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Roo'd
by Joshua Klein

Fed was 18 when Tony got roo'd. He'd been prepping for early college admission with late-night com-classes, goggled in and finger-cramped over nasty circa-2009 C++ code examples while longing to toss it in for time to scan some flashy Java virii. Tony had been gone from his life for at least a couple years, five years his senior and a failure, as far as their folks saw it. Bailing out of a prestigious single-course curriculum at MIT, the rumor was that he'd crashed and burned on Pakistani kraft; carefully engineered cold cells delivering a prolonged payload of top-flight methamphetamines directly to the spongy flanges of his right hemisphere.

"Coulda been a genius" Fed's father had said when he'd said anything about Tony, which wasn't often. He had never said much, plugged in as he was basically 24/7 to a Grecko-Roman massively-multiplayer game world based out of a datahaven in the Balkan Islands. Fed's Dad had been an in-game Wizard, administering illegal betting and avatar trades through a Russian triumvirate. About the time Tony had washed out of MIT their Dad's game servers had been pulled by marketeers and put to use in a retro Furry MUD. Without the reassuring virtual community of brother-love Fed's Dad had simply faded away, dissapearing the same way Tony eventually had.

Fed's Mom was unfortunately much more present. Plugged in all day to secretarial comstats turning nasty boardroom sharkfights into regurgitated memorandums suitable for shareholders, she was the bland paste that put a shine on corporate "accountability" clauses. Every night she got home and either popped a tricyclic and a red stripe lager, settling in for a long night of Disney-produced medi-dramas, or mixed vodka and an MDMA-derived german sports drink and went out with Bark. Bark was not Fed's favorite in the long line of boyfriends his mom had had, mostly because he insisted on trying to win points with his Mom by palling around with Fed. All Fed wanted was to be left alone to goggle in and wrench his brain around the tightest code he could find, teasing it apart byte by byte until that singing satisfaction of comprehension flooded his brain. One day Fed was going to change the world, and he'd figured out early that you didn't get to change the world by sitting on your ass.

But it was because of Bark that Fed started seeing Tony again. Bark'd come over for dinner, which was really just an old-fashioned form of foreplay, and had somewhere along the line decided that Fed should keep his tray with theirs on the jittery fomica platform that served as a kitchen table.

Fed had just unplugged when Bark's yelling had shook through the plyboard walls between his room and the kitchen. Fed ignored it and ran his finger around the mounting post on his right leg. He wiped off the excess antimicrobial grease on his jeans and held it up under the lamp to inspect his work, noting with a grimace the spreading crack in the plastic housing on the shin. Grunting to himself he slid it home and felt it catch. He leaned his head back against the water-stained wallpaper. His head hurt.

He'd been living on Hawaiian time for weeks, running the normal classes locally and power napping until the start of the courses on the islands. EST plus Hawaiian - which always ran late - was burning him bad, but he wanted the computer virus background something fierce and Hawaii was the only place that offered it. Everywhere else was too political. Fed sighed and finished socketing his legs on before shuffling down the hall.

"There we go. Like a family" Bark'd said, as though it held some meaning or weight which might translate across the tautological divide between them. Fed stood in the doorway, the kitchen's grease-stained wallpaper rendered in clean RGB scan lines on the inside of his goggles, his chording keyboard clenched tightly in his right hand.

Bark slapped a meaty paw against the sole empty chair. "C'mon, it'll be fun! Your Mom even fried 'em on the George Forman. And I have a new mesquite margerine spray - got it promo from work today. You'll love it." Bark worked as a distributor and "display maximization consultant" for Easy-Pick, the line of closet-sized convenience stores painted into corners of gas stations and confectionary shops.

Fed sat down at the table and flipped one goggle cup over his eyebrow, his other hand keying in the combination for single-handed chording.

"No computers, Fed" his Mom said. "How about we just enjoy each others' company?"

Fed's jawbone tightened, slowly recognizing the signs that Mom's antidepressants were hitting the half-life wall and that another round of emotional trauma was coming due. "Enjoying each other's company" was practically a code word for months of repressed guilt and anxiety sloshing heavily against the floodgates, held back by carefully-wrought "productivity" subliminals at work and the crufty remains of his mother's neuro-reuptake inhibitors. Fed flicked back the other cup of his goggles and let the scattered light show flicker out and across their faces, tiny glimmers of blue and red and green laser light pulsing softly against their cheeks as it tried to resolve on a cornea, any cornea. He keyed in a locking sequence and

pocketed the chord, bending over the soy patty to industrially cut it into easily-stackable bite-sized chunks.

"My muscleman loves this shit" Bark said "Gave me a total discount on the ab work I was showing you." He followed this with a wink to Fed's mom. Bark paid precious money to have his sedentary lifestyle painstakingly smoothed away through an injected cocktails of hormones and the electrolytic equivalent of a battery charge, individual muscle groups drugged and brainwashed into thinking they'd been working very hard for weeks. As a result Bark's body had the look of someone who worked out very regularly on only one muscle group at a time. It probably also meant he could maintain an erection for hours, a fact that was a sure selling point with Fed's mother. Fed didn't mind; a well known side effect was an inability to ejaculate.

"You ought to come down to the shop sometime and take a look, Fed" Bark said. "My muscleman, he kinda looks like you. Name's Tony."

Something inside Fed did a convulsive somersault around half a soy patty.

"Tony?" asked Fed's Mom, wonderingly, "Tony Farkeren?"

"Yeah! Old Farker! You know him somehow?" said Bark, delighted in a dull, dog-like way that he had managed to get everyone's attention.

"We know him" said Fed, steadily. He shoved the remains of his soy patty into his mouth, his cheeks bulging, and went back to his code.

It took two weeks for Fed to find the time and work up the courage to see Tony. After he'd bailed from MIT Fed'd pretty much written him off; he had never come back home, just emailed Fed's Mom that he was done with MIT and was exploring better horizons. Fed knew they'd spoken at least once afterwards, mostly because of the four six-packs of Red Stripe strewn sticky and empty across the living-room floor one Sunday afternoon, but never found out where Tony had ended up. After bringing it up once with his Mom (and regretting it) he'd decided not to think about it anymore - Tony'd never been around much anyway, and this meant Fed could put the bottom bunk to good use by mounting his database cluster of salvaged hardware somewhere that the danger of overheating wasn't such an issue. A few months later Fed took down one of Tony's old The Cure posters to make room for a sheaf of printouts on new chording key combinations and realized he'd cancelled his brother out of his life in exchange for more time focused on coding. The ensuing twenty-four hour scripting binge had resulted in a render-farm plugin he'd traded for a new rig out of midland China, and Fed had never looked back. Until now.

The shuttle from his housing park was late as usual, and he ended up stuck at the rail station with a half hour between trains. While he was there he logged in on the local net and double-checked his mail, spawning a couple newsbots to try to dig up anything new on Tony's shop while he waited. Nothing interesting turned up - Greener Pastures was just a regular tattoo / body-shop, pretty much like any other, although the online pics showed some pretty flash stuff with muscle therapies and bone implants. Made sense; Tony had been checked as one of the top candidates in his class in the biosciences at MIT before he'd bailed. And he'd always loved the bodmod scene even if he was too clean-cut to be part of it. Now that he wasn't in school anymore it figured that he'd get involved there.

The train pulled up and he got on, rolling his eyes inwardly at the solid wall of low-level corporates lined up neat and tidy in their uniforms. Interspersed between them like peacocks among pigeons were the contractors - flashy clothes and spiky hair and expensive corneal replacements set in deep-set, sleep-deprived eyes. The difference, in Fed's mind, was in the corporate contract. Most people that wore uniforms didn't know how to bargain, didn't realize that they represented a value proposition to the corp. The contractors were even worse; living in a fantasy world from contract to contract, constantly scabbling for the next job. When Fed got his chance he'd come into the market with a strong chip - big school cred - and would bargain like hell for his employment agreement. He didn't want the constant worry of freelance. Instead he'd make a secure deal and keep his head down, hide under the waves of uniformed clueless and let the freelancers make their noise. He'd worked it out a while ago, after Tony had disappeared, and now he just had to get into a good school to make it a reality. That's where Tony had screwed up; for some reason he couldn't take it at MIT, and as a result he'd kissed his one good chance at happiness goodbye.

His Mom wore a uniform, Fed considered idly, and claimed to like how it looked.

Just as the train was pulling in Fed's goggles pulsed a link from one of his bots showing a new post about Greener Pastures' animal sex pics. Fed sighed and deleted the spam. The stuff was self-mutating now; a bot somewhere had obviously sniffed his query and modified it. The shit was making the net all but unusable these days, and only Fed's aggressive filtering kept his inbox from getting glutted. He killed off the rest of the bots in case they'd been caught too and joined the mob stepping out into the ionized air surrounding the maglev depot. He liked the train; despite being unwilling to pay the per-use fees for its network access. Those same fees had almost killed it as a form of public access, especially since wireless access was free on buses and subways, but it also made it cheap and not quite so full of advertising, which was why Fed liked it.

The train pulled past him as he hobbled behind the crowd. It was cold in the old station, microclimates funneling a

sharp wind from the high-rises over Africatown and out towards the suburbs. Fed shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and looked for a shwag vendor. Sure enough there was one in the far corner of the station. He wandered over to it, his legs making the old familiar hiss-shuffle as their hydraulics softened his steps. They'd need more oil soon, he reminded himself. Better models were available, and lots of people got amputated for the replacements alone, but Fed held on to his old hospital-issue legs as a sign that he wasn't a mod. He hadn't hacked off his legs to get a better jump shot, or faster sprint, or flashy chromium LED-studded cat-toes. Fed hadn't had a choice, and mods weren't his thing. Apparently they *were* Tony's thing, he reminded himself, afterimages of hasty in-shop comm photos of toeless feet and coral-stud horns lingering in his mind. Fed had always talked shit about bodmod, about how he was going to go whole-hog one day and get roo'd. Fed snorted at the thought, his hips aching as they warmed up to his normal rolling gait. He'd been born without legs below his knees, a "genetic anomaly." Some folks got webbed toes, Fed had got no legs. Tony used to say there was an equal exchange, that Fed had been given better brains instead. It was stupid, but his liked to think about it sometimes, usually when he was plugged in pulling overtime on coursework, trying to get an edge on upping his Prog-SAT scores.

As he came up to the vendor he fished around in his bag and pulled out a dirty slug of gelatinous plastic, transparent and light blue. The thing was about the size of his thumb and had been injection-molded into the shape of a Japanese-designed bug-eyed alien. It looked like it was wearing a Jewish kippah, an imprint over the back of its head circled in curdled plastic. It had originally been meant to fit over the end of a tablet's stylus for kids, but now it had a John Doe fingerprint sealed on the back of its head. It was kind of old - the print had been pulled out of a vulnerable U.S. marriage certificate database over a week ago - but Fed was pretty confident it would still work. He'd traded it for a quick hack he'd put together for a kid at school, a modified version of the program he'd used once to loop his image on the video conference, and was glad to get to use it before it aged out.

He stuck the back of the alien's head on the scanner and punched a selection on the touch screen. The vendor's sides flashed, the telephone-box sized thing's every inch suddenly dedicated to announcing the virtues of the Chrysler-Daimler product Fed had chosen a sample of. Thankfully someone had disabled the speakers on the thing so he didn't have to listen to it. Let the John whose print he'd used get the advertising in his mailbox; that's what the vendor really wanted. Pegged for big-business spam for the rest of his life by virtue of selling off his biometrics. Privacy for convenience. Idiot.

Fed palmed the tiny triangular package as it fell into the vending tray and found a quiet corner nearby. He gently pulled the tyvec jacket out of its pouch. It was silk-thin and silver and traced through with fiberoptics, making it look slightly veiny. Still, for something spun out of aerosoled carbohydrates it would cut the wind and hold in his body heat, and Fed had recently gotten a tip for dealing with the blinking ads that covered the jacket's surface. They'd flashed to life as soon as he had pulled it out of its vacuumed-packed container, the Chrysler-Daimler name spinning and blinking around the arms and across its chest and back. Turning the thing over he found the collar, tracing the wire there until he found the discreet bulge near the left lapel. He didn't have anything sturdy enough to bang it with in his bag, but looking around he found that the bolts on one end of the bench he was sitting on were loose. After a minute he'd wedged the bulge into the space between the bench and the floor. After sitting down heavily a couple of times he heard a satisfying crunch and the jacket went dim. By now the station was pretty quiet, and a vendor selling stir-fry across the empty hall yelled at him in Chinese. Fed ignored him and pulled on the jacket. It was stained and rusty around the collar, but Fed wasn't wearing it for the fashion. Even so he thought it made a nice statement to be wearing an almost-new adjacket that wasn't actually flashing anything. Kind of neo-punk. He slung his bag over his shoulder and headed out of the station.

Chapter #2

Greener Pastures was in Chinatown, Fed was disappointed to discover. The stink of real chickens and MSG-derived carbonated sodas filled the air, undercut with the sweet-salty reek of the grey water sewer systems set not-far-enough under the street drains. Chinatown had been targeted for unproven water recycling programs like a lot of the cheaper burbs, sold a bill of goods for plant ponds under their streets to separate them from the rest of the city's water supply, make them self-sustaining. Now the burb sat on the biggest cesspool in North America and paid a premium for showering and drinking water to boot.

A group of Chinese boys came up the street past him as he walked, their rainbow mowhawks filling the road in a tight phalanx. As they got closer he saw that they were pushing a heavily mod'd scooter. It had aftermarket plastic molding all over it, little logos and flashing product names stenciled in carefully ordered lines over every inch of its carbon-fiber frame. There was a fairing on it, Fed noticed disbelievingly. A stylish wind fairing on a device that could go twenty miles an hour.

A few minutes later he had followed the little blinking cursor in his eye to a tight alley off the main shopping street. The end of the alley had a car garage in it, two three foot long red plastic dragons framing the door. As Fed entered the alley the doors opened and a battered mini came roaring out at him, the cold glare of a thousand white LEDs suddenly blazing from the headlights that unfolded from its blunt nose. Fed skipped backwards and out of the way, and as the mini slowed to join the foot traffic he noticed that the alley was covered with some sort of plastic dome, and that the dome had some sort of mold on it. He pushed his goggles back as he walked into the alley, neck straining to make out the green clouds that seemed to be floating motionless above him.

"Algae tanks" a female voice informed him. "The building's owners skim off the fuel cells from the cars to feed them. But we like it for the color."

Fed lowered his head to see a Chinese girl standing against a doorway to his left, the bitter smell of burning wood riding the grey smoke wisping out of her hand. She wore olive cargo pants and imitation Russian combat boots, topped with a cropped brown shooting sweater. The rifle patch on her right shoulder had been carefully embroidered with softly glowing white thread. She was long and thin with an animal look, and her smooth belly was a caramel color that looked pleasantly edible in the green light from the algae tank overhead.

She stuck the stub of a thin hand-roll into her mouth and tightened her short pigtails. Her big eyes were heavily circled with black eye shadow, the pupils thick pools you could fall into, braer tar he'd never come back from. Fed realized he was staring. She was beautiful.

The girl took the cigarette out of her mouth and puckered her lips at Fed; let a ragged stream of smoke tumble out at him. She tossed the butt on the ground, and as she stamped out the ashes and turned to tug open the doorway Fed saw a sign overhead. "Greener Pastures," it read.

Fed pulled his goggles off his forehead and down around his neck, chewing his lip before deciding to follow the girl inside. The door was heavy, probably metal core for security, and beyond it was a short dark entranceway of stained, gray-painted cement. Matching grey steps met the edge of the real wooden floor beyond, otherwise deliriously expensive real wood from real trees scarred and dented and stained into sub-plastic value. This place was old.

Just beyond the steps sat a huge metal dentists' chair, an antique in chrome and black plastic barely containing the swollen folds of an enormously fat man. He was getting a tattoo etched on his bare pink belly. The artist, a tall, intensely black-skinned man, glanced once at Fed over the girl's shoulder as she squeezed by. The man's head was a mass of steel-capped nubs, a style Fed had heard described in newsgroups but never seen.

In the background, a twangy Thai band was playing on tinny speakers. It was a German metal song Fed had heard on the streaming music channels he listened to while coding, something that had caught the music world's ear this week. It was an angry, growling song, but the way the Thais played it the metal seemed lollipop sweet. Fed liked it. There was something about the way tonal languages interpreted guttural Germanic ones that sounded more... authentic.

He stepped onto the stairs and past the black man. He was arranging the naugahyde straps of the big silver tattooing machine over the fat man's stomach. The fat man looked nervous and sad and excited, and he stank. Fed crept by, trying not to touch either of them. The girl was gone. The walls were lined with old soda- and snack-dispensers, those 6-foot high machines you used to put real coins into and which would pop out plastic packets of food and chilled drinks from their glass covered shelves. They were full of tattooing and bodmod equipment now, and a huge assortment of ink jars filled one marked "Fanta." The place reeked of fluorochlorocarbons and bleach.

At the end of a room a hugely solid metal desk filled almost its entire width, and on the desk was a massive, ancient waldo. A big black helmet was attached to the waldo by a fat data cable, and someone had stuck a Hello Kitty logo in bright pink right on the forehead. As Fed got closer, watching the man wearing the helmet wave thick rubber sensor gloves in the empty air, he got the eerie realization that he knew him, that this guy behind the shiny black plastic must be his brother, and that his brother was miles and miles away in a little tiny space between atoms or cells or Swedish avatars or something, thinking about anything, anything but here.

"Hey, Fed" came a muffled voice from under the helmet. "Be with you in a minute."

Chapter #3

Tony pulled off the helmet and smiled at Fed, his crooked grin bringing back 16 years of brotherhood all in a rush.

"What's up, bro?" he asked. Before Fed could answer he called out to the black man running the tattoo machine, "Hey Mil, this here's my brother! Came all the way down from the house-parks to see me."

"Come down here to stare at Cass's ass is what he did" said Mil without turning around. He punched a button on the control box sitting next to the fat man. The machine began to hum, and the fat man groaned.

Tony steepled his fingers, his hands still encased in the thick waldo gloves. He watched Fed for a moment. Fed watched back. What do you say to your estranged brother after two years of nothing?

"Why'd you leave, Tony?" he asked, the words out of his mouth before his mind had a chance to think about them.

Tony's smile widened. "Tonx" he said.

"What?"

"Tonx. Call me Tonx. Tony died a long time ago. I'm Tonx now. Changed the name when I left MIT."

"Tonx?" asked Fed, "Why Tonx?"

Tony's smile deepened. "Don't remember? When I was a kid I could never get the hang of writing a 'y'. I always wrote it as an 'x'. Teachers used to give me hell, for a while. Called me 'Tonx' to make fun of me, to try to shame me into playing by the rules. So I did, for while. Now I don't. So... Tonx."

Fed forced a laugh, his chuckle sounding fake even to his own ears. "That's cool, Tony - Tonx. That's cool."

Tonx's smile widened and he pushed a strand of greasy black hair behind one ear, a thick malachite talon arching

from the lobe. He jumped out of the chair and grabbed a big black thermoelectric hoody off its back. Pulling it over his sleeveless white tee he shuffled by the edge of the scratched metal desk.

"Let's get some lunch," he said to Fed, "we've got some catching up to do."

Two hours later Fed was full of beer and stir-fry, picking little crunchy bits of fried tofu out of his teeth with the splintered remains of his disposable chopstick. He was regaling Tony - Tonx, he reminded himself - with tales of his 'sploits, explaining some of the new code he was seeing in the newsgroups these days, how cool it all was. The beer made his head swim. He'd only been drunk a few times and hadn't liked it, but his brother had ordered for them and he had been afraid of looking stupid. Tonx was listening to everything he said with the same rapt attention Fed remembered, nodding his head as he shoveled down his stir-fry.

"So then I got the idea of forcing the compile on the captured machine. I mean, where better? You're already leeching cycles off them for the scans and port postings and everything else. Everybody's got a connection to at least one or two peer-to-peer networks, and this way you can anonymously pull down the libraries you need. It adds additional routes to the data vectors they have to backtrack, and allows you to control the programming by modularizing it."

"But doesn't your initial access point have to stay open?" asked Tonx.

"No. That's the beauty of it. The compile is set to use the same memory space as the access logs. So the initial compile erases your tracks right from the start, and uses the same execution levels as your logging daemons. It reads like a port scan being logged, or firewall intrusion attempt by some clueless newbie."

"Clever" conceded Tonx. "Very clever." He belched and leaned back, folding his hands over his belly. He looked over Fed's shoulder into the middle distance and ran his tongue over his teeth, working loose a piece of sweet-n-sour pork. "Good to see you've been keeping busy."

"Busy?" asked Fed, "It's the hottest fucking virus that's ever hit the 'Nets, and I've almost completely reverse engineered it. That's more than busy, man."

Tonx put his plastic sandals on the edge of the table and wiggled his toes for a moment. "Got to get rid of these babies," he muttered to himself. He looked up at Fed, and shrugged.

"What does that mean?" asked Fed.

"What about your regular coursework?" Tonx asked.

"Oh. That's fine. It's a hassle, learning all the legacy shit, is all. I don't see the point if you're not going to use any of it. Nobody these days does their own garbage collection, and any modern language can handle all the pointer stuff for you."

"Seems kind of counterproductive spending all your free time reverse engineering viruses if what you're really after is getting a spot in a corp" said Tonx. "I mean, doesn't security development have more to do with prevention than attack?"

"That's stupid," said Fed. "Of course you have to understand the virus-writing side."

"So...?" Tonx drawled, leaving the question hanging in the air.

Fed realized he was sitting on the edge of his chair, one elbow in a nest of napkins filthy with stir-fry and soy sauce. He jerked his arm back and slid fully onto his chair.

Tony had taught him to code, gotten him hooked on the underground newsgroups and chat rooms using their Dad's pass codes to get around the "Parental control" lock filters that came with their school-issue laptops. That was back when his Dad was still around, or as close to around as he'd ever been. Tony had steered Fed through the basic 'Net protocols, started him on his first shell scripts, gotten him involved. It was because of Tony that Fed had developed any interest in coding at all, and although Tony had ended up going for biologicals he'd never, ever, stopped pushing Fed to produce the best, tightest, cleanest code he could. And now he was asking him why.

"What are you after, Tony?" he asked.

"Tonx, Fed. And I'm just asking if you're really enjoying what you're doing, where you're going."

Fed picked up a rumpled but clean napkin from the little bamboo basket on the table next to him and wiped off his elbow.

"Of course I am. I'm even getting into some of the undergrounds at the big schools. If I can finish reversing this virus I've got a contact that'll sponsor a full nym for me. I can start posting some of my questions without being marked as a noob."

"Huh" said Tonx. A group of asian schoolgirls in uniforms from a corporate-sponsored school swirled by, giggles and yells and the rapid pattern of their talk rising then dimming in the empty air of the shop. Suddenly Tonx stood up and flashed a paycard over the reader embedded in the table. "It's on me," he said.

They walked out of the shop through battered translucent plastic slats hanging from the doorway, out into the twilight. The sky was a rich, dark blue in the gaps between buildings, and a couple of lone clouds overhead took up the yellowed color from the city lights below.

Tonx stepped down onto the street and waved a hand. "Come on, I got to get back to the shop."

Fed zipped up his jacket and followed, his eyebrows pulling together as he watched the heels of Tonx's black converse knock-offs rise and fall in front of him. After a moment he jogged forward and caught up, dodging past a pair of old ladies carrying some dead leafy thing to walk next to his brother.

"Why'd you leave?" he asked again. "Why'd you leave MIT?"

Tonx unsealed a flap on the hem of his hoody and stroked the controls for a moment. Fiber optic threads started glowing around the inside of his hood, illuminating his face in a dim red light. He pushed back an errant lock of dark hair and leaned towards Fed as they walked. "Why'd I leave MIT?"

"I left because great people aren't great because to their education, or the school they went to or the toys their parents or companies or curriculum buys them. I left because people become great by doing what they love to do."

He leaned away from Fed, the red light fading as the heating elements in his hoody ramped up to full capacity.

"I love biotech, man, not school."

Fed snorted, loudly. "That's fucking stupid," he said. "You couldn't get better access to biotech than at MIT."

Tonx stopped and placed his hand on an aluminum push panel set into a door on the side of a building. The soft hum of machinery cut through the street noise and the door clicked, then shuddered.

"Okay" he said. He looked thoughtful for a moment. "How's this then: I left because I didn't need to be there anymore to do what I wanted. To achieve what I wanted to achieve."

He looked away from Fed, off down the street, his face hidden in the shadow of his hoody.

"My goals changed," he said.

He pushed into the crumbling hallway beyond, yellowed fluorescents flickering to life through metal gratings overhead.

"You coming?" he asked.

Chapter #4

Fed followed Tonx inside the hallway. The walls were a cheap poly-plyboard coated with a peeling latex. The composite they had used had fat chunks of plastic that didn't hold the paint well, leaving sagging, discolored pockets over its surface. The lights overhead flickered as they went, the growling hum of old transformers shuttling electrons through grime-coated wires.

"Listen, Fed" said Tonx, "I got practice tonight. You're welcome to stay, and you're welcome not to, but I don't want Mom riding down here on her broomstick either way."

"Don't worry about it" mumbled Fed. There was a blackness growing in his belly, an anger spreading over the tofu and fried vegetables and up through his throat. Tonx had been gone for two years, and in those two years Fed had spent almost every waking moment goggled in, sweating blood over prefabbed lessons and newsgroup HOWTOs. He'd lived and breathed code, and Tonx had been out... here.

"Fed." Tonx had stopped at a doorway set into the end of the hall. "I'm sorry."

"I always meant to come back and explain things to you, but whenever I talked to Mom she made it sound like you didn't want to see me. I don't know what changed, or why you decided to show up, but... I'm glad you're here."

Tonx had his hood pushed back, tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. He looked at his dirty shoes, at Fed. "Listen, why don't you come in and after practice we'll talk some more?"

"What practice?" asked Fed.

"Aikido" said Tonx with a sudden smile. "It's an old martial art based on joint locks. With all the free muscle you can buy out there these days it's one of the few arts left that'll still take somebody down. It doesn't rely on strength." Tonx stuck his arm out in front of him. "Here. Grab my wrist."

"You're doing kung-fu now?" asked Fed, raising an eyebrow.

"No, dude. 'Eye-key-dough.' I told you, it's an old martial art. It's sweet shit, for real. Relies on knowledge of physiology and timing instead of raw strength. It's for people with brains. Come on, try to grab my arm."

Fed grabbed his brother's wrist. Tonx's smile widened, and he gently put his free hand on top of Fed's. "It's easy," he said. He slipped the fingers of his bottom hand on top of Fed's and pressed softly.

"FUCK! YOU! BITCH!" yelled Fed, falling facedown on the concrete floor in front of Tonx's shoes. Tonx was laughing, doubled up against the wall holding his belly. The door behind him opened and the Chinese girl from earlier looked down at them. The floor she stood on was a foot higher than the floor of the hallway, thick blue mats covering its surface. She looked at Tonx and then down at Fed, now on his knees pressing his wrist between his thighs, tears welling up in his eyes.

"Tried that shit-ass nikyo on your brother, Tonx?" she asked. She turned toward Fed. "Don't worry about it, man. Your brother's the biggest wuss we got on the mat. Stick around and you'll see him get his."

Tonx reached a hand up and let her haul him through the gap, his hand lingering against her hip as he stepped in. "Hey there sweetheart" he murmured. "You dissing my nikyo?"

"Your nikyo ain't shit, baby," she murmured back, hopping down into the hallway and helping Fed to his feet.

"Give me that," she said, grabbing his hand and pushing gently against the inside of his wrist with the ball of her thumb. She ran her fingers up his arm, pushing deeply into the muscle. Fed felt his arm relax, the pain dissipate. "One of the rules is, 'you break it, you fix it,'" she informed him. "So I guess this means your brother owes me."

She still smelled like smoke, and up close Fed noticed she was about his height. He pulled away, his cheeks hot, mumbled a thank-you as he scrambled up into the room. He heard her chuckling softly behind him.

The room was roughly forty feet square, no windows. Bare concrete bore witness to a poor job done steaming off wallpaper and paint, tiny knobs of colored polyplasticines clinging here and there. The blue mats covered the entire floor, and two plain white doors stood on either side of the far wall. There was a low shelf on Fed's right with a little picture of an old guy and a huge scroll with a single Japanese character splashed on it hanging above. Fed flipped on his goggles, scanned the scroll and ran a query, got a quick answer.

"Love" the scroll said. Fed wrinkled his nose.

"What's this?" he asked Tonx.

"You mean the kanji?" Tonx asked, waving his hand at the scroll. "It's Ai, means love. Aikido is called the art of love. Kind of funny at first, but it makes sense once you've been doing it a while."

He swung around, his arms taking in the whole room. "This is our dojo - it's actually the back of the shop. We've got practice later, you can try it out. But first I want to show you something."

"You going to show him your fishies, Tonx?" asked Cass, letting her hair down and pulling it up again into a ponytail.

"Yeah" said Tonx, turning to give Fed that familiar half smile. "I'm going to show him my fishies."

Chapter #5

Tonx's room was a simulacrum of the one they had shared at their Mom's place. A futon sat on a frame covering the majority of the floor surrounded by a dense layer of clothing, printouts, discount reference books and bits of electronics. One wall was covered in gorilla racks, sturdy industrial-grade shelving. A thick data cable snaked out from a pair of rack-mount computers; pizza-box-sized systems Tonx had paired up to handle the throughput required for the VR he used to manipulate his bio work. A black plastic helmet of the same make as the one in the shop hung from a hook nailed into the wall over the bed, the data cable attached via rubber bands to nails in the wall.

What got his attention, though, were the tanks. The gorilla racks contained at least a dozen fish tanks of varying sizes. Each had a big metal canister like a coffee dispenser next to it, spiked metal sensor arrays protruded from each into the tank it accompanied. Tonx had glued recycled LCDs to the front of each tank and wired them to the canisters. As he watched, the displays cycled through a string of numbers and acronyms that meant absolutely nothing to Fed.

Tonx settled onto a stool in front of the shelves and thumbed on a strip light over one of the tanks. As Fed watched a fat goldfish swam into view over the blue pebbles covering the bottom of the tank. Tonx snickered.

"Watch this" he said.

He pulled out two film canisters from next to the tank, one white, one black, and emptied the contents of both into his hand. Then he dropped them into the water. The fish swam faster, darting around, poking at the canisters. It nudged and pushed at them until the air clinging to their sides tore away and they settled onto the bottom.

"You put food in those?" asked Fed.

"Nope" said Tonx, smiling. Inside the tank the fish seemed to have lost interest and was swimming around aimlessly. "Here. Drop one of these in."

Tonx handed him two small black rocks and a penny. Fed shrugged and dropped the penny into the tank.

Without hesitating the fish swam to the penny and grabbed it, wedging it into its mouth before swimming over to one film canister and then the other. The goldfish nudged the canister upright and deposited the penny inside.

Then the fish swam over to the side of the tank and looked out at him.

"Put in a rock" whispered Tonx, clearly enjoying himself. Fed did. The fish caught the rock before it hit the bottom and put it in the other canister, then returned to watching them from inside the glass. Tonx keyed in a sequence on the canister next to the tank and a thin slick of grayish fluid seeped out of one of the spines. Inside the tank the fish began to bob up against the surface of the water, sucking at the slick.

"What the fuck was that?" whispered Fed. Tonx just laughed and turned off the light over the tank.

"That, my little man" he said, "is a mutagenetically altered goldfish. Your brother here found a way to conjoin endomorphic neurological tissue with shocked brain tissue using genetically modified carcinogens." He smiled proudly.

Fed slowly raised his eyebrows. Tonx rolled his eyes and sighed. He was clearly enjoying himself.

"I cut and pasted some brains, and used a GM cancer to make it stick" he explained.

Fed let his eyebrows stay raised, waited for the long explanation that was sure to follow. Tonx strolled over to the futon and fell back on its rumpled sheets.

"The coursework I worked on at MIT focused on mutagenics. The big breakthrough I came into there was the use of endomorphic tissues - you remember that?"

"Yeah" said Fed, squinting as he remembered the hazy past, back when Tonx had been clean-cut, carefully clad, ready for his break into the corporate graduate schools. Ready to make it, big time. "Yeah, endomorphic tissue is from squids and stuff, yeah?"

"And a lot of other critters, yes. It's tissue that can readily change. Stuff like color, shape, firmness... that kind of stuff. Turns out that endomorphic tissue readily accepts mutagenesis."

"That is..." asked Fed.

"Meaning it's easy to hack its genetic code. Endomorphic tissue readily accepts changes to its base DNA sequences. It led to a bunch of patents Johnson & Johnson licensed off MIT for those T-cell multiplier Band-Aids. The ones they recalled because they gave a bunch of people a nasty rash?"

Fed remembered. "Yeah. Funny shit. Why was that?"

"Not everyone's body gets rid of mutagenic cells the same way - a lot of folks' skin freaked out and tried to isolate the cells thinking it was foreign tissue. Made lots of little bitty scars under the skin. Anyway, J&J got bit because they didn't test it well enough. They only used refugees from Serbia as a test base. They happened to have readily mutagenic-prone cell bases."

"So they didn't get the rash?"

"Exactly. But J&J imported the stuff here and slapped it on a bunch of people and all of a sudden the entire population of Irish Americans in New York started getting nasty zits. Biogenetics are like that, man. Got to take into account the entire variance of the human genome, you know?"

"So what about the goldfish?"

"Right. Lots of people had discovered that using endomorphic tissue as a base provided you with a ready chunk of material you could mutagenetically alter directly. But as a conversion vector it's got a lot of problems - mainly, the body thinks it's a virus.

"Just about the time I bailed from school some of my peers figured out that they could use cancer cells to create recombinants - cells that combine DNA sequences. The ability to hack cancer cells has been around a long time; you just set it up to create the cells of your choice and off you go. But the body readily identifies those cells as foreign, typically, and kills them. Cancer in the wild propagates because it finds a variety that's particularly virulent - whatever you end up mixing together at home is pretty easily taken care of by the immune system. So what we figured out was a marriage of the two - a genetically unstable cancer that sought endomorphic cells and was vulnerable to conjoining."

Tonx looked proudly up at Fed, his hands laced behind his head. Fed folded his arms.

"What the hell does that mean?" he asked.

Tonx smiled. "It means the cancer cells bust open the endomorphic cells and ingest part of their DNA. Makes a new cell, a combination of them both."

Tonx watched Fed for a moment, traced the slow steady vector of his thinking and pre-empted him. "The benefit of that is twofold. One, you don't have to try to introduce an entire DNA sequence into the cancer cell before you launch it. That shit's hard, and you usually get something too unstable to last long enough to get it into a new system. Two, the body starts out thinking it's trying to kill two things, and then suddenly those two things are gone and you have a third thing instead. Takes a little while for the body to adapt.

"The reason folks are so shit-hot to make this stuff work is for healing or replacing limbs or other tissue. If you could just stick a chunk of endomorphic base tissue onto the bloody stump of somebody's arm and have it grow back you'd have yourself some pretty powerful economic leverage.

"The way they've done it so far is by having the cancer cells look for two types of cells: stem cells, and endomorphic cells. Stem cells are endomorphic, so it's not as hard as it sounds."

Tonx paused, looked at Fed from the corner of one eye. "Stem cells are the ones that turn into whatever other kind of cells is needed."

"That's the stuff the breeders are used for, right? They get them out of embryos?" asked Fed.

"Yeah, but I'm not talking about that. Every body makes its own stem cells, it's part of the normal healing process."

"Okay" said Fed. "I got it." He was starting to enjoy himself now, the back-and-forth of his brother's stream of thought and his questions. Like old times. He found himself relaxing into learning, looking for holes in the logic, questioning his own knowledge and marking out things for later exploration.

"Good" said Tonx. "So you set up the cancer cells to ingest the transformative DNA sequence carried by the stem cell. That's the "message" the stem cell has about what it's supposed to turn into when it gets to the damaged part of the body. The cancer cell eats that, combines with the endomorphic tissue, and uses the message sequence from the stem cell to inform the final mutation. The result - if you're lucky - is a cell that's accepted into the body as a replacement for the damaged cell."

"So does the body accept it as native?" shot back Fed, seizing on a loose thread from earlier in the conversation. "You said that one of the benefits to the process was that the body starts out looking for two types of tissue, and then discovers a third."

Tonx nodded. "Bingo. The big problem is that no matter what you set up the mutagenic cells - that's the result of all this rigmarole - whatever you set up the mutagenic cells to be you end up with something that the host body thinks stinks. The delay you get by making it three-phase gives you time for the tissue to integrate, but eventually the body realizes it's permeated with shit, and attacks it. Right now my goldfish only last about two weeks. By the end of the first week they're

pretty damn smart, but eventually I always end up with retarded goldfish. They're fucking Algernons. Most die - I damage their brains to prompt the production of stem cells, and because the mutagenic cells replace the stem cells that were sent to heal the brain it ends up scarred. The fish's body thinks its got a malignant growth and eats any local connected brain tissue. Its immune system eats its own brain."

Tonx sighed, sat up and rummaged around under the edge of the bed. "The other problem is that you can only really make one kind of cell. If somebody gets their finger cut off the stem cells think they're supposed to produce a scab, and all the mutagenic cells absorb that message and you get a scab the size of the host medium - the endomorphic tissue - that you stapled on there. There's no way to make the mutagenic cells responsive to the variance of the host body's repair response." He pulled out a little golden jar and unscrewed it. The smell of strawberries swam through the room.

"That's the hurdle everyone's stuck on right now, except me - they keep ending up with one kind of cell, which is useless to them."

He began rubbing the contents of the jar into his lips with his thumb.

"Doesn't the goldfish have the same problem?" asked Fed.

"Nope. That's my brilliant discovery: brain tissue. Brain tissue is inherently mutagenic - it changes in response to use over time, like muscle, except electrolytic. So you can produce a shitload of the same type of tissue and integrate it into the brain, and the brain just thinks it's got new virgin brain to work with. It accepts it immediately and starts firing synapses like crazy to formulate usable neuropathways. You go from a genetic matrix to a neurochemical one - and the DNA base suddenly becomes moot. You sidestep the entire problem of DNA sequence variance, and just build a bigger brain. It populates itself."

Fed stared at his brother. "Let me get this straight. You smack the goldfish's brain to damage it, rub on some endomorphic tissue, shoot it up with your GM cancer, and the endomorphic tissue all turns to brain tissue?"

Tonx nodded.

"But how does that new tissue fit in its head? And how does the fish think with it?" he asked.

"One, you scrape out some of the bone. The brain is just lumped in a sack inside the skull, so once you have more room the endomorphic tissue swells to fit. Two, I don't know, but it seems to do okay. I think they see better, and they certainly learn better. Obviously size isn't everything - elephants aren't smarter than people - but the extra mass does seem to be used quickly as ancillary memory. In one case it grew out the visual cortex and the damn fish fit all the rocks in the bottom of the cage into a solid plate, just by sizing them. It doesn't much matter to me how it works, at least not yet. What matters is that you can make something smarter. If I could get this stuff to work on something bigger than a goldfish it wouldn't take much to test where and how to apply it for maximum results."

Tonx slowly leaned forward, his eyes glittering. "Can you imagine it?" he whispered. His brother's grin split wide across his face. It was the ultimate upgrade; it was the truest hack Fed had ever heard of.

"The big companies would never think of it" Fed said.

"Truer words were never spoken. They want marketability; they weren't able to make the leap. That's the advantage the undergrounds have got, Fed. We think outside the box because we ARE outside the box. Who would think of adding mass to your brain?"

Tonx's smile slowly faded. "The problem is that the changes never stick; it's just as vulnerable to immune system rejection as any other mutagenic recombinant. The worst part is that it's become a data-crunching problem. In a fish lumping on another gob of brain tissue isn't so big a deal. The genome's been mapped a bazillion times over, so finding combinations that are within a working range isn't so impossible. But even there it's taken forever to find something that will last two weeks. It's much harder to find something that'll pass as native to the goldfish's immune system - although I believe it's possible."

"Does that mean I can't become a genius here?" asked Fed.

"That's exactly what it means" said Tonx. "Trying to discover a working recombinant for three-way DNA mutagenesis in a more complex creature is orders of magnitude more complicated. It's just impossible."

Tonx leaned back on his elbows. "Each conjoined state needs to account for the entire genome's sequencing before and after that state's conversion, and the end recombinant needs to stay stable as usable tissue. The goldfish is about as dead simple as it gets - and it took me two years of processor time on every machine I could beg, borrow, or steal access to just to get this far."

"But isn't it just a matter of combination matching?" asked Fed. He realized his hands were shaking. It sounded impossible - but it wasn't. It was just very, very hard.

"Sure it's just a matter of combination matching" shouted Tonx. "But the combinations range in the millions of billions - and they all have to be cross-compatible. And any satisfactory result set needs to be cross-checked across the entire data set."

He screwed the lid roughly onto the jar and tossed it under the bed. "I wrote a short compiler to process the data I've got so far, but I don't have enough processing power. Nobody does. I know my code is crap but it just doesn't matter at this scale. To prove my work, to make it worthwhile, I need to figure out how to keep the cells from eating themselves, locate a reasonably intelligent endomorphic creature that has had its DNA fully mapped, and then co-opt all the computing

power in China to run the comparisons." He rubbed his hands over his eyes.

A faint thumping noise began, Fed's leg jumping nervously against the bottom rung of the stool.

"Okay." said Fed, quietly. His voice trembled slightly. He stared wide-eyed into space, his hands fastened tightly to his knees, fingers rubbing the junction where his sockets turned to flesh.

"Okay" he said again, louder. He looked at Tonx, a smile playing across his face. "You find me a data set for a real smart endomorph and I'll get you the computational power to design a match."

Tonx opened his mouth, closed it again. He frowned, and opened his mouth again.

"From all the computers in China." Fed said, and pulled out his chording keyboard.

Chapter #6

Poulpe tapped all ten fingers roughly onto the desk and pulled off the headset. The lights in the room slowly brightened as the panel set into the desk dimmed, an aesthetic touch by the Japanese designers who had implemented the system. As the room brightened Poulpe's log notes slowly faded from view on the walls around him, cast by projectors hidden in the molding. He watched as three charts he kept placed near the doorframe slowly disappeared. They showed a steady upward march of tic marks, and were listed against a timeline of three years.

The black plastic housing on the top of the tank next to him hummed gently, filtering the blood and loose bits of skin and muscle out of the water. He squinted at the display he'd stuck neatly to the outside of the tank, watched the pixels flash and dance there. Reaching out a finger he traced the fat grey cable running out of the display and into the water, connecting neatly to the beige plastic lid of the baby-food jar just under the surface next to the glass. He paused a moment, watching the red and yellow LEDs softly blinking on the top of the jar. A pair of glass pipettes had been pushed through the lid next to the cable, antibacterial medical tubing leading from them to the machinery in the tank top. Poulpe tapped gently on the glass, looking at the tiny gray mass perched on the brown stump of growth medium in the jar. He lightly jiggled the cable, watched the jar's contents slowly rotate until two small orbs swam into view. Poulpe examined the squid's eyes, willing them to life.

"Wakey-wakey" he said softly.

Poulpe stepped back, admiring the view it afforded of himself. He liked how he looked in the LCD screen, liked the way the squid brain perceived him. As always he wondered at the tracers and blurs of color that followed his motions. He'd observed that the overall picture took on richer, redder tones when the tissue was in pain, and cooler colors when fed or when feeding was likely to occur, but that wasn't really his business. In any case it certainly wasn't validated by any scientific analysis, and as such Poulpe refused to pay it any heed.

He stood up and carefully removed his paper-thin sanitary tyvec suit. He folded it with practiced ease, pressing the creases flat with familiar fingers before stacking it in the disposal. His hands adjusted his tie as he left the study, humming tunelessly to himself. Once in the kitchen he took down a covered bowl of soup and half a baguette, remnants from lunch. As the soup heated he grated fresh Parmesan over slices of tomato on the bread and put them in the oven to heat. The soup chimed just as he finished. Taking a white towel from its hook next to the microwave door he carefully placed the bowl in front of the window and slid the adjustment open just enough to allow a breeze. He slipped on his shoes and coat and stepped outside for a smoke, confident that the oven would cut the heat in time to prevent the cheese on the bread from burning.

It was early evening, a lull spot in the circadian rhythms of tourists and locals alike. Now was a shift-changing time, when cleaning crews came and went, sure not to disturb residents as they went out for early dinners or late lunches, or slept the dead, ignorant sleep of tourists, bodies discovering themselves under new skies. Poulpe slipped out of his building and onto the stoop, nodding at a Polish couple that was huddled under the doorway's overhang. A late October rain was threatening, fat sullen drops probing at windows and the hoods of cars. He lit his cigarette with a match from a matchbox that fit nicely in his coat. He had a case of them in the apartment; he'd first bought them from the cafe where he'd found them, after he'd discovered how well they fit in his jacket pocket. Now he ordered them from the manufacturer every six months. The Polish couple relaxed at the smell of his Portuguese cigarettes, lifting their own butts with stained fingers. Poulpe recognized the bluing around their cuticles as an indicator of neurological damage from the house cleaning supplies they were using. He didn't ask about it.

His comm vibrated against his hipbone. He had several optional units that he could wear about his person, but he was from an era where the first early comms had been pagers - simple alphanumeric devices - and he'd never gotten out of the habit of wearing a belt-mounted unit.

Poulpe nodded politely at the Polish couple and shuffled around towards the opposite side of the doorway, eyes squinted against the smoke that drifted into his eyes. "Yes?" he asked, lifting the comm to his ear.

"Oh" he said. "One moment please."

Poulpe switched the phone to his other hand, wedged it between his shoulder and his head as he took the cigarette out of his mouth. He went to drop it, reconsidered, and offered it to the Polish man. The man, an old, graying lump of a person, took the cigarette gingerly. The woman smiled at Poulpe, yellowed teeth jagged in her bloodied gums.

He turned his back on the couple. His free hand tapped out a silent staccato against the doorframe, his fingers a blur hidden by the fold of his coat. The comm chimed lightly, a secure connection established between himself and the voice on the other end of the line, and his hand stilled.

"All right. Go ahead" he said. A few words came through the comm, a quiet buzz against the background of the city.

"Yes. Of course. Right away." he said, and abruptly hung up the phone. He shoved it into his coat and stood still for a moment, his hand resting against the doorway. Then he fumbled in his jacket for a cigarette, dropped his matches and knelt suddenly to retrieve them, jerked a match from the box. He paused for a moment as the match came to life, lit his cigarette against the plume of the flame, inhaled. Poulpe's eyes focused on his fingers holding the dead match. After a moment the trembling stopped. Poulpe nodded approvingly as his fingers moved smoothly to put the matchbook back in his pocket, and finished his cigarette.

A short time later Poulpe sat quietly in his living room, staring out over the rooftops at the grey sky beyond. His gear was spread out in front of him, the needle resting tip-up, glistening. This was not proper; Poulpe never took his gear out of the windowless bathroom. But things were not as they should be.

For three years Poulpe had been working for his sponsor, as arranged, pursuing an elusive yet - he was certain - achievable goal. He had estimated three to five years to reach that goal, but his sponsor had apparently decided to exercise a termination clause in their agreement. Poulpe had not yet reached the goals he had been told to reach, despite making great progress. He knew that his sponsor had found him profitable, albeit in a limited way. His research was of narrow scope; it was not easily applied in marketable ways. Not at present.

Poulpe's work was expensive. His equipment was top-of-the-line. The samples he purchased from the exotic fish stores were of extremely limited quantity, and hence, very expensive. His habits, also, cost a great deal, despite being the sole reason he was able to work as he did. His fingertip traced the bruised flesh around the Teflon sleeve embedded in the crook of his arm.

Once, a long time ago, Poulpe had been widely recognized as brilliant. A leader in his field. Later, he was recognized as being somewhat misguided, and then, as very valuable when kept under the right conditions. Now he was here, at the end of that long, bright arc, and knew that a change must be made. Either Poulpe produced, or that arc died.

Poulpe was scared. He did not want that arc to die.

He found his fingers preparing another hit of a very expensive and somewhat exclusive combination of drugs. It was his third in as many hours, and yet the clarity he needed had still not developed. He knew he could not do much more without losing a whole day, a day gone to the white crystalline light that would seep through the edges of his thinking until there were no more thoughts, only an aching hot understanding. He couldn't afford that. He wouldn't see his supplier for another week, and this would leave him without for three days. He couldn't not have it for three days.

He left the hit on the table, put on his coat and walked outside. He lit a cigarette and walked down the market street and across town to the left bank of the Seine. The artist booths were there, cheap sketches by pseudo-talented students and perennial tourist leeches alike, old books, garage-sale dolls, prints from Taiwan of famed French watercolors. Off-color impressionist paintings to be crumpled on flights home, to be taken out and passed around through drink-stained fingers, "I bought this in Paris!" they would say, no-one knowing that the original artist had died of hunger or leprosy or been put to death for sodomy. "I bought this in Paris" they would say, their Euros falling through the mill of the legend of the left bank of the Seine.

Poulpe followed the river south until he found an American selling sunglasses. The tiny stall had all manner of out-of-fashion glasses available, some more expensive than others. He paid the price of dinner for two at any fine restaurant in Paris and collected the sunglasses and a little white cigarette. He crossed the street to the small cafe there; the Mucha Cafe. He sat outside despite the cold, admiring the crowd gathered there. The view was fine. He lit his cigarette, and put on the sunglasses.

The lasers in the glasses were a shock after using his headset for so long; they were not tuned to his particular corneal pattern and took much longer than he felt was necessary to map the back of his eyeballs. His eyes watered and he choked briefly on the harsh smoke as nausea chewed at his belly. Suddenly the sounds of the crowd around him cracked into focus; the cool touch of a tear on his cheek felt reassuring, and the cold seeping through his collar rolled sweetly across his neck. The drugs in the cigarette had kicked in. Just then a prompt appeared floating over the Seine, asking for a channel. A timer flickered into view superimposed over the table next to him, a bright pink character indicating the minutes left before his encrypted wireless connection would cease to exist. Given the lag in the timer's appearance Poulpe guessed the entire process was being tunneled out to some third-world organization.

Poulpe reclined into his chair. He smiled broadly, and launched an email client. He began to write.

Chapter #7

Fed went home just before Tonx started practice. He caught the train out of downtown and made it to the housing park just as the last bus rolled out. No one was in. His Mom had left a voice memo on the fridge's comp that she was out

with Bark, that he was treating her to a night on the town. He took a pizza out of the freezer, realized the ancient appliance was filthy. Knew that it had always been filthy. Once his pizza was hot he took it from the microwave and, as an afterthought, grabbed a beer from the back of the fridge. The beginning of the day seemed far away, a distant history as he rolled down the hall from the kitchen to his room.

He fell into his chair and swiveled around. The place seemed suddenly tiny, childish. Charts of old scripting languages were tacked to the wall, yellow stickies with IP addresses for long-gone servers peppering their edges. His desk lamp leaned crooked against one corner, its spring broken, hinges splinted with duct tape. The stacks of books on the edge of his desk sat leaden, unopenable. They were all entrance exam aids. All of them.

Fed finished his pizza and clicked off the lamp. He crawled up onto the top bunk and lay staring at the ceiling. The Beowulf cluster in the bunk below hummed quietly, the tiny red and yellow LEDs casting dim shadows against the wall across from him. Fed sighed gently and sat up before pulling off his legs. He took a jar of silicone lube from a crack between the mattress and the bed and applied it to his prosthetics' vulnerable joints, his fingers working deftly in the dark. When he was done he set them aside and massaged a tube of gel over his stumps, kneading the thickened tissue there back into pliability. There was nothing but the sound of his breathing, the hum of the fans in the machines beneath him.

Tonx's idea was amazing, was the coolest bio hack he'd ever heard of, and Fed wanted in on it. He knew he could pull together a virus that could get them the computing power they needed, knew it like a cold hard lump inside his head. A certainty that this chance was his.

And right there beside it was the fear; if he took this on he'd be out of school, dropped off his fast track to the big schools like a kitten from a car on the interstate. Bailing out for no good reason would be noted, his sudden absence ascribed to drugs use or, even worse, an inability to cope with the stress. Even if he came back he'd have to struggle against it.

Fed realized he was breathing fast, stopped and pulled down some deep breaths.

He could always claim medical problems. Say he had a growth spurt that landed him in a hospital for a while doing physical therapy to learn new legs. It had happened before and he'd always come right back.

But this was different, he knew. They would be watching more closely, this time. But still...

Fed finished rubbing gel into his stumps and lay back, pulling his goggles down over his eyes. Notes filled his vision, sketches of a virus that would take the DNA map Tonx was to find from some ectomorph and check it against a map of the human brain. They'd decided to go for broke; if it worked they would need some serious value to sell off the results, and knowing how to make a dog smart wasn't going to cut it. Not when you'd taken over China to find out how. Not when you'd virused the world.

Fed smiled, almost giggled. He pulled himself up on his elbows and flipped his goggles up, staring into the dark. In the dim light the stacks of books, the piles of notes on exams and dry half-dead languages, the trash from the last few years of his life crouched chaotically on his desk. He fell back onto the bed and laughed before yanking the goggles back on, the rubber straps catching the hairs on the back of his neck.

He was just starting to put together some basic processing modules when they chimed, lightly. It took a minute for Fed to realize what it was, the reaching fingers of the sound pawing at his cerebellum, pulling him back from the program. He fumbled to open the session, watched the chat client come up:

```
%<TONX> What up, Itlman?  
$<> Working. You get something?  
%<TONX> We got lucky.  
%<TONX> This channel secure?  
$<> Should B. BRB, let me C yr con.  
%<TONX> Ok, I use,..<@#$.#$><AS.%%:"OO9888>>>>>>>
```

Fed's hands flew over the chord as he rerouted their session through several secure servers, set up a one-time certificate to use, and re-initialized. Garbage characters flew across his retinas, randomness flooding his buffers to throw off any listeners. Their chat session connected again:

```
<PKI HANDSHAKE COMPLETE>  
<SSH CERT. VERIFIED>  
<IP 222.19.13.73 VERIFIED>  
<IPSEC CONNECTION INITIATED>  
  
<$CONNECTION RE-ESTABLISHED>
```

\$<> Looks good.

%<TONX> OK. Listen. I have a contact in France. High-end corp doing undrgrnd work on big gambit. Just got ordered to dump three years of work because he wasn't meeting their bottom line. Was told to start working on dead boring plastic-eating bacteria. Wants to sell out and get out. Will give up whole genome map for Pacific Octopus in exchange for our getting him out.

\$<> Octopus is good?

%<TONX> Highly endomorphic. Vry vry smrt; not well understood, but definitely fits. French contact has mapped and used tissue >2 yrs will supply working notes also.

\$<> LOL Fuckyah! Perfect.

%<TONX> He may know how to stop cancer's detection using squid's endomorphic tissue w/stem cell sequence; he pioneered the approach. Has same prob. as us - can't compute match for final recombinant.

\$<> Solve both prob at once. Neat.

%<TONX> We'd be stealing him from a major corp; they've got armed forces. We will have to produce fast to publicize results before they find him.

Fed felt something catch in his throat. His eyes unfocused. Somewhere, millimeters from his cornea, tiny vibrating pieces of glass tried to force the image of a blinking cursor onto the backs of his eyeballs. This was not what they had talked about. This was dangerous, suddenly. But if they pulled this off, Fed realized, they would own patentable rights on a way to increase human intelligence. The owners of this technology would become more than human. The world would change.

Fed sucked in a breath, hard. His heart hammered in his ears. He blinked, saw Tonx had written more:

%<TONX> Can you do it in 2 wks?

%<TONX> I guess this means no school 4 U. 8-)

The cursor blinked in Fed's eye. Something inside him tightened, hardened, released. He could do this. He would do this.

\$<> 2 wks no prob w/out sleep.

%<TONX> Excellent. It'd be better if you were local - can you move in over here?

The Beowulf cluster hummed beneath him, the subtle vibration an indication it had started its nightly log cleanup routines. The musty smell from the old tech in the room sat heavy in Fed's nostrils. The apartment he had known all his life sprawled still around him, lifeless. He was done here, he realized suddenly. Despite all his work there wasn't anything for him to stay for.

\$<> OK.

%<TONX> Come over tomorrow. Room will B tight; Poulpe wants 2 vst.

\$<> Poulpe?

%<TONX> Poulpe is contact; means octopus in French.

\$<TONX> He needs backdoor 2 undrgrnd tight & now. We'll disappear him. You do the data.

\$<> What r rsk's?

%<TONX> LOL. many. No pain no gain, ltlman. wlcem 2 undrgrnd.

</CONNECTION TERMINATED>

</IPSEC CONNECTION TERMINATED>

<IP 222.19.13.73 traceroute/nmap STARTED>

</PKI HANDSHAKE RELEASED>

Fed cancelled the trace; he'd already followed it when Tonx started the call. His senses filled the room, the size of this choice a weight heavy on his chest. There was no cooler task than this; it made dissecting public viruses look like a crossword puzzle. But it was dangerous. Corporate extractions were no joke. And he'd be set back a semester, easy, if he ever made it back to school at all.

He laughed, nervous, realized that a semester of school was the least of his worries, now.

It was a long time until he slept.

Chapter #8

Fed left a note on the fridge comp that he'd joined a study group for a couple months' intense prep work and would be gone a lot. Before he'd left the kitchen the fridge bonged at him and he saw a response from his Mom asking what it would cost. He keyed in that it was free in exchange for using branded materials, and shortly after she responded with an OK. That was all. Fed cleared the screen and stared at the smirking milk carton, the icon the manufacturer had chosen to represent its software. He felt sick.

Walking back into the living room he pulled his army-navy surplus backpack over the shoulders of the hacked adjacket. Its pockets were full of cables, jacks, minidisks and various types of flash media. He was pretty sure that everything he was going to do would be software, but he didn't want to have to wait for a run to Radio Shack for lack of a cable. His bag was full, almost too full, but it still seemed strange to Fed that he was about to walk out of the room he'd spent most of his life in and didn't need more than two cubic feet of it. He'd wiped the cluster and pulled the cable so nobody could access it from the net. To Fed's eye the regular pulse of the cluster's LEDs seemed like a glaring omission, the lack of irregular flashing to indicate up/downlinks as startling as a flatline to a med student. Fed grimaced, shifted his weight. No one else would notice.

He pushed a black knit cap down on his head, gothic print spelling out "Geek" in white lettering across his forehead. He walked out the door. As he went he flipped his goggles on and wobbled down the steps. Soon he was at the train station, then on his way downtown. The apartment grew distant; he thought of other things. Fed tracked the glyph on the little map in the corner of his vision automatically, his fingers clutching and spanning the chord as he exited the train. He was coding voraciously, line after line flowing through his fingers, precompiles whirring in the background as he pulled objects from predefined libraries, modified them, dropped them in the hopper for cross-compatibility checks. He was in the zone again, his feet finding the pavement automatically. As per Tonx's instructions he'd plotted a new route so he didn't come to the store the same way, and he followed the map overlay without thinking about it. His mind was consumed with the structure of the program he was writing, the delicate architectures of subprocesses hanging in his mind. At random intervals his chord squirted encrypted and compressed chunks of data to one of a series of secured servers according to predefined daemons he'd integrated into his development environment. Fed was zoned in, feeling the code. He flowed.

He'd put on his backpack with both straps and his lungs emptied to vacuum when the backpack's handle was yanked backwards. His vision swam, his eyes suddenly unable to distinguish between the overlaid code and the street in front of him.

"Pay me" a dull voice demanded. Fed looked up, the overlays fading as he focused beyond their reach. The rainbow mohawk decorating the skinny Asian youth in front of him vibrated slightly as he cocked his head at Fed and raised a thin, perforated eyebrow. Half a dozen black metal rods punctured its length, tiny OLEDs pulsing blue at their tips. Fed blinked, saw the street was mostly deserted, wondered if it had been when he'd walked into it.

"I said pay me, man" repeated the boy. He'd had extensive muscle work done to his shoulders, but it hadn't taken in his arms. He looked as though someone had slid oversized sausages into his collarbones, huge slugs of muscle twitching under his skin. He forearms were spindly by comparison, a grotesque man-boy combination. He was wearing a muscle shirt and had thick tattoos scrawled across his biceps. The ink was mottled where the tissue had wrinkled up, the muscles there rejecting the treatment so obviously at odds with his genetics. Somebody behind him said something in a language Fed didn't understand, and the boy laughed. Fed twisted and saw a couple Samoan-looking men standing behind him. They both sported various kinds of facial piercing and fat slabs of muscle work, their mowhawks looking like a child's party decoration as perched on daddy's pit bull. One of them held Fed's bag with a huge hand, smiled when Fed tried to squirm to see more of him. He twisted back, noticed that there were several more mohawk-sporting youths standing around him.

"You want cash or credit?" the first guy asked, raising his other eyebrow as he imitated thousands of immigrant Asian workers in shops the world over, unconsciously mocking himself. Fed realized his mouth was open. He couldn't talk; all he could think of were the lines of code he'd been working on.

One of Samoans swayed into view and gently lifted Fed's arms, carefully working the straps of his backpack off his shoulders. He smiled as he worked, ignoring Fed, and shortly after disappeared again.

"Okay, good" said skinny. His shirt was too short and Fed noticed his belly button was an outy. It was disturbing, seeing that little lump of flesh protruding between his shirt bottom and the top of his pants.

"Now give me the gogs and keys and we'll talk, okay? Have a nice talk."

Fed tried to run.

It was a bad idea. A dozen multicolored gang members grabbed hold of him and pulled him to the ground. Somebody kicked him in the stomach and he doubled over in a bright sticky flash of pain. In a moment he found himself zip-tied and on his face, his hands behind his head and his legs pulled up behind him, zip-tied to the straps on his wrists. He heaved for breath, gasped a mouthful of grit from the street as hands started running through his pockets.

He'd just started breathing again when the hands slowed, then stopped. He became aware of a quiet, rapid conversation in a language he didn't understand taking place just beyond his field of vision. The shiny black toe-caps of a small pair of army-navy's stepped in front of his face, oversized heavy canvas cargo pants tied into their tops with expert laces. He followed the legs upwards, saw where a tight nylon turtleneck was tucked into a big leather belt, wrapped around a slim woman's torso. He followed the swell of her breasts over the taut stomach, caught her big dark eyes and the soft smile on

her lips. It was Cass.

"You just got expensive, Feed" Cass said, her smile suddenly gone. She nodded and someone cut the zip ties loose. He scrambled to his feet, almost fell as he noticed the universally unhappy faces which surrounded him. All the rainbow boys wore matching petulant expressions, brows knit and arms folded. Cass said something to them and Fed's bag landed in front of him with a crunch. Slowly, bits and pieces of his things were tossed on the pile. "Okay?" asked Cass to Fed, her hips canted, eyes twisted narrowly.

Fed rummaged through the pile, failed to find his backup. "My H.D." he said "my backup's gone."

"What's it look like?" she asked, slowly.

"Black. About this long. Three ports and a v.2 PCMCIA slot on..."

"Good enough" she interrupted, turning to Skinny. He looked like he'd swallowed something spiny and distasteful and was studiously ignoring them. Cass shouted a word at him, and when he jumped she followed it with a long string of invectives. He waited until she was done and inhaled sharply, shouted back a similarly unintelligible range of tonal adjectives Fed couldn't follow but certainly understood. He paused to inhale again and hurled a final word at her. A silence the size of Montana dropped onto the street. One of the Samoans to one side of Cass blew out his cheeks and turned red, glancing to his huge partner in shocked embarrassment. Fed didn't know what that word meant, but he tried hard not to remember it.

Cass's eyebrows had flown to the delicate arch of her forehead when he'd finished, and now her lips slowly twisted into a vicious snarl. She paused, reached into her jacket. Everybody's eyes followed her hand as it slipped inside the pocket there, slowly retracted holding a gunmetal grey, square object the size of two packs of gum.

She flicked her wrist and the voice comm snapped open, a hyperkinetic techno tune exploding into the air in fully rendered midi. Everyone jumped. Skinny grimaced, mashed his teeth together, the tendons in his neck pulling taut. Cass hit a speed-dial number and held the phone to her ear. Skinny leapt forward, his hands flailing and an unstoppable stream of begging demands flowing from his throat. He danced around as Cass kept the phone firmly in place. Suddenly he leapt to Fed's right to grab his backup drive from behind the back of one of his minions. He pressed the drive into Fed's shaking hands and pleaded to Cass, crouching in front of her as though he was about to cry, actually getting onto his knees as she regarded him. Fed clutched the drive to his chest and she snapped the phone shut, smiled sweetly at Skinny.

"You can fuck off now, okay?" she asked in jilted English, a perfect impression of a cartoon anime girl. The rainbow boys disappeared, funneling through an alley at a trot. Cass unfolded her arms and turned to Fed. "You're more of a pain in the ass than your brother is." She adjusted her jacket and the phone disappeared.

"How'd you do that?" he asked.

"I know his mom" said Cass. "Now you want to tell me what the fuck you were thinking?"

"I wasn't paying attention" he said. He was shaking, his stomach a cold fist. "I was coding."

"You were coding" said Cass flatly. "Of course." She laughed, shook her head. "My percentage just raised, I'm telling you that. Dumb shit motherfucker..." she strode over to a garishly bright biodiesel scooter. It was the same one he'd seen pushed down the street the day before.

"Hey, didn't those guys have that scooter yesterday?" he asked, pulling his bag back onto his shoulders. She folded her long legs gently around the creaking vinyl of the seat, palmed the lock off. "Yeah" she said. "So what?"

"Never mind" said Fed. His wrists ached and his lungs hurt. "What are you doing here?"

"Saving your stupid ass, mostly. I was delivering. Hop on and I'll take you back."

Fed straddled the tiny scooter's seat behind her, its steeply angled plastic driving his crotch into his brother's girlfriend's lower back. Her arms stretched out in front of him, the tiny hairs on the back of her neck tickling his nose as he tried to hold on to the seat. She smelled fantastic, musky and fresh, and his groin sprang to life as he slipped once, twice into the seat and against her.

"You trying to kill me with that thing?" she asked with a smile, her breath sweet on his face. Fed blushed furiously, his mouth stammering. "Don't worry honey, I know that size isn't everything."

She laughed at her own joke and pressed the ignition. The scooter shuddered to life, hydraulics lifting it up off the street. The smell of burnt toast exploded through the air.

"Smells funny" shouted Fed over the buzzing roar of the engine. The scooter was excruciatingly loud, far louder than an engine that size should be.

"Modded like hell" she shouted back at him. "Like everything else."

She pulled a shiny black helmet over her head, reached back and grabbed his arms and wrapped them around her. The rubber of the tires snatched hold of the concrete and they rocketed up the street, the hydraulics in the scooter tilting sharply to keep their weight distributed over the center of balance. The engine noise crept to a high-pitched whine as Cass banked right and they cannoned into an alley, flying over cobblestones and out into an empty marketplace. She flipped their weight the other direction and wove through the shiny metal posts used to hold tarps over tables when the market was in use, turned again towards a short hill. She was practically sitting on him by the time they flew off the top of the hill, the bike snapping its wheels back under them from the distorted configuration it had used to push them up the slope. They landed with a thump and she swerved around a broken-down VW bug, its battered carcass perforated with tiny bullet holes. The bike

downshifted as they slowed, then sped up going down a long hill past boarded-up windows before turning into another alley. Cass let the bike coast out, the angry squeal stuttering out into a slow guttural growl. Eventually she stopped in front of a three-story brownstone with two floorless metal decks curving out from the top floors. The windows were dark behind sheets of grime, the bottom floor windows hidden behind black plastic spray boarding. Cass got off the bike and switched it off, peeled the helmet back to reveal a blazing, idiot smile.

"Goddamn, that shit's hot!" she said. She tossed the helmet to Fed and told him not to move, turned and waltzed into the apartment like she was going to powder her nose. He was breathing heavily.

Two minutes passed. Five. Fifteen. Fed was seriously considering contacting his brother when Cass appeared again, chatting sweetly with someone as she crossed the threshold and out onto the street. Behind her followed the most horrifically modified person Fed had ever seen.

