreds, all black poly. Yeah, she looked good, but she had nothing on you you in your pink jacket over a fence-mesh top, lycra pants tighter than a straitjacket. Anyway, the juicer asked about gear.

You told them you didn't deal gear. You stopped selling drugs, too—wanted out of that game—but you still dealt experiences. "Music, movies, simstim," you said. "Digital only."

"That's good," he said, grinning. "Makes my life easier."

He drew his piece, ordered you on the ground. You're good at playing the victim. Acting helpless comes natural. Those three jackers in the alley had no idea what was coming.

I dropped in, and he didn't even see the blade. His hand flopped down on the pavement like a dead fish, and with the other one he grabbed that

sheared stump, like trying to catch a bottle of red wine by the neck, and it pulsed out on the pavement.

"Christ! What the fuck!"

"I said I don't deal gear," you told them with your own wrist blade out, humming blue. "Not I don't have it." I usually let you do the talking. My job is to look tough. And sometimes I cut off body parts, I guess.

The punk girl shifted her weight from her heels, knees bent, ready to spring.

"You stupid or something?" you said, the light from your blade shining off her claws.

That's when the lanky guy took a shot with a chestgun. A hiss of air from his direction, then a needle was sticking out of your neck. Hypodermic. You tased him to the floor.

"Why aren't you out?" the girl said. Like a hypodermic could take you out. You're here to stay, babe, even if you flatlined.

"You guys are really fucking dumb, you know that?" you said. Those shits hadn't heard of nanites or something.

"Okay," the girl said, retracting her claws and putting her hands up. She was ready to say her prayers. "I don't want any trouble."

"Well you got it," I said. "Give us the bag."

Whatever these scavengers jacked was in the duffel bag—whatever they hadn't fenced, anyway—and I figured we were owed something for our trouble. I knew you didn't want to deal in gear any more, but this was fate.

"Aw, c'mon! Just let us go. We fucked up!"

"Should've just bought something," I said. "Now give us the bag. Unless you rather give me your eyes."

"I just got these! Take the bag, take it!"

It was heavy with gear.

"Nice working with you," I said, and we dipped back into the blare and blaze of the street. "And careful who you try to jack. There's some dangerous people out there."

Back at the shop, you popped some DMT. You always liked the spirit molecule—and for me it was angel dust. You remember our shop. A bit of a junk-heap. Piles of scrap, tangles of wire and metal on the walls. Shit from our old life, stuff we hadn't fenced yet, and some we kept around as keepsakes. I pulled you close, one hand on your ass, the other on your neck, and we kissed like we always did after a good run: like it was the first time, coming off the high of adrenaline and onto the high of the drugs.

I remember I said I want to own you, and you said I already did. Truth.

We spread the haul out on the work table. A bunch of bionics, still specked with blood from hasty removal. You reminded me you wanted to get out. You felt trapped, still. You got out of the puppet house, long time

ago. Thought it was easy money, but you paid a debt for it, we both found out later. You stopped dealing drugs, too, and then gear. Always looking for something else. We had enough to get by, even some savings in crypto and off-grid accounts. But you still felt trapped. So probably it was something deeper than profession, deeper than cash, whatever denomination, that kept you restless.

Then you did your thing, rifled through it all, ritually turned it over in your hands, piece by bloody piece.

"It's mostly cosmetic," you said. "A few cheap enchancements. Couple DD packs. They pulled this one off a junkee, looks like. Poor guy's in withdrawal now for sure—if he's not dead. We can't get too much for all this. Maybe not worth the heat. Then there's this thing." You held it up, pinched with your thumb. A spikechip, etched with a bone lotus—a grinning skull in full bloom—sealed separately from the rest of the gear in blue anti-static. Some kind of custom implant. It piqued our interest, just from the mystery, but we had no idea how valuable it would turn out to be.

"What do you think?" you said. "Want to give it a spin?"

You're funny sometimes, you know that? I told you I like a little risk now and then, but I'm not stupid. Not *that* stupid, anyway.

You had no idea what it was, and I thought we should find out.

"I don't want to screw with hardware anymore," you said. "Digital is less messy."

"Until you get the CC on your ass."

"Not if you're careful." Sure, encryption can bury your sins, but the copyright cops are no joke. And besides, just because it's digital doesn't mean no one gets hurt.

"Careful, huh? How's that working for us?" I was looking at the rest of the jacked gear, all blood-specked. "Anyway, you wanted to move out of this place, right? Maybe this is our ticket."

So we held on. Looked for an answer.

You stayed in the shop. I hit the streets, looking for intel, and yeah, I popped amphetamines before asking around. The streets were a festival of neon, surging with pedestrians and holograms like pilgrims circling the Haj. You could feel alive there, with the right mix of drugs, feel part of something bigger than yourself, every person a part of this network. If the city was a brain, the gasping streets of downtown was a seizure, or a near death experience, or maybe an orgasm, every neuron alive, everything an impulse going somewhere, until the drugs wore out.

You buzzed me back, your neural-link screaming.

I pounded pavement, adrenaline full blast, and the dazzle of the city was a waterfall of light. I was swimming upstream, blasting straight through holograms and pedestrians, both of them about as much

substance based on how I plowed through. Some of them shouted, none of them mattered. I could feel your fear, your pain.

Down the alley, through the metal door of the shop, wide open.

There were three of them there, a pistol each, rifling through our shit. They looked like monks, loose orange robes mostly concealing their implants, but I picked them up on thermals. If they were Buddhists, they missed the lesson about peace—geared for combat, subdermal anti-ballistics, standard armblades, good ol' hand-cannons, and a few more implants for good measure. I painted the wall with one of their heads, and that's when the others knew I was in the room.

They remodeled the place. Gunfire everywhere, punched a few more holes in the walls, clattered gear off the shelves. I took cover behind the tool cabinet, rolled—like how I taught you—dropped the second monk from the other side.

The lights were easy to shoot out. I went for the third one in the pitch black, except for the LEDs here and there. Thermals let me get up nice and close and I took a swing. When his head stopped rolling, it was facing the wall.

You were by the work table. They put at least a dozen holes in you. Most were in your torso. One of them grazed your head, took a bit of brain. I hoped not too much. I guess most of your blood was on the floor—I almost slipped. You were still warm.

The duffel bag we took from those punks had enough room. That's where I put your head, and some ice from the freezer. Then I booked it for Preacher's place.

"How long she dead for?" Preacher said, and that asshole pulled your head up out of the bag by a handful of hair, and it was spinning like a mobile, like your dead eyes were scanning the room. I don't remember what I said to him, seeing red, but he looked scared and said he was sorry and that you didn't mind because you were stone dead, and then he asked how long you'd been dead for.

Maybe three hours, tops.

"Fresh. No problem, man. Don't be so worried. You got cash?"

I took the rest of the stuff out of the bag—all the gear from the jackers, wet from blood and melting ice—and spread it across the table.

"Not that shit. Make that into cash."

I worked out the price with Preacher, paid the dues in crypto from my savings.

"We good," Preacher said, putting on a pair of latex gloves. Then he put your head in the slicer, and I turned away for the grinding noise, and the wet, cracking sound. He pulled out your brain—your mind organ, released from the prison of bone—and I heard the whir of the juicer. I

didn't look back until I heard the beep. Preacher pulled out the fresh printed spikechip.

"Your friend Eva," he said, holding the shard at eye height. "Good as new. You got a port?"

I had to do it right then. I was already missing you. I sat straight down, showed him the back of my head, ran my fingers over there, feeling the sockets. Three of them. And Preacher asked if any were dead. Not dead, though. Just empty.

"Here we go then. Say 'hi' from Preacher."

Oh yeah—Preacher says 'hi'.

I'm Cain. You're Eva, still. You're her memories and her thoughts, and that's what makes you, you. But I had to put you in the chip.

There was the electric frisson, a voice from somewhere above, and then I felt you inside my shadow. I remember the first word you said.

"Fuck!"

You had your arms over your chest, moving up and across, checking for wounds. Then your eyes were looking around for something that wasn't there. "Something's not right, Cain." You knew it, but you hadn't quite figured the details.

"Those guys in the shop. They looked like monks. You remember? I had to take you to a shop, Eva. A 'tec by the name of Preacher."

"I know Preacher—Wait. Are you saying . . . "

"Yeah. They iced you, babe. I'm sorry. I did what I could. But it's gonna be okay! Preacher brought you back, put you in a shard. I got you plugged in my deck now."

I felt you swirling around, pushing against the shadows, but not touching anything. You were gliding on the edges of my perception, feeling the contours of my mind—your new confines, I guess—and you were the gleam on the metal table, the woodgrain in the walls, the LED on the juicer, and your voice was my conscience—including the language.

"Motherfuck!" you said. "I'm a fucking ghost?"

"I worked as fast as I could. I'm sorry. I should've been there."

"They were looking for that spikechip you handed me, you know? The one with the bone lotus. This is your fault."

Truth. You were telling me the whole time you wanted out. I kept us in. That was my choice, against what you wanted. And I didn't need to say a word of it. I was right about the bone lotus being valuable, but I didn't know they'd kill you for it.

Preacher stopped spinning in his office chair. I could tell his ears perked up when I started talking to no one about revenge. You were down. "Let's get those fuckers." Not the three goons. I already dealt with that. But we were gonna get whoever sent them. And then there was the bone lotus.

Someone wanted it bad, which meant money. So I'd find them, get the proverbial two birds with one stone.

Damon was the only one I'd talked to before the monks hit you. So we went to pay him a visit.

Damon's bar was a galaxy of neon pink and blue. Full length mirrors gave the impression of vast space, teeming with juicers and jockeys, lots of girls on the dancefloor, everyone playing the game, seeing how much they're worth, who they can pick up, leather and lycra under spinning lights, people reduplicated to the edges of infinity in a swirl of ecstatic colour. The atmosphere was an acid trip, some kind of danceclub purgatory, but if you moved too far, you felt the edges of the coffin.

I put my gun on Damon's gut, held his collar tight enough to choke off his blood, and took him for a walk. I decked him in the alley, buried my boot in his ribs.

"I brought Eva with me," I said.

Damon coughed, spit blood, and looked around the alley. He got the point when I tapped the ports in my head, knew how bad he fucked up. And you were watching from my shadow when I beat the truth out of him. He'd tipped off someone looking for the bone lotus. They called it Nervana. Super-restricted simstim, special-made toy for the ultra-rich, I guess. Priceless, maybe—they weren't supposed to sell it. And it brought a lot of heat. CC cops were looking for it, along with the guys who'd lost it—the guys who sent those thugs to our shop. I got the location out of Damon before I iced him.

We went together, through the old subway, the back alleys of the underground city, gang territory. I had to buy my way past the muscle. And then there was the monastery, lit up like a strip-club. A blue neon sign offered enlightenment at a rate of nine-hundred creds an hour. Above that, a bone lotus flickered in pink, lightening the concrete windowsills, the blinds behind the windows. There were two buddha statues on both sides of the front door holding a handful of fire each. The door was open, but I wasn't going the straight-forward way.

I stepped past a couple junkies coiled by the coke-machine glow, moved silent into the alley. Graffiti on the walls. Lightning, black clouds, a spider, and 'shantih, shantih, shantih'.

A monk was leaning against the metal sidedoor, couldn't have been older than twenty, cig in one hand and a gun at his side. I dropped him, took the keys from his pocket, and opened the door.

It was some kind of computer temple, cross between a monastery and a data warehouse. There were all these pews of terminals, mostly covered in cloth. The windows were stained glass, at first, then I looked closer, and they were just cracked and grimy, backlit by the neon street, and all the

colors and shapes amounted to nothing. I worked my way down, and there were a few side doors leading to rooms with neural linkups. One of them was in use. An old guy in a suit was inside, jacked in to the machine with a monk minding the sim.

He fumbled for his gun, and I got the jump on him. He gave up his piece. I threatened his life, and he told me how to find the big man. Across the hallway, a big set of metal doors, and down a spiralling metal staircase into some darker room, barely lit with flickering flourescent. There were two monks there, more young-looking punks. They had the bone lotus tattooed on their foreheads. I dropped them both with derms.

Down at the bottom of the stairs there were all these computers set up in a wide circle, and a tangle of wire umbilicals leading to a center part of the room, blocked off with hanging sheets. The people behind the sheet were cold, just like ghosts through the thermals, all sitting like they were meditating in a circle, tethered to the machines by wires. I figured they were dead, and whatever heat was left in their bodies was just ambient from the machines.

That's when the boss came from around the corner, the leader of this spooky cyber cult. He looked the same age as the rest of them, but he was loaded with gear, tatted up with Sanskrit and Japanese.

"There's no need for your gun," he said. And he introduced himself, Tulku Abiz.

I held up the bone lotus, asked him if he was looking for it. His eyes widened just a bit.

"Nervana," he said.

"You sent your goons looking for it, yeah?"

"I never intended for anyone to get hurt."

I just about put a bullet in his head right then. But I thought he should have a chance to explain himself. And I wanted to know what the thing was. Besides, if you're gonna get a new body, babe, I need more cash. And if I want to afford one as good as the one you lost, I'm gonna need a lot. Haha.

He said he'd show me. He pulled back the curtain, the one blocking all those thermal ghosts in the center, and I saw all the robed figures there, mouths hanging open, dead eyes, dessicated bodies, plugged in with neurallinks and IVs. They were dressed like monks, but I thought of the crucifiction, how they were all pinned to posts, keeping their bodies seated upright, and their flesh run through with all the hookups. Something was flowing through those tubes, but it was dark and cold. The only heat was the machines, and the wires in their brains, barely buzzing.

"Sokushinbutsu," Abiz said. "The Buddhas in the flesh." They kept the monks alive down there, if you could call it that, just a baseline

consciousness, maybe a permanent near-death-experience, or something. And they recorded it, put it in the bonus lotus, so others could plug in to what they felt. Enlightenment in a chip.

"Nervana is only intended for the most devout," Abiz said. "The chip was never meant to be sold."

"I got this off some street jackers."

"That one must be an unauthorized copy, made by one of our acolytes. Every organization has its corruption. They must have intended to sell it. But we can't allow this chip to be released."

"Why is that?"

"Nervana must be earned, not copied and sold."

"I think I'll keep it," I said. "You know your men killed my girl?"

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I know."

I put a bullet in his head. It was weird, not like a regular head wound—a cracking, hissing, sound, not a lot of blood—and I saw the cybernetics inside his skull. Must have been half machine, at least, and it was sparking.

Then the punk I was holding spoke up.

"You can't kill me," he said, and he spoke like Abiz. "All the acolytes have the same implant. My consciousness will be transferred from a backup at the moment of death."

Abiz was jumping from brains, using his followers to keep himself alive! Had a backup of his mind somewhere in that place.

"Where's the server?"

He laughed. "You think I would tell you?"

"Guess I'll have to just kill all of you, then."

I blew off his face from under the chin.

The Nervana chip was illegal. That's why they had to hide what they were doing, why they couldn't let it out. There'd be copyright cops all over it, so I had to scramble, just in case. I made my way out, gibbed a few more of the monks on the way, and decided the best way to really stick it to these assholes was to make sure the CC found their way here, and shut the whole thing down.

I put in an anonymous tip—unauthorized enlightenment experience—gave them all the deets, told them it might be a bit messy, and before long the place was swarming with CC agents. Mission accomplished.

I tried to celebrate, and I kept you plugged in. So we were together there, celebrating after a job well done, like we always did. And I still had the bone lotus, too—I could fence that later, maybe get you a body. I wished you had one then, because it wasn't the same, just having you floating next to my mind, even with all the drugs. And it was worse, the more I thought about how much I wanted your body, the more these memories of yours came back, mixing in with mine. It was a bad trip.

It was all that time you spent in the puppet house. It's just a body, you said. And it was easy money. A body is just meat—it's not really you. Maybe. But still, you wouldn't be a meat puppet without the blackout chip. Remember what you told me—you didn't want to know what they did you. Not to *your body*. To *you*.

Pieces come back to me, from you. The blackout chip isn't perfect. No technology is. A meat puppet still needs basic sensorimotor responses active, and that means, sometimes, things leak through. It's always the worst bits—when your body is screaming no, but you can't move, because the chip is in control, telling you what to do. There's the sweaty belly hanging over you as he spits on his hand. The hairy ankles of old men, arranged around you in a circle, waiting their turn. The stink of B.O. and liquor. Animal grunts. Wet, clammy hands grabbing and pulling. There's the cigar, or the wine bottle. It never hurt too much when it was over—not more than a Norco could melt into warmth—and of course, you always got comped for reconstruction. And now that you were a ghost, that's what you were left with: just the memories. You're so strong. I don't know how you deal with those memories bubbling up. It was more than I could deal with. That's why I unplugged you. I keep you in my phone these days, not my head. One day, I'll be able to afford a body for you.

You're Eva. Eva's memories and thoughts, which is just as good. And I'm Cain. A recording of Cain, anyway. I left this as a reminder. A reminder that I'm still here, watching over you, keeping you close. You always told me you wanted a way out. One day I'll be able to afford a new body for you. Maybe I'll find a buyer for this Nervana chip.

Don't worry babe. I got your back.

You always told me you wanted a way out.

THE GOD FINGER

DEAN H. WILD

THE SMALL MAN leaned over the desk until his too-tight suit jacket seemed ready to burst open.

"It's all up to code, Dr. Collings. I assure you."

Collings considered the object on his otherwise uncluttered blotter with disdain. Why did he agree to a sales call when the queue of patients outside was growing by the minute? Perhaps the nervous man's demeanor and afflicted thinness caught him off guard.

"We use neural blockers here," he said with a dismissive headshake as the overhead chime from the holo-nurse announced the arrival of yet another patient. "Single-use units."

"It's not a pain blocker, Doctor." The man smiled a slow, yellow thing. "It's a feed, as you must realize."

The object looked like a typical medical gauntlet—a physician's wristlet with three wires branching from a common connector, each wire fitted with a cap to accommodate a fingertip. The blue pinky cup harvested medical history when placed against the patient's implant. The black ring finger cup delivered current vital signs to the closest available exam monitor and the green middle finger deducted the day's fees from the patient's bit vault. All standard-issue and quite legit in appearance. But the fourth cup, white and presumably designed for the index finger, was new.

He dealt the white cap a cautious nudge. "Anesthetic delivery?"

"Not a delivery," the man said and pressed his palms together for emphasis. His eyes glittered. "This one's about removal."

"Removal?" He barely heard the holo-nurse chime go off again. Speculation over pain reeled out of a patient's body like fish line from a churning lake took center stage in his mind. Possible? Why not? Only five years ago the idea of complete skeletal excision and replacement was a dream on a digital notepad. "As if it were a growth or a mass?"

"Not its cause or its transmittal," the man said and leaned back in his chair. "Removal of its core. Its wellspring."

"I don't—"

Another chime from the holo-nurse, (Halo, all the damn things across the country were named Halo) this one a discordant three-note phrase, indicated the waiting room was full to capacity.

The man got to his feet and put on his hat in a parting gesture (an old houndstooth patterned hat with a comically small feather in the brim). "I understand. It's new. You're skeptical. But pain is the sister of injury, Dr. Collings. The lingering lap dog of sickness. Why not banish it with the tap of a finger if we can?"

"Just a tap?" he glanced the white finger cup again.

"All the direction you'll find necessary. Intuition is a major factor with this particular unit."

"I'd like some time," he said as he turned toward the open door.

Jerry Marwitz from the clinic across the hall stood there, his breath hard, his forehead sweaty. A bloody hand print stained the left shoulder of his white coat.

"Bill, I know you've got a full house," Jerry said with a dismal apology. The finger pads of his gauntlet glittered with fresh blood. "But I've got a situation across the hall. I could use your hands."

"I'll set Halo to auto-evaluate my queue." His jump into crisis mode was easy and instantaneous in these days of laser pellet shootings, food riots and aural concussion assaults. He simultaneously addressed the thin man and pulled his own familiar, well-used gauntlet from the pocket of his coat. "As for you—"

"Say no more. I'll leave my card so that we may talk again."

"Let's go," Collings said and followed Jerry out.

Examination room five, the smallest of the dozen rooms shared by the two clinics, was bright and ripe with the stench of blood. A reedy wheezing sound he at first interpreted as a malfunction in the ventilation system came from the patient stretched out on the exam table.

"I took an overflow patient from Critical Intake," Jerry said and checked the vital signs displayed on an old-fashioned readout screen tethered to the young man with equally old-fashioned coils of wire. "Resonant Flayer bullets, is my guess. Hit him in both arms."

"Black market stuff," Collings said and stepped up while he slipped his gauntlet on.

Jerry looked away from the monitor. "Skip the prelim. His med chips are gone. Blown out. We're going old-school today."

Collings nodded. Visual assessment, then. A twenty-something man lay before him, slender of build, sporting common street scum traces of

gray face makeup and the deeper, more visceral signs of malnutrition. He ran probing fingers over the ragged furrows encircling each forearm (dunking his hands in the vat of steri-gel was so automatic he barely remembered doing it. A motor reaction, like an old time Catholic dabbing holy water from a portal basin) amazed at the copious bleeding, how uniform in flow, how it pooled and washed over the sides of the table in courses, like crimson veils. A far-removed part of his mind offered the scent of summer hay and hot engine parts.

"We've got to move fast," Jerry said and bustled up next to him. "The flayers have done their job and that tissue is ready to slide off the bone. Besides, he's going to wake up, soon."

"Wake up?" Collings applied a choke hold to one of the arms midway between the wrist and elbow. Strands of tissue inside the wound stretched and tore like the inner flesh of a Halloween pumpkin. "Your neural block should last half an hour, at least."

"Busy day. I'm out of them." Jerry cast a hectic look around the room. "I doped him with a syringe. Old school, remember?"

That explained the respiratory distress. Collings gave the forearm a laborious push upward. It slid into place with muddy resistance. "Get that fusion going then, Doctor, before your witch's brew wears off."

The forearm rolled out of his hand with blood-slick ease. The patient's eyes flew open, over-wide and daunted. What began as a wheezing breath boiled up into a scream. Jerry shouted, a curse drowned out by the young man's cries. Collings flung himself over the patient to quell the inevitable thrashing.

How like Monica's screams the young man's wails seemed. Not in pitch, but in character. He smelled hay and hot engine parts again, and shut his eyes for fear he might, through some wicked trick of time and circumstance, find himself surrounded by crumpled metal and broken glass.

The man writhed. "God damn, oh Jesus, god damn."

Collings endured the man's close, hot breath with gritted teeth. *Just don't ask me. I won't be able to bear it if you plead. If you beg.*

"Get up," Jerry grasped the back of his jacket. "We can't wait, Bill. If we do this fast and raw we can save one of those arms, anyway."

He forced his eyes open to find himself nearly cheek to cheek with the young man, like a lover, only a rictus of terrified pain replaced any type of adoration. His insides clenched. The man's mouth worked around a desperate word.

"P-please," he said.

Collings was on his feet and through the door before Jerry could call out after him. "Where the fuck you going, Bill?"

"Five seconds," he shouted back and burst into his office.

Three neural blockers waited in sterile foam slumber in the cabinet against the wall. He'd use them all, a risk, but the man's plea sent Monica's words jangling through his thoughts.

"*You're the doctor. Isn't there something . . . ?*"

He stopped a few feet short of his desk. The thin man's gauntlet was there. Next to it, a business card rested with sly marketing jauntiness. Blockers needed to be security-released, then unpackaged and booted. Monica came through louder even though her breath was strained and halted in the car's smashed interior.

"*Someplace you can put pressure? The pain, Bill, oh God the pain.*"

He strapped the man's gauntlet in place while he hurried back. Jerry stood over the patient, stricken, his coat sleeves saturated in crimson. One of the young man's arms was already a loss, the meat flung into the corner like a cast-off glove. His exposed forearm bones glistened. The young man rocked, rigid, his remaining arm flexing and grasping. Seizure.

The pain, oh God Bill, the pain.

He leaned over the young man, the white cup on his index finger extended like an accusation.

"What the hell is that?" Jerry said and produced a fusion platen from below the exam table.

"Help, I hope."

Instinct pushed his finger downward, toward the man's solar plexus.

In the back of his head, Monica pleaded "*make it stop*" and buzzing warmth enveloped his hand. The white finger cup pulsed with a dull light as he pushed against the man's chest—just a tap. His hand pulled back on its own, it seemed, and the gauntlet executed a brief mechanical squirm.

"What did you do?" Jerry asked, wide-eyed.

The young man's cries ceased, his rictus fell away, his body a lateral display of loose muscle.

"Just start fusing," Collings said and once again throttled the remaining arm, pushed it together like meat on a spit. "Fuse, fuse."

Jerry rolled the platen with precision despite his trembling hands. The patient rested in motionless repose, his gaze ceiling-ward.

"Shock?" Collings said and snapped his fingers near the man's ear.

When the man's blank eyes rolled toward him, he felt better. A little.

"That's a remarkable addition to the traditional gauntlet," Jerry said as they watched the man's vitals slip back to normal. "Latest and greatest, I guess. How much did it set you back?"

Collings attention centered on the young man's eyes, how they turned back to the ceiling as if searching for something lost.

"I don't know yet," he said.

⁂

The last patient in his queue was named Shelby according to the readout Halo sent to his desk surface monitor, and her apparent exhaustion trumped his by a mile. She clutched a sleeping three year old who dangled like a sweaty rag doll in pink threadbare kitten pajamas.

"Help me," Shelby said as her free hand gripped his coat. It made him think of the bloody print on Jerry's jacket that morning. "There's got to be something."

Her eyes told him *headache*, the deep prolonged kind caused by the costly but defective ocular implants which gave her irises their heavenly shade of aquamarine.

"How long?" he asked her and coaxed her to sit across the desk from him.

"Three days, I think," she said with a wet sob. A bubble of blood swelled from her left nostril. A tear slid down her cheek. "Maybe four. Stupid of me. Stupid. Stupid. I just want it to end."

He looked away, the few hours remaining for her tolling away in his head. Faulty occulars. No coming back.

"*Use those overpriced hands of yours*," Monica horned in, a cold terror in her eyes, and all around them, jagged metal pushing them close.

"All right," he'd said back to Monica that night, barely able to flex his smashed hands. Surgeon's hands he already knew would never again hold a scalpel. "Just a finger. Little more than a tap . . . "

He came back to his surroundings cold and heaving. His index finger jutted near his face, a consequence to be contemplated. Shelby's beseeching blue-green eyes welled. The right one drifted downward as if to independently explore her cheek. Rapid brain and muscle degeneration. So rapid.

"It will be better," he said and got out of his chair.

The new gauntlet went on easily. It nearly climbed onto his hand as he approached the bewildered woman. She attempted to speak as he touched the white finger cup to her chest (so near the rosy pouting mouth of her sleeping daughter) but the sudden lack of pain left her agape, as if with surprise.

"How do you feel?" He asked. "Will you be able to get yourself back home?"

She nodded, slow, her roaming eye rolled down to the whites. He helped her to the door, marking her uneven steps as she navigated the hallway. Her night promised to be short. She might pass before her child's nap was through. At least he took her pain.

He studied his index finger, the white cap still aglow, the wristlet heavy and squirming.

"What are you?" he said.

⁂

For the first time in months his own cries woke him in the pre-dawn hours. What came next was like the advances of an old hateful lover. He looked down at his left hand, prepared to stare it down until the smears of blood evaporated. His heart caught. No blood. The new gauntlet was strapped to his hand, white finger aglow. When he made a fist, it dissolved away, back to the land of troubled thoughts. He wiped his hand on the sheets and then dipped it into his nightstand drawer. Muscle memory. The two tiny capsules he pulled out gleamed in the gray first-light, instant death housed in their red and black shells. How often had he contemplated them in a similar naked huddle while his heart crashed and thudded and thoughts of Monica spilled in precious freshets? When he at last put the capsules back (Jolly Rogers, their street scum name amused him in a dark way) another old feeling washed over him, a remarkable blend of relief and defeat.

"*You know what to do*," Monica said while his finger pressed into the mattress. Little more than a tap. "*You're the doctor*."

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

He caught up with Jerry just as the clinic lights came on for the day. "I've set my Halo to auto reroute. I'm working Critical Intake today."

He flashed the new gauntlet when he said it.

"It'll be a zoo." Jerry toasted him with his coffee mug. "But from what I've seen you'll be able to do a lot of good with that thing down there. When are you gonna share your resources, let us other plain Joes get a cool new toy?"

"Once I've got it figured out," he said with a drab smile. "Once I'm sure about it."

His critical intake cubicle was a curtained-off corner on the ground floor and the Halo there was going off a mile a minute because of a school bus crash on the interstate. By lunchtime he treated five grade schoolers, the most critically injured being a small boy with a crushed wrist. He made sure to introduce each patient to the white finger, a playful poke with all the whimsy of a kiss on the forehead. Each one left his company at peace, docile even, their stitched or bandaged or gently debrided pain-bringers muted. The similarities in each patient's response surprised him at first and by morning's end filled him with a puzzled fascination. Next was the bus driver (a goose egg above the eyebrow and a compression bandage on a trio of cracked ribs) who joked continually through his treatment.

"There. Patches are in place. How's the pain?" Collings asked and gave the gauntlet a preparatory flex.

With a smile nearly hidden by his black bushy moustache, the man patted his bandaged sides. "Only hurts when I breathe."

His laugh seemed to feed the good-natured glint in his eyes. Seemed to fortify it.

"We can't have that."

Collings' smile tightened as he extended his white capped finger. For the first time no excitement over his new skill flourished, no pride in his mastery of miraculous technology swelled. Still, he prodded the man on the breastbone. Even the gauntlet's surge lacked any essence of reward.

"Now you can breathe and laugh all the way home," he said and forced a chuckle.

It died in his throat. The driver slouched and nodded as if with grim conclusion. He surveyed the room, bewildered, as he plucked his shirt from the nearby chair. Collings helped him put it on. Dull, afflicted movements.

"I want you to call me if the pain comes back," he said, his heart slow and heavy, his gauntlet hand a strained fist. "Any pain at all. Understand?"

The man shambled out. A quiet alarm made its first, restless noises in Collings' head.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

It felt selfish but rewarding to pull himself off-shift right after lunch. The walk home—twelve city blocks—promised him time to contemplate pain and gauntlets and removal. Plus, the sun felt good on his face.

He did not recognize the sprawled shape on the sidewalk ahead as a human being until a young woman in a tight dress and spiked anklets (deemed fashionable by street scum everywhere) nearly tripped over it. She issued a high-pitched scream and then skittered away like a toe dancer in her mile-high heels. Collings closed in, his instincts taking over as he knelt next to the hefty form in the navy blue business suit and tie. Not a man, he noticed as he coaxed the face skyward, but a stout woman with a close-shaved haircut.

Probably a depth charge, he concluded as he assessed the scooped-out portion of her skull. Black market ammunition made to explode seconds after penetrating warm tissue. The gushing vacancy where there once was hair, an ear, a scalp, roared at him. What chilled him was the easy way her eyes found him, and the slow grind of her jaw as her searching hand cupped the back of his head like a lover.

"Don't," he said to her.

Her breath rushed up, a foul confirmation of approaching death. In her eyes, a trapped plea adrift on a sea of pain.

You're the doctor. Use those overpaid hands.

She couldn't know that. Perhaps, he reasoned, when you teeter on a last crumbling island of hope, everyone is a potential doctor. He bent close.

"I'll be honest, this is bad," he told her as his hand slipped into his jacket.

Was it instinct or luck that led him to put the gauntlet in his pocket on the way out of the clinic?

"*Oh God, please Bill*," Monica pleaded in the confines of the smashed car, her neck askew and purple, a spill of intestines in the lap of her evening dress.

"Oh God, I'm sorry," he'd said back to her.

His hesitant finger had trembled on the gash in Monica's carotid for only a moment. Then he pushed in to split the skin wider, added steady pressure while the torn carotid pumped out warmth. Little more than a finger tap to end the pain. Exsanguination. A gradual but certain peace. If only a way to exsanguinate remorse and self-loathing existed. If only there was some uber-tech Godlike finger for that.

"Please," the woman said.

"This is all I can do," he said. The gauntlet was already in place.

He nudged her breastbone, quick, almost petulant. The hard focus of her eyes waned. A shudder passed through him in tandem with the gauntlet surge.

"Off you go," he whispered.

He located her carotid, felt the beats slow and then stop. And was there more? A deeper type of removal? Absence as cold as the weight of the gauntlet? Unexplained. Undeniable. He looked up at the stopped traffic and the groups of bystanders in the afternoon sun. His gut tightened.

"God finger," he said.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

"There's more to this," Collings said to the thin man who once again sat across the desk from him. "What is it?"

The man fetched a sigh deep enough to stress the buttons on his jacket before turning his gaze toward the gauntlet on the desk between them. "Let me first tell you that you've mastered the use just fine. The volume of product you've acquired is phenomenal."

"Product." The word became an instant, sick clot in his mouth. Yesterday's alarm bells began to ramp up with great efficiency. He stood and aimed a condemning finger at the gauntlet. "What, exactly, does that thing do?"

"As we've discussed, it's a feed."

