

# INFOQUAKE

By David Louis Edelman

## CHAPTER 1

Natch was impatient.

He strode around the room with hands clasped behind his back and head bowed forward, like a crazed robot stuck on infinite loop. Around and around, back and forth, from the couch to the door to the window, and then back again.

Behind him, the window was tuned to some frantic cityscape that Jara didn't recognize. Buildings huddled together at crooked angles like the teeth of old men, as tube trains probed the cavities. Singapore, maybe? Sao Paulo? Definitely a Terran city, Jara decided. Every few minutes, Natch would look in that direction and inhale deeply, as if trying to draw energy from the thousands of manic pedestrians ensconced within the four corners of the window canvas.

Natch stopped suddenly and wheeled on his apprentice. "Why are you just *sitting* there?" he cried, punctuating the question with a snap of his fingers.

Jara gestured to the empty spot next to her on the couch. "I'm waiting for Horvil to show up so we can get this over with."

"Where *is* Horvil?" said Natch. "I told him to be here an hour ago. No, an hour and a *half* ago. Can't that lazy bastard learn to keep a calendar?" Around and around, back and forth.

Jara regarded her employer in silence. She supposed that Natch would be devilishly handsome to anyone who didn't know he was completely insane. That casually athletic physique, the boyish face that would never know gray, those eyes predictably blue as sapphires: people like Natch just didn't exist on this side of the camera lens. Nor



did they spout phrases like *trouncing the competition* and *creating a new paradigm* without a trace of irony or self-consciousness.

Natch shook his head. “I can only *hope* he remembers we’ve got a product launch tomorrow.”

“I don’t know why you’re so uptight,” said Jara. “We do twenty or thirty product launches every year.”

“No,” whispered Natch. “Not like this one.”

Jara let it go. As usual, she had no idea what Natch was talking about. NiteFocus 48 was a routine upgrade that fixed a number of minor coding inconsistencies but introduced no new features. The program had an established track record in the marketplace, built on the well-known optical expertise of the Natch Personal Programming Fiefcorp. Unless Natch expected them to rework the rules of bio/logic programming overnight — and she wouldn’t put that past him — the NiteFocus product launch would be a pretty routine affair.

“Listen,” said Jara. “Why don’t you let Horvil sleep for another hour? He was up all night tinkering on this thing. He probably just got to bed. Don’t forget that out *here*, it’s seven o’clock in the morning.” *Here* was London: a sane place, a city of right angles. The city where both Horvil and Jara lived, and some six thousand kilometers away from Natch’s apartment in Shenandoah.

“I don’t fucking care,” Natch snorted. “I haven’t gotten *any* sleep tonight, and I didn’t get any yesterday either.”

“Might I remind you that *I* was up all night working on NiteFocus too?”

“I *still* don’t care. Go wake him up.”

For the third time that week, Jara considered quitting. He always had this condescension, this mania — no, *lust* — for perfection. How difficult would it be to find a job at another fiefcorp? She had fifteen years in this business, almost three times as much experience as Natch. Certainly PulCorp or Billy Sterno or even Lucas Sentinel would take her on board. Or, dare she think it, the Patel Brothers? But then she considered the three agonizing years she had spent as Natch’s apprentice, and the scant eleven months to go before her contract expired. *Eleven months to go until I can cash out! I should be able to keep it together that long.*

So Jara didn't quit. Instead, she gave her fiecorp master one last bitter look and cut her multi connection. True to form, Natch had already turned his back on her, probably heading into his office to do more fine-tuning on NiteFocus. *You need to watch yourself*, Jara thought. *Natch's brand of insanity just might be contagious.*

She slid into nothingness.

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The hollow sensation of a mind devoid of sensory input. Those blessed two and a half seconds of free time after one multi connection ends, but before the next begins.

Emptiness, blankness.

Multivoid.

Then consciousness.

Jara was back in London, but not at Horvil's place, as she had expected. Horvil must have refused her multi request, so the system had automatically stopped the feed of sensory information flowing through her neural cortex. She stood now on the red square tile that was her apartment's gateway to the multi network, staring at the walls she had never had time to decorate. She stretched her calves, slightly sore from five hours of multi-induced paralysis, and walked down the hall to the living room.

Jara's apartment insulted her with its desolation: a featureless space, a human storage chamber. She resisted the urge to blow off Natch's little summit and go shopping on the Data Sea for wall hangings. *Eleven months, eleven months, eleven months*, Jara told herself. *And then I can cash out and start my own business and it won't matter. In the meantime, I'd better wake up Horvil.*

If Horvil wasn't answering her multi requests, he was either asleep or ignoring her. The engineer was not known for being an early riser. In Horvil's parlance, *early* meant any time before noon, and to a global professional who hopped continents with barely a thought, *noon* was a slippery concept. Jara gritted her teeth and called up ConfidentialWhisper 66, the program de rigueur for remote conversation. If Horvil wouldn't see her, maybe he would at least *talk* to her.

The engineer accepted the connection — solid evidence he was, at least, awake.

Jara waited impatiently for an acknowledgment, a response, *something*. “Well?” she complained. “Are you coming over to Natch’s apartment or what?”

Jara heard a number of fake stretching and groaning noises from Horvil’s end of the connection. ConfidentialWhisper was strictly a *mental* communication program, not an oral one. “I *could* pretend I’m still asleep,” said the engineer.

“If *I* have to be at this idiotic meeting, Horv, then *you’re* not getting out of it.”

“Tell me again why he wants to hold a meeting this early in the morning.”

“Come on, you know how it works. Apprentice in a fiefcorp, work on the master’s time.”

“But what’s this all *about*?”

Jara sighed. “I have no idea. Probably another one of his stupid schemes to take over the world. Whatever he’s up to, it can’t be good.”

“Of *course* it can’t be good,” said Horvil. “This is *Natch* we’re talking about. I ever tell you about the time in school when Natch tried to form a corporation? Can’t you just picture him trying to explain laissez-faire capitalism to a bunch of nine-year-old hive kids — ”

“Horvil, I’m *waiting*.”

The engineer sounded unconcerned. “I’m *tired*. Call Merri. Call Vigal.”

“They’re not invited.”

“Why not? They’re part of this company too, aren’t they?”

The question had occurred to Jara as well. “Maybe Natch trusts us more than he trusts them.”

Horvil chuckled and made a sound like he was spitting out pillow lint. “Right, sure. Maybe he knows *we’re* too cowardly to stand up to him.” And before Jara had a chance to respond, the engineer cut the ‘Whisper connection, leaving her alone with her empty walls.

*How dare he call me a coward!* she fumed silently. *I’m not afraid of Natch. I’m just practical, that’s all. I know I only have to put up with him for eleven more months.* She called up her apprenticeship contract for the thousandth time and reread the clause on compensation, hoping as always to catch a glimpse of some previously unknown loophole. But the letters floating before her eyes hadn’t changed: Jara would receive

nothing except room and board until the end of the four-year term, at which time her shares matured. She blinked hard, and the illusory text on the surface of her retinas vanished.

Jara gave one last wistful glance at her apartment and stepped back down the hall to open another multi connection. Multivoid swallowed her empty walls and regurgitated Natch's metropolitan windows. The fiefcorp master was nowhere to be found, but Jara was in no mood to track him down. He had to be here somewhere, or she would have never made it into the building. Jara threw herself down on the couch and waited.

Five minutes later, Horvil materialized in the room wearing the same mixture of bonhomie and bafflement he always wore. "Towards Perfection," he greeted his fellow apprentice amiably as he plopped down in Natch's favorite chair. It was actually a chair-and-a-half, but still barely wide enough to accommodate Horvil's considerable bulk. "Who's ready to wallow around in the mud? I know *I* could use a good wallow right about now."

Jara frowned, wondering whether Horvil had concocted some algorithm to make even his virtual clothes look disheveled. "That makes *one* of us," she said.

The engineer yawned and sat back in his chair with a smile. "Stop being so *dramatic*, Princess. If you don't want to be here, go home. What's Natch going to do? Cancel your contract? Fire you?"

Jara extended her finger into an accusatory position by reflex. She lowered it when she realized she had nothing to say.

And then Natch returned.



Neither apprentice saw the fiefcorp master come in, but now there he stood with his arms crossed and his eyes glaring. For once, he was not pacing, and this made Jara nervous. When Natch chose to focus all that kinetic energy on some concrete goal instead of stomping it into oblivion, mountains moved. Jara examined the gorge in her stomach and came to a sudden realization: she *was* afraid of Natch.

“We’re going to the top of the bio/logics market,” he announced. “We’re going to be number one on Primo’s.”

Horvil put his feet up on the coffee table. “Of course we are,” he said breezily. “We’ve been over this shit before. Market forces, fiefcorp economics, blah blah blah. It’s inevitable, ain’t it?”

Natch closed his eyes and took a deep breath. When he opened them, his gaze fixed on a spot of nothingness hovering midway between the two apprentices. Jara suddenly felt transparent, as if the world had gained presence at her expense. “You don’t understand, Horvil,” he said. “We’re going to be number one on Primo’s, and we’re going to do it *tomorrow*.”

## CHAPTER 2

The two apprentices sat stiffly, afraid to move. Jara wondered if she had stumbled onto the set of an old-fashioned drama by mistake, with Natch playing the part of the Mad Capitalist Who Went Too Far. Or maybe the fiefcorp master was starring in a farce instead. Number one on the Primo's bio/logic investment guide *tomorrow*?

"Impossible," said Jara. "You can't just press a button and *will* yourself to the top of Primo's. It's all impartial, rules-based. They've got strict formulas that nobody knows except the senior interpreters."

Natch regarded her with a stare he might have given a less-evolved subspecies of humanity. "And?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Natch. They sift through ten thousand bio/logic programs a day, and every decision they make affects the hierarchy. You can't predict Primo's rankings. And don't give me that look — you can't rig them either. People have tried." She turned to Horvil, aiming her index finger at his bulbous nose. "Come on, Horvil — *you* know about Primo's as well as I do. They're not accountable to anyone."

The engineer stretched his arms out over his head, suspended them there momentarily, then sent them crashing down onto his commodious lap. "*Primo's: impartial because we have to be,*" he quoted the company's official slogan. "*Your bio/logic systems depend on us, from hearts and lungs to stocks and funds.*"

Natch might well have been a video clip in pause mode. He gave no outward sign he had even been listening to his apprentices' exchange.

"All right," spat Jara, anxious to break the tension in the room. "I suppose you have some brilliant plan to make this happen."

The fiefcorp master began to pace once more. "Of course I do," he replied, stone-faced. "Now, as you know, today we're scheduled to release NiteFocus 48, our biggest — and best — product this year."

Jara thought about debating the *best* portion of his statement, but changed her mind and leaned back in the sofa. Horvil was one of the *best* engineers in the business, but Jara knew from experience he got sloppy when he worked long hours. NiteFocus 48

would have its share of bugs and inconsistencies, like any program bred of human thought.

