

|

LESSONS LEARNED

(((|)))

Len Borda was dying.

Or so Marcus Surina told his twelve-year-old daughter Margaret one blustery winter morning, the two of them striding through the hoverbird docks, wind at full bore, the sun a frail pink thing cowering behind the clouds.

He won't die today, of course, said Marcus. His voice barely registered above the clanging of the cargo loaders and the yelling of the dockworkers. *Not this week or even this month. But the worries hang from the high executive's neck like lusterless pearls, Margaret. They weigh him down and break his will. I can see it.*

Margaret smiled uncomfortably but said nothing.

If the city of Andra Pradesh had a resident expert on untimely death, it was her father. Before he had accepted the Surina family mantle and assumed his birthright as head of the world's most prominent scientific dynasty, Marcus had wandered far and wide. He had teased the boundaries of human space, flirted with dangerous organizations in the orbital colonies. Death was a constant presence out there.

And yet, High Executive Borda seemed an unlikely candidate for the Null Current. He had been a hale and headstrong man upon his inauguration just weeks after Margaret was born. A NEW EXECUTIVE FOR A NEW CENTURY, the headlines had proclaimed. Some predicted that the troubles of the office would prove too daunting for the young high executive. They murmured that Borda had never been tested by hardship, that he had come of age in a time of plenty and had inherited the job uncontested. But his stature had only grown in the intervening decade. Try as she might, Margaret could find no lingering gaps on Borda's calendar, no telltale signs of weakness or indecision. As far as she was concerned, the high executive was on his way to

becoming a fundament of the world, an eternal force like rock or gravity or time itself.

But Marcus Surina remained firm. *You develop a sixth sense out on the frontiers*, he said, examining the hoverbird manifest for the third time. *You begin to see things outside the visible spectrum of light. Patterns of human behavior, focal points of happenstance. Travel the orbital colonies long enough, and you learn to recognize the omens.*

Margaret stirred. *Omens?* A strange word coming from the lips of her father, the quintessential man of science.

The omens of death, continued Marcus. *Plans that wander from their steady paths. Appetites that suddenly grow cold. Thoughts that lose their ballast in midsentence and drift off to places unknown.* Her father stopped suddenly and turned his hyper-focus on a dented segment of the hoverbird wing no bigger than a finger. Three aides-de-camp hovered a meter away, anticipating a word of command or dismissal. *Some people, you can look in their eyes and see that the Null Current is about to pull them under, Margaret. You can see the inevitability. Just like you can see the stalk of wheat as the thresher approaches, and know that the time's come for a newer, stronger crop to bask in the sun.* Marcus made a gesture, and the aides scattered like duckpins.

Then he was striding off again, and it was all Margaret could do to keep up with him. She shivered as she ran, whether from the cold of encroaching winter or from the strangeness of the man before her she could not tell. Lusterless pearls? Wheat and threshers? His clattering metaphors made her teeth ache.

The girl resolved to be patient. In less than twelve hours, her father would be gone, off to the distant colony of Furtoid with the rest of the TeleCo board, and routine would slink out from the alcove where it had been hiding these past few days like a bruised animal.

She called him Father, but it was mostly an honorary title. Marcus had spent four years of the last twelve on the road, and here at Andra Pradesh he was constantly fenced in a protective thicket of apprentices,

scientists, business associates, capitalmen, government officials, drudges, bankers, lawyers, and freethinkers that even a daughter could not penetrate. He would stop by her quarters unannounced, cloaked by the night, and quiz her on schoolwork like a proctor checking up on a promising student. Sometimes he would speechify as if Margaret were the warm-up audience for one of his scientific presentations. Other times he would assign her outlandish tasks and then vanish to some colloquium on Allowell or some board meeting in Cape Town.

Prove Prengal's universal law of physics for me, he told her once. It took Margaret three months, but she did.

Margaret had no doubt that she did not have a normal upbringing. But how far off-kilter things were she had no way of judging. The Surina compound was a cloistered and lonely place, despite the crowds. Her mother was dead, and she had no siblings. Instead she had distant cousins innumerable, and a team of handlers whose job it was to confine her life in a box and then call that order.

But there were some things the Surina family handlers could not shield her from. Lately Marcus' face had grown sterner, the lines on his forehead coagulating into a permanent state of anger and anxiety. Margaret suspected there were new developments in her father's battle with the Defense and Wellness Council. Len Borda wanted TeleCo. He wanted her father's teleportation technology either banned outright, or conscripted for military purposes; nobody was sure which. And now, this past week, tensions seemed to be coming to a head.

Margaret couldn't quite comprehend what the fuss was about. She had watched a dozen trials of the teleportation process from unobtrusive corners, and it wasn't anything like the teleportation she had read about in stories. You couldn't zap someone instantaneously from one place to another. The procedure required two people of similar biochemical composition to be strapped into a metal container for hours on end while particle deconstructors transposed one body to the other, molecule by agonizing molecule. Margaret wondered why High Exec-

utive Borda found the whole idea so threatening. But whenever she asked one of the TeleCo researchers about it, they would simply smile and tell her not to make premature judgments. Marcus had big plans up his sleeve. Give the technology a chance to mature, they said—and generate much-needed revenue for the TeleCo coffers—and she would one day see wonders beyond her imagining. The world would change. Reality itself would buckle.

She took the TeleCo scientists at their word.

That look of inevitability, said Marcus, wrenching Margaret back to the present. They were taking the long, silent lift to the top of the Revelation Spire, where her father had his office. *That look of death. I've seen it, Margaret. I've seen it on Len Borda's face. The high executive knows that the thresher is coming for him.*

Margaret shook her head. *But he's not that old, is he? You're older than he is and—*

Age has nothing to do with it.

The girl wasn't quite sure what to do with that statement. How to make her father understand? How to pierce that veil of myopia and arrogance that kept Marcus Surina from the truth? *But—but—I was talking to Jayze, and Jayze said that you've got it all wrong. She said that the Council's coming for you. The high executive's going to bust down the gates to the compound any day now and take TeleCo away—*

Marcus Surina laughed, and the worry lines on his face broke like barricades of sand washing away with the tide. At that moment, they reached their destination, and the elevator doors opened. Marcus put one brawny arm around his daughter and led her to the window.

You see that? he said.

Margaret wasn't entirely sure what she was supposed to see. They stood on top of the world in a very visceral and literal sense. The Revelation Spire was the tallest building in human space, and built on a mountaintop, no less. Far below, she could see the Surina compound and a blue-green blob that could only be the Surina security forces con-

ducting martial exercises. Sprawled in every direction outside the walls was the unfenceable polyglot mass of Andra Pradesh, city of the Surinas, now getting its first taste of the seasonal snow. Margaret could think of no safer place in the entire universe.

You see that? Marcus repeated. *It's winter. Everything is shrouded in snow, and the world seems bleak and hopeless, doesn't it?*

The girl nodded tentatively.

The gloom doesn't last, Margaret. It never lasts. Remember that.

But—

He gripped her shoulder firmly, turned her around to face him. Marcus Surina's eyes shone brilliant blue as sapphires, and she could smell the cinnamon of morning chai on his breath. *Listen*, he said quietly. *Don't breathe a word of this to anyone, especially your cousin Jayze. Len Borda's lost. Our sources in the Council say he's spent too much time and money coming after teleportation, and he's ready to move on. That's why the board's going to Furtoid. To negotiate a settlement. By this time next week, it'll all be over. Do you understand? We've won.*

The girl blinked. If the victory bells were ringing, she could not hear them.

Always remember this, Margaret. No matter how bad the winter, spring is always right around the corner.

The girl nodded, smiled, let Marcus Surina fold her in his arms for a last embrace. Better to leave him with this memory of hope at the top of the world than to shower him with cold truths. *Spring might always be right around the corner*, she thought. *But there's always another winter behind it.*

(((2)))

Lieutenant Magan Kai Lee stood at the window of a Falcon hoverbird and watched the Potomac scroll away until it was lost in the snow. December of 359 had proven an exceptionally good month for snow.

The pilot quietly veered off the established flight path, leaving the sparse morning traffic behind while they plowed through the mist a dozen meters above the river's froth and foam. Today, at least, the hoverbird's egg-white finish made decent camouflage.

Magan looked out the port window and saw the Shenandoah River slide into view. "Ulterior admission," he said quietly. *Full stop.*

It was a small craft, designed by Defense and Wellness Council engineers for first-response situations. Twelve could fit here with comfort, and today there were only three. The pilot could hear his superior officer's command just fine. "Impulse open and locked," he replied in acknowledgment. *Full stop.* Seconds later, Magan could hear the decrescendo of engines shutting down and the ethereal whir of anti-grav kicking in. The hoverbird came to rest twenty meters above the treetops.

Within the space of a heartbeat, the illicit advertising began dribbling in to Magan's mental inbox. Guerrilla messages, automated, probably keyed in to the whoosh of the hoverbird's vapor exhaust.

COZY WINTER GETAWAYS on the SHENANDOAH:
Affordable Prices!
Hoverbird in Need of a Boost? Read Our Special Report
THE MAKERS OF CHAIQUOKE SALUTE THE SHENANDOAH COMMUTER

The hoverbird's third occupant blocked the flow with an irritated *tsk.*

Rey Gonerev, the Defense and Wellness Council's chief solicitor,

rose from her seat and stood at Magan's side. She parted her long braided hair to reveal a thin face with skin of deepest cocoa. Magan could feel the neural tug of her ConfidentialWhisper request. "You sure we're not overdoing this?" she asked, her words appearing silently in his mind like adjuncts of his own thought process.

Magan ignored her and watched the skyline. His mind was sifting through combinatorial possibilities in preparation for their mission. Rey Gonerev had no place in his reflections at the moment.

The solicitor pursed her lips. "Lieutenant?" Receiving no response, she shrugged and retreated to her seat, keeping the Confidential-Whisper channel open just in case.

Magan turned his attention to the circular table that comprised most of the hoverbird's rear section. He waved his hand over the surface, causing a holographic map to blink into existence. It was an example of true Defense and Wellness Council austerity: the meeting of two rivers reduced to a handful of intersecting vectors, with the hoverbird itself nothing more than a triangle of canary yellow. As Magan studied the hilly terrain with a critical eye, four more yellow triangles arced into the display and halted in formation alongside them. He looked out the window and surveyed the line of sleek white hovercraft floating above the Shenandoah, silent as vultures. The lieutenant noted approvingly that the noses of the hoverbirds were in perfect alignment.

There was a momentary squawk of pilots confirming their rendezvous and their mission number. Then one craft broke off from the rest and took a vanguard position. A blue dot on the map indicated the presence of the team leader: Ridgello, a veteran from the Pharisee front lines and one of Magan's most trusted subordinates.

The team leader opened a voice channel to the rest of the troops. "Broad strokes imply a declension of purpose, and such things cannot be ascertained with present information," he said. *We commence operations in approximately six hundred seconds, after we receive the technical crew's signal. Any questions?*

“My question,” said Rey to Magan over the Confidential Whisper channel, “is whether this whole thing is overkill.”

The skepticism in her voice would have earned a swift reprimand had it come from anyone else. But Magan had learned long ago that kowtowing to superiors was simply not part of Rey Gonerev’s nature. She would continue dropping little bombs of snarkiness all morning until he had answered her. “If you insist on observing,” replied Magan over the Whisper channel, “the *least* you could do is follow standard procedure and use Council battle language.”

The solicitor made a dismissive shrug. “This isn’t a military issue,” she stated icily. “It’s a policy question, and you know it.”

“This policy comes from High Executive Borda.”

“But Magan—nineteen dartguns, six disruptors, and three technical crew, just for one unarmed man? You’ve taken out whole Pharisee outposts with fewer boots on the ground.”

Lieutenant Lee gritted his teeth, perfectly aware that he had no cause to gainsay her. *You know she’s right*, he told himself. *And there’s nothing you can do about it*. He seethed momentarily with ire for the unsorted, for the unordered, for the chaotic and unplanned.

Magan turned and gave Rey Gonerev an appraising look. She had risen once again from her seat and was standing alongside the pilot watching the formation. Gonerev should have been the type of volatile element that Magan tried to suppress from the Council hierarchy. Instead he had worked hard to put Rey Gonerev in the chief solicitor’s office, and it had taken him some time to realize why. It was precisely *because* she refused to kiss ass, because she was not Len Borda’s toady and did not aspire to be Magan’s either. Gonerev could always be counted on to cut through bureaucratic and organizational hypocrisy like a machete slicing through so many thin vines. It was no wonder the pundits had nicknamed her “the Blade.”