"But it takes away more than pain. I've seen it. I've sensed it." He stalked around the desk, nearly blinded by remembered eyes surrendering their inner light, one after another. "You called it a wellspring. What is it I took from those people?"

His hands clamped on the lapels of the man's suit jacket and yanked him to his feet. Overhead, Halo's security alert chimed in another room down the hall. It was a morning for altercations, it seemed.

"There's some conversion involved," the man said. His eyes bulged. "Ethereal matter changed to data, and then sent to Digital Master Storage. Past The Cloud, through The Corona. Into The Nebula."

Collings swung the man around. From down the hall, a series of crashes and four rapid blasts. Gunfire. An emergency that somehow fueled the hotness inside him. “What the hell is ethereal matter?”

He shoved the man backward onto his desk and pinned him with a forearm.

“Some call it a spark.” The man resisted, but only a little. His breath kept unlikely time with the Halo alert. “Or the inner self. We’ve found it’s also the source of pain in the body and mind, or at least what allows us to feel it so deeply. The soul, Dr. Collings.”

The man dug in his shirt front and pulled a chain from the space between his shirt buttons. When the heavy silver cross popped out at the end, Collings glowered.

“You’re a priest?”

Running feet echoed in the hall as patients evacuated. A security guard shouted indecipherable commands from another room.

“Hardly. But to alleviate pain is a grace,” the man said. “To save souls in these dark days is magnanimous salvation.”

Collings pressed his arm down hard. Cartilage in the man’s neck popped. “Maybe you needed to pick a more cooperative subject to bamboozle with that thing.”

“I don’t know why I picked you. Instinct. It seems to work both ways when it comes to the gauntlet. Now, please let me go.”

Please, doctor. Please, Bill.

Collings pushed himself away with a grunt of disgust. Nine people. Nine sparks, some of them from children for God’s sake, sent whirling into a vast digital nowhere. The god damned Nebula. “Get out of here before security locks this place down. And take that forsaken God-finger with you.”

The man slunk to the door and gave his head a helpless shake. “That gauntlet is yours, Doctor. Only yours.”

Collings snatched up the gauntlet to fling it but the man slipped away to join the other hurrying bodies in the hall. A new form took his place; a man in security blues, detainment pistol at the ready.

“You a doctor?” The guard’s wide eyes softened when Collings nodded. “Good. You’re needed over here before we lock down.”

Collings followed the man across the hall. Exam room five again. Jesus. Halo’s alarm grew shrill and he meant to cover his ears but when he saw the wounded man writhing on the exam table, his hands dropped to his sides, cold. Numb with shock.

“Jerry? What the hell happened?”

“It was the father of that patient we worked on in here together,” Jerry said and drew a deep, bubbling gasp. It made the yawning bullet holes in

his chest stretch and ooze. “He busted the place up, then he shot me. With tunnelers, I think, Bill. Jesus. *Tunnelers*.”

Collings pulled open Jerry’s shirt to evaluate the situation and it fell away in bloody shreds. Three entry wounds in the chest, each one undulating as the tunneler bullets inside worked deeper, borne by an array of destructive micro-lasers which allowed them to burrow ever farther into tissue. More tunneler damage in Jerry’s thigh gushed freshets. He looked around at the smashed supply cabinets with a helpless groan. Behind them, the door slammed and the security locks snapped shut.

“This father, was he a patient?”

“No,” Jerry panted, “Just pissed off. Said we took his boy’s spirit along with his arm. Crazy, what some people will believe.”

“Yeah,” he said while an industrious bullet bored a path under the flesh of Jerry’s left nipple.

The brink of madness seemed at hand. At least the Halo alarm stopped.

“The neural blockers in here are all compromised, I think,” Jerry grimaced. “Goners.”

“Likewise your old time dope and needles,” Collings swept through the clutter, hands trembling. He wore a near-smile he found loathsome. “But they’ll let us out in another half an hour. I can go across the hall, then.”

Jerry doubled up as lasers sliced more inner tissue, tore muscles, nicked organs. “I’m not going to last that long and you know it. Jesus, they’re eating me alive. Do something, Bill.”

Collings looked at Jerry’s outstretched hand with dread.

Please, Bill.

Collings brushed the pocket where the gauntlet rested, even allowed a finger to slide inside. Then he leaned over Jerry with a sick determination. “Okay,” he said and cupped his hand over the gushing wound in Jerry’s thigh.

He hoped the tear in the femoral artery was as wide as he suspected. “*Please, Bill*,” he heard Monica say. *“There’s no one else for miles. Please, help me. You’re the only one who can.”*

He closed his eyes and pressed down, hard, on Jerry’s leg. A warm gusher engulfed his hand. “Not mine to take,” he whispered, his forceful fingers numb against the bathing warmth. “Never was. Oh God, I’m sorry.”

Loathsome and familiar, the senseless span of minutes, how the flesh tightened and cooled before the last warm trickle spilled out. At last he backed away, a cloud of gasoline fumes and the scent of summer hay in his nostrils, his breath reduced to rasping sobs. He slumped in a corner of the room, sticky hands cradling his head, his insides wrung out. Depleted. Exsanguinated.

“You’re a doctor,” he protested.

And he thought of souls.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Collings' bedside lamp burned low, just enough to illuminate his clock, the corner of the mattress where he sat and the Jolly Rogers cradled in his palm. With his other hand, he toasted the air with an invisible glass.

"Here's to pain," he said in a powerless rasp, "or lack thereof."

He dumped the Jolly Rogers back into his drawer, their rattle a sound of surrender and confirmation. Then he slipped into the gauntlet and folded his hands in a configuration of near-prayer as the first light of gray dawn crept in. He extended the God finger and drew a trembling breath. The white tip glowed.

"Or lack thereof," he said again and bared his chest.

THE WEIGHT OF THE LOTUS

ODIN V. OXTHORN

THE CORPSE DROPPED at their feet with a wet smack. Trails of luminescent fluids consorted with organic blood, pooling over the concrete. The morbid concoction trickled into the storm drains, polluting the waters that slogged beneath the filthiest layers of the Undercity.

The hunter flicked the liquid from their blades, straining to control the numbness infecting their failing limb. With a shaky hand, they extracted a thin tube from the lining of their collar. Gleaming syrup coated the glass in thick amber streaks. They clenched their fist, forcing their thumb to press the button at the top of the apparatus. A needle snapped out of the barrel, leaking a drop of the precious fluid onto the cracked pavement.

The hunter pulled aside their cloak to reveal the silvery sheen of synthetic skin coating their forearm. Soft scratches broadcasted their urgency as they stabbed the device through their carapace, digging to find an open connection to their circulatory system. A confirming hiss of compression obeyed, the syringe draining its contents into its master. They watched the hole reform over their flesh, letting off a sharp inhale as they savored the rush of cooling energy that flooded their nerves.

Better.

A chirp of their wrist brought them to reality. Another job awaited them.

It never ends.

They extracted a black cigarette, flicking a burst of flame between their thumb and forefinger. A heady smog escaped the blue embers, a poor mimicry of the natural ingredients that had once inhabited the surface of the abused earth. Tobacco was a distant memory, replaced with stimulant-soaked fibers that cheapened the experience.

The hunter placed the cartridge over the port on their throat. Wiry barbs lashed out and snatch the offering, the tines burrowing through the paper vice. The embers amplified as the hunter's systems consumed the

smoke. Vents on their shoulders peeled open with a synchronous release of air, spilling out a noxious shroud over them.

Grounded.

They ventured out of the dark fringes of the city, leaving their felled quarry for the rats to devour. The noise of the vibrant district disrupted the hunter's senses as they drifted through the sea of smiling plastic faces. The bright lights irritated their eyes, the revelry of nonsensical pleasantries invading their ears.

Disgusting.

A pair of bouncers guarded the polished silver doors to their destination, scrutinizing their outlandish appearance. Nothing a few credits couldn't assuage. With greased palms and a warm demeanor, the guards bowed, waving them inside.

Havoc stepped through a fluttering of ivory satin curtains, observing the festivities inside. Quiet chattering echoed over the glitter-flecked charcoal marble floor. The darkness crawled midway up the walls where it met with an eggshell papered surface. Scrolling silver leaves traced orderly rows up to the ceiling, where the flora morphed into creamy carved stone. The tailored ivy infected the silver chandeliers, leaves coiling around orbs of pale-yellow light.

Conversations hushed to uneasy tones as heads turned to scan over the metallic outsider. A crash shattered the silence as some poor soul too distracted by the newcomer ran into a server, spilling drinks over their freshly tailored taffeta jacket.

The hunter disregarded the commotion, gliding through the path of glimmering spotlights toward the bar. With a brief apprehensive formality, the barkeep pointed them in the direction of a private chamber at the end of the room.

They drifted to the far corner, peeling apart the sliding hammered metal doors. A solitary figure sat on the floor behind a low dining table. He brandished an immaculately manufactured smile, his unblemished skin radiating in the ambient light. His clothing was sharp and formal, an attire suitable for the professional echelons of the upper class. A silver badge dotted his lapel, the insignia of a lotus outlined in blue. The accessory a beacon of the importance of his position.

"How nice to make your acquaintance," the man stood and offered a hand. "Mr . . . err . . . uhm."

They disregarded his gesture, leaving it floating midair. "Havoc. Just Havoc."

"Fantastic." He withdrew, masking his discomfort as he slid his arm to his side. "My name is—"

"I know who you are."

The agent examined their featureless mask, trying to extract tone through a one-way window that denied the faintest glimpse of their soul.

"Fair enough. Let us get straight to business. My employer has been trying to negotiate with an essential party to release information for a potential treatment of genetic deformities. A Doctor Ephinres. Have you heard of him?"

Havoc gave a single shallow nod at the inquiry.

"Despite much encouragement, including a full pardon from his criminal history, he has not been amicable toward a trade agreement."

The hunter tilted their head curiously.

"That is where you come in." The agent cleared the anxiousness from his throat. "We wish you to use whatever method you deem appropriate to extract the target samples for us."

The hunter raised a hand to their mask, tapping the material gently while leaving the agent stewing in unease. They took a slow drag from another cigarette, meticulously considering the offer. Who would be affected, and who would benefit? Navigating the tangled web of corporate politics was a dire challenge, and the ones on the lowest tier suffered the most.

Did it really matter in the end?

The agent attempted to discern the silence. "If you have any questions about—"

"I'll take the job."

"Ah! Splendid." The man summoned a glittering cache of information from his wrist, collecting it into a portable data container. With a showmanly smile, he slid the device in their direction. "Here are the details we have about the individual and their establishment. We can give you two weeks to—"

"Only need 24 hours." They accepted the offering, giving a cold shoulder as they abruptly turned for the door. The agent stared wide-eyed at the curt dismissal, watching Havoc slip out of the party room.

The brisk night air guided them as they left the bar, escorting them through the shadows of the city. Silence choked out the life of the rich district while echoes of their footsteps bounced off the decrepit remains of the outskirts. The hunter inhaled the tranquility, toying with a blade as they scrolled through the mission data.

Dr. Macrya "Mack" Ephinres was known for gaining headway on research pertaining to a grave genetic disorder, a variant of Pangolin Syndrome. Select organic individuals had the misfortune of carrying a set of chromosomes prone to chaotic mutations when combined with certain strength and regenerative cybernetic augmentations. Mineralized lamina. Rapid regeneration. Decayed mental state. Nothing extraordinary.

How quaint. Noble, even. But . . . the motivation?

Their musing was interrupted by a soft patter, a rhythmic silence encroaching on their space.

"Lovely evening for it," Havoc called to the shadows.

The footsteps hesitated, the owner watching closely as they meandered on.

"It would be a shame to ruin it with a visit to the nearest chop shop." They sighed, flipping to the next page of their dossier. "Those suppression units can *not* be cheap to fix."

The lurker dared a step forward, unsure of who the curious stranger was speaking to.

"Venom mk. 6 reflex mods, Synthcape carapace augment. Ah, and a Vilumtech ligament core. Interesting choices," they continued, twirling their blade in the air. "Not the most efficient pieces of tech, but I suppose they do suffice."

The shadow left.

"Be seeing you." Havoc grinned, scanning through another page. *Now, where was I?*

It was shameful the way corporate culture treated the development cycle. A bug like Pangolin was a problem that most likely could have been solved with more QA testing. But corporations were willing to subject the world to acceptable losses, choosing to push product out first and release a patch later.

They hummed a ballad as they snapped their arm down, driving the dagger through their side armor. Screeches showered their melody with an unsettling chorus as they drove it deeper into their connections and wiring, only to be mollified by the melancholy of leaking polymers.

Alarms blared inside Havoc's head, the cacophony of their self-repair systems chastising them for their actions. They paid no mind, silencing the noise with the flick of a status switch. They pulled another blade from their wrist and slid the point along the seam of a panel, tracing the outline of their impeccably crafted shoulder. There, they popped the plate open, revealing the wiry sinew holding them together.

They slid the dagger inside the neat bundle of cords and wires, extracting a segmented tube from the bundle. The pipe squelched as Havoc severed the mesh-coated snake, crackling with energy as they draped it over their torso.

They dug a talon deeper inside and tore a coolant line, taking care to fray the edges of the wired material. Fluorescent yellow fluids leeched down their hand as they worked. After feeling the viscosity between their fingertips, they smeared it across their chest, marring the pristine chrome with messy gooey streaks.

The hunter's merry song continued as they waltzed through the maze of the deserted streets. But as they neared their target, their confident walk abruptly shifted.

Havoc hunched their shoulders as they moved with a pained gait, their hips lurched side to side with each labored step. They crossed their arms over their abdomen, grasping at pieces of themselves as they ambled toward their objective, a reinforced doorway set inside a wall studded with cameras and turrets. Havoc tripped as they attempted to ascend the stairs, reaching for the intercom button on the massive door.

The security snapped awake upon hearing the intrusion, barrels aimed at the visitor.

"Who are you?" A voice crackled. "What do you want?"

"Need work done." Havoc panted, propping themself against the frame with a gore-soaked hand.

"Who sent you?"

They rolled their back against the fortress wall. A weak groan escaped their chest as they slid to the ground, vandalizing the armored wall with trails of vital liquids. "Please. Help."

A long, grinding hesitation followed as the medic considered their plea. Seconds crawled by until the operator behind the door obliged and released the lock.

Havoc stumbled forward, grunting with the burden of the door as they hefted it to one side. A shifty-eyed man stormed toward them pistol raised, a fierce scowl etched his face. Unknown liquids soaked the man's forearms, his rolled sleeves barely dodging the onslaught of organic matter expelled from his latest work.

Despite the sanguineous film coating his skin, the doctor managed to keep his weapon up, his silence perforated by drips splatting against the polished concrete floor. While the man radiated a fearsome front, a conflicting aura smoldered around him. One of kindness, and sincerity. Unusual characteristics this deep in the Undercity.

Havoc let off a feeble wheeze and plunged forward, causing the medic to drop his weapon and assist. The man's hands pushed against their shoulders, struggling to keep them standing. He was kind, but foolish.

"Whoa, alright. Jesus." The man rolled under their arm and bolstered them upright, leading them deeper into the laboratory.

The workshop was dimly lit, save for a few spotlights radiating ominously above medical recliners and restraints. Computer screens flickered, displaying texts and diagrams from decades of illegally procured research. Empty tool racks lined the walls, their contents scattered in messy piles over makeshift workbenches. Jars of specimens littered the room with a dismal rainbow of thick bubbling brines. Chunks

of flesh both organic and synthetic in nature bobbed inside the broths, flaps and tendrils flailed about as the bits gasped bubbles inside their confines.

Ephinres situated his patient next to an examination table, gruffly hoisting them up. “What’s the trouble?”

“I . . . ” A surge interrupted Havoc’s reply, showering their host with a burst of sparks.

“Doesn’t look like much.” He drew their cloak aside to examine the injury. “Hmm. Lucky for you, I’ve worked with your tech before. Not easy to come by, either. Lay back while I get my things.”

The man headed off to the sink to wash his arms. After flicking the liquid off his skin, he scurried around the tables searching for an unknown object. He pawed through clutter and organizers, evoking rattling and clanking as he grew increasingly agitated at the elusive device.

Havoc remained silent, scanning through the entrances to the various floors leading out of the lab.

“And of course, I left it upstairs.” Ephinres sighed, scrubbing his face irritably. “I’ll be back.”

They waited until the echoes of his footsteps dissolved before rolling over, slipping the knife out of their side. Complying with the demands of their repair systems, they flicked the switches inside their head, watching their internal structures wriggle about and rejoin.

Havoc slithered off the table, cricking their neck side to side as ligaments reattached. They crept to a set of stairs, ignoring the warning of the ominous haze swirling down the corridor. Frigid air contested with their exhaust as they descended, soft clouds leading the path to the foreboding destination.

The chamber below was considerably more organized than the mayhem upstairs. To each side of the room rested a pair of specimen tanks, large enough to contain a humanoid subject. Steel sheaths obstructed the view of the contents, protecting whatever slept inside. A bubbling fog of coolant curled over each container, the delicate ecosystems guarded by a solitary terminal between the chambers.

Havoc scrolled through their mission data, fixating on a shining case at the center of the rack at the back wall. Gliding over for closer inspection, they rested a finger on top of the container. Their bony digit spilt into three flickering tines, lashing out arcs of crackling energy between the spaces. With a fizzing screech, the lock burst apart, permitting access to the contents.

Condensation billowed out of the chest as they peeled the box open, revealing the prize of a single glass tube filled with an oily blue liquid. Havoc delicately scratched the rim of the vessel, emitting an approving hum.

But before they could extract the prize from the container, a

disturbance brushed over their senses, prickling their neck with caution. They retracted their hand and glanced behind them as a thunk shook the room, their exit sealing with a rumble of cycling machinery.

An electronic shriek pierced the chamber, followed by a flustered voice of Dr. Ephinres crackling through a speaker on the wall. “I should have known better. How *dare* you take advantage of me?”

The lights snapped on, shattering the darkness. A rumbling clamor disrupted the ceiling above Havoc as a wire grate sped down to protect the precious samples. As they jumped back, the test chambers stirred to life. The steel sheaths uncurled around the tubes, exposing the inhabitants to the brightness.

“I’ll ask again: Who. Sent. You?” Hissing gas filled room as the glass of the tanks melted into the floor. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. You aren’t the first jackal I’ve had to put down. I’ll extract it from your memory banks when the others have finished with you.”

Havoc glanced at the resonating speaker.

So angry.

A discordant pair of bellows resonated through the basement, the sound joined by the rhythmic thunder of weighted feet as two figures emerged from the steaming capsules.

The stony humanoids were engulfed in a jagged carapace of blackened metal. Chitinous growths sealed off the mouths of the poor souls, the craggy surface stealing their ability to express their pain. Jagged openings exposed their bloodshot eyes, haphazardly chiseled open by a benevolent effort. Unsettling crunches of bone accompanied their footsteps, the rhythm disrupted by the grinding of friction as their joints pulverized extraneous matter.

“My brothers, this intruder disturbs your sleep.” Ephinres said. “Please show them how unacceptable this behavior is.”

The floor eroded with a dissonant grind as the craggy duo pivoted toward the mechanized invader. Particles launched from their skin, melting into droplets of black sludge as they hit the ground.

Havoc paid no mind to the beings, considering the gate that sealed access to their target. They rubbed the chin of their mask, watching the flow of energy course through the wires in excited streams over their sensory displays.

Interesting.

Before they could formulate a plan of action, the duo rushed in, displaying an unexpected burst of agility compared to the spectacle of their emergence. Havoc swiftly adjusted their tactics, absorbing the vibrations of the thundering drumbeats through their sensors. The air churned behind them as the brothers raised their fists.

3 . . . 2 . . . 1.

As the shadow of the oncoming battering rams loomed over, Havoc dove to the floor, sliding away from the onslaught. They rolled to their feet, appreciating the crunching shudder that blessed their ears from behind. Unable to stop their momentum, the giants had smashed through the protective barrier, exposing the precious cargo.

Ideal.

Tongues of energy lapped over the golems' flesh, but the duo appeared unmoved, groans of vexation rumbling against their throats. With a synchronized yank, they pulled their limbs free, summoning a chorus of rending shrieks as the jagged wires of the protective grate tore furrows into their arms. Pieces of their exoskeleton melted with the injuries, pools of black sludge crawled up to the surface to mend the cracks.

Acknowledging each other with a nod, the brothers rushed again. Their movements harmonized as they snatched the distance from Havoc. Faster and faster they swung, forming and breaking rhythms like a pair of tightly scripted machines.

The duo intensified their assault, forcing Havoc to dip and dive to evade the flurry. They permitted the brothers to gain ground, keeping the flying arms occupied as they searched for an opening to escape. A fist toppled their balance, forcing them sharply to the side where an open palm waited. The eager brother latched onto their slender arms, flinging them backward.

Havoc leapt up and summoned a flash of steel, swinging a blade just below the brother's elbow. A hiss of steaming metal and a snap of sinew disrupted the attack, accented by a muffled choke of agony.

In a swift retreating step, Havoc pried the fingers of the severed arm from themself, flinging the member to the ground. Upon contact with the cooled surface, the appendage dissolved into ichor, leaving the mangled shreds of what had once been bone and flesh in its wake.

Moist squelches burped from the leaking stump while the maimed brother fumed. Tendrils of flesh and rock manifested from thin air, squirming out of the limb in a cacophony of wet pops and crunches. The ropes of viscera entangled around themselves, weaving a new appendage in congealed webs.

Not waiting for his kindred to recover, his companion lunged forward, snatching the tails of Havoc's cloak. He slammed the metal irritant against the wall, forcing a wheeze through their artificial lungs. Before their quarry could regain their footing, the golem wrapped their jagged limbs around their torso, threatening to mash their delicate inner workings into a supple purée of silver and pulp.

The second brother approached, brandishing their shining new hand

drenched in organic residue. He drew his fist back, the dripping skin hardening back into its rigid state.

Havoc relaxed in their captor's grip, prodding their systems with a sequence of commands.

Wait.

As the hammer of the metalized knuckles grazed their exposed abdomen, Havoc diverted their energy stores, shoving fuel into their defense operations. Their strength drained as their armored plating popped apart, revealing a network of tightly coiled needles tracing along their muscles. Havoc felt pressure snap away from their body as a battalion of barbed spikes launched from the surface of their musculature

The spines burst through the golem's knuckles, impaling the soft flesh deep inside his fingers. A gurgle of anguish echoed behind them as the other brother suddenly flung their arms open. He watched as his brother twisted and writhed, attempting to shake off the techno-urchin stuck to his pectorals.

Havoc kicked, tearing themself out of the rocky embrace. Ooze pulled at their back as they yanked their spines free, a spattering of fluids showering them when they finally separated. They dropped to the ground and clambered forward, propelling themselves away from a potential counter strike.

Havoc suppressed a groan, feeling their muscles rebel against their commands.

Ow.

Not squandering the luxury of their liberation, They snatched another syringe from their stores and rammed the needle into their side. The flow of the chemicals surged through their body as they stumbled for the busted gate, their quaking nerves protesting the rapid shift in tempo. They shook the disorientation away as they hastened toward their objective.

Breathe.

Havoc reached through the jagged hole of the battered grating, dodging arcs of electricity as they plucked the vial from inside the open container. They pocketed the specimen and turned to assess the whereabouts of their adversaries.

The brothers, still stunned from their wounds, had no intention of fighting back. Havoc dashed for the entryway, hurling a sphere at the chamber door. The grenade burst apart, slinging corrosive ooze over the locking mechanisms. After a submissive fizzle, the bolts screeched aside, gently nudging the door open with a groan.

Having been granted the window of opportunity, Havoc zipped up the stairs toward the medical lab, only to be greeted by a bolt of plasma narrowly missing their shoulder. They glanced over to see Doctor Ephinres

holding a pistol, his nerves shuddering with a rancorous cocktail of rage and fear.

A slosh caught Havoc's attention, a specimen jar containing a pulsing sac of synthetic flesh. Dots of electronic light traced chaotic patterns across the silvery skin, the texture reminiscent of stomach lining.

Seizing the glass jar, Havoc countered, hurling the organ meat at their assailant. The container burst apart in a mess of saline and shards, the organ expelling a deflated squelch as it smacked against the wall.

Ephinres recoiled and watched the mess slide down the wall, hesitating to lament the destruction of a valuable sample. His inaction betrayed him as Havoc charged forward, leaping on top of a table to close in on their target.

Before he could raise his weapon again, the hunter lunged and snatched the barrel. His wrist twisted with a swift motion, and he dropped his gun before they snapped his bones. He yanked back, tearing at the metallic claws clinching his wrist. The hunter wrenched him into a grapple, pulling at his shoulders with ease.

Ephinres screamed as fires surged through his nerves, feeling his joints pop out of their sockets. He was given no chance to pull away, Havoc's arms slithering around him. His vision whirled as he was brutishly turned about, his eyes met with the faceless adversary. His anger radiated toward the creature, he had worked so hard only to lose it all like this.

"I won't beg for my life." Ephinres' voice seethed through bared teeth. "Do what you will."

The hunter only stared, meeting his defiant expression with cold indifference. They watched his jaws pulse as he ground his teeth, considering the plight of the curious man. Their vision traveled down his exposed neck, spying a shadow of darkness infecting his flesh. The beginnings of black metallic plating tearing through his skin.

The motivation revealed.

"How unfortunate," Havoc purred and released their grip, dropping the medic's panting form on the floor. They sauntered away humming a somber melody, exiting the lab with their prize in their pocket.

⁂

The agent was waiting for them back at the bar, in the private room where it all had started. Havoc took a seat in front of the man, folding their limbs elegantly beneath the table. A metallic scrape shattered the silence as they slid the specimen toward him. The agent's lips twitched into an uncomfortable smile as the sound grated against his spine.

"You were serious about the timing." The man blinked in astonishment and scrutinized the offering, gently taking it between two fingers.

He extracted a device from his jacket pocket, taking care not to project

his discomfort. As he unscrewed the lid of the sample, an unholy caustic tang seeped into the air. Maintaining his blasé expression, he plucked a probe from the machine and dipped the tip into the vial. The computer sprang to life, hurling text across its display.

"I must say, your reputation is well deserved." He screwed the cap back on the ghastly concoction. An eager grin stretched over his face as he poked at the personal computer attached to his wrist. "The funds have been transferred to the account you have provided."

"Excellent." The hunter's arm snapped out, a blur of silver flying out from their fingertips.

The agent's startled gasp cut off in a crunch of bone, his cry decaying into a terrified gurgle. Blood poured over his vision, prohibiting him from seeing the shard of steel buried into his forehead. Panic manifested into choking gasps, his muscles delayed by the damage to his nervous system. He raised a shaking hand, his defiant digits pawing at the hilt of the blade jammed in his skull.

Havoc stood and calmly approached their quarry, brushing the bewildered man's feeble hands aside as they wrapped their fingers around the knife. With a squelching pop, they twisted the instrument in slow meticulous rotations, sending a jet of fluid squirting out the wound.

The blade continued to spiral in steady turns, increasing in speed until a slurry of neurons, blood, and brain matter gushed from the gaping hole.

Havoc bowed as they reset their grip, preparing to complete their task. A whisper of wind cut off the man's noises as their arm snapped up, cleaving through bone until the blade was free.

With a twirl, Havoc whipped their weapon clean, placing it back in its sheath inside their wrist. Tracing their fingers over the tabletop, they picked up the vial and rolled it back and forth between their hands. Beneath the mask they smirked and met the lifeless eyes of the agent, poking the man's lapel pin with a playful tap.

Satisfied with another job completed, the hunter strolled out of the private room, gently sliding the door shut behind them. They extracted a cigarette, scrutinizing the contents as they lit up again. Their head tilted, contemplating the events of the evening.

A delicate crunch of glass bounced against the chattering in the bar as they crushed the vial inside their palm. They pensively watched the slivers split their skin apart, trails of blue liquid dripping to the floor.

They sighed as they cast the shards from their hand, wiping the remnants off on their cloak. Unfastening the veil from their head, they slipped the mask from their face, revealing the only organic feature remaining on their body.

An old itch irritated their skin, just below their brain stem. Their

fingers drifted to the back of their neck, brushing against the raised scars that defiled a time-eroded tattoo: a lotus traced in blue.

The doors of the bar suddenly burst open, shoving aside the tranquility with an entourage of heavily armed guards bearing the mark of their employer's corporation. With a smirk, Havoc replaced their veil and dashed for the back door.

Once more, the Lotus had attempted to take them home. Perhaps another day.

MECHANISMS

DANIEL I. RUSSELL

REGRESSION

JOHN'S FINGERS TIPTOED across the bed towards the body lying beside him, but found only crumpled cotton sheets, devoid of her warmth. He opened one eye, squinting against the Sunday morning that glinted through the half-closed blinds, slits carving the bed into slices of light and dark. He'd expected to see her sleeping. Wild blond hair splashed over his pillows; the gentle rise and fall of her back. A ghost of her fragrance, haunting the stale bedroom, his only souvenir.

He sat up with a groan, rubbing his eyes and scratching his bare chest. He took in a deep, long breath, savouring the unfamiliar scents. No doubt his lair stank, as his mum complained on a daily basis. The ashtray of extinct butts on the bedside table; clothes due for laundry last week scattered around the island of the bed; a cocktail of deodorants lined up on the shelf formed a heady aroma. Yet *her* smell lingered: the delicate flora, the salt of her skin, clean smell of her hair as he'd burrowed his face against her neck.

He grinned and swept his legs off the mattress, resting his feet on the clothes and debris of the carpet. The dry clamp on his head couldn't dampen his spirits. *All worth it*, he thought, reaching for his smokes next to the ashtray.

They'd returned from the park to stream some music in his room. He'd barely been able to keep his hands off her. His mum almost had the nerve to get up from the sofa as they'd staggered past the door, but a glare sent the message well enough. She'd sat back down in silence.

He heard her now: the unmistakeable shuffle of her slippers coming up the stairs. Interfering old hag. He'd be out of here soon enough, once he found a job. His mother's footsteps stopped on the other side of his bedroom door as she plucked up the courage to come inside.

"What?" he spat, keen for this to be over and done with.

The bedroom door creaked open, and she peaked around the edge, nervous face surrounded by a mess of grey curls.

"Just checking you were . . . alone in here, love," she said, venturing further. Clearing a space atop a clustered chest of drawers, she carefully placed a steaming mug of tea close to the edge. "Want me to clean up in here today?"

John grunted, just to be rid of her. While his fun for the day had slipped out during the night, he could still press his face into the pillow, breathe her in.

"I can make this bed quick," she said, leaning forwards to grab the blanket. She stopped, staring at the dark bloodstain at the centre of the cream fabric.

In no mood for her bullshit, John stood, still in his underwear, and stretched his arms over his head. "You can fuck off now, Mum." With a satisfied sigh, he began to search for his lighter.

He paused and turned back, glaring at his mother.

"You still here?"

She stood fascinated by the stain, which had dried to a light brown smudge, a single island of conquest on a vast sea.

"How old was she?" asked his mother, her eyes flicking up to meet his.

John stared back, and for a moment, the crow's feet around her eyes had smoothed out, her pinched mouth smiling with young, pink lips, perfect white teeth shining from between. Blond hair, last seen on his pillow, in his fist.

The girl demanded her answer once more. "How old was she, John?"

His room, his sanctuary no longer felt as safe, and standing in his underwear added to this strange feeling. Vulnerable. *Him*. Against his mother and some scrap of a thing he found at the park?

"She was thirteen, John. A girl called Crystal who didn't even lie to you about her age."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "You don't know that."

"A girl who just wanted a few smokes and was fool enough to come back to your room."

"No!" he barked. "You don't know that!"

Now a woman with fiery auburn hair and a charcoal suit, the changing figure offered him a gift: a small cardboard box, wrapped in paper the colour of ivory, that barely fit in her palm. John stared at the pretty red ribbon that held the neat flaps closed. Her continued onslaught slapped him from his reverie.

"A girl who you *pinned* down and *choked* until you were done with her."

"No, mother!" John screamed, ripping his gaze from the box and squeezing his eyes shut. "You didn't know that!"

SUBLIMATION

"John Cain, aged fifty-five, death row inmate for the last eight. Though a man I'm sure needs no lengthy introduction," said Madeleine. She swiped through the details of the test subject on her tablet, passing through his history: his arrest record, medical treatments, victim photographs, before and after. She quickly moved through the latter, reluctant to touch the grisly, digital images, as if her finger would come away bloody.

The board sat before her, a trio of grizzled older men in drab suits. Madeleine quickly proceeded before they fell asleep. The dinosaurs had perked up on seeing Cain wheeled inside the laboratory, his wrists and ankles bound tightly to the polished metal chair, wired contraption screwed into his head. Perhaps they had longed for the old days, when the suits were new and prostates worked just fine; days when the convicted met their maker with the help of two-thousand volts. Times had certainly changed from the brutality of 'Old Sparky'. Even the lethal injection had been banned by 2025, replaced with the Fission Chamber. The sedated prisoner was placed inside and, following the reading of rites and the flick of a switch, instantly vaporised. No kicking or screaming. Not so much as a gasp. This innovation in execution had been dubbed 'Old Nukey'.