“Well, guess who *else* is planning a product launch this week?” continued Natch.

Jara’s heart skipped a beat. “Don’t tell me the Patel Brothers are finally releasing NightHawk 73,” she said.

The fiecorp master nodded. “The same.”

Jara frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. With that kind of competition, how in the world did Natch expect to top the market *this* week of all weeks? The Patel Brothers had dominated the number one rating on Primo’s for the past two and a half years. They were widely perceived to be unbeatable. Of course, this hadn’t stopped Natch from confronting the Patels head-to-head on a variety of programs over the past few months — on the contrary, the challenge spurred him to new heights of competitive frenzy. He plotted their release schedules on graphs of three, four and five dimensions. He hunted down even the deadendest rumors about Frederic and Petrucio Patel.

And now, it seemed, after feeling the occasional prick of Natch’s jabs on the Primo’s battlefield — a loss of a point here, a preempted product launch there — the Patel Brothers had finally accepted the challenge of their younger rival. Releasing NightHawk in the same week as NiteFocus was a direct assault.

Horvil was unperturbed by this latest turn of events. “Why are you two so worried?” he said, trying unsuccessfully to stifle a yawn. “We’ve put a lot of work into NiteFocus. It’s good code. I’m not afraid to go up against the Patels.”

“So then, what do we do?” asked Natch. His tone of voice indicated it was a rhetorical question.

Jara scowled. She knew where this was heading. “If anybody but *you* asked me that question, I would say, *We both launch our products on the Data Sea, and may the best company win.*”

The fiecorp master gave her one of his wolfish grins, the kind that had little to do with humor. On some alternate plane of existence, Natch’s audience howled in gleeful anticipation. “You think I’m afraid to go up against the Patels.”

“I just don’t like pulling these dirty tricks of yours. We’re number six on Primo’s, in a field of thousands. Why can’t you be happy with that?”

Natch stopped in midstride and gave his apprentice a piercing look. “Happy with failure?” he said incredulously, as if she had suggested joining one of the creeds and devoting his life to poverty. “Happy with *this*?” He gestured wildly around him at what seemed to Jara to be a pretty nice flat. Natch’s apartment had enough space for both living and working quarters, with room left over to entertain. Not only that, but it boasted real *and* programmable windows, as well as a lush garden of daisies right smack in the middle of the place. Maybe Natch’s apartment paled in comparison to the Lunar estates of the big tycoons, but at least it was decorated.

Jara composed herself. “Natch, number six on Primo’s isn’t failure,” she said. “Most programmers spend their whole *lives* trying to crack the top ten. We’ve gotten here in thirty-six months. *Thirty-six months*, Natch! Primo’s has been around for almost seventy *years*, and nobody’s ever done it as fast as we have. Horvil, where were we a year ago today?”

The engineer focused his attention inward for a split second, the telltale sign of a brain angling for information on the Data Sea. “Sixty-two,” announced Horvil momentarily. “The year before that, four hundred nineteen.” Jara threw up her hands as if to say, *See what I mean?* “And the year before that, we didn’t — ”

Natch cut his apprentice off in midsentence. “Does this shit have a point?”

Jara stood her ground. “I’m not suggesting we quit trying, Natch. I’m just saying we’ll *get* to the top eventually, *by the strength of our products*, without dirty tricks. The Patel Brothers are getting older, and we’re gaining on them all the time. In a couple of years, when all the tax breaks dry up, they’ll sell out and dissolve their fiefcorp. That’s what happens in this business.”

Natch grimaced, rocked back and forth on his heels, and let out a restless sigh. He looked like the little boy who had been scolded by his proctors for staying out past curfew. Despite all his frantic motion, every chestnut-colored hair on his head remained perfectly in place. Jara met his stare, but she was disappointed to see Horvil struggling to stay awake. *Thanks for backing me up, Horv!*

“All right,” said the fiefcorp master, with a look on his face that said, *I’ll go through the motions of considering your worthless ideas, but only for form’s sake*. “Let’s take a look at NiteFocus 48 in MindSpace. Let’s see how *strong* our products really are.”

Jara and Horvil followed Natch into his office. The room was short and sparsely decorated and functional, but still quite a bit nicer than Jara's workspace. Artificial daylight, streaming into the room from two square windows, showed a hectic market square somewhere in Beijing. *That's one way to keep working through all hours of the night*, Jara thought sourly. *Pretend it's day.*

Natch walked up to the squat workbench that sat in the center of the room and waved his hand to summon the virtual programming bubble known as MindSpace. He was instantly surrounded by a clear holographic sphere about two meters in diameter, along with an assortment of interlocking geometric shapes and connecting fibers.

The program loaded in MindSpace looked like a dense pyramid carpeted with spikes. It wasn't any code that Jara recognized. "What's that?" she said.

"Nothing," grumbled the fiefcorp master, banishing the display with a flick of his wrist. A more cohesive structure appeared in the layer beneath, shaped like a lopsided donut and colored in soft grays and blues. Strands of purple and white formed an intricate net through the center. Jara could have traced those supple curves with her eyes closed. NiteFocus 48.

Natch took one look at the mass of bio/logic code floating in front of him and gave a snort of disgust. His dissatisfaction grew as he rotated the donut slowly along its z-axis. *Imperfect!* Jara could hear him thinking, a fourth-act soliloquy to his invisible audience. *Unsatisfactory! A mocking reminder of all the projects I've left unfinished, all the goals I've left unattained.*

"Well, what are we waiting for?" said Horvil. "Let's fire this baby up."

Jara gave her internal system a silent command to activate NiteFocus, and then waited a few seconds as the program disseminated its instructions to the microscopic machines floating in her bloodstream. She tried to detect the millions of calculations going on inside her brain, the logical handshakes extending thousands of kilometers from her virtual body here to cellular structures standing stiff on a red tile in London. But she knew that even if she were here in the flesh, the chemical reactions in the retina and the electric pulses along the ciliary muscle would be completely undetectable. Bio/logic programs had not been that crude since Sheldon Surina invented the science some 360 years ago.

“I think it’s working,” said Jara. A hopeful statement.

Horvil puffed up his chest and clapped a virtual arm around Natch’s shoulder. “Of course it’s working. What’d I tell you?”

The fiefcorp master said nothing. He turned off the Beijing scene on the left window, leaving a view of the real darkness outside. Natch squinted, shook his head, and marched through the other room to the balcony door. Horvil and Jara followed him as he stepped outside into the coal-dark Shenandoah night, about half past three now. A

platform promptly slid under their feet from the side of the building.

The three fiefcorpers stood at the railing and gazed into the distance, looking for a suitable object on which to test their enhanced vision. Flashing lights were still evident in the rowdier quarters of the city, but out here in the

residential district, things were relatively quiet. “There,” said Horvil, pointing towards a viewscreen that stood several blocks down the road, its lights dim now that there was no foot traffic. Jara found she could read the advertisement clearly.



## DRINK CHAIQUOKE

*Because the Defense and Wellness Council Still Lets You.*

Beneath the print, the smart-alecky ChaiQuoke pitchman suckled on a neon purple bottle while a Council officer looked on with overt disapproval.

Horvil danced a clumsy jig of triumph. “Looks like the Natch Personal Programming Fiefcorp will still be in business tomorrow,” he crowed. “Oh yeah!”

Jara breathed a sigh of relief. Why had she been nervous? NiteFocus 48 had worked fine yesterday too, and the day before, and the day before. She hadn't seen a major glitch in the program since version 43 or 44. "So what do you think?" she asked Natch. "Ready for launch?"

"Does it *look* like it's ready for launch?" the fiefcorp master replied brusquely. "The color resolution needs a lot of work. And from the look of those blueprints, this program uses *way* too many cycles. You think we can just release a product that sucks up all the computing resources on the Data Sea and crashes people's systems? No, it's not fucking ready at *all*."

Jara reacted as if he had slapped her. There was a sudden fermata in Horvil's dance, which he tried to pass off as intentional. Why had they slaved through so many nights if they were going to get this kind of treatment?

"Can't either of you see what I'm trying to do?" asked Natch, his tone suddenly quiet and contemplative. "I'm just pointing out the same inadequacies that Primo's is going to find tomorrow. Primo's doesn't care if you spent all night coding. They only care about two things: success and failure. Success means more sales. It means more respect. It means moving up to the next level of the game. Everything *else*... is failure." Natch rubbed his forehead and gave a yearning look out towards the horizon.

Jara couldn't help but roll her eyes at his histrionics. *Doesn't Natch ever stop to wonder if he's taking himself too seriously?* She wanted to screech obscenities at the invisible audience, to throttle his knowing smirk. She wanted to get him out of those breeches somewhere quiet and instruct him in low, sibilant tones about the things that *really* mattered.

The fiefcorp master turned. He gave Jara a long, penetrating stare of amusement and contempt while Horvil shifted awkwardly from foot to foot behind them. "Now come inside," Natch said, "and I'll tell you my plan."

Jara lowered her eyes. "I thought you said no more dirty tricks," she whimpered.

"I never said that. I said I'd *take a look* at NiteFocus 48, which I just did. And it's awful. Besides, why do you keep using those words, *dirty tricks*? I don't do dirty tricks. It's called *business*."

### CHAPTER 3

The sun crept up the early-morning sky, panther-like, reminding Jara she had managed to last another twenty-four hours without going crazy or quitting or killing someone. She flushed with accomplishment. All she needed to do for the next eleven months was pace through the days with her head bowed low, like Natch in one of his moods, and she would survive. That was how you killed a stretch of time: stick around long enough to outlast it.

She told the others she needed a few minutes alone in the cool night air. Natch and Horvil disappeared inside.

Jara stayed outside and watched the city of Shenandoah shake itself awake. Buildings that had automatically compressed themselves overnight to conserve space began puffing up like blowfish as their tenants awoke. The balcony outside Natch's apartment floated upwards, almost imperceptibly, as residents on the lower levels claimed their living space for the morning. A river of pedestrian traffic wended from the poorer districts to the public multi facilities, ferrying half a million workers to offices around the globe, or to Luna, Mars or one of the orbital colonies. Others flooded into the tube stations where sleek trains would whisk them across the continent at exorbitant speeds. A privileged few used the teleportation stations, still shiny and unspoiled and mostly empty.

Jara had witnessed the same morning transformation many times in London, but until now, she had never seen it in Shenandoah. She felt a momentary pang of envy for the people who lived and worked in the smooth, low curves of a modern city. They had never scabbled to work over ancient brick or weedy cobblestone, nor taken a circuitous tube route around yet another corroded abbey that had been given perpetual right-of-way For The Sake Of History. *Stop feeling sorry for yourself*, Jara thought. *You could live in Shenandoah if you really wanted — even though all you could afford here is a room in one of the old skyscrapers.* She gazed off to the east, where the faint broken towers of Old Washington thrust above the mist. The towers were all that remained now of the variegated American empires that had flourished in the years before the Autonomous

Revolt. One lone tube track snaked out in that direction from Shenandoah and disappeared into the fog like the fossilized tendril of some long-dead beast.

