

SHADOWRUN
TECHNOBABEL
Stephen Kenson
A ROC BOOK

ROC

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street,
New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.
Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane,
London W8 5TZ, England
Penguin Books Australia Ltd,
Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books (N.Z.) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road,
Auckland 10, New Zealand
Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England
First published by Roc, an imprint of Dutton Signet, a member of Penguin
Putnam Inc.

First Printing, May, 1998 10 9876543

Copyright (c) FASA Corporation, 1998 All rights reserved

Series Editor: Donna Ippolito Cover: Peter Peoples

SHADOWRUN, FASA, and the distinctive SHADOWRUN and FASA logos are registered
trademarks of the FASA Corporation, 1100 W. Cermak, Suite B305, Chicago, IL
60608.

Printed in the United States of America

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this
publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval
system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission
of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE AT QUANTITY DISCOUNTS WHEN USED TO PROMOTE PRODUCTS OR
SERVICES. FOR INFORMATION PLEASE WRITE TO PREMIUM MARKETING DIVISION, PENGUIN
PUTNAM INC., 375 HUDSON STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10014.

If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book
is stolen property. It was reported as "unsold and destroyed" to the publisher
and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this
"stripped book."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who helped in the creation of this book who I would like
to thank. Thanks go to Bob Silverman for helping me make the jump to doing
this novel; Mike Mulvihill for giving me a shot and developing some great
Shadowrun storylines to work with; Donna Ippolito for giving an untried
novelist a chance; my fellow authors Mel Odom and Jak Koke for their
invaluable advice; FASA's extraordinary editorial staff for making me look
better than I am; my family and friends for putting up with me and encouraging
me; and, lastly, Tom Dowd, Paul Hume, and Bob Charrette for creating such a
cool world to play in. Thanks, everyone, I couldn't have done it without you.

Prologue

The year is 2059 . . .

Magic has returned to the world after an absence of thousands of years. What
the Mayan calendar called the Fifth World has given way to the Sixth, a new
cycle of magic, marked by the waking of the great dragon Ryumyo in the year
2011. The Sixth World is an age of magic and high technology. The age of
Shadowrun.

The rising magic has caused the Earth to Awaken. The ancient races have
re-emerged, throwing off their human guises. First came the elves and dwarfs,

born to human parents. Then came the orks and the trolls, some born different like the elves and dwarfs, others transformed, twisted from human form into their true selves as the rising magic activated their DNA. Dragons and other creatures out of fantasy appeared in the skies and in the wilderness. Unknown to the people of the twenty-first century, some of these folk and creatures out of fantasy recall an earlier world where magic reigned supreme, long before the earliest of recorded history. They know secrets that make them powerful in this new Age of Magic.

The Sixth World is a strange blend of the arcane and the technological. The march of technology has become a race. The distinction between man and machine is blurred by the power of cybertechnology. Machine and computer implants are commonplace, a mating of flesh and machine. People of the Sixth World are a new breed; stronger, smarter, faster. Less human.

The Matrix has emerged like a phoenix from the ashes of the old global computer network. A virtual world of

computer-generated reality, a universe of electrons controlled and manipulated by those with the fastest cyberdecks and the hottest new code. In this world is stored all of the information hidden behind powerful data fortresses just waiting to be liberated by pirate computer users, deckers, who glide like shadows through the corporate and governmental databases.

It is an era where information is power, where data and money are one and the same. Multinational megacorporations have replaced governments as the true superpowers. In a world where cities have grown together in sprawling maga-plexes of concrete and steel, walled-off corporate enclaves and arcologies are the modern castles from which corporate executives control masses of wageslaves for the profit of a lucky and ruthless few.

But in the shadows of the corporate giants there are the SINless. Those without System Identification Numbers are not recognized by the machinery of society, by the bureaucracy so massive and complex that nobody understands it completely. Among the SINless are the shadowrunners, traffickers in stolen data and hot information, mercenaries of the street-discreet, effective, and untraceable. They are the agents of the corporations that battle for power and control in the concrete jungles.

In the depths of the Matrix, strange new forces stir, beyond the knowing of any of the millions of people who access the vast network each day. The dealings of a powerful inventor from a forgotten age of magic and a multinational corporation with dreams of domination over the world market draw the attention of powers unknown to either. A new faction has entered the struggle of the Sixth World that is neither magic nor machine, but something else entirely ...

The Matrix is a computer-generated, symbolic representation of the grid, the world information network. Instead of dealing with messy manual commands and procedures, the cyberdeck lets the user perform apparently real actions in cyberspace and then translates them into system operations. A person in the Matrix reaches out and touches the symbol representing a file. The deck's software knows the user wants to open that file. The machine performs all of the operations, freeing the user from the tedious task of having to enter those commands manually. Matrix imagery is imposed on the user by the grid in a "consensual hallucination," to use Dr. Hikita 's term. It's no more an ultimate reality than an animated vid-chip. These are computer-generated, graphic images. The systems and the functions those images represent are real, but the images are just that. They have no reality.

-Dr. William Spheris, noted expert on Matrix design, from a tridcast interview on People to People, June 12, 2049.

Not real? Not real!? Looks to me like the doc's never done a run. I'm tellin'you, when you're dartin' through the peaks of Mitsuhama's L.A. mainframe shaggin' combat systems that are doin' their bangest to roast you

alive, plus you 're prayin' to Ghost your deck doesn't melt in your lap cause you got stupid, and you looks up and there in front a you is Death himself jacked in by the corp to rip your soul . . . babes, that's reality.
-Decker "Sandman" commenting on Spheris' statement in the People to People interview

1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

-Genesis 1:1

Think back. What is the first thing you remember?

My life begins in an alley-a dark, hidden place in shadows of the city. I awaken there like being born: weak, blind, and helpless, new to the world and all of its strange sounds, smells, and experiences. And alone, but not for very long. The first thing I become aware of is the darkness and the noise. I cannot see, but I can feel and smell and hear.

I can feel the ground beneath me. It is hard and cool. The roughness of it is not unpleasant-like someone scratching your back-and I lie there for I don't know how long, just enjoying the sensation of being supported by the ground, feeling its cool and strong embrace. I can feel the air stir around me, a gentle breeze brushing across the bare skin of my face and hands and ruffling my hair. The breeze brings smells and sounds to me as I lie there.

I smell the harsh smell of the city: a smell of burning. Burning fuel, burning trash, burning wood, and people burning with hope, despair, misery, and joy make up the smell, mixed in with the slow decaying scent of the city as metal, mortar, and stone slowly crumble to rust and dust,

ground down beneath the force of the elements. I smell my own sweat, cooling on my skin.

I hear the distant sounds of the city, the constant rumble of noise that most city-dwellers ignore almost completely in their daily lives. I hear the voices of cars, from the bass rumble of diesel engines to the high whine of electric motors powering small commuter cars. From time to time a horn blares out its distant cry of anger or warning. The voices of the city whisper and speak to me, and I know there is danger.

Then I hear another voice, much closer, which is speaking to someone else.

"There he is," the voice says and I know he is talking about me.

Then another voice, deep and gravelly. "Just like Crawley said he would be.

I'll give him that, Weizack, that freak may be weird, but his information is right on the money."

Weizack laughs, more like a humorless bark. "You should talk, chummer. You ain't winning no beauty prizes yourself."

Weizack's partner growls, a low, throaty sound. "Watch it, chummer. I may look like something outta somebody's nightmare, but at least I ain't no fragging ghoul. Let's just do this job and get the frag out of here. This place gives me the creeps."

A rough hand grabs my jaw, and I feel a jolt of fear and surprise shoot through my nerves. I want to push away the hand touching me and filling my nostrils with the stench of overripe sweat and the smell of decay, but my body refuses to obey me. My muscles remain limp and I lie like a dead fish on the cool, hard ground as the hands turn my head to the side and blunt fingers brash against the side of my neck.

"Hey," I hear Weizack's comrade say, his hot, rank breath blowing past my face. "He's still jacked in."

"So unplug him. What's the big deal?"

The fingertips brush my neck again. I hear a faint metallic click and feel an immediate and yawning sense of loss open up within me. He has taken something from me. Something very important, my connection to something larger and

greater than I am. I am truly alone now, and helpless against

these strangers. I try to move, or even open my eyes, but I can't. It feels like my brain is detached from the rest of my body. Like I have forgotten how to use it somehow. The part of me that is awake and aware floats somewhere, detached, unable to make the connection to make a move or a sound.

"Fragging chipheads," the deep voice grumbles. "Why they wanna burn out their brains beats the drek outta me. Feedin' stuff straight into your brain is totally fragged up. All of that techno-trash, just for the sake of gettin' high."

"You ever try slottin' sims, Riley?" Weizack asks his partner.

"No way. Those things'll frag you up for good. Not even the beetles, just the soft-core drek. My cousin was a sim-chipper, and all he did was spend the whole day sitting around slotting chips and living in a fraggin' fantasy world. Couldn't hold down a job or nothin'. Finally cooked his brain slotting something he shouldn't of. Cheap Hong Kong trash. You wanna get trashed, I say do it the old fashioned way-with a bottle or something. These brain-burners frag you up but good."

"What about all of this stuff?" Weizack says, his voice coming from close by and above where I lie. He must be standing near my head, looking down at me.

"Leave it," the one called Riley says. "Said you don't wanna mess with this drek. It's bad biz."

"Why not? As long as we're here ..."

"No." Riley's tone flat and cold. "Bad enough we're comin' here for him, but I ain't messin' with some of the weird-ass mojo that goes down around here.

Beetles are bad enough, but this place gets used for some real magic. Once we're done with him we're out of it, but if we mess with this place we could end up cursed or worse."

"You really believe in that hoodoo curse drek?" Weizack asked.

"Take another look at my face, drekhead, and tell me there's no truth to curses. Ever since the magic came back, it's been nothing but trouble for the whole world." Riley's voice was heavy with bitterness. "It mighta made some of the elves and their wannabes happy, but it's just another

way to slot over the rest of us. Proof that mother nature is a slitch with a sense of humor. Now shut the frag up and give me a hand here. We need to move this guy before somebody finds us here."

A strong pair of hands grips my ankles and, a moment later, another pair slides under my shoulders and grips me under the armpits. They lift me off the ground like a limp rag, all of my muscles still stubbornly refusing to respond to my mind's demands to move. Just a little movement, a twitch or a blink, to show these two I'm awake and aware. That's all it would take. But I can't seem to figure out how to do it.

I feel vaguely sick and dizzy as I'm carried a short distance, swaying gently between my two porters. They set me down again on a surface that is slick and soft over the hardness of the ground.

"All set?" Weizack asks, and for a moment I think he's talking to me. Riley grunts in response and Weizack says, "O.K., let's get going. Crawley doesn't like to be kept waiting."

"Frag him," Riley says. "I don't take drek from any frag-gin' ghoul."

I hear the sound of a zipper and feel the slick vinyl-coated cloth close around me like an embrace. The zipper passes up over my head and I'm completely sealed in ... oh no. They don't think I'm unconscious. They think I'm dead! But I'm not!

I feel panic grip my heart like a cold hand as my mind frantically screams at my body to obey. I just need to move, to make a sound, something to tell these men I'm really alive, that they've got the wrong guy. Dammit, move! I feel my breathing begin to quicken and I hope the sound will penetrate the heavy vinyl, but there is no response from outside it.

Two pairs of hands lift me off the ground and swing me like a sack a couple of

times before releasing me. There is a moment of cold, stark terror as I fly through the air with no sense of balance and no idea where I will fall. Then I drop

onto something firm but yielding, and roll just a bit before coming to rest on my side.

There is a clunk of metal on metal and the retreating footsteps of the two men. Then the sound of doors opening and muffled talk from somewhere ahead of me. That's when I realize I'm lying on top of a stack of bodies, all of them wrapped up for delivery just like me. But delivery to where? And are they dead or like me, trying desperately to gather the strength to cry out, to yell "I'm alive!" in hopes someone will hear them?

The thought hits me: is this what death is like? Maybe I really am dead and just don't know it. Maybe when you die all you really do is become a helpless prisoner in your slowly decaying body, aware of the world around you but unable to move or communicate in any way. Maybe your mind hangs around until your body rots away in the ground or you get the quick and merciful release of cremation. The thought of this paralysis as the afterlife nearly makes me scream and collapse in terror, but another thought bubbles up into my mind from somewhere. I know I'm not dead. I just know it somewhere deep down inside. I know I've been dead before and this isn't what it was like. I'm alive, reborn, and I have to figure out how I'm going to stay that way. Be a shame to start my new life only to end up dead again.

An engine rumbles to life and we start to drive. The meat-wagon slowly pulls away from the place of my awakening and heads out into the city.

2

The initiatory experiences of shamans the world over are remarkably similar, which we can now account for in the universal nature of magic itself. The proto-shaman falls into a trance or profoundly deathlike state, often as a result of an illness. While in this state, the candidate's spirit leaves the body behind and travels or is taken into the other world. In this spirit world, the candidate's spirit-self encounters and speaks with the various spirits dwelling there, learning certain secret words, names, and songs. The candidate's spirit form is then torn apart or devoured by the spirits, reduced to nothing more than a skeleton. The spirits introduce something new to the shaman's skeletal form, something symbolic of the shaman's awakened magical talent, like a magic stone or bone. The spirit-body is then reconstructed better than ever before. This death/rebirth experience awakens the shaman's magical potential and the candidate returns to the physical world with an awareness of the spirits and the power of the spirit world. This traditional form of shamanic initiation continues even into our modern magical age.

-from the lecture "Shamanic Traditions in the Twenty-first Century," by Nobel Prize winning shaman Dr. Akiko Kano, Cal-Tech, 2044

I lie on top of a pile of corpses for I don't know how long. Time seems to drag without destination or origin. We sway and weave through the traffic like a funeral barge slowly

making its way downriver to the sea. I try to let the gentle movements soothe me instead of making me sick to my stomach while I concentrate on trying to find a way out of this situation. The smell inside the meat-wagon is awful. The hot, organic smell of death mixed with the sharp bite of chemical cleansers and overlaid with the strange smell and taste of the rubbery vinyl of the body-bag surrounding me like the cocoon of some kind of strange insect. A thought passes through my head about how body-bags are not exactly designed with comfort in mind, and I have to force down a bout of hysterical laughter at the idea.

I know I've got to find some way to get out of here. Buried in the hot darkness and the smell of decay and disinfectant, I take stock of the situation. I cannot make my muscles work the way they should, but I can still feel my hands and my feet, the sensation of the vinyl body-bag against my skin, the way I rest on top of the bodies supporting me, the motion of the van as it moves. My mind is a jumble of thoughts and images. I was expecting to see someone else. Someone else was to come and find me, not these body-snatchers looking for corpses.

Why can't I move? I try to figure out what could have happened to cause this. I can still feel everything. Neither my limbs nor my skin are numb. I dismiss the possibility of injury causing my paralysis. The idea makes me ill, and, if it's true, there's not much hope of getting out of here. I push the thoughts aside. No point in dwelling on what I can't change.

Drugs? I don't think so. I don't feel sedated or drugged. My mind is sharp and awake. It might be a drug I don't know, but, again, there isn't much I can do if that's the case. Best to consider the other possibilities.

Magic? It's possible. There are spells to paralyze and control people. I know something about the theory behind them. Magicians have the ability to do such things, but I can't recall ever having been under a spell. Thinking about magic makes me feel strange. There's something I don't remember about it. Something important, but it doesn't help me with my present problem.

There's the possibility of the BTLs Riley talked about. Better Than Life chips-beetles-were things plenty of people plugged into their brains to experience feelings and sensations more pleasurable and intense than anything real life had to offer, supposedly. I dimly recall a feeling like that, feelings deeper and broader than anything I thought a human body and mind could contain. A sense of being so large, so vast, but it slips away from me even as I try to grab hold of it. Was I using chips in the alley? Is my current condition the result of neural damage to my motor centers? I can't remember.

The way I'm lying on top of the stack of bodies is giving me a painful pull at the base of my neck. I long to raise my head or to roll over to a more comfortable position. I focus on the pain, let it fill my thoughts. I pour all of my effort into making my body roll over to the side. Just a little contraction of the muscles. Just a slight change in position. That's it. Should be easy. Nothing to it.

I start to sweat inside the confinement of the body bag, and I can feel the air getting hot and stale. The sound of my own breathing is loud in the confinement, but I focus on it to remind me I'm still alive and I try to quicken its pace. I need more air, more oxygen to my muscles and my brain to try and speed their recovery. If they can recover, that is ... No, I can't let myself think that way. I have to be able to move or there's no chance at all. The meat-wagon takes a corner hard, and I throw all of my strength into rolling with the movement. There! I manage to roll onto my back on top of the other bodies, and I think I can feel someone's arm under my lower back, as if it were holding me in an embrace. It isn't much, but I moved.

I start concentrating on my hands and my feet. They are tingling a bit and, with some effort, I can almost move them. The paralysis gripping my body is starting to fade, I can feel it. I concentrate on trying to move, trying to find my voice, to bring my mind back into synch with my body. That's it. I feel like my mind has lost touch with my body, like I've only forgotten how to use it properly. If I

could only open my eyes. Of course, all there is to see right now is the inside of a dark body bag. I just need to try a little harder.

We slow to a stop, and the driver kills the engine. We've arrived somewhere. I start to work feverishly to regain some movement, any kind of movement. I have to tell them I'm not dead, that they've made a mistake. I have to get out of here. I hear the doors of the van clunk open, and I can hear the men talking

again. Weizack is saying something about the Urban Brawl game he lost some money on last night. His partner Riley just grunts in response to his ramblings.

Rough hands lift me out of the back of the van, and I try to squirm or struggle inside the body bag to tell these two they're not handling a corpse. I manage to flex my hands a bit, curling the fingers in to form fists, but I still can't move my arms. The thought of Weizack and his chummer dropping me in fright and cracking my skull on whatever is under me if I move flashes briefly through my mind. I could end up needing a body bag for real then, but I have to try and make them aware of me.

Then I hear a new voice speaking.

"Is this him?" the voice asks, barely audible through the thick vinyl body bag. The sound of it is low and whispery.

"Yeah, right where you said he would be," Weizack says, his voice gone flat and cold. The newcomer is obviously not a friend.

"Let me see," the other whispers.

I am lowered to the ground, and someone unzips the body bag. There is a rush of cool night air, and a foul stench assaults my nostrils. It is the smell of death and decay from the meat-wagon, but much worse and without the acidic tang of the disinfectant to cover it. The touch of the cool air and the terrible smell send another surge of adrenaline through my system, and I fight to move or see what is going on.

"Good, good," the new voice whispers, and I shiver a bit at the sound. Did they see that? "He's still in good shape, his aura is still bright and strong."

A dry hand gently caresses my cheek and I nearly gag at the touch. It's like the touch of a corpse. I can feel sharp nails like claws just barely grazing my skin.

"Ah, fresh meat," the same voice whispers again with a sigh of pleasure, sending a whiff of hot, foul breath wafting across my face. Hearing those words, I regain some control over myself. My eyes snap open and I stare up into what looks like the face of death itself. The figure crouched above me is pale and hairless, with skin tinged the gray of the grave and drawn tight over his bones. Thin lips curl back in a cruel smile, exposing sharp teeth that remind me of a small, meat-eating animal. A narrow tongue of a darker shade of gray emerges to lick his lips like a man sitting down to a feast. His hands are bony claws tipped with sharp, rending nails, and his eyes are the worst of all. White and blind, they seem to focus on my face, and yet look past my flesh as if they were peering straight into my soul.

"Good evening," the gray figure whispers to me, and I realize it is night, the dark sky covered with a gray shroud of clouds. I also realize neither my two "handlers" nor the creature crouching above me are surprised or shocked to see me awake. They know I'm not dead, and the implications break over me like a wave. If they knew I was alive the whole time, then I haven't been taken for disposal like some kind of rubbish off the streets but for some other purpose. The ghoul's comment about "fresh meat" comes to mind and I shudder again and try to move. My limbs jerk spasmodically this time, causing the creature to stop smiling and back away a bit, even as he waves the two handlers in closer. "No, no," he whispers in his low voice, "don't try to move. You'll be better off if you stay still. We wouldn't want you to injure yourself." His words are intended to sound comforting, but they only make my skin crawl. I look up at his pinched, gray face and his sightless eyes and see no pity or sympathy there.

"Bring him," he tells the two handlers. "You can come back for the rest later. It's not like they're going anywhere." Chuckling a wheezing laugh at his own joke, the

creature turns and moves off as the handlers each grab one of my arms and lift me up. I notice that Weizack is a man with a bit of a paunch and red-rimmed

eyes. He wears a scuffed leather jacket and a faded and stained denim shirt. I also notice the butt of a pistol protruding from the side of his belt underneath the jacket.

His partner is a tall, hulking figure with a broad, flat face. Two short tusks protrude up over his upper lip and his ears are longish and pointed, lying back against his skull. He looks like a goblin or ogre out of some fairy tale, but I realize he's an ork, one of the metatypes who assumed their true forms when magic returned to the world. He is right about one thing; his face is ugly as sin, but it's nothing like the hideous visage of the creature they work for, the ghoul. I catch the thing's face out of the corner of my eye as they lift me off the ground, and he almost looks sorry for me. That worries me more than anything I've seen so far.

The two handlers carry me away from the meat-wagon, my feet dragging on the ground, toward a low brick building. The van is parked in an alley alongside the building, and there's a side door nearby. The weathered brick walls of the building are smeared with years of accumulated graffiti; the signs, scrawls, and symbols meshing together like the secret writing cities use to communicate with those who know how to read it. The symbols are strangely familiar to me, but then I notice something else scrawled in vivid red near the door of the building: "Beware the Tamanous."

I'm dragged through the door, down a corridor lit by the blue-white light of flickering fluorescent tubes, a glow to make a healthy person look dead, which only emphasizes the ghoul's pallor. He leads us into a room and turns to Weizack and his partner.

"Put him up on the table," he says, "so I can get him prepared for delivery." Delivery to whom? I wonder, as the men drag me toward a flat, steel table in the middle of the room. Next to it I see a tray of shining, polished instruments: scalpels, needles, tubes, wires, and gleaming hypodermics. "It seems like such a waste," the creature sighs softly

somewhere behind me. "The parts are always best when they're fresh." When I hear those words I feel the adrenaline rush into my body like a dam breaking. Synapses fire and connect, newfound energy shoots through my nervous system and I find the strength to plant my feet on the floor and shove Weizack away. As he stumbles back with a yell into the tray of instruments, I grab for his gun. Time goes strange and everything seems to be moving in slow motion to me.

Weizack crashes to the tiled floor along with all of the sharp and shining surgical gear as I flick the safety off on the gun and spin on his partner. I faintly hear the gray creature cry out not to damage me too much as I level the gun at the ork.

A look of total and utter surprise on Riley's face makes him look almost innocent and comical for a moment before I fire and the rounds from Weizack's gun erase his face in a blur of red. He topples back toward the floor with the top of his head blown off.

Before I can turn toward the ghoul, he is upon me, slamming into my side with surprising speed and strength. His skin is like leather and his eyes are hideous, wide and staring. The smell of him is as overpowering as the charnel smell of the meat-wagon, and he sends us both crashing to the cold tile floor near the steel table. The gun flies from my hand and slides across the tile floor just out of reach. I struggle to get to it, but too late.

The creature is hideously strong and I am still weak and moving too slow. It grabs me and throws me down onto the floor on my back, pushing the air out of my lungs with a whoosh and sending pain lancing up my spine. A blow to my stomach makes me want to retch, and another upside my head has me seeing stars. I struggle to throw the thing off me as it straddles my legs and strikes at me with its wiry arms, but it is too strong, too heavy.

The gun is out of my reach and Weizack is stirring and cursing, bleeding from several cuts and gashes the surgical tools have given him. The hot, metallic smell of blood is everywhere in the room, and it seems to drive the creature

pinning me into a rage. It smiles and licks its thin lips, revealing a mouthful of sharp teeth and an animal-like tongue.

I shrink back in fear. Something cold and primal uncoils inside me and seems to take over, a basic instinct. There is a metallic click, and I strike out at one of the wiry gray arms pinning me down. The ghoul arcs back, howling in pain, a scream that scratches against my brain like a monofilament edge parts flesh and bone like water. Blood spurts out in dark goutts from the stump of the ghoul's arm. I kick the screaming thing off of me and scramble onto my hands and knees toward the gun. The dark, carbon-fiber blade slides silently back into my forearm, shedding the blood and gore from its slick surface as it goes, my skin sealing perfectly over the opening with only the slightest mark to reveal its passage.

Grabbing the gun from the floor as Weizack begins to get back to his feet, I shoot him in the leg, shattering his thigh bone and leaving a exit wound I could fit my fist through. He goes down yelling "Frag!" over and over again at the top of his lungs as the ghoul also continues to howl and roll on the floor in agony. I have to get out of here before I find out if they've got reinforcements nearby. I move over to where Weizack is leaning against the wall and clutching at his leg.

"Keys," I say as I level the gun at him. He looks for a moment like he's going to tell me to go slot, but then glances again at the gun I'm holding and reaches into the pocket of his jacket. I grab the key-ring in the shape of a little plastic dragon without taking my eyes off him and then back a few steps away.

Turning from the carnage in the room, I head out the door, my head still ringing from the ghoul's strike and my ribs and legs aching. I burst out into the hallway to see a man wearing a pristine white lab coat over his street clothes. He is studying the flat computer pad in his hand. He looks up as I rush out of the room, all bloody and wild-eyed, and there is a long instant where we seem to just stand and stare at each other. I raise the gun and shoot him

without a second thought and keep moving down the corridor. He drops the computer pad with a clatter and stumbles back from the impact of the round to his chest. The look of surprise is frozen on his face, and he leaves streaks of blood where he slides down the pale gray wall. I have no idea who he is. I run down the corridor and out the door to the van parked in the alleyway, still loaded with its macabre cargo of corpses. I yank open the door, jump into the driver's side, and gun the ignition, body-bags scattering from the meat-wagon's open rear doors as I peel out of there. A horn blares at me as I swerve onto the road and accelerate away, but there is no sign of pursuit from the charnel house. Only when I'm several blocks away do I notice the blood spattered on my clothes and skin. I look down at my arm where the terrible curved blade emerged, seeing the faint, pale line on my skin near my wrist that is its sheath.

I didn't even know it was there.

3

Now the whole earth had one language and few words. And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth." And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, "Behold, they are one people, and they

all have one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the earth.

-Genesis 11:1-9

It had been a long time since God felled humanity's last attempt to build a tower to the heavens, but humanity had now toppled heaven from the sky and raised up a new heaven to replace it. A heaven of glittering satellites and

low-orbital factories singing their electronic choruses in praise of commerce and free enterprise, looking down on the Earth with their watchful eyes, seeing all.

In the highest throne of the new heaven sat the Zurich-Orbital, home of the Corporate Court. The Court arbitrated the disputes and laws of the vast, multinational mega-corporations straddling the globe and holding the power and prestige once reserved for the nations they had eclipsed. Granted extraterritorial status by the weakened governments of the world, the megacorps answer to no law but their own, embodied in the form of the satellite orbiting high above the mundane concerns of Earth's teeming populace. From their heavenly headquarters, the thirteen justices of the Corporate Court pass their divine judgments on the world below and the megacorporations controlling it.

Justice David Hague of the Corporate Court floated in his small office space on board the Zurich-Orbital like an angel sitting on a cloud, but the Justice—a paid employee of Fuchi Industrial Electronics—was anything but serene. Fidgeting in the loose harness keeping him tethered to one wall of the small room, Hague did his best to simulate pacing in a zero-gravity environment. Floating gently back and forth while looking out the room's small window at the vast blue sphere of the Earth below, he was alone for the moment with his worries and concerns.

Despite his unease, Hague was very much the image of an angelic figure. His rosy cheeks and wide blue eyes gave him a boyish air that made him look years younger. He'd cursed the "baby face" in youth, but now that he was past fifty, his youthful looks worked to his advantage. Where most of his colleagues were spending huge sums on cutting-edge treatments to keep them looking young and vital, David Hague could still pass for a man in his thirties. Oh, there was a touch of gray in the golden curls, but his hair was so fair most didn't notice it anyway. He sighed and thought wistfully of his native Amsterdam again, wishing he were back home, or at least back on Earth.

He longed to be standing on solid ground and wished the whole matter he'd come here for was over. The trip up to

the orbital had been exhausting, as usual. The Z-O operated on Greenwich Mean Time, which meant it was something like four a.m. here, whatever meaning that had for a station in low-earth orbit. Hague's personal body clock wasn't far off, and he wished for the hundredth time that the whole thing was over and done with so he could at least get some sleep.

Although Hague, like all of the Corporate Court justices, was no stranger to confrontation or conflict, he felt a deep uneasiness about the events that had brought him to the Zurich-Orbital station. A serpent had entered the Corporate Court's economic and legal Eden, and he feared it might topple their tower to the heavens just as God had toppled humanity's last attempt. The balance of power between the megacorporations was delicate in the extreme, and the Court was entrusted with maintaining it and keeping the peace.

An electronic chime drew Hague's attention away from his brooding. He gently pushed off from the wall to grab a padded handle, which let him turn toward the door of the room.

"Enter," he said, and the hatch slid open with a pneumatic hiss to allow Hague's visitor to float gently into the room before expertly catching one of the wall handles and hooking her harness to the nearby ring to tether herself. Although the room was small, Hague could normally use all of the space to move and work in, including the walls and the ceiling, rather than being limited to just the floor. But when he had visitors, he preferred to speak to them face to face rather than having people dangling from the ceiling while talking. It made him sick to his stomach. The addition of his guest made the room seem smaller and more cramped, although Hague was not sure if it was her presence or the news she carried.

"Hello, David," Justice Lynn Osborne said with a smile. "How are you enjoying your visit?" Like Hague, Osborne was a member of the Corporate Court in the employ of Fuchi Industrial Electronics. Fuchi was one of the few megacorps with two Justices on the Corporate Court. It had been a considerable coup for the computer-industry giant

over the past few years and one that should serve them well as they now brought a serious matter before the Court. So serious that Fuchi had invoked the right to have all the justices present in the flesh instead of merely by virtual reality.

"Lynn, you know how much I despise freefall. It's a good thing the treatments they're giving out for space-sickness are reasonably effective, or you could never have dragged me up here. Can we just get on with this?"

Osborne smiled and nodded. Unlike Hague, Osborne spent considerably more time on board the Zurich-Orbital handling her duties as a justice. Hague preferred to remain on Earth and conduct Court business through the virtual-reality interface of the Matrix via a sophisticated satellite uplink system, but not this time. No matter what he said, he and every other justice would be physically present. When the Court was in session, Z-O would be isolated from the worldwide computer network and inviolate to spying or outside interference of any kind. Osborne's regular presence on board the station had also acclimated her internal clock to the orbital's routines. Where Hague was tired and irritable, she was fresh and well-rested, which only grated further on his strained nerves.

Taking a computer pad from a clip on her belt, Osborne touched the flat-screen and brought up an organizational display of the Corporate Court. Eight of the thirteen icons representing the Justices were colored in green while the remaining five were colored in red.

"We've got our chance," she said triumphantly. "I've just come from talking with Doi and Msaki, and they're willing to lend their support. That's enough of a majority for the initial hearing to go forward. It's only a formality for the Court to convene now."

Hague wasn't overly surprised. The two justices working for Mitsuhamma Computer Technologies might have their differences with Fuchi, but they also knew what was at stake in this issue and what could happen if two of the major computer-tech corps didn't work together on this one.

He nodded and gave a low "hmmm" of approval. "What about Napoli? How do you plan to handle him?" he asked,

and Osborne gave a small pout that made her look almost girlish despite her fifty-plus years.

David Hague knew Osborne was one of those people who spent part of her considerable salary as a member of the Corporate Court on maintaining appearances. Her fine features were the best Fuchi's exclusive cosmetic clinics could produce, but she still had not gone the route of entirely concealing her real age beneath some plastic glamour-girl facade. The dark chestnut hair was free of gray and the smooth skin free of lines, but Osborne still looked like a mature woman somewhere in that vague range between thirty and fifty. An observer would be hard pressed to guess her real age.

She shook her head. "Don't worry about Napoli. He's isolated on the Court-and

he's a lame duck. We can handle him. Renraku hasn't exactly been making friends on the Court lately."

That's certainly true, Hague thought.

"But it doesn't change the fact that Renraku has a lot of clout," he said.

"Renraku has been handing us a lot of surprises over the past two years, and it's just possible they might have a card up their collective sleeve that could trump even the Court. Who knows what Lanier might have given them."

"Renraku is out of cards, David. Nobody can stand against the whole Court when we're unified behind a cause. The Veracruz Incident proved that."

The event Osborne referred to had occurred ten years ago, before either she or Hague had become justices. The so-called incident consisted of the world's first-tier mega-corps joining forces to punish one of their own for flouting the Corporate Court's authority. A military strike against some of the target's holdings had been carried out with surgical precision, and the message sent was clear: defy the Court's edicts at your own peril. Now loomed the possibility that another megacorp was heading up that same dangerous road.

"I wish I shared your certainty," Hague replied. "Francesco Napoli is a pit bull. He's not going to let go without a fierce

fight, and by now he must know what you're planning to present before the Court. Renraku's got to know everything by now, including the fact that our case has holes in it. He seems too confident. If he wasn't, he'd never have allowed this hearing to happen in the first place. He'd have come up with some kind of delaying tactic or--"

Osborne held up a hand to stop him. "Napoli doesn't know all of the facts, David, and neither do you, just yet. It's what I'm here to tell you."

Hague choked off a retort at the interruption, but he wasn't really surprised by her words. He knew that Osborae's loyalty to the Villiers faction of Fuchi put her more in the loop about the corporation's plans now that Richard Villiers seemed to be consolidating his hold on the corp. Hague was allied with the Yamana family, which dominated Fuchi Europe.

"What are you talking about?" he said finally. "What do you mean I don't know all of the facts? Has Fuchi been keeping something ..."

Osborne jumped in again before he could finish. "Not keeping something from you--just protecting our interests. Renraku isn't the only corp with cards up its sleeve. Security on this was too tight to trust to anything but face-to-face communications. That's why we're talking in person. Now, will you listen for a moment?"

Hague swallowed his response and only nodded curtly. If Osborne noticed his annoyance at being kept in the dark, she didn't show it. She just continued talking.

"The case against Renraku is more than just smoke and mirrors, David. There is real cause to believe they've violated the concords of the Court and that Lanier's involvement is the key to it. We've got a lead on something that could blow the lid off this whole thing and implicate Renraku in serious violations of the balance of power. It's the only explanation for what's been happening."

Over the past year and a half, Renraku Computer Systems, one of the world's three computer giants and a member of the Corporate Court, had gone from being a slumbering giant to become a runaway juggernaut on the global mar-

ket. Renraku had been a powerful and prosperous company for years--one of the top eight in the world to claim a position on the Court--but its methods had been conservative and, most analysts thought, rather outdated.