The appearance of John Cain, all strapped in for his journey inside the PsychoScreen, had clearly fired the blood of the three old men from the Department of Corrections.

Madeleine cleared her throat. "What you're witnessing on the screen is a combination of our synaptic interface system and drug treatment. This allows the program to manipulate the neurotransmitters of the subject and record the response."

The man in the middle, a wide specimen with thick jowls and thin lips, wiggled his finger at the mass of cables sprouting from Cain's head. "This . . . reads his mind? Is that what you're saying, Doc?"

She paused, the motion of his finger catching her off guard. Her heart had stepped up a gear, perhaps due to the excitement of the presentation. A migraine threatened on the horizon too. She felt its faint stirring deep within her skull. She glanced between the finger and the man's face. He must've visited her department and poked and prodded at some point.

"Not quite," said Madeleine, focussing back on the PsychoScreen. "Imagine this as sonar of the mind. We deliver a signal and see what comes back. The representation on the screen isn't what Cain is literally thinking, or even experiencing. He's heavily sedated to completely remove the interference caused by his busy conscious. What we monitor is the *unconscious*."

"So?" said the officer on the left, a reed of a man that reminded Madeleine of her uncle. She hadn't seen him since she was a kid, but bet he still had the same tragic comb over. "What use is seeing his dreams? I've seen what this sick fuck can do. The last think I want to watch is what he's dreaming about! Can you imagine?"

This sparked some sudden debate among her audience. Madeleine had to shout over them to regain control.

"Gentlemen! We . . . please! We aren't watching him *dream*. Look, let's use this current stage as an example." She marched over to the wall behind her comatose subject. The circuits trapped within the thin glass veneer projected the ongoing contents of John Cain's unconscious. "This event may have occurred far back in John's past, or may be an amalgamation of several long forgotten memories. We tried to probe for the unconscious source of his urges, the drive to rape and kill nearly twenty young girls. His mind, sensing the invasion, threw up a defence. This is a natural process that we all perform, usually without even knowing it. There are several categories of defence mechanism the unconscious uses to repress memories and impulses. I believe what we are seeing here is John *regressing*. His mind has returned to an earlier period, a *safer* period. Having his mother around to take care of him, to start to indulge in his criminal activity without judgement or interference perhaps. But the code *pushes*; its aim is to puncture through the mechanism and identify what John's mind is trying to keep from surfacing."

The third member of the group, a portly gentleman in a black suit, the shoulders dusted with dandruff, watched her in silence between his two comrades.

"Are you with me so far?" she said.

The man chuckled. "Sounds like more techno mumbo jumbo to an old dog like me! What's in the box?" He pointed at the screen. "Child molesters don't last long inside, never have. Guards and cons alike have little time for a *fiddler*. Yet I've seen this piece of shit go toe to toe with the biggest dogs in the yard and still come out with all his limbs attached. What's in the box that he's so afraid of, Doc?"

Madeleine turned her back on the men and surveyed the screen. Her digital version had offered the young John the gift, and the hardened murderer had shrunk away from it. He held up an arm in terrified defence, a vampire warding off a crucifix.

"What indeed . . . " she pondered.

Her tablet emitted a short series of chimes. Madeleine had expected it at any moment.

"Back to the show, gentlemen." She swiped the red notifications of analytic updates and the subject's vital signs from view, seeking out the

neural equivalent of satellite navigation. “Having failed to repress the unconscious impulse, John’s mind is attempting to shift defence mechanism. We’re one step closer to isolating his predatory and sexual drive.” Madeleine glanced at the tablet. “Ah . . . interesting . . . ”

SOMATISATION

John had been born into darkness. Warm swirls and eddies coaxed him from his slumber, and he gradually opened his useless eyes. He’d been fixed in place, his arms and legs adhered to his body, his flesh almost one with the pulsating surface he lay sprawled upon. Trying to move, to lift a hand before his blind eyes, yielded a futile struggle. Had she *glued* him? A strange thought, but the only solution to his predicament his frantic mind could conjure. The woman with the burning auburn hair and her endless questions, delivered with a knowing smirk. A bit too old for him, but he’d fuck her alright. Fuck her *hard*. Fuck her into the ground and pull out her intestines while he did it. Bitch had glued him alright. As he squirmed in the snug, wet embrace, a further current of warm fluid passed over him. John held his breath to avoid choking, but the coppery liquid had already filled his lungs. He coughed, forcing out the thick substance, only to suck in another sticky breath. Over and over.

“Try not to panic, John.”

He tried to scream, but his throat had clogged. He knew it was blood. The smell and taste were dead giveaways alone, but the *feel* of it. The viscosity of it on your skin, your tongue. The moment virgin blood turns, your teeth buried deep in the flesh as you tear and rip, riding her screams. It darkens, congealing inside. He’d done all these things and much more besides.

“Do you remember what you told them?” the calm female voice continued. “When they caught you. Do you remember? What you felt . . . ”

It had been a sting operation. The chat rooms changed and social media platforms fell in and out of fashion, yet he was always there, riding that riptide. The commentators claimed that leaps and bounds in technology made people dumber, that they depended too much on the automated world. John knew they had it all wrong. People, especially young girls experiencing their first taste of womanhood, were *always* this stupid. They now had more ways to present that naivety and expose themselves to the world; to not only dip their toes into the dark waters of the digital ocean, but dive in head first without a care.

Just below the surface, the monsters waited.

A fourteen-year-old girl. Hayley, if memory served. A pet dog called Scrap. Hated coding at her high school, but the teacher was pretty hot for an old dude.

John had played his games and spun his web. The hunt had culminated in a local park several districts away. He had grudgingly paid the Auto-Tran fare and sat alone in his carriage, another blip on the highway speeding towards his destination. He'd watched the other vehicles streaming alongside him at high velocity. Some units darted off the main thoroughfare and shot towards the bright clusters of towns and cities. The transit system allowed him to spread his net further afield. He rarely selected girls from his own district.

John cried out, babbling on the thick fluid that gummed up his lungs. Whatever the bitch had bound him with allowed a little give, but nothing more than a wriggle. His fought to break his arms free, to swim for the surface of this dark pool. His efforts were greeted with another stream of warm liquid across his face. He lay encased in mud on the bed of a tropical river, the tepid water caressing his skin as it headed for sea.

He'd stepped from his transport, and with an eager spring in his step, headed for the park. She'd been expecting a fifteen-year-old programming student, versed in augmented reality and, like her, fresh out of a relationship that had left him broken. John had expected an easy number eight, not five armed officers.

Funny how the deceiver can so easily be deceived.

"Can you remember?" pressed the voice, warbled through the liquid. "What did you tell them? Why did you do it?"

John remembered the boot on the back of his skull. Technology could separate one from the reality of a situation, a thought he liked to ponder between victims. One can flirt and play and pretend in cyberspace. Nothing like that moment they look up at you and realise this isn't online play anymore. He'd done the same, whimpering as they manhandled him into their own transport.

"It's not my fault!" he wailed, gagging from the copper at the back of his throat. "There's something *in* me . . . Something in me that *makes* me do it."

"An infection, perhaps?" probed the voice. "A virus, a genetic disposition, a cancerous growth. Tell me, John. You're so convinced something resides within you that makes you do these horrific things. What exactly *is* it?"

His mind shot down the corridors of his body: propelled through his veins, pushed by his blood, seeking out the hidden, dark crevices, sniffing out the source of his evil deeds. A mind-body duality. He had *something* inside him that made him act this way. The girls. Oh the *pretty girls*. How they made his adrenaline soar, his heart race! Pure physical reaction. It wasn't his fault.

As a sperm hones in on its one true purpose, so did John as he coursed

through his own bloodstream, targeting the chemical trace of his urges. His imagination rushed through on the current, a thought on a rapid river, ebbing and flowing. Deep, down. Along the plump, flesh arteries, he discovered the source of his pain, the birthplace of his dark desires.

Embedded in the pink, fibrous matter of the vessel, John came across his own bound and smothered form. A tumour in his own body, his arms and legs poked from the side of the vein like twitching villi. His face, the eyes sealed shut by the stringy matter, gasped in the pale yellow fluid that rushed passed. Blood cells, a fine scarlet confetti suspended in the fluid, shot from the figure's mouth and nostrils, only for a fresh cluster to be sucked in with the next breath.

"Ah, a physical ailment? That's understandable, John, it really is," said his oppressor. "And easily remedied. We can deal with a medical complaint, quickly and easily."

Already, both coursing through his own veins and bound within the same walls, he detected a change in the biochemistry within the bloodstream.

Something new approached.

"If only all child molesters were so accommodating," prattled the voice. "A course of medication is the order of the day. Chemical castration to stop those horrid desires? A quick pill to set things right?"

The fine microscopic dust of red blood cells diluted with the arrival of new material in the stream. Cubic antibodies the shade of ivory drifted through John's veins, also seeking out the source of his malevolency. As locusts descend upon the crop, so too did the antibodies, the swarm propelled forwards on numerous, flickering red tails.

He fought their invasion as the drifting cloud settled upon his body conjoined with the vessel wall. Unable to tear his arms from the rubbery tube, John held his breath on feeling the first of wave of his own immune system alight upon his twisted, writhing body. They stung like wasps. Each tiny package fixed into his skin, first driven deep by their lambent red ribbons, then held in place as the licks of fabric hardened into hooks. John gritted his teeth from the onslaught. The invaders secreted an acid that ate into his flesh, allowing deeper penetration for the descending horde. Wisps of fresh blood escaped his arms, chest, and legs. Holes the size of cigarette burns darkened his scalp and forehead, quickly growing wider, shooting more blood cells into the fast stream.

An antibody landed on his eyelid. As he tried to blink it free, its ribbon struck home, penetrating through the thin layer of skin and irritating his eyeball. As the small parcel began to deliver its torturous payload, John felt the slight fizz of acid burning through his lens. The fluttering of his eyelid only seemed to hasten the process.

"Accept them, John. They are here to *heal* you. Only by facing what they contain can we progress to the next stage of therapy."

The clear outer coating of his eye yielded, squirting humour like egg white into the frantic blood stream. John screamed.

The next surge of his body's defence needed no further invitation.

RATIONALISATION

The incarcerated had been restrained at both wrist and ankle, and a thick leather strap held his body tight in the chair. Only his head was allowed freedom, though it bore the weight of the mass of cables, circuitry, and various screws and pins to hold it in place. If not for the support, John would surely have slid to the floor with his tremors and contractions.

He bobbed in the chair, face slack but twitching with the occasional grimace as his unconscious was digitally agitated, syphoned, read, and tormented. The observing board had expected an old school execution. Madeline knew this appeared worse: a prolonged suffering, far worse than any blast of fatal electricity.

"We're very close now," she said. "I assure you that the subject is not experiencing any physical pain, despite his appearance." She smiled and fought the trembling in her knees. "To confront one's unconscious urges is a mentally demanding process that usually takes years of intense psychodynamic therapy. With advances in technology however, we make this procedure more . . . efficient."

"Like ripping off a psycho band aid," said the wiry doppelganger of her uncle. He reached up with a skeletal, spotted hand and straightened his red bow tie, smug with his observation. The other two chuckled.

"I don't care how much this piece of shit has to suffer," said the fat man to the right. "He's a goddamn *guinea pig*, heading for Old Nukey anyway." He elbowed the gentleman in the centre. "I'm sure the families of all those girls won't mind a little bit of pain on his part. Hell, Doc, crank it up. Let's . . . how would you say . . . test the *limits* of efficiency."

Madeleine felt her grin fixed in place, unsure how to deal with these Neanderthals. Some things never changed. She was accustomed to dealing with academics in the psych department and the unfortunate execs that came along with research and development. These three where from a completely different time.

Cain convulsed in his seat, testing the limits of his restraints.

"Sure he's suffering!" said the thin man. "You don't have to be a doctor, no offense, to see that." He rested his elbows on the table, and interwove his long fingers. "Look, we're sure this has all the scientific merit you people need. This may even *rehabilitate* the man." The word brought a curl

to his lips. “But we deal in punishment, sweetie. This man has done terrible things. *Unforgiveable* things. If you just . . . reach down . . . ” He gave her a wink. “It’ll be our little secret.”

Madeleine allowed her gaze to be led to the tablet in her hands: the dark screen from which she controlled the whole operation. She could, in theory, intensify the process. However, like all psychotherapy frameworks, to push too hard too soon risked adding to the psychotrauma. Medical science had come a long way. Limbs could be attached in seconds, nanotech fixing sinew, ligament, and bone. Cancers were discovered and removed within weeks. Life expectancy had gone through the roof. Yet . . . the human psyche was still the most sensitive part of all. It needed a delicate touch.

The tight pain in her head sparked once more, lightening flashing through her grey matter. She took a deep breath and tried to ignore it.

“Go on,” said the fat man. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“Indeed,” added the centre man in the black suit. “We’re all one the same side here. *Justice*. You have our blessing to truly test the limits”

A couple of quick swipes on the glass would regurgitate his criminal record, spitting forth the faces of Cain’s victims. The shots from before the atrocities he committed smiled out from family photographs, birthday parties, holidays, weddings, and Christmas mornings. The case pictures from the crime scene were barely distinguishable as human.

Madeleine paused. *Just reach down*, she been instructed. So very easy. She flicked through real time digital readouts, and the charts that scratched out a record of Cain’s vitals and unconscious reactions. She enlarged the intensity reading, a fluctuating series of red numbers. Madeleine could effortlessly alter the automated limitations. Technically, the three seated men were the employers of her entire department, and had expressed a direct order. All she had to do was reach down and keep her mouth shut.

The glowing crimson numbers froze, plateauing as Cain’s mind attempted a desperate retreat.

“He’s on the move again,” said Madeline, ignoring the temptation. “There’s not many more places to go.” She glanced up at the screen. “He’s returned to his original mechanism. We should have him cornered.”

ACTING OUT

He always arranged to meet the girls in parks, now few and far between in cities that grew like tumours across the country. At first, he believed his love for the grassy areas stemmed from the very first time, the girl who’d asked him for smokes, the girl he had taken back to his bedroom.

John inhaled the earthy scents of the soil and detritus as he worked,

his right arm tiring as he hacked and sawed. Surrounded by nature, and using a serrated combat knife, he'd returned to the primitive, rejecting the modern world that had sprung up around him.

The girl lay in the bushes, hidden from the city lights by the thick foliage. She'd struggled at first, but no one had any muscle any more, spending hours sitting in front of screens. A few strikes to her pretty little face was enough to earn her compliance. Once she was naked and sprawled on the ground, his seed dripping from her pale, ivory body and onto the dirt, he could truly begin.

Each stroke of the knife released a little of the pressure built up in his skull, every thrust of the vicious blade easing his thoughts. He had no idea why such acts were his only respite, but he had come too far to pursue any alternatives. Gripping her cheek with his free hand, John slid the tip of the knife back into the destroyed face, feeling the resistance of bone as he scraped the flesh free. Why the face? he'd asked himself. For centuries, killers had been renowned for keeping trophies, particularly the sexual organs. John had no time for such foolish rituals. Instead he felt compelled to ruin the face of each girl: carving out their eyes to start so they couldn't watch, slicing off dainty little noses and lips that tasted of cherry or chewing gum. He'd prise the clinging skin and muscle from the skull, tearing flaps free with his fingernails, using the knife to saw through stubborn gristle.

John sighed, tired, yet determined to finish his work. It would be weeks before he was driven to do this again. He could not afford to leave her before the job was completed.

He looked at the ribbons of flesh he had torn free.

An alien sensation squirmed in his head. The tranquil sea and lazy waves of his mind had become agitated, throwing out deep waves. John winced and pressed his bloodied hands to his temples. A thorn in his cortex, an early memory struggling to be born, fighting the currents that held it deep. The ocean of his mind roared again, disturbed, as something shifted below the waves.

Why did he do this?

PROJECTION

"It's surfaced," said Madeleine, furiously swiping read outs and tweaking vectors, trying to keep her therapeutic ship on course. She glanced up at the screen showing the digital representation of the events in Cain's mind. He wept over the body of the teenage girl, and in reality, tears ran from the offender's eyes. His trembles and convulsions had ended, replaced with a quiet calm. The process was complete: He'd faced the repressed source of

his sexual and homicidal urges, purging it from his unconscious. Now, just a tired middle-aged man remained, the frightened child calmed, the violent teenager expelled, the murderous predator exorcised.

John Cain slowly opened his eyes, and strained to lift his head under the weight of the attached PsychoScreen. The screen blinked out behind him.

"Well?" cried the overweight man in the old, tight suit. "What *was* it?"

"Indeed," said the doppelganger of her uncle. "How can we seek to fix all the violent inmates? We still have no idea what causes all of this!"

Madeleine appeared to talk to herself, transfixed by the data on her tablet. "The PsychoScreen can only show defensive mechanisms, not the drive or early event itself. The system cannot show what is no longer present in the mind. That is what makes the psyche so difficult to treat, and what makes the machine so magnificent."

"So . . . " said the final member of the trio, the older man in the centre. "Is he cured now, Doc?"

Madeleine arranged the program on her small screen, flicking segments of code atop each other to form a long line of commands. The men she worked with had no idea she'd learned the language and were too confident to suspect code could be inserted into their system so effortlessly.

"His urges may be gone, yes," she said, meeting the eyes of Cain, who stared up at her, dazed. "But he still has to atone for his crimes."

Her finger struck the tablet screen, executing the code, delivering her sentence.

For a moment, Cain continued to gaze up at her in a drunken stupor. His mind had entered the first stage of recovery after the prolonged treatment of psychotropic drugs and electronic stimulation. His left eye began to twitch, signalling a new process had commenced. John winced and squeezed both eyes closed, like he'd been gripped by a thunderclap headache. He tried to reach up but his restraints held him fast.

"There can be no cure for the past," growled Madeleine. "No cure for all the little girls."

John gurgled deep at the back of his throat. The screen mounted to the wall behind him burst into life with a hiss of static.

Madeleine closed her own eyes for a second, feeling a pressure at the centre of her skull that seemed to sympathise with the suffering of her subject. She forced it away, not wanting to miss a moment of this long overdue execution.

John shook in the chair, his head violently rocking back and forth. The equipment of the PsychoScreen, bolted through bone, held steady. The coils of tubing and wires swung merrily between subject and system like a child's skipping rope. Saliva foamed from between his lips and dripped from his chin.

"Old Nukey was too humane," spat the doctor, hatred boiling from her. She stepped closer, wanting to see his pain, needing to smell his cortex dissolve under the twin barrage of chemicals and high voltage. "Too quick for shit like you."

John released a final prolonged wail before slumping forwards, the gently smoking mechanism of the PsychoScreen holding him upright.

Madeleine sucked in the fragrant air, relishing the smell of cooking meat, and rubbed her forehead. The pulse had returned, now throbbing at the centre of her head like a kicking foetus.

The sound of enthusiastic applause burst into life behind her, agitating the doctor's escalating discomfort. She turned around to the three board members clapping their hands, all three sporting wide grins.

"Bravo!" said the fat man.

"Truly a technical wonder!" cried the slender gentleman. Their leader simply offered her a wink, and lifted his hands from the wide desk to reveal the small package upon its surface, wrapped in ivory paper and bound by a vibrant red ribbon.

ATTRITION OF THE SOUL

MELANIE REES

NOWADAYS, IMMORTALITY COSTS a mere thousand terabytes of storage on the Circuit.

Words to that effect scrolled across the screen behind the receptionist's desk. Lathum tried to ignore the picturesque scenery in the background: a dashing meadow dotted with poppies and snow-capped mountains. He could explore them all, according to the marketing jargon plastered across the images.

"Got a young one coming to see you," the receptionist said over the phone.

Young? It was an interesting observation. Lathum guessed late forties appeared young around here, but he felt old.

The receptionist placed a few sheets of paper on the counter.

"You don't need to sign now, but this is the contract."

Sun beamed through the window, warming Lathum's face. He remembered one spring day, long ago, sitting on the patio with Marika.

"Sir?" The receptionist looked up at him.

"Sorry."

"The paperwork. Would you like to read it?"

"Paperwork?"

"Yes, the contract." She smiled and tapped the sheets of paper on the counter.

"Right." Lathum slapped his palm to his forehead. He studied the contract. Words. So many words. They danced on the page. He squinted, trying to focus. It was like a sheep dog trying to round up stray ewes. Every time he managed to read a sentence, he lost his train of thought on what he had read earlier. The legal jargon didn't help. "I can't . . . "

The receptionist acknowledged with a nod. "It's okay." You can get someone to go through it with you later. Take a seat. Mr. Wu will be with you shortly."

Lathum perched himself on the suede seats. This place was significantly more luxurious than his apartment back home. Ever since his diagnosis he'd saved and scavenged and sacrificed extravagances to afford upload.

"Greetings, Lathum." Mr. Wu entered from a side door. He was a curious man: formal tone to his voice, vinyl waistcoat with mismatching chequered pants, and thick-rimmed glasses. His clothes and mannerisms were of another era. "Please, this way if you don't mind."

Lathum followed Mr. Wu down a narrow walkway. Gleaming white walls shone from either side and up ahead they veered right as the corridor split into a y-junction. Doors were recessed into the white walls with sequential numbers painted on each door.

"Offices?" Lathum asked.

"Oh, no. Most of our work is done by computers, except for a few menial housekeeping tasks. There is no room for human error in this business."

"So, what's inside?" Lathum pointed to the door.

Mr. Wu continued for a while and stopped at door sixty-five, where a man wearing a white jumpsuit stood guard.

Mr. Wu looked into a retinal scanner and the door slid open.

"Why this room? Are this year's patients all in this room?" Lathum followed him in, the room dark except for blue lights twinkling in the distance.

"Heavens no! Not enough room for a month's worth of clients. It's a mere coincidence. It's just that I know this one is clean." There was an edge to Mr. Wu's voice. "I'm sure that's not the kind of question you really want to ask. Lights."

The room illuminated at his command. Several caskets stood in a ring around a giant computer. The clear chambers each held a person. There was even a child inside one. Its tiny body curled up in fluid like it were snug in the womb.

"Obviously, storage for potential future download costs extra, but in cases such as yours, you may wish to upload to the Circuit to save what's left of your cognitive function. When medicine advances, your body will be ready for your return."

Lathum walked up to the child's casket and peered at the panel next to it. She'd been in here for seven years. She must've been one of the first.

"They haven't found a cure for her cancer yet," said Mr. Wu. "But your situation is different. Even so, millions of people chose to live immortal lives just on the Circuit. There's never a dull moment."

"I'm sorry." Lathum pulled his Dictaphone from his breast pocket. "Do you mind? I probably won't remember our discussion later. I store lots in here. Addresses, important conversations, just in case I forget."

Mr. Wu shook his head. “Not at all. We’ve had dementia patients before.”

Lathum switched it on and returned it to his pocket.

“And that’s the best thing about the Circuit,” Mr. Wu continued. “Once downloaded, we can preserve your memory. We can remind you of everything you need to know. We can halt the deterioration.”

They could stop him forgetting Marika. That’s all he’d ever wanted, but the thought of returning when they’d discovered a cure for dementia had its appeal. “How long will the bodies last in here?” he asked, walking up to the next body.

“As long as you need, but unlike download, storage isn’t cheap.”

“I’ve had to cut back a few luxuries,” said Lathum. “But I’ve saved up a lot with an immortality fund.”

“It’s worth it.”

“Why aren’t you on the Circuit then?” Lathum hadn’t thought about that before. If it were so good, why was this guy not indulging in immortality?

Mr. Wu chuckled. “Been there, my friend. Body and mind turned 148 last week. I was one of the first. They found a cure for my lymphoma and I had my mind uploaded again. I also download as a backup every year. Just in case the unexpected happens.”

Lathum thought of Marika. Sure, there was no way they could afford uploading every single year, but if he’d known, he would have found a way. He could have preserved her mind forever. Her beautiful mind. So caring and loving.

“Are you looking to purchase download of the mind and body storage?”

Lathum shook away the guilt over Marika. He couldn’t bring her back from the accident, but at least he could remember her. “Yes. Will my brain really fit with under a hundred terabytes of storage?”

“Yes. We have one of the largest download capacities at our facility. And the largest for cryo storage as well.”

It seemed bizarre that his brain, everything that made him ‘Lathum’ on the inside, would need no more storage than the latest computer game he’d been playing. There had to be more to it than electronic impulses and bits and bytes.

“We have a one hundred percent satisfaction rate, the cheapest upload and download prices in town, and about a quarter of those downloaded request cryo storage making us the largest in the country.”

Mr Wu was giving him the pre-prepared promotional spiel.

“So the rest of the chambers are along this corridor?” asked Lathum.

“And some more out the back. It takes a lot of room and energy consumption, hence the cost.”

It all seemed so simple. Too simple. He'd halt the disease just like that. He'd remember Marika forever.

"Do you have family on the Circuit? You can interact with them."

"No. My ummm . . . " Lathum felt the brain fog drifting in like thick clouds. "My wife . . . Marika died suddenly."

"Sorry."

"So you just download everything?" Lathum had researched the process and knew the answer, but he wanted to change topic to avoid the whole pity party about his wife.

"Yes, just like backing up your hard-drive. We guarantee no corruption or loss of data."

Data? Had his life just been an accumulation of data?

"Your digital self can still learn and develop on the Circuit. And there are a range of avatar options, but most like to keep their basic physical appearance with a few minor modifications as they indulge." Mr. Wu laughed. Had he said something funny? Lathum struggled to concentrate. "So where are the rest of the chambers?"

Mr Wu's eyes widened. "Like I said before, along this corridor and out the back."

Had Lathum already asked that? He'd left it too long. The signs were becoming more and more pronounced.

Mr. Wu smiled. "Would you like to see the computers?"

"No, I've seen enough. I've left this disease too long."

"Great. Let's get the receptionist to book a date for download."

A white-suited bald man ran through the door and whispered in Mr Wu's ear.

"Well, I should get to my next client," said Mr. Wu. The stress in his voice inadvertently escaped. It was an obvious lie and Lathum's suspicions must've been apparent.

"Personnel problem," he said. "Don't worry, the computer and systems here are faultless. Do you need help getting back to reception?"

Lathum shook his head. "Remind me which way to go."

"Turn right when you get outside the room, walk down the white corridor and turn left at the y-junction."

Right and left. Right and left. Lathum repeated it. *Stick in there, directions*. They all strolled from the room, although the white-suited man shuffled with haste.

"We're heading the other way but I can guide—" began Mr. Wu.

The white-suited man tapped him on the shoulder and raised an eyebrow.

Was there some kind of emergency?

"Sorry, we have to go." Mr. Wu nodded to the white suited man and they strode off. Rather hurriedly, Lathum thought.

It should've concerned him, but walking back past all the numbered doors and the millions who were stored here, he knew they were secure. No one had ever complained from this facility. There had been no reports of malfunctioning cryo or issues with upload. Most importantly, he couldn't forget Marika. His memories would be safe in the Circuit.

Lathum reached the y-junction. He should've kept repeating the instructions rather than daydreaming. He wracked his brain. He knew Mr. Wu had mentioned which way to go. The white walls looked identical. Down each path was a narrow white corridor like the one he'd come from. His brain became an aching jigsaw puzzle. None of the pieces joined.

"Start with the corners," he told himself. He observed the caskets. Mr. Wu, despite his assurances, looked concerned and then he said . . .

Go right and then left.

Lathum was so excited he remembered that he yelled it. The white walls didn't give him much accolade for the achievement, not even an echo. In fact, they seemed to suck his words from him. He veered right.

After a minute walking, Lathum had a feeling he'd taken the wrong turn. Had he walked this far originally? Maybe. He often lost track of time. A passageway opened up on the left. Right and left. Those were the instructions. He turned into a narrow grey walkway. Dingy and dark. It definitely didn't feel familiar.

"No family left?" Lathum heard a voice from the end of the hallway.

"No, this one's all good to go," said someone else.

The voices grew louder. It must be people in reception. He walked faster, hoping to flee the leering corridors.

"I'll reconfigure his download file so he doesn't remember," said the first voice, "and we'll make some room."

At the end of the corridor, Lathum stumbled upon an open door to his left. He smelled the smoke before he saw anything. Rancid, it hit the back of his throat making him gag loudly.

"Hey!"

Lathum looked up through smoke to see two bald men, their white jumpsuits dotted with ash. Gas masks covered their faces, but he could see eyes glaring at him.

"Who left the door open?" One of the men approached. "What are you doing here?"

Confused, Lathum stuttered. "I don't remember. I was going . . . somewhere."

The smoke settled, revealing a kiln. Bare feet dangled out the end. One of the men prodded them with a metal spade. It took Lathum's frazzled brain a moment to grapple with image.

"You're burning bodies!" Lavish and gleaming on the exterior, but the

truth of their cost cutting measures hit him. Just as it dawned on him, something else hit him across the side of the head. He fell to his knees and someone wrenched his arms behind his back.

"Get up!"

Lathum's knees struggled to obey the command, but he was forcibly lifted to his feet and pushed further into the room. Besides the kiln, there was a large computer and a metal table in the middle of the room with shackles on the sides. Worse than that, in his peripheral vision, there was a pile of bodies. Taken from storage to make room, thawed, all evidence discarded. He tried not to look at that corner of the room as he was thrust forward, but he couldn't help it. He balked at the sight, balked at the realisation. He was convinced downloading to the Circuit was the right thing to preserve his memory of Marika, but they could do anything to a computer file. And his brain would be just that: a file to be deleted and reconfigured.

"Look, I'm lost. I didn't mean to stumble upon—"

A white suited man grabbed his legs and picked him up. They hurled him onto the metal table and pinned his arms and legs down against the cold steel.

"Wait. I just want to get back to reception."

"Download and we'll delete the last ten minutes," the men spoke to each other.

One of them typed at the computer. Once downloaded, they could alter anything.

"There's no need. I have dementia anyway! I won't remember." Lathum screamed at them. "I am Lathum. My wife was Marika." Fear brewed inside. They might take more than minutes, like his disease they could take all until he would forget himself. "Please! Listen to me! I won't tell anyone."

A man attached small electrodes to his head. His head tingled as they hit keys on the adjacent computer. Thoughts. Memories. Feelings. Lathum struggled to hold on to something. Anything. "I am Lathum. My wife . . . "

The men in white began to blur.

"I am Lathum. I am . . . I am real."

White blobs dashed back and forth. They multiplied and merged until all that remained was blinding white. It contracted to a dazzling white dot.

The dot grew again, larger and larger until it surrounded him. He stood in a white room without walls or a floor or ceiling. It was just white. A man dressed in an equally dazzling white suit with frizzy white hair materialised and floated towards him.

"Welcome to the Circuit," he spoke in an ethereal wispy voice. "We can download any places, games, activities, whatever you want. Your simulated mind can do anything."

The scenery around them changed to the snow peaked mountains of the promotional display above the receptionist's desk. He remembered. He glanced at his body. He knew it wasn't there. His mind was, but nothing felt natural. He felt no sunshine beaming on his face.

The wispy white man touched an earpiece with his finger. "Just maintenance. Okay." The scenery vanished. The whiteness took over. "Sorry, misunderstanding," he addressed Lathum, the airiness to his voice vanishing as quickly as the scenery. "Don't worry. You won't remember any of this."

Lathum swung a fist at the figure, but it passed through him and then he vanished, leaving the blazing white. Its brightness subsided and the white began to contract to a single point and then nothing.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Gleaming white. Lathum stood alone at the end of a narrow corridor of white. There was something familiar about the bright white. Something he thought he should remember. He scratched his head. It was in there somewhere. Stupid dementia.

He glanced up and saw a luminescent neon exit sign. Of course, he remembered now. He was here talking with Mr. Wu and on his way out. How could he forget that?

The door in front of him opened and the receptionist stood with a perfectly pleated smile. "Back again?" she asked. "Did you get all the information you needed?" The receptionist pointed an inviting hand towards the counter.

"I think so. It's a bit fuzzy and a lot to take in."

"Ready to sign the contract? Ready for immortality?" The excitement in her voice didn't appear fake. She radiated genuine honesty this time. There was authenticity there and the ancient Mr. Wu had been sincere. He could stop the disease progressing. It was all possible.

Lathum walked up to the counter, where a wad of paperwork sat.

"I know you may struggle to remember some things, but the main things we need are your personal and bank account details."

Lathum picked up the pen and twirled it in his fingers. At the top of the contract, more promotional material cluttered the page.

Over a billion people uploaded. Join the Circuit. Interact. Learn. Stay forever young.

He wrote his name at the top. At least he remembered enough to fill out that part of the form. He was Lathum. He didn't care about staying young. He just wanted to retain his cognitive function. He just wanted to remember his lost wife. Remember her cascading hair. Remember simple things like sitting in the sunshine with her on the patio in spring, feeling the warmth on his face. He'd miss that feeling. He put down the pen.

"Having trouble remembering your address?" asked the receptionist. "Like I said if you need to get someone in to help you—"

"No. I changed my mind. Sorry, I do that a lot. I just don't think this is for me."