Most of the online fights these days were between mods, people who'd had their bodies augmented to minimize the damage they received and maximized the damage they could dish out. The giant who followed Cass made her look like a child, was a caricature of what a man could imagine being. Muscles the size of Fed's thighs wrapped around his arms, snaked up to where his neck should be, but wasn't. He had had his ears removed, tiny holes ridged with chemically induced calluses. His nose was also gone, replaced by tiny slits that made him look snakelike, and his eyes peered from within heavily muscled tissue implants. His brow had been grown out, probably using coral bone grafts, and when he spoke Fed saw that his lips had been reduced and his teeth uniformly replaced with titanium incisors. The metal plates under the skin wrapping the top of his head gave him an animal look, made his head appear to be growing straight out of his torso, and as he gently raised Cass's hand to his face in a parody of a gentlemanly kiss Fed could see his hand had also been modified. He only had three thick fingers on each hand, burn-treatments and bone-replacement surgery turning delicate body mass into hammers mounted on the end of the man's wrists. For the second time that day Fed felt like pissing himself, and then the man turned and looked over Cass's head to stare at him.

Cass skipped lightly over to the scooter, followed in two heavy steps by the monstrosity. Fed was sure the street shuddered as he walked.

"Fed, this is Marcus. Marcus was winner of the Australian Triples last year. He's a good friend of your brother's."

Fed nodded dumbly. Marcus smiled, the tight hole where his mouth was splitting like a tear in a steak to spread over sharp metallic teeth.

"Marcus was wondering if you could help him. He's having trouble with his computer." said Cass. "I was told you were good with computers."

Chapter #9

"Have you tried rebooting?" asked Fed. He couldn't imagine what this beast would use a computer for.

"I don't want to lose my data" explained Marcus. His voice was deep, but not unusually so, and the slight lisp his lack of lips gave him was hardly noticeable. "I'm running a metabolic simulation over some new work I'd like your brother to do, and I think I may be suffering from insufficient RAM."

Fed stared upwards at Marcus. Something in the back of his head reminded him that time was passing. "You what?" he asked, dumbly.

Marcus glanced at Cass, then back at Fed. "A metabolic simulation. Most of my mods involve increased mass, and the metabolism required to support it requires some pretty tricky calculations. If I put on too much weight I could overload my heart. It's Swiss, but it's still just a heart."

Fed realized he was acting like an idiot. "Can I see your machine?" he asked.

"Sure" said Marcus. "Come on in. Park your bike on the sidewalk and we'll secure it from inside."

They walked into the house through the doorway, Marcus stepping sideways to get through the frame. Inside was a large living room lined with couches, a series of colorful throw rugs giving the place the feel of an Afghani restaurant. Marcus yelled upstairs to someone, and a man's voice called back that the bike was taken care of. Marcus led them through the living room past a dining room whose walls were covered in posters of transhumanists and bodmodders of all stripes. One of the posters prominently placed at the head of the table was of Marcus, his arms held aloft in the middle of a huge metal cage. His head and upper body were coated in blood. The picture was foreshortened and Fed couldn't make out what was lying on the mat behind him. "I still say I owe that one to you guys" Marcus said to Cass, seeing the poster catch Fed's eye.

"Don't be silly" replied Cass. "You trained hard for that and you deserved it. I'm just glad we got to take part."

"Your brother designed the tetrahydroxide combines which allowed me to survive that fight" said Marcus to Fed. He led them into a cozy kitchen and gestured at the oversized bar stools which surrounded the raised table.

"Please excuse the furniture" he said. "Tea or coffee?"

Fed began to get the feeling that he should be asking about a rabbit hole. "What's tetrahydroxide?" he asked.

"Tea please, Marcus" said Cass as she looked demurely at the wallpaper.

"Tetrahydroxide is an amine that can only be processed in combination with an over-oxygenated blood supply. My

particular physiology allows me to metabolize a large amount of it quickly without having to worry about toxic shock." He thumped his oversized chest and leaned his head conspiratorially towards Fed. "Oversized lungs. More of your brother's work."

He leaned back. "Cassandra here authored the theory and worked with your brother to create an implant that would allow me to ingest it in a fight without having to worry about my liver falling out. They designed it to respond to the anaerobic wastes accumulated when fatigue sets in. Most fighters' mixers aren't so clever by half, and end up wasted mid-way through the second round. Because of them I was able to stage a massive comeback in the third round and tear Tichowsky apart!"

Fed had no doubt. Marcus turned and began to pull tiny teacups from the cupboard and place them on a battered black wooden tray.

"Cassandra?" he whispered at Cass across the table.

"Say it again and I'll pull your guts out your navel!" she whispered back sweetly.

He was about to say more when Marcus placed the tray on the table. He followed it with milk and sugar in slightly chipped cups before going back to the stove. Instead he turned to Cass and asked, "Why'd you call me Feed?"

"That's what Mil calls you" said Cass "and I think it's cute."

"That doesn't make any sense" Fed said. "My name sounds more like 'fed' than 'feed.' It's stupid."

She shrugged, unconcerned.

"How is Mil?" asked Marcus as he returned to the table. He cradled a steaming teapot in one hand and carefully enfolded the top of the stool with the other as he squeezed into the remaining seat.

"Still asking when you're going to come back and play" Cass said with a smile. Marcus laughed loudly, his chest creaking loudly.

"Not a chance, my dear. Mil is too far my superior for me to want such a lesson again any time soon." Marcus raised his giant paws and pointed his palms at them both. "These were expensive, and I'll thank him not to break them."

"You fought Mil?" gaped Fed as Marcus poured him his tea with one thick digit carefully plastered over the teapot's lid. Marcus smiled broadly.

"I wouldn't call it a fight" he said. "I put a few holes in the wall and made a lot of noise, and he danced around and gave me two sprained wrists." He chuckled again, leaning back in his chair, remembering.

"Funny thing was he kept telling me what he was going to do before he did it. 'Marcus, you need to be calming down now or I'm going to pop your other wrist. You won't fight again for a long time, it's a big shame'"

Marcus's imitation of Mil was spot-on perfect, and both Fed and Cass were snortling tea and giggling as Marcus continued, his trunk-like arms swaying gently in imitation of the skinny little man's fluid movements.

"There, see, I told you that was a bad idea. Now how long you will be healing? Marcus, you are making a scene. You're embarrassing yourself Marcus."

Cass covered her mouth with one palm, her shoulders shaking with laughter as they imagined Mil casually breaking down the giant mod fighter. Marcus chuckled and sipped his tea. "Mil is a gentleman, don't get me wrong, but he most certainly does not fight fair."

Fed laughed again in disbelief at the thought of the no-holds barred mod fighter asking for a fair fight, but decided against asking any more about it. Marcus finished his tea, and eventually they got around to examining his computer. The interface was a six-foot square whiteboard with thick stubby pens Marcus could easily manipulate with his oversized hands. Fed found the problem almost immediately. A memory leak in one of the programs used in the simulations was accumulating in RAM and choking the system on memory swaps. Fed didn't want to mess with the program's code, so he ran a cleanup program, making a few performance tweaks to Marcus's system and generally cleaning house a little. Marcus politely asked questions along the way so Fed showed him a few ways to keep memory fragmentation down as well as running him through how to clean up after his simulation programs so the leak wouldn't get out of control.

"With a little luck that ought to solve your problem and keep things running more smoothly. I would get more RAM though, especially if you're going to be running complex models like that on a regular basis."

"Thank you, Feed. I appreciate the help" said Marcus politely. "I'd ask my brother to help, but sometimes the cure is worse than the disease." He followed them to the entranceway and helped Cass with her coat. Outside the scooter was surrounded by a laser-painted red circle slowly pulsing clockwise around the perimeter of the bike. Looking up, Fed saw the black muzzle of something duct-taped to a bright yellow plastic Sony waldo. The thing had to have been designed for children, its joints encased in cheery pink plastic ducting.

"Cessus!" shouted Marcus into the doorway. The laser light blinked out. "I apologize for my roommate's lack of manners. He's deeply involved in something, I'm sure." said Marcus. "You should be able to mount your bike now."

They saddled up on the bike and waved goodbye to Marcus. This time Cass drove off slowly.

They drove a few dozen blocks back into Chinatown and pulled up to the back of the garage next to Greener Pastures. Cass leaned on the horn until the door next to the corrugated pull-down opened and a tiny little Asian man leaned out. He was wearing a filthy baseball cap on backwards, but his smile when he saw Cass on the bike was big and genuine. She revved the engine a few times before stabbing a thumb at the doorway. The little man nodded and disappeared, reappearing a moment later as the garage door pulled upwards. He was wearing filthy blue service overalls, and was shortly joined by three other, identical little men. Cass pushed the bike inside and shut it off, stepping back to admire it with the rest of them. Cass started swapping notes with them in language Fed didn't understand, but he could tell by the tone of their voices and the low soft whistles that they were impressed. After several rounds of laughing and pointing grimy fingers at various parts of the bike she grabbed a socket wrench and a screwdriver. With a few deft twists of her wrist she pulled open a side panel and started popping screws. Her fingers flew over the polished metal housing, sculpted pieces of aluminum-bonded carbon fiber panels neatly lining themselves up to reveal the bare metal skeleton of the bike. Cass suddenly stood up, her hands on her hips. Even Fed was impressed - revealed, the bike was a pure racing machine. He could see weld marks where extra struts had been put in to support additional stress, and at least two extra shock plates. The Japanese men whistled again, loud and low. Cass nodded.

"Who did that?" asked Fed. The men ignored him, pointing and murmuring among themselves.

"I did" said Cass. "Come on." She tossed the first guy the keys and gestured for Fed to follow her. They exited via the front door past the big plastic dragons and crossed over to enter Greener Pastures. Mil was working in the front room, this time setting up some muscle boxes. The square red plastic cases contained all the ingredients needed to shock muscle groups into sudden growth, and Mil was busily strapping them to a rangy redheaded man. The guy had a split tongue he was sucking on through his teeth as the muscle box stabbed and massaged the hormones into his chest. Having something cut into your muscle a thousand times a second wasn't fun, but Fed understood that the pain was part of the procedure. It was a rite of passage.

They nodded at Mil as they entered, Fed following Cass towards the back of the store.

"You made that bike?" Fed asked.

"I modded it. The design is good, but when you bore out the pistons and amp up the carburetor you have to put in extra supports and..." she paused, glanced back at Fed.

"You have to hack it a little" she summarized.

"Who were those guys?" asked Fed.

"They let me use their shop" said Cass. "I worked there originally until I started at Greener Pastures, after I came up from California. Just basic chop shop work."

"You speak Japanese with them?" asked Fed.

"They're Chinese. They speak Mandarin. Mandarin slang, really - folks around here come from a lot of places, so they drop a lot of weird verbiage in from other places" she said.

"Where did you learn that? Are you Chinese?" he asked.

"Swiss" she said without turning. Her voice was flat, a studious neutral. "Swiss French. From Sion." She stopped and turned to look at him. "You know where that is?"

He'd kept his goggles on after the bike ride, not in small part because he felt nervous about not understanding what the guys at the garage were saying. His buffer had caught her comment, and now he keyed against the text string, chose a visual representation of the data. Suddenly he was staring at a map of Switzerland. "Yeah. About... two hours from Zurich?" No, four hours - his fingers fluttered against the chord in his pocket, saw a swarm of train schedules fly by, an agent resolve an answer. "No, sorry. Two hours twenty-five minutes by train from Zurich. Looks like they're not using the maglev there yet, huh?" Fed smirked.

She smiled out of one corner of her mouth, turned and continued down the hallway.

"We marked off part of the dojo for you. It's not very respectful to Sansei" - she jabbed a thumb towards the front of the store - "but he agreed that if we were doing it to fund a full dojo it was worth impinging a little. Just remember to take your shoes off, okay? You don't have to bow."

She stepped into the Dojo, which was dark, and bent to take off her shoes. Fed was reminded again that she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen in person. There was something about the way she moved, her long limbs, the arc of her neck, the way she bent her arms. She stood and clapped her hands. A light went on inside a blue bubble out in the far corner of the room. "Shoes" she reminded him over her shoulder, and walked towards the light.

He slipped out of his canvas converse - black, retro - and followed. The light soon resolved into a one-person camp tent, an OLED panel lashed inside the top of its arced roof. A thick yellow power cord fed from the shadows of the Dojo's edge to under the tent's. An ethernet cable was wrapped neatly around it, secured every couple feet with black electrical tape. It was tidy work, definitely not Tonx's. Cass knelt and tightened a zip-tie securing the cord to a tent strut before crawling in, her slim figure turning to blue-tinged shadows. A moment later her head appeared.

"You coming?" she asked.

Inside the power cord was connecting to a translucent blue chest. The chest was empty other than a UPS (in case of power surges, Fed noted approvingly) and a power strip. One slot in the strip snaked up and out of the chest through a wire-

clip mounting in a hole on the back of the chest, connecting to the OLED. The ethernet cable fed into a splitter, one lead feeding the OLED and the other taped against the side of the chest with several feet coiled loosely through the handle. The floor of the dojo was covered in thick soft mats, and as Fed sat back he saw that Cass was sitting on a tightly rolled sleeping bag in brilliant orange cameo.

"Thought of everything" he said.

"The cable's connected to the main server rack in Tonx's room" Cass said. "It's limited, but Tonx said you'd hack into it easy enough. I try to keep things neat around here, despite Tonx's best efforts."

They sat quietly for a moment. Fed pushed his bag up next to the chest, looked around his new blue bubble.

"Why do you like it dark?" Cass asked.

"What?"

"Tonx said you'd like the rest of the Dojo to be dark. Said that's how you liked to program. How come?"

Fed thought a moment. "It helps me see what I'm doing" he said. "When I program, it's like I'm seeing the shape of the code, of the program. It's easier to do when I can't see anything else."

Cass nodded, smiled slightly. Fed wondered if she thought he was crazy.

"He thinks you're pretty good" she said. Her eyes reflected the glow of the OLED panel overhead. "Are you?"

"I guess so" he said. "What's it to you?"

"It's my ass on the line. Maybe Tonx didn't tell you, but this is a big fucking deal. He's pulling in a lot of favors to make this one go through. There's a lot of risk involved. Tonx has every confidence in you, but I don't know you from shit."

She tilted her head and leaned forward, suddenly threatening, the muscles in her neck tight. "You going to let us down, Fed?"

Fed didn't say anything. Cass watched him. When he'd been a kid Fed's Dad had held him by the chin for the better part of twenty minutes, yelling at him that he wasn't anything if he couldn't look him in the eye. Fed had almost pissed himself on the cheap carpeting of their second-rate flat, but he had ended up staring his Dad down, looking into where his Dad really was, looking there and not flinching. Fed and Tonx had talked about it later, agreed that it was important somehow. Fed didn't know where his Dad was now, but he knew he could keep his eyes pegged on this girl when it mattered. It mattered now.

"I'll do it" he said.

She smiled that same half-smile again. "We'll see. Just don't get us killed, okay?" Cass leaned forward to crawl past Fed.

"Where is he?" he asked.

"Who, Tonx? He's out making arrangements. Our man is coming in through Florida and Tonx's asked some colleagues to make the pickup. Tonx's pretty well known in the body-mod scene down there. He's done a lot of work, mostly on the Cuban edgers. They got some real hardcore shit. Tonx helped pioneer a lot of it." She stopped, half-in, half-out of the tent. "You don't know much about him, do you?"

Fed pulled out some drives and a hub and started cabling them together. Cass was gone a moment later.

Chapter #11

Poulpe was feeling spectacular. He sat in the smooth, grey leather seats of SAS's first class front row, the slow, gentle red flashes of LED clusters on the wing tip outside accompanying his heartbeat. A gentle music, most likely Bach, played in his headphones, and a gorgeous young stewardess had just brought him a steaming towelette. It smelled of fresh lemons, and massaged his pores nicely.

He'd known they'd have agents waiting for him at the airport, known that they couldn't cover all the terminals. The airport had been made a public building and security had been terminated and handed over to the public on the basis of repeated strikes - Parisians were famous for their strikes - and now the security personnel was Joe Everyman. The Charles d'Gaule had taken on the air of Grand Central Station. It was full of people bustling about, studying each other with a removed distance, ignoring each other with the mild paranoia of intense self-interest.

His sponsor could not have known how things worked here; the intricate micro-politics of black market subsidies and megacorporation buy-ins to the newly publicly held facility made it a rat's nest of legal and illegal possibilities; the routes from the subway outside to the inside of an outbound plane were infinite. Shortly after he'd arrived at the airport's edges he'd located a Nigerian dope-dealer. Part of the cost of his purchase included a fresh passport and a ticket.

He'd taken his ticket and the little aluminum-foil wrapped plug and gone directly through a service entrance. The Nigerian man had advised him it led to an unused bathroom with a good lock. The drug traffickers had worked a deal with the unions that maintained the airport facilities, and had regular access to "under repair" restrooms and service halls.

Before he'd left his apartment he had manufactured a very pure mix of methamphetamines and antipsychotic to help control the urge to panic. It had made him a bit jittery, he thought, and so now felt it worthwhile to make use of the heroin he had bought. He entered the all-green one-piece plastic bathroom, carefully stepping over the blue puddle of cleaning fluid pooling over its drain, and made his preparations. While he was there he carefully washed his hands and

inserted the smallest finger of his left hand into his rectum.

The remains of his work - approximately three ounces of medium separated into twenty-eight distinct, unpatented, and unique viral agents - were sealed in plastic and seated comfortably inside his anus. He had used a woman's prophylactic to mount it there, and was fairly confident that a probe would consider it an enlarged prostate. He smiled as he knelt in the stall with his pants around his ankles. His was a familiar paranoia, a friendly, jovial, I'm-your-mother-here-to-eat-you kind of paranoia, and it was helpful to him. He submitted to it with all the industry he had applied to the last three years of work.

His dealer was gone when he emerged, which was to be expected. He pulled his suit coat on with a flourish and allowed the aluminum foil to fly from his hand and into an abandoned potted plant arrangement as he did so. It wasn't a safe thing to do, but he was feeling flashy - most likely an aftereffect of the amphetamine mix, he decided.

Ten minutes later he had entered his terminal through the service entrance the Nigerian had sold him access to and was beginning to smile uncontrollably. A part of him, a sensible part, felt that perhaps he had been overgenerous with the Nigerian's products. Several times he became dizzy and had to check again to assure himself that he was in the right terminal.

He blinked, and the flight was boarding. Blinked again, and was onboard. He'd upgraded himself, it seemed. He was pleased. He awoke some small time later, on the down slope of his buzz, very pleasantly surprised indeed to find himself both alive and experiencing the best part of his high in such lovely surroundings.

He ordered a Bordeaux, noted that it was excellent.

Some time later he arrived in Florida and was the first one out of the plane. The translucent panels in the boarding ramp's walls revealed a drizzly morning, dim grey light that must surely become hot and sticky later in the day. Poulpe resolved to do some shopping before allowing his contact's men to abscond him; thermoplast beige was certainly unsuitable for this climate.

Poulpe wandered out of the ramp and down the aisle, noting with amusement the bright OLED panels flashing advertising across every available surface, the endless parade of American product shipped straight from China. He was pleased to see more Spanish than English, allowed his eye to accumulate information about the local styles. The third store he passed contained a number of quite nice Armani knock-offs, probably made locally. He picked out a pair of oversized cotton trousers in wheat color, matched it with a coat in exaggerated Cuban style, and waited patiently while the store owner scanned him for a shirt to match. He tried on the trousers while the shirt was spun up in the back, pleased with their fit and the way they breathed.

A gentle knock on the door accompanied a flash of his shirt through the plastic panel. He hummed a tune and opened the door a crack, reached out to accept the shirt.

He saw the black stub before it hit his hand, recognized the mean silvery tabs sticking out of each side before it dumped several thousand volts through his nervous system. His body convulsed, threw him back against the rear of the stall, made all the hairs across his pale bare torso fly upwards in angry arcs. The door was open before he landed, a short, ugly man in a hunting vest and cement-colored pants pulling his body over and plastering his hands flat against each other. Something cold and sticky enfolded his fingers before the man pulled him to his feet by his hair. Poulpe's eyes watered with pain, struggling to get his breath back, his chest sick and twitching with residual endomuscular electricity. He staggered against the side of the stall and a strong hand grabbed his neck, pulled a T-shirt over his head. He noticed another man visible through the doorway of the stall, this one speaking calmly through a head-mounted mic tucked over his ear. He was tanned and hard, this man, and as his lips moved his calm grey eyes tracked his, watching him.

The first man was padding through Poulpe's pockets, sifting through his bag in a swift and orderly fashion. Poulpe began to babble; "I can pay you. Whatever they've offered you, let me assure you..."

He stopped as the man stood up and said something short in a guttural tongue. It was clear he either didn't understand Poulpe or didn't care to, and to prove the point he slapped a strip of duct-tape hard over Poulpe's mouth. Poulpe felt his jacket pull over his shoulders as he stared in disbelief at the man across the hall, stared into the cold grey eyes. "De Boers" the man in the vest had said. Bounty hunters from Africa, disenfranchised mountain people who had modeled themselves after the Yakuza clans of Japan. They spoke only their own tongue and were known for never rescinding on their contracts. They were not kind people.

Poulpe's legs began to tremble.

Chapter #12

Despite the circumstances Fed's new home was good as gold. After he'd finished taping together a stack of drives and arranged them in the case he'd rolled out the bag and plugged in. The OLED overhead had a good wide viewing angle, so he could see it pretty much anywhere from the inside of the tent, and after a few minutes of playing with it he'd set it up as a light. It cycled through some color patterns he'd pulled from an old UCLA psych lab, stuff designed to enhance productivity and encourage calm thinking. A short while later he found that Tonx had given him root on the cluster in his room, and that the cluster was heavy; his brother had scored some powerful machines. Fed grinned in the dim light of the tent, appreciating both that Tonx trusted him enough to let him have complete Admin privileges and that the boxes he was going to play with

were respectably badass. He set up some background daemons and routed their output to run along the edge of the OLED. They would keep him informed of the cluster's resources and monitor other users, if any. Then he synced his goggles and chord to the OLED and set his gogs for medium opacity. Now when he looked at his workspace, floating over his field of vision, the OLED sat behind it, slowly pulsing and cycling through the color tests. His status charts were lined up neat, his buffers clear, ready to go. He set up a few compile jobs and keyed in a script to let him drop them onto the OLED instead of in his immediate vision, and went to work.

His first task was homework. He'd already sketched out what he thought he wanted the virus's executable to look like, but he didn't know nearly enough about handling data sets of that size. A few search agents later he found that the National University of Laos was getting a lot of rep for their statistical analysis approach to genome-related data processing. Most first-world corporations were ignoring the actual number crunching in favor of predictive programming and fancy guesswork using chaos theory and quantum computing, but Laos was sufficiently backwards to be breaking new ground on the topic. Fortunately most of their scientists were from L.A., so he didn't have to worry about running the coursework and research papers through a translator. It was tough work, though; the math was way over his head and he had to cross-reference the pertinent parts of undergrad courses from other universities for most of the afternoon to get up to speed.

Fortunately Universities were set up as huge reference corpuses. Since the work Laos was doing was based on fairly common math (albeit math deemed impractical for use due to the computational power required) Fed was able to find a bunch of FAQs and tutorials arranged by relevance to the learning methods he liked to use. They were highlighted in order so he could jump back to the example problems illustrated in the coursework. Fed knew it was incomplete knowledge at best, but it meant he could transfer it into code, which was the problem at hand. It was a delicate balance - if you ignored too much you were bound to misapply the formula and not know it, and if you didn't skim over enough you could spend the rest of your life researching. But figuring out what was important and how to apply it was what Fed did. It was what he was good at.

Six hours later Fed's eyes were burning and his back was sore, but he had the basis of the Laotian formulas he'd need. He'd completed the fifteen sample sets used in their quarterly exams and walked through at least eight introductory tutorials. He flipped up his goggles and rubbed his eyes, keyed off the OLED and crawled out of the tent.

It was quiet, the only sound the gentle hum of the air intake ducts high in the walls overhead. Fed stretched into empty space, reaching for the ceiling and smiling. He bent and reached for his feet, wiggled his toes and his fingers, crawled back into the tent. He tore a single-serving sack of juice from its foil string and ripped open a nutraceutical bar. Old fashioned, yoghurt-coated. He pulled a stack of shirts out from his bag and piled them up under his lower back, flipped his gogs back down and went to work.

The next part of the problem was figuring out how to build the actual virus itself. The D3\$Troy virus author had used the libraries from the Nokia picture frames to protest the draconian licensing scheme they were using. While it was certainly funny to morph pictures of people's grandkids into penises tattooed with the name "Nokia", the virus wasn't quite broad enough in scope for Fed's purposes. He knew the libraries the D3\$Troy virus had used could effect the contents of the program, but figuring out how to use them to drop a trojaned payload onto dozens of different platforms was something else. He had a good idea for how to incorporate the Laotian algorithms into code, and also how to redirect the calls for coordinating the recombinant matching, but not how to get the code to execute and propagate.

The Chinese had made it easy for him, in a lot of ways. Years ago they'd given Microsoft the finger and implemented a government-mandated OS based on Linux. In typical bureaucratic fashion they included required updates, and also in typical bureaucratic fashion they used an outdated, kludgy technology to do it, requiring that new software be downloaded on a regular basis. The general consensus among Chinese hackers was that it was a method for maintaining constant observation over the public, particularly because a lot of the code made calls back to centralized servers. It didn't matter to Fed. What mattered was that all the computers in China ran the leaked Chrysler-Daimler code in a picture display program that nobody used, but which was run as part of every software update. Picture show apps were a dime a dozen; that the Chinese government had endorsed a particular one for its people didn't mean it was the one they liked, and nobody was going to use an app that showed ads instead of every third picture.

The catch was that China had some heinous outbound/inbound net proxies. They wouldn't do much against his virus, but it would make getting the huge data set it would generate out of China difficult. For a start it would require knowing a whole lot more about their security systems and filters. And then there was the problem of deploying the damn thing...

Fed heaved a sigh and tabbed through his notes. It was there, all right. The virus he was after was there somewhere, nascent, unformed. But it was there.

Fed sighed again and started running agents to get him data on China's content filters.

Chapter #13

Tonx sat in the Chicago O'Hare airport, fingers laced behind his head, bobbing slightly to the new trance tunes Cass had fed his comp before he left. He was excited to meet Poulpe in person; they'd collaborated together at least a dozen times and he had a lot of respect for him. The man was sharp and had consistently surprised him with his insights. That he had put

his life in Tonx's hands didn't ease that weight much, Tonx was pleased to discover. He rolled the feeling around his head, took its measure. The next few weeks were going to be big. Tonx smiled, adjusted his sunglasses, watched the scrollbar roll across the bottom of the lenses' edge, and waited.

He'd just hit that alpha state of relaxed wakefulness, that edge of sleep, when the call from Pharoe brought him instantly to anxious consciousness. He wasn't supposed to be getting calls now, here. Something was wrong.

"Hey man, what's up?" he said in forced amicability.

"Oh, you know" said the cool voice on the other end of the line. "Just wondering when you're coming, what with your flight being delayed and all that."

This was bad. Pharoe was paranoid at the best of times; calling to say there was a delay, and on an unencrypted line, meant something had been seriously fucked up.

"As long as the plane's able to fly I'll be there, man. I'll check the schedules and drop you a message" he said.

"No worries, they make them planes tough. I'll be looking for your message. Adios, bro."

"Ciao" Tonx said.

He waited a moment, forced himself to take ten full breaths, cleared his head. First order of business was getting a clear comm channel. He hesitated, then dialed in a call to Fed.

His comm beeped six times before his brother's sleepy voice fell onto the line. "Hello?" said Fed, "Tonx?"

"You betcha, bro" said Tonx. "Listen, I need you wakey-wakey ASAP, ok? I just realized I missed an important email but I can't get to it from here. Think you can access it for me?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Fed. "You're calling me, aren't you? What's the problem with your connection?"

Tonx cursed his brother's lack of guile, massaged his forehead with his thumb and forefinger.

"Oh, you know me!" he laughed. "I think I hozored my mail client. It's a message from Aunt Penny. Think you can help me out, Fed?"

There was silence on the line for a minute.

"Aunt Penny?" Fed asked.

Tonx pursed his lips, waited, hoped.

"Okay, Tonx. No problem. Ah, do you want me to fix your email client while I'm at it?"

Tonx smiled, closed his eyes. "Yeah, man, that'd be a huge fucking help. You think you can figure a way to get a good connection to me here? I'm at an airport and they don't let you initiate any outbounds except for web traffic."

"No problem" said Fed, his voice warming, the purr of a challenge in his words. "Sit tight. How recently did Aunt Penny message you do you think?"

"Real recently. I'd guess it's the only message I'd have gotten to that account in the last hour or so."

"Okay" said Fed, and hung up.

Tonx sat back, put his hands behind his head, and practiced breathing. Aunt Penny was a codeword they'd used when they were kids, a character from a Penny Arcade game mod they'd both liked. The mod had included some porn skins, and Aunt Penny was the code word they'd used in front of their mother to refer to anything in the game involving downloading or running the mods. It was ancient history, but Fed had remembered and caught on. The boy had promise, Tonx thought. Thank god.

Twenty minutes later Tonx's comm beeped and he watched a web address scroll by. It was an Angelfire site, a free hosting provider that paid for itself through copious pop-up ads and flashing banners branded across whatever content you put up. The sites they hosted were about as temporary as anything you'd find on the Net, havens for porn and warez. Angelfire admins constantly worked through the content deleting sites that violated their terms of service, frequently enough that most folks ignored stuff hosted there entirely as it was likely gone by the time you'd found the URL. But it was a perfect place to host something like this.

Tonx clicked the link and watched a page expand. The colors were a little washed because his glasses were so lightweight, but it was clear enough for him to see the mauve background and tope ad text flashing across the top of the page. The design screamed amateur and violated every decent web page design rule out there, but before Tonx could read more an alert box appeared asking if he wanted to accept a security certificate from an unknown source. Tonx checked the cert and smiled at its owner, one Mrs. Gabriel Penny. He clicked OK and watched his browser initiate a secure handshake, encrypting the connection. The box disappeared and the page resolved itself. Tonx laughed; the page had two text boxes, one for him to type in and the other for text to appear in, and the boxes were flanked by pixilated topless women gyrating clumsily. It was ancient game art from the mod they'd played - Mrs. Penny at her finest. It also violated Angelfire's terms of service and guaranteed a half-life of about an hour for the page. The whole setup was primitive, but it fit the bill for what Tonx needed, and Fed had put it together fast. Words appeared in the top text box:

<?> Sorry to force text, but the airport only allows secure web sessions. Still had to proxy it through a bank transaction traffic rebounder to get an acceptable route. It's crackable, but they'll need a big data set to do it. I'm limiting us to 11,000 bytes."

Tonx watched as the tiny counter at the bottom of the page iterated to 41, stopped as Fed stopped typing.

<X> Excellent. You get the mail?

<?> Yeah, only one account had a single email arrive in the last hour. Who setup your security? Your cluster's tighter than a pre-teen Moslem.

<X> Who said I didn't?

<?> I did, you aren't that good. Here's the mail, from "Pharoe Munch."

The text Fed pasted in appeared in blue, indicated it was copied from another source. Tonx chewed his lip briefly, put his hands in his armpits.

<?> I don't get all that, but it doesn't sound good. And is this shit babelfished? It reads like it's converted from something other than English.

<X> Yeah, its spanglish and street slang from down south. I need you to find Cass and get her to contact a guy named Cessus. That's who setup my box's security, he's fucking badass security guy. Watch him - he's crazy.

<?> Okay, what do I tell him?

<X> Looks like the Boers got Poulpe locked up tight in some backwater in Florida. Pharoe's boys got a way to jack him, but we need to make sure no data leaks back to his sponsors. The GPS coordinates are in his email.

Tonx thought for a moment, added:

<X> Tell Cessus our man worked for the mouse. He'll go for it. He hates the megacorps big fierce.

<?> ??

<X> How long does this channel stay open for?

<?> I'd give it another half hour.

<X> Can you relay a command line through this? I need to do some biz. We need a way out of here, assuming we turn up with a live person instead of a corpse.

<?> No prob. Call me if you run out of word count and I'll rerun this site somewhere else. Be quick, though - not too many folks transmit that much traffic to their bank, so the Airport will start looking soon.

<X> Thanks

The text box cleared and the login for Tonx's account scrolled past. A family of four, both parents wearing matching Coca-Cola corp suits, strolled by carrying an assortment of luggage. Their two boys towed behind in kids' versions of the outfits, the swirling coke label animated and swirling on their backs, laughing and poking at each other with tiny pistols. Tonx started typing.

Chapter #14

Fed couldn't find Cass, and her comm wasn't responding to his pings. He'd gotten what he thought must be a private address for her off the server, but she wasn't responding to that either. Eventually he swore and scrambled into his adjacket, tabbed a security lock onto the OLED and his connection and crawled out of the tent. This wasn't his gig; he didn't do meatspace. Tonx had said something about Boers, which was serious shit. If Boers were involved someone was going to get killed. He swore again as he wandered, blind, through the dark of the dojo. He wasn't supposed to be doing this; he was here to code, not run around finding people. But Tonx was in trouble. He stumbled over his shoes, sat down and fumbled with their ties in the dark. He wasn't used to tying them on; at home he just left them on and took his legs off.

He got the shoes on and went through the door. He wandered through the shop but it was empty, the front locked down tight. The metal grating had a padlock on it, and he wasn't going to waste time searching for a key. Instead he hustled to the private exit and down the long white hall. The door shut behind him with the jangling click-click of wired locks.

He followed the curve of the building, nervous now, unsure what he was going to do or how he would do it. His stomach had started to ache. He'd walked almost a full city block when he came to a turn, recognized a familiar side street and broke into a jog. Seconds later he was banging on the faded blue metal fire door next to the corrugated gate they'd taken the scooter through. It opened a moment later, the tiny Asian guy that'd taken Cass's keys appearing, his face seamed into a scowl. One eye widened when he saw Fed, and he stepped back a little. "Yeah?" he asked.

"I need the bike" said Fed.

The man took off his cap, scratched the back of his head, and studied Fed.

"Anata no baka desu ka?" he asked.

"Shit" breathed Fed. He peered over the man's head into the garage. There in the back of the room was Cass's bike, half-lit under a desk lamp jacked together with duct tape. He pointed.

"That. I need to get a ride on that" he said.

The guy looked back at Fed from where he'd followed the direction of his arm, smiled a crooked smile. Shadows emerged from under some kind of car over to the left, oil-resistant soles scuffing against the concrete. The man turned towards the dark of the garage, called out a string of words Fed would never understand. Fed swore again and pushed his way inside.

The little guy didn't like that, but he didn't touch Fed. A suddenly flurry of voices rang through the garage as he walked quickly towards the bike. He'd almost reached it when a loud pop smacked the air and Fed got the odd feeling that he'd just been shot at. He looked the poster board over the workbench on his right, next to the scooter, and watched a three-inch drill bit droop, then fall clattering to the bench. He turned slowly away from the bench, his hands jumping to his ears.

Two of the little men were standing nearby with a two-foot crowbar and a three-foot wrench, respectively. Over towards the car one of them had just fitted another drill bit into the compressor he'd shot the first one from. He was smiling broadly, clearly pleased at his shot. He'd done this before. The guy Fed had pushed by stood over to Fed's left, out of reach. He held a dented tin can in one hand, and when Fed looked at him he turned his head slightly away and smiled broadly, thick eyebrows rising into a mass of wrinkled forehead. "Yeah?" he asked again.

"Cass. I need to get a hold of Cass" Fed said.

"Cass?" asked the man. He held up his free hand to his head, thumb towards his ear, pinky finger jutting out towards his mouth in a gesture Fed's parents would have made, a sign for old-school voice comm. Fed tapped his ear, shook his head.

"No. No answer. Cass. no. answer."

The guy held his hand out and pretended to type on a computer. Fed gritted his teeth.

"No. No answer that way either." Didn't these guys understand? She'd shut off her comm lines, period.

"Listen, it's im-por-tant. Muy importante. Very important. I need to talk to Cass!"

The Asian guy adjusted his cap and walked a large semicircle around Fed, towards the scooter. He nodded at the guy with the compressor drill and set his cup onto the counter, reached out and gently shook one of the scooter's handlebars.

For a second nothing happened, and then a high-pitched siren howl burst out of the scooter. Fed jumped, scrambling backwards against the counter, his heart in his throat. The little man squinted and shook his head at the noise. It split off a moment later, the guy with the drill yelling and waving his hand at the one who'd touched the scooter. He staggered backwards and started swearing in fluent English as a pale grey smoke came up from the floor where the fluid from the cup had spilled. The counter was obviously immune; the yellow liquid had pooled slightly there, but a charred black smudge was growing where it was dropping onto the floor. Cass's voice came from the belly of the scooter:

"You're fucking with my bike and I'm about half a minute away. I suggest you get the fuck out of there before I show up and cut your head off." Her voice rang with authority and anger, and it took a second for Fed to realize she didn't have a visual.

"Cass, you there?" he asked. There was a pause.

"Feed? Who's fucking with my bike?"

"Me. I couldn't reach you and Tonx needs help ASAP. I need to get to Cessus and was going to borrow your bike."

"Idiot" she said, her voice breaking slightly. "I thought someone was fucking with my fucking bike. Is Wang there?" Fed looked at the four men standing around him, two of them scattering cat litter across the counter and the floor.

"Um, yeah."

She spoke for a minute or two in Chinese, punctuated twice when the guy who'd opened the door made agreeable noises in the bike's direction. She switched to English. "Feed? You know how to drive a scooter?"

"Yeah, of course" he said. He'd ridden scooters before. Old ones. A couple times.

"I'll meet you there, just give me a chance to get some clothes on. Cessus's address is loaded into the helmet. And Feed, don't fuck up my bike. It runs hot, so don't granny it."

The background buzz of the connection clicked off and Wang (Fed assumed it was Wang) handed him the keys. It took him a few moments to figure out how to disconnect the lock, longer to get the helmet off the hook and onto his head. It was tight, crushing his ears, but Fed was grateful to discover a familiar interface appear on the inside of the helmet's faceplate. He wheeled it out the door, turned it on, and saddled up. He managed to get the helmet synced to his map data, the route charting itself to the address Cass had listed under Cessus's name. He slowly twisted the throttle. The bike screamed at him as he edged on the clutch, vibrating angrily. Fed ground his teeth under the helmet, rolled out onto the mostly empty road, tried to take it up to speed. He never got there; the bike wasn't happy at less than full bore, and even at halfway open Fed was lucky not to take out a lamppost. By the time he arrived at Marcus's the bike's heat readout was approaching redline, the aftermarket pipes hazy in the heat radiation. It stank of frying plastic, but he'd made it.

Fed dismounted, turned to see Marcus filling the doorway, arms folded, eyes glinting in the deep folds of his face.

"Welcome back, Feed" he said, his voice deep. "Cass called. What's the problem?"

"Tell you inside" said Fed, jogging up the stairs and past Marcus. "The bike okay there?"

"It's fine" called a voice from inside. It was the voice Fed had heard when he was here last, from upstairs.

"Cessus" said Fed as he walked in, entered the broad, couch-filled living room. At the far end was a tall black man

sprawled out in a gleaming white terrycloth bathrobe, legs spread out in front of him. He had tiny round spectacles perched on the bridge of his long, sharp nose, a huge mane of thick dreadlocks sprouting from his head. In the fingers of one hand he held a tall blue bong, gently considering its gleam in the light. The room was rank with the smell of hash. Fed looked closer, realized his glasses weren't glasses, they were implants. There was nothing connecting the lenses over his nose, and the arms disappeared into the side of his head. As he watched Cessus smiled and revealed a neat row of clean white teeth. The small round lenses in front of his eyes rotated away from his nose, flipping towards the side of his head, sliding slowly into place alongside his temples. He released a huge cloud of smoke, choked, started giggling, stamping his feet as he struggled for breath.

"None other" he choked out, laughing, red eyes peering fiendishly at Fed. "What I can do you for?"

"Shit" breathed Fed.

"Take a seat" said Marcus, guiding him with one huge paw into a couch next to Cessus. He turned to the other man. "We secure here?"

"Sure" said Cessus. "I plugged the holes when you got me up. Costs, but what price liberty?" He smiled again at Fed, winked.

"Okay. Feed, why don't you tell us what Tonx needs. Cass mentioned Boers, which is bad news. What's the situation?"

Fed told them what he knew. Tonx had said to trust them, and he didn't see that he had any other choice.

"Tonx told me to tell you our man used to work for the mouse" he said to Cessus when he was done. "He said that'd mean something to you."

Up until then Cessus had been basically horizontal, taking the occasional toke but otherwise looking bored. As soon as Fed mentioned the mouse he sat bolt upright, turned a snarling jeer at Fed.

"Booyah!" he screamed, hurling the bong across the room. It shattered against the opposite wall, glass shards raining on an unused couch. "Fucking stealing from Disney, are we? Booyah!" he jumped at Fed, arms waving, his bleary red eyes wide. Marcus sighed gently and reached up with one huge arm, grasped Cessus's shoulder with his hand and shoved him back onto the couch. "Christ" he cursed softly, getting up and fetching a broom and bucket.

"Disney?" asked Fed.

"That's the mouse, man. Your Bro knows. Booyah!" said Cessus, disentangling himself from the couch and the tie on his robe. "You got stats on their local?"

"Yeah, of course. What are we going to do?" said Fed.

"We gonna lock 'em down, my friend. Easy-cheesy." Cessus peered carefully at Fed, "Marcus says you know comps. What's your specialty?"

"Code, I guess" said Fed self-consciously.

"You a script kiddie?" Cessus asked, squinting at him from one eye.

"Fuck no" frowned Fed. "I write my own scripts."

"You understand networking protocols? Mostly?"

"Mostly" agreed Fed "I can read log files and make sense out of them."

"Good enough" smiled Cessus. "We'll invoke Pan and drop them after Alice. But first!" he stood up, his robe falling open to reveal two long halves of a flaccid, split penis, "we get dressed!"

Cessus tore out of the room, the sound of his heels hammering against the stairs as he took them two at a time. Marcus grunted, rising from where he had been sweeping up the remnants of the bong. "He's crazy, but he's good" he said.

"That's your brother?" asked Fed. He didn't know what to think; Cessus's bizarre performance had left him reeling.

"We're all brothers here" said Marcus. "Cessus and I go way back."

He turned and walked into the kitchen, emptied the broken pieces of glass into the trashcan. He reemerged carrying an unmarked spray bottle full of green cleaning fluid. The room stank of bong water, a long brown stain fresh against others, Fed noticed. Marcus nudged the couch with his foot, causing it to jump towards Fed, bunching up carpet as it went. "Ignore what he says and watch what he does" Marcus advised. "He really is brilliant. You could learn a lot from him."

He finished spraying down the wall and splashed a liberal dose of the fluid on the floor behind the couch, hooked its edge with his foot and pulled it back into place. "You want some tea?"

Chapter #15

Cass had arrived twenty minutes later, five minutes after Cessus had strolled downstairs in black slacks and neat black suit shirt. He had a silver tie neatly knotted around his neck, thin black lines patterned after silicon circuit boards. He disregarded their invitation to tea in favor of fetching a metal briefcase and disappearing to fill it. Cass stormed in eyes blazing, and went straight towards Fed.

"You blued my fucking pipes, asshole. Had to ride it hot, didn't you?"

"It ran hot naturally" he said.

"No shit it runs hot naturally. The things fucking well air-cooled, isn't it? What'd you do, stop-n-go through traffic the whole way here?"

"Perhaps we can deal with the matter at hand?" asked Marcus. He was drinking a protein shake from a BiggestGulp mug, 48 ounces of chocolate sludge that he had promised Fed did not taste like it looked.

"Fed tells us your man has been captured by Boers and is being held in a small cabin in rural Florida. We downloaded some satellite prints and it is, indeed, the middle of nowhere."

"Where's Tonx?" asked Cass.

"We're waiting to hear from him" said Marcus.

"He's in Chicago" interrupted Cessus from the doorway. "I got him a secure line through a kids terminal. He doesn't like competing with the children, but it's more secure than your hack." He smiled at Fed. Some of his dreads had been replaced with tapered vinyl tubes. "You left your end of the connection open; not likely they would've found you backwards from the proxy, but not safe either."

"How'd you know?" demanded Fed.

"Traced your hack from Tonx's end. Got to do your homework, my boy." He strolled into the kitchen and winked at Cass. "Care to go for a ride? I'd love to do some more reconnaissance, but don't see any reason to advertise our work from here."

Five minutes later they were all piled into Marcus's Pinto, Fed tucked into the center of the back seat. The driver's seat was remounted almost into the trunk to fit Marcus.

"Where'd you find this car?" asked Fed. "You must have had to shop around."

"Cass made a few changes for me" said Marcus. "At my size it's hard to find a car that really fits."

"Do you mod everything?" Fed asked Cass.

"Everything I can get my hands on" said Cass. She gave him that same sweet dangerous smile, "But don't worry. I'm strictly into mechanics."

As they swung onto the road Cessus pulled an ancient grey laptop out of his briefcase and seated it on his lap.

"A laptop?" asked Fed in disbelief.

"Marcus said you might want to learn something. To that end I've brought this screen; as an illustrative aid. Why don't you watch and tell me what I'm doing?"

"Okay" said Fed, shuffling forward to peer over Cessus's shoulder as the system booted up. Cessus put a little grey plug into its USB port, thumbed a switch on it. A yellow LED on the plug began to glow. There was a transparent plastic shield fitted over the keys. He gently rubbed each of his fingernails. They were black, thick plastic press-ons glued in place.

"Those shells?" Fed asked, excited.

"Oh yeah" smiled Cessus. "They got them as implants now, you know that? This shit is the only way to work, and the implants are supposed to be way more sensitive. Got to get me some of that, we make any money off this run."

He ran a config program, quickly pressed each of his fingers forward, back, side to side, the shells calibrating against the movement of the blood under his fingernails as he pressed his fingers down. The LED on the plug flashed, his fingernails synching up. Then he started setting up daemons.

"Okay, you're splitting all our comm channels to reassign themselves through a proxy list. Am I right?"

Cessus smiled again. "Go on."

"That's... that's an encryption module? You're swapping channels for the remodulated packets. For the proxy list, yeah? You're making voice packets look like text packets, basic stenography... okay, what's that?"

The conversation continued while Marcus drove aimlessly around town. Cass was clearly bored out of her mind and tried to make some calls until Cessus told her she was violating the ether.

"You're making too much noise for us to monitor the cell traffic" Fed explained. He was impressed. The security protocols Cessus was using were extremely complex, but elegantly arranged. He wove their data streams according to some logic Fed couldn't understand until they were stacked next to each other. Once they sat together it made perfect sense. It was wonderful to watch, like beautiful code but real-time, reactive. Cessus was dancing with the data, arranging a set where they were invisible, the data turning inside itself.

Suddenly he was done, shuttled his work to a half-screen graph view, nine columns of traffic gently streaming up the screen, each representing a different data type or path. It didn't look like anything, anymore, or rather it looked just like the data streams had before he started. It would look like that whatever they did. They were hidden.

"Fuck" said Fed. He was grinning like an idiot.

"You got your gogs on?" asked Cessus.

"Yeah" said Fed.

"Okay, look for a music device in your PAN."

"PAN?" asked Cass.

"Personal Area Network. Old-school term for short-range devices; for a while they wanted to market everything by range. You know, WAN for stuff like cell networks, LAN for wired networks or WiFi networks in your house, PAN for your MP3 or OGG player and your watch and gogs and stuff. But once the wireless technologies started getting cross-compatible nobody thought of it like that anymore."

"Fucking marketese bullshit" said Cass. "Why can't they just let people call it what it is?"

Marcus grunted, bored. "How about some music?" he asked. He had an old-fashioned single-purpose music player mounted in the dash, text display only.

"Please" said Cass.

Marcus spun through a long list of artists, his huge fingers moving deftly until he settled on something called Astrid Gilberto. The faint strains of cocktail lounge settled through the car, a woman's soft voice da-da-dading along with it. Marcus hummed quietly along, turning down streets at random.

"You find the music device?" asked Cessus.

"Yeah" said Fed. "But why?"

"Sync it" said Cessus. "And run the visualization option."

Fed did as he was told. All music devices came with little apps to make random shape and color shows, but Fed wasn't sure Marcus's would provide anything useful.

Instead the nine columns he had seen on Cessus's screen appeared in rippling rainbow colors, rendered in swirling hypnagogic pixels. Fed snorted. "Clever" he said.

"Thank you, kind sir" said Cessus. "Marcus's stereo is disconnected from the networks for security reasons, but anybody watching could only reasonably expect that his car would have one and that it would be broadcasting. I've only synced the text patterns - the colors are modulating as expected. The difference between what you're seeing and what anyone else would see is attributable to lag on your comp's end and the packet loss inherent in syncing on such a weak connection over any further distance. So. I think you can watch those packets for any sign of trouble, if you please."

"Excellent" said Fed. "What now?"

"Now we find out what to listen to" said Cessus. "They're in a little house in the middle of nowhere. We have an address and GPS coordinates. Nothing else. How do we figure out their comms?"

"Uh, can we trace the address to an owner, figure out the data line that way?"

"Good thinking, but I would expect the owner's name is faked, or at least nonassociated. But that far out there I'll bet they're running wires only. Probably copper, probably owned by an ex-Baby Bell. All those wirelines are leased, and the Bells had them divided and subgrouped geographically."

"So we just need to find..." Fed's voice faded as Cessus began tabbing through maps, geometric shapes etched on them in brilliant red. "Where did you get those?" he asked.

"Bells were busted long time ago. Tracing their maps against ISPs and traffic owners is a good basic practice for seeing the patterns. Got to understand the beast's bones before you eat the meat. Now, here. There's only this one main trunk near their location. It's leased out to Gaterville Countryside ISP, LLC. Let's see what their security looks like, shall we?"

Fed watched as Cessus dissected the ISP's firewall, set agents to gather traffic in and out of their open ports, diagnosed their operating system, detection countermeasures, their security's weaknesses and flaws. Cessus eventually found a mail session started through an unencrypted link to a public server from an account at the ISP and sucked out the password and login. Then he set up some filters to watch for the same login being used elsewhere. Sure enough, not ten minutes later the login was used with any encrypted handshake to run a shell to the same server the mail session had connected to. Thirty seconds and Cessus had logged in and discovered root access.

"Okay" said Cessus. "Now that we've got full admin privileges over here, how do we get back to the ISP?"

"Log files" said Fed. Check for when this guy went the other direction and connect in some believable way."

"Good idea. How about we assure that we can get back here again some other time, first?"

Cessus installed three separate root kits, backdoors hidden in four different places in case any one of them was found and deactivated. Then he scanned the log files for a secure shell connection to the ISP's primary servers, found one and discovered it provided a root connection straight to the ISP.

He logged out and erased the connection from the log, backed out from the mail server entirely.

"What are you doing?" asked Fed. "We had access!"

"You know what it is if it smells like shit?" asked Cessus. "It probably IS shit. That was easy, too easy. I didn't like how it smelled."

"I don't like how this car smells" said Cass. "You want to drop me off downtown so I can do some biz? My boyfriend's gone missing and sitting here listening you two hackers babble on is making me nuts."

"I agree" added Marcus. "Is there a safe connection I can leave you guys at for a little while? I would also like to do some business."

Cessus sighed. "It's not as safe if we don't keep moving, but we could do an hour on the tower. Is that cool?"

"Sure" said Marcus. "Let me drop Cass off first."

He headed downtown towards the banking district, down to where a long strip of restaurants and tourist joints jostled for space. They said goodbye to Cass, who promptly turned and disappeared into the crowd, and then headed north towards Cartoff Tower. Cessus pulled a discreet corporate-cut dread bag, matt black, over his dreads.

"Are your dreads wired into your brain?" asked Fed. Cessus smiled, a glint of gold in his teeth.

"No. They monitor temperature, electrical activity and such - for meditational purposes. But they don't jolt my brain. I don't need that kind of feedback fucking up my senses."

Marcus dropped them off in front of the tower, waved goodbye.

"They are spiked with memory metal, though" Cessus said. "For heat diffusion."

Fed grunted as they turned towards the tower entrance, huge glass doors spanned by bronze touchpads, fountains flanking each entrance in gaudy laser-lit gushes.

"Memory metal?" asked Fed, more for conversation than any real curiosity. The hotel made him nervous - too many suits, too many people looking down their noses at him, wondering about why this kid was here with this dreadlocked weirdo.

"Nitinol. Flexible wire, returns to its original form when my head gets above resting temperature. It's pretty weak, but it can lift some hair. I came up with the idea and Cass wired everything in. Thought the patent would do me some good, but it looks like folks haven't caught on to the trend yet."

Cessus nodded at the doorman, his briefcase held casually at his side. Fed felt suddenly out of place, the sound of the street cut off abruptly as the doors sealed shut behind them. They approached a bank of elevators, got inside.

"The Nitinol wires I use were formed straight, bonded to rubberized inserts implanted in my skull. Osseointegration, bonding gold/titanium amalgam plugs with bone. Your brother's a wizard at it - he's reinforced almost half of Marcus's skeleton that way."

He glanced at Fed, and added, "It takes a lot of skill, otherwise you get Heterotopic Ossification."

"Hetero what?" asked Fed, his eyebrows meeting as he tried to decide if Cessus was making stuff up.

"Heterotopic Ossification. It's a condition that sometimes happens with major implants. Used to be hip replacements were most vulnerable - basically the body starts trying to re-form the replaced skeletal tissue. You get pieces of bone forming inside the muscles around what you replaced. It hurts."

"Are you joking?" asked Fed. "Has it happened to Marcus?"

"Nope. Like I said, your brother's good. One of the best."

Cessus punched the top floor and stood back, hands folded over the handle of the briefcase.

"Anyway, the end result of my dreadlock design is that the hotter my head gets, the straighter the Nitinol gets. The straighter the wires get, the less my dreads cover my head and the more heat escapes." He smiled widely, "It lets me overclock my brain."

Fed stared at the line of illuminated elevator buttons and tried hard to pretend he wasn't listening. He knew Cessus was good at security - he'd seen that much already. But he didn't want to hear about how he thought he was overclocking his brain. Tonx had been right when he'd said Cessus was crazy.

They exited the elevator, turned sharply and came to a tall wooden stand behind which a maitre d' stood at attention. He and Cessus stared at each other for a moment, evaluating. The man opened his mouth to speak, was cut off by Cessus.

"A window seat will do nicely. My nephew has yet to truly see the city" he said, gesturing at Fed without looking.

The maitre d' nodded, mumbled something unintelligible and led them into the restaurant. It was shaped like a disc, the bar and kitchen in the center. They descended some steps to a booth by the edge. From their seat Fed could see tourists on a walkway just below, children's pink fingers wrapped around rubber-coated chicken wire. Cessus put his briefcase on the windowsill, blocking his own view of the scenery below, and plugged a small black wire into its base. He draped his napkin discreetly over the wire. Then he pulled a splitter from his pocket and put his hands under the table, leaned forward towards Fed.

"Connect this to your comp and act like a disaffected youth, would you?" Fed felt Cessus hand him the wire under the table, the thick black nails scraping gently against his fingers as he took it. A waiter appeared.

"And I'm sure your mother's lawyer will agree" Cessus added, looking slightly flustered as he turned towards the man. "Ah, yes, ah... coffee, please, with cream. And the boy will have, ah..." Cessus looked at Fed, who looked ceiling-wards and flipped his goggles down over his eyes.

"Ah, ice cream will do, I believe. And a coke" Cessus signed, handed the waiter the unopened menus. He pursed his lips slightly and took a newspaper from the briefcase, his glasses sliding out from both sides of his head and flicking into place. Tiny rainbows began to flash over his corneas and Fed saw a prompt flicker across his gogs.

<C>Very nice, Feed. You could almost hear the adolescent condescension.

<F>I try.

<C>Good. Now, you may be wondering what the hell we're doing up in a giant rotating tower when what we really need is a net connection. Yes?

<F>Yes, actually.

<C>Please draw your attention (without looking) to the briefcase next to me.

<F>??

<C>Are you familiar with the principle of how antennas work?

<F>I thin kso.

<C>Please type like an adult, Feed. My briefcase contains one slightly curved metal mesh antenna, attached to three actuators. See the bolts on the side of the case?

Fed looked, saw that there were indeed three polished knobs arranged in a triangle around the center of the briefcase. He'd assumed they were decorative.

<C>The actuators move the antenna slightly, homing in on a signal. The opposite side of the case is not metal - it's polished plastic. The newspaper in front of me has a sheet of metal mesh in it to hide the contents from scans. That's probably why the waiter gave me such a look on the way in here - I was either a terrorist or a businessman who thought himself important enough to buy a scan-proof case.

<F>So the case has an antenna that'll track signals?

<C>Yes. From here we can see all over the city; there are sure to be unencrypted networks out there.

The waiter returned and Cessus ignored him, pouring milk into his coffee and dropping in two sugar cubes with casual precision. He stirred the result with a tiny spoon, his little finger raised as he did so. Fed's comp buzzed, an icon in his gogs showed a message from Tonx. He gripped his chord under the table, sat back in forced calm and popped open the message.

A moment later Fed flipped up one goggle and leaned towards Cessus.

"My brother's sitting tight but complains the kids are driving him crazy. He wants an ETA."

"Tell him I'm busy."

"How long, Cessus?"

"Soon. I'll be done soon."

Fed passed the message on to Tonx and switched back to the connection he shared with Cessus. The screen was reformatted to show a similar setup to what they'd had in the car. The briefcase had found a live connection, apparently, and had them plugged into the network through a wireless setup somewhere in the city below. Cessus was busily resuming his scans of the Gaterville Countryside ISP in the foreground. A web browser window expanded, the company homepage appearing. Ghostly cursor followed links to their user login page, strings of gibberish-code pasted into the URL.

"SQL injection" murmured Fed, his lips moving slightly. SQL injection was an old method of dropping database commands into a browser such that the code controlling the page passed it on to the database. It was an ancient attack, although Fed knew a lot of companies still used the database systems that were vulnerable to it. Fed flipped back to the chat window.

<F>How'd you know they used SQL?

A response came quickly:

<C>Fits the profile. Feel the space, the little hole this ISP occupies. What shape your heel, Achilles?

Fed flipped back to the browser. It was spitting out page after page of text, database records piling on top of each other. Cessus piped the browser's output to a window, scanned it and piped the output to yet another window, name and password combinations and a column called "priority" streaming up the screen. Cessus reformatted the display, the priority column suddenly on the left. It started showing numbers, twos and then threes and then fives suddenly bobbing to the top, their name/password matches seated next to them. The stream slowed, stopped. Five priority one accounts rested at the top of the page, each name a mix of a first letter and a last name, each password a ten-character long mix of letters and numbers only a computer would generate. Typical old-school corporate methodology. Administrator accounts. Fed switched back to the chat window.

<F>That smell right?

<C>Good as gold, my friend.

An invisible cursor copied the five admin accounts and dropped them into a scratchpad window on the top left of Fed's visual space, the web browser disappearing along with the used scan pages. A new window opened and a secure session started up with the ISP's main server. Cessus logged in as tspranger, password 99f3x1!j06. A welcome script scrolled by. They were in.

Chapter #16

Esco was in the driver's seat smoking a long thin filterless through the open window. The ruler-straight lines of his carefully trimmed mustache arched and jumped as he mouthed along to the music. Spanish death-metal thundered through the cab of the tiny Toyota truck, the three of them sitting sticky, side-by-side in the sweat-slicked heat. A Puerto-Rican flag hung from the review mirror, jumping and shimmying with the bass.

Next to him and dwarfing him physically sat Pepe, his hugely muscled shoulders hunched carefully forward to avoid crowding the other two, the gearshift digging into his thigh. Pepe was new to the team, younger, and was working very hard to keep his arms from twitching under his experimental hormone therapy and hurting somebody. On the far side of the cab sat Baby, the pudgy Puerto-Rican clad in a gleaming white jumpsuit, his gold Nikes tapping in time to the music. Baby's head was wrapped in a carefully filigreed viewset, the Virgin Mary etched out in ruby plastic over his forehead. A sinister-looking black joystick sat casually in his lap. From time to time Baby gently caressed it, making minor adjustments.

The song ended in a crashing guitar riff, the flag slowly settling.

"Mmm-hmm" murmured Esco in approval. Across from him Baby smiled. Another song started.

Pepe twitched, shaking the car. Baby swore loudly in Spanish, invoking actions from Pepe's mother which nature had surely not equipped her to commit.

"Fuck, man!" said Esco. "That's it. Get the fuck out of the car."

Esco slid out of the seat, the neat creases in his trousers flagging sadly. He waited until Pepe had squeezed by him and slammed the door shut behind them, reached through the window to click the auto-shut. He winked at Baby through the rising glass as he moved back towards the younger man.

"What the fuck's going on, man?" he asked. "You losing it on us here?"

Pepe shook his head quickly, a muscle on the right side of his neck seizing up for a second before he could wrench his head back level. Esco raised a carefully plucked eyebrow, the cream-colored skin of his forehead wrinkling briefly, inexplicably.

"You're not impressing me, man" he said. "Pharoe tells us you're good, that we got to take a chance on you. Baby's in there running two fliers at once. You jostle him and we could lose it all. Not good, man." He sighed. "Not good."

Pepe shuddered briefly, sweat staining the stretched-out sleeveless t-shirt pulled taut across his chest. Pepe was new to the mod scene in Florida, his cousin letting him crash on his couch after he had jumped a 'liner from the islands. The only thing he had going for him was that he was big, and Pharoe had offered him a chance to make good on a loan to get the muscle work he wanted done to get bigger. His English wasn't that good, and the hormones made him paranoid as well as self-conscious. He was a wild card. An expendable one, as much as nobody wanted to say it.

Esco sighed again and leaned carefully back against the side of the truck. He looked up at the oversized plywood bed cover, its insulated white plastic sealant gleaming in the hot sun. He ran his eyes over the carefully lettered advertisement for landscaping services picked out in red, the foot-high glyphs of men in sombreros hefting shovels. He pulled out another cigarette and lit it, shook his heavy golden Rolex into place and turned towards Pepe.

"Look. You're new here, right? Maybe freaked out a little that you just arrived and get sent out to the boonies, yeah?" Esco suspected that Pepe had never been out of the boonies before arriving in Florida, that part of the reason Pharoe thought he was a good choice for this job was that he could make it in the swamps if he had to.

"So let me give you a little advice." Esco held his cigarette in his carefully pursed lips as he tucked in the back of his shirt with his free hand, adjusted a fold on his shirtsleeve. It was pink linen, and set off the tiny golden cross around his neck nicely. Esco was one of very few men in the world who could wear a pink linen shirt and still look mean enough to be taken seriously. It was part of the reason Pharoe had had him manage this job.

"You want to stay alive this trip, you keep it cool. Ain't no big thing what we're doing out here. We get the signal, fire off the big gun, and you go in and get our man. That easy. No need to get excited, no need to go running around all crazy-like. It's business, those Boers understand that. You follow?"

Pepe nodded, once, his big brown eyes following Esco's.

"What we do not want" Esco said, tapping ash carefully away from his personal space, "is a big mess. Pharoe doesn't like messes. You keep shaking like that... Well, it's messy."

Esco eyed Pepe meaningfully, waited a moment while the younger man tried to process this. Eventually Pepe responded; "Why are you in the Mod crew?"

Esco took another drag from his cigarette, frowned slightly and looked past Pepe's shoulder.

"What the fuck does that mean?"

Pepe wasn't from here, was ignorant. He didn't know that he was getting into dangerous territory. He peered at Esco and pointed one thick trembling finger at him.

"You're not mod."

The edges of Esco's nostrils flared ever so slightly, thin wisps of smoke curling out of them as he let out his breath in one long controlled sigh. His eye snapped over to Pepe's.

"I'm more mod than you are, fool" he said quietly. Pepe took a step back, unconsciously, his hands balling into fists. Esco's pink linen shirt crinkled slightly around his shoulders as he cupped one elbow in his hand, took another drag.

"I got more mods on me than you do by a long shot, but they're all aesthetic, see? I'm carefully designed, planned out."

Esco leaned forward off the truck, towards Pepe.

"This isn't crude" he stabbed his cigarette at the larger man, "bullshit" again with the cigarette, "muscle mods." He bit off the word with teeth clenched, his thin mustache wrinkling under an angry sneer. Pepe's face twitched and jerked, degrading synapses trying to decide between anger and fear. Esco's face dropped back into blank, formal beauty.

"What I got is subtle. Takes a long time. It's art, see?" He watched Pepe carefully, noted his gaze shift between his eyes and his shoes, waited until he was sure the larger man knew who he was, if not what he meant.

"Doesn't matter" he said softly, flicking his cigarette into the bushes. "Just keep it cool, okay? Go check the rig again. We should be hearing something soon."

Esco climbed back into the cab, death-metal filling the air. He twisted the knob with a casual flick of his wrist, leaned back to rest his arm on the back of the seat.

"Boy's a fucking idiot" he said.

Baby nodded, smiling, his face hidden behind the viewport.

"Anything new?"

"Nope. Same readings. The big gun ought to do it, we get digital coverage from Tonx's guy. They spaced out their screamers pretty good, but I got them all marked. They put timers on them so a casual scan wouldn't see them all. Clever fucking bastards."

"Whatever, man. Just so long as we've got the situation under control."

"Yup. I'm bringing back a flyer - keep an eye on the other while I do it."

Baby tapped the joystick and the review monitor flickered from scraggly swampland to the front side of a small cabin. A beaten-up petrol Studebaker was parked in the lot, a large mail sack holding a body - hopefully a live one - slumped across the front porch next to the screen door.

"He still okay?" asked Esco.

"Mmm-hmm" mumbled Baby, his hands busy. He was taking the other flyer in through the woods so it wouldn't get spotted, but it wasn't easy.

"He's still breathing, anyway. You want to hear him blubber go ahead and pipe it through the radio."

"No thanks" said Esco, snorting in disgust. Fucking French eurotrash. What the fuck was he doing out here?

The truck shuddered as the flyer suddenly slammed onto the hood of the truck. Esco jumped, the back of his head hitting the rear of the cab.

"What the fuck you do that for?" he shouted at Baby. The pudgy pilot shook with laughter, keyed in a mounting sequence. In front of them the long, tubular flyer bobbed and weaved as its three legs adjusted themselves, slowly moving around until it was level, pointing straight at the sky. The flyer was pornographic pink, thirty inches of rubberized plastic wrapped in three rims containing silenced fans. Esco didn't like the thing. It seemed - dirty.

Baby got out of the car and strolled over to the flyer, carefully unpacked a set of hydrogen filters and a small bottle of water. He bobbed his head back and forth as he worked, casual confidence plain in his movement as he went through the familiar motions. Baby was one of the best pilots in Florida, and Esco was glad to have him. He worried about the cerebral implants he was considering, figured that the eyejacks were good enough. But it wasn't his business. A man's mods were his own; you just had to respect that. It was part of what made being a mod great.

The rearview monitor bleeped and Esco pulled out a tiny voice comp, syncing it to the truck's comm before placing it next to his ear. It was ceremonial, of course, but that was part of Esco's composition. He listened to the voice that came through it and nodded, twice, before hanging up. The music resumed as he clicked off the comm, and he sat a moment as the chorus ended before turning it off. Esco stepped out of the car, saw Pepe standing more or less where he'd left him. He called to Baby over his shoulder, nodded at Pepe.

"Gentlemen, it's time."

Chapter #17

"It's time" said Cessus. He reached up and twisted off one of his rubberized dreads and placed it carefully on the table between them. Midway through its length it was banded with a glowing blue ring.

"This thing starts blinking, you start chatting into your comp and slowly go out to the elevators. Punch the third floor - it's another restaurant - and take the stairs down to the front. Then get a cab and go home. You got that?" He stood up, adjusted his shirt.