Ridgello had just received final status reports from the other four hoverbird teams. “Perhaps we need to cover extremities and observe

full zoning regulations,” he said. *Commander Papizon will signal us when he’s overridden the building’s security and compression routines, and then it’ll be time to move.*

“This man is not to be underestimated,” Magan told the Blade. “He is as sly as a snake.”

“But—”

“*Enough.* The high executive has made his decision. My duty—and yours—is to carry it out.” Magan cut the ‘Whisper channel with a curt swipe of one hand, and even the Blade knew that further argument was useless.

Ridgello concluded his preoperational briefing with a question for Magan Kai Lee. “South by southwest makes for a defensive maneuver,” he said. *Anything to add, Lieutenant?*

Magan could feel the randomness algorithm hijack his thoughts and twist them into unrecognizable shapes designed to sow confusion among any eavesdropping enemy. “Keep pushing for higher ground, regardless of any spiking temperatures,” he said. “It’s a tribute to your preparedness that we have a robust strategy at all.” He could imagine the same process at work in reverse in each of the soldiers’ heads, realigning and reassembling his gibberish into something more comprehensible. *Remember that the subject is expected to be unarmed, and lethal force will not be required. If we encounter his apprentices, they are to be taken alive.*

Silence ensued. Magan watched the drifting snowflakes and tried to clear his mind. He could see the officers through the window of the next hoverbird polishing their dartguns, choosing which canisters of black code-laden needles to load. Rey Gonerev was making small talk with the pilot in plain speech, as if deliberately flaunting her defiance of military convention.

A little more than a month ago, Magan had never heard of this man, this fiefcorper who was the object of their mission. He had come from nowhere, really, a shameless entrepreneur who had clawed his way out of the bear pit of bio/logic programming. Nobody was quite sure how he had wormed his way into Margaret Surina’s good graces, or

how he had gained control of her MultiReal technology so quickly. Then he had showed up in Len Borda's chambers, mere hours ahead of a major product demo, looking to make a deal. The Council's protection from some group of assassins in black robes that had ambushed him on the streets of Shenandoah. Protection from the black code swarming through his bloodstream even now like barracudas. In exchange: access to MultiReal.

The high executive had kept his word. He had raised his hand and sent three legions of his best troops scrambling for Andra Pradesh. The fiefcorper's product demo had gone off as planned.*

And what had the entrepreneur delivered in return? Nothing.

He had failed to show up for half a dozen scheduled meetings over the next week, leaving Magan and his underlings to sit alone in a series of conference rooms feeling foolish. Urgent messages and Confidential-Whispers had disappeared into the void, unacknowledged and unanswered. Threats had gone unheeded.

Borda had responded to this charade with the subtlety of someone conducting an orchestra in a suit of armor. He had sent white-robed Council officers to shadow the man twenty-four hours a day, then had those officers parade before the man's windows with dartguns drawn. When that had failed to apply the appropriate pressure, he had ordered the troops to accept no excuses and firmly escort the man to the Council's administrative offices in Melbourne. Still the fiefcorp master managed to elude them. He would disappear for days at a time right under the officers' noses—nobody knew where or how.

Two days ago, Len Borda's patience had reached its limit. He had called Magan Kai Lee to his chambers in the middle of the night, telling him to drop everything and bring the intractable fiefcorper back to the negotiating table, by force if necessary.

*For a more detailed synopsis of the events of *Infoquake*, book 1 of the Jump 225 Trilogy, see appendix A.

“In handcuffs?” Magan had asked.

“In chains,” Borda had replied.

Lieutenant Lee had looked at that weathered face, that bald capstone of a head. The high executive had stared back at him with a gaze of acid. Magan felt his fingertips flex involuntarily, yearning to take hold of the dartgun holstered at his side and aim it at that caustic, lich-like countenance. Borda had merely sat there, defenseless but utterly without fear. He knew that Magan would not break their agreement.

And Borda was right. In the end, Magan Kai Lee had done what he was told. He had retreated back to his quarters, filing the impatience away in yet another mental side room that was full dangerously close to bursting. He had called up Papizon, and the two of them had sketched out this endeavor, with occasional input from the Blade. The next forty-eight hours had been a haze of architectural blueprints, supply requisitions, and scouting reports.

An incoming blip snapped Magan back to the now. It was time.

Go.

All at once, the Defense and Wellness Council hoverbirds blasted into motion. They quickly shifted into single file as they sped towards Shenandoah like a poison arrow, with Ridgello’s hoverbird the barb and Magan’s VIP ship the fletchings.

Magan took a parting glance at the crossing of the two rivers. He thought of the flow of illicit advertising, and wondered what kind of societal parasite would resort to such a scheme.

Natch, he thought, you brought this on yourself.

• • •

Five hoverbirds darted out from behind the Blue Ridge Mountains, skirting close to the ground, where they blended in with the snow. Traffic was a farce this early in the morning. The sun hung close to the horizon, unsure of itself.

Papizon, what's your status? said Ridgello.

Even scrambled, the tactician's voice sounded serene and unhurried. *Security is under Council control, he said. We're decompressing the building now. Target apartment will be just inside the northwest entrance in ninety seconds.*

And Natch? asked the team leader.

We saw him enter the building last night at approximately ten o'clock local time. He's been active in MindSpace ever since. There are human and data agents watching every exit.

Magan and Gonerev exchanged looks of cautious optimism. So far, so good. Let the Blade call the plan overkill; once they had the fiecorp master safely onboard a Council hoverbird en route to Melbourne, this whole operation would be yesterday's lessons learned.

Rey Gonerev joined Magan at the command console. The yellow triangles were rapidly converging on a blinking red star. A sixth triangle hunkered down beneath the building in the pipes of the city's underground transfer system. That would be Papizon and his technical crew.

Magan switched the rear windows of the hoverbird to battlefield display, blocking out the rapidly receding December landscape. Perspectives from six different soldiers filled the screens: here a man rubbing the barrel of his multi disruptor with a soft cloth, there a woman stretching her calves and muttering about the cold. Following regulations, Magan flipped through each of the twenty-five officers in turn to verify the connections. He found Ridgello calm and collected and not the least bit nervous; operations like this were his gruel.

The hoverbirds zipped over a large hill and went into a steep, nose-bleed descent behind a copse of trees. The pilot cut the inertial cushioners to stifle the noise. Rey Gonerev grunted as her head bounced against the low hoverbird ceiling, but Magan remained composed. He thanked a thousand generations of Chinese heritage for making him too short to worry about such obstructions.

They touched down in the snow with a soft thud. All five yellow triangles were now clustered on a slope next to the blinking red star.

Seconds later, the doors whooshed open and the Defense and Wellness Council was on the move.

A disciplined sprint up a snow-covered slope, dartguns drawn. A building that curved atop the next hill like a natural extension of the landscape. Two dozen figures in white fatigues with muted yellow stars edging through a small huddle of fir trees. The fog of heavy breath.

About ten meters up, a door opened and spat forth a middle-aged woman holding a mug of steaming nitro. A black platform slid beneath her feet in the blink of an eye to serve as balcony. She yawned, stretched, cracked her knuckles.

Take her down, snapped the team leader.

Six pinpricks of light slid across the woman's torso. The dart-rifles sang. The woman collapsed, ceramic mug of nitro tumbling after.

Magan watched from his ship as Ridgello's team zipped across the snow and dashed through the building's northwest entrance. Rey flipped a window to focus on one of the three soldiers ascending the unconscious woman's balcony via magnetic cable. One of the officers glanced back over his shoulder at the copse of fir trees, which looked perfectly undisturbed. Ridgello was good. Magan felt confident that nobody inside the building had noticed anything unusual.

The interior hallway was brightly lit. Ridgello's team flew down the corridor, swift as ghosts, until they reached the first door on the left. Two officers lined up on either side of the door, dartguns drawn and needles loaded. Ridgello blasted the apartment security with a Defense and Wellness Council priority override, and the door slid open. A dozen troops swarmed into Natch's apartment.

Rey Gonerev let out a gasp.

The apartment was empty.

A half-eaten sandwich lay on the kitchen counter alongside a cold mug of nitro that had obviously been untouched for hours, perhaps days.

One of the viewscreens was broadcasting a spirited melee from a fencing tournament on 49th Heaven. A triangular blob of code rotated inside a MindSpace bubble in Natch's office with no hand there to rotate it. Even more telling, however, was the absence of the ubiquitous shoulder pack of bio/logic programming bars that fiefcorpers always kept within reach.

"You *said* he was here, Papizon," barked the Blade. "Where is he?"

A puzzled stammer came over the connection. "You mean, he—he's not *there*?"

"No, he fucking isn't."

"But the scope says . . . There's still . . . If Natch isn't there, then who's working in MindSpace?"

Ridgello, the only one still using battle language: *No sign of him, Lieutenant.*

The troops had relaxed their guard by now, and were all casting dazed looks at one another. One of them scratched his beefy head with the barrel of his disruptor gun, against all weapons protocol. Officers were poking through closets and peeking under tables on the off chance that Natch might be cowering in some undiscovered corner. A woman standing behind the workbench in Natch's office turned to face one of the interior windows and was startled to read the text printed there in bold letters:

A PRIVATE MESSAGE FOR MAGAN KAI LEE

Back in the hoverbird, Magan blanched. Rey Gonerev's face showed some amalgam of disgust and amusement. *The snake knew we were coming*, thought Magan. *How could he possibly have known that?* Magan counted the people who had known the details of this operation ahead of time on three fingers: the Blade, Papizon, himself. Not even Ridgello had known what was going down until late last night.

The team leader had seen the text by now. *Do you want to read this, Lieutenant?* he said.

Magan felt his mind downshifting, looking for a more acceptable gear. The smart thing to do would be to ignore the message and get his people out of there as fast as possible. But wasn't that what Natch was expecting him to do? The message on the window was such a transparent ploy to get Magan into the apartment that the fiefcorp master must be counting on him to *not* take the bait. In which case . . . shouldn't he do the opposite? The lieutenant cursed silently. How difficult it was to use logic on a creature whose entire nature rejected the concept.

Magan opened the supply chest at his knee, grabbed a canister of black code darts, and snapped it onto the barrel of his dartgun. "You're not going in there, are you?" said the Blade incredulously.

"Shit," replied the Council lieutenant, striding for the door of the hoverbird. "I guess I am."

Within two minutes, he had made it up the hill to the tenement building's northwest entrance. Magan was approaching middle age and no longer possessed the feline agility of his younger troops, but he still doubted that any of the building's occupants had seen him. Magan glanced up at the balcony of the third-floor apartment, where the officer standing guard confirmed his assessment with the okay signal. Two other guards were escorting the unconscious woman back to her bed, where she would wake up in a few hours with a splitting headache. Even the dropped mug of nitro had disappeared back inside.

The yellow-starred officers in the apartment saw the look in Magan's eyes and gave him a wide berth. He walked into Natch's office, ushered the massive Nordic team leader out the door, and opened the message on the viewscreen with a gesture.

SMILE FOR THE CAMERAS.

Magan frowned. What kind of message was this?

Suddenly his eyes widened. "Out! Everybody out!" he snapped, unencrypted, startling the Council officers into a pell-mell gallop for

the exit. “No, he knows we’re here—southeast exit!” The group skidded to a halt and reversed directions. Rey Gonerev was yelling something in his ear, but Magan couldn’t process it quickly enough. He managed to decipher the solicitor’s words just as they burst into the southeast courtyard: “No, stay inside. The drudges, the drudges!”

Standing in the snow outside Natch’s building was a pack of men and women whose eyes were lit with predatory glee. Magan recognized many of their faces on sight: the craggy visage of Sen Sivv Sor, the dandyish face of John Ridglee, the weasel smirk of V. T. Vel Osbiq.

The drudges.

Ridgello, clearly irritated, gave his troops the signal to sheathe their weapons. The Council lieutenant summoned PokerFace 85a to mask his own roiling emotions as the drudges formed a receiving line and began peppering the retreating officers with questions for their readers.

“Lieutenant, why has Len Borda decided to seize MultiReal by force?”

“Who approved this mission?”