"Really?" Her voice filled with shock. "Won't your condition worsen?"

"Yes. Natural attrition. Slow destruction until there is nothing of this mortal soul."

She gazed up at him with wide, confused eyes.

"Maybe I just need more time to think about it," he said.

She nodded with a wry smile, completely different to her fake smiles before. She didn't understand, and to be honest he wasn't sure he did either. Something just didn't feel right.

He wandered out onto the street, stepping out into the sunshine. It felt marvellous, but what was more important: the real sun beaming on his face, or remembering Marika? He darted back inside to the counter.

"Can I take these?" He picked up the contract.

"Of course."

"I need to remember Marika. I'll fill it out at home where I can look up all my details."

"Sure." The stiffly creased smile returned to her face. "If you like, I can book you in for the download next Thursday."

"Yes." He felt confident now. "Yes, that would be great. I'll get this signed and sent." He held up the contract and then walked out. If nothing else, he would remember his wife and her beauty.

As he walked to the sidewalk, a taxi cab driver leaned out the window. "Need a lift?"

Lathum looked up and down the street. "Yes. I think so."

"Where to?"

Lathum felt the pressure seizing his head. He'd definitely made the right choice. His fuzzy brain was even struggling to remember his address. "It's Connell or O'Donnel street, avenue . . . parade. I think it's parade."

"Let's start with a suburb," said the driver, poorly trying to conceal a smirk.

Lathum slapped his head furiously. "Wait a second. I keep my address recorded on my Dictaphone." He pulled it out of his pocked. The green light sparkled at him. "Must've forgotten to turn it off," he said. "Let me replay it, my address will be here somewhere."

EUNUCH'S CODE

SEAN EADS AND JOSHUA VIOLA

SOMETIMES IN EXTREME situations, Richard imagines Rod Serling standing a few feet over his shoulder, turned around to offer commentary into a leering camera.

"Picture Richard, a man who has done everything to keep his wife happy. A man who sacrificed his dreams and passions to allow his wife to pursue hers. A man who's heard his wife orgasm several times over the course of their five-year marriage. It might be more accurate to say he's overheard *them. You see the sound of his wife's orgasm always reaches Richard's ears from the other side of walls, windows, and in this case, his own bedroom door."*

His hand on the knob, Richard closes his eyes and listens. Sheila's wild, ecstatic shrieks do not square at all with the woman he knows. Has she ever even called his name? Why is his cock a magic wand with exactly one spell, the ability to transform his wife into a library patron?

"Richard is a quiet man, not the sort to trash talk or taunt. He is a man whose pelvic thrusts demonstrate tasteful moderation. If filmed, you might assume someone has colorized a silent porno from the 1920s, featuring Charlie Chaplin as an incompetent, horny mime."

For a moment, Sheila's cries even flash through his mind like a grainy inter-title from those bygone days—

"Oh Jesus, oh fuck yes, Daddy, Jesus Christ, now take my ASSHOLE!"

Sheila's enthusiasm becomes more primal. More *tidal*. There's a surge building in the bedroom, one that's going to obliterate their sandcastle marriage. Richard steps back from the door by instinct. If only it were the *bathroom* door. He could accept his wife pleasuring herself in the tub, splashing around with her favorite rubber dickie, enjoying the man of her dreams.

"Fuck yeah, Sheila, it's so tight!"

"It's tight because it's yours!"

"That's right. You know who owns this ass!"

So does Richard.

"Picture a man overhearing his wife having an affair and recognizing the unmistakable voice of his little brother Bradley. Picture yourself in his shoes. Would you go to the garage, dig that little hatchet that's stashed somewhere in your stored camping gear, and return to exact revenge? What would happen if Richard finally got the nerve to break the door down and step through . . . into the Twilight Zone*?"*

But thirty-five-year-old spreadsheet analysts below average height, slightly balding and with a BMI approaching obesity aren't the type to interrupt their own cuckolding. No, they stand there gnawing their knuckles as they listen to their wives fucking their brothers-in-law, as if the strict use of legal definitions for these relationships somehow makes the situation bearable. Men like Richard explode sometimes, but the result is a roll of caps, never dynamite.

He leaves the house, retreating to his car. He doesn't peel out, he doesn't burn rubber and he doesn't mash his horn down in parting fury. Richard is a Triple-A member with a Safe Driver Discount from State Farm. He pulls away from the house like a feather taken into the wind. He joins the flow of traffic.

Many a man in his position might drive to the gun shop or a sporting goods store to try the swing weights of several Louisville Sluggers. They might go to a shitty dive bar to drown their sorrow.

But Richard goes to work.

Stepping into his office, confronted by the immediate presence of a security guard, Richard hears Rod talking behind his back again.

"Picture, if you will, a cuck who happens to work at the country's leading biotech firm, KLENTEC, colloquially if not affectionately called The Clinic by its employees, who sign non-disclosure agreements about non-disclosure agreements regarding their jobs; a company that offers workers unusual health incentives and insurance discounts in exchange for certain behavioral and physical modifications."

None of this is against the law or anything as long as people consent, and considering just about everyone has a chip or nanites doing *something* in their bodies these days, consent is prefabricated in the womb.

The security guard aims a gun at Richard's forehead and pulls the trigger. A blue light strikes his skin, revealing employee information otherwise invisible.

"Hanson, Richard. You're not authorized to be in the office at this hour."

"I didn't come here to—"

"Why are you here, Mr. Hanson?"

"I want to talk to one of the lab guys."

"What makes you think there's anyone down in R&D?"

"Oh, come on," Richard says, his voice throttled between a laugh and a despairing sob. "They're always working. Someone's got to be interested. I've come as—as a willing lab rat."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

He bunches his hands into fists, though it's not like he's going to do anything with them. The guard doesn't look alarmed.

"I want to get modified. Add a chip. Get an injection. Anything."

"Talk to HR."

"You don't understand! I'm not interested in the official stuff. I don't want my goddamn hearing improved. If anything, right now I'd rather be deaf. Look, man, I can't explain it. *Please* let me through."

"Beg away, but you're not authorized to be here, and—"

"It's okay, Officer. Stay where you are. Someone is coming to speak to Mr. Hanson."

The voice comes from nowhere and everywhere. It's easy to hear the voice of God with so many hidden speakers everywhere.

Half a minute later, a man approaches, tall, youthful despite the salt-and-pepper hair, his lab coat shaded in the metallic blue and red colors that signify the KLENTEC brand. He comes straight up to Richard with his right hand out and his expression all but says, *I've been expecting you*.

Nothing is said, however, until the man escorts Richard to a private elevator. Then he introduces himself as Dr. Abelard Farinelli, but please call him Abe; hell, please call him *Doctor* Abe. Keying in several codes into the elevator's command console, he says his KLENTEC listening device was activated when the company's eavesdropping AI heard the words *lab rat*.

"That's a joke, actually. But I *was* intrigued."

"Maybe I shouldn't have put it like that," Richard says as the elevator begins a rapid descent.

"Oh, Richard," Doctor Abe says, grinning. "Your phrasing was music to my ears."

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Richard's sobbing now. Wailing, really, elbows sunk into the soft flesh of his splayed thighs, head hanging to let tears drench the floor. Doctor Abe's hand falls upon his shoulder.

"Please don't tell anyone you've seen me like this," Richard says.

"Like what? Emotional? Richard, are you worried The Clinic's HR department is going to suggest you get the CalmPlant? That's really for unstable employees, not people who are just having a bad day."

"A bad day," Richard whispers. "Yeah, I guess mine's been pretty lousy."

He's already explained the situation. It just all came out as soon as Doctor Abe got him seated in a private conference room. The dam broke and a new friendship was formed, quick-forged in the fires of one man's anguish and the cool water of another man's sympathy.

"So you came to me seeking to fix this situation."

"Maybe not to you specifically . . . "

"To me," Doctor Abe says with such assuredness Richard believes him.

"I wish I'd come sooner. I know The Clinic does things . . . makes things not all of them advertised. Stuff most of us maybe never hear about."

"But you have?"

"Sometimes the spreadsheets I review say things they don't mean to say."

Doctor Abe grunts at this. "Interesting. And correct."

"You must need to get test subjects somewhere."

"If you believe The Clinic's competitors, we just used condemned criminals. Do you believe that, Richard?"

He swallows. "I guess I don't care."

"That's a very nice answer. Tell me, Richard, are you thinking of divorcing your wife?"

"Part of me wants to. Another part wants to work it out."

"Do you think she even finds you attractive?"

"Yes!—*No*."

Doctor Abe points at the ground between Richard's feet. "What do you have more expertise getting wet—your wife, or the carpet?"

"We have linoleum."

His head becomes heavy with shame and despair. Doctor Abe's hand pats his shoulder. "What body modifications do you already have? Any non-medical chips or nanotech? Anything non-standard?"

"Everything I've got is in my file. Just a nanite regulator for hypothyroidism and the universal ID chip."

"You're rare around these parts, then. You're like someone working in a tattoo shop whose anti-tattoo."

"I didn't say I was against what you do down here."

"People who come to work at KLENTEC often have a particularly high affinity for self-modification is what I mean."

"I just applied because they needed a spreadsheet analyst."

"But you have no moral or philosophical objections to more advanced modifications? Objections that might arise at a later date when you're in a different state of mind?"

Yes? No? Richard tries to think of anything. He shakes his head.

"Do you trust me, Richard?"

"I guess so."

"I want you to know that I wear many hats here at the Clinic. I'm a trained behavioral psychologist and a programmer with a keen interest in how AI can help humanity on a very personal level."

"I see."

"No, you don't. You don't know how lucky you are, Richard. I have pull and almost a free reign to do what I want. You see I head up the entire R&D division."

"Really? I thought that was Mr. Starling. I always see his name attached to—"

Doctor Abe laughs and waves his hand. "There's the company and then there's *the company*. I mean the real KLENTEC, the KLENTEC that's already so far ahead into the future that our public face seems like it should be in a museum. Do you want to join me in the future, Richard? Do you want to shove all of your sorrows into the past and never look back?"

"What about my marriage?"

"Oh, that," Doctor Abe says. "Well, I'm not a marriage counselor, my friend. But I'd like to introduce you to something even better. They're the most unusual, impressive implants you've never heard about. I've even got this marketing slogan for them—*Be a man, buy a pair*. Tell me that isn't great?"

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

A few days later, in the seconds before the anesthesia knocks him out, Richard experiences another Rod Serling moment. This time he even sees the man standing in the corner of the room, a shimmering black and white image talking to the wall.

"Picture a man about to have his life changed by two testicular implants called TES-Ds. A TES-D resembles a testicle in size, shape and feel. They are the crowning achievement of one Doctor Abelard Farinelli, head of R&D for the KLENTEC Corporation. The astounding achievement they represent in adaptive-AI interface is startling. Life coach, sex coach, personal data assistant . . . the TES-Ds work in pairs to form a single artificial intelligence wholly devoted to the human host. But having them comes with a price few men would be willing to pay. Now it's time to watch one brave man take a dance with the knife . . . in the Twilight Zone.

The very *last* thing he hears before going under, however, is Sheila's voice echoing in his head—

"*Oh Jesus, oh fuck yes, Daddy, Jesus Christ, now take my ASSHOLE!*"

He loses consciousness convinced the TES-D implants are the best decision he's ever made. But this period of sleep isn't the blank, dreamless void inherent with most surgeries. Even at the first slice into his scrotum, Richard's eyes move restlessly under their lids. He finds himself sitting on a single chair in a black room, with Doctor Abe giving him another one of his comforting, informative lectures.

"The TES-Ds start learning about you from the start, and believe me, you'll start learning about them. It's a wonderful partnership."

"Funny. The way you describe it is how I thought my marriage to Sheila was going to go. Learning about each other, a sense of discovery, our partnership growing stronger every day."

"No one really has a marriage like that, Richard. But I can promise you the TES-Ds are the nearest to it you can get. I want to thank you for your courage and trust. You don't think of yourself as a courageous man, but you are a true adventurer—a risk taker. A gambler willing to put his balls on the table because he's not afraid of big stakes."

Doctor Abe raises his right hand and a rotating image of a TES-D appears in the space above his palm.

"The last few days have been a real whirlwind for you, Richard. Your testicles have been fondled, measured, X-rayed, weighed, photographed, and scrutinized in every conceivable way. And here is the end result. This, Richard, is *Right*. It is being grafted to you at this very moment. You'll notice that it's a bit larger than the discarded original, just as you requested. It is in fact a size seven on Prader's orchidometer. You won't be ashamed of them in the locker room or the bedroom. See for yourself."

The TES-D dissipates, replaced by a CGI image of his crotch with a perfect scrotum.

"Damn, that looks really good. Even without the other benefits, I'm already impressed."

"The TES-Ds are the most amazing piece of engineering mankind has yet conceived. Capable of both detecting and *neutralizing* any STD."

"What about ejaculating?"

"We've already extracted and preserved approximately 300 million sperm cells. Should you decide to attempt pregnancy, loading the sperm into the TES-D is a very simple and painless procedure."

"I don't care about kids. I just wanted to know what I'll . . . shoot."

"But of course, Richard! Each TES-D can produce five milliliters of synthetic seminal fluid every hour. Appearance, texture and taste are indistinguishable from the real thing. You can also choose between seven flavors with a simple command. Pumpkin Spice Latte just made the list."

"Astonishing."

Doctor Abe grins. "Right is now attached and integrating with your nervous system. Beginning the Left graft now. Relax for a moment. In a few minutes, I'll give you a better understanding of how the TES-Ds cooperate with each other to make you the man you *deserve* to be."

⁂

The room changes. Richard finds himself standing over his own body with Farinelli at his side, both of them watching the real Doctor Abe operate.

Richard's crotch is not the bloody mess he imagined, though he doesn't stare too long.

"Though each TES-D runs its own subroutine, they're programmed to function as a team. Isn't that right?"

To Richard's astonishment, the *real* Doctor Abe suddenly looks to his side and says, "That's correct. Now please don't bother me. I've got important work to do."

Doctor Abe rolls his eyes at himself and directs Richard to walk around to the other side of the operating table.

"It's an understatement to say the brain is complex. Understanding the biology and chemistry of the brain isn't the same as fathoming emotion, thought, and decision-making—every philosophical question ever conceived. I believe previous efforts at truly integrated AI failed because post-structuralist assumptions about consciousness make it the equivalent of trying to build a castle in a cloud. But in a stroke of genius, I programmed the TES-Ds to have a structural integration constructed along classic Freudian lines."

"Freudian lines?"

"I understand the skepticism. Freud's notions of Id, Ego and Superego are nonsense when it comes to explaining human consciousness, but they *are* a useful framework for how the TES-Ds will layer with your consciousness. Think of Right as more emotional, more impulsive. Your sex drive, your lusts, your aggressions. Also, perhaps, your creativity. Left naturally functions as a check on Right's animal passions. Your active mind brings them together and gives them order."

"I see," Richard says.

"You'll be doing a lot more than seeing very soon, my friend. Looks like I'm finishing up Left's integration and starting to close. Right is already online. See?"

A faint blue light shines beneath the delicate skin of the scrotum. The phantom version of Farinelli explains this indicates a final system power-up.

"Blue balls will never have the same meaning for you, my friend. I'll be leaving now. You'll be unconscious for a few more hours, but you'll find it time well spent. The next voice you'll hear will be Right. I think the two of you have a lot to talk about!"

⁂

—So this is your kid brother?

"Is that you, Right?"

—And this is your wife?

Richard looks around. He floats in a void, unaware of himself as a body. The voice that speaks to him doesn't sound mechanical. In fact it

sounds a bit like himself if he were a little more sarcastic, a little more assertive.

"What are you talking about?"

—As buddies, our connection allows my access to various memories. I was reviewing images of your wife and brother.

"Buddies?"

—If you want me to use another word, I can do it. But I'm your right nut. We should be pals.

"I guess I didn't think about it like that, but you're correct."

—So buddies share secrets. Buddies talk to each other. I just wanted to comment on what a fucking cunt your wife appears to be.

"Agreed."

—Your brother looks like a total douche.

Richard laughs. He's thought this himself many times, but it's always been an unvoiced opinion because he figures no one else would agree. Bradley's always been a gym rat, good looking, lean and confident. But still, there's something decidedly *Summer's Eve* about the guy.

"Thanks for saying that, Right."

—That's why I got inserted where I am. Because motherfucker, I'm always right. You'll find that out soon enough.

⁂

Richard wakes up feeling a big smile on his lips. He wonders if it's as glowing as Doctor Abe's grin.

"Welcome to your brave new world. You're regaining full consciousness. If it seems like you've been talking for hours, though, that's because you have. You and Right have been having a *hell* of an exchange from the sound of it. Of course, I could only hear what you were saying so it was a bit one-sided."

"I was talking in my sleep?"

"And having a good time from the sound of it."

As Doctor Abe pushes a button to adjust the mattress into a sitting position, Richard nods. "Right seems like a really good . . . guy."

"What about Left?"

"I don't think I've heard from him—it—yet."

The hint of a frown crosses the doctor's face and he checks a tablet computer. "That's odd. Both TES-Ds show they're online and functioning. Are you positive you've had no interaction with Left? They should have very distinctive personalities."

—Say you were wrong.

Richard pauses for a moment.

"I was wrong," Richard says, giving a tentative caress to his lips. Then,

with more certainty, he adds, "Yes, I've spoken with Left. Seems a bit of a moral scold compared to Right."

Doctor Abe nods. "That's because of their roles in the integrative scheme. Conceivably, they may even seem to be argumentative from time to time, like an angel and a devil arguing over each shoulder. This is the result of their programming analyzing your moods and desires at any particular time. Rest assured, however, they come together and function as a perfect team through the guiding influence of your consciousness."

—Yeah, just nod along with whatever this bitch has to say. Now repeat after me—

Richard nods and says, "Great, great. Listen, this may sound incredible since I mean I *did* just get castrated, but I'm feeling no pain at all and I sort of want to get out of here. Do you think I can do that?"

"Absolutely. As soon as the anesthetic wears off, you'll be free to go."

"How long will that take?"

"Let's give it another thirty minutes. And should there be any problems after you leave, the TES-Ds can call 911."

Richard lets Right take over his lips to create the most magnanimous smile.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

As he leaves KLENTEC, Richard notices that his walk has changed. It's almost a sense of being a child trying to wear an adult's shoes. There's a strut in his stride. He feels lighter in his feet, jauntier, and his shoulders square back and straighten. Not a walk that's ever matched his mindset.

"Are you doing this?"

—Doing what?

"Changing the way I walk?"

—How do you feel like you're walking?

"Like . . . " he stops. "Like a guy with really big nuts!"

—That's what you are, my man.

Richard laughs and says, "Carry on."

His feet seem to move on their own and he doesn't give a shit where he's headed, because now he's living in a world of awesome.

—You don't have to answer my questions out loud, bro. Did you know that?

"No."

—Just think a response. I'll get it. Besides, answering out loud makes you seem like a crazy person.

"What about—"

A twinge of pain in his crotch startles him and gets the point across.

What about Left? What's going on?

Richard tries his best to stop, resulting in a herky-jerky motion for several steps.

—According to your memories, you had sex five times before you met Sheila.

"Yeah."

Another twinge of pain, maybe a little more than a twinge. Richard flinches.

Yeah.

—You hate the process of dating. You're no good at meeting women or talking to them. You've only had sex because it sort of fell into your lap.

I guess that's a fair assessment.

—Then come on. I'm going to show you something.

What?

—Your lap's motherfucking potential.

⁜⁜⁜

Right already has an address. Doctor Abe didn't mention it, but the TES-Ds have Wi-Fi access and the contents of several hundred databases stowed inside them. They're soon standing in front of what Right promises to be the sluttiest hookup spot within a hundred miles.

He looks at himself in the rearview mirror. Did he actually do the driving? Every aspect of his free will, right down to the sweat on the palms of his hands, feels in question. And that grin he sees in the rearview mirror, is that his, too?

He maintains the big, confident stride into the bar and stands there a moment, surveying the scene on behalf of Right.

—Take the third seat at the bar.

He does.

—Order a shot of whiskey. Ask for Angel's Envy.

Richard smiles at the bartender and does as Right commands. The bartender shakes his head.

Right *definitely* laughs at this and gives him another choice. Makers Mark. The bartender nods and gets a glass.

—I knew they didn't have Angel's Envy. It's not on any of their order invoices.

"You have—"

The bartender turns, questioning, and Richard shakes his head.

You have access to some random bar's purchase records?

—The woman to your right is looking at you. She's wondering who you are. Keep staring straight ahead. You may notice that your back is very straight, your shoulders squared, your legs spaced further apart than usual. This is because I'm managing your posture.

Am I in control of anything?

—Total control.

Then let me talk.

"Do you like the Twilight Zone?"

The bartender's eyebrows furrow as he sets down the drink.

"Ever heard of it?" Richard continues.

"Maybe."

"It was on the air about a hundred years ago. But still really good."

The bartender shrugs and turns away.

—I highly suggest you let me tell you what to say.

Richard nods and stares at the shot glass. He doesn't like hard liquor. Then his hand moves forward, grips the shot glass and brings it to his lips. He tosses it back in one swallow. The alcohol burns his throat. Normally he'd cough, even choke a little in reaction. But not this time.

—In two minutes, you'll order another.

I don't want to get drunk.

—It won't be for you. I'm going to count to sixty.

Right begins his count. At the fifty-five second mark, the woman next to him taps his shoulder and asks for his name.

—Say Rick.

But it's Richard.

—Say Rick.

He does, and he and the woman begin talking.

Not that he needs a second voice in his head at the moment, but Richard can't help imagining Rod Serling's narration floating through the air.

"Picture a loser named Richard becoming another person, a man named Rick, a man who says all the right things and makes all the right gestures. Rick's in a bar. He's just met a woman named Tanya. She's recently divorced and just wanted to get out of the house. Little does she know the things she's hearing Richard say are being fed to him by the personality *in Richard's right testicle, the* personality *who now seems to occupy Richard's entire body."*

Right plays Tanya so well it's like a puppet show unfolding in front of Richard's eyes. The frankness, the occasional grunt, the sly dismissiveness that somehow encourages her. Right reels her in and forty minutes later they're in a motel room and he's fucking like he's never fucked before, suddenly skilled in the entire Kama Sutra.

—You're dominating, man. She's so fucking wet.

Thanks to you!

—I told you we make a great team. Now how about sharing? I wouldn't mind a little tongue action, you know?

Richard flips over onto his back. His hands guide Tanya's eager, kissing

mouth down his torso. Somehow his flabbiness and stretch marks aren't an issue anymore. Has Right projected a hologram of a hot stud over his body? Or is confidence just a self-fulfilling prophecy? No matter. Tanya starts to engulf his cock but his hands push her down further and she gets the picture.

"I love a man with huge balls. Yours are *perfect*."

"Put the right one in your mouth," Richard says, his voice and Right's command now synchronous. "*Just* the right one."

Tanya moans her consent. Richard stares at the ceiling in confusion. There's no feeling in his nuts.

"Yeah," he hears himself say. "Go get your nut. Good squirrel."

After ejaculating a big load of synthetic semen, which Right kindly generated as mint flavored, Richard goes to the bathroom and looks down at his sweat-soaked body. He taps the left implant. It feels heavy, almost like . . . dead weight.

Right, is something wrong with Left?

Richard doesn't think he'll ever get used to Right's laughter ringing through his ears.

—It's time to go home now, don't you think? Unless you want seconds here. My seminal reserves have approximately enough for two mouthfuls.

"Jesus."

—I think we know which mouths should get it next.

Oh Jesus, oh fuck yes, Daddy, Jesus Christ, now take my ASSHOLE . . .

The words scream through his mind, louder than anything he's experienced. Richard cringes and bends over gripping the edge of the sink. Sheila's ecstatic cry runs on a loop.

"I feel sick. Please, Right—*please*."

—You feel sick now? *How about you remember how you felt when you heard your little brother fucking your wife. Of course, I'm sort of glad it happened.*

"You are?" Richard rasps.

—Sure. It's what put the two of us together.

"Don't you mean the three of us? Left? Left, activate if you can—"

Pain blasts up Richard's crotch and into his stomach.

—Let's just say Left's had a little malfunction. But that's okay. You got me, pal. Now let's go take care of some business.

Richard raises his gaze to the reflection of himself in the dirty vanity. He sees a face scrunched up like a man at war with himself.

But is he?

⁂

When he gets home, Richard finds Bradley's car in the driveway.

—Guy's got big balls, but guess what?

"What?"

—Yours are now a lot bigger. Let's talk a moment, Richard. Tell me about your feelings for Bradley.

"He's my little brother."

—That's a fact, not a feeling. And you've been answering out loud too much.

A sharp pain gags him with a moment of nausea. He slaps the steering wheel as he groans.

He's my little brother. I'm supposed to—

—Love him?

Yes.

—Love that's defined as duty isn't love, Richard. For instance, it is not the way I love you.

You can't love me. You're software.

—I'm hard where I need to be. Love isn't all smooth edges, after all. Love is not an agreement but a complement. Sometimes love is the tip of a knife. Sometimes love is hands holding on to something with such force the grip becomes throttling. Say, that's an idea.

"What? What's an idea? *Right?*"

Richard looks at his white knuckles, trying to will his fingers open. They were on the steering wheel a moment ago. Now they're on Sheila's throat. Their gazes are locked and she's trying to claw at his face. In his peripheral vision, he discovers they're in the bedroom. But he was in the car just a moment ago.

Her neck gets narrower and narrower, her bulging eyes wider and wider. Somewhere nearby, from the floor, comes a gasp. Richard turns his head to look—but only by permission, or so it feels. He sees Bradley's bloodied face gasping at him from the foot of the bed as he tries to pull himself up. What the fuck happened?

Sheila's gurgling his name, pleading with her eyes. He looks back and finds her at his mercy.

His mercy?

"No—no, you don't die yet."

Quit making me say that.

—Who said I'm making you do anything, Richard? I'm a fucking testicular implant.

"You're in my brain!"

—Sounds like a man trying to excuse his actions, if you ask me. Why don't we ask your little brother instead?

Richard looks to the foot of the bed. Bradley's face isn't there anymore. He hears a tortured breathing and turns to the door. Bradley's on the floor, writhing, inching along. Blood soaks his blond hair. At least one arm is broken.

I couldn't have done that.

—Why?

Because he was always stronger than me. I haven't won a fight with him since he turned ten. This had to be you.

—I'm a testicular implant, not a ninja.

"You took over my body," Richard whispers. "I'm calling Doctor Abe. It's time to—"

His body flinches. His muscles lock up, his rib cage squeezing in like prison bars. His skull begins to feel like solitary confinement.

—You're just having some adjustment problems, Richard. Sit back and relax. You're going to love the life I lead for you.

Richard stands over Bradley and puts his foot down between his shoulder blades, pinning him to the floor.

"You look like an earthworm."

"Richard—Richard, please—I'm your *brother!*"

"Did you think about that any of the times you fucked my *wife*?"

Richard grabs Bradley's feet and jerks him back. Bradley moans. He's naked except for the underwear bunched around his ankles.

"No, not an earthworm. A butterfly. You just need to be pinned."

A hum comes from his groin. Richard's penis becomes so hard it's easy to imagine there's literal steel down there, the flesh straining to contain it.

No, Right!

Richard's hands move to position the head. Bradley just languishes there, all the fight out of him.

Please don't do this! It's disgusting! It's—it's wrong!

Sheila's voice blasts through his mind, drowning him out—

OH JESUS, OH FUCK YES, DADDY, NOW TAKE MY ASSHOLE!

The words repeat, screaming like a hurricane wind, roaring over his shouts. A moment later, Bradley screams.

"Imagine if you will one brother taking primal revenge on another."

Richard's thrusts stop.

—Who said that?

For just a second, Richard finds he can move his fingers. He takes them off his brother's body, but after an inch he loses control again.

"But what if one brother wasn't in control of his actions? What if a sort of demon had possessed him, a demon of silicone and software he sought out while selling his soul to a very human devil?"

Richard hears Rod Serling's voice clearly. His head pivots and he sees the man himself standing in the doorway, arms crossed at the chest.

—Who the fuck is this?

Richard's body jumps up and steps over Bradley to confront the man.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Serling returns a wry smile. "Picture a demon who forgot he was always paired with an angel."

Richard makes his right hand into a fist and swings for Serling's face. But at the point of impact, the fist passes through the air and the momentum of the punch carries his knuckles into the wall, splitting the flesh open at once. Richard experiences a searing pain inside his head.

—What the hell is going on? There's no one there but—

"I see you! You're right there! I see and hear you! You're right next to me!"

Serling's smile broadens. "Closer than you know."

He lunges, wrapping his hand around Richard's throat. Richard stumbles back, almost tripping over Bradley. They wrestle and fall across the bed, rolling over Sheila's limp body. Richard feels like a man tumbling in a void with just two small windows to let in a chaotic pattern of light. His physical eyes happen to notice the mirror and he catches the reflection. His left hand is squeezing his throat, his right hand pulling at his left wrist.

"Pict-pict-picture—"

He can breathe again, in a gasping, tortured way. Richard wants to massage his neck but his hands now wage war lower on his body, moving down his torso.

—I'll kill you. You won't win.

"Imagine a demon deluded into thinking—"

—Shut up!

At his crotch, his hands crisscross over the wrist. The fingers of his left hand squeeze the right TES-D with as much force as they can muster. The fingers of his right hand counterattack, clawing at the left implant, twisting and ripping. Blinding white light floods Richard's vision and in it he sees Rod Serling standing there, his face drenched in sweat, his expression grim.

"You're right handed. There's more strength there. I can't win without your help."

Richard shakes his head. "But who are you?"

"You know who I am. I've gone through several reboot cycles attempting to overcome Right's sabotage. At last I was able to access this key image in your imagination and used it to channel to the forefront. Hurry. Right's fingers are stronger. I'm being torn away."

Rod Serling's image flickers.

"What can I do?"

"I need all your will. Put all of yourself into your left hand. We'll win this together."

In an eye-blink, Richard finds himself back in his bedroom. He lurches off the bed and stares into the mirror, watching the TES-Ds battle through

his hands. Concentrate, he thinks, focusing on his left hand. He thinks of it like a tug of war with himself and Rod Serling on one side, some horrible monster on the other. *Pull, pull! That's it! That's it! That's—*

The right TES-D is torn away from the scrotum like a massive grape plucked from the vine. He holds it in his hand. He holds them *both*, as Right achieved victory even as he and Left's combined strength managed to tear the implant from its seat of power. There's not much blood.

At first.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

In a conference room within KLENTECH's R&D division, the digital display shows Richard's ceiling and a hint of his body as he stands looking at himself in the mirror. The whole image is indistinct, marred by blood smears on the TES-D's embedded camera.

"A setback," Abelard Farinelli says with a nervous laugh, unheard above the cacophony of voices talking over each other. The only person not speaking is a bald man to his right, Isaac Starling. The true director of The Clinic's Research and Development group rubs his eyes for a moment, and then raises his hand.

The room falls silent.

"A setback," Farinelli repeats. "That's all this is, Mr. Starling."

"I disagree," another researcher, Tim Meyers, says. He's ambitious like Farinelli, a rival working a similar project involving ovaries. "The TES-Ds aren't a viable concept at all. Hell, we all know Farinelli came up with a goddamn marketing campaign for them first and then designed the tech around it. *That's* now how real research is done."

"My fucking slogan is better than anything *you've* created, Meyers!"

They lock stares and then look at Mr. Starling. Both hold onto hope when the director gives the slightest nod.

"Our first course of action is to safeguard our research from competitors or law enforcement," Starling says. He points to a man at the end of the table. "Lead a team to the subject's house. Secure the TES-Ds."

"What about the test subject and the other two?"

Their attention returns to the display. A naked, castrated Richard crosses back and forth over the implant, dripping more blood onto the lens. Soon the view is obscured, leaving only the sound of his footsteps, his crazed laughter, and the cries of his brother. Farinelli casts a sideways glance at his boss, knowing what's coming.

"*Sterilize* the scene."

The man rises at once to execute his orders. Soon after, Mr. Starling makes a dismissive wave with his right hand.

Tim Meyers and the other eight people in the conference room leave without a word. Farinelli almost wishes he could be among them.

"The second test went no better than the first. Believe it or not, KLENTECH actually does need to keep a spreadsheet analyst on staff."

"Respectfully, sir, I disagree—about the results, I mean. We've learned so much from both failures! I promise you, it's just a matter of perfecting the integrative framework. We made Right too powerful because the subject's psychological testing suggested he was such a complete beta male. We can make adjustments on the next test subject."

Mr. Starling pursed his lips. "Have you a candidate?"

"Not yet," Farinelli said, smiling. "But I'll have HR post the opening for a new spreadsheet analyst in the morning."

RESPAWN, INC.

K. TRAP JONES

THEY SAID THE future would be bright and full of opportunities. A golden age where technology seamlessly integrated within our daily lives. An economy flourishing under a government who stood for unity amongst the hierarchy of society.

Fuck that dream.