"Where're you going?" asked Fed.

"To the bathroom" said Cessus.

He turned and left.

Fed was suddenly aware of the fact that he was sitting in front of a melted bowl of ice cream, a newspaper containing a metal-mesh signal shield, and a hidden tracking antenna through which they were hijacking a connection from somebody's house a half-mile away.

The waiter appeared, collected the dish and Cessus's empty coffee cup, and disappeared.

Fed realized this was the first time he'd been alone since he'd found out about the Boers and all the trouble. Up until now he'd just been reacting, doing what he was told. And what the hell were they doing messing with Disney, anyway? The megacorp had become world renowned for their vicious investment and takeover cycles, leading the way in overseas labor exploitation and almost single-handedly reworking the World Trade Organization committees in their favor. Disney had

become synonymous with sweatshops, black market trafficking, and stock manipulation. They'd pioneered the concept of corporate armed forces, generating a marketing spin-off to DARPA which eventually partnered with and was then sold to the U.S. government. Along the way they'd bought a couple third-world countries and used their citizenships as testing grounds for new products. The Disney nations were wonders of Darwinian downbreeding and ongoing corporate propaganda as enforced by law. They were scary, scary places.

Cessus had a right to hate them, although Fed didn't know why he was so willing to go head-to-head. It was only business, after all.

In any case Tonx was out there risking his ass right now, and by extension so was he. If they were hijacking Poulpe from them Disney sure as hell weren't going to sit around idle while they waited for him to come back. Defectors from Disney didn't last very long unless they got under some other corp's wing, and even then the battles for custody lasted forever. The Disney passport wasn't so much a permissions slip as a title of ownership.

Scary shit, and not exactly what Fed had been planning to do with himself. He was supposed to be studying, following the courses along a prescribed path to corporate security. Part of him had actually considered working for Disney; if you got a good contract they made sure you were set for life. Instead he was about to help steal from them.

Fed crossed his arms and stared out at the city moving slowly by beneath him. He tried hard not to think about Disney. The data streams in front of his eyes flowed on, modulating against the view, rippling the houses and cars below like water over rocks. Cessus had spent a long time just watching it work, scanning for anomalies, letting error-checking routines and monitoring tripwire software get a solid handle on what normal was. He'd held forth at Fed for a while about patterns, about the parts of your brain that recognized and managed large data sets without your conscious thought. Cessus seemed to think that the 90 per cent of the human brain that didn't seem to be doing anything actually did a lot, that it acted as a hugely subtle modulator for the electrical signals being used by that ten per cent that people could monitor. Fed had started to get interested until Cessus lapsed into theories about ESP and government mind control.

But he had made some good points. Fed knew that sometimes, when he was coding, he'd get so caught up in the overall pattern, the structure, that he'd code good-sized chunks without thinking about the specific lines he was writing. Those lines worked, they fit into the structure perfectly, but they'd been written by some other part of his brain. The module that handled the rules for code had done its job, and Fed hadn't had to think it through character by character to do it.

He was beginning to understand how Cessus could do the same thing with network monitoring.

"How do you tell how cold it is by looking out the window - barring obvious indicators like snow?" he'd asked. Fed hadn't had a good answer, had said "I just know."

"That's right" said Cessus. "You just know. Because your brain there knows how the light looks at that precise time of day in certain humidity and under particular wind speeds. Your brain knows that if the shadows are just so it must be cooler, that if the road is just that wet it's a particular humidity. You don't think about it, you just know."

Fed had remained unimpressed.

"It's the same with code, or network monitoring, or anything else you see on a screen. A good coder can often find the problem spot in code just by tabbing over it. He just seems to be able to find it, know what I mean?"

Fed did, but didn't understand the implication. "So what?"

"So anybody can do that. Once you learn a basic skill it becomes automatic, right? You can peel potatoes without thinking about it - you just do it. It's boring. Coding isn't like that because you have to think about *how* you use the skill. Sure you can write code - the writing part is automatic - but figuring out how to write the code to address each individual aspect of the overall program can require a lot of thought. That's the overhead you're imposing. It's just a matter of recognizing that your conscious mind isn't the part that 'knows' coding, or 'knows' what packet loss looks like. Your conscious mind is just an orchestra conductor. It's not playing the flute, it's telling the flute player to play. So if the flautist is doing his job just fine, why don't you leave the conductor bloody well enough alone?"

Fed scoffed. Cessus was constantly making stupid analogies like that, abstract comparisons that didn't make any sense. It was pissing him off.

"You're not making any sense. Are you saying you'd code better if you didn't think about it? That you could hack systems better if you stared off into space and let your fingers mash the chord?"

Cessus had just smiled a smug grin and turned back to his tripwires and data logs, the screen over his left eye sliding forward and into place.

Now Fed was left watching the same data streams flow in front of his vision, waiting for Cessus to come back. He knew that at some point Pharoe's guys would act and Cessus's daemons would snap into place, injecting fake TCP data packets in place of the real output from the Gaterville ISP. There was no point in starting that process any sooner than necessary, and with any luck the injection would be seamless. But Fed and Cessus both knew there was no such thing as perfect. There'd be some clue, and Fed's job was to watch for it, to map it out and see if it got caught.

It was simple, mindless watching, and as Fed sat still he kept coming back to what Cessus had said. He'd experienced that jolt of knowing before, of scanning over code without really thinking, of just letting your eyes go and suddenly - wham - you knew you were looking at the problem. It didn't happen all the time, but when it did it was effortless. Fast and efficient. But unreliable. It seemed stupid to Fed that Cessus would endorse thinking that way all of the time; "leveraging

the massive" he'd called it. "Your brain's perfectly capable of parallel processing all on it's own. Don't try to implement your own resource management" he'd said.

It was crazy talk. But Fed couldn't forget it. Some part of it made sense.

His brain clicked, his thumb and forefinger tabbed a sequence, the screen split. On the top half the data continued to stream by, unchanged. Normal. The bottom half contained the buffered data from the last ten seconds of those streams, the most recent at the top. Fed stared. There is was - three packet handoffs, all identical. Packet handoffs happened sequentially, and error checking would have launched a correction sequence to verify any break, if the Gaterville ISP had caught it. He was looking at the slip, the error where Cessus's fake data had slid into the stream, and there was nothing. They were in.

"Nice" murmured a voice in his ear.

Fed jumped, banged his knee on the table, and tried to discreetly scan the restaurant.

"Figured you'd catch on fast, boy-o" said Cessus's voice. There was the faint sound of a urinal flushing. "Don't worry about those packet handoffs - I already deployed a log cleanup to cover the drop. As switches go it wasn't bad."

The sounds of hands being washed, of paper towels being yanked from a dispenser, of shoes clicking over tile filled Fed's ears over his comm. He'd almost gotten his heart out of his throat by the time Cessus had returned to the table. He gently re-affixed his dreadlock, put the newspaper back in the briefcase.

"Our work here is done. Let's pay the bill and go home. I deserve a treat."

"You deserve!" growled Fed. "What the fuck was that? Leaving me alone out here? You scared the shit out of me!"

"Period of maximum risk" said Cessus. "It was wiser for us to be apart should the mouse have been watching."

Fed looked up at Cessus, bewildered.

"If they'd busted in here they would have gone for me first" said Cessus. "If there were only a couple agents you might have been able to get away while I holed up in the can. At the very least you could have pleaded ignorance in court. It was actually," Cessus stood up, paused while his glasses receding to the sides of his head, "safer for you."

He turned and walked to the waiter's desk, paid with a credcard. Fed stormed by, past Cessus and towards the elevator bays.

"Excitable lad" he heard him say to the waiter. "Insisted we come up here to watch birds and then jumps half out of his skin when he sees one. Children these days, no sense for nature."

Chapter #18

In Florida things were not proceeding quite so smoothly. When Esco'd gotten the signal they'd done exactly as planned, pausing only long enough for Baby to get his flyer back in the air. Then they'd stashed him in the tiny hunter's blind they'd setup by the side of the road, copious screamers giving off light chiming tones as they exited the area. They were synced in, of course, passive transponders embedded in their asses giving off 2048-bit certs every half second as the screamers scanned them.

Esco'd driven to within three hundred yards of the cabin and helped Pepe get suited up with a bulletproof vest. He briefed him again, quickly. Then he stepped out of the truck and lit a cigarette, fitting an earcomm and checking in with Baby for an all clear before giving Pepe the thumb's up. Pepe nodded once and threw the truck into reverse, his brow furrowed as he stared fixedly at the rear-view monitor. Esco knew Baby had his hands full with the fliers and said a quick prayer before Pepe and the truck disappeared around the bend in the road.

A second later Esco saw the fliers shoot into the air, the black one, the one like a huge wasp, gaining altitude much faster than the pink dildo. Then he heard the bang of the truck's rear doors flying open and the echoing retort as three barrels of chemical battery drained all at once. Esco breathed deep and threw his cigarette on the ground, rubbed it out with the sole of his shoe. He started walking up the road.

As he rounded the corner he saw the truck parked cantilever to the other two cars, facing directly away from the cabin. Its rear doors were snapped out and the driver's side door was open, bulletproof panels folded down and braced against the ground. Pepe huddled behind it, his flechette gun snapping from one window to another. The air smelled of ozone, but the yard was quiet. Their target lay still on the porch. This close Esco could see the wet stains on the bottom of the bag. He was glad they'd be able to dump the tanks and store this guy in the back; gringos always stank like shit when they sweat.

Esco coughed gently, pulled out his phone and switched it to sync with the loudspeakers in the back of the car.

"Gentlemen" he began. Nothing happened. "Fucking Christ, Pepe" he hollered. "Did you turn off the fucking car?"

"Yeah" came the muffled reply, the flechette snapping from one cabin window to the door to the other window. "Sorry, is habit."

"Habit my fucking ass you stupid shit. How the fuck we going to make our demands we don't got no loudspeaker?"

Esco looked at his phone for a moment before tucking it back into his jacket pocket. He'd rehearsed his speech all afternoon, and now he didn't get to use it.

"All right, go get the package. They've figured it out by now anyway. And for gods sakes try not to drop him."

Pepe didn't move for a moment, then shook his head, one muscle in his neck quivering like a bowstring in the hot

afternoon sun.

"What the hell does that mean?" grunted Esco. He took three steps forward and snapped the sharp tip of his sharkskin loafers into Pepe's right kidney.

"You ain't getting paid to choose your job here, man. Get off your fucking ass and do your fucking job."

Esco held out a hand for the flechette and fished in his jacket for a cigarette with the other. The pistol grip hit his palm with an angry slap, but Esco didn't respond, just lit his smoke with a silver butane lighter. He leaned against the hood of the truck, rested the barrel of the pistol on the doorframe, and inhaled deeply. What a fuckup. The electromagnetic pulse they'd shot through the cabin had fried every kind of electronics within a hundred meters, including most of the screamers Baby had already mapped out. Their cars were likely fried as well - the truck Esco and crew had ridden in on had had to be specially shielded, and they were on the safe side of the EMP gun. There wasn't much in this world that didn't rely on some kind of digital control these days. The Boers were probably busy calculating the odds of their getting out of here and through the swamp alive. Didn't matter to Esco. They weren't his target here, and if they lived it wasn't likely they'd hold a grudge against losing some equipment.

Pepe had crept up to the porch, two long hunting knives clenched in his fists. Esco wondered idly if he knew how to use them. The package moaned slightly, and Pepe froze for a second.

"Hurry up!" shouted Esco.

Pepe put his right foot on the porch, eased his weight up onto it. The screen door swung open and the first Boer stepped out. He was a nondescript white guy, tanned and hard. Esco could see from here that he was hard, could see the stone-hard look in his eye and the line of his jaw as he lifted an empty hand, palm down, and flipped his fingers in a shooing motion at Pepe.

"You have no weapons" shouted Esco. "We've fried all your equipment. You're stranded. Surrender now" Esco had been starting to say more when Pepe had stepped up to the porch and the Boer stepped fully out of the cabin to meet him. As he did his other arm, the one away from Esco, the one shadowed by the drop of the roof and the dark of the cabin inside, had swung out and up, a two-foot gleaming grey tube snapping into place three inches from Pepe's forehead.

"What the fuck?" asked Pepe and Esco simultaneously, just before the antique single-action rifle blew the bright pink contents of Pepe's braincase across the yard.

"Fuck" yelled Esco, the flechette catching the Boer in the shoulder before he dropped the rifle and dove down the steps and behind the Desoto. "Fuck" he yelled again, this time in anger as another Boer barreled out of the cabin and had his face filleted by two bursts from his pistol. There was a sudden crash, then a boom, and Esco saw the dildo come sailing over the back of the house, try to land on the edge of the roof, topple. The black wasp buzzed overhead and a thin silver line traced out and down into the bushes next to the cabin, a sharp grunt as the wasp emptied its battery through the line as a taser-shot before dropping into the bushes. The leads tangled and it caught, hanging suspended, rocking slightly eight feet in the air.

A rock caught Esco just above the eye. The first Boer had crept around the other side of the Desoto and thrown a rock at him. Good shot, too. A little further back and he would have been down, thought Esco. As it was he was just pissed.

"A rock, man?" he asked, dancing backwards and slipping slightly on the crushed gravel of the drive. His balance was off.

"Pretty fucking unprofessional" he said before another rock caught him in the elbow. That throw was good, and his arm went suddenly numb followed by a flaring pain. Probably broke the bone, thought Esco, noting with disappointment that he'd dropped the gun as he staggered. He had the good sense to duck before the next rock whistled by his head. He lunged for the pistol, vertigo turning it into a dive as the Boer appeared running breakneck around the front of the truck.

The Boer hit first, and Esco's finger stubbed hard against the flechette's barrel. He had one slow-mo view of the open end of the barrel swinging towards him, of staring down its length before it spun away from him under the truck. Then he was rolling, sweeping under the bulletproofing and to his feet before the Boer had a chance to get his hands on him. He sucked in breath, his ribs aching hard where he'd been kicked. Dust swirling across the yard, drifting slowly away from the two of them and the side of the truck. Esco regarded the Boer through the open car window.

"We don't got to do this" he said between clenched teeth.

The Boer didn't say anything, his lips pressed hard together. The flechette had torn a gaping hole in his shirt, and Esco could see the farmer's tan, the line on the man's shoulder where dark tanned flesh turned to pasty white. His arm was peppered with twisted shards of ceramic, blood oozing around rapidly purpling flesh. The Boer's sandy brown hair flickered lightly as a breeze kicked up. The dust went flat, sheeted away from them for a moment and the Boer kicked the door, hard. Esco danced back and out of the way, one arm useless, up on his toes now. Esco looked pretty and could talk nice, but he'd trained hard at boxing every day of his life and it was for this reason that he'd made as good as he had with Pharoe Munch.

He danced back and forth, moving slightly away from the truck, lifting his good arm to cover his face. He nodded, slightly, getting his head into the rhythm. The Boer circled past the door, bending his knees deep, his right arm wide, out from his body. Esco feinted, judging his opponent's responses, skipped a pace or two towards the cabin to get the sun out of his eyes. He smiled, slightly. The Boer had kept the truck to his left, refused to get pulled out from the sun at his back. Esco stilled slightly, weaving, bobbing, counting combos, letting his eyes blur as he watched the motion, not the man.

The Boer bent, scooped up a hand of gravel and hurled it at him as he simultaneously dove forward, his one good hand

reaching for Esco's face. Esco's fist deflected most of the gravel but a handful of dirt filled his nose and eyes as he struck, sidestepping and ducking together, his fist snapping into the Boer's face and out, his shoulder peeling back as he slid to one side. He danced back, shaking his head, blinking furiously to get the grit out of his eyes. Vision swam into place through watery eyes and he saw the Boer was down, face down, not moving in the swirling dust of the yard.

Later they'd find out that he'd broken the man's nose, driven it upwards into his brain. It was a great shot, though Esco didn't like to think how much of it must have been luck. They'd slit the throat of the guy Baby had tasered, but ignored the Boer who'd come out the back. He'd drowned by the time they'd found him, his face stuck in three inches of filthy seep. Baby's pink flier had dumped a powder bomb on him and he'd fallen, paralyzed, into a muddy pool in the back of the cabin.

The Frenchman was alive, if barely. He had a nasty case of heatstroke and Esco and Baby had a hell of a time getting him to get into the truck next to the big gun. The sedatives Pharoe had given them did the trick, though, and they were able to wrap him in cool packs and get some water into him before he passed out. Then they'd done a clean sweep of the cabin, wired it up with explosives, and dropped the bodies in the battery barrels. Baby set a timer on the explosives so the bodies would have time to decompose in the acid before it went off. They left. Esco's arm was starting to really hurt now, and he was eager to get to a doctor.

"Nice work back there" said Baby, his viewport back on now and wired to the truck, driving by joystick as he sat behind the wheel. It was weird to see the wheel move by itself, Baby leaning back from it.

"It always happens so fast, know what I mean?" said Esco. "Just do what you know how to do, hope it comes out. Got to believe this one was lucky, man."

"They're all lucky, Esco."

"Hey" said Esco, lighting himself another cigarette with his good arm, "I was just scared he was gonna go for my face."

Chapter #19

Tonx landed in Austin and was the first one out of the plane, grinding his teeth through pat down after pat down until he hit the luggage claim and was able to switch on his comm. He breathed a deep sign of relief when he saw the spam for clitoris enlargement in his inbox. It was the prearranged signal for success in extracting Poulpe. He waited until he'd gotten into a cab to call Fed.

"Hey bro, how's the weather?" he asked.

"Shit. And who the hell did you stick me with here? Marcus is gone and Cessus is fucking around with bananas."

"Yeah he's crazy, but he's good. We get a clean report card?"

"No, man. He bought a shitload of bananas, says he's going to distill banananine through a decomposition of sugars from ice cream."

Tonx closed his eyes, smiled. "That's cool. Cessus is a little eccentric, but it's part of the charm. You could learn a thing or two from him, little man."

"Like how the perfect banana split will provide an avenue to nirvana?"

"Could do worse. He say we're all clear?"

There was the muffled blur of voices in the background as Fed and Cessus conversed.

"We're good. From what we saw during our checkup on the way home they hadn't found the switchover a half hour after the jump. Cessus says they'll either find it in modulo two hours or another twelve, but either way the logs should be cleared by now."

"Sweet" chuckled Tonx. "Listen, you guys did good. Thanks for the help, Fed."

There was momentary silence on the line, and the corner of Tonx's grin jumped as he imagined his little brother trying to cope with the praise.

"Whatever. Listen, what happens next? I've still got a bunch of work to do on the deployment, but we're going to need the data set here soon. Is your 'package' going to be available anytime in the near future?"

"We'll take care of it" Tonx said, his fingers reaching out to trace the wire reinforcing the glass of the cab's window.

"Listen, Fed. Maybe you know where I'm at, maybe not, but for god's sakes don't come looking, okay? This end of the game isn't your space, right? Stay out of the meat and don't worry. I got it covered."

"No worries" said Fed. There was a silence, then, stretching out thin over the ones and zeros that filled the space between them, continental gaps of void stretching wide and empty, soundless.

"I'll keep an eye on Cass" said Fed. "You take care of you, okay?"

"You take care of you, too" echoed Tonx, and clicked off the line. Both brothers regarded their comms with the same sense of sad satisfaction, identical looks in their eyes held for exactly the same half second, thousands of miles apart.

Tonx sighed and leaned back into the grey polyplastic of the taxi, suddenly very tired. He should message Pharoe, set up some credits as a token thanks, hint at future services to be rendered. But he **was** tired. Now that he was able to act the action was done. A monumental sense of hubris filled the back of cab, sat thick and steaming over Tonx all the way to the hotel.

When he arrived he tossed his duffle on the cheap bed and took a shower first thing. Crawling out of the steam he decided against hitting the nightlife; he was too burnt to do any good. He sent out some mails to Pharo and Cass, promised to contact them in the morning and slipped into clean, air-conditioned sheets.

When he woke up the light coming through the three-foot-wide porch windows was metallic and thin. After fumbling behind the curtains for a while he found the LCD tint control and slid it off entirely. Tiny, electrically controlled pixels embedded in transparent film in the glass turned sideways, the window became clear, and solar heat washed over Tonx's body. It was going to be a hot day.

His first order of business was to find someplace safe to hole up Poulpe, and maybe others. He didn't know if Pharo's guys were going to want to hang with him - chances were good Pharo would want to ensure his investment, and Tonx would have to provide some kind of push-back. Their bid wasn't a sure thing, but if it worked out he didn't need any "help" with artificial debts to pay off.

Tonx had been to Texas a few times. There were some serious hardcore mods developed out here, biological rejection therapies tested on backwater hicks in clandestine mountain cults, radiation tattoo gangs, trailer-park gene therapies, the works. Texas was a big place - big enough to hide just about anything.

Now Tonx had to find a place to hide himself and a few friends, some place clean and safe and with a solid comm feed they could access.

The first order of business was getting a hold of John Tucker. John's Dad had pioneered the bodmod scene ages ago as an errant son to a medical equipment supply company maven. He'd decided to use his training to make real tools for hardcore bodmodders. Laser cutters, epidermal lifts, osseointegrated plug-nuts and more - securing patents for all of them, of course. John's dad had held rituals in his living room, implanting nails into break-point posts to make real spiked mohawks. He'd been the first to use lasers for scarification purposes (intentional, anyway) and developed the entire field of teflon-coating implants. He was on the wanted list in four different states, received permanent protected status from the Hell's Angels, and eventually fled to Texas. This was just after he discovered the use of coral as an implant medium for making horns, elbow spikes, and the like. There'd been an incident where he was trying to irradiate the coral to control its growth and accidentally turned his subject's frontal lobes to sludge. When the police arrived he provided the waivers and legal documents protecting him from all liability and was pronounced a danger to society on the spot. While his lawyers (who were many - lawyers always have kinks and always love favors) started heading for the supreme court with his case he fled straight to Austin. Your average Texan didn't much like the kind of people Phil Tucker serviced, but they sure as hell weren't going to put up with being told what they could and couldn't do with their own bodies. Besides, it was one short step from controlled-growth coral horns to tummy-tucks and the ubiquitous titanium mesh breast implants, and although nobody wanted to say it they sure as hell weren't going to do without them. It wasn't the easiest place for a pioneering bodmodder to be, but in a lot of ways it was the safest.

So John had grown up with a powerful sense of personal liberty and a nation of awed miscreants to back him up. Tonx and John had gotten on like a house on fire when they met at the Implant and Scarification Consortium in New York, and after a three-day bender had established a lifelong friendship. They'd always stayed in touch, and a lot of Tonx's work had been built on stuff John had come up with or scraped off his boots after tromping through the filthy nooks and crannies of the Texas plains.

He rummaged through his bag for some jeans, found an ancient Punky Brewster brand beer shirt and tugged it on. It was a tight fit; Tonx kept himself in good shape between the muscle work and his Aikido, but a tight shirt that emphasized your biceps was almost de rigeur down here. Next he pulled out the grayed leather kit with his toothbrush and tattoo needles (just in case) and sat down in front of the obligatory dressing-room makeup table. This was the part of being in Texas he didn't like; the constant need for makeup. First he slathered on a generous coating of sunscreen, covering his arms and face and the back of his neck. He was careful to get his ears; last time he was down here he'd forgotten them and they'd developed tiny white pustules that slowly secreted millimeter-long, waxy eggs of dead tissue. For weeks. Next he drew on dark eyeliner and thick red lipstick pulled out wide across his cheeks. Texas was a goth state, especially Austin, and if you wanted any credibility you had to play to the audience. Finally he pulled out a topical numbing agent and threaded microfilament needles through his cheeks along his jaw line, over the lipstick, white LED posts glowing like pearly teeth through a head-wide smile. It was a look he'd come up with just out of school, and it'd taken off big down south. He was over it now, had been for a long time, but knew it'd emphasize his cred.

Finally he gelled his hair into a hard shell of spikes and went to wash his hands. Too goddamn much product. That done he pulled on his glasses and thumbed his comm for a taxi, grabbed his jacket and went outside.

Fifteen minutes later he was standing in downtown Austin. The place was clean, pristine, and as angry as he remembered. Austin's government had gone for wind power as an alternative to oil once the reserves had started to tap out and been largely very successful. They'd also decided to go with the Gay theory, which said that in order for a city to grow and profit it needed a large population of educated, artistic young spenders. Homosexuals were pegged as the benchmark for success along the metric, and the city planners had done everything they could to import them. They attracted a wildly

diverse population, including a lot of educated people, a lot of artistic people, and a lot of young spenders. They also got a shitload of angry radicals and a furious split of opinions among the general populace. Between the emphasis on clean energy and environmentalism and the continually escalating tension between "locals", Austin had wound up a very angry place. Tonx didn't know anywhere else that bar fights were started with intentional littering. Now he was here in the thick of it, smelling the hot grease stink of the streets, taking in the feeling of the city, watching the body language and modeling his own to fit. Tonx didn't want any undue attention, he wanted to find John and get some results.

Unfortunately John didn't own a comm. It was a complete pain in the ass but Tonx had to admit it ensured both his safety and his rep. If you wanted to talk to John Tucker, you had to ask for him, and the person you asked had to decide to tell you. This meant that you never found him until he knew you were coming - and you both knew a half a dozen people knew also. John had plenty of theories on the social dynamic he claimed he was using, such as the idea that it went both ways. John thought that by requiring word of mouth and local social networking he was enabling a six-degree rule - that he knew everybody in the world by a string of relationships through no more than six people. His name was widely known, and continued to be known by constant reinforcement, even if only as "the crazy bodmodder from Texas who has no comm." It was true John did exceedingly well at contacting folks and finding that one right person for a job, but Tonx wasn't convinced it didn't have more to do with his fame. John, for example, was fully Roo'd.

Being Roo'd was the quintessential bodmod, being exceedingly dangerous and risky as well as dramatic and beautiful. It was developed out of nowhere by a team of Icelandic prostheticists working in conjunction with a team of Israeli surgeons, and the number of people in the world who were fully Roo'd could be counted on both hands. The number of people who had tried but failed numbered considerably more. Those people spent their lives, if they lived, in wheelchairs.

To get Roo'd you had to have your legs effectively amputated below the knees. The first person to be Roo'd, Haldor Haldorsson, had had his legs run over by a semi-autonomous rock-crusher in the arctic deserts of Iceland's highlands. This was not an entirely new occurrence; what was new in his case was the salinated cold packs they stuck his lower body in when it happened. That's where his luck started. Then he was rushed to a hospital that happened to be right in the middle of a convention on new prosthetic technologies coming out of Iceland, and had attracted the attention of fifteen world specialists on leg surgeries including the group from Israel. Haldor was a very lucky man.

It turned out that the nerve tissue and much of the muscles in his legs were salvageable, but most of his bones were absolutely ruined. A big chunk of his tibia had snapped straight out of his right shin, and in the rush to get him to a hospital was now missing. (It turned up later, stuck in the tire of the rock-crusher). The scientists in residence conceived of a radical and bizarre suggestion for saving his legs. It was later reported that they were all drunk when they had come up with it, but nevertheless when Haldor regained consciousness he was presented with twenty-three cocktail napkins detailing a radical experimental surgery. Haldor was a typical Icelander, blue-collar and fluent in three languages. His hobbies included competition-level team handball and translating Latin texts to Icelandic. In his own words, broadcast across the world in dozens of languages, he said: "having my legs reshaped like a kangaroo's sounds fine. Very fine."

Very fine. The scientists shredded the muscles in his calves, microscopically separating fast-twitch fibers from slow-twitch. They replaced his lower leg bones with shortened carbon-fiber titanium amalgam plates; stronger, more flexible, and twenty times lighter than bone. His Achilles tendon was stretched, reinforced with cloned tissue, and re-strung. His feet were completely restructured, the last two toes removed. They fused the two toes next to his big toe, giving him two fat pads to stand on, and replaced his heel with a compound amalgam joint. The fine bones in his feet were replaced with one long grooved plate. The ball of his foot was reinforced, artificial muscle grafted along his entire leg, his skin stretched on metal frames in a saline bath while still attached at the thigh. He stayed in the bath for two weeks, drunk on morphine analogs, surrounded by floating bits of his own muscle and skin. When the skin had grown long enough and the muscle grafts fully took, they sewed him back together. One month after the accident Haldor Haldorsson walked out of the hospital a man like no other man had ever been, his blond face ruddy in the sharp wind.

He stood a full seven feet, his thighs canted at a 45-degree angle towards the ground and bulging with hormonally exaggerated muscle. His feet were as long as his thighs, his shins substantially shorter. His toes had been microscopically grated to create thick calluses, and the nail beds had grown together and thickened to provide traction for the extra musculature. They'd implanted a thick sheen of hair over his thighs, and tanned the skin overall for a healthy glow. When reporters had asked him what it had been like to be flayed in a saline tub for two weeks he'd simply said "Yah, yah. No problem. It's very fine."

It turned out to be more than fine. Haldor was able to jump almost twice his normal height, standing, and could take six-foot strides at an incredible pace. His handball team soon rocketed to the top of the Icelandic charts, Icelanders seeing no reason that an unusual surgery should require artificial handicaps in aid of the other teams. The carbon-fiber and titanium bones in his legs bonded perfectly with his muscles such that they flexed slightly, giving him more power and speed than his even his surgeons had imagined. Haldor spent eight wonderful months as the world's most famous man before turning up dead of morphine overdose in his Nike-sponsored summerhouse in Denmark. It turned out that addiction ran in the family.

Since then the U.S. Army, NATO, most of the Caribbean and a hundred individual profiteers had tried to replicate the surgery. The idea of supermen that could out-run and out-jump any normal man appealed enormously, but the realities of

massive body reshaping cut everyone's fantasies short. Being kept flayed alive for a month in a salt tub was not, it turned out, especially healthy, and finding the right balance of muscle growth and hormone therapy was almost impossible. Haldor Haldorsson had been a miracle, but he'd inspired the world to think of their bodies as something malleable. One year later a Taiwanese baker underwent the surgery after being run over by a tank and survived. Another wave of attempts followed. It produced three successes, in Russia, Japan, and Austin. John Tucker was one of the winners in the karma lottery that time - and the only previously unharmed volunteer for the procedure. An estimated 130 people weren't so lucky and were left permanently crippled; the process didn't leave a solid enough bone structure to fit normal prosthetics. Two people died. A year after that the bodmod scene had truly taken off, and the cage-fights like those that Marcus competed in began to overtake sports like "normal" boxing. But there had yet to be any more successful Rood's - most folks were happy taking a prosthetic leg and a lifetime of walking to a month of pain and the possibility of being permanently relegated to a wheelchair.

The upshot of this was that a single tattoo from John Tucker earned him about as much as Tonx made in a week of work at Greener Pastures. It also made him a lot easier to find. Tonx headed downtown, the Texas heat making tiny rivulets of gel trickle down his temples as he went.

He and John had been talking about how to make getting Roo'd safer for years now; being Roo'd had been Tonx's dream before he had gotten into MIT, and being out hadn't diminished his dream any. But Tonx was neither as crazy as John nor any less intelligent, and he wasn't ready to take the risk until he had a reasonable chance at success. Recently John had been sending him a steady trickle of emails hinting that he had found some new information, but they'd always been couched in terms of cash flow. Tonx didn't hold it against him - John knew a lot of people, and sometimes getting information cost. John knew Tonx wanted to get Roo'd bad, and Tonx knew John would put him at the head of the list if he ever got the cash, but for now John's lips were sealed. Which was okay - John was a purist. He wouldn't sell the info to the military, he'd make sure a true bodmodder got it first. That didn't make Tonx any less anxious; there were plenty of bodmodders with money out there, and Tonx wanted to be one of the few while there was still time.

After too much time in the afternoon sun Tonx finally found what he was after. Tucked in the basement level of a three-floor polyplast apartment building was the gleaming green sparkle of neon. A glance through the window told Tonx he had the right place and he slouched his way through the undersized doorway. The AC hit him like a blow to the chest, over dried air artificially chilled by a dozen old units mounted in the windows along the top edge of the wall. This was the place. Seven pairs of eyes turned and sized him up as he came through the door, the dim light of the beer sign over the bar illuminating countless rugs and cushions covering the floor around the bar. Tonx had gotten lucky - three of the teenage boys situated in careful nonchalance around the low table in the center of the room were sporting skeleton grins like his. Their luminescent piercings slowly pulsed a reddish hue in a broad imitation of a skull's smile, intricately permed and pressed curls held up with foot-long fakir needles. The remaining two boys wore identical floor-length carbon-fiber trench coats and wraparound sunglasses. Neos. Serious throwback culture there, thought Tonx - despite the Matrix's cult following he was always surprised to see the dated style reappear. The one girl on the floor with the boys was broad-hipped and overweight, white folds of flesh puckering out between the cotton strings of her undersized corset. Her wonderbra exhibited all the gravitationally impossible qualities its advertisements promised, the wattles of her chin pooling slightly where her bizarrely tanned cleavage met with her neck. The curlicues of her eye makeup were uneven, Tonx decided, but her lips looked great. Probably her first mod.

He walked up to the bar. The massive lump of a woman there had her arms folded impassively, the grayish-white plugs of earphones protruding from uneven ears. Her chin nodded slightly in tune with the unheard music, and her deep-set eyes glared over Tonx's shoulder. Someone took a pull from the oxygen bar set in the table on the floor behind him, the burbling sound long and clear.

"Bear" he said.

"Tonx" she replied, her eyes snapping to his, her broad smile spreading to reveal three golden teeth and one silver cap. Bear was serious old school, had been piercing and tattooing for years up in Seattle. She'd moved to Austin for reasons unknown, her steady hand and solid bedside manner making her an instant favorite. Trouble was, she didn't go in for anything more high-tech than antibiotic cream, and most of her clients weren't content with that. He'd spent a few drunken nights teasing it out of her and had been impressed to learn that her reasons were spiritual: she felt that bodmod was a ritual to be honored, a rite of pain and passage, and using machines or tech tools to do the otherwise impossible went against the meaning in it. Not that she held it against those that chose to go that way - just that for her, she only wanted to do what she could do with her own two hands. Bear was a true-blue bodmodder, and Tonx had to respect her for sticking to her guns even if he disagreed with her reasoning.

The downside of all this was that she only really got older folks and kids in her shops, people that were too chickenshit to go for what they usually really wanted. Kids like the ones sitting behind Tonx now.

Didn't matter. Bear was a good egg, as Tonx's dad used to say, and he knew he could trust her. He pulled up a stool and nodded towards the lone beer tap.

"Buy you a drink, Bear?" he asked. She smiled, thick natural muscle rippling up the side of her head and into her graying crew cut.

"You know I don't drink, you little cunt. But I'll cred you a free one for bringing me the looks from the boys there." She glanced briefly over his shoulder at the kids behind him, and Tonx smiled. He could tell by the furtive whispers that he'd been recognized. They'd be messaging their friends now, the bar's reputation jumping on the newsgroups even as he sat there. The mods styles he'd invented weren't popular everywhere, but where they had stuck his name was worth something. Bear should be able to count on a week or so of good business due to the visit. It was a strange currency, but the beer was cold and free for of it.

"Thanks, Bear." He chatted with her a while longer, probing her willingness to work with some of the newer biological inks like the jellyfish-derived glow stuff, asking about the mod scene in Austin, feeling out biz. Eventually the conversation lulled and he asked how to get in touch with John Tucker.

"Wondered if you'd come to ask about the boy" said Bear, turning to hack a meaty fistful of wheat grass from a small field growing on the shelf behind the bar. She stuffed it into a tiny press mounted on the underside of the bar, pulled a shot glass of juice with a steady hand.

"Clear out that beer with this and I'll make some calls."

Fifteen minutes later Tonx had an address fed into his comm and a note to send her some samples of ink from a supplier he'd found a few weeks ago in Malaysia. He bought a pack of smokes from Bear and headed out the door, nodding briefly at the kids as he went. The skullheads nodded in unison back at him, the Neos staring motionlessly, fat girl asleep on the floor. Too much oxygen.

Chapter #20

Since they'd pumped him full of boiled black Cuban heroin Poulpe had found himself significantly happier with life. The crazy Hispanics who'd rescued him had been exceedingly sloppy about the whole affair, but effective. That the Boers had underestimated the crude techniques his contact's representatives were willing to use was clear. He would be nervous about the actual data trail they left later, but for the moment he was high as a kite and couldn't bring himself to care one whit.

At the moment he was playing with his toes, noting with some interest that four of them were broken on his left foot. He recalled distantly that the Boers had broken them before they'd put him in the car, most likely so he wouldn't try to run away.

"Shit! Hey you crazy fuck, cut that out! You're going to have to walk on that soon!" yelled the taller fellow, the one with the magazine-perfect face, pores artificially shrunken, skin a glowing golden brown.

"You're like a delightful pastry, brushed with egg whites before baking" sighed Poulpe through the tiny sliding window between the truck bed and the cab.

"And you're like a fucked up gringo somebody overdosed on smack" growled Esco, more at Baby than at Poulpe. Baby shrugged impassively at his side, fingers sliding up and down and over the black plastic knob of his controller. He'd wired in a chord to the thing, of course, and was busily obtaining coordinates for their next stop. Pharoe had told them to head to Texas, towards Austin, and to keep the Frenchman safe and in their sight. This was the part of the game Esco didn't like, the politicking in which he was clearly a lackey. He didn't like being a driver, didn't appreciate the tiny ante part of the job. Could be they'd be driving from mini-mart to mini-mart in the backwaters of Austin for weeks, providing distanced proof they had the package, taking him away again, getting shot at out of nowhere, having to kill sixteen-year-old Columbian prostitute-ninjas when they bust through his door waving swords while he was trying to pluck his eyebrows. It was messy.

Esco didn't like messy. Poulpe began to sing songs of the French revolution in the back of the truck bed, comfortably sprawled out on the metal-cased wiring of the big gun, oblivious to his dehydration and miscellaneous injuries.

Baby was right that the heroin had taken care of the Frenchman's whining and sniveling, but he wasn't at all convinced it had improved the situation. The man needed professional care, and while keeping him full of water and in the cool of the air-conditioned truck ought to help his heatstroke, that foot was going to need more. And when he came down from the smack... It wasn't going to be much better than before at all. Poulpe began humming loudly in the back and Esco slid the window shut with a snap.

"Take the next exit" said Baby, late-afternoon sunlight glinting off the Virgin Mary where his eyes should be. "We got some brothers running a restaurant here. Pharoe's bought us a nice meal and some protection until we get our next location."

Esco pulled off the highway into the deep blue shadows pooled on the off ramp, the truck cooling suddenly as they plunged into the shade. Baby gave him a few more directions, the lazy shopping malls aggregating around them like garbage in a pond, Starbucks and Targets and juice shops and sandwich chains. As they passed from one shopping center to another the buildings showed less plastic, developed nailed-on shingles, piles of trash in the corners of their lots. They began to see dark and peeling paint, hand-made signs appearing in the windows. Esco realized he was reading Spanish more than English when Baby told him to pull into a lot, pointed to the store at the far end of it. An ancient hardware chain had been taken over by one of the ubiquitous mexicali restaurants sprawled across the countryside. Cultural kudzu, clinging to people's need to eat. As they approached Esco could see that the store had originally been called Sears. The new owners had tacked up red neon over the blue sign, adding an "n" and an "o" where the "a" had been. Sears became Senior's, the accent

over the n done in squiggly glow-in-the-dark spray-paint.

He hoped they had plantains.

The truck pulled up next to half a dozen others of similar make and style, albeit likely without hardware like theirs. Shovels and blowers and wide-feed lawnmowers were mounted on polyboard sidings glued onto the beds of the trucks with fat worms of plasticene. Chew cups and shotgun racks gleamed dully in the fading sunlight through the open windows. A dog barked from the back of one of the trucks, followed it with a weird chittering sound.

Sick dog, thought Esco as he got out of the truck. Inside, Baby was reclining his seat, cussing at the Frenchman to move over towards The Big Gun. The truck was modded so the seat could recline all the way back, a false jacket and bag resting over Baby's legs and midsection. The rest of him laid back into the bed of the truck where he could control his toys in peace. The Frenchman was making things difficult, but eventually Baby got him moved over. Esco lit a cigarette in the meanwhile, eyeing the cars, considering his angles. Eventually he reached in across Baby's knees and pulled the flechette from the glove compartment. Baby had cleaned and reloaded it while they'd drove, running through the process by touch on the back of a porn mag held over his lap. Esco tucked it into the small of his back, stretched out his arms a few times, loosening up his bad elbow. The bruise the Boer had given him was bad, but from what he could feel there wasn't any breakage. The icepacks and anti-inflammatories he'd used on the drive helped, but it still hurt like a bitch. He hopped on his toes to wake up his legs and peered in the cab to make sure Baby was fully covered. He could see all around the truck from his headset, but there was no sense in tempting fate. The Frenchman moaned loudly in the back and Esco winced.

"What're you sending in?" he asked Baby's knees.

"Fox. Here." said Baby.

From beneath the truck a small, lumpy figure crawled out, its round head facing skywards as it walked on all fours. Once it stood next to Esco it bent its back legs and rose smoothly to a standing position, its front legs becoming arms. The creature was a panoply of colors, exposed wires and ducting welded across its back and between its limbs and body. It was garage work at its finest, Baby's hacked darling. The thing packed enough firepower to take down a legion. If it didn't break down first.

Fox tilted its head and snapped a neat salute at Esco. He took another drag of his cigarette, regarding the tiny robot next to him, and then turned and slammed the door to the car. The day was fading.

Baby had to make Fox break into a run to keep up with him on his way to the restaurant.

Esco pushed through the heavy door and entered a giant hall. The bar stretched out nearly a hundred meters in front of him, a metal lattice making an artificial ceiling on which candles and chemsticks flickered and glowed. The place was nearly empty, a small cluster of tables near the door hugging the bar. The rest faded into dimness. Voices stopped when Esco entered, plumes of smoke from cigarette-fueled conversation slowly rising and vanishing into the darkness overhead. Half a dozen cowboy hats perched on the tables, nearly twenty dark men next to them sitting motionless, watching him.

He went to the bar. The short Mexican behind the bar said nothing when he asked for a beer. Esco'd figured there'd only be one kind, and was right. An unmarked bottle of piss yellow liquid appeared in front of him. He put a twenty on the table, kept one finger on it as he leaned forward towards the bartender.

"I'm here to talk to the owner" he said in Spanish. He knew it was Puerto-Rican Spanish, knew it marked him more clearly than his mods or clothes or attitude. He wheeled on his chair, beer in hand, leaving the bartender behind him to sort out the rest. Fox was standing in the shadows near the door; if the bartender tried anything he'd get a laser in the eye for the effort. At least, Esco hoped Baby would do as much.

Somebody to Esco's right tossed back a shot glass of an oily yellow liquid. Esco went to do the same, realized his beer wasn't opened. His eyes tightened as he frowned and reach his arm out level to the bar on his right, let the top of his bottle rest against the edge of the bar, pressed. The cap popped off and beer sizzled against the cement. Esco's shoulder muscles screamed but he smiled sweetly, slowly brought the beer back in front of him, wiping off its edge and flicking the drops towards his shoes. He hadn't done that in years. It fucking hurt.

But it worked. The guy who'd swallowed his shot stayed seated, cigarettes began their cargo cult missions from mouth to table, beers were slowly mouthed over. Nobody said anything. Esco watched the crowd. The crowd watched Esco. Baby, via Fox, watched them all. Esco hoped.

The sound of boots came echoing up slowly from the vanished dark rear of the room. A figure entered the bar from the shadows to Esco's right, a tall figure dressed a in neat white shirt, sturdy black trousers. Esco watched over his right shoulder, noticing the tiny golden cross, the neatly cropped hair, the six-foot frame wrapped in loose solid mass. As the man approached Esco slowly turned to meet him, stood when he came close and extended a hand.

The man slapped his palm against Esco's own, leaned close and kissed his cheek. He smelled of bay rum and aftershave, of rich tobacco meant to be packed in pipes, and most importantly, a sweet fine scent of hot fried plantains. The man whispered a few words of Spanish the way Esco's parents spoke it, held his body close for a moment before leading him back to the shadows. Esco was smiling.

Five hours later Baby had setup perimeter defenses of his own around the back office Fuentes had given them. They'd feasted on fresh fried plantains and chorizo burritos dripping with sizzling grease and served up by a small grayed and

grizzled woman Fuentes introduced as his Mama. It was, barring the burritos his own mama had made, the best Esco'd ever had.

Now they sat watching the last of the sunset over the dusty remains of a cornfield behind Senior's. Every three minutes a soft shuffling noise reminded them that Fox was patrolling the hallway behind them, every ten minutes a small flash showed the black flyer zipping by against the tree line on its way around the house. Esco inhaled deeply from the thin white hand-rolled he'd gotten from a red-eyed old man parked by the far end of the bar after they'd eaten. Fuentes' appearance had worked magic on the crowd, and they smiled when Esco returned to them. Baby slid in easy, ignored and smiling as always. Baby liked all his mods internal, enjoyed the anonymity of his mulatto background and easily forgettable looks. Esco thought Baby didn't much care how his face looked - it belonged parked behind a headset anyway.

The Frenchman moaned slightly, the comedown troubling his already fitful sleep. They'd sedated him once they got him inside, splinted and tied up his foot before he had a chance to start feeling it. Fuentes had given them some stuff to accelerate the healing, but it'd still be a while before he was walking steady.

Baby had sent word to Pharoë that they'd reached their first destination. Now, they waited.

Chapter #21

Fed had been coding more or less nonstop since they'd returned from the tower. Cessus had celebrated by smoking a fistful of weed and then munching three banana splits. He talked nonsense the whole time, his formerly lucid self-dissolving into a nonstop stream-of-consciousness tirade. Fed had the feeling that Cessus's being fully together was a rare event, but decided to take a chance when he reappeared in his bathrobe after a hot shower. The Chinese firewalls used a weird mix of homespun iptable rules and port-knocking systems, and Fed couldn't figure out how to propagate his code via the P2P networks because of it.

Cessus had sat quietly sipping a glass of grape kool-aid, a Cheshire grin plastered across his face, and produced a finely detailed description of the network architecture the Chinese were using to sidestep outbound data access. He'd grasped the essence of Fed's problem and fit it against a deep understanding of the networks in under a minute. And this while, clearly, completely stoned.

"How the fuck you do that, man?" asked Fed, after he'd recovered his wits and run some preliminary scans against the networks to see if it would work. The results were positive; it'd take a few hours to code up the right routines, but it would do the trick.

"Do what?" asked Cessus back at him, grinning again.

"How do you just figure it out like that? You're all fucked up but you get what I'm after right off and give me a good answer. You some kind of genius?"

Cessus laughed, a long soft barking howl.

"No, man. I just know how to allocate my brainspace. I was telling you in the tower but you were too busy trying to defend your own gestalt. And no, it isn't easy. Takes a whole lot of meditation to init concurrent and complete llobal access." Fed stared at the man for a moment, a grimace of disbelief wrapping itself across his face.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he asked, against his better judgment.

Cessus smiled again.

"Let me make it simple for you, Feed. You've been training all your life to grind through information and pack it into your brain one letter, one digit at a time. That's good, that's how you own data; by chewing up and understanding each part. But once it's in there" Cessus reached over and rested the tip of one hot finger on Fed's forehead "it's up to you how you use it."

He leaned back, put his palms flat on the table. "Remember we were talking about how sometimes, when you're coding, you stop thinking about the individual lines of code? How you see the whole shape of the program and some other part of you does the actual coding?"

Fed nodded, cautiously.

"That's a state of whole-brain awareness. You're focused on the task at hand, but not at the expense of all the other processes. You play any sports? Meatspace stuff?"

Fed shook his head.

"If you did you'd know what I mean. I used to play combat sims, even real paintball games. After a while you get in a zone where you aren't thinking about your opponent's gun, the turn of the next trail - you're just listening. Your whole brain listens, processes all the data you can absorb through all your senses, organizes it all into one coherent picture of your situation and how you're going to react. That's what your brain is designed to do."

He got up and tore open another packet of grape soda powder, dumped it in his glass and topped it with water from the fridge filter. "What humans have that dumb animals don't is the ability to augment an immediate situation with additional information. We can learn abstractions previously, and bring that knowledge into play in the immediacy of the present. You can learn what the range of an opponent's gun is, and then know when he's staring you down if you're safe or not. But." Cessus stopped standing before the table, pointed at Fed over the top of his glass, "that doesn't mean you have to stop

everything else to think about it.

"Once you own the data, really know it, you can let the rest of your brain handle it. That's what I've specialized in, man. Owning the data I absorb, and letting my brain do all the preprocessing. When I make a run, I spend a lot of time frontloading information about the situation and setting up peripheral inputs.

"When I was starting out I had whole walls of color bars, music feeds set to reflect data streams, all kind of shit. Turns out you can train your brain to notice pretty much anything as background information, though, so eventually I just put up traffic streams. That was what you were watching while we were in the tower."

Fed stared at the tabletop, at the ring of water where Cessus had set his first glass of Kool-Aid.

"So you don't think at all?" he asked.

"No, man. I think liminally. I make myself open to the multiprocessing the rest of my brain gives me. I let the other 90 per cent inform the ten percent I know of as the present, as myself. You can do that shit with drugs, but it'll cost you. Train yourself to do it, though, and you'll be able to program with all your knowledge at once, any time.

"Of course" he laughed "you may end up staying in that state most of the time, which is what I do. It's liberation, my man. It's being present to the complete reality of your experience during the only moment which exists, the white hot instant of now. That's zen."

Cessus stopped and stared intently at Fed, his ruddy eyes glistening wetly in the dim light of the kitchen. Then he laughed, long and loud, and reached out to rub his hand roughly over Fed's head.

"Come on, white boy. Come on upstairs and let me teach you how to think."

Fed spent the next several hours with a strip of duct tape wrapped across his forehead, brainwave monitors stuck with gel against his scalp, a collar of galvanic-skin response indicators, pulse and breath rate sensors snugged up against the small of his neck. Cessus ran him through three hours of tests, three hours of progressively less entertaining games. The games were simple; maneuver a bouncing ball through a series of platforms, steer a boat through a bunch of buoys, fly a glider over a mountain landscape. There was no joystick; control over each game depended on Fed calming himself and reaching a state of near-pure alpha waves; the closer he got to what Cessus called 'the zone' the better he did at the game. After the first couple hours, tired and cranky, Fed was able to recognize what he had been talking about. It was the same space Fed tried to reach when programming normally, when dissecting new code; that pure empty feeling of just doing. He'd been there before, he went there all the time when he coded. But it was hard.

Around midnight Cessus and Fed were sucking down a veggie pizza from Cessus's favorite Italian delivery, arguing about how the process of frontloading a programs' shape every time was wasteful. Cessus felt you could just scan the code and know the thing, and program from there, but Fed wasn't convinced. He did know that Cessus was on to something with his hippie-dippie brainwave shit, though. When he'd gone back and looked at the Chinese P2P modules after spending three hours on Cessus's games he'd slipped into it easily, found the match between the routines and the port-knocking systems almost by accident. He was more focused on the feeling than the code.

Still, he found that the code he was producing was buggy and full of stupid errors. It was sloppy.

"That's your disbelief, grasshopper. The more confidence you have the less you'll trip yourself up" said Cessus.

Just then Marcus came into the kitchen, saying nothing, and started mixing himself a huge mug of protein shake. He glared at the two of them.

"What up, Marcus?" asked Fed. Cessus slapped a quick hand on his arm, shook his head at Fed. He raised his other hand, palm out towards Marcus. The huge man was already starting to lean over towards them, his lips curling back over his titanium shark teeth. Cessus led Fed upstairs, the pizza forgotten.

"What the fuck, Cessus?" asked Fed once the door to Cessus's room was shut.

"What the fuck, Feed" replied Cessus. "Why are you dicking around with Marcus when he comes down from a fight? You got to be able to tell when to leave a man alone, boy."

Fed recoiled. "Boy? Marcus is a friend of mine. I know if he needs leaving alone."

Cessus smiled, shook his head slowly. Something crashed downstairs. Something big and heavy, but Cessus didn't flinch.

"No, Feed. You don't. Marcus has a whole lot of chemical lines wired through that chassis, and when he's in a fight he uses all kinds of things. He comes home like that you just leave him alone, okay? I appreciate you considering him a friend, but trust me.

"Sometimes you just got to leave a man alone. Now..."

Cessus turned and pulled out a long piece of glass. Putting it on the low, candle-wax covered table in front of him he took out a packet of white powder out of his bathrobe and dumped a small pile on to the mirror. Fed stepped back.

"I don't use, Cessus" he said.

"Don't give me that shit. You've used since your fingers first hit a keyboard, you just haven't had to buy anything for it" said Cessus. "I've been training on those games for six years now. I was two years in before I got to what you sat down with today."

He looked up at Fed, his eyes flashing.

"You're a natural, Feed. Your code is tight, you got the knack. You know how to learn, how to make your brain take it in. Most important, you got discipline. But you keep holding yourself down to the status quo. You've been taught your whole life to code by the rules, use the same stupid routines every average script kiddie out there uses. You've seen the work of pros, you know it isn't the same."

He pulled a razor out from under the table and cut the powder expertly into six half-foot long lines. The razor went back under the table and he took out a short black straw.

"You could be a pro, Feed, if you bust open the bullshit you've reigned in your mind with. I'm not proposing a habit here" he gestured at the lines, "I'm proposing a one-way ticket to your taking back control of your mind."

Fed stared at the mirror. Cessus sat back and crossed his arms, his legs folded beneath him. A long moment passed. "What is it?" asked Fed.

The next sixteen hours went by fast.

Chapter #22

Fed crashed sometime after noon the next day. Cessus had brought him a tea with strange ping-pong-ball sized seedpods in it which he drank without thinking. He'd spent at least twelve solid hours coding, twenty data streams dancing in the background of his vision, behind his compile jobs and module libraries, behind the blinking cursor from which all things came. Cessus had dropped him into a simple biometric feedback loop once he'd taken his first line, an image of a broad red vertical stripe and a thick red ball. The clearer Fed's head was the closer the ball came to center. Fed had finally gotten it hidden behind the line after half an hour and lost it completely when Cessus pulled up the first data stream. In another forty-five minutes he was able to keep the ball hidden and the data stream running. Another hour after that and he could spot errors from the simple TCP/IP traffic flow Cessus was pushing past him without letting the ball slip.

Fed lost track of time after that. Cessus pushed him data, he acclimated to it, and soon he had a development environment chock-full of inputs flowing through his visual space. But it wasn't like that - it wasn't external. He was the data, he was the environment. He saw the compile errors before they occurred, felt it in the debugger's increase in cycles. Sometime early in the morning he'd had a flash of understanding, had seen crystal-clear how the compromised Java libraries could be used to run his algorithms against the as-yet-unseen data set spread across the sea of Chinese boxes. He'd understood it the same way you understand that the next beat of a song is going to happen, the same way you know where your coffee cup is behind the paper you're reading. He reached out and took it, drank deep. The code happened.

Cessus danced, played music, went in the bathroom and masturbated. He brought Fed countless glasses of water that Fed emptied from his bladder while chording one-handed. Fed sat behind the tall red line and let it all go through him, and the sun came up, and he drank the tea. He remembered keying in a save sequence before slipping into a peaceful, hot sleep.

When he woke up his head felt like someone had rubbed shattered glass into his brainpan. He was desperate, panicked and fatigued. That he couldn't figure out how to socket on his legs was a tragedy beyond all description, so he left them lying on the floor, sniveling, and crawled as quietly as possible to the bathroom. He vomited in the toilet and lay there, heaving breath, cold spasms pulling at his stomach.

Eventually Marcus appeared, picked him up in his arms like a baby and gently seating him downstairs on the couch, his legs placed neatly besides. Cessus was nowhere to be seen. The mod fighter brought him a bowl of gray-green mush, blackish swirls of what tasted like dirt spiraling through it. He tried to protest but the big man wouldn't budge, and eventually he'd just shoveled the cardboard-tasting mash down his throat. When he was through Marcus brought him a big mug of coffee, pulled out an ancient monitor-pad, and keyed him into the house media database. Fed sat and listlessly watched cartoons, sobbing occasionally. His life wasn't supposed to be like this, this chaos. He had worked so hard for so long to go the right way, to not make the same mistake Tonx had made, and now here he was. Doing exactly what his brother had done, thrown it all away. Fed sat and listened to his blood creep, felt the heavy black weight of sure dead certainty that everything was ruined.

After an hour or so Cessus appeared, moving slowly downstairs. He waved briefly at Fed, his eyes red and throbbing, and disappeared into the kitchen. A conversation so soft he couldn't follow drifted through the doorways, and he fell asleep.

Fed woke up again to Cass's voice, cold panic flooding him. "Marcus?" her voice had asked from down the hall. There was fear there, a vibrating waver. "I think there's someone following me."

Then there was a thump followed by a bright flash and her high-pitched scream, and from where Fed was sitting he could see her helmet bounce across the doorway and out of sight down the hall. Marcus flew from the kitchen, his tiny, deep-set eyes glowing as he danced to the door, bellowing for Cessus. A mass of dreads appeared taking three steps at a time and Cessus's white robe spun wide as he twisted into the doorway behind the fighter. Fed had a single image of Cessus's hairy black ass beneath the robe before he snapped to and grabbed for his legs, slamming them on and jumping out of the couch. He almost pissed himself right then, very nearly dumped a load in his own pants. His guts twisted tight, his lungs spasmed, and he fell limply across the living room table.

"Get the fuck up and help, Feed" screamed Cessus over his shoulder, pulling Cass across the floor and into the living room by one arm. She was dressed in her usual black cargo pants and a bloody wife-beater. Bloody. Fed peered at her as she went past, and one of her eyes swiveled towards him, pink froth slowly sliding from her lips. She grinned.

He struggled up and over the table, tried to grab a leg as Cessus pulled her into the dining room. She kicked feebly. "Sa'right" she slurred, one arm waving. "Gimmie water."

Cessus came back with a pink power-puff girls mug. She tossed it back, getting more on herself than down her throat.

"Get your guns, cowboys" she said, slapping the back of her hand against her mouth. Blood began to trickle from her upper lip, but she didn't seem to notice. "We got company."

That was when they heard Marcus bellow. Fed watched Cass's eyes dilate at the stone-hard sound, the raw animal groan from the front doorstep. There was a sharp crack and a flash down the hall before somebody let loose a muffled scream. Marcus stormed inside, a body in a suit limply trailing behind the man's head, which Marcus held in one hand. He was bleeding from a hole in his hip and there was a quickly purpling dent in his forehead.

"Get the pack" he said, pointing a thick finger at Cessus. "Type 9947 into the keypad downstairs" he said, pointing at Cass. "Take her there" he said to Fed, swiveling to stare him in the eyes. There was nothing behind them, just a blank, seamless shape, a functioning Fed didn't, couldn't understand.

"Now" said Marcus. His voice was soft, but it made Fed's feet jumped beneath him, made him grab Cass despite the twisting in his guts and sling her arm over his shoulder.

They were on the stairs and halfway to the basement when he realized his gogs and chord were upstairs.

"I've got to go back" he huffed.

"Fuck no" she coughed.

"Fuck yes" he said, moving to prop her up against the stairs.

She stabbed her thumb in his eye. They dropped, her legs not strong enough to take the two of them. The servos in his ankles whirred and creaked, rattling against the steps as they slowly shuffled into a collapse. They slid several steps to the landing at the bottom of the stairs. He heard her retch, struggled up to see her long pale neck bent back over her shoulder. She spit a phlegmy glob across her arm and turned to glare at him.

"Help me up" she grunted. He did as she asked, blinking away tears.

The tiny basement had a five-foot tall server rack wired to a punch panel on the far wall. The punch panel had a keypad, and Cass typed in the code before collapsing against the wall under it. Fed crouched next to her, his hand pressed hard against his swollen eye. He couldn't open it. There was an explosion upstairs and Fed smelled smoke.

"Fucking hurts" he said, his head ringing with a deep, threatening buzz. He realized she was crying beside him, tiny little-girl gasps. His one good eye made out her sweat-slicked face, snot dribbling down one nostril, lips curled into a wounded pout. She gasped again, louder, and started dry heaving.

Cessus appeared with a hammer and a slick-looking hiking pack. He took one quick look at them and started whaling at the pressboard wall at the back of the room. Stacks of old-style muscle vids, a pile of training pads and several 20-gallon containers of protein powder scattered underfoot. Gray dust flew and chunks of plaster scattered over them, Cessus swinging like a maniac, peppering the wall with blows. In less than a minute he'd cleared away a big hole in the plasterboard. "Fuck" he breathed. Through the dim light Fed could see a dozen rebar poles set horizontally through the frame, solid-looking wooden boards nailed neatly behind them.

The ceiling suddenly shook and a man screamed. It wasn't like in the movies, Fed thought remotely, where people howled dramatically. This was a desperate thing, a whimpering, terrified sound, and it ended quickly. The door at the top of the stairs blew open and Marcus came thundering down the steps. Cessus had produced some kind of pistol and had it aimed and ready, his arms straight, one lens forward and glowing slightly over his eye. When he saw it was Marcus he lowered the gun, nodded at the hole in the wall. Marcus nodded back, his eyes narrowing slightly when he saw the rebar.

Cessus handed Fed the pistol, pulled him to his feet and shoved him towards the bottom of the stairs. Fed put his finger over the trigger, raised it to aim at the empty landing at the top of the stair, tried to stare down its length like they did in the vids.

Behind him he heard Marcus tear the first piece of rebar out of the wall. The stairs shook and his ears rang. The tip of the gun bounced around at the end of his arm, a live thing. Marcus tore another bar out of the wall. Cessus cursed and bent to search through the pack. Marcus tore another piece of rebar, grabbed a big plastic jug of powder and slammed it several times against the boards mounted there. They shuddered, tore away, and a sharp yellow light flooded the room through the hole. Cessus swung the pack over to Marcus, who stuffed it through the hole and let it fall into the space beyond. Then Cessus clambered over the larger man and followed the pack. Marcus gently picked up Cass and fed her, feet-first, through the hole, then turned and pulled the gun from Fed's hand before feeding him through the hole too. Marcus shouted at them to get back. Then he disappeared into the dark of the basement.

They were in some kind of storage room, cardboard boxes stacked along both sides of the long space. Long flat-panel lights lay yellowed and torpid against the ceiling.

Marcus jumped through the hole. His shoulders were slightly too wide and a piece of board stuck to his shoulder by a nail, a gash opening up through his shirt and flesh. He landed facedown flat on the concrete with a heavy thump. He turned

his head to where they were huddled nearby, waved one hand to get down. A white-hot sheet of flame shot through the hole like a jet engine. Marcus scuttled forward, the piece of board sticking to him like a badge. They found a fire door leading to stairs and hurried up them, Marcus in the front and Cessus to the rear. Fed supported Cass as they went, felt the itching tear as the mounting post in his right leg twisted. He'd meant to get it adjusted, had never found the time. They came out the top of the stairs and jogged down a long hallway, climbed another set of stairs and went through a wide empty room, bare metal wall framing standing silent next to soggy piles of plasterboard. They turned and went down another set of stairs and came out onto a fire escape on the second floor of a long alley. Across from them a featureless brick wall rose two floors, mute and windowless.

"I'll go" said Cessus, smiling widely at Marcus. The tendons in his neck shone slick with sweat. He nodded briefly at the bloody stain on Marcus's thigh. "You do something about that."

Cessus climbed over the side of the escape and Marcus grabbed his free hand, leaning out wide to lower the smaller man closer to the ground. It was still a good-sized drop, and when Cessus fell and rolled on the black tarmac Fed could see it hurt. He stood and waved jauntily, turned and limped quickly down the alley towards an oversized garage.

"Who are they?" asked Marcus, turning and examining Cass. "How'd they find us?"

She hissed slightly as he probed her ribs, one big hand pushing aside her breast to find the hole in her side. He sniffed, then turned and reached into the bag.

"They got to be the mouse" she said, her teeth ground tightly together. "I came back to the shop. Somebody had been there. Mil wasn't around. It smelled like trouble, so I didn't go in, took off from the back." She cringed again, tears starting from her eyes as Marcus lifted her arm over her head and tore her shirt open across her midriff with two fingers, like party paper. He sprayed a small blue aerosol can over the wound. Her skin stained yellow.

"I couldn't get Tonx on the comm. Went for a lookup on the public proxy before I realized they'd owned my comm too. Took the long way here, thought I was clear until I got to fifth." She whimpered slightly as Marcus smoothed half of a strip of tape over the top of her wound, pulled it down to fasten the hole together.

"Shouldn't you get the bullet out?" asked Fed.

"Shut up" snapped Cass, glaring at him. "There's no bullet in there. Marcus is the one with the bullet." Marcus put one thick finger against the smooth line of her chin and pulled her face back towards his.

"Then what?" he asked before turning back to the bag.

"Then I walked in your front door and they fucking shot me. I got scared, Marcus. I brought them down on you." She began to cry again.

"We don't have time for crying, my dear. I'm touched, but I'll bill you later. Turn your head." Marcus sprayed the contents of another small can over the tape, pink film forming against her golden skin. He pulled her arm down.

"Try not to move that much" he said. "Feed, you okay?"

Fed nodded.

"Liar" said Marcus, smiling. He lowered himself against the railing and pulled long stainless steel tweezers from a plastic Tupperware box. He hooked a thumb over the hem of his pants and pulled them out from his hip, revealing a bruised black hole. Fed looked away as Marcus stuck the tweezers in the hole and started searching. The big man grunted twice and something small clanked against the landing before falling to the cement below. Fed felt nausea grip him, turned in time to see Marcus wiping the tweezers neatly on his pants before reaching for the aerosol cans. The door at the end of the alley began to open, electric winches pulling it smoothly upwards.

"Our ride's here, people" said Marcus, slowly standing. The metal landing shuddered and shook as he pulled himself up, flakes of rusted paint fluttering away beneath them.

Cessus drove the cab of the huge cargo truck under the landing and Marcus lowered them all onto it. They limped over the hood and into the cab, Fed and Cass crawling into the back of the cab where a small couch formed a bed. The truck was an unmarked shipping line, a huge white freight container its only cargo. A steep whine announced the release of the pressure break, and Cessus pulled out of the alley and into a yard full of similar trucks. They stopped next to the oversized gate and Cessus pulled out a pen-shaped device. He twisted its top and held it out towards the speaker grille.

"Samuel M. Miller" the pen announced. The voice reeked of New Jersey. The gate opened and they pulled out, took a right onto the arterial, went two blocks more before turning onto an onramp.

Cessus pulled up some maps on the dash-mounted view screen. The hiss of aerosol came from the front seat as Marcus tended to himself.

"Where are we going?" asked Cass.

"South" said Cessus. "We're going south."

They rolled on, the truck taking to the far lane and settling into cruise control. Cessus sighed, point out the window to his left. "Going to miss that place." he said. In the distance a thin pale plume of dirty smoke rose above the center of the city.

"Sorry about your house, Cessus" said Cass.

"Cessus's house?" asked Fed. "I thought that was Marcus'."

Marcus chuckled and Cessus smiled.

"Turns out international credit card theft pays more than mod fighting" he said. "Get some sleep. The shock's going to wear off any minute and when it does you're going to wish you were unconscious."

Fed sat back against the small couch, Cass's boots wedged against his hip. Traffic rolled by, Cessus and Marcus speaking quietly together in the front, words hidden by engine noise. Fed looked around the small space, saw a poly-fleece blanket wadded into one shelf and pulled it out. Slowly, he spread it out over Cass, tucked it gently over her shoulder.

She wiped her nose against the back of her hand, wincing slightly as the cut on her lip reopened. Fed smiled, and she smiled back.

"Sorry about your eye" she said quietly. She laughed. "You look like shit."

Fed waddled up to the front of the cab.

"I left my comm back in the house" he announced.

"Bullshit" said Cessus, without turning. "Picked it up on the way out. Wouldn't have mattered anyway; I was running a tracker on your box all last night as part of the input monitor."

Fed turned and looked expectantly at the bag resting between Marcus's knees.