*Stop delaying, Jara thought. Go inside and get this over with. Then you can go home and sleep. Whatever idiocy Natch is planning can't be much worse than what you're already doing.*

• • •

She was wrong.

“You want me to *what?*” Jara shrieked, sounding even to herself like some farcical harpy from the dramas. The Unbeliever, the sour-faced One Who Doubts Our Hero's Prowess.

Natch gloated at his apprentice's reaction. “I want you to spread rumors,” he said calmly, mid-pace, “that the Data Sea is about to be bombarded with a crippling black code attack.”

“A crippling black code attack.”

“By the Pharisees.”

“The Pharisees. And what good is this going to do?”

“It's going to cause the Patel Brothers to delay their product launch.”

Natch's orders were such an affront to common sense that Jara couldn't help but laugh. An emboldened Horvil let out a guffaw of his own. “Great plan,” cheered the engineer mockingly. “While we're at it, let's *cause* the Patel Brothers to put a million credits in our Vault accounts and give us all neck massages.”

Jara wondered fleetingly if Natch really *had* lost his mind. What connection was there between a respectable bio/logics company selling programs to improve the human body, and a group of superstitious fanatics who had walled themselves off in a far corner of the globe? Then she looked at Natch's condescending smirk and realized he was utterly serious.

Insanity.

The analyst took a seat on the sofa next to her fellow apprentice. “All right, start explaining,” she said.

Natch nodded and gave another one of those self-absorbed looks into the distance. “What’s tomorrow?” he said at length.

Horvil tilted his eyes upwards in thought. “November 1st.”

“November 1st. A day like any other, right? For us, yes. Products launched, products sold, business as usual. But for the Pharisees, tomorrow is the Day of the Dead.” He waved his hand at the closest viewscreen, which happened to be showing an early landscape by Tope. The painting’s sharp blues and greens morphed into an old Prime Committee video about the Day of the Dead. *Technology has marched onwards,* announced the narrator, *but in the mythology of the Pharisees, ghouls and goblins still come out at night.* The three of them watched as a band of brown-skinned Pharisees bowed low in dusty robes and began chanting in an archaic guttural tongue.

*The Pharisees hate the civilized world,* continued the nameless documentary narrator. *Using bio/logic programs to manipulate the human body is ‘ungodly,’ they say. And to implant tiny machines in the blood, to let some programmer’s code actually broadcast images into the brain... Unnatural! A sin!*

Natch paused the display and snapped for emphasis. Onscreen, a youth was frozen in mid-sowl, his sunburned fist raised in defiance at some unseen foe. “Remember the program that started raising blood pressures in all the orbital colonies?” said Natch. “That was just two years ago. Twenty-three hundred dead, and a harsh military response from the Defense and Wellness Council. But do you think they’ve had their fill of bloodshed? Of course not! The Pharisees haven’t been idle since then. They’ve been plotting and scheming and studying programming techniques, just waiting for the perfect opportunity to strike.

“When do the Pharisees tend to attack? On days of religious significance, of course. Like the Feast of All Saints. Like Jesus Joshua Smith’s Birthday.

“Like the Day of the Dead.

“Think about it! Couldn’t the Pharisees have figured out a way to disrupt the financial markets or Dr. Plugpatch or the multi network by now? Couldn’t they have chosen *tomorrow* to launch their opening salvo in the next holy war against us ‘connectibles’? Isn’t it possible the Defense and Wellness Council is shoring up its

defenses *right now* to prepare for a major onslaught by some frightening new breed of black code?”

Horvil was totally captivated by Natch’s little narrative. He leaned forward on the edge of the sofa, shifting his attention nervously between the wildly gesticulating Natch and the ominous figure on the viewscreen with the unkempt hair and dirty robe. “It is possible, isn’t it!” he gasped.

“And if all this is true... wouldn’t November 1st be a very unlucky day for the Patel Brothers to launch a product upgrade?”

Jara felt Natch’s plot snap into focus, and for one sickening instant she saw the world through the fiefcorp master’s warped lenses. Colors faded away, blacks and whites dissolved into a miasma of indistinct gray. “So you want us to tell people *our friends at the Defense and Wellness Council say something big is about to happen*, and wait for the rumors to clog up the gossip networks?”

“I don’t want anything *clogged up*. I want fucking bedlam.”

“And you think the Patel Brothers will catch wind of all this and postpone their product launch to a day with a slower news cycle.”

Horvil shook off the jitters and sat back in thought. “So *that’s* why you’ve been pushing us so hard on NiteFocus 48,” he said. “A near-perfect program... launched on a day where there’s no competition... That just might cause Primo’s to edge us up a notch or two in the ratings.”

Jara frowned. She now gleaned why Merri and Serr Vigal had been excluded from this early-morning rendezvous; they would never participate in such a scheme. In fact, now that Jara thought about it, Natch had been excluding them from a lot of ethically shady errands like this lately. A thought slithered through the back of Jara’s mind. What did that say about Natch’s opinion of *her*? She purposefully let it go.

Natch restarted the video. They watched a squad of Defense and Wellness Council officers execute a coordinated strike on a crowd of restless Pharisees standing on a hilltop. The Pharisees fired laser rifles wildly at the white-robed figures materializing all around them. But the figures they hit were nothing but ghostly multi projections, spotters for the real strike force lining up behind them. A volley of needle-sized darts flew through the air, lodging themselves in the flesh of their adversaries and unloading



“We’ve got good connections. People will believe *them*. Besides, we don’t need to come up with any specific information — a rumor of a rumor, that’s all.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

Natch shrugged. “If it doesn’t work, then what’s the harm done?”

“The Council will deny the rumor,” interjected Horvil.

“And knowing the Council, they’ll deny it so forcefully that people will remain suspicious. Nobody ever accused High Executive Borda of being subtle.”

*I could say the same thing about you, Natch,* Jara thought to herself. “I don’t understand this at all,” she said, throwing up her hands in exasperation. “If we have four programs ready to launch on the Data Sea, why don’t we just launch them now? Why do we need Pharisees?”

Natch shook his head. “First off, the programs *aren’t* good enough yet,” he replied. “We need at least another day to polish them up. And second, the Patel Brothers have been watching our every move for weeks now. They know we’re eyeing their number one spot on Primo’s. Unless we catch the Patels unaware for a few hours, they’ll immediately fire off a barrage of their own upgrades so they can stay on top. But if we have enough of a cushion, we just might be able to grab number one for a few hours.”

“What if someone catches us spreading rumors?”

“Like who?”

*He’s right,* the fiefcorp analyst reflected bitterly. Truth on the Data Sea was like the light from an ancient kaleidoscope: tinted and scattered and refracted on all sides. Especially in the bio/logics trade, where everyone was an interested party. Fiefcorps and memecorps spread rumors about their competitors all the time. So did the capitalmen who funded them and the channelers who pushed their wares. Jara remembered the recent case of a woman who planted rumors of incompetence about her own son to drive him out of business. Or the case of the fiefcorper who cornered the market on gastrointestinal programming by sabotaging his competitors’ sales demos. No charges had been filed in either case.

And who stood in Natch’s way? The Meme Cooperative — a fumbling bureaucracy.

Jara thought back to those interminable childhood lectures from the hive. *So if the Meme Cooperative is so incompetent, she had once complained, who's looking out for the little guy? Who's keeping things fair?*

*Nobody*, her proctor had replied ruefully.

*Nobody?* Jara had screamed in youthful outrage.

*Oh, I could tell you what the headmaster wants me to tell you*, the proctor had replied. *All that bullshit in the official hive curriculum. "The fluidity of information on the Data Sea ferrets out weak struts in the economy." "The independent writers, pundits and watchdogs known as the drudges are very effective at rooting out corruption." "We rely on the Local Political Representative Associations of Civic Groups — the L-PRACGs, our governments — to keep the free market in check." But you read the news, Jara. Do any of those statements sound like the truth to you?*

They had not. But those discussions had all taken place half a lifetime ago, back when a career as a Meme Cooperative bureaucrat or an L-PRACG policy maker had seemed like an attractive option. Fiefcorps were a place to build up a nest egg until something *real* came along. How quickly everything changed after the hive! All it had taken for her to sell out her governmentalist ideals, Jara thought with bitterness, was the flattery of rich, handsome, intelligent men like Natch.

Jara rubbed her eyes and came back to the present moment, but she could not dislodge Natch's obfuscating lenses. *The plan might work because it's so ridiculous*, thought Jara. *Who would suspect the industry has sunk so low that one of its finest is willing to sow panic in the streets with Pharisee terrorism rumors? Who would suspect Natch has anything to gain by it?*

And if someone *did* find out — if the Council or the Cooperative or the drudges or the Patel Brothers caught wind of the true source of these rumors — Primo's would probably still crown them number one. An independent valuation system couldn't afford to be swayed by the vagaries of law or politics.

Natch stopped pacing, making Jara uneasy. "I only see two potential problems," he said. "One, the rumors might not generate enough flak in the marketplace to faze the Patels. They might still launch NightHawk on schedule. Two, Primo's might find some undiscovered flaw in one of our programs and penalize us for it."

“What about the other fiefcorps?” asked Jara.

“Who? Lucas Sentinel? PulCorp? Prosteev Serly?” Natch gave a dismissive flip of the hand. “I’ve already checked their launch schedules. Nothing.”

Horvil frowned. He had been silent for some time now, listening to Natch’s maddening logic and making quiet calculations of his own. Jara wondered if he had enough functioning brain cells this early in the morning to fully comprehend the magnitude of Natch’s scheme. “There’s one more problem,” said the engineer.

“Which is?”

“What if these rumors spook more than just the Patel Brothers? The Pharisees have *killed* people with these terrorist attacks before. What if we spark too much panic? I mean, we’re all connected” — the engineer waved his hands around in the air as if he could scoop up molecule-thick multi bots and subaether transmissions with his fingers — “and so we’re all vulnerable. There *could* be another black code attack any day now. Everyone knows that. The Council might *really* be gearing up for another assault. What if we cause too much panic? There might be a rush on the Vault. People might stop trading. The whole financial system could collapse.”

Natch grinned as if he relished the possibility. “Small chance,” he said. Was that a note of disappointment in his voice? “Come on, Horvil! A few rumors shut down the financial system? People aren’t *that* gullible. Besides, the Council will quash the rumors long before that happens.”

“And what — what if the Pharisees *do* actually launch an attack that day?”

“Horv,” laughed the fiefcorp master, “*I’m* not responsible for what those lunatics do. The only one I’m responsible for is *me*. Let them do their worst. No matter what happens, the markets will still be there on November 2nd. *Trust* me.”