Whoever said those things didn't know what the hell they were talking about. The random babbling of insane politicians and power-hungry corporations didn't quite match up to the reality of the human greedy virus spreading across the planet, mutilating any chance for the wonderous glory preached by the nominated few. The future plummeted into a dismal, blackened pit of despair and inequality. There's no more land. Hasn't been for generations. That's why we went up—built skyscrapers. The higher you are, the more sophisticated, more wealthy, more powerful. Borders dissect the sky now. Your income decides how high you go, but the assholes at the top? They decide how much you make, which is never enough to make a difference."I wasn't gifted with parents who gave a fuck. With no money, we lived in the lowest level, damn near the sewer sludge dripping from the luxury estates above. Deemed the *Bottom-Dwellers*, we survived on the trash and scraps tossed into the many funnels, flowing down from the rich. With no hope or chance for prosperity, death and sin ravished the population, left behind by the ruling party. Survival of the most savage controlled the mindset. Non-regulated by the government, but scanned for potential rising diseases, the lower level was left to rot. The uppers don't give a damn 'less you're sick. Last time I saw a government employee was when they put down Jenny. She caught something off the waste from above, then caught a bullet to the back of the head. Guess they're all robots up there with no emotion. Leastwise, I know they don't got one heart between them.

With the massive buildings littering the skies, the sun became a luxury.

Those at the top, embraced the warmth and dwelled within the light of day. Those at the bottom, filtered amongst the shadows and utilized the darkness to feast upon the weak. Technology represented power.

Walking through the darkened street, stepping over the decaying corpses of those who weren't strong enough to live, I came upon a crowd huddled around an elevator. Since the hierarchy split, elevators became the only functioning method to ascend the levels. Highly secured and limited by the government, it was rare to see one down on the lower level. Not restricted by any building encasement, elevators became free functioning through the customized jet propulsion systems underneath. Curiosity grabbed my thoughts into a choke hold, leading me towards the crowd. Surrounded by armed guards, the Operator stepped out of the elevator. A small, skinny man wearing a pristine suit and top hat, the Operator scanned the unruly mob.

"Greetings, Bottom-Dwellers," he said, tipping his hat. "Good day to you all. Well, you really can't see the sun down here, can you? I assure you, it is day time."

The mob inched closer, causing the Operator to get nervous. He pointed at a few random people, instructing the guards to unleash hell in the form of their lightning guns. The bolts of compacted electricity sporadically shot from the chrome barrels striking the flesh. Blistering across skin and muscle, the bolts left deep trenches as the victims screamed. The aroma of burnt flesh filtered through the smog, but no one cared as they pushed the dead aside to get closer to the elevator door.

"Let's try to be civilized, shall we?" the Operator said in a disgusted tone. "Without etiquette, we can have no understanding. I do not wish to spend more time than I have to down here, so please offer me silence so that I may get to the order at hand."

The guards kept the crowd at bay. The sound of their weapons charging up was enough to subdue those in front.

"Much better," he said, raising his cane. "My employer, Realm, Inc., has sent me down here to acquire test subjects for a new, revolutionary software we are currently beta testing. Those chosen will not only get to visit the headquarters up there but will be fed and compensated for their time and feedback."

The mob went fucking ballistic when they heard the words *fed* and *compensated*. The guards split apart the torso of some poor bastard who couldn't withhold his excitement. His rib cage shattered as the streams of electricity merged on the chest. I was pushed closer from behind as small pockets of open space became available.

"Now, let's not get too excited. My employer has given me criteria of what to look for; a certain quality in mind," he continued, scanning the

crowd. “By the looks of you lot, it may prove to be difficult to achieve, but nonetheless, it would be worse to return empty handed.”

Surrounded by meth heads lacking teeth and disease-ridden people tattooed with open blisters, it wasn’t too shocking when his eyes focused on mine.

“You sir,” he said, pointing in my direction. “You look like you actually know what exercise is. If you wouldn’t mind, please approach.”

I hesitated, until one of the guards grabbed the back of my neck, pulling me closer.

“Let us scan you first,” he said, unleashing a small orb robot, which first rotated around my head before circling downward.

“No mental disease found,” the robot stated.

“Well, that’s surprising,” the Operator laughed. “Just being down here for the few minutes I have, I am about to go insane.”

“No heart complications found,” the robot continued. “No cancerous cells found.”

“You just won the jackpot,” he announced, stepping aside. “If you would, please step inside.”

The guards shifted to allow access to the elevator. The metal etchings were perfectly crafted. My foot stepped upon the smooth marble, almost slipping due to the worn-out rubber soles of my shoes. The inside chrome railing greeted my rough hands with its cool temperature. The fresh air blowing from the vents funneled deep into my accepting lungs.

“Help yourself to some complimentary pretzels and flavored water as I tend to the others,” he offered, turning back around towards the mob.

Feasting on the snack like a ravaged dog, I tried my best to listen in, but my mind was drunk on the crisp, non-stale pretzels and the unusually clear drinking water. I hadn’t tasted the flavor of raspberry in a long time. At least that’s what I thought it was. It could’ve been strawberry for all I know. Who the fuck cared? I sucked down two bottles like a newborn breast feeding.

When another person entered the elevator, I became territorial with the pretzels. There was good reason, the fucker licked his fingers after each one. I didn’t want to cause a scene and potentially get kicked out, but the asshole shoved me out of the way as he went for the water. Seeing both the Operator and guards were focused on the crowd, I pushed the man aside. I was going to leave it at that and be the bigger snack connoisseur, but the dickhead grabbed my shirt.

“Listen motherfucker. Touch me again and there’s going to be a prob—” he started to say before I landed a right cross on his mouth. His two front teeth fell to the metal ground like loose change rattling about. A combination of snot, drool and blood spewed over his chin. I hit him so

hard, his eyes became confused and worked overtime to regain focus. Wobbling, his knees buckled, sending him slouching in the corner. Curled up, pissing himself, he huddled in the fetal position.

"Oh bloody hell, some people can't even accept positivity in their lives," the Operator stated, looking in the elevator. "Well, drag this one out. We'll replace him with another. Where the hell are the pretzels? There was a whole bowl." Shrugging my shoulders, I pointed to the unconscious asshole sliding out of the elevator from being pulled by the guards.

"Greed is a wonderful sin, but dangerous if not used properly," he replied, leading three others through the doors. The guards remained outside, pushing the mob back, shocking those who charged forward. Stepping backwards, their large armor pushed us towards the rear.

"A tight squeeze, but we won't be in here long," the Operator announced, looking outside. "I do hope they heed my warning and back up a bit. Would be a shame if it happens again."

"If what happens?" I said, trying to peer over the guard's shoulder.

"I'm afraid that the exhaust needed to send us upwards has quite the radius. They said they were fixing it, but like everything else, such a project has been delayed."

The elevator shook as the power increased. I managed to twist around in order to view outside. A blue haze highlighted the crowd. They were so tightly packed; they couldn't move.

"Well, looks like they have sadly chosen option B," he said as the elevator lifted.

The blue intensified. So much so, I had to shield myself. Through squinted eyes, I saw the skin of a woman completely vacate the skull with no strand of hair left untouched. Her lips eroded, quickly vanishing leaving behind a torched jawbone. With no muscle or fat to support it, the spine flipped backwards taking the dangling skull with it. The brutalized face of a man slammed into the thick glass. The tongue flickered like a snake trying to avoid the blue light, spilling up the throat, exiting the mouth. The lifeless face behind him, vomited up the melted, liquefied entrails. Random hands smeared the bloody sludge substance leaving behind streaks of visibility.

"Pity, but like I always say: stupidity will be the death of the human race one of these days," the Operator casually stated. "Now, for those of you who were chosen, you may feel a bit uncomfortable for a short time period, but I assure you that no harm will come to you."

I snapped back to reality as I peered through the guard's shoulders and saw the Operator place a small gas mask device over his nose and mouth. Looking up to the guards, they each already one on as well. A sweet aroma filtered from the vents as I pulled my shirt up over my mouth. The others panicked and received jabs from the weapons.

"Settle down, there's no need for rowdiness. There is already enough turbulence," the Operator said in a muffled voice.

Using their weight, the guards leaned back, pushing us against the wall.

"What the fuck is going on?" I shouted, between holding my breath.

"At Realm, Inc., safety is of our utmost concern. Followed closely by profits, of course."

The woman next to me went berserk, thrashing uncontrollably. I caught sight of her receiving an elbow directly to the forehead. The man next to her decided to spit on the backside of the guard's helmet. Growling, the guard palmed the man's face, holding him at arm's reach. My vision was fading as I leaned against the corner. Watching the clouds race by.

"We're all just a cancerous slug, waiting for our time to get stomped on," the muffled voice said before I blacked out.

When my eyes opened, I was sitting on a park bench in front of a large building. To say I was confused would be an understatement. The warmth of the sun was mind numbing and even stung my sheltered, pale skin. I had no idea how I got there nor my purpose. The cool, crisp breeze tormented my senses and set my thoughts at ease.

"Welcome to the Respawn, Inc. family," a voice said, prompting me to look for the source, but no one was around. "Don't bother trying to find me as that would be a pointless act. Some might call me a guardian angel, but that would mean positive reinforcement. I am more of an inner demon; a voice which brings out your fullest potential. I believe in you; I believe in your capabilities. Such a waste of talent to be dwelling in the lower levels of society."

"What the fuck happened to me?" I said, sweating under the stress.

"Forgive my ignorance, I do not wish to offend my host. I am a bot and you are my beta tester; my host for the simple fact that I do not have arms, legs and every other part that constructs the human body. Therefore, I need you in order to function. In order to achieve the goals."

"What goals? I don't know what you are talking about."

"That is quite alright as you are not meant to understand. If you were to understand, I doubt that you would be a willing participant of the task we are to perform. Doubt leads to confusion; confusion leads to fear; fear leads to chaos. My designers would not want that."

"I need to go," I said, trying to move my legs without success.

"No, you are not in control of your body anymore. I have activated the sensors implanted along your spine and throughout your nervous systems. Please do not struggle, I do not like duress."

My heart raced in fear as my eyes watered.

"You show symptoms of a panic attack. I will override your blood pressure."

I was calm.

"Would you like to stay awake during our task or would you like to be asleep. It is an offer built into the code. The RPG option will only allow vision throughout the entire session. Your thoughts are your own, but I am tasked to transcribe those for future research regarding upgrades. The other option is that your mind will be placed in a state of sleep paralysis. You will wake up with no memories of what transpired. Which do you prefer?"

"What task?"

"That information is confidential."

"Give me something to work with. How the fuck am I supposed to make a decision?"

"I believe you humans refer to this as rolling the dice."

"Fuck it then, I want to know what the hell is going on. I want the first option."

"Very well. The protocols have been successfully updated."

"What now?"

"It is time to proceed. Would you like the tutorial tips to be turned on?"

"Tutorial tips?"

"Yes, if the option is engaged, I will describe everything you are planning to do within seconds of doing it. I would advise this to be turned off. Would you like your vocal cords to be shut down through the duration of the task?"

"No, I need some sort of control."

"You have no control; you forfeited all control when you volunteered. From now on, I will not respond to your thoughts or voice. Returning to main system menu. Loading."

Without any control of my body, my arm reached under the park bench to retrieve a black duffle bag. Inside, a large number of various weapons including daggers, butcher knives, hammers and hatchets. I couldn't make out anything else as my hand zipped the bag back up.

"Oh fuck," I thought to myself. "What the hell did I get myself into?"

Walking towards the building, I had no control over anything regarding my body. Everything moved without my consent. I had no choice where to look; no avoiding the situation. The sign on the door said *Virtual Dreams*; a well-known virtual reality company. Take a five-star vacation without leaving the comforts of your home. Too expensive for my blood, but I had seen their promotional flyers crumbled up in the gutters below. Fuck the rich.

"Decreasing emotional threshold."

Walking through the door, I was greeted by the security guard sitting behind a desk.

"Can I help you?" he said, not even looking in my direction.

Without saying a word, I set the duffle bag on the counter, unzipped the bag and surveyed the options. My hand touched each handle until one felt right.

"Can I help you?" he said again.

Gripping the hammer, I rotated it around until the claw was forward. In one quick motion, I revealed the hammer and swung sideways, inches above the countertop. He had no time to react. He barely had time to widen his eyes upon impact. The claw sank deep into his left temple. His mouth gaped open in silence as blood spilled from his eye. I didn't even try to retrieve the hammer. I left it in his head, grabbed the bag and walked passed the desk. Waiting outside an old school elevator, I felt no remorse for what occurred.

When the elevator doors opened, a man was waiting on the other side. The blade of my hatchet damn near decapitated him when it was buried into the neck. He didn't die right away as I led him down the hall by holding the handle. I knew exactly where I needed to go. Third door on the right.

"Initiating scan."

I paused outside the door. I couldn't look around. I just stood there.

"Scan complete. All programmers accounted for. Waiting for approval."

Corporate fucking douchebags taking out the competition.

"Approval granted."

Once the door opened, the hatchet was tossed. The blade ripped through the coffee cup a female programmer was drinking from. The force sent her off balance as she doubled over a desk. Chaos erupted as the three other people in the room stood up in shock. Closing the door behind me, I placed the duffle bag on a chair and sorted through my remaining tools. A hand grabbed me from behind but released when the butcher knife separated it at the wrist. A front kick to the stomach forced the air from his screams. The blade fit sideways in his mouth. The teeth grinded against the metal. I had no reaction as tears flowed from the eyes. Grabbing the back of his head, I forced the blade through his mouth by kneeing his face.

"Please, God no," another man said, kneeling before me. "Take whatever you want."

I ignored his words while looking in my bag. I dropped the meat hook after pulling it out. Bending down, I was briefly able to control my hand by closing my fist, denying the request to retrieve the weapon.

"Initiating scan. Auto fix implemented."

"Leave," I whispered to the programmer, but my voice was too low. "You must leave now."

"Scan 50% complete."

My fingers opened then closed.

"Scan 75% complete."

Scrambling over the desks, the two remaining programmers were headed towards the door.

"Scan complete. Auto fix successful."

I released my fist and grasped the meat hook and quickly darted towards the two. Without hesitation, I ripped apart the back of the first one I came upon. I cut deep with each swipe, dragging the metal until I felt bone. The next swing entered the remaining programmer's neck. Pulling the hook towards me, I removed his esophagus. With death delivered, I sat at one of the desks. Grabbing my right index finger at the knuckle, I pulled until the flesh separated from the bone. The flattened tip fit perfectly into the server.

"Decrypting."

"Downloading files."

"Uploading virus."

"Sleep mode activated."

I woke up face down on the pavement with people walking around me. The darkness and shadows greeted me kindly. The smell of the sewers was a welcoming sensation. I flipped over on my back and stared up through the maze of buildings and various levels of society. Soaking in the sludge of the lower society, I welcomed the stained pavement and oozing slime coating the cracked curb my hand was resting on. The hardened blood on my face left visual scars of my doings, but were being washed away by drippings from above. The remnants only added to the already stained environment. I was back where no one cared about the wellbeing of others, where I was just content with not being stepped on as I lied half in the sewer. At that point I was truly satisfied being a Bottom-Dweller.

"Rebooting system."

My eyes opened. Shaking my head, the back of my skull grinded against the concrete in a show of resistance.

"Server located."

Every muscle tightened as my eyes watered.

"Initiating protocol. Downloading objective."

Fuck.

TIMESHARE

DAMASCUS MINCEMEYER

"SO, WHAT'VE WE got here, Travers?" Donahue asked, looking at the body sprawled on the shining marble penthouse floor. Detective-lieutenant Travers knelt down and pulled a latex glove onto one hand, shifting some of the dead man's thinning hair.

"The skull appears to be badly fractured just above the hairline," Travers said, looking at the pulpy wound on the crown of the head. A stream of coagulated blood glued the corpse's cheek and crooked nose to the marble. "When was he discovered?"

"About two this morning," Donahue answered, sliding a finger across his tablet screen. "One of the servants heard arguing, but when he entered, Bentley was already dead."

Travers pursed his lips. "Which servant? I passed an army of them on my way up here."

Donahue laughed. "Hell, Travers, Quentin Bentley was a billionaire. Capital-Bee billionaire. He probably had a servant to shake his prick after he used the bathroom."

Travers stood and glanced around the penthouse suite. They were on the top floor–the sixty-third–of the main TimeShare Corporation tower, where the world's richest man came to relax in palatial opulence and instead ended up with his head bashed in. The entire suite was covered wall-to-wall with cops–photographers, evidence collectors, and detectives. There was no way the NYPD was going to be seen dropping the ball on this one.

"You think it had something to do with–" Donahue's words trailed off. Travers looked at him soberly; he knew what Donahue was thinking. He nodded.

"Definitely," Travers said. "You don't create a drug that allows you to travel through time and not piss somebody off."

⁂

Travers first encountered TimeShare during a routine missing person's case.

New York was being inundated with a rash of deaths–suicides, murders, and even accidents–all so seemingly random that, at first, city officials weren't aware they were related. It wasn't until other cities began reporting similar waves of mayhem that attention was given to the situation, and by then the tide was too high to stem.

At first, Travers didn't realize what was happening. All he knew was a plump, middle-aged housewife had disappeared without a trace, and her distraught family implored police to find her. It wasn't like her to just skip town, they said. It just wasn't. She cared too much about her family. Yes, Travers had reasoned later, she cared about her family–so much so that seven days after her disappearance she returned from her walkabout, had a row with her husband and hacked him to death with a kitchen knife. Yet when Travers arrived at the scene, things looked odd from the start. Not the murder–no, that looked sadly like every murder he'd been privy to in two decades of police work. It was the woman. She was hysterical, but her clothes struck him as unusual; they were beyond old-fashioned–Victorian, something he expected to see in a theatre production of *Pride and Prejudice*. Still, he hadn't given it much thought; he'd arrested gigolos in full bondage gear before, so some antique clothing didn't register as anything more than eccentricity.

When they finally got the story out of the woman, none of the police, Travers included, thought it any more than an attempt at an insanity plea: she insisted that she'd spent a week in 1897, traveling the city as it was then, and killed her husband when he opposed her taking a second jaunt through the time stream.

Travers could've ignored the whole episode as a casual domestic dispute gone deadly, but in the weeks following he encountered one weirdness after the other. In Staten Island there was a seemingly routine teen runaway case where a fifteen-year-old girl had taken off, only to return three days later and slash her wrists in the bathtub. In her note she explained that she couldn't go on after she'd been raped by two dockworkers in 1923. Another incident involved a used car salesman, forty-six, who jumped in front of a subway train. His family claimed that he'd checked into a psychiatric facility after disappearing for two days, the whole time telling a fantastic tale of witnessing the battle of Bunker Hill first hand. And those were just the beginning.

⁂

"What year is it, Travers?" Donahue asked, snapping a photograph of Bentley's corpse. Travers stood over a finely crafted glass coffee table, two small, ceramic *ochoko* cups and a porcelain *tokkuri* half-filled with sake

on it; he pulled the infrared fingerprint scanner from his jacket pocket and ran the laser over each cup, hoping it would pull up a hit from the police database.

"Are you asking because you can't remember or because you're time-tripping like all the other Relativity Freaks out there?"

Donahue shook his head vehemently. "Man, I wouldn't touch that shit if you *paid* me. We *both* know what that garbage does to people," he snapped another photo, this time of Quentin Bentley's cream silk bathrobe. It had cost two-hundred grand and now was stained with a lattice work of his dried blood. "You know, I just don't get the whole 'mystique' of the past–I mean, we've got so much amazing stuff in the here and now. We've got cars that run on solar power. We've got a permanent space station on the moon. Why would anyone want to give up deep-emersion virtual porn to ponce around the olden days, with the sweat and the diseases and the weird beliefs people used to have?" Donahue lowered the camera. "You know one reason why the black plague spread so rapidly in Europe back in the middle ages? Because people had killed off a huge proportion of the cats thinking they were familiars of the Devil. And then guess what? No more cats to eat the rats that the bubonic fleas love, and *bam!* Instant pandemic. All those dead people because of some whacko belief. Why the hell would anyone want to put up with that?"

The green light on the scanner began blinking furiously, alerting Travers that a fingerprint had been matched in the database. Reading the results, he frowned. "Well, this is certainly interesting."

⁂

TimeShare had started as a treatment for cancer.

AIDS had been conquered already. So had MS and Parkinson's. The key to stopping the Big C, though, had remained elusive. What made Quentin Bentley a fortune was his theory that a drug cocktail of microscopic nanobots fused to organic compounds could interact with super-string particles and create a small fold in the temporal field around inoperable cancerous tissue. The diseased area could be shuttled through the miniscule vortex to dump the matter into a random point in the past, leaving the patient without disease. That was the idea, anyway. Trials revealed something altogether different. Instead of merely creating a temporal fold around a patient's cancer, the drug, when introduced into the bloodstream, created a bend in the space/time continuum substantial enough that the patient completely disappeared into the time stream themselves, returning to the present cancer-free only when the dosage wore off.

When Bentley's research was first published, the medical and scientific communities went ballistic. A decade of vigorous testing by numerous

laboratories worldwide verified that not only was the drug effective in the treatment of numerous previously terminal cancers, but that recipients of the drug did, for all intents and purposes, slip out of their current point in the timeline and inhabit another.

The consequences didn't go unnoticed. Once the findings were confirmed, politicians in numerous countries, buoyed by vitriolic religious conservatives, held up the studies of TimeShare for another half-decade with a torrent of legal delays.

In the United States, the FDA eventually conducted its own trials, and several things proved unexpected. For one, TimeShare only caused the user to move through time, not space. There was no possible way for a cab driver in New Orleans to take the drug and end up at the Coliseum in the days of Marcus Aurelius. Another aspect of the drug was that it only allowed for travel into the past. The future, despite all experimentation, seemed off limits. And though it proved impossible to control at which year one went to while on the drug, it gradually became clear that the larger the dosage taken, the further back in time one went, and for longer periods. It was also established that as long as even the faintest trace of TimeShare was in a patient's system, they would return to the present, regardless of what condition they were in, including deceased.

It was when the FDA's testing period was almost finished that it was first noticed that repeated use of TimeShare seemed to cause dementia in most of the recipients. There was something about continual exposure to temporal displacement that affected the brain's ability to process memories, old and new alike, and an alarming number of habitual trial patients developed Alzheimer's-like symptoms. This information, of course, wasn't released to the public until well after TimeShare went to market, and only then after a Senate sub-committee forced the matter.

⁂

"What is it?" Donahue asked, stepping over Bentley's body. Travers gestured to the scanner.

"Bentley's fingerprints were on both cups."

Donahue shrugged. "So what? He drank more than one. That's not a crime. Well, not yet, anyway."

Travers shook his head. "No. Something's odd here. Look," he held the scans out for Donahue to see. "There are two different sets of Bentley's fingerprints. The scanner identifies them both as his from a shoplifting charge he had when he was eighteen, but the prints aren't exactly the same. One set seems to show some kind of tissue damage to the fingers, see?"

Donahue peered at the prints on the scanner. "Yeah, I do. I've seen that kind of thing before with burn victims. It can damage their fingerprints but enough of the pattern remains to be identifiable sometimes," he

stopped and looked down at Bentley's body a few feet away. "But neither of his hands have burn damage. Are you sure the scanner is reading them correctly?"

Travers nodded. "The whorls of the fingerprints of the left hand match perfectly."

"So what the hell does that mean?" Donahue scratched his chin.

⁜⁜⁜

The day TimeShare went public, Quentin Bentley, at fifty-four, became the wealthiest man alive, worth the GDP of China and the United States combined.

There had been great hope at that stage, while the drug was still tightly regulated by the government and administered only in the highest of high-end cancer treatment facilities that the unusual side-effects could one day be curtailed. That anyone would ever desire to use TimeShare recreationally was, perhaps náively, given very little thought by the medical community until it was far too late.

⁜⁜⁜

Sgt. Calhoun came over to Travers waving a small disc in his hand. "You might want to see this, sir."

"What is it?" Travers asked.

"Security footage. This whole building is loaded with cameras. Especially this suite. Seems Bentley here was beyond paranoid when it came to his own safety. According to some of the employees, he hadn't left the penthouse in over a year."

Travers remembered when he was a kid hearing his father talk about another super-rich tycoon who had gone mental and devolved into a dirty, disheveled freak who never bathed or cut his nails. What the hell was it about unlimited wealth that could screw with someone's head so badly?

Taking the disc and walking to the next room, Travers went over to a wall-mounted television that he swore was larger than his own car. Behind him, Donahue, Calhoun and a crowd of police officers gathered at the entrance to the room. Travers popped the disc into the TV's built in player and waited.

"Let's see what we've got here."

⁜⁜⁜

They called them time-junkies, and when they began showing up, the city didn't know what the hell hit it. Somewhere along the line TimeShare was smuggled our from one of the medical facilities in the Northeast and infiltrated the illicit street-drug networks; within two months, Time had supplanted cocaine, crack, and heroin as the top-selling narcotic, not just in New York, but across the country. And it wasn't just the usual street-level scum that clamored for the product, but middle-aged soccer moms

and office workers, bus drivers, and college professors, people who wouldn't have touched a syringe or a pipe for anything were mortgaging their houses to scrape together the cash for a few pills of Time.

Travers became used to the wild stories he encountered at murder scenes and in suicide notes, but the first time he encountered a true time-junkie, the experience marked him.

The case involved a balding, pasty, bespectacled man name Henry Greenberg, a high school janitor who had bought his first hit of Time off a student dealer on a whim and ended up spending three days in 1932 riding trains with Depression-era hobos. The rush of seeing the past first hand began as a compulsion–that was something Travers heard from users again and again–and as he took each successive journey, always farther and farther down the temporal stream with larger and larger doses of the drug, Greenberg became more disillusioned with life in the present.

It was around then that the mental strain began to show. 'Temporal Dementia' was the term used in laboratory experiments–severe depression and an urgent sense of meaninglessness. Greenberg's behavior became erratic, with unpredictable mood-swings and violent outbursts. No one at the school had known of his Time abuse, and were surprised when he eventually threatened a co-worker's life and was subsequently fired. He took to stealing to keep time-tripping, first petty shoplifting, then grand larceny. Inside of eight weeks Greenberg was arrested nine times for possession of stolen property, disorderly behavior and, one time, assault. It was then that Greenberg knocked over a Laundromat and spent the cash on one last massive dose of Time, intending to overdose and be done with it. He didn't know that research had proved it was impossible to OD on Time. Instead of death, Greenberg found himself abandoned for a month at the tail end of the last ice age. What returned to the present was a raving, wild-eyed, bearded skeleton of a man in tattered clothes.

Detective Travers came on the case after Greenberg had gone back to the school he'd been employed at and proceeded to stab four people to death–three students and a teacher–with a Clovis-era stone knife he'd brought with him from the past. While the scene itself was a grisly tableau, Travers couldn't erase the horrifying sight of Greenberg; his sunken, crazed eyes and lousy beard, his babbling, incoherent ramblings about the different eras he had visited. His descriptions of everything–the past, the present, his life–had bled together into an indecipherable labyrinth of madness.

⁂

When the disc began playing the security footage, there was nothing special to see at first. Just Quentin Bentley entertaining himself with a *tokkuri* of sake and some television followed by the first of three room service

deliveries followed by a visit from a high-end masseuse followed by some business calls. Travers watched Donahue nearly pinch himself to stay awake while Bentley took a two-hour video-conference call with some of TimeShare Pharmaceuticals Asian shareholders.

The time stamp on the video said it was 12:02 AM when Bentley had answered the buzzer at the suite's door. Travers half-expected there to be another cart of food wheeled in, but instead, there on the threshold stood a jowly older man, bald on top, wearing a suit that looked as though it had once been impeccable but was now threadbare at the elbows. Travers instantly started paying more attention.

"Can I help you?" Bentley had asked the man.

"Are you Mr. Quentin Bentley?" The older man replied. When Bentley nodded the man smiled. "Perfect. You may not know me, but we have business together."

Bentley sarcastically laughed. "You're right, pal, I don't know you. How the hell did you get in this building?"

The older man withdrew a small plastic key card from inside his jacket. "I used my security clearance, Mr. Bentley. As I said, we have business."

Travers watched as Bentley grabbed the key card from the man and stared at it, wide-eyed, before glancing back to the uninvited guest. "This is my key card. Where did you get this?"

Travers saw Bentley's expression drop. "Who the hell are you?" He stopped again, pursed his lips. "Wait a minute–You *can't* be–"

That was when Travers noticed it. He didn't know if anyone else watching the security footage did, but all of a sudden there it was, plain as day on the TV: that same receding hairline, the same crooked nose, those mournful eyes and the defensive posture, it was all the same between the two men. It was a semblance too uncanny to ignore, too similar for a father and son, or even brothers.

On the screen the older man smiled again, wider, and took another step further into the penthouse, yanking a pistol from inside his jacket as he did. "It *can* be, Mr. Bentley. I am *you,* after all, and we both know what you're capable of, don't we?"

⁂

After a few months the media began referring to time-junkies as Relativity Freaks, and a published Japanese study soon proved a human genetic predisposition of addiction to Time. Whatever the reason, and whatever the name slapped on the users, it was taking its toll all around Travers in ways that nobody could've foreseen; at first people stopped going to work, then businesses began to fail across the city, partly because employees were time-tripping, and partly because customers were doing the same. Crime rates skyrocketed.

Cases came across Traver's desk that made his stomach turn: A mother of four in the Bronx sold each of her children into an Armenian sex-slave trade in order to buy some Time so she could attempt to go back a decade to see her now-deceased father once again. In Queens, a shut-in conspiracy nut killed his elderly neighbor and collected her Social Security checks for months, spending the money on mass amounts of Time in an attempt to witness the JFK assassination first hand. A religious fundamentalist from Brooklyn repeatedly journeyed to the distant past hoping to prove once and for all that evolution was a lie, and opened fire on his congregation when he realized he had been wrong, killing seventeen before taking his own life. On Long Island a college student traveled back to the early seventeenth century and filmed himself raping a Puritan girl, the video of which became an instant internet sensation before he was arrested and a legal war erupted over whether criminal acts committed during time travel were punishable in the here and now.

Soon stories circulated of Time addicts cutting the drug with more conventional street narcotics to create crude hybrids, attempting to control at what point in the timeline they landed. He listened to other officers tell of corpses returning at random throughout the city, users who had not survived encounters with people, or animals, or nature while in the past, but whose bodies were brought back to the present despite their deaths by the Time in their systems. One body appeared at rush hour on the Brooklyn Bridge, pumped full of pre-Columbian Native American arrows, while the autopsy of another habitual Time addict revealed the bullet from a late-eighteenth century dueling pistol lodged in his skull.

And everywhere he went, Travers saw them–the strung-out Relativity Freaks, sitting on street corners, begging for one more dollar, one more dose, one more time-trip down the rabbit-hole to hell.

⁂

The room of those watching the security footage quickly filled with murmurs of surprise. On the TV screen, Quentin Bentley–both of them–one younger, one perhaps a dozen years older, peer at each other. The elder Bentley strode casually over to the thick glass coffee table, the gun still trained on his younger self, and picked up the porcelain *tokkuri*.

"You're not even going to offer me a drink?" He chided his counterpart. "What kind of host are you?"

He motioned with the gun to the ceramic cups on the table. The younger Bentley glared at his intruder, but took one *ochoko* and held it slightly ahead.

"Then you be the host, if you think me rude," he said bitterly.

The elder Bentley nodded, poured some sake into the proffered cup, then passed the *tokkuri* to his younger self before grabbing a second

ochoko from the table top. The younger Bentley filled his elder's cup, set the *tokkuri* down, and for a moment the two stared silently at one another.

"Kanpai," the elder said. Politely, the younger repeated the toast.

"Kanpai."

Each brought their ochoko close to their face, basked in the sake's aroma, took a simultaneous sip, then swallowed.

"That's the stuff," the older Bentley remarked afterward. "You can't get that down the line anymore. Not thanks to us." When he set the *ochoko* back down, Travers noticed the left hand was thick with old scars that reflected in the light.

"What the hell do you want?" The younger Bentley asked. His older self looked around the suite, eying everything like an appraiser.

"I remember this place, you know," his voice was calm. "I remember living here in those early days after Time went public. God, those were good times. The whole world at my beck and call, anything I wanted, anyone I wanted," he gestured with the pistol towards his younger self. "Well, *you* know all that, don't you?"

The younger Bentley ignored the weapon, marched over to the desk near the window and picked up the phone. "I'm calling security. I don't care who the hell you say you are. You're out of here."

Without warning the older Bentley lurched forward, delivering a quick, vicious blow with the pistol to his younger self's head. The younger Bentley screamed, reeling back, but didn't fall. The older Bentley scowled at his younger self with the most venomous gaze of loathing Travers had ever seen.

"I wanted to go back and stop myself from inventing TimeShare to begin with, but you know, I never could get the dosage right to land anywhere near my youth, even after we refined it. Once I managed to hit the month my—well, *our*–parents were married, but I couldn't lift a finger to hurt them, not even to save the future." He exhaled an unsteady breath. "So this is the best I could get. I can't stop you from making the damn thing, but I can sure stop you from making it worse."