"Get some rest, Feed" said Marcus. "We're going to need you pretty soon." The big man crossed his arms and leaned his head against the rear of the cab.

Fed did as he was told.

Chapter #23

Austin was truly a shithole city, Tonx decided for the fifth time that day. He'd finally gotten in touch with John, placing a call from a public terminal in a pachinko parlor high up on the fifth floor of a mall gallery. The clamor of thousands of tiny metal balls filled the air. He glanced back at the skinny kid with golden shark teeth and bad skin eying him warily from behind a pink and purple desk. It was mounted in a giant plastic ball at the front of the store, Asian pop stars gyrating across its surface cast by external projectors.

"You sure this deal's good, John?" he asked again.

"Given the stunning lack of information you've provided I'd say you ought to count yourself lucky I could help you at all." The deeply tanned skin over John's beard wrinkled into a smile and he winked conspiratorially.

"Serious. I know my boys aren't your style, but they're running some legit business up that way and are about as good a cover as you could ask for. Given what you've told me you could use the muscle, and the reputation sure won't hurt either."

John leaned over, out of view of the screen, and said something to someone Tonx couldn't see.

"Just do me a favor, okay? Make sure you bring me in on marketing whatever it is you get out of this. I can tell it's big - much respect - but I'm pulling some strings for you here. You got me?"

Tonx smiled warmly. "I got you John. You know I'd spill if it'd help you, but right now it'd be more risk for you than it was worth."

"I figured" said John. The broad face wrinkled, frowned, glanced off screen.

"Don't worry, I'll cut you in when I got something" said Tonx. His comm ringed.

"Don't answer" said John, not looking up.

Tonx's glasses showed an unlisted number buzzing through with a Florida area code.

"It's biz" he said, not asking how John knew he was getting a call, annoyed that he did. "I got to run."

John's eyes got wide and his lips puckered to speak as he glanced up at Tonx.

Tonx flipped the call open, stepping back from the terminal and turning slightly away.

"Tony Riel you are under arrest pursuant article D.B.12 of Private Corporation number one-one-three. You will remain where you are until our agents have arrived. You have the right to your company's legal counsel"

Tonx flipped off the line, looked back at the terminal. John's face was turned off screen again, teeth clenched in concentration.

"Two floors down, the tea parlor. Ask for Cheung. Do what he tells you. Go. Now!" The terminal flickered off, flicked on again.

"Tonx!" he called. Tonx turned back. "Get rid of your comm. Garbage can by the exit. Sharky will dump it."

Tonx disentangled his gear, popped the memory stick that held his vital files and tucked it in his pocket. He slammed it and his chord into the large plastic bin alongside pre-rinsed coke bottles, a separate pail for their caps hung on its edge with wire. He darted back and tossed his glasses in after it. Golden-tooth boy stared open-mouthed, then turned as his terminal buzzed. Tonx took off, down two flights of escalators in a rush. Mall security would be on him but shouldn't do more than tail him - security liked to run folks off, not actually touch them.

Two floors down Tonx glanced around for a tea parlor. There it was, tucked between a Pizza Us and a Veggie McDonalds, a rainbow-colored flat-panel sign with tiny animated characters marching along the letters 'Pink Fizz'. Teenagers poured in and out of it clutching oversized polyurethane cups with color-tinted domelike tops, sucking thick tapioca plugs through oversized straws. Bubble tea, back in fashion for the third time since Tonx could remember. A slight young man in nicely cut business wear appeared through the doorway, looked around before pressing his comm more firmly

into his ear. Before he could look away he spotted Tonx and pointed to a sky tunnel leading from the arcade to another mall across the street, hurrying towards it without looking back.

Tonx's stomach tightened and he followed. A few seconds later he fell into step beside the young man. His thick dark hair betrayed an Asian heritage, his eyes taking in Tonx in a quick competent glance before he handed him an unmarked cred card.

"Chueng?" asked Tonx.

"Take this to the phone shop, basement level" Chueng said, nodding. "Tell them you need my backup package. It should stay secure at least twenty-four hours after you start it up."

They slowed, shoved their way through a large crowd of frizzy-haired matrons on a mall walking expedition, their guide holding a three-foot placard flashing purchasing options and recommendations.

"After you get the phone leave through the parking garage exit. Go to the back of the garage and look for a dumpster. Wait behind it. I don't know any more than that."

"Thanks" said Tonx.

"No need, glad to help. Besides," he stopped and shrugged as they entered another shopping arcade in front of a bay of escalators, "I never saw you."

Chueng smiled mischievously and turned, disappearing into the crowd. Behind them a fire alarm went off and red lights flashed from a store next to the sky bridge, followed by wire gates sliding shut across the bridge's mouth. Tonx's mouth twisted into a grin. He didn't bother looking for Chueng. Tonx slid past a pair of teenage girls in floor-length transparent plastic raincoats with matching bikinis and double-stepped down the escalator.

He was out of breath by the time he got to the basement level, fear dulling his senses, his eyes darting from face to face. He passed a shop selling fake candles, tiny LEDs glimmering in phased-array series like slow-mo flames through rainbow colors. An enormously fat person of indiscriminate gender wearing a kilt and a black mumu-like shirt filled the space between the bottom of the escalator and the store on the other side, and Tonx had to go around. As he backtracked he saw a Hot Topic shop, retro-80s, 90s, early 2thou gear done and redone and redone again across retro cotton to polyplast fabrics, icons resituated across genre and subgenre. Strawberry Shortcake, the standard borne by early teen drug users when Tonx was a kid had reappeared as a goth dominatrix. Hello Kitty was being branded on cloned human-flesh wallets and shoes from Japan. His Mom used to like Hello Kitty, he thought distantly.

As he passed Hot Topic he saw the phone shop, a half-width store split by a darkened glass shelf, its clerks' raised elbows testifying to the miniscule space allowed them. He shuffled in sideways, retracted as a short Spanish woman and her son advanced, reinserted himself.

"How can I help you?" asked the woman before him. She was of indeterminate age, indeterminate background. Her hair was a watery brown, her features a bland, forgettable, and beautiful blend of Asiatic and Caucasian. Tonx started as he realized she'd had extensive pore-shrinkage, her skin a smooth seamless sheath. He couldn't tell if she was an Asian who had had bone work and gene therapy, or a Caucasian who had had melatonin injections and facial muscular reconstruction. She was a woman, as beautiful and sexually uninteresting as a nice car.

"Who did your work?" he asked impulsively. She smiled, revealing perfect white teeth.

"Actually, Pastor Frankel does all my work" she said, her eyes crinkling slightly. Asian, epicanthic folds removed, decided Tonx. He didn't recognize the name.

"Nice. I'm here for Chueng's backup package." The smile disappeared as she reached for the keyboard beneath the counter, her elbows tonging softly off the glass panel behind her. She didn't seem to notice.

"You don't look like Chueng's type" she said softly.

He didn't reply.

"May I have your cred card please?" she asked, grey eyes zeroing on his.

He handed her the card Chueng had given her. She ran it without comment. The angle of the terminal reflected against the glass and he scanned, upside down and backwards, credit card numbers, names, and addresses flashing by. A summary line appeared at the bottom of her screen, listing either the number of accounts or the total expected cash return. Either way, it was a large number. Card numbers; underground currency. The shop was laundering. He owed John some favors - what he was getting wasn't cheap.

"One moment please" she said, smiling with her lips alone. She shuffled sideways down the length of the counter, waiting for the clerk beside her to move out ahead. She bent, slightly, back straight and stood with a paper bag stapled shut in one hand, shuffled back with the patient practice of routine. Her long arm extended over the counter, bag in hand.

"Thank you for your business" she said, nodding. "The exit is over there."

He left, forgetting her face the moment he turned away. Pushing through a sudden crowd of young black men in ultra thin cotton zoot suits he saw the garage exits before him, cruised through and dodged left. He stood for a second in the shadow of the entrance to the garage, scanned it. People flowed in and out, suits, kids, mommas and papas. No way of knowing. Nothing to know. He popped the staples on the bag and crossed past the doors towards an ancient soda machine, its coin slot roughly sawed out and replaced by a card reader secured with clear caulking.

"Fuck" he said, pulling out a sealed plastic bag containing one pair of glasses, one comm, one earbud, and a watch-ring

dongle. All done in matching yellow Hello Kitty brand. As he watched the icons moved in a rapidly slowing synchronized dance, obviously powered by the motion of his movement. They faded slowly to the end sequence, running out of juice, the image of Hello Kitty with shotgun held overhead inert on the thick yellow plastic.

He rolled the plastic bag and stuck it in his pocket, crumpled the paper bag and placed it carefully in the fifth bin past the soda machine marked "paper, uncolored, clean." He began to walk purposefully to the back of the garage.

He heard his ride before he'd gotten halfway there. The rumble of big-bore engines announced them. He heard loud voices laughing, a bang and crash of something metal, and turned a corner around the last column at the long row of cars.

A crew of twenty-some Hell's Angels on big hogs of all stripes stood idling around the dumpster towards the back of the garage. Tonx drew back his lips, sucked in a breath. Without slowing he continued forward.

A small man in a worn but carefully tailored cameo-pattern suit jogged forward before Tonx got more than twenty feet from the group. Engines died, the sudden silence stifling in the dim garage. The guy in the suit adjusted his wire rims and produced an e-board, text flaring into view against the battered metal casing.

"Please sign" he said politely, a British accent coloring his voice.

"Who are you?" asked Tonx.

"Mr. Snipes. I am this crew of righteous' bastards lawyer" he said, pronouncing the words as if it were a title. Maybe it was.

Tonx sighed and signed, waited for Mr. Snipes to turn and jog back towards a big bike monkey with a handlebar mustache. The man glanced at the e-board and nodded at Tonx.

"Ride with Nancy" he called over the sudden roar of engines, jerking his head at a woman near the edge of the crew. Nancy was in her 40s, frizzy blond curls tied sensibly behind a jaunty kerchief. She had a 2005 Toyota GoldenBoy, factory original from the look of it, based on the Harley Fat Boy line from some decades before. There was a matching sidecar, and as Tonx approached Nancy smiled broadly and reached over to toss him a helmet from inside it.

"Hope you don't mind riding shotgun" she laughed, a tinkling sound that seemed oddly out of canter. As Tonx pulled on the helmet he saw an ugly pink scar knit straight down Nancy's breastbone. He must have stared - scars were rare things to see these days - as Nancy paused from adjusting the choke to give him an odd grin. She hooked her thumb over the edge of the flowered blouse inside her Cordova jacket and pulled it back to reveal a patchwork of musclework wrapping over her collarbone and down her shoulder. Full muscle replacement, cloned or stolen and stitched in direct. Scary sloppy work, laser-cauterized in place but surprisingly effective, Tonx knew. The threat of rejection was constant, the pain continuous as misplaced nerve tissue attempted to grow through dissimilar slabs of muscle, but if you wanted crazy strong fast-twitch muscle and a lot of it this was about as good as it got. As good as it got on the street, anyway. Nancy smiled broadly and Tonx slotted her tiny pupils as due to amphetamines and pain-suppressants.

"Both arms, full down to my fingertips" she announced proudly. She leaned and patted the side of the side car, thumbed the start switch.

"Come on, boyo. Let's ride."

Johnny Cash rumbled up from the base of the sidecar and Tonx fastened his helmet, climbing into place. The group rode thundering out of the garage, streaming onto the street outside in a menacing phalanx.

Chapter #24

Poulpe was losing it. Esco'd asked for some help from Fuentes and had gotten a skinny kid with missing teeth. The guy blinked constantly, narrow-eyed and darting, jail tats from the homies down south dirty blue smears under his filthy shirt. Esco'd asked a little, listened more, let his smooth fall over the guy. When he was sure the kid was his he'd snapped for Baby to send in Fox, the hurky-jerky bot shuffling in pushing a cart with leftovers and a beer. Esco pulled out a cigarette, didn't offer the kid one, lit it and nodded his head to where the Frenchman was tied down onto the broken-down bed. When he'd woken up he'd started in with mewling and whining, despite the swelling in his foot going way down. Later he had pissed himself and then begun straight-out raving. When he'd started talking with himself, arguing some crazy gene-fixer sci-fi crap, Esco'd ordered him tied up and gagged.

"He gets one scratch, we find you, man. You hear me?" he asked. The kid nodded his head once, slowly, his lips twitching. Esco stubbed out the near-untouched remains of his cigarette on a dirty plate, looked the kid in the eye until he knew Esco knew he would take it after he was gone, knew what that meant about Esco.

Baby shook his head when Esco came back into their room.

"Shut up" said Esco smoothly, preempting Baby's pending jibe. "I'm going downstairs. Biz. You coming?"

Baby grunted something to the negative. Esco had known as much before he'd asked, but following the protocol was part of what let Baby and he to work together so well. They didn't have much in common beyond language and culture, but they did know the rules. They'd been holed up together before. Neither of them liked it. Neither of them cared. It was work.

Esco smoothed his tie, a silk number from a boat he'd helped himself into down in the docks in Florida last summer. He was dressed nice in pressed pants and saddle shoes. He adjusted his golf cap in the mirror, ran one polished fingertip down its rim, turned suddenly and left.

Downstairs Senior's had filled rapidly. Fuentes had warned them that there would likely be a big crowd tonight. Esco hoped he was right; he hadn't had a woman in a while, hadn't danced in longer. A smile creased his lips and his shoulders eased, slid back in a familiar swagger.

The crowd was an odd mix, hip-hop boys in oversized blue jeans and field workers in their pearl-button best. Less savory crews from the city huddled around the edges, filtering out to the fringes, looking for anonymity, trouble. The music filled the bar from flat-panel speakers suspended overhead, monofilament plastics framed by black metal tubing. Corrido music beat down from above, a strong Latin beat backfilling lyrics endorsing a larcenous lifestyle, the bravery of the ghetto. The light over the dance floor flickered, green and glowing, and Esco looked up to see that the framework the glow sticks were suspended from had fat transparent tubing lashed to them. The tubing ran down the length of the room, switch-backing over the breadth of the dance floor. Tiny jellyfish floated by on an artificial current, glowing gently.

"Cloned human flesh" someone yelled into his ear over the pulse of the music. Esco turned to see Fuentes standing next to him, dressed neat in a tailored black suit. His shirt was green silk, the tie a tasteful robin's egg blue. The two men shared a smile and Esco followed him towards the far side of the bar. A stage had been erected there, scavenged couches ringing something Esco couldn't see. They wove through the rapidly growing crowd. As they went several good lookers caught Esco's eye, took him in. Fuentes led the way up the steps to the stage, a dozen men rising from the couches to either side to shake his hand, clap arms around his back. Esco was introduced all around, names yelled in his ear he'd never hear or remember.

The couches were arranged around a pit, a six-foot-deep hole in the middle of the floor made larger by the stage wrapped around and above it. Below him in the hole three shirtless men paraded by, pitch-black skin puckered in carefully lined scars down their arms and across their cheekbones. Each man was leading an enormous dog by a thick chain. No, not a dog; Esco stopped and peered through the marginally improved light of the stage. They were hyenas, shaggy brown coats wrapped over bunched shoulders, yellowed teeth shaking through gaping jaws as they lolled their tongues nervously. Each was almost as big as the man that led it, jerking them around in circles, pumping their fists in the air in tune to the music.

Fuentes had taken a seat on the red velveteen couch by the far side of the pit, a three-foot tall wrought-iron stand holding a massive silver ice bucket to one side. Three gorgeous black women were draped around the edges of the couch, smooth silk dresses revealing more than they hid. Ornaments, but the kind Esco appreciated. He liked Fuentes, he decided, liked his style. The man had class. Fuentes waved Esco over and he took his place on the couch next to him. He noted the many men lounging nearby and across the stage, watched them share glances and tried to tabulate the number of guns he was likely surrounded by. One of the woman popped the bottle of champagne in the bucket and glasses were produced. The ladies stepped back, hands folded in front of them, and the music suddenly dropped away to a dull lull. The crowd kept moving.

"Noise cancellation - directional. Very useful for talking in private, in public" Fuentes said. He used the same Spanish Esco used, that Esco's parents had used. He raised a glass and the light caught on the thick rings on his right hand.

"To our mutually beneficial relationship," he said. "It is my hope that your employer and I may continue to enjoy each other's business."

Esco smiled politely. It was not his place to reply. Fuentes gestured towards the pit and the music fell over them like a wave. Huge white sheets on both sides of the dance floor unfurled and projectors flickered, threw up their light. A roiling black mass resolved into a cage full of dogs. Pit bulls and Dobermans snarled and snapped at the camera, jumping and slamming against the bars. A tune from Esco's own youth, 'Who Let the Dogs Out,' wove into the mix, a solid horn instrumental layered over it, and the crowd began to shift. The music picked up its pace, moved to Spanish, and Esco could see men with gold platters moving through the bar, two of the women with the same shining disks slowly sashaying past the couches, collecting bids. The crowd began to shudder, slamming rhythmically against the side of the stage. The fringe-dwellers had left the dark edges, mosh pits and small fights breaking out on the floor. The heat rose, adrenaline a hot metal taste in Esco's mouth. The lights flashed faster now, stark images of flesh, arms and legs and beer bottles, white teeth and wide eyes caught in the glare. The crowd surged again, away from the screens and back again, the shuddering air causing the images to distort as the sheets fluttered.

Eventually Fuentes waved a hand and the men in the pit jumped out, thick metal chains trailing behind them. The men sitting around the edge of the stage hand-adjusted lenses on two ancient video cams, and out on the floor the sheets flickered to reflect their view, the nervously trotting hyenas swimming in and out of focus. Two of Fuentes's ladies carefully fitted a transparent plastic panel into a slot cut in the edge of the stage in front of them, returned and wrapped themselves comfortably into the couch. The floor underneath Esco's feet shuddered and a trapdoor in the edge of the stage banged open. A solid stream of dogs poured out, over the edge, onto the hyenas below. The fight started.

Blood splashed up against the panel and one of Fuentes' men leaned over and wiped it off with a white handkerchief. Esco barely noticed; the fight below was entrancing, it was everything. It was horrible. Animals were slaughtering each other below him, pit bulls latching sharp teeth into the hyenas' thickly scarred hides, pulling them down, being kicked and bit and disemboweled in the process. A Doberman bit into one of the hyena's neck and the thing bent and snapped back at it, the thick skin stretching in the Doberman's teeth. Huge jaws crushed the Doberman's snout, splintering it like an ice cream cone. Blood and bone splattered and one of the dog's eyes fell out of its head, ruined as it tried to run. Its good eye turned

toward Esco before the hyena kicked free of another dog holding its leg, leapt forward and latched onto the Doberman's side, pulling it down and tearing a great patch of flesh from its belly like wrapping paper from a birthday present. A pit bull jumped and caught its haunch, knocking it aside, the Doberman left thrashing helplessly on the floor with its legs tangling in its own skin.

Across the pit two dark hounds had each caught a hyena's rear leg and were dragging it backwards. Another Doberman caught the back of its neck and was pulling it down as it struggled to stand. As Esco watched a big-headed dog with a short brown coat leapt forward and caught the hyena by the throat as it snapped at the Doberman on its back. Another pair of Dobermans, suddenly bold as the thing fell backwards beneath the onslaught, leapt forward and tore at its stomach. Bright glistening entrails spilled onto a floor already slick with spittle and blood and the howling, baying, screaming din of the crowd leapt to a new pitch.

It didn't last long. Esco's heart was pounding in his throat, his blood singing in his brain. He had a hard on like a lead pipe and could barely keep from leaping out of his seat. The woman in his lap snarled lightly at him, her pupils wide against big brown eyes. The crowd was a wild thing, frothing and pounding as the music washed over them. Esco's lady unfolded, pulling him up with her. He paused to look back at Fuentes, received a pleased nod, and turned to follow her off the stage.

As he walked across the stage he noticed a shift in the crowd out by the door, frowned as he stared. He snapped a finger to his ear and comm'd Baby.

"Gotcha. Bunch of gringos, bad news" said Baby's voice inside his skull. The sound was an itching buzz over the rumble of the music. "Looks like bikers. Should we move?"

"No" subvocalized Esco. His voice sounded fuzzy in his own head; he hoped the words made it through to Baby. "Fuentes gets first shot; it's his show." He shook his head 'no' at his lady, watched with disappointment as her fine ass turned with a shimmy and disappeared.

The newcomers flowered inside the crowd, bodies shoved aside as they descended on the bar. People's drinks flashed into the air as they were dumped out of their seats, and still more of the bikers came through the door. Esco wondered where the bouncers were.

The music changed, shifted to a more neutral metal band singing in Spanglish, a cover of an old White Zombie tune. The crowd eased but continued to roil where the bikers met its edge. The flow of gringos ceased, joined the rest like a blot of water in oil. As Esco watched a goth boy slipped through the door after them, white studs lined up his face. As he looked the boy slid a hand up the back of his spiked black hair and began following the edge of the floor towards the stage.

Esco descended and bee lined towards him. He caught up just as he'd left the wall and started towards the stage. The goth boy sized him up, noted the tie and the attitude, and glanced at the stage. He bent his head towards Esco.

"I'm looking for the owner" he shouted, extending one hand. Esco took it, laughing when he felt the cash inside.

"You want me, not the owner" he yelled back. He held up the bill. "Word from Egypt, man. Follow me."

Together they threaded through the crowd towards the stairs in the back, mellowing into the pools and groups, drug-mad dancers owning the central part of the floor as the rest sized up the gringos while they got their drink on. The screen showed the remaining pair of hyenas gorging themselves on the corpses of the dogs, wide jaws and teeth, fur matted with blood.

"The bikers yours?" Esco asked as soon as they'd ascended the stairs and closed the door behind him.

"Hell's Angels. Yeah" said Tonx. He didn't say more. Pharoe was a business partner, but his business was shady and Tonx needed the package and a ride out of here. The guy who'd led him here, who'd met him in the bar was wound like a spring, but smooth. Real chill. Tonx was ready to bet on him for that alone, especially after his biker crew had met up with three other groups on the way out of Austin. Tonx was nervous, the ragged edge of lost control panting at the back of his neck. The mouse had bit him, and he needed a get out.

Esco shrugged and knocked five times, then twice more on the first door in the hall. He smiled at Tonx and pulled out a cigarette with a practiced motion. Something was jacked about this goth and Esco's senses were already wired sky high after the dogfight. Something clattered down at the end of the hall and Tonx stepped back, towards the stair.

Fox slowly shuffled down the hall towards them, an ancient red laser painting a grid over the walls and floor. Baby was showing off. Tonx laughed, rubbed his eyes.

"Got me scanned, yeah?" he asked Esco, nodding towards Fox. "All I got is my comm."

Esco nodded cautiously, waited.

Tonx turned his head slightly, leaned back against the wall behind him. He was tired. Nancy had kept John Wayne pumping the whole damn drive, increasing numbers of increasingly rowdy bikers adding their whoops and hollers all along the way.

Eventually Fox turned and left, his head swiveled backwards to draw a red line rolling down the hall behind him.

"After me, I presume" said Tonx.

Esco arched one eyebrow, the corners of his lips tensing slightly.

Tonx paused, smiled. "Tonx" he said, holding out his hand. Esco took it.

"Esco." The two men's eyes met, locked. They let go of each other's hands and turned, slowly, unsure of the other's measure.

This here's one weird ghost, thought Esco, glad that Baby had agreed to contact Pharoee at first sign of their lead. Apparently the response had been positive, else he'd have gutted the gringo already. Still, he was surprised Pharoee had given up the package so fast. Perhaps, he thought spitefully, it was because the package was drug-addled scum.

They followed Fox past another door and continued on to the end of the hall. A candle in a worked tin lamp was nailed to the wall, tiny holes casting light in a constellation over the wooden walls. Fox stopped in the far corner, raised one arm towards the door.

Tonx cast a glance at Esco, grabbed the knob and went in. Esco shook his head at Fox as he passed, left the door open.

"Well fuck" said Tonx. The kid had a shiv at his throat, his other hand gently but firmly holding Tonx's balls in dirty fingers.

"Ah..." coughed Esco, embarrassed. That was sloppy. The kid could have killed their contact. He swore and gently moved the shiv, pointed at the hallway beyond. The kid disappeared.

"Well fuck again" said Tonx, this time catching sight of Poulpe tied down on the piss-stained mattress with lengths of purple plastic twine. His wrists were purpled and his eyes were screwed up tight, a low guttural chant escaping around the gag. Esco sighed, wrinkled his nose. No wonder the kid with the shiv had been high strung.

Tonx walked over to his colleague, let his hands hang open by his sides in the universal gesture for helplessness.

"Poulpe?" he asked, pulling out the gag.

"Why yes" announced Poulpe in a rough singsong voice. Suddenly his eyes snapped open, his eyebrows darting to the top of his brow. "Tonx?" he asked in a desperate whisper.

"Ye-sss" said Tonx, drawing the word out long, doubtfully.

"Thirty cc's risperidone analog, please" Poulpe whispered, then, "Risperidone? Over the long term risperidone produces ex-trapyramidal symptoms at therapeutic dose. In contrast, amisulpride is a highly selective antagonist of dopamine D2 receptors..." The words faded on Poulpe's lips, his eyes rolling up into the back of his head.

Esco walked slowly up to the side of the bed, one hand holding his sore elbow, his other hand bringing his cigarette from his lips.

"Any idea what he's talking about?"

"Risperidone's a neuroleptic - an atypical antipsychotic medication" said Tonx.

"Antipsychotic?" asked Esco, one carefully sculpted eyebrow raised. He regarded the remains of his cigarette, carefully inhaled the last of it and dropped it. He ground it into the floor with one foot.

"Wonderful."

Chapter #25

Fed woke sprawled out on the couch in the back of the truck. It wasn't moving. He could see Cessus's elbow from where he sat, saw his lenses flash as he turned and muttered something to Marcus. He sat up, wincing at the crick in his back. His head ached, but he no longer felt quite as much like dying. A light rain pattered against the windscreen, the sky a bruised purplish-blue.

"Is it morning?" he called out.

"Night" said Cessus, turning to look back at him. "How you doing?"

Fed unwrapped himself from the fleece and socketed his legs on, wincing at the dark flesh where he'd twisted the socket. The hospital-issues weren't meant for anything athletic, weren't really meant for anything. There were better legs out there, made for actual comfort and running and such. But they didn't look real. They looked mod.

He crawled up to the front of the cab. They were in a rest stop somewhere, darkened forest stretching out on either side of them.

"Where's Cass?" he asked.

"Getting coffee" said Marcus. The big man was quiet, his eyes staring at something beyond the horizon out ahead of him. Cessus coughed once, lightly.

"Ah, Feed. We should talk a little business here" he said. He was watching Marcus.

Fed said nothing.

"We just got our house burnt down. Marcus here lost a lot of equipment. He's got a fight coming in another month and needs training, not to mention his supplements. Me, I don't care so much other than the house. But still..."

A silence filled the cab.

"What're you saying?" asked Fed.

"We need to know what we're getting for putting our asses on the line for you and your brother" said Marcus.

"Oh" said Fed.

"It just seems like we ought to know what the conditions are here. I'm happy to help you out, you know, just for the adventure like, but my man here" Cessus clapped a hand on Marcus's huge biceps "he's got to consider skipping the fight to help you out. And it's better for his career to take the fight."

Fed sat back on his haunches. Something seeped out of him, some strength he didn't realize he had had before.

"All we need to know is the terms of our agreement, Feed" said Marcus. "That's just biz."

"I'll have to ask Tonx" said Fed.

"Sure" said Cessus. "Sure. No problem."

Cass knocked on the truck window.

"Here's your coffee" she said, handing Cessus the tall Styrofoam cups on a press form cardboard tray. It flexed dangerously as Cessus balanced it over his lap, pulling one out for Marcus.

"You want to get one for flyboy here?" asked Cessus, waving a thumb at Fed.

"S'okay" he said. "I'll get it myself."

He crawled past Cessus and shuffled out the door, the cold wind outside waking him up a little. He limped around the front of the truck, the hood shuddering slightly as the door closed behind him.

"Why do you have those old legs?" asked Cass. "You could get a nice pair of carbon-fibers, at least. Maybe a springboard set. I know a guy..."

"I don't want that" interrupted Fed. "These are fine."

He shuffled towards the rest stop, the click-hiss of his ankles clear in the cold air.

Cass shrugged, followed.

There was an ancient cred card reader duct-taped to the top of the table next to the tall silver coffee dispensers. Hand-painted signs advertising the Boy's and Girl's club's latest project, a new baseball field, were propped up around the thin plastic tablecloth. He let the steaming trickle fill his cup, held it in both hands, feeling the heat.

Cass reached over him and grabbed a sugar cube, dropped it in her own cup. Steam curled up and around her face, a dirty smudge lining one nostril. Fed turned and looked out over the forest, at the fading light through the cloud breaks beyond.

He walked down the covered length of the rest stop, under the chap-board walkway to the picnic tables, their legs encased in the cement. Cass's boots made soft scuffling noises behind him. They sat next to each other on the table, hunched over their knees, feet on the warped seat benches. He ran one finger over the smooth pink line where his ancient tennis shoes had worn away the flesh-colored paint on the plastic of his foot.

"They want a cut" said Fed. "Want a contract."

"Huh" said Cass. "Makes sense."

"I guess" said Fed.

"You guess? They just got their house burnt down. Marcus has a fucking dent in his head. Fucking Disney is after our ass. Of course they want a cut, Feed."

He turned and looked at her, admired her big brown eyes, the curve of her cheekbones.

"Fuck you" he said. He didn't raise his voice, didn't yell. He just said it, calmly. She raised one eyebrow.

"Oh?"

"You've got your cut. What do you care?"

"It's my ass, too, Feed. And they're my friends."

"So? Go hang with your friends, then."

She sat back a little, swirled her coffee.

"What's with the attitude?"

"What's with yours? You've been harshing on me since we met. Now all I have is a couple guys I thought I could trust and a brother who's out who-knows-where with big business types trying to kill him. Kill us. I can't go home because they might be tracing me and I can't go anywhere else, either. Now I've got to buy myself some protection with money I don't have and hope we pull something off."

Cass took a long pull on her coffee.

"Okay" she said.

"Okay what?" he asked.

"Okay, it's a tough situation. But those guys are just looking out for themselves same as you would. You can't blame them for that. It doesn't mean they don't like you."

He rolled the coffee cup in his hands, felt its half-empty weight. He tossed it into a garbage can.

"Whatever" he mumbled.

"I miss him too, Feed" said Cass. Her dark hair drew across her face in the breeze, the cold air prickling the back of his neck down his collar.

She stood up. "C'mon. If we're going to do anything we need to get you coding."

She tossed her coffee in the big garbage can next to the table, stopped and waited a moment on the path.

"Come on, it's fucking cold out here."

They walked back to the truck, Cessus jumping out of the passenger side to let them in.

"Got good news, folks" he said. "Tonx called while you were out, got himself a secured comm. He's okay despite the mouse's best attempts and we've discussed terms. Feed, copies are on your comm if you'd like to look at them - nothing's official until you sign off. If they're okay we've got a new target where we're going to meet up with Tonx and get ourselves

some data to play with."

Cass grunted from the back seat, pulled the blanket over herself.

Fed pulled his goggles on, signed in and scanned the new files. It made no sense whatsoever to him, obtuse legalese sprinkled with LPJ, Local Private Jargon certified legal for the participants. The contract would act to shield them from each other should they get caught breaking international laws - would tie their lawyer's hands from laying the blame in one individual in the group. It would also provide the illusion of uncertainty that what they were doing was against the law, and hopefully give them some wiggle room in an international court. If they made it work their results ought to be worth enough money to leverage the contract into some kind of legally protected status under one of the corporate states. It would also guarantee everyone their fair share of the profits, if there were any. He punched in his key string and zipped the document, looked on the local PAN and dropped it onto Cessus's comm.

"Thanks man" said Cessus. "Just a formality, you know?"

"No hard feelings, Feed" rumbled Marcus. He reached across himself with one huge hand, folded it over Fed's own in a street grip, thumbs crossed. "I'll be with you until we meet up with Tonx. We'll see what comes after that."

He turned back and fired up the engine, pulled the seat belt taut and clicked it in place.

"Who knows" he said, dark eyes glimmering, "maybe we'll get to have more fun together yet."

He and Cessus started chuckling.

They drove.

Chapter #26

"Motherfuckers" swore Tonx. "Slapping me with a fucking contract in the middle of a fucking deal."

"Trouble?" asked Esco.

"Friends" said Tonx. "Don't do business with friends."

"Noted" said Esco.

"You got any chem boxes I can mix with around here?" Tonx asked.

"Doubt it. We could check with the owner. You ought to meet him in any case, before we try to move the package."

"Right" said Tonx. "Good idea. Let me pull this shit out of my face first."

Tonx's bag had been abandoned in his escape from Austin, so he just pushed the studs out with his tongue and unscrewed them, tossing the hair-thin posts on the table after them. He could get another set anywhere.

"These not your style?" asked Esco, lighting another cigarette off the butt of the previous. Poulpe had quieted some after his small speech, for which they were both grateful, and now he just mumbled softly.

"I mod for a living. You wear what the locals expect, sometimes. I've got other mods I keep permanent." Tonx glanced up at Esco, nodded briefly at him while bending over to pick up a dropped white stud. "Nice face work, by the way. Good job on the nose."

Esco nodded briefly. "Thank you. I'm Puerto Rican, had a lot of mongoloid features when I started."

"Your primary model an Escobar or a Ricardo?"

"Ricardo, though to be honest I did a lot of the composites myself. This kind of work you can't be too similar or it ruins the effect, you know?"

"Totally" agreed Tonx. "Okay, I think I'm ready. Hopefully my ride hasn't fucked the place over yet."

The room shook briefly and the two men threw out their arms to balance themselves, shared a quick glance before scrambling for the door.

"THIS PSYCHO BITCH YOURS?" asked Fox in its finest Kraftwerk mechanoid voice. Red beams were streaming from its eyeholes to balance on Nancy's pert button nose in the junction of the hall.

"Hey flyboy, you want to turn off your puppy there?" she called. "There's some bad news downstairs I'd love to tell ya'll about."

"Cut it" said Esco, tapping Fox on the head. He muttered something else in deep Florida spanglish slang as Tonx pushed past him, then followed.

"What up?" Tonx asked.

"CAF" said Nancy. "Corporate Armed Forces, all done up in red and black. Got Mickey Mouse on their uniforms, funniest shit I ever seen."

Tonx swore loudly and pushed past her towards the door at the top of the stair. Below was madness. CAFs were pushing through the door sewing beanbag guns and audio-scramblers into the crowd in front of them. Behind the front line the mob was throwing beer bottles, taking pot shots with pistols and throwing knives. The music was still pulsing, wild street beats thrashing along with the mob.

"How do we get out of here?" he yelled at Esco. The taller man pointed at the stage on the far end of the hall, cigarette trembling between two fingers.

"There's our host. You want to get out of here alive that's the only way I can think of. Baby scanned the joint when we first got here; there's an underground garage but the rest is surroundable as fuck. It's faradayed so they won't scan in, but we

only got a little time."

Tonx turned to Nancy.

"Nancy, can you do me a favor?"

Nancy smiled big as a house.

"What I can do you for?" she asked, her words a drawl.

"Don't let anyone down this hall unless it's us. Sound good?"

"Sounds boring. Promise you won't be long, now."

"Promise. Esco, let's go."

Tonx turned and led the way through the door and into the fury beyond, taking the steps two at a time. As they hit the landing he grabbed Esco and held his head close to his ear.

"Your guy can keep an eye on her too, can't he?" he shouted. Esco nodded. He'd already comm'd Baby as they started down the steps. They were well behind the mob's edge as they stepped out onto the floor but the crowd was getting wilder, no exits available. Tonx started forward, sticking as close to the wall opposite the entrance as possible.

About ten meters into the crowd Esco saw someone big fall back, jostle into Tonx and turn. It was a street kid, jacked up huge with cheap bodshop steroids, and he grabbed Tonx's wrist with one hand while shoving a long thin blade at his head with the other. Tonx was pulled forward like a drunk date at the prom, nowhere to go but dead. Esco leapt forward too late, saw the blade slide past Tonx's ear, ruffling his hair as the smaller man drove his forehead into the street kid's nose. The punk's head bounced like a beach ball and he staggered back on his heels. He'd dropped the knife, and one arm flew out for balance as he fell. Esco stopped a step away as Tonx gently laid a hand on the guy's knuckles where they gripped his wrist and pressed slightly. The kid reversed direction and dove for the floor face first, taking a detour to smash his bloody nose into Tonx's waiting knee.

Esco was surprised, but the guy's scream was clear as day over the music, and he didn't get up. He stepped over him as he followed Tonx forward, not sure what he'd just seen. Weird motherfucking ghost indeed, thought Esco.

They continued forward at a rapid jog, fighting off a few stragglers as they went. There wasn't much heart in it, though; the real fighting was up front and those who wanted to run had already looked for exits in the back. The smell of smoke wafted over the stench of sweat and fear, gunfire punctuating the music. The crowd surged toward the entrance again and Esco and Tonx ran forward as fast they could in the dim light, trying to make time while there was space. Esco noticed that the tubes overhead were drained, empty and dim. He wondered where the jellyfish were.

They had almost reached the stage when they saw the first CAF. Dressed in full-body riot gear the man was covered in black and red piping, the light flashing off the chromed knuckles of his gloves. The Mickey Mouse logo glared skull-white on the back of his helmet. Tonx skidded to a halt, Esco plowing into him as the man stepped onto the stage and turned back towards them. His helmet fit his face perfectly, reflective lenses set over his eyes printed with the flat white-and-black gaze of the mouse. He stiffened, suddenly, seeing Tonx, and raised his slim black rifle before a beer bottle careened off his head, snapping his head back.

Tonx didn't wait. He jumped forward, rolled onto the stage and to his feet behind him. The soldier grabbed his helmet in his hands, one eye shattered as Esco shoved him off the stage and into the crowd.

Esco leapt for the stage on the surge of the crowd, thrown almost into the pit by the sudden momentum. Tonx grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet, yelling something he couldn't hear over the pandemonium. There was a loud whoosh, and the wall facing the parking lot peeled upwards in hot flame, yellowed light splashing onto the crowd. The fire leapt higher as a staggered row of mice appeared silhouetted against the burning wall, stubby backpacks pouring fire up it and out into the crowd. The mob pulled back.

"Where is he?" screamed Tonx in Esco's ear. Esco looked around. The couch where he had sat not long ago was where he'd left it, but the stage was deserted. He nodded towards the rear of the stage and pulled Tonx after him, keeping his head bent low against the thin LED spots vibrating overhead.

They found Fuentes right away. His throat was slit, his head bent sideways where he had slumped to the stage. One of the hyena owners had gone for him, and now his back opened in a meaty pulp where Fuentes had shot him with some sort of high-caliber handgun. His body was draped elegantly over Fuentes's hip. An angry chattering scream filtered up from the pit and Tonx stared down below.

Esco pulled Fuentes out from under his killer and started going through the body's pockets. As he did so Tonx produced a long, pale-white ceramic blade from one pocket and started hacking the black man's arm off.

"What are you doing?" screamed Esco, rolling Fuentes's body over to get at his wallet. He found what he was after, a pale yellow card key appearing between his fingers. He smiled. "Come on!"

"...pheromones" he heard Tonx say, blood-sticky fingers peeling dark skin down the arm like casing off a sausage. The fingers inverted, raw meat covering bones, the skin sticking at the fingernails. Esco's stomach pressed against his throat. But Tonx had found what he was after, apparently, taking the skin and slicing it against the wood of the stage to produce a perforated plastic strip. It looked like half a wiffle-ball, and a thick musky stench hit Esco as Tonx held it up. The stage shuddered as the crowd hit it again, surging back from the CAFs as the wave of chemical flames rolled towards them.

"Help me" yelled Tonx, kicking the mutilated body out of the way and pulling on the couch. He pulled one end

towards the pit, got behind it. Esco leaned in, pushed until the couch slid in end-first. For a moment he thought it would topple, but it stuck, fell back against the edge. The first hyena was up and out before Esco'd had a chance to stand, a high-pitched scream like a baby girl peeling out of its lips. It leapt straight for Tonx, and fell, its eyes wheeling back wide and white in its head. Esco thought at first it had been shot, but then it rolled, belly up, nose waving in the air towards the flat sheet of plastic in Tonx's hand. Tonx tossed it to Esco, mimed rubbing his hands with it, and the second hyena bounced up the couch. It caught a hold of Esco's pants before the smell hit it, nervously backing away and tearing a long rent in his left pant-leg as it went.

Tonx snapped the chain into the carabineers on the hyena's collars. They came to their feet, ears back, eyes averted as he led them.

"Relax" he yelled at Esco. "You're an alpha now - try to act like it. Come on!"

There were stairs on the back of the stage and Tonx led the way, the two animals dwarfing him like wolves would a child. Esco noticed their ears twitching and darting, the way their noses led them, and figured that whatever the smell was it wasn't affecting their fighting senses any. They were huge animals, and Tonx kept them in check with sweeping yanks on their chains. The ghost had balls, thought Esco.

The crowd had thickened substantially, almost flattening against the back wall as it tried to escape the flames and rubber bullets. The sound of a baby crying suddenly turned into a deafening wail as a sonic weapon rolled over them. Nausea followed and people nearer the CAFs fell to their feet in a wave, their balance destroyed. The hyenas sowed chaos, yanking Tonx forward and pulling back, going for people's legs every time, pausing only to dart over arms and past knives to crush throats. They'd been trained to do this, Esco realized, raised from pups to gnaw through people like termites through wood. They didn't once leap up, leaving themselves open to kicks or weapons held in spindly arms the way a dog would. They made good time.

It was insanity. Even sticking to Tonx he almost got swept to the ground again and again, hands grabbing and crap flying through the air all around them. He was surprised when the stairs loomed ahead of them, surprised again when he realized there were people clinging to it, defending their position with broken bottles and knives. Tonx hesitated and the crowd suddenly pulled away. The hyenas lunged forward, sensing Tonx's direction.

The first guy almost gutted Esco, falling over the hyena and rolling down Tonx's back, his kitchen blade flashed by Esco's ribs as he took a header into the stair. The next two kept their bottle and knife in front of them, the longhaired freak on the wall side bracing his feet to stand on the railing. Esco grabbed Tonx's shoulders and kicked out the railing on the outside, the old wood buckling away with a snap that shook the steps. Both of the freaks toppled and the hyenas were on them, flinging their bodies aside. The last guy threw his bottle and leapt into the crowd below, the ragged glass catching the lead hyena in the face. It screamed as blood gushed, shaking its head and pawing at the wound. A bright light fell on them, turned everything white. Wood splinters slapped Tonx's face as a bullet shattered a board next to his head. He jumped for the top of the stairs, dropping the chain in his haste, Esco close behind.

They made it up and fell through the door, blood and musk and terror, a mad bundle of fur and limbs, the chain wrapped over Esco's arm and around Tonx's legs.

"The door!" Tonx screamed as Esco kicked it shut, sparks flying as bullets glanced off its metal plating and down the hall. Tonx struggled to his feet, kicking free of the chain. He still had the plastic sheet in his hand, and looking down he saw one hyena sitting placidly at his feet, head cocked, tongue lolling. The chain led from its neck down over Esco, who pulled free from it, and to the still-twitching carcass of the other.

"Caught plenty of bullets" Esco observed of the dead animal, dusting off his jacket and flicking it into place.

"Doggies!" said Nancy. She was seated on a neat stack of three dead men and was wearing a fancy black cowboy hat, silver studs lining its brim. Her curly red hair descending from it rear in a wave. She had her long legs crossed and a thin combat knife hung loosely in one hand. Her jacket was peeled down and tied around her waist, the sleeves of her flowered blouse torn away to reveal long thin patchwork arms. They were too long for her body, Tonx noticed, wondering how much of them, if any, were hers. "You boys get what you were after?"

"Maybe" said Tonx. The hyena's ears were back, teeth bared at Nancy. It had turned towards her when Tonx did, and now slowly advanced. "Uh, here. Hold this, Nancy."

He tossed the plastic sheet to her and she caught it deftly in one long hand, her eyes never leaving Tonx's.

"Perfume?" she asked. "S'nasty."

"No. Pheromones. The thing's conditioned to them. Come on" he said, handing her the chain. She pulled hard and the hyena slid on the pool of blood on the floor towards her. Esco stepped delicately past, smiling politely as he did so.

Fox was still stationed by the door, eyes flashing through a red-green scanning sequence. Tonx jogged through to Poulpe, cutting the twine and rolling the filthy bed sheets over him.

"Help me get him up" he panted at Esco, grabbing his legs. "Where are we going?"

"Next room over" said Esco, shuffling his arms under Poulpe's. The man's eyes were open, staring at nothing, his cracked lips moving slowly.

Together they staggered up and out the door, backing down the hallway. Behind them they heard Nancy chastising the oversized animal.

"Sit!" she said. "Goddammit, dog, I said sit! Don't you know English?"

Esco kicked the door open and Fox clanked to life, following as they filed into the next room. It wasn't much better than the one Poulpe had been in, but it was clean, a long row of beer bottles along one wall by an ancient cathode-ray screen. A thin metal railing flanked a corrugated metal platform in one corner of the room, a post topped by a black metal box with two buttons on its far corner.

"The lift" huffed Esco, leading the way over to the platform. He dropped Poulpe onto it, ran over to the beds and kneeled to look under them.

"Always check you didn't leave anything" he said, apologetically as he returned to the lift, bag in hand.

He stabbed the green button and the platform shuddered, began to descend. A loud boom shook the doorway and a rush of sulfur-stinking air pushed over them. Nancy appeared in the doorway, the hyena bounding after her like a puppy. Her face and most of her chest were covered in blood, little bits of pink skin sticking in her hair.

"Whoo-hee!" she hollered, jumping onto the lift after them, the huge animal following. The platform squealed loudly, canted to one side as they landed, but kept descending.

"Duck!" she yelled, bending below the rising lip of the floor. They followed suit just as another loud boom shook the room, bits of furniture and broken glass hitting the wall behind and falling over them. Nancy stood and hollered again, a loud rodeo call. She fumbled in her jacket and produced a little silver pistol, its tiny muzzle protruding just past her fist. She pointed it up the well above them and rummaged through a pocket with her other hand. The hyena sat on Tonx's foot, knocking him into the wall. The lift shuddered again, fell a foot and caught, slowly descending. Nancy's long arm pulled out a small round green ball, her thumb catching the metal ring stuck out of one side. She jacked her arm back just under Esco's face, waiting. The sound of stamping feet came down from above just as light broke from below, the lift slowly sliding into the room beneath. Mouse-eyed faces appeared alongside rifles for one short second as Nancy's pistol cracked, deafening them all and echoing through the well of the lift. The faces disappeared and her thumb flicked the pin out and down the front of Esco's shirt, her arm jerking upwards. The grenade disappeared overhead and Tonx wiggled feet-first through the gap. Another loud boom shook the air overhead and a rifle fell on them, hitting the platform butt-first. The left sank to a halt a foot off the ground and they jumped off.

"Conjos" swore Baby, his face slick with sweat underneath his headset. He held a Russian military-issue semiautomatic, and behind him a tall black armored civilian SUV sat facing a big set of old wooden garage doors.

"S'cool" said Esco, one hand out towards Baby while he fumbled with the control panel next to the lift. It shuddered into life again, going up, half of a Mickey Mouse logo fluttering past it and onto the floor.

"S'cool my ass, Esco" said Baby, pointing his gun at the hyena. "What the fuck is that?"

"That's my dog, boy" said Nancy, her chin up, chest out as she marched over to him. Her cheeks were flushed, gore slicking her shoulders and the curls of her hair. She radiated crazy like a tesla coil.

"Back off, puta" he said, leveling the rifle at her.

"Don't nobody call me cunt, boy" she said, her glazed eyes narrowing slightly. Next to her the hyena's teeth started chattering together, its ears back, oversized shoulders trembling.

"Chill, people" said Tonx. "We don't have time for this shit. You" he pointed at Baby, "where are we and where are we going?"

"It's an old water channel for the fields" said Baby, pointing at the wooden doors. All my flyers are outside so I couldn't check it, but there's a bunch of open channels like it about a mile south. I figure it connects somewhere, but I don't got the range..."

"Good" said Tonx. "Get Poulpe into the car and let's get out of here."

"No can do. The car's locked tight, no keyholes or nothing. Bulletproof glass, the works. Plus there's no light down there, I don't know how we're going to..."

"Shut up, Baby" said Esco, pulling Poulpe towards the car by his feet. He fished in one pocket and tossed the card key over. "Open the fucking car."

A moment later they were all piled in. Esco rode shotgun, the robot held awkwardly in his arms, head out the window so it could scan ahead. They pulled through the doors and Tonx jumped out to pull them shut behind him, crawling back into the drivers' seat. The oversized vehicle was tricked out and armored tight, and it stank overwhelmingly of musk. He flicked the lights to maximum brightness and kicked the thing into gear. They surged forward, picking up speed.

"How far does it go straight?" he asked.

"100 meters. Can't see more than that unless you turn off those lights" said Baby. Esco reached over and flicked a switch, a HUD tracing the tunnel's edges in light blue over the inside of the windshield. Tonx smiled, turned off the lights.

"How about now?" he asked.

"Better" said Baby. This thing looks clear at least a hundred meters."

A loud roar filled the tunnel, a pale white light shining from behind them.

"Fuck! Turn him over, man! Turn him over!" shouted Baby, scrunching himself down as far as he could into his seat. Esco struggled to roll the clunky robot to face behind them.

"Undo the safety lock, motherfucker" yelled Nancy, stabbing her finger at the window button. Something loud

smacked into the rear window and a spider web wound out in the glass from a small dot behind the hyena's hump. It turned and cocked its head, ears raised. Tonx swerved as he reached for the right buttons, sparks exploding as the mirror on his side tore off against the cement wall.

"Stick him out!" yelled Baby gruffly, his viewset on and head buckled against his chest, hands clenching the black controller. Esco poked the robot's head out the car window, holding it by the legs, his own head ducked low. Fox's chest opened and a set of four tiny rockets slid out with a clank.

"Hold 'em steady, conjos" said Baby, and the rockets slipped out and flew away behind them. Another row of bullets sluiced across the back of the car, at least a couple hitting the window. It creaked but held.

Tonx's eyes blanked as he saw something appear in the dim traces of the HUD. He flicked on the headlights and saw a corrugated plastic wall ahead of them, started stomping the brakes.

"Don't" yelled Esco, seeing the wall ahead. "Punch it!"

Tonx took his foot off the brake, glanced at Esco. The top of the robot's head bounced off the wall, almost tore from Esco's hands. Baby howled behind him.

"Fucking punch it, white boy!"

Tonx did. The rear window blew out, glass shards flying everywhere before a yellow glow illuminated the cave from far behind as the rockets hit. Nancy stopped banging her door and turned around, kicking Tonx in the back as she scrambled to shoot down the corridor behind them. The wall resolved into pale green fiberglass, grew wide enough to fill the width of the hall in front of them. Tonx accelerated, the speedometer rising, the car shuddering and bouncing as hot air roared through and they hit

and went through the bright yellow light of streetlight fluorescence cutting into their vision from the big empty space ahead of them. They thundered into the open-air water channel and Tonx hit the brakes again, sliding up the far side before Tonx yanked the wheel, took his foot off the brake. They careened right, almost parallel with the ground before carioles force threw them out and down the channel.

"Where the fuck are we?" asked Tonx. Nancy hollered again, punching the roof of the SUV with one wild fist.

"South" said Baby. "Keep going."

A moment later a big black hornet appeared over the edge of the channel.

"That's us" said Esco, pointing.

"There's a ramp about two hundred meters ahead on your left" said Baby, the wasp-shaped thing disappearing again.

"Take it, slow, and then go right."

The ramp appeared as promised, and Tonx slowed enough that they came up it and through the sun-bleached wooden fence with hardly a shudder. Tonx curved right onto the service road that followed it, saw a highway over the field ahead.

"Bingo" said Esco, the robot leaning headless against his thigh. A moment later they were on the eight-lane road, scooping handfuls of shattered safety glass out of their laps, laughing crazily in relief.

"Somebody check Poulpe" said Tonx suddenly, realizing they'd left him in the trunk. Baby shoved the hyena towards Nancy, elbowing his way to the narrow armrest and undoing the latch to fold the seat back. He disappeared into the trunk for a few moments, the stench of urine filling the car over the reek of musk.

"No problems, man" he said. "Not even a hole back there. This thing's built like a tank."

Tonx blew out a sigh. "We being followed?" he asked.

Baby drew his headset back on, stroked his controller.

"Don't think so" he said. "I see a bunch of CAFs running around Senior's, but looks like the mob's finally broken out on 'em. They shouldn't have burned the wall; the bikers got through to their shit. Three CAF cars burning so far."

Nancy smiled, hugged the hyena close before reaching forward and punching Tonx in the arm.

"Those are my boys!" she said.

Esco fiddled with the control panel for a moments and the dulcet tones of traditional Puerto Rican work songs filled the car. Tonx noticed with relief that the fuel tank was full. They drove.

Chapter #27

Later that evening they drove through a small town Cessus had scanned and found a Red Cross drop-off point. They pulled out a couple of old futon couches and some wiring Cessus said he could use. Fed slept in the back, the giant freight container empty and rattling as they roared down the highway. Around midnight Cessus woke him up and made him hold a little LED flashlight for him while he wired a power plug and tiny faux-Chinese lamp to the truck's batteries. They'd pulled a bunch of fleeces and a torn sleeping bag from the Red Cross, so Fed was warm enough, and now he had a chance to recharge his comm.

When Cessus was gone he couldn't sleep anymore so he propped the lamp up next to him and logged in. There were a few messages from Tonx, mostly from the night before asking for info about what was going on. He deleted those and found himself staring at his empty email buffer. He liked to keep things clean, to answer his mail and shunt out the replied-

to messages elsewhere. He used to feel proud to see his inbox empty, like he'd achieved something. Tonight he just felt empty.

Without an uplink he couldn't very well get the news, or check his 'groups or join a chatroom. His relationships were cut off as firmly as a light with the switch off. He didn't even know where they were going. Instead he pulled up the code he'd written under Cessus's 'guidance' a night ago. He found himself wishing he had some more of whatever Cessus had helped him put up his nose, but that just made him angrier. He'd written this shit, he should be able to figure out what it did.

Eventually he discovered that he'd taken a new approach to the distribution methodologies that relied on the anachronisms of the older architectures used in China. At first he'd thought he would just use the networks they had that were like the ones in the U.S. because they were more robust, but looking back he sort of remembered deciding to do it this way. As he teased out the processes of his code it started coming back to him, loose, fuzzy. He found some custom objects he'd written and discovered some clever genetic algorithms, code that would evolve around a given set of parameters to meet predesignated objectives. He ran some in a closed environment and found that the loops they produced worked very well. He hadn't tested them when he wrote them, he remembered, despite having done only minimal genetic programming in the past. He'd just known it would work.

And it did. But there were problems, too - objects that didn't do any processing at all, just notes about what they should do fleshed with a few lines of code. It was like he had sketched out the whole app at once and then filled in the main parts, one sweep at a time. Details were left out, there was no order to it. It was sloppy. It wasn't like him.

It wasn't like him. The thought kept running around in his head and Fed slumped back further on the futon. The Chinese lamp bobbed and bounced on the other couch, the truck dancing as it went down the road. What was he doing? He needed to produce code that worked, not dick around on spiritual tangents some dread-headed stoner thought would improve his coding.

But the code was there.

Eventually Fed found himself putting in pieces that were missing, running precompiles. He'd been writing code for years, and not doing it went against intense, intentional habit. As he wrote he found the outlines of the program coming back to him, filling itself in, becoming more tangible. The image of the red line came to him, and he chuckled absently.

"What?" said a voice, over-loud over the noise of the truck. Fed almost jumped out of his skin.

"Christ" said Cass, her hands up in mock defense. "Jesus, you really do get into it, don't you?"

He remembered faintly that the truck had stopped, she and Cessus had come in and fucked with the wiring some more. He guessed she had just stayed. He lowered himself into his seat again, spread his arms out and breathed. The code was gone again. No, not gone, just - out there. A little bit beyond his ability to see it. He reached for his chord again. The red line came to center, he tabbed through the code, found the shape of it again. There was a function missing - there. It ran well in the precompile, but the other objects were unfinished. The whole was not yet complete. He wrote.

It was like that for a long time.

When he woke up he was covered in an unzipped sleeping bag and the truck was stopped. He yawned, sat up to see dim light filtering through the translucent paneling of the cargo container roof, the big square shapes of solar panels dotting its length.

"G'morning" said Marcus, the big man rummaging through his bag on the other couch. The dent in his skull stood out with a dark shadow.

"Morning" said Fed, guardedly.

"I think Cessus's got some food out there. We pulled off the highway for a stretch and found a nice spot."

Fed got up, stretched out his knees in his tired jeans. He'd left his legs on again, could feel the chafing where the bruise was. How long had it been since he'd showered? he thought, searching around for his jacket. He pulled it on and wobbled down the length of the container, fumbling a bit with the door before pulling it open.

The morning rushed in like a wet kiss, moist and clammy. Watery sunlight stabbed his eyes over the misty lines of some kind of forestland. The truck was in a small clearing along a service road, a big rock ring littered with aluminum beer cans charred black from use. Cessus and Cass were sitting on thick chunks of tree pulled close to a small fire, a set of white paper bags advertised some kind of fast food. When Fed opened the door Cessus called out;

"Welcome to the land of the living! Come and get some cold and greasy."

Fed eased himself off the back of the truck and to the ground, his legs unsure. As he sat down next to them he found himself eager to be near, missing their companionship. Cass offered him a white bag folded shut, and he opened it to find the ubiquitous silver-wrapped burger and fries combo. He shoveled them into his mouth, unthinking. Cessus handed him a matching white soda cup and he became aware of them both looking at him. He stopped, mouth full of fries.

"What?" he mumbled.

The both looked away, eyes on the ground.

"Nothing, man" said Cessus. "Just making sure you're okay, you know?"

He kept eating. Cass went up to the cab and Cessus began rolling a joint, carefully sprinkling crumbled bits of plant over the length of the thin white paper.

"Where'd you get that?" Fed asked.

"Previous occupant. Thoughtful of him, you ask me" said Cessus calmly. He twisted off the end in a neat roll, held up his work for inspection.

"You been coding?" he asked, touching his tongue to a loose flap in the paper.

Fed regarded him, his eyes flat, pale disks.

"Why?"

"Wondering how it's going after I hooked you up with your meta-mind, that's all."

Fed looked out into the forest, noisily sucked the last of his drink through the straw. Cessus put the joint in his mouth and produced a bic, flicked it to life. Birds chirped in the distance.

"You got any more of that powder?" asked Fed.

"Wouldn't matter if I did. You're inoculated" said Cessus.

Fed stared at Cessus.

"I'm what?" he asked.

"Inoculated. That shit's dangerous, Feed. I told you I wasn't suggesting a habit. It was a one-time offer only. When you crashed out I gave you a shot off an inhaler. Customized cholera virus, contains the same fingerprint as the drug you took. Your body will recognize it as an invader, now, chew it right out of you before you ever get a high."

He smiled, broadly, took a deep toke. He spread his arms wide and coughed, smiling, grey smoke pouring gently over his lips and up his face.

"You couldn't think I'd get my man Tonx's little brother hooked, now would you?" he gurgled.

Fed stood and tossed the cup into the fire. Cessus choked and spat, jumping for it.

"Hey, that shit's recyclable!" he said.

Fed walked out towards the forest, stumbling on the uneven ground, his legs whining. He'd been to the forest a couple times, with his dad when he was younger, but had never gotten used to it. He only made it a short ways off through the clearing before he sat down on the far side of a tree. In a moment he realized the ground was wet, stood up and stared angrily at the moss. He stomped around the tree, seeing nowhere else to go, stopped and peed on the wet pine leaves. As he zipped up he looked back and saw Marcus stretching his huge arms in front of the fire, Cessus gesturing with the half-burnt cup. He looked again. Cass was sitting in the front seat of the cab, watching him.

He considered going back there, considered stomping off into the forest. He did neither. Instead he kicked together a pile of dead brush on the roots of the tree, sat down and thumbed on his comm. Fine. If he had nowhere else to go at least he could be useful. The strange sounds of the forest faded away, and he coded.

Chapter #28

They dropped Nancy off in Penelope, TX. She'd had a husband there once, she said, and could get them a deal. In the end they rolled out of Penelope in an ancient converted station wagon, faux-wood paneling peeling along its sideboards, biodiesel engine hiccupping and choking over a misaligned drive train. She'd taken the hyena with her, said she'd decided to call it Sid. She'd laughed at that, poking Baby in the ribs with her boney elbow. "Sid and Nancy" she'd said, "you get it?"

According to the thin guy at the garage selling the car, the guy with wispy strawberry-blond hair and Nancy's nose, the SUV could get its software wiped and a new paint job in place half a day. Tonx told Nancy to take the rest of the profit from the car and keep it, knowing his cred would get back to the Hell's Angel's lawyers where it would be tabulated and later accounted for.

He'd also gotten a cheap mix kit from the garage, a bright red plastic thing covered in big crosses and warning labels. It practically screamed contraband, but it did the trick and Tonx was able to get Poulpe's dose mixed up and down his throat before they hit the county line. The Frenchman settled into sleep, then, and stopped mumbling. They'd tried to change his clothes when they sold off the car, but decided on just wrapping him up tighter in the sheets and riding with the windows down.

Baby and Esco didn't say much, didn't ask where they were going, and Tonx didn't bother to ask if they were coming with. He knew they were stuck with him for now and didn't need the fight to get rid of them. Pharoe would hear about what had happened, and if he wanted to renegotiate he'd wait until he got the full facts to present his case. Pressing the point now wouldn't help any.

So instead they just drove. Esco was changed, shaved, and cleaned, sitting shining and pristine in the front seat. Baby sat in the back with his headset on, running maintenance on his big black wasp. The two of them had had some sort of heated conversation about another of his flyers, but Tonx's Spanish wasn't up to the task and he kept misunderstanding something about a dildo. The little robot, Fox, was toast.

They'd been driving for a few hours when Poulpe woke up.

"I take from the smell that I have been remiss?" were his first words. In the rearview Tonx saw the warm light of sanity in his eyes, let go of a breath he hadn't known he was holding.

"Welcome back, Poulpe. I don't think we ever properly met. I'm Tonx" he held one hand over his shoulder, withdrew it

when he saw the other man struggling with the tightly wrapped sheet, extended it again as he got a hand free and pushed it forward. They shook upside-down and backwards, awkwardly.

"I thank you for the rescue. You two are the ones who saved me from the Boers?" he asked, turning his head softly towards Esco and Baby.

The smaller man grunted through his headset and Esco nodded his head, looked out the window.

Tonx's eyes met Poulpe's through the rearview mirror, held them, cautioning. Poulpe smiled.

"Even crazy men have ears, gentlemen" said Poulpe in smooth, accented Spanish. Esco's head slowly turned around.

"Gracias" said Poulpe. He leaned back, then, and closed his eyes. Baby's hands resumed running their routines. Tonx drove.

An hour later they pulled into a lone gas station and Tonx helped Poulpe unravel himself and limp to the restroom. Poulpe limped out in clean garage coveralls, the sheets a rumpled mess on the bathroom floor behind him.

"I am still in need of a shave" he said as he stumbled through the minimart inside the station, his bad foot shoeless and tied up in cloth strips torn from his former shirt. "But I hope I appear more human now."

"As long as you're feeling better" said Tonx. Esco was outside smoking, his jacket fluttering slightly in the breeze.

"Listen, Poulpe, I know you're just now recovering, but we really need that data..." Tonx let the words hang. The events of the last few days had him spooked, but now he had contracts out to several people and could only push forward. Given Poulpe's state of mind when he'd found him he was suddenly presented with the possibility that he'd bet on a bad horse, had pulled someone out of Disney for nothing.

Poulpe smiled and put his arm around Tonx's shoulder, leaning on him as he limped. He led them out towards the door, letting their heads pull together. As his hand rested on the metal bar of the door's handle he whispered in Tonx's ear:

"The Latin American Jewish Association of Hawaii homepage background image. Standard Rijndael/CTR encryption, then RSI encrypted data set. Key phrase is 123654. Very good, Tonx?"

Tonx smiled with relief. "Very good" he said, pushing through the door and helping Poulpe to the car. As soon as the man was seated he turned to look at where Esco was leaning against the sun-bleached side of the minimart and walked out into the empty gravel parking lot. He pulled the yellow Hello-Kitty phone from his pocket. Its tiny glyph flashed to life as it detected the light of day, Kitty's shotgun waving overhead in a cycle ending in a skull-shaped cloud on the smooth flat screen. He checked the time. If what Chueng had told him was true, he had another couple hours until the 24-hour safe period was over. His fingers tabbed in Cessus's secure mailbox, waited the prescribed three rings before hitting the zero. A Korean woman's voice read off a request to leave a message and there was an ancient beeping noise. Tonx smiled, remembering how his Mom had always got nostalgic about the beep.

He repeated what Poulpe had told him into the phone and hung up.

Chapter #29

Fed had been almost completely useless, huddled down behind the tree. He'd pretty much known he would be. But the others had waited, which told him what he needed to know. When he got back he ignored the three of them, sitting around the fire, Cessus's ancient laptop out and laid flat so they could look at his GPS maps. He went around the far side of the truck and hauled the back door open, got into the freight container. He left the door open and walked back to the futons.

After a few minutes the voices stopped and Marcus's silhouette filled the doorway. He pulled the door shut behind him, locked it in place and strolled to the other couch while the truck rumbled to life. The container lurched and jumped, smoothing out after a while as Cessus got them back on some paved roads. The grind of the engine in front of them became a gentle background rumble.

Fed rubbed the smooth rubber on the edges of his gogs, thought about how long it'd been since he'd cleaned them. Not since he'd had dinner with Bark and his Mom, he figured, smiling in the half-light at the thought. The smile was bittersweet. He didn't miss his Mom, didn't miss the housing complex they'd lived in, the burbs where he'd grown up. But he missed the familiarity. He missed knowing there'd be food in the fridge when he woke up, empty beer bottles on the floor on Saturday mornings. He missed working towards something he thought he could trust, missed the certainty of getting into a good school. He missed not being shot at. The thought appealed to him, and he chuckled in the darkness.

"What's funny?" said Marcus.

"Nothing" said Fed, looking at the larger man. Marcus's head still had a crease where a bullet had grazed him, his huge arms splayed out over the back of the couch. His eyes were lost in the meaty folds of his face, but there was something about the split where his lips should be that suggested a smile. Fed was glad; for a monster, Marcus was a pretty welcoming human being. And right now, despite everything else, Fed was lonely.

"You ever miss home, Marcus?" asked Fed.

"Home?"

"Your folks, where you grew up. You ever wish you could go back?"

Marcus grinned, the interlocking mesh of his metal shark teeth gleaming wetly in the dimness.

"Yeah, I do. I miss my momma. My home, not so much, but my momma... she was a hell of a woman."

Fed was surprised - he'd never thought of Marcus as having a mother.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Lung cancer. From the plastics they were using in the walls. The projects were full of it. Turned out the builders were getting kickbacks from the paint companies for using the shit up."

Marcus sighed, an over-long whooshing noise like a garbage bag being deflated.

"We couldn't afford any of the gene-therapies, so she tried chemo, and it killed her."

Fed stared. Chemo hadn't been used in years, not even in most second world countries. It debilitated people. It was a torture, not a treatment. There wasn't even a high success rate; they just - poisoned you - and if you survived, maybe the cancer didn't.

The silence stretched out, Marcus's eyes lost in shadow.

"Made me into who I am today, though" he said eventually. "Got the same shit, but by then they had lung replacement. Couldn't afford it, of course, but got me started rumbling, trying to enjoy myself before I kicked. I was just a dumb thug, but I've always been big."

He stretched one huge three-fingered hand out in front of him, flexed it.

"What happened?" asked Fed.