That was before a twist of fate put Miles Lanier on the Renraku Board of Directors. Lanier was a go-getter and an aggressive executive known for his take-no-prisoners attitude toward business. His skill and cunning were well known to Fuchi Industrial Electronics. Lanier had been Fuchi's chief of internal security, the head of the company's most sensitive and important security arrangements and the protector of its most vital information. That

is, until he had defected to Renraku two years ago. After Lanier's defection, Renraku research and development suddenly began producing state-of-the-art computer technology that was blowing their competition away in the market. Their Matrix software and algorithms were outselling Mitsuhamas by a good margin, and their computer hardware was threatening Fuchi's dominance of the market, a first for Renraku. The corp's security had also increased to truly paranoid levels. Industrial espionage by the other corps, including Fuchi, had netted them some scraps of useful R&D data on Renraku's latest developments, but gave them no clue about where the corporation was getting its phenomenal new products: no names of researchers or information on facilities turning out new technological breakthroughs. Fuchi naturally suspected that Renraku was conducting datasteal operations against them. But if they were, it was being done with such skill and finesse that Fuchi could find no evidence of them whatsoever. Renraku was on a roll and there seemed to be no stopping them. The corporation's annual report showed that they had already surpassed Mitsuhamas in power and were quickly gaining on Fuchi's position as the world's Number Two megacorp. Only the vast Saeder-Krupp empire was more powerful, and Hague suspected that even S-K's dragon CEO Lofwyr had his concerns about Renraku. And that was why the Corporate Court was getting involved.

Not that the megacorporations had any problem with one of their number being successful and making money. The Court existed solely to assure that the various megacorporations might continue to do so. But the Corporate Court also existed to make sure its members followed certain rules in their game of global competition and profit-mongering. The megas had resources and influence that could savage the whole planet unless a delicate balance of power was maintained between them. The economic and military power to dictate terms to entire nations could be devastating if the megacorps turned it on each other in a global war that would benefit no one.

That was why the Court had established the Concords, secret agreements between the great megacorporations to carefully maintain the balance of power. Better to be assured of slow and certain growth and control over the world's markets than to risk the devastation unfettered competition could create. The corps agreed to certain rules by which they would play the game, but now it was suspected that Renraku was breaking those rules. It was highly possible that their acquisition of Miles Lanier was letting them conduct industrial espionage on a massive scale, allowing them to push new product onto the market well in advance of the competition and to know their competitors' moves even before they made them.

"So we're still accusing Renraku of violating the Concords?" Hague asked. It had happened before. Everyone knew it. Part of the point of having rules was so the megacorporations could find ways around them. Just as ordinary people broke the laws of their governments, so did the megacorporations occasionally break the laws of the Corporate Court. It could be a considerable advantage to claim resources not possessed by a rival.

"Yes," Osborne said. "Renraku is trying to gain clear superiority in areas where Fuchi operates, and everyone knows Lanier has to be giving them something to help them do it. They've got to be stopped now, David, before this all gets out of control. I talked to Priault, and I can tell that even Saeder-Krupp is worried about this. Priault is a stone-face, but I could still read him."

"And if you're right about Renraku and they refuse to abide by any sanctions the Court makes, you know what it will mean," Hague said. He was quiet for several long seconds before completing the terrible thought. "Corporate war." "It won't come to that," Osborne replied tartly, obviously unwilling to even consider such a possibility. "Soon we'll have the information we need to bring Lanier and Renraku down."

A smile crept back over her face as she tapped the data-pad she was holding.

"And Fuchi can be right there to pick up the pieces."

4

In ancient times it was widely believed that knowing the name of something gave you control over that person or thing. People would have secret names known only to themselves and to their closest friends and family, and a "use name" they would tell to the world at large. In this way they protected themselves from enemies who might use magic against them. Now it is the twenty-first century. Magic has returned to the world and there is a new culture of people who guard their names. They hide behind so-called "street names" to conceal their true identities from the law and to keep their real names out of the massive computer systems keeping track of nearly everyone in the world. Even the pirate users of the computer Matrix, the deckers, make use of false names to cover their transactions. In the age of technology, true names have become more important than ever.

-Mullins Chadwick, Monkeytribe:

A Survival Manual for Erect Bipedals,
Putnam-Izumo, New York, 2043

I don't know how long I keep driving, or where I drive to. I just need to get away from that place and the memories of the ghoul. My mind panics, but my body seems to know where it's going, so I let it drive for a while. I'm some distance away-at least I think so-before I return to anything resembling rational thought and check out my surroundings. I realize that driving around in an open van loaded with full body bags is probably a very bad idea, so I find an out-

of-the-way alley where I park the van and leave it behind. I wonder if the body-snatchers or ghouls will find it again and try and make use of the bodies remaining inside. I'm tempted for a moment to find some way of blowing the whole van sky-high, creating a funeral pyre for those unknown people who fill the black vinyl bags. It's a useless idea because I don't have any means to do so and an explosion would be a sure way of attracting unwanted attention. In the end I just leave the van behind with a silent prayer that the spirits of its occupants are at rest.

Jamming my hands into my pockets, I walk carefully out of the alley, looking all around me for any signs of trouble. It's still night and the city is alive all around me. I can see more lights and activity a few blocks ahead, along what looks like the main drag, the streets lit by the glow of neon signs, street lamps, and holograms flickering from badly tuned projectors in store fronts. The night air is cool, and the light on the street is inviting enough for me to head toward it. I pass through the shadows and cut through an alleyway to reach the strip.

The alley is filled with the heavy smell of food cooking. My stomach rumbles loud enough to be heard in the narrow alley, and I realize I have no idea how long since I last ate, but it seems like it must have been a long time. Thoughts of noodles and rice and vegetables fill my thoughts and make my mouth water.

I turn out of the alley and look into the scratched armor-plas window of a shop displaying some cheap trideo sets among all the other electronic junk for sale. One set is showing a piece of softcore pornography, the naked holographic figures writhing in slow motion through the static while the other set is tuned to a news channel where a plastic talking-head speaks in an evenly pitched, cheerful voice that sounds happy to tell you about the worst atrocities. I stop for a moment to watch.

"Locally, the stock market reports another active day of trading in which the Dow is up some seven points. Renraku Computer Systems stock continues to

maintain the strongest increase following the company's release of their latest

algorithms for the development of sophisticated Matrix interface experiences. These algorithms form the basis for simsense and the virtual reality of the Matrix. A local Renraku spokesperson is quoted as saying 'Renraku is redefining the state of the art.' Other stock-market watchers in the Boston metroplex ..."

Boston. I'm in Boston. That should mean something to me, but for some reason, it doesn't. The voice on the trideo drones on about the opinions of men in suits regarding the mystic movements of the stock market and the advancements of Renraku and what the other megacorporations are going to do about it. An exterior shot shows the looming stock exchange building in the financial district of the crowded metroplex at night.

That's when I notice the reflection looking back at me from the darkened window. A young man with shaggy, dark hair. He is thin and pale, and his eyes match the color of the purple bruises on his face and arms, a strange violet color that almost seems to glow from the dark glass. He's wearing a black T-shirt with a scrawl of silver Japanese characters under a loose denim jacket with the sleeves torn off, a pair of much battered and patched jeans, and black, laced-up combat boots. The clothes are spotted with dark spatters of blood. Silver gleams from behind one ear, and I brush my fingers against the cold metal ring of the dataport implanted there, watching the reflection's arm move as well. He's me, and I'm not entirely sure I recognize him. It's more like looking at a stranger, a phantom on the other side of the glass gazing out at me.

That's when I start to realize I don't really know who I am, and the realization hits me like an electric shock. How did I end up where the body-snatchers found me? Where am I going to go? Where do I live? What's my name? I don't know any of those things, but I know I should know them. There are breaks in my memory, like someone punched holes in my mind, leaving black gaps where remembrances used to be. I reach out to touch the glass with a trembling hand, and the stranger on the other side reaches out to me, his eyes wide and frightened.

Who the frag are you? I ask silently.

"Renraku Computer Systems provide you with the security of a solid reputation coupled with the leading edge in computer and Matrix technology available today," says the trideo. My attention is drawn back to the trid, where an image plays of a dark, endless vista lit by glowing neon shapes and glittering forms of slick chrome and pure color, too smooth and perfect to exist in the real world. The image zooms through the world of lines and shapes that rush by, moving toward a giant black pyramid in the distance. I can almost feel myself fly along through that world, and I suddenly feel a terrible longing for something I can't find the words to describe. That is my world. The place where I belong and, perhaps, the answer to some of my questions.

The view zooms up to the pyramid and focuses on a logo etched along the side in bright blue and red neon, a dot and expanding wavefront symbol beside a name written in both English and Japanese. The announcer's voice reads the name at the same moment that my lips silently form it: Renraku.

"Renraku. Come join the winning team."

Then the screen switches back to a view of the newsroom and another talking head who begins to go on about a speech given in the UCAS capitol by Vice President Nadja Daviar. An image of a beautiful woman with midnight hair and pointed ears fills the screen, but I don't even pay her any attention, so entranced am I by the image that came just before.

Renraku . . . Renraku. The name means something to me. The taste and feel of it in my mouth is familiar. Why? Do I have something to do with Renraku? What? My head starts to hurt and my fists clench and I want to slam them through the store's window, smashing the smiling face of the elven woman talking on the

trideo about national healing and racial unity between humans and other metatypes. My vision blurs with tears and I pound my fist against the glass, but it resists blows harder than mine every day and my fist only bounces off with a dull thud.

I want to just curl up in a ball on the sidewalk and start

crying when a swarthy man comes running out the door of the shop. He has rough skin and tusks coming out of his mouth, like Weizack's dead partner Riley back at the charnel house, except he's a bit shorter and his skin is darker. I realize that neither his looks nor Riley's surprise me the way the ghoul's did. They seem almost normal to me. I stand there staring at him through blurry eyes for what seems like a very long time before I realize he's yelling at me.

"Fraggin' chiphead! I said what the frag are you doin' to my fraggin' window, drekwit! Have you burned out too much of your fraggin' brain? You deaf?" He hefts a dull silver club with a black rubber handle, and I back away a step from him.

"Maybe you'll listen to this, you worthless piece of drek," he says as he lifts the club, from whose tip bright blue sparks leap and crackle.

I suddenly become very angry at being threatened by this ... thing. What the frag does he know? I'm having a very bad day and I'm in no mood to be threatened by some street scum kawaruhito. I pull Weizack's gun from the waistband of my jeans and level it at the club-wielding shop owner. His jaw drops a bit and I can see in his eyes that he expects to die. I saw the same look from Riley the split-second before I shot him.

I stare at the ork over the barrel of the gun for what seems like a very long time, thinking about how Riley's face disappeared in a spray of red as his body fell to the floor. The ork starts to slowly back away from me and my hands begin to shake a bit.

"Buzz," I hiss out in a low tone, and the ork suddenly bolts back into the store yelling something that I can't hear. I turn and run away from the shop, bolting across the street. Cars screech on their brakes and honk their horns at me as I run past, still holding the pistol, tears of frustration and anger blurring my vision. One of the drivers yells something at me, an offer of help or a curse or something else I don't know. I don't hear him. I just keep running, wanting to get away from there and down through darkened streets and alleys, far from the lights and sounds of the strip.

I don't know how long I run for or where I'm going, I just need to get away, to run away from the terrible feeling of emptiness inside me. Away from the looming black holes in my mind and all the questions that cluster around them. My name, what the frag is my name? Someone told me, but I just can't remember. My head feels so full I can't find anything in it. Too cluttered, too many things going on at once. I just need to sort it all out, make sense of the jumble of thoughts.

I stop running in an alley somewhere and huddle against the cold brick wall as a wave of exhaustion sweeps over me. I shiver in the growing chill of the night air and grip the pistol tighter as I wrap my arms around my knees and lay my head back against the wall to look up at the cold, gray sky lit by the distant lights of the city. The tears streaming down my cheeks make the reflections of the city lights into multicolored blurs against the darkness. I can almost imagine for a moment that I'm in that perfect, safe world I saw on the trideo. The world where everything makes sense and I know who I am and what my purpose is.

I'm so tired, so very tired. I have to rest, just for a little while, close my eyes for a second and rest...

The megacorporations, beyond the reach of any national or international law, are capable of dictating terms to any government in the world, so tight is their hold on the world's economy. However, the same economic system also binds the megacorporations as surely as it does any of their customers. Corporations exist solely to generate profit, so they depend on the ability to continually gain market share and produce new products to sell to their customers and to draw in new customers.

This ongoing competition between nation-spanning giants might well have degenerated into open warfare among the megacorporations without having to resort to the needless destruction of company assets. The Corporate Court is the invisible force operating behind the scenes of the megacorporations to maintain the delicate balance between them; keeping the most powerful forces on Earth from each other's throats and so keeping the unsuspecting citizens of the world safe from what could escalate into the most devastating war humanity has ever known.

-Professor Henry Gallow, *The Invisible Hand:*

The Corporate Court and World Economics,
MIT&T Press, Boston, 2052

The Corporate Court was called into session shortly after Lynn Osborne's visit to her Fuchi colleague, once all of their fellow justices had arrived on the orbital. Osborne showed up early and watched the other justices slowly file

into the central area of the station to take up their positions in the courtroom. The Rotunda, as the central core of the orbital was called, was made up of a single hexagonal shaft to which the other station tubes and modules connected like branches spreading out from the trunk of a great tree. It was large by the cramped standards of a space station, capable of holding the gathered justices and their trusted aides and assistants comfortably, although it was rare for all thirteen members of the Corporate Court to gather together in the same room. Like David Hague, most of the justices preferred to conduct their business via the Matrix, only visiting the court chambers of the Zurich-Orbital on the gravest occasions requiring utmost security. Like now. It was difficult to create a dignified courtroom atmosphere in the zero-gravity of the orbital, but the Court had done its best to see that tradition and the decorum were upheld. A narrow ledge ringed the cylindrical chamber. Between the ledge and the wall was a gap wide enough for the court justices to position themselves, held in padded harnesses to the wall. The ledge formed the "bench" from which they dispensed justice. It held sophisticated computer displays and information-retrieval systems linked directly into the Zurich-Orbital mainframe, one of the most sophisticated computer systems ever designed. Designed by Renraku, in fact, Osborne recalled with a bit of a chill as she ran a finger over the flat black macroplast surface of her console. Renraku's specialty was computer architecture and, although Fuchi, Mitsuhama, Ares, and others had provided much of the hardware to build the system, Renraku had pioneered the algorithms and the software to run it.

The floor of the court chamber was reserved for the few assistants needed on hand for any particular occasion as well. Only rarely were others allowed into the chamber with the justices. Most testimony and evidence presented to the court was carried over the Matrix using the sophisticated holographic systems built into the bench-ring, which could project nearly any image in three dimensions into the center of the chamber for all to see. But the Zurich-Orbital would not be communicating with the Matrix for now, not

while the court was in session. If what Fuchi and the other megacorps believed

about Renraku's surge of new technology was true and Fuchi's security was compromised, the Matrix could not be entirely trusted, and so the court would be isolated, cut off from the rest of the world while they heard evidence. Osborne carefully reviewed each justice and his or her position in her mind as they entered the central chamber and made their way to their appointed area. David Hague was one of the first to enter, and Osborne had no serious concerns about him. Hague was loyal to their mutual employer and Osborne knew from their talk earlier that, while Hague had his doubts and concerns about Fuchi's plans, he would do nothing to endanger his employer or his own position of prestige on the Court.

Hague was a native of Europe, and his loyalties shifted between the Yamana family, who controlled Fuchi Pan-Europa, and the Villiers family, which currently controlled Fuchi North America and the corporation as a whole. He had been a compromise choice between the two camps. Osborne was loyal to Villiers and had been chosen more recently, when Richard Villiers was in a strong enough position to dictate terms to the rest of Fuchi. That, and Osborne's reputation for getting things done, was why Fuchi-which meant Richard Villiers, these days-wanted Osborne to handle this matter rather than Hague.

The next to enter the courtroom was Jean-Claude Priault, elder statesman and chief justice of the Corporate Court. He carried himself with unassailable dignity and grace even in the awkward environment of free-fall, and his fringe of gray hair was neatly trimmed in the finest European style. Priault was in the employ of Saeder-Krupp Heavy Industries and supposedly answered directly to the great dragon Lofwyr himself, who had bought the corporation with some of the riches from his fabulous horde after emerging from his centuries-long sleep. Having served on the Court longer than anyone else, Priault had certainly earned his status as Chief Justice. Osborne knew Priault was sharp as a monoblade and

wouldn't miss a trick. The man had a reputation for conducting court business in a fair and impartial manner and his dragon boss always seemed to back up whatever angle Priault wanted to take. Osborne knew Priault wouldn't hand Fuchi a decision in the matter-he didn't really have the authority for that-but she also knew that even Lofwyr and Saeder-Krupp were getting edgy about some recent Renraku developments. Priault had to know the score. If the gravity of the meeting weighed on the old man at all, he didn't show it, making his way to his position along the bench with deliberate care and grace. After the Chief Justice came Mitsuhamas court representatives. Korekado "Corey" Doi practically oozed charisma from his every pore, looking completely at ease in his fine-tailored suit, casually exchanging a joke with his companion and smiling enough to light up the room. Osborne knew from experience that Doi's charming and cheerful demeanor concealed a cut-throat negotiator rumored to have ties with the yakuza clans, who were the real backers of Mitsuhamas Computer Technologies.

Doi's companion, Jonathan Msaki, also served as head of one of MCT's major subsidiaries. That kept him more closely in touch with the activities of the megacorporate giant than Doi was, but Msaki was often more concerned with his other affairs than the business of the court. Osborne noticed he tended to follow Doi's lead on most issues and let the more charismatic MCT mouthpiece do the talking. Msaki was better at gathering information, and Osborne knew that very little escaped his notice. That was why she moved so quickly to secure Mitsuhamas support. Doi and Msaki made a formidable team, and Mitsuhamas had suffered more from Renraku's rise in fortune than any other member of the court. Osborne suspected that she could put that to good use. Mariene Carstairs, the other Saeder-Krupp representative, looked distinctly unhappy about being on board the orbital. Osborne knew that Carstairs liked neither space travel nor the orbital's zero-g environment, and she distinctly enjoyed any occasion for Carstairs' discomfort. Mariene Carstairs

had made her share of enemies in her years on the court, and Osborne counted herself among them. She knew Ono from Ares didn't get along with Carstairs either, but it was the spectacular breakup between Mariene Carstairs and the late Renraku justice Sam Violet that Osborne was counting on.

The two had had a tempestuous affair that went down in flames when Carstairs vindictively arranged for Violet's wife to find out about it. Osborne suspected that Carstairs had also had something to do with the commuter plane crash that ended Violet's life just as he returned to Earth after failing his bid for re-election more than two years ago. Mariene Carstairs was a cold slitch, and everyone knew she had shed no tears for Violet. Osborne hoped Carstairs' hatred of the late Renraku justice would be enough to keep her from fragging with Fuchi's case out of malice. The Saeder-Krupp justice was a believer in the adage "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," and Osborne planned to make it work in her favor.

Along with Carstairs came Domingo Chavez, who had also just made the shuttle-flight up to the orbital. Chavez, like Carstairs, made no secret of his dislike for visiting the orbital, but the dislike was well-founded. Chavez was a mage, a man with a talent for shaping the magical energies of the Awakened world. It was a power that had changed the face of the Earth since the Awakening in 2011, and the megacorporations knew magic as a powerful tool to be used and respected, which had put magicians like Chavez in positions of power among them.

Unfortunately, all of the evidence suggested that the power of magic was strongly tied to the living Earth, and so did not work as expected outside of the atmosphere. In space, magicians who attempted to call upon their powers went mad or even died. Some simply vanished, never to be seen again. All of the corporations and many others were investigating the problem, but it seemed for now that the use of magic simply wasn't an option in space. Magicians were safe so long as they did not attempt to use their powers. That was why so few magicians were chosen to serve on the court, and why Chavez was so loathe to come to

Zurich-Orbital in person. A thin sheen of sweat coated his dark brow, and he mopped at it nervously with a linen handkerchief as he made his way carefully around the perimeter of the chamber to his place.

Aztechnology was always a wild card in court decisions. The megacorp had the dubious honor of being the first to be punished by the court some ten years ago for their activities in Southern California and in Aztlan, the nation that had taken over the former territory of Mexico and much of Central America with encouragement from Aztechnology. It had been necessary to teach Aztechnology a lesson, and the Court had acted decisively. Osborne knew that lesson still stung for many in positions of power in Aztechnology. She couldn't help but wonder if it would keep Chavez from approving similar measures against Renraku or if the Aztechnology justice would welcome an opportunity to pay back some of what his corporation had suffered to another member of the court.

The next to enter the courtroom were the Ares Macro-technology justices on the court. Paul Graves came first, looking like a linebacker or a marine someone had dressed up in a thousand-nuyen designer suit for the occasion. He moved through the freefall of the station like a soldier traversing an obstacle course he had run a dozen times before. Osborne knew Graves was no stranger to living and working in space, being a regular visitor to Ares' own Daedalus orbital platform as well as the Zurich-Orbital. Graves was one of the military types so typical of Damien Knight's inner circle of business associates and subordinates, a lethal weapon to be pointed and fired at any target Knight chose.

Behind Graves came Akae Ono, moving through the room like a fish in water to reach his "seat" along the bench. Despite his age, Ono moved about the orbital easily. He was the only justice who lived on the station full-time and had done so since his appointment to the court some seven years before. Rumor had it that he was there for the life-prolonging effects of living in a

zero-gravity environment, and it certainly seemed to agree with him. The septuagenarian justice looked and acted more like a man half his age. Osborne

knew that Ono was the one holding onto Graves' leash for Damien Knight. If she could convince the old man that Fuchi's interests were Ares' interests, Osborne would certainly win Graves over as well.

The remaining two female members of the court entered the room together, although neither was overly fond of the other. Yoshiko Hino of Yamatetsu was physical perfection as only twenty-first-century biosculpt surgery could make it. Osborne smiled briefly at the pronounced effect zero-gravity had on Hino's breasts, which were a bit too large for her body, and how fond the vainglorious Hino was of using the effect to her advantage whenever circumstances brought her to the orbital. In fact, Osborne believed that Hino's holo-image transmitted through the Matrix was "enhanced" in the same way to provide a distraction for her largely male audience. Yamatetsu was a hungry corporation that had forced its way onto the Corporate Court only a few years after it was established, and they still worked under the stigma of "the newcomer" even years later. The corp had been a vocal supporter of the action against Aztechnology, and Osborne suspected Hino would be eager to join in with anything that would make her employer part of the majority.

In contrast to Hino's "corporate bimbo" image, Mariko Kiyonobo was all business. She was the director of Shiawase's active Envirotech Division in addition to her duties on the Corporate Court and juggled the two jobs with considerable skill. Although only a junior member of the court, appointed in the past term to replace the lackluster Lorraine Wakizaka, Mariko was not intimidated in the slightest by the other justices and pushed the agenda of her company forcefully and skillfully. Osborne liked her and thought the feeling was shared by Kiyonobo. Shiawase was not overly concerned with Renraku's activities, but Osborne believed that Kiyonobo would do what was best for her corp and the Court.

The last to enter the courtroom and take his place on the bench was Francesco Napoli, the Renraku representative who so concerned Hague. "Paco" Napoli did have a con-

siderable reputation as a corporate bulldog and "resources adjuster" for Renraku Computer Systems. His career before coming to the Corporate Court was littered with the carefully buried bodies of people who had gotten in his or Renraku's way at some point, but Osborne wasn't concerned about any danger Napoli posed to Fuchi's case. Ever since the unfortunate demise of Sam Violet, the only place Renraku hadn't prospered in the past couple years was on the Court, where Napoli remained their only representative. Some took it to mean Renraku had decided they were above being concerned about the august body, but Lynn Osborne chose to interpret it as a serious error in judgment by Renraku, one she aimed to exploit to her full advantage.

If Napoli was at all concerned about the hearing in the courtroom, he didn't show it. Osborne had to give him credit for that. Napoli was a cool one. His blood must be like ice, she thought, quietly watching him out of the corner of her eye while she pretended interest in the display screen built into the surface of the bench. Napoli settled quickly into place and exchanged pleasantries with Hino to his right. Osborne gritted her teeth as Hino laughed at some joke or comment of Napoli's.

Jean-Claude Priault took an old-fashioned gavel-made of real wood, no less-from its resting place clipped to the side of the bench facing him and rapped it slowly several times on the bench to get everyone's attention. The cost of carrying the gavel into orbit for the use of the Corporate Court probably could have supported the average family of four for a couple of months. The megacorporations spared no expense where authenticity was concerned.

"The Court will come to order," he said in his deep voice that revealed only the slightest accent of his native French. "This meeting of the International

Corporate Court is now in session."

The room fell silent, and Osborne felt a dozen sets of eyes watching her as she gathered her thoughts. She patiently waited through the official roll call and the reading of the Court's charge "to protect and ensure the prosperity and security of its members." Then, they were ready to get

down to business. Priault would normally have had the secretary of the Court read the current item on the agenda, but no one apart from the justices were permitted in this session, so Priault personally read it aloud from the display on the bench.

"The subject of this hearing is whether or not the Corporate Court should censure Renraku Computer Systems, Inc. for the use of unfair practices and violations of the concords of the Corporate Court and whether or not the Corporate Court should order any reparations by Renraku Computer Systems or authorize any other action against Renraku on these grounds. The case has been brought by Justice Os-borne of Fuchi Industrial Electronics, who will address the Court on the issue. Justice Napoli of Renraku will also be given the opportunity to speak. We will now hear opening statements from the two parties."

Well, Osborne thought. Here goes everything.

6

Infringement against pan-corporate law falls into two basic categories: infringement by minor corps and infringement by megacorps. The first case is a no-brainer. If the Corporate Court decides that a minor corp (any corporation not classified asAAA) has broken a law and warrants punishment, it gives mandate to one or more of the major corps to a given degree. This mandate grants the megacorp official authorization to use its security assets against the guilty corporation, to the specified extent. A mandate can range from relatively minor destruction by black ops assets to "open season," where the enforcing megacorp can destroy the target corp.

Procedures work a little differently if a AAA megacorp violates corporate law. -downloaded from "Corporate Shadownles" on the Shadowland BBS

Osborne placed her hands on the bench, carefully and gently elevating herself a bit above the level of her previous position to approximate a standing pose in zero gravity, having adjusted her harness earlier to carry off the move gracefully.

"Fellow justices," she said, scanning the room and taking in everyone with the sweep of her gaze, "this Corporate Court was established to ensure two things: a safe and secure environment in which business can flourish and the maintenance of a balance of power in which all of our companies can continue to prosper. When that delicate balance

is threatened, we must act as our charter requires to correct the imbalance and put things back on track."

Osborne paused for a moment and saw that she had everyone's attention. No one in the court wanted to think about the possibility of the megacorporations losing the profitable business environment they needed to stay viable.

"I am here today to bring to the attention of the Court a danger to that delicate balance. Renraku Computer Systems has made considerable advances in their research and development recently, for which they are to be commended. But Renraku's advancements come through channels other than accepted means. Fuchi Industrial Electronics wishes to formally require Renraku Computer Systems to present documentation of their research and development of these

new technologies, on the grounds that Renraku is in violation of the concords of this Court regarding industrial espionage against Fuchi and other members of this Court, particularly involving the aid of Miles Lanier, formerly an employee of Fuchi and now a shareholder and member of the Renraku board of directors. We are prepared to present evidence that such a full disclosure is warranted and in the best interests of the corporate community. Thank you." Osborne carefully lowered herself back into her place and gripped the edge of the bench to steady herself while Paco Napoli, still the very model of composure, leaned back a bit and took a deep breath.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I am fortunate," he began, choosing his words carefully. "I am in the employ of a corporation producing the finest developments in computer and Matrix technology in the world, and business is good. For that, I am grateful to Renraku's brilliant research and development department. I am also fortunate that the burden of proof lies not with Renraku, but with Fuchi Industrial Electronics and their misplaced claim that Renraku Computer Systems has acted in any way other than according to the guidelines set out by this august Court.

"It is certainly true that Renraku has made great strides forward in the marketplace in the past few years, and may have done so at the expense of some of Fuchi's business.

But that is the way of the fair trade and competition we are chartered to preserve. Renraku's developments and success are not crimes, and we have violated no corporate law. Renraku Computer Systems cannot be condemned simply on the basis of its financial success, and it is up to Justice Osborne to produce any evidence that says otherwise. I am confident in the outcome of this Court's findings."

Napoli indicated he was finished with a slight nod of his head toward Chief Justice Priault, who tapped his gavel against the bench and turned back to Osborne so that she might present her case. Napoli just sat there, looking for all the world like he didn't have a single worry about how things were going to go.

Don't be so smug, Paco, Osborne thought as she punched up a display on her console. When this is all done and you see what we've got on Renraku, you 'II be lucky if they let you walk home from here.

Lynn Osborne rose from her position behind the bench. She blithely ignored Napoli's smug look of confidence and did her best to project an air of quiet competence. For her case to be successful, she needed to start with a rational argument, the same kind of argument that had gotten Fuchi's complaint against Renraku this far in the process, to the point where the case was actually being presented before the Court.

You're wrong about one thing, Paco, Osborne thought with a quick glance at the Renraku justice's swarthy face. The burden of proof did not rest solely with Fuchi and Osborne.

In an ideal universe it was certainly true that the Corporate Court held to the concept of "innocent until proven guilty," but the Court was not a court of law. The justices were not appointed by any government, and the corporations they represented were not subject to any government's law. The megacorporations were laws unto themselves, which meant the Corporate Court, which settled disputes between them, was not bound by the rules and procedures of any legal system but their own. Osborne knew she didn't need definite proof that Renraku was a threat to corporate stability, not if

she could convince the other justices it was in everyone's best interest to see Renraku humbled a bit.

"Fellow justices," she began. "I don't need to remind you of our purpose, to sustain an environment of economic prosperity and growth for business. In order to accomplish our goal, the corporations we represent have agreed to certain terms and concords, including the banning of specific areas of technological development that could de-stabilize the profitable environment

we are creating."

"Yes, yes, you've already made that clear, Ms. Osborne," said Marlene Carstairs. "Are you accusing Renraku Computer Systems of knowingly violating the concords? And if so, which ones?"

Osborne bit back a retort directed at the Saeder-Krupp representative and stomached the interruption. She knew Carstairs was going to be difficult and she needed to win her over at least as much as any other Justice on the Court. She also needed to stall for time. If she could drag the preliminaries out long enough, Fuchi's agent would be able to get her the proof she needed to turn the Court against Renraku. She only had to keep things going long enough. "I am not bringing any accusations, Ms. Carstairs, only acting in the name of Fuchi Industrial Technologies. Fuchi has reason to suspect that Renraku has been illegally using resources available to them to acquire a leg-up over other megacorporations, particularly Fuchi. We believe Renraku has been involved in the exploitation of Miles Lanier's knowledge of Fuchi Industrial Electronics to conduct illegal and covert operations against us to acquire research and development information from our facilities to allow them to push forward some of their own developments. Renraku's actions have been in flagrant violation of the concords and standards of this Court and we are asking for appropriate action."

Point one for me, Osborne thought as the impact of her statements rippled through the room. All of the justices on the Court knew what every major corporate player did: espionage and shadowruns conducted by one corporation against another were just another part of doing business. But

the justices also knew that the cardinal rule of shadowruns and black operations was "thou shall not get caught." Although every corporation was aware that all of them were conducting industrial espionage against each other, the only way the Corporate Court and the megacorporations could function on a day-to-day basis was to pretend that nothing illegal was going on. As long as everyone kept their illegal activities quiet, nothing was to be said of them.

Osborne's accusation could only mean Renraku had violated the unwritten law of not covering your tracks well enough. That meant that either Renraku was getting sloppy, in which case they deserved some kind of punishment to remind them to be more careful, or that Renraku was becoming so powerful or desperate that they didn't care if they got caught. The latter was not a pleasant prospect. The megacorps all operated by a very delicate set of rules of conduct. If one of the most powerful megas was willing to flagrantly ignore those rules, it threatened a breakdown of the whole structure. No member of the Corporate Court could stand by and allow that to happen.

So long as Osborne could direct and control the fears she tapped into, there was a good chance of convincing the Court to act. The other justices were certainly not supporters of Renraku's growth in the past months, but they also felt the need to follow procedure. It was procedures like the Court that allowed the megacorporations to coexist at all without being crippled by constant conflict. If Renraku was the one not following the rules, then Renraku would have to be punished, and Osborne could unite the other corps under Fuchi's banner to do it. So long as she could keep things heading in the right direction.

"I am sure all of the members of this Court are familiar with how Miles Lanier came to be in possession of a substantial amount of Renraku stock and therefore entitled to a position on the corporation's Board of Directors. I am sure you are also aware that Mr. Lanier's departure from Fuchi was under less than ... cordial circumstances." That was certainly an understatement. Nearly everyone in the corporate world knew that Richard Villiers and Miles Lanier had

ended a years-long friendship over Lanier's departure from Fuchi. It had been the talk of the corporate gossip circuit for months.

"Mr. Lanier wasted no time in taking his talents and assets to Renraku once the reading of the dragon's will confirmed him as a shareholder. Although Fuchi took every precaution against Mr. Lanier walking off with any valuable secrets and corporate security information, it still took some time for Fuchi to make all of the necessary arrangements, given the suddenness of President Dunkelzahn's demise and Mr. Lanier's departure. Even with some of the security modifications put in place by Richard Villiers himself, Miles Lanier remains a very capable man who is intimately familiar with Fuchi's security protocols and procedures.

"Not long after Mr. Lanier took up his position on the board of Renraku, only a month in fact, the corporation released an upgrade to one of their intrusion countermeasure systems, the so-called 'Black Samurai' line. This upgrade bears strong similarities to designs Fuchi was working on at the time. The technical information on the two programs from our research department is available for your review from the main databanks. Not long after that, Renraku began releasing other products, nearly eighty percent of them in the same fields where Fuchi was engaged in development, with technical similarities to our prototypes. The correlation of our findings are also available for the Court's review."

Doi from Mitsuhamma spoke up when Osborne paused to let the members of the Court digest her words. "So you are accusing Renraku of engaging in espionage against your company with Miles Lanier's help?"

"That's correct," Osborne said, with a glance at Napoli. "We would ask the Court to require Renraku Computer Systems to produce their records of research and development to prove that their projects over the past fourteen months were not developed or completed with information stolen from Fuchi's systems." "Justice Osborne," Jean-Claude Priault began, "I hope

there is something more substantial to your case against Renraku than some circumstantial evidence about their developments in fields that have traditionally been dominated by your firm."