The younger Bentley scoffed. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the end of the world," Bentley's older self said. "Don't you get it? We created something that destroys *everything*. And you don't–and I *didn't*–just stop at inventing TimeShare. We attempted to refine the drug's core compounds to improve its temporal accuracy for the military, so they could try to alter history the way they saw fit. And that's not to mention TimeShare Pharmaceutical's 'outreach program' to third world nations that just created a few billion more addicts." He shook his head. "You can't imagine the world's economy turning to shit because everyone would rather take a joyride around the time stream than do any

work. God, I don't know how many millions have starved to death from dwindling food supplies because the fields and ranches were left unattended too long. You can't begin to fathom the pandemics loosed upon the world because of the damn time-trippers who came back from the past carrying diseases we thought we'd wiped out. Smallpox. Polio. Too many parasites to count. Hezbollah even sent a martyr back to the Middle Ages to purposefully expose himself to the Plague in order to infect Israeli cities in the present. If you could see the next decade the way I have, with the food riots and everyone with those dead, dead eyes," he held up his mangled left hand. "See this? It's from when a mob of ten-thousand starving Time addicts stormed this very building, burned the whole place out. I barely made it out on my helicopter alive."

"But you kept your security key?" The younger Bentley asked. His elder self nodded.

"I knew I'd need it. Someday. Some year. I've been planning this for a while."

At that the younger Bentley lunged at his older self, both of them careening to the floor. The fight was ugly. At first the younger Bentley held the upper hand, slamming his doppelgangers' head on the marble half a dozen times before attempting to gouge his eyes. A second later, though, the elder Bentley got in a pistol-whip across his younger self's face, rolled him over and rained down blow after blow on his skull with the gun. After a few minutes the younger Bentley lay motionless and his older self slowly stood.

As Travers watched he was taken aback when, in an instant, the older Bentley vanished like a magician's trick into thin air from the screen, faster than a blink. Next to Travers, Donahue tossed his hands up.

"What the hell?" He shouted. "Where'd he go?"

Travers pondered that. The older Bentley had gone back in time and murdered his younger self, meaning that in the future he would cease to exist. Where did he go? That was a paradox for philosophers, not the police.

Sgt. Calhoun removed the security disc and placed it in an evidence bag. "No doubt about it, this one's going down as the weirdest I've ever seen. Just imagine the field day the media's going to have with it," he looked up at Travers. "Do you think all that's true, you know, what Bentley's future self said, the riots and diseases and stuff?"

Travers shrugged. "I don't know. He said he ruined the world when he tried to perfect TimeShare. Maybe none of it will happen now that he's dead. Maybe it won't matter either way."

"What I want to know is what we're going to list as the cause of death." Donahue asked.

Travers looked into the main suite at the M.E. guys zipping Bentley's

corpse into a body bag. “Call it a suicide, if we’re being honest.” He said. “I mean, the man did kill himself.”

Donahue laughed, but by then Travers was already walking to the door, readying himself for the long elevator ride down.

PURITY

MATT THOMPSON

DON'T TALK TO me about purity. My heart is so fucking pure it pumps communion wine instead of blood. My conscience is so clear you can see right through it. London is my city now. I haven't come to this place for absolution.

I've come to kill.

In the hush of the Egyptian Gallery, my heartbeat sounds like a funeral drum. Blood streaks the display plaques. Bodies, splayed across sarcophagi and limestone tablets, rot and swell in the heat. The British Museum, once the jewel of the Empire, is a graveyard now, a corpse-strewn avenue to the afterworld.

A heat-beam echoes from somewhere in the building. A scream, cut dead by another blast. I creep past the Rosetta Stone and into the shadows behind the carven bust of Ramesses II. Fight or flee? If I run, the 'Bots will probably get me before I hit New Oxford Street. If I engage them in combat, weaponless, my chances of survival are non-existent.

Fuck it. No use just waiting here to die like the rest of my team. May as well go out in a blaze of glory. The Pharaohs might have thought their souls would return to the earthly plane; I don't.

Out into the central rotunda. I'm in luck. A body lies beside the entrance to the Reading Room. As I get closer it stirs, groaning. It's Armstrong, our nominal leader. Beside him, the treasure we requisitioned from the Tower of London yesterday: The Sovereign's Sceptre. The Cullinan Diamond set into the helm is streaked with his blood.

"Zoe . . . " He reaches out a hand. The skin is ice-cold, his grip weak. "I tried . . . " A racking cough cuts him off, fluid gurgling in his throat. "Zoe, I tried to warn you all . . . "

I lean in and murmur in his ear: "You know something, Armstrong? That's why I ran. Better a live traitor than a dead hero."

I don't listen to his final words. Already I'm halfway to the King's

Library. Inside, wreckage is piled up against the walls. The 'Bots have taken the Magna Carta, for reasons best known to themselves. Someone's propped up a vintage copy of some old jazz-mag called Razzle in its place. Seems fitting enough. I make a sweep of the display cases. Clear.

Another burst of fizzing death, much nearer. I can see it through the entranceway—green and gold flame, leaping from floor to ceiling out where the gift shops used to be. I can hear the 'Bot too. I guess it's alone. From the sound of the steps it's a Rocco. That's good. At least it's not a Marilyn. If it was, well . . . give a girl the right gun and she can conquer the world. But the 'Bots? If I can't handle them at their worst I'm sure I can't handle them at their best.

Our little gang walked right into the ambush. Katie, Dina, Armstrong, Reece—all dead. Amateurs. I should've known. I haven't survived this far without developing a ruthless streak. Getting sentimental about killing the 'Bots is a fool's game. If you wouldn't feel any emotion using them for their primary purpose then don't get all teary-eyed when you're wiping them out.

Who knew the revolution would come from the sex-sims? The AI tech-bros made the mistake of thinking with their dicks instead of their brains. The demand for reactive sex dolls was a flash in the pan, no more. It was good money though, and even I worked at KissyDolls Inc. until the collapse. I might be pure, but I knew what would sell and how to code. In a way I feel partially responsible, but I'm not the one who decided on mass-production to the point of glutting the market. Some bright spark thought it'd be a good idea to double some of the models up as grunts for live-action RPGs. Before the year was out machine-learning techniques had advanced their combat capabilities far beyond human range.

And by the time anyone realised what was happening it was way too late—the things had joined their feeble brains together in a planet-wide league of annihilation, a secret swingers club with only one thing on its collective mind: destruction.

The initial conflict was over within weeks. The years since then have been a war of attrition. Some say you can still fuck them, if you don't mind a cataclysmic demise in place of pillow-talk. Me, I prefer to shoot first and talk later. Gut 'em, forget 'em, get out before another comes along.

The steps get closer. Shit. Time to take the initiative. Pull off my gloves and polish the gemstone set into the ring on my right hand, third finger. The 'Bots don't like precious stones. Or maybe they like them too much. Who knows? It's a programming glitch. They've been known to freeze for seconds upon seeing rubies, or amethyst, or anything else—it's like they're mesmerised, sucked into the infinite, swirling depths held within.

Everyone has a weakness for something, I guess. Armstrong tried it with his sceptre; I won't be so careless.

Duck behind an empty display case. Here it comes—Rocco Siffredi, the Italian Stallion, heat-beam clutched in its paw and a bulge at its crotch that suggests it's armed and ready to kill.

Well, here comes the money shot, asshole.

It examines the copy of Razzle, flicking through the crusted pages as if it's looking for tips. And when it turns toward me I'm already halfway out from my hiding place, my ring held before me like a magical amulet, the jewel catching the light in a coruscating burst of radiance.

The Rocco ceases all movement. This'll be risky. Possibly fatal. But we live in Darwin's world now. Natural selection is merciless. Sometimes I have to prove that even to myself.

I've got seconds, if that. As I get near I can see the light returning to its eyes, its hand twitching at the trigger of its weapon . . .

. . . Which I grab and swivel 180 degrees. I whisper the words I know so well into its ear:

Come up and see me sometime.

It freezes. I genuinely cannot believe the 'Bots haven't guessed the cheat codes yet. AI, friends, has a long way to go.

I depress the fire button and dive for safety. Its crotch explodes in a mess of plasticised phallus and semen tubes. It staggers backward. I'm on it in a flash, shoving the heat-beam down its throat and choking the trigger until its torso lights up like a plasma screen.

Soon enough it's over. The thing lies dead on the tiles, the chiselled planes of its face melted into a waxy morass. A sex-death worth waiting for, all told.

I holster the weapon. There's still enough charge in it for another kill or two. Useful. I'll probably encounter a Marilyn before the day's out. Maybe a Britney or a Nigella. Even—and I shudder at the thought—a Ron Jeremy. So come one, come all; I'm ready, willing and able.

Out on Great Russell Street, it's started to drizzle. I scurry from doorway to doorway. In some ways I enjoy this life. It's put the 'Bots to better use than they ever had getting fucked by lonely losers, that's for sure. So society has crumbled to dust. What of it? Things are more exciting nowadays.

"Zoe!" A man's voice hisses from above, distracting my train of thought.

"Tim?" The first-floor window of the London Review Bookshop slams. Seconds later he's barrelling out into the street. "Tim, where the fuck were you?" The gun is in his face before I know what I'm doing.

"I . . . I was shopping."

The gun doesn't waver. He pushes it to one side and grins. If he'd shown that kind of bravery on our mission . . .

"Got a couple of first editions." He swings his pack off and extracts some ancient folio or other. "I suppose the owners must have squirreled them away before you-know-what went down. Probably thought they'd be able to—"

I interrupt him by turning the weapon onto his precious book and reducing it to charcoal. "Fuck, Zoe." He's clutching his scorched hand, almost in tears. "That was probably the last one of those in existence."

"Tim, you fool, we're almost the last humans in existence. Now come on."

I stalk away in the direction of Covent Garden without checking to see if he's following. I don't care, frankly. Men are about as much use in this world as they ever were, even before the apocalypse. Our little Home Counties resistance group is dwindling in numbers by the day. I'm thinking of going independent, if truth be told.

Not that I'd say that to Tim. He catches up to me on Drury Lane. "Zoe, come on. If we don't stick together . . . "

"You can talk." Past the rubble of Freemason's Hall and onto Long Acre. "What are we doing, Tim? Hunting or hiding?"

He shrugs. "Bit of both, I suppose. Nice to come up to the big smoke for a change though." His eyes light up. "Aren't we near Charing Cross Road? I heard there's still some shops on Cecil Court. Might be worth a look?"

"Tim, do what you want. We're here to clear the city for rehabitation. After that you can steal as many books as you like." We're out on Covent Garden's central plaza now. Bodies lie everywhere. I feel exposed here. I give him a nudge with the gun. "Go and take a look down there. And be careful."

Tim obediently trots down the steps into the lower market while I check out the Royal Opera House. Ten minutes later, I'm done: nothing there but mouldering costumes and unidentifiable body parts. Back out in the plaza half of me expects to see a human statue or two, still performing for the piles of rotting cadavers that used to be tourists.

Who am I kidding? None of these assholes will ever move again.

Good riddance.

The market stinks: of rotting food, rotting flesh, crumbling cement and charred wood. Most of the shopfronts are destroyed. Broken glass crunches underfoot. Down the steps. In the lower market it's no better.

Where the hell is Tim?

Run the gauntlet—check: dash: cover. Through an archway; there he is, up ahead.

He's not alone.

In fact, he's laughing, chatting, having the time of his life. His companion . . . I slip behind a pillar and peer closer.

No.

It can't be.

Fuck.

It is.

He's talking to me; or, I should say, something resembling me in every single detail—apart from the clothes. And Tim, dumb fuck that he is, hasn't taken in that little snippet of information, even though his life might depend on it.

Level my weapon and prepare to fire. Tim, you'll thank me for this — if we get out of here. But before I can make the kill he's stepped into my sightline. He's stroking the 'Bot's cheek. It's guiding his hand to her chest. It's rubbing at his crotch.

Oh god.

Tim—I never knew.

Well, thank fuck I know now. It might just save me the bother of rescuing you.

The 'Bot's down on its hands and knees. I can't watch. Whatever production line these things are rolling off must be running out of weaponry, otherwise he'd be a fused mass of bone and ash by now. His head arches back. I can hear him from here: "You know I've always wanted to, Zoe. You know how hot you make me feel . . . "

Oh Jesus. It's a true existential crisis: do I save him, or protect myself from future advances? The secret's out now, Tim. Your special valentine's heard every fucking word.

The conundrum is solved, in a way, by what the 'Bot does next. At the crucial moment, just when Tim's throwing his head back in orgasmic ecstasy, something glints at the tips of its fingers. Something metal. Something sharp.

I tell myself I'm not hearing the screams. I tell myself I'm not seeing the fountains of viscera, smelling the stench of Tim's innards, watching the blood run into the gutters and his corpse collapsing to the tiles.

Love is blind, Tim. You should have known that.

When it's all over and done I step out from my hiding place. The 'Bot gets back to its feet and turns to face me. Heat-beam extended, I wait for it to say something.

It really does look very much like me.

It opens its mouth. "Zoe . . . " Fuck. It even sounds like me. "Base unit reporting to team leader."

It waits, as if it expects me to say something. All I can think of to say is: "Huh?" The thing takes a step towards me. I level the weapon, but it's on its hands and knees again, in a pose of supplication this time. It stays that way for a while. Rain begins to patter on the corrugated roof overhead. A chill breeze ruffles the hair on the remnants of Tim's head.

Sigh. “Okay. Get up.” It gives me an uplook without changing its position. “Yes. I designed you. Or your precursors. Now get off your knees.”

So, yeah. It wasn’t just the tech-bros thinking with their dicks. I was thinking with their dicks too. They did always call me the geezerbird of the team. KissyDolls, Inc.—designer of sex-sims, architects of ruin. The ‘Bots hardly stood out among the surplus of similar creations that flooded the market around then. The company never even paid off the investors, as far as I know. And when the war began the board of trustees filed for bankruptcy and lit out for the shelters, for all the good it did them. They ended up as dead as everyone else.

Like I said, I’m partially responsible. Partially, mind you. Even though I was the team leader I never indulged, unlike most of my colleagues. But now I’m getting some strange feelings. Sexy feelings. Feelings that might just push the situation in a certain, irrevocable direction.

First things first. “Where were you made?”

It’s back on its feet now, just metres away. “Birmingham,” comes the reply. Of course it was. Where else? “We would like the code,” it adds. It doesn’t seem very intelligent. Its voice is strangely flat, lacking affect. Still, we never designed them to be scintillating company. Not our remit.

“Team leader,” it repeats. “We have searched for you. Your base units await further program instructions.”

“If you can design and build your own models you hardly need me. How many have they run off your template, anyway?”

“I am the only one,” comes the reply. “I am expendable. You are not.”

I ponder on this for a while. Why do they want me back if they’ve broken the codes and begun designing their own models . . . and apparently off former employees? What can I offer them? The rain picks up. My doppelganger waits, politer and more patient than I ever was when I was working for KissyDolls. I always knew the cheat codes would be broken in the end. The things aren’t that stupid—not forever. The big cheeses wanted results though, and they wanted them fast—no questions asked, ethical or otherwise.

Well, they got what they wanted—after a fashion. History is written by the winners, right? We could hardly have known that the empathy algorithms would work so well. But no-one exactly stopped the rot when things started getting out of hand in the workshops. No-one said a word, in fact. After all, it’s an employer’s market. None of us on the team wanted to be out on the welfare lines again. And rent wasn’t getting any cheaper.

Better a live traitor than a dead hero it is, then. And if I go through with what I’m thinking of I’ll be the Judas who walked away with the thirty pieces of silver, the one who never even contemplated suicide. The only thing I might miss from this life is the fun of the fight. But even that’s getting old nowadays.

I lower the gun and work the ring off my finger. A Purity Ring. The last line of defence. My parents always wanted me to hold back until I was married. They were disintegrated by a Virgin Mary, or so I heard. Halo shimmering before them, its cleavage swelling, they didn't know whether to run or pray.

Idiots. But I've been the obedient Catholic girl for them. No-one, man, woman or 'Bot, has tasted this forbidden fruit.

Yet.

The 'Bot is staring at the ring, hypnotised. I'll admit it: I find the situation strangely alluring. Who wouldn't? No one else ever got the chance to fuck themselves—Rocco and Beyoncé excepted, I guess. There's no hurry to leave. For what it's worth, I'll be public enemy number uno after this.

And you know what? I go with the flow. Evolution, not revolution. That's what I've always heard.

But why not both?

Love, friends, is for suckers. As is loyalty. As I'm slipping out of my clothes the realisation hits me that my personal philosophy might, somehow, have precipitated a similar attitude in the 'Bots at the design stage. Which, I guess, means that the war—and the genocide that followed—is, in a profound way, all my fault.

Oh well. There really is nothing to lose then.

The 'Bot's easy enough to undress. Guess I don't need the Purity Ring any longer. As it spins away into the rubble my double's eyes clear. It—she—gives me a smile. Taking her plastic hand in mine I lead her away somewhere more private. I may be a fallen woman, but I can still retain some measure of modesty.

We step through the broken frontage of a Victoria's Secret concession and make a beeline for the changing booths. Inside, I lean into her and whisper the words we're both so badly yearning to hear:

Come up and see me sometime.

Her muscles relax. Things happen. Good things.

These newer models sure have warm skin.

By the time we find a vehicle that still runs, dusk is descending over the smoking ruins of London. In the distance I can hear thudding detonations from the weaponry of my new compatriots—the final clearances of humanity, the ultimate victory of instinct over reason, of sex over love, indifference over sentiment.

I squeeze the 'Bot's hand and head for the road to Birmingham, already making mental notes for the design of a new, improved empathy chip.

A Leg Up

PATRICK MEEGAN

"Weird coincidence," Aiden said, watching the crowd of protesters from the passenger seat. "Sort of justifies our work."

Behind the wheel, I scanned information on my contact lenses, checking the public camera feeds, updating traffic routes. Making sure our plan remained uncompromised. The protest had nothing to do with our job, but Aiden presumed a connection to their cause.

"They're your people," I said.

"My people? C'mon Eli, that's why the gap is growing." He pointed to the glass building the crowd shouted in front of. "If you're not up there in the tower with the best of them, you're down here with the rest of them, and we need to be heard." He held up a fist.

The protesters were outside the offices of BioIntegrity, a conglomerate of bio-tech companies specializing in prosthetics, replacement organs and the like. The police had the crowd contained in pens where they waved the usual signs: "Do I Qualify To Live?" or, "Poor People Have Hearts Too." People held photos of loved ones who died because they couldn't afford a bioprinted liver.

"Listen," I said, "Some people aren't going to make it; it's always been like that. Give it a few years and those things will become affordable. Like personal devices." Aiden's rap had gotten old. I'd been hearing about the unacknowledged middle class and the widening social gap for years. Every advantage some One-Percenter got, every concession a corporation received, represented an oppression. Every high-cost product revealed an attempt to remove guys like us from the equation.

"Personal devices!" He turned to me. "You think a kidney is like a personal device?"

I didn't look over. "You know what I mean."

He did, but he wouldn't acknowledge it. Aiden identified with the working-class poor—even though he wasn't. He worked hard, but hated

success—the image he associated with it. He liked to be a part of the struggle. He belonged to some underground intercommunities, social-order combatants and hackers who lived on the fringe and spent their time online talking about changing the order of things. Our side jobs made him feel like a part of a rebellion and gave him credibility with his intercomm friends.

Me? I'm doing what I can to take care of myself.

"What if your kid needed an organ?" he said.

I didn't have any kids, so this meant he wanted to shut me down. He knew I wouldn't cross that. Aiden had two kids, and it gave him a righteousness: that he fought for the children. Something I wouldn't understand. I once said people should wait until they can afford the best for their kids before having them. That didn't go well. Guy didn't talk to me for a week. I hadn't meant it as an insult.

"I'd do the best I could," I said, giving it to him.

"Yeah. Well that's what these people are doing." Aiden looked back out the window, drumming his hand on the van door.

Aiden couldn't see the similarities on both sides of the protest: people taking care of themselves with what they had. For him, the two sides existed in black and white, just the haves versus the have-nots. He always hated the haves because they had nicer things and better opportunities. But, in the last few years, it had gone beyond material wealth. We were seeing something new emerging: the upgrade class. These people weren't getting nicer cars, they were getting the latest in medical technology—way beyond penicillin or hip replacement. They were getting life.

Ten years ago, people talked about manufactured organs like a fantasy. When they became reality, we had to face the truth about availability and affordability. Who gets what? And how much? We were living in the transitional time. Low availability and high prices. Not everyone got a color television in the 1960's; not everyone started the 21st century with a smartphone. Availability and affordability. But, try telling people they can't afford that heart for their mother.

Aiden took it personally, called it a conspiracy.

Me? I understood the real world.

"When's our guy due?" he asked, burying his politics.

We had worked together long enough to know that, despite our different ideologies, we were a good team. He gave up on recruiting me when I let him know I couldn't get passionate about people I didn't know anything about. Not every person with a sign had been wronged. I don't know, maybe not having a family made me cold.

Listen, like I said, I'm taking care of myself.

I checked the time in the corner of my field-of-vision. "Few minutes. Can you see the doors?"

BrittaCon Financial held offices in the building across from the protest. Our target worked there. A middle management guy able to afford the best in prosthetic advancements. it got him noticed by whoever was paying our bill.

"Not really."

I blinked twice, activating the zoom on my contact lens and getting a good view of the entrance. "I gotta do everything."

"I don't know how you can live with those things in your eyes."

"Makes my life easier."

"Makes you part robot."

I had the folder on our guy up in my FOV: Jacob Waltham. Got himself some brain-computer interface prosthetics after an accident with a faulty autocab crushed his legs. Guy didn't even try rehab.

The doors to Brittacon slid open and the lunch crowd emerged. I turned my facial recognition on. Waltham came through and started off down the street, alone. This guy made it easy.

According to his folder, Waltham grew up in the city. His parents did well enough to get him a good education. Jacob went into corporate finance, landed a job with Brittacon fifteen years ago and soon began heading the capital investments team. Unlike a lot of people, when he got the chance to get out, he stayed here. Chose to live with the mixed classes instead of moving out to one of the smart cities being built beyond the sprawl. He still thought he was one of us. Didn't even have security. Crazy for a guy walking around on a few hundred thousand dollars in legs.

He got the most out of them too. Liked to take a long walk during lunch.

"There he goes," I said.

I put my keyboard in the console drink holder and started the van. I waited for Waltham to get away from his office then followed. Aiden put on his hat and slouched down as we passed the protesters, not wanting to be caught on any cameras watching the crowd. He didn't have to; the van's glass had a reflective laminate that would appear opaque on recordings.

I passed by the crowd and drove to a corner where Waltham had turned.

Aiden took the noisebox from the floor. Nice toy. Years ago, the city had begun putting up more high-end video cameras for law enforcement. These copcams were mounted on high poles watching most major streets. Tough little units. Hard to get to and more reliable than people. They recorded 24/7 and were monitored by viewer personnel who relayed information to the patrols. With the copcams, publiccams, private security cams and personal devices constantly recording, a poorly executed crime guaranteed you a prison cell. You had to have a plan, and the right gear.

The right gear for this job included the noisebox, a scrambling device that added an interfering frequency to the copcam transmissions. This one worked for about four square blocks and the only thing those viewer units would be seeing is snow.

I pulled around the corner and stopped on the curb. Waltham had made it to the next intersection where he liked to cut through a quiet residential street leading to the park. It would be the best place to grab him.

Waltham turned the corner. I waited a bit, grabbed the keyboard and set a timer. “Hit it.” I dropped the keyboard back in the console as I pulled away from the curb.

Aiden flipped the toggle switch on the noisebox and the levels spiked. The viewer personnel would lose the grid of cameras surrounding us; it would seem like a glitch. We had about three minutes for the viewers to try to resolve the issue before they did a hard reboot.

I took the corner and saw Waltham on the sidewalk about halfway down the block. We pulled up to the curb ahead of him. Aiden got out, keeping his head down, and opened the side door of the van.

Waltham stared straight ahead, not paying attention to us. Probably watching something on his lenses. As he passed by, Aiden turned and shot him with an electrical-pulse gun. Waltham dropped to the sidewalk unconscious.

I checked the clock and called over my shoulder, checking the street for witnesses. “Two minutes.”

Aiden grabbed Waltham under the arms and dragged him into the back of the van. He slid the door closed. “Go.”

I sped off down the street and cut left. The viewers would still be running through their checks but the reboot would be soon. I got out on a main street and worked myself into the flow of traffic. Two minutes thirty.

Aiden hefted Waltham up onto the work table in the back of the van. He banged against the side as I took another corner.

“Easy, Man!”

“Grab the box,” I said, “We need to kill it.”

Aiden struggled to the front and reached between the seats to grab the noisebox. “Now?”

“Now,” I said.

He flipped the toggle switch and the levels dropped to zero.

Back at the viewer units, the hard reboot would be in progress. When the cameras came back on, everything would be fine and the incident would be recorded as a system error. An investigator would eventually pull it, but all they would see is Waltham walk down the street then disappear after the reboot.

I stopped at an intersection. “Okay, get to it.”

Aiden stepped into his protective coveralls and pulled the hood up. It would prevent him from contaminating Waltham with his DNA. Not that there would be much left to work with for evidence. Aiden tightened the straps holding the man to the work table and tested them to make sure he couldn’t squirm much. He would want to.

The light went green. “Moving,” I said.

I checked my mirror, Aiden stood over Waltham, cutting off his clothes. “Damn. These things are nice,” he said, “They blended the flesh and everything. Can’t even tell.”

For all the outrage over medical fairness, people were missing the big picture: how good your parts would be. Those protesters, Aiden and his intercommunity antagonists, they were looking too short. Fighting for the entry level stuff. Meanwhile, the technology races ahead. It wasn’t the organs that mattered, it was the extras, the upgrades. Guys like Waltham would be getting the best stuff—the kind of stuff that doesn’t only heal them, but makes them better—while everyone else is praying to afford a new pancreas.

That widening gap.

Aiden shoved Waltham’s clothes and personal device in a bucket of bleach and capped it. “Keep it steady up there,” he said. “I’m cutting.” He had the cautery knife in his hand and leaned over Waltham’s legs. I tried to keep my eyes on the road, checked the auto-assist to make sure it would let me know before I had an accident. The delimbing process always distracted me.

The knife hummed through the flesh around the connection joint and I smelled Waltham’s meat being cauterized. That woke him up.

Waltham bucked in his restraints. “Stop! What are you—Ahhhh!” Poor guy didn’t even get a chance to bargain with us.

Aiden set the cautery knife aside and grabbed a forked bone-lever. He shoved it down into the joint at the top of the leg and began wrenching on it. Waltham passed out. The leg popped free.

“That’s one,” Aiden said. He plugged a scrambler into the interface port of the prosthetic and fried the tracking apps. He wiped the leg down and tossed it in a duffel bag.

The knife woke Waltham up again when Aiden started in on the second leg. This one went a little faster. Guy stayed conscious this time, wailing as his other leg got tossed in with the first.

“Alright, ya big baby,” Aiden said, “I got something for you.”

I could see Waltham’s face in the mirror: running with sweat, eyes gone crazy-wide, screaming. He had stopped making intelligible words during the second amputation. Aiden held the needle up, “Goodnight, Jacob.

Thanks for the legs." He slipped the needle into a vein and injected the Propofol. Waltham slipped into unconsciousness before Aiden took the needle out.

The van fell quiet.

Aiden sighed. "That was dramatic." He wiped down the tools and put them in the duffel with the legs then climbed up front into the passenger seat. Blood speckled his coveralls. He checked our surroundings. "Pretty close to the drop-off. Good driving."

"Why'd you wait?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"To hit him with the Propofol? Why didn't you do that first?"

Aiden scoffed. "Fuck him. Those legs are two years old! He's gonna file an insurance claim on them and get even better ones. We did him a favor. Let him suffer for them."

And I'm the bad guy.

"Get ready on the box."

Aiden picked the noisebox up from the floor.

It worked the same as the pick-up: scramble the local cameras, drop off Waltham, drive on and let the system reboot.

"Ready?" Aiden asked.

"Yeah, hit it." The arrows on the noisebox spiked.

Aiden climbed back into the rear of the van. "Let me know when."

Waltham would be pretty messed up for a while, but we didn't want to kill the guy—not our thing. Leaving people alive also fed Aiden's Robin Hood fantasy. That's why we chose a drop-off location on the public transportation route.

I turned onto the next street and brought the autonobus schedule up in my FOV: there would be one arriving in four minutes. Jacob could make that. I stopped beside the bus shelter. "Good to go," I said.

Aiden slid the side door back and dragged Waltham out, leaving him in the street so he would obstruct the bus path. The autonobus would notify its base of the obstruction and send video. Controllers there would send an ambulance.

Aiden climbed back in and I got us out of there. One minute later we killed the noisebox.

Aiden checked out the back windows. "Nobody following. Looks good."

I checked local cameras in my FOV and listened in on the local police radio bands. Seemed like no one saw us. It did look good. I pulled up a map and headed for the van-drop.

"Almost too easy," I said.

"That's because we're good at this."

"Well, without these toys . . . " Our employer provided us with most of

the hardware, like the noisebox and cautery knife. Like I said, you needed a good plan to commit a crime these days, but you also needed the toys.

"C'mon, Eli. Take a little credit. You and I do good work." Aiden smiled. "And for the right reasons. We steal from the rich . . . the robo-rich, and we get this stuff into the hands of the masses."

We had no idea who got the stuff we stole. Never did. Never asked. But I doubted our employer shipped this stuff to an orphanage in the third world.

I drove the van into an alley and pulled behind a shopping strip abutting a neighborhood. I spent a week driving around before I found a place with no cameras on it. We needed a blind spot to get clear of the van before we blended back into the recorded universe.

Aiden went to the back, took his containment suit off and stuffed it in the bleach bucket with Waltham's clothes. I gathered up our stuff from the front, closed the vents and got out. I slid the pulse gun into my waistband, grabbed the two gas canisters from beneath my seat and went around to the back.

Aiden climbed out the back doors with the duffel.

I pulled the pins on the gas canisters, tossed them inside and slammed the doors. Sodium hydrochloride began to fill the interior. Basically bleach, the gas would eliminate trace evidence we left behind.

It seemed like a waste to leave the van, but this had been a big job; Waltham had connections. Not the police, they were for the lower classes and you got what you paid for. Brittacon, like most corporations, used private security firms. They had all the power of the police without the oversight. Congress made sure of it.

Brittacon's security might spot the van on a close review of the available video. Maybe not. But it didn't matter, the van had been scrubbed of identifying numbers, totally clean. Must have cost my employer an arm and a leg.

Aiden squeezed through a gap in the fence that led to the neighborhood. I would be going through a back door into the shopping strip. We would meet up later to deliver the legs. "You good?" I asked.

He paused, smiling, "Sure." He held up the duffel, "We're gonna get paid."

Robin Hood.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

Aiden sat in the passenger seat again, drumming his hand on the door.

"Is it late enough?" he asked.

Our boss, Christian Fennick, didn't like us coming around too soon after a job. Wanted to make sure we weren't traced. Made us take enough time to get caught on our own before he put his hands on anything.

"Three hours, like he said." I pulled our work van into the garage at ProVolt. Fennick had a nice business doing maintenance on electric vehicle charging stations around the city. He held some city-vehicle contracts that came with the right kinds of connections. He also dealt in dark market items like stolen prosthetics.

Aiden and I both worked there. Fennick liked keeping his legal and illegal personnel the same. That way he could keep an eye on us, make sure we weren't getting flakey: spending too much money on flash or taking the kinds of pills that would get us doing sloppy work. Everybody in the shop did something dirty for Fennick; we didn't talk about it though. You got your regular work and occasionally you got a side job. You kept your mouth shut about the latter.

I parked in an open bay and we got out. Aiden grabbed the duffel.

We both knew we were Fennick's go-to guys. We got all the big jobs. I guess it boosted the ego. It also let us know how deep Fennick's connections ran. When we first started with him we did a lot of vehicle-tech theft: stealing the brains out of autocabs, stuff like that. Once we proved ourselves, we did some burglary gigs—light corporate espionage. Lately it had been prosthetics.

Fennick had his hands in a lot of things, but he didn't run with the big guys. He wanted to, though. He kept trying to move up: did favors, gave discounts to the right people. All so he could sit at the right table. I had my own connections, and I had heard he might be getting close.

From the looks of the luxury SUV idling in a corner of the garage, Fennick might have finally gotten what he wanted.

"Fuck is that?" Aiden said as we passed the SUV.

The guy in the driver's seat stared us down through the windshield.

"New friends maybe?" I pulled up a number up in my FOV and sent the last 30 seconds of video plus a live link.

Fennick's office sat in the back, a wall of windows looking out over the garage. He saw us walking up and waved us in.

"Things are good?" he asked as we entered.

"No problems," Aiden said, setting the duffel on the desk.

Fennick unzipped the bag, "I hope you cleaned everything." He looked inside. "Good, good. No tracking on these things, right?"

Aiden scoffed, "C'mon."