"Cessus covered cloning my lungs, told me if I did him a favor he'd pay for them. I was close to dying, had lost a lot of weight. Couldn't keep my drugs down anymore, couldn't make any money. Twenty three and almost stupid enough not to care."

"You were 23?"

"Yep. With an IQ to match. But Cessus had known me on the street for a while. I couldn't figure out why he'd want to do that, get my lungs cloned for me. I'd never even worked for him."

"What'd he ask you to do?" asked Fed.

Marcus let his hand drop to his side, looked up at the ceiling overhead. Fed heard his ribs creak as he inhaled and exhaled, slowly.

"Listen, Fed, I know you're pissed off by how shit has gone down. But don't be. It's going to work out."

Fed looked at the big man and frowned.

"Then why's it so important you get a contract?" he asked.

Marcus spread his arms out across the back of the futon couch.

"Would you want to tell me how much I'm worth once this whole thing plays out?" he asked. "What about if Cessus gets killed? What if I lose an arm, can't ever fight again? What if you make a million? What if you make just a hundred?"

He pointed one huge finger at Fed.

"You don't want to have to make that decision. None of us do. We're in this because we believe in you guys. But that doesn't mean we want to argue about it afterwards. You follow?"

Fed said nothing.

"Well I hope you do, Fed, because we're risking our lives for you and you're acting like a little bitch about it."

They stared at each other in the darkness, Fed's breath quick, lost in shadow. Marcus heaved a sigh. He turned and rolled over onto the couch, pulled the tiny blanket over his shoulder.

"Think about it" he said.

The truck rumbled on, streetlamps overhead yellow blurs flashing through the translucent ceiling.

"What did Cessus ask you to do?" asked Fed.

The truck jumped, swaying as it changed lanes.

"He told me to go get my Momma," said Marcus, his voice a deep rumble from the dark heap on the couch. "He told me to go get her from the hospital freezer and bury her the way she deserved."

He pulled the blanket further up his shoulder.

"Now let me sleep."

An hour later Marcus's breathing had slowed and Fed had gotten back into his code, mostly filling in details and running error-checks over some of the larger functions. He was coming to the point where he was just guessing, writing code based on what he thought the data set would look like. It bugged him; it was stupid to write that way. He was starting to worry he'd never get the thing done when the truck slowed and shuddered to a stop. They heard the driver's door thud open and shut, and a moment later the back of the freight container swung open. The roar of the highway flooded in along with Cessus.

"We got it, baby" he shouted, tossing Fed a white, cigarette-box shaped device.

"It's an old MP3 player" he explained, fumbling in his pocket for an adaptor. "Here, it doesn't have wireless built in."

He walked back and forth in a tight circle, watching Fed fumble around for the wireless plugin, then toss it aside to pull on his gogs. He found the device in his PAN, opened it up and saw a big image file, a plain data file, and a database file. He flipped up one gog, lifted an eyebrow at Cessus.

"Crazy motherfucker encrypted it as a washed-out mostly-black background image on the Latin American Jewish Association of Hawaii homepage. Used standard Rijndael/CTR encryption. Safest place in the world, man - right out in the open."

Fed knew this wasn't strictly true; it was risky leaving anything out in plain sight. But it did mean they could get to it from anywhere without leaving much in the way of tracks, and it had been encrypted once already before it had been merged into the image. Clever.

"What's the first-layer encryption?" Fed asked.

"RSI, but I already decrypted it all. That's the data file. It turns out to be the database."

"Oh fuck yeah" interrupted Fed, his hands shaking as he clutched at his chord, scanning the data. "Totally pre-orged, separated along first-take similarities."

He looked up at Cessus, "We're ready to roll."

"Marcus, you mind driving with Cass? I want to watch this guy run with this shit. Maybe learn a thing or two. Spot-check you at the very least, yeah?" Cessus winked at Fed.

Marcus grunted and sat up, strolled towards the back of the freight.

"Marcus" called out Fed.

He turned.

"Um, thanks. For what you said earlier, I mean."

Marcus nodded, and disappeared over the edge of the truck bed.

"You boys have a chat?" asked Cessus, settling onto the other couch, lenses rolling out.

"Sort of. I was being an asshole. I'm sorry. You want to code now?"

Fed heard Cessus grin in the dim light as the truck pulled back onto the highway.

"After you, my friend" he said.

Chapter #30

Tonx made a few more calls before he hung up and tossed the phone onto the dirt of the parking lot. He'd pulled the chip from the phone so at least his call record should be gone in case anyone picked it up. Esco had returned to the car and was watching Baby run take-offs and landings with the black wasp bot. Poulpe was doing something with the mix kit, but he couldn't see what in the shadowed inside of the car. As Tonx walked back towards them Esco slid forward, stopping him a dozen feet from the car.

"A word, man" he said, delicate fingers splayed level to the ground.

"What up, Esco" sighed Tonx. "You get word from your boss?"

"No. No, we didn't. We just got to hold tight with you and the Frenchman. But that doesn't mean we don't want to know where we're going. You follow?"

Tonx sized up the slightly larger man. Esco's shoulders were loose, his knees bent. He looked and sounded like he was talking about the weather, or a sports game he didn't care much about. But there was a certain carelessness about him that reminded Tonx of Mil. He was comfortable. Too comfortable.

The moment hung in the hot air, silent. Tonx sighed again.

"No" he said.

Esco rolled back and forth on the balls of his feet, twice.

"Yes" he said, his eyes not leaving Tonx' face. "You're going to tell us where we're going, my friend. It's not a choice."

"I tell you and we're all worse off. It's better you don't know."

"That's not the business agreement" said Esco.

"It's the way it is" said Tonx.

They stood for a long moment, still and silent.

"We got to know something, man" said Esco, quietly. "You would want the same if you were in our place."

"You know it's a bad idea" said Tonx. "You know it'll make things complicated."

"Doesn't have to" said Esco.

"But it will" said Tonx. He turned and spat in the dust. Neither of them moved. Behind them Baby landed the flier and started packing it into the trunk of the car. The sun fell on them hard from overhead and the wind kicked up a little, died again.

Tonx sighed. "We're going to Mexico, motherfucker" he said.

Baby slammed the trunk shut twice, the rusty latch failing to catch.

Later, when they'd all gotten back in the car and driven for a while, Poulpe leaned forward and quietly asked Tonx why they were going to Mexico. Esco'd looked at Baby, Baby had looked at Tonx, and Tonx had looked back at Poulpe.

"You don't ask that" he said. "We're keeping you safe. I'm getting us somewhere we can do that. The less you all know until then, the better."

"I am not sure that's in my best interest" said Poulpe, his accent drawn out, nasal.

"It's in your best interest that if one of us gets caught and tortured, we can't say where you are" said Baby, his hands still for once. "It's in your best interest that if you get caught you can't tell them where we are before we track you down."

"Then why was it so important that you gentlemen know?"

Esco and Baby shared a glance. Tonx stared out the window, driving.

"We still don't know shit" said Esco. He leaned forward and snapped on the radio, tinny country songs in Latvian or Swedish rolling out through the punctured speakers. The road went by beneath them.

Hours later, and Esco was driving. Tonx and Poulpe sat together in the back seat.

"So why risperidone?" Tonx asked. Poulpe hadn't proven to be a very charming guest, but Tonx knew from their long correspondence that the man was brilliant. More important, he knew that very soon he might need him.

Poulpe licked his lips with the tip of his tongue before he replied.

"My former employer used a specific chemical addiction to assure my loyalty. While I thought I had found a solution it was clearly an insufficient dose. After your friends here treated me to a variety of chemical cocktails my neurochemistry began to go through withdrawal. The risperidone helped combat all of these effects."

He smiled thinly at Tonx.

"Fortunately you were there in time to catch one of my lucid moments and administer the correct dose."

Tonx shrugged.

"You seemed to be arguing with yourself about it. Suggested amilsulpride, but in a tweaked-out voice. I went with the risperidone."

Tonx had kept his voice light, but Poulpe pasted on an imitation of a smile as soon as he mentioned amilsulpride. There was something wrong there, something out of sync with the man that made Tonx's throat tight.

"Delusional talk" Poulpe said. "Nothing to worry about. Now, I seem to recall that we communicated some time ago about using prions to stimulate acceptance of new RNA sequences. Have you learned any more about that?"

The rest of the conversation was just biz.

Chapter #31

Fed and Cessus coded for a good four hours before Fed started dropping cycles, losing track of the details. Cessus called it first; "You're getting burned, man. That's the third time in as many minutes you've tried to tweak that same function."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're right, I'm crunched" said Fed.

"No worries. Your code's tight, looking real good. Was I helpful at all?"

"Very. I like how you made the mockup of the network to run the client side through. I was getting stuck on that part of the architecture until I looked over and saw you playing with the solution."

Cessus smiled.

"I don't do coding like you do, man, but I know the networks. You want to try and get these guys to stop for a bit?"

"Yeah. And maybe get something to eat. You hungry?"

"Always. Doctor says I have a fast metabolism."

Fed pulled his gogs off and yawned, stretched his legs out in front of him. Cessus rapped on the front of the freight container, three times fast, then three times slow. He waited a moment, repeated it. The second time he was interrupted by four even knocks.

"Right on" he muttered, slumping back onto the couch.

"You know, these fingernail sensors are real nice, but your hand can't breathe, you know? Like if you're wearing some cheap-o nail polish and after a while it's like your hands are sweating in a plastic bag or something."

"Wouldn't know" said Fed, staring at the black shells over Cessus's fingernails.

"They got them as implants now, I hear. Anchor them to the nail bed, look like little half-moons. Saw a piece on it recently. Stuff comes out of Israel."

"You told me. Sounds excellent, if you can afford it."

The truck slowed, swayed as it pulled off the highway.

"You pull this off we can get them put in our toes if we want" said Cessus, his hands splayed out in front of him.

Cass pulled open the back door and crawled in.

"Okay, boys. Get out of here and let the nice lady relax" she said.

Fed gathered up his things as she slumped down on the couch where he'd been sitting.

"Mmm, nice and warm" she said, curling up under the blanket he'd had over him.

"You want anything to eat?" asked Cessus. "We're going to make Marcus stop for some grub."

"No thanks. Just finished off the leftovers from breakfast" she said, her eyes closing. Cessus looked at Fed, followed him out the back of the truck. They were in another rest stop, almost identical to the one before, but the landscape was drier.

The sound of the highway followed them as they walked on groaning limbs to the cab of the truck, pulled themselves up and in. Cessus crawled into the back and sprawled his legs up between the seats, moaning.

"I'm getting old, Marcus" he called out. "I'm losing my edge."

"Whatever" rumbled the mod fighter.

"Can we get something to eat?" asked Fed. "I'm totally fucking starving."

"No problem. I need to get some supplements anyway" said Marcus. "There's a good-sized town coming up in a few miles. We'll stop there."

He eased the truck back into gear and onto the highway, Cessus and Fed stretching as they went. Before long there was a snick and a flash. The buzzing odor of burning weed filled the cab.

"Jesus, Cessus" said Marcus, his big fingers mashing the button to roll down the window. "Can't you hold off 'til after we eat?"

"This is the best time, my friend" Cessus chortled, his lungs full. "Helps the appetite. What're you going to eat?"

"500 grams of whey protein, if I can get it" said Marcus.

"Sounds delicious" said Fed. Cessus laughed, purple clouds of smoke billowing out of his mouth.

"Sui enique pulchra" he said. "That's 'to each his own is beautiful' for the heathen uneducated among us."

Both Fed and Marcus ignored him.

"Did Cass want anything?" asked Marcus.

"No, sleeping. Said she ate the last of the fries" said Fed.

Marcus swung the truck onto an off ramp and Fed noticed they'd cruised into a town. From the rise they were on he could see the billboards and peaked tops of the shopping centers ahead.

They cruised the main road for a while, rolling past stores until Marcus saw what he was after and eased them into the back of a large parking lot. When he stopped the engine ticked and pinged heat waves shimmering across the chromed top of the grill at the front of the truck. Cessus was slumped in the back, tunelessly singing lyrics in some tongue nobody spoke. Marcus pulled a big piece of blanket from under the seat and flicked out a huge knife.

"Fuck" said Fed, alarmed to see eight inches of steel appear in his friend's massive hand. "What is that?"

"It's my pocket knife" grinned Marcus. "Here, give me a hand."

With Fed's help he sliced up the blanket, a light blue poly-cotton thing with tiny pink bears on it. When he had cut enough of it into strips he separated them into two groups and knotted the ends. Then he began to wrap his fingers together.

"What are you doing?" asked Fed.

"He's going into stealth mode" answered Cessus from behind them. "Big man's a star, don't you know?"

Marcus didn't say anything, just grumbled deep in his throat.

"He doesn't want anyone to recognize him and give away our trail, so he came up with this." Cessus continued, sliding into his best faux-salesman pitch. "You may be asking yourself, 'what could complete this ingenious disguise'?"

"Perhaps clever facial injections? Muscle manipulation? Makeup? Heavens no! This is professional quality work! Only the best will do!" Marcus snapped his muscle-wrapped head towards the smaller man, started to say something but stopped himself. He reached up to the shade in front of him and Cessus began a drum roll. The big man paused and sighed audibly before taking down a pair of large aviator sunglasses. They were yellow, the kind you'd expect a hunter to wear under his cowboy hat. A hunter with a mustache, maybe, drinking a beer.

"Ta da!" announced Cessus. "What's a better disguise for the mod fighter with no ears or nose, than - sunglasses!"

"Listen, it's all I could find in here" said Marcus, gesturing at the truck cab.

"No no no" countered Cessus, twitching one long finger. "I suggested the hat, but you wouldn't have it."

Marcus leaned back in his seat, frowned. He looked down at the steering wheel and folded his arms.

"It's not appropriate" he said quietly.

"What hat?" asked Fed.

"Never mind" said Marcus, but Cessus had already disappeared into the back of the cab. He returned a moment later, a large orange mesh back baseball hat held reverently in both hands. He bowed slightly as he displayed the front to Fed. It said, "Real dogs eat pussy" and had a cheap cartoon of a cat sporting enormous breasts under a bikini top.

"It even fits" he whispered to Fed, big bloodshot eyes rolling towards Marcus.

One huge, blanket-wrapped hand slowly reached over and picked up the hat. Marcus mashed it onto his huge head, the plastic strips at the back hanging loosely apart.

"You happy?" he said, shoving the aviator glasses onto his face. Despite all of the elementary laws of physics the glasses remained perched where he left them, their arms making deep creases into the skin on both sides of his head.

"More than you can imagine" said Cessus. He suddenly fell backwards into the rear of the cab, peals of laughter cascading out of him.

"Go get some food" growled Marcus, opening his door. "Feed, you come with me."

Fed jumped out of the truck and stretched his arms in the sun. The light felt warm and his hands tingled with the stretch. He broke into a hobbling jog, catching up with Marcus shortly before they reached a big sports store.

They walked in together, Fed staring up at his friend's bizarre new appearance. About halfway through they came

across a set of shelves containing nothing but big plastic tubs of protein powder. They had names like Uber-Mass, Big Size, 123% Gain.

Marcus strode down one aisle, scanning the tubs. He took them around the end and into another aisle. The tubs were bigger here, some as big as Fed's torso. Most of them had large yellow tags reading 'Sale!', 'Deep Discount price!', and 'Check Out the Discount' in faux-hand written font.

Marcus found a set of yellow tubs almost as tall as Fed's leg and started pulled them out onto the floor. Almost immediately a skinny kid appeared, his pimply face pink and moist underneath his blue cap.

"Can I help you?" he asked, wiping his hands on his matching blue apron. He was chipper, almost mechanically so.

"Sure" said Marcus. He stood, glanced around him. "Take five of these to the counter and ring me up."

He strode swiftly towards the boy who jumped out of his way, wide-eyed. He stared at Fed as he followed. There was a thud as one of the tubs slowly rolled into the opposite set of shelves.

"Asshole" said Marcus, under his breath.

There was nobody else at the front of the store, so Marcus made Fed go get a cart and load it up with a couple flats of water and two crates of neutricutal bars. They didn't taste like much, said Marcus, but they were better than those damn Army/Navy MRUs and had all the same shit. He tossed a couple big containers of vitamin supplements onto the top of the cart and waited.

Their clerk appeared, two carts wired together and tied to the back of a Segway. The platform's big wheels slipped as he tried to take the turn, its internal gyroscope jerking and wobbling to compensate for the uneven pull of the carts behind it. He clutched at the handlebars as he slowly cruised in behind them, the carts just barely catching on the racks of gum and magazines next to the checkout counter. A handful of merchandise clattered onto the floor as he jumped off the Segway and stepped behind the checkout counter.

"Mega Sport Member's card?" he asked cheerily.

"No" said Marcus.

"Oh" he said, sounding disappointed. "Care to make one? You get 15% off on all"

"No" interrupted Marcus.

"Oh" he said, again. "Okay. Address?"

"No" said Marcus.

"We don't send you any spam or anything" he said, defensively.

"No" said Marcus, his eyebrows wrinkling behind his sunglasses. They sank alarmingly and he had to push them back up with one big cotton-wrapped hand.

"Your hands okay? We've got a sale on training gloves" said the clerk.

Marcus didn't say anything.

"Right. Could you had me one of those tubs?"

The big tub sailed slowly down the conveyor belt, briefly obscuring the clerk. There was a faint chirp and it resumed its path, gliding to the end of the counter.

"Very good, sir. Cash or credit?"

A few minutes later they were each pushing a cart out of the store.

"Do you have to put up with that every time?" he asked.

"Nope. Sometimes they recognize me. Then it's worse" said Marcus.

"Hardcore, man. You are so hardcore" said Fed, laughing.

They got to the truck and pulled open the back, shoving the crates and tubs in and lining them up against the wall.

"Help yourself" called Fed towards Cass. An arm raised in response, flashing him the finger.

"Bitch" he grumbled to himself, hopping out and into the parking lot.

Cessus was just coming up pushing a shopping cart full to bursting with chips and sodas and cookies.

"Excellent" said Fed, his eyes growing wide.

"You get any real food in there?" asked Marcus.

"Brain food, my man. Come on, let's put this stuff in front. Cass will have to wake up if she wants to get the good stuff."

They stowed Cessus's treats in the back of the cab and slowly rumbled out of the lot and back onto the highway.

"Did you get anything Cass might actually like?" asked Marcus, once they were up to speed.

"Yeah, yeah" said Cessus. "I got some of those fizzy drinks she always has, and some veggie dogs and stuff. Don't worry."

"What do you care? Let her eat chips" said Fed.

"Girl eats like a bird" said Marcus. "It's good to get her something she'll like."

"So what? She's probably just PMS'ing" said Fed, enjoying the camaraderie.

"What would you know?" asked Cessus.

"Just that she's, like, in permanent bitch mode. Ever since I met her she's been riding my ass. Acts like she's fucking better than everyone."

Cessus had taken out his pipe along with a bag of cookies, and now took another hit. Marcus coughed gently, glanced over at Fed.

"Go gentle on her, man. She's got her own history" he said.

Cessus coughed, wheezed, and exhaled a long plume of smoke.

"Girl's history's long as my arm" he snorted.

"Shut it, Cessus" said Marcus mildly.

"No, what's the deal with her? You guys are under contract, but I don't know anything about her. She's my brother's girlfriend" said Fed. "What's her deal?"

The two men were silent a moment.

"Go ahead" said Cessus. "The man here asked a question, he deserves an answer. We're all riding to imminent doom together, might as well be in the clear about each other."

Marcus looked out the window, rubbing his shiny head. One big finger slowly explored the dent. He sighed.

"Cass came to the States from Switzerland. Came in the summers a lot as a kid, part of the program. That's where she learned Chinese."

He checked his GPS, tilting the screen slightly and frowning.

"Her folks were from Zurich. They were part of an R&D firm specializing in predictive genetics and developmental hormone therapies."

"Translation?" asked Fed.

"They bought a bunch of Cantonese girls off a freighter" he said.

"They processed dozens of them during a standoff on the coast of Portugal, all gene-tested and statistically analyzed. Her folks administered the DNA tests. They bought her from the military as part of a group of five and sent the rest back to the boat. The Portuguese government eventually rejected them and towed the thing out to sea; no idea what happened to it. Cass and four others were flown back to Switzerland and were raised as sisters."

Fed's eyebrows bunched and he glanced back at Cessus. He was leaning back on a bed of dreadlocks, his eyes closed, his face smooth.

"They got weekly injections, mostly estrogen. Girls that get a lot of it when they're young develop smaller noses and ears, bigger eyes. Other things. Their diet was controlled down to the microgram. They had daily exercise routines, classes in etiquette, walking, anthropometrics. Whole days spent learning visual cues on eye movement based on cultural background and archetypes."

Fed's throat tightened, uncertain.

"Why?" he asked.

"Professional modeling was the 'official' goal of the program, but that was just a sideline. Most likely it was for government espionage. Those that didn't make the cut got other jobs. Bad jobs. Bad jobs with bad people doing bad things."

Fed stared out the window.

"That's why she's so hot" he said.

"She can't help it, Feed. You think she likes it?"

Fed didn't say anything.

"Anyway, doesn't matter. She bailed. Dug the tracker out of her own ass and hit the street. Learned a lot real fast. Cass has been through some crazy shit, but it's her life now. She earned it."

Marcus looked over at Fed, back at the road. "She deserves respect for that, Feed."

Chapter #32

They crossed the border sometime in late evening, the dry air turning chilly as they went. Tonx had never been to Mexico, never had a reason to. But somehow the thrill of driving past the big wooden board declaring the country line was absent. Ever since the WTO agreements to sell the trade rights to the American Agricultural Association the border control had been dissolved. Without proper ID illegal immigrants were easy prey for company work camp "recruitment raids" that roamed the border towns. Those that could get immigrant labor cards usually bartered them off, their final holders collecting lots of them and shipping their own employees to picking sites via private bus. There wasn't even a real drug trade anymore, not now that synthesizing common stuff was so easy.

So they just drove down the road, the stars bright overhead in the pitch-black sky. The streetlights were infrequent and the night was quiet.

About an hour after they'd crossed the border Baby roused himself and spoke.

"We're being followed" he said.

Poulpe had been messing with the mix kit for the last several hours, the cheap LCD panel mounted on the inside of the plastic case illuminating his face in off-white grayscale.

"Who are they?" Tonx asked.

"No idea. Big white Cadillac. Looks old, maybe unconverted. Tinted windows, but they'd got a night HUD. They're

driving without lights."

"How far off?" asked Tonx.

"About a mile behind us."

Esco got the pistol out, started checking it.

"Wait" said Poulpe. "I know a better way."

He began keying in a sequence on the bumpy plastic of the kit's keyboard. A moment later the screen flashed and the kit began to hum.

Twenty minutes later they rolled past a spot in the road that looked good and Tonx slammed on the brakes. Poulpe opened the door and walked briskly back up the road the way they had come. When he had taken a dozen long steps he tore open a thin plastic package and began scattering it around the road. When he finished he dusted off his hands and looked at the street under his feet. He could see no evidence of his work. Poulpe's lips gently pulled up in a grin. Carefully, he unwrapped another candy and put it in his mouth, savoring the cherry flavor. Then he folded his hands together and waited.

He didn't wait long. A few minutes later the long white Cadillac appeared and slowed. Its ancient engine growled and sputtered, the harsh smell of burnt oil drifting out in front of it as it gently came to a stop a half a dozen feet in front of Poulpe. The warm glow of the moon made the brilliant expanse of its hood shine like the hull of a boat. Its engine stopped. In the desert beyond crickets began to chirp. Poulpe smiled.

"Are you alone?" came a voice, thick and crackling through a speaker mounted on the bottom of the car. Poulpe continued to smile. His face was frozen in a pleasant rictus, eyes twinkling merrily. He'd had years of practice at this, of not hearing his listeners, of not noticing those who watched him.

"Answer me or I'll shoot" said the voice again. Poulpe did nothing. The crickets surged behind him, the warmth of the day fueling their search for mates.

Inside the car behind him Tonx swore softly, his head ducked down, eyeing the keys hanging in front of his face.

The universe was singing to him, thought Poulpe, admiring with fond pleasure the brightness of the stars. He waited.

A squeal twisted out from the underbelly of the car as the speaker shut off. Then the door behind the driver clicked, opened. An air-conditioned breeze twisted out and against the ground, the laws of causality replacing it with the warm fecund air above the tarmac.

One brown leather shoe set itself firmly on the dusty road, followed by another. Poulpe approved. This was as it should be. He nodded slightly at the dark-faced man who emerged, admired the rustic cut of his blue jeans and slightly worn cotton shirt. He liked the leather apron he wore under his bulletproof vest. He liked the man's thick mustache. He liked his dark tinted glasses, surely designed for shooting.

The man swung the short thick stub of some sort of chromed automatic weapon from the behind the car door and trained it on Poulpe's midsection. He walked around the door and swung it shut behind him. The man stood still. Poulpe smiled. The crickets sang.

Eventually Poulpe began to nod at the man. Gently, he nodded in time with his heartbeat, a steady pulse. The man nodded back, his face expressionless. Then his shoulders began to bob, gently, along.

Poulpe felt the heavens open to him and raised his hands up to the sky, nodding in time, the sweet smell of the night air rich in his lungs. He felt his blood sing, saw the man begin to cry. He cried black blood, the stain of his sins washing away. The angels sang above them. Then the man began to dance, to jerk, to flail a little. The gun fell from his hands, clattered to the ground, and his knees gave way beneath him. He slumped against the side of the car, one arm crooked over the mirror, black blood flowing from his eyes. Now it flowed from his ears, from his nose, and he opened his mouth to emit a thick black spurt. It stained his shirt and he fell, broken and soiled. Forgotten.

The universe buzzed around him, and Poulpe let his arms sink down. He walked slowly to the car and opened the driver's side door. Another man, much like the first, rested peacefully, the holes where his eyes had been dark and empty. There was a steady drip-drip within the car, dark fluids gently streaming from the ceiling, from the walls. Poulpe reach in and collected the keys. He walked back and unlocked the trunk and was rewarded with a large blue gas container. He poured it over the car, sloshed it on the seats, sanctified the bodies with it. When he was done he undid his shirt and peeled it from his sweat-stained back. He tossed it onto the driver's lap, bent and pulled off his coveralls. He held them up with one hand, reached into his pocket, pulled out a lighter.

The whoomp shook the car, and Tonx sat up despite himself. Poulpe was walking towards them, naked, arms upraised, a smile wide as heaven across his face.

"We are saved" he said to Tonx's car window, his voice muffled through the glass. Then he walked down the road ahead of them, a bright blue gas tank in his hands, slowly pouring it over his limbs, rubbing it into his hair.

They let him walk ahead of the car for an hour. Then they tossed him a rag to wipe off with, and let him settle down to sleep in the back of the car. Nobody spoke as they drove onwards into the night.

Fed had filled up on chips and soda before settling down to code. Cessus put him in the back seat and taped him up again, intent on checking his "signals" as he coded. An hour into it he interrupted Fed to get him to take some vitamin tablets and a neurticutical bar. The rest of the night sped by.

Now that he had the data set he could finalize the entire application. Using the network mockup Cessus had put together he was fairly certain it would propagate correctly, but he had to be absolutely certain it would crunch the data the right way or the whole thing would be a waste. The genetic algorithms he'd put together during his all-nighter at Cessus's had him especially nervous. From what he could tell his seed code should develop into functions specific to each chunk of the data set, and then process it more efficiently than anything he could hand-code ahead of time. But he wasn't very practiced in genetic programming, couldn't be sure about it in advance. He could only let it loose in a small sample space; there was no way to replicate what it would do when he unleashed it on a large scale. Like China.

So he concentrated on the rest of the system. It was fairly straightforward: he was creating a supplement to the software updates required of all Chinese computers. It used the same Chrysler-Daimler libraries as the original photo-display app, but tweaked slightly. He'd tried to make the alterations as subtle as possible, using existing virii available online as a guide, and thought he'd done a good job. The Peer-to-peer networks in China used an outmoded, multi-level push model wherein a primary database, controlled by the government, had all the updates. A first wave of computers was contacted and checked to see if they had the new updates. If they didn't, they were fed them via download. Then those first-wave systems contacted their neighbors and checked them. All those second-wave systems would start downloading the new update from the first-wave ones and simultaneously make themselves available to update other second-wave systems. This way the Chinese government didn't have to host massive server systems to support updating every computer in the country - after the first wave, they all downloaded from each other. And they did it simultaneously, pulling data from multiple other machines at once. When they'd finished the download, they checked a hash key to make sure they'd received the download correctly. That was the flaw Fed was exploiting.

If the Chinese government had done it right they'd have made all the second-wave systems check their hash from the government's primary servers. But it would all happen pretty fast, and would require the same server setup they'd wanted to avoid in the first place. So instead of making an alteration to the P2P software to space the hash checks over time, they let all the second wave systems check with each other.

That meant that Fed could intercept an update and insert his own software in place of the existing image-viewer software. As long as he put it in a second-generation machine, all the computers checking with the one he'd infected could be made to assume they'd gotten a bad download, and search for confirmation about which was more current. Again the Chinese system made it easy for him. They'd set it up so that cases like this caused a check with their central server. But it was written so that both of the machines with a different hash did the check simultaneously, resulting in a race condition. Whichever machine came up with the answer first was assumed to be correct, and to have the latest version of the update. Any two machines that had a different hash first checked with each other to see who had the most recent hash, if any. It was lazy programming, Fed knew, but common enough, and it worked in his favor. All he did was tweak the library so that his update came with a pre-existing hash. That way, whenever any two machines had a different hash they checked with each other, and Fed's code generated a timestamp for his hash on the spot. His update version was always more recent, and his code would be propagated.

It wasn't foolproof. Some machines would update more often than others, and eventually one of them would win the first-generation machine lottery and get assigned to download the update directly from the government's system. In that case Fed's timestamp trick wouldn't work because the government machines would know their system had the correct hash. But he'd set up his code to concede an error to timestamps that were similar enough to his - to updates that were as recent as the last few seconds. It meant it would take longer for his code to propagate, and that first- and second- generation machines would only get his code if they ran incidental updates and failed to be assigned first-machine status the second time. But any infected computer contacting the government's servers directly would simply question whether it had the right update, and then confirm that it must have received a buggy version. Since the distribution system worked like a pyramid, chances were good that not many systems would raise the challenge. If it was noticed, the government could only assume there were a lot more corrupted versions of the update than expected. That could be due to anything from bad software updates to rain on the old copper wires. If they ran a random search they'd find a lot of machines with the corrupted update, true, but it would correct itself as soon as they ran the query. And as soon as the machine tried to update itself again it would get Fed's code from its neighbor, assuming its neighbor wasn't a first-generation machine.

Fed had even set it up so the code cleaned itself out if the application was opened. Anybody doing a close scan of their system would be able to tell that the only application that wasn't updating correctly was the photo-viewing app, but if they launched it, or ran any part of it to check for hacks, it would notify that it had received a corrupted update and attempt to recompile. It would mean that a small bit of Fed's data was lost, but he'd designed his code to be extremely redundant about processing the data set, and it was safer than leaving any tracks.

Most importantly, the entire data processing cycle should be done in under a week, based on his calculations, and the updates typically came biweekly. If everything went as planned he could inject his code somewhere, and when the next update cycle happened it would propagate. The networks would be really busy for a while. Longer than usual, but by the

time it was clear there was a problem Fed should have his answer, and Tonx should have his solution, and they could all get paid.

That was assuming it all worked as planned. For all he knew his propagation mechanism could be nipped in the bud by some new update technology the Chinese launched that week. Or it could fail to collect the parts of the data set correctly, or multiply out of control and completely crash every computer in China. He wouldn't know until he tried.

Until then he could only debug as best he was able, and run simulations on the mini-network Cessus had made. So Fed coded, and recoded, and error checked and debugged and read and re-read his code. Over and over again.

He did that for a couple of days, stopping a few times here and there to jump on a public wireless network from a parking lot or in front of a library, checking data collection sites and letting Cessus scan likely targets for dropping the trojan update. On the second day after they'd picked up Marcus's supplements he got online at the same time as Tonx, and was relieved to see his brother on a public IRC chat server. He flagged Tonx into a private session and they passed public keys back and forth to ensure another layer of encryption. It was like shaking an old friend's hand.