"There is, Mr. Chief Justice," Osborne lied smoothly. "We have information we wish to present on Renraku's recent activities and how they affect not only Fuchi, but all of the members of the corporate community." Out of the corner of her eye, Osborne saw Napoli reach up to stroke his chin. Although it seemed no more than a gesture of quiet curiosity, Osborne knew that, for Napoli, such a break in his composure was almost a statement of surprise. Score one more point for me, she thought. You. didn't think we had a real case, did you, Paco?

"But before I present our evidence," Osborne continued, focusing her attention on Priault and deliberately ignoring Napoli, "I would like to ask the Court for a recess so the justices may review the materials I have presented thus far and have the opportunity to rest and come at this matter fresh. The information is germane to the evidence Fuchi wishes to present."

Osborne silently bit her lip while Priault considered. Would he see what she was doing and give her the time she needed?

"Very well," Priault said with only a brief pause. "I know everyone must be feeling the space-lag, and the court appreciates the opportunity for the justices to review all of the facts. A six-hour recess is granted. We will reconvene at ten A.M., station time, to hear the rest of Fuchi's case." Priault rapped his gavel on the bench, and the members of the Corporate Court began to file out of the room to rest and unwind from the long trip to the station and to begin reading the files Osborne had made available on the or-bital's computer system. Waiting while the rest of the justices left the room, Osborne gave Napoli a smile as he headed toward the door. He acknowledged it with a slight nod, but the look on his face showed that he was not happy with the way things were shaping up.

Osborne realized that Napoli's confidence was as feigned

as hers in many ways. Renraku was worried, which meant they knew Fuchi's case

had a chance of hurting them. Just as Villiers had predicted, Renraku had something to hide and Osborne had a good shot at forcing Renraku to show their hand on Fuchi's terms. She just hoped that hand didn't have a gun in it. Renraku could panic if they were backed into a corner, and that would mean real trouble for all concerned.

So far so good, she thought as she watched Napoli's retreating back. Now I just have to hope my evidence materializes in time for me to present it, or else Paco Napoli is going to be dancing on my grave.

7

Skilled Matrix programmers have known for years the power of the imagination. The system memory required to program a supra-realistic icon to interact with multiple senses is substantial (taste and smell are usually overlooked as cues by most programmers, often unwisely, as we shall see). Balancing system functionality against the complexity of programmed images involves certain trade-offs, compromises a programmer has to make.

One of the ways in which programmers make up for this deficiency in memory space is by using certain sensory "cheats" to produce the effects they are looking for. Instead of programming every single detail of the desired image or sensory impression, the programmer uses certain key elements of the experience to evoke an overall sensation from the receiver of the impressions. Simsense producers and editors use a similar technique in producing biochips. The user's own imagination fills in the "gaps" in the sensory information to produce a contiguous whole, and the entirety of the impression is perceived with minimal system space occupied by the necessary imagery.

This technique of "simplifying" sensory impression has been known to practitioners of memorization and visualization techniques for centuries, but with the advent of virtual reality programming and ASIST technology, we have opened entirely new doorways of perception, the likes of which Aldous Huxley could

never even have dreamed. We are learning more than just how to program our machines.

We are learning how to program ourselves.

-Iconography and the Deep Mind,
by Dr. Yoshi Tanaka, E-Books Press,
New York, 2054

The dreams I have are strange. I recall a glittering neon world of line and form extending in all directions to the endless horizon, and another place which is all that and so much more. I hear songs and words and riddles in that place, but they are not in any language spoken by human mouths. It is a secret language. The language of the other place. I remember. I remember going down a long trail to a place with a deep well full of silvery water. A voice tells me to drink from the well, and I cup the water in my hands, cool and shimmering like quicksilver. As I drink it down I realize it's not water I'm drinking, it's knowledge. Liquid software, every molecule encoded with information, spreading out through my cells in a cool wave, speaking to my DNA in a strange and alien language. I'm changing, changing, changing into what?

I wake from the dream with a start and realize I'm not where I was before. The dark and damp alley is gone and daylight streams into the room. Where am I? A bed. A clean bed in a room somewhere. How did I get here? I remember the alley and the chop-shop and the ghoul and I wonder if this place is as dangerous. It feels different to me for some reason. I feel safe here. This place is familiar somehow. I think I know it, but the information slips away from me when I try and grasp it, as elusive as the images from my dream. I still can't remember anything from before waking up in the alley where the body-snatchers

found me and I wonder if I've simply forgotten coming here from the alley. Or has all of it been a dream? No. I'm sure what I recall of the encounter with the body-snatchers and their ghoulish boss was real. I glance at the back of my wrist and I can still see the faint white line where the cutting blade emerged. That was certainly real.

I look around the room and take stock of my surroundings. The place is old and shows signs of its age. The walls are of stone, heavy and gray, and the floor is covered with an oriental carpet of faded jewel tones. The light in the room comes from tall, slitted windows. Some of them are covered with sheets of translucent construction plastic in different colors while a few still have panes of stained glass in them. The glass depicts saints and religious icons and sends shafts of colored light slanting into the room. The light suggests that it is very early-or quite late-in the day. I wonder how long I have been asleep. I felt like I could have slept for days in the alleyway, but I feel well-rested now. The furniture and trappings of the room are all mismatched and scavenged, but in good repair.

The door opens and a boy, no more than ten years old, looks in at me. He's wearing coveralls and a T-shirt that look to have been patched a few times in strategic worn-out spots. His hair is cropped almost military-short and his face and hands are clean. There is a kind of awe in his eyes and he smiles widely at me and seems pleased that I'm awake.

Just as I'm about to speak to him and ask where I am, he turns and runs off. I toss aside the sheet and thin blanket and get myself out of bed and stretch. My clothes are clean, neatly folded at the foot of the bed, and I start pulling them on. I find my boots sticking out from under the bed and put those on as well and lace them up. There's still no knowing if I might have to leave this place quickly. I look around for the gun I took from Weizack, and I'm not surprised to find it is not in the room. I can hardly blame my hosts for relieving me of it. It might have been left behind in the alleyway, but it wasn't likely that anyone would bother to pick me up and bring me here would have left something like a loaded gun lying around. My stomach rumbles and I wonder again how long it's been since I last ate. I can't remember the last time, though it feels like I haven't eaten in weeks. Maybe I haven't. As if in answer to my thoughts, the boy comes back into the room carrying a tray and in the company of an old man. I don't know how old, maybe fifty or sixty. He looks like

someone who has always been old, someone who is hard to picture ever being young. He's Asian, fine-boned like a bird, with long white hair, a neat little beard, and a gentle smile that he gives when he sees me.

"You're awake. Good. I was worried about you." When he says it I know he means it. I don't know quite how to respond, so I just nod and watch. He has a cloth bag over his shoulder that looks quite full. He nods to the boy, who carries the tray over to the small table beside the bed and sets it down. The older man sends him out of the room with a pat on the back, then closes the door behind him.

"When you turned up missing, I sent the others out to look for you, but it was some time before we found you near the Combat Zone in that alley. It's a good thing we did, before some of the other inhabitants of the Rox decided to take what they would have seen as easy prey."

"They did," I say, speaking to him for the first time. "Some men took me from the alley. I think they were body-snatchers, organleggers. There was a ghoulish at the place where they took me. I managed to escape and ran. I ended up in the alley and must have passed out." The old man looks very grave and gives a low "hmmm" sound deep in his throat as I speak.

"The Tamalous," he says with some distaste. "Ghouls and grave-robbers who traffic in stolen body parts. They have never troubled us before this. I will have to see to it that they do not think they can interfere with our sacred sites. You are fortunate to have escaped from them intact." He gives a faint

smile tinged with irony. "Perhaps you should have been a warrior instead of a mystic." A tantalizing smell reaches my nostrils, and the old man gestures toward the tray at the bedside.

"You must be hungry. It is time to break your fast and regain your strength. Come and eat."

I make my way over to the table. The tray has a bowl of steaming soup on it and a couple of sandwiches. I pick up one of the sandwiches and bite into it, making it vanish, then start on another. It is the best food I have ever tasted, although I have trouble recalling ever tasting anything be-

fore. The old man seems amused by my hunger and watches quietly for a moment. He moves over to an open spot on the floor and sinks into a cross-legged position with much more grace than I'd expect from an old man. He takes some devices from his bag and sets them up on the floor in a pattern that seems strangely familiar, like so many things. It brushes against my mind teasingly, but retreats when I try to grasp hold of it. While he arranges the items on the floor to his satisfaction, I finish the other sandwich and begin drinking the soup. It's very good, too. The warmth of it spreads out from my stomach and makes me feel safe and comfortable for the first time since I awoke. The old man waits quietly for me to finish eating before speaking to me again. "Come," he says in a tone that's more inviting than commanding. "Sit with me and tell me what you saw in the Resonance and we will interpret the images and omens."

I look for a long moment at the serene old man sitting on the floor and I decide there is no point in lying to him.

"Sir, I have no idea what you are talking about. What is this 'resonance' and who are you?"

He cocks his head like a quizzical bird and looks at me with his dark eyes for a moment, like he is looking into the depths of my soul. Then he waves his hand toward the clear spot on the floor in front of him.

"Sit, and I will explain," he says.

I make my way over, inside the small ring of technological gear, and sit down with my legs folded up beneath me, resting on my knees and settling my weight on my heels, different from the old man's lotus position, but it feels comfortable. I study his face and appearance, sitting there like a smiling Buddha, and try to place him in my memory.

"Do you know me?" I ask.

"I do," he says. "I am called Papa Lo and you are one of my pupils, apprenticed to me to learn the secrets of the world of light."

A spark of hope ignites inside me. "What's my name?"

He shrugs, a gesture that carries considerable calm and acceptance of what is.

"I took your name from you before

you left," Papa Lo says, like it's something he tells everyone when they wake up not remembering who they are. "You're the only one who can find out what your new one is.

"You are part of our tribe. We are called the Netwalkers and we live in the Rox, a section of the Boston sprawl, like many other tribes we trade with. You had no family or means, so we took you in off the streets. You became part of our community, and you showed you had the potential to experience the Resonance."

"You mentioned that before," I say. "What is this resonance? Is that why I can't remember anything?"

If Papa Lo is upset at being interrupted he doesn't show it. Instead he smiles. "Yes," he says. "Temporary memory loss is not uncommon with the experience of the Resonance, although I think you will find that your memory will be much improved when you have fully recovered, and that you will recall events and information with great clarity from now on.

"Unlike the other tribes of the city," he continued, "we are the Walkers-of-the-Network, the intermediaries between the world of the physical

and the world of light and knowledge." He reverently brushed a hand across the smooth plastic finish of one of the pieces of hardware laid out on the floor. "The Matrix is a place that exists within the infinite data-space of the world network, the grid. It is another world created by computers and mathematics, a world we can visit using computers as our gateway to enter and explore." I recalled the smooth metal of the jack behind my ear and my fingers went to it, almost unconsciously. Papa Lo smiled again and brushed away some of his long, white hair to show a similar plug, rimmed in white porcelain and chrome, behind his own ear.

"Yes. With this," he said, touching the jack lightly with one finger, "we can connect ourselves directly to the computer and read its signals. The machine transmits the world of the Matrix into our minds and we can learn its paths and its secrets. There are many things to be learned in the world

of light and many who want to protect those secrets. That is how our tribe prospers; by entering the world of light and bringing back knowledge that is of value to the people, like shamans and sorcerers gain knowledge when they travel into their spirit realms.

"You showed considerable talent in entering and working in the Matrix. You knew something of computers and learned quickly how to use what we have here and what I have to teach. I decided you were ready to attempt the Resonance. It is an experience, an initiation. It shows you the deep secrets of the Matrix, secrets even I am not privy to." He paused for a moment, his eyes wistful. "If only I were years younger . . . but it is not my destiny to experience the Resonance, only to guide those who can. Such as I guided you. You are the oldest youth I have seen who had the potential for the Resonance, so I prepared you and brought you to experience the initiation. Now we need to see if you were successful. Tell me what you can remember of the time before we found you."

I don't know how, but I know what he says is true. I think I can trust this strange old man. Even if I can't, I have much to gain and nothing to lose, so I sit in his circle of hardware and tell him as much as I can remember, from the moment I first became aware in the alley to my escape from the Tamanous to finally collapsing from exhaustion where the other members of the tribe found me. I don't mention the dream at first, but Papa Lo asks if I recall any dreams, so I tell him what I can and he gives a kind of satisfied nod.

"You have been fortunate beyond what most people will ever know," he said. "The Matrix has favored you and you have succeeded in the Resonance. You are more than any other mere traveler in the world of light, you are a follower of the way of the machine. An initiate. A technoshaman."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

"I will show you soon," he says, "but first I need to check your condition and make sure you're all right. The Resonance is a difficult experience and it sounds like you've had a harder time than most."

He lifts a slim cable ending in a chrome jack toward my

temple. I grab his wrist and he looks at me with hard, dark eyes for a moment.

"This is for your own good, my son. You must trust me."

I realize that if Papa Lo or any of his people wanted to kill me they would have done it already, or simply left me in the alley to die, so I take the cable from his hand and slot it into the jack behind my ear like I've done it a thousand times before. It slides home with a faint click that shudders through my being, and I feel a sense of completeness I haven't since I was disconnected by the body-snatchers. I know I never feel so complete as when I'm jacked in, the connection between me and the machine fills my spirit and makes me feel whole again.

When Papa Lo powers the diagnostic deck, I can feel the trickle of power flowing along the cable and into my jack, pulses of light and energy dancing along the fibers like a kind of music filling my mind, like the rhythmic beat of a drum or a living heart. Listening to the steady beat of the electrons, I

slip into a kind of trance and time does strange things as Papa Lo works the keys and command surfaces of the deck. He's quiet and composed, carrying out his work like an artist who seeks to achieve a perfect and peaceful state of Zen as he works his art.

We sit there in silence I don't know how long as the energy trickles through my system, probing and sifting like millions of invisible fingers. I can feel them all, probing into all parts of my mind, but I relax and don't resist their gentle brush against my mind. I know they can do me no harm and I feel somewhere inside me that I could stop them if I really wanted to.

When Papa Lo powers down the deck, I start a bit, not realizing he is finished.

"Your hardware is online," he says with his serene smile. "The memory is wiped, but that has happened before. I thought there might be something in there to help you, but no. The hardware is still good, and the casing is a bit beat up," he says, gently touching my bruised arm, "but now we need to check the wetware. Follow me." He gets up and makes to leave.

"Where are we going?" I ask. The old man glances up at me over his shoulder, then begins slowly walking out of the room again. His voice carries back to me as he goes.

"We're going to see if you can find your name," he replies, and I quickly move to follow. Papa Lo guides me out of the room and into the hall of what I now see is a deserted church, made over by the Netwalkers tribe into part of their home, our home, I suppose, if I am one of them. The place still has a quiet air of the sacred to it; not a place where people live day-to-day, but where serious and important spiritual matters are handled.

In the basement of the church there is a room I had not expected to see, but which strikes me with an overwhelming sense of *deja vu* as I step across the threshold. I know I have been here before.

The room fills most of the long basement space. The low-beamed ceiling makes it feel somewhat cramped and close. The walls are covered with hardware, displays, and complex paintings and drawings done on the gray concrete with brightly colored metallic paints and chalk. The drawings are circuit diagrams, flow charts, algorithms, and other images: great open vistas of metallic towers against a dark sky and planes of warped geometry that make you think you could put your hand through the wall like it was only an optical illusion. They bring the cold gray of the walls to life and seem to shimmer and move in the flicker and hum of the fluorescent lights hanging from the ceiling. The floor of the room is a tangled mass of cables in a rainbow of colors, like a nest of snakes sleeping on top of one another. There are woven mats and pieces of equipment networked together, computers, displays, printers, small storage drives stacked up like musty books, and collections of things that blink and whir and hum with power. Seated on the floor like a praying monk is a boy, about twelve or thirteen years old. His eyes are rolled back, and the half-closed lids nutter in a strange kind of dream state. His hands are folded in his lap as in prayer and his lips move as he whispers something, maybe a mantra. The sound of it is familiar to me.

"This is our lodge," Papa Lo says to me quietly, and I start a bit at the sound of his voice. I almost forgot he was there.

"Our lodge?" I say, not knowing why I speak so softly other than the strong feeling I have that this is a sacred place.

"It is our place to touch the power of the inner world and the spirits," he says. I look around the room and I know for certain this is like no lodge that I have ever seen or heard of before.

"Aren't lodges supposed to be full of skins and furs, crystals and herbs, with a big smoldering fire pit in the center? You know, *drek* like that?" I say.

Papa Lo makes a low sound in his throat that I take as approval of my question. If he notices or is offended by the vulgarity, he makes no sign of it.

"It is good you can recall such things," he says. "No, this is a different kind of medicine lodge. Quite unlike almost any other in the world. While the shamans work their magic by calling on the Awakened spirits of the land, we are in touch with something different. We touch the magic of the modern age, the Digital Age. Instead of the ancient powers of the land, sea, and air, we commune with the spirit of the Machine, the intelligence of the Matrix."

"And who is 'we'... the Netwalkers?"

"Not entirely. We are part of the tribe, but we ... you are special. Like the shamans to their tribesmen, we are the intermediaries between them and the otherworld. It is for those of us with the knowledge and the ability to travel into that world and bring back the knowledge it contains for the good of all.

"We live outside of the so-called 'civilized' world, the world of the megacorporations and their wageslaves," Papa Lo says, and the disdain in his voice for that world is clear. "We live off the land like the tribes of old, only our environment is the city and not the re-grown forests or plains of the Native American Nations. We live in a different wilderness, but we know its secrets better than most.

"You set out into the wilderness to gain a vision as peo-

pie have done since time began and I think you have found it, and it has changed you in the process. The vision is a rebirth that makes a new person of you, transforms you so you are a true walker between the worlds of the physical and the mental world of the Matrix, a technoshaman, like Taki here." He gestures to the boy sitting on the floor. "He and two others are the only children of the tribe to experience the Resonance and make the breakthrough to the other state of existence I knew existed out there in the Matrix. And now you. You are the oldest student to be able to find the Resonance. I had given up hope of finding anyone older than a child with the Gift."

He beams at me in obvious pride and I feel a bit self-conscious about the whole thing. I know I should know this man who is supposed to be my teacher and mentor and feel happy he is proud of me. Why do I feel guilty about Papa Lo's pride and the fact that I have succeeded in his goal for me?

"You keep talking about a transformation," I say, looking for an explanation of my feelings. "But, apart from not being able to remember what happened, I don't feel transformed. How am I supposed to be different?"

Papa Lo makes his way over to one of the collections of computer hardware stacked high like a totem pole reaching for the ceiling and picks up a cable lead that he holds out to me.

"Why not find out for yourself?" he says.

I'm frightened by the prospect of jacking into an unknown machine, of trusting this man who says he is my teacher and friend, but part of me hungers for the jack he holds out to me like a worshipper for the touch of the sacrament. Or an addict for a hit of a drug. Either way, it is a desire I cannot refuse. I take the cable from his hand, sit down on the floor, and plug in the jack.

In an instant, the electron world of the Matrix opens up all around me, like a fractal flower opening up in my mind. I haven't done anything other than slot the cable and I realize there's nothing between me and the computer systems

that make up the Matrix. No cyberdeck, no workstation, no terminal running the ASIST transformation algorithms to take the electronic ones and zeroes making up the worldwide information network and turn them into images and sensations the human brain can perceive and understand. There's just me and the machine. Somehow, I'm doing it all myself, making sense of the flowing electrons in my head. There's nothing but my mind and the Matrix, together like one.

This is the difference. Other people like Papa Lo can access the Matrix through a jack, but they need hardware and software to do it: a computer running the right programs to synchronize the complex operations of the human brain with the equally complex workings of the Matrix, to let them communicate and create the portal through which to enter the virtual world. I don't need any hardware or software, just the jack to connect through and my wetware; my

own brain.

I can hear the hum and heartbeat of the world-grid pulse through the electronic reality all around me and I understand what Papa Lo is talking about. I'm home and I know who I am, even if I can't remember my life before I came to the tribe. I know who and what I am now and I know my purpose in life. My name is Babel, and I am a technoshaman.

8

The slumbering giant of Renraku Computer Systems has awakened hungry. In the last year, Renraku has shown amazing growth and innovation in the production of computer hardware and software systems. Always a leader in computer architecture, Renraku has moved into the software and hardware fields with a vengeance, grabbing up market share with their cutting-edge developments in optics, program algorithms, adaptive systems, and other new technologies. The corporation's surge of success has clearly proven attractive to Renraku CEO Inazo Aneki, who continues to turn down opportunities for retirement to remain at the helm of the corporation. The seventy-year-old Aneki has guided Renraku since the founding of the corporation some thirty years ago and has "no intention of stepping down until Renraku secures its position as the leader in computer and Matrix innovation." The corporation's sudden success came as a surprise to market analysts, who were predicting troubled waters for Renraku due to the corporation's heavy investment in their Artificial Intelligence Project, which to date has still shown no results.

- "Profile: Renraku Computer Systems," excerpted from the online magazine Corpwatch, 3 May 3059

Inazo Aneki sat and studied the print on the wall of his office in Renraku corporate Headquarters in Chiba, Japan, contemplating the news he had just heard and the meetings he was about to have. The windows behind him afforded a

view of the streets and buildings of Chiba and the sparkling waters of the Pacific in the distance through the afternoon haze that hung over the city. The painting was entitled "The Wave of the Future," and was based on the famous wood block print known as Kanagawa oki namiura by Katsushika Hokusai. It showed a great wave cresting in the sea off of Kanagawa, with the white cone of Mount Fuji rising in the background. A twentieth-century artist had scanned the original painting and altered it so that the graceful woodcut curves of the tidal wave morphed into a pattern of colorful computer-graphics against a black sky. A twenty-first-century artist had further altered the painting. He had added a woodcut design of a serpentine dragon coiling around the peak of Mount Fuji, its body twisting around the mountain, a sleek-scaled, photorealistic representation of the great eastern dragon Ryumyo as he had first appeared, flying above Mount Fuji, in late December of 2011, the herald of a new age of magic and myth.

Aneki had admired the print from the day he first became CEO of Renraku. He liked to think of the company in much the same way: ancient and honorable tradition adapting to a world of high technology and rapid change, where nothing was certain apart from the company and the need for the company to provide its workers with a solid center to their lives. Renraku had always done that for as long as Aneki had been involved with it, and he intended to ensure the prosperity of his company and its community for a very, very long time. Long after he was gone, if karma would allow.

Inazo Aneki was not a young man, but he had the finest medicine both science and sorcery of the twenty-first century could provide, so it was likely he would live a good many more years still. Perhaps he would one day take his retirement on board the Zurich-Orbital station. Perhaps the zero-gravity environment would add a few more precious years of life for him to make sure his company would always be there, which was all the immortality Aneki wished for himself.

A musical tone from the telecom screen on one side of Aneki's desk brought him

out of his reverie. He touched the illuminated button on one side of the display screen to acknowledge his assistant's page.

"Yes?" he said into the air, and a voice, chosen for its soothing and professional quality, replied.

"Chairman Watanabe to see you, Aneki-sama." Aneki gave his assent and a moment later the door of his office was opened by his secretary to admit the Chairman of the Renraku Computer Systems Board of Directors, Yukio Watanabe. The secretary executed a flawless bow and withdrew, closing the door behind her. Watanabe walked smoothly to a respectful distance from Aneki's desk and executed a slight bow that was little more than a nod, as befitted her status as Chairman. Aneki returned the gesture and motioned for her to take one of the comfortable chairs in front of his desk.

In Aneki's father's time, it would have been unthinkable for a woman to be involved in business affairs, much less to rise to a position of power as great as Yukio Watanabe. But times are different now, Aneki thought with a glance at the print on his wall. Women in the business world of Japan were a small change by comparison to things such as the rise of magic, the twisting of a tenth of the world's population into creatures like orks and trolls, and the world-spanning influence of the Matrix.

Still, women such as Watanabe-scwza had to work hard to prove themselves in the traditionally male-dominated world of business. They had to be more capable, confident, and efficient than their male counterparts in order to achieve the same results. That meant, Aneki had learned, that women in business, especially successful women, were people to be respected. He had watched Watanabe's rise to her current position and, even though he and the Chairman didn't see eye to eye on every issue, he respected her opinion and her skills as a businesswoman. Under their mutual guidance, Renraku Computer Systems had prospered. It only remains to be seen, Aneki thought, whether our efforts will secure the company's future or seal its fate.

"So?" she asked without preamble. Her brusqueness was not offensive, considering the circumstances.

"Napoli-san says Osborne is handling the case. He thinks she is stalling for time, but she also claims to have evidence that we have violated the concords."

Watanabe took the news stoically, without any outward sign of concern. "When will he make contact?" she asked.

Aneki did not have to ask to whom she referred. It was the sole reason they were both present in his office this afternoon.

"Soon," he said. "Provided he can be bothered to do so at all this time." Watanabe's face darkened. "I hope he has been informed of the importance of this matter." She clearly could not imagine why anyone would not take the affairs of Renraku as seriously as she.

"He has been informed, but it remains to be seen if he has decided to understand." Aneki knew from experience that most people were caught up in their own little worlds, believing their own concerns to be primary and wondering why everyone else did not share their opinion. The individual they awaited was more prone to such behavior than most. Renraku Computer Systems was no more concern to him than the affairs of tribesmen in the Siberian steppes, perhaps less.

Even as Watanabe was about to retort, Aneki raised a hand to interrupt. "Every effort has been made to ensure he will understand, Yuki. His obsession might blind him to the everyday concerns of life, but he knows he needs Renraku's patronage to continue his work. I instructed for that to be made clear to him."

Watanabe nodded in approval of the veiled threat issued in the company's name. Matters were too grave to play around with needless diplomacy, and she understood well that fine words were best backed up by a sharp sword. Aneki's assistant entered the room like a silent shadow, carrying a tea service. She set it down and then proceeded to pour for the CEO and the

Chairman, moving with quiet grace and efficiency. Another tone sounded from Aneki's

desktop console, this one different from the signal from his assistant's desk. With a wave of his hand, Aneki dismissed the assistant from the room and ordered that there be no disturbances whatsoever. He knew she would efficiently field any problems, allowing him to concentrate fully on the matter at hand.

Aneki touched the Receive key on the telecom, and a window opened to reveal a complex, fractal encryption image. It was like an electronic lotus of incredible complexity and surpassing beauty, and Aneki found himself impressed as always with the way the code's creator combined brilliant functionality with aesthetics. Aneki manipulated a few keys to make sure the systems were linked and the encryption secure before hitting the final acceptance key to open the link.

An image shimmered into place in the chair across from the one where Watanabe sat. The sheer resolution of the image was such that anyone would have sworn a spirit had manifested in the office, but Aneki and Watanabe knew it to be only a simulacrum, created by the state-of-the-art holographic projectors discreetly built into the office. Still, the technology was so sophisticated one could almost reach out and touch the figure sitting in the chair.

He was tall and thin, with long, dark hair swept back from a high forehead and sharp, aristocratic features. Hands with long, slim fingers were steepled in front of him in a casual gesture. His eyes were dark and impossibly deep, and Aneki always marveled at them. He often wondered if their incredible ageless quality was real or merely a creation of the image the man behind them projected. The long hair covered the delicately pointed ears that were the clearest mark that their visitor was an elf. Elves were just one of the many metatypes that had appeared with the return of magic, new races that had thrown off their human guises and, according to many, then- human rights. "Welcome, Leonardo-san," Aneki said with a slight nod of his head and Watanabe followed suit. The seated elven figure gave a slight smile and echoed the gesture.

"Good day to you," he said in flawless Japanese. "To what cause do I owe this interruption of my work?"

Aneki was no longer surprised by Leonardo's abrupt manner. He had dealt with it before and did not allow the breach in etiquette to ruffle him. "And how does your work progress?" he asked.

Leonardo gave an expressive shrug. "As well as can be expected, under the circumstances. Things proceed apace, but there are only so many hours in the day and so much yet to be done." He leaned forward in the chair-an impressive gesture for a hologram-and fixed his intense gaze on Aneki. "That is why I would like an answer to my question. Why have you seen fit to disrupt my work with this interruption?" Aneki swallowed hard under that unsettling gaze but maintained his composure. He was about to reply when Watanabe spoke up for the first time.

"We need more," she said, going immediately to the point. "The technology we have is not enough."

Leonardo turned his head toward her, and a faint smile played across his sculpted lips.

"And suppose there is no more, Watanabe-san? What if Renraku now has all of the little toys I might have to offer you. What then?"

Watanabe's face darkened at the elf's mocking tone. "Do not play games with us Leonardo." Her tone was cold. "We know you have not yet shared all of the technological treasures from that laboratory of yours. We have provided you with billions of nuyen to fund your . . . project and you have given us little more than crumbs of knowledge and technology in return. We expect some kind of return on our investment."

One of Leonardo's eyebrows raised in a delicate arch.

"Indeed? I understood Renraku's stock has been steadily increasing in value over the past year and a half. Your products are beating out all others in their respective markets and your company holds the cutting edge in computer and Matrix technology, all thanks to my 'little crumbs.' I would think putting Renraku on the fast-track to becoming the

most powerful megacorporation in the world would be worth more than a paltry few billion nuyen."

Aneki decided to intervene before the situation got out of hand. There still might be a chance to reason with Leonardo before he went off into one of his fits of pique.

"Leonardo-san," he began in a calming tone, "we are indeed appreciative of your genius and how it has benefited Renraku, just as I am sure you are appreciative of the resources our company has made available for the continuation of your very important work." In truth, Aneki had little idea what Leonardo's "great work" concerned. The elf inventor was eccentric at best, and quite probably certifiable, but the value of his inventions could not be denied. It certainly would not be the first time a corporation bowed to the whims of an erratic genius.

"But," Aneki continued, "our mutually beneficial relationship is threatened. Renraku's growth and prosperity has created concern among the other megacorporations, and there are those who would topple us from the pinnacle we have achieved. We need additional technology from you to make sure that does not happen so we can continue to provide you with the resources you need to continue your work undisturbed."

The CEO's words seemed to have the desired effect on Leonardo. His image sat back in the chair and appeared to consider and carefully weigh Aneki's words for a few moments.

"And what will I receive in return for providing you with more of my research?"

Aneki had already thought carefully about how he would respond to this inevitable question. "In addition to our gratitude, we are prepared to increase the resources at your disposal. Renraku has profited from your work and we are willing to share our profits with all those involved in our corporate family."

Leonardo's slow smile made it clear that he did not feel he was a part of anyone's "corporate family," but he was at least willing to consider the offer. The elf seemed more

amused by the prospect than anything else. He steepled his fingers again and leaned forward.

"I will consider your offer," he said slowly. "We will speak again soon, and I will let you know my decision." Watanabe looked like she was about to say something, then seemed to think better of it.

Aneki cleared his throat. "We have prepared information on our most important needs," he began, and Leonardo smiled his enigmatic smile.

"I know," Leonardo said. "I've already downloaded it from your database. I will review it and you will hear from me soon. I have . . . other matters to consider and another distraction awaiting me." Without any further comment, the elf's image fuzzed and faded out of existence, leaving only an empty chair once again.

Watanabe looked over at Aneki, who consulted the console on his desk. He gave a bit of a shrug as he turned back toward her. "The system reports we are secure in here, but where he's involved, how can anyone be sure?"

Watanabe spoke the thought that was on both their minds. "He got through the new 1C. Easily, from the look of things."

Aneki nodded. "Did you really expect otherwise?" he said. Intrusion Countermeasures, known as "ice" on the streets, were sophisticated computer programs intended to keep pirate deckers out of important systems and away from sensitive corporate and government data. Most 1C programs only restricted

access and worked to trace data-pirates back to their location in the physical world so the authorities could deal with them. Some IC, technically illegal, worked directly on the mind of the decker and could injure or kill or, worse yet, alter some of the decker's "wet-ware" through psychotropic techniques to, for example, inspire paralyzing fear of the corporation the decker was trying to rob.

Renraku led the field in the development of new intrusion countermeasures ever since gaining access to Leonardo's brilliant leaps in computer technology. Renraku's most sensitive systems were impregnable by almost any standards

in the world, but it seemed Leonardo still had his means around them. Not that it came as any great surprise, as Aneki said. Only two years previously, Leonardo had used his phenomenal computer skills and technology to deck his way into the core computer systems of all eight of the world's triple-A megacorporations simultaneously, a feat that was considered impossible, then and now, by any other decker in the world. Leonardo had left no clue other than a blackmail threat demanding that the megacorps pay him billions of nuyen or else he would totally crash their computer systems. He also left behind an enigmatic image as a kind of "signature" of his work: a figure cobbled together from false religious icons and the work of his namesake, Leonardo DaVinci.

Naturally, all of the megas had scrambled to investigate the mystery decker who so blithely defied their finest computer security, but there was no trace. It was as if he had simply materialized out of nowhere and then disappeared back to wherever he had come from. Aneki knew through Renraku's intelligence operatives that the other mega-corporations had been as concerned as Renraku about the danger to their systems, but too distrustful of each other to cooperate in finding the culprit, on the suspicion he might be working for a corporate rival.

Renraku's agent turned out to be more capable, or more fortunate, than those of the other corporations. He was able to trace the mystery decker's clues to a facility hidden in northern Africa, a facility no one even knew existed, so sophisticated were the electronic defensive systems hiding it from the watchful eyes of orbiting satellites and other means of detection. And in that amazing facility, Renraku's agent discovered Leonardo, the elven genius capable of building such a place and of creating a cyberdeck sophisticated enough to break into the finest corporate systems in the world.

It turned out Leonardo was pursuing some project of his own and required large sums to fund his "great work." He was too interested in privacy to sell his advanced technology directly, but he was willing to trade it to a corporation like

Renraku for the money he needed. The megacorporation had originally intended to destroy Leonardo's facility to eliminate the threat he posed, but after hearing the report of their agent and seeing the technology the elf had at his command, Renraku saw the advantages of an alliance with the eccentric elf. So far, that alliance had proven most profitable. Leonardo got the nuyen and privacy he needed to carry out his pet project while Renraku gained technological developments years ahead of its competitors. They were able to use the most basic applications of Leonardo's Matrix and cyberdeck research to jump-start R&D work on new products and to supply deckers with the means to lift additional research information from their competitors' own computer systems.

Aneki knew the company's finest research and development personnel were still working on unraveling some of the finer applications of Leonardo's technology. He also knew Leonardo referred to much of what he gave Renraku as "toys" and that there had to be other technological secrets he was keeping to himself. Aneki had heard other things, too, stories that Leonardo believed he was immortal and had lived for thousands of years, that he was the original Leonardo DaVinci and had been secretly learning and developing his scientific

and artistic skills for uncountable human lifetimes. Aneki found few things impossible to believe in an age of dragons, magic, and virtual worlds contained in desktop computers, but he personally thought Leonardo was mad. Yet, it didn't really matter one way or another to him what the elf believed, so long as Renraku was not threatened.