“Has the Council consulted the Prime Committee about this?”

“What charges are you planning to bring against Natch?”

“Is this legal?”

Magan Kai Lee trudged through the courtyard, saying nothing, trying to figure out the exchange rate of this new situation. He could practically taste the bile in the back of his throat. “You see, Rey?” he said over ConfidentialWhisper. “*This* snake has fangs.”

(((3)))

Natch stood at his workbench and waved his left hand. A shimmering bubble the size of a coin appeared in the air before him. The bubble quickly expanded until it encompassed most of the workbench, until it enveloped him entirely and blanketed the rest of the world in a translucent film.

MindSpace. An empty canvas, a barren universe. Anything was possible here.

With his right hand, Natch undid the clasps to the weather-beaten satchel that sat on the side table. The satchel flopped open to reveal its hidden treasure: twenty-six thin metal bars, branded with the letters of the Roman alphabet. Natch's fingers wandered blindly to the bar labeled F and slid it whisper-quiet from its sheath. As soon as the bio/logic programming bar passed the borders of MindSpace, spikes and finials burst from its sides like a butterfly's wings emerging from the cocoon. Natch swished the bar back and forth in front of him, and the butterfly took flight.

The fiecorp master raised his left hand again and spread his fingers wide. The MindSpace bubble exploded with a sinuous curve of interlocking spheres, a virtual centipede in hues of purple and brown. The canvas was covered down to the last square centimeter, and yet still the shapes multiplied.

Too close in. Natch hitched his thumb back, zooming out to a better vantage point. The spheres only grew in density as they receded, until they became atomic particles in a solid block of gray. Farther out, the block was now merely one of thousands, a brick in the wall of an ominous castle of programming code. Natch, impatient, continued jabbing his thumb backward. Now even the castle was just one small portion of an immense oval-shaped structure. Parapets and walkways

in aqua and silver swirled through the whole and made daring forays across the central void. A MindSpace megalopolis.

At last the entire structure lay visible before him. Natch could pan out no farther. He extended his left index finger and rotated his hand ninety degrees counterclockwise, causing a legend to appear atop the block of code.

POSSIBILITIES

Version: 0.76

Programmer: The Surina/Natch MultiReal Fiefcorp

Possibilities was the fiefcorp's brand name for MultiReal. MultiReal: the product of sixteen years' isolation by one of the world's most brilliant scientists, with virtually unlimited resources at her disposal. MultiReal: the crowning achievement of an entire line of Surinas stretching back for generations.

And now the program belonged to Natch.

The entrepreneur hefted the spiky programming tool in his hand, testing its mass. He rotated the castle around and around, looking for just the right spot. . . . There. A soft place, a weakness in the virtual masonry. All at once, Natch raised the bar over his head and struck at the castle wall with furious strength.

Clang. The bar bounced off the castle and set his right hand vibrating.

Natch grabbed the bar again with both hands, wielding it like a crazed samurai. He began delivering savage blows to the structure before him. Again and again he struck, snarling with rage. Finally one of the blows smashed through the brick, and the castle wall shattered into a thousand pieces with a deafening crash.

Natch peered at the interior of the vanquished castle, expecting to see a skeleton of virtual boards, planks, and girders. But the structure was completely hollow and had no visible means of support. This was no mere emptiness, no simple absence-of-something-else; it was a

yawning chasm of nothingness, a force of void that seemed to pull at him with intense gravity.

As the fiefcorp master stood, paralyzed with fear, the program began to crumble all around him. Blocks that had been anchored and secured by a thousand connections were buckling under the strain, pulling loose, succumbing to the Null Current. Soon objects across the room were sliding toward him; programming bars were making kamikaze leaps from his satchel; even dishes were somersaulting in from the kitchen to get swallowed by the growing darkness.

Natch felt the tug in his knees first. He struggled to get to the office door, thinking that if he could just shut out the nothingness, he would be all right. But soon the void was pulling at his entire body. He managed to hook his fingers around the doorjamb just as he lost his feet. For a minute, maybe two, he hung there with his heels in the air and his fingernails clawing for a handhold on the door. And then a chair slid in from the living room and bashed his knuckles. Natch lost his grip. He began tumbling end over end into the chill of the darkest night.

Nothingness.

He came to in a wintry patch of forest, a torch in his hand. A sickening smell that Natch identified as burning flesh wafted through the air.

Natch dashed through the trees. He was in a hurry, but he couldn't say why. Paths crisscrossed on the forest floor below his feet, but he didn't know where they had come from or where they were going; better to trust his instincts. And right now his instincts said to head west, towards the rapidly falling sun. He ran through the foliage as quickly as he could. Thorns and sharp branches lashed his face.

Then Natch heard the screaming.

Stop! Wait, stop! Don't! Don't! Don't! And then a long shriek of anguish and pain, underlined by the snarling of a confused and angry bear. The distant tumult of rushing feet through the leaves. The wet sound of human flesh ripping.

Natch could not move. The light from the torch sputtered and went out. In the split second before the dark enveloped him once again, Natch looked up and discovered he was no longer holding a torch—it was the bloody stump of a boy’s arm.

Then he awoke.

• • •

Natch slowly lifted his eyelids and let the world soak into his consciousness one millimeter at a time.

He took inventory of his surroundings. It was a familiar setting. His hands lay palm-down on faux ivory armrests, and he could feel faux leather at his back. Sunlight tapped a staccato message on his face from behind a latticework of redwoods passing by at superhuman speed. Natch had practically memorized every twist and turn of this Seattle express tube over the years.

The entrepreneur took a closer look at the window. Something floated there in boldface awaiting his arousal from sleep.

COUNCIL STORMS NATCH’S APARTMENT
IN PLOY TO SEIZE MULTIREAL

Natch gave a tired nod. *So those fools took the bait after all.*

He skimmed through a few dozen drudge clippings, stacking them on the window like bricks. There was video from fifteen different angles, and some anonymous wit had given the whole thing a symphonic score. Natch summoned the baffled face of Magan Kai Lee and watched his entire walk of shame back to the hoverbird four times.

At last you have some breathing room, the fiecorp master told himself. *Now you can stop running and go home again.*

Natch had woken up on a tube train every day this week. He had traveled the entire world over the past few weeks in an effort to skirt

the Defense and Wellness Council. Yesterday he had seen the desert sands of old Texas territory, pausing for a brief multi foray to Shenandoah to set his trap; the night before, he had skimmed the surface of the Indian Ocean.

But there were a number of close calls. Natch could find only so much anonymity when his face had been burned into the public consciousness through a hundred interviews and drudge reports. A group of teenagers in São Paulo had seen right through his false public directory profile, and Natch had had to pawn off one of his new bio/logic programming bars just to keep them quiet. Counting the one he had flung at his black-robed pursuers in Shenandoah a few weeks ago, he was now two bars short of a complete set.

Then there was the disturbing incident with the crazy woman in central Europe. She had worn the bright blue uniform of a healer, but had reached the age when many abandoned curative treatments and sent in their applications to join the Prepared. The woman had walked up to him in plain view of three white-robed Council officers, indignant, demanding that Natch explain the “dirty tricks” he had performed at the demo in Andra Pradesh. Natch’s mind had been gliding through some remote place, and he had nearly panicked. But suddenly people had stood up to defend him with voices raised and fists clenched. Soon a handful of L-PRACG security officers had gotten involved, and the Council officers had scurried over to investigate. A small-scale brawl had erupted between Natch’s supporters and his detractors. Libertarians shouting *Down with Len Borda*, governmentlists bellowing *Respect the law*. Natch, dumbfounded, had offered no resistance when two libertarians calmly tugged him out the door and thrust him onto a tube running in the opposite direction. He had managed to escape before Len Borda’s people realized exactly what was going on.

In a world of sixty billion people, simple mathematics dictated that Natch must have millions of sympathizers on the libertarian side of the political spectrum. A hundred million people probably sup-

ported his fight to keep MultiReal out of the Council's hands from sheer spite for Len Borda. But to discover that people had coalesced on this issue, that they were willing to stand up to *armed Council officers* . . . Natch simply didn't know how to process it.

Once aware of this undercurrent of libertarian sympathy, he began to see signs of it everywhere he went. Natch found posts of support on the Data Sea, speeches by L-PRACG activists, drudgic calls for embargoes against the central government. Suddenly he realized he had underestimated the number of his supporters by several orders of magnitude. A minority, perhaps, and still skulking in the shadows, but gaining strength every day.

And now the Council's raid on Natch's apartment building had altered the dynamics of the situation altogether. He called up Sen Siv Sor's reportage on the window.

COUNCIL STORMS NATCH'S APARTMENT IN PLOY TO SEIZE MULTIREAL

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: Nobody is worse at bungling public relations than High Executive Len Borda.

In the three weeks since Natch's MultiReal demonstration at Andra Pradesh, the fiefcorp master has disappeared from the public eye. This morning, we found out why. Because Borda, in his supreme wisdom, has already decided to renege on his assurances of safety, and to seize MultiReal from its rightful owners without provocation.

What else can we conclude from the dazzling display of stupidity executed by one of Borda's lieutenant executives, Magan Kai Lee, this morning? You all saw it right here, dear readers. If not for an anonymous tip-off to the drudge community early this morning, the Surina/Natch MultiReal Fiefcorp might have already been dissolved by now. And its fiefcorp master might be rotting away in some orbital Council prison.

It's astounding the lengths some will go to in order to preserve the vaunted status quo. Which is why—

Natch had read enough. He banished the potpourri of Data Sea ramblings from the window and let the redwoods show through once more.

Yes, Natch's clever MindSpace tricks had enabled him to reverse the tide of public opinion, if only for a day or two. Even the staunch governmentalist Mah Lo Vertiginous was grudgingly admitting that the Council had blundered today. Borda and Lee would not dare pull another stunt like that anytime soon.

Natch caught his reflection in the window. *So why are you still sitting on a tube train heading in the wrong direction?* he asked himself. *Why didn't you get off at the last stop and make your way home?*

He conjured a picture of the city of Shenandoah in his head. Home. But when he saw those undulating streets and shifting buildings, all he could think about was the mercenary precision of the black-robed figures who had ambushed him there. He could still feel the pinpricks of their black code darts and the icy rush of poisonous OCHREs suffusing his bloodstream. The void, the nothingness.

Natch stumbled upon an unexpected realization: he was afraid.

You find yourself capable of strange things when you run out of choices, Margaret Surina had told him last month.

Now Natch understood what the bodhisattva meant. For three weeks, he had been fleeing from the Council, catching the occasional update from Horvil or Serr Vigal over ConfidentialWhisper, taking quick glimpses at the evolving Possibilities program whenever he found a rented MindSpace workbench he could trust. Nobody had heard a syllable from Margaret in all that time. Nor had the Patel Brothers stirred from their lair to stop Lucas Sentinel and Bolliwar Tuban from thrashing them in the Primo's ratings.

And what about Brone? Natch blacked out the window and displayed the message he had received the other day in small, precise lettering.

32 MULTIREAL

Why is the vaunted master of the Surina/Natch MultiReal Fiefcorp running away? What does he think he will gain by fleeing from tube train to tube train? Does he think his enemies are just going to up and disappear?

How long before he realizes he needs additional allies to complete the MultiReal programming and bring the program to market? When will he finally accept the helping hand that an old enemy has held out to him? When will his need for funding, equipment, privacy, and security outweigh the irrational hatred he carries around his neck?

There was no trace of a sender or signature. Natch supposed he could use some arcane tools of the trade to track down the message's origin, but of course there was only one person who could have sent it.

A snippet of dream floated through Natch's head: a bear, screams, the bloody stump of an arm. Where was Brone? What was he doing? Certainly after all that had happened during the Shortest Initiation, after all the machinations Brone had gone through to put Natch in his debt, he wasn't planning to just sit on the sidelines. After all, he was the head of a major creed organization, the Thasselians, with vast stockpiles of credits and half a million anonymous devotees at his disposal. Opportunities for mischief were plentiful.

It was a time of suspended animation, of delayed choices. And now Natch's ruse against Magan Kai Lee had set things in motion once again.

You've faced challenges before, Natch told himself. Brone, Captain Bolbund, the ROD coders, Figaro Fi, the Patels. What's different? What are you so afraid of now?