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## CHAPTER 4

Jara stared gloomily at the three-dimensional flowchart she had constructed on the coffee table. The flowchart towered mightily over her head, information layered on top of information like a ziggurat. She sat back and surveyed her handiwork. The names of people Jara had known all her life were lined up on a tier of data labeled GULLIBLE. Other names — friends, relatives, old lovers and companions — were skewered on holographic arrows labeled HARD SELL and SOFT SELL. Her own mother's name stood on an out-of-the-way parapet with the caption UNTRUSTWORTHY.

*This is what you've always wanted to do, isn't it?* Jara told herself. *Strategic analysis for a bio/logic fiefcorp. Managing timetables, scheduling product launches, assigning resources... right?*

Monday was nearly over, and she still hadn't gotten any sleep. Jara suddenly realized she had been staring at the flowchart without moving for at least an hour. Any minute, she expected the ziggurat to come crashing down on her in a virtual avalanche of data. And then she would die here, buried under the weight of Natch's lies.

*If you don't want to be here, Horvil had told her, go home.* She thought about the engineer, sweating inside a MindSpace bubble at the other end of London. The fact that Horvil was also foregoing sleep was small consolation to her.

Shortly after sundown, Jara felt the mental *ping* of an incoming multi request. Natch.

The fiefcorp master emerged from nothingness, gave her a cheerful wave in greeting, and began scrutinizing the flowchart. Jara hadn't seen him since this morning's meeting in Shenandoah, and his transformation was truly eerie. Gone was Natch the petulant schoolboy, seemingly shut off with the touch of a button. In his place stood Natch the slick entrepreneur, Natch the salesman, Natch the emblem of positive thinking.

"So you think we'll achieve maximum penetration if we start spreading the rumors tonight," he said with one hand pensively rubbing a chin that may have never known stubble.

Jara nodded wearily. “I’ve categorized all our acquaintances on three axes: credibility, connections, and sphere of influence. Then I’ve traced the likely flow of rumor from person to person, and plotted out the percentage chance the rumors hit critical mass.” She pointed to the pinnacle of the tower, a place of convergence. “I figure we need to start with our most influential friends tonight and work our way to the bottom of the list by tomorrow morning.”

“Why not the other way around?”

“These rumors have to have some foundation before they’ll take hold. One carefully planted source is worth more than a hundred pieces of idle gossip. That’s why I’m going to have Horvil talk to his family connections at Creed Élan later tonight. How can you get more credible than a creed?”

Natch began a fast-paced circuit around Jara’s apartment, but this time it was less an obsessive march than a confident strut. “I’m impressed, Jara,” he said. It was the first time he had praised her work in months. “Why the long face?”

Jara scowled. “Wouldn’t *you* have a long face if you had just called your own mother UNTRUSTWORTHY?”

Her sarcasm ricocheted off him like light off a mirror. “You really are something, Jara,” he said. “I don’t know how you manage to stay so detached through all this. My emotions have been all over the place the past few weeks. I’ve been irritable and demanding, I know... but that’s just because I can’t seem to find your level of *professionalism*. In fact, Horvil said to me the other day that you’re really the glue holding this fiecorp together...”

On and on it went, and Jara found herself responding to his abject flattery in spite of herself. She had a secret weakness for a handsome face and a sugary voice, and Natch could be devastating when he turned on the charm. *How does he do that?* she cursed silently. Didn’t she know by now that Natch’s apologies were never sincere, that the honeyed words were just another weapon in his arsenal?

Nevertheless, his strategy worked. Somehow he had discovered her weakness for praise and exploited it. Jara found herself responding to the low, erotic pulse Natch stirred up in her — that he could stir up in *anyone*, male or female, at his discretion —

and hated it. Hated it and hungered for it like she had never hungered for any of the hundred sexual satisfaction programs she had tried in the thirty years since initiation.

*Or are you just jealous?* she asked herself. *He's still in his twenties and he's ready to take over the world. You're past forty, and you're still working as an apprentice.*

“We’re going to be number one on Primo’s tomorrow, Jara, and we couldn’t have done it without you,” said Natch with a hand on her shoulder. It was a firm hand, not inappropriate, but still pregnant with possibilities. “The capitalmen are going to remember this in a few years, when you finally get sick of working for me and venture out on your own again. They’re going to beg you to accept their money.”

The analyst ran three fingers self-consciously through her curly mountain of hair. She wished there were an easy way to turn off the sensation of Natch’s virtual grasp, but the multi network didn’t allow that level of customization. “Yeah, well, maybe,” she replied lamely.

And then, seconds later, he vanished. His smile remained burned on her retinas.

Jara tiptoed down the hall to make sure Natch had indeed cut his multi connection and not just ducked into the next room to deceive her. *You're so paranoid, Jara,* she told herself. *This is your apartment. Nobody can multi here without your permission.* Still, she breathed a sigh of relief after determining that her boss was not in the flat. Natch had been known to perform miracles before.

She glanced back at the ziggurat and nearly retched. There it sat, in three dimensions — the evidence of her final degradation in the bio/logics trade. *There has to be some way to stop this from happening.*

Jara stood at her window and watched the London evening crowd go about its business. Of course, it wasn’t a *real* window; Jara couldn’t afford an apartment with exterior walls on her meager fiefcorp stipend, and had to settle for flat viewscreens. But how easy it was to just tune in an exterior view from the building and pretend. Down below, hundreds of people bustled around the public square, thousands maybe, casually perusing the Data Sea with hardly a thought to the bio/logic programs that ran their lives. Bio/logics regulating their heartbeats, bio/logics keeping their appointment calendars, bio/logics pumping sensory information into their skulls every second.

Jara's mind buzzed with evil possibilities as she fell into the familiar game of *what's the worst that could happen*. What would happen if panic overtook the market tomorrow and people started pulling money from their Vault accounts? What would happen if Horvil's trepidations became reality and the Pharisees really *did* launch a black code attack? Or what if — perfection postponed! — some unconnectible lunatics figured out a way to sabotage Dr. Plugpatch? Jara's eyes darted to some anonymous pedestrian making his way across the cobblestones below, and suddenly he was no longer anonymous.... He was an important businessman who would wake up tomorrow in Beijing or Melbourne or one of the orbital colonies, Allowell maybe.... He tries to grab a batch of stock reports off the Data Sea while he drinks his morning nitro, and *nothing happens*.... His blood pressure starts rising, he's supposed to close a big deal today. What the heck is he going to do now?... The OCHREs in his body frantically ping the Plugpatch medical databases for advice on how to keep his blood pressure down, and what to do about his congenital heart condition.... But Dr. Plugpatch doesn't respond.... The room goes dark, the lights go out....

*Get a hold of yourself!* Jara thought. *You're giving Natch way too much credit. One man can't bring the whole Data Sea crashing to a halt on a whim. The Pharisees aren't going to launch a black code attack tomorrow. What's the worst that could happen? A few fiecorps will lie low for the day, that's all.*

She switched the window display to a peaceful Irish countryside and tried to get back to work. The three-dimensional flowchart on the table silently mocked her: GULLIBLE. UNTRUSTWORTHY. UNDEPENDABLE.

“Fuck fuck fuck!” Jara cried aloud, slamming her hand against the bare walls. She couldn't just sit back and let this happen. Natch had to be stopped. He *had* to.

• • •

“I'm telling you,” said Horvil, “they're talking about it all over the gossip networks. I'm not making this up! Go check it out for yourself if you don't believe me.”

The woman pursed her lips skeptically and regarded Horvil with a penetrating look. It was the kind of dubious stare that muckety-mucks from the creeds had been

giving him his entire life, long before he was old enough to deserve them. Then she cast a spiteful glance at Horvil's apartment, which the engineer had carefully arranged in a tableau of dishevelment: half-eaten sandwiches mingling freely on the floor with dirty clothes, pieces of broken furniture, and the occasional bio/logic programming bar. The elderly woman sighed and turned back to smoothing the wrinkles on her purple suede robe. The state of the robe seemed more important to her than Horvil's dire warnings of enemy attack.

"Creed Élan has contacts in the Defense and Wellness Council," she said. "We have people in the Meme Cooperative. If everyone is panicking about Pharisee black code, why haven't we heard about it?"

"Heck, *I* don't know. I'm not a Council officer. Who knows how a wave of rumors like this gets started?"

"I don't care *how a wave of rumors like this gets started*," she mimicked cruelly. "I'm more interested in knowing how *you*, of all people, end up on the crest of it."



The woman's name was Marulana — at least, Horvil *thought* her name was Marulana. These rich old crones from Creed Élan were all interchangeable. They scrapped amongst themselves to be the first to solicit your donation for their silly charity events, but when it came time for *you* to ask a favor of them, they were nowhere to be found. All Horvil knew for sure was that she was a bigwig in Creed Élan — one of the handful of minor bodhisattvas that ran the organization. She was also one of the women his Aunt Berilla frequently had over for lunch in that gaudy calcified estate of hers on the West End.

He could have verified her name in a heartbeat on the public directory, but it didn't really matter. Horvil knew this was going to be a short conversation anyway.

“You want to know how I heard about this?” Horvil gulped, looking for a quick way to foist Marulana’s suspicions on someone else. “Natch told me.” He gave her a conspiratorial shrug as if to say, *Crazy world. You never know when you’re going to get swept up in another rumor or scandal. But what can you do?*

“Oh, *Natch* told you,” replied the creed official with deepening suspicion. “Somehow that doesn’t surprise me.” Horvil had no doubt she would recognize the name. Ever since he had signed on with the fiefcorp, Natch’s name had been spreading among the Élanners like a virulent cancer. Aunt Berilla’s influence, no doubt. “So you hear that a major black code attack is imminent, and your first instinct is to contact your spiritual mentors at Creed Élan. Is that it, Horvil?”

The sarcasm in her voice was palpable, almost a third participant in the conversation. “Listen, your holy creedfulness,” said Horvil. “I don’t expect you to panic every time you hear a strange rumor. But this is *me* talking! You guys know me. My family’s been shelling out credits to support Creed Élan since the beginning of time.” *And I haven’t paid any attention to your dumb creed activities since I was a kid. I don’t even pretend to understand what kind of morals and values you people teach anymore. I’m not sure I ever did.* “I’d just hate to see your fine customers — er, constituents — get sucked dry because some black code caught them unaware.”

“I’m certain our *devotees* will be just fine.”

The engineer lost his patience. “Why do you always have to look for ulterior motives? Do you think Creed Élan has a — a *monopoly* on good intentions?”

“No,” Marulana replied drily. “We simply know from experience that the only people fiefcorpers care about are themselves.” She threw a vulture-like frown in Horvil’s direction. Then her multi connection winked out without even a goodbye.

Horvil collapsed back to the couch, frustrated, sending a stack of grubby pillows to the floor in the process. *So much for family connections*, he thought. At least he could be comforted that the state of his apartment would make it back to Aunt Berilla.