Now, both he and Watanabe had to wonder what the limits of Leonardo's abilities were. The elf had taken the data they had prepared from a datastore protected by Renraku's finest new ice, apparently with ease. Was it possible he was spying on them even now? Did Leonardo have unlimited access to the Matrix? Was there any data Renraku could trust? Aneki did not know for sure. What he did know was that such thoughts were paralyzing and a waste of valuable time.

"Now that the ball is in the elf's court," Watanabe said with a note of distaste, "what is our next move?" She didn't care for dealing with Leonardo. In addition to the fact that he was kawaruhlto, a "changed person," as the Japanese referred to metahumans, Leonardo was obviously mad and Watanabe did not share Aneki's tolerance for his eccentricities.

"Now, Yuki, we proceed just as we would if Leonardo had refused to help us. Renraku cannot rely on a mad inventor in some African backwater to solve our problems for us. Being beholden to Leonardo for our every success will make those successes meaningless. Renraku must have the ability to maintain its position without Leonardo or any other individual. We will report the situation to the Board and update them on the measures we are taking. If they are successful, Renraku will not need Leonardo or anyone else to stand up to the Corporate Court. They will cease to be a concern, because we will have the power to dictate any and all terms that please us."

Watanabe bobbed her head a bit. "Any word from our agent yet?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

Aneki shook his head. "No, but there will be."

"How can you be so sure, Inazo?"

Aneki looked her straight in the eyes, his old face resolute and set like stone. "Because we must succeed, Yuki, or everything we have built may be lost."

9

If a man desires peace, let him prepare for war.

-Sun Tzu, The Art of War

All but one of the members of the Renraku Computer Systems Board of Directors were gathered in the spacious boardroom overlooking the cityscape of Chiba. Some were present physically, but most attended the meeting virtually, via the Matrix. Sophisticated holo-projectors built into each place at the table created near-perfect simulacra of the attendees in their correct places at the long table. It was not unlike the manner in which Leonardo appeared in Inazo Aneki's office. Although the images of the Renraku board members lacked the animation and the sheer presence of the elf, the holographic technology and the neural/visual algorithms Renraku used to make the holographic simulacrum process possible were rapidly advancing.

It would have been simpler for everyone if all of the board members were jacked into the Matrix directly. In the world of cyberspace it was possible to project any image directly into the user's sensorium without the need for holographic projectors and the often fussy nature of projected light and sound. But that was not considered an option. Despite Renraku's reputation as the one of the top computer corporations in the world, many of the board

members preferred to keep themselves grounded in the physical world. Those who were forced to attend sudden afternoon board meetings in person insisted on the right to remain in the physical world and have their Matrix associates join them there.

Nearly all of the board members had already taken their seats when Yuki Watanabe entered along with Inazo Aneki, the CEO yielding the right of way to the Chairman as she swept into the room and made her way to the head of the long table with bows of greeting to many of the members. As Watanabe took her place, Aneki seated himself on her right and glanced around the table. Nearly everyone was in place, the meeting almost ready to begin. He went over again in his mind what he would relay to the board members to quell their concerns about the news that was of such concern to them all, the reason they had been summoned here on such short notice.

Watanabe checked her watch and let her gaze make a final sweep around the gathering. She tapped a control on the panel set into the polished wood surface of the table and a musical tone chimed from hidden speakers, signaling that the meeting was beginning. The board members ceased their conversing with their neighbors and over their eel phones, both internal and external, and turned their attention to the chairman and Aneki at the head of the table. "Honored board members," Watanabe began in a clear and confident voice, "the purpose of this meeting is to discuss the accusations now being presented before the Corporate Court even as we speak, regarding Renraku Corporation's phenomenal growth and success over the past few years. The board is entitled to be informed on all of the particulars of this case as well as the action Renraku Corporation is taking regarding it."

As Watanabe spoke, another image shimmered into place at the sole empty seat farther down the table.

"Pleased you could be bothered to join us, Lanier-san, especially considering your involvement in this matter," Watanabe said tartly to the holographic image of Miles Lanier. Lanier shrugged off the slight with an expressive gesture. He had endured many worse slings and arrows from the Renraku board in the past. Aneki found himself admiring Lanier's tenacity in the face of such adversity. Few people stood up to Watanabe-sama, or Renraku Computer

Systems so calmly. But, of course, Miles Lamer was not just anyone. He was the former the head of Internal Security for none other than Fuchi Industrial Electronics, the corporate rival now bringing the case against Renraku in the Corporate Court. Lanier had served Fuchi well during his time, and he likely would still be in his position with Fuchi if not for a strange twist of fate. The will of a dead dragon had granted Lanier ownership of a substantial portion of Renraku stock-more than even Aneki owned, in fact-enough to entitle him to a seat on the Board of Directors. The dragon, Dunkelzahn, had apparently been an investor in Renraku through a series of shell companies and other blinds.

Lanier's appointment to the Renraku board had created a considerable stir in the corporate community. Lanier was a valuable Fuchi employee, but the conflict of interest involved in becoming such a major Renraku shareholder clearly made it impossible for Lanier to continue to serve Fuchi if he wished to retain his newfound stock. So Lanier left Fuchi and took up his seat on the board. Rumor had it that his resignation from Fuchi had led to an explosive argument with his former employer and friend, Richard Villiers. Fuchi slammed the door behind Lanier and started work on changing the locks.

The reception Lanier received from Renraku was nearly as cold. Most members of the board, including Watanabe, didn't trust Lanier as far as they could throw him and the ex-Fuchi man submitted to what Aneki considered invasive security checks and surveillance to prove his loyalty to his new corporate community. Lanier passed every test with flying colors and his advice to the board on how to handle certain relations with Fuchi had proven invaluable in securing Renraku's new market position against its formidable rival. Lanier was

considered a full member of the board, but Aneki knew Watanabe and other board members still did not accord him their full trust, even after so many months. Chairman Watanabe ignored Lanier's dismissal of her sarcasm and continued as if she had not been interrupted.

"Chief Executive Aneki-san will summarize the events that have transpired and describe the actions Renraku is taking to control the situation."

Watanabe swiveled her chair a few degrees in Aneki's direction. He rested his hands palms-down on the table as he addressed the board in a calm and unhurried voice, cultivating an image of inner serenity he wished was as good as it sounded.

"As you know," he began, "Fuchi Industrial Technologies has brought a case before the Corporate Court claiming Renraku Computer Systems has violated the fair competition and practice concords of the Court with our rapid development and marketing of new technologies that are beginning to outsell Fuchi's products. Fuchi maintains that our research relies on illegal and illegitimate sources." He paused to fix his gaze on Lanier, but the former Fuchi man remained impassive, his image calm and unwavering. "We do not intend to dispute Fuchi's claim."

A ripple of shock and noise spread through the board room like a stone thrown among a flock of birds as the board members exploded with questions and protests. Aneki held up his hands for silence.

"We will not contest Fuchi's claims because to do so would put us in a difficult position. In order to prove that our technological sources are legitimate, we would have to provide technical information to Fuchi that would compromise the value those technological developments have for us. Fuchi knows this and wishes to gain access to the information as well as to try to prove their claim that some of it has been stolen from our competitors. If our data becomes spread among the members of the Court, then our advantage is neutralized."

The other board members quieted and considered Aneki's words. There had certainly been times in the past when the Court's solution to contested technologies had been to share them equally among all of the members, thus maintaining the balance of power.

"What then will our response be, Aneki-sama?" asked Motoki Matsumara.

"There need be no response," said Yasuhiro Sasaki, one of the younger and more ambitious board members who supported Renraku's aggressive stance in the market recently. "What does the Corporate Court have? Where is their proof we have done anything wrong?" , "That is simple," said Gordon Leighton with a nod in Lanier's direction. "They have him to hold up to the Court as a source of information we could be exploiting." Lanier did not rise to Leighton's bait, but it did not matter because the others had already begun to throw in their opinions.

"We cannot be sure ..." Matsumara began to retort when Aneki again held up his hands.

"Gentlemen!" he said sharply. "Please listen to the report of Renraku's response before you begin any debates." The noise subsided, and Aneki swept his gaze around the table before continuing.

"As I said, we will not respond to Fuchi's accusations with anything other than a denial of them. As Sasaki-san has pointed out so forcefully, the burden of proof remains with Fuchi. They must demonstrate some wrongdoing on our part for the Corporate Court to act. However ..." Aneki paused and stood, then walked over to the side of the table.

"Renraku's growth and success over the past two years has been rapid enough to concern many of the members of the Corporate Court. Of the eight first-tier multinationals, only Fuchi and Saeder-Krupp currently exceed us in the world market. That means the other members of the Corporate Court are not likely to be well-disposed toward us. Although some of them might wish to see Fuchi humbled, they are more likely to be concerned regarding Renraku's growth and

may see fit to take action to limit our corporate activities. We wish to ensure Renraku's continued growth and success, and cannot allow the possibility that the other megacorporations will unite against us."

"Do you really think that will happen, Aneki-sama?" Lanier said quietly from his side of the table, his ghostly holographic image flickering a bit as he moved.

"You of all people should know the answer to that,

Lanier-san. You helped coordinate the Court's operation to teach Aztechnology a lesson some years ago, neh? If the members of the Court feel sufficiently threatened, they will act. We must give them good reason not to act against us while maintaining Renraku's growth and influence."

Aneki touched a panel set into the wall, and the wall of the conference room became blank, its thin polymer coating functioning as a computer display screen to bring up images at his command.

"The key to our goal," Aneki said, "lies here." The screen filled with an image that was as familiar to the Renraku board members as it would have been to their corporate counterparts. It was an image that had haunted the nightmares of many corporate systems analysts over the past two years. The picture on the screen showed a figure made of two different parts. The lower was taken from the Shroud of Turin, believed by many to be the shroud Christ was buried in. But the head of the image was a woman with an enigmatic smile. Both images had been reversed as photo-negatives, giving the figure black skin highlighted with white outline.

"The Leonardo image?" Matsumara asked. "Of what use is that to us?"

"The image itself is of no use, Matsumara-sama. It is what the image represents. The Leonardo Project. The technology Leonardo has provided us is the same technology he used to simultaneously compromise the central computer systems of all of the major megacorporations. It is the selfsame technology that has made Renraku more powerful and influential than ever, made our computer systems invulnerable to our rivals' deckers, and given us near-supremacy in the Matrix, allowing us to spur on our own research and development projects while subverting and gaining access to the work of our competition. An unbeatable combination."

Aneki did not mention his concerns about Leonardo still being able to circumvent Renraku's computer defenses when he chose to. Let the board consider Renraku invulnerable on that front for now.

"But," he went on, "the Leonardo technology has not reached its full potential. Thus far, our uses of it have been subtle and conservative. We have gained information from other corporations where we have not been able to go before, but the abilities Leonardo displayed, the ability to compromise the systems of all of the Corporate Court and its members simultaneously, has been beyond us."

Miles Lanier seemed to listen carefully while Aneki spoke, his fingers steepled in front of his chin as his virtual image leaned back in the motionless boardroom chair.

"Are you saying, Aneki-sama, that Renraku now has the sort of ability Leonardo used against us?" Aneki was not surprised that Lanier was the first to pick up on the implications of his words.

"No, we do not. At least, not yet. The difficulty does not lie in the technology; it is still years ahead of anything else that has been produced. Nor does it have to do with the skill of the user. Although Leonardo's computer skills are no doubt significant, we have many of the finest deckers in the world in our employ and yet they cannot match the feats Leonardo performed with his cybertechnology.

"No, the answer lies instead in here." Aneki tapped the side of his head with a bony index finger. "In certain neurological modifications necessary to make full use of Leonardo's cyberdeck technology, modifications intended to work in conjunction with the deck's unique processing capability to increase the power

of both many times and make the user unstoppable by conventional intrusion countermeasures."

"What are these 'modifications,' then?" piped up Shun Isoge. Aneki knew the man was involved in many biotechnology companies. Biotechnology and its applications interested him keenly.

"That is what we are in the process of determining," Aneki replied. "The nature of those modifications is being investigated even as we speak." Once again the board members began chattering in surprise and the meeting threatened to become chaos.

"Why weren't we told about this project?" Matsumara said, pulling a white handkerchief from his coat pocket to

mop his damp forehead. Aneki was about to answer when Chairman Watanabe spoke, her voice cutting through the chatter like a sword, bringing silence to the room again.

"Security was too paramount, Matsumara-san. This project holds the entire future of Renraku. I knew of it, as did Aneki-san and our appointed agents within the company. The board members were not informed because the project was in its most preliminary stages and security was the most important consideration." Several pairs of eyes glanced toward Miles Lanier as Watanabe continued. "Now, with the activities of Fuchi, it is more important to make sure the project is seen through to its conclusion with all possible haste." "And what is this project, Madame Chairman?" Miles Lanier asked with a touch of exaggerated courtesy. Aneki cleared his throat and touched a control, transforming the wall-screen into a map of North America, with a patchwork of nations picked out in different colors. There were the United Canadian and American States and the Confederate American states in blue and gray, the two nations dividing the eastern half of the North American continent between them. The purple of the Republic of Quebec showed in the upper corner. The red of the Native American Nations covered most of the western half, save for the gold of California Free State, the green of the elven nation of Tir Tairngire, and the small blue island in the midst of the red of NAN that was the Seattle metroplex.

Four cities were highlighted on the map with glowing points: Seattle, Denver, the Federal District of Columbia, and Boston. All of them UCAS cities, save for Denver, which was held jointly by many of the nations of North America as part of the treaty that ended the conflict between the old United States and the Indian rebels who used the reborn power of magic to attempt to reclaim the land they considered rightfully theirs.

"These cities," Aneki said, pointing toward the map, "are all places where activities of tribes of children known as 'otaku' have been reported. The otaku have taken our name for those who obsessively become attached to the

world of the Matrix and turned it into a legend, a story of children who have the ability to access the virtual reality of the Matrix without the use of a cyberdeck interface, using only the power of their own brains. R&D believes, and certain independent consultants have confirmed, that the Leonardo technology requires the special abilities of the otaku to realize its full potential. There are limits to the hardware and software that can only be overcome by engineering changes to the 'human factor,' to the brain itself." "Ridiculous," Matsumara said with a snort of derision. "The otaku are only a myth, an urban legend. Are you seriously telling us that you are risking the fate of Renraku Computer Systems on the basis of a decker tall tale?"

"Many things were once considered myths, Matsumara-san," Aneki countered. "Things like magic, elves, and dragons, neh? But one need only look at the daily newsfax to see that they are all real. Why not the otaku? How else can we explain why Renraku, with some of the finest research facilities and deckers in the world, has not yet realized the full potential of the technology we have acquired? Our research suggests that the otaku do exist, and they have a means of altering the human brain to function within the

Matrix as a kind of bioprocess holographic computer system. In conjunction with Leonardo's paraoptical cyberdeck technology, such an individual would be able to perform the feats we ourselves witnessed two years ago."

"The compromising of every megacorporate computer system in the world," Larder said quietly, and Aneki nodded.

"Hai. And with that ability in our control, there is no rival in the world who could realistically challenge us. Not when we can subvert their communications, command structure, records, and finances at will. The Corporate Court will cease to be a concern, because Renraku will have an advantage that no other corporation can match. The Matrix is the lifeblood of economics and trade. Control the Matrix and we hold the very existence of our rivals in our hands."

"The other megacorporations would never stand by and let that happen," Isobe said. "It would collapse the Court, there would be corporate war..."

"No," Lanier spoke up before anyone else could answer. "I don't think so. A corporate war would be too destructive to risk. The first-tier corporations have resources equal to those of the national superpowers that once existed, which means they need must avoid a war no one could win. If Renraku secures this technology, there won't be anything the other corporations can do about it without risking the total destruction of the Matrix we all rely upon. They would look for other ways to subvert or steal the technology, but they wouldn't go to war to prevent Renraku from rising to the top, not while there were still other options."

"The only trouble," Aneki said slowly, "is that the agents we have planted in the otaku communities we know of have been under deep cover for some time. Two are confirmed dead. Their bodies were found by our people. One is alive and in the care of a private clinic in Seattle, but shows signs of permanent brain damage. We are hoping her doctors will be able to provide some additional information. As for the final agent, there has been no word from him for several weeks, but an effort is underway to locate him. We must find him or, failing that, discover the secrets of these otaku some other way if Renraku Computer Systems is to survive."

10

At first, urban tribalism was considered nothing more than another fifteen-minute fad that would fade along with all of the other crazes that came before. But the tribals didn't go away. They proved the adaptability of human nature by finding ways to continue and to survive. They took ancient folkways and techniques and adapted them to life in the urban jungle. They found niches in the city ecology where they could live and hunt and raise their families. They cut themselves off from the rest of the world. They established their own "reservations" in the midst of the chaos of the sprawls, staked out their territory and defended it against all comers.

Now there is even a second-generation of primitives, those who have known no life other than that of their tribe. Some of them are forming the basis for the future continuation of their tribes, while others, like youth everywhere, rebel against the ideals of their parents and want to learn more about the society that they have never been allowed to be part of. They are drawn back into the places and ideas that their parents rejected. Some return to their tribes shaken by what they have seen while others find new lives in the outside world and are never heard from again.

-from *Urban Primitives*, by Dr. Niles Wolfe, Ambrosius Publications, Boston, 2049

I am amazed at how easy it is to settle into life with the tribe. I expected it to be more difficult, but I truly feel at

home here. Nobody even questions my not remembering them from before; they say I'm a different person now and it's only right I should start a new life with a clean slate. Some even think that forgetting what happened to me before I

underwent the Resonance means I am destined to be a truly great shaman, that I really have been reborn in all of the ways that matter, able to look on the world with new eyes.

The Netwalkers welcome me into their tribe with open arms and, although I have no blood relations here, I feel like I am part of a family. There are forty-six members of the tribe living in a complex of structures in the Rox-the Roxbury Barrens of Boston. Most of the tribe is made up of people who have dropped out of ordinary society, forced by a variety of circumstances to live in the wilderness of the Rox instead of the clean and protected corporate enclaves of the city. Papa Lo is the tribe's chief. He keeps us together with his leadership and teaches the tribe's children the skills to make the Netwalkers something special among the tribes in the Rox. He shows us the ways of the Matrix, like few other people ever learn them.

But now I am learning them all. Dipping into the well of knowledge and information that is the Matrix and drinking deeply, just as in my dream, taking in all of the knowledge I can for my people, our territory, and the world around us. Many of the things I have learned feel very familiar, like relearning things I've known before, exercising old reflexes. Other lessons feel entirely new to me. It's no surprise, since I'm told I knew the paths of the Matrix quite well even before I was initiated.

One thing that feels the most familiar and yet the most different is the Matrix itself. I know all of the different structures and pathways of the virtual world like they were written on my soul, like I have known them my entire life, but I see them in an entirely new way now. I need nothing more than a live feed plugged into the chrome jack behind my ear to be connected to the otherworld of cyberspace. Other people need a computer to sit between them and the

glory of the virtual world, translating its signals into sensations they can experience, but I experience the Matrix directly.

I spend hours every day jacked in and exploring the bounds of the Matrix. Within it, I can travel around the world in a few seconds and visit distant places like a spirit, faster than most computer-users can even dream. Millions of people visit the Matrix every day, but I am one of the few who make it my home.

I make sure everyone can see my persona icon the moment I walk through the virtual door. Out on the street, samurai live or die depending on how tough they look. You are sized up from the moment you walk into a room and those first few seconds are the most important. If you don't say right off "don't frag with me or I can mess you up something bad," you are in for trouble. It's the same way on the wild side of Matrix, and everything about my persona tells people who see me that I'm bad news in cyberspace.

Most street samurai would think the idea funny, because there isn't anything threatening about my icon to someone who doesn't know the Matrix. Unlike a lot of deckers, my persona isn't a giant robot, chromed samurai, animal, mythic beast, or giant bug. I also don't go in for any of the numerous historical figures, pagan gods, modern celebrities, or fictional characters inhabiting virtual reality. I'm already a legend in cyberspace: a technoshaman, cyberadept, otaku, someone who can enter the Matrix like an amphibian enters the water, equally at home in both worlds. Without the need for a bulky cyberdeck. No, I use only the power of my mind.

My persona is basic, almost nondescript, because it looks just like me. In the Matrix I have the same "statistics," the same appearance I do outside of it. I don't feel a need to make myself bigger in cyberspace just to feel tough, unlike some of the 'trix dancers out there. My living persona has the same height and build as me, to keep the kinesthetics as closely matched as possible, giving me a slightly quicker response time. My persona has my dark hair and my somewhat angular face.

All in all, nothing spectacular. Certainly nothing to com-

pare with looking like a chromed-up preying mantis or a carved-out-of marble Adonis or even a talking pair of breasts like some of the exaggerated am'me-style female personas I've seen. But in the Matrix it's not a matter of what you do as much as how you do it. My persona may look just like me, but it's because my persona is me, an extension of my true self in the electron world. Every detail, every nuance is there, just like reality only more so. From the depths of my gaze to the black of my polished boots. From the folds and flow of the cloak to the individual resolution of my hair. And not only the sights, but the other senses many programmers neglect, the little cues that go into making an image more real.

Like sounds. The faint creak of leather, the whisper of flowing cloth, the quiet sounds of footsteps, the clink of metal rattling loose in a leather satchel, and the brash of cloth on cloth. Textures, from the smooth-worn surface of comfortable leather to the dry nubiness of woven wool to the cool smoothness of metal and the warm softness of skin. Even the smells of wool and leather and skin mixed with the faintest scent of chrome and rain. All of these little elements go into building an image to make all of the fantasy figures used by normal deckers look like cartoons by comparison.

Two-dimensional, without substance or style. The kind of resolution my persona has, the presence, tells everyone who knows anything about programming that I am like nothing they have ever seen before.

The losers and wannabes don't have a clue about the kind of complex programming needed to create a persona like mine and don't notice the subtle details, of course. All they see is a persona without much flash or glitz, which makes them think I'm no big deal. That's just fine with me because it means they tend to underestimate me. By the time they get an indication of my real Power, they're recovering from a dump-shock headache the size of the Denver Front Range Free Zone. The real deckers in the Matrix know how to recognize the subtle cues, so when a persona like mine strolls into a site, it draws attention. Generally there are some newbies in the place who take notice until

someone else tells them who and what I am. I admit it-I like generating speculation about who I am and why I'm there. A little mystery can do wonders for the reputation.

Now the eyes. The eyes are the most important part. They're the same shade of violet as my real eyes, an unusual color to inspire just a touch of discomfort in people when I fix them with the right kind of stare (which is much easier to do in virtual reality, where you don't have to blink). Mine have a quality eyes in the Matrix don't usually have. Mine show the depths of my living persona, the presence of a mind and a soul behind them. Other eyes in the Matrix are windows onto nothing, but people in cyberspace can look into the eyes of my persona and see me looking back at them. It's a difference people notice, whether they're aware of it or not.

In the Matrix I dress in dark jeans, a blue tunic, and black boots with a gray cloak thrown over the whole thing (good for being able to pull things out of at a moment's notice). A woven leather belt and the leather bag for carrying my Forms.

The Forms are my tools in the Matrix, my magical weapons and charms in the electron world. Deckers make use of programs with names like Black Hammer, Squeeze-It, Aegis-IV, and Shoggoth to do things in the Matrix. The programs run on a cyberdeck interfaced with the decker's brain. The decker thinks of what he wants, and the program does the work to make it happen, translating the task into the appropriate image in the Matrix. An attack program can look like a gun, a sword, a blazing energy blast, a spiked mace, or anything else the decker wants, but it is just what it is programmed to be. It isn't really any of those things, it's just a program. A tool.

Programs have to be written and stored on a cyberdeck for a decker's use. They are loaded into the deck's active memory, limited by the hardware's processing power and storage capacity. And deckers must run their programs with the

limits of their decks in mind.

The Forms are different. I have no computer to connect me to the Matrix, nothing to hold any programs. I do things

in the Matrix with nothing more than the power of my mind and spirit. I have headware memory-computer chips installed in my neo-cortex to store data I copy from the computers of the Matrix, but I don't use programs to get things done. The Forms are created from inside me, molded from the stuff of my will and imagination to create tools in the Matrix. They are not illusions like a decker's programs. They are real. Forms are not limited by memory or hardware. Their only limits are my imagination.

The first Form I learn to summon in the Matrix is my sacred sword, a shining steel manifestation of my will and power as a shaman that I can use to dispatch enemies in the Matrix. Few can withstand its sharp edge. I also make other Forms and keep them in the sacred bag I carry with me. They are talismans to aid the power of my own Channels and help me do things in the Matrix: magical dust, silvery runes, thin chrome chains, and other treasures. I meet different travelers in exploring the Matrix, deckers who slide like shadows through the vast corporate databases. I also meet others like me and the technoshamans of the tribe. There are tiny groups of us in other cities like Seattle and Denver. I speak to them about the electron world and learn some of the important lore of the data-streams and the systems creating them. I hone my skills as a warrior in the Matrix and fight enemies both mortal and inhuman. Few can stand against the kind of power I bring to bear.

I learn from Papa Lo and the other cybershamans-both of my tribe and others. They show me how to envision and call upon my spirit helpers in the electron world and command them to perform different tasks. The spirits of the Matrix are like our Forms, made from the stuff of the electron world, but the spirits differ from the Forms in that they are not tools, but helpers. Deckers also have helpers called "frames," but they are soulless and lifeless automatons of code. My helpers are living beings, spirits of the Matrix. I learn to conjure from the depths of my mind and spirit the first of my helpers, a spirit I name Rook.

She is a raven with feathers of glossy black chrome and

dark eyes shining with cleverness. She flies at my command through the paths of the Matrix, searching far and wide and returning to whisper in my ear what she sees and hears in the distant places, allowing me to learn more quickly without even having to go anywhere. Rook ferrets out hidden systems and secret knowledge for me.

My other helper is a different spirit. He is called Bake-mono and he is a more material creature than Rook. He is a small goblin, bent and twisted, no more than half my height. His dark skin is stretched tight over his bones, giving him a leering, skeletal look, and his eyes are a glowing yellow. Bakemono is a trickster and a fighter, who attacks and bedevils my enemies when I command it. He watches my back in the Matrix and does small tasks for me while I deal with more important matters. Bakemono fights with the same animal strength I felt when I fought the ghoul in the body-snatcher's lair.

Papa Lo says I learn very fast, but he expected no less. "I always knew you would be a great shaman, Babel," he says to me. "There is an important destiny awaiting you." He never explains what he means.

The tribe's elders also teach me some other skills I need to know. The Rox is an urban jungle that requires survival skills to live here. I learn how to forage and how to make my way through the ferrocrete canyons without being seen. One of the tribal elders is a man named Hunter, which is also his role in the tribe. He is a warrior and one of the tribe's strongest protectors. He has known Papa Lo for a long time. Although Hunter is not nearly so old, his hair does show traces of gray.

Hunter teaches me to fight and to defend myself. He says all of the members of the tribe must know how to protect himself and each other from attack, and

Papa Lo agrees. Even we shamans have to know some of the basic skills of combat. "You won't always have the luxury of fighting in the Matrix," Hunter says. "Sometimes an enemy will come looking for you in the real world. Those times, it's best to be somewhere else when they come looking, but if you can't, then you need to know how to fight."

I learn to fight with my bare hands and with whatever weapons are at hand. Hunter says there are weapons all around to the warrior's trained eye, but Hunter has the power of magic to improve his sight. His skill in combat is greater than any normal man's and his speed is like a spirit of the Matrix-like electrons moving and responding at the speed of thought. Although I am very fast, I am no match for him in our sparring matches. I am not the best student of hand-to-hand combat. I do better learning to shoot-Hunter says I have an eye for precision-but guns are not something the members of the tribe use casually. In the Rox they are difficult to find and more difficult to maintain and supply with ammunition. The tribe has guns, but they are carefully cared for and used sparingly.

One day while sparring, I tell Hunter about the fight with the ghoul and my escape, before he and some of the tribe's warriors found me in the alley. I also tell him about the memory of the weapon I used to stop the ghoul from killing me. When I show him the mark on the back of my arm and then concentrate, a slim, dark blade snaps out like a striking snake.

"Ghost!" he cries and jumps back a step from me. The blade emerges from just behind my wrist and arcs smoothly over the back of my hand, slightly curved to fit the contour of my arm. There is almost no weight to it as I wave my arm slightly to test the feel of it. Hunter steps toward me again and seizes hold of my wrist to examine the blade. He lets out a low whistle as he runs a finger just above its rear edge.

"That is one nasty cutter, Babel," he says with respect. "I've seen plenty of street-muscle with razors but never anything quite like this. It's like a standard spur, but the brushing on the arm-sheath is nearly invisible, and the blade looks like some kind of carbon-fiber composite. It would be almost impossible to detect, and the damn thing must be sharper than hell. Do you know where you got it?"

I shake my head. "Did I have it when I came to the

tribe?" I ask and Hunter shrugs and shakes his own head in response.

"I don't know, kid. You might have. We don't have the kind of gear to scan people for cyber, but I doubt we would have found it even if we did. If you had it when you got grabbed by the Tamanous, it was already there." I still cannot recall anything from before awakening after my initiation, and the blade becomes another mystery for me. Hunter teaches me how to fight with it, and I learn that it is indeed "sharper than hell," able to tear through wood and plastic with ease, just as it sliced through the flesh and bone of Crawley's wrist.

I ask Hunter and some of the others of the tribe about what I was like before my initiation, how I came to the tribe. They tell me I have been part of the Netwalkers for only a matter of months. I was barely getting by working the streets as a decker with the handle of Rook, the same name I gave to my first spirit helper. It is a fitting passing of the name, I am told. Papa Lo was impressed with my abilities after I did some work with the 'walkers and asked me to join the tribe.

Compared to the way I must have been scraping by, I could see why I accepted. While the Netwalkers do not live in luxury, we are better off than many of the people who live in the Rox, and the tribe takes good care of its own. I wonder about my life as a street-decker and where I came from before. Was I born in the Rox? It seems likely, since most of the people from here tend to stay. If the Rox is where you come from, there isn't really anywhere else logo.

I learn more about the tribe's history, its allies and enemies and my duties as a shaman. Only four of us have undergone the Deep Resonance and learned the

Channels, to enter the Matrix without the hardware and equipment even Papa Lo still needs. That makes us important, and we have a responsibility to the tribe to travel in the Matrix, seeking the knowledge to help the tribe survive and prosper. Knowledge is power, and there are many secrets to be wrested

from the spirits of the electron world that are worth something to the right people.

The trick is finding the right people and making sure they don't kill you to get what you have.

11

Dragons in their pleasant palaces.

-Isaiah 14:12

The young novice made his way quickly down the quiet halls of the lodge set high up on the slopes of Mount Shasta. The rest of the shamans and other inhabitants of the Shasta Lodge were settling in for the night, but Running Bird had a duty to fulfill before he could do so. He tried to calm his thoughts, following the instructions of his teachers to reach an inner core of peace and strength as he walked up to the great doors.

A knock on the double wooden doors of the chamber interrupted Hestaby's meditation. She raised her head, the great eyes half-closed, and turned toward the entrance.

"Enter," she said, and the doors opened to admit Running Bird. He bowed deeply, hands folded before him, and the great dragon coiled in the room returned the bow with a nod of her great, scaled head.

"Forgive this interruption, Lady," the novice said in a quiet voice. "There is an incoming communication for you. It is encoded and tagged as most urgent." Indeed? Hestaby thought. How curious. She inclined her head again in acknowledgement of the acolyte's message.

"Very well, Running Bird. You will remain and speak for me." The young man was clearly taken aback by the command. To be privy to the great dragon's secret communications was no small thing, but Hestaby did not doubt the loyalty of those closest to her.

"I, Lady? As ... as you wish." He closed the door be-

hind him and walked over to the communications console hugging the stone wall near where Hestaby's great body spawled on the floor. With quiet efficiency, he tapped some keys and brought up a trideo image that filled much of the blank, whitewashed wall behind the console.

The image was of a complex fractal pattern, beautiful in its complexity. A few seconds after the console was engaged, the pattern dissolved and the image of a face appeared on the screen. It was an elf with dark hair swept back from his face, covering his pointed ears. But his sharp, elven features were as clear as if he were in the room with them. Hestaby's voice spoke in Running Bird's mind and he relayed the words. It felt almost like the dragon were using him as a mouthpiece, requiring no effort on his part.

"Leonardo," the novice's voice said, "what an unexpected pleasure. To what do I owe the honor of taking you from your studies?"

The elf on the screen looked askance at Running Bird for a moment, and the novice felt the force of the dark gaze upon him. Leonardo shifted his attention back to Hestaby with a slight shrug, apparently deciding the dragon's servant was of no concern to him. His voice was melodious and charming.

"I have called on a matter of mutual interest, gracious lady. We both have our opinions regarding the ways and the future of our peoples. Once those ideas placed us in the minority, but recent events have changed the course of the future and may offer opportunities for ... alternative viewpoints to be heard and listened to. I would very much like to meet with you to discuss the possibilities."

Hestaby cocked her great head to one side in a quizzical look as Leonardo

spoke, and Running Bird waited for the dragon's voice in his mind to tell him how to reply. There was a long moment of silence, and he looked back over his shoulder at his mistress. She nodded and the novice turned back to the screen as her thought-voice spoke through him.

"An interesting offer," Hestaby said, "one I would not

have expected from you. There was a time when such a meeting would have been considered impossible."

"All the more reason to undertake it," Leonardo replied. "I have always been fond of accomplishing the impossible as, I believe, are you."

"There are those who will see a meeting such as this as a threat," Hestaby said, and Running Bird felt a slight chill as he spoke the words. Who could possibly threaten a dragon with the power of Hestaby, she who had once turned back an elven army from the slopes of Mount Shasta?

"Perhaps, but what is life without a little risk?" Leonardo replied.

Hestaby paused for another long moment, and Running Bird could almost hear the great dragon's thoughts buzzing on the edge of his awareness before she spoke again in his mind and directed his voice toward the trideo screen.

"Very well. Where do you wish to meet?" she asked. The elf gave an enigmatic smile that made his classic features seem to light up with pleasure.

"How about my place?"

In a vast arcology on the banks of the Rhur, a great dragon lay curled up like a sleeping cat on the fine marble floor of a room large enough to serve as a hangar for a private jet. Giant columns supported the vaulted ceiling and fine carvings decorated the stone walls. The room was solid, cool, and gave off a comforting atmosphere for a creature used to lairing in great mountain caves. Unlike those lairs of old, there were no piles of treasure, no picked bones, or rusted weapons belonging to foolish would-be dragonslayers. The room was clean and dry, filled with the heavy musk of reptilian scales and the faint charred odor of smoke. There was no furniture and no windows—save those open to display computer graphics or information—the room's sole inhabitant needed neither.

The vast room in Saeder-Krupp's world headquarters in the Rhine-Rhur megaplex was jokingly known as "the corner office" by the dragon's minions. They thought he was unaware of their nickname for his lair, but there was pre-

vious little the great dragon Lofwyr, President and Chairman of the Board of Saeder-Krupp Heavy Industries, was not aware of.