It was the black code swimming through his veins. Somehow it had aged him in a way that none of his adversaries had managed to do before. He could practically feel it tinkering away inside of him, deconstructing his innards, disassembling his mind. Every day, Natch sensed that he was losing a small piece of this inner turf to the encroaching void, to the winter, to the nothingness.

The nothingness was coming to claim him. And Natch knew that all the battles he had fought before were merely the opening skirmishes of a much larger campaign against this nothingness. It was a campaign he could not afford to lose.

(((4)))

Magan spent the next four hours on three different hoverbirds, watching time and space drift by the window.

“Towards Perfection, Lieutenant Lee,” chirped a voice from the cockpit as Magan stepped aboard the last hoverbird. Obviously the pilot had been too absorbed in the complex trigonometry of space flight preparation to catch the news. “Anything I can get you before we lift off? Commissary’s got a nice batch of weedtea, straight from—”

Magan cut her off. “Nothing, Panja, thank you.”

“How about—”

“To DWCR, please.”

Panja quieted down. She had flown Magan to DWCR hundreds of times in the past few years—only a small number of pilots had clearance to fly there—so she had learned to read his emotions well. Something must have gone terribly wrong.

Magan took a seat in the back row of the hoverbird and strapped on his harness. The pilot conducted the ship’s mechanical tests without a word, then set them on their way. Magan watched the clouds approach and fell into a light sleep until the ship alerted him that they were making the final approach into DWCR.

To those in the know, DWCR was the Defense and Wellness Council Root, Len Borda’s center of operations—and those who could not define the acronym weren’t aware of its existence anyway. But even most of those privileged enough to work at DWCR couldn’t pinpoint it on a map. The location was highly classified, and officers like Panja had to withstand a battery of loyalty tests before they were admitted to the inner circle.

Magan himself had spent several years stepping on a red multi tile without knowing exactly where he was being projected. But he never

mindful such obfuscation, even when it served to block something in his path. A system with a hidden solution remained a system with a solution, after all; a welcome change from the centerless anarchy his life had been before enlisting in the Council twenty-five years ago. Magan knew that, with scrupulous planning, he could master any system that confronted him. He knew that time and chance were the only obstacles between him and the pinnacle of the Council hierarchy. Eventually the secrets of DWCR would be his.

Nearly ten thousand Council employees were not so confident. Magan saw them huddled in their offices week after week wasting hours in useless conjecture. Some believed the Root sat in one of the many unexplored crevices of Luna. Others favored the Pacific Islands or the Antarctic or the uninhabitable sectors of Furtoid as more likely candidates. But so far Len Borda's engineers had succeeded in keeping the Root impervious to any known positioning or tracing program, and prodigious sums of money were expended to ensure that the mystification would continue for years to come.

Nonetheless, Magan knew the secrecy could not last indefinitely. Secrets had a gravity of their own that sucked in the curious and the determined. Had the high executive planned for that contingency, or was he relying on the secrecy to last forever? The bodhisattva of Creed Bushido had the perfect aphorism to describe such closed-mindedness: *Short-term plans, long-term problems.*

In actuality, DWCR was a disc-shaped platter in orbit at the outermost reach of Earth's gravitational pull, only a slight rocket thrust away from either floating off into the aether or spiraling planetwards to a fiery, cataclysmic doom. Lieutenant Lee watched out the port window now as the platter slid into view. A single observation tower jutted from the bottom with priapic majesty, as if waiting for something to impale.

Panja docked the hoverbird without a sound, and Magan stepped through the airlock as soon as DWCR had given them the all-clear.

Generals and military planners filed curt nods with Magan as he strode the Root's maze of twisty little passages, all alike. Without proper clearance, he could wander these shifting corridors of gunmetal gray for days. Someone had made an attempt to inject some color on the walls, but the smattering of pretentious landscapes and portraits of executives past did little to lighten the atmosphere.

Magan made his way to the observation tower and kept his ears open for the hallway gossip. He heard rumors of military deployments, complaints about research budgets, details of appropriations bills before the Prime Committee . . . but not a single comment about the failed raid early this morning. Magan frowned. The only thing worse than listening to officers chatter about the Council's failure was not hearing them chatter about it at all. He sighed as he reached the central elevator and cleared his mind.

The elevator did not head upwards. Instead it dropped, leading Magan to a floor on the tip of the observation tower. Borda's private chambers.

When he emerged from the elevator, the Council lieutenant found himself standing on the deck of an ancient sloop-of-war. The ship swayed tipsily in the waves, sending the occasional spittle of SeeNaRee brine splashing on Magan's face. Still-smoking cannons on the deck spoke of a recent battle against some enemy hovering just out of sight in the fog.

Standing at the prow of the ship was High Executive Len Borda.

• • •

Borda listened to his lieutenant's version of events with rising ire, his back to the mast and his nose pointed out to sea. "Bloody drudges," he said in a rumbling basso that not even the waves could drown out. "If I wanted their opinion, trust me, they'd know it."

Some called the high executive *arrogant*, but that word seemed

beside the point. After nearly sixty years running the world's military and intelligence affairs, Borda needed no tone of intimidation. He spoke with the timbre of a man who had been the final arbiter for so long that he had forgotten any other reality.

Magan watched Len Borda move to the railing and run his hand over the intricately carved wood. He seemed to be scanning the murky horizon for a sign of the enemy, which would be the French, if memory served. Why Borda devoted so much attention to this virtual playground, Magan could not fathom. He admitted that the SeeNaRee programmers had a terrific eye for detail and historical accuracy. But Borda was spending more time here than in the world of flesh and blood lately, and that was not a good sign.

"Today is December twenty-seventh," said the lieutenant after a long and uneasy silence.

Borda shrugged. "What of it?"

"The new year comes in four days. After what happened this morning, do you really think you can gain control of MultiReal in four days?"

One stony eyebrow lifted itself on Borda's forehead and then subsided, like a breaker on the SeeNaRee ocean. "Four days is a lifetime," he said. "I was willing to deal with Natch behind closed doors. He's the one who decided to bring this fight into the public eye." Borda scowled. "So be it. Let's see how he handles a full onslaught."

Magan clenched his fists into a tight ball behind his back, then slowly forced himself to stop, take a breath, unwind. Could Len Borda really be so foolish as to try the same thing again? Had his mind become so entrenched that he could do nothing but continuously loop through the same routine? "And what if this *onslaught* of yours fails?"

Borda was not nearly so successful at hiding his emotions, and didn't bother with PokerFace programs either. The gritted teeth and trembling jaw told Magan everything he needed to know.

The high executive was planning to break their agreement.

“Forget about the fiefcorp master for a moment,” said Borda. “I need your help with something else.” The high executive waved his hand and summoned a block of text to float against the gauzy gray sky. Magan pushed the anger aside and read the letter with a growing crease on his brow.

Congress of L-PRACGs
Office of the Speaker
Melbourne

In accordance with my duties as speaker, I am writing to inform the Defense and Wellness Council that the Congress has officially opened an inquiry into the causes of the computational anomalies known as “infoquakes.”

Four such disruptions have occurred in the past month, leaving thousands dead and wounded. According to the sworn testimony of Congressional engineers, the severity of these disruptions is growing. It is my belief that the Council’s measures to limit bandwidth on the Data Sea are no longer sufficient to contain this threat.

The Congress hereby charges all employees of the Defense and Wellness Council to answer any forthcoming subpoenas promptly and with the utmost discretion.

May you always move towards perfection,
Khann Frejohr, Speaker

“You assured me that Frejohr wouldn’t be a problem,” growled Borda. “You told me this libertarian uprising of his would die on the vine.”

Magan Kai Lee banished the text with a hard blink of the eyes and stared glumly at the sea, which was barely visible through the thickening veil of fog. “So I thought, a month ago,” he said.

“*So you thought,*” replied Borda caustically. He bent to pick up a small chunk of wood, a splinter that must have been torn from the rail by French cannons. “Frejohr’s only been in office for two weeks, and already he’s got the Congress of L-PRACGs holding hearings.”

“They’re meaningless,” said Magan. “The Congress has no authority over us.”

“No, but the Prime Committee *does*. And these infoquakes give Frejohr the impetus to put ideas in their heads.” Borda angrily threw the painted wood chip off into the mist, where the sea swallowed it without a sound.

“Papizon will find out what’s causing the infoquakes,” announced Magan. “It’s only a matter of time.”

“How much time?”

“I don’t know.”

The high executive snorted his contempt. “Papizon is usually not so vague.”

Borda’s pessimism was starting to grow tiresome. Magan thought the time had come for a quick knife thrust. “Papizon usually doesn’t get distracted by your useless side projects.”

Borda paced calmly across the deck of the ship. Magan noticed that the Ionic column of the high executive’s body was immune to the rules of physics governing the rest of the SeeNaRee; instead of Borda swaying with the tide, the sea itself appeared to be rotating around the fulcrum of Borda.

“If you have something to say,” rasped the high executive, “then say it.”

Magan widened his stance, flaunting his lack of intimidation at Borda’s presence. “You’re going about this MultiReal situation all wrong,” he said.

“Oh?”

“Natch thrives on anger. Every blow you strike against him only makes him stronger. So send another strike force to Shenandoah, start your *onslaught*. Not only will you fail to get control of MultiReal, you’ll have the Congress in full-scale rebellion. You’ll have people on the streets shouting their support for Natch and Margaret Surina.”

Borda’s face remained impassive, but the sea began tossing steep

breakers against the ship, as if trying to send Magan plummeting overboard. The fog thickened, further obscuring Magan's mental compass. But the lieutenant executive had done plenty of time on Council naval vessels and knew how to react to the choleric moods of the sea. He kept his feet.

"You forget I've been through this before," said Borda in a voice like molten rock. "I know how to deal with entrepreneurs. *And* with Surinas." His words were punctuated by the crackle of cannon fire from the enemy juggernaut still hidden somewhere off in the chop.

Magan recalled the iconic video footage that had swept across the Data Sea almost fifty years ago, footage that could still be found just about anywhere you looked. The smoking hulk of a shuttle half-buried in the sands of Furtoid. A charred and mangled hand arching out of the wreckage.

But then there was the other footage, the secret footage squirreled away in the depths of the Defense and Wellness Council archives. Marcus Surina, having miraculously survived the blast, blackened, gasping, eking out the last fifteen minutes of his life on a Council stretcher with Council dartguns aimed at his head and Council hoverbirds whirring in the background. Denied access to the soothing balms of the Dr. Plugenpatch databases lest someone discover he had not perished instantly in the wreckage. Cursing Len Borda to the very end.

"He should have compromised," muttered the high executive, gripping tightly onto the railing. Whether he was speaking to Magan or to himself was unclear. "He didn't have to come to such an end. But these Surinas, they're all the same. Too full of pride, too nearsighted to see what's right in front of their noses. I tell you, it must be something in the curry." He leaned on the railing and peered out to the sea, but his attention was not on anything visible there. The British sloop began to pick up speed, causing the few remaining hairs on Borda's head to flap in the wind.

Magan stood his ground, icy silent, and made no reply.

“It was a choice I had to make!” yelled Len Borda suddenly, snapping his fingers and wheeling on his lieutenant executive. “What should I have done? Let Surina hand out teleportation to every man, woman, and child? Assassins zapping onto the floor of the Prime Committee! People teleporting into walls! Millions dead! Would *you* have that blood on your hands?” The high executive aimed one finger straight at Magan’s chest. His voice was a thunderbolt, a primal and electric force of nature. “Consequences? Yes! There were consequences, Magan. Strong actions always have them. A new TeleCo board willing to listen to *reason*. A board *smart* enough to apply the appropriate safeguards. It was a necessary change. And if such a change required a— a market adjustment . . . then . . .”

Len Borda slipped into a troubled silence, which Magan Kai Lee made no effort to fill. The high executive was not blind. He had seen the millions wandering the streets for years with nothing but worthless TeleCo stock to their name. He had seen teleportation technology crawl back into the marketplace a stunted and crippled thing, too expensive for the masses to afford, too unreliable for the moneyed to trust.

And now Len Borda stood on the prow of his SeeNaRee ship, not just the most powerful man in the world, not just the master of the Council’s invincible armies—but an old man with a fractured mind, a man who had sacrificed some crucial chunk of his mortality fifty years ago in a shuttle explosion on Furtoid.

Short-term plans, long-term problems.

Magan Kai Lee pressed his advantage. “You made a mistake,” he said. “I can’t allow you to make the same mistake again.”