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<prvt><Feed>Where the hell are you?
<prvt><Tonx>Hey! Good to hear you! Everything OK?
<prvt><Feed>Stellar. Aside from the urge to kill your girlfriend I'm dandy. Cessus has been a huge help w/ the project.
<prvt><Tonx>Cass getting on your nerves?
<prvt><Feed>No biggy. I think she misses you.
<prvt><Tonx>that's cool. Give her my best, tell her I owe her.
<prvt><Feed>Will do. You okay there?
<prvt><Tonx>Better than okay. Take your time; you're not going to get anything done once you get here. Don't know why I didn't come here before.
<prvt><Feed>You know the anticipation's killing me.
<prvt><Tonx>:) That's SOP, my friend.
<prvt><Tonx>Standard Operating Procedure.
<prvt><Feed>I went ahead and approved Marcus and Cessus's contract, hope that's okay.
<prvt><Tonx>good. It's all boilerplate anyway; they're good guys.
<prvt><Tonx>Marcus look cool with it?
<prvt><Feed>I think so. I think he's bummed about missing the fight, but is glad for the cash. I don't know he's weird.
<prvt><Tonx>Weird?
<prvt><Feed>In a good way. he'd a good person.
<prvt><Tonx>You're getting sweet in your old age. You got any code for me?
<prvt><Feed>:)
<prvt><Tonx>":)" ?
<prvt><Feed>`8& }
<prvt><Tonx>WTF is that?
<prvt><Feed>Raver smiley. Yeah, I got code for you. I'm nervous as fuck about it.
<prvt><Tonx>Should be. I don't know how many chances we'll get to deploy it.
<prvt><Feed>Yeah well there isn't exactly a big pool of folks for me to have error check it you know.
<prvt><Tonx>Don't worry. This is what you've always wanted to do. It'll be fine. This connection secure?
<prvt><Feed>As secure as we're going to get before we meet.
<prvt><Tonx>Shit. Never mind. tell me how it works when we see each other. How far are you?
<prvt><Feed>Marcus says we should be there tonight.
<prvt><Tonx>Sweet. That's not too bad. I can sit on it until then. The pina coladas help.
<prvt><Feed>???
<prvt><Tonx>You'll see. But you also better hope this pans out. Otherwise I'm going to have a nasty tab to try and run away from.
<prvt><Feed>No pressure.
<prvt><Tonx>(hic)
<prvt><Feed>Whatever dude.
<prvt><Feed>Cass is banging the truck. Time to roll. C U later.
<prvt><Tonx>later, little man. Take care.
<prvt><Feed>ciao.
```

When he closed the chat session Fed felt a kind of strange relief. He'd missed Tonx. He thought maybe he'd been missing him for a long time.

Cass opened the back of the truck.

"Okay you slobs - Jesus! Cessus, you're fucking asphyxiating him out back here!" she said.

"No worries, sister. Feed's all good. Says it doesn't effect him" said Cessus. He was sprawled on the couch, one eyeglass rolling slowly back towards his head, the other glimmering liminally with tiny golden pixels.

"My ass" she said, throwing the lock to open the other door. They were in the parking lot behind some kind of mini-mart, the rear of a big wooden sign peeking over its plastic-shingled top. Lazy plumes of brown smoke rolled out over the edge of the doorway and away.

"It's no problem, Cass. For real" said Fed. She opened her mouth to argue, but closed it again. Her brow dipped, a tiny pout appearing on her lips.

"Whatever. You getting some good code done?" she asked.

"Better. Just got off a chat with Tonx. He says to give you his best and said that he owes you."

"Damn straight" she said. "That boy's got a big debt running."

"He misses you" he said.

"Good" she said, turning. "Just make sure your shit's together. We'll be seeing him tonight and Marcus says we'd better be ready to roll."

"Girl, the boy just put together a month's worth of code, easy, in under a week. Give him some cred" said Cessus. He was upside down on the couch, his feet tapping against the side of the truck, his head hanging off the side. She turned back towards him, planted her hands on her hips.

"His shit's tight. You got my word on it" he said.

Cass's mouth stayed shut. She stared at Cessus a moment longer, turned and nodded at Fed.

"All right" she said. "Good work. Tonight we'll see how well you did."

She left the truck.

"That girl needs to get laid" said Cessus, swinging his feet over to the side of the couch. He sat up and rubbed his eyes, yawned. "Anything else we can do to check your code?" he asked.

"I can't think of anything. Or rather, I can think of a billion things, but they all involve someone looking at it who hasn't written the damn thing. And you don't count" said Fed. He scratched under one arm, wishing he could take a shower. The slut baths they'd been taking at rest stops and gas stations hadn't done him any good, and he only had the one change of clothes.

"How about your stuff? You got all the launch sites ready?"

"Oh yeah" said Cessus. "Piece of cake. The Chinese have plenty of holes in their security for being so goddamn uppity about controlling information coming in and out. The TCP-IP stack has been the same for how many years now, and folks still don't get it. I got a couple dozen machines ownzored until the next update. You give me your code, and I can drop it into place in under three minutes. Already scripted it out and everything."

"Yeah?" asked Fed.

"Yup. Using a series of relays to make time delays in delivery. It'll be backward scaling, so I'll connect through eight or nine relays. I'll dump the package through the last and terminate that connection. Then I'll only be connected through eight relays. Then dump the next one, terminate that connection. Anyone tracing me will want to track sequentially. They'll have to work backwards through time, which isn't typical. It also means they'll never know which drop is the last, make it harder to figure what we're up to."

He smiled and began methodically cracking his knuckles.

"I got a few other tricks up my sleeve, but that's the basic plan. I figure I'll use that one and a couple others and we ought to have everything delivered and our tracks cleaned up in under three minutes. It's automated, and I have an extra dozen machines cracked for redundancy."

"Excellent. I should only need ten, but more is better. I just don't want to set off any alarms, you know?"

"Don't you worry. I got it covered. Used to do this for a living, you know?"

Fed didn't know, but figured that he pretty much didn't want to.

"You think the collection idea will hold up?"

"It should. The code's delivering to three different anonymous, public spaces. Each piece is encrypting its bit of the puzzle and posting it as an image file. Without knowing better it'll all look like random noise keys. The cryptographer newsgroups are full of that kind of crank shit, always have been. It won't seem like anything more than the usual kind of traffic. We'll be the only ones who know what to look for or what to download, and we'll be the only ones who can open it up once we get it."

Cessus seemed pleased. He pressed one of his black thumbnails down hard with the palm of his hand.

"We got it covered. Every one of those machines makes a hash check off the image Tonx's guy posted in Hawaii, then passes it around. Uses the same check system native to the Chinese update system, yeah?"

Fed nodded.

"So we're set. They grab their little chunk, mutate to be able to process the best fit, and post their result along with their processing code to one of three newsgroups. We sit back and watch it roll in, cross off redundant responses, and get a full picture in under a week. Cakewalk, yeah?"

"Unless" began Fed.

"Unless nothing" said Cessus. "You designed this thing from the ground up, Fed. We've tested it backwards and forwards. The only way we're going to know if there's an error in your code is if we launch it. The time for doubting yourself is over, man. Let your brain have a rest and do some background processing. Live in the now, you know?"

Fed nodded again, pulled off his goggles. The image of swimming bits of code, a graphic representation of the genetic algorithms, swam in petri dish after-images of laser light on the inside of his eyeballs. He'd been watching them for hours. They never acted the same way twice, but they usually did the job. Usually.

"C'mon" said Cessus, standing up. "Let's get something to eat beside those damn nutrient bars. Chances are good Marcus is going to want to make the rest of the trip in one go. If you have to piss now's your chance."

As they came out of the truck they saw Marcus and Cass leaning against the cab, looking out over the parking lot to the next lot over. It was a hotel, and a fairly fancy one if the neatly trimmed hedge was any indication. The front drive was u-shaped, curving up and under an overhang. As they watched a limo pulled out and onto the road just as a second one pulled in.

Cass scratched under one armpit, wincing as she stretched her ribs. She'd found a new t-shirt at the Red Cross and it had stained almost instantly from riding in the back of the truck. Cessus nodded at the limo.

"What's up?" he asked.

"We were discussing how you could tell who was security and who was just a date" said Marcus. The second limo stopped under the overhang and a bellhop ran up to open the door. An immaculately dressed man with a full beard stepped out, smoothing his tuxedo as he stood. He was followed by an angel in blond hair and a long, pure white evening gown, tiny pearls glimmering in a sheer web across the drape of the fabric. Their driver had come around and was gathering up the gown as it spooled out of the car, gently lifting it up in an arc behind her as he followed them inside. The car slowly shut its doors and drove over to one side as soon as they had left.

"What do you think?" asked Marcus.

"Date" said Cass. "Those are Manolo Blatnik shoes, definitely not made for any kind of action. They're incredibly comfortable, though."

Cessus snickered. "Give me a break" he said. "I'm just impressed she could walk in them."

"I'm serious" said Cass. "Those heels are as comfortable as these boots I'm wearing. They should be; they cost more than your house was worth." This last was aimed at Cessus, and she smiled as he rolled his eyes.

"For shoes?" asked Fed.

Cass shrugged. "It's what people will pay for them. Believe me, you have to spend eight hours standing around looking pretty and they'd start looking like a good investment to you too. I know a guy who has a friend who knows the guy who invented the heat conductive cooling sets they put in tuxedos, and the guy lives like a king down in South America. At a certain point the money is sort of a secondary thing."

She scratched herself again before turning to spitting on the hot cement.

"Come on" she said, walking towards the mini-mart. Let's piss and get back on the road. I've got a boyfriend to beat up."

Marcus chuckled and keyed in a locking sequence on the cab before following her. Behind them another limo pulled up to the hotel, then slowly pulled away.

When they got into the mini-mart there was two unisex restrooms. Cass came out before Marcus was finished, and Cessus went next. Fed browsed among the magazine rack as she sorted through the juices for one with a remotely recent date.

"Do you miss it?" he asked.

"Miss what?" she said.

"Miss dressing up like that. Miss limos and fancy shit." Fed knew he sounded like an idiot, didn't much care. He found, to his surprise, that he really wanted to know.

"No" she said thoughtfully. "Not really. I mean..." she stopped to pull out an orange juice but left the cooler door open, letting the cool air slowly pour out and over her legs.

"It was nice, in a way, to be so comfortable so much of the time. To eat nice things, to only wear clothes that really fit. But it had its costs, and the benefits never outweighed them."

"What costs?" asked Fed.

"Freedom" she said, slowly scratching the price tag off the juice with one grimy fingernail. "I was never free. I went where I was told, wore what I was given to wear, ate what was cooked for me. I played by the rules and was pretty successful at it. But it was never **my** life."

She shrugged and let the cooler door swing shut. "I guess it's a matter of what's important to you - being safe, or being happy. I could have stayed the rest of my life in evening gowns and limousines, but I wouldn't ever have been happy there. Took me a long time to figure that out, but when I did the rest was easy."

Marcus emerged, nodded at them before heading back out to the truck. Fed turned to head for the bathroom.

"Scratch that" said Cass. She stood straight now, her arms hanging loosely at her sides as she looked past Fed's head

and into the parking lot beyond.

"It was never easy. But once I made that choice it started to be worth it."

Fed shuffled to the restroom in the back.

Chapter #34

Fed spent the rest of the ride in the passenger seat. Marcus drove, one large arm draped over the wheel, his thick legs hiding the pedals. He'd gotten Cessus to plug in the old white MP3 player into the stereo, selecting a constant stream of ancient French lounge music Fed found relaxing. It was like one long song, the way the MP3 player played it, blending each song into the next.

Cessus had started the trip up front with them, but ended up going into the back to setup for the run. Marcus had asked about his life growing up in the 'burbs, but there wasn't much to tell and they'd ended up talking more about mod fighting. Marcus had done some crazy things in his life, and didn't mind telling Fed the truth about it. Fed liked Marcus; he treated him with respect, even when he asked stupid things or didn't know about something that must have seemed obvious to Marcus.

Every so often the pale green light of the GPS would flicker on over Marcus's face, and eventually Fed noticed it had become nighttime. He'd nodded off a few times during the drive, but every time he woke up Marcus just took it like the conversation was still going. Eventually they stopped talking entirely, watching the plain scrub of the desert roll by. It'd been like that for hours, the night getting darker and darker. Not like in the city, where evening dropped down like a blanket over your head, but slower. It eased in over them, the countryside getting dimmer and dimmer. Shadows grew, and it got harder to make out the little cacti and stumpy trees alongside the road. He tapped his foot in time with the music. Marcus pulled slowly off the cracked pavement and onto a dirt road.

He turned and looked at him. The big man's face was painted in green light, a frown driving his eyes deeper into the folds of his face.

"What up?" he asked. "You know where we are?"

Marcus didn't say anything for a moment. Then he grunted.

"Yeah, but it doesn't make any sense. Keep an eye out, would you?" he said.

The drove on and the crushed rock of the road gave way to a rutted track through the sand. Then even that disappeared, and they followed a series of bare patches through the weeds.

"This shit keeps up we're going to get stuck" Marcus grumbled.

Just then they came to a rise and crested it, the truck bouncing and bucking as harder ground lifted beneath them.

"Well fuck me silly" coughed Marcus.

Ahead of them the dune crested to a long low beach, white sand spreading out as far as they could see in both directions. Their lights spilled over three trucks, similarly sized to theirs, all pulled up next to each other parallel to the beach. Their headlights were on, bright white LED light glaring against plastic tables and beach chairs. Just beyond the reach of the headlights a circus-type pavilion had been set up, the yellowed light of alcohol lamps rolling over a circular bar propped up on wooden struts. Dozens of people staggered and danced between the bar and the tables, and out beyond them Fed could see dripping bodies playing in the surf.

Soon after they'd crested the rise one of the bodies separated from the bar and ran up towards the truck. As it came closer Fed could see it was Tonx, tanned nut brown and ferociously drunk.

"Welcome! Welcome welcome welcome!" he called, pounding over the sand to jerk Fed's door open.

"Just in time for the party, goddamn" he panted, pulling Fed out of the truck and subjecting him to a bone crushing hug. He smelled of sweat and the ocean, and of strong liquor.

Cessus appeared, one lens out and his fingers tapping frantically on his chest.

"What the fuck is this? Jesus Christ, have you seen the bandwidth out here?" he said.

Fed hadn't, and made to reach for his goggles.

"Don't" said Tonx. "No need. What're you getting, Cessus?"

"Upload and download speeds are both at the top of the possible spectrum!" he said, his dreads bouncing crazily as he gaped at Tonx, at Fed, at the bar below. "It's pure unshared bandwidth just for us!"

"It gets better out by our tent" said Tonx. "But forget that, I'll explain it later. For now come get a drink."

"What the hell is this?" asked Fed.

"What do you think? It's a party! Don't ask stupid questions and you'll have a good time. Where the hell is my girlfriend?"

Cass was suddenly standing in the mixed light from the beach, her fists balled up, eyes gleaming wet as she regarded her shirtless, dirty, drunken boyfriend.

There were certain times, Fed was convinced, that the right thing to do was the unexpected one. He decided that Tonx was a master of it that night, when he grabbed his girlfriend in one long, deep kiss. He did it right in front of everybody, almost hitting Marcus as he came around the front of the truck, and he took an unabashedly long time of it. When Cass

stood upright again she was flushed and speechless, and Fed knew everything was going to be okay.

"Park the truck next to the others. Leave it on electric, we got generators everyone runs in the morning. Grab yourself a drink on my tab and I'll see ya'll in a while" he said. Then he lifted Cass up off her feet and ran down the beach, disappearing around the bar and into the night.

"That motherfucker never ceases to surprise me" said Cessus, his fingers still dancing over his shirtfront, his eyeglasses dimly illuminating the whites of his eyes. "We got serious net connectivity here, and traceroute's giving me a different path out to the net every time. This shit's as bizarre and secure a setup as I've seen in a while."

He turned towards Fed. "I don't know where the hell we are, but if we're going to launch from anywhere, this is the place to do it."

Fed smiled a half-smile, stared at the dark of the beach where his brother had disappeared.

Marcus's heavy hand fell onto his shoulder.

"You want to help me park this thing?" he asked.

"Yeah" mumbled Cessus, standing back so Fed could climb up ahead of him. "Then we have a hard-earned drink to enjoy."

A short while later they'd parked the truck, a redheaded guy with a beard and a mumu showing them how to tie into the generator line for the morning.

"Better to set it up before the hangovers start" he'd said, his eyes unnaturally wide and bright. He'd slapped Marcus on the shoulder a number of times, amazed at how loud it sounded. Then he'd led them over to the bar, explained to the bartender that they were on Tonx's tab, and disappeared.

They settled into a table out near the truck, Fed nursing something Cessus had ordered for him that tasted like nail polish and lemons.

"It's a gimlet" Cessus advised. "Give your tongue a chance to get used to it before you throw it out."

He'd ordered something that came in a glass the size of two fists, thick clear glass revealing a dark swirl of small, almond-shaped leaves. It oozed cold perspiration in the warm night air.

"Mint julep" he said, noticing Fed's gaze.

"I like mint" said Fed.

"Not like this" said Cessus, although he handed the drink over. A few coughing gasps later Fed agreed. It did bear a resemblance to what he knew of as mint, but only a passing, noxious one. Fed tried to finish his drink and succeeded, eventually, before deciding to try a martini. He'd only seen martinis in vids, classy guys drinking them like sodas. It turned out to be horrible. It tasted like pickle juice and gasoline, so he slurped it down as fast as he could, trying to gulp it when he thought Cessus and Marcus weren't watching.

Marcus drank mineral water. After he'd finished half his martini Fed asked him why.

"You know how much I weigh?" Marcus asked, an amused smile on his face.

"No" said Fed.

"Somewhere around four hundred pounds. You know how much booze it would take to get me drunk?"

"But it's on Tonx's tab" said Fed. His head hurt, a little, and he was having a hard time following the conversation. He kept getting distracted.

"That's not the point. I have the same size liver as you do, you know" Marcus said, then laughed. Fed's head had become too heavy all of a sudden, and he'd dropped his drink to spill over on the table. Marcus steadied Fed with one hand and tipped the table with the other, the glass and its contents rolling off into the darkness.

"Grab that, would you Cessus?" he asked, reaching over to pull Fed up and out of his chair.

Chapter #35

Fed woke up on the futon in the truck, his head pounding, needing desperately to pee. He pulled the door open and gasped a little as the sharp light of pre-dawn crawled in through his eyelids. He eased himself down onto the sand and out to where the bushes grew thicker by the dunes. After relieving himself he stumbled back into the truck and gently shut the door, unsocketing his legs and tossing them off the futon as he went. Then he opened a fresh bottle of water and sucked it down. He was terribly thirsty all of a sudden. He crawled back into bed.

Not long after that some people came in and then left. He thought it might have been Tonx.

Later, after that, he woke up again. His head hurt. There was a half a baguette, old tomato slices wedged against oily bits of mozzarella. A pair of small blue pills sat next to it on a piece of waxed paper. A new bottle of water held the paper in place. He took the pills and washed them down with the water, leaving the sandwich, and laid back down.

The ceiling overhead slowly changed color, the sound of the sea outside interrupted only occasionally by voices. The pounding in Fed's head subsided as he swam in and out of sleep.

Some time later the door opened and Cessus called his name.

"What?" he croaked, surprised to hear his own voice sound so hoarse.

"I asked if you want to launch" Cessus said, laughing. "Looks like we got an update scheduled within a 24-hour window. Now's the time, man."

Fed sat up suddenly and immediately regretted it.

"Oh Jesus" he mumbled.

Cessus laughed. "Come on. You've been sleeping all day. This place is amazing; let's launch and I'll show you around."

A little while later Fed had splashed the grit out of his eyes and struggled outside. His legs had gotten grit in the joints and whined and squealed; worse, the sockets had started to itch, which might mean infection. He tried not to think about it. It was ungodly bright, so he pulled on his goggles and toggled the world to a bearable opacity. Cessus was right; the place was amazing. The truck next to theirs had a huge stack of towels, swimsuits, water bottles, sandwiches, and other goods. It was manned by an darkly tanned and stubby German woman who spoke in a thick accent and smiled constantly. The next truck over had a big blue pipe that went down to the water and several smaller lines leading over to the dispensary truck. It was covered with solar panels.

"That one does all the water processing" said Cessus. "My guess is it's taking the solar power and using it to split the water into hydrogen cells to run the trucks. Leftover water gets filtered on its way to rebottling."

"Nothing but regenerative power, man. Fucking classy. Altogether these trucks pull up on any beach in the world, unload the tent, and drop a line in the water. Viola, you got yourself a party."

"What about the net access?" asked Fed.

Cessus pointed at the ocean. "Can't really see it, but there's got to be a boat out there. Probably two or three. Gyroscopically stabilized dishes is my guess, bouncing the signal to satellite and probably some land-based beacons along the coast. It's too far out to see them very well, but with a reasonable-sized tower they could provide line-of-sight connectivity in some pretty big waves. And they got all their traffic proxied through a dozen or more relays; run a traceroute and you'll see your data come out from spots all over the world."

Fed smiled, impressed despite himself.

"Who the fuck pays for it all?" he asked.

"Don't know. Don't want to know" said Cessus. "Somebody with big money and people to hide. Whoever they are they owed Tonx some favors."

He looked at Fed, rumbled his head roughly with one big hand.

"Don't worry about it. But don't bother folks here asking them about where they're from, either. Everyone's real friendly, sure, but they aren't exactly mixing it up."

Fed looked around again, peered at the variety of people lounging everywhere in Hawaiian beachwear obtained from the first truck. Cessus was right, mostly people were clumped together in little groups. They had their heads together or were scanning the crowd, polite nods and empty smiles the only contact between them.

He sighed. "Okay. We going to launch?" he asked.

Cessus smiled, his hands wriggling a bit in his pockets as he typed. Fed felt himself start to sweat in his grimy shirt and jeans. The sun was hot, the morning cool burned away hours ago. The ocean roared further down the beach, fiddler crabs running back and forth between the waves.

"Launched" said Cessus. "Baby, we're live."

Fed chewed one lip and watched a seagull coast by.

The first few hours he'd goggled in almost every ten minutes, sipping tomato juice (he'd never had it before) and watching for news of technical problems in China. But after most of the morning had slipped by in a sunny haze he'd given it up. Cessus assured him there were plenty of filters in place to catch anything that looked relevant and had even clamped one of his polyurethane dreadlocks onto Fed's head to alert him in case anything came up.

"Be careful with it" he said. "That baby's one of my only vibrating ones. Very popular with the ladies."

Fed had grimaced and mimed wiping his hands off, which had made Tonx almost fall out of his chair with laughter. Even Cass seemed to be enjoying herself, the elegant black bikini she wore shining with sea salt.

"Serious" admonished Cessus. "Cass charged me an arm and a leg to wire this thing up."

"How likely is it to come out?" asked Fed, twisting his eyes back to try and see the long black lock where it draped from the side of his head.

"Unless you suddenly go bald you'll be okay" said Cessus. "If it starts buzzing, get your butt back here and check the news. Easy cheesy."

Tonx and Cass had come up just as Cessus was fixing the dreadlock in place, and shortly afterwards a pair of sketchy-looking Hispanic guys came up next to him. One of them wore a light-colored suit of some fancy polymer-based fabric, light as silk and slightly transparent in the sleeves. The other guy looked like he'd gotten sunburned skiing, a sharp line under his eyes separating light skin from dark. He was pudgy, and didn't look at anyone.

They said a few words to Tonx in a slang Fed didn't understand, and Tonx nodded his head.

"Hey guys, I want you to meet Esco and Baby. They're friends of mine. Their boss is already in the contract."

They shook hands all around. When Marcus stood and leaned over the table to grasp Esco's the smaller man raised one carefully plucked eyebrow and grinned. Gleaming white teeth shone through his perfect lips as he asked; "Marcus, huh? I've seen your fights. Tight shit, nigger."

Fed could almost feel his eyes dilate. Esco was dark, but he looked Hispanic, not black. Fed suddenly had the idea that Marcus was going to reach over and crush the man's head.

Instead Marcus laughed and enfolded Esco's hand in a series of street grips.

"You know it, man. You mod too, or just naturally pretty?"

Esco jerked his head upwards at Marcus's chin. "Yeah, I'm mod. Strictly surface, though. How you support all that mass, man?"

The two walked over towards the truck so Marcus could get more water to wash down his supplements. Their street-slang patter faded into obscurity as they went.

Fed looked at Tonx, bewildered.

"What?" asked Tonx. "They're geeks, man. Both heavily modded. You think you computer jockeys got a corner on the market for obsessive hobbies?"

Fed forced a smile and looked at his shoes. His cheeks burned.

"What" he coughed, glanced at Esco's retreating back. "What's that guys mod?"

"Mods" corrected Tonx. "Major facial surgery, bone and muscle reconstruction. Probably lots of carefully balanced muscle therapy, some glandular adjustments. Possibly vocal chord tweaks, and definitely lots of depilation."

He glanced over at Baby, who shrugged.

"Point is" Tonx said "the guy's invested a whole lot of time and effort to reshape his body into an ideal. It's a more careful thing than just buffing out a six-pack. More of an art thing. Same as Marcus - just a different ideal."

"Oh" said Fed, feeling stupid.

Baby faded away, wandering slowly off towards the tents.

"Where's the guy who supplied the data set?" asked Fed. "The Frenchman?"

"Don't ask" said Tonx, grimacing. "You'll meet him soon enough."

Cass stood and stretched her long arms, her bikini sticking to her like it was painted on. It may have been, thought Fed.

"I'm going body boarding" she announced. "Anybody want to come?"

"Sorry, sweetheart. I got work to do" said Tonx. He eyed Fed.

"Why don't you take my bro, here?" he asked.

"What?" asked Fed.

Cass sized him up, the corners of her lips pulling back to reveal a pure, pretty smile.

"Yeah. Want to learn, Feed? Be good for those legs of yours..."

After a little more prodding he'd swapped in his grimy jeans and shirt for a pair of board shorts and gone out to try drowning. Cass said she'd learned to body board while she was couch surfing in California. She was a good teacher. Fed was surprised to find the water comfortably warm, and after catching a few waves he was laughing out loud and running back for more.

The day wore on, and Fed found himself forgetting about the code, the launch, the computers in China. He caught some good waves, got a sunburn, let Cass disappear to catch some better surf further down the beach. Eventually he bailed out; his skinny city kid arms were aching from trying to paddle out to the good waves. The rest of the afternoon went quickly, a nap on the futons followed by a dinner of BBQ pork ribs, thawed and flash-cooked in one of the trucks.

The sunset painted the sea all kinds of colors and Marcus showed him some of the basics of his fighting style, Gracie Jujitsu. It reminded Fed of wrestling with his dad when he was a kid, and Tonx and Cessus joined in, all three of them scrabbling and grabbing to pull Marcus down. Eventually the big man got a hold on all of them, and everybody went into the ocean together.

Fed skipped the martini that night, sitting with the group of them as night fell. As it turned dark he began to feel out of place, separate from everybody. They were talking a lot about the mod scene, laughing about people and making jokes about things Fed knew nothing about. Even Cass was part of it all. Fed guessed she was as mod as any of them, what with getting weird hormone therapies since childhood. Fed didn't know anything about it. He didn't have any mods, hadn't ever thought about getting any. He'd always had his head down, working on code. Watching the group of them laugh and argue he realized he was missing something. He missed feeling like a part of something, like a part of them. Like he belonged somewhere other than behind a keyboard.

After a while he excused himself and went to the bar. The German woman was there, big smile in place. She laughed as Fed approached and asked him if he wanted beer or a cocktail. He asked for something sweet and she gave him an oddly shaped bottle full of something pink. It had bumps and ridges and was oddly phallic, but he felt embarrassed asking her for something else, so he took it and left. It was good, sugary-sweet and citric.

He went down the beach on the other side of the bar, found a seat in the quite space between the tents and the shoreline. The night surrounded him, full of sound. He took a pull from his drink and noticed a figure approaching.

It was a short thin man in one of the ubiquitous Hawaiian shirts and shorts from the trucks. He had a hooknose and

carefully fashionable hair, and something about him screamed European. Fed wondered how anyone could look European in Bermuda shorts and a floral-print Hawaiian shirt, but there he was.

"You are Tonx's brother, no?" the man asked. He had a thick French accent.

"Uh, yeah" said Fed. The man's eyes were supernaturally bright, the skin of his face tight. He looked like he was repressing a laugh.

"Then it is my honor to meet you" he said. "I am Poulpe. But you may call me Poulpe. I am in your debt. You have afforded me my freedom."

Fed took the man's hand and they shook once, firmly. Poulpe sat down next to him, carefully arranging his legs in front of him.

"I haven't afforded anybody anything yet" said Fed.

"Nonsense" said Poulpe. "I'm here now, yes?"

He seemed to be waiting for an answer.

"Uh, yes" agreed Fed.

"So. Then you have done me a great service. Is your recombinant processing in place?" Poulpe asked.

Fed dug his toes into the sand, pushed the corner of his lip between his teeth with one finger.

Poulpe cocked his head to look at him, and Fed met his eye.

"Yeah" he said.

"It goes well?" asked Poulpe.

"I guess so" said Fed. "We won't know for a while. So far it looks good. But there's no guarantees..." he let his sentence trail off into silence.

"That is all we can do, no?" said Poulpe. "We do our best, make things of beauty, and celebrate life. It is striving that makes it worthwhile, don't you think?"

Tonx's voice drifted over the beach, the end of a joke followed by raucous laughter. The ocean broke against the shore and erased the sound. Fed thought of his code, of the application's shape, the way it fit in his mind.

"Yeah" he agreed. "That's all we can do."

Poulpe smiled, a wide white grin. He thin lips stretched tight over his teeth and he made a long series of grunts. Fed realized he was laughing.

"Very good then" he said. "The night is beautiful..."

He cocked his head again, looked at Fed questioningly.

"Fed" Fed said.

"I thought you were called 'Feed'?" asked Poulpe.

"That's not my name" said Fed. "My name's Fed."

"Very well. Fed it is" said Poulpe. He smiled again, apparently delighted.

"Allow me to celebrate you" he said.

Poulpe pulled out a small silver container, its scratched surface showing a tiny cartoon monster done in red plastpaint over the bare metal. He opened it with a smooth twist and held it towards Fed. There were a dozen pink candies inside, rounded squares like little creamy pillows.

The ocean roared.

After a moment Fed took one, popped it in his mouth and reached for his drink.

"No no no" said Poulpe. "Taste it. Savor it. This night is here for you to enjoy. Take all your time."

The strange little man smiled at Fed again and leaned back, closed his eyes. After a while Fed did the same. He listened to the sound of the waves. The candy tasted tangy against his tongue, artificial cherry flavor filling his mouth. Some time later Poulpe got up and wordlessly walked away into the darkness. Fed didn't mind.

The beach called to him, long slender waves like girl's arms sighing his name, begging for his company. He rose and walked down through the moonlight. The stars overhead glimmered and danced, shrinking and flaring through the edges of his vision. The silvery light rolled over the crests and dips of the beach, footprints of ancients next to his own, dripping and flowing over everything. He started, noticed the water was moving still. And again. He moved on.

Suddenly he was standing in the surf, felt the wet cling of the water on his pants' legs. He didn't remember coming here. The water was warm, welcoming. It ran, soft and gentle, up his leg. It kissed the hairs on his thighs, each one individually.

Out in the middle distance the dark line where the sea met the sky twisted and jumped. Fed gasped, stumbled back out of the water. He noticed the moon. It was - lonely.

Fed was sitting on the beach. He was dry, his whole body was soft and malleable, putty-like. He felt the lumps of the beach under his ass, the way his muscles rolled over them. The stars overhead called to him, he felt like they had been calling him for a long time, and he looked up. It was his first look, ever, to see the sky. It was beautiful.

He felt that part of him that was his humanity dance and jiggle inside him. He was human, it was so beautiful to be so human. So full of pride and spite and beauty. He pulled on his goggles, set the opacity to minimum, and watched the stars wink through the scan lines.

He began coding the universe.

Time passed.

He started, realized the sun had risen.

Cessus came and said some things, came again and brought him a sandwich and a bottle of water. He didn't touch them.

Some time later, Tonx came and carried him back to camp.

He slept.

Chapter #36

A long time later Fed woke to a gentle buzzing against his face. He woke slowly, wiping one hand against his cheek and rolling over, the soft edges of his consciousness curious but lazy. The sensation faded.

He woke again, unsure how much time had passed, suddenly aware of what the feeling had been and of what it had meant. He sat up. There was sand on the futon, his stumps itchy where a bit of seaweed had stuck to them. His brain reeled, and he staggered up and out of the truck. It was cold, the top of the beach soft with a thin layer of dew.

The chairs and tables were empty except for Cessus. His hair was unkempt, twisted dreads sticking out at odd angles atop his white robe. One long black leg stuck out cantilever, his foot buried in the sand, and his fingers drummed a mad beat on the tabletop.

Fed rounded the table and dropped into a chair, his thoughts confused. Cessus's eyes were distant over the horizon, the light of his lenses glimmering and winking against his corneas.

"What time is it? Did I sleep all day? What's going on?" asked Fed, fumbling to get his goggles into place.

Cessus grunted, then; "Morning; yes; and see for yourself."

Fed scanned the local data network and found Cessus's com. He logged in with his guest account and opened up a view.

His hands trembled.

"What's that?" he asked.

"That's your code. Those are results" said Cessus.

"But" said Fed. "But that's almost the complete data set."

Cessus let his hands fall flat on the table, turned towards Fed, smiled.

"You don't say" he said.

"But how?" asked Fed.

"It looks to me like your code took a while to propagate, but pretty much did as we'd planned. We got 67% penetration by midafternoon yesterday. That in itself is pretty good - better than expected. The spike in downloads from the data set peaked around 9 last night. Six hours later we started seeing results, and the upload rate has increased exponentially until now."

"That's... nine hours from the peak download of the data set to peak data return. That's incredible!" said Fed.

"That's some impressive fucking code is what it is" laughed Cessus. "Go get Tonx. I'll keep monitoring this. We need to know how to verify our results, now that we have some."

Fed ran out to the tents, not sure which of the identical white cotton V-shapes was his brother's. He danced around between them, shuffling sand and shivering in the morning air, frantic with excitement.

"Tonx" he hissed, peering at sandals in front of a long tent. "Tonx!"

A bleary Japanese face stuck out from between the flaps of the tent. Fed caught a glimpse of shadowed tattoos spilling across the man's back before he met his steel-hard eyes. The head disappeared with a frown.

"Tonx" he hissed again, softer.

There was a rustling followed by a stream of quiet curses from the opposite side of the field of tents. Fed heard Cass's laugh and saw Tonx stagger into view, pulling on his shorts. He saw Fed and ran over, limping as he lost one sandal.

"Cessus comm'd me. What is it?" he asked.

"We got results. Almost the whole data set" said Fed. He was hopping up and down now, rubbing his goose-pimpled arms to keep warm. The sun broke over the horizon and spilled onto Tonx's face in a golden glow. He shaded his eyes,

squinting at Fed.

"Already?" he asked.

"No shit. Cessus says my algorithms adapted faster than expected. China's networks are going to have a glut from all the traffic" he said. His own gut clenched as he realized what he'd said, thought about the high traffic rates Chinese officials would see from all over their network. The algorithm would be changing itself, spreading new versions with each iteration. If it was producing results at this kind of rate it must be rewriting itself on every system as fast as it could spread.

Fed stopped moving, pulled his chord out of his pocket and stared at Tonx's bare chest through the data field overlaid by his goggles. He pulled up a news filter, watched. There was nothing. No news from China about overworked systems, no decrease in traffic in or out of their networks - nothing unusual.

"Come on" he said, breathless. He turned to run back, but Tonx was already ahead of him.

They skidded to a stop next to Cessus just as Marcus was returning with a pair of cups of coffee. He looked at Tonx and handed one to him and one to Cessus and turned and went back towards the bar.

"Why aren't we seeing anything from China if we've got this sort of data rate?" asked Fed. "It should be propagating like mad and..."

Cessus held up one long hand, sipped from his coffee cup.

"Calm down and think it through. All this shit's load balanced. You wrote the code, Fed, you know that. It'll propagate, but no faster than standard updates would, and it's only a small subset of the code. It's a lot more processing than usual, but nothing that'd break anything down. Nothing China would want to brag about."

"But that data set is huge" said Fed. "Its crunching major numbers across..."

"Across thousands and thousands of computers" interrupted Cessus. "Dude, have faith in your code. It's exceeding your expectations. So be happy. I'm sure we'll see reports of congestion in the Chinese systems later on. Just because it isn't making the headlines doesn't mean it isn't working."

"Can I see what we've got?" asked Tonx. He was excited too, his face flushed pink and eyes wide.

"Sure, but it won't make any sense. It's filtering in bit by bit, so you won't be able to get any useful data for another couple hours. That's if we keep our current rate. It's leveled, by the way. Still freaking incredible turnaround time, though."

Fed ran back to pull on his jeans, cleaned and pressed in the truck with the water filtration system and delivered to him tied with brown twine. When he returned Tonx had gone to get some more clothes on himself and to ready his com. Once the full data set was returned he would have to run a simulation over the differences Fed's code recommended, but unlike the actual combination matching it should only take little while to confirm it made sense.

Fed and Cessus and Tonx huddled together over Cessus's laptop, pulling over a couple beach umbrellas for shade to make Cessus's screen readable as the sun came up. They drank hot coffee and, later, fresh rolls cooked by the bread machine in the bar. The data trickled in.

"That's it" said Cessus. They watched as the peaks and troughs of the uploads to the three online locations suddenly dropped. The lines bounced a few times, peaked once or twice, and went flat.

"We got it" he said. His fingers flew over the tabletop in front of the laptop's keyboard as he keyed in a copy function to Tonx's machine.

"All you, man" he said, pointing a long finger at Tonx.

Tonx started the process and Fed showed him how to connect the results screen over the network to Cessus's laptop so they could all watch. It didn't make much sense to him, number chains and DNA sequencing color-coded and flashing, but the rising progress bar was clear enough.

They sat, and waited. Cass came by, sat quietly next to Fed as she ate her breakfast. Marcus fussed about the truck, cleaning out cookie wrappers and soda bottles.

The computer dinged.

"What do we got?" said Cessus and Fed simultaneously. Tonx's face showed nothing, his eyes scanning a long list of odd-sounding acronyms and short chemical chains. He slowly shook his head.

"Something's not right. This doesn't make sense" he said.

Fed's gut twisted. His head ached, suddenly, a rising pounding heat across his temples.

"What's not right?" he asked.

"This is all wrong" Tonx said again, tabbing through his results. "Let me run it again. Give me the data. Maybe it got corrupted in the transfer."

"I'll re-download the entire set. Maybe we got a little spike afterwards with corrections" said Cessus. He pushed Tonx's window behind his own and reconnected to the data Fed's code had returned. There were no new uploads, but he got all the data again anyway and pushed it to Tonx. The colored tabs and number chains processed, again, and they waited.

There was a faint taste of metal in Fed's mouth.

It seemed to take twice as long to process this time. The ocean roared distantly, the light suddenly tinny and cold. After a short forever the computer dinged again. They all stared.

Tonx shook his head.

"These results are completely incompatible" he said softly. "Something's fucked with the data set."

Chapter #37

They spent the rest of the afternoon trying to figure out what had gone wrong. From everything Fed could tell his code had run correctly. Tonx couldn't make any sense of the errors he was getting. Huge swaths of the genetic recommendation fit perfectly, and then there would suddenly be a chunk that just didn't fit. There was no gradual combinatory degradation as he'd expect from a near-fit solution.

Then, in late afternoon just as the sun seemed suddenly to cool, Fed found something strange.

"Cessus" he said, nudging an elbow into his ribs. "Give me some screen room. Look at this."

He pulled up a window on the laptop in front of them. He pointed at one of the sample chunks of RNA they'd posted for processing in one column, the genetically developed algorithm for processing it in another. The result was shown in a third column, an RNA combinate like all the others they had received from the virused machines. Fed took the numbers representing the RNA chunk and ran the algorithm on it. A second later a result appeared. It wasn't the same as the result they'd downloaded.

"What the fuck?" asked Cessus.

"Is your code screwed?" asked Tonx.

"No, man. The code works fine. But we got a weird result posted" said Fed. His face tightened into a scowl. He copied the function again, jumped to a terminal window and ran a carefully worded search string.

"What are you doing?" asked Tonx. Next to him Cessus narrowed his eyes. Fed thumbed his comm lightly and the screen suddenly filled with scrolling lines, all identical.

Fed slumped backwards in his chair, head tilted, gazing upwards at the sky as the lines scrolled past his vision.

"He searched for other instances of the same result or formula" said Cessus, his eyes scanning the screen. "Those are all the times a combinate was suggested that was identical to the first error."

"What the fuck does that mean?" asked Tonx.

"It means we've been cracked" said Cessus. "It means that our data got intercepted on the way to being posted and huge chunks of it were replaced with bogus results."

The lines stopped, displayed a blinking cursor on an empty line.

"Who?" asked Tonx.

"We don't know" repeated Cessus.

Fed's head snapped up.

"You got the Rijndael/CTR encryption you used on the background image for the initial data set?" he asked.

Cessus nodded. "Yeah, why?"

"Run it on our results" said Fed.

Cessus stared at the younger man for a moment, then began to drum his fingers on the tabletop. He paused a moment, watching the results scan over the back of his eyeballs. He wasn't synced to the laptop, so they couldn't see what he did, but they saw his eyes grow wide.

"Anybody here speak Chinese?" he asked after a moment.

Tonx jumped to find Cass and Fed pounded on his chord, syncing Cessus's view to the laptop. The murky background image of the Latin American Jewish Association of Hawaii homepage appeared, crisp white text laid across its middle. The top seven lines were each in a different language, followed by a long sentence in tiny Chinese characters laid across the bottom. The English sentence read:

'What are you doing?'

Chapter #38

Cass confirmed that the rest of the text was contact info for an anonymous-sounding Chinese government address along with instructions. They wanted a full explanation of what the combinate results were intended to do. The message was businesslike, succinct, and final.

Cessus thought that whoever had sent it was most likely in the Chinese governmental system and had seen the increased data load. Because all Chinese internet traffic ran through extensive proxies on the way out of the country he or she'd been able to sniff and replace all their recombinant sets on their way out. What was impressive was that whoever they were, they had distinguished Fed's results from all the other random noise and postings going out in the same direction, and had coded up a response right after Fed's had finished propagating. It was a neat hack.

Tonx spun into damage control as soon as the news hit, contacting those people he'd pulled favors from to warn them that there was a delay. Fed's first inclination was not to tell anyone anything, but Tonx assured him that he hadn't got this far by hiding facts from his investors.

After examining everything they had it was clear they couldn't rework the remaining data themselves - there was too

much information lost and no way of confirming if any of the rest of it had been scrambled. Cessus told Fed to prep a sampling app to run random confirmations on what they had and disappeared into the back of the truck. As soon as he'd shut the door Fed got a message on his comm; "don't let anyone bother me" it said. Signed, Cessus.

Around dinnertime a small Toyota sedan with tinted windows picked up a group of Japanese men. An hour later a tourist bus dropped off three hard-looking Italians in expensive looking suits. They pitched a tent farther down the beach and reappeared in shorts and Hawaiian floral-print shirts. Nobody talked to them. Fed coded, exhausted. What the hell was he doing here, on some weird Mafioso beach in Mexico, big players waiting for him to pay out. Friends waiting for him to deliver. Screwed.

Somebody lit a bonfire between the chairs and the beach. Fed stopped to get a plateful of shirred pork chops and BBQ beans. He coded, eventually finishing his app. It would take days to run, but it would do the job. It was messy. Fed didn't care.

After dinner Tonx reappeared, his shoulders peeling. Cass was with him, carrying their plates as Tonx wrote, fingers flying over his comm. His Hello Kitty glasses glowed and pulsed, his face hard behind them.

"Where's Cessus?" Tonx asked.

"Working" said Fed.

"Doing?" asked Tonx.

"Don't know. Probably trying to trace the guy who cracked us" he said.

Tonx looked down the beach at the fire, noticed Cass and took his plate. He sat and ate.

After a while a tall, beautiful boy with dark curly hair mixed classic operatic pieces with hip-hop tunes on his lapcomm; they'd patched him into the speakers mounted in the bar.

Eventually Cessus reappeared. He looked like a black woolly octopus was eating his head, three-day scruff turning his face dark. His eyes shone in their hollowed sockets.

"I got him" he said.

They stared.

"It's one guy. Or a small number of guys. Got to be an important muckity-muck in China's IT dept. Big into networking, but his security's got some holes. Small ones."

"But big enough?" asked Tonx, his voice hopeful.

"Big enough" agreed Cessus, reaching over and grabbing a pair of pork chops from Fed's plate.

"So what do we got?" Tonx asked.

Cessus chewed, grimaced as his lenses rolled back to the sides of his head. His eyes were a bloody red.

"Like I said, likely one guy. Not enough stuff done concurrently to be otherwise. He followed the data uploads until he had a good sample rate and spoofed the rest. Fooled us, though. No idea what the actual processing rate was like, but the boxes I owned were all done by the time I got to them. Looks like your code did about as well as we thought, Feed."

"We just didn't get the results" Fed said.

"So who is he? How do we get our data?" Tonx asked.

"There's the rub" said Cessus. "He took the real combine results and put them on a private machine in Beijing. A roach motel."

"What's a roach motel?" asked Cass.

"They were originally used for credit card numbers," said Fed. "E-vendors use them for making credit card transactions. When they want to make a transaction the vendor sends them a packet with an identifier, like 'ID #12345, \$125.00, for Fuzzy Eggbeater' and they match the ID number with an actual credit card. Then the roach motel runs the transaction."

"So why are they called roach motels?"

"Credit card numbers check in, but they never check out" said Tonx.

"Is that bad?" Cass asked.

"It means we can't get at the data from here" said Cessus. "Roach motels only do one thing - you send them packets, and they run a transaction completely separately. In this case they're just passing it requests, and the roach motel is sending the recombinant information out some other way we don't know about. Since we can't see the packets going out, we can't intercept anything useful."

Cass snorted loudly through her nose.

"I thought you guys were uber-hackers. You're telling me you've got a machine that only does a single thing - *only* takes packets in - and you can't hack it?"

"Kind of breaks the illusion, but yeah" said Cessus.

"So how'd you find out he put our data up there?" asked Fed.

"One of the people who was trying to look at the information screwed up. He'd set up an anonymizing proxy before making the request to the roach motel. The guy who got our data put it on a web site somewhere - probably the roach motel itself, but we have no way of knowing - and when the person using the proxy tried to access it his browser kept asking the roach motel for the data instead of the web server. I just listened to what his browser was asking for and figured out that

whoever had our data had put up a web page with a bunch of DNA data. A recombinant."

"He put the whole thing up there?" asked Tonx.

"No, he didn't. That's the funny part. He put up half of it. The web page was extremely simple, but it took a really long time to load. The guy using the proxy kept pounding the reload button on his browser, which sends a new request each time. That gave me a nice sample set to figure out what he was trying to pull down. I compared the size the actual recombinant would be against the web page, and it comes to about half and change."

"Who was asking for it?" asked Tonx.

"The request I saw was run through an anonymizing proxy, like I told you, but the packets it sent out to make the original request were all signed with a user ID" said Cessus.

They waited.

"And?" said Fed.

"The ID was C.Hintao" said Cessus. "The only person with that name that comes to mind is the president of China, and it *was* run through government proxies. The anonymizer is maintained by their equivalent to the secret service."

"But then why didn't he put the whole recombinant up?" asked Fed.

Tonx laughed. "The fucker's playing them" he said.

"Probably" said Cessus. "Either he's claiming the full data set isn't done yet, or he's ransoming it until he finds out what it's for."

"So does he have the correct data set somewhere?" asked Fed.

"If it exists, he has it" said Cessus.

They turned to Tonx. The ocean roared behind them, the gulf stream stirring its waves, winds from Brazil to Finland pushing its currents. Fed's brother tucked a strand of hair behind his ear and looked around at them. He reached over and put a hand on Cass's.

"So you want to go to China?" he asked.

Chapter #39

Tonx insisted they split up onto different flights. They argued at length about whether to bring Marcus, but the big man had pointed out that he was under contract, and folded his arms and set his jaw, and that was that. It meant buying another ticket, but Tonx had found a line of credit from somewhere so Fed figured that wasn't the main problem. The other issue was what to do with Poulpe. When they'd finally found him, sleeping in the sun with a face smeared blue with zinc oxide, he'd just smiled and nodded.

"I would suggest you take me with you. I am the only one who can readily determine the veracity of whatever data we obtain. You may need me on short notice" he said, pinching off the end of each word.

Tonx hadn't moved. He ground his jaw as he thought it over.

"You'll go with Cessus. And Fed" said Tonx. "Cass and I'll go first."

"What about Pharo's friends?" asked Cessus.

Tonx looked down the beach to two the tiny specs that were Baby and Esco.

"Last" he said. "If at all."

Fed looked at Cessus, caught his eye. The bigger man shook his head slightly, slowly.

"Pharo?" asked Poulpe.

"Never mind" said Tonx. "Just get your things together. We're leaving in an hour."

An hour later everyone's stuff was piled into the truck or the station wagon, respectively. Tonx had had to bribe the German woman to keep their shorts and shirts.

"Fucking robbery" muttered Tonx, coming back to where the two cars were turned and lined up on the road. "Okay, here's the drill. We drive to Mexico city. It's about seven hours. When we get there Esco, Cass and I get dropped off at the airport and Bay will circle around with the car."

"Why is Baby driving?" asked Esco.

"Because I want one of the both of you with some of us at all times, in case Disney catches up. The more communication channels we have the better" said Tonx.

"Baby will meet you at a Denny's that's about a half hour off from the airport. An hour after they join up with you everybody except Marcus will catch a cab into the airport and get on the next flight after ours. An hour after that Marcus will drive into the airport, park the car, scrub it, leave the keys in it, and get the last flight of the day."

He looked at the faces surrounding his. "Got it?"

Everybody nodded.

"I don't like getting moved around so much" said Baby. "Why doesn't Esco stick with your hackers here, and I'll catch the first flight?"

"No" said Tonx. "We're going to need all the smooth we can get when we land. Esco stays with me."

"What the fuck am I going to smooth in China?" asked Esco.

"The people I have to secure us with are going to want to see business professionals" said Tonx. "Baby's not it, and you know it. We have one hour from the time we land until they arrive to make sure everything's kosher, and you're the only one here besides myself that can make that happen."

He glared at Esco, reached up a hand to pull back a lock of hair. "You got my back, or what?"

Esco pursed his lips. He nodded.

"Once we arrive in Beijing we'll take separate cabs to the Hotel Paris. Meet in the lobby there. Marcus, you go into the restaurant. We're going to have enough trouble with you as is."

"What do you mean?" asked Fed.

"Marcus is a popular man" said Tonx. "Damn fool did a commercial there and now he thinks he's going to stealth mode it."

"That was two years ago" said Marcus. "And it was in Japan."

"For a Chinese product" yelled Tonx. He slumped back in his chair. "Whatever. Look, we have a lot to do. I've secured tickets and faked identity checksums, so make sure you sync your comms to Cessus here before we split up. Pull out all your munitions or anything else illegal by the time we hit Mexico city. We can store whatever we need in a locker on the way to the airport, but don't forget they're not deregulated. They're going to have armed security crawling all over that place. Don't do anything stupid."

Everybody split up. Fed followed Cessus back to the truck. Marcus had spit-shined the whole thing, and everything that wasn't fastened down was stacked neatly in the back.

"Pack what you need and put the rest in these bags" said Marcus, handing Fed a fistful of big black plastic.

"What the fuck am I going to pack?" Fed asked. "I'm lucky I have pants."

He scrambled up into the back of the freight container and collapsed on a futon. Cessus dumped out a thin plastic bag of components and wires and began sorting.

"Going to be fucking awesome hitting the markets there" he said. "No idea how easy it'll be to get shit, but if it's anything like Japan there's going to be some slick motherfucking tech to be had."

"Idiot" said Fed conversationally. "China's not Japan, you know."

"That so?" asked Cessus. "Since when did you get to be the big expert, Feed?"

Fed smiled. "Hey, I just ownzored over 67% of the country's computers. Looks like I know something."

Cessus stared at him for a second, and then broke into a loud baying laugh.

"Boy, you're coming along nicely" he said.

Fed just smiled.

Chapter #40

Everything went according to Tonx's plan. They cruised into Mexico sometime late evening and found the Denny's no problem. There wasn't much room to park the truck in the lot, so Marcus ended up bribing a policeman to issue them a temporary working permit so they could park on the road. Once they got inside Cessus made them move seats twice. Eventually they wound up with their backs to the bathrooms, facing the door.

"Are you always this careful?" asked Poulpe.

"Try to be" said Cessus.

They ordered dinner, Marcus ordering two, and dug in. It was good stuff, better than what Fed was used to at home.

"Denny's is different down here" he said around mouthfuls of bacon burger.

"Not as greasy" said Marcus. "They add too damn much up in the U.S."

"This is less grease?" asked Poulpe.

"Hell yeah" laughed Cessus. "After all this is over we've got to take you to a Fat Burger joint, man."

"Fat Burger?" asked Poulpe "Are you for serious? There is a place called 'Fat Burger'?"

Fed almost shot coke out his nose, he laughed so hard.

"It is a strange country I've come to" said Poulpe.

"Yeah, the irony's heavy" said Cessus.

"Besides, you're not in the U.S., you're in Mexico. And you're about to be in China" said Marcus. He raised a finger to signal their waiter.

"Indeed. We are jet-setting, no?" asked Poulpe. "Like rock stars."

"Except for the people trying to kill us, yeah" said Fed.

"Come on now" said Cessus. "Man's got a point. Didn't you ever want to go to China?"

Fed raised his eyebrows and shoveled more fries into his mouth.

"Uno more Sunrise Special" said Marcus to their waiter.

"Yes sir, right away" he replied.

"Fucking English all over the world" said Marcus.

"This is your global economy" said Poulpe. "Are you not pleased?"

Marcus grunted. "I like the prices, but the deculturization is crap. I want to live a quality life as much as the next guy, and can understand the mechanisms that get people to sell out their heritage for it, but that doesn't mean I have to like it."

Baby came in the front door, caught sight of them. His tan had faded somewhat and he looked less like a raccoon; Esco had insisted he rub in some tanning lotion before they left the beach. His eyes shifted nervously back and forth across the restaurant, and when the waiter approached he almost jumped through the window.

"How was your drive?" asked Cessus as he skittered over to their table. "Everything go okay?"

"Yeah, yeah" said Baby. "I just don't like it down here. Mexicans don't go much for Puerto Ricans, you know?"

"Why?" asked Poulpe.

"Puerto Rican's get U.S. citizenship automatically" said Cessus. "The Mexican's just get shipped around as labor. Unequal opportunity."

"Why is this?" asked Poulpe. "You are such charming people."

"Puerto Rico is part of the U.S., officially. Means we got U.S. passports real easy" said Baby. "Mexicans don't, even though they're right next door and always getting used for labor. We competed for a lot of the same jobs, except we had the obvious advantage. After the deregulation of the border it got worse. Listen, it's a long story. It doesn't matter" He pushed his bag under the table. "I'm going to take a piss. Order me a burger, okay? No onions."

After Baby had had his dinner they sat, waiting. Baby kept ducking under the table to pull on his oversized headset, waiting for messages. Poulpe ordered an ice cream but announced that it was disgustingly sweet as soon as it arrived, and left it on the table to melt.

Fed was stuffed. He leaned back and pulled on his soda, waiting. He didn't know what was coming next, kept telling himself it was out of his hands. He thought about what Cessus had said, tried to think of it as an adventure, but it wasn't working.

"China's not known for its human rights, is it?" he asked.

"Not known for their human rights violations, either" said Marcus. "Not anymore, anyway. They're still gunning to get their currency established as the international standard."

"Where the fuck are they?" asked Baby. "Esco's supposed to comm me as soon as they get on the flight."

"Probably got delayed" said Cessus. "This is Mexico, after all."

"That's not protocol" fretted Baby. "He's not responding, either."

"Don't worry about it" said Marcus, his voice heavy. He glanced up at the clock. "Cessus?"

Cessus smiled wide, big white teeth glimmering. He stood, shouldered his bag.

"Yep. I reckon it's time to go. Poulpe, Fed, if you'll follow me?"

He gestured towards the exit.

"What the fuck?" asked Baby. He reached for his pocket, started to stand.

Marcus's arm fell around his shoulders like a weight and he crashed back into his chair.

"Let's have a coffee, shall we?" Marcus asked Baby.

"Sorry, man" said Cessus. "That's business. Tonx's orders."

"But we got no comm from them" protested Baby.

"You got no comm from anybody" said Cessus. He jerked a thumb over Baby's head at the wall behind him. "Men's room, taped under the sink. Jammer, paired with a fake signal. Gave your comm something to talk to. But your messages aren't going anywhere. Tonx's girl worked it up in-between sets out at the beach."

Baby blinked widely, twice.

"You can keep it" said Cessus. "Some pretty neat wiring in there. The girl's got mad skills with a soldering iron."

"Just stay cool and you'll do okay" said Marcus. "We're going to sit here for a little while longer while they get on their flight, and then you're going to go on a sightseeing cab ride. Don't piss anyone off and I won't have to explain how a Puerto Rican is trying to rip off a Mexican Denny's. You follow?"

Baby just nodded, dumbly. Poulpe suddenly made that huffing sound that Fed recognized as laughter.

"Baby" said Cessus, leaning over towards the man. "You're a good guy, you know? Maybe next time we can work on the same side of a contract." Baby nodded again, took a deep breath. He shrugged.

"That's biz."

Cessus smiled a lopsided grin and turned, ushering Poulpe and Fed out ahead of him.

Chapter #41

They made it to the airport in no time, the filthy cab Cessus hailed outside tearing through side streets and around traffic. Cessus gave the man a big tip and walked through the revolving gates, Fed and Poulpe right behind. He waved their IDs over the auto-teller and folded the paper receipts into his pocket. They moved on.

"We got an extra half hour before our flight. Let's use the time to get dressed for China, because this Hawaiian bullshit isn't going to fly, not to mention it'll be cold there. Poulpe, you can dress yourself, but Fed and I aren't going to pass for

bizmen. Here's a cred card. We'll hit Nike town and meet you at the food court, okay? Be there in 45 minutes. No less. You got me?"

"Yes, Cessus. I have got you" replied Poulpe, his rosy cheeks puckering a little as he said the words. Cessus began to walk away, and as Fed turned to follow him he saw Poulpe pull out his little tin. He palmed the lid and gently laid a small red candy on his tongue. His pale gray eyes slowly raised to meet Fed's, and he reached the tin towards him. Fed discovered, suddenly, that he did want one. He wanted one very much.

Then Cessus was there, his long fingers wrapped tightly around Poulpe's hand, hissing something fierce at the smaller man. He pulled the tin away and casually lobbed it into the trash bin of a passing service cart. Fed could barely see Poulpe's face through the forest of dreadlocks as Cessus whispered in his ear. He was smiling, grinning like a naughty schoolboy who knew he wasn't really going to get into trouble, but who would bear the teacher's lecture anyway. Cessus threw Poulpe's hand down and spun around, wrapped his arm over Fed's shoulders, led him briskly away.

"Don't fucking pull that shit on me" he said, anger hissing under his quiet voice. "You want to play around on the beach, okay. But you take candy from that motherfucker piece of shit you going to be flat out when we need you most."

"It's okay" said Fed.

"No, dude, it is not okay. You know what you took the other day?"

"No."

"Me neither. That's means neither one of us knows what you got floating around in your blood right now, how addictive it is, what the long term affects are. Nothing. We don't know shit, which means we got to trust that slimy motherfucker."

Fed stumbled a little, Cessus's long arm propelling him down the arcade past tall thin mannequins wearing sequined skintights.

"You know what that fucker did for a living, Fed?"

Fed nodded, but Cessus continued anyway.

"That guy designed biological pharmaceuticals for Disney."

Cessus pulled him in-between two stores, in front of an unmarked metal door, spun him around to face him.

"That's not the kind of guy you want to take drugs from."

Fed felt a hot flash of anger.

"I fucking get it, Cessus" he said, pushing the larger man's hand off his shoulder. "I fucked up. Once. Don't worry, I'm not going to do it again."

"I got to trust you, Fed" said Cessus.

"Damn straight" said Fed. "You do. Now help me find something to wear in China."

Cessus got himself with a pair of nylon camo pants and a bunch of skater shirts. The pants had the Nike swoosh stitched through the fabric in reflective thread, multicolored bits of light reflecting off him as he moved. He topped it off with an enormously oversized red hoody, plastic fibers sewn in to poof it out. He wanted the bright white sneakers they had in the window but they didn't have them in his size, so he settled for the tanned leather hightops.

"Okay" he said after his unmarked cred card slid through. "Now we get to dress you up."

"Tell me I don't have to look like you" said Fed.

"No sir, you do not. You could not, in all fairness" said Cessus "I would have set you up like this, but it's my only choice and there's no way they're going to believe you're a U.S. rapper in China."

"That's crazy talk, Cessus. You couldn't rap your way out of a paper bag."

"Yeah, but you got to play to the stereotypes, you know? I'm a black man with dreadlocks and expensive implants; what do you want me to pass for when we get there?"

Fed shrugged. "Okay, but what about me?"

Cessus smiled. "You get to be a businessman's son. Think you can handle that?"

Something about the way he smiled put Fed's teeth on edge.

"What do you mean?"

It turned out Cessus meant for Fed to wear a pressed white polo shirt with the alligator logo on the cuffs, slightly tight wool pants cut a little bit short. Stiff black leather shoes matched a suit coat that forced Fed's shoulder's back. Fed was willing to put up with it until Cessus came back with a beige knit vest and a little plastic box of hair wax.

"Fuck you" said Fed as Cessus cornered him in the dressing room.

"Dude, we all have to do our part. Once we get out of there you can do whatever you want. But for now it's my call, and I want you looking as innocent as possible."

"Absolutely fuck you" said Fed. "I'm not wearing that vest and I'm not wearing that sick fucking wax."

Fifteen minutes later they were walking swiftly down the walkway, Fed's face pulled tight against his skull by the rapidly hardening shell of his waxed-down hair. He was carrying his jacket, and had stuffed his goggles and chord into its pockets. They didn't fit in his pants.

Poulpe was standing by a fountain, gently smoking a long white cigarette. He was wearing a neat black suit with

miniscule grey stripes and had a long tan overcoat thrown over one arm. His hair was pulled back in gentle waves, and as he caught sight of them he cocked his head and waved.

"My my, you are looking very nicely, Fed" he said as they walked up.

"Don't fuck with me" said Fed.

"I'm not" said Poulpe. He seemed genuinely puzzled at Fed's reaction. Fed snorted and rolled his eyes, disgusted at this whole affair.

"Listen up, kids" said Cessus. "We can't go strolling on there together. You two go on ahead and I'll tail you. We're all sitting next to each other on the plane, but for gods sakes don't start chatting as soon as we get on. Poulpe, you get your headphones on as soon as sit down and space out for the rest of the trip. Fed here will play your useless son. Fed, I'll start up a conversation once we get going. Follow my lead."

Cessus looked them both up and down.

"Okay, we're good. One last thing. Poulpe, you offer Fed anything and I'll see to it you die good and slow. Fed, I find out you asked him and I'm going to tell your brother about this plus what happened on the beach. We clear, gentlemen?"

They both nodded.

"Good. Now move your ass and I'll see you two on the plane. Here are your tickets."

Cessus handed them their papers and strolled off towards a bookstore, waiting for them to get ahead of him.

Poulpe waited until they had strolled a ways down the arcade before he reached out one white hand and rested it on Fed's shoulder.

"You had a good time on the beach the other day, yes?" he asked.

"It was interesting" said Fed. He walked slightly apart from Poulpe, let his hand fall off his shoulder.

"I am very glad. I feel a kindred spirit in you, Feed. We are both... apart from the others. Not the same, you see?"

"They're my friends" said Fed.

"Of course. And Tonx, he is your brother. But you are not the same. This is difficult, yes?"

"Poulpe, I don't need this bullshit. I appreciate the hook up the other day but we're not bosom buddies, you got me?"

Poulpe stopped, reached over and slowly stubbed out the butt of his cigarette in an ashtray.

"Of course, Feed. I am not a bosom buddy."

He reached into his jacket pocket. Fed looked around, but he couldn't see Cessus anywhere.

Poulpe pulled out another cigarette. He lit it with a cream-colored wooden cube, exhaled slowly.

"But who is?" he asked.

Chapter #42

The flight attendant read them a security warning and emergency checklist in one long singsong breath. Fed didn't understand any of it. Soon after they were taking off, had taken off. The lights dimmed. He'd never flown internationally before, he realized. He decided he didn't like it.

The next eight hours were interminable. Poulpe had politely requested a blanket and pillow as soon as they were in the air, tilting his chair back and relaxing into a gentle sleep. Fed was sure he had managed to take some kind of drug because he stayed that way the entire flight, seemingly refreshed when he woke. Fed and Cessus played the ancient video games on the consoles mounted on the seat in front of him, all seventeen of them. They couldn't plug into them "for security reasons" so they had to use the cheap square plastic controllers that extended on retractable wires from the seat handles, thumbs cramping from the constant, repetitive button mashing. The hours passed, slowly. Cessus tried to sleep and so did Fed, a restless, sweaty, chilled imitation of sleep where his head kept snapping forward off the seatback, jerking him awake again and again. They were served, and ate, some kind of soy-based meat analog in a tomato sauce. Eventually he slipped into a semi-awake zombie state, the stale air crusting the exhaled breath of a hundred other people in sharp spikes on the inside of his nostrils.

They arrived. As they stood to exit Fed realized he was as tall or taller than most of the people on the plane. Why hadn't he noticed it in Mexico City? And so many people were Asian...

Fed crammed a palm of one hand into his eyes and rubbed them until lights shown. He was sleepy, wasn't thinking right. He was in China. Poulpe ushered him off the plane and they followed Cessus a short distance behind. The terminal was a massive crush of people. Fed found himself getting claustrophobic. There were so many bodies, so many people pushing against him, jostling his ribs, brushing his thighs. And everyone looked the same, a huge sea of people spilling everywhere.

They emerged outside, joined a long line waiting in the rain for taxis. The shadows of the city sprawled overhead, lights upon lights upon lights. A sea of lights glimmered out of a seamless bank of buildings, a solid wall ahead of them. Cessus got a cab, made a show of inviting them to join him. Poulpe generously accepted. Nobody watching looked twice. Fed felt lost in Beijing, like the city was swallowing him whole, like a drop of rain hitting the ocean.

The cab drove. Fed fell asleep. Cessus woke him up when they got to the hotel, a huge posh building with a separate

entrance for the cab. When the door opened the smell hit him like a hot wet blanket, the air soiled with the scent of petrochemicals, food, people, old wet dust... And so many people, still more people than at the airport, running at a trot everywhere. And neon glimmering everywhere. Real old fashioned neon. Fed smiled, impulsively. The stuff was rare in the U.S. now that electroluminescents were available, but here you saw it everywhere. "I'm in China" Fed suddenly realized, and he smiled, took a hesitant breath. Disgusting. But new.

He followed Poulpe into the hotel. Sitting in the lobby like a pair of rich tourists were Tonx and Cass, dressed in eveningwear and swirling fancy looking drinks in thick glasses. Cass almost spilled hers as they entered the main doors, started laughing so hard Fed thought she must be pissing herself.

"Looking good there, Fed" said Tonx.

"Yeah fuck all y'all" said Fed, putting his hand on his head before remembering the wax. He was just about to wipe his palm on his pants when Poulpe caught his wrist, raised on eyebrow in stern disappointment. He produced a handkerchief from his breast pocket with a flourish and dropped it into Fed's palm.

"Jesus Christ" muttered Fed.

"I think we done good here, folks" said Cessus. "I'm sticking out like a sore thumb, so I'm going to grab a drink in the bar and see what I can do with the hotel's network. Ya'll enjoy your drinks and let me know when Marcus gets here, yeah?"

"Good thinking" said Tonx. "Poulpe, Fed - care for a seat?"

They sat, Poulpe ordering a warm sake from the young woman who appeared at his elbow as soon as his ass hit the plush chair. She seemed delighted at the request, bowing obsessively as she backed away towards the bar.

"Warm?" asked Fed.

"That is the proper way to drink this brand" said Poulpe. "And from a wooden box. From this you may determine the caliber of the establishment and their perception of you."

"Thanks for the advice" Fed sighed. "Look, are we going to get a room? I'm exhausted."

"In this place?" asked Tonx. "Not a chance. I got some backing money, but it's not enough for us to sleep here. I've already booked a place a little ways away. Once Marcus arrives we can sync up and take off. Until then, get some coffee."

"I don't drink coffee" mumbled Fed. When the woman returned with Poulpe's sake he ordered a coke. As she left he looked over, noticed the sake had come in an open plastic box.

"Guess they don't like you" said Fed. Poulpe smiled serenely and sipped his drink.

"So here's what I got so far" said Tonx. "This guy that Cessus fingered is either playing his boss or us or both. If he's fucking his boss around there's a good chance he's stupid enough to leave the data in the box Cessus found. If he's trying to lure us into going for it so he can find out more there's a chance we can negotiate, maybe split the profits or find some way around him. I think the least likely option is that he's doing it by the books for his bosses to get a hold of us. If that were the case he wouldn't have posted the dummy data like he did. He also wouldn't have bothered to encrypt the message for us to find."

"Unless he was being clever" said Poulpe.

"What do you mean?" asked Tonx.

"Perhaps he is trying to get you to think he was playing against his employer" said Poulpe. He put his sake box down. "You said you had contacts here?"

Tonx shook his head. "No. That was just to get Esco to play along."

"And Esco is..." asked Poulpe.

"Not here, to state the obvious. What are you getting at, Poulpe?" asked Tonx.

"My point is not to question your reasoning. I only mean to emphasize that we cannot be certain what our opponent will do. From your introduction I would guess you were about to suggest approaching the box directly."

Tonx frowned. "What if I was?" he asked.

"I urge caution. Contingencies" said Poulpe.

"Great thinking" said Tonx, leaning forward. He dropped his glass on the counter next to him. "And what the fuck would you suggest?"

Poulpe picked up his sake again, took a slow sip.

"I have the original data set, yes?" he asked.

They waited.

"And for us it is trivial to manufacture minor workable changes in the code, yes?"

Tonx nodded, once.

"So I would suggest you begin a bargaining process. Encourage them to believe you have a similar solution already. They would not want just one if they could have two, you know. Not if they thought you had perhaps done this before, created something else."

"What would they care?" asked Tonx. "They don't even know what the first data set is for."

"So tell them" said Poulpe.

"What?" asked Tonx "What for? What could I tell them the second, make-believe set was for that would make them hand our results over?"

Poulpe tipped back the last of his sake, gently set the box on the small thin plate it had come on.

"Biological weapons" he said.

"You're crazy" said Tonx. "What do I have to gain by that? The government's already on our ass, we've got Disney hunting for us - why would introducing a major threat to their country help?"

"I'm merely suggesting it may give them pause" said Poulpe. "They would certainly not want to destroy the data set they have if they could parley it for something of established value."

"You're crazy" said Tonx, again. "I'm not going to argue with you about this. All that does is up the stakes and make this more dangerous for everybody."

"It is only a contingency" said Poulpe.

"Fine. I'll remember that if I have a gun to my head. In the meanwhile, how about we figure out how to get into that box, and better yet what to do with it when we get there."

"We don't even know what else is on the box" said Fed. "If the guy has half a brain he's not going to keep the rest of the data set there."

"True. I'm not saying we make the grab first thing. We've got to watch the guy for a while first, figure out who he is, what we can do with him. The only catch is we don't know how much time we have."

"Lovely" said Fed, draining the last from his miniature bottle of coke. It was in a glass bottle, he noticed. He marveled at how heavy it was, even empty. Who made bottles out of glass?

"Where the fuck is Marcus?" he asked.

Tonx said nothing.

Chapter #43

Three hours later Marcus still hadn't arrived, and they were running out of new drinks they could order. Eventually Tonx simply stood and walked out, and the rest of them followed. They waited until Cessus appeared a small distance away, seemingly oblivious to them, and started walking.

"Where are we going?" asked Fed. He was exhausted now, stumbling along in a semi-delirious state. The caffeine had failed him, making him jittery and itchy but no longer waking him up at all. All he could think about was getting to a real bed.

"To our hotel" said Tonx. "None of us can think well right now. We'll wait there until we hear from Marcus. He should be able to find us somehow."

"More likely we'll find him" said Cass. Tonx said nothing.

The hotel was a thin cement building squeezed between two tall office buildings, its stained grey front unpainted. The sign overhead had one Chinese character in lit neon. The dim dirty light of dawn began to seep through the forest of stone and metal around them. Fed waited outside with Poulpe while Tonx went in to secure things. A few minutes later Fed got a notice on his comm and they went in, repeated Tonx's name and access number three times to the faceless metal grille where the front desk would have been. He got no response other than a click as the plain whitewashed fire door to his left opened. They went through, walking on threadbare orange-and-brown carpeting. It smelled of mold, of starch and rice. There was no one in the hallway.

They arrived at room 712, and Fed wondered absently if there were really 711 other rooms. He doubted there were more than a few dozen, but when Tonx opened the door and he peered inside he revised his estimate. The entire hotel room was the size of his bathroom at home, three tiny beds so close together Tonx doubted he could get his knees between them. The one window on the far side of the room was framed in electroluminescent panels, white light bright across the glass, the brick wall directly behind washed out in the glare.

"There's a cot under the bed on the right there. I'll take the floor. Cass gets a bed. You all can draw straws on who gets the rest when Marcus shows up" said Tonx. Fed fell back onto one of the beds, almost went straight into sleep before he remembered Cessus and comm'd him a quick message on how to get in. Then sleep hit him, heavy, angry, and hot.

He woke later, didn't know when. He was pushed up against the wall, Cessus's bony hip digging into his side. He shuffled around, getting a dreadlock in the eye for his troubles. The room looked the same as when they'd come in, Poulpe on the middle bed, Cass and Tonx wrapped around each other on the far bed. Marcus wasn't there. The cot was out, empty, filling the last of the space between the wall and the beds. Fed had to tip in on its side so he could get by to search for a bathroom. There wasn't one.

He let himself out, wandered down the hall in search of a place to pee. It was full of identical wooden doors, all numbered. He came back down the hall and peered out into the lobby before spotting a numberless door across from their own. He paused in front of it. Would they have electrified doorknobs here? Should he knock?

The door opened with a soft creak, revealing a miniscule sink and a hole in the tiled floor. A bulb hung overhead, gleaming dimly. It wasn't LED or anything, just plain old electric filament. A hazard, Fed thought. He aimed a thin stream

of piss down the hole, washed his hands in the chill reddish water from the tap, and left.

When he got back into the room Cessus was on his back, arms splayed off both sides of the bed, one leg hanging over its edge. Poulpe had his hands folded over her chest, fully dressed, his face untroubled. Tonx raised his head when Fed came in, eyes bleary.

"There a bathroom out there?" he asked quietly.

"right across the hall" Fed said. "The one without numbers."

He lay down on the cot, the metal frame biting into his shoulders. By the time Tonx came back he knew he wasn't going to sleep anymore.

"Any word from Marcus?" asked Fed. He spoke softly, the room somehow made sacred by the quiet breaths of his friends.

Tonx shook his head, tucked a strand of hair behind his ear.

"No" he said. "I don't know why."

He signed, tried to pace in the space between Fed's cot and the door and succeeded only in turning around twice.

"You get any signal in here?" he asked.

"A little. Regular comm channels. Don't know how the data throughput will be, though" said Fed. "This place seems a little third-world, know what I mean?"

Tonx smiled. "Never thought I'd be in China" he said, quietly. "Thanks for coming with."

Fed looked at the window, at the brick wall beyond.

"What do we do next?"

"I figure you and Cessus go get some gear. The rest of us will scout out our man and his box."

"Then what?"

"That depends on what we find out. I don't know, Fed. We got to get our data, somehow. But I don't know how, don't even know where it is." He sighed, slid to sit on the floor next to Fed's cot.

"Sorry I got you into this."

"Fuck off" said Fed amicably. "Better than dead-ending it at some sucker school, you know? I ought to be thanking you."

Tonx grunted a quiet laugh. "Yeah, guess you're right. What would mom say if she knew her darling boys were slumming it in China, eh?"

"She'd drink" said Fed. He'd meant it as a joke, but neither of them laughed.

"We'll get the data" he said, more to himself than Tonx.

Chapter #44

Cessus woke next, said nothing but shuffled off to the bathroom. A short time later he returned, looking freshly minted in his new clothes.

"Okay-dokay, boys. I figure I'm going to find me some gear. How much cred do we have to work with?"

Tonx tossed him a card, naked cartoon babes stenciled on its front in laser-bright reds and blues. "Use that. Don't know how much is in there, but it should do you. Just try to be discreet, eh?"

Cessus smiled, shook his dreads out.

"Soul of discretion, that's me" he said. "Who comes with?"

"Me" said Fed. He'd pulled on his highwater pants but ignored the suit coat and the vest. "I want a new coat."

"You joking me?" asked Cessus as he led the way out of the room. "That vest was the shit, man."

"Fed" called Cass. She sat up on the bed, her hair a tangled mess, makeup smeared and eyes bleary.

"Yeah?" he asked.

"Hand me my bag" she said.

Fed looked quizzically at Cessus and then Tonx. They stopped, staring back at him expectantly. Suspicious, he shuffled through the pair of backpacks stuck in the crevice between the beds and the cot. There was a gunmetal gray plastic bag tucked between them, and as Fed looked at it Cass called out.

"Yeah, that one. Open it" she said.

He pulled the bag up and found it contained a overlong shoebox-shaped box. It matched the bag, no brand name anywhere on its surface. It was light, but something solid jostled inside it as he picked it up. Everyone watched him as he sat down on the bed and pulled back the lid.

Inside, nestled carefully on shredded paper pellets, was a pair of black carbon fiber Otto Bock C-legs. They had matching ComfortFlex sockets with heat shrink mounting pads and ultra-lightweight enclosed hydraulic knee adjustment units. There was an Alps silicone liner with distal pin attachment, and it already had an adjuster screwed in place for his older mounting pin. The feet were LuXon Max, a split-heel design that had only come out earlier that year. They looked like jet engines designed for running, like a racing bicycle you'd wear on your feet.

"You don't have to keep them if you don't want them" Cass said. "But they've got built-in neural nets for load-balancing and running adjustments."

"I got a development kit from a friend of mine" said Tonx. "Just in case you want to, you know, hack them or something."

He smiled, an awkward grin. Fed stared at his brother, at Cass, looked back to see Cessus beaming.

"Your old legs made this funny squeaking noise all the time" said Cass. "And besides, after the beach they were starting to smell."

Fed smiled then, and laughed, and got suddenly teary eyed. He pulled off his old legs and used the tiny packet of sanitizing gel to wipe down his stumps before he put the C-legs on. He paused after he pulled them in place. They were... comfortable. They felt like a tailored jacket, the way he'd imagined a good pair of shoes would feel. The distal pin adjuster socketed easily, and the Alps liner warmed to his body heat and was unnoticeable almost as soon as he got them in place. He eased himself upright and folded his pants legs up around the sockets. They didn't look like feet, he thought, and realized suddenly that he didn't care.

He stood up, almost fell forward over the cot.

"Whoa there captain" said Cessus, his hand out to steady him.

"These things have bounce" said Fed, surprised.

"It'll give you something to tweak" said Tonx.

Fed made his way to the doorway, his new legs steadying as he got used to their responsiveness. They were so much lighter and more comfortable than his old legs it was almost unbelievable. He couldn't believe how much weight he'd been carrying around, and for so long. When he got to the hallway he tried jumping and almost hit his head on the low ceiling.

"Shit!" he chirped.

"Careful, dude" said Cessus. "Those things are designed for sports, you know - you're going to be able to run and jump more than a norm in no time."

"Those are the same model they're using in the Paralympics" Cass said. "You use them for a while and they'll collect enough data to dynamically change resistance based on your behavior."

She smiled shyly. "They've also got optional gyroscopic plugin units, and galvanic-skin response mount-in adaptors to expand your data range, but I didn't know if you'd want them."

Fed didn't say anything, suddenly turned and ran down the hall. He hadn't tried running in years, not counting the shuffle sprinting he'd done on their way out of Cessus's place, and the feel of the air on his face made his heart race. He spun into a lunge at the end of the hall, the knee adjustments and dynamic ankle flexing beyond the range a flesh-and-bone foot could ever reach. He turned on a dime and bounced back into the room, laughing and heaving for breath.

Everyone smiled and Tonx got up to give Fed a big hug. Cessus ruffled his hair and slapped him on the back, and Cass just smiled quietly, her hands in her lap.

"I know you kept saying you didn't want them, but the other ones were giving you so much trouble, and"

"Thanks" Fed interrupted. "Seriously, Cass. Thanks. A lot."

She smiled, and glanced at Tonx.

"Okay" he said. "Now get the fuck out of here. I want you to get completely comfortable on those new legs before we do our run."

"Yes sir" said Fed. He bent to roll his pants down all the way over his new legs, decided against it. He bounced out of the hotel, Cessus following behind.

Cessus downloaded a map from the hotel LAN on their way through the hall, googled a few dozen electronics stores and found a listing for a street market that "specialized in esoteric Asia-only digital devices."

"No idea what that means, but it might be a good place to find something worthwhile" he said. "It'll be fun, anyway."

"Let's go there first, I'm freezing" said Fed. He'd regretted his decision to leave the jacket behind as soon as they'd walked out the front door. The air was cold and wet, a dirty smell like old dogs clinging to his shirt. But he still didn't care.

"Okay-dokay" Cessus said again, taking a deep breath. "Love that smell, man."

"You like that stink?" asked Fed.

"I like the smell of adventure. Never been to China myself. And you?"