All the dragon needed was the collection of moving images filling most of one wall of the great chamber. The display screens on the wall provided a steady flow of information to keep his vast mind occupied. A visitor to the room might have suspected that Lofwyr was asleep. Sitting curled up with his great, wedge-shaped head resting on his forelegs, large golden eyes nearly hidden beneath their heavy lids, the dragon stared languidly at the video wall. It was just before dawn in Germany, and few people were awake in the vast arcology. Lofwyr's mind, however, was ever active, following all of the input from those screens while simultaneously juggling a dozen different thoughts at once.

Some of the windows open on the video-wall provided updates on the activities of Saeder-Krupp and its many subsidiaries and interests across the globe. Saeder-Krupp was the largest megacorporate conglomerate in the world. Overseeing the hundreds of companies it controlled would be a monumental feat for a human CEO, but for Lofwyr the intricacies of corporate politics and economics were something to keep his mind occupied. He reviewed the activities of dozens of companies a minute, storing away the information and keeping mental notes he would later dictate to his servants to carry out. Stock information, buyouts, the rise and fall of businesses around the world, all took up a mere fraction of the dragon's attention.

Other windows displayed information about Lofwyr's other interests. There were few things in the Sixth World in which he did not take at least some interest,

so displays of new trideo programs, documentaries, stock portfolios, and other pieces of data gathered by Lofwyr's agents, both living and artificial, decorated the video-wall for his edification and amusement. Toxic spills in the North Sea, gun-running in Southeast Asia, another border skirmish in China, political polls from the United Canadian and American States, all of these were grist for the mill of Lofwyr's brain.

The dragon had a vast network of agents in every country devoted to nothing more than feeding information into his hungry brain for him to digest: updates, rumors, and secrets from all over the world.

Despite the vast amount of data rushing past on the display before him, the great dragon seemed almost bored, impatiently waiting for something to happen. He huffed a great sigh, sending small trickles of smoke pouring from his nostrils as he kept watch over the world through the magic of modern technology, thinking of the days when a magical mirror or pool would have served in place of the video wall. But such tools were not as quick or efficient as the power of the Matrix for processing information. Modern technology had its uses.

A musical tone interrupted the hubbub of the many display windows, and Lofwyr's eyes widened, his head lifting slightly from where it rested. A red indicator on the display flashed "incoming transmission." The dragon's lips curled slightly in an almost-smile that would have chilled the blood of any Saeder-Krupp employee present in the room. Lofwyr smiled only rarely. It always meant the dragon had found something interesting to him, and no one wanted to be the object of Lofwyr's interest.

The flashing indicator opened into another window on the video wall, displaying the calm, refined features of Jean-Claude Priault, chief justice of the Corporate Court and Lofwyr's employee.

"Greetings, Master," Priault said. Most modern people had trouble with Lofwyr's preferred title. Even the most pitiful wretch from the Barrens of Seattle or post-war Europe believed they were above calling anyone "master," but Priault managed the term quite well without becoming utterly servile in the process. It was one of the reasons Lofwyr liked the human and chose him to represent Saeder-Krupp on the Corporate Court: Priault was a good leader because he was such a capable follower. Lofwyr wished all humans were more like him.

The great dragon inclined his head at Priault's image, acknowledging him, then stretched his long neck up to its full

height, working out some of the kinks from lying still. Lofwyr preferred to discuss business in person whenever possible, but with the chief justice on board Zurich-Orbital that was not an option. Modern communications were most inconvenient for dragons, because they did not speak as humans did: using the lips and tongue. Those organs were best used for eating, in Lofwyr's opinion. Dragons spoke with the power of their magical brains, directly into the minds of others. Unfortunately, machines could not pick up the transmission of dragonspeech, so certain ... modifications were necessary to make use of electronic communication. A human translator was one option, but Lofwyr preferred to handle this matter personally.

With a slight wave of one great talon, Lofwyr's form began to shimmer and change. Like smoke, the body of the multi-ton dragon dissolved and assumed the shape of a man, tall and thin, with long, white hair swept back from a high forehead. He wore a finely tailored suit echoing the color of the dragon's own scales. He brushed an imaginary piece of lint from his sleeve before turning toward the screen where Priault's image waited.

Few humans had known anything of the great dragons' ability to assume a human form before Dunkelzahn demonstrated it to them. It was a violation of one of the many secrets of his kind, but Dunkelzahn had paid the price for his indiscretions and humanity remained uncertain if other great dragons possessed the same ability. The dragons weren't talking and people were reluctant to

question a dragon who didn't want to be questioned, which was fine with Lofwyr. He displayed his ability only in front of trusted servants like Priault. The rest of the time, Lofwyr acted through intermediaries and translators able to carry out his wishes without any need for him to assume an uncomfortable human form.

"What have you to report?" Lofwyr said in a deep voice as he strode closer to the display window. Human eyes were so poor that he wondered how the creatures saw anything at all.

The chief justice cleared his throat a bit. "Very little so

far," Priault said with a bit of a shrug. "We are at recess currently. Osborne has begun to present her case. What she has so far is flimsy and circumstantial. It is unclear whether Fuchi really has the evidence to back it up."

"They have," Lofwyr said. "It remains to be seen if they can use it properly. What are your thoughts on the tenor of the Court and Osborne's chances of success?"

Priault frowned a bit, his brow furrowed with deep lines. "The Court is concerned about Renraku," he began, choosing his words carefully. "Its growth needs to be checked, and I think the court will take advantage of any viable opportunity to do so. It depends on whether or not Fuchi's case is considered sufficient cause for the Court to act against Renraku in some way. Their success has not been anywhere near what Aztlan tried to do along the Pacific Rim, and we know how long it took the Court to decide to respond to that. Osborne will have to make it clear that Renraku is violating the concords of the Court and using means that could endanger us all. She is off to a good start, provided she backs it up with something more than rhetoric."

The dragon in human guise turned from the display and paced back a few steps, the click of his heels echoing loudly on the marble floor of the vast chamber. His hands were clasped behind his back.

"Very well," the dragon said. "Continue to support Osborne and Fuchi quietly and give her every opportunity to turn the Court against Renraku. If she is not able to do so or her evidence is not forthcoming, I may have to take a hand in the matter. But for now I am content to allow Fuchi to act against Renraku. If the two can be maneuvered into direct conflict, so much the better. I will consider a follow-through for the conclusion of this matter while you oversee the case. Continue to inform me of your progress."

Priault executed a bow before the camera. "Yes, Master," he said, then cut the connection.

Lofwyr paced back to the center of the room, tapping the palm of his hand. He reassumed his natural form, stretching languidly to work out the kinks, his powerful muscles rip-

pling under his scaled hide. He luxuriated in the cool surface of the marble, and curled up again to resume watching the displays on the video wall and to consider this new information to plot his next move. The matter of Renraku and Fuchi's case against them had taken up considerable amounts of the great dragon's attention.

And it was not healthy to be the object of Lofwyr's attention.

12

One of the duties of the shaman is to act as psycho-pomp and walker between the worlds. The shaman travels to the Underworld as well as the Upperworld for a variety of reasons; to escort the souls of the dead to their resting place and to seek wisdom from the spirits who live in the Underworld and bring it back to the people. Every shaman travels into the Underworld to fulfill the needs of the tribe and to maintain his or her power as a shaman by speaking with and learning from the spirits who dwell there. Although most Underworld journeys in modern times consist of astral travel to the metaplanes to draw on the wisdom to be learned there, modern shamans also undertake other kinds of

underworld journeys every day of their so-called "mundane " lives.

-from "Shamanic Traditions in the Twenty-first Century," a lecture given by Dr. Akiko Kano at Cal-Tech, California Free State, 2044

One of my duties as a shaman of the tribe is to travel to the Underworld of the Catacombs. Most of the people who want the secrets the Netwalkers have to sell live down there in the tunnels running beneath the city, some of them very old. The Catacombs date back to when the subway system in Boston was first being built and expanded. Over the years, many different tunnels were built. Subway tunnels, maintenance tunnels, sewer tunnels, and other conduits for daily necessities radiating under the streets of Boston, a whole world under the feet of the city.

Over the years some of the tunnels were lost, sealed off, or forgotten. New tunnels were build over, under, and around them, and the old remnants were found by street people needing shelter. The earthquake that shook the East Coast in 2005 leveled Manhattan, and also left many of the Boston tunnels ruined or abandoned, requiring the construction of new ones. The old tunnels and lost stations were declared unsafe and sealed off by the city government. They became home to refugees outside of the system, people like our tribe. Most of the tracks are above-ground in the Rox, too exposed to be of any use to the city now. So the tunnels into the Rox were among those abandoned. Nobody wants to come into the Rox, only to leave it, so there was no need to send trains along the tracks any more. The tunnels and the stations were left to the denizens of the Rox, just as were its buildings and streets. The crumbling concrete spans of old, above-ground train bridges are where we built and maintain the pirate satellite links to connect our tiny corner of the Matrix to the rest of the world. The ground-cable connections in the Rox are few and unreliable, damaged by the forces of nature and left to rot by the city workers who put them in place. Part of the work of our tribe is maintaining the web of fiber-optics stretching out from our territory and connecting us to the world. The satellite links give us the best Matrix access in the Rox, something valuable to the right people. One of the commodities the Netwalkers have to offer in trade for the things we need to survive and prosper.

The tunnels are the underworld of the Rox. When the Awakening came, the tunnels got new inhabitants. First were the strange, magical creatures from the darkness under the earth. The tribe has stories and legends about these creatures of the underground: giant worms burrowing through solid rock, devil rats, and other scavengers who feast on the carrion in the tunnels. Even more frightening are the tales of intelligent creatures of the dark tunnels: vampires, ghosts, and ghouls, like Crawley, the one working with the Tamanous. The monsters of myth and legend are real and prey on

the inhabitants of the Rox, hunting for the flesh, blood, and living essence they need to survive.

Tensions in the city drove many of its metahumans underground to hide from those who hate and fear them simply for how they look. Communities of orks, trolls, and dwarfs developed in the Catacombs, and tribes of meta-human and human outcasts banded together to create their own homes down there. The Netwalkers live above-ground, not in the darkness of the tunnels, but we make trips down into the Catacombs to bargain with its inhabitants for supplies and other necessities in underground bazaars set up in the abandoned stations. In return, we trade our skills with hardware and software and the knowledge we have acquired. I accompany Papa Lo and others on trips into the Catacombs and learn quickly about how to bargain, talk, and trade with the tunnel-folk.

The Undermarket is one of the places we visit often. The tunnels leading into the Rox are abandoned. The city government and the corporations can't be bothered with maintaining access to an area where they feel none is needed, so

the Rox stations and tunnels are left to rust and decay. Taken over and transformed by the people of the Rox, they are our gateway into the underworld and the treasures of the Undermarket as well as a pathway into other parts of the plex, provided one is willing to brave the security guards watching the stations and tunnel entrances and the creatures living in the dark recesses of the underground, not to mention the danger of being caught in front of an oncoming subway train too far from a sheltering alcove. Many tunnel-dwellers die that way.

Set up in one of the abandoned stations, the Market is a bazaar where different folk from the Rox and elsewhere in the city buy and sell, carrying on a whole economic system totally separate from the government and the corporations. Many of the merchants live in the tunnels themselves; orks, trolls, and stranger creatures cast aside by the rest of the world, forced to hide in the safety of the dark underground. The Market pays protection to gangs and tribes in the Rox,

and we all recognize the importance of the Market and protect it. The Market is neutral ground, no trouble is allowed there.

But trouble still happens from time to time. That is why warriors accompany us down into the tunnels to the Under-market. There are plenty of people in the underground desperate enough to break the law in hopes of obtaining something they can sell or use to make it through another day. These are the desperate and hopeless who have abandoned all tradition and understanding. "They are the real savages of the Rox, not us," Papa Lo says. Without tradition and honor, we are nothing. I know it is true, it is something I feel I have believed in for a long time.

Shadowrunners come to the Market from time to time to get things they need. They are outcasts like we are, living outside the law and the shelter of the corporations and the government. Like us, they do not exist in the eyes of society. Like us, they live in the spaces abandoned by the rest of the world. Unlike us, they serve the corporations, working as their agents in the shadows to accomplish the work that is too dangerous to be carried out in the light. Shadowrunners are the corporations' warriors and agents, fighting a secret war most people never even know about, provided the runners do their jobs well. I encounter as many Shadowrunners in the Matrix as I do in the Market, if not more. The Matrix is very important to Shadowrunners, since it is where the corporations store their valuable information. If we can acquire the data, it is worth something.

We are in the tunnels one day when the trouble begins. I have been going to the Market long enough for Papa Lo and the tribal elders to trust me to go it alone. I am the oldest of the shamans, which gives me the right and the duty to take on more responsibility. A small party of warriors accompanies me when I speak to the merchants and bargain for the supplies the tribe needs. We have some useful information, security codes and diagrams acquired from a Fuchi corporate system, that some people are interested in acquiring. We are promised food, medicine, and blankets for the data.

I am always taken in by the sights and sounds of the Market. Set up in a long-abandoned station of the subway, it has flat concrete platforms lining a deep trench where the trains once ran. The platforms are covered over with lean-to tents, small booths, counters, and other kiosks. Curtains and folding screens make temporary walls between the stalls and create shadowy nooks for talking business and making deals. Over the dark trench of the train tracks are laid heavy boards and pieces of construction plastic in an odd sort of web to create bridges across the tracks to the platform on the other side. The empty pit is used for storage or as a place to conduct quiet meetings under the makeshift bridges. Small scavengers scurry and squeak under the bridges as you cross over them.

The place is filled with different people hawking their wares, examining the merchandise on sale, or conducting their own private business. Some live in

the underground, others in the Rox, while a few are visitors from other parts of the city: shadowrunners handling their own affairs and, it is said, corporate agents and others doing business in the underground for the goods and services that can only be found there.

The fixer I need to deal with for the trade is named Milo, a fat, pale dwarf who sweats even in the coolness of the tunnels. He reminds me of one of the little rodents that live down here: beady, dark eyes darting nervously from side to side at the slightest sound. Spotting him as soon as we enter the Marketplace, I make my way toward him, followed by my entourage of tribal warriors. We cross the rusting metal stream of the rails on a wobbly wooden bridge of pallets to Mile's small kiosk. A folding wooden pegboard behind him holds some weapons, tools, and computer hardware. None of it works, of course. This is only the showroom. Milo is careful to keep his valuable goods stashed in safe places: hidey-holes in the tunnels of the underground or elsewhere in the Rox, I don't know where for sure.

"Hoi, Babel," the dwarf says as I approach the booth. He's sitting on a tall stool cleaning a pistol, a Colt Man-hunter, with an oily rag. The huge gun is nearly the length

of Milo's forearm. He smiles to reveal a row of yellowed teeth peeking through his ragged brown beard.

"Hoi, Milo. I have the data you asked for. It wasn't easy to come by, either." "Of course not. If it was, I wouldn't have asked you to get it."

I smile at the compliment. "Flattery will get you nowhere," I say.

Milo's smile broadens and he gives a hearty laugh. "Can't blame a chummer for trying. Don't worry, the goods are all set as we agreed. As soon as I verify the data's good, I'll send word out to begin moving things along."

I nod and reach into my synthdenim vest to withdraw an optical chip. I lay it on the counter with my palm over it, then slide it toward Milo before lifting my hand away. The dwarf picks up the chip slowly, not wanting to appear too eager. He pulls a battered chip-reader from under the counter and slots the chip. The reader's drive unit whirs a bit as the lasers read the optical data off the chip, and it scrolls across the small display screen. Milo's brow furrows and he scrolls through the data, giving an occasional "hmmm" deep in his throat. The warriors have fanned out and remain alert for any signs of trouble. I don't expect any. Milo deals fairly with us.

"Data looks good," the dwarf says, pulling a cloth from his pocket to mop his sodden brow and brush aside a few dark strands of hair plastered to his forehead. "You'll get the goods right away."

I smile and nod. "A pleasure doing business with you."

Just as I turn to leave, Milo clears his throat. "Babel?"

I stop and turn back toward him. "Yes?" I ask.

"This might be the last deal I can cut for a little while. Things have been going on in the underground, seems like something big might be going down and, well, I don't want to get caught in the middle, so I'm playing it careful for a while."

"What's going down?" The dwarf has my full attention. I haven't heard anything about this.

Milo shakes his head. "Can't say for sure, but you should

tell Papa Lo I told you things could get ... busy around here. He should know."

I nod. Milo, like most fixers, lives off his complex network of connections. He probably knows people involved in what is going on in the shadows and can't reveal anything about their activities. At the same time, by passing on a warning to Papa Lo and the Netwalkers, he might curry additional favor in the future, should everything work out.

"I'll tell Papa you said so." Milo nods and goes back to cleaning the Manhunter.

The dwarf's announcement of trouble brewing in the underground and the Boston

shadows has its effect on our party. On our way out of the Market, I have a strong feeling of being watched and I tell the warriors to keep alert. They are already on edge.

Even so, we are nearly taken by surprise when surrounded by a group of hideous and twisted figures coming out of a side tunnel. They carry different weapons. Some have blades or clubs, others just bent and twisted pieces of metal with spikes and sharp edges. The warriors close in a ring around me as one of the dark figures steps out of the shadows and smiles at me, revealing a mouth full of sharp yellow teeth.

"Remember me, meat?" the ghoul says, waving the stump of his right arm. The hand I sliced off has been replaced with a barbed hook gleaming dully in the tunnel-light. "Someone wants to see you," he sneers. "Take them." The tunnel-dwellers howl and charge at us.

There is a loud crack and a flash of blue light as Ricardo strikes out with his stun-baton, sending a powerful jolt of electricity through one of the onrushing ghouls. It drops to the dirty concrete floor of the tunnel, gasping for breath as one of its companions, a huge ghoul covered in bony lumps of armor, leaps in and stabs Ricardo with a long spear of bent metal. The stun baton flashes with a crack and the scent of ozone. The ghoul howls in anger, twisting on the metal spear. Ricardo screams in agony and drops to the ground, red blood pumping from his chest.

The other warriors use their weapons: shock batons and

knives for the most part. The melee is too confused and the ghouls too numerous for them to use the few guns we have without risking hitting each other in the dark and crowded tunnel.

The ghouls outnumber us at least three to one and they are quickly overwhelming the warriors. I see one of the others go down under three ghouls who bear him to the ground and rip the weapon from his hands. His name is Joshua, and he paints some of the best designs of the Net-walkers' totem spirits. But I don't have time to find out if he is alive or dead. I feel the same cold feeling in the depths of my spirit from the night when I was taken by the Tamanous, and the ghoul's words echo in my mind: the meat is always best when it's fresh. Then a ghoul conies at me, snarling and hissing like a wild animal.

The monofilament-edged razor snaps out from my forearm, and I slash at the onrushing thing in a blur of movement. The tip of the blade rips across its face, parting flesh and showing white bone. The ghoul shrieks and falls to one side, clutching its torn face. Another just as quickly comes at me and I slash at it, but not quite fast enough. The ghoul's filthy claws rake across my side, leaving a trail of pain behind them. The light armor in my vest protects me from the worst of it, but the force of the blow puts me off balance. That's when Crawley decides to make his move.

He lunges forward with a slash of his hook-hand, and I back-peddle out of the way as it makes an arc through the air near where my stomach was.

"What do you want?" I ask as Crawley and I circle each other, each looking for an opening. He only snarls and bares his teeth, like a maddened animal. My mind races, looking for an explanation for the attack while I try to defend myself. Is Crawley just looking for revenge? He said someone "wanted to see me."

The other ghoul steps in at me again and a jab of my blade keeps him at bay. I hear one of the other warriors cry out in agony and the sickening sound of splintering bone. The noise makes me break one of the cardinal rules taught to me by Hunter: I look toward the sound and away from

my opponent. Only for a split-second, but that's long enough.

A wiry body crashes into me and bears us both to the ground, pinning my arms. I struggle to bring my arm-spur to bear against Crawley, but I don't have the leverage this time. He knows to avoid it now. The cold concrete floor comes up in a rush and the wind is knocked out of me with a crack, leaving my sore

lungs gasping for breath. Something hard and metal hits the side of my head, snapping it to the side. I taste blood in my mouth and see stars. I look up to see the savage death-mask of Crawley's face leering above me, lips curled back from his sharp teeth.

"Goodnight, meat," he whispers as he raises his remaining fist. It comes down on me and then everything fades and goes black, like a computer switched off. Shutdown.

13

To travel to the otherworlds, the metaplanes of astral space, an initiate must first pass the trial of the Dweller on the Threshold. This mysterious entity may be a creature living on the narrow, misty border between the etheric plane and the dark depths of astral space or it may be nothing more than the living embodiment of the magician's own subconscious fears and insecurities trying to sway the traveller from his course. In the end, it makes little difference which is the case. The Dweller always challenges the traveller at the Threshold of the metaplanes themselves. The Dweller seems to know every dark secret, every hidden thought, the magician has ever had, and it uses the knowledge to try and convince the questor to turn back and give up the journey. Passing the Dweller on the Threshold and the dark revelations it offers is very difficult for new initiates to conquer. Little do they know it is only the beginning. -from *Otherworld Quest: Metaplanar Experiences*, by Francis O'Rourke, ThD., UCLA Press, California Free State, 2054

I'm almost getting used to the idea of waking up in strange places from time to time. This time I wake in the depths of the underworld, one of the Lost Stations of the T system. It's like the Market, but is a place I've never seen before and never want to see again. Once quite proud and elegant, the old art-deco platform and archways are now corroded by a century or more of dust and decay, the black and white

tile floor cracked and discolored. I can smell the strong musty odors of rust, dust, and oil in the dimness of the place.

There is a shuffling sound as I stir and open my eyes. I see shadowy forms moving in the dim light cast from the glowing lichens and mosses clinging to the dank tunnel walls, shedding a pale greenish light over everything. The dark shapes move closer to me with a shuffling movement and hoarse whispers in some guttural tongue. I cannot make out their words, only the rasping sounds of the voices. My vision begins to clear and I see white, sightless eyes staring back at me. I scramble to my feet, and crawl backward, away from the leering ghouls until my back presses against the cold wall, fuzzy with glowing moss.

I tense my wrist, preparing to unsheath my arm-blade when another figure cuts through the knot of shadowy forms around me. It's Crawley. He pushes aside some of the others with harsh words and threatening waves of his hook-hand. "Step aside, you maggots!" he says, his voice loud in the enclosed underground. The other ghouls scatter before him with grunts and whines of protest, more like animals than intelligent creatures. Crawley turns his blind eyes on me and smiles his predator's smile. He levels a snub-nosed pistol at me from his good hand.

"Get up," he says, gesturing ahead of him with the gun. "Mama is waiting to see you."

I know of Mama, of course. Everyone who goes anywhere near the Catacombs knows about her, but very few people ever see her. The stories say she styles herself the ruler of the Boston underworld and that everything which happens in the Catacombs reaches her ears sooner or later. She is a power-broker and deal-maker, with contacts and connections forming a complex web of influence throughout the shadows. Her influence makes fixers like Milo look truly small-time. Mama is also reputed to be a hideous witch who calls upon dark powers and feasts on human and elven flesh to sustain herself. Maybe she is the source of the rumors Milo mentioned. Is Mama planning some kind

of move to consolidate her power in the underworld and make good her claims of rulership? If so, what would she want with me? Influence over the Net walkers? I see no choice but to do as Crawley says, so I let him guide me from the station platform toward one of the dark side tunnels. When we reach the dark pit of the train tracks, the ghoul gestures with his gun. I look down into the trench and back at the ghoul, then jump down among the rusting rails, broken ties, and loose gravel. Crawley follows and prods me in the direction of another dark tunnel with the snub-nose of the pistol.

The walls of the tunnel are decorated with strange totem figures made from broken parts of cars, trains, and machines mixed with fur, bone, and other refuse. The figures stare out from the walls with their broken headlight eyes and rusted chrome mouths like guardians who watch all who come and go from this place. These are the dark and secret totems of the city's rusting underground and I silently pay respect to their dominion.

Crawley tells me where to take a turn off to the left into yet another narrow tunnel. The tunnel looks too narrow to be part of the train system. Perhaps it is a siding or a maintenance tunnel, I can't say for sure. The tunnel ends at a heavy steel door set into the wall. A wheel is set in the middle of the door to open it, like an old-fashioned airlock of some sort. Crawley steps up to it, keeping the gun trained on me, and I consider running. I might be able to bolt down the short tunnel and around the corner before the ghoul can get a shot off.

I quickly dismiss the idea, however. Even if I could avoid being shot, I have no idea where I am in the underworld or how I can get out of the tunnels here. Crawley and his ghoul companions would hunt me down easily in the darkness, tracking as they do by scent and magic. Easier to go along and find out why Mama wants to see me while I learn more about my situation and what the old woman wants. I might be able to bring that knowledge back to the tribe with me, if I survive.

Crawley raps sharply on the door with his hook, once,

twice, three times. The sound echoes in the tunnel and, after the third rap, there is a squeak and the wheel on the door turns. The door swings outward, and a huge troll steps back from the doorway.

Crawley gestures with his gun and I step through the door, followed by the ghoul. He almost runs into me as I stop short to look up at the massive troll standing on the other side of the door. Over three meters tall, his skin is like a rocky cliffside. He—at least I think it's a he—is covered with lumpy deposits of bone on the surface of his skin, forming a kind of natural armor, as pale and white as the shell of some kind of underground beetle. His eyes are small and pink, staring out from under beetled brows topped with long and twisting horns that look formidably sharp at the ends. His body is squat and heavily muscled, and I'm certain he is easily capable of crushing me with one hand.

"Keep moving, meat." Crawley's sharp comment pulls my attention away from the pale giant standing in front of me. "You don't want to keep Mama waiting." I turn away from the troll and begin walking down the brick-lined corridor, aware of Crawley and the troll falling into step behind me. The way is lit by flickering bulbs set into brackets in the wall-like torches. They cast a wan, yellow light over the hall, but brighter than the dim phosphorescence from outside.

"Don't speak to Mama unless you're spoken to, if you value your hide, boy," Crawley says in a loud whisper. He sneers. "And be sure to call her 'grandmother.' She likes that. If you call her anything else, she's likely to have you flayed alive. Not that I would mind the entertainment ... call it dinner theatre." I shudder at the idea of what Crawley and his pack would consider entertaining, or dinner.

The hall ends in a wine-dark curtain of velvet that is surprisingly clean and intact. I gently push it aside and step past it. Crawley follows, then the

troll squeezes his bulk through the narrow doorway into a place like something from out of the distant past. The room is fairly large and lined in brick. Several tall, brick archways are filled with dark, flowing curtains much like the one we entered through.

Numerous candles set into candelabras and lanterns hang from the ceiling. Real candles, not electric bulbs like those in the hall. They shed a warm golden light in the room, which does little to chase away the chill and the dampness of the place. On the floor is a heavy Oriental rug stretching nearly from wall to wall. There are several pieces of furniture that would not have been out of place in the house of somebody's grandmother: a red velvet settee, several overstuffed chairs, and a few small tables of dark wood and clawed feet. Bunches of fragrant herbs hang from racks along the wall, filling the room with a strong scent of musk and spice. On one of the small tables sits an antique record-player holding what looks like an actual vinyl record grinding out some slow and quiet classical music with a great number of violins and mournful cellos. I don't recognize the piece.

One of the curtains on the far side of the room is lifted to the side by a skeletal hand, and then Mama enters. She is small, probably no higher than my shoulder, and painfully thin. Her body is wrapped in a long, dark dress, and a dark-colored shawl covers her head and shoulders. Only her hands and face are visible and they are old and wrinkled. Her bony hands, pale and touched with dark splotches, clutch the ends of the shawl while her face is like a fairytale witch. It is long and pointed, with a sharp nose and chin. Her thin lips part to reveal sharp and yellowed teeth. Her eyes are small and dark beneath pale brows, not pale and lifeless like Crawley's, but almost as cold, like lumps of coal. Wisps of brittle, white hair escape from her kerchief and she sweeps the room with her gaze.

Despite her aura of great age, this crone is not feeble or senile. She moves with a wiry grace, like a huntress or a spider negotiating her web. Her dark eyes have a fierce intelligence and a gleam that seems to catch and reflect the glow of the candles. I feel her staring at me as if she were looking into the depths of my spirit to learn my every secret.

"Well, well, well," she says in a crooning voice, caressing each word and drawing it out. "What have we here?"

There is a slight accent to her speech that I cannot identify, like something from the Old World that cannot be overcome, even with years of speaking English fluently. She glides over toward me as if barely touching the ground and brushes my cheek with the caress of one bony hand. Her skin is dry and brittle like the many old, yellowed news-faxes scattered over the streets and alleys of the Rox. I fight down a shudder and stand perfectly still.

"What is your name, boychik?" she asks.

"I am called Babel." I pause, then add, "Grandmother."

Mama's lips purse and her sunken cheeks become even more hollow. Her mockery of an almost girlish pout is hideous. "What a polite boy. A lovely boy. Is that your only name, Babel?"

"The only name I can give."

"Can give or will give?" she asks with a tone of menace.

"Can give," I reply. "That is the only name I have, the only one with any meaning for me now." That is not entirely true. There is the street name, Rook, I once used. And I am still curious about my other name, the name I had from my life before the streets, before I found the Net-walkers and became a shaman.

"Names have power," Mama says, speaking as much to the shadows as to me. She turns her gaze from me and begins pacing slowly toward the phonograph. "Once all people kept a secret name that they shared with no one and another they told to the world. Discover a man's secret name, and you held power over him. Do you believe that, boy?" She spins suddenly and fixes me with her dark gaze again.

I nod. "Yes. Names have power. I have learned many secret names in the world of the Matrix. Passwords, systems, and codes."

The old crone waves her thin hand in a dismissive gesture, turning back to caress the ornate metal horn of the phonograph. "Smoke and shadows, mere child's games with no touch of real Power." She waves her hand, and a darkling sprite, formed from candle flame and shadow, leaps from one of the candelabras on the table nearby. It

flutters into the air on burning wings and I feel a quick stab of jealousy at the sight of it. When the Sixth World began almost fifty years ago, the power of magic returned to the world. Some people suddenly gained the ability—the Talent it is called—to shape the magical forces flowing around the Earth, using them to cast spells and summon spirits. I know when I see the fire sprite leap from the candle flame at Mama's command that the gift, the power of magic, is something I have always wanted. Dim memories stir inside me of dreams of becoming a powerful sorcerer; casting spells and binding spirits to my will. But then, isn't that what I am now? I consider my apprenticeship and my initiation into the Netwalkers, all I have learned in the other-world of the Matrix, and draw myself up to face the old crone.

"I have seen power in the electron world, grandmother. I have danced with spirits and fought soulless creatures as dark and cold as any demon. I have taken their secrets from them and put them to my own use. That is real." The old hag smiles her hideous smile and looks at me, looks through me. With a flick of her wrist, the small sprite vanishes in a puff of flame and a small popping sound, making the room seem a bit darker and colder.

"Is that so?" she says, like she is humoring a little child. "Do you believe you have touched real power, little machine-worker? Do you think you have danced with real spirits? Do you believe you know what it is to fight a true demon? Do you think you know power to equal the secrets of the Arts and Crafts of a humble old woman ... Michael?"

The sound of the name goes through me like a power surge, stiffening my muscles and making me gasp slightly as I look at the dark humor in those eyes. That name, that name has meaning for me. Somewhere in the back of my mind the thought blooms like a dark flower. She knows, she knows who I am.

"What? What did you say?" I hear myself whisper.

"You heard me, Michael. Why? Does that name have some meaning to you, to Babel the mighty technoshaman?"

You said you had no other name. Do you, Michael? Is Babel the only name with meaning for you?" I hesitate and cannot seem to find my voice. I only hear the name repeating over and over in my head. Michael, Michael, Michael. I know it does have meaning to me. I know it is my other name. Mama is right. Knowing a man's true name does give you power over him. I have to know what else she knows about me. No matter what she wants.

"How do you know that name?" I ask, and Mama smiles at me like I am a schoolboy who has just asked a patently obvious question.

"I know because it is my business to know," she says. "I know a great many things, my boychik. I know all that goes on in my realm and many of the things that go on above. Knowledge is power, something you should know well. Didn't your Papa Lo teach you the value of knowledge and secrets?"

I nod somewhat dumbly.

"You are quite valuable yourself, Michael. Word has reached my ears from many quarters of those who are interested in you."

I think immediately of the sorts of people who might want to know about me. Who could they be? Friends? Family? Enemies? Mama reads all of my thoughts and feelings as if I spoke aloud.

"I do not fear the spirits you traffic with, little Babel, the spirits of the machine. Their power is limited and nothing compared to the ancient powers of magic. Still, they are not without power of their own and can still make some profit for me and my children here. That is why I have found it useful to deal

with your tribe from time to time through others. Information is valuable, and I traffic in all things of value. Your corporate masters want you back, but they don't yet know what I know. They don't know where you are or what you have become. It is knowledge they will pay handsomely for, but not yet. In fact, you can be worth more to me than even that, you will be able to make your grandmother a tidy sum, yes indeed. But I do not wish you to be

troubled, my boychik. You must rest and conserve your strength. You will need it in the times ahead."

Her dark eyes focus on me and I feel a deep lethargy pour down my body like the heavy, honeyed words she croons.

"Yes, my boy, that's the way, rest your tired eyes and sleep, sleep the sleep of the innocent, the sleep of the little lambs, sleep, sleep ..."

I do not hear the rest of Mama's crooning song as I slip into a deep and dreamless blackness, wondering if I will awaken again to discover the truth of who I am.

14

As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from afar country

-Proverbs 25:25

Alone in the dimness of a private office in the Mandala Technologies office building in the Boston sprawl, Miles Lanier, member of the Renraku Computer Systems Board of Directors and former Director of Internal Security for Fuchi Industrial Technologies, sat behind a desk rolling the slim datacord of the gleaming neural jack in his hand. It was quite late, and all of the regular employees had long gone home, leaving the hall outside silent and dark. As he turned the datacord over and over, Lanier thought about the strange turn of events that had brought him to where he was now.

He had been a military man once, a master sharpshooter. That was in a time when the major factions of the world needed a lot of military people to settle their differences. Miles Lanier was the kind of man who specialized in troubleshooting, at first literally and later with more subtlety, but with no less precision than in his sniper days. He rose in the ranks to become an officer in the military and put his tactical skills to good use.

Then the world changed and the military wasn't solving the problems of people of power and influence. A quieter approach was called for, so Lanier went into the business of "security," which was a softer name they used for military forces working for the megacorporations, the great powers of the world. He became Director of Internal Security for

Fuchi Industrial Electronics and prided himself on the efficiency with which his department was run. Fuchi's security was respected. Everyone knew the corporation wasn't to be trifled with. Lanier continued to do what he did before: find problems that were developing for his employer and eliminate them before they could become a serious threat. It was what he did best.

Then the dragon changed everything.