• • •

Jara stood in the atrium of the Meme Cooperative's administrative headquarters. All the other governmental and quasi-governmental agencies built their offices in Melbourne, under the imposing shadows of the Prime Committee and the Defense and Wellness Council complexes. Not so the Cooperative, which chose the lonely orbital colony of Patronell as its base of operations for no reason Jara could discern.

The building followed the same bland architectural recipe that all bureaucratic buildings used these days. Start with a base of stretched stone and flexible glass to provide that chic curved effect. Throw in a clump of rice-paper walls to show solidarity with the past. Add impossibly high ceilings. Coat every available surface with viewscreens, and auction off the advertising space to defray construction costs. Mix in a crowd of thousands. The result: instant nausea.

But Jara was not there to study architecture. She was there to do the right thing. She was there to report Natch to the Meme Cooperative and stop this insanity before someone got hurt.

The very idea was absurd, and it grew more ridiculous with each step she took. *Who are you going to tell? And what are you going to tell them?*

Jara didn't know; she just knew she had to tell *someone*. She tamped down that tiny voice inside suggesting she use the information as leverage to get out of her apprenticeship contract. *No, I'm not just doing this for myself. I haven't sunk to Natch's level yet.* Natch's plan wasn't just dangerous to the capitalmen who had grown fat off the fiefcorp boom, or the degenerate fiefcorpers like Natch and her old boss Lucas Sentinel, people Jara would just as soon see destitute. The plan also made a mockery of the Primo's rating system that had served the public for seventy years. People trusted Primo's to uncover shoddy programs — programs that did not obey Plugpatch specifications, programs that could theoretically overload bio/logic systems and cause fatalities. Primo's was not perfect by any means. Its interpreters could be petty and inaccurate and just plain spiteful. But who else was there to turn to, really?

*If Primo's can be undermined, thought Jara, then what in the world can you depend on?*

The fiefcorp analyst wasn't sure where her feet were taking her, but now she discovered they were heading towards a department called the Fraudulent Fiefcorp

Practices Division. She could see the office now, just past the viewscreen hawking a program called *Feminine Mystique 242.37a*. Natch's fiefcorp had received its share of warnings from this office before, and Jara had walked these halls more than once to plead the company's case before an arbitration board. She could have filed a complaint from home, of course, but this was the only way if she wanted to remain anonymous. Without proof that the petitioners were real people, the office would be flooded with data agents from dishonest fiefcorps.

Judging by the long line of multi projections, there were plenty of disgruntled consumers willing to put in the extra effort. Jara scanned the queue and discovered a dozen people who had carefully scrubbed their public profiles to protect their anonymity. She herself had taken this prudent step before opening the multi connection to Patronell; anyone who pinged the public directories with Jara's image would see her name as Cassandra and her locality as Agamemnon's Palace. She doubted anyone here would get the joke.

A fine dust of boredom settled on the petitioners. Every minute or two, the line would shuffle forward. The silence of strangers, the doldrums of public spaces.

Forty minutes later, Jara reached the head of the line. An incoming message welcomed her to the Meme Cooperative and offered a map to guide her through the office to her designated inspector. She took a deep breath and dove into the labyrinth of cubicles.

"Come in, come in," urged the caseworker when she finally reached his cube. A slack-jawed fellow with Scandinavia in his eyes.

Jara walked to the stiff-backed chair opposite his desk and found herself ankle-deep in snow. The walls of the cubicle had disappeared — along with the rest of the Meme Cooperative building — replaced by a frozen tundra. *SeeNaRee*, Jara thought with distaste. She could practically hear the familiar *SeeNaRee* slogan she had seen on a thousand viewscreens: *If you can't go to the places you love, why not bring them to you?* At least it was good programming; her toes were already starting to freeze.

"I am required by the charter of the Meme Cooperative to inform you this is an anonymous conversation," began the official in a tired voice. "To ensure your confidentiality, neither I nor any of my colleagues can see you or otherwise identify you,

your gender, or any of your distinguishing characteristics without your express permission, except to confirm your presence on the multi network. A sealed recording of this conversation will be stored in our archives for a period of no less than..." The nondescript official droned on for another minute as he gazed myopically in the direction of his visitor's chair.

"I'm here to report a crime in my fiefcorp," said Jara when she was finally given the chance to speak.

"The nature of the crime?"

"Inciting rumors with the intent to mislead."

The Meme Cooperative official gave her a patronizing nod. "That may or may not be an actual crime," he said nonchalantly, drawing circles in the desk condensation with his index finger. "Do these rumors concern a business rival?"

"Well, not exactly, they're more just — general rumors...."

"About your industry?"

"You mean, are they about bio/logics? In a roundabout way, I suppose."

With smooth strokes, the man connected two of the circles on his desk, forming the mathematical symbol for infinity. "Do you have any evidence of these alleged rumors that can be presented before an arbitration board?"

*I knew this was a mistake, thought Jara bitterly. I haven't been here for five minutes, and we're already talking about "alleged" rumors.* The Meme Cooperative official was obviously more interested in enjoying his SeeNaRee than in listening to the grievances of some ghostly, genderless voice from the outside world. "Listen to me!" she grunted. "Something terrible is going to happen, and someone's got to stop it. It's a matter of public safety!"

Again the placating smile. "This really sounds like it's outside our jurisdiction. Perhaps you might try contacting your L-PRACG. Or maybe the Defense and Wellness Council would be willing to take a statement. There's also the Fair Business Working Group of the Prime Committee. Have you tried them? Or the Creeds Coalition's Council on Ethical Fiefcorp Behavior..."

Jara shook her head. This was pointless. Even if she did manage to ram a complaint through the thick skull of this bureaucrat, it would get lost in the administrative

morass. She pictured a colossal Rube Goldberg machine two hundred meters high, her complaint a pea bobbing back and forth on some remote conveyor belt hidden deep in the works. *What else can you expect when you trust an industry to police itself?* thought Jara bitterly. But the system had lined too many pockets over the years; no one else wanted the responsibility.

The analyst cut her multi connection without a word. The familiar walls of her London apartment appeared once more. Let the bureaucrat prattle on in his little winter retreat and make excuses for the Cooperative's inaction. Jara couldn't take another minute of it.

She flopped down on her couch and called up the holographic rumor flowchart. Another towering structure that obscured her very existence, only this one she had built herself. Jara rubbed her temples and prepared to send a ConfidentialWhisper request to the first name on her list.

• • •

Horvil whined and pulled his head out of the burrow of pillows he had created in his sleep. His internal calendar assured him it was indeed Tuesday morning, and he had slept for ten hours. But if the sun wasn't directly overhead, then it was simply too early for someone to wake him up with an urgent ConfidentialWhisper request.

"What?" groaned the engineer.

"I believe we owe you an apology," came a timorous voice.

Horvil bolted upright, capsizing a stack of nitro mugs. "Marulana?"

"You were right, Horvil," said the creed official, her voice a mixture of fear and chagrin. "Someone *has* launched a black code attack — and they're going straight for the Vault."

## CHAPTER 5

It took Jara almost ten minutes to get anything coherent out of Horvil. He had shown up at her front door in person, having run halfway across London with a threadbare pillow clutched under one arm. He was babbling about Creed Élan and losing his family's trust and what would happen if the Data Sea came crashing to a halt.

"All right, slow down," said Jara firmly, clasping his plump chin in her right hand. "What's happening?"



The engineer activated a de-stressing program and took a deep breath. A few seconds of Re/Lax 57b was enough to allow him to cram the panic back into the mental sideroom where it normally resided. "The world is coming to an end," he said earnestly.

Jara rolled her eyes. "Can you be *more specific*?"

"A bunch of lunatics are launching attacks on the Vault. Black code is sprouting like crazy on the Data Sea. The Vault keeps spitting out messages telling people to check their account balances. Nobody's heard a thing from the Defense and Wellness Council. Ergo... the world is coming to an end."

"Are you sure you're not just falling for the same dumb rumors we spread last night, Horvil? That was *fantasy*, remember?"

The engineer shook his head vehemently. "Look at *this*," he said, and Jara instantly felt the mental click of an incoming message. She projected the message onto a blank patch of air, where the holographic letters hovered menacingly like stingrays.

## PLEASE PROTECT YOUR HOLDINGS

The Vault has detected a DNA-assisted decryption attack directed at your account. Your holdings have not been compromised, but it is advised that you periodically check the security of your Vault account. This advisory has been automatically routed to the custodian of records for your L-PRACG and, depending on your L-PRACG's policies, may also be forwarded to the Defense and Wellness Council.

“My Aunt Berilla sent me that message,” said Horvil glumly. “Half the women in her creed circle have gotten them by now. This is just how the last one started. Remember all those warnings from Dr. Plugpatch that kept — ”

“Did you tell Natch? What did he say?”

Horvil nodded. “I finally caught him on ConfidentialWhisper about ten minutes ago. He just cackled something about *those crazy Pharisees* and went off to examine his accounts.”

The two of them sat down in Jara's breakfast nook. She instructed the building to mix up a tall glass of ChaiQuoke for the engineer, while he quizzically studied the fetid pillow in his hand and tried to figure out how it got there. Jara decided to see if her own meager holdings were in order. Within a fraction of a second, Vault statements were floating before her eyes in stolid financial fonts. All was well: there were no unusual transactions, and access was still guarded by a long series of encrypted numbers derived from her DNA. Jara turned to the fiefcorp accounts next, and was relieved to discover no sign of mischief there either.

Horvil slurped down the glass of milky ChaiQuoke that had emerged from the kitchen access panel. But despite the soothing beverage and the de-stressing program, the engineer was still fidgeting like a teenager. “You might want to read this too,” he said. “This just came five minutes ago.”

Jara found herself looking at the latest editorial rant by the drudge Sen Sivv Sor.

## THE COUNCIL ASLEEP ON THE JOB — AGAIN

The reporter's screed appeared in letters the size of her arm. An ugly white-haired face grimaced from the margin, daring her to mention the red birthmark on its forehead. *Sensationalist hack*, thought Jara as she rubbed her eyes and pushed the article back half a meter to a more readable distance.

Nobody has broken into my Vault account. Yet. Like many of you, faithful readers, I was awakened early this morning by an announcement from Vault security telling me to double-check the security of my accounts. I was pleased to discover that not a single credit had been touched.

But I may be one of the lucky ones. The scuttlebutt across the Data Sea is that unexplainable transactions are starting to pop up. A woman in Omaha informs me she lost a hundred fifteen credits this morning. A business on the colony of Nova Ceti claims it lost twenty-seven. You might be thinking that twenty-seven credits is not a lot of money, but multiply that by the estimated 42 billion people who hold accounts at the approximately 11 million financial institutions secured by Vault protocols, and you have the makings of a crisis.

Now the question on everybody's lips: Where is the Defense and Wellness Council?

Rumors that the Pharisees were planning a major black code offensive have been circulating for days in the drudge community. High Executive Borda must have heard them too. Certainly, he must have figured out that today is a major religious festival in the Pharisee Territories. And if that's the case, then why wasn't the public warned ahead of time?