Fed shook his head, smiling. They walked.

It turned out they were almost a dozen blocks from the market. It passed quickly, one nearly empty street filled with garbage bags giving way to a covered set of identical fashion shops the size of closets. The closets turned to restaurants turned to chicken-sellers, heads and feet waving gently in the air. Starving dogs ran from equally starving children, and everywhere they went they saw the tops of heads covered in shaggy straight black hair. Fed was taller than everyone. It was a bizarre feeling. As they pushed their way through a crowd of little old ladies holding woven-reed baskets he felt the power of tiny elbows in his crotch and hips. Cessus was pinned against the opposite side of the alley from him, pulling himself against the wall as the crowd passed, and their eyes met. Fed made a face and Cessus laughed, causing the ladies to titter and murmur behind their hands.

Eventually they reached the market, an endless sea of canvas overhangs parted by thin walkways, tables and piles of junk separating them all. Fed had never seen so many different kinds of people look so similar in so cramped a space. They entered the market and Fed pulled down his goggles, amazed. They passed pottery, tiny dogs in cages, and a man with a monkey almost as large as he was. Cessus soon zoomed in on the electronics part of the market and waved at him to follow, parting the sea of people who stepped nimbly out of the way so they could stare at him pass. They'd just gone by a huge tray of one-inch compartments, each holding a different color-coded resistor, when Fed saw an ancient motorcycle jacket hanging in a stall over a thick Turkish rug. As they approached he saw the stall had all manner of American clothing, from ancient to new, but all of it retro. The clashing combination of genuine classic American items like the jacket and the modern-retro items like the fiber-optic bellbottoms were an ugly fashion train wreck in Fed's mind, but he liked the jacket. It was real, and old.

"Don't stare, my friend" said Cessus, bending past Fed to express a sudden critical interest in a bronze teapot the size of his fist. "You stare, you lose your bargaining advantage."

"I don't want to bargain, I want to buy it" Fed said.

Cessus straightened and looked at Fed in disgust.

Twenty minutes later Fed walked out of the booth in his new jacket, sans his pressed shirt. They'd traded it in after Cessus had somehow convinced the proprietor that it was the same model as worn by Johnny Rotten during a U.S. tour. The entire transaction had taken place in a kind of pidgin English, but the careful interplay of glances, shuffled feet, heavy sighs and the beginning of steps out of the stall was obviously the important part. The words were just window dressing. Cessus seemed pleased with his deal, although he confessed to Fed after they'd left that he was sure they'd been taken.

Fed didn't care. He liked the jacket. It was too short in the arms, but both he and Cessus ignored the fact, and it looked good with his goggles hanging around his neck. And the old white tee they'd gotten in the bargain was clean, which was a bonus.

"Matches your hair" said Cessus, knocking his skull gently. It was true; the gel had hardened overnight into a carefully manicured shell, comb-lines like record grooves across his skull.

They entered the center of electronics area and Fed was immediately lost. He'd never seen so many LEDs or wires or tiny miniaturized components in one place. It was geek heaven, and despite not knowing much about hardware he was instantly entranced. Cessus bought a wooden picnic basket first thing and began haggling components into it like a pro. One of their first big finds was a tall stack of disposable cameras. The proprietor mimed taking a picture and stabbed the air with his middle finger, and in the end they had to make him write it down and use their comm's character recognition to find out the cameras were all equipped with only one shot. As soon as Cessus read that he was on the guy like a shark on bait, and they soon had a couple dozen of them wrapped in monofilament plastic in the bottom of their basket.

"What a deal" snickered Cessus as they strolled on. "Glad we made him write it down, the little demon. Thought he'd sucker the foreigners, did he?"

"What are you going to do with them?" asked Fed.

"The capacitors in these things are enormous. A few wires, a little tape, and you got yourself a crazy powerful stun-gun that looks like a camera" he said. "Neat trick I learned as a kid. You'll love it. Here, hold this."

He made Fed hold a large glass jar while he sorted tiny capacitors into it.

Almost an hour later the basket was nearly unliftable, and Cessus was arguing with a tiny wizened woman over an equally tiny toolset.

"These sockets aren't worth shit" Cessus insisted, miming trying to turn a screw. The woman smiled and demonstrated how she couldn't tear them apart using both hands.

Fed was getting tired of shopping. As he shifted the basket he turned to see a mirror image of himself stop suddenly at the end of the aisle. There was a group of five young men, all roughly his age, each clad in tight highwater pants and patent-leather shoes, each wearing an identical leather motorcycle jacket over a white tee shirt. Fed blinked, noticed they were staring back at him.

His head swam. Their black hair was all waxed down in careful curves, and as he looked their shock vanished and they all stood straight, looking suddenly casual. Fed stepped closer to Cessus, trying to get his attention as the boys bore down on them.

Cessus waved Fed off and made a show of tossing the set back on a pile of plastic slippers. Fed turned to find the lead boy standing directly in front of him, staring at his hair.

The boy nodded.

Fed inhaled, nodded back.

The boys broke into smiles and bobbed their heads enthusiastically at each other. Fed noticed that only the lead boy had a real leather jacket. The rest were made of pleather, fakes, with wear-marks pressed into the plastic. They began to yammer at him in Chinese, reaching out to finger his jacket, stroke his pants where the wool pulled tight against his thighs, poke the swivel joint in his new ankles. Fed stumbled back a little, bumping into Cessus.

"Hey hey" Cessus yelled, turning. If he noticed the boys he didn't show it, and pulled Fed up only to push him back into the aisle. The woman called back to him and he rolled his eyes, returned to demand a better price.

The lead boy pointed at the bulge in Fed's pocket where his chord rested, mimed keying in a number. He repeated something, and suddenly the boys started pulling things from their pocket. One produced what looked like a pocket calculator, but with letters on it. Fed keyed in one of his comm numbers, not sure if it would route right through the Chinese proxies. It did, and in a moment the lead boy stood back, chewing his gum enthusiastically as Fed's comm buzzed. He keyed it on and a hiss of static rushed at him. The boy in front of him spoke, and half a second later a woman's voice came from his comm in a charming British accent;

"Glad to make your acquaintance. Are you American?"

Fed said yes, and the lead boy turned and announced something to the group. They all nodded again, heads bobbing madly.

"Are you here on vacation?" the boy spoke with the woman's voice again.

"Sort of" said Fed, then laughed as the boy cocked his head, confused.

"Yes" he said. More head bobbing.

"Are there many people with this outfit in America?" the voice asked.

Fed froze for a moment, panicked.

"No" he said, deciding to go with the truth. The boy stared back at him, waiting.

"It's special" he said. This met with mad applause and much bowing as the lead boy repeated it to the others.

"Do you like Pokey?" the voice asked.

"What in holy hell is going on?" asked Cessus, one hand holding the tiny toolset wrapped neatly in plastic film.

"What's Pokey?" Fed asked.

Cessus shrugged. The boys gestured ahead of themselves in invitation. "Let's find out" he said.

Chapter #45

Several hours later Fed found himself dancing on an elevated square platform done in translucent plastic panels. Each panel flashed different colors and patterns in tune to frantic remixed American classics. A sticky-sweet pop version of Route 66 was rumbling off the platform at 100 beats per minute. With his new legs he held out like a champ, but he was no match for the local competition. The song ended and he laughingly dismounted. He'd scored 437,002 points against the other guy's 12,879,982. They both shrugged on their matching jackets and bowed, smiling. The lead boy, the other guy with a real leather jacket, got up onto the platform and the group hushed. He was squared off against a girl dressed in lacy black Victorian clothing, her face painted white and her hair a shiny violet. The music started and their skinny arms began to flail and weave in unison as their feet flew beneath them, music throbbing.

Cessus had found a 3D version of an ancient classic, Pac Man, and was bobbing along he rode the big inflated yellow ball mounted at its base. The arcade was in one corner of a giant warehouse that looked like Mardi Gras for the pop-culture obsessed. The giant sign over the door had said "Pee-Pee", which Cessus insisted was a Chinese word. That didn't make any sense to Fed, and neither did the shops or crowds inside it. Everyone was Fed's age or younger, from the storekeepers to the security guards. If they really were security guards. For all Fed could tell they were just more costumes. Music spilled from every door, window, or backpack, a giant clash of cross-cultures and colors.

The group they had fallen in with called themselves "Cassicoos." ('Classicals' interpreted Cessus) and they pushed through the throng with the authority of ownership. Eventually they dined in a shop that sold tiny yoghurt-dipped cookie sticks, exclusively. Fed stuck with mint chocolate, but Cessus tried the curry and something called Kim Chee, and smilingly declared that they were both disgusting. Afterwards they hit the arcade, watching as their guy made a jumping spin at the finale of the song and scored a 15-point lead over the painfully cute girl dancing against him. The machine flashed and shook, and the couple bowed politely to each other, thin chests heaving. They jumped off the platform, but before the girl could join her group of black-clad sisters the boy ran over to them. He raised his comm towards her in silent inquiry, shoulders back and smile wide. Identical plain white fans flew out as the girls all hid behind them, giggling, but the girl nodded and bowed and blushed, and eventually pulled a comm shaped like a tiny green penguin out of her thin beaded purse. She leaned demurely over and gently touched its head to his comm. Then she skipped back and hid behind her fan, surrounded by her companions as they fled the scene. Their guy swaggered back to the rest of them, pulling on his leather jacket with a flourish, brandishing his comm. PAN-activated number exchange, Fed thought. He'd heard of it, but wasn't it kid stuff? Having to touch comms to exchange numbers seemed painfully inconvenient until he realized how crowded it was here. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea, after all. Besides, he had to admit it was more romantic than doing it wirelessly.

Cessus returned from the Pac-Man game, dreads bouncing as he towered over everybody. "Hey Feed, we probably ought to hit it. You think these boys have a suggestion on where to go for some good 'net connectivity?"

It turned out that the question was a tough one, causing a ruckus among the Cassicoos as they argued over where to go next. Eventually the lead boy won out and gestured for them to follow him. He led them towards the back of the warehouse and out a metal door between two stores selling plush animal costumes. They emerged in a dark alley, the boys surrounding them and ushering them quickly out and onto a main street. Throngs of traffic crept past, businessmen in suits sliding past hip-to-hip as they pushed through the crowd. They climbed over a small fence dividing two directions of foot traffic and

squeezed through a glass-walled arcade, plain-looking military-style clothing on dummies standing antiseptic under bright LED spots. Young women with heavily branded shopping bags laughed and stared as they went by, not glancing twice at their accompanying group of identical Cassicoos. They emerged in a courtyard and one boy thumbed a code into a number pad on the far doorway, pulling them into a hallway. They filed down a flight of stairs, the railway rattling, and came out into an identical hallway. As they were emerging from the stairs the lead boy pulled up short, and an angry adult voice filtered up past him. Fed peered around the doorway to see a large man in matching brown shirt and pants, hands on his hips uttering clipped sentences at the lead boy. He waved his hands back towards the stairway and the boys raised a clamor of protesting voices.

The guy immediately in front of Fed turned suddenly, slipping by and heading back up the stairway. A moment after he'd disappeared a loud buzzing noise erupted from the open doorway beside the man in front of them. He stared into the room and yelled at them one last time as he went inside. The boys grabbed Fed and Cessus and they tore down the hallway and out a door at its end.

They came out onto a rooftop platform, basketball courts and tennis nets traced onto its stippled tar surface in neon paints. The boys flew across the rooftop in single file, descending a rickety metal spiral staircase bolted to the side of the building and down into a long alley. Cement walls raised on all sides. They paused and caught their breath. There were tennis balls littering the alley, rolled up along its edge and tangled in heaps of rain-stained posters. Their guides stood, brushing invisible dust from their jackets.

"Otaku" said the lead boy, pointing at the dead-end wall at the butt of the alley. It was plain cement, fused in vertical panels eight feet by five.

"Otaku" he said again, miming typing on a keyboard. They walked to the wall and stood nervously in front of it. The lead boy cleared his throat and announced something Fed couldn't understand. Nothing happened. He said whatever it was again, and one boy laughed. A few more minutes passed and the remaining boys turned away, defeated. Mockery erupted at the lead boy, who threw down his hands in defeat and spat towards the wall.

As they turned they saw Cessus leaning back, staring up towards the lip of the building opposite, lenses out and lights flashing. His hands hung down, fingers padding gently against the cement supporting him. A loose smile traced his lips.

"Cessus?" asked Fed.

"Don't bother me" he mumbled. "Fucking tight shit, man."

The remaining boys stood around awkwardly, the situation suddenly out of their control. Their leader was starting to punch in a call to Fed when a door they somehow hadn't seen opened in the wall opposite Cessus. A young man stepped out of the shadow, older than Fed but younger than Cessus, long straight black hair bound loosely behind his neck. He held up a hand towards Cessus.

"Stop, please. You are hurting our firewall" he said.

"That's because your port-knocking was weak. Your ACKs turned me onto the sequence and you followed it with a straight password challenge" said Cessus.

"Yes, but now you are dictionary attacking our password challenge with many many dictionaries. Routing attacks from outside is blocking our traffic" he said.

"You should have an IP blocking mechanism" said Cessus.

"We have such a mechanism, but your floods are dynamic, and anticipated it" the man said.

Cessus nodded, and his fingers danced a rhythm on the wall behind him. The man paused, listening to something they could not hear.

"Thank you" he said. "Welcome to Otaku. Please come in."

As they entered the building they realized the walls were translucent from the inside. The alley was visible as a kind of fuzzy shadow, like looking through a shower door.

"Fiber-Optic mixed as a binding agent into the cement. One-way film laid on the inside" said the man with the long hair as he closed the door behind them. A sophisticated-looking set of shiny metal tubes suspended the door, a six-inch slab of the same kind of cement, and it slid closed smoothly under his hand.

"I am Xing" he said, bowing slightly to each of them. Fed touched the wall, running his finger over its surface. It had been cast in place with some sort of wooden board. The swirls and whorls were etched in its surface, nearly invisible in its translucence.

Cessus whistled as he turned, ducking to avoid the metal framework suspended from the low ceiling. The room was long, maybe fifty feet by thirty, and was filled with row upon row of angular wooden chairs. Each chair contained a Chinese boy, each face obscured by some kind of plain white mask. The masks terminated in a thick plug, the plug tracing into a cable that ran upwards and disappeared into a neatly bound series of master wiring on the gridded framework overhead. Xing gestured towards the back of the room and they followed, passing by a long row of boys on exercise bikes facing the wall. Each of these boys had a wide blue plastic yoke taped over their shoulders and bound into their masks' plug. The bikes were all wired, the wiring leading up and away via the overhead frame. Before Fed could see more they had passed into a hallway made of the same translucent cement.

"Otaku is Japanese word. Means someone who is obsessed with something, originally comic books or cartoon shows" said Xing. "Here, now, it means someone like us. We believe the computer is ultimate Otaku opportunity. Is self empowerment through interest."

He spread his hands, gestured towards the room they could see through the cement wall before them.

"We arrive in one location, everyone brings their own mask. Power via ethernet, so only one wire per person. Bikes make enough electricity so no noticeable new load is seen. Most processing is done off site. Everyone finds way to pass traffic. If police come, everyone take mask, there is nothing but ethernet cable to find. We come and go to new places, but this is oldest place. This is original Otaku."

"Why would the police come?" asked Fed.

Xing smiled, nodded. The Cassicoos all nodded back.

"We are hackers here" Xing said. "We are making software that is free, for everyone to use. It is not made with business license from government. This threatens their economic model. Not good closed-market capitalism."

"That's not illegal" scoffed Fed.

"Yes yes" agreed Xing, smiling. "Very illegal."

The top of the stair opened into a wide-open space, obviously once an office. Young men stood in groups around ancient dusty chalkboards, wires snaking over the floors and into assorted devices on the folding tables throughout the room. Some were clean-cut, like Xing, but many sported wiry beards and food-stained tee shirts, some with shorts and sandals. As they emerged the room grew silent and all eyes turned towards them.

"Welcome to Otaku" said Xing again. "I understand you need fat pipe?"

Cessus coughed and looked at Fed. "We do?" he asked.

"Fat pipe is serious problem in China" said Xing. "Right now is even bigger problem. Big virus has affected most systems. Ours is protected, but rest of the network is very hurry."

Fed felt his face flush.

"You were very clever with our doorway. Figured out we are with Faraday over most of building, but have a window there" Xing pointed to a large plate-glass window. The alley beyond was slightly hazy, and it took Fed a moment to remember the large advertisement for Pocky stretched over the wall in the alley outside. It must have been perforated with micro-holes, to allow them to see out from inside.

"Maybe you can help us with connection through traffic problem to outside world?" he asked. "Then you can get fat pipe."

Cessus made a soft strangling noise.

"Can I make a comm call?" asked Fed, his voice oddly pitched.

Chapter #46

Tonx hadn't been able to offer them much advice. He said they'd traced the location of the box, but it was in a massive high-rise so they were having trouble finding which room.

"Look in the directory" Fed had said.

"It's a hundred story building" Tonx had said before hanging up "and we don't have a name."

Cessus had plugged into Xing's network after giving them a small show of his sliding glasses. They did not seem very impressed until he plugged what he was seeing into a box the size of a loaf of bread that projected its image against a far wall. It's resolution was fantastic, easily as good as what Fed saw in his goggles less than a half-inch away from his eyes.

"What is that?" he'd gaped.

"Multi-laser projection system. New from Korea, not yet sold in U.S." Xing had said.

Cessus's first move had been to scan their system's security, which they seemed to take as a given. When he started propping columns of data flows as part of his background image they had begun to murmur, and when he'd started plucking bits of data out of all of them at once they'd started getting upset. One man in particular, a round, bearded guy with a bare head and coke shirt had started yelling and gesturing at Cessus until Xing had quietly said a few words to him. That had shut him up, but everyone was clearly equally excited.

"How are you doing this?" asked Xing.

Cessus had paused the feeds and pulled up a drawing screen before launching into his grand theory of unified brainpower thing. Fed had been sure they were fucked until he noticed that many of the Otaku were taking notes, completely silent. Twenty minutes into it Cessus had covered the basics of what he'd told Fed, and when he shut down the drawing screen Xing had asked him to drop it into a publicly accessible share folder. Several of the guys asked him for the software he'd used to train Fed, and as soon as he'd dumped that in the share too a bunch of them disappeared to find the biometric devices necessary to use it.

"You are training in this method?" Xing asked Fed.

"Yeah, but it only ever helped with some genetic programming shit" Fed said. Xing looked at him a moment and Fed's heart flew to his throat.

"Then he is your sensei. You are very lucky" Xing said. "I am follower of Confucius. Choose best practices for all things. But your method looks very promising."

He bowed to Fed, who returned the bow awkwardly.

"So what's the problem with your network here?" Cessus asked. Xing showed them. Cessus made a show of looking around, but both he and Fed knew where to go; they'd been seeing this traffic in their sleep for a while now. Cessus quickly zeroed in on the code base that was causing the redistribution. It was Fed's code, all right, chugging away exactly as he'd designed it to. They were able to watch it from the inside, this time, given free reign to the Chinese side of the network through Xing's proxies. Fed watched sample sets stream through his gogs, feeds Cessus diverted to him as they roamed the networks.

"They fed us a bogus set. It's still running" he muttered to himself.

"Looks like somebody dropped something into the updates that propagated" Cessus said. Several people nodded, silent. "But what's interesting is that the government caught on. See, here - see how many of the machines are dumping towards the same three places? If you look at the router logs from these traffic aggregators they suddenly start going through these government machines. Same looking traffic, but now proxied through a single cluster."

Xing smiled.

"I'd say there was a virus attack and your government thought it'd be handy to use the virus to do some business of their own" said Cessus. He sat back and folded his arms, glanced at Fed.

Xing raised his hand in a slight gesture and the remaining men in the room bowed and left, smoothly and quickly disappearing down the stair.

"What does this virus do?" he asked.

"I don't know" said Cessus. "Just lucky in spotting it, you know?"

"Did you write it?" asked Xing, looking directly at Cessus.

There was a silence. Cessus shook his head.

Xing smiled again and turned towards Fed.

"You are very lucky" he said. "Your method is very promising indeed. Now, please. Explain."

Chapter #47

Tonx swore and slammed his fist against the tall plastic pedestal in front of them. They were at the base of the third of eight monolithic buildings, each blotting out the sky in a sheet before them. They'd had absolutely no luck in tracing any sort of information about where the box might be beyond knowing it fed into the data center for these eight buildings. Scanning the directory was useless, he knew, and access to the data center was limited to monthly maintenance visits - the next of which was three weeks from now.

"This is hopeless" he said, swearing again.

"Chill" said Cass, her voice level. "At least we're doing something. Besides, it sounds like Feed's got a good lead."

"The boy's going to get us fucked, playing with haxors in some underground like that. That shit's more illegal than heroin around here."

"Feed's got a good head" she said.

"I know" said Tonx. "It's just so fucking hopeless. We've got to find that box, get our code out from under the nose of some bigwig IT official, and then market it. You know I haven't even figured out a way to Proof of Concept it yet?"

"Don't worry" Cass said, turning her back to lean against the pedestal.

"Listen, why don't we go back by the data center again? Maybe I can sweet-talk one of their suits into taking me to lunch..."

"No" said Tonx. "It's bad enough that I've dragged you here to act as translator, I don't want you sweet-talking dangerous corp-boys."

"Did it ever occur to you I might have wanted to come here?" asked Cass, her voice suddenly cold. "I'm from here, you know."

"Sweets" said Tonx. "Sorry. I'm just worried about you, that's all. Of course I figured you'd want to come. But" he ran his hand through his hair, tucked away some errant strands. "I just don't want anything to happen to you, you know?"

Cass smiled. "Don't worry. I can take care of myself."

Tonx's comm rang. They'd gotten him a new one at the airport, used the IDs Cessus had gotten for them to clear it. He'd kept the yellow Hello Kitty glasses, though. Something about them appealed to him, some sort of retro-throwback irony thing.

Tonx yelped as he saw it was Marcus, mashed the channel open.

"Marcus" he said, "where the fuck are you?"

Cass couldn't hear what Tonx did, but she could see Tonx's face and the sudden color that blotched it. He almost threw his comm across the foyer, changed his mind and punched the plastic pedestal again with his free hand.

"You're what?" he hissed. "With who? No, I don't give a shit about how many of them there were. We've been running

around like fucking crazy wondering where you were."

Tonx was silent for a moment.

"Yeah" he said. "Yeah" he said again, more quietly. "Okay, that's true, but..."

He ground his teeth together, and Cass grimaced.

"Actually, yes. That would work perfectly." He turned and stared at Cass. "Marcus?"

The mod fighter said something on the other end of the line. Tonx smiled, baring his teeth. "You're still in big trouble. I'll call you back." He hung up.

"What?" asked Cass.

"Motherfucker's spent the last 24 with a group of 'young lady admirers' who have a fan club here. They picked him up at the airport after his flight was delayed. He says he couldn't get to a comm unattended until now."

Cass blinked, then smiled, then laughed a deep, belly shaking guffaw that doubled her over holding her sides.

"It's not funny" insisted Tonx, although now he, too, was smiling. "Asshole's got us an ace in the hole, though."

He leaned over and shoved at her playfully.

"Stop laughing, I've got to make a phone call."

Chapter #48

Xing had understood the logistics alarmingly quickly, even for someone familiar with the network from the inside. They hadn't told him why they were crunching the data, but the choices for what would require that kind of processing power were relatively small. It was either biotech or a big chunk of cryptography, and there was already a whole canon for applying quantum computing to crypto.

"We appreciate your not prying too deeply about this" Cessus said for the third time. "We can't tell you what we're doing until we're done."

"I understand" said Xing. "However, we are still suffering from very hurry network. Government is using your code, now. This is not good for you, no?"

"No. They've got data we need. Or they will, once this virus finishes its work" said Fed.

"So you have something you need. We also have need" said Xing. "We have no free access to rest of world. This closed-market capitalism prevents free exchange. Chinese hackers live in vacuum, no access to new ideas. We are very good talent here" he spread his arms to encompass the office, "but cannot progress. Means no opportunity for work outside of China. Not good for individuals or for groups."

"I sympathize, but I don't know what we can do about it" said Cessus. "We think we know where our data is being kept, but I don't know how that will help you."

"I have told you. We need connection outside of government proxies. You are very good hacker, know networks very well. Maybe you can set up spoof machines on outside..." Xing let his words trail off, hands folding gently in front of him.

Fed frowned. Xing seemed like a nice guy, but having a few international machines cracked so they could connect to them would hardly circumvent the government proxies for long.

"How does that help you long-term?" he asked.

"They want a set of machines, probably government boxes" interrupted Cessus. "If they get a nice range of them cracked from the outside they can backdoor more as they need them. It'd be impossible to do from inside China, and just incredibly difficult from outside."

Xing smiled.

"It's also very dangerous; the U.S. government frowns on having its boxen ownzored by international competition."

"Can you do that?" asked Fed.

"Sure. It'd be really hard, and really risky - what with being a violation of international law - but possible" said Cessus. He scratched the back of his head, tossed a handful of dreads over his shoulder.

"Besides, it sounds like fun. Okay, Xing. You got a deal. You help us get our data back, and we'll crack you a route out of China."

"Excellent" said Xing. He straightened, adjusted his shirt. "I think we can help each other very well. Now, your missing data is stored on publicly-accessible box, yes?"

"It's on somebody's private box in an apartment on the other side of town. The only folks who have accessed it are government officials" said Cessus.

Fed's comm rang. "Excuse me" he said, stepping to the back of the room.

"What is the address of the box?" Xing asked Cessus.

"I don't know, it's NAT'd all to hell and back. It's in a huge set of apartment buildings, 100 stories each" said Cessus.

Xing smiled. "Very good. Is the box using port re-routing for its access? Port 1019 for SSH?"

Cessus looked down at the smaller man for a long moment, his face blank. Then his fingers fluttered, calling up data, and he nodded.

"Yes, that's right."

"Very good, very good" Xing said. "You are looking to get data from Harry Chow. He is China's lead IT Security Officer. He is big problem for us. It would be very happy for us to assrape him."

Cessus blinked. "Assrape?"

"You say this in English, yes? Means make unpleasant?" asked Xing.

"Um, yes" said Cessus.

Fed ran back to them, falling on a small plastic chair as he came. He jumped from the floor; "They found Marcus" he said, breathless.

"Where is he?" asked Cessus.

Fed filled him in, much to Cessus's amusement. Xing looked on, confused.

"Tonx says we should use Marcus as a distraction somehow, make some kind of media event. Apparently Marcus has gotten a lot of popularity over here since his commercial."

Cessus sucked on his lower lip for a moment before turning to Xing.

"You know which apartment this Harry Chow lives in?" he asked.

"Yes, of course" Xing said. "We even have sympathizer live on same floor. But security very tight. No way to get in without being noticed, and building have very many guards."

Cessus smiled. "You ever hear of 'The Shok-a-ru'?" he asked.

"Shock-a-roo?" asked Fed.

"The Shark" said Xing, pronouncing the word crisply. "Yes. We know of him. He is Pokari Sweat salesperson, yes? Very popular with Gothic Lolitas now. They are girls wear all black dress. He is very big mod fighter, yes?"

"Right" smiled Cessus sweetly. "He's my brother, and he's just been discovered by your local fan club."

The smile came on very slowly to Xing's face, and took a long time to leave.

Chapter #49

The rain has washed the air clean during the night and the next day dawned bright and clear. Fed woke around 4am, having slept soundly thanks to the cold meds Tonx had ordered for everyone from the hotel vending machine. He showered in the tiny stall across from their room, the water turning suddenly cold just as he'd gotten the little plastic package of shampoo open. He emerged soon after, dressed in a one-piece white jumper made of Tyvec. The spun plastic fibers made for a bizarrely thin and warm outfit, and he wondered again why he'd spent his life in jeans and tee shirts. He met Cessus coming out of the room, suit stretched taut against his skinny chest, gonads captured in a neat little bubble.

"This ain't gonna happen" he wheezed. "I can walk if I bend over, but that's it. This shit hurts, dude."

Fed laughed. "I like the hat" he said. Cessus had a surgeons' cap on, his dreads stuffed into it like an oversized shower-cap. Cessus grimaced and tried to tug the suit into a configuration that made more room.

"Seriously" he said. "No way I can work like this. And besides, security will never believe we're there for an audit if I look like a clown."

"Don't worry about it" said Fed. "Just act like you don't like it any more than anybody else does."

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked Cessus.

"I mean you're fucking ugly like that, dude" laughed Fed. They went back into the room. Poulpe was standing in front of the tiny mirror, adjusting his carefully folded tie. He ignored them completely as he made his preparations, checking his new tape recorder and using tissues from a small plastic package to polish the tiny scuff marks off his shoes.

"You ready to roll?" asked Fed.

"Yes, Feed" said Poulpe. "Do I look like a reporter?"

"Sure" said Fed. "As much as anybody does, I guess. You just have to be the spotter, you know? Don't kill anyone and they'll just stare at you like they do every other foreigner."

Poulpe smiled with thin lips and adjusted his hair again. He'd developed dark circles under his eyes ever since they'd landed in China, and Fed was suspicious that he was using makeup to cover them.

"It is good to be a foreigner sometimes, Feed. You are reminded how much control you have over how others see you" he said.

"Or not" said Cessus from the bed. He'd unzipped the top part of the tyvec suit and tied the arms around his waist before lying down. "Sometimes people see you how they want to, you know?"

"That is not the point" said Poulpe, turning. "Why would you want to focus on what you cannot do? Is it not better to take control over what you can?"

Cessus just shrugged. "Can't control everything" he said.

"This is true. I must go, to be in place ahead of time. Do not look for me" said Poulpe.

"I hope we don't hear from you" said Fed. Poulpe turned on him, his eyes narrowing, and he raised his hands in defense. "I mean it'd be better not to hear from you during the run, right? Because that'd mean there weren't any problems,

right?"

"Oh" said Poulpe. "Yes, you are right."

He examined his tie in the mirror again.

"My apologies. I am not used to this sort of work. I am nervous."

He turned and left. The room was silent for a long while, the old air conditioner rattling in the background.

"That there is one weird motherfucker" said Cessus eventually. "I don't like him one bit."

"Me neither" said Fed. The room was quiet again.

"Okay" sighed Cessus. "Might as well get going. But listen, I'm going to wear my suit like this, okay? Don't give me any shit about it, we'll be all right."

"You worried your wang is going to get tangled up?" joked Fed.

"My 'wang'?" said Cessus unbelievably. "Are you calling my penis a 'wang'?"

"Hey, you're the one with the split dick" said Fed.

Cessus shrugged again. "The ladies like it. Don't be dissing the mods, man."

"It's your urethra, dude" said Fed, checking his comm again to make sure he had the route ready. He pulled a dull green backpack over his shoulders, the wadded up clothing inside making for a soft load. Cessus would carry most of the actual equipment. With his goggles on Fed was pretty sure he could pass for a Chinese serviceman, but what did he know? They all looked the same to him.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Ready steady" said Cessus. They marched out of the room, the lock sliding shut automatically behind them. They took a right outside the hotel, following Fed's map. They walked three blocks and caught a taxi waiting for them there. The driver eyed them impassively through the polyplast window, following the directions Fed's comm sent his GPS. They crawled through traffic, fumes turning the middle distance into a waving haze. Fed pulled his goggles off in the heat of the taxi, knees pressed up against the back of the driver's seat. Cessus sat next to him, his head slumped against the window. They stopped at a light and Fed saw a tiny dog look out of a wooden basket an old woman had over her arm and realized he didn't know if it was a pet or lunch. He let his head slip back against the rear window and stared at the roof of the car.

Eventually they lurched off the main road and down a side street, children in matching blue and grey uniforms running by the car, their laughter muted through the glass. The taxi driver stopped and Cessus paid with cash; Tonx had gotten a bunch from somewhere and wanted them to use it on the run where possible for anonymity reasons. Fed watched the transaction with envy. He'd never really handled paper money before.

They got out and let their GPS orient itself before setting off. They went down a long road behind the school the kids had come from, the ground-floor windows small and barred. They came by a tree-lined street hedged by shrubs and followed it. A block later they found that the shrubs contained a park, and just outside the park entrance was the junction box they were looking for. Cessus unslung his bag and set it gently on the ground before comm'ing Xing.

"Hey, is Billy there?" he asked.

"I am very sorry. You have a wrong number" said Xing.

Cessus hung up. "We're good to go" he said to Fed.

They'd spent most of the night before going over schematics and working through the process in their heads. Xing had gotten them the equipment, but late, and they'd had to do most of it virtual.

Fed lifted the brown-paper wrapped pieces out of Cessus's bag and was surprised again at how light they were. He set them neatly to one side of the service box while Cessus made a show of pulling out the right key from a big ring of them in his pocket. He bent over, Fed standing up by his side, and squirted a tiny aerosol can into the keyhole through a thin brown nozzle. Then he hurriedly shoved the key inside, wringing his hand around as though he were trying to shift it. He turned to Fed and blew out his cheeks, eyebrows raised. Fed gave him an empty smile, his mind elsewhere, going over the procedure.

Cessus grasped the key and twisted. The door opened smoothly and Fed could see him exhale. He shuffled to one side and pulled a larger aerosol can out of the bag. He went to work cleaning the expanding polymer out of the lock. Fed stepped forward and pulled on a pair of latex gloves as he examined the locker's contents.

Five minutes later he had a neat line of sixteen screws lined up along the edge of the locker's top. Cessus stood up, key in hand, a wad of paper towels tucked into a small plastic sack.

"We ready?" he asked.

"Ready" said Fed. He reached out and grasped the thick, L-shaped tube that relayed the fiber optic signals from the eight huge buildings hidden by the building behind them. Cessus comm'd Xing again.

"Billy" he said. "Billy, man I think we got a problem here."

"There is no Billy here" said Xing. "You called earlier."

"Sorry" said Cessus, and hung up. He nodded at Fed.

Fed twisted.

The piece stuck, unmoved, and Fed swore, adrenalin plunging through his system. He heaved on the relay and it sprang loose. Fed fell on his ass and banged the back of his head on Cessus's legs.

"Fuck" yelled Cessus as he staggered back. He jumped forward and pushed Fed back upright in front of the box. Fed

snatched up the replacement relay and fit it in place. Neither of them spoke until Fed had put the last screw secured. He grabbed the doors and swung them almost shut, sidestepping out of the way to give Cessus access. Cessus threaded the tiny hair-thin cable from the replacement relay through the lock before fastening the door shut. Xing had planned this operation a long time ago, knew the specifications for the relay boxes as well as how they were actually deployed in the field. He'd preferred they take the risk, however, so now Cessus fussed with the miniscule fitting, a tiny grey bottle-cap shaped piece of custom electronics. When he had it connected he held it gently in one hand and fished around in his pocket with the other. He pulled out a little pink tube and carefully smeared its contents against the metal plate next to the keyhole. He softly pushed the bottle-cap onto it before counting to twenty and letting his hands go. The bottle-cap stuck.

"Walk" he said, grabbing his backpack and turning smartly down the street. His glasses unfurled, hands disappearing into his pockets. Fed wiped the sweat from his forehead and hurried after, bouncing slightly as he went. They circumnavigated the park.

Chapter #50

A few blocks away Cass stepped out of an identical taxi, head bowed, studying her shoes rather than looking up at the crowd ahead. She wore a plain black skirt and slightly worn brown business jacket over a beige blouse, her makeup plain and poorly done. She pushed wire-rimmed glasses up her small nose with her forefinger and walked with tiny steps up the walk towards the fifth of eight huge buildings she and Tonx had scouted out the day before.

Nodding and bobbing, she slowly made her way through the crowd, just another Chinese housewife juggling work and home. Her neck bent and eyes lowered, elbows held close to her ribs, she pushed with excruciating slowness through the dozens of black-clad Gothic Lolitas clumped outside the building. "Granny" they said behind their fans, annoyed glances skewering her as she pushed by. "Old cunt" they said with mock sweetness as she passed, fingers blurring over their comms.

As she arrived at the front doors she nervously piled through pockets and her little purse. The guard stationed there watched, bored. Nodding and stammering more quietly than he could hear she presented her invitation with both hands. The guard rolled his eyes as he stepped away and comm'd the man on the 89th floor, apartment 3.

"That floor has very tight security right now, but go ahead" he said, waving her in. He returned his attention to the growing crowds outside. The sea of black petticoats ruffled in the breeze, multicolored heads of flossy hair curled and gelled into multi-layered anime styles. Little white- and black-gloved hands were comm'ing back and forth, moblog photos sprouting on the web like mold on bread. The network traffic spoke of an impending wave, a tsunami of flash mobbed pop-icon ecstasy.

Cass was in an elevator, her shoes very close together, tips aligned away slightly from the door. A group of three businessmen returning home from work stood shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the door, murmuring rude jokes, ignoring her. They got out on floor 82. She stood motionless while the doors slid shut. Gravity pulled at her, let her go. She stepped out on floor 88.

Below, on the street, a rented miniature limousine pulled smoothly to a stop in front of the building. Three feed vans were already there, each a cluster of antennas, lenses, and electrified gridding. Reporters flew up, white polystyrene coffee cups bouncing on the ground behind them as the limousine arrived. The Lolitas swelled forward, estrogen-poisoned teenage throats screaming in waves. The crowd paused and the door of the car swung slowly upwards.

A hundred sets of tiny pink lungs inhaled, and Marcus stepped out of the car to the roar of voices so pure, so high, so fervent that he felt his nipples clench painfully against his chest in the face of it. He wore grey canvas pants, tiny scales welded onto metal strips woven into the cloth. The pants looped around his feet inside his oversized steel-toed Russian-Army issue size 52 (European) boots. He wore nothing else. His torso was a roadmap of overlapping scars detailing close to twelve years of closed-space fighting, his skin a curious grey color imbued by experimental (though now very popular) hardening therapies. He pulled his lips back in a wide smile, displaying his sharp metal teeth and thinking, for the millionth time, that if they knew how many times he'd sewn the tip of his tongue back on the crowd would vomit.

In one huge hand he held a two year old promo-sized can of Pokari Sweat, the product that had earned him acclaim across Asia. He'd recently learned that the Chinese company had re-issued his commercial as a resurgence marketing campaign, and was fairly sure that a lawyer he knew from L.A. could find a loophole in the contract that meant they owed him a great deal more money. He lifted his arms to embrace the crowd and sighed heavily as the five tiny Chinese guards in full riot gear locked their transparent shields in front of him.

Behind his head Xing had climbed to the roof of the car with a loudspeaker. It squealed and chirped and the crowd fell respectfully and abruptly silent. Xing read a short paragraph off a piece of paper, something about this visit being a bridge between their two nations, about The Shark's desire to spread love and harmony between their people. He summarized by explaining that Marcus had received an email chain letter about one special little boy who had terminal leukemia and who had always wanted to meet him. The boy's story had apparently so moved The Shark that he had resolved to come to China to make his wish come true.

Xing finished with a breathless read-through of Marcus's availability for speaking engagements and modified fighter

closed-combat entertainment events please contact him via his website, etc. etc. Marcus caught the name of his site and nodded graciously to the cameras. Xing clicked off the loudspeaker and Marcus began to wade forward, his five guards pushing hard against the girls.

Upstairs, Cass stood by the door at the end of the hall one floor below her target. She was watching the parking lot over the smooth folds of her invitation, pretending to read the address again. 88 floors below her Marcus entered the building, his guards stopping at the entranceway to hold back a sea of Lolitas. Other cliques had joined now, including a thin line of boys with shell-hard hair, imitation leather jackets gleaming in the sudden sunlight. Another large crowd of boys wearing matte grey climbing jackets and a variety of blue jeans milled quietly outside the main crowd, admiring the Lolitas. Everybody's comms were streaming stuttered clips from their POV, hoping to catch something good. Online bots spun stitched-together video montages from the images, attention from a million separate eyes sculpted into a single democratically decided data stream of What Was Happening.

Car windows flashed brightly in the parking lot as three identical Chinese men climbed out of a van and unloaded an enormous white disk, like a sanitary wok, and mounted it on the roof of the van.

A tiny camera mounted in the middle of the hall tracked Cass according to an algorithm invented in France as she slowly minced her steps back towards the elevator bay, her hands quickly pulling out lipstick, applying it, stowing the glasses in the purse. Two sure thumb swipes pushed the tiny dots of eyeliner at the corner of her eyes, which had looked poorly applied, across the rims of her eyelids in perfect sweeps. Her cheeks flushed suddenly as she willed the capillaries in them to expand, her eyes glistening in a quick saline flood. She pulled her hair back in a saucy faux-professional two-part bun and let her chin settle level with the floor as she pressed the "up" button.

A moment later the bay dinged softly and she stepped to the next elevator door over just as it slid open. A full car of reporters and cameras were packed gut-to-ass in front of her, and they pulled back like a live thing as she stamped forward. Her chin was up, eyes blazing, shoulders back.

"Who here's a freelance camera?" she asked in crisp Mandarin, her voice crackling with authority. "I got up here early and my footage will double your video asking price." She slammed one palm against the elevator door as it tried to close. It dinged lightly in protest.

A stubble-haired man with bags under his eyes raised one hand, steadily ignoring the immaculately dressed reporter in a light blue business suit tucked under his elbow. Her eyes widened in shock and anger and she began to scream at him in a vitriolic stream.

"Shut up" said Cass loudly, slashing the air with her hand. The door dinged again and she slammed it again, harder. Everyone in the car winced.

"15 percent plus resale rights" said the cameraman.

"5 percent and I'll use you again if what you get is good. I'm here for a joint LMA A&E report and have three more days of footage to get this week." Three days of solid footage in a week was worth at least a month's wages and the cameraman knew it. So did everybody else in the car. He nodded, dumbly, but his eyes shone. The reporter under his elbow bit her lip, lipstick smearing against her teeth.

The car dinged again and closed smoothly in front of Cass, a bubble of space surrounding her and her new cameraman.

On the ground floor a long bay of carefully locked glass doors silently clicked open, their magnetic locks discharged by an unusual maintenance schedule put in place fifteen minutes before. A few short blocks away one of Xing's compatriots allowed himself a wry grin as he walked past the service box and bent to tie his shoe, slipping and pulling off the bottle-top shaped device Cessus had put in place, erasing the hack. One of the Cassicoos near the base of the building looked at his watch and swaggered towards one of the doors, pushing it open with the tip of his carefully shined shoe. He turned and yelled at the crowd before darting in.

Nearly a hundred Gothic Lolitas, forty Grays, fifteen Cassicoos, and a wide assortment of hangers-on burst through the bay of doors and overran the guards, heading for stairs and elevator bays. The Cassicoos were in front of everyone, and the guards grabbed for them first. Little single-shot disposable cameras were shoved against legs and arms, discharging capacitors in loud cracks. The guards disappeared, twitching, under the throng of frantic teenage legs.

In the parking lot the van hummed to life. The two-meter wide dish mounted on the roof shuddered and whined, saturating the 89th floor of the building overhead with carefully generated electromagnetic noise. If they had been looking anyone with a comm would have noticed they had no signal, would have seen that their access to police lines and panic buttons was suddenly cut off. But nobody did.

Chapter #55

The reporters had arranged themselves in a line between the elevator bay at the end of the hall and the door to apartment three. Behind him the five black-suited guards who were the private employees of the resident of apartment one stood in a solid line, shock wands held horizontally in front of them slowly buzzing with blue light. Little red lights on the

cameras winked at Marcus as he bent to press the doorbell with one big finger. The door opened and a poster child for cute Chinese children everywhere slowly shuffled out, a big floppy cap perched on his head. A slightly haggard, but clearly loving father appeared behind him, bowing compulsively. Marcus slowly bowed to the them both and presented the boy with a big red box with a yellow bow. The boy's hat slid off as he looked up, his bald head gleaming pinkly in the camera lights. A slow shy smile spread over his face and the reporters begin to drool as they saw their ratings start to spike.

The elevator bay dinged softly. A solid wall of media-mad teenage bodies erupted from them, pouring over the reporters and cameras alike. The cams had time to capture one long image of Marcus shuffling the boy and his father inside their apartment and turning, frowning slightly towards the oncoming wave. Then everything was chaos.

The reporters were more or less thrown past Marcus and into the guards, their carefully sculpted hair flying akimbo as they hit the shock wands. Cass kicked out one guard's leg and jabbed him in the ribs as he fell into the bitchy reporter whose cameraman she had stolen. She pulled off one shoe and smashed the sculpted LED array hanging like a fruit from the imported Cuban chandelier overhead. The camera's lights clicked on to cover the sudden dimming, dazzling everyone. She ran for door number one in the shadows at the end of the hall.

Meanwhile the guards were downing everybody, Marcus bellowing at the top of his lungs to stop hurting people. It was in English of course, so nobody understood it, but it played well on film. At least six Lolitas lay on the pile of reporters, mouths frothing, delicate limbs jiggling. Tiny beaded purses spilled jelly-colored cosmetics everywhere. Marcus waited until the crowd surged back enough for one of the cameramen to steady himself against the wall and aim. Then he reached to cover the girls with his arm.

Over three hundred pounds of grey muscle lunged towards the guards' line of defense. They did what anybody in their situation would do and shocked the fuck out of him.

Marcus knew it was coming and had already clenched his teeth, but enough volts to power an average microwave sputtering through his nervous system still threw him. He staggered, crushing a very small and very expensive tape recorder with the reporter's name in zirconium studded characters on one side, but he didn't fall.

He defended himself. With prejudice.

Cass had already misted the knob with superglue and flicked on a tiny black light by the time Marcus got shocked. She smoothed a thin piece of scotch tape over the best print she could find and pulled a two-inch plug of gummy plastic from where it had been stuck inside her bra. Nicely warmed it took the print quickly, the oils from the print etching away a negative on its surface. She waved it in the air, the constant screaming building to a crescendo as Marcus threw one guard into the doorway next to him, his long arm taking another shock as he covered a Lolita scrambling across the floor for her phone. The elevator dinged again and more fans poured out. Cass huddled by the doorknob and twisted the thumb in half, licking the half without the print and pressing it firmly against the negative. It resisted her saliva where the oils had coated it and dissolved away where they weren't, making a dummy print. A moment later she pressed the dummy against the scanner mounted in the wood paneling beside the door, and was in.

The door snicked shut behind her and she let her hair down. Her bangs slid in front of her face and she ran bent-backed as she ran through the foyer, shoes in hand, the pump's little heels held outwards. She's hammered nails through the heels the night before so they wouldn't break, so she could use them as weapons if she needed to. But there was no one there.

The living room gave way to a tiny kitchen, immaculate and unused. Beyond lay a bedroom. It had one futon, blankets folded at its head, and a long, solid-looking table holding a three-foot tall, six-inch wide, two-foot deep beige metal box next to a monitor. Cass stared. It was by far the biggest single-user computer she had ever seen.

Cass had come prepared, and pulled the slim black box from where it had been taped to her lower back. Scanning the room again she opened her little purse and retrieved the multi-headed set of cables that fit into it. She knew the box might be wired for movement, thermal or pressure changes or extremely minor electrical alterations. Assuming she could get past that the software was likely bleeding edge security, black ops code written by some of China's best. The little black box Xing had given her should connect directly with whatever the interface was and bypass those securities.

She shifted her weight between her feet, hands fluttering uselessly in the air. The keyboard was massive, a big metal and plastic affair, and there was a plastic paperweight on a stack of papers next to it. That was it. The little black box in her hand wasn't registering any wireless access, and she couldn't see any ports on the front of the box. There was nothing but a small slot a few inches wide. She unfolded a small mirror from her purse and held it over the back of the box.

There were wires running from it, big thick beige plastic wires like she hadn't seen since she was a kid. The black box had jacks for nearly eighteen different kinds of ports with software to execute appropriate attacks on each. There wasn't a single port on the thing that fit this box. Something stuck, buzzed around her mind. She looked at the front again. It had a floppy disk drive.

A disk drive. Her dad had had a computer when she was a kid, a 4GHz monstrosity with umpteen buzzing fans and cards the size of your hand you put inside to operate the graphics, or the sound, or whatever. It was ancient when he'd tried to pawn it off on her for schoolwork. This thing in front of her was just like that.

As she looked she saw actual plastic data disks, wide as her palm, in a neat pile next to the box. She stepped back, eyes wide, and as she did so jostled the desk. The paperweight on the papers slid and the screen made a loud oscillating hum,

flickered dimly to life.

Two words: Name, and Password. The keyboard was the only interface. Cass held the very expensive, very useless thin black box in her right hand and stared.

Marcus's right leg wasn't moving any more. Things weren't going as planned. The guards hadn't all gone down yet. He'd managed to get one to stay down after he'd smashed his head through the fiberboard ceiling panels and looped him over a supporting rod, but that was it so far. A big group of boys in matching grey jackets had come out of the stairway on the far end of the hall, cutting off his fighting room even more. The elevator kept dinging, more voices screaming, trying to get in and out at once. The guards waved their rods in wide sweeps, the crowd roiling at bay.

His vision was misting over. Bile rose in his throat, fatigue riding him, gulping down hot dry breaths too fast. A guard rushed him and missed, Marcus's hand slapping the back of his head hard as it went by. But the feint had worked. Marcus had fallen for it, and the guard's rod followed as he fell, sliding up Marcus's arm. He pitched forward, bright colors angry in his eyes.

Fighting in close quarters requires two things: a good grip, and solid footing. As Marcus swung through a tight roll his size 52's planted themselves solidly on the ultra-fine hundred-weave 'arctic sand' colored carpeting. His surgically oversized torso carried through like a piano falling out a window, cannonballing him out of his roll. Three wide fingers on each hand clamped down on the tiny, delicate fingers of two of the remaining guards, closing over the rods along with them as he let his weight swing through them, their bodies slamming backwards into each other.

Marcus danced as the current dumped into the three of them. Cass came out of the apartment door just as the rods finished their discharge. The bright camera lights behind him turned Marcus into one huge silhouette, the guards flying like banners in front of him. They fell, twitching at his feet.

The remaining guard turned and ran, away from Marcus. He wasn't looking at her, ignored her as another helpless female. The slim black box in her hand took out three of his teeth and tore away the cheek from his gums before burying itself in his throat. Then Cass was gone, down the stairway, past the last few Gray boys standing staring. Behind her Marcus slowly twisted, and fell.

Chapter #58

Cass made it back to the hotel first. Fed and Cessus came later, having changed clothes in a tiny public porta-potty before vanishing with the slowly dissipating crowds. The media frenzy was in full swing by the time they left, but the ambulances that came and went told them enough. They'd seen Xing come out with Marcus, carried on a pair of stretchers hooked together. Everyone had ignored each other. That much, at least, had been prearranged.

Now they stood in the doorway; worried, tired, and scared. Cass sat on the bed, stabbing at the tiny monitor hanging on the wall in front of her, flipping through feeds.

"What?" she asked.

"You get it?" asked Cessus. Cass held up her hand. It was wrapped in thick wads of toilet paper, bloody. She turned and picked up something heavy, tossed it to him.

"Enjoy it" she said, and turned back to the terminal.

Cessus hefted the old magnetic drive in one hand. He and Fed looked at each other.

"What the fuck is this?" he asked.

"A disk drive. Circa 2000. That idiot had an ancient machine without a single current port on it. Xing's toy was useless and there was no way I could have made it out of there carrying the case it came in".

"So you unscrewed it and pulled this out?" asked Fed.

"No" she said, standing up and brushing past them on her way to the bathroom. "I didn't have a screwdriver."

Tonx was on his way in, wiping his hands on his pants as she went out, and he gave her a wide berth.

"Hey" he said. "Think you can do anything with that?"

"This is ancient" said Cessus, still standing by the doorway. "I haven't used one since I was a kid. If she just yanked it out there's a chance she nuked some of it. And who knows what sort of security it had..."

"It isn't likely it had any. Unless he did some fancy wiring" Tonx held up both hands "and I know he may have - but if he didn't the whole thing should just be there. I did some searches for old manuals when we got back. Xing ought to be able to help us."

"Security through obsolescence" murmured Cessus. "Motherfucker."

"Not so clever enough that she couldn't just walk in there and take it" said Fed.

"She didn't just 'walk in there'" said Tonx. "The case was *steel*. And it had funky screws nobody uses these days. It *was* clever. If she hadn't had a temper she would've been caught. We wouldn't have anything."

"That's assuming we can get this thing to work" said Cessus. "And pretty clearly they know we're after them now."

Tonx nodded, turned towards the terminal. "Pretty clearly."

The media made a huge show out of the whole fiasco, running the clip of Marcus covering the Lolita with his arm just before being shocked over and over again. The clip of him tearing the arms off the last two guards before he went down was even more popular, albeit on the underground networks only. It became the hottest download of the month in less than eight hours, and advertisers were salivating for Marcus to be well enough to talk before he'd even come out of surgery. Then it was revealed that the guards were working for a government employee, which made it all the more scandalous. Due to government regulations the reports weren't allowed to specify the relationship, but because the guards were privately hired they could still run the story. And run it they did. An unruly public that was already irritated by slowed networks now discovered what sort of people were running them. It didn't cause riots - riots weren't popular in China anymore - but the public discontent was felt far up the food chain.

None of which meant anything to them. What *was* news to them was that Poulpe was missing. He'd checked in with Xing as promised on the way to the run, but disappeared from contact afterwards. Tonx was worried the government had gotten a hold of Poulpe so he'd pulled them out of the hotel and into some spare warehouse space next to Otaku. Marcus wasn't going anywhere, ensconced in a hospital bed and surrounded 24/7 by fawning admirers in black petticoats and publicly addressable comms, cameras on full-stream over subsidized bandwidth.

"thwith hearth" he'd told Fed, thumping his chest. He'd bitten the tip of his tongue off.

Now they were locked away, hiding sleepless trying to get to the data they had stolen. At three in the morning a few days later, in the front workroom where Xing and Fed and Cessus had first met, the three of them sat with Tonx and scanned the drive's contents. They'd gotten it to talk to an old OS-emulator they'd downloaded from a specialist in London. Cessus had had to pay for it from a private account as they'd run out of backing funds.

"For my collection" he'd shrugged. "You can pay me back when we pull this off."

The drive was intact and completely vulnerable. There were two partitions on the drive, one of them locked down tight with a modern encryption system. It was crackable, but would take a very long time, and they could only get the data piece by piece. Knowing what bits were useful would be trial and error.

Then there was the other partition. Not buried in the encrypted system, not part of the OS, it contained a simple, old-style web page. The web page had a password requirement, but using the emulator they were able to run a few million tries from dictionaries over it and had it open in minutes. The result was exactly one half of a DNA chain. One half of the recombinant that Fed's code had tried to calculate.

They sat quietly for a few moments, the plain-looking web page slowly spinning that half chain in blue and black pixels. Xing bowed and quietly excused himself to go to bed. Cessus laid himself out on the table behind where Fed stood next to Tonx. Nobody spoke. Outside, in the alley, rain began to patter against the giant Pokey ad covering the window.

The silence stretched out for a long time. After a while their screens blanked themselves automatically to save power, and darkness spilled through the room.

"What now?" asked Fed. Nobody answered. Tonx rose, walked to the window. The Pokey logo stood out against the lamplight from the alley below, circling his torso. He crossed his arms.

"I don't know" said Tonx. "I don't know."

Chapter #59

In the end they'd slept on it. The next morning they gathered together in the upstairs room of Otaku, Xing and his fellows still asleep in their warrens throughout the city. They sipped green tea and salty soup and rubbed the dark rings around their eyes. The room was still, rain streaking the windows, a dim gray light creeping slowly over them.

Eventually Cessus broke the silence. "I'm going to comm Marcus" he said. Cables came together and the projector flickered to life. Marcus's dark face filled the far wall, bruised features resting peacefully against smooth white pillows.

"I'b here" he rumbled quietly, his deep voice rolling out of the speakers, filling the room.

Tonx coughed, examining his fingers as he laid them flat against the table. Everyone watched, waiting.

"We're leaving" he said.

"What?" asked Cass.

"We're going home" said Tonx. "It's time to call this thing off."

He looked around at them. "Sometimes you have to know when to give it up. All we've got is a drive with who-knows what on it and half our data. Chow holds all the cards, Marcus is in the hospital, and we're out of options. It's gotten too dangerous. We're going home."

"We could bluff them" said Fed "tell them we've broken the encryption."

"And then what?" asked Tonx. "Go in with guns blazing? At some point we have to hand over the drive, and when we do we're out of leverage."

He shook his head. "It's too dangerous. I'm not risking your lives an further for my half-baked idea."

Tonx stood up and turned away, towards the stairs. "Pack it up. I'm going to order tickets. Marcus, I'll arrange for the proper documentation so you can get a hospital ride as soon as you're well enough. We're all under contract and I'll pay off

expenses as I'm able."

Tonx took a step away from them, the boards creaking under his weight.

"Bullshit" said Fed. Everyone turned. Fed's lips were curled back, his eyes cast in shadow. "It's too late for that, Tonx. We've already risked our lives. We've already given up everything for 'your idea.'"

He stood up, the chair skittering backwards across the floor. His eyes shone as he stared across the long table. "I gave up a steady ride through school straight into a cubical for this, and I wouldn't trade anything for that. I'm here because I believe in this, I believe in us. I'm going to make it happen. If you want to go home, then go. But I'm staying here and finishing this."

Nobody spoke. The rain spit against the windowpane, a quiet, angry rattle.

"Cub geb mig" came Marcus's voice. Everyone turned towards the screen. Marcus's eyes were swollen almost shut, deep black lines tracing the metal plates in his skull where the excess voltage had burned the skin.

"Cub geb mig oudda here" he said again. "T'b wid Febe."

"Me too" echoed Cessus. "I'm with him."

"We all are" said Cass. "We all are."

"It's too dangerous" protested Tonx. "There's no way to do this without putting ourselves under serious threat. We're underpowered here, people, and if we keep pushing somebody's going to get killed."

"We know the risks" said Fed. He folded his arms. "But it's not your choice anymore, Tonx. You may have pulled this thing together, but we're all in it now."

Tonx stood at the head of the stairs and looked at his friends.

"It's okay, Tonx" said Cass. She pushed his chair back from the table with one long leg, pointed at it.

"Now sit down and start thinking of a way to get our data back."

In the end they'd confided in Xing. The professed Confucian hacker had listened carefully to everything they'd said and slowly steepled his fingers.

"Confucius was known for preaching right action and respecting authority. He did not say much about rebellion" he said.

"Sorry to make it hard on you" said Tonx.

"No, no" said Xing, a shy smile crossing his face. "There is a saying; 'The roots of education are bitter, but the flower is sweet.' It is good challenge. Besides"

His eyes closed and he smiled benevolently. "It will good to assrape Harry Chow."

Cass let out a burst of disbelieving laughter before she could stifle herself.

"Right" said Cessus, getting back to the subject. "So how do we deal with this? He's got the data and, we can assume, Poulpe. The half of the drive that's encrypted is still completely unknown to us - it may be trash for all we know. Although it's our guess that he's going against the wishes of his superiors we've got to assume he's still got government firepower available."

"A Chinese saying is, 'If the father is a rat, the son will only know how to dig holes'" said Xing. "Let us give Chow a hole, and let him dig."

"What do you mean?" asked Cessus.

"Chow expects treachery and lies. So, we should give him treachery. Otaku have been problem for Harry Chow for a long time now; he knows of us. He will not be surprised if I call him and offer to betray you."

Fed started in his seat. "What?" he said.

"He's talking about a feint" said Tonx. "We'll call Chow and tell him we've cracked the data on the drive and want to swap it for Poulpe and the recombinant. Once we're done negotiating Xing will call and suggest that the Otaku have been working with us and want to sell us out in exchange for privileges, like guaranteed government data lines. Am I right, Xing?"

"Yes yes" said Xing. "Exactly. Chow makes deals for favors all the time. He will not be surprised for us to sell you out."

"But how does that help us?" asked Fed. "We've still got to meet him and exchange the data."

"There's no way we can count on him actually bringing the data with him" said Tonx. "We've got to meet him and get some kind of lasting leverage. Otherwise he'll screw us and keep the data until he can figure out what it's for. He has no reason not to."

"Good point" said Xing. He sighed lightly and flexed his fingers against each other. "But Otaku are not fighters. We cannot compete for firepower with Chow."

He sighed again, staring intently at the blank tabletop before him. He looked up; "Mencius said, 'The benevolent has no enemy.' It is perhaps better to make this an opportunity for others."

"You lost me" said Tonx. "Who do you mean?"

Xing smiled shyly. "You are familiar with Triads?" he asked.

"They're the mafia in China, right?" said Tonx. He wasn't smiling.

"That is good explanation, although they are many centuries older than mafia" said Xing. "Otaku has a... relationship with the Triads. They are very interest in Harry Chow. Maybe they will help."

Cessus and Tonx shared a glance Fed didn't know how to interpret.

"What kind of relationship?" Tonx asked.

Xing smiled.

Fed didn't know what the hell was going on. A full day after their meeting with Xing the whole Otaku tribe was swarming like bees. The room downstairs resembled a spinning class, sweating Chinese boys pulling on masks and taking their turns on an extra bank of bikes, generating power from thin pale muscles. A near-constant stream of them flowed in and out of the back doors and hallways, the alley door occasionally sliding open to admit a new cadre. Nobody made eye contact and all the boys spoke in stuttering hushed tones. The whirl of the bikes and the click of chords was pervasive, an orchestra of plastic crickets. They'd given Fed a mask to use so he could plug in, but he didn't like not being able to see what was going on around him. He preferred his goggles anyway.

So he sat in one row of seats, his cable trailing upwards and away, surrounded by the stink of soy sauce and sweat and teenage testosterone, inundated by the sound of hacks being made.

The rest of the conversation with Xing had gone suddenly and steeply over his head. Tonx and Cessus and Xing had had a long talk about "relationships" and "assistance" and "interests," all of which seemed to Fed to mean that some people owed other people favors. But none of it was very clear. All he'd gotten out of it was that Otaku occasionally wrote code and ran data for a triad called Fuk Ching, and that Fuk Ching and a bunch of the other triads all reported to a sort of uber-triad called Big Circle.

Tonx had tried to explain it to him later, after Xing had gone off to contact whoever it was he was going to contact.

"Think of Big Circle as angel investors" he'd said. "They act as arbitrators, right, because they've got their money in all the triads. It's in their interest to keep everyone from killing each other. The triads all benefit from Big Circle's money and influence, so they all keep members of Big Circle 'on staff.' They're kind of like members of a huge board of directors, except it's a crime syndicate."

"But what do they want with us?" asked Fed.

Tonx rubbed his eyes. "That's the hard part." he said.

"Fuk Ching, the triad Otaku does work for, has a big presence in New York. As a result of the business laws in the US a lot of the other triads use them for money laundering, fronts, and related business shit. So Fuk Ching has its fingers in a lot of pies."

"But what's that have to do with us?" said Fed.

"We fucked everything up" said Tonx. "They had this nice balance going, where all the triads had minimal data lines out of the country due to governmental controls. Otaku specialized in ways to get around those restrictions, with limited success, and Fuk Ching shopped them around."

"So?" asked Fed.

"So we launched your app and proved that the governmental controls could be circumvented. Worse, Chow picked up the app and used it for who knows what. If word gets out to the triads about this seriously bad shit will start to happen."

Fed scratched his head. "Like what?" he said. "Who cares if the triads find out? They can write their own damn software."

"Exactly" said Tonx. "Think, Feed. If the triads realize they can exploit the country's network to their own ends they suddenly have a way to create an enormous advantage over the other triads. The Chinese network will be overloaded with viruses. There would be a major power struggle based on accessibility and network share dominance."

"And the average Chinese guy wouldn't be able to do shit" said Fed, realization slowly dawning.

"He'd be lucky if he could get his email" said Tonx. "Xing wants to empower the average Joe here. He wants to blow the lid off the network restrictions to implement free market capitalism under imperialistic socialism. But he knows they can't do that by simply toppling the existing regime."

"So instead he wants to get Big Circle to do it?" asked Fed.

"No, instead he wants Big Circle to negotiate with Chow on Fuk Ching's, and subsequently Otaku's, behalf. Chow's gone out on a limb to try and do something with our code - we don't know what. Xing is betting that Big Circle can threaten him into turning over our results and maybe make some slow, long-term changes towards opening up the networks a little."

"They want to make a controlled shift" said Fed.

"Right" said Tonx. "It's a political play, but if it works we get our data and get sent back to the U.S., and the triads get a little more in bed with the government, and the Chinese networks slowly loosen up a little."

"And nobody knows how we did what we did" said Fed.

"Not necessarily" said Tonx. "Depending on how things play out with Chow we may want to spin it as a successful attack he countered. Who knows. Right now that's pretty much the least of our worries."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning we're way the fuck in over our heads, Feed. The triads aren't small players. They own most of Asia, and

they're run by Big Circle. The only reason I can see for them not just shooting us and dumping us in the river is that Otaku's completely fucking in love with Cessus."

"They're what?" asked Fed.

"He showed them some sort of weird biofeedback programming training app and now they think he's the next Bodhisattva or something. They're all hyped on training under him." Tonx paused, narrowing his eyes as he peered at Fed. "And they think you're a prime example of this shit because you wrote the virus."

"It's good code" shrugged Fed, his eyes flickering down to the chord in his hand. "So does that mean they'll protect us?"

"It means we have a better chance of not ending up dead. But not a great one. We're going to have to act as the bait to get Chow to come out. Big Circle's not willing to risk a direct confrontation, so it's up to us and Fuk Ching to get a hold of him and arrange an 'incidental meeting.' Fuk Ching's not exactly delighted to have some outsiders forcing their hand, either. So it's not a stellar situation, no."

"Wait a minute" said Fed. "Xing knew about the virus from when Cessus and I first got here. Why didn't he contact Big Circle earlier?"

"He did" said Tonx. "They were just waiting to see if our app really worked. Instead we proved that Chow was abusing the Chinese network with it and that he probably has our data somewhere."

"Xing what?"

"Xing's been in touch with Big Circle the whole time. They've just been waiting and watching. I told you Fed, we're in way over our heads. Now come on, Cessus wants to show off his prime student. And you'd better make it impressive."

#60

Fed had done a little show, watching the data flows and even doing a little preliminary programming, sketching out the shape of a program he'd been thinking about since they got to China, then darting in here and then to start filling it in. The Otaku that were free to watch seemed impressed, but he wasn't sure how to read them - the constant nodding and muttering was unnerving. A bunch of biofeedback equipment had been hastily assembled in the upstairs room and Cessus was busily putting people through their paces. Fed was shocked at how badly the Otaku programmers did - they couldn't keep calm minds to save their lives. It was like they were blind people, casting their arms around wildly as they tried to code, or crawling step-by-step with no leaps at all. It reminded him of when he'd first gotten prosthetic legs, way back as a kid, and how badly he'd walked. He couldn't keep his balance, then. He hadn't known how.

"What's wrong with them?" he'd asked Cessus during a quiet moment as the older hacker leaned back against a desk, watching his new students go through the games.

"Shut up, you arrogant little prick" Cessus said agreeably. "I told you you were good. Now get out of my hair. I've got another hour of this and then I need to learn the entire Beijing traffic system."

Fed left. The truth was there was nothing for him to do. The Otaku were in charge of some series of hacks and political maneuvers Tonx and Xing were orchestrating, and Marcus and Cass were charged with setting up the meeting point. Cessus was helping the Otaku and running cracks against the Chinese systems, and Fed just couldn't follow it. He was a coder, not a networks guy, and although he knew viruses he knew next to nothing about direct system break-ins. So he'd peddled on the bikes for a while, getting used to his legs, building up muscles long unused. He reviewed his code. He listened in on conversations between Tonx and Xing and Cessus, and understood none of it. It was made clear that his job would be answering any questions Chow or the Big Circle representatives had about his code and that the less he knew about the rest of it the better. So he tried to work on his pet program, and found that'd he'd improved. His code was tighter, more efficient. He was better than before, and it felt good. He slept well the second night after the decision, against all odds, his thighs burning, lines of code bright against the giant empty space inside his skull.

"Feed, wake up." It was Cass's voice. "Wake up, we're starting."

Fed fumbled out of sleep, the tiny cave under the desk he'd staked out as his own suddenly claustrophobic. Dim lights illuminated the empty room beyond, one of the multitudes of cubical-warrens the extra Otaku space was riddled with. His own cube, Fed realized, his eyes adjusting to the light. Cass had a tiny headlamp pulled up against her forehead, her eyes red-lined with exhaustion and nerves.

"It's time?" he asked.

"Yeah. It's time" she said. "Come on. You need some food in you before we head out."

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"The warehouse. We already went over this" she said.

Fed's brain slowly reeled in the memories. They were going to send in substitutes to fake out Chow and then redirect them to a new location for the actual meeting. They'd come to the warehouse where Fed and Tonx and the others were, hopefully unprepared. Tonx had made plan B's, but Fed didn't know what they were, shouldn't know. He'd asked Tonx about it the night before, late, before he'd crawled under the desk in the cubical.

"The less you can give away, the better" Tonx had told him. "You're our bluff card, Fed. You've got to convince Chow he won't be able to replicate your code. Not easily, anyway."

"But anybody could do it" Fed had said.

"No" said Tonx. "Not everybody could. You've got to believe that. Trust me. Chow will know, he'll know when he talks to you, he'll know what it would take and how hard it would be."

"Why won't you tell me what's going to happen? What about our auxiliary plans?" Fed pleaded.

"Onions" said Tonx, his face in his hands. He reeked of stale sweat and green tea, fatigue pouring off him in an invisible cloud.

"Layers within layers" he muttered.

"What?"

"You plan and plan, Fed, and eventually you just have to go with it. I've tried to anticipate everything, but I'm... It doesn't matter. You need to stay safe. If the unexpected happens we just have to hope things work out. Knowing about everything else won't help you. You have to trust me."

Fed hadn't said anything.

"Feed?" Cass asked.

He was staring at his hands, his fingertips resting lightly on the polished metal rims of his legs, the smooth puckered line where the plastic and rubber socketing pressed against his skin.

"Yeah" he said. "Yeah, I'm coming."

They'd eaten some kind of tofu rolls, Otaku members coming in and out, in and out as they sat. Cessus joined them, a long thin spliff resting casually between two trembling fingers. Marcus was in a makeshift bed, some sort of huge lazy-boy / smart chair hybrid with oversized metal flanges supporting his legs and arms on white temperfoam slabs. His gray skin looked pale in the dim LED light, but he smiled when he saw Fed. They'd hardly spoken since he'd gotten out of the hospital.

"Goob to 'ee you" he said, his deep voice fainter than Fed remembered.

"Goob to ee you,' too" Fed joked.

Xing appeared then, surrounded by a phalanx of Otaku wearing headsets and wielding display tablets. He was an unperturbed as ever, glancing at data thrust at him from all angles, nodding slightly at this suggestion or turning his head at that idea. He reminded Fed of the proverbial eye of the storm, the calm space around which cyclones spun.

Then Tonx came into the room. He had his hair pulled back in a tight ponytail and was wearing a heavily detailed motorcycle jacket, thick layers of armor aggregating around his joints, tiny scales of carefully stitched leather over padded plastic. The thick ridges over his spine cascaded down like a tail, covering the back of his pinstripe wool suit pants like an alien tuxedo coat.

"We're ready" he said as he slumped down across from them. "I've spoken with Chow and we're on. He should be at the dummy site in half an hour. That gives us a little over forty minutes to get into position. You all know what you're supposed to do. We've prepared all we can- now it's just a matter of hoping."

"It'll work out" said Cessus, a thick cloud escaping his lips and obscuring his eyes as he spoke. "We're the good guys, remember?"

"Right" said Tonx, a rare smile drifting across his lips.

"Listen" he said. "Listen, whatever happens, I just..."

Marcus's huge hand gently crushed the can of Pokari Sweat he'd been drinking and let it fall, tinkling, to the table.

"We know" the big man said. "We know. It's going to work out fine. We've done our homework. We've planned. We're prepared. Now's the time to think of success, Tonx."

"The time to worry about failure is after you've failed" said Cass. "You taught me that, Tonx."

Tonx smiled again, fully this time. "You're right" he said. He rooted through the pile of take-out and wires before him and fished out an unopened tube of green tea. He popped the lid with his thumb and held it aloft.

"To our success" he said, his smile wide, full of confidence. The Tonx they knew.

"To success" they echoed.

They were in a tiny car, an ancient metal-framed electrical affair, humming across the tarmac between giant dark buildings. They'd gone by subway and then bus, separating and rejoining, pretending not to know each other. The rain had kicked up again as Fed had gotten out of the last bus, waiting at the nearly empty stop for the car. Cass had gotten out of a taxi a block down and walked up to join him once it had left, her eyes deeply roughed in black circles, her hair a cascade of loose dirty spikes.

She pulled out a packet of cigarettes as she stopped next to him under the shelter.

"Smoke?" she asked him, the pack sprouting a single cigarette as she did something sudden with her fingers.

"You don't seem like the type" he said, shaking his head. It disappeared into her oversized woolen overcoat, the tips of

her military boots peeking out dimly from the hem. She produced a cheap blue plastic bic. They waited.

Eventually the car had glided slowly out of the gloom and the door kicked open. A plume of smoke came from inside and they smelled weed. Fed smiled despite himself as it was followed with Cessus' beaming face.

"Come on, we got to hurry" he said. "Your friend here drives like a granny."

Tonx drove. Everyone had goggles on, and every few minutes Cessus would drum his fingers against the cheap plastic paneling on the inside of the car and they'd see a skip in their data as he switched secure channels. The wind gusted and the car rocked, and Tonx suddenly turned them down a loading ramp into a basement. They got out into the dark.

Fed had borrowed some canvas shorts from Xing and tied them off just over his stumps. He was glad he had; he could feel the chill in the metal of his legs, an invisible draft leaking up into his kneecaps. The leather jacket he'd bought had busted its zipper while he was on the bus, and the yuppie vest they'd gotten at the airport underneath did nothing to keep him warm.

"Anybody have a hat?" he asked.

"Shhh" hissed Tonx. Fluorescent lights flickered on in a low ceiling overhead, revealing a wide empty room. A hallway led off to the left, and stairs led up ahead. He waved them forward.

As they came up the steps a dim red light came on high above them, tiny LEDs lining the support struts in the warehouse ceiling. It filtered down in a kind of bloody twilight, revealing a few hazy shadows dancing around the perimeter, tiny manlike figures shadowboxing with themselves. In the middle of the room a table sat on a stage with two chairs. In the distance Fed could see a giant door in the wall opposite them, sensor arrays blinking yellow lights around its edge.

"Who are they?" Fed whispered.

"Fuk Ching" said Xing from behind them.

Tonx had gun out and lined up at Xing's forehead before Fed had even turned around. He wondered, over the rapid thump of his heart, how long Tonx had had it.

"Don't fucking do that, Xing" Tonx said. Xing smiled.

"My sorry. It's an habit" Xing said. "To answer Feed's question those men are Fuk Ching combat specialists. You would like to meet them?"

"Sure" said Cessus. His lenses were out and tiny bits of light danced across his eyebrows and over the bridge of his nose, an avalanche of data.

Xing turned to the dark corner of the building to their right and raised a hand. A figure separated from the shadows there and sped toward them at a dead sprint, hands smoothly pumping up and down, legs raised. Suddenly the man was in front of them, standing quietly two paces from Xing.

In school Fed had had to study physiology as an alternative to taking classes in floor hokey or gymnastics. He'd been fascinated at the way the muscles connected over the structure of the skeleton, the way the model of the human musculature was so efficient. This man looked like that model had, his jawbones razor sharp and his muscles etched so tight it seemed as though there were cracks in his skin where they met. His eyes were set deep in his skull, his pale yellowed skin thin and papery-looking. As he stood there Fed could see that he was breathing fast, the rims of his nostrils flaring slightly in and out, in and out. But otherwise he stood stock-still. He seemed, somehow, like he was listening for something they couldn't hear.

Xing said something in Chinese that Fed couldn't follow and gestured at Cass. She's bowed deeply at him, avoiding his eyes, and the man nodded back. He wore loose black cotton cargo pants and thick black rubber boots, and had a dirty gray muscle tee. A wife-beater, they used to call them, sleeveless deep-necked undershirts. That was it.

The man turned and nodded at all of them in turn, his thin lips held tightly together, and then turned quickly and darted away.

"What kind of mods?" asked Cessus, his eyes far away, looking at data.

"You could guess" said Xing, glancing at Tonx.

"Dangerous work" Tonx said. "Full body muscle blending? Fast twitch weave, enhanced metabolism? Drug implants and oversized heart?"

Xing shrugged. "I don't honestly know. But I assume you're right on at least some of it. I do know they eat sticks of butter mixed with nutrient supplements every half hour or so, and have had a lot of meditation training in order to obtain enough REM sleep. From what I've seen they sit very still for one half hour out of every four, but I don't think they have to. I think it's part of the program."

"It doesn't look comfortable" said Tonx, staring after the deep shadow of the corner the man had disappeared back in to.

"I don't think that is a concern" said Xing. He gestured at the small stage with the table in the middle of the room.

"Would you sit? They should be here soon, and the rest of us should be away by then."

Tonx nodded and started forward. Fed moved to follow.

"Go with Cass, Feed" said Cessus.

"What?" asked Fed, bewildered.

"You're too valuable" said Tonx without turning around. Xing continued walking ahead of them, away toward the stage. "We need you safe."

"But I'm supposed to talk to Chow" said Fed.

"You will. Through me. We have an infrared connection they shouldn't be able to trace, and you can feed me answers as he asks them. We'll all be tied in" said Cessus. "Chow demanded that the virus author be at the meeting. I'm your stand-in."

"Fuck that" Fed spat. "You can't force me out like this!"

"What's Chow doing with your program?" asked Cass from next to him. She'd pulled out another cigarette and was slowly tapping the filter end against her lip.

"What's that got to do with it?" asked Fed.

"We don't know what he's doing with it" answered Tonx, finally turning around. "But it could be anything. He could be devising an incurable disease that only works on his enemies - it's not unrealistic. He could be making a new AIDS."

Cessus nodded, his dreads bouncing jauntily in the red light.

"If we don't make it out of here, Feed, we need you to figure out a way to stop him."

Feed blinked, felt himself stranded, captured in the cold logic.

"You wrote it, little man" said Cessus, his eyes focused on his, through the data. "You wrote it. It's your responsibility."

Then they were gone, walking away towards the table.

"Come on, Feed" said Cass, lighting her cigarette with a flick of her bic. "There isn't much time."

#61

Fed had allowed himself to be led away, back past the stairs and down the long hallway. Their car was gone when they went through the big underground room. Several of the Fuk Ching darted around, quick hands setting what looked like clay bricks around the entrance door. One of them glanced up at Fed as they passed through and their eyes met. Fed didn't recognize the look he saw there, shiny eyes like black marbles.

"You planned this" said Fed.

"No shit" said Cass. "Do you disagree? You're the only one who"

"I know" interrupted Fed. The smooth lift of his legs made him bounce lightly as he followed her, afloat. "I know."