Lanier was never much of a believer in the idea that the return of magic to the world had re-written history. Certainly, the Awakening had put incredible power into the hands of people who previously had none, like the Native Americans and some of the other tribal peoples in the world. And they had used it against the governments that had formerly oppressed them. Used it to reclaim some of their lost land and lost heritage. There were magicians walking the streets, spirits appearing out of nothingness, and dragons flying in the skies, but Lanier believed the Awakening had changed very little in the end.

Some land got shuffled and some borders redrawn. Some new professions were created and a few new security concerns were raised, but when the dust from the Awakening began to settle, the world was still run the same way it had always been. People, corporations, and governments with power did as they pleased to those without it, and people like Miles Lanier still found work

taking care of the problems of those powerful entities. Things hadn't changed much, but only because there were people-beings-who played the game of power and control better than any mega-corporation or government ever imagined. Beings whose existence was a kind of chess game on a grand scale. Creatures like dragons.

A dragon had used his vast wealth to buy his way onto the airwaves more than forty years ago, coming live into the living rooms of people all over the world. Somehow, nobody really questioned that a creature out of myth wanted more than anything to have his own trideo show broadcast into millions of homes. In fact, most people thought it was rather cute. It made a creature weighing tons, with a maw capable

of crushing and swallowing a man in one bite, into a cuddly media icon almost overnight. People began to lose their primal fear of a monster out of legend and consider him almost a member of the family.

He must have been planning it for a very long time, Lanier thought as he watched the reflections off the desk lamp gleam from the chrome datalink. But, then, what is forty years to a creature who might have been . . . what? Hundreds? Thousands of years old? No one knew for sure.

It was a brilliant strategy. The dragon-Dunkelzahn was his name, the kind of name a friendly dragon from a fairy tale might have-became the darling of the media and had a reputation as "the friendliest dragon in the world." He was the only one of his kind to actually deign to talk to the small, fragile creatures living around him, and he earned the trust of the people who saw him, or at least something very like it. The kind of trust people give to characters they see on their favorite tridshows.

So when the dragon decided to apply for citizenship to the United Canadian American States and to move his vast lair to Prince Edward Island, who could possibly object? Who wouldn't want the coup of having the world's most famous and friendly dragon as one of their citizens? Not to mention his incredible wealth and influence. The UCAS government practically fell all over itself to grant Dunkelzahn citizenship. It was an election year, and a photo opportunity not to be missed: the President "shaking hands" with a gleaming, silver and blue-scaled dragon on the White House lawn. That was the setup move and still nobody saw the checkmate coming.

When the election turned into the biggest political scandal of the century and everyone's faith in the government was shattered, who better to restore hope to a defeated and battered nation than a creature of magic and fantasy? When Dunkelzahn offered the impossible idea of a dragon running for the highest office in the UCAS, who wouldn't stop and think to himself for a moment, "why the frag not?" It was almost too easy, and Lanier had predicted from the moment the news of Dunkelzahn's candidacy broke that they

would have to start renovating the White House, and he was right.

The thing Lanier didn't see, that nobody foresaw, was what happened the night of Dunkelzahn's victory, when the dragon-in human guise-departed a party at the Watergate Hotel, stepped into his presidential limousine, and then vanished in a fiery explosion only blocks away from the hotel, leaving nothing but a huge crater, a livid scar in the skin of the highway, to mark his passing. Maybe Dunkelzahn foresaw it, Lanier thought to himself. Or maybe there is someone better at playing the game than even a great dragon. Whatever the case, Dunkelzahn wasn't finished playing yet. Even though the dragon was dead, his treasure, his vast horde, still existed. His will was read to a stunned nation, and the legendary treasure of a dragon combined with a financial empire a corporate raider would envy was distributed to Dunkelzahn's beneficiaries, including Miles Lanier.

Lanier had never dreamed of being a beneficiary of Dunkelzahn's will. He'd met the dragon only once, during his presidential campaign, a goodwill meeting on behalf of Fuchi. A remarkable conversationalist, Dunkelzahn had inquired after Lanier's background and seemed familiar with much of his work with Fuchi, much

to Lanier's surprise. The whole time they talked, Lanier had the strange feeling that the great dragon could look straight into his mind and soul and read him like a book. It was a strange feeling of being exposed to Dunkelzahn's scrutiny.

In his will, Dunkelzahn left Miles Lanier all of his stock in Renraku Computer Systems, enough to give Lanier a seat on the board of directors and increase his personal net worth by a billion nuyen. The day the will was read, Lanier packed up his office while Fuchi scrambled to change their security protocols-the protocols he had designed-before he could get out the door with them. He smiled faintly, recalling the chaos in the halls of Fuchi HQ over the announcement of his resignation.

Lanier had been on the Renraku board for over a year, and they were only now beginning to believe he wasn't a plant from Fuchi, that the dragon's grand political schemes

and fiery death weren't somehow all staged solely for the purpose of putting one man in a position to betray them, so great was their arrogance. Lanier didn't claim to understand Dunkelzahn's motivations any better than anyone else. Who could say why a creature like a dragon did anything?

Lanier worked hard for Renraku and did what he did best. He got rid of Renraku's problems, large and small, with surgical precision and skill. He also got rid of people who opposed him with the same skill. It was a ruthlessness the other members of the board and Renraku's highest executives had learned to understand and respect. Lanier made sure of that. Now he sat in the chair his ambition and good fortune had made for him, thinking about his next move in the game.

He wasn't looking forward to the conversation he needed to have, but there was no avoiding it, and time was of the essence. He let his breath out with a long sigh and slid the connector home into the dataport behind his ear, settling it there with a comfortable click. His headware immediately interfaced with the sophisticated communications system built into the desktop, and a virtual display superimposed itself on Lanier's vision, buttons and data-readouts floating in space in front of him.

He reached out and manipulated the virtual controls to set up the isolation protocols for the commlink. His military days had taught him the importance of protecting communications. Especially when you're behind enemy lines, he thought with a grimace. Once he was satisfied that the scrambling and encryption systems were online, he waited.

He didn't have to wait long before receiving the signal of an incoming call. He reached out and tapped the Receive button floating in space to his right and the call connected. There was a brief shower of static in his field of vision as the encryption systems kicked in and negotiated with each other back and forth over the fiber-optic line. Then an image shimmered into place on the opposite side of the desk from Lanier.

The man who appeared, chair and all, was dressed in an immaculate, tailored suit from one of the finest designers in

Paris. Lanier knew because he owned a couple of them himself. The visitor's short dark hair was swept back from a face with aristocratic European features, features Lanier remembered well. The imagery was perfect, down to the detail of the threads of his suit and the individual strands of hair. Lanier would have sworn the other man was actually in the room with him instead of being simply a virtual projection, but that came as no surprise. There was nobody in the world better at virtual-reality technology than Fuchi Industrial Electronics, and the image was as real as their tech could make it (which was "realer than reality," if you believed their ads). The man who sat across from Miles Lanier was Richard Villiers, CEO of that megacorporation. He was also Lanier's former boss and his good friend.

"Hello, Richard," Lanier said with a genuine smile. "It's been a long time." Villiers nodded, but the smile he offered in return was only the ghost of one.

Lanier could see that stress had worn heavily on his old friend. There was more gray in the dark hair, which Villiers did not bother to hide with cosmetic or magical treatments or even alterations to his virtual image. There were a few more lines around his eyes and mouth, and he looked tired. Lanier saw instantly that things at the highest level of Fuchi weren't going well. His ability to read Richard's mood and intent with nothing more than a glance was one of the things that had made Lanier so valuable to the Fuchi CEO, both as head of Internal Security and especially now.

"Too long, Miles," Villiers returned, then he leaned forward in his chair and took on an air that was all business. There was no time for pleasantries.

"Are we secure?" he asked.

Lanier gave one of his trademark shrugs. "As secure as possible," he said.

"With some of Renraku's capabilities, who can say?"

Villiers gave a low "hrmmm" of agreement. "Do you have what we need?" he asked. Lanier leaned back a bit in his chair and rested his steepled fingers against his chin, a gesture some found arrogant, but which always gave him time to think and carefully plan his responses.

"I don't know yet for sure. From his story, our boy is clearly one of these 'otaku,' or at least he thinks he is. We've gotten some unusual neural scans, and he does have some very high-grade cybernetic modifications. We're working on tracing them now. They might be Renraku or they might not. It's not likely they would have left the trademarks and serial numbers on them, and Renraku has been putting out a lot of new stuff lately. It won't be easy to track down."

"That's just the point, isn't it?" Villiers said, looking Lanier in the eye.

"Renraku has been putting out a lot of new patents, designs, and technology lately. Too damn much. It just doesn't fit what we know about their capabilities. It contradicts all the predictions and models I pay the marketing department so much money to develop. Renraku used to be so predictable you could set your watch by them, Miles. They were triple-A, but they had a certain pattern to them that we'd learned to anticipate. Now nothing is like we predicted and Renraku is breathing down our necks. You know that the Yamanas want me removed as CEO?"

"They've wanted that ever since you got the job."

"Yes, but now they might actually have a cause to rally around. We're losing market share for the first time in years and Renraku is starting to beat us at our own game. That hurts the bottom line and that's the one damn thing the Japanese can agree on. It's turning into a mob scene at the board meetings, Miles, and the mob is going to start howling for somebody's blood."

Lanier tapped his fingers against his chin as he considered the implications. He hadn't known it was that bad, but Fuchi was good at keeping internal matters internal, and Lanier had definitely been out of touch for a while. Fuchi had always been a house divided, made up of the powerful families that controlled the megacorporation. Two of them, the Yamanas and the Nakitomis, were Japanese industrial families who'd provided much of the capitol and investment money to create the Fuchi empire. The third, Villiers, was the business genius who had made Fuchi the top corporation in its field and kept it there. Feuds and infighting for control over Fuchi brewed all the time between the three

families, only now it looked like Villiers' seeming inability to slow Renraku's runaway growth was uniting the other families against him. Villiers controlled more of Fuchi than any one man, but it was still possible the Japanese could hurt him if they got their act together.

"That kid is the only chink in Renraku's armor we've been able to find so far," Villiers continued when Lanier remained silent. "We know Renraku arranged for people to infiltrate the otaku." Villiers left unsaid the fact that Fuchi knew about Renraku's plan only because Lanier had been involved in the planning stages of it. Lanier's skills as an intelligence gatherer had

been too useful for Renraku to pass up. They had never revealed to him why they'd wanted someone to infiltrate a scruffy tribe of techno-mystics living in the Barrens, but they did call upon Lanier's expertise to help set up the means to do so.

"This kid has the profile to be the agent the corp chose," Villiers said. "If he is, then he could be the proof we need that Renraku has been overstepping their bounds. We need evidence that this is part of the project you've told me about, the plan to use the otaku to get leverage over the Court. We need to get him to name names and give us the information Renraku sent him to look for."

"Part of the problem," Lanier said, carefully choosing his words, "is that we can't get any leads on our subject. We've run all of the usual identification checks on his fingerprints, retinal patterns, and DNA traces. There are no records in any of the national databanks or SIN files we've checked. Our mystery otaku just doesn't exist in any of them."

"Could Renraku have erased those records?" Villiers asked, not hiding the note of concern.

"All of them? In every database in the world?" Lanier shook his head. "I doubt it. If Renraku has that kind of ability, then this little game might as well be over. More likely he was born SINless. There are plenty of blanks who aren't in the records who they might have recruited. He could even be a shadowrunner."

Lanier waited for Villiers to say something. When he

didn't, he went on. "The other problem is that the kid's memory may really and truly be fragged up. Whether it was conditioning Renraku gave him or something that happened with the otaku, we just don't know yet. If it is, then we might not be able to get anything useful out of him. Unraveling the mess of his wetware is going to be difficult and take time."

"Time is something we don't have a lot of," Villiers said, starting to look more worried. "The push is already on with the Corporate Court. If our case is going to be successful, we have to get evidence fast enough to present it to the Court before Renraku can make some kind of counter-move. That means doing some of this operation on the fly and gambling we can get what we need in time to make use of it. It's a big risk we're taking here, Miles, a high-wire act with no net. There's no margin for error."

"You don't have to remind me of that," Lanier countered. "My position is probably the most precarious of all." Lanier had worked hard to get even a modicum of the Renraku board of directors' trust, and he knew if Renraku knew what he was up to they'd have had him killed long ago. And they still might. "I'm not so sure of that." Villiers' voice was cold. "Your seat on the board might protect you if this thing blows up in our faces. After all, if this operation fails and our case against Renraku collapses, you're still on the board of the corporation that's number one with a bullet. If it works, then you stand to be the one who knows when to jump before Renraku's ship sinks. It sounds to me like you've got all of your bases pretty well covered."

Lanier was shocked at Villiers' comment. Even though it was delivered in a cold and even tone, to Lanier's trained ear it clearly carried a note of desperation. After all they'd been through, how could Richard even think to question his loyalty? How could he doubt Lanier's loyalty?

Villiers leaned back in his chair, visibly settling himself. "I'm sorry, Miles. That was uncalled for. This whole mess has me on edge. We're taking a serious chance to get this whole thing cleared up."

Lanier leaned forward in his seat, his voice low but urgent. "We'll do it, Richard. We haven't come this far to lose it all now. I know in my gut that this kid is the one we're looking for. I'll get the information out of him no matter what I have to do, and then we'll be able to convince the Corporate Court to take Renraku down a peg or two. Renraku won't risk a corporate war when they've already gained so much. They aren't going to throw it all away."

Villiers nodded soberly. "We'd better hope so. If we can't pull this off, there may be no stopping Renraku, and then the Japanese will probably have me for lunch. You've got to find the proof we need, Miles. And as soon as possible. If anyone can do it, it's you. I'll be waiting for your call." His virtual hand brushed air off to his left, and the image of Richard Villiers vanished.

Lanier shut down the connection and reached up to pull the datacord from his jack. He held the plug in his hand and looked at it for a long moment before allowing the inertia reel in the desk to spool up the fiber-optic cable and stow the cord away. He stood up and smoothed "his dark suit, adjusted his tie, and looked around the dark, quiet office for a moment before returning to his work.

Whatever it takes, he thought to himself. Whatever it takes, I'll find out the otaku's secrets.

15

Otaku n. Originally derived from the Japanese term otaku-zoku, a highly formal way of saying "you." Something like, "Oh, honored sir," only more so. First used to describe an identifiable group of people in the late twentieth century, ironically applied to Japanese computer "nerds"-technologically brilliant but socially inept individuals who spent most of their lives shut in their darkened apartments, communicating with others only through the primitive computer networks in use at the time. Asocial and actively antisocial, the original otaku represented a considerable sociological problem for Japanese society before the turn of the century.

Presently the term otaku is used to refer to young Matrix users indoctrinated into life in virtual reality from a very young age. These users display amazing facility with computer systems, along with the same stunted social development as the original otaku. A popular urban legend describes otaku who achieve a kind of mystical "union" with computer systems, allowing them to access the Matrix without the use of a computer, using only a datajack and their own brains.

-World Wide WordWatch, 2057 edition

Miles Lanier adjusted his silk tie as the pneumatic door hissed open to admit him to the interrogation room. The chamber was largely bare of furniture or ornamentation of any kind, save for the chair and its attendant tables and

rolling cabinets in the middle of the room. The walls were plain and unrelieved gray-ferrocrete blocks and metal plates. One wall had a dark glass insert to the observation room, its opacity controlled from the booth. Lanier knew that the technicians in the booth had been carefully monitoring and recording everything that happened in this room. No piece of information could be overlooked. He had already reviewed the recordings himself and decided it was time for him to take a hand in matters personally. Time was of the essence.

A quiet voice droned from inside the booth, repeating words familiar to Lanier.

"My life begins in an alley-a dark, hidden place in the shadows of the city. I awaken there like being born ..." Lanier himself had already reviewed the information from the subject. He doubted the technicians would find anything else useful, but had ordered the recordings reviewed again, just in case. As the door closed behind him with a hiss and a metallic click, he turned his attention toward the room's two other occupants. The first was Dr. Ferrera, busy checking her instruments and the monitors arrayed around the other figure, who was seated in a chair. Her glossy black hair was bound back from her face in an efficient braid fixed with a clip of silver and turquoise. Her smooth, dark brow furrowed as she examined readouts and displays, her long fingers expertly manipulating the controls to bring up other windows and information.

Lanier recalled when he had personally overseen Ferrera's extraction from an

Aztechnology facility down in Aztlan. That had been a difficult operation, but Lanier believed that gaining the services of a neurophysiologist of Ferrera's caliber was worth every nuyen spent and every drop of blood shed. The Renraku board and Aneki-sama had personally congratulated Lanier's coup in acquiring Ferrera's services. Little did they guess that Lanier had his own plans for the brilliant expert in brain-computer interfaces. She looked up from her work as he approached.

"Well?" he asked. The look on Ferrera's face was not

promising. She anticipated his question and stepped to one side so Lanier could see the displays on the computer terminals.

"He responded as expected to the drug treatment," she said. "The compound caused a holographic memory replay, a kind of fugue state, in which he related all of the events of his involvement with the Netwalkers that he could consciously recall, like he was reliving those memories. We recorded all of it and analysis is underway, but..."

"But what?"

"It still gives us very little information to go on. There's no clear data about his experience of gaining his ... unique abilities. We collected some interesting data about the use of the otaku abilities from the memory-playbacks, however."

Ferrera touched a control pad, and one of the display screens was filled with a three-dimensional image of a human brain, its various areas highlighted in various bright colors.

"The MRI scan shows some amazing neurological activity, even in the flashback sequences. He clearly utilizes areas of the brain not currently charted or much understood. It's not unlike brain activity recorded in magicians working their spells."

"Are you saying his abilities are magical?"

Ferrera shook her head and blanked the display. "Not at all. Only that there are certain similarities. All of the known magical abilities interact poorly, if at all, with technology. Magicians and adepts have reported psychosomatic pain and discomfort from immersion in virtual reality, most likely because of the lack of subconscious mental input from their magical senses ..."

"So, is he otaku or isn't he?" Lanier interrupted with a touch of impatience. The doctor had a tendency to lecture when she was given the opportunity, and Lanier didn't have the time.

Ferrera didn't seem ruffled by his curtness. "I would say so. Without a standard of comparison, it's impossible to know for sure. He is the first so-called 'otaku' to ever be

examined in this way, so far as we know. His neuro-chemistry and neurophysiology have definitely been altered from the norm."

"Altered how, doctor? By whom? Those are the questions we need answered."

"It's going to take more time, Mr. Lanier. We've only really begun-"

Again Lanier cut her off, this time with an abrupt wave of his hand. "Time is the one resource we don't have, doctor. I need answers, and I need them immediately." He glanced back at the unconscious figure. "Do you think he knows what we're looking for?"

Ferrera gave another one of her infuriating shrugs.

"It's possible. The drugs didn't reveal any conscious awareness of any explanation of what happened. As far as he related, he recalls nothing before waking up in that alley. I would hypothesize that whatever changed him happened before then, as part of the 'initiation' ritual he mentioned a few times."

"Could he be resisting the drug in some way? Concealing part of what he knows?"

Another shrug. "It's possible, but I don't think it's likely. With his unusual neurochemistry it's difficult to predict for certain how his reaction to some drugs might differ from the baseline. If he does know anything about the

experience, it may simply be that he's not able to articulate it properly. Otaku are known for having retarded or unusual verbal skills, although his seem fairly normal."

Lanier walked slowly around the outer perimeter defined by the instruments and monitors, face hard and eyes as cold as stone in the pale fluorescent light of the room.

"We have little choice then," he said, almost to himself. "Here, Doctor, is what I want you to do ..."

"Time to wake up, Babel," the voice said, the same voice that had asked him what he remembered.

Babel first became aware of a quick, piercing pain in his arm, followed by the light. A bright light stabbed into his brain, and he gasped and shut his eyes tightly against the

glare. When he tried to raise his hands to rub his tired and gritty eyes, he found he couldn't move them from his side. A momentary wave of fear swept over him that the paralysis he'd experienced in an alleyway far away had returned, but he realized he could still move his hands and feet. His arms and legs were held down, strapped to the padded chair in which he sat, reclined at a slight angle, so Babel faced the ceiling of the room and the light blazing down from it.

He became aware of shadows moving at the edge of his vision in the room, silhouetted in the light. One took a step closer and spoke to him in a strong, masculine voice.

"Hello, Babel, how are you feeling?"

He tried weakly to lift his head to get a better look at the dark shape in front of him.

"Where am I? Who are you?"

The shadow-man spread his arms in what was probably intended to be a gesture of reassurance. "You're safe," the voice said. "And you can remain that way, so long as you cooperate."

"What are you talking about? Who are you?" As he spoke, Babel felt a wave of searing pain from his right hand, so sudden and unexpected that he cried out. He felt heat rush to his hand and a wet stickiness spread across it. He thrashed against the bonds that held him, but the restraints didn't budge.

"You do not ask the questions here," the shadow man's voice said. "I will ask the questions and you will answer them. If I don't like your answers, you will suffer. Is that clear?"

Babel nodded stiffly, biting his lip against the throbbing in his hand.

"Good. I suggest you cooperate. I have discovered that the human body is capable of withstanding a great deal of pain without dying. But then you already know some of that, don't you?"

The silhouetted figure stepped closer, brushing his fingers over the jack behind Babel's ear. "Cyberware itself is a kind of torture inflicted on the body, pieces of metal and plastic embedded in the flesh." The cool fingers ran

down Babel's neck and brushed across his shoulder before withdrawing.

"Why should I tell you anything?" Babel tried to keep his voice steady and calm. He focused on the pain in his hand to help him concentrate and shake off the fuzzy feelings clouding his thoughts.

"You have already provided us with a great deal of information. Do you remember?"

Babel thought back. He recalled a woman's voice asking him to remember, the press of an injection spray against his neck and the words tumbling out of him like a rushing river. He'd been helpless to hold them back.

"You drugged me," he said. "I remember the Netwalkers, the ghouls, and the fight. They captured me, brought me to Mama..."

"And she delivered you to us. That's right, Babel."

"If you've drugged me, then you already know everything I know. Why are you doing this?" Another stab of pain shot through Babel's hand, making him wince

and almost cry out.

"I told you, you don't ask the questions, I do. What is your name?"

"You already know my name. It's Babel. You called me by it."

"What was your name before?"

Michael, Babel thought, Mama called me Michael. "I don't know," he said, and a cold, razor edge pressed against his hand. "I don't know!" he screamed as the edge bit down and Babel gritted his teeth to avoid crying out this time. It's only meat, he told himself, only flesh. They can't touch the real me. The pain seared up his arm, and tears rolled down his cheeks. The voice continued, relentless.

"Why were you sent to infiltrate the Netwalkers tribe?"

Babel felt cold metal gently close around the little finger of his right hand. The burning in his hand seemed to turn to ice, and he could feel the throbbing of his pulse against the blades poised to cut off his finger. His fear became a pure, animal thing, and a dark blossom of knowledge seemed to

open up in the depths of his mind. He spoke without thinking, as if another voice was using his lips.

"To learn the secrets of the otaku," he gasped out, and he knew it was true.

The press of the blades relaxed a bit.

"Very good," the shadow's voice purred. "Now, did you succeed in your assignment?"

Babel's head jerked in a spasmodic nod. "Yes. I have learned the Channels and the Forms, the ways of the Matrix."

"Who do you work for?"

Babel closed his eyes and felt the knowledge bubbling up from deep inside him, a well of information that had lain untapped. The answer came from him unbidden. The red and blue neon logo, the trideo image zooming in on the dot-and-waveform symbol.

"Renraku Computer Technologies," he said.

The images and information seemed to pour into Babel's head and threatened to drown him. He wished the tide of it would carry him away, away from the pain and confusion he felt to someplace safe.

"How were you to communicate your findings to Renraku?" the voice continued, and the blades came close to caressing his finger again.

"A signal," Babel gasped. "Send a Matrix signal... and they would arrange ... retrieval."

"Good. Tell me about the Deep Resonance. Tell me how you became an otaku."

"Return me to Renraku. You can't get what you want from me." Smack! The backhand strike left Babel's head ringing, and he tasted blood in his mouth.

"This is Renraku, my friend," the man's voice said. "You are to give me the information we sent you for."

The blade pressed closer. Babel's mind raced like a massive computer system, struggling to integrate the new data welling up from the depths of his mind with what he was being told. Renraku had expected their agent to signal them and return willingly, not become involved with the tribe he was sent to infiltrate. They must have assumed he'd gone rogue, and in a way he had. Babel had lived with the Net-

walkers, talked with them, became one of them. He saw the secrets of the Matrix and the spirits dwelling there, felt their words and their music inside his mind. He knew Renraku had no idea what they had truly sent him for, what they were asking for. Now they wanted to make sure they got the information they wanted about Babel's initiation, his sacred experience as a technoshaman. It all made sense, but somehow the shadowed man's words rang false in Babel's ears. He knew in the depths of his being that there was more to this interrogation.

He recalled Mama's words: "Your corporate masters want you back, but they don't yet know what I know. It is knowledge they will pay handsomely for, but not yet."

Babel shook his head.

"That's a lie. This is not Renraku. I know that. Mama sold me to someone else. If you're part of Renraku, then you're a traitor. It won't be long before they find me, and you." The blades bit down with a snap and Babel screamed, arcing his back and throwing all of the strength of his muscles against the restraints like his body wanted to leap from the chair at his tormentor. Blood dripped from his mutilated hand, and pain shot up his arm like lightning. Like electricity.

Only flesh, only flesh, only flesh, Babel repeated to himself over and over like a mantra. The words began to calm his mind until the pain seemed to make everything in the world come into incredibly sharp focus.

That's when he realized that the shadowed man had no face. He had features, and appearance, but they were only partially there, like an unfinished sketch or an impressionist painting. There was no clear definition, no presence to the figure. Babel's own perceptions filled in the shadow man's presence. Because he could see so little of him, he'd just assumed there was more, but now he saw there was no more.

Babel's mind pressed out against the glassy, slick surface of the world around him and felt it yield. His lips moved shakily as he intoned.

"My will is sovereign, the master here. Spirits of illness

and pain, I command you to be gone. I speak your names and command you.

Trouble me no more. Leave me and return to trouble your source. I command this illusion be done. One one zero zero one be done zero zero be done zero one one be done!" The surface of space seemed to shimmer like the heat of a summer road and then break into endless threads and strings in a massive tangle that began to break up itself. Babel heard someone speak as if from very far away.

"The datastream's been disrupted!" the woman's voice said. "The system is crashing." A cool shower of static poured over Babel's sensorium, washing away the pain and the blood, leaving only a slight aching and fatigue behind. His vision cleared and he was still strapped into the same chair, but the bright light was gone and he could see the plain gray walls of the room. An Hispanic woman gently pulled the plug from the jack behind Babel's ear while looking askance from him to the snowy display screens as if she didn't believe her own eyes. A gentle beat filled the air, and Babel turned his head to see a man slowly clapping, like mocking applause, and he knew it was the shadow man from his vision.

"Bravo," the man said, "well done." He was not so frightening in the light as he had been in the vision. Babel estimated he was a bit above average height, but he had an imposing presence his simulacrum lacked. He wore a corporate suit in a popular style, the dark motif broken only by touches of color in his tie and the handkerchief folded in his breast pocket as dictated by corporate fashion. His dark hair was short and touched with a bit of silver. His features were smooth, refined, and chiseled, accented by his neatly trimmed mustache. Babel didn't think he could be called a handsome man-the nose was a bit too hawkish and the chin a touch too pronounced-but the intensity of his gaze and his bearing made it clear that this was a powerful man who was used to being listened to and obeyed.

"You have provided an excellent demonstration of the legendary abilities you were sent to discover," the man

said. "Too bad our instruments may not have lived to tell about it. Doctor?" The woman near Babel's head looked up from where she was wrestling with one of the display consoles. "The system is totally trashed," she said with a note of disbelief in her voice. "Not just the simsense routines, but all of the diagnostics as well. Some kind of progressive virus."

"Very impressive," the man said, never taking his eyes off Babel. "So the stories are true. The otaku have the ability to deck without a deck, controlling computers with nothing more than the power of their minds. I can see why you are considered a valuable prize, Babel. Your gifts could make some

of the hottest ice-cutting technology available look like an antiquated tortoise system in comparison."

Babel raised his head from the chair as best he could to look the man in the face. The man looked familiar to him somehow, but Babel couldn't retrieve the memory from the whirling flood of images in his mind. Mama was right, his name was Michael, and he knew this man.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?"

"You've already figured out most of it for yourself. I want the information Renraku sent you to find, the secret of your amazing abilities. I also want details on who you took your orders from in Renraku and anything else you know about the company and its operations. In short, I want everything."

"And if I refuse, what? You'll drug me again? Try to torture me again?"

The man's face darkened and he suddenly sprang forward, like a stalking cat on a cornered mouse. The Hispanic woman gasped and stepped back as the man grabbed the front of Babel's thin shirt and held his face so close Babel could feel the heat of his breath.

"I will, if you force me to," he said in a low voice. "Make no mistake, boy, you have something I need and I will get it from you however I can. You've proven that simulated interrogation scenarios won't work on you, but there are other means, real and very painful means, I can use to extract information. By the time I'm done with you,

you'll be begging to tell me anything I want to know. I've already proven that pain can be an excellent stimulus to the memory, haven't I... Michael?"

The sound of his other name made Babel jump a bit.

"Oh yes, Mama sold me your name. A pity she didn't share the rest of it. There are a lot of Michaels working for Renraku, but we're working on a comparison."

The man slowly released Babel's shirt and rose up to his full height, adjusting the sleeves and front of his suit jacket.

"Believe it or not, I have no reason to hurt you unless you force me to. Just tell me what I want to know, and I'll let you go. You don't have to make this any harder on yourself." He held his gaze on Babel for a long moment, dark eyes on pale violet, before Babel finally spoke.

"Lanier," he said slowly. "Miles Lanier. I know you. You're on the Renraku board. I saw your image many times on the corporate news channel. You're playing a very dangerous game, Mr. Lanier."

Lanier's jaw dropped for only an instant before composure covered his face like a cold mask.

Knowing someone's name gives you power over them, Babel thought. Let's see if that's true. He only hoped he could find some way to get back to Renraku. He had to complete his mission. If Lanier was working for somebody else, as Babel suspected, then he had to make sure what he had for Renraku didn't fall into the wrong hands.

Lanier looked down at Babel for a few moments, then turned to the doctor hovering nearby. Babel never found out what Lanier was planning to do next because the lights in the room suddenly shifted to red. Then an alarm sounded and all hell broke loose.

16

Shadowrun n. Any movement, action, or series of such made to carry out illegal or quasi-legal operations.

-World Wide WordWatch, 2058 edition

Like a silver shadow, the gossamer-winged sprite skated through the glowing neon towers of the Boston Matrix. The gleaming chrome surface of her icon reflected the virtual light of the gridlines and other icons around her in sharp, twisted reflections, a testament to her programming skills. Here was a decker to be reckoned with. Other denizens of the Matrix would know the sprite's markings and recognize her as a fellow predator, someone not to be fragged with. Those who did not have the wisdom to see her for what she was weren't likely to see her at all. She was a shadow, a ghost in the machine.

As Ariel sped through the telecommunications grid of the metroplex toward the Mandala Technologies system, she hoped the price her team had paid Milo for the local telecom number she was using was worth it. Her scanner programs were online and sending out invisible feelers along her path, prepared to warn her of any hidden dangers or software traps she might encounter. Ariel found her pulse rate increasing, the pre-run adrenaline surge starting to hit her. This was what most deckers lived for: the rush of preparing to break into a protected system, to test their skill against the skill of the programmers who'd built the system's defenses and to lay their lives on the line that their skill and their hottest programs could beat the defenders'

skills and their coldest ice. A game with the highest stakes around. With a blur of movement through the datastreams, Ariel arrived at her destination. In the real world, her cyberdeck connected with the LTG number she had entered, and her passcode programs went to work to provide the key to open the door Ariel needed to get through. There was a tense moment where she was uncertain if the programs would work, or if the system would recognize her as an intruder and send out an alert. Bits and alphanumeric characters flashed before her eyes in the virtual world of cyberspace as the two systems negotiated and haggled back and forth before Ariel was able to step into the back door of the target system. She breathed a sigh of relief and started looking around.

It had been a gamble, but it paid off. Ariel's first scouting of the Mandala host system had made it abundantly clear that it was possible to get in. Ariel was proud of her skills as a decker, but she knew her limits. She was one of the best ice-breakers in the biz, but there was no way she was getting inside a system that looked to be protected by some of the best Fuchi had to offer. Fuchi was the corporation when it came to Matrix technology, and their ice was some of the best in the business.

Ariel told her boss that she'd never get in via the front door of the system without being detected. The only ice Ariel had ever seen that was worse was the kind Renraku Computer Systems had protecting some of their important hosts. Renraku had always been known for its cutting-edge ice, but lately their systems had been getting even smarter, a lot smarter. Adaptive architectures, cascading party ice, the worst. Word on the street said Renraku's best systems couldn't be broken, and even legendary deckers like Fast-jack and Black Isis had tried and failed against them. Fortunately, Ariel didn't have to worry about Renraku ice on this run.

"Trouble, this is Hammer," came a voice out of nowhere. "We're en route, ETA eight minutes. Report."

Ariel took a quick look around the room her icon ap-

peared in. It looked like a fairly standard host-system, no fancy sculpting of the virtual architecture, very little code wasted on fancy images or psychological warfare. That probably meant the system was keyed for some serious main-line defense without any frills. Ariel had to be ready for blasters, tar pits, corroding programs, and possibly worse.

"Trouble here," she replied, the cybernetic link of her cyberdeck translating her thoughts into transmissions on the team's tacticom radio band. "I'm in. Beginning search through the system for access to security and internal surveillance. Stand by."

"Roger that," the deep voice replied. "Keep me apprised."

Ariel activated a scanner program to check and see what kind of access the host had to the building's systems: The access she'd used to penetrate was a secondary system, a back door put in by a programmer eager to earn nuyen selling access to people willing to pay, and the Hammermen had paid handsomely. It wasn't nearly as good as access to the main system, but it would have to do.

Ariel's scanning program appeared in a glittering cloud of dust, becoming a tall mirror set in a gilt oval frame. The surface flowed and shimmered like

quicksilver as the program linked with the host's diagnostic and status subroutines and fed the information into Ariel's cyberdeck. The system specs started to appear on the surface of the mirror in glowing characters, and Ariel scrolled through them quickly, stopping to check a few items on the long list for anything she could use in her mission. Good, the system was primarily concerned with environmental control within the building, but there were some connections between the environmental systems and the main building controller; feedback loops and other access points to allow the building's systems to work harmoniously together. It would have to be enough. The connections between the systems contained command pathways that system administrators and maintenance personnel could use to cross-link systems and perform upgrades and repair work simultaneously without having to leave their cushy offices. With the right command codes,

Ariel could set up a similar link to allow her access to the important parts of the main host-the security systems and internal sensors-without having to go through the glacial layer of ice protecting the systems from intrusion from the outside. The trick was setting up the right dummy codes without putting the system on alert to her presence.