"We haven't seen a successful black code attack on the Vault in years," a source inside the Defense and Wellness Council told me. "It's a totally distributed system running millions of different protocols and locked down on the submolecular level. How far do you think these fanatics are going to get?"

But is High Executive Borda naïve enough to think that the march of technology won't eventually...

Jara waved the scrolling text into oblivion. She could predict the rest of the article anyway. Sor would make his typical excoriations of the Council for being so secretive, and insist that Len Borda be held accountable for his inaction. Then he would segue into his standard rant about the moral decay of society.

“See what I mean?” moaned Horvil, head in his hands. “The world is — ”

“Shut up,” Jara barked.

Sen Sivv Sor had a devout following of several billion who hung on his every word. And he was but one among hundreds of thousands of independent commentators competing for readership. Now that the drudges were involved, Jara knew it was only a matter of time before panic whipped across the Data Sea like a tsunami.

And so it did.

While Jara sat quietly with Horvil in her breakfast nook, messages started rolling in to her mental inbox. Urgent warnings and sheepish apologies from the same friends and family members she had spoken with just last night. A letter from her L-PRACG administrator urging calm. Offers for useless “black code protection programs” from desperate fiefcorps that traded on unsavory bio/logic exchanges. Jara bristled at all the confusion.

“Listen to this,” said Horvil with a nervous laugh. “There’s a rumor going around the Data Sea that High Executive Borda is dead.”

Jara snorted. “Maybe he got caught in that orbital colony explosion that just killed half a million people.”

Half an hour drifted past like a thunder-laden stormcloud, full of bad omens. Jara tuned her viewscreen in to the public square outside, expecting to see thousands of Londoners rioting in the streets. She saw nothing but the usual Tuesday afternoon traffic. But could she detect an edge to the crowd, an impatience, a fear of the unknown? Or was that simply the everyday background hum of anxiety? Too many choices to make, too many consequences to consider.

“You know this couldn’t possibly be a coincidence,” said the analyst.

Horvil rested his cheek on the cool plastic of the table and sighed. Obviously, this thought had occurred to him too. “So you think Natch knew a black code attack was coming?”

“Maybe. You know that he’s hip-deep in the black coding culture.”

“Jara, I’ve *seen* those ‘black coding groups’ on the Data Sea that he follows. They’re a joke. A bunch of kids talking about mods for bio/logic programming bars, how to boost OCHRE transmission frequencies, shit like that. If one of *those* people launched an attack on the Vault, then I’m a Pharisee.”

“Well, it’s either that or...” Jara let the sentence trail off.

The engineer leapt to his feet, face as pale as the droplet of ChaiQuoke piloting its way down the grooves of his chin. “Come on, Jara. There’s no *way* he could’ve done that black code himself. I mean, yeah, Natch is one of the most brilliant programmers out there, but to break into the *Vault*? The Pharisees and the Islanders and who knows how many other lunatics have been trying to do that for *decades*. You think he just cobbled together some black code to crack open the financial exchange system in his *spare time*? He’s not that smart. No one is.”

Jara grimaced, conceding the point. Humans had limits. It was an axiom she felt she would be wise to remember. “Okay, okay. So what are the other alternatives?”

“Are the messages fake?”

“I don’t think so. They look authentic to me. The signatures check out.”

“Maybe he’s involved with the Pharisees. Maybe somebody warned him ahead of time. But wait — that doesn’t make sense either. The Pharisees don’t use ConfidentialWhisper or multi or — or *anything*. They’d have no way to get in touch with him.” Jara could see Horvil sliding back down into the mental quicksand. He was flailing his arms around in increasingly wide arcs to match the mounting decibels of his voice. “You know Natch likes to ride those tube trains in circles for hours on end. Maybe he’s going to the Pharisee Territories... or meeting the Pharisees halfway... or — ”

“That’s ridiculous. Natch is *not* holding secret meetings on the tube with a bunch of violent lunatics. He just *isn’t*.”

“Then maybe he has a source in the Defense and Wellness Council.”

Jara snorted. “Horvil, we’re getting nowhere. Natch doesn’t have sources *anywhere*. The only people he talks to are you and Serr Vigal. Everyone else trusts him even less than *I* do.”

They were both standing now, venting their inner turmoil at each other. Jara turned away from her fellow apprentice and stalked to the other side of the kitchen. Suddenly, the news began flooding into her consciousness once more, overrunning the hastily erected barricades she had put up so she could concentrate on her conversation with Horvil. Drudges of all political stripes were bickering in public about the sums of money that had vanished. The Council was maintaining complete silence about the situation. Jara’s younger sister in Sudafrica sent her a panic-stricken message asking for advice. And then, without thinking about it, Jara opened a message from the Vault authorities.

#### PLEASE PROTECT YOUR HOLDINGS

The Vault has detected a DNA-assisted decryption attack directed at your account. Your holdings have not been compromised...

The fiefcorp apprentice smacked her hand loudly against the wall and stomped off to the living room. Jara instantly regretted it. Blank walls weren’t so bad in the kitchen, but in living space they seemed like an accusation. She didn’t want the world to come to an end before she had made *some* kind of mark on this place.

“You know what we have to do,” Jara said grimly to the engineer, who had followed her out of the kitchen.

“What’s that?”

“We have to go to the Council and tell them what we know. *They’ll* listen.”

Horvil’s jaw dropped. He was too stunned to speak.

“Horvil, can *you* live with something like this on your shoulders?” she bellowed. She started to pace, Natch-like. “I mean, deceiving greedy fiefcorp masters is one thing. Even deceiving Primo’s. But what about *those* people out *there* who are going to suffer the consequences?” Jara’s sweeping gesture encompassed the London commuters visible from the window. The multied businesspeople hustling to meetings, the families

scampering across the square looking for safety, the street performers in the midst of some apocalyptic pantomime at the foot of Big Ben. “What if the medical networks break down? What if the multi network collapses? What if this black code attack sparks a total panic? What if people *die*, for process’ preservation?”

The engineer cocooned himself in a ball on Jara’s couch, as if his voluminous stomach might provide some insulation against the calamities of the world. “But... but... I’m sure that Natch wouldn’t — that he didn’t...”

Jara refused to give any ground. “I don’t know *how* he’s involved in this. Maybe he heard a rumor on the Data Sea weeks ago. Maybe he had a hand in putting this black code together. But he knows *something*. We can’t just ignore that, Horvil! We can’t just let people die! The Council might need Natch’s information to help stop the attack.” *I know Natch has been your best friend practically since birth, Horv, but sometimes you’ve got to look out for your own ass. Do you think Natch cares one way or the other what happens to you?* “Horvil, there comes a point where we have to put this Primo’s nonsense behind us and think of the *people* out there.”

The engineer was starting to crack. “All I ever wanted was to be a bio/logic engineer,” he whimpered, as if this were the most relevant statement in the world. “All I ever wanted to *do* was help people.” He peered up at this pint-sized woman with the mass of curly hair standing over him, but there was no mercy forthcoming.

*Can’t you see that I’m trying to help you, Horv?*

*Don’t you realize this could be just what we need to do to get out of these miserable apprenticeship contracts?*

And then Horvil narrowed his eyes, puzzled. The color gushed back to his face all at once. He looked as if his tongue was struggling to catch up with the information in his head. Finally, the engineer shook his head violently, banished the display on the viewscreen with an outstretched hand, and summoned forth the craggy visage of Sen Sivv Sor.

## BLACK CODE ATTACKS OVER

Defense and Wellness Council to Make Statement

\* \* \*

Jara could afford only one outgoing multi stream at her apartment, and it would have taken too long for Horvil to physically traipse back to his place on the other side of London. So the engineer had to rush down the street to the nearest public multi facility, something he hated to do. He didn't care how many times the Council guaranteed the safety of these public connections and how many guards they posted; you could never really feel comfortable letting your body stand slack in a room full of strangers while your mind was off elsewhere. Life in the world of meat and bone could be so *inconvenient*.

Apparently, word of the Council's impending statement had hit the streets. People started vanishing throughout the block as they slid into multivoid and prepared to open new connections. Horvil arrived at the public multi facility just in time to claim the last open red tile. He breathed a sigh of relief, and stepped into the space between a fat Japanese businesswoman and a wiry Indian man who seemed to be a technician of some kind.

"We didn't *have* to multi over here," said an amused Jara when Horvil finally caught up to her in the crowd. "We could have stayed at my place and watched the press conference on the viewscreen."

Horvil sniffed. "How much fun would *that* be?"

They were standing in the Defense and Wellness Council's main auditorium, its public face. Everyone knew the Council had moved its *real* base of operations to a new compound of unknown location. The auditorium was a fat wedge that might have represented 20 percent on some vast pie chart — a number that roughly approximated the Council's public approval ratings.

Horvil had actually been here in person once, during his requisite tour of the Melbourne governmental facilities. He remembered seeing the entire city laid out before him during the descent of the arriving hoverbird craft. If he had the power to see through the dozens of hanging pennants to the west and the stretched stone wall beneath them, he could have seen the Prime Committee complex and the Congress of L-PRACGs. To the

east lay the headquarters of the Creeds Coalition and the chief lobbying arms of TubeCo, GravCo, and TeleCo.

Jara pinged the Council’s multi information node. “A hundred and twelve million,” she said, gazing around at the assembled crowd of multi projections.

Horvil whistled. This black code attack had shaken people up. It looked like only twenty thousand, of course; in situations like this, the network conveniently abandoned the illusion that multi projections inhabited Cartesian space. “Any sign of Merri? Or Vigal?” he said.

“Public directory says Merri’s here somewhere,” replied Jara. “But no word on Serr Vigal. He wouldn’t come out here for something like this.”

“And Natch?”

Jara looked at Horvil and shook her head with a frown.

At precisely three o’clock (London time), there was a decrescendo in the background chatter of the crowd. Lights that had been glaring at full intensity dimmed to candle strength. Horvil held his breath and watched the stage below for the towering form of High Executive Len Borda.

But the man who materialized on center stage wasn’t him. A white-robed and yellow-starred figure approached the podium. The man, a pureblooded Asian, was little more than half Borda’s height, and had only a third of his girth. He stood patiently for a moment, dispensing that arrogant Council stare.

Borda’s underling did not give his name or rank. He simply opened his mouth and began to speak in a dead monotone. “My word is the will of the Defense and Wellness Council,” the man said, “which was established by the Prime Committee two hundred and fifty-two years ago to



ensure the security of all persons throughout the system. The word of the Council is the word of the people.”

Horvil shuddered involuntarily. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jara doing the same. They had heard this opening dictum thousands of times in dramas, news reports and speeches, and yet it still had the power to send ripples up and down the spine. Horvil was convinced the effect was bio/logically enhanced.