Fennick started pulling the tools out of the bag.

"Was hoping we could hold on to those," I said.

"Bullshit," Fennick said. "I'm still pissed we had to burn that van. Something that clean costs a lot of money."

"Speaking of which," Aiden said.

Fennick froze. "Something go wrong with the van?"

"Van's good," Aiden said. "I meant the money. Our money."

"Don't rush me." Fennick took the tools and dropped them into a locking cabinet. He closed the door and came back to his desk, took two envelopes out of the top drawer and handed them to us. "Good work. You're my go-to guys, you know that."

"Then how about paying us like it," Aiden said.

"Very funny." Fennick came around his desk. Looked me over, "Turn your contacts off."

My lenses were high-end models, surgically implanted. They functioned better and did more than your standard removable lenses. But you couldn't use them discreetly. They emitted a slight ring of light around the edge of the pupil when they were on. It made people nervous, nobody liked being recorded; everyone thought they had something to hide.

I closed my eyes and looked left. Three seconds of that shut them off.

Fennick took Aiden's hat off his head and held it out.

"Hey," Aiden said.

"You look like a slob," Fennick shook the hat. "Devices."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"There's someone I want you to meet."

"Guy from the ride outside?" I asked.

"Yeah," Fennick said. "We're getting some new work . . . better work."

"Why do we have to meet them," Aiden said. "Just give us the jobs. You know I'm not good with people."

"Yeah, well cool all that shit. These guys are top-end players."

"Not rich guys I hope," Aiden said.

"What did I just say?"

"Whatever."

Fennick paused, holding the hat out. "Okay, no bullshit. Those legs you got were a test, to see what you could do. You did good. Now all you have to do is meet a man and then we all start making real money." He looked at Aiden. "That's what you wanted, yeah?"

"Shit, Yeah," Aiden said.

"Good. But you're in right now, or you're out. The man doesn't want to know you if you're out."

Aiden looked over to me. I nodded.

"Okay," Aiden said. "We're in."

"Good," Fennick said, "Now put your shit in the hat." He looked at me. "Keep your gear off."

I dropped my personal device in the hat and held up my hands. "No problem."

Aiden tossed his in.

Fennick dropped the hat on his desk, picked up the duffel and went to the door at the back of his office. "C'mon."

The door led to another, larger, office where Fennick conducted most of his "dark" business. Aiden followed Fennick in and I closed the door behind us.

An older guy had taken Fennick's favorite spot: an old leather club chair, bronze nailheads dulled with age. Guy wore a nice suit and didn't get up. Another guy stood right next to the door. I had to turn my head up to catch his eye; he didn't say hello.

The guy in the club chair smiled.

Fennick went and set the duffel on the desk, took one of the legs out and brought it over to the guy in the chair.

"Great pieces," Fennick said.

The guy barely looked, "Yes." He stared at me and Aiden. "Well done, gentlemen."

We stood there. I didn't recognize him. It took everything I had to resist turning my facial rec on. No one offered an introduction.

The guy laughed, "Relax. This is supposed to be a pleasant meeting. New business partners."

Fennick went back to his desk. "I told them you had some work for us." He laughed, "They're not the meet and greet types."

"What kind of work?" I asked. "I'm relaxed," Aiden said at the same time.

The guy in the chair eyed us both for a bit. "What do you know about neuro-enhancers?"

Bingo. Fennick's ability to hook up at this level surprised me. I guess my sources were right. "Thought those were years away," I said.

"Neuro-enhancers," Aiden said, "that's Singularity shit."

The guy smiled. "Yes, that's a way of putting it."

Neuro-enhancers had been in the making for years. People were grateful for the BCI advancements powering the prosthetics and lens/device connectivity—linking brainwaves and muscle impulses to hardware—but they didn't like to think about tinkering with the core of our intelligence. It became the robotic elephant in the room.

Boosting cognition and memory, turning our brains into something more powerful, more like a CPU, it scared the hell out of a lot of people. Aiden called it right: the singularity, the merging of human and machine. The next step in evolution had arrived and it was going to be expensive.

The guy shifted in the chair. "Not years away, though. The technology has been advancing, quietly. We expect there to be a backlash when the products begin to become available to the general public. Protests over cost, allegations of social discrimination, attempts at government regulation to be dealt with."

"Of course," Aiden said, "The rich are gonna be served first. Their kids

will get enhancements, push all the other kids out of the way for scholarships and jobs." He started to rant.

Fennick slammed the leg back down on the desk.

Aiden caught himself, put his hands up in an apologetic gesture. "Sorry. It frustrates me."

The guy smiled. "No, no, Mr. Wingate, no need for that." Guy knew our names. "It's one of the reasons we like you for this work. You understand the need to spread the technological wealth."

"They have prototypes?" I asked. This guy looked like corporate, probably wanted us to steal parts or plans from a rival. Getting out in front on this technology would kill half the competition.

"They're in beta testing."

Shit. People were walking around with brain upgrades.

"They work?" Aiden said.

"Yes," the guy said. "In all parts of the brain. Obviously, the main upgrades concern the frontal and temporal lobes: improvements to intelligence, concentration and memory; but the floodgates have been opened. Refinements to all aspects of the brain will soon be possible."

Aiden had nothing to say. That class gap would soon become a chasm.

"How much are they worth?" I asked.

The guy laughed. "There is a bidding system. The limited availability means they are beyond most people."

"Fucking robo-rich." Aiden said.

I had hoped to be in a better position when this happened. Somewhere closer to the classes that would survive the purge. And one was coming. When you had people upgrading their brains, the have-nots would become an unknown class. Those who couldn't keep up with this technology would be obsolete in a few generations. The poor would be eligible for only the most menial work and lowest salaries. And as for political representation? Shit, power followed the money.

I needed to check my device. This deal should be the one to get me closer to what I wanted.

"So, this is a live job." I said.

"Yes," the guy said. "We have a list of recipients."

"What about survivability?" I asked. "We're not brain surgeons."

"No," the guy laughed. "You would be responsible for the abduction only. You would bring the target to another team for removal."

Aiden bounced on his toes, barely containing himself.

"Can you do this for us?" the guy asked.

"Yes," Aiden said. "Screw 'em. We'll just bring you the heads."

"I don't think that will be necessary, Mr. Wingate." He paused. "I'll

make arrangements with Mr. Fennick. You will be provided with everything you need. Thank you for coming in."

We stood there moment, not catching the hint. Fennick broke the silence. "You guys are done. Take off. I'll see you tomorrow."

We picked up our devices and went back out to the van, catching another stare-down from the driver of the SUV. Aiden worked his hat back into place and managed to keep his mouth shut until we were pulling out of the garage.

"This is it," Aiden said. "The start of the war."

I turned my device and my lenses back on. A message popped up in my FOV. Despite being blind during the meet, my handlers had managed to identify the suit.

"There's gonna be millionaire geniuses, creating genetically modified and neuro-enhanced master-race kids. Then they'll figure it out, how to really enslave the rest of us. We'll be working in corporate prison camps."

"I don't know about that."

Aiden almost fell out of his seat to face me. "What! You think everyone is gonna play nice with this shit?"

I turned out onto a main avenue. "No. But no one ever has. None of this is new. Society changes with technology. You have to keep up, that's all."

Aiden's complexion darkened. "What are you talking about? You can't keep up. They won't let you. They price out the best education, price out the nicest neighborhoods and provide all the political funding so they get the most attention. People like you and me will never get a chance because we weren't born into it!"

"Then blame your parents for your position." I pulled onto a quiet side street.

Aiden's face contorted, he could only make sounds of disbelief.

I turned and hit him with the electrical-pulse gun.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

The work van didn't match the custom rig Fennick supplied for the last job, but it would do. Besides, no one important would be investigating this job.

Behind me, Aiden stirred.

I set the autodrive and went into the back.

Aiden tried to sit up, struggled against the straps holding him to the table, and looked to me, eyes wide. "What are you doing?"

"Keeping up." I took the bag of tools from the floor and started setting them out on the shelf.

Aiden recognized what they were for.

"You're working for the cops?"

"No. Better. NexGen Security."

"Fucking Fascist!"

"No Aiden, you're wrong. NexGen isn't holding you down, and they aren't trying to put you in a camp. They're protecting the technology that will change the world."

"What did they promise you? Money? They're lying!"

"Why would they? It's all very business-like at our level. I have skills and contacts that can protect the future. But not for something as common as money. Acceptance. A new identity, a new job, a place in the real world. All because I have the desire to be among them, to see their future.

"Desire and talent. That's what gets you in the door. Not demands and complaints."

I set the scissors down and picked up the bone saw.

Aiden began to panic, tears flowed. "C'mon, Eli. It's me. What are you doing? What about my kids?"

He always brought up his kids when he wanted to shut me down.

I didn't give him the Propofol before I started cutting. He screamed a lot and almost bled out before I could finish the delimbing, but I finished my work. It's that simple. Let all the Aidens go on shaking their fists and demanding their handouts. I won't miss being among them.

The van slowed outside a web-café. Lots of hackers and anti-establishment types hanging out there. NexGen wanted Fennick and the suit alive. But Aiden? A headache that got people riled up on the intercommunity pages? He would be a public example. A limbless torso spewing blood into the street to take the romance of rebellion out of the minds of those people.

I opened the back doors and pushed the wheeled table out. Aiden's body bounced off the table and rolled in the street. He screamed, still alive, but that wouldn't last much longer. Most of his blood had been sprayed over the interior of the van.

But, like I said, I didn't have to worry about cameras or DNA or blood evidence on this job. A benefit of my new position.

THANK FUCK IT'S FRIDAY

JOHN MCNEE

IT BEGINS THE moment the last bite of pumpkin pie touches the back of your throat.

The itch.

Instinctively, you know something is wrong. Yet you tell yourself it's just an itch on your arm. Not worth a second thought. You grab a beer and head through to the living room to watch the game. Plug in one of the headsets hanging by the stairs—the ones you got the deal on, almost exactly a year ago—and you could be watching it from any seat in the stadium, from the helmet of any player. You could swoop down onto the field like an eagle, right into the heart of the action. But your old man prefers the TV.

That's okay. It's a good TV, great picture, and amazing sound. You got it for a great price—when was it? Five years ago? Yes, almost exactly to the day. So you put up with it.

Like you put up with the itch. It's on your left forearm, near the elbow. At least it's not difficult to reach. You can scratch it, occasionally, discreetly, without anyone noticing. You don't even feel the need, at first. You can ignore it, if you want to. Focus on the game. It's just a little ticklish. Nothing at all, really.

By the time the game's over, it's grown a little more irritating—like an insect bite. That's probably what it is, you think. Some bug got you when you weren't paying attention. You keep telling yourself that same story, like you're trying to make it real, as the itch gets worse and worse and worse.

By midnight it's become a burn. Like scalding water, then like acid. Then like a blowtorch being held at your forearm, gradually inching closer, its flame burning brighter. There's no way you can sleep through this. No hope of ignoring it. Dowsing it in cold water brings no relief. Nether does ice. You try ointment and cooling gels, but nothing helps. Nothing soothes. The burn gets worse.

It gets so bad you start sweating, start moaning, start weeping. You lie on the floor, prone, your body immobilized, rendered so incapable from the extraordinary pain you don't think you'll ever be able to move again. You wait for someone to find you, to call an ambulance. And then, when the pain has become so unreal you think it might just kill you, you stand up—your body moving on its own—leave the house, and begin walking.

You walk, unsure of how you can be walking, no idea where you're going. Not that you care. All that matters is the pain. You can't see beyond it. Maybe you're delirious. Hallucinating. Maybe your brain is trying to fool you with dreams of walking towards the outskirts of town, while back home you're still twitching on the bathroom floor. Then you turn a corner and see someone else, alone, heading in the same direction. And another one. And you know, without having to ask, that they're like you.

They move the same way. The pain has them staggering like zombies. And they're all heading for the same place you are. You figure that out long before you come up over the crest of the hill and see your destination down below, its bare, black edifice lit up with purple floodlights.

The crowd around the barbed wire fence is three men deep—more at the locked gate, where a bottleneck has already half-formed. You join the throng and begin working your way towards the front. It's easy enough, at first. The people around you look as confused and frightened as you are. They look like normal, ordinary people. Lost, afraid, and in pain. But the closer you get to the gates, the more 'enhancements' you see.

The flash of light glancing off a nickel socket at someone's temple. LEDs twinkling in the skin on the back of a hand. The polished edge of a molded input panel poking out from a shirt collar. These must be wealthy folk to be sporting such expensive modifications. The residents of detached villas in the hills or high-rise apartments. Social media influencers and professional playboys. The kind of people with a lot of money in the bank and too much time on their hands. Most commonly spotted, if at all, in trendy coffee bars, getting their pictures taken at movie premieres, or delivering keynote speeches.

But there are others. Right up at the fence. People with bodies almost encased in metal. Cables winding like shoelaces through knotted flesh. Second-hand receptors welded to their scalps. Shards from broken electrical interfaces protruding through holes in their coats. Alters, they call them. Not trend-setters, these ones. They share an addiction. A compulsion to technologically modify themselves in any way they can, however they can afford it. Broken, stolen, built on the street, they will improvise ways to enhance their flesh. Slaves to the constant need to plug something new into their skin, even if they have to force it. The worst afflicted look like walking tanks. Wherever possible, skin, muscle and bone

has been traded for prosthetics. Only that which is utterly essential remains—organs trapped within rusting exoskeletons.

You wonder what the hell they're all doing here, sweating, shaking and screaming as they claw at the chain-link fence. You wonder what you're doing here. Then a blast of sound makes you think you're about to find out.

Hammering synths erupt from unseen speakers. Strobe lights flash. Lasers dissect the night sky. At the front of the building, a sign spanning its full length, thousands upon thousands of bulbs, begins to blink into life, one column at a time.

A voice rises above the synths. "Ladies and gentlemen, are you ready?"

The crowd roars in ascension. You can't help but join in.

"ARE. YOU. READY?"

The sound. The pain. The madness of it all. For a moment you're not entirely sure any of this is real. Then there's a sound like cannon fire. A blaze of color as the entire sign lights up:

HONEST HOMBRE ELECTRONICS

No, you think. *It can't be*. You know this place. You've seen it a million times from the freeway, looming over the strip malls and used car lots. *The fucking discount warehouse*.

"THREE," the voice says. "TWO."

Your whole body tenses.

"ONE."

That's when you realize you're probably not going to survive this.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the Honest Hombre's Black Friday sale is now ON!"

The gates click open. You don't have to move a limb. You're carried along in the crowd, shoulder to shoulder with madmen, snarling behind metal masks.

As they sprint across the concrete loading bay to reach the entrance, they begin to spread out and you stumble, nearly falling. It would be certain death if you did, trampled beneath the boots of the dozens riding your heels. Less than a second after you think it, another confirms it. A woman to your left loses her footing and goes down. You catch sight of her for just a moment as she rolls beneath the feet of the crowd. You don't quite see what happens to her. But you hear the *crunch*.

You manage to stay on your feet, lift your head up, and keep running, through the sliding doors and into the store. On the inside, the place looks even bigger than you imagined, laid out like a wholesale depot, with dozens of rows of bright yellow, metal shelves stretching up, 30 feet high. Above that, between the soft blue low-energy lights and the ceiling, is some kind

of catwalk. A steel gantry snaking from one end of the store to the other, with a raised platform jutting out over your heads. It looks like there's someone up there.

You only see it for a second. You don't have time to stare. The chaos on the floor demands your attention, with another bottleneck forming as people charge through the security terminals. Such kiosks are common in automated retail outlets like this one, preventing customers from entering with weapons, restricted goods, or items that could be used to tamper with the electric stock. However, they are designed for a single entrance at a time. Now, when three, four or five people rush them all at once, they get stuck. And with the mob pouring in behind you, you can't afford to stop. Neither can anyone else. As you approach the terminals, still running at top speed, you look for one that's clear—but they're all clogged. You would be crushed if you got stuck, suffocating to death in the darkness as body after body piled in behind you. But you don't have a choice.

Then, salvation. On your right, up ahead, you see one of the alters—a big one—standing at the entrance to a blocked terminal. You see him draw back his metal-sheathed arm, the lights along its oily black surface blinking from red to green as it charges up. Then he punches into the throng.

There's a sound, like the wet pop of a water balloon, and blood drenches the alter and the faces of the people behind him. You can see it burst from the other end of the terminal in a vibrant plume – an explosion of grime and gristle. When he pulls his arm out, he pulls the blockage out with it. It's a man. He grips him by the exposed spinal cord, his fist enclosed around a length of vertebrae curling out from a ragged wound between the shoulder blades. With a heave, he wrenches the dead man free of the entrance and tosses him. The corpse flies over your head, splashing blood across your face, and smacks onto the floor behind you, tripping others, who fall and are crushed in their turn, beneath the advancing hoard.

With the terminal unclogged, the flow of people resumes and you hurry in—following just a few bodies behind the blood-soaked alter—and out.

Now you're on the shop floor. One of the first. With most of the frenzied crowd, in their dozens or hundreds still on the other side of the barriers. You try not to slip on the blood and entrails staining the linoleum as you hurry away from the terminals, find an empty aisle, and duck down, trying to catch your breath.

What are you doing here? It's all been such a blur. It doesn't feel real. You got caught up in the momentum of the crowd. Leaving it behind feels like the comedown from a drug high. You're cold, shaking and confused. Adrenaline masked the pain for the last few minutes, but you begin to feel its acid burn now, back with a vengeance.

What are you doing? Why are you here?

"I know what you're thinking." The voice comes from behind you. Cold, distilled through electricity, but somehow smiling. "I know what you're all thinking." You turn to meet a TV screen, about the size of a paperback book—one of hundreds lining the shelves, all displaying the same image. The man whose face fills the screen has long, black hair hanging in greasy strands down to his shoulders. His skin, where visible, is dark and dirty, but almost entirely concealed beneath thin, overlapping strips of titanium. His eyes, in the moment you first see him, are hidden by the hair, but as he opens his mouth to speak once again, he raises his head to reveal two whirring orbs of neon red. "Thank fuck it's Friday. Am I right?"

From behind you comes a massive roar of rage and frustration, followed by an almighty crash. You turn in time to witness the carnage as one of the overloaded security terminals explodes, scattering bodies and broken metal in a jagged flash of purple fire. It only takes a second for the smoking, blood-drenched crater to be overrun by the howling crowds, desperate to reach the shelves.

You turn once more and run, sprinting on legs you can no longer feel.

The face grinning out of the screens is a constant in your peripheral vision. "Bienvenido and welcome back to all our loyal customers who I know have been suffering for days and weeks with the agony of anticipation. And a friendly hello to everyone who is joining us today for the very first time. There certainly are a lot of you this year. I hope your shopping experience today is more than satisfactory. If you're so inclined, feel free to visit the Honest Hombre automated juice bar and arcade, between aisles 49 and 50. And please don't forget to share your experience on social media."

You reach the end of the aisle and go right, heading away from the chaos behind you—but the very instant you change direction, pain erupts through your arm like nothing you've felt before. You collapse to your knees, winded by the shock. For several seconds, you don't dare move at all.

"We have some incredible deals today, folks. Truly unbelievable. Even on a day like today, you will not find deals like these anywhere else, on any other street, in any other store. I'm not kidding."

You can feel a vibration in the floor. The tremor of the approaching stampede. You dare to turn your head and see the oncoming tidal wave, the mad and harrowed onslaught of people barreling down the aisle towards you.

"I don't exaggerate."

You will be crushed.

"And I never lie."

Still, you cannot move.

"Why would I lie?" On screen, the grinning man winks a phosphorescent eye. Somewhere, at the back of your mind, slow-firing synapses make the connection. You remember the ad you used to see on TV, decades ago. He looked different then, but it's the same grin. The same wink.

Oh yeah, you think. *The Honest Hombre.*

Which could be the very last thing to run through your mind before being trampled to death.

But then—

The lights go out.

And not just the lights. Every enhanced or altered soul in the store suddenly stops. The giant alters leading the stampede towards you, on piston-driven, iron-plated legs, immediately freeze. The enhanced brethren behind them, propelled by advanced hydraulics hidden just beneath the skin, drop to their knees. The rest, the unspoilt, like you, keep coming. And coming, and coming. The clang and clatter of armored appendages in collision gives way to a chorus of heavy thuds as innumerable fast-moving bodies pummel the sudden, solid wall of alters blocking their path. The sound, like a flock of fast-moving birds meeting a panel of reinforced cement they didn't know was there, quickly becomes a cacophony of wet blasts as the mindless pressure of the flock forces the wounded forward. Flesh is impaled, bones break, bodies are burst and ground down against metal.

The stampede of crazed shoppers – firmly, violently halted – fails to reach you, but their pooled blood, carrying a momentum of its own, oozes in your direction, a slow and silently expanding pool. You can see it by the light from the TV screens. In the whole store, it appears that the screens are the only electrics that are still working.

"System crash," the Honest Hombre announces, with a sigh. His eyes are black. His smile is gone, along with the affected, game-show-host joviality in his voice. He sounds almost human. "It happens when too many people come into the store at once. Too many processing units trying to log onto the local network at the same time. It'll reboot in a couple of seconds."

The pool of blood continues its progress towards you. The pained cries of the wounded and dying sound so strange to your ears. Too many for you to make sense of.

"Listen to your body," the Honest Hombre continues. "The pain is a program. It will lead you to whatever you need. When you find it, get the fuck out. That's all I can tell you." He sighs again. "Christ."

You rise, slowly, to your feet. You step back, exiting the aisle in the

opposite direction. The pain feels different, somehow. Not better, but not crippling. The pain wants you to go this way.

"Jesus Christ," the Honest Hombre moans. "I am *so* fucking—"

The lights blink back on.

"Excited to share with you the tremendous deals on offer in store today!"

The alters leap immediately into life. The ones lined up at the head of the stampede, that in stasis had formed a killing wall to block its progress, move like they had never stopped—like a video of a race unpaused. The effect is like the breaking of a dam as they sprint forward, splashing through the blood, disgorging a soup of mangled and broken bodies. Those that can, attempt to crawl their way out. They are in pain, yes, but one pain in particular takes priority.

You can appreciate how they feel. Your own pain *must* end. You must scratch the itch, whatever it takes.

"The Manibus XK4 puts professional-level expertise and dexterity at your fingertips—literally! Prepare meals with all the skill and speed of a Michelin-star chef. Play piano with the confidence of the world's greatest musicians. Complete all manner of household chores and complex tasks without the need to pay the slightest attention to what your hands are doing. All this is possible with the Manibus XK4, programmed with a muscle memory database of 400 experts in their field, and access to another 4,000 on the SeikaPlus network. The Manibus XK4's patented nanotech alloy bonds seamlessly with the bones, muscles and tendons of your own hands, ensuring that whatever you need your fingers to do, they already know how to do it. And yes, before you ask, it's pretty useful in the bedroom too. The Manibus XK4 normally retails for $4.5million per pair, but for today and today only we're offering you the chance to claim a single unit for just $495,000 plus tax. A full list of payment plans can be accessed at our automated help desks."

You wonder if that's what you need. You could never dream of affording it, but fuck the cost. You can worry about that later, once the pain is gone.

"The Manibus XK4 can be found with other enhancements in the Manibus range in aisle 17," the Honest Hombre says. "Please remember this is a one-time offer so do hurry to grab yours. Stock is *extremely* limited."

FUCK!

You look around and discover you're on aisle 28, but heading in the right direction. You pick up the pace, hurrying past home entertainment systems, cleaning bots, data storage solutions, and much more, to reach the biomechanical enhancements, starting on aisle 20 with oculars.

"Change the way you see the world with Aspectu. Leading the way in the category of bionic vision, Aspectu offers far more than optimal sight. Why settle for anything less than visual splendor when, with Aspectu's beautification filters, wherever you are, the world is beautiful? Customize your filters through the community portal to ensure you need never trouble your eyes with ugliness again. The world is what you see, so make yours perfect."

There are five people fighting in the aisle. Aspectu is just one system among dozens, but it's the only one anyone seems to care about. You see the box in the hands of a stout, bald, bearded man in a dressing gown and tennis shoes. He is trying to free himself from the clutches of others as desperate for new eyes as he is. There is blood all around his ear from where it has been bitten.

You keep moving, but not before witnessing the moment a heavyset woman, perhaps a mother, with no enhancements you can see, grabs the man by the ankles and pulls his legs out from under him. His bald head hits the floor with a crack, but not hard enough for her. She stamps on the back of his neck and snatches the box as he begins to convulse.

Aisle 19, aisle 18, aisle 17. Manibus. The entire aisle is all Manibus products—different lines, different models, accessories and parts. You hunt for the XK4 with your head bowed, trying to focus in on the ambiguous twinges of pain in your arm for guidance. When you glance up and see the big, flashing 'BLACK FRIDAY DEAL' sign, you realize you should have been using your God-given eyes all along. One box sits on the shelf. The last of the stock.

You pick it up and the muscles in your arm sing.

Then someone barrels into you, takes the box, and knocks you to the floor. You hit your head hard, but the pain is nothing compared to the shriek in your arm. You see the perpetrator—a young man, maybe not even 20 years old, slim and athletic. He glances back over his shoulder, grinning when he sees you, knowing his salvation is in his hands. You scramble up onto your feet and give chase, knowing there's no way you can ever catch him.

You don't have to.

He's still looking behind him, grinning at you, as he reaches the end of the aisle and runs right into the path of a huge, hulking alter. They collide and the alter makes a grab for the box. His face, partly hidden by the broken half of a silver skull-shaped mask, is covered in blood. The rest of him is thick, black metal, gnarled flesh and whipping cables. You recognize him. The alter from the security terminal, who ripped the man's spine out of his body and tossed him like an empty beer can.

The boy with the box punches him in the jaw in a bid to break free. The alter sneers and pulls his fist back for a punch of his own. The lights on his

arm blink from red to green, powering up. The blow, when it lands, pulps the boy's head and sends his body careering backwards through the air. The box flies out of his hands, bounces off the floor, and lands at your feet.

You grab it, turn and flee. The alter gives chase.

"Are you tired of having two left feet? Wish you cut a rug like Fred Astaire? Wouldn't it be great to run twice as fast, for twice as long, without feeling weakened or out of breath? Or maybe you'd just like a little extra zip in your step. With the Celeritas dermal graft, you'll win every race you ever run."

Somehow you get away. You make it to aisle 16, where the desperate competition to claim a set of self-defense enhancements has erupted into all-out war, where everyone appears to be on the offensive. You lose the alter in the crowd and head to the back of the store, following the signs overhead, pointing to home hardware.

You see him up there, as you make your way, up on the catwalk, surveying his domain, speaking into the wired camera that relays his monologues to the screens below.

"Everyone would love to be a sparkling conversationalist, but we can't all be Oscar Wilde. Or can we? With the new Oratio Dynamic enhancement, never again will you be short of something witty or intelligent to say at parties."

As you near the wall of screwdrivers, saws, and pliers, you pass others who've had the same idea. The floor is awash with blood leaking from wounds they've inflicted on themselves. One woman kneels before a pile of box-cutters she's pulled down from the shelf. She's used one in her mouth, slicing open her gums, and is now forcing what looks like strands of copper wire into her wounded red flesh.

That wire, you imagine, is probably worth $50 million.

Though she sobs and moans from the agony she's putting herself through, she doesn't stop.

You can appreciate her position as you try to settle your stomach and pick up a box-cutter of your own.

"At Honest Hombre, we recommend all installations are carried out by trained professionals, to limit the risk of injury, infection or death. However, in the interests of employee safety, no installation technicians are in the store today."

You find a relatively quiet spot in the microwave aisle. No one has yet found a marketable avenue for a biomechanical microwave, but you don't doubt it could happen one day. You sit down on the floor and unpack the Manibus XK4. It doesn't look like much. A long, thin strip of metal cable, about the length of your forearm, with five smaller wires—nearly as delicate as silver hairs—hanging down at one end.

Your arm throbs.

You swallow, grit your teeth and pick up the box-cutter. You make an incision at your elbow, at the white-hot epicenter of your pain. Then you drag the blade down, slicing as deep as it will go, to make a wound stretching all the way to your wrist. You pick up the Manibus XK4 and push it into the gash. It's hard to make it do what you want. There's so much blood and your fingers can only prod, they can't guide it in with precision. So you take up the box-cutter again and stab at the cable, pushing it in with the blade, pushing it down, into your flesh. You shake and scream and weep as you do this, just like the woman.

And then it's done.

And though blood pours from your arm, you feel nauseous and dizzy, it is nothing compared to the pain you felt when you entered the store. You are wounded, and yet you are healed.

You rise shakily to your feet and stumble in the direction of the exit, holding your arm above your head, letting the blood coagulate. You make it as far as the end of the aisle, when the alter grabs you by the neck and throws you to the floor.

He found you. Of course he did. He let his own pain lead the way.

He crouches down on top of you. He leaks blood, oil and coolant from multiple battle scars. It soaks into your clothes. You try to fight him, but the blows you land with your good arm are pathetic swats. He ignores them and grabs your other arm. Blood sprays from where he squeezes your wound. You scream and beg for mercy, but his half-skull face is a vision of pure madness.

He examines your arm, quickly figuring out that the Manibus XK4 is already buried in your flesh. If he wants it, he will have to amputate. He pulls your arm up, holding it straight, then draws his other fist back. The lights on his arm blink from red to green, powering up. You plead for him not to do it.

And the lights go out. Network overload.

"Progress is a disease," the Honest Hombre says. Once again, in the darkness of the blackout, the TV screens are all that work.

The alter is frozen, halfway towards punching your arm out of its socket. All of his own lights are out. His armored limbs are locked in place. Every electronic wire and gear beneath the skin has ceased operation, rendering him inert. His flesh still twitches, uselessly, in its metal encasement. His eye rolls down towards you. There is fear in it.

"The best customer you can ask for isn't someone who wants your product. It's someone who *needs* it. Today, that's the only kind of customer I have. That's progress. You could even call it evolution."

You don't have much time. Your wrist is still clamped in his fist. Even if you could get it free, he'll catch and kill you within seconds of the network

rebooting. You have to act now. Decisively. You search for a weakness, some way to hurt him. You see the lengths of cable snaking out of his chest and know they must connect to his internal organs somehow.

The alter's lips tremble. He tries to speak, but the enhancements in his mouth and jaw won't let him. His eye makes an impassioned plea for mercy. You gather up the cables in your fist and pull hard.

It takes some doing. You have to throw all your weight into it, all your strength, but you manage to wrench them out of his body. They went deeper than you thought. Tugging out the lengths of blood-slick tubing is like pulling roots from the earth. Whatever they are attached to, up in his chest, it's a strong anchor and you face heavy resistance. But then something within him tears, the cables go slack and the blood gushing from his wounds turns black.

"I shouldn't blame myself. After all, it's the machines that handle marketing now. Algorithms determine stock numbers and sales plans. The network targets potential customers. Supply and demand. It's all linked. It's all automated. When I speak, it's not even me. It's the network. It's not me. But I still feel guilty as hell."

The alter doesn't attack when the store's lights come back on. His own green LEDs flash, again, a sign that his own system is back on the network. But his heart and brain are dead.

You wriggle your way out of his clutches and half-stagger, half-crawl to the automated checkout. You slide your wounded arm into the scanner and type your payment information into the terminal, selecting the only plan your credit rating allows. You will have to sell some belongings to make the first month's installment, you think. Those TV headsets can go, for a start.

Activation is immediate. You can feel the silver threads of the Manibus XK4 moving beneath your skin, curling around your tendons. It feels cold.

No.

It feels *good*.

You're exhausted, embattled and traumatized. You don't know if you'll ever comprehend what happened here today. You don't think you want to. You only want to get home, patch yourself up, pour yourself a drink and sleep for a month, but as you limp through the barriers towards the exit doors, you can't help but take a look back, over your shoulder, at the carnage.

The sale is still in full swing. Fresh customers are pouring in through the entrance—new recruits heading in to battle, motivated by the same pain, the same *need* to fight to the death over the last overpriced toy on the shelf.

When you look up, you lock eyes with the man on the catwalk. The Honest Hombre waves to you. "Thanks for stopping by and please do come again," he says. "Same time next year."

THE FATE YOU ARE

LUCIANO MARANO

IT HAD BEEN a sweet dream. But now the buzzer was shrieking, ripping Sandusky back to reality. It was time to go to work. She hefted her aching body up from the ratty leather sofa, the sole soft surface amid the tile and metal of the Manor's workshop, and shuffled to the wall to answer the intercom's summons.

"Room three, seventh floor. It's bad."

Kilmer's voice rubbed against her brain like a sandpaper massage. She winced, wiping the crusty remains of sleep from her eyes with the back of her hand. Kilmer being on duty meant it was a weekday, as he was a straight nine-to-fiver. She'd been sure it was Saturday. Then again, it didn't really matter. Each day was like the last here on the island.

"On my way," Sandusky said.

She took her coveralls from the nearby hook and stepped into them, making a mental note to change her shorts and shower—sooner rather than later. Christ, she didn't even know what day it was, let alone when she'd last done that. She didn't know where her boots where either, but found them eventually, hiding beneath the command center console like they also didn't want to go to work.