The high executive’s voice was a croak. “And what say do you have in the matter?”

Magan steeled his spine and summoned all the repressed rage buried in his soul. “You gave me your word, Borda, and I intend to see that you keep it. You will announce your retirement from the Defense

and Wellness Council in four days, and turn this crisis over to me. As we agreed two years ago.” *When I stood here in this office with a loaded gun pressed to the back of your neck. When I swore to you that I would not be stung by an assassin’s dart like the other lieutenant executives before me. When you convinced me that it would be better to take your seat as a chosen successor and not a mutineer.*

“You don’t have the experience to handle this,” scoffed Borda quietly. “Marcus Surina—”

“Marcus Surina was a buffoon. He hid behind his family name and his reputation with the drudges. But *this* man, this Natch—he has no family to lose. He has no reputation to uphold. This man will outthink and outplot your armies until the end, Borda. No, there is only one person capable of defeating Natch.”

“And who is that?”

“Himself.”

Len Borda slumped perceptibly and turned back to the sea, looking old and careworn—but not before Magan caught the briefest shimmer in the high executive’s eye.

Magan felt a sudden nibble of doubt at his ankles. All his experience with Borda had taught him that the high executive was a creature of passion rather than forethought, a short-term planner. But why then did he occasionally see that knowing glimmer in Borda’s eye? Was it just the nostalgia of the grizzled veteran watching the young protégé come into his own? Or could it be that Borda’s ardor was merely artifice? Was that how Borda had bested all his would-be supplanters over the years?

The high executive stood for a long time without speaking. His ship had returned to calm seas, but the fog around them had only thickened. There was no sound but the soft, rhythmic lapping of oars on seawater, the distant cry of a gull.

Finally, Borda spoke. “I would like to offer you a compromise.”

Magan said nothing.

“New Year’s Day is just a convenient symbol,” continued Borda, his voice disarmingly matter-of-fact. “We chose that day to protect the markets, didn’t we? To cushion the financial impact of the announcement. But the *real* financial impact won’t come until the new year’s budget goes into effect on the fifteenth of January.” The high executive stood up straight, brushed something off his collar. “So I’ll give you two and a half weeks. Prove to me you can handle this crisis, Magan. Bring MultiReal under the Council’s control by the fifteenth, and I will abide by our agreement.”

Magan could feel his mind whirling like a difference engine, calculating odds, extrapolating possibilities. “And how do I know I can trust your word this time?” *How do I know I won’t end up at the bottom of a river, like the last lieutenant executive who tried to bargain with you for succession?*

“What choice do you have?” said Borda.

“Don’t delude yourself,” said Magan, his voice keen and deadly as a razor. “This decision isn’t yours to make, not anymore. You don’t think I’m the only one eager to plant a black code dart in your skull, do you? The only reason you sit in the high executive’s chair to this day is because *I* allow it.”

For the first time in the conversation, Len Borda smiled. It was a horrid expression, the hungry grin of a carnivore. “Spare me the pity of Magan Kai Lee,” mocked the high executive. “I don’t need it.”

And then, without warning, the SeeNaRee dissolved away. Magan found himself standing no longer on an ancient British sloop-of-war, but in a modern office arranged with the strictest military discipline. Two tables, a smattering of chairs, windows with a view of the globe below. Standing in a semicircle around him were four Defense and Wellness Council officers who had been hidden in the virtual mist. Their dartguns were drawn, and aimed at Magan. As the lieutenant executive regarded them with a cool eye, he felt the barrel of another dartgun press into the back of his neck.

“I give you until the fifteenth of January to take possession of MultiReal,” said Len Borda, his voice larded with triumph. “If you do, we have an agreement. If you don’t . . .” The officer behind Magan pressed the dartgun barrel deeper into his flesh.

Magan kept his face neutral, determined to show no trace of emotion or hesitation. “You’re not *giving* me anything, Borda. The Council will have control of MultiReal by the fifteenth, and you will relinquish the high executive’s chair—one way or the other.”

He turned without being asked, and the officer with the dartgun at his neck turned with him. Magan strode calmly to the elevator. Four of the officers sheathed their weapons as he passed, but the one at his back never let the nozzle of the dartgun stray from Magan’s skin, even as he accompanied the lieutenant executive onto the lift.

When the doors closed and the elevator began its ascent to the main level, Magan fired off a secure ConfidentialWhisper to the man at his back. “Keep that dartgun right where it is until I’m off the elevator,” he commanded. “Then send someone to find Papizon and Rey Gonerev. Tell them I need to see them.”

Ridgello nodded. “As you wish, Lieutenant Executive.”

(((5)))

On the way back to the hoverbird docks, Magan took a detour to see the statue of Tul Jabor. The atrium where the statue resided was the one place in DWCR whose location never changed. The statue itself was a small-scale replica of the one standing in the center of the eponymously named Tul Jabor Complex in Melbourne. A thick man with mahogany skin atop a tall pillar. No matter where you stood, some holographic trick caused Jabor's gaze to always meet you head-on—and left you constantly standing in his shadow. As unsubtle an architectural metaphor as Magan had ever seen.

The founding father of the Defense and Wellness Council needed no caption, but bold block letters at his feet did pose a question.

DO YOU ACT IN JUSTICE?

The locution had always seemed peculiar to Magan. Acting *in* justice, not *for* or *with* justice. As if justice were merely a vehicle you might ride to a particular destination, and the terrain you trammed to get there was nothing more than dirt under your wheels.

Certainly Tul Jabor had treated justice that way. He had dramatically expanded the Council's power by going after erstwhile supporters like the OCHRE Corporation; some even suspected he had signed Henry Osterman's death warrant. Then again, Jabor had come to power in a world without precedents, a world simultaneously drunk with the possibilities of bio/logics and desperate to avoid repeating the horrors of the Autonomous Revolt.

But Len Borda? Borda had two hundred years of Council history to guide him, with every manner of high executive from Par Padron the Just to Zetarysis the Mad as object lessons. He should have known

better. Instead, Borda was ever willing to sacrifice principle for pragmatism, ever ready to steer justice down the muddy, unpaved path.

And you? the lieutenant executive asked himself, kneeling in silence before the statue of Tul Jabbor. *Are you forcing Borda to step down because he's made a mockery of Par Padron's ideals? Or are you just afraid to wake up at the bottom of a river?*

Magan Kai Lee was a man of reason and principle, or so he told himself. He had been drawn to the Defense and Wellness Council by its discipline, its rigidity, and its stability when compared to the life of the diss—or so he told himself. Now, after watching Len Borda use the Council as a blunt instrument of self-preservation for years, Magan was contemplating the ultimate move *against* the very discipline, rigidity, and stability that had brought him here in the first place. And that contradiction sat in his mind like a poisonous flower with ever-expanding roots.

But Magan couldn't allow Len Borda to repeat the mistakes he had made with Marcus Surina, could he? Wasn't there a higher principle at work here that needed defending?

Do you act in justice?

• • •

Papizon and Rey Gonerev caught up to him in the hallway, no simple feat in an orbital fortress whose constantly shifting corridors rendered geography meaningless.

"We spotted Natch an hour ago," said Papizon as he moved into step behind Magan like a hoverbird merging into traffic. "He's on a tube train, headed north out of Cisco."

The lieutenant executive ground his teeth together. "And you didn't think to look there *before* we raided his apartment?"

Papizon shook his head. He was immune to criticism. In fact, he seemed to have been inoculated against most forms of human expres-

sion altogether. Sometimes Magan wondered if Papizon was really some sublevel engineer's attempt to circumvent the harsh AI bans in place since the Autonomous Revolt. If so, one couldn't have picked a more peculiar vessel: lanky, storkish, brown eyes not quite symmetrical and permanently half-lidded.

Rey stepped up to Papizon's defense. "We *did* check there, Magan," she said. "We swept half the tube trains in the Americas yesterday. Natch was definitely not on that tube line."

Magan gave the Blade an appraising look. She had pointedly not fallen half a step behind him like Papizon, but walked at his side like an equal. A message meant not so much for him as for the other Council officers in the hallway. The ones she would be jousting with someday when it was Magan's turn to step down from the high executive's seat.

Papizon: "So are we going to try to pick him up again?"

"No," said Magan, shaking his head. "Just keep an eye on him for now—and make sure he knows we're doing it. Make his life unpleasant."

"Unpleasant," his subordinate echoed with a nod, then slipped down a side corridor and disappeared. Making Someone's Life Unpleasant had been honed to a science at the Defense and Wellness Council, and Papizon was a true authority on the subject. *Unpleasantness* meant snooping programs that left clear traces of their presence. It meant ghostly figures that followed you on the periphery of your vision. It meant a few unexplained transactions in your Vault account, too small to be of consequence yet too large to go unnoticed.

"And me?" said the Blade.

"You," replied Magan, "will be planning the main attack on this fiefcorp master. I don't care how much you spend—you have the coffers of the Defense and Wellness Council at your disposal. We need unprecedented coordination. Propaganda, logistics, regulatory, personnel, finance. This man has weaknesses, Rey. I want to know what they are, and I want your plan for exploiting them."

Gonerev nodded sagely with the look of someone taking notes in her mental log. “What about Margaret Surina?”

“Let her rot in her tower for now.”

“And our time frame?”

“Two and a half weeks. MultiReal must be in our hands when the new year’s budget goes into effect.”

The Blade didn’t blanch at the urgent timetable; if anything, she seemed to relish the challenge. Magan thought briefly about the day when he would find himself with Rey Gonerev’s dartgun pressed into the back of his neck. That day would surely come, but it was still decades in the future. Would he go quietly? Or would he cling to power far beyond his time, resisting oblivion with every last breath in his body, like Len Borda? And if he resisted, how far would she be prepared to go to take him down?

2

THE NOTHINGNESS
AT THE CENTER
OF THE UNIVERSE

(((6)))

Geronimo: 22 years old, heterosexual, Caucasian, xpression board player for the Dregs of Nitro. A self-styled dissident, a philosopher, a poet, a lover. Or so his profile on the Sigh network claimed.

Jara wondered who he *really* was.

In the more prosaic world offline, the sullen man across the room wearing the CALL ME GERONIMO T-shirt might really be a diplomat or a black code junkie or a fugitive from the law. There was no way to tell for sure. Some sociologist had recently published a formula that purported to describe the ratio of truth to falsehood in Sigh profiles. Jara couldn't make heads or tails of it, but apparently the formula had something to do with Fibonacci numbers.

"Geronimo" spotted her and threw her a look. Jara could feel the incandescent knife of lust twisting in her abdomen. He rose from the purple couch and began strutting towards her through the crowd.

From a distance, the resemblance was uncanny. Average height, hair sandy and slightly tousled, physique trim yet not quite muscular. Eyes a vivid sapphire blue. If only science could provide a way for Jara to have him at a distance before he opened his mouth.

"Perfection," said Geronimo as he approached, in that incongruous half-lisp of his. "How you doin', Cassandra?" Of course, Jara didn't use her real name here on the Sigh; few people did. But at least she projected her own pixyish body onto the network instead of some idealized substitute, which was more than most could say.

"Towards Perfection yourself," Jara replied, standing on tiptoes to give Geronimo a hungry hello kiss. The kiss quickly evolved into a full-on tongue-dueling affair until the pain in her toes made her withdraw.

"So you get us a room?" grunted the youth, almost shattering the illusion. "How 'bout one-a those leather ones?"

The fiecorp analyst winced. Jara didn't know whether this idiot was really dissident, philosopher, or poet, but one thing was certain—he definitely was *not* Natch. She hid her disappointment behind a coy smile. “Of *course* I got us a room. What, you think I'm some kind of amateur?”

Geronimo chuckled and brushed his knuckles across the side of her breast, an act that didn't require the slightest apology or explanation to the crowd. Not on *this* channel, at least. Jara could feel the knife twisting inside her, uncontrollable, setting everything it touched aflame. “Awright,” mumbled Geronimo. “Let's get moving.”

Please shut up, she thought. Please, please, please.

Jara and the boy walked arm-in-arm across the lounge, past columns of wriggling goldfish and green cushions nestled on the backs of porpoises. They saw twosomes and threesomes and moresomes of all genders and orientations flirting away the time between encounters. Jara noticed a trio of four-breasted mermaids rubbing fins. Geronimo goggled appreciatively at a woman who must have been three meters tall, locked in a passionate kiss with a man whose dangling equipment looked equal to the task. There were no fewer than three Len Bordas in the room. One of them had two heads.