“Today, rumors have circulated on the Data Sea that the Vault was under black code attack by Pharisees,” continued the Council officer coolly, as if system-wide panic was an expected hazard; the total at the bottom of a spreadsheet column, the predictable outcome of a well-weathered formula. “Many irresponsible words have been written about the so-called vulnerabilities of the financial system and the supposed failings of the Defense and Wellness Council.

“High Executive Borda wishes it to be known that these rumors are completely without foundation. There *was* no black code attack this morning.”

Even through the sound-deadening programs of the Council auditorium, Horvil could hear the murmur of a million raised voices. He remembered his pathetic sniveling at Jara’s apartment, his panicked dash across London, and felt an embarrassed flush cover his face. The engineer risked a peek at Jara. Her nostrils were flaring.

The anonymous Council spokesman pressed on, either oblivious to or unconcerned by the crowd’s reaction. “The attack this morning was not a product of bio/logic engineering, or of black coding skill. It required nothing more than the ability to make clever forgeries and the will to deceive.

“These forgeries of Vault security messages were designed to fool the public into believing their financial holdings were under attack. What the perpetrators hoped to accomplish with this ruse is unknown. High Executive Borda believes the forgers’ goal was to sow panic in the marketplace. Suffice it to say these messages have been tracked down and eliminated.”

Jara seemed disoriented. She took a step backwards and turned her focus away from the diminutive Council spokesman, who began to recite a numbing series of technical statistics. “I don’t understand,” she ConfidentialWhispered to Horvil. “You

can't just *forge* a message from the Vault like that. You'd need DNA, atomic signatures, who knows what else."

Horvil tilted his head in thought. "It's not impossible."

"Horv, we *saw* those messages. They said they were from the Vault. They looked authentic. They had valid signatures."

The engineer smiled. The panic of the world coming to an end had already given way to the open vistas of a mathematical challenge. "Sure, it *looked* authentic," he explained. "It's not hard to make a forgery that looks official at first glance. You could probably find black code on the Data Sea that'll do the trick. The *hard* part is getting people not to take that second or third glance." Horvil summoned a virtual tablet in the air and began making sketches. "And you could probably do the same thing with the signatures... if you knew bio/logic encryption theory inside and out..."

Jara cradled her head in her hands and began rocking back and forth. She interrupted Horvil's musings in mid-sentence. "Horv, have you checked the dock at the fiefcorp in the past few hours?"

Horvil had already ventured far afield into chaos theory and fractal patterns, but Jara's question brought him back to familiar territory with a sickening thud. He shook his head.

"I can't believe we fell for this," Jara croaked. "Natch did it. He went ahead and launched all those programs onto the Data Sea this morning, when nobody was paying attention. NiteFocus 48, EyeMorph 66, everything."

"A-and the Patels?"

"Pushed back their NightHawk release until tomorrow. *Routine last minute error-checking*, their channelers are saying."

There was a very easy syllogism to follow here, even for someone who had not studied subaether physics and advanced bio/logic calculus like Horvil had. Natch had spread rumors of a black code attack.... There *was* such an attack, or at least a fake one.... The attack had created confusion in the marketplace.... Horvil didn't want to solve the problem. He wanted the whole thing to disappear, to vanish like the multi pedestrians on the street had vanished.

But the Defense and Wellness Council spokesman had no such hesitations. “The perpetrators of this crime may not have launched an actual attack on the Vault,” he said, his voice preternaturally calm. “But nevertheless there *has* been an attack — an attack on the people’s assumption of safety and security. And that is something the Council cannot abide.”

On cue, a row of ghostly figures materialized behind the spokesman. Council officers all, adorned with the white robe and yellow star, steely dartguns holstered at their waists, the inexorable mastery of the Data Sea written on their brows.

“This disruption has been thwarted, as *all* attacks against the public welfare are thwarted,” continued the small Asian at the vanguard of the officers. “To the perpetrators of this act, let me say this:

“The Council will not forget. The Council will not forgive. The Council will bring you to justice.”

Jara looked at the man with his index finger pointing towards the audience, the implacable representative of Len Borda’s will. She remembered Natch’s statement barely twenty-four hours ago: *We’re going to be number one on Primo’s, and we’re going to do it tomorrow*. It had been so easy. Natch’s had not been a statement of intent so much as a prophecy, a foretelling of an event already preordained. When she looked into the Council spokesman’s eyes, she could see the same force of will.

*Insanity*, Jara thought. *There’s no other word for it.*

## CHAPTER 6

Jara awoke groggy the next morning, hoping the past two days had been some sort of paranoid hallucination. After yesterday's grim pronouncements from the Defense and Wellness Council, she had prived herself to the world and slunk straight off to bed like a wounded animal. Now she discovered she had slept for fourteen hours straight, a Horvillesque achievement.

Anxious for something familiar, Jara fell back into the morning routine she had been forced to abandon by Natch's crazy plan. The routine went like this: Sit up and project the news feeds on top of the plaid blanket. Tune one viewscreen to the morning commentary by Sen Sivv Sor. Tune the other to the editorial by his rival, John Ridglee. Order a steaming cup of nitro from the building. Fetch nitro from the access panel at the left side of the bed. Activate Doze-B-Gone 91.

A few minutes of peaceful routine were enough to convince Jara she was okay. Enough to convince her that a small niche had been carved out for her somewhere in this hardscrabble mountain called the bio/logics industry. *Almost* enough to convince her she would survive another eleven months.

Insanity, insanity.

The chatter about yesterday's "black code attack" had already slowed to a trickle. Everyone who had claimed financial losses in the panic had quietly recanted during the early morning hours. Representatives of the assorted Pharisee tribes were tripping all over themselves to declare they had nothing to do with the hoax. Talk on the Data Sea had shifted focus from the attack itself to the Council's behavior during the crisis. Why did Len Borda send an underling to face the crowd at Melbourne instead of appearing himself? How did the Council plan on pursuing the offending parties? Other drudges were bemoaning the fact that vast swaths of the public had been deceived by such a simple stunt. Technology had kept the world so secure for so long. Had society become slothful and complacent?

The speculation merely elicited a yawn from Jara. She moved past the mundane news about TubeCo's financial woes and deaths in the orbital colonies, waved away the

parochial gossip from her L-PRACG and the solicitations from programming supply companies. The news feed on her blanket shifted in the blink of an eye to the bio/logic industry reports.

The lead headline:

## PATEL BROTHERS UNSEATED BY RIVAL FIEFCORP

*Natch Personal Programming Takes #1 on Primo's*

• • •

Jara let loose a tidal wave of messages on her boss. She stood on the red square in her hallway sending multi requests and ConfidentialWhispers by the dozens, enough to cause a major headache. Anyone but a trusted associate would have automatically been cut off by the Data Sea by now. Still, Natch could have prived himself to her communiqués with the barest thought. *What are you waiting for, Natch?* Jara asked. *What are you afraid of?*

Finally, one of her multi requests got through. Jara took a deep breath and activated the connection. Multivoid whispered its sweet promises of oblivion for a scant few seconds and then abandoned her in Natch's foyer. A viewscreen right in front of her face broadcast one of the early nudes of Baghalerix.

Voices drifted into her ears before the connection was stable enough for her to process them.

"Ratings? Who really cares about ratings?" came the first voice, cool and butter-smooth and almost certainly enhanced with bio/logics. Natch.

"Well, *you* do, from what I've heard," replied the second. Jara stood for a moment, trying to remember where she had heard that scratchy growl. A male voice, at least twice Natch's age. And then suddenly she placed it: the drudge Sen Sivv Sor.

*So the feeding frenzy has begun,* thought Jara bitterly. *Everybody wants to talk to the new number one on Primo's.*

She wondered when her fiefcorp master was planning to bring her in to the conversation. Or did he just plan to keep her dangling at arm's length? She studied the



*Perfection taint you!* she screamed silently at her boss. The fiefcorp master had cordoned off the living room, blocking access as only the apartment owner could. It was an inhuman feeling, this sensation of just *stopping*, the inability to even make an effort to transgress. The designers of the multi network strove so hard to provide complete verisimilitude, and yet their method of access control utterly short-circuited human instincts.

“So what’s next for the Natch Personal Programming Fiefcorp?” Sen Sivv Sor was asking.

Natch’s grin was practically audible. “Kick the Patel Brothers out on their asses, of course.” His imaginary audience let out a spirited cheer.

Jara gritted her teeth and fired off a terse ConfidentialWhisper. “This interview is *over*,” she announced, “unless you want me to start bombarding *him* with all the evidence I’ve found about your little scheme.”

There was a pause in the conversation. Jara could hear the rustling of clothing, a man arising from his chair. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to call it a day, Mr. Sor,” said Natch. “Duty beckons. I’ve got a fiefcorp to run.”

“Sure, sure!”

The analyst suddenly found the impenetrable barrier lifted, and swooped around the corner just in time to see Sor give Natch a final clap on the back. The drudge looked exactly like his pictures on the Data Sea; his craggy face, white mop of hair and distinctive birthmark would be recognizable anywhere. A second later, he disappeared. Off to rebroadcast the interview and play the bit part Natch had assigned him in the drama of his life.

Natch displayed no sign of the fatigue a normal human being would feel after four days without sleep. He looked alive, focused, handsome. Jara felt the familiar twinge of lust stabbing through her abdomen and sneered it down.

And then, in the space between one breath and the next, Natch’s demeanor completely shifted. A mask was silently discarded. Now his eyes held nothing but sullenness, and the once-over he gave her spoke more of dismissal than command. Natch didn’t even offer his apprentice a chair to sit in, but instead marched straight into his office. Jara stormed after him, trembling, only to find him standing at his workbench in

the midst of a MindSpace bubble. The donut-shaped code of NiteFocus 48 — or NiteFocus 49, she supposed — surrounded him like a life preserver.

“*What* evidence?” grunted Natch.

Jara put her hands on her hips and mustered her best accusatory stance. “Evidence of what you did.”

“And what exactly did I do?”

“You know exactly what you did, you son-of-a-bitch! You launched that fake black code attack yourself.”

If the analyst expected an angry outburst from her master, she was disappointed. She would have even been reassured by one of his contemptuous laughs. Instead, Natch nudged a periwinkle-colored chunk of code with his left hand while he probed its cratered surface with the fingertips of his right. “What makes you think I did *that*?” he said.

“Come on, Natch! There aren’t many people clever enough to pull off that little fandango yesterday. There’s even fewer who would have anything to gain by it. I’ve seen you tinkering around with strange programs over the past few weeks, stuff that doesn’t look like anything in *our* catalog. And then, of course, there’s the fact that the so-called attack happened exactly when our rumors said it would.”

“A happy coincidence.”

“And was it a *happy coincidence* you put *our* necks on the line instead of *yours*? Did it occur to you that when the Council starts asking questions, the rumors’ll lead back to Horvil and me? Not you, of course. *You* didn’t have anything to do with those rumors. *You* were busy getting our bio/logic programs ready for launch, as the MindSpace logs will clearly show.”