With a wave of her icon's slim, silvery hand, a long, tapering wand appeared. Ariel tweaked the programming on the code-breaker she'd designed, checking some of the system specs to make sure everything matched up correctly. Then she sent the command. Open sesame! she thought as she waved the silver wand, trailing a sparkling cloud of fairy dust behind it. The sparkling motes of code infused themselves into the blank gray walls of the room where her icon stood, and her cyberdeck began to execute a flurry of algorithms and program instructions at incredible speed, too fast for the human mind to even begin to follow.

In the space of a few seconds, the two systems wrestled over the access codes to the command pathways, and the battle was decided. Before Ariel's eyes, the glowing motes of fairy dust resolved themselves into a rectangular shape in the gray wall, which then broke away from the wall and swung open into the room, a doorway into the rest of the system.

Smiling to herself and keeping a tight rein on her impulse to leap directly through the access pathway, Ariel keyed her transmitter.

"Hammer, this is Trouble, I've got access. Proceeding with Beta."

"Copy, Trouble. We are about seven minutes out." Ariel carefully checked the passage open before her. All of her systems had probed and scanned the path, and found it safe for her to travel. It was possible the pathway was some kind of trap, triggered by tampering with the command codes, but if it was, then it was too sophisticated for Ariel's deck or her sharpened Matrix instincts to pick it up. She would be almost proud to be taken down by such a sophisticated defense mechanism. Law of the electron jungle, she thought as she stepped through the doorway.

The virtual passage led Ariel from the secondary host of the building to the central computer system. From here she could access all of the main systems of the target with only a minimal lag from the limited bandwidth of the back-door connection. While the limited pipeline to "squeeze" programs and commands was a problem, it was nothing compared to the difficulties of cutting through the ice protecting the main system from the outside. Ariel began a scan-assessment of the system just as she had from the access node. The silvery mirror reappeared and shimmered in the air as the system's specs scrolled across it. Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the best decker in the sprawl? Ariel thought to herself with a grin. Her eyes widened at the sight of the security specifications on the system. Holy ghost, it would have taken a blow torch to cut through that much ice. The rest of the specs were equally impressive. Apparently the Mr. Johnson had known what he was talking about when he said the target site had some very sophisticated systems running on it. The facility's computing power was way out of spec for what Ariel knew of Mandala

Technologies. They were an up and coming software corp, but their ice was some of Fuchi's best. Mandala must be working on something requiring a lot of computer horsepower, which meant cutting-edge tech, which translated to nuyen for Ariel.

She was sorely tempted to scan through the databanks for files that might contain valuable pay data she could sell on the underground market-Milo and some other fixers were always willing to fence good hot data-but Ariel was a professional and paydata wasn't what she'd been hired to find. She had a team depending on her. She hadn't let them down yet and she wasn't going to start now.

The remainder of the security specs were online, and Ariel breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of them. The security in the facility was top of the line, but it was still controlled by the central computer and the security subroutines. Many corporations, understanding the potential vulnerability of their systems to invasions like the one Ariel

was carrying out, had moved away from trusting their computer systems to safeguard their important installations. Advances in human-machine interface allowed human operators to take the role of central controller for a security system, plugging into the security grid and in effect "becoming" the building. They "felt" all of the input of the security sensors through a closed-circuit simsense feed, and they could "move" any of the building's security systems as easily as raising an arm to swat a fly. Best of all, such systems were virtually impregnable to decker subversion because the human operator could recognize nuances no computer could match, and the two operating systems were largely incompatible.

Fortunately for deckers everywhere, such systems were extremely costly to implement and maintain. Human operators still got tired, sick, or bored and had to be relieved at regular intervals, paid, fed, and given vacation time and raises. Computers didn't care about any of those things, nor could they be bribed, bought, or blackmailed. Computers also didn't have opinions about what they saw or heard from day to day and didn't abscond with important company secrets. Brain-rigged security systems were still reserved for very specific facilities that needed a "human touch" but where the corporate controllers were willing to entrust a single person as the all-seeing eyes and ears of their facility.

Since the building's computer was in control of all of the security systems, Ariel could access and control them through her link to the computer system. The security subroutines were of course protected by access barriers and more ice, but Ariel had cut through enough ice in her time to know what to do. A wave of her wand and a pinch of fairy dust produced a ring of old-fashioned skeleton keys that jingled pleasantly (an added sensory touch Ariel was quite proud of). A complex matching algorithm ran, and one key presented itself at the top of the ring in the silver fairy's hand. Ariel stepped over to the chrome-and-circuit-covered wall of the host system and inserted the key into the slot that appeared there.

Gently, gently, she thought as she manipulated the code to match the system access. The wall shifted and flatscreen images appeared on it. Images of the darkened and empty parking area outside the building and of the lobby, the corridors, and the underground parking garage and the vehicles in it. Another screen filled with information on the current status of the security systems in place throughout the building. Success!

Looking over the displays, Ariel could see that her intrusion had not triggered any alarms so far. She was dimly aware of the breathing and pulse rate of her physical body, hidden away in a safe-house kilometers from the target site. Her senses were focused totally on the virtual world and what was happening there. A few commands to her cyber-deck sent out a looped playback of the quiet scene outside the building and among the corridors into the central security processor. The loop would continue to display that image for

as long as Ariel wanted to, blind and deaf to the events about to happen. The loop would eventually trigger an internal alert in the system's self-diagnostic, but if the Hammermen were around long enough to worry about that, something far worse than a simple internal alert would happen first. Now, a check through the internal sensors. Ariel checked the internal readings of the security system, and was surprised by what she found. Hmm, internal systems and cameras in the lower level are mostly offline. Only the systems in one lab space are working, and they're feeding into an isolated datastore. Ariel shifted her attention to the recording systems for the basement-level lab, which were sending data into a protected archive in the computer system. They're putting out a lot of data, she thought, examining the datastore. Must be a couple hundred megapulses at least. Probing carefully with all of her sensor programs, Ariel approached the datastore, looking for a way to access the datastream flowing into it without giving away her presence in the computer system. The data could provide some valuable information on the location of the target her

team was seeking as well as on the status of the facility. There didn't seem to be many people in the upper levels of the facility, so Ariel had to assume that whoever was home was in the lab where the datastream originated. She keyed her transmitter.

"Hammer," the deep voice replied to her signal.

"I'm into the security system, external and internal cameras and detects are neutralized and I figure they'll stay that way for a good twenty minutes. I've got an active data feed from a basement-level lab. Suspect that is the location of our target. I'm attempting to access the data."

"Good work, Trouble. Proceed with caution. We're just a couple minutes out."

"Roger that." Time to open this baby up, she thought.

Ariel waved her magic wand, and the Matrix responded to her commands. She carefully peeled away layer after layer of access to the datastore, using her route through the command system to justify her actions to the computer's security. Time slowed to a crawl as she focused solely on the task before her. In a matter of moments that seemed like hours, Ariel accessed the datastore and examined the data-stream. It was a huge volume of data focused on a single individual. It contained physiological and neurological data of every imaginable kind: vital signs, galvanic response, brainwaves, blood chemistry, neurochemistry, pupil dilation, capillary flow, respiration, all carefully measured and digitized responses to stimulus flowing from the computer system to the test subject and back again.

This has got to be our boy, Ariel thought as she looked in amazement at all of the data. She could hardly imagine why anyone would want such detailed information on anyone, but it wasn't hers to ask. Whoever their target really was, he was important enough to two corporations to want to hold on to him and to be willing to pay the Hammermen's fees to get their hands on him.

Suddenly, the datastream from the lab fluctuated strangely. What the hell...

? Ariel thought just before the whole system went crazy. A surge of data from the input stream struck the datastore like a thunderbolt. The entire collection of files

vanished in a cloud of digital static, dumped from the system entirely. The sudden and unexpected force of the backlash sent Ariel skittering away from the doomed datastore as the computer system suddenly came to life around her. The lighting of the system shifted from silvery gray to deep and pulsating red as the entire system went on alert. From the static and snow of the datastore's demise stepped a black-armored figure like a robot designed to look like an ancient Japanese samurai. The figure seemed to absorb light into its black surface except for the edge of its long, curved sword, which gleamed wickedly, a touch of programming flair Ariel had to admire even as the helmeted head of the samurai slowly turned and scanned the system. It locked a gaze on Ariel made up of two burning red points of light deep within the slit

of its helmet, and she knew it was too late for her to activate any of her masking programs to get away. The ice had spotted her. As the silent black form of the samurai stepped closer, Ariel readied herself for a fight. The ice was in the depths of the system, protecting some of the highest-security files, which could only mean it was black ice, a force known and feared by deckers everywhere in the shadows as the only ice that did more than damage software and hardware. Black ice targeted the wetware, the brain of the user, with a lethal jolt of energy. One wrong move and you were dead.

17

The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong.

-Ecclesiastes 9:11

As the Hughes WK-2 Stallion helicopter cut through the night sky over the Boston sprawl, Harlan Hammarand checked his sidearm for what must have been the tenth time since takeoff. He knew that everything about the Colt Man-hunter was in perfect working order, since he kept the gun in top shape, but the task of checking the firearm gave his hands something to do as the seconds ticked away on their final approach toward the Mandala Technologies facility. Ariel reported that she had taken care of the security systems, just as Harlan knew she would. Ariel was the best decker he'd ever worked with and he counted on her to handle anything the system could throw at her.

Harlan had the same confidence in the rest of his team. The Hammermen, they were called, after Harlan's handle on the streets: "The Hammer." The ork mercenary had picked up the name during his younger days on the harsh streets of New York City, where he ran with one of the hundreds of gangs living in that urban jungle. Unlike most of them, Harlan had turned his talent for street-fighting and organized mayhem into a marketable skill that had gotten him out of the barrens and barrios of the Rotten Apple and on to bigger and better things. Most of his omaes from the old gang were long dead, but Harlan was still around. That was a trend he aimed to continue for as long as he was able.

Hammer looked over at the rest of the team huddled in

the back of the chopper. Sloane, Tojo, and Tootall were all mercs he had worked with for years. They'd met in the trenches of the Desert Wars, and they still came through for him just as dependably in the canyons of the concrete jungle. Sloane and Tojo were humans, as different as night and day. Sloane was tall, blond, and Nordic, with a build to nearly rival Hammer's bulky ork physique. Tojo was small, lithe, and Asian. Both men were as capable with their bare hands as they were with an AK-97.

Tootall hardly needed any of the weapons he wore on his harness. Some three meters tall and weighing in at almost two hundred kilos, the troll was a fearsome fighter using nothing more than his massive fists, each one capable of crushing a human's skull. All of the men sat silently, either looking out the window or at the walls or floor of the chopper's cabin, each wrapped up in his own thoughts about the action to come.

Geist sat away from the rest of the crew. The mage was small and slight, only little taller than Tojo and not as well-muscled. His hair and skin were pale and looked washed out in the dim light of the cabin, adding to the ghostly appearance that gave him his street name. Geist was German by birth, but Hammer had known him for several years in the shadows of cities from North Africa to North America. The street mage had considerable skill at his job, having been trained at a university in his native Germany before being forced out into the shadows by an incident he never talked about. Hammer suspected it had something to do with Geist's famous indiscretions with women, particularly those who were married and supposed to be off-limits. Whatever his personal habits, Hammer found the mage to be more than capable at his job. Right now, Geist sat quietly in the back of the cabin, eyes closed in silent meditation, centering himself and gathering his magical power. Hammer knew that that power

would be needed before the night was out.
He had a strange feeling about this run. Not that it was all that unusual.
Hammer had pulled off tougher extraction

runs than what he knew about this one. It wasn't the mission itself, but the setting and the unusual speed the Johnson demanded for pulling off the extraction. Hammer had the impression the Johnson had gotten the word that he needed to act quickly. That was the way things went in Boston these days: things were happening fast and you had to keep up. Get out of the way or else get run over.

The Boston sprawl had been something of a quiet town for shadowrunners until the last couple of years or so. It was the location of the East Coast Stock Exchange ever since the earthquake that had devastated New York City years before Hammer was even born. The importance of the stock exchange to the economy sustaining all of the megacorporations was enough to make the major multinationals declare Boston "off-limits" to the usual kind of shadow operations the corps routinely conducted against one another. Boston had become a city of "corporate pride" that the megacorp bigwigs could trust as "neutral ground" for their dealings with their rivals. The cutthroat business of Boston was conducted in board rooms and on the stock exchange, not in back alleys like it was in cities like Seattle, New York, and Atlanta.

After the assassination of the great dragon Dunkelzahn, corporate competition in Boston took on a new tone. Many up and coming smaller corps, supported by money from the dragon's vast estate, were now in a position to compete with some of the big boys. Other corporations found their structures shaken up by redistributions of stock and assets in the dragon's will. The death of a single, powerful being had sent Shockwaves through the corporate world and into the shadows of the Boston metroplex. Suddenly, a place that was once neutral ground became a hotbed of shadow activity, pitting every company against the others in the race to get the latest and greatest advance. The heart of the UCAS high-technology industry, Boston had begun to see far more corporate espionage and black ops than the plex's small pool of shadowrunners could handle. That was why out-of-town talent like the Hammermen had become such an increasingly common part of the Boston underworld.

There was plenty of work to be had in the Boston shadows lately, if you were good enough.

The job Hammer and his team were on now was just the kind of work-showing up in Boston lately. The ork didn't know for certain who they were working for-knowing your employer was a privilege to be earned in the shadows, or information you had to find out for yourself if you were looking to hedge your bets. Most employers of shadow-talent preferred anonymity, going by the universal name of "Mr. Johnson." The Hammermen's current Johnson was Japanese, which made the name all the more ironic.

Ariel had done some checking on him and hadn't turned up much. Clearly, Mr. Johnson was a cautious man. Ariel believed Mr. J worked for Renraku. Word on the streets said the megacorporate computer giant was running a lot of operations against their rival Fuchi in the past months.

But Hammer had his own suspicions about who the team's new employer was. The target Mr. Johnson wanted was a small computer corp called Mandala Technologies in a small high-tech research park in the Route 128 area. At first glance it looked no different than any of the hundred small technology corps in the area, but Ariel did some digging and came up with some interesting facts. It looked like Mandala was owned through a series of holding companies that traced back to none other than Richard Villiers himself, king of the Fuchi corporate empire.

The interesting thing about the facility was that Fuchi didn't own it, but Villiers did. The baby corp wasn't part of the "Fuchi family of companies," as the corporate reports liked to read. It was part of what looked to be a growing number of companies in the UCAS owned by Villiers alone, part of a

personal financial empire the Fuchi CEO seemed to be building for himself. Hammer had heard rumors that there was trouble brewing in Fuchi's ranks. The corp had always been split between the three internal factions who controlled it. Villiers currently had the upper hand over the other two, both of them powerful Japanese industrial families. Having the upper hand, however, seemed to be a good reason for the

Japanese families to set aside their differences and work to bring Villiers down a peg or two. The fact that their CEO was building his own power base behind the backs of his Japanese partners could not sit too well with them. Add in the fact that the Johnson was a Japanese who seemed to know a lot about the facility and Hammer suspected Fuchi was already splitting into camps and that there were going to be plenty more operations like the one they were handling tonight.

If all went well, there could be the promise of additional work for the team. Hammer just wanted to make sure he didn't join up with the wrong side. Corporate internal conflicts were nearly always the nastiest. They say nobody knows how to fight like family, and when it came to the megacorps, that was doubly true. A Fuchi internal struggle could be very profitable, but it could also lead to runners working on the wrong side ending up very dead.

"One minute to the LZ, boss," came a voice from the front of the cabin. Hammer looked up from his work on the Manhunter and bolstered the pistol at his side. "Okay, boys, get ready for some action," he said to the rest of the Hammermen. He turned toward the front of the chopper as Val guided them in toward the target. The Mandala Tech building was exactly as shown in the holes and specs Hammer had seen, a small office park structure like dozens of others in the Route 128 area. The broad band of highway north of downtown Boston was the highest concentration of high-tech companies and corporate research facilities in the plex. The office part was the same as most of the others, a three-story structure of brick and modern ferrocrete composites with windows of tinted glass and a broad, open parking area currently vacant of vehicles. There was a small expanse of open ground behind the building with a small pond and benches where employees could take their lunches when the weather allowed. Some tall stands of trees surrounded the plot of land on which the building was situated.

Although the landscaping and design of the facility were intended to be pleasant to view, Hammer's trained eye

could see that the design was planned as much for security as for aesthetics. The terrain around the building was planted with trees, which blocked a clear view of the building from neighboring plots and the road. The small pond provided some natural defense from any approach from the side of the building as well as an additional surface for radar to scan for unusual vibrations or indications of movement. The parking area was an open expanse perfect for sweeping with sensors of all kinds, and could become an open killing zone if the company decided to exercise their right to protect their territory with deadly force.

Fortunately, the Hammermen wouldn't have to worry about any of those security measures if Ariel had handled the main computer system as planned.

"Hammer to Trouble, report," Hammer said into his throat mike. A burst of static greeted him, followed by the decker's voice.

"I'm a little busy right now, Boss," Ariel said. "We've got an active alert down here. Security's suppressed, but something else crashed a lot of the system. Things are going crazy." A harsh burst of static drowned out whatever else she was going to say. Hammer listened on the channel for a moment.

"Trouble? Trouble, do you copy?" There was only silence of the line. From the cockpit of the chopper, Val called back to the leader of the Hammermen.

"What's the word, Boss? Do we hit the LZ or fly by?"

Hammer considered his answer carefully. Ariel's message made it clear that all was not going as planned. If there was a dust-up, he could be leading his team

into a deathtrap of corporate security just waiting for them. On the other hand, if the security system was still offline, as Ariel said, it was possible the system crash could serve as a distraction for the operation. If Hammer scrubbed the run, the team would never get another chance at their target. Corporate security would be on alert, and they would move the target to a safer location. The run would be for nothing, and the team would be in the red for the expenses they'd

already put out. Corporate Johnsons weren't well known for paying for incomplete or failed shadowruns. Hammer rested a hand on the back of Val's seat and looked out at the Mandala facility. "Hit the LZ," he said. "We're going in."

18

On February 8, 2029, computer systems across the world were attacked, apparently at random, by a virus program of unprecedented power. Systems crashed, their data wiped clean and even their hardware burned out by the effects of the virus. As the killer program spread, governments toppled and the world economy neared collapse. Only the Echo Mirage Project sponsored by the United States government was able to produce data-processing specialists able to directly engage the virus in cyberspace. By 2031, the last known concentrations of the virus code were purged from the world telecommunications system and only seven of the original thirty-two members of Echo Mirage lived to tell of it.

-From How It Came to Pass: Events That Shaped the Sixth World, by Armand D'Angelo, Virtual Press, Seattle, 2044

Hammer had the door of the chopper open even before Val put the bird on the ground. As soon as the helicopter settled onto the ferrocrete of the Mandala parking area with a gentle bump, Hammer and the rest of his team were hitting the ground and moving low away from the backwash of the rotors as they kicked up dirt and leaves from the immaculate black surface. The facility was too small to have a helipad of its own, but the empty parking lot made a perfect landing zone for a pilot of Val's skill.

The five men loped across the open ground of the parking area, senses alert for any signs of a trap or that their

approach was noticed in any way by someone in the darkened building. There was nothing, no sign of movement or light from the windows, no chatter from hidden sentry guns or hunting cries from any magical beasts that might be guarding the facility. The place seemed to be as Hammer's connections had described, a low-key facility relying heavily on being too small and unknown to be of much interest to anyone. Any security the Hammermen had to worry about would have to be inside.

The Hammermen reached the side door of the place in short order. Tojo took a maglock passkey from one of the pouches on his web belt and slashed it through the card-reader posted next to the door. The electronics in the key-card sent out a pulse to scramble the lock's systems and override the magnetic mechanism. It was a brute-force solution to overcoming the lock, but time was of the essence. If what Ariel said was true, the facility's systems were already on alert. Hopefully the maglock tampering would go unnoticed in the midst of all of the other commotion.

Hammer still wished he could get some kind of response from the decker. There had been nothing since Ariel's last transmission, but he didn't dare try to raise her. If she was in the middle of fighting some of the security counter-measures in the system, any distraction could be fatal. In the Matrix every microsecond counted.

He pushed the concern out of his mind. If Ariel did okay, she would make contact. If she didn't, there was nothing he could do about it.

The door popped open with a clack and the lights on the lock went to flashing red. Hammer waved to the other members of the team. Sloane and Tojo took the doorway high and low, covering left and right. Then they moved through the door, followed by Tootall and Geist, with Hammer bringing up the rear. He left the door open behind him, since they would likely be heading out of the place in a hurry. The corridor on the other side of the door stretched away for about six meters to meet another at a right angle. "Trouble says the target is on the lower level," he said to the team. "Geist, can you find him?"

The mage nodded and sank into a lotus position on the floor with practiced ease. His breathing slowed and he gave a deep sigh. Hammer imagined he could see Geist's spirit leaving his body with his breath as the mage descended into a deep trance. His astral form would be able to recon the place more quickly than any flesh and blood person and report back. The rest of the team would keep an eye on Geist's meat body while he was "away."

Hammer glanced up from the still form of the mage just as a pair of security guards appeared around the corner. There was a split-second where the guards were surprised at the sight of the runners. In that fraction of a second the Hammermen were already moving. Tootall stepped in front of Geist's body to protect the mage from stray rounds. In his trance-state, Geist was helpless and any injury could drive his body into fatal shock.

At the same instant, Sloane, Tojo, and Hammer moved into action. Tojo's hyped-up reflexes made him a blur of motion as he drew a bead on the first guard and fired a burst from his Crusader machine pistol. The guard's body armor soaked up much of the kinetic force of the rounds as the bullets stitched a line up his chest. None of the 9mm rounds penetrated the armor-weave, but the impact sent the guard stumbling back, off-balance. Sloane followed up Tojo's attack with a shot from his Ares Predator. The heavy pistol round caught the second guard full in the chest and bowled him over, packing far more stopping power than Tojo's light machine pistol. The guard went down to the floor, probably with a few broken ribs, at least.

Hammer leveled his Manhunter at the first guard, who was trying to bring his own weapon to bear on the runners. To the ork's enhanced nervous system, the guard seemed to be moving in slow-motion-time compressed itself into an eternity between aiming and firing. The targeting systems in the pistol interfaced with Hammer's built-in smartgun circuitry and he fired. The high-caliber rounds from the Manhunter made even Sloane's Predator look like a cap-gun. The shot caught the guard in the high collar of his

armored uniform. The armor absorbed most of the impact, but there was still more than enough force to crush the man's trachea and send him flopping onto the floor, dropping his gun and clutching at his neck before he passed out. The other guard tried weakly to get back to his feet, but Tojo was on top of him before he had the chance. A snap-kick to the guard's head and he was down for the count. Two guards down in just seconds. The shadowrunners stopped and surveyed the area around them, weapons at the ready, but no further threats materialized. Tojo and Sloane checked down the corridor either way the guards had come from and gave the all-clear signal back.

Tootall turned to Hammer. "You chummers coulda saved some for me," he said with one of his tusky grins. The troll didn't have the speed the rest of the team could call on, but his massive body was strong enough to tear a human in two and his tough hide usually gave him protection to make up for the speed he lacked.

"Don't worry, chummer," Hammer said grimly. "Looks like there could be plenty more where those came from."

"There are," Geist said as he roused from his trance and stood up. Tootall helped him up, and the pale mage turned to Hammer.

"There are at least another dozen guards in the facility. Our target is in a room one level down. There are elevators and stairwell access, but security is

between us and them. We've got to clear through them to get to the lab. The good news is I didn't detect any of my associates with them. No significant magical defenses."

Hammer nodded and motioned to Tojo and Sloane. "All right, then. Let's get through security, grab our boy, and blow this firetrap."

Lanier reacted immediately to the sounding of the security alarm in the complex. He turned away from Babel and Dr. Ferrera and crossed over to the intercom panel on the wall of the interrogation room. He pressed his fingertips against the panel to activate it.

"Security, report." Nothing but static came from the speak-

er. Lanier turned back to the young man strapped into the chair in the center of the room.

"Are you responsible for this?" he said with a dangerous edge to his voice. Babel shook his head. "I was only trying to break your illusions," he said with a slight smile. "Perhaps I broke more than that."

Lanier turned to Ferrera. "Doctor?"

She was still working on the terminal near Babel's head. "I don't know. It could be some kind of malfunction of the security grid because of the computer failure, but I don't think so. The system is on alert, which could mean an intrusion. Of course, that could be the computer's way of interpreting what our young friend did when he crashed the datastore." She shook her head in frustration. "I just can't tell from here."

Lanier turned toward the smoked transpex panel in the wall and touched another control on the comm panel. The window shifted to translucent, and he could see the technical crew inside the control room.

"Get the copies of our data together," he ordered, "and get in here. Saunders, go and get some security down here. Move!"

The technicians jumped to follow Lanier's orders even as he moved back toward Ferrera and Babel. He reached under his tailored suit jacket and withdrew a slim 9mm pistol from its concealed shoulder holster. Ferrera spotted the gun and paled slightly beneath her tan complexion.

"Mr. Lanier!" she started to say, but he silenced her with a wave of his hand.

"Now is not the time to become squeamish, Doctor." He pressed the barrel of the gun under Babel's chin and spoke in an even, icy tone. "All right, my friend, we're going to be leaving now. If you're wise, you won't give me any reason to use this. One wrong move, one attempt at escape, and I'll kill you. Understand?"

Babel met Lanier's eyes and nodded slightly, as much as he could against the pressure of the gun barrel. Lanier jerked his head toward Dr. Ferrera.

"Release him."

The other two technicians entered the room, one of them carrying a black plastic case containing the chips with recordings of Babel's interrogation and all of the other information gathered by Dr. Ferrera's instruments. He handed it to Lanier, who slipped the case into the inside pocket of his suit jacket, never taking the gun off Babel as Ferrera manually released the straps holding him to the chair.

Babel slid slowly out of the chair and to his feet, wavering slightly as his cramped muscles protested movement after sitting still for so long. He had no idea how long Lanier and his people had held and interrogated him. He gently rubbed his sore wrists and silently willed the aches and fatigue away. It's only meat, he told himself. It's the mind that's important.

"All right," Lanier said with a wave of the pistol. "Let's move." The two technicians went out the door first, followed by Babel, with Lanier and Dr. Ferrera coming behind. Lanier's gun was trained on Babel's back. The corridor outside the interrogation room was plain and unadorned, with pale gray walls broken by the occasional door along its length. Red emergency lights filled the corridor and gave everything a hellish cast as the alarm continued to sound throughout the building. The two technicians began moving toward the

right, but Lanier's barked order stopped them in their tracks. "This way," he said, standing in the doorway. "The elevators can't be trusted if the computer system has been compromised. We'll take the stairs." As the small group began moving down the hall toward the stairway, Babel considered his options. Of the four people with him, Lanier appeared to be the only one who was armed. Babel had to assume they knew about his concealed body-blade, but it was still an effective weapon, provided they hadn't found some way to disable it. But Lanier had a gun, and even the small pistol would have enough stopping power to put Babel down if he was shot. Nor did he know the layout of the building well enough to escape even if he did manage to get away from Lanier and his people. There apparently

was security elsewhere in the building, from what Lanier told the technicians. Reluctantly, Babel decided there was no means of escaping that wouldn't put his mission in jeopardy. He had to survive long enough to get back to Renraku to complete the mission that had sent him into the Rox, or more lives would be in danger. For now, that meant going along with Lanier and seeing where that took him. An opportunity to escape would present itself sooner or later. He just had to be on the alert for it so that when it came he could act. As the black-armored samurai stalked closer, Ariel triggered her combat utilities. Shining silvery armor covered in Celtic knot designs materialized to cover her icon's body, and a slender silver sword appeared in her hand. The samurai warrior came in fast, with a speed born of optical co-processors and combat algorithms.

Ariel met the attack with her own blade, her deck's systems fighting the invasion of the foreign code as the ice sought a weakness, a chink in her armor it could exploit to get at the woman behind the electron image. Ariel thrust back at the ice, and it countered, clashing blades ringing in the hallucinatory world of the Matrix, a metaphor for a very real conflict going on between her cyberdeck and the computer system. Ariel was glad she'd been able to warn Hammer and the rest of the team about the alert before the ice jumped her, but she needed to deal with the samurai program as quickly as possible so she could be on hand to help out the team if they needed it. She also needed to get her hands on any data on their target still in the system.

The samurai came in for another attack, shuffling forward with its sword held high, coming down in an overhead chop. Ariel jinked to the side and swung her blade. Sparks flew as the silver sword slashed across the samurai's armor. First blood! Ariel thought as the ice program fell back a bit before renewing its attack. It was no time to celebrate, however. Responding to the damage it had taken, the ice

redoubled its attack and made a flurry of sword blows, looking to overwhelm the decker's defenses. Ariel managed to avoid them, but only barely. She couldn't keep this pace up for much longer, while the ice, tireless and inhuman, could keep going all day as long as the processing power was available to it. Ariel had to end this fight quickly, or it would be ended for her when a lethal charge of electricity fried her forebrain.

Dodging to the left she set the ice up for another attack. It was risky, but the ice seemed to be focusing more of its effort on attacking her and less on defending itself. It didn't have the same instincts as a living being to protect its own existence. It could only follow its programming to destroy intruders. The ice operated within the parameters of the samurai warrior it appeared to be. Whoever the programmer was, he had obviously been a stickler for realism. So the samurai ice attacked much the way a real samurai would. Ariel thought she could use that.

The ice saw the opening and went for it. It shuffled forward, sword raised high above its helmeted head, the edge of the blade gleaming in the reddish light inside the system. Ariel waited until the last moment and lunged forward, driving her silver sword into the chest of the ice construct to the

hilt.

A real sword would have been blunted by the samurai's armor, but Ariel's electron blade was not constrained by the rules of the physical world. Here in the Matrix it was like a magical sword, and it cut through the armor with ease. The samurai started to bring its razored blade down in a killing strike, but it froze in place, transfixed by the sword through its torso.

The image hung there for a moment, frozen in time, then it de-rezzed, breaking up into the individual pixels that made it up and vanishing into nothingness in a shower of static, leaving no trace of its presence behind. Ariel breathed a sigh of relief and keyed her commlink to the rest of the Hammermen.

"Yo, boss, you there?"

"Glad to have you back, Trouble," Hammer's voice surged back across the link.

"What's your status?"

"The immediate problem is handled for now. I'm going to try and get access to the security systems and our target data."

"Good work. Lock out the elevators and all of the access from the floor our target is on. It looks like our birds are trying to fly the coop. We're on our way."

"Copy that, Hammer."

Ariel closed the channel and turned back on the swirling chaos that was the datastore. It didn't look like there was much to salvage from it. What the frag were they doing here to have created a mess like this? she thought. It looked like the datastore had been taken apart by some kind of virus, but not one like anything Ariel had ever seen.

Whatever it is, it can do a lot of damage to high-security data systems quickly and efficiently. The ice tried to stop me, but it didn't stand much of a chance against this. If Fuchi's working on it, they just might have another crash virus on their hands.

19

. Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we shall die.

-Isaiah 22:13

Hammer flattened against the wall as the second burst of autofire cut through the air and ricocheted off the walls. The damned security guards had moved faster than he figured, blocking off both the passage to the stairwell and the elevator.

Sloane had taken a couple of slugs and was leaning up against the wall near Hammer's feet. His armor kept the bullets from penetrating, but he probably had some cracked ribs at least. Geist crouched beside him, quietly chanting and laying his hands on Sloane's arm and chest, healing the injuries.

Tootall stood across the hall, just out of sight of the security men around the corner, with Tojo hugging the wall not far behind him. Hammer looked over at the big troll and gave the nod. Tootall ducked around the corner and began laying down a hail of fire from his AK-97 assault rifle, forcing the corporate guards to duck for cover. Hammer knew his team couldn't hold out for very long before the corpers decided to rush them. They had to break through the guards or fall back to avoid getting caught in a crossfire, which meant they needed to end this quick.

Hammer turned to Geist, who leaned back from Sloane with a sigh. Hammer hoped the healing spell hadn't taken too much out of the mage. Sloane rose slowly to his feet and acknowledged Geist's help with a nod.

"We need to get past these fraggers now. Do you think you can take them?"

Geist gave Hammer a look that left no doubt he thought he could handle any mundane threat. "I can, but I need to see them if I'm going to hit them, and I need a distraction to give me time to act."

Hammer nodded and turned to Tootall. He spoke quietly into his mike, and the troll's headset picked it up across the hallway.

"We need to give those corpers something to think about for a few seconds so

Geist can take 'em out. Hold for my mark."

Tootall grinned and nodded, reaching for a pouch on his web-belt.

Geist remained crouched at the base of the wall. He settled his back against the wall, his eyes closing and muscles relaxing as he went into a trance. A faint shimmer appeared in the air in front of the mage, slightly blurring his features, like heat rising from summer asphalt. Hammer knew Geist was calling on the aid of one of his servitor spirits. He had seen the telltale signs with Geist and many other magic-workers before. The mage was calling in the big guns.

When the shimmering appeared, Hammer turned to Tootall and nodded. The troll yelled "Banzai!" and let fly a small, flat silver object from his belt pouch. A second later, the stun grenade went off with a loud bang and a bright flash. There were shouts from the corridor, followed by more cries of confusion from the security guards.

"Gas attack!" a voice cried out. "Use your masks! Use ..." the voice trailed off in a flurry of choking and coughing as a terrible smell wafted over to the shadow-runners, nearly making Hammer retch from the foulness of it. He wrinkled his broad, flat nose and backed off a little bit, staying near Geist's motionless body. What the frag was the mage doing?

In a few seconds, the coughing and choking noises

subsided, and Hammer was sure he heard a few bodies hit the tiled floor of the corridor. He waited another moment longer and then signaled to Tootall. The two of them whipped around the corner, weapons at the ready.

The corridor and lobby beyond held a bank of elevators and the doorway to the stairwell. A thick, bluish haze like a bad afternoon in Los Angeles hung over the area, obscuring the elegant corporate decor. The corridor was littered with the prone bodies of eight guards wearing the same uniforms as the ones the team had taken out near the side entrance. A few of the men had small filter-masks on, but the masks had been useless against a threat that didn't come from a gas-grenade.

The source of the disgusting smell and the faintly bluish haze hovered in the air above the unconscious guards. It looked like a man-shape made up of thicker areas of mist swirling and shifting in the depths of the haze as it hovered there. The air elemental was able to penetrate any physical protection with its insubstantial body, using its power to control its native element to choke the guards with noxious air. As Hammer watched in fascination, the spirit seemed to collapse in on itself and all of the mist in the room was drawn to a single point in the air like a whirlpool of air. When the room was clear, the misty spirit was also drawn through the invisible hole in the air and vanished in a glimmer of light.