They came to another staircase, a short one, metal plates welded into place over their exit. Next to the stairs the concrete pooled in a stone imitation of melted butter across the floor, revealing a crack leading to a small hollow space beyond.

"We put in a fake wall across the back of the warehouse overhead. It's metal, so it should resist their scans" said Cass. She slid sideways through the gap in the wall and he heard the rattle of aluminum beyond.

"We welded a ladder in here. A few of them." Her voice grew faint. "They should hold, though."

He slid inside the gap, his goggles amplifying the dim light within. Someone had put strips of glow tape across every third rung of the cheap aluminum ladders that stretched upwards and out of sight in the thin high passageway.

"Why this?" asked Fed.

"We have to communicate with Cessus through IR. They'll trace anything else" she said from above him.

"So we have to be line of sight" he muttered.

"So we have to be line of sight" her voice echoed. "Hurry up."

It was slow going, and Fed was seized with panic every few steps as his new feet rocketed him forward, or slipped as the traction pads found new purchase. The passageway was only about as deep as he could reach, and he kept scraping the small of his back as he bounced upwards. After what seemed like an eternity Cessus' voice crackled into his ear;

"Five minutes and counting" he said. "They've taken the bait and are on their way in. T-bird and Funky Daddy in position. Big Mac in position. Slim kitty, you in position?"

"In position" said Cass, her voice a faint echo. "But Smart Boy isn't here yet."

"Feed, get your ass up there" Cessus's voice said.

"Cut the code name bullshit" Tonx said across the comm. "If they can decrypt our channels they'll be able to triangulate anyway. Switch to true private. See you on the other side, people."

The sounds in his ear went dark; no data at all. Fed's goggles showed his feeds trailing off and shrinking to single points, tiny blinking cursers an array around the edges of his vision. Cessus had cut them off.

He scrambled up and felt a hand reach out of the dark to grab his shoulder.

"Come here" Cass's voice whispered, pulling him away from the ladder. His stomach fell as he groped his way towards her, out onto a foot-wide platform jutting towards the ladder. His foot slipped from it as he went and he almost fell, his hand banging against the wall behind him as he steadied himself.

"Quiet" hissed Cass's voice in his ear. She moved sideways and pulled him farther from the ladder, and suddenly Fed was looking out a ping-pong ball-sized hole out at the warehouse below.

"Fiber-optic cable" Cass said. "Gives us a view out. Here. Plug in." She handed him a data cable and he fumbled it into his headset.

".is what Xing said" said Cessus. "Okay, hold tight folks, here we go."

Through the tiny portal in front of him Fed could see the stage far below, Tonx sitting on the chair, the metal drive on the table in front of him. Cessus stood to his left, his hands folded behind him. Even from here Fed could see his head bobbing slightly in tune to some unheard music.

The giant door ahead of them slowly began to lift, and Fed realized his view was image-enhanced for light. The edges of his view curdled as headlights poured halogen brilliance through the widening crack. The Fuk Ching were nowhere to be seen. Slowly the door lifted to about waist-height, and stopped.

A huge figure crouched to fill the space beneath the gap, then stood up inside. Another figure appeared and slipped in, and another. Nearly a dozen of them filed in, and then a small one, a tiny man in a suit, his movements awkward as he shuffle-stepped under the door. The large figures surrounded him and they moved forward in a tight phalanx.

As they approached the table the large figures resolved into men in full-combat gear, semiautomatics on hydraulic struts mounted to mottled green exoskeletons, pistons whirring behind their ankles with each step. Giant backpacks full of ammo and fuel and intelligence gear straddled their backs, long broad featherlike antenna waving gently from behind where their ears would be, if they had ears under their full-face helmets.

"It was rude of you to not show up at the appointed place" said Chow as he stood in front of the table, his hands tucked carefully in his beige suit coat's pockets. He hadn't stepped onto the stage yet.

"We do what we can" said Tonx. Their voices sounded dull over the IR connection. "You seem to have adapted."

Chow nodded. "You have brought the drive?" he asked.

"Yes" said Tonx. He gestured at the seat across the table from him. "Feel free to inspect it. You had some very interesting encryption there."

Chow grinned. He glanced at one of the armored soldiers next to him.

"Yes, thank you" he said. "You enjoyed the contents?"

Tonx shrugged. "Did you bring our data?"

"That is an interesting thing" said Chow. His suit wrinkled tightly around his belly as he moved.

"You know I have been using your program" he said. He watched Tonx out of one eye as he said it, his round head cocked to one side. Tonx said nothing.

"I know you know this. I have made arrangements with your friends, the Otaku. They have told me about your exit strategy, about the cars hidden in the back of the building."

Chow began to slowly pace to one side. "Furthermore, I know you have not cracked that drive. There is nothing to crack. I filled it with garbage and encrypted it using three different systems to give an impression of regularity. You have been wasting time."

Fed could hear Cessus' breathing through the data line, a thin rasping in and out.

"Finally" Chow said, "I told you to bring the programmer. He has done some brilliant work and" Chow waved his hands in a flourish, "I was excited to meet him." He pointed at Cessus. "This is not the author of the virus."

"How do you know that?" said Tonx. "Otaku don't know that."

Chow positively beamed. "I know."

"How?" demanded Tonx. Fed could hear Cessus's breath quicken.

The soldier to Chow's right slowly let his arms drop from the tight ready position he had held, his legs slowly easing upwards and into an easy slouch. The long barrel of the automatic flipped upwards as he fumbled at the helmet, slowly pulling it away to reveal Poulpe's head ensconced in taped-on sensors and carefully placed pieces of rubber padding. Thickly gloved fingers clumsily peeled away the tape and pulled back his hair.

"Surprise, Tonx" he said. "It is so very good to see you again."

"Poulpe" said Tonx, his voice flat. "You betrayed us."

"This is just business" mocked Poulpe. "Isn't that right? We may say that I found a better partner. Mr. Chow has made a very generous offer in exchange for my help with your brother's software. We stand to make substantial profit."

"Doing what?" asked Tonx.

Poulpe grinned and pushed the tip of his tongue against his lower lip as he glanced at Chow. "That doesn't matter, does it Tonx?"

"Where is Feed?" asked Chow, all traces of courtesy suddenly gone.

"Plan B" said Cessus urgently over the comm. "Plan B Goddamnit Plan fucking B do it do it now."

Cessus and Tonx suddenly disappeared through a gaping hole in the platform beneath them, the entire stage collapsing upon itself and over them like an obscene plywood origami. Something heavy shook the wall in front of Fed and one of the soldiers flew backwards to skid across the floor. The others began to the fire, goutts of yellowed light flinging thousands of tiny bullets around the perimeter of the room. Garbage-can sized cylinders rolled under the edge of the giant door and sprang into two wheeled halves, their middle a solid armored block, gridded baskets on their tops casting green laser light in scanning patterns across the room.

"Plan B!" screamed Cessus across the line. He was panting now, running somewhere. "Get out of here!"

He was interrupted by a roaring scream as the cylinders began to fire as they fanned out from underneath the door, bright white tracer rounds flying away from them like stars from gyroscopically spinning turrets in their tops. The soldiers followed the brightest clusters, charging ahead through the bullets.

There was a burst of flame as one of the robots exploded and Fed saw a Fuk Ching out on the floor for the first time. He was flying upwards and outwards like superman, driven through the air by the explosion, the metal plating of a robot's underbelly slowly falling away from his feet. He spread his arms as he rose, his legs slowly unfolding from the compressive shock, tiny globular pistols spitting dark clouds of some sort of grit towards the soldier underneath him. The arc of his flight peaked and he fell, gently tucking his feet back beneath him and collapsing into a roll that threw him past Fed's line of view. He saw another of them, a giant soldier spinning nimbly on his hydraulic exoskeleton to avoid the thick black gloves the Fuk Ching wore on his hands. They danced, the soldier sewing strips of lead across the floor and through the air, tracking the Fuk Ching as he leapt and spun around him. He didn't seem to be trying to hit the big soldier, didn't have a gun or a knife or anything. He just leaned in past the bend of the soldier's arm and put his hand against the joint - there, then flung himself back and under the line of fire before kicking himself forward and slapping his hand against the joint of the soldier's knee.

"Feed!" shouted Cass from below him. "Feed!"

Fed saw the soldier suddenly stumble and fall, his weapon sputtering inexplicably out. His arm flew out and Fed saw the man inside bend backward as he struggled to undo the armor. He was screaming. The Fuk Ching leapt forward towards him and as he did so a tracer round buried itself into the base of his skull, the force of the shot turning his leap into a dive, the burning metal shot expelling his brains as steam behind him as he flew.

"Feed!" yelled Cass again. "Come *on*!"

Just below him on the warehouse floor by where the table had stood Fed saw Poulpe. The Frenchman was bent over and waving his hands over his head in a bizarre bid for protection from the bullets filing the air around him. Another boom shook the room and the rifle attached to his arm shattered, tiny bits of shrapnel tearing the air over Poulpe's head. He looked at his arm for a moment, bewildered, before Chow appeared at his feet, clambering up out of the hole.

Cass was next to him then, on the platform.

"Feed, we need to go now. Pull it together. Come on."

Her voice was steady and solid, a real thing. Fed reached out and felt her strong hands grip his. She pulled him over to the ladder and got him heading down besides her. His goggles adjusted and he saw she was holding herself in place with her arms and legs propped out against each wall, her feet spread wide beneath the overcoat.

"Go" she said "Go and don't stop. I'll meet you at the bottom."

She disappeared, falling. Fed started to descend as fast as he could, a series of explosions rocking the wall the ladder was wielded to.

His comm crackled to life, his vision suddenly blooming as his data feeds reconnected.

"...fucked" came Cessus's voice. "The passage collapsed, probably explosives. We can't get out. Xing! Xing!"

There was a sudden hiss and a distant rattle from the comm line as Fed continued to descend.

"..dammit oh god" came Tonx's voice.

"What's going on?" asked Fed. Nothing. Fed repeated the question, panic biting into him, his hands slippery on the ladder as he tried to descend.

"Feed? You okay?" Tonx asked. He sounded strange, almost drunk.

"Yeah, I'm"

"This is going to hurt a little" interrupted Cessus's voice. Tonx screamed

"Where's Cass?" Cessus asked, then, "stop moving, I can't tie this thing off."

"She went down before me" said Fed. "What happened to Tonx?"

"Nothing" said Tonx, his voice suddenly firm. "Fed, listen. Xing's line was traced. He's cut off from communicating directly. We need to get Chow to the train. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, but"

"Just listen. Cessus is dumping the data to you now. You need to get Chow to follow you and then head out towards the northeast corner, the one the first Fuk Ching came from earlier, you remember? There's a secret exit there. Get to it and you'll find transport. Follow the map as fast as you can and get on that train!"

"How am I supposed to make Chow follow me?" asked Fed.

"You're the one that he wants, Feed. He needs you to alter the program. Poulpe's told him everything. It was a ruse. They only want you, Feed!"

"Stop moving!" said Cessus. "Tonx, this is a lot of blood, we need"

Their voices cut out. A tiny cursor in the corner of Fed's vision showed a successful download. Data expanded, a three dimensional map of the building, a thin dotted line curving out from his current location, down the ladder and the hallway and up the stairs and towards the northeast corner. The image rotated, went 2D, the line repeating itself before turning to half opacity. Fed's foot hit the ground, rocking him as his legs took up the shock.

As he wriggled out of the hole and into the hallway leading out to the main underground room he saw Cass standing silent next to the edge of the wall, a pistol in each hand. As he approached she glanced over at him and waved him back. She followed, grabbing his head with one gloved hand and holding his ear close to her face.

"There's two of them. They just finished off a set of Fuk Ching and are deciding what to do with them."

"Tonx said I need to get Chow to follow me" said Fed.

"I heard" she whispered. "I'll cover you."

"How?" he asked.

"Trust me" she said, her lips brushing his ear. "I'm a professional. Now get ready to run."

She stepped back towards the edge of the wall and bent down to something Fed couldn't see. Then she stood and glanced at him over her shoulder. She winked, a wry smile on her lips, the spiked strands of her black hair only lightly covering her eyes.

Then she stepped out into the room, her hands throwing back the edges of her coat in a wide sweep. Even from where he was standing Fed could read the confidence in her stride, the cocky power, the absolute certainty as she raised her pistols level in front of her.

"Hey, boys" she said.

A crack like the sound of a gatling gun going off filled the room, bang after bang as colored smoke suddenly flew up from something on the floor beyond. Cass's guns went off and she dived, out of Fed's vision, into the room. He ran forward.

The edge of Cass's coat flickered out of view and into a cloud of blue, sheets of smoke billowing up in green and red and yellow. The smoke glittered, metal powder flickering through it, jammer for the soldier's sensors. He caught sight of one of the soldiers as he ran towards the stairs, saw the long rifle stop in its slide away from him, reverse its motion.

Then he was up, on the stairs, his heart in his throat. He flew, bounding up the steps two, then four, then six at a time, leaping up and out of the stairway and into the room beyond.

He landed on the warehouse floor and almost fell, stopping dead into a tight crouch. The floor before him was littered with bodies and smoldering chunks of metal, a thick acrid smoke hovering a few feet off the ground. A flash of light caught his eye and he dove, a set of tracer rounds streaking through the air where he had stood. He slid to a stop and looked up, saw Poulpe carrying Chow in his arms almost at the far door.

"Chow" Fed screamed, but it did no good. The robots were firing more intensely now, tracer round cover split between him and a couple other spots in the room. Fed saw two of the soldiers move from the far wall towards him.

He stood up and waved his arms in the air. "It's me! I'm the programmer!" he yelled, running parallel to them towards Chow.

More tracer rounds filled the air and something cut into his arm, his leather coat suddenly smoking.

"It's me" he screamed, running faster now. One of the Fuk Ching, a corpse on the floor, inexplicably leapt up before him and rolled towards the soldiers, one arm trailing twisted and bloody behind him. Fed heard gunfire, but kept loping forward, uncertain, his head low.

"Chow" he screamed again, this time looking up to see Poulpe turned, Chow in his arms like a child, arguing as they looked back towards him. Poulpe let Chow fall as he recognized Fed, bringing one arm up to aim at him before he realized his weapon was gone. Chow landed on his ass in a heap, howling, and Poulpe sprang towards him into a dead run, letting the machine wrapped around his body choose the most efficient motions as it hurled him through space at Fed.

Fed felt blind terror strangle him, saw the spittle curl out in thick drops from Poulpe's wide sneer, felt time slow so there was nothing but the Frenchman's face and his own painful death rising up at him. Then he was twisting, running, his back almost horizontal in a tight curve over his pumping thighs, the bend in his legs getting deeper and deeper, each step pushing him faster and faster as the sensors in his legs adjusted their tension, their give, to meet his need. Fed ran, and the faster he ran the further he flew.

Something sparked on the floor in front of him and he leapt, his speed turning his jump into a sudden free fall, his body curving forward as his center of gravity revealed itself. His legs were almost weightless and his torso spun, his head heading towards the ground. Fed saw the floor rise up beneath him, the horizon to his rear lifting until he saw Poulpe, upside down, charging towards him. Then he landed, his shoulder taking the impact as he rolled across the floor in a clattering heap and was up again, his feet finding purchase on the bloodstained floor as he danced past one half of a Fuk Ching, over entrails spilled across the floor.

Fed didn't have time to notice. He ran, his angle of approach changed now, ducking and weaving. Another set of tracer rounds flew past his legs. They were trying to cripple him; they weren't shooting for his body, Fed thought.

As he got closer his goggles adjusted for the shadow, the tracer rounds blanking everything out in half-second flashes. There was nothing there. The two corrugated metal walls met over the solid cement floor, metal studs in a line six inches from their junction on both sides. Fed tried to stutter to a stop and failed, tipping over and rolling again, his head battering

against the concrete before his feet fell into place in front of him just before the wall, leveraging him up and sideways. He saw Poulpe reaching for him as his head rose and twisted, the force of his motion pulling him standing and then over himself, backwards into the wall.

And through it. He felt the metal give way like sheets of plastic and he fell, a foot or more, onto his elbows on the tarmac in a dark place. His goggles cranked up the light enhancement as he scrambled to his feet, a sudden pounding as he heard Poulpe hit the wall in front of him. A tiny light on his leg blinked in time with a similar LED, lonely in the darkness on the corner of the wall. Some sort of ID recognition Cass must have installed. Fed hugged his knees for a moment, gasping desperately for breath, and then stood and turned.

In the dim monochrome of his goggles the motorcycle in front of him looked like some sort of animal, a sleek solid carbon-fiber monstrosity of overdeveloped torque-producing machinery. Most of the fairing had been removed except for a tiny wind guard, the shiny metal and black carbon-fiber pieces glimmering like scales in Fed's vision. A helmet sat on the seat, a nearly vertical affair meant more for mounting than sitting on. The wall behind him clanged again, and several loud bangs were followed by giant dents appearing in its surface.

Fed reached for the helmet, pulling his goggles down around his neck and plunging himself into darkness as he did so.

#62

"Tonx?"

"Yeah, Cessus?"

"Why you smell so bad?"

"Shut up Cessus."

It was quiet, a stillness broken only by Cessus shuffling around in their tiny space, struggling to get comfortable next to where Tonx lay in the darkness.

"It's only your legs, Tonx."

"I know. That's why I need you to shut up."

"They got surgeries for this, you know. I heard about these Icelanders, they done some *crazy* shit."

"I know, Cessus. I know. That's why I need you to shut up. I need to figure a way to get out of here."

There was a long silence then, the only sound an occasional vibration as the soldiers above jogged nearby their location. What they were doing they couldn't tell.

"Tonx?"

"Yeah, Cessus?"

"You mind if I smoke?"

Somewhere in Beijing a traffic controller, seated in front of thirty monitors flickering different views of each traffic intersection in the city, was in the process of losing his job. He was crouched over the control board, both hands tracing quick circles in the air, his mouth flapping wetly and silently. He had just called his boss and told him that the AI in control of the traffic system wasn't responding anymore. His boss, who had been trying to enjoy a very expensive exotic massage with a disappointingly overweight Korean call girl, had run into his office and opened a terminal to discover that things were working fine. He even called his administrative assistant to verify against recent satellite imagery.

"There's hardly any traffic at all, you idiot!" he said.

"I know sir! That's the problem, sir!" said the traffic controller. "It's early Saturday morning, sir! There should be a LOT of traffic!"

"You're fired!" his boss said, terminating the connection.

It was a bad decision.

The Beijing West Railway Station was an enormous complex, thousands of trains running like clockwork. At one time it had been renowned for its efficiency and security, police saluting smartly in every hallway.

Not now. A man, large for China, wearing a pink shirt and baby-blue pants sporting cleverly interwoven Domino Pizza icons strode quickly toward track #12. The conductor's lounge was near there and despite meager attendance on the long-range lines in recent years the maglev trains still ran regularly, even early in the morning. The man held a stack of six pizzas in one hand, his other hand lingering near his face, massaging the thick black moustache there.

He came to the conductor's lounge door and knocked three times sharply, doing his best to straighten his back and

remember his lines.

The door opened and Mr. Bei Ke opened the door.

The man recited eighteen words in Chinese as one long word, sung slightly out of tune and decidedly not the way any Chinese person would.

Mr. Bei Ke blinked. He had been a conductor for nearly two years now, mostly taking night shifts because he could get away with smoking in the cab of the train. He peered out at the strange foreigner holding the pizzas and didn't like what he saw.

"Mei you" he said, pushing at the man's arm. He pointed towards the center of the station, towards the administrative offices. The man's arm didn't move, and neither did the man.

"Uh, ah, um... it's free!" said the man, breaking into a big smile. Mr. Bei Ke's coworker, also named Bei Ke, got up from the lounge where they had been watching a cooking show and approached the door. Mr. Bei Ke 2 was much larger than Mr. Bei Ke 1, and fancied himself to be a bit of a roughabout. He puffed out his chest and stepped in-between the two. "Mei you!" he said, authoritatively. As he did he noticed that the pizza boxes seemed to all be full, which was unusual. Normally when the bigwigs in the main offices ordered food they got drugs included, which made the pizza boxes sag.

"Hanyu zenme yang? How do you say?" said the man, pointing at the pizzas.

"Hanyu zenme yang" chuckled Mr. Bei Ke 2. He said something rude about foreigners, still eyeing the pizza. A moment of decision came and he leaned forward and snatched the pizza boxes. Mr. Bei Ke #1 immediately made a fuss, tossing his hands about and rushing to the doorway to peer out and down the hallway.

"Hanyu zenme yang?" the man said again. Mr. Bei Ke #1 turned towards him, now seriously wondering if foreigners all had mental deficiencies that made them deliver pizzas to the wrong address in the middle of the night while trying to improve their bad Chinese.

The man grabbed the back of Mr. Bei Ke's head and shoved the muzzle of a gun so deep down his throat his Adam's apple bulged like some sort of bizarre scrotum. Mr. Bei Ke 2 dropped the piece of pizza he had been hastily shoving down his own throat, his eyes beading in sudden tears.

"Hanyu zenme yang, motherfuckers" said the man.

#63

As soon as Fed had put on the helmet he discovered the same sort of map layout superimposed over his view as the one that Cessus had forwarded to his goggles. Stats on the bike ran along the left hand side of the helmet's faceplate, the right hand side framed in one long thin pale column. He'd found thick motorcycle gloves inside the helmet, felt them auto adjust to a snug fit as soon as he pulled them on. As he crawled up onto the bike it started itself, a tiny red bar flaring to life along the column, darting upwards in time to the throaty growl. Fed found himself laying across the bike's tank, and as he sat he felt the seat slowly reach up and wrap itself against his ass. He couldn't touch the floor, and didn't know how he was going to kick off the kickstand. Fed sat in the dark, the monster bike underneath him growling and shaking, unable to see or hear. He looked around, trying to make out the features of the room as he sat in the dark, trying to shuffle the bike forward or find some lever or switch that would release him.

Fed saw a tiny white countdown in the corner of his vision, noticed it as it went from 3 to 2. He scrabbled for the handlebars.

The doors blew off the front of the tiny shack built into the fake rear wall of the warehouse accompanied by carefully aimed smoke bombs and a magnetic charge designed to throw off any electrical sensors. The bike tore out of the hole and past the spinning smoke bombs so fast Fed felt his tongue mash down against his Adam's apple, felt his individual vertebrae compress. Tiny glyphs in the left of his field of vision showed the bike auto shift from second to third to fourth gear faster than he could read. The map flashed, a sharp bend in the white dotted line indicating that he was supposed to turn.

Fed gently leaned on the left handlebar and the bike dove for the ground, the tires licking up pavement like it was candy. Fed's field of view flashed red and then clear again in a rapid staccato and he bounced against the auto control, pulling out of the curve just before his kneecap was spread like liver pate across eighteen meters of cement. The bike, sensing a straightaway, pushed forward again, flicking through gears in quick, heady surges. Fed realized he was roaring between warehouses, saw the map showing a vast empty space ahead of him. As he drew closer the map expanded, showing a label on the wide blank spot: Lake Beihai.

He realized he had the throttle pulled wide open, knuckles clenched, and gently eased off the accelerator, peering ahead for the turn he was supposed to take in the dim light ahead. Sparks flew up from the ground ahead of him. Someone was shooting at him.

Jerking his head around he saw a humvee bearing down on him, Poulpe leaning out of its roof still wrapped in the mechanical carapace, a tiny pistol held with both of his thickly gloved hands. Fed had let the bike almost idle out as he tried to figure where he was going and now he cranked it, tossing the front tire up before the bike's frame bent itself and realigned to the torque, shooting him forward. He saw the turn now and leaned into it, setting the angle and sliding along it like he

was on a rail. The adrenaline overload in his brain finally pierced the fog of panic and everything clicked into sudden, painfully bright crystal clarity and he *drove*, hauling back on the throttle as he wove through another two turns, tight alleys in the maze of warehouses. The bright lights of the humvee behind him winked out as he left them behind, the bike flying ahead like a rocket.

Fed entered a straightaway, a long run the map said should take him past four or five separate warehouses before he came to a broad road. He pulled back on the throttle again just as he noticed a bright light descending from the sky. Two hundred meters ahead and above him a matte black military helicopter bristling with weaponry and antenna was falling slow-mo through the sky. It was bright because it was on fire, big gouts of flame pouring from the armored panels on its flank. Fed slowed to a stop, blinking stupidly as he saw it sink and crumple against the ground.

There was a boom. Fed's helmet covered his face but he felt the heat against his chest, through his open jacket. His kneecaps felt suddenly burnt.

A giant insect flew in then and tried to convince him to get moving. Fed realized he was in shock, that he was hallucinating. The insect was nearly three feet long and looked like a giant pink penis. It had a propeller, too, a couple of them. The thing spun lengthwise a few times before stopping in a horizontal line level with the ground, gaudy red lights along its length running in series to Fed's left. Fed shook his head and reached for his helmet, trying to ignore the thing's frantic spinning around as he did so.

Then it stopped spinning and turned towards him and a little green rocket flew out of its tip, leaving behind a tiny trail of propellant, and Fed realized he wasn't hallucinating. The rocket went right over his left shoulder and as he jerked his head to see where it was going he accidentally pulled on the throttle and jerked forward again, almost falling over as he wove left. The explosion behind him pushed him up and he was moving again, parallel to the water between two warehouses.

The big bug appeared floating ahead of him, spinning counter-clockwise and then clockwise twice in quick succession before he picked up speed. It aligned itself with him and the red lights flashed along its length, pointing forward. Fed rode, and it popped out of sight heading upwards.

The warehouses gave way to a broad field and a tiny service road. Fed slowed slightly as he came onto it, curving right. As he rounded the side of it he saw the bug ahead of him, further down the road and parallel to the warehouse he was passing. He picked up speed, noticing as he did so that they were heading further away from the main road and the route marked on the map.

As he approached the bug it spun a couple times towards his left, stopping briefly as it bobbed gently in the air to flash its lights to go left.

"I hope you know where we're going" muttered Fed to himself, easing off the road and into the dirt. The tall weeds there made it impossible to see, and as he bounced and rattled across the ruts he began to wonder about the miracles of irrigation, about how far they'd taken the use of ditches here in China.

Then the bug was in front of him again, its strip of red lights flashing in unison, hovering steadily in place. He slowed, then stopped.

Far away down to his right he saw the familiar yellow lights that marked the top of a freightliner. It was good to see, although the driver was apparently having some sort of trouble. The top of the cab was shuddering and shaking every few seconds, waving even. As it came closer Fed heard a crunching sound, followed by a tremendous roar and the squeal of tires. The bug blinked again and floated off ahead of him.

Fed edged forward and up a sharp rise, the bike hunching over to move his center of gravity as it climbed. Then he was up and onto a four-lane highway littered with dark, motionless cars.

Fed stopped and looked to his right, noticing as he did so the lights of the city rising up against the clouds, giant towers glittering in a rising spike. He looked to his left, nodded dumbly at the giant freighter laid neatly across the entire length of the road. People were slowly coming out of their cars, punching comm buttons as they called their security system providers to threaten lawsuits for their cars suddenly turning off "as a deterrent against theft."

"You crazy-ass motherfuckers" breathed Fed against the inside of his helmet. A little motor whirred to life, whisking his hot breath away. In front of him the bug spun and bobbed, point towards the city.

Fed turned, noticing that as he did so the cars nearby and for a few hundred meters ahead had started flashing their lights, their internal speakers blaring some sort of emergency warning. The people who had been swarming onto the road vanished, darting for their cars, and Fed slowly leaned on the throttle, eating up the empty road.

#64

The rooftop of an unusually tall low-income apartment building somewhere between the warehouse district and downtown Beijing was inexplicably closed. Several lovebirds had been very distraught to discover their usual meeting place locked so tight, but the cinch bars latched onto the door's outer side kept them out.

On the wide plane of the rooftop a jungle gym of antenna and satellite dishes sprouted from one central mount, blossoming upwards like the flowers of some huge plant. Nestled among them was a giant beach umbrella spray-painted the same gray color as the satellite dishes, and under it sat a comfortable-looking lawn chair and a folding card table.

Sandwiched between the two was a slightly overweight Hispanic-looking gentleman, a large, colorful headset obscuring most of his face. He was sipping from a big plastic container with a transparent domed lid, the thick straw showing a steady stream of tiny pea-sized lumps ascending through the milky liquid. It was bubble tea, and Baby had discovered that he loved it within fifteen minutes of touching down in China.

"Okayyy..." he mumbled, both hands slowly fluttering over the two joysticks on the table in front of him. His field of view had maps over maps, tiny matching readouts next to each showing temperature, fuel, speed, latitude and the like. In the middle of them all was a window replaying the bug's view of Fed as he pulled the throttle and roared off towards the field, the flanges of his mechanical legs finding the tiny foot posts on the bike like he'd been born riding it.

"Boy's a fucking natural" chuckled Baby, canceling the video feed. He studied the maps again more carefully, noted the tiny red dot moving swiftly down the highway. Far to its right three green dots were navigating a series of local roads, moving to intercept him. As Baby watched a similar set of dots suddenly appeared on the highway close behind Fed. Baby clucked his tongue and pattered his fingers against the two joysticks, slowly wiping his hands before bending over the side of the table. He sat up holding an oversized, no-nonsense, matte-gray joystick. It was an expensive item, stolen by certain key people under Big Circle's employ, and Baby was very pleased to be able to use it. He jacked in and watched a grid unfold, aligning itself with the maps he already had open. Baby chuckled again and took another pull on his bubble tea before slowly wrapping his fingers around the joystick in front of him. He breathed deeply, slowly, and began to caress it.

A visual appeared in a window in front of him, a top-down image of the highway, the city at its edge. He touched the joystick and it zoomed in, slowly resolving on a tiny motorcycle and three humvees racing down an aisle of motionless cars. At the center of the image was a transparent red circle almost the width of the middle two lanes. The herk-jerk of the image slowly settled, steadily tracking the three cars. The red circle hovered over them, wavering slightly left and right to encompass the passenger cars to either side, cars full of innocent Chinese wondering why they were locked in and who was driving by.

Baby exhaled slowly and his thumb flickered against the base of the joystick. The red circle got a little darker, then lightened again, and the three green dots suddenly slowed.

Somewhere behind Fed an obscenely powerful burst of microwave radiation lanced out of the sky and charred the three humvees behind him into melted slag, hot pools of metal spilling forward into otherworldly sculptures all over the road.

Feed didn't notice.

He was not having a good time. His back was cramping up being hunched over the bike and he hadn't seen any sign of Chow's military since he'd gotten on the road. It was too long on one track, and the white line just kept scrolling forward.

Eventually he got cold enough to try to zip up his jacket again, riding one handed as he glanced behind him. He didn't manage to get the stuck zipper moving, but he did discover that the gloves had chords built in. As he tugged at the zipper a tiny set of Chinese characters appeared, scrolling down the right-hand side of the helmet's HUD alongside the accelerometer. It ended in a question, followed by a "yes/no." He keyed in "yes" and chorded the usual "hello world." Sure enough, the words appeared along the bottom of the screen.

It was tricky, chording and driving at the same time, but before long Fed had discovered a whole host of feeds streaming into his helmet, all encrypted. Each was formatted differently, and it took him a while to figure out that he was looking at a toolset Cessus must have built on top of a series of Xing's boy's hacks. The bike's gyroscopic force kept it level as Fed raced onward toward the city. Fed's eyes grew hard under the helmet as he correlated the data, backtracked through apps, dissected command sets. He was looking at Plan B.

Fifteen minutes later he pulled off the main road, roughly thirty blocks away from the train station, and slowed to a stop behind a corn syrup tanker refilling its tanks. The bike shimmied and grumbled as it idled, a low grind that almost matched the sound of helicopters coming in from the south, back the way he had come. but Fed was temporarily away.

Baby had fed the bright red cord through the unusually thick antenna main some hours before, and lowering it to a near horizontal was easy. He connected the mains to it and carefully disconnected everything else except for his joystick and comm. They ran on battery power and were tied into the same geosynchronous satellites he'd used to fry Fed's pursuers. A squat square block with four accordioned legs was slowly waddling away from him, pincers mounted on its top holding the twelve-meter metal-ceramic amalgam tube. Baby hustled back under the gray canopy and settled himself into the lawn chair, pulling on his headset and fiddling with the joystick as the horizon bobbed back and forth with the motion of the robot. He chuckled to himself and rubbed his hands together gleefully before finishing the last of the bubble tea and tossing the container on the rooftop next to him. This was the part he'd been hoping for the whole trip.

Suddenly the horizon spun, the distant cityscape spinning by. His hands clenched and hammered on the joystick with no result, and he scrambled up in his seat, tearing at the headset.

Down past his feet, at the end of the long tube, the robot was double-timing to the left, away from Baby.

"What the hell are you doing" he screamed, his hands still flying over the joystick. He pulled the headset down again and saw the view suddenly resolve, then zoom in faster than his eyes could follow. The visual snapped to and Baby was suddenly looking at a set of tanks rolling down the road towards him in the distance.

"Urk" said Baby. There weren't supposed to be tanks there. He was going to use the gun on the helicopters that were coming in from the south.

Overlaid against his view of the tanks came a series of red and green lines, and as he watched code spun out in a column on the right-hand side. A google page flew up, jumped to a page about high-speed magnetic physics, and a formula flew from the page and dropping into the code. The visual turned to wire frame, the lead tank suddenly plucked out and pasted against a visual recognition window, statistical data spilling from the google window and also snapped up into the code. The red and green lines shuffled themselves, once, then twice, then aligned themselves in a gentle arc along the event horizon of the tank treads. The visual zoomed in until all Baby could see were the treads, and the red and green lines began to blink. Behind the visual warning notices suddenly began to pop up, bright red warning notices in several languages, most of the English ones including terms like "extremely dangerous," and "Fatal." One very prominent window read "Overload."

Baby yelled and slapped the headset to transparent, leaping up and entangling the top of the headset in the canopy. He struggled free and danced around the giant capacitor mounted against the bottom of the tube, his hands grasping at nothing, his mouth making a little "O" over and over again. He turned and ran alongside the tube towards the robot, his hands in the air, not noticing when the cable to the joystick on the table behind him reached its limit and pulled out of his headset with a little "ping." He hopped over the tube as the robot made a minute, last-minute adjustment, then straddled it and waddled forward as fast as he could as he came close and prepared to grab it.

There was a loud "zot" and a dopplered "zing" as the air around the tube vibrated out of the magnetic spectrum. A second later a thundercrack sounded as the metal rod that had previously been housed inside the tube split the air at several times the speed of sound. It left a tracer in the air, tiny waves of split hydrogen atoms flickering back together, creating a track from the tip of the rail gun forward and down the long road away from Baby. He slapped the headset again, little bits of glitter descending from the Mary painted on its front, and slowly let his jaw descend. The row of tanks now had only one set of treads apiece, smoking bits of metal littering the road where the wheels on their right-hand side had been. A blank space in Baby's field of visual suddenly sprouted data, shouted commands and screams in Chinese coming through a previously dead channel. They'd been on radio silence, operating outside of the visual spectrum. A moment later Baby's headset faded to black, the sounds fading to a dull distant whine.

"Fatalities: 0" scrolled across his headset. Then, "Distractions: 1."

Baby heard the sound of helicopters approaching.

His headset scrolled another message, and this time Baby listened. It read, simply, "Run."

Feed shoved off the side of the syrup tanker and pulled out of the lot, turning to head back the way he had come. Chow was approaching, but more slowly now, and the attack on the tanks weren't going to encourage him any. Feed didn't have to go far; only a few blocks down the road he could see sirens atop the military humvees. He waited until they were almost directly in sight before waddling forward onto the road atop the bike, making a show of trying to get the thing started. There was a loud crunch as one of the humvees swiped a car getting past it and Fed leapt forward, tearing ahead and towards the train station, trying hard not to think about the weapons pointed at his back.

He made it moments ahead of them and came to a stop right outside the station. It was deserted, the parking lot almost empty, florescent lights flickering in and out across the vast empty plane in front of the giant complex. Feed didn't know how to shut the bike off so he let it slow to neutral and then jumped off. The bike wobbled and flicked out its kickstand, the engine clicking off behind him.

Feed pulled off the helmet and snapped his goggles up and into place. He'd re-routed the data feeds to his own comm, and now he slapped the helmet into shutdown as he strode purposefully into the station, following a map only he could see.

He took two turns down a short and a long corridor, then stopped in front of an unmarked service door. He knocked, twice, and stared up with hard eyes as it was opened.

Marcus caught the helmet and stared in surprise at the man standing in front of him.

"You got a gun I could use?" asked Feed.

Marcus nodded, surrendering a tiny brown pistol.

"You know how to use it?" he asked.

Feed's fingers fluttered against the inside of the motorcycle gloves as he sucked down data about the pistol.

"I do now" he said, slapping out the cartridge and checking the bullet count before slamming it shut again and sticking it in the hem of his pants, against the small of his back. He nodded briefly at Marcus before spinning on his heel and leaving the way he had come.

Marcus closed the door behind him and carefully misted the inside of the helmet with bleach, wiping down the headset and changing the air filter. He took out a small plastic bag of gray powder and dusted the helmet with it. He checked the tiny headset he'd brought with him to make sure the corridor was empty and pulled himself up onto his crutches before slowly hobbling out of the room.

Marcus made his way to the end of the same corridor Fed had left by before unlocking and squeezing into a tiny broom closet. He leaned back on his crutches and watched the data through the headset. He waited a while, watching information stream by, trying to figure out what had happened to Cessus and Cass and Xing and Feed. There was no sign of them; the

lines were silenced, which meant that either they'd been cracked by Chow's men or that everyone was dead. He eventually gave up worrying; there was nothing he could do about it except to fulfill his part of the plan. He'd seen the look in Feed's eyes - he would have to take care of the rest. He was the only one who could.

#65

The cameras throughout the train station fed into a semi-public feed, terminals mounted at each hallway junction flipping through different views. The most prominent, frequently seen image was of the main entrance, of the doors through which Feed had marched only a few minutes before. Now that view was filled with an increasing expanse of angry-looking Chinese youth. Three or four dozen punks of varying flavors hopped around and punched at each other to the tune of antique Brit-Punk. "Anarchy in the UK" was chorused with no "r"s or "l"s, blaring from a cheap local broadcast through the trashy scooters parked haphazardly in clusters around the lot. They were loitering, biding time, building up their courage. Hands sought pockets with lengths of chain hidden within them, fingered kitchen knives wrapped in antiseptic towelettes carefully placed to remove any DNA in case they were used.

Chow watched from the end of the street leading to the station and silently ground his teeth. He needed the programmer, needed him to rework the virus so Chow could re-use it on his own, so his rogue French geneticist could fulfill his remaining promises. Instead he waited, watching the punks in the parking lot, the empty stalls without cars, the silent street they were parked on.

"Why are we waiting?" hissed Poulpe. He had little bits of white fluff sticking to the back of his arms and legs, tiny cotton strands from where his exoskeleton had torn up the car seat as he wormed around like an anxious child. "We just saw him go in there!"

"Why are these young people here?" asked Chow, more to himself than Poulpe. The two soldiers in the back of the car kept quiet, eyes watching the slowly waning charge on their suits' battery indicators.

"Does it matter?" asked Poulpe. "We can take care of them, yes?" Poulpe was becoming increasingly difficult to handle. He was drunk on the power of the suit and knew neither how to handle it nor its limitations.

Somebody came out of the train station and the crowd leapt up. A familiar-looking motorcycle helmet was waved in the air and the punks streamed in through the front doors, disappearing within.

Chow cursed and pressed one of his cufflinks, subvocalizing a command in Chinese. The other humvee pulled out and plowed up the stairs and to the front doors of the station, four soldiers leaping out as they powered on their suits. They disappeared inside.

The rest of them waited. The cameras aimed at the parking lot showed the scooters, tiny LEDs and day-glo stickers vibrating slightly to the tune of the music blaring from their tinny speakers. The empty humvee idled, tracer lining sparking blue lances of electricity around the handles and windows. An old newspaper appeared at the far end of the lot and slowly traversed it, carried by an untraceable wind.

One of the soldier's voices crackled across the radio. Chow asked a question, got the same answer: "Fatchan."

Chow cursed again, louder this time, and threw the humvee into drive. He leaned across Poulpe as he pulled the car out into the street and towards the station, took a pistol from the glove compartment.

"Fatchan?" asked Poulpe.

"Triads" hissed Chow. "The Triads are after him."

"Move! Move! Move!" screamed Feed, waving his pistol in the air. He had found the right train and gotten on the first car, his pistol and goggles and oversized gloves driving the pair of occupants there through the doors like rabbits. He ran through to the next car, found no one, then onward. There were thirty cars in all, and he only found a handful of occupants. In the seventh car he had to kick a drunk awake, screaming death-threats the man would never understand. He finally got to the end, pulled open the door and crossed to the final car.

This car terminated in a solid silver wall at the far end, no handle visible. Its seats were the same as all the rest of the train, plain hard green plastic tilted in 90-degree angles, booth seating only. Feed was startled to see a slightly balding head in the last seat, and jogged up to it, gun extended, one hand chording up access to the station camera system through a hack the Otaku and Cessus had put in place earlier that week.

"Get out" he said, breathing hard now. "Get the fuck out of here."

The man in front of him did nothing. He was in his fifties, yet another worn and wearied salary man, deep wrinkles around his mouth and bags around his eyes. He seemed tired, his dark suit seemed tired, his plain, carefully cut fingernails at the end of his old hands, resting on his knees, seemed tired.

When Feed pointed the gun at his forehead the man no longer seemed tired anymore. He straightened, slightly, and gently cocked his head to one side. One corner of his mouth twitched up and he shook his head no.

"Get out!" screamed Feed. He was starting to shake a little, now, the adrenaline eating away at his nerves. "Get out of the fucking train!"

The man slowly bent over and covered his head with his hands.

"Get out! Get out get out get out!" screamed Feed. He reached over and shoved the man.

Something didn't feel right, when he did that, and he backed up. Cursors in the corner of his vision showed alarms tripping, showed the helmet leaving the building, coming back in again. Feed moved to the far seat opposite the man and sat down.

"Just don't fucking move" he said, carefully switching on the gun's safety and tabbing up the visuals on his goggles. "Just don't move."

The first four soldiers had caught up to a large group of punks and slaughtered the lot of them, their cries of "Barbarian" as they peeked through doorways turning to screams of fear, then the silence of death. They were deep in the warren of tunnels and pathways now, their headsets painting an ordered path for them to follow. They had thought they had a lead on where the punks were going, or at least where a lot of them were going, but now they weren't sure. They were chording inputs to each other, trying to come to a decision when the lead soldier flashed a hand up for silence. The mics on their exoskeletons picked up a shuffling tap-tap-slide, tap-tap-slide. Their rifles snapped to and they fell into standard position, two against the wall, one bent in front, one standing behind. Marcus turned the corner ahead of them, hobbling forward on his crutches.

"Ting" announced one of the soldiers, his rifle aimed at Marcus's forehead. Marcus stopped and slowly spread his feet, letting his crutches fall to the ground on either side of him. He balled his huge fists and raised them in front of him, his bloodshot eyes deep-set and glittering.

"You know what's so great about being big?" he asked. The two soldiers on either side of the corridor exchanged smiles, their guns dipping as they watched the lead man walk forward and raise the butt of his rifle to knock Marcus aside. Their exoskeletons gave them strength and speed, power this crippled foreigner couldn't match no matter how big he was.

"It's because everyone thinks you're stupid" Marcus said. The lead soldier slowed as he approached, a look of fear spreading over his face as the regulated oxygen supply to his helmet suddenly sputtered out. At the same time his suit stopped moving, its weight no longer a support. The soldiers were in peak physical condition, but as Marcus watched they slowly let their arms drop and their backs bend, their knees giving way one by one as the weight of their battery packs drove them to the ground like old men. Their curses turned to huffing for breath and then, slowly, to tired whimpers. Marcus bent over, wheezing, and picked up his crutches.

"I know how you feel" he said, blowing out his cheeks as he held his breath, easing himself back to standing. He leaned over and slapped a panel on the wall. Tiny spigots in the ceiling stopped spitting out the bacterial mist that had been showering the soldiers, bacteria designed to eat through the rubber housing sealing the conduits from the battery packs to the exoskeletons they wore, to dissolve the junction cables there that powered the suits.

"Clever shit" said Marcus, looking down at the soldiers. "My friend Tonx designed it."

The soldier said something in Chinese, heaving for breath, his face turning red through the thick glass of his helmet. Marcus didn't understand, didn't care to understand. He nodded solemnly at the soldier.

He held up the headset and peered through it again. "You better hope he's okay" he said quietly.

Chow made Poulpe stay behind the two soldiers in the lead, had to keep telling him to keep back, to cover their rear.

"I am not here for covering rear" said Poulpe. He had found the bayonet that attached to the end of his suit's arm and was waving it around like a mechanical grim reaper. The first thing he had done upon entering the station was to punch a hole in one wall and puncture a water line, tripping an alarm and flooding the main room with water. Now they sloshed out and to higher ground, stopping at a set of terminals showing groups of punks running down hallways, civilians cowering in doorways and being left behind, the first group of four soldiers running down a long corridor in standard point formation.

"There" said Poulpe. "Next to that statue of a boy." He pointed and they caught a glimpse of a slight, mechanical-legged figure slipping behind it and out of view. One of the soldiers consulted a map on his HUD and said something to Chow.

"Follow me" said Chow to Poulpe. Chow's pants legs were soaking wet, but he still commanded the soldiers with authority, an authority Poulpe found both distracting and annoying. He had been enjoying himself a great deal since he had met Chow, had made use of the resources Chow allowed him to explore several pharmaceuticals he had not allowed himself in a long time.

They strode down the hallway, their hydraulic legs sending them gliding past and around Chow, his shiny Italian leather shoes double-timing to their every step. Poulpe found himself in the rear, and took the opportunity to relax himself a bit with a tiny aerosol spray can. It hissed lightly, coating the inside of his palate with a minty flavored combination of several carefully selected drugs. Time slowed, the hallway stretched out in front of him, and Poulpe became delightfully aware of the interplay of light on the shiny portions of his fellow soldier's exoskeletons.

Chow heard the hiss and grimaced, but did not turn around.

They entered the main hall and saw eight of the punks disappear around the same statue they had seen Feed by.

"Hurry!" said Chow, breaking into a trot. The two soldiers overtook him, looking down at him in pained anxiety.

"Go!" said Chow, then breaking into Chinese he gave them open license to do what was necessary to take Feed alive

and to prevent his capture by the Triads. They broke into fluid trots, then a flat-out run as they rounded the corner and out of sight.

"Carry me" said Chow to Poulpe. "And don't drop me this time."

Poulpe was tired of this. He was the mastermind behind this coup, had arranged everything since he'd first met Feed and sensed the potential there. He was not destined to answer to little, arrogant, public officials.

"To hell with you" said Poulpe, wetting his lips slightly with the tip of his tongue as he savored the taste of the words.

"Do it or I send you back to Disney" said Chow. He was through with being nice; it was time the Frenchman knew who was in charge and what the consequences for failure were. Poulpe didn't smile. His dreamy eyes narrowed. Chow had been doing his homework, he was disappointed to discover. He had learned somehow about the training Poulpe had received, about the conditioning he himself had designed for Disney to use with its top engineers. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny tin.

"What are you doing? Pick me up! We are falling behind!" said Chow.

"I need focus, Monsieur" said Poulpe. He was having a difficult time making himself do this. He could feel from the distant clench in his chest that as soon as he did he wouldn't be having any fun anymore. He was having a lot of fun right now, was really, really enjoying the slightly orgasmic chills running across the hairs of his arms, the tender pull of his calves under the support straps of the suit. He pulled out a plain white pill from the tin and gently set it on his tongue. Chow watched as he closed his mouth, chewed once, and swallowed. His pupils abruptly tightened to pinheads, as sharply as if he'd walked out of a cave and looked at the sun.

"As you ordered, sir" he said, scooping Chow up off his feet. He broke into an awkward run, the suit picking up the pace and turning it into a rapid glide as they went. Chow hung on, startled, his arms around Poulpe's neck. The stale antiseptic smell of the Frenchman's sweat swirled around them and they hurried down the corridor, the other two soldiers turning and running out of view at the other end. There were screams and an explosion. The comm on Poulpe's shoulder hissed to life, a gurgle of Chinese followed by several words that were sharply cut off. The sound of machine-gun fire rattled against the walls and down the hall towards them.

The room beyond was another antechamber, a huge sculpture of a man in traditional bamboo armor standing on a dais at its center. Bodies littered the room, punks splayed out in bloody repose. The body of one of the soldiers was prone on the floor, a long filet knife somehow woven between the protective plates of his suit and buried in his neck. The remaining soldier was firing at an archway extending off to their left, and he nodded quickly at Chow as they stepped into the room. He pointed once at the comm mounted to his chest, drawing attention to the single bullet hole there.

"Nice shooting" gasped Poulpe, the drugs making him heave for breath despite the suit. The soldier waved at them and held up one finger before pointing at the archway. He jogged up to the wall next to it and waited, watching Chow for orders. Next to and over his head a row of terminals showed a set of three trains pulled up next to their platforms in the room beyond, the empty lot in front of the train station, the water-filled front room. The sound of shouting came from the room beyond, then a tearing metal sound. The shouting dimmed.

"Go!" barked Chow, pointing at the doorway. The soldier stepped out and around the corner, pressing his back up against the other side of the wall. Poulpe stepped forward before they saw the center of the man's torso explode, the wall blowing back towards them, splattering the floor with gore.

"Merde" shouted Poulpe, scrambling backwards, reaching to scoop the blood from his eyes. He started to hop up and down, his adrenal gland in overdrive, unable to hear in the echo of the explosion.

"Let me go! Let me go!" screamed Chow. He produced a gun from somewhere and snapped the butt hard against the side of Poulpe's nose, breaking it cleanly. The Frenchman released the Chinaman, dropping him to his feet as he struggled to see.

"Now. Go!" said Chow, pointing at the archway.

"To hell with you" said Poulpe, his fingers feeling the light grind of broken bone that he'd certainly feel most keenly later. He spat bloody phlegm at the smaller man's feet.

Chow bared his teeth and glared up at the Frenchman. He didn't need this right now. He needed obedience, he needed service. The sound of breaking glass rang out from the train tracks and they could hear the punk's whooping yells echoing from inside somewhere.

"You will cover me" Chow said. "And we will discuss later." He turned and checked his pistol before peering once, quickly, around the corner. Poulpe paused long enough to pull the semiautomatic rifle from the first soldier's belt, then jogged up behind Chow.

There was no one to see. The door to the first car on the second train had been ripped open with a crowbar, the windows along its near side shattered. As they watched they heard more windows breaking further down the train, out of sight.

"There!" said Chow, his pistol flashing as he shot down the near platform.

"What?" asked Poulpe. "What are you shooting at?" The dark gap between the near train and the wall was barely three feet wide, lined with electrified cables and rails and razor wire to prevent the homeless from sleeping there.

"I saw a someone" said Chow. He was jerking his gun straight-armed in front of him, left-right, left-right.

"You are nervous, Mr. Chow" said Poulpe. He flipped the safety off his own gun, considering his options. He wondered if Chow had reestablished contact with his data center, if his death would trigger a recording of audio or visual data.

Chow quieted, taking in their position, the lines of fire.

"What now?" asked Poulpe.

"The Fatchan are pursuing Feed now. They will not kill him" said Chow. "We have superior firepower, and additional assistance should be arriving shortly. We will wait for them to capture him and bring him out, then kill them and take him with us."

Poulpe grinned.

#66

The sound of breaking windows was getting closer. The man across from Feed had unfolded his head from between his knees and was staring out the window and the dark tunnel beyond, the very picture of ennui. Feed pulled out of the data streams, listening.

"What the hell are they saying" he muttered to himself, the punk's chants getting louder. The door to the car they were in suddenly shuttered.

"Barbarian" said the man, his hands folded demurely in his lap. "They are chanting for the head of the barbarian."

Feed stared at him for one long second before the door to the car was pulled open, a red-eyed Chinese youth with a row of three green mowhawk stripes leading the charge. He had Feed's helmet in one hand, the top scuffed and speckled with green paint from the walls and doors he'd been bashing with it.

They only glanced briefly at the man in the suit, grabbing Feed and pocketing his gun, cries of venomous joy as they pulled his hands behind his back. The lead punk pushed Feed's head back against the wall, grabbing his jaw and forcing his mouth open by jabbing his fingers against Feed's cheeks. He stabbed a long flexible swab down Feed's throat and the punks fell silent.

The green-striped punk lowered the swab into a silvery tube connected to a tiny display. Everyone held their breath. The tube chirped and he shook his head, sadly eyeing Feed. They all sighed, issuing sad moans as they dropped him roughly back into his seat.

The man in the suit politely asked a question and the lead punk replied in kind. He said a few words, gesturing excitedly towards the track outside, and the punks immediately perked up. Nodded excitedly at the man in the suit they took up their hollering again, running out the exit door and back down the platform towards the main building. The train grew quiet behind them.

"What did you say?" asked Feed, breathless.

"I told them the foreigner they were looking for was black" said the man, nodding happily at Feed. Feed stared at him again, then grinned out of one corner of his mouth.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Li" said the man in the suit. "Please call me Li."

Feed's fingers fluttered against his thighs, data streams flowing again.

"You want to go for a train ride, Mr. Li?"

Chow wasn't getting any response from his comm, not even from the encrypted military lines. Something was jamming him, but he couldn't leave the building to find out who or how. He didn't have time to ponder the issue as the punks came bouncing jauntily down the platform towards them, their loud whoops echoing ahead of them.

"Please prepare, Mr. Poulpe" said Chow. Poulpe raised an eyebrow. He was positively bored stiff. Wearing military armor and all was certainly exciting, but it wasn't much use if all you did was stand around. The suit was made for close-quarters killing, something he had yet to do.

The punks rounded the end of the near train and stopped as they saw Chow and Poulpe. The lead punk had Feed's helmet slung over his shoulder and dropped his arm as he saw them, the helmet now held in front of his crotch in awkward unease. He said a few words to Chow, nodding and bobbing. The rest took up the gesture, blinking back sudden tears towards the barrel of Poulpe's gun.

"What are they saying?" asked Poulpe.

Chow said several words forcibly in Chinese and the boys looked even more distraught, glancing at each other with comical frowns. The lead boy turned back to Chow and shook his head, saying a few words before Chow interrupted him with more demands. This time the boys looked the very picture of desperation, clutching their heads and glancing back and forth at each other in mutual agony.

"What?" demanded Poulpe. "What's going on?"

"They said the barbarian wasn't in there, that the foreigner they were looking for is black" said Chow. "Feed tricked them. But this okay good, we can use them..."

Poulpe interrupted him by firing the gun's entire clip into the crowd of young men, the jerking bodies bouncing under the impact, laying silent and smoking when he was done.

"What..?" gaped Chow. "What did you do that for?"

"They were stupid" said Poulpe. "You said so yourself." He felt better now. He'd been wanting to do that for a long time, and had found it rather gratifying.

The train began to pull out.

"The train! The train!" called Chow. "Quickly!"

Poulpe nodded and calmly followed Mr. Chow in stepping through the sea of bodies and across the platform. He had to break into a slight jog to catch up with the last car, then stepped in and casually tossed the semiautomatic out behind him. It was empty anyway, and he didn't have any more clips. Things were looking up.

"I think your friend is getting upset" said Li, pointing out the window at the door to the engine cab ahead of them.

"I know" said Fed, looking out the other window through his goggles. "He'll get over it."

Outside Esco had been tapping at the keypad lock for a good five minutes, trying to stealthily get into the train so he could drive off with it. Cessus hadn't been able to access the controls remotely and neither had any of the Otaku, so it was a big surprise to him when the train suddenly began to lift and then slide forward.

He was surprised, but not stupid. Despite operating in radio silence Esco knew more than to try to cling to the outside of an accelerating maglev as it was heading out of the station. Instead he let go and carefully shuffled back and out of the tunnel entrance, leaning low as the cars silently swam past. It disappeared down the tunnel and out of sight.

Esco sighed and pulled himself up onto the platform. He was wearing a black combat suit, nylon webbing holding an assortment of gear, his face blacked out with charcoal.

"Very pretty" said a deep voice from the end of the platform. "You dress up just for me?"

Esco nodded a greeting to Marcus and stepped over the steaming bodies at the end of the platform. He slumped down on the passenger side of the golf cart Marcus was driving, avoiding the crutches slung between the seats.

"Nice ride" he commented wearily. "Damn fool locked me out."

"He's just like his brother" said Marcus as he drove the cart down a corridor and towards a service entrance in the back of the building. "Always doing shit his own way."

They drove in silence for a few hundred yards, Esco wiping the stain from his face and accounting for his gear.

"Got two of them" he said. "Pulled off a twenty-yard shot on one of them, took out his comm with my pistol until they were all together, then lured him out in front of a wall mine. Idiots did it exactly by the book, just like Tonx said they would."

Marcus nodded. "Lucky for you. Those boys got good intel, if nothing else."

Esco grunted agreement. "You heard from them? I've had radio silence since just after they first saw Chow."

"Nothing" said Marcus. "I haven't heard anything from anyone."

Esco looked at Marcus out of the corner of his eye, then looked the other way, watching the tiles slowly slip by under the tire's thick tread. "They'll be okay" he said.

Marcus grunted, a meaningless sound. "Listen, you ready to relax?"

"Hell yes" said Esco. "Been in China almost a week already and haven't seen anything but train stations and shipyards."

"Good. I know this nice private club, members-only kind of place. Normally it's women only, though."

Esco pursed his lips, nodding solemnly. "I think I can deal with that" he said.

Marcus returned the nod. "All right, then. You like that style, the one where they dress up like Chinese school girls?"

Esco turned and gave Marcus a broad wolfish grin before the two men broke into deep, howling laughter.

#67

The maglev picked up speed, the tunnel giving way to the pre-dawn city, high cement walls cradling the train interspersed with plexiglassed view ports as they made their way out towards the country. The air howled dimly in the car behind them, a high-pitched whine as the wind tore through the ragged glass of the broken windows.

Eventually Chow's balding head appeared, thin black hair swimming in a bolus around his brow. Even then he managed to appear calm and in control, stepping through the doorway holding his pistol in front of him as though it were a tobacco pipe, and him just wandering into his study. Poulpe came behind him, little bits of white cotton fluff sprinkled across his arms and legs, splattered brown stains from dried blood slicked over the clothing beneath his military exoskeleton. He saw Feed and reached up one long, metal-wrapped arm to pull back his hair as he bowed, slightly, in Feed's direction.

"We meet at last, Mr. Feed" said Chow, glancing briefly at the man in the suit who sat slumped, motionless, against the window opposite them. "Who is he?"

"Some salary man with a death wish" said Fed. He stuck out his little finger and put his thumb towards his mouth, miming drinking from a bottle.

Mr. Chow shrugged. "No matter." He gently lowered himself across from Feed. "We will speak English. You are coming with us, Mr. Feed. It is my hope that you will do so willingly. It has been very expensive, finding you."

Feed watched Chow for a moment, trying to get some information from the smooth blank gaze the Chinaman gave him. He turned to Poulpe.

"What are you getting out of this, Poulpe?" Feed asked the Frenchman.

"Oh, the usual" said Poulpe, smiling. "Defection privileges; diplomatic immunity, political asylum, protection and safe passage. I have a new employer now, you see, one of the few who can protect me from the old one."

"Traitor" said Fed flatly.

"Yes I am" said Poulpe. "And if you're a clever boy you will be too."

There was a sudden hissing sound as the car behind them released from theirs and slowed, trailing away behind as they picked up speed.

Feed turned back to Chow. "You are Harry Chow?"

Chow bowed slightly. "Yes. You have written a very impressive virus, Feed. It took me a long time to figure out how to use it once we'd seen it start."

"You have the recombinant genome from its first run. Seeing it complete its results must have helped."

Chow smiled then, a broad grin that revealed unnaturally even teeth.

"I was surprised when you did not determine this immediately" he said.

"In the heat of the moment one misses the simplest things" said Fed.

"I would like to learn more about this code" said Chow. He was warming to his subject now, his hands spread wide in front of him in a gesture of generosity. "We have used it a little, but I think there must be a way to limit its use of its hosts. If we could throttle its resource load it may be possible to keep it deployed publicly. China is a big place, and it seems only correct to use its resources as effectively as possible."

"You would like to use your country's computers as a giant distributed network" said Fed.

"Yes" said Chow. "But the people will not stand for this without price cuts. They are already very frustrated with the filtering and controls. Your virus was very stealthy, and I must believe it can be made to alter itself according to the abilities of the host."

Fed nodded. "Sure. But it would take a long time to change it. And I won't help you."

Chow's smile disappeared. Poulpe coughed.

"Please reconsider, Feed" Poulpe said. "The Chinese use strong motivational tactics. It would be a shame for your friends to suffer because of your obstinance."

Fed cocked his head, staring at Poulpe in sudden realization.

"You relaunched the code, didn't you?" he asked.

Poulpe glanced at Chow, back at Feed. "We have found other uses for it, yes" he said. "But that is not your concern..."

"You must have left the original code intact, or else you wouldn't need me to alter it for you" said Fed. "If you could have changed the code by yourself you would have."

Poulpe began to speak but Chow raised a small hand. Poulpe tried again and Chow turned towards him, frowning.

"Be quiet now, Poulpe" he said. Poulpe sat back into his chair, a pout spreading on his lips.

"Go on, Feed" Chow said.

"The only thing you could have changed was the input data" said Fed. He could feel his heartbeat, now, a steady rapid pulse, and it filled the quiet in his head as his understanding unfolded. "You play by the rules presented to you, Poulpe. Like in the Paris Hotel, with the sake. You've always worked on biologicals, on weapons. You must have done that now."

Chow was watching Feed now, observing the wheels turn, the connections grow as he plucked the truth from the scattered evidence in front of him.

"The code I wrote finds a way to match endomorphic tissue from the sample genome map you provided with the human brain, to intersect with the stem cells in the human body to replace the damaged tissue."

Poulpe had stopped frowning now, was watching Feed. His lips were slightly ajar, a surprised grimace. The two men sat still, listening.

"You couldn't change the code to make the genome map match with something else, or to intersect with some other kind of cell. I'm assuming you didn't think to defect until you got here and realized what kind of opportunity you had."

Chow barked a short laugh and clapped his hands once, delighted.

"The simplest thing would be to replace the genome map you provided for the octopus with one of the human brain" said Fed. "You already had access to the site in Hawaii, and the human genome is easily accessible from anywhere. You had a copy on your comm when we were at Xing's so you could verify our results in case we got them off the disk we stole."

"That's right" said Poulpe, his eyes emotionless disks. "I got one from your brother as soon as we landed."

He shrugged. "And so? What would be the use of it, Feed?"

Chow smiled, watching him.

"If you could get a cancer that took its signature from the hosts' stem cells it would be undetectable" said Fed. He was staring into the distance now, finding the answer. "And if it was mapped to replace human brain tissue instead of implanted

endomorph tissue it would attack the host's brain. It would convert the existing brain tissue to scar tissue, or muscle, or whatever the stem cell it found was designed to heal."

Chow laughed again.

"Very good, Feed!" he said. "I am very impressed! What is the best part is that the result would look like any of a number of neurological diseases. Enemies of the state will simply suffer from brain disfunction, the cause unknown, potentially hereditary. And as a virus it is safe to handle as it has no natural vectors for spreading. A perfect weapon."

Feed nodded. "We wanted to enable the world, and you found a way to cripple it."

"That is not entirely true; we simply wanted to empower the most appropriate parties" said Chow. "But this is unfortunately not enough; if everyone suffers from the same sort of attack it will seem rather obvious, don't you think?"

Feed didn't say anything, just watched the small man in front of him.

"It would be even better if we could modify your code to find similar, less obtuse attacks. Perhaps find ways to affect only certain gene lines? Certain families, for example, or only people of particularly troublesome bloodlines. Over time you could select survivors for individual traits and create an ideal state. A kind of utopian Darwinism, you see?"

Feed shook his head and drummed his fingers on his thighs.

"Give me the recombinant, Chow" he said. He wasn't asking; his voice was cold. He'd tried to imagine what Poulpe would come up with, what the worst-case scenario for the misuse of his code could be, and had been unpleasantly surprised.

"Certainly, Feed. It would be my pleasure; I am very curious to learn more about your code." Chow gestured widely with his hands, the pistol held out gently in the air. "Simply tell me you would be willing to work with me and we will share it all with you. We'll even let your friends go."

"You're already doing that" said Fed. Chow put his hands back at his sides and frowned lightly at Feed.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"The Otaku collected enough voice samples from you during their 'negotiations' to make an audio model of your speech patterns. Once you got on this train and into its faraday cage a preprogrammed recording was sent to your officers. My friends are already receiving medical attention."

Chow's hand flew to his cuff and he tapped, persistently, listening to nothing. Feed was right; the train was built from titanium and steel, even the windows netted with thin metal wires. Normally an internal antenna ran down the center of the train and re-broadcast any signals from inside - but Feed had obviously turned it off. They were in complete radio silence.

"Very nice" said Chow. "But it won't do you any good. They may be provided with medical care, but your friends are still captured as enemies of the state. I cannot ensure their release without being physically present and verifiable."

"I know" said Fed. "Mr. Li?"

The man in the suit straightened, stretching out his arms and back before turning towards them and giving a little bow. He smiled sheepishly, hands raised, and shuffled over to sit next to Feed.

"Who is this?" asked Chow, his pistol quietly trained on Li until he had stopped moving. "Your lawyer?"

"Something like that" said Fed.

"Please" said Li. "It's terribly embarrassing that I am here at all. It is a very unfortunate coincidence."

"What the hell are you talking about" snarled Chow. "Who are you?"

"Please excuse me" Li said to Feed. "There isn't an appropriate way to say this in English." Then he turned and murmured several short words to Chow.

Chow turned white. Not just pale, but completely white. The blood seemed to have entirely emptied from his body. He didn't blink or move, or even seem to breathe.

"It is you?" he murmured.

Mr. Li held up both hands in front of him. "Yes, but please, as I said, this is just an unfortunate coincidence! I was riding this train to see my granddaughter when this nice young man defended me from some misinstructed youth."

"They were Fatchan" said Chow wanly.

"I know" chuckled Mr. Li. "Entertaining, isn't it, the amount of confusion which can come from within one single organization. You can see why I am such a busy man."

"What is this?" asked Poulpe. "Who is this stupid person?"

Mr. Chow nodded at Feed. "You have all this recorded, don't you?" he asked.

"Audio, visual, plus heat and pulse. It's all been streaming real-time to Otaku servers" said Fed.

"I see" said Chow. He coughed, then pulled himself up straight. "It seems that there has indeed been a misunderstanding."

"What's going on?" asked Poulpe. "You must tell me now; why are we talking with this person?"

Chow bowed towards Mr. Li, ignoring Poulpe. "I am sure we can reach an agreement. The virus I mentioned earlier is still a source of untapped potential revenue. Perhaps together we can find a way to share it."

"What?" coughed Poulpe. "You can't do that! I have a percentage in that!"

"There is no more virus" said Fed. The three men turned to look at him.

"I said there is no more virus" said Fed. "I designed a counter virus and launched it once you told me what you had planned for it. The Otaku have already published their analysis on the threat, and the world hacker community is sure to

launch similar exploits shortly. Your government would seem grossly negligent if it didn't launch defenses against that sort of attack now, and without a distributed dataset there's no way you'll reverse engineer what was already in place."

"But it's still on everyone's computers..." protested Chow.

"Not anymore it's not" said Fed. "I wrote it, Mr. Chow. Don't you think I would know how to get rid of it?"

The four men sat quietly for a long moment before Mr. Li raised a hand and began to laugh demurely behind it. "You are a very enterprising young man, Feed" he said. "It is my pleasure to have met you."

"Me too" said Fed, softly. He was tired. The train began to slow. "This is our stop."

Outside the landscape had slowly turned from a blur to a long mountainscape. Over the fields surrounding the train and before the mountains stood one of the oldest and most impressive of man's attempts to defend himself from invasion; the Great Wall of China.

"It was antiquated by the time it was built" said Mr. Li. They stood and walked to the doorway side of the train, looking out at the incredible landscape before them.

"I think you will have to reconsider this" said Poulpe from behind them. "You don't know who you are dealing with; I have important connections, Mr. Chow, and you, Mr. Li, cannot just"

"Don't be a dick, Poulpe" interrupted Feed. "You bet on the wrong team and now you're done."

"To hell with you" spat Poulpe. "You think you can just erase all our work, take it as your own and walk away? I have worked hard to make this... power. I will own it, Feed. And you will help me."

Poulpe shoved Mr. Li and Mr. Chow aside as he reached out and grabbed Feed by the neck. His exoskeleton whined slightly as it picked him up, rocking only slightly as the train came to a stop.

"Fuck you, Poulpe" hissed Feed through clenched teeth. His hands were wrapped around the Frenchman's armored wrist. The train stopped completely. "We rescued you, and you sold us out."

The train sighed as it decompressed, the air in the car filling with the smell of cut grass. The door behind him slid open and he got one long look at Poulpe's face, at the look of shock and fear there as he stared past Feed and out at the platform beyond. Tiny metal splinters had sprouted from his neck; tranquil darts, Feed assumed. Poulpe began to shake a little, sweat sprouting on his forehead, and a voice came over a loudspeaker behind Feed.

"Customer 587B3S1 you are being reclaimed by the state of Disney by and for services owed there. You will come quietly. You know your rights pursuant to Article B of the Disney sovereignty agreement and are free to enjoy those services as defined in our agreement. You will have a nice day."

Feed realized Poulpe was whispering; "please Feed please you do not understand what they will do to me it is not right Feed please oh please do not leave me with them it will hurt Feed so much please help me..."

Feed slowly lowered himself from Poulpe's shaking arm, his trembling amplified by the suit. The stench of urine rose from the Frenchman as he let him go.

"Poulpe" said Feed. "Fuck you."

Poulpe began to cry - real, frightened tears as he slumped forward and into the arms of the mechanized suits of the Disney guards. He was broken, Feed realized, a broken person returning to a broken state.

"Please sign here" said one of the Disney men as he boarded the train, his face hidden behind the wide white eyes of the mouse. He held out a tablet to Feed along with a little pen with Mickey's head on the end in molded plastic. Donald Duck slow-mo'd a disco in the background behind Feed's name as he wrote it in careful strokes.

"What will you do with him?" Feed asked. The man didn't answer, just stood there a moment, faceless behind the mask. A long minute passed before he straightened, nodding at Feed.

"We will reintegrate him back into a happy, productive member of the Disney team" the man said. It sounded sad, the way he said it.

The Disney troopers had plugged a handheld unit into Poulpe's exoskeleton and had let it carry him to a huge truck pulled up in the parking lot next to the platform. The doors shut behind them, the remaining Mickey Mouse men marching off the platform and down to their conveyer. Mr. Li stepped out of the train, nodding slightly to Mr. Chow who returned the gesture with a deep bow. The train slid out of the station and disappeared into the distance, leaving behind a silence broken only by the sound the chirping of crickets in the rice fields in front of them.

"The next train will be a couple hours" said Fed. "I had to shut all of them down. Sorry."

"That's no problem" said Mr. Li. "It's been a long time since I last came out here."

They stood quietly, breathing the warming air of dawn.

A small car appeared, trundling up the road toward the station. As it got closer they could see a tiny figure waving from the front passenger window. Feed raised an eyebrow at Mr. Li.

"My granddaughter" Li said. He looked at Feed in mock surprise. "What, did you think I was on the train just for you?"

Feed slowly pulled his gloves off, sunlight breaking over the wall to warm his chest, the sweat on his face evaporating as the day arrived. The car pulled up in front of the platform and Mr. Li began to walk towards the steps.

"I've taken the liberty of negotiating with Chow on your friend's behalf" said Mr. Li. "They should be released and given the best medical care available."

"Thank you" said Feed. The weight of the last few days had begun to descend on him, a giddy joy at realizing he was

alive and was likely to stay that way, if only for a while.

"My pleasure" said Mr. Li. A little girl in a pink fairy costume jumped out of the car and ran up the steps and into his arms. He called out to her in Chinese, waving brightly at the young woman getting out of the driver's side. They exchanged a few words, the woman looking curiously at Feed over her father's shoulder and nodding.

"Would you care to come for tea, Feed?" asked Mr. Li. "I don't get to meet people like you often enough."

Feed looked out over the rice fields, past the gently smiling Triad leader and his smiling granddaughter and off towards the Great Wall. He sighed and peeled his goggles backwards off his head, dropped them lightly onto the cement of the platform.

"I think" he said, stopping to take a deep breath, "I think I'd like that."

#Prologue

When Tonx opened his eyes again the first thing he saw was Feed sitting next to him. He was wrapped in a thick wool robe but his eyes were twinkling, waiting for Tonx to say the first word.

"Where am I?" asked Tonx.

"Don't remember a thing, do you?" Feed smiled, obviously enjoying himself. "They warned me that might happen. You're in a hospital, Tonx."

"Hospital?"

"Yep. Do you remember leaving China?"

Tonx heaved a sigh and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "I remember being trapped in the tunnel with Cessus and smoking some vicious big joints. Thought I was going to die down there."

Feed grinned wide. "Uh-huh."

"But I didn't, huh?"

"Nope" said Feed. "You didn't. Neither did I, or anybody else."

Tonx started; "Where are they? Where's my girlfriend? Is Cessus okay?"

"Calm down" said Fed. "It's not good for you to get worked up just yet."

He checked the monitors over Tonx's bed before pulling the blankets up around his brother's chest.

"Everyone's okay. Cass took out one of the soldiers and kept the other one busy while I got away. They conked her on the head and threw her in a prison truck, but that's it. Turns out she's a good shot with a pistol, you know that?"

Tonx grinned a little as he settled back into the bed. "Yeah, I knew that."

"Cessus stuck with you until you passed out, kept you from bleeding out" Fed said. "Eventually the soldiers dug you up and he handled it from there. Gave them instructions and everything, kept things working until you got to the hospital."

"What about Marcus?" asked Tonx.

"He's fine. He and Esco 'disappeared' for a day or so after the main event, won't tell me where they went" said Fed. "That was a hell of a trick, Tonx, calling Esco and Baby in like that."

Tonx shrugged. "We needed backup, needed an ace up our sleeve. And I was worried that Poulpe would do exactly what he did. Having them run a second cover nobody knew about meant we had a fallback plan."

"Good thing" said Feed, sighing. "I'm glad you did it, I just wish I could have known about it earlier."

"It was too much risk" said Tonx, staring out the window at the bright blue sky over the snowy mountains in the distance. "If they'd have captured you there wouldn't have been any angles for us to use to get you back..."

"I know. It was a good plan. But next time I want in, all right?" said Fed.

"Sure" said Tonx. He swallowed, closed his eyes for a second. "Baby and Esco made it okay?"

"Yeah. I scared Baby half to death by hijacking his rail gun just before he shot down the 'copters, but he didn't know there were tanks sneaking up on his rear. He swears he almost gave up being a pilot."

"You hijacked his gun? There were tanks?" asked Tonx.

"Yeah. The network Cessus had tied the Otaku hacks through was a public access network's sub layer" said Fed. "'The best place to hide something is out in the open,' you know? When the Otaku slammed gridlock on the city it only left one route open, for Chow. The Tanks could force the lights to change in their favor, of course, so I could see them coming by the network traffic they caused in resetting the system's changes. Baby was too intent on reading the data in front of him to interpret the noise, so I had to help him out a little."

"And you hijacked his gun" said Tonx flatly.

"Yeah. Scared him pretty good, but he was going to ice the 'copters and there was no reason for it. So I crippled the tanks and used the explosion as a distraction" said Fed. "I invited him here with us but he insisted on going back home to Puerto Rico for a vacation. Said he'd had enough crazy foreigners to last him a while."

"Heh" chuckled Tonx. "So everything worked out with Chow?"

"Uh-huh" said Fed. "Mr. Li handled everything. Otaku now works directly for Big Circle, and Chow's got a new job acting as a proponent for opening up the Chinese networks. We got the recombinant from him and I deleted the virus from the networks, so there's no evidence of how we got it, which is just the way they want it."

"We got the recombinant?" asked Tonx, trying to sit up a little in bed. A look of panic crossed his face. "Shit, I need to get up. I need to call Pharoe..."

"Relax" said Feed. "Chill. I took the liberty of hiring a friend of yours to handle the business side of things until you recovered - I got him under retainer and everything."

"A friend?" asked Tonx suspiciously.

"John Tucker" said Feed. "He said that Texas was getting too hot for him anyway. I already ran it by Cessus and Cass and they thought he was a good candidate, and so far he's done a great job. Sold preliminary patent rights to Du Pont with a substantial percentage on the first few derivative products, and plenty of room for co-authorship after that." Fed glanced up at Tonx, for a moment the little brother again. "Is that okay?"

Tonx looked at Feed in surprise. "Yeah, that's great. That's better than I had hoped for - I'd figured they'd just want to buy it outright. And John's here?"

"John's actually in California, so there's an eight hour time difference. But he made me promise to conference him in once you were on your new feet."

Tonx didn't move. He stared at Feed with heavy lidded eyes and slowly pulled a strand of hair behind one ear. Something moved under the sheets at the far end of the bed.

"That's my toe" said Tonx. Somewhere far away the air conditioning kicked in. Feed smiled.

"Yes, that's your toe. And you'd better take care of it because you've only got four of them now, and they were damned expensive."

Tonx lunged forward and threw back the bed sheets, gasping like a schoolgirl as he caught sight of what protruded from the bottom of his hospital gown. Each of his legs were nearly five feet long from hip to toe, the scar tissue fading to a gentle tan around his thighs. The toes were split into two thick digits, the nails blackened from recent surgery. The sole of his foot stretched back to a large pink joint before doubling back up towards his kneecap, and as they watched Tonx struggled himself into a sort of half-lotus, running his hands lightly over the extra joint.

"No shit" he whispered.

"No shit" agreed Feed. "John included some special research he'd found as part of his deal with us, some crazy shit the tribals were doing out in the desert. You were pretty out of it in the hospital in Beijing, so we took a vote and decided to fly you to Iceland. You'd been wanting to get Rood since forever, and since your legs were all smashed up and a bunch of folks owed us favors it kind of made sense..."

Tonx's eyes glittered, his crooked smile spread wide. He held his hands on his new kneecaps as though they were rare sculptures, beaming with excitement.

"You little fucker" he said, his voice trembling a little. "You little fucker, Fed."

Feed smiled. "It's Feed" he said to his brother. "I'm Feed now. And you're welcome. Just get well soon."

He got up and flipped on a wall screen, flexing his fingers as he keyed in to the display and the lights in the room dimmed.

"I have this idea, see, and I need my business partner to work out the details."

Finished at 1:07pm on Sunday, October 3rd, 2004.

Dedicated to Hulda, for getting me there.