Something she said finally penetrated Natch’s thick skin. He worked quietly for a few minutes without speaking a word, the gears in his head clearly grinding away. The pause of a politician carefully phrasing a key platform. “If you really think I would do that to you and Horvil,” he said at length, “then you don’t understand me at all.”

Jara studied the fiefcorp master’s face carefully. Could he possibly be telling the truth? Could he be operating on a plane that far removed from everyday life? Or was this just another one of his acting jobs? She gazed into that unblemished, boyish face and

wondered if there were any truths at all buried beneath its surface, or if truth for him was as mutable as programming code, subject to updates by the hour.

A minute rolled by, then two. Jara cursed her body as a turncoat, fired up Delibidinize 14a for the third time that hour. *Can't he at least give me the satisfaction of turning MindSpace off?* she fumed. Finally, she straightened her spine and looked him squarely in the eye. "I quit."

Natch gave her a sly look. "Fine," said the fiefcorp master blithely. "Quit."

A stunned silence filled the room. Jara didn't move.

"Stop being so fucking melodramatic, Jara!" Natch burst out. He grabbed NiteFocus 49 with one hand and violently spun the virtual code around like a wheel, himself stuck in the spokes. "You've got less than a year left on your contract, and after that you'll have the option to cash out. You're telling me you're going to give up all those shares and start from scratch someplace else? Room and board for another four years? I know you better than that, Jara. You're going to stay right where you are and get filthy rich with the rest of us."

"I could turn you in to the Council."

Natch didn't lose a beat. "Without hard evidence — which I *know* you don't have — where would that get you? Nobody wants to hire a whiner or a whistle blower. You'd be right back where you were when I found you: blacklisted by the major bio/logic fiefcorps, taking shit from second-rate imbeciles like Lucas Sentinel. And *don't* tell me the Council will get to the bottom of this, because they *won't*. Dozens of cases like this cross Len Borda's desk every week, and he's lucky if he can close a tenth of them."

"Then I'll tell the Meme Cooperative."

"Don't make me laugh."

"The drudges. I could send a message to Sen Sivv Sor and John Ridglee right now."

Natch shrugged, as if the effort of responding to such an inane proposition was beneath him. He caught the spinning donut of code with one hand and began studying its surface once more.

Jara let her hands drop inertly to her sides. *Is he right about me?* she thought. *Is that all I am — a whiner and a whistle blower?* She thought back to her days peddling

bio/logic analysis to Lucas Sentinel, to all the times she had cursed her fate and threatened to quit. Wouldn't Lucas pull the same stunts that Natch did, if he had the guts or the foresight?

She hadn't really intended to quit, she realized now. Despite all the indignities, Jara couldn't bring herself to hate this cantankerous child. What she had wanted was the opportunity to deliver some kind of high-handed sermon about Pyrrhic victories and the value of interpersonal relationships. She wanted him to take her seriously. "People could have gotten *hurt*, Natch," Jara said quietly.

"They didn't."

"But they *could* have."

Natch finally capitulated and flipped off the MindSpace bubble around his workbench. The holographic donut melted back into the void. "Jara, everyone who invests in bio/logics knows what's going on. Things like this happen all the time. Do you think the Patel Brothers got to the top without getting their hands dirty? Or Len Borda?"

Jara snorted angrily. "Oh, I see, *the end justifies the means*."

The entrepreneur narrowed his eyes, as if trying to adjust his focus to a shallower depth of field. "Do you really think number one on Primo's is the *end*? Then you don't understand *anything*, Jara. Getting to number one on Primo's isn't an end at all — it's a means. It's part of the process... just a step on the ladder."

"So what *is* the end? Where do all these means *lead* to?"

Natch stared out into the nothingness for a moment without speaking. She saw him for a brief instant unadorned, between masks. His jaw rocked back and forth, and in his eyes burned a hunger the likes of which Jara had never seen. That fire could consume her schoolgirl lust, swallow it without a trace. She shivered involuntarily.

"I don't have a clue," said Natch. "But when I find out, I'll let you know." And with a peremptory wave of his hand, he cut her multi connection.

Jara found herself standing once more on the red square in her London apartment. It was Wednesday afternoon already. In a few blessed hours, this entire debacle would be a distant memory. On the viewscreen, she could hear the crowds milling about in the public square, restless, impatient, disconsolate.

Jara sank to the floor and cried for a moment, then dragged herself back to her office. There was work to be done.

## CHAPTER 7

Sleep tore at him, shrieked at him, pummeled him without mercy. His traitorous body was only too happy to succumb, and it took a monumental effort of will for Natch to keep himself awake.

Sheldon Surina, the father of bio/logics, had once defined progress as “the expansion of choices.” Natch wanted the choice to stay awake. So he switched on PulCorp’s U-No-Snooze 93 and let the OCHRE machines in his body release more adrenaline. Within seconds, he was awake and alert.



He was on the tube headed north out of Cisco station, through the great redwood forests that carpeted much of the northwest, and up to Seattle. Natch had been on this route hundreds of times. The tube would shuttle back and forth between the two port cities all afternoon, hauling industrial supplies and a dwindling number of commuters. At this time of the morning, the passenger car was nearly empty. Besides Natch, there was an elderly gentleman who appeared to be killing time; two businesswomen who were probably accompanying their cargo in the trailing cars; and an Islander tugging

uncomfortably at the steel collar around his neck. Fickle economics, which had once courted TubeCo with ardor, had moved on to younger and more acrobatic mistresses.

Natch had no business to transact in either Cisco or Seattle. He came to see the trees. To see the trees and to plot his next move.

Everyone in the fiefcorp knew about his ritual of tubing out to the redwood forests whenever he had something to mull over. Nobody understood it, least of all Jara. “You refuse to eat a meal sitting down because it’s a waste of time, but you’ll spend *three and a half hours* riding a hunk of tin across the continent?” she had once scolded him. “Why tube all the way out there when you can multi instead?”

“It’s not the same as being there in person.”

Jara rolled her eyes. He saw the incomprehension written all over her face: *This is the same kind of backwards logic that the Islanders and the Pharisees use. I thought you were smarter than that.*

“What about a hoverbird?”

“I don’t like hoverbirds. Bad memories.”

“Okay, then why don’t you *teleport*? I know, it’s expensive. But time is money, isn’t it?”

Natch had had no reply. He was not very good at elaborate explanations. He simply knew he did his best thinking while in a tube car staring at giant sequoias. Teleporting or multi projecting out to the redwoods just wasn’t the *right way to do it*. It was *wrong*, like an imperfect bio/logic program was wrong.

Maybe what he appreciated about the tube was that it was *done right*. TubeCo had an eye for perfection in everything they did. Their vehicles were not “hunks of tin,” as Jara had accused. They were sleek and beautiful, the product of a business that had reached its awesome maturity. Transparent from the inside but breathtakingly translucent from the outside, the tube cars floated on a cushion of air just molecules thick and whooshed over slim tracks with quiet grace. Even the armrests on the chairs were sculpted from synthetic ivory and contoured for maximum comfort. Unlike so many technological marvels these days that blended into the background — microscopic OCHREs that regulated the human body, multi projections that were nearly indistinguishable from real bodies, data agents that existed only within the mind — the

tube was a visible, palpable manifestation of human achievement. It was progress writ large.

The redwoods, in contrast, were nature writ large. Natch gazed through the transparent wall at the sequoias towering over the tube tracks. These trees had watched over this route long before the tube even existed. Most of them had undoubtedly seen the days of Sheldon Surina and Henry Osterman, the days of bio/logics' founders. Some of the trees had stood here since long before the Autonomous Revolt or even the First American Revolution. All of human history, in fact, was but a footnote to their tranquil and reflective existence.

The tube car completed its circuit through the redwood forest and slid to a graceful stop at the Seattle station, but Natch stayed on for another pass. Then another, and another. He watched the trees, he pondered the future, he formulated plans. Gradually, the effects of the U-No-Snooze program wore off. Natch let his guard down and drifted off to sleep.

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In his sleep, he dreamed.

He dreamed he was standing in a grove of redwoods, dwarfed by their majesty. He felt small: a forgotten attribute in the great schema of the universe. He was trapped down here. The forest was endless. Tube trains whizzed by just over the next hill, powerless to do anything but circle around in vain looking for an outlet.

But Natch had found a method of escape. He had prepared for this moment. He was a bio/logic programmer, a master architect of human capability. He had studied in the Proud Eagle hive, apprenticed with the great Serr Vigal, gone up against formidable enemies like the Patel Brothers. And he had brought all his skill and learning to bear when he had crafted the ultimate program: Jump 225.

He stared at the canopy of leaves many kilometers up in the sky. It looked impossibly distant. But then he thought about the Jump program, the way it swirled and swooped in MindSpace with impossible grace. The sheer number of its tendrils, its

connections. The geometric shapes that formed mathematical constellations beyond human perception.

Natch was confident. He started the Jump program, felt programming instructions flowing off the Data Sea and into the data receptacles built into his very bones. Felt the tingling of OCHRE systems interpreting the code and routing commands to the proper leg muscles.

He Jumped.

Natch propelled himself right-foot-forward in an elegant arc towards the sky. The code was grounded in one of the classic moves of natural law: the jump, a movement humanity had worked out through a hundred thousand years of constant iteration. Yet the program bore the indelible signatures of an artificial product: the curl of the toes at mid-leap, the triumphant arching of the back, the pleasing whistle where no whistle would otherwise exist. The sky drew nearer and nearer, the ground now but a distant memory. Breaking free of the redwoods was already a foregone conclusion, and Natch had set his sights on still loftier goals. Jump 225 would take him not only above the redwoods, but up into the clouds and out of natural law altogether. He would achieve freedom from the tedious rules that had governed human existence since the beginning of time. Down would no longer follow up. Autumn would no longer follow summer. Death would no longer follow life. The Jump 225 program would accomplish all this, and more.

Then, just when his straining fingertips struggled for purchase on the twigs hanging off the highest branches — when he could feel the feathery touch of the leaves — when he had just gotten his first whiff of pure, clean, unspoiled sky — the inevitable descent began.

Natch could see himself falling in slow motion, as if he were looking down from the pinnacle of the tallest redwood. He could see his arms flailing and feel his lungs bursting every second of the way down. The whistle of the Jump had become the screech of gravity's avenging angel. What mere seconds ago had been a triumphant Jump now turned into a horrible, agonizing Fall. How could he have been so blind? How could he not have seen this?

This was worse than not having Jumped in the first place: the force of the impact would surely crush him, flatten him, destroy him. And still he accelerated. Falling so fast

now that he would actually crash *through* the ground, down through the pulverizing rock, down to the center of the earth, where nothing could ever rise again. He yelled his defiance. He shook his fists. He railed at the trees, reaching out in a vain effort to pull them down with him.

A split-second before impact, Natch awoke.

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