They followed the data beacon around a long curved corridor, threading their way through gossiping bystanders. Geronimo was humming one of his atonal Dregs of Nitro songs. Finally, they reached a nondescript door and opened it to find an even more nondescript room. A low queen bed, a nightstand. Mirrors.

“What, you want *this*?” said the youth with a sneer.

“I thought I'd let you pick,” said Jara.

“Oh,” replied Geronimo, grinning goofily. “I get it. Well, lemme think for a minute. . . .”

Don't think too hard, Jara glowered silently. You might damage something.

Geronimo flipped through a number of exotic environments—

Amazonian jungle, Arabian harem, something called “The Twelve Rings of Zarquatt”—and finally settled on a pleasure den whose every surface was coated with black leather. Jara let out a small noise of exasperation. This was exactly the same motif Geronimo had selected for their *last* two encounters. Jara could already tell that this afternoon’s tryst would solve nothing. That knife was wedged much too deep for a neophyte like Geronimo to reach.

The Natch look-alike was hopping on one foot, struggling to remove his pants. Jara thought about cutting her connection to the network right then and there, but decided to stay. She had paid good Vault credits for this room.



Jara had figured that three weeks away from Natch would cool her passion. She was wrong.

It’s the eternal paradox of love, the drudge Kristella Krodor had written recently. When he’s at arm’s length he’s too far, but when he’s in your arms he’s too near. Jara was ashamed to admit she read such tripe.

But the idea of using the Sigh as a therapeutic tool hadn’t come from Kristella Krodor. It had come from an unexpected source: Bonneth, companion to her fellow apprentice Merri.

Jara had decided to open up to Merri a few nights after the demo at Andra Pradesh. As the fiecorp’s channel manager and resident truth-teller, Merri spent hours every day in Natch’s presence too, and sexual orientation was no barrier to the entrepreneur’s charms. She would have to understand what Jara was going through, on some level. But Jara never got the chance to find out. Moments after Jara multied to her apartment, Merri rushed off to resolve some unexpected emergency with her beloved Creed Objectivv, leaving Jara and Bonneth alone.

The analyst felt as if she barely knew Merri, much less her quiet companion. But suddenly Jara found everything spilling out in one

long, torturous flood. The proctor who took advantage of her, the two decades of professional frustration, the gullible years as Lucas Sentinel's apprentice, the stabbing desire for Natch that would not go away.

Bonneth listened intently from her well-padded chair. *I think I know how you feel*, she said. *Wanting something you just can't have, not being able to let go.* She raised her arms feebly and made a gesture at her brittle frame, twisted in what looked like a very uncomfortable position. Bonneth had Mai-Lo Syndrome, one of those rare instances of genetic engineering gone awry. The bones in her arms and legs were fragile as eggshells, beyond even the skill of bio/logics to repair.

When you've got multi and SeeNaRee and powered exoskeletons, it's not such a handicap, continued Bonneth. *But I'll admit . . . sometimes I just have to know. Late at night, after I've repeated all those Dr. Plugentatch statistics to myself a million times . . . I just need to know what it's like, even for a couple of hours, and then I can go on again.*

So how do you do that? Jara asked.

That's easy, said Bonneth, with an impish smile. *The Sigh.*

Jara hardly knew where to start. She had taken plenty of practice laps around the shallow end of the Sigh when she was a teenager. But back then her options were limited by the boundaries of her parents' L-PRACG: no partners over eighteen, no extreme stuff. Now suddenly she was free to explore the three hundred thousand channels running on Sigh protocols. Free to dive deep and explore the crevices and trenches, the scabrous surfaces, free to coax the hidden pearls from their shells. Most channels simply connected people of similar interests. There were other channels that specialized in every perversion humanity had dreamt up in the last hundred thousand years. Adventurous souls could dally with automated pleasure bots that had survived the long Darwinian slog through the competitive market of sexual programming. When the pleasure bots grew tiresome, there were channels that circumvented bodily mechanics altogether and delivered massive unadulterated doses of endorphins.

But how to exorcise this obsession with Natch? It wasn't as easy as it sounded.

The Sigh was not restrained by the same limits as the multi network, so it was simple enough to plaster someone else's face on your partner and be done with it. But while this subterfuge might suffice for the man living down the street or the faintly glimpsed woman on the tube, the illusion simply didn't work for an intimate acquaintance. Call it a failure of technology or psychology; virtual simulacra just could not fool the discerning human brain.

Enter the Doppelgänger channel.

Jara found a series of intriguing promos featuring celebrity impostors of stars like Juan Nguyen and Jeannie Q. Christina, all with ridiculously mundane names and occupations. *I'm Lester James, hoverbird repair technician*, said an Angel Palmero look-alike. *And I've been searching for you on Doppelgänger.*

It was a simple system. Point the interface to the Data Sea profile of your lust object. Doppelgänger proceeds to track down his unwitting twins spread throughout human space. Each twin is presented with an invitation to meet. Given a pool of sixty billion people to choose from, the odds were high that someone would accept the invitation. Frequently that someone was looking for a person just like *you*, which gave the arrangement a nice symmetry. The closer the match, the higher the fee.

Jara had fired off a Vault credit authorization to Doppelgänger, along with a video of Natch at his most beautiful and solipsistic. Two days later, Doppelgänger had led her to Geronimo.

The relationship worked very nicely for a week or so. Geronimo tried to fulfill Jara's fantasy of bedding her boss, and Jara tried to fulfill Geronimo's fantasy of bedding . . . who? A neighbor, a coworker, some woman who had caught his eye in a Beijing night club? Jara didn't know and didn't care. This was the Sigh, after all, where mutual fulfillment was the decorum and questions were bad form.

Then that week turned into two and rounded the corner heading for three. Now, here she lay, thirty-seven minutes after her arrival in this leather SeeNaRee, and Geronimo was gone. Jara still had twenty minutes left on the account, and an additional two hours until the next fiefcorp meeting. She decided to loaf for a while.

Jara hated to chastise Bonneth for bad advice, but it was becoming pretty clear that this form of therapy just wasn't working. There was something intensely sexual about Natch. Yet he kept that virility under such iron control that Jara could not even tap into it through fantasy. What would Natch be like if he vented his passions in the bedroom? What if there were no bio/logic fiefcorps, no Primo's ratings, no MultiReal to distract him? Easier to imagine a bird without wings or a fish that could not swim.

The closer Jara got to possessing the fiefcorp master, the more he seemed to edge away. Achieving his lifetime goal of topping the Primo's bio/logic investment guide should have loosened him up a little. Given him a sense of accomplishment. But instead, the entrepreneur was retreating farther and farther inside his shell.

How long would his sanity last?

It needed to last a while. Jara no longer had the consolation that this would all be over in eleven months when her apprenticeship expired. She had chosen to sign on to *another* apprenticeship, serving a brand-new company in a wholly untested market. Another few years wrestling with this peculiar crossbreed of loathing and lust.

Meanwhile, Horvil was out there somewhere. Sweet, innocent Horvil, who had opened up his heart on the floor of the Surina Center for Historic Appreciation while a thousand Council troops marched through the courtyard. They had managed to avoid being confined alone ever since. Jara could honestly say she had never thought of Horvil in a romantic light, and had no idea what to do. Her feelings were as easy to decipher as cuneiform.

Confused, emotionally knotted, exhausted, Jara finally logged off

the Sigh and waited for the mediocrity of the real world to seep in again. There was a name for the haze of a mind switching between multi connections; why wasn't there a word for the postcoital letdown of logging off the Sigh?

Jara sat up in bed and looked at her still-white walls. In the living room sat the pitiful arrangement of daisies she had blown an inappropriately large chunk of her fiefcorp stipend on. She arose, walked into the breakfast nook, and had the building brew her up some hot nitro.

When did you lose yourself? the analyst asked her reflection in the window.

Was it at Andra Pradesh, when Len Borda's troops were swooping all around her? Or further back, when she had threatened to quit the fiefcorp after Natch's little black code stunt? Maybe there wasn't a single moment. Maybe it was a gradual eroding of self, a twenty-year process that had started long before she ever heard of Natch or Horvil. Everything that had happened in her adult life felt like one attenuated chain reaction to that moment in the hive when her proctor had settled his hand on her thigh, a few centimeters higher than propriety dictated, and Jara had tried to convince herself that she liked it there.

(((7)))

The familiar sight of his tenement curving around a Shenandoah hilltop put a smile on Natch's face that not even black code could dim. Natch had never felt a sentimental attachment to any of the places he had called home; he remembered walking out of the hive for initiation with barely a backwards glance. But he had never savored the unique flavor of returning to a place he had fought to defend either.

The front doors swished open to greet him. Natch stepped into the atrium and nearly collided with Horvil.

The engineer's chubby face instantly sparked into a grin. "You're back!" he cried, folding the fiefcorp master into a bear hug. Natch could feel a turgid programming bar pressed against his back. The distinct smell of peanut butter drifted through the air.

"I'm back," agreed the entrepreneur.

"For real this time, right?" The engineer poked him in the collarbone with one grubby finger. "Not just another five-minute stop-by in multi?"

"For real."

"About time," grumbled a voice from the back of the atrium. Horvil shuffled aside to reveal his cousin Benyamin, who was rising from one of the stiff-backed chairs that lined the building's front hall. "Your apartment won't let us in," he said, stretching his arms up in the air with fingertips clasped.

"Well, that's not completely true," said Horvil with a frown. "Vigal, Jara, and me, we can all override the security just fine. But you never approved everyone else for emergency access."

"So *we've* been stuck working out *here*," continued Ben.

"At least the building management was nice about it," said Horvil. "They could've kicked us out. But they didn't. They even let us drag the workbench out here once or twice."

“You can thank *her* for that.” The young apprentice tilted his head slightly to the left, indicating another roomier chair where the channel manager Merri had taken up residence. Merri struggled to stand, suppressed a yawn, then switched on a stim program to suffuse her with some energy.

Natch took in the blond woman’s disheveled dress and the backpack propped slantwise against the leg of an end table. Suddenly he realized that, unlike Benjamin, Merri was here in the flesh and probably hadn’t been home since the demo at Andra Pradesh. “Why are you still *here*?” Natch asked incredulously. “Why didn’t you go back home?”

Merri shrugged with embarrassment. “I know how expensive it is to teleport to Luna,” she said. “It’s just not worth wasting the company’s money. And I’m not up to one of those long shuttle rides right now.”

“Someone else would’ve put you up. Horvil’s Aunt Berilla has a fancy estate in London. They must have a thousand spare bedrooms.”

“It’s not a big deal, Natch. The local Creed Objectivv hostel works just fine.”

“But you’ve got a companion on Luna,” Benjamin retorted. “Bon-neth needs you, you said. She can barely get across the *apartment* by herself—”

“Bon-neth,” said Merri with an air of tired finality, “will be fine.” Natch sensed undercurrents of tension between the two fiefcorp-ers, but decided this was something he could deal with another time. He shook his head, stepped around the pleasantly befuddled Horvil, and strode down the hall to his apartment with three apprentices in tow.

Jara seemed to have anticipated Natch’s arrival before he even made it in the door. The tiny fiefcorp analyst was perched on the arm of Natch’s sofa, contemplating an ornate holographic calendar floating in midair. “We need to talk scheduling, Natch,” she announced without even looking up, as if continuing a conversation already in progress.

The fiefcorp master paused a moment and let the comfortable trap-pings of home flood his senses: the windows showing bar charts of the

bio/logic markets, the workbench in his office with a trapezoidal structure bobbing above it in MindSpace, the sprightly patch of daisies in the apartment's precise geometric center. A cup of tea on the kitchen counter gave mute testimony to Serr Vigal's presence. "Where's Vigal?" asked Natch.

"Here I am," came the voice of the neural programmer as he wandered in from the balcony. Natch thought he spotted a few more gray hairs in his old guardian's goatee, and an unusual amount of concern written in his eyes. Serr Vigal surprised the both of them by taking Natch into a tight embrace.

"I'm glad you're back," mumbled Vigal.

"Me too," said Natch.