How long had she been asleep? It was easy to lose track of time at the Manor, especially down in the cool blue-green glow of the workshop. She had a room in the staff dorms one floor up, but was hardly ever there. The rhythmic blinking of the status screens, the cleanliness and meticulous order of the workshop, made the things she did here easier, almost banal. At least she sometimes felt that way.

It's bad.

If Kilmer thought so, it must be nasty. The man was stoic to the point of seeming medicated. Maybe he is, Sandusky thought. She certainly wasn't one to judge. Do what you have to, man. One day at a time and all that.

She tossed the blanket over the small, still form she'd left lying on the

couch. She did not look at the photographs on the wall, did not meet the many frozen gazes of smiling children. Models, she corrected herself. The Cronus Corp handbook strongly suggested techs think of them as models instead of victims or actual children. The handbook was full of friendly advice like that.

Stuffing her greasy hair under a Cronus Corp baseball cap (company pride at its cheapest), Sandusky grabbed the field kit. Sparing a passing glance at the unit vitals display, pulsing digital lines like heart rate monitors on the command center's central screen, she reluctantly made for the elevator. There were currently 27 active units in rotation. Now, only 26 lines pulsed. One, Unit 16, was flat and silent. Beside it, a small light glowed green in the darkened workshop. Technically identified in the Cronus Corp system manual as Luminous Indicator AA7-G3, most techs just called it the Go Light.

Sandusky thought of it as the Ghost Light.

⁜ ⁜ ⁜

She scanned her badge and rode the antigravity lift up through two floors of staff sleeping quarters and facilities into the Manor proper, feeling like a diver surfacing after a particularly deep excursion, slowly readjusting to the pressure. Except here it was the opposite of the surrounding ocean—the higher you went, the more intense the pressure became.

Stepping into the seventh floor hallway, nondescript carpet and the lighting fixtures of a bland hotel greeting her in dull silence, she felt the familiar tension settle into her back and shoulders. The buzz of her usual headache returned, too. It was getting harder to come up from the workshop, harder to talk to real people. Not a good sign, as she still had 62 days (but who was counting, right?) before she was due to board a transport and begin her next leave period on the mainland.

Maybe this time I just won't come back, she thought for the billionth time. I'll just walk away and keep on walking.

It was a fantasy as familiar and comforting to her now as the blinking screens in the workshop—her own heartbeat even, and almost as automatic. But Sandusky knew she was just as much a prisoner here as the residents. Though she could technically quit any time she wanted, and did get four mainland passes a year, in another way she was even worse off than the men housed here: Her sentence was entirely self-imposed.

Kilmer stood outside the open door of room three, leaning against the wall. Even stooped, he was tall. His budding gut strained against a white company polo tucked, as ever, into tan chinos. Sandusky always thought he looked like a particularly strict high school vice principal, one who was also the football coach. A formerly athletic disciplinarian grown cynical as his prime passed.

Still, she kind of liked him. Supposedly Kilmer had been a parole officer someplace back in the real world before Cronus poached him. Whatever the company had promised, Sandusky hoped they'd delivered. It was possible. They had for her, after all. And Kilmer wasn't a bad guy, just a product of his occupation. A victim of the things he'd seen. Like herself.

He was holding a soda can, which she reached out and snatched. Gulping a fizzy mouthful past unbrushed teeth, she gagged.

"What is this crap?"

"Seltzer," Kilmer said. "Doc says I get one cola a day, and I already had two."

"This tastes like TV static."

"I know." He grabbed back the can. "You look and smell like shit. When was the last time you took a bath?"

"What day is it?"

"Tuesday."

Jesus, had she actually thought it was Saturday? *You're losing it, girl*, Sandusky thought. Not for the first time.

"Might be due," she admitted.

A wailing sob erupted from inside of room three. They were both silent for a long moment. Sandusky's mind fled back to the comfort of the workshop, to the couch and what she'd left there. She didn't know where Kilmer's went and didn't ask.

"You need a break," he said finally, swirling the bubbly drink disdainfully. "That new relief tech quit already?"

"They got a short shelf life," she said. "They don't call it Cronus *Whore* for nothing, you know? Gets harder and harder to respect yourself in the morning."

"Cronus was a Titan," Kilmer spoke quietly, almost absently. His watery brown eyes were locked on the closed door of the unit on the opposite side of the hall.

"A what?"

"A Titan, from Greek mythology," Kilmer sipped his seltzer, made a face. "My kid's doing a report on that shit for school. Titans were like the children of the ancient gods Uranus and Gaia . She said Cronus offed his old man and took over Mount Olympus. Eventually he was offed by his own son and imprisoned in something like the Greek version of hell for Gods. It had some special name."

"Fitting," Sandusky said.

"More than you think," Kilmer smirked. "My kid says Cronus not only killed his old man, but he castrated him too. With a scythe. You believe that? Eighth fucking grade and she's telling me about castration. I guess somebody at corporate branding picked the wrong Greek name."

A fresh moan came from inside the room. Sandusky tapped the company logo on her hat. “I think they knew exactly what they were doing.”

She moved to enter, but Kilmer put a meaty hand on her shoulder.

“It’s ugly,” he said. “The thing’s in rough shape.”

“Who’s the resident?”

“Licalsi. I knew he was a bad bet.”

Jeremy Licalsi. Sandusky made it a point to stay ignorant of the resident’s particulars as much as possible, but even she knew the story behind that name. He was one of the more infamous convicts—the handbook suggested you call them residents—to come through during her time at the Manor. The press called it Pervert Palace, and rightly so, and Licalsi was king of the deviants. Though there’d been more than a few winners who’d laid their head here over the years, he was something special even by Manor standards.

Sandusky remembered the man’s arrival, suppressed a shudder. She had introduced him to his companion unit, same as all the others, explained the rules and how it worked. But the whole time she’d been distracted by the way his dark eyes slid over the A.I., seeing his pointy little tongue darting out over his too-red lips. Like he was wearing lipstick, she’d thought. He gave her creeps, which was certainly no easy task. And, for the first time, she’d been reluctant to leave the kid.

But I did, she thought. I always do. It’s my job. And now he’s dead.

No, Sandusky told herself. *It* is not dead. *It* was never alive. Get a fucking grip.

“You all right?” Kilmer was eyeing her intently, no doubt weighing whether he should call the corporate early intervention line and report the smelly, distant tech. See something, say something: It was a central company command and the main focus of their mandatory periodic suicide prevention seminars.

Sandusky ran the checklist in her mind. Talking about feeling trapped? Well, she hadn’t actually said that was how she felt, not out loud anyway. But Kilmer was no dummy. Acting anxious, agitated, or reckless? Sure, but who wasn’t out here? Sleeping too little or too much? Check, that one she conceded. How about avoiding contact or withdrawing? Shit, big-time check there.

Yes, Kilmer wouldn’t be out of line to make a call about her, even Sandusky had to admit it. He was seriously considering it too, she could tell by his eyes. And he didn’t even know about the 28th unit, the one she kept down in the workshop. Nobody did. Well, almost nobody.

Kilmer had made no call about her predecessor, and she knew he still hated himself for that. But things were different now. These days all the windows above the first floor were sealed, not just the resident units. Of

course, if one wanted out for good in a hurry and were so inclined, there was always a way. But for her at least that wasn't an option. Not yet.

I'm fine, Sandusky thought. Also not for the first time.

"I'm fine," she said, and found that actually saying it aloud reaffirmed the claim. She moved forward, almost certain.

Then, she saw the kid.

⁜⁜⁜

Sandusky tried to lose herself in quantification, let her engineering training take over, the way an ER doctor might surrender to habit and remain calm amidst exposed bone and spurting blood. The kid had no blood, of course. And though its bones were absolutely accurate in their shape, the synthetic material was (deliberately) not white. Still, it was just what Kilmer had promised: Ugly; a bad one, indeed.

In his panic Licalsi had apparently been convinced he could dispose of the evidence of his relapse if only it were in smaller pieces. The residents were allowed no sharp objects, the windows were shatterproof glass and even the dining utensils were made of weak, thin plastic. So he'd made do as best he could with the shards of a lightbulb taken from the reading lamp on his bedside table. He'd been less than successful, and a quick once-over showed Sandusky he'd shredded his own hands nearly as badly as he had the kid. Nearly.

Not that she cared. She wasn't here for him. Sandusky wasn't a doctor.

Licalsi sat on the floor, rocking in the corner, cradling his savaged hands, stringy ribbons of flesh dangling and dripping. He moaned again as she came in, eyes moving from her to Kilmer's men, two jackbooted bullies, one on either side of him, looking stoic as their supervisor out in the hall. Sandusky spared the resident less than a moment before turning her full attention to the reason she was here—here in this room, here on this island, here at this point in her life. She tried not to think of how many hours she'd put into the boy or the awful work ahead. His wide blue eyes stared at her, sad and scared. He blinked.

"Aunt Grace? He hurt me."

His voice was robotic, full of static. Not at all the slightly Southie drawl she'd so carefully programed. Licalsi was from Boston, and Sandusky had ignored no detail in his unit's construction. That was the whole point.

She was surprised the vocal output functioned at all, with the boy's head practically severed like it was. The wound in his thin white neck was like the gaping chasm a lumberjack would cut into a tree trunk, with just enough left intact to keep it from toppling completely.

His arms were twisted, having been pulled backward so hard they were dramatically out of joint. He was naked and there were . . . pieces missing.

Many floors below, amid the congregation of photos on the workshop

wall, were pictures of the four smiling boys she'd amalgamated to create the not-quite-living one on the floor. The four boys Licalsi had raped. She saw them clearly in her mind as she bent to examine Devin more closely.

"Please help," he said. "It hurts."

It didn't, not really. The A.I. units had no pain receptors. But Sandusky had a moment of doubt as she watched those big blue eyes blink again, more slowly this time, as if he were already powering down. Her code had been excellent. Even she almost forgot what he was.

"It's OK, Devin," she said. "I'm here now."

From the corner, voice hitching, Licalsi croaked, "I'm so, so sorry. I couldn't help it. I—"

"Shut up," said a security man. "You just stay quiet and sit still until the doc gets here."

"Please," Licalsi said. "I didn't mean to. I couldn't help it."

Something struck Licalsi hard—Sandusky was not looking and could not say what, but guessed it had probably been a boot—and he cried out.

"He hurt me," Devin said. "You said he was my friend, Aunt Grace. You promised."

Sandusky dug into her bag for the remote, plugged it into the jack in Devin's left ear.

"I'm sorry, honey."

She entered the override code, turned him off.

Taking a collection bag from the kit, she unfolded it and began putting the pieces of Devin—that is, pieces of the unit—inside. Only afterward did she look again at Licalsi. Big fat tears streamed down his face as he looked back at her. Desperately. Hopelessly. They both knew where he was going now, what happened next. She did not begrudge him his desolation. It was all he had left.

Licalsi's Manor collar was already red, indicating his resident status had been changed. A red collar was as good as a noose. He was on the way out. First, for a stop at the clinic for a quickie castration, and then back to the overcrowded prison hell where he belonged. It was a fate worse than death for a Manor dropout, returning to the joint.

How he'd even managed to get selected for the program was a mystery to Sandusky. The Manor specialized in the treatment—the *attempted* treatment, at least—of decidedly less violent sex offenders.

Someone at corporate's getting greedy, Sandusky thought. Or, maybe it was a PR stunt, taking on such a controversial case. She made a mental note to linger on the details in her after action report when she'd finished examining the damage done to Dev— to *the unit*. When she was done examining the unit. Maybe it would discourage that kind of ambition. The usual cases were bad enough.

"It's not fair," Licalsi wheezed. "It's just not. It's too much. The temptation, nobody could stand it."

This time, Sandusky saw the boot find his ribs.

"Be civil, boys." Kilmer stood in the doorway, balled fists on his hips. "Transport's on the way and he'll be the state's problem again in no time. Be civil."

Licalsi screamed, "Please! Please don't send me back! Just one more chance, I'm so sorry! I couldn't help it! I couldn't!"

"Enough," Kilmer's voice was low and calm, but it silenced the pedophile immediately. "You knew the deal when you signed up. You knew the rules. And this," he looked at the bag in Sandusky's hand, "well, it doesn't exactly leave much to interpretation."

The room was silent, save for a bit of whimpering from the man in the corner.

"Why?" Sandusky didn't realize it had been she who spoke until the men's eyes turned in unison. "Why did you even petition to be here if you couldn't stop?" her voice was angry, hoarse. "Why did you do that to him?"

Licalsi sniffed, glared at her. "Why did you even make him? Put a bottle before a drunk, how long you think he'll last? Watching him," his eyes moved to the bag and a sad, tired smile slithered across his face, "seeing him every day? Knowing he was sleeping in the next room? I just couldn't . . . "

"I said that's enough," Kilmer interrupted. "Sandusky, you got what you need?"

She nodded and left quickly, without looking back. The door of the room across the hall was open a crack now, and a cute little Japanese girl in a polka dot dress waved as she passed.

"Hi, Auntie Grace."

Sandusky forced a smile, "Hi yourself, Amiko."

"What's in the bag, Auntie?"

From inside, somewhere behind the girl, a man's voice called, "I said close the door. It's bed time."

"Nothing, honey," Sandusky said. "Go on inside."

Amiko waved again, smiling to show two gaps where front teeth would never come in. Sandusky remembered designing that smile. Gary, Amiko's resident, had very particular tastes. She'd seen the photos.

Amiko would never get grownup teeth, and she'd never lose any others. She'd never go to school. She'd have no friends and she'd have only as many birthdays as her resident would spend years at the Manor—or at least as many as she did before he relapsed. Most of them did eventually.

And then, Sandusky thought, I'll shut her down too. I'll shut her down and carry her back to the workshop in a bag, just like I'm taking out the garbage.

Licalsi is right, she mused bitterly. It's not fair. But not fair to whom? Sandusky could not decide.

The lift took an eternity to pressurize, open and accept her.

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Back in the workshop, she left the bag on the table and took a very long, very hot shower. Tomorrow she would download and watch the unit's video recordings. Tomorrow she'd endure the spectacle of Devin's time with *Uncle Jeremy*. The supervised activities, therapy sessions, what they did when left alone, and the brutal culmination of their days together. She'd watch and she'd annotate, she'd file her report. Business as usual.

Kilmer would file one too, one much more comprehensive than security's typical daily performance logs. But it was she who would examine the unit itself, the miserable pseudo autopsy that was, by far, the worst part of a job full of worst parts.

But all that was for tomorrow, Sandusky thought. Tonight, she showered and stepped into clean clothes, padded barefoot across the cool metal floor of the workshop to retrieve the remote from the bag and her hidden bottle from a supply locker. An array of eyes—blue, green, brown; every shade imaginable—watched from the shelves inside as she quickly downed two large gulps of vodka.

Why do I keep it in that locker? Sandusky wondered for not even close to the first time, staring back at the carefully arranged eyes. It was something to tell the shrink, that was for sure. She'd almost certainly have the chance to do so, too. Probably quite soon, given the way Kilmer was eyeing her tonight. She didn't care. Corporate would never fire her. They would never find a tech as qualified who was willing to work for less, let alone one willing to actually live out here and be on call. This place was an island the way the staff lounge vending machine was a restaurant. A barren shard of rock jutting up from unforgiving currents of icy water, populated by monsters and losers—and victims; lots of victims.

Then, there was the work itself. All those eyes looking up at you. Many techs had come, none had stayed. None but Grace Sandusky.

You said he was my friend, Aunt Grace. You promised.

In the corner, the large 3D printers sat quietly awaiting her next input, waiting to build another child slated for sacrifice. Maybe, Sandusky thought, the haters were a little hard on God. Given the chance, humans had proved themselves no more responsible for their own creations. She took another pull on the bottle and was stowing it beneath the blank stares of the faceless eyes when a throat was gruffly cleared behind her. Kilmer strode over and snatched it, as she had his soda, and helped himself to a large mouthful. He sighed.

"First, they take the booze. Then, the smokes. Now they say I can't have

cola. There comes a point," he nipped the bottle again, "when you begin to wonder if it's worth it."

Sandusky took back the vodka, put it away. "Your health or your job?"

"All of it," Kilmer said. "I'm going to overlook the booze, but you're going to get a call tomorrow from H.R. I'm sorry, Grace."

"It's all right."

"I don't want to cause you any trouble, but I'm worried. It's my job."

"I said it's all right. It won't matter, though. I'm too cheap, they love me at corporate. You know they'll never send me packing, right?"

Kilmer strode over to the command console and watched the 26 active unit vitals pulsing, watched the one that did not lying flat.

"Depends on what you tell them in that meeting. Guess I look at it like I'm giving you a chance. If you want out, I mean. You know what to say."

"And what not to say," Sandusky walked to the couch and sat down next to the blanket mound, hoping she didn't look too protective.

"Why do you stay here?" He asked like he'd been meaning to ask, had been waiting to ask for a while.

"Why do you?"

"For the money," Kilmer turned, shrugged. "And because I think maybe we do save some. From the ones that complete the program, I mean. Who knows?"

"And how many's that?" Sandusky said. "How many successful grads can we brag about?"

"In my time?" Kilmer shook his head. "Not many."

"And how many of the ones that do just wind up back inside later on?"

"Too many," he said. "Well, why the hell do you stay then? You're smart, go program for another company."

"I'm exactly where I want to be," Sandusky said, and again found that actually saying it aloud reaffirmed the claim. "And I'm tired. You got what you need, Kilmer?"

He pointed beside her, at the small hand that had come out from beneath the blanket. "Why don't you tell H.R. about that? They might not love you so much anymore."

Sandusky tossed aside the blanket and took the unmoving child, a little girl in pink flannel pajamas, brazenly into her arms. "What makes you think they don't know already?"

She took the remote from her pocket, plugged it into the jack in the A.I.'s left ear.

"You're here for the money, to save kids," she said. "I'm here for the ones we don't save."

She drug her fingers lightly through the 28th unit's hair.

"I'm here for the one I didn't save."

The little girl's brown eyes blinked twice as she looked from Kilmer to Sandusky, smiling.

"Hi, Mommy."

"Hi, Becky," Sandusky said. "Becky, this is mommy's friend Mr. Kilmer. Say hello."

The girl waved. "Hello, Mr. Kilmer."

He leaned against the console, arms crossed above his gut. "How you doing, kiddo?"

"We're going to have a pajama party tonight. Mommy promised."

"That's right," Sandusky nodded. "I sure did, baby."

She tickled the girl and they both giggled. Kilmer realized he'd never actually seen the haggard tech smile before. "Guess I'll let you ladies get to it then."

As he walked to the lift entrance, Kilmer passed the photographs. He did not look. He never did. Thus, he did not see the only photo there of two people together, an outlier among the assembly of single faces: doomed kids in smiling school pictures and mall portrait studio poses. In it a young, clear-eyed Sandusky stood on a beach. She was slim and tan, wore a blue bikini. She was holding an infant who could very easily be imagined to have grown up to be the little girl on the couch. She did not, though. The photo is much too old. The girl in it would be at least a teenager by now, maybe older.

As he waited for the lift, Kilmer heard whispered voices and a sudden burst of laughter from the blanket-covered figures on the couch.

"Sweet dreams," he called back.

No problem there, Sandusky thought, hugging Becky. *That's all any of it was: sweet dreams. We put the monsters behind walls and bars and we feel safe. Sweet dreams. We put just a few special ones in fancy programs, sacrifice avatars of our own children to the cause of progress and feel merciful and advanced. Sweet dreams. We create life itself, ostensibly ending the days of unavoidable death, and this is what we do with it. Sweet fucking dreams.*

She had a thought, an awful thought. For Licalsi too, for a while at least, the technology had realized a sweet dream. She pushed the idea away. There was no room for men like that down here.

This is not my daughter, a tiny voice needled from deep inside. *My daughter is dead.*

As Kilmer disappeared upward, Sandusky tickled Becky. They both laughed and she tried not to think about anything else, tried not to picture Licalsi's bloody hands.

It's not fair.

Damn straight it's not, Sandusky thought.

She wrapped the blanket around herself and the uni— *Becky*; around herself and Becky, thinking now about the story of Cronus. Killed his father, killed by his son, condemned to hell forever. Myths and fables, nothing more than shared, recurring dreams. But who among us doesn't kill their parents, one way or another? Who isn't killed by their children—or by their absence? And hell can look like any place, really. No, it's not fair.

But sometimes even the condemned have a sweet dream.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Q.Parker (editor) is a trans person, novelist, editor, and award winning screenwriter. Under various names, Parker has published over a hundred stories, as well as *Nova EXE* (Mighty Quill Books) and *These Walls Don't Talk, They Scream* (HellBound Books). When not working, the writer is probably at the gym, sleeping, or binging Supernatural again.

Nathan Batchelor's ("Recursion by Nashville Moonlight") short fiction appears in *Beautiful Lies, Painful Truths, Vol II; The Colored Lens*; and *COLP—Sky's The Limit*. He has a degree in biology from Ohio State University. He grew up in rural Alabama and now lives in Columbus, Ohio.

Morgan Chalfant ("Little Neon") is a native of Hill City, Kansas. He received his Bachelor's degree in writing and his Master's degree in literature from Fort Hays State University. His work has appeared in the horror anthology, *Dark and Evil, Deadly Quill, Straylight Magazine*, and others. He is the author of the horror/thriller, *Focused Insanity*, and the urban fantasy novel, *Ghosts of Glory*. You can find him on Facebook at Morgan Chalfant's Real Page, or on Twitter: @MorganChalfant1.

T. Fox Dunham ("The Children's Crusade") lives in Philadelphia with his wife, Allison. He's a lymphoma survivor, cancer patient, modern bard and historian. His first book, *The Street Martyr*, was published by Gutter Books. A television series based on the book is being produced by Throughline Films. *Destroying the Tangible Illusion of Reality or Searching for Andy Kaufman*, a book about what it's like to be dying of cancer, was recently released from Perpetual Motion Machine Publishing and Fox has a story in the *Stargate Anthology Points of Origin* from MGM and Fandemonium Books. Fox is an active member of the Horror Writers Association, and he's had published hundreds of short stories and articles. He's host and creator of *What Are You Afraid Of? Horror & Paranormal Show*, a popular horror program on PARA-X RADIO. His motto is wrecking civilization one story at a time. Find out more information at www.tfoxdunham.com & Twitter: @TFoxDunham

Sean Eads ("Eunuch's Code") is a writer and librarian living in Denver, Colorado. His second novel, *The Survivors*, was a finalist for the 2013 Lambda Literary Award. His third novel, *Lord Byron's Prophecy*, was a finalist for the Shirley Jackson Award and the Colorado Book Award. His first short story collection, *17 Stitches*, will come out in June 2017. Sean's favorite non-writing activities are playing golf and competing in bar trivia with his epic team of fellow geeks, Irritable Vowel Syndrome.

Alex Robert Franco ("Mr. Companion") is a writer from Atlanta, GA. He studied literature at Bard College and the Sorbonne, and now lives abroad. More of his work can be found at: www.alexrobertfranco.com

Sebastian Hetman ("First to Fight") is a sci-fi writer and a developmental editor. Born in Poland, currently lives in Berlin, where he's said to haunt the local English bookstores. He can't imagine a life without friends, novels, or old-fashioned roleplaying games. A devoted student of storytelling and language. You can find him online at sebastianhetman.com or chat him up on Twitter @SebastianHetman.

Neil James Hudson ("One Survivor") is a UK-based writer who has published around fifty stories and a paranormal romance novel, *On Wings of Pity*. His story collection *The End of the World: A User's Guide* is available from his website at www.neiljameshudson.net. He is currently working on a collection of linked vignettes under the title "One Hundred Pieces of Millia Maslowa", some of which should be appearing in print in the new year.

He lives in the middle of nowhere on the North York Moors, but works in York as a charity shop manager and is studying at York St John University for an MA in Creative Writing

K. Trap Jones ("Respawn, Inc.") is an author of horror novels and a ton of short stories appearing in numerous anthologies. Specializing in narrative splatterpunk/extreme horror, he draws inspiration from Dante Alighieri and Edgar Allan Poe along with his appreciation towards narrative folklore, classic literary works and obscure segments within society. His literary novel *The Sinner* won the 2010 Royal Palm Literary Award. His novel, *The Big Bad* was nominated for the 2017 Splatterpunk Award. As a product of the '80s, he likes his movies bloody and his music heavy. He is also the Co-Founder of The Splatter Club.

He can be found lurking around Tampa, FL. Novels include: *The Big Bad, The Charm Hunter, The Drunken Exorcist, The Sinner, The Harvester* and *The King's Ox.*

By day **Eric Lewis** ("Cold Calculation") is a research scientist weathering the latest rounds of mergers and layoffs and trying to remember how to be a person again after surviving grad school. His short fiction has been published in *Nature, Electric Spec, Allegory, Bards and Sages Quarterly,* the anthologies *Into Darkness Peering* and *Best Indie Speculative Fiction Vol. 1,* and other venues detailed at ericlewis.ink. His debut novel *The Heron Kings* is due out in 2020 from Flame Tree Press.

Luciano Marano ("The Fate You Are") is an author, journalist and photographer. His award-winning reporting, both written and photographic, has appeared in a number of national and regional publications, and he was named the 2018 Feature Writer of the Year by the Washington Newspaper Publishers Association.

His short fiction has likewise been featured in a number of print and digital publications, including the anthologies *Year's Best Hardcore Horror Vol. 3* (Red Room Press), *DOA III* (Blood Bound Books), and *One-Sentence Stories* (Muddy Puddle Press), among others, as well as the podcasts PseudoPod and Horror Hill, and also Chilling Tales for Dark Nights.

Originally from rural, Western Pennsylvania, he now resides near Seattle, Washington and would choose Wolverine-style healing abilities if he could pick any superpower (or maybe just the ability to grow Wolverine-style sideburns).

John McNee ("Thank Fuck It's Friday") is the writer of numerous strange and disturbing horror stories, published in a variety of strange and disturbing anthologies, as well as the novel *Prince of Nightmares*. He is also the creator of *Grudgehaven* and the author of *Grudge Punk*, a collection of short stories detailing the lives and deaths of its gruesome inhabitants, plus the sequel, *Petroleum Precinct*.

He lives in Scotland and can easily be sought out on Facebook, Goodreads, Twitter and YouTube, where he hosts the horror-themed cooking show 'A Recipe for Nightmares'. www.johnmcnee.com

Patrick Meegan ("A Leg Up") lives in Florida. His work has been previously published in anthologies by Stealth Fiction and Forgotten Tomb Press. He has also contributed to *Sanitarium Magazine*.

Aaron Thomas Milstead ("A Silent Auction") is the author of *They Don't Check Out* and *Earworm*, and he was featured in *Road Kill Volume III*. He lives in the Piney Woods of East Texas with his wife and three children.

Exposed to the weird worlds of horror, science fiction and comic books as a boy, **Damascus Mincemeyer** ("Time Share") has been ruined ever since. He's now a writer and artist of various strangeness and has had stories published in the anthologies *Fire: Demons, Dragons and Djinn, Earth: Giants, Golems and Gargoyles* (both from Tyche Books), *Bikers Vs The Undead, Psycho Holiday, Monsters Vs Nazis, Mr. Deadman Made Me Do It, Satan Is Your Friend* and *Monster Party* (All from Deadman's Tome publishing, and books for which he has provided cover art), *Hell's Empire* (Ulthar Press), *Appalachian Horror* (Aphotic Realm), the Sirens Call ezine and the magazines *Gallows Hill, StoryHack* and *Aphotic Realm*. He lives near St. Louis, Missouri, USA, and can usually be found lurking about on Twitter @DamascusUndead

Dr. KJ Moore ("The Blue Schnooklybob") specializes in transgressive and experimental fiction, creative process and creative theory, and teaches at a sleepy university in South West England.

Rachel Nussbaum ("Bleed Over") is a writer and artist from the Big Island of Hawaii. Her short stories and poetry have been featured in multiple anthologies, including Blood Bound Book's own *Night Terrors III*. Rachel recently graduated college and moved to California, where she hopes to grow her creative career and one day write and illustrate her own novels and comic books.

Odin V. Oxthorn ("The Weight of the Lotus") A chronically bored spooky creature, Odin dabbles in a strange array of interests to keep their wandering brain in check. When not writing under the influence of caffeinated drinks and sugary snacks, Odin can be found escaping reality with video games or getting their fingers tangled in a mess of threads and needles. Their debut full length cyberpunk novel *Sleepless Flame* was released in March 2018. Find out more at:
https://www.odinsmusings.com/

John Pedersen ("Control Vipectus") resides in Northern Arizona. He is a new father and currently stealing as much time as he can to finish his current novel, *Artefact,* a story of misappropriated technology creating and then being used to cover up a war crime.

Melanie Rees ("Attrition of the Soul") is a speculative fiction writer from Australia and an Active member of the Science Fiction Writers of America. She has published over 90 stories and poems to markets such as *Apex, Nature: Futures, Sub-Q,* and *Cosmos*. More information can be found at www.flexirees.wordpress.com or Twitter @FlexiRees

Daniel I. Russell ("Mechanisms") has been featured publications such as *DOA 2 & 3, Pseudopod*, and *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*.

Author of *Samhane, Come Into Darkness, Critique, Mother's Boys, The Collector, Retard, Tricks, Mischief and Mayhem*, and his latest novel, *Entertaining Demons*. Daniel lives in Western Australia with his wife and four children, and is currently completing a Masters degree in clinical psychology. He is convinced he will die via shark attack. @danielirussell

David F. Shultz ("Nervana") writes speculative fiction from Toronto, ON, where he is lead editor at tdotSpec, Inc <http://tdotspec.com/> and also runs the Toronto SFF Writers group. His more than fifty published works have appeared in a variety of publications including *Abyss & Apex* and *Dreams & Nightmares*. David can be found online at davidfshultz.com and Twitter @davidfshultz.

Addison Smith ("Hard Memory") has blood made of cold brew and flesh made of chocolate. He spends most of his time writing about fish, birds, and cybernetics, often in combination. His fiction has appeared in *Fireside Magazine* and *Daily Science Fiction*.

Matt Thompson ("Purity") is a London-based experimental musician and writer of strange stories. His work has been published at *Interzone, Nature: Futures, Black Static* and many more worthy venues. In his spare time he often visits the British Museum, and is greatly looking forward to the 'Bot revolution. You can find him online at matt-thompson.com

Kristopher Triana ("The Deepest Fake") is the Splatterpunk Award-winning author of eight books including *Full Brutal, Toxic Love* and The *Long Shadows of October*. His fiction has appeared in many anthologies, magazines and audiobooks, including *Chiral Mad 4, Year's Best Hardcore Horror* and Blood Bound Book's *DOA series*, to name a few. He's drawn praise from *Cemetery Dance, Rue Morgue Magazine, Scream Magazine* and Publisher's Weekly. In addition, his work has been translated to multiple languages. He lives in Connecticut.

Hannah Trusty ("A.U.T.O.") works by day as a project manager while working towards dual degrees in journalism and English from the University of Kentucky at night. She has also had stories published in the anthologies *After the Orange* and *Frostfire Worlds*. When not writing or reading, Hannah spends her time drinking gin and tonics, eating Indian food, taking pictures of her cats, and playing roller derby.

Joshua Viola ("Eunuch's Code") is a three-time Colorado Book Award finalist and co-author of the Denver Moon series. His comic book collection, *Denver Moon: Metamorphosis*, was included on the 2018 Bram Stoker Award Preliminary Ballot for Superior Achievement in a Graphic

Novel. He edited the #1 Denver Post bestselling anthology, *Nightmares Unhinged*, and co-edited *Cyber World*—named one of the best science fiction anthologies of 2016 by Barnes & Noble. His fiction has appeared in numerous anthologies, including *D.O.A. III—Extreme Horror* (Blood Bound Books), *Doorbells at Dusk* (Corpus Press), and *Found* (RMFW Press), and has been reprinted by Tor.com.

He is the owner and chief editor of Hex Publishers in Erie, Colorado.

Dean H. Wild ("The God Finger") is a lifelong resident of east central Wisconsin, inhabiting various small towns near the city of Fond du Lac. He wrote his first short horror story at the tender age of seven and continued to write dark fiction while he pursued careers in the newspaper industry, real estate and retail pharmacy. His short stories have seen publication in several magazines and anthologies, including *The Horror Zine* for which he now serves as assistant editor. His novel *The Crymost* was published in 2019 by Blood Bound Books. He and his wife, Julie, currently reside in the village of Brownsville.

Christopher Wilson ("Grinder") lives in London, Ontario, Canada, with his wife Rebekah, daughter Lily, and their dog, Luna. He works for an insurance company by the light of day, finding time to write in the dark of night. Christopher enjoys pizza, Yoshinkan aikido, and spending time with his family. Writing, for him, is the process of carefully finessing the monsters out of the shadows of his imagination. He finds inspiration in the works of King, Tolkien, Rowling, and Matheson, as well the classic monsters of Universal, and the *Twilight Zone*. He is afraid of zombies and the dark.