The moment was brief. There would be plenty of time later for sentimentality; right now Natch had business to attend to. He stepped free of the neural programmer's arms and began his normal hectic pace around the living room. Benjamin and Horvil hustled to find seats. "Everybody here? Someone's missing. Where's Quell?"

Merri settled into a quiet corner on the floor next to the balcony and sat with her legs crossed. "Quell went to get a bite to eat," she said. "He kept complaining about the food in your building, so we found him an Indian restaurant down the street. He should be back in a few minutes."

"Where's he been sleeping?"

The channel manager shrugged her shoulders. "I think he rented a room somewhere."

"Fine," said Natch with a flip of his hand. "Okay, Jara. Scheduling. Go."

"*This* was the day of our presentation at Andra Pradesh," said Jara, pointing to the holographic calendar. The square marked *Tuesday, December 6* popped off the calendar like a kernel of corn on the flame. "And here's today." December 28 leapt up, causing the previous three weeks to cascade off the surface of the holograph. "The public hasn't

heard a peep out of us in three weeks. No press releases, no timetables, no demos, nothing.”

“Natch’s been a little busy,” snorted Horvil, who had appropriated the chair-and-a-half for his ass and the matching ottoman for his feet.

“Granted,” said Jara. “But the public doesn’t know that. Three weeks is an eternity in bio/logics. It’s a good thing the Council pulled that little stunt yesterday, because people were wondering if he was still *alive*.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” muttered Vigal, balancing his cup of tea on one palm as he found a place on the couch between Ben and Jara.

“Magan Kai Lee swoops down here with dartguns blazing, and you call that a *little stunt*?” said Horvil. “If Natch hadn’t warned us to stay clear, we could’ve all been killed.”

Jara did not back down. “Come on, Horv,” said the analyst. “The Council just wanted to scare him. They weren’t planning on *killing* him.”

Ben let out a harrumph. “How do you know that?”

“Because,” replied the analyst as calmly as a proctor explaining arithmetic to a hive child. “Natch can’t hand MultiReal over to the Council if he’s dead, now can he?”

Benyamin’s mouth clamped shut. Silence enveloped the apartment.

Jara continued. “Listen, Ben. We’re talking about basic Data Sea networking principles. Len Borda can’t just *steal* the MultiReal code from Natch. He needs core access, or Natch could just lock him out of the program whenever he felt like it. And core access on the Data Sea isn’t something the Council can fake. They’d need the matching signatures tied up in Natch’s OCHRE system. It’s practically impossible to crack.”

Serr Vigal nodded sagely. “She’s right,” he said. “Even the Defense and Wellness Council can’t circumvent Data Sea access controls.”

The young apprentice refused to give up. “They could get core access from Margaret.”

“Sure,” said Horvil, picking at a loose thread on his jacket. “But

think of it this way. There're two people in the world with the master key to MultiReal. One of them's holed up in a tower with five thousand armed guards, and one of them's just hanging out in an apartment building. Who would *you* go after?"

"This is all beside the point," continued Jara. "Without Natch's cooperation—or Margaret's—Borda wouldn't even be able to *find* the code. You can't just trace subaether transmissions. He'd have to search every qubit on the Data Sea with pattern recognition algorithms. Even using the fastest computational engine in existence, that'd take . . ."

Arithmetic fluttered behind Horvil's closed eyelids as he yanked the string on his jacket free. "Two thousand one hundred twenty-nine years. No, wait. Maybe four hundred eighty-eight years. Or . . ."

Jara raised her eyebrows and extended an open palm in the engineer's direction. "A long time, at any rate."

"But if the Council couldn't find MultiReal, then *nobody* could find it," protested Ben. "It would just float on the Sea forever with all the other useless crap. If Len Borda's trying to get rid of MultiReal, wouldn't that suit him just fine? Get rid of Natch and Margaret, and then nobody has core access."

"Yes, but what if Borda wants to keep MultiReal for himself?" said Jara.

Benjamin leaned forward on the sofa, ran one hand through his inky black hair. "I must be missing something," he said. "This doesn't make any sense. If Borda can't take MultiReal away, and he can't kill Natch, then all he can do is threaten, right? What are we so worried about?"

Horvil put a hand on the young apprentice's shoulder. "Do I really need to spell it out for you, Ben?" he asked in a throaty whisper.

All conversation came to a halt. Bio/logics could do much to shield the human body from pain, but in the wrong hands it could also be used to cause pain. Over the years, unscrupulous groups had devised OCHREs that injected painful toxins directly into muscle and bone, nightmare SeeNaRees that tapped into their victims' darkest fears, and

programs that directly stimulated the pain centers of the brain. Who could say which of these techniques the Council used?

Natch stopped midpace in front of the window, silhouetted by the Shenandoah morning. “The Patel Brothers are giving another demo this Sunday.”

The rest of the company blinked in surprise. Nobody had noticed that Natch hadn’t said anything for several minutes. Merri gulped uneasily and gave Horvil a sidelong glance. “I was going to mention that,” she said. “How did you know, Natch? The Patels haven’t even announced it yet.”

“Well, how did *you* know?” asked Horvil.

“Robby Robby,” replied the channel manager. “It’s his business to know what’s happening in the sales world. And it’s *my* business to know what *he* knows.”

Natch could feel the stares of his fellow fiefcorpers, but he paid them no mind. His eyes were locked on that pulsing square labeled *Tuesday, December 6*, hovering menacingly near Jara’s fingers like an accusation. How was it possible for three weeks to slip through his fingers and vanish without a trace? Already those days on the tube were becoming ghostly, indistinct, something from a dream. Jara was right: three weeks was an eternity in bio/logics. What unspeakable malice had the black code inside him unleashed during those three weeks?

“Natch . . . ?” Vigal prodded gently.

The fiefcorp master blinked hard, trying to get his mind back into balance. He focused on the holographic calendar. How did he know about the Patel Brothers’ demo? The same way he had known about Magan Kai Lee’s failed incursion into his apartment building. Some might label it *intuition* or *foresight*, but to Natch it was simply algebra; all you needed to do was to churn through the variables and eliminate the cruft, and you would inevitably arrive at the solution. Couldn’t they *see* the reddish aura surrounding that square labeled *January 1*? Couldn’t they *tell* the Patel Brothers were giving a demo that day just by looking at it?

“So what did Robby find out about this demo?” Natch asked Merri. “Any indication what they’re doing?”

“Not really. Just vague rumors. They’ve booked an auditorium at the Thassel Complex, but it’s not one of the larger-capacity halls. We’re guessing it’s an industry-only event. Robby thinks he can get one of us in without too much trouble.”

“I’ll go,” said Jara.

The fiefcorp master nodded and began to pace once more. “So how do we respond?”

Horvil did some mental extrapolation of his own, then dropped his face dramatically into the palms of his hands. “Shit,” he said, nose poking through his thick fingers, “you’re not gonna put us through all that crap again, are you, Natch? *Another* demo in less than seventy-two hours?”

Natch shook his head, and the rest of the fiefcorpers released their breath simultaneously. “There’s no point,” he said. “The demo at Andra Pradesh showed everyone that *we’re* the standard bearers in this business now. If we scramble to beat Frederic and Petrucio to the punch again, it’ll just look like we’re being defensive. Better for us to schedule something on our own timetable. Take a little time to get this one right.”

Jara gave a curt nod of agreement. “So, when?” She swept her hand across the calendar, causing entire rows of dates to ripple smoothly off the surface. Her fingers drifted down towards February in a transparent effort to bring Natch’s attention to a later date.

Natch studied the chunks of time floating in the middle of the room, rubbed his chin. To Natch, each day had a unique flavor that he could roll on his tongue like wine. Few recognized the distinctions between weekdays and weekends anymore, and nobody but lawyers and accountants observed the new year. But there were a few days that seemed disturbingly rancid, for reasons he couldn’t discern. January 15th stood out as a particularly bad day, and the whole following week tasted as bitter as ash.

“January 8th,” he said at length. “A week from Sunday.”

More relieved sighs. Given what the fiefcorp had gone through for the last demo, eleven days felt like a century.

“It’s too bloody quiet in here,” came a gruff voice from the doorway. “Let’s hear some more noise.”

Quell strode in, his breath stinking of saffron and bay leaves. The Islander looked as if he could have curled the rest of the fiefcorp with one massive biceps. The thin copper collar around his neck feeding him the sights and sounds of the virtual world seemed more uncomfortable than ever.

“You’re missing all the excitement,” said Horvil to his fellow engineer. “It’s demo time again.”

“Fun,” said the Islander, voice doused with sarcasm. “I can’t wait.” He walked over to Natch and enacted his peculiar Islander custom of clasping hands and shaking.

Natch stood before the window for a moment with his hands behind his back. Staring. “No, not a demo,” he said. “An exposition.”

Benjamin let out a skeptical *phfft*. “What’s the difference?”

“A demo is a preview. An exposition is a celebration.” The fiefcorp master’s statement was greeted by a confused silence. He stepped back and spread his arms towards the window as if unveiling a marquee. “Picture this: a field of grass, a huge crowd. Two teams playing baseball, every single player using MultiReal.”

Horvil gazed unblinkingly at the window. “Where are you going to get the other team?” he said. “You wanna invite the Patel Brothers?”

“No. We pick them at random. We pick *all* the players at random, both teams.”

“We could hold some kind of public lottery,” said Merri, her eyes glinting. “Then we could announce the winners at a big publicity event.”

“I think this could work,” put in Quell, rubbing his chin with his bear’s paw. “Instead of holding MultiReal up on a stage, we give the

audience a taste of it. So they'll know what it's really like to *use* the program. Makes it that much harder for Borda to take away."

"Aren't we beating this baseball thing to death?" said Jara. "People are going to think the only thing MultiReal's good for is hitting home runs."

Natch, unconcerned: "Then let's make it soccer. Or jai alai. Doesn't matter." He turned to face the rest of the fiefcorp and straightened his spine like a drill sergeant. "Listen, I know it feels like we have eons to put this together. But we've used up the element of novelty. People have been talking nonstop about MultiReal for a month now, and we can't just repeat what we did last time."

The analyst flipped dark curls of hair from her eyes, the better to face down a looming challenge. "I'm up to the task," she said. "But it's not me you have to worry about. Most of this is going to fall on Horvil's shoulders."

"Me and Quell, we've been pounding out all kinds of changes to the code in MindSpace," said the engineer with an insouciant air. "Possibilities is *bumming*. It's like we turned some kind of corner. But still—doesn't mean it's gonna be easy. We have a lot of loose ends to tie up before we can sic this thing on five hundred million people again."

Natch: "So can you get the job done?"

Horvil's voice did not leak the smallest droplet of doubt. "Yeah, we'll get it done," he said. Quell gave a reinforcing nod of confidence. "Provided that Ben's assembly-line goons do *their* job."

"No worries," said Benjamin. "Greth Tar Griveth has the programming floor standing on notice."

"And I'll start working the sales channels with Robby Robby," put in Merri, standing up and brushing off her blouse.

Serr Vigal sat on the sofa, beaming quietly. His role in the fiefcorp was strictly an advisory one, but no one doubted that he would make himself available as needed.

Natch's pacing slowed as he surveyed the group arrayed before

him. He could scarcely believe that a month ago, the Surina/Natch MultiReal Fiefcorp had been fumbling, awkward, and ready to quit. Now they had caught the same intoxicating scent of victory that Natch had been following since his first meeting with Margaret Surina. This was no hodgepodge of runners-up and also-rans Natch had assembled; this was a first-rate team.

The entrepreneur tried to conjure some words of inspiration, but for some reason the linguistic centers of his brain felt tangled and knotted. "All right," said the fiefcorp master, twirling one hand in the air. "Let's get to work."

(((8)))

Jara pledged to waste no more time with Geronimo until the Multi-Real exposition was over, at the earliest. There was too much to do. But she might as well have spent the next morning dabbling on the Sigh, for all she accomplished.

She began the day arguing with Merri over details of the MultiReal exposition. They agreed to have the lottery winners play soccer instead of baseball, but Merri insisted there should be twenty-three lottery winners instead of twenty-two.

“That’s uneven,” Jara complained. “Somebody’s going to get an extra player.”

“Yes, but think of the symbolism,” said Merri. “One for each member of the Prime Committee. We could even choose one player from each Committee bailiwick.”

Jara summoned a holographic bar chart that displayed the Committee bailiwicks in bright blues and purples. Across the Atlantic, Merri’s window would be showing the same thing. “That means putting a bunch of central government employees on the field,” she protested. Jara pointed to the column labeled MEME COOPERATIVE (3) and set it aglow. “Do you really want three Meme Cooperative officials nosing around backstage at *our* exposition?”

“That could be part of the gimmick. It’s perfect, Jara! The Congress of L-PRACGs has twelve seats on the Committee, right? And all the other government and business interests put together have eleven. We can bill the game as ‘the people versus the government.’”

“And the extra player?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we can just rotate goalies. We’ll figure something out.”

But Jara was skeptical, and they decided to put off making any

decisions until they had spoken with Natch at the afternoon fiefcorp meeting. *This sounds like one of his ideas*, thought the analyst. *He'll definitely take Merri's side, and that's just going to cause trouble.*

Frustrated, still itching with unscratchable desire, Jara decided to cut the conversation short and step out of her apartment for a change. Her next-door neighbors blinked in surprise when she passed them in the hallway, having given her up for dead weeks ago.

Jara emerged from the tenement into a glum, drizzly London afternoon. *So much for modern technology*, she thought. For thousands of years, the British Isles had been under the capricious grip of nature, and London had constantly wallowed in rain. Now, after two centuries of unparalleled technological progress, the weather was determined by the Environmental Control Board, the regional L-PRACGs, and a patchwork of smaller agencies—and still the city wallowed in rain.

The fiefcorp analyst made her way north, where the cobblestone turned to splotchy asphalt. She passed the farmers' market and the baseball stadium. Twenty minutes later, she found her destination: a small nitro bar nestled among the shops of New Downing. A familiar site, part haven and part hideaway. Jara could practically feel the warm nitro lathering her tongue as she walked in the door.

But as soon as she made it inside, she stopped short. The man standing in her path may have been wearing a loose green caftan instead of a white robe and yellow star, yet there was no mistaking Magan Kai Lee.

• • •

Jara could feel her animal instincts kick in. She made a quick pirouette, looking for the glint of Council dartguns, but all she could see was the quotidian assortment of nitro junkies and chintz-patterned sofas.

Jara had watched the video of Magan's failed raid on Natch's apart-

ment at least a dozen times. She had gotten used to seeing him as a startled animal buffeted by a hailstorm of drudge questions. But now, standing in the nitro bar, the lieutenant executive was serene and confident, like a man who was either armed to the teeth or twice as large as everyone else in the room. But Magan bore no weapon that Jara could see, and even she topped his slight frame by a few centimeters.

“Towards Perfection, Jara,” said Magan.

The analyst scowled. “What the fuck do you want?”

“Just to talk,” said the lieutenant, sweeping one hand towards the side door with a magnanimous gesture.

Jara regarded the doorway with suspicion. “Talk,” she said. “Right. How do I know you’re not going to plug me with black code out there?”

The corners of Magan’s lips rose a millimeter or two. A smile. “Surely if I can plug you with black code out there,” he said, “I could do it in here just as easily.”

Jara sighed, acknowledging the point. She had a passing familiarity with the waitstaff here, but she couldn’t imagine any of them sticking their necks out for her. The initial shock of seeing Magan was wearing off, and she knew she needed to get out of there, fast. *Run, you fool*, she told herself. *Contact your L-PRACG security. Send a Confidential-Whisper to Natch. Go.*

But she did none of these things. Instead, she followed Magan out the side door.

There was no sudden barrage of black code darts, no ambush, nothing but the London drizzle. Jara exhaled in relief as Magan Kai Lee led her around the back of the building to a partially roofed courtyard decked with wrought-iron tables and chairs. The analyst had spent many weary afternoons out here nursing a chai or nitro with her loose circle of friends. But now, whether because of the rain or the Defense and Wellness Council, the courtyard was empty. Magan took a seat at an unassuming table set with a pair of steaming nitro mugs. Jara followed suit.

“All right, so here we are,” said the analyst. “Now what do you want?”

“I want to introduce you to some people,” said Magan simply.

“What people?”

“The people who have been following Natch around and scouring your fiefcorp’s records.”

Jara could feel her shoulder blades clench and her jaw tighten, the primitive reflexes of fear and flight. She quickly activated a pair of bio/logic programs to soothe her nerves as a line of Defense and Wellness Council officers marched into the courtyard from the alleyway. There were thirteen in all, each bearing a demeanor that could only be described as nonchalant.

“Allow me to introduce you to Commanders Papizon and Ridgello,” said Magan. He indicated a tall flamingo of a man whose eyes did not quite line up, and a hulking blond mercenary who might even be a match for Quell in hand-to-hand combat. “Papizon and Ridgello are in charge of the security detail that has been following Natch’s every move for the past forty-eight hours.”

Papizon bowed awkwardly in Jara’s direction, as if performing the act for the first time. Ridgello made an obscure gesture with one hand, causing seven more phantoms to step out of the shadows. Two or three looked vaguely familiar, faces Jara had seen in passing in Shenandoah and not given a second thought. Ridgello waited for her to get a good, long look. Then he signaled again, and the spooks melted back into the mist.

Jara reached somewhere deep inside herself for a bravado she did not feel. She tilted her head at the remaining Council officers. “So I guess *these* idiots must be the ones scouring the fiefcorp records,” she said.

A lithe woman with dark mahogany skin stepped forward in response and gave a perfunctory bow. “You might recognize the woman I have put in charge of this team,” said Lieutenant Executive Lee.

Jara let out a gasp before she could stop herself. “The Blade.”

“See, Magan, she *does* follow the Council drudge gossip,” said Rey

Gonerev, seeming well pleased. Her voice was a wasp's sting. "It's an honor to finally meet you, Jara. I've read so much about you in the Council files that I feel like I know you . . . *intimately*." The slant on the word was unmistakable.

Jara felt a flush rising from her toes and diffusing across her entire body. She had heard rumors about sketchy channels on the Sigh selling customer data, but never quite believed them. How much did the Council know? And how much had they seen? There was nothing illegal about her frolics with Geronimo, of course, but the fact that someone might actually *know* about them felt as intrusive as any molestation.

Magan made a disdainful frown, clearly signaling to the Blade that she had crossed the line. Whether he was genuinely irritated, or if this was just part of their good cop/bad cop routine, Jara couldn't tell.

Rey Gonerev was just getting started. She marched up and down the row of Council officers, introducing each in turn. More than one seemed to be quivering slightly at the Blade's presence, or Magan's, or both. "Clarissa here has been itemizing every Vault credit Natch has spent over the last ten years," said Gonerev. "Refaru Gil Motivan is collecting every word he's ever spoken in public and every scrap of text he's ever posted on the Data Sea. William Teg has been keeping tabs on Serr Vigal, while Larakolia is in charge of analyzing your company's programs. . . ."

The flush in Jara's skin quickly turned to nausea. Police intimidation: it was a ritual as old as time, invented by the ancients with their primitive firearms and consecrated in a million crime dramas ever since. Jara felt like she could recite every line before it was uttered, but the familiarity did not stop her knees from shaking.

She didn't even hear what nefarious deeds the last few were up to. "Why are you showing me this?" she said quietly when the Council solicitor had finished her little presentation. "Am I supposed to be scared that you're following Natch around? Don't you think he already knows that?"

Magan gave the row of officers an almost imperceptible nod. One

by one, the team disintegrated into the multivoid until just four members of the Council remained—Papizon, Ridgello, Rey Gonerev, and Magan Kai Lee.

“I’m showing you this to deliver a message,” said Magan. His demeanor was almost polite, his hands folded on the table like an ordinary plebeian at teatime. “MultiReal is the Defense and Wellness Council’s top priority. As long as Natch refuses to cooperate with us, the Surina/Natch MultiReal Fiefcorp is *my* top priority.”

“I don’t understand why you’re hassling *us*,” Jara said, pinching her temples in an effort to stanch the ache. “You want access to MultiReal? Go talk to Frederic and Petrucio Patel. I’m sure they’d be happy to sell you all the access you need.”

Magan shook his head. “You know that the Patel Brothers are only licensees, Jara. Limited access. I suppose we could learn a lot from someone with master engineering privileges, like your friend Horvil. But what good would that do when Natch could lock us out of the program without notice? No, I’m afraid only Natch and Margaret Surina can give us what we need.”

“Listen, I don’t know who you think you’re dealing with, but Natch is more than capable of st—”

“No,” said Magan, cutting her off without raising his voice. “Don’t be naive. Your fiefcorp master is canny and resourceful—I’ll give him that. He caught us off guard the other day. But there are only seven of you. The Defense and Wellness Council has millions of officers at our beck and call. We have unlimited resources. *We will bury Natch.*”

“And those foolish enough to stand with him,” added Gonerev. Unlike Magan, she appeared to be enjoying herself.

Again the slight disapproving grimace from the lieutenant executive. “Len Borda’s agents are tailing Natch day and night,” he said. “We are exploring every transaction your fiefcorp has ever done, every piece of code you’ve ever launched onto the Data Sea. This MultiReal exposition you are so diligently preparing for *will not happen.*”

The analyst slouched down in her chair, wishing she could slip between the cracks and disappear unnoticed. After everything Magan had revealed, why should it be a surprise that the Council knew about the MultiReal exposition? But it hadn't even been twenty-four hours since Natch came up with the idea, and as far as Jara knew, nobody had said a word about it to anyone outside the fiecorp yet.

Jara looked to the steaming mugs on the table for relief. The drizzle had found its way under the awning to the side of her face, but it hadn't done much damage to the nitro yet. She reached for the closer mug and took a quick gulp, hoping that her beverage wasn't poisoned. *They ordered my nitro just the way I like it*, Jara thought with a shudder. *Extra dark, extra bitters.*

The Blade came close and crouched down until she was almost whispering in Jara's ear. Jara could have gotten lost in those long braids of ebony hair. "You don't think Natch is the *only* one Papizon and Ridgello are following, do you?" said Gonerev.

Commander Papizon merely stood there, squinting at the rain. Ridgello might have been a carven effigy.

She knew from watching the dramas that this was the point when she was supposed to crack. But somehow the thought of Council goons tailing her on the street helped Jara rally her courage. "This little act of yours is getting old," snapped the analyst. "If you were really so confident you could *bury Natch*, you wouldn't be sitting here playing these little games. You'd just go ahead and *do* it."

Again the insignificant raising of the lips on Magan's face. "And if *you* were so confident in Natch, you wouldn't be sitting here listening to us."

Jara said nothing. Rey Gonerev retreated to stand beside Papizon, her task done.

Magan rose from his seat and turned in profile to face the advancing clouds. Jara knew that even a lieutenant executive of the Defense and Wellness Council was not exempt from the dictates of the weather, but he seemed strangely untouched by the rain.

“What do you want from me?” asked Jara.

“I’ve studied your record very carefully,” said the Council lieutenant. “I’ve seen the people you’ve worked for over the years; I’ve seen the quality and integrity of your work. You can’t possibly be pleased with the direction Natch is steering this fiefcorp. Dirty tricks, sabotage, rumor, innuendo—this isn’t *you*, Jara. I know what you really want: you want *out* of this miserable apprenticeship. You want to wipe the slate clean and strike out on your own.

“The Defense and Wellness Council can give you this.

“Do we want something from you in return? Of course. We want your cooperation. The more cooperation we get from you, the fewer public resources we have to waste, the quicker we can move on, and the easier it will be for Natch.”

Magan turned and focused the full intensity of his glare on the fiefcorp analyst. It was not an unkind look, but rather a look full of hidden trapdoors and secret caches of information. In many ways, Lieutenant Executive Lee was Natch’s antithesis: a man of hyper-rationality, a man who scrupulously choreographed everything that happened in his presence.

“Jara, I can compensate you for any shares you lose. Not only that, but I can set you up with your own company. A proper company, one run in accordance with the laws of the Meme Cooperative. A company that can earn the number one slot on Primo’s *honestly*, through hard work.

“Natch won’t survive this, Jara. You can’t change that. What you *can* change is whether you go down with him.”

With that, Lieutenant Executive Magan Kai Lee gave a bow and strode off into the fog. He seemed small enough to be swept away by the rainstorm. Rey Gonerev, Ridgello, and Papizon followed seconds later, leaving Jara sitting alone in the courtyard with a mug of tepid nitro. It was only after several minutes of doleful reflection that Jara realized Magan had not actually asked her to do . . . anything.