"They should be out for at least an hour," Geist said, coming around the corner. Hammer almost jumped at the sound of the mage's voice. It was times like this he was reminded just how much of an asset a mage like Geist was to a team. Hammer turned away from the prone bodies of the corp guards to look at the mage's pale face. Geist had a look of smug satisfaction on his features. Hammer didn't bother to comment on it. As long as the mage did his job this well, he was entitled to be a little arrogant.

"Good work," he said. "Let's hit the stairs." He waved an arm to the rest of the Hammermen and took the lead.

* * *

Gunfire echoed faintly through the corridor, and the two technicians turned and looked back toward their boss with concern written on their faces. Their job descriptions might have included monitoring grueling interrogations, but not dealing with armed opponents capable of fighting back. Miles Lanier kept his gun leveled at Babel's back and looked past him at the techies.

"Keep going," he said. "Our people will keep them off us until we can get to the parking garage and out of here." The small group reached the stairwell door and one of the techies slashed his passcard through the mag-lock. The red

light burning over the mechanism remained unchanged.

"The lock won't respond, sir," he said to Lanier. Lanier took a step around Babel toward the door when the lights in the corridor went from red emergency lights to normal lighting, silencing the alarm system, followed by a loud bang from the stairwell above. Lanier glanced over at the door and away from Babel. In that moment, Babel acted, the monofilament-edged slasher extending from his arm like a striking snake. Time slowed to a crawl, and he swung at Lanier, aiming for his extended gun hand. Dr. Ferrera screamed a warning to Lanier, but the man had already caught Babel's movement out of the corner of his eye. He stepped back quickly to get out of the way, tripping himself up and falling against the security door. The edge of the blade caught Lanier's pistol and knocked it from his hand, sending it clattering to the floor with a silvery gash along the side.

Lanier immediately dropped into a crouch to avoid Babel's next attack, matching his speed. The cyberblade passed harmlessly over his head, cutting a narrow gash in the metal of the security door. Lanier snapped out one leg in an expert kick, catching Babel in the knee. The technoshaman fell back in a burst of pain, struggling to stay on his feet as Lanier made a grab for his fallen weapon.

Babel leapt forward again toward Lanier when one of the techies decided to be a hero by tackling him. The two went down on the floor in a heap, but Babel quickly rolled to the top. He straddled the hapless technician's chest and grabbed his throat with one hand, holding the point of his cyberblade menacingly close. At the click of a hammer being drawn back, both men looked over at where Lanier had his gun trained on them.

"Let him go," Lanier said, "and get up slowly."

Babel looked down at the fearful face of the technician and back at Lanier. He could threaten the techie, try to use him as a hostage, but he knew that would be hopeless. If Lanier was any match for his reputation, he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice one man to hold onto Babel, and then Babel would have nothing to bargain with. Lanier was corporate, and Babel knew how little the megacorporate big noises cared for their employees when push came to shove. He slowly got to his feet and stepped away from the prone technician, the carbon-fiber blade silently retracting into his forearm as he did so.

"Impressive cutter," Lanier said. "But you could use a little more training in how to use it. Now stay right there." Lanier took a key-card from the inside pocket of his suit-jacket and tossed it to the technician, who was getting to his feet.

"Use this," he said and the techie scrambled to obey. Lanier's key-card overrode the maglock, and the light flashed green. The technician reached for the handle when the door flew open with a sudden bang, striking him in the face. He crumpled against the wall and fell into a heap. Lanier took no notice of the technician's fate. He spun on the ork coming through the door, pistol in hand. The ork held a hand-cannon that made Lanier's slim weapon seem like a toy by comparison.

"Drop it, chummer!" the ork said in a booming voice. Lanier hesitated for a moment, and Babel could almost see him mentally calculating the odds of being able to

take this fierce-looking ork. He raised his hands, pointing the gun at the ceiling, but not dropping it as the ork ordered. The newcomer moved carefully into the corridor, keeping his gun trained on Lanier, but watching everyone, as several other men emerged from the doorway. All of them were wearing dark camouflage fatigues and urban street armor. Three men were human, the fourth had to bend down a bit as he came through the door. He was a troll, and carried a military-grade rifle with a taped-banana clip. The men quickly moved to cover everyone in the hall.

"I said to drop it, chummer," the ork said in a flat, even tone. Lanier took one more look over the group of armed men, and his gun hit the floor with a

loud clatter.

"Kick it over here," the ork ordered, and Lanier complied, sending the gun sliding over toward the ork. One of the other men bent down to pick it up. Babel noticed he was the only one who did not already have a weapon in his hands. There was a pistol bolstered in a shoulder-rig, but Babel had the strong impression the man rarely used it and carried it only for show.

"You don't know who you're fragging with, drekwits," Lanier said.

The ork gave a short, barking laugh, echoed by several of the other men.

"You're not exactly in a position to bargain, chummer. We've got you outnumbered and outgunned." He glanced toward Babel. "About all you can do is tell me why we shouldn't take our boy here and leave the rest of you deadweight for the clean-up crew." He leveled his weapon at Lanier's heart and Dr. Ferrera gasped.

"Who are you working for?" Babel asked.

The ork turned to glance back at the technoshaman. "That's not your problem, kid," he said. "You'll find out soon enough."

"It might matter to you that this guy is Miles Lanier . . ." Babel started to reply.

"Lanier?" the ork said. "The former Fuchi security guy?"

I thought you worked for Renraku now? Is this some kind of put-on, kid?"

"I don't think so," said the man who picked up Lanier's gun. "I scanned the Renraku corporate report recently, and this man looks very much like Miles Lanier. He could be quite valuable to the right people . . ." The man let the remainder of the thought dangle, and the faces of the other men lit up.

"Hey, nothing like a little extra cred," said the tall blond man.

The ork stared at Lanier over the top of his gun, the weapon never wavering for a second. "I don't like complications, chummer, but I also don't like the idea of leaving a guy like you behind to cause trouble for us. And geeking you is going to make more problems, so you and the lady can come with us. Don't make killing you less trouble than keeping you alive, so ka?"

Lanier nodded, his eyes as hard as flint. The shadow-runners fanned out to herd Lanier, Ferrera, and Babel up the stairs to the first floor of the facility. Babel saw the unconscious guards in the corridor and lobby above and knew these men were not to be trifled with.

"We're clearing out of here, Val," the ork leader said quietly into his throat-mike. "Get ready to rock." The shadow-runners led their charges out through the side entrance of the building where a helicopter sat on the pavement of the parking lot, its rotors revving up as they approached. Everyone climbed into the chopper's open side door, the ork last of all. He swung into place in the cabin and slid the door shut, calling out to the pilot.

"Take her up, Val. Let's buzz." The rotors whined faster and the Stallion lifted smoothly from the ground.

"Nice and smooth," the ork said as the pavement dropped away below them.

"Not quite, boss," came the voice of the lady chopper pilot. "We've got a bogey coming in on intercept."

The control cabin radio hissed and crackled with an incoming transmission.

"Unidentified craft, this is Knight

Errant Security patrol beta-four-one. You are in violation of corporate airspace and metroplex air-traffic regulations. Identify yourself immediately or we will be forced to open fire. Repeat, transmit your identification codes and flight plan information immediately or we will down your craft."

20

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

-Matthew, 7:7

"Looks like a Knight Errant interceptor," Val said over her shoulder to

Hammer. "They're fast and they're armed with enough to knock this bird down just like they said. I could try and outrun them, maybe lose them, but it won't be easy."

"Let me talk to them," Lanier said. Hammer turned toward him and raised a bushy eyebrow.

"I can get you past them," Lanier told him. "I don't want to get shot down any more than any of you. This is saving my hoop along with yours."

The ork mercenary was clearly thinking over his options and quickly decided the other ones the team had didn't amount to much. He drew the bulky hand-cannon from the shoulder-holster beneath his left arm and leveled it casually at Lanier. With a wave of the gun, he motioned him toward the cockpit.

"All right," he said, "but no tricks. Remember, you're not the target of this operation, so we don't need you for anything. You breathe one wrong word to the Knights, and you'll be a smear on the pavement."

Lanier pushed himself out of his seat and covered the space to the cockpit in a couple of strides. He pushed past the ork into the co-pilot's position near the dark-haired rigger. Picking up the spare radio headset, he quickly slipped

it on and settled the throat-mike in place as the radio crackled again.

"Unidentified craft, this is your last warning. Give your identification code and flight path information or we will be forced to take action. You have ten seconds to respond."

"Knight Errant patrol beta-four-one," Lanier said crisply into the mike, "this is a AAA alpha-priority flight, clearance code gamma-iota-four-seven-seven-two-blue. Disregard and continue on your normal patrol route. Repeat, this is a triple-A alpha-priority. Do you copy?"

A long moment of silence filled the cabin of the helicopter as everyone on board held their breath, waiting for the hiss of an approaching anti-aircraft missile or the roar of the Knight Errant helicopter's chin-mounted chain gun to send them plummeting from the sky. But no attack came. The sleek Knight Errant craft banked off above the corporate park and turned back toward the downtown area of the metroplex, winking its running lights at them. A voice crackled over the radio.

"Your code is confirmed. Keep out of trouble. Out." The transmission ended and the patrol chopper headed off into the distance.

Hammer turned to Lanier, clearly impressed. "How did you pull that off?" he asked.

Lanier merely shrugged as he removed the radio headset. "The Corporate Court has a series of priority codes for sanctioned intercorporate activities and emergencies to make sure everyone isn't tripping all over everyone else. All the top-tier megacorps have an understanding that lets the Court use the codes to get things done when it needs to. Ares Macrotechnology is one of those megacorporations, and Knight Errant is an Ares subsidiary, so I just gave the KE boys a Fuchi code and told them this was out of their jurisdiction. As long as you don't cause any more noise, they won't come looking for you. At least, not until they figure out what really happened."

"How come you still have Fuchi codes? I heard the corp changed all the locks when you left Fuchi.. ."

Lanier just shrugged again. "You have your secrets, chum-mer. I have mine." He stood up from the cockpit and quietly made his way back to his seat. Hammer's eyes followed him the whole way, but Lanier gave no sign of what he felt or thought.

Hammer turned his attention to the target of the operation, the young man who sat quietly between Lanier and the Hispanic woman, studying the shadowrunners with his strange, purple eyes.

"What about you, kid?" the ork asked. "Why are you so valuable somebody wants you grabbed?"

Geist spoke up first. "His aura is unlike anything I've seen before," he said,

almost as if thinking aloud. "There are ... changes to it that are unknown to me."

"You spellworms," Babel said with a sad shake of his head, "you think everything can be explained by your auras and your divinations. You're so arrogant, so sure of your power."

"Magic is the true power of the Sixth World," Geist said in a dangerous tone. "If you doubt that, you can ask the guards my spirit downed at the facility. Had you been protected by a magician of any ability, we might never have been able to get to you."

Hammer didn't think he'd ever heard Geist angry about anything, but the mage seemed bent out of shape about this strange young man.

"Your power is old, outdated," Babel said. "There are powers in the modern world that magic cannot begin to comprehend or control."

"And you do?" Hammer said. He wanted to head this off before Geist got truly riled. He would talk to the mage later about his attitude. The young man only looked up at Hammer with his strange-colored eyes like he was looking into Hammer's soul. Hammer had seen mages do the trick lots of times and wondered for a moment if the kid was a magicker himself. Geist hadn't said anything about it. Though it might be possible for something like that to escape Geist's notice, it didn't seem likely.

"I know the Channels and the Forms," Babel said, "and I know my destiny."

"Well, right now, kid, your destiny is wherever we frag-gin' take you. Don't forget that." Hammer turned his back on his captives and looked out the windscreen of the Stallion at the lights of the sprawl spread out below them. He couldn't wait to reach the rendezvous point and be finished with this run. He had a strange feeling about it, and it wasn't a feeling he liked at all. They landed on the outskirts of the Rox, in an open lot left by the demolition of some old buildings to make way for new construction that never came. The Rox had been abandoned by the metro government and the corporations when they turned their attention to more important construction centered around the gleaming new East Coast Stock Exchange and its satellite buildings. Left to the cast-offs and shadowdwellers who inhabited it, the Rox was almost entirely lawless, home to tribes like the Netwalkers and an ideal place for mercenaries who technically didn't exist to conclude their business for the evening. Val powered down the rotors of the helicopter, but kept the systems ready for a hot re-start. It might be necessary for the Hammermen to pull out in a hurry, and she wanted to be ready. Her nervous system still synched with the Stallion's on-board computers, Val could "see" through the thermoptical and radar sensors of the bird and control the Stallion's weapons systems with nothing more than a thought. Hopefully, it would be firepower they wouldn't need.

Hammer turned back to their three "passengers" as Sloane and Tojo hopped out of the side door of the Stallion onto the cracked and tumbled pavement of the lot, dust swirling in the backwash of the slowing rotors.

"O.K., out," he said with a wave of his Manhunter toward his captives. Lanier and Babel wasted no time in getting out of the helicopter while the shadowrunners covered them. Dr. Ferrera moved more slowly, her eyes fixed on the runners the whole time. The runners were alert for any

signs of treachery, but there were none. Lanier wasn't foolish enough to try something with all these guns trained on him and the mage present. Not in the middle of unknown territory with no sure means of escape. Better to wait and see who the runners' employer was and what he or she wanted with Babel. Ferrera was obviously intimidated by the runners, and wouldn't make any trouble either.

As for Babel, he seemed perfectly composed and calm, almost emotionless. Lanier knew at least part of it was an act, and was impressed by the display of self-control. The shadowrunners didn't seem to know Babel personally, but Lanier wondered if he had been expecting this extraction in some way. He

certainly acted like he had no problem with being abducted yet again. One of the shadowrunners, the smaller, Asian man, nodded toward the open space between two abandoned buildings on the outskirts of the lot. Bright halogen lights flared into existence there, bathing the lot in their harsh, white glare. Hammer gestured the three of them forward with a wave of his gun. The other two runners followed close behind.

The side door of the car waiting at the mouth of the clearing opened, and a dark figure emerged, obscured by the glare of the lights. He stepped forward, the headlights outlining him from behind and casting his face and features into shadow.

Hammer took a step forward. "Here's your boy," he said with a jerk of his head toward Babel.

The dark man nodded. "Yes. Good work." His voice had a slight accent that was difficult to identify. "But I only hired you to retrieve one target, who is . . ." He paused as he took a more careful look at Babel's companions.

"Well, well, well," the shadowed figure said with a tone of considerable amusement. "The infamous Mr. Miles Lanier. How very interesting." The man raised one hand and snapped his fingers. Instantly, two other men emerged from the car. The shadowrunners tensed, but took no action.

"And this must be Dr. Ferrera," the shadowed man said with a trace of a smile in his voice. He executed a slight,

formal bow. "A pleasure to meet you, doctor. Your work in neurobiology precedes you. I have had the pleasure of reading some of it. Fascinating."

"Thank you," Ferrera said in a small, confused voice.

"Put the men in the car," the shadowed man said, and the two other men moved toward Lanier and Babel, drawing slim pistols from within their suit jackets as they did so. As the two men were escorted to the car, their leader also reached into his coat to withdraw a slim plastic rod, which he held out toward Hammer.

"The agreed upon payment," he said. "With a little something extra for a job well done." The ork took a few steps closer to reach out and take the credstick. He pulled the portable data-reader from his web-belt and slotted the stick. After checking the credit balance, Hammer's eyes widened a bit. The bonus was obviously more than he expected. He quickly pocketed the stick and signaled the rest of the team to get back to the Stallion. It wasn't a good idea for them to stay on the ground for too long.

"A pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Johnson," the ork said as the rotors of the Stallion began to rev up again and the Hammermen trotted back to the chopper. The man beside the sleek, corporate limousine stood and watched the shadowrunners climb in and pull the door closed as the helicopter began to rise into the night sky.

"Oh no, my friend," he said, smiling to himself. "I assure you that the pleasure is all mine."

The inside of the limousine was lushly appointed, with wide and deep seats. Lanier and Babel settled themselves in the back seat, with the two company men sitting on either side of them by the doors. They watched the helicopter take off from the field and quickly vanish into the darkness over the Rox, then the door opened and the other man climbed into the back of the car with Dr. Ferrera. One of the company men closed the door behind him, and the man rapped on the partition separating them from the front of the limo. The car smoothly pulled out of the lot and onto the road, the rear windows darkening to opacity. Lanier and Babel

found themselves looking over at the man who had paid a team of shadowrunners to abduct them.

He was Japanese, dressed in a dark, finely tailored suit of a corporate cut. His tie had a geometric design, and he wore no ornamentation or jewelry. His hair was cut above his collar, short enough to show the gleam of metal from the jack discreetly placed behind his left ear. Although his face was

impassive, his dark eyes showed he was very pleased with himself.

"Well, Michael, it is good to see you again," he said to Babel. Although the man spoke in Japanese, Babel was surprised to discover that he understood the man perfectly, almost as surprised as he was by the man's use of his real name.

"Do you know me?" he said to the Japanese man. He looked puzzled for a moment, his brow furrowing.

"Do not worry about speaking in front of Mr. Lanier, Michael," the man replied in Japanese. "Anything he learns at this point is of no importance."

"Mister Lanier speaks Japanese just fine," Lanier said in the same language.

"So don't think you can shut me out that way." Ferrera, on the other hand, looked from Lanier to the other man. She, at least, did not understand any of the exchange. Japanese was hardly required for employees of Aztechnology, and Ferrera had picked up very little of the language during her time with Renraku.

"I would never dream of such a thing, Lanier-san," the man said in English. "I most certainly want you to have the opportunity to see the completion of our operation."

"You're ..." Babel said. "Then you're Renraku." It was more of a statement than a question. The Japanese man turned his attention back to Babel, his eyes darkening again.

"Did you send me into the Rox?" Babel demanded. "Why? What's going on? And who the frag are you?" The man didn't reply, but instead turned toward Lanier with a dangerous, questioning look in his eyes.

Lanier merely smiled and raised his hands in an elaborate shrug. "Not my doing," he said in response to the unasked question. "He's been like this the whole time. I

stirred up memories of him working for Renraku, but it seems they are incomplete at best, since I assume he is supposed to remember who you are." The other man nodded and turned his eyes back to Babel. "Yes, Michael, I am Takana Saigo. I am your sensei, your teacher, and your employer. You are Michael Bishop, an employee and agent of Renraku Computer Systems. Do not be concerned. You are home now, and soon we will restore you to normal and allow you to complete the mission you have carried out so well."

"You might find that harder than you think, Saigo," Lanier said.

"Simply because you failed? We have methods you might not have employed, Lanier-san. We also have the advantage of being Michael's true employers, not traitors attempting to compromise this operation. It is clear his loyalties remain intact." He focused his gaze on Babel for the last comment, leaving the question unasked.

"I knew I had to return to Renraku . . ." Babel said, almost to himself.

"You see? Soon we will be able to complete this operation successfully and you, Lanier, will be turned over to Renraku Security."

"I'm on the board of directors . . ."

Saigo dismissed Lanier's announcement with a wave of his hand. "That will not matter once your part in this has been revealed. Your reasons for attempting to interfere with this operation are unclear, although anyone could venture a very good guess. I will take great pleasure in seeing the board of directors deal with a traitor like you."

"Don't be so sure this operation is going to come out the way you want it to, Saigo. Your agent seems to have a lot of trouble just remembering who you are. Are you so sure he got what you sent him for?"

Saigo glared at Lanier for a moment, but said nothing. No one else in the car dared to speak, so the little group remained silent for the rest of the trip. When the car finally came to a stop, one of the company men opened the door, allowing Saigo to step out of the car

and extend a hand to assist Dr. Ferrera. The company man followed, then Lanier and Babel, along with their other corporate escort. The car sat in an

underground parking garage near a bank of elevators. Lanier and Babel were led over to them while the car drove off into the depths of the garage. From the time the trip took, Lanier assumed they were still in the Boston metroplex, most likely in the downtown area. He didn't recognize the surroundings, but it wasn't likely they were in Renraku's major Boston facility. Probably some secondary installation similar to the blind Villiers had arranged for Lanier to use.

Saigo instructed one of the company men to see to Dr. Ferrera's comfort while he handled "other matters." He bowed to the doctor and made his way over to the bank of elevators where Babel and Lanier waited with their corporate guards.

The elevator, instead of ascending, took the men down below the parking garage at least several levels. The doors opened with a quiet brush of metal on metal to reveal an almost featureless corridor. Saigo led them briskly through the halls of the underground complex to a room not unlike the interrogation room they had just left behind. It was a large, open room with a high ceiling. The walls were covered with banks of sophisticated computer equipment around a diagnostic chair. Two men in white lab coats attended the sensors and other devices around the chair while technicians handled the computers under the watchful eyes of grim-faced men in Renraku security uniforms.

Saigo escorted Babel toward the center of the room while the company men kept Lanier on the sidelines. Lanier looked over the facility on their way in and casually scanned the room they were in now. It was clear Renraku planned to make use of whatever information they could get from Babel as quickly as possible. The facility had all the signs of being set up as a kind of urban bunker, a command center for whatever operation Renraku had in mind for the information Babel carried. It was like a war-room, a thought that did not ease Lanier's mind about Renraku's plans.

The two men in white coats bowed to Saigo as he ap-

proached, although neither of them was Japanese. One was slight and had a pinched face while the other was broad-chested and sported a full beard and the unusual anachronism of a pair of spectacles. They marked him as a user of magic in Lanier's eyes. Magic wielders disdained any biological modifications or implants, even corneal surgery to correct vision defects, since it could affect their ability to use magic.

"Michael, this is Doctor Lambert and Doctor Westcott. They will be helping you to remember."

Babel looked at the two men and then back at Saigo. "And what am I supposed to remember?" he asked.

Saigo led Babel to the chair and gestured for him to sit down. Babel did so, although he looked as if he thought the chair might bite him.

"Your real name is Michael Bishop," Saigo was saying, "and you are an employee of Renraku Computer Systems and a graduate of MIT&T here in Boston. You were chosen for a special mission to infiltrate the Netwalkers tribe, to learn their technoshamanic techniques and bring the information back to us at Renraku."

"You mean I was sent to betray them?"

"No," Saigo said, "you cannot betray them, because you are not one of them. You are one of us. Renraku is your home and employer and we have been for nearly all of your life. The Netwalkers have brainwashed you to try and make you one of them. But don't worry, we will help you. Doctors?"

The two men conferred briefly and proceeded to examine Babel carefully. He sat quietly without protest as the doctors scanned and examined him, talking quietly to each other about the results. They excused themselves and went over to confer with Saigo, close enough so Lanier could make out some of what the men were saying. Dr. Lambert pointed out some items on a portable datapad he handed to Saigo as he talked.

"We have concluded that the Netwalkers must have used some kind of programmable ASIST biofeedback technique to alter Bishop's memories. If so,

detecting and undoing the

process using conventional technological means will require several days of painstaking work at the very least, perhaps as long as a week."

Saigo was about to interrupt when Dr. Westcott cut him off. "However," he said, "using magic I may be able to break through the conditioning and access the subject's memories immediately. There is, of course, some additional risk in using such powerful mind probing spells ..." Westcott let the rest of the comment dangle.

"Do it," Saigo said in a low voice. "We need the information as soon as possible, whatever the risk."

21

And there was war in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought Michael and his angels.

--Revelation 12:7

Lynn Osborne stared with complete dismay at the image of the man on the flat-screen display in front of her. She gripped the padded handle she was tethered to along the bulkhead of the orbital station as her world seemed to fall out from under her and she felt the effects of the zero-gravity beginning to disorient her for the first time since she'd become used to space travel.

"What did you say?" she repeated. Had she been anyone else, her tone would have earned a rebuke. Considering the situation, Richard Villiers chose to ignore it.

"You heard me," he said. "We've lost him. As near as we can tell, a team hit the facility less than an hour ago. We're checking through the facility's data systems for any information, but it looks like they've been trashed by some kind of progressive virus the ComSci division can't identify. Whoever they were, they were thorough."

"It could have only been one faction," she said.

The man on the screen nodded grimly. "Renraku. They've taken our ace in the hole."

"But how ... ?"

"You let me worry about that, Lynn. You handle the Court." Osborne considered for a moment. It was only a couple of hours before the court was due to reconvene.

"I could get a continuance," she mused out loud. "Maybe buy us some time."

"Try and do that," Villiers said. "We might be able to mount a recovery operation in time to make a difference. If not, we're well and truly fragged. We have no case against Renraku without proof they were trying to make use of the otaku in some way, and they'll use this to their advantage when the next court election comes up."

"Do you think we have a chance of recovering him?"

Villiers stared at her for a moment, then shook his head. He looked tired. "I really don't know, Lynn. We've got people working on it now. There's one possibility that's promising, but I can't get into it now. Not over the comm-link. Just stall the court for now and hope for the best."

"What about Hague?" she asked.

Villiers shook his head again. "He hasn't been updated yet. I want you to take care of that. Hague is still in too tight with the Yamanas for my taste. He'll go running to them at the first sign of any trouble and I don't want them getting wind of this yet. Since the operation involved one of my companies, it'll be a little while before the Japanese find out anything about the raid or the loss of the ... evidence. I'd prefer to keep them off my back until we've got a handle on things. Keep Hague under control up there, understand?" Osborne nodded. It wouldn't be difficult to get David Hague to follow her lead in this matter, considering what was at stake. Hague was loyal enough to the Yamanas, the Japanese clan who got him his position on the Corporate Court, but he was far more loyal to maintaining the high lifestyle he had become

accustomed to. Any threat to his prosperity would be enough to keep him in line.

"I'll keep you updated," Villiers said just as a chime sounded at the door. "I have to go," Osborne said. Villiers nodded and broke the connection, the vidscreen going blank.

Osborne smoothed her hands over her formal court robe and made sure her voice was steady as she called out the door. "Enter."

The door hissed open to reveal Francesco Napoli lurking on the other side, like a cat waiting to pounce. He was certainly grinning like the cat who'd eaten the proverbial canary. Oh frag, Osborne thought. I should have expected this. He must have known about the snatching of the otaku even before I was notified. She did her best to keep her thoughts from her face, remaining composed and businesslike, with just a touch of surprise at seeing Napoli, even though she had been dreading this meeting.

"Hello, Paco," she said cordially. "It isn't time to reconvene yet, is it?" Napoli shook his head, clinging to the support outside of the door like a spider, just waiting for a little vibration of his web to act. "No, not yet, but I thought I might take a little of your time to talk about this case. We might be able to resolve things more easily between us. May I come in?" Without waiting for a reply, Napoli flipped himself through the doorway and grabbed onto another handhold just inside. The door automatically hissed closed behind him.

"This kind of expartate communication is really inappropriate, Mister Napoli." Osborne put some emphasis on her formal mode of address. "Anything you have to say to me can be said when the court reconvenes."

"Come now, Lynn. I really don't think you're that much of a glutton for punishment. We both know your so-called case is nothing but smoke and mirrors. You have nothing on us and the court will have to dismiss your charges. Spare yourself the embarrassment of having to beg the court's forgiveness for having wasted their time. Let's tell them we chose to settle this matter between us quietly."

"Why would I want to do that?" Osborne asked cautiously.

Napoli gave his crafty smile. "Because you're a smart lady. You know you don't have anything substantial and you know you can't win. Why not cut your losses and have a shot at getting something out of this deal rather than losing face in front of the whole court and getting nothing but grief? Don't you think you'd be serving Fuchi better to put the company's best interests above any desire you might have of humbling Renraku?"

Osborne wanted more than anything at that moment to simply bash in Napoli's face and wipe that oily smile off of it. The fragger knows he has us right where he wants us. He extended a datapad to Osborne with a bit of a theatrical flourish and let it float from his hand. It tumbled across the short span separating the two justices and Osborne caught it easily.

"That has the agreement for the out of court settlement on all of this," Napoli said. "All you have to do is read and sign it. It drops all of the charges you've raised against us in exchange for Fuchi getting certain distribution and licensing rights for some of our more profitable developments. Fuchi can still get on the bandwagon by distributing some of that leading-edge Matrix technology."

Sure, as long as the technology is owned by Renraku, who will get a big cut of the profits while Fuchi does all of the work. Renraku gets fatter and Fuchi falls behind in developing and marketing their own products because they don't want to compete with their own licenses. Nice try, Paco.

Osborne glanced at the text displayed on the screen of the datapad for a moment before flipping the pad back to Napoli with a flick of her wrist and a bit more force than was necessary. The startled Napoli almost missed catching the pad as it sailed back toward him.

"Forget it, Paco, no deal."

Napoli recovered from his surprise quickly and clutched the datapad as he glared across at Osborne. "Don't be stupid," he said in a low tone. "If you continue to press this case, I will personally bury you. You have no evidence, you have no witness, you have nothing. Nada. Zero. If you try this and fail, I'll see to it you go up on charges of wasting the court's precious time with this nonsense. And when the time comes, Renraku will make certain that... certain interests at Fuchi are encouraged over others, if you understand my meaning. We'll see just how long your boss, Richard Villiers, lasts when the most powerful corporation in the world decides to come down on top of him like a ton of bricks."

Osborne didn't allow Napoli's little tirade to shake her. If anything, it only confirmed what she suspected. "Don't be so sure of yourself," she said, her voice matching Napoli's icy tone. "You're not number one yet. You've got Lofwyr to deal with, and the dragon isn't going to let some two-bit zaibatsu walk all over his plans. But before that even happens, Paco, you have to deal with me. You're offering me a deal, an easy way out that saves face for everyone. Why?"

Napoli started to reply, but Osborne cut him off before he could do more than draw breath. "Out of the goodness of your heart? I don't think so. Why offer us a deal at all? You could have simply waited for this case to fall apart if you're so sure we've got nothing. It would have embarrassed Fuchi and you could have walked away from it all looking squeaky clean. A settlement, even one favoring Renraku, makes it look like you're guilty. So why bother? "I'll tell you why. It's because you're scared. It's because you have something to protect that's so big you don't want to raise even the possibility we could win this case. You're more willing to risk looking a little guilty than take the chance we might win, or at least create enough suspicion in the process for the court to find out something you'd rather they didn't. Well, you don't have to worry about dealing with the dragon just yet, Paco. First you're going to have to deal with me, and when I'm finished, I'm going to make you wish Lofwyr had decided to bite your fragging head off. Now get out of here."

"You said what to him?" David Hague's face was even whiter than usual and Osborne wished she had something to capture the look for posterity. "You should have seen it," she said with a laugh. "He looked like he was going to explode. But I called one thing for certain, David. Napoli is scared, meaning Renraku is scared. They don't want this investigation to continue, and they're willing to start making deals to make sure it doesn't." "Maybe we should think about that," Hague replied. "If they're so scared, then maybe we can renegotiate, cut a better deal than what Napoli was offering."

"Why do that when we still have a chance at getting it all?" she shot back. "Renraku is standing on a house of cards, David. I can feel it. If we knock out the right ones, the whole thing is going to come tumbling down around them. We could take them down and be right there to pick up the pieces when it's all over. That's worth a little risk."

"Risk? Are you out of your mind? We don't even have a case. Where is this evidence you keep talking about? What are we going to have to prove to the court that Renraku is a threat to the rest of them? They aren't going to act based on anything I've seen so far. If anything, they'll probably side with Renraku against us so they don't end up on the losing side."

"Don't worry," she said in a firm voice. This line of thought had to be nipped in the bud before Hague panicked. "We've got a line onto something that will do what we need. I just need to ask the court for a continuance to make sure everything falls into place when we want it to. All you need to do is back me on it."

Hague looked out the window of his office at the blue-green globe of the Earth far below them. He sighed, and Osborne could almost read his thoughts. The Japanese weren't going to be happy if he was even partially responsible of

damaging Fuchi's reputation in the court, but they would be even less pleased if they found out he'd had an opportunity to hurt Renraku and not taken it.

"I don't have much choice, do I?"

Osborne smiled. "There's always a choice. And you just made the right one. Trust me."

"Justice Osborne, this Court does not appreciate having its valuable time and resources wasted." Jean-Claude Priault's tone was icy cold and carried a distinct chill through the courtroom. Osborne did not wither under its touch or his hard gaze, but held her head high in a pose of quiet dignity.

"I understand that, Chief Justice," she replied, having chosen her words carefully before the court reconvened. "It is not my desire to waste any of this august court's vital

resources. That is why I must request this continuance of our case. In order to present our evidence in the most efficient and timely manner possible, we require the court's indulgence. I can personally assure you that a further continuance will prevent the loss of considerable time and effort relating to this case and will be valuable to the court in the long term."

The recess hadn't allowed Osborne to feel out the other justices on a continuance. She'd barely had enough time to brief Hague and be certain of his support. She knew that the other justices were eager to finish their business on board the Zurich-Orbital so they could return Earthside and resume their own affairs, either because they disliked the zero-g environment or because other matters were pressing for their attention. She was gambling that mere discomfort wouldn't win out over a desire to see this case through to the end. It was a serious risk. If the other justices decided that her request was a sign that Fuchi's case was weak, they might side with Renraku as Hague feared and dismiss the whole thing. They might even call for sanctions against Fuchi for wasting the court's time. But Osborne had made a career out of being able to accurately read people and situations, and her instincts told her she should press this case now for all it was worth. She'd have continued even if Villiers hadn't ordered her to do so. She was also counting on a little help from another quarter, even if he didn't know it.

"Mr. Chief Justice," Francesco Napoli interjected. "I think it is clear Justice Osborne is merely stalling for time with this request for a continuance. On behalf of Renraku Computer Systems, I would respectfully suggest that the Corporate Court has wasted enough of its time on this hearing, not to mention the resources required for all of us to meet here in person. Fuchi has invoked the right to hold this closed-door hearing on board Zurich-Orbital, as is their right according to our charter, but I suggest they not be allowed to waste our time with further delays. If Fuchi has a case to present, let them do so. Otherwise, we should be allowed to return to the business we were called away from."

Thanks, Paco, Osborne thought. That was just what I needed. Osborne refrained from pointing out what was surely obvious to the rest of the justices present in the courtroom. She knew Napoli, pit bull that he was, wouldn't be able to resist twisting the knife a little in open court, especially not after how she'd thrown him out of her quarters earlier. In truth, all Napoli needed to do was keep his mouth shut and let Osborne dig her own grave. Her request had already annoyed the justices, who had been dragged up to the orbital for this special hearing by Fuchi. They probably would have voted against Osborne's request out of sheer malice and a desire to have the whole thing over and done with.

But Napoli's little speech alerted them that something else was going on. He was too quick to try to shoot down Fuchi's case. Not that the members of the Corporate Court didn't admire ruthlessness. There was nothing wrong with kicking an opponent while he or she was down. None of them would be holding their high offices if they didn't know the hard truths of the twenty-first-century corporate world.

No, Napoli's mistake was in showing his hand before the moment came to play his cards. His little speech told the Court exactly what his earlier offer to Osborne had revealed her: he and Renraku were worried about the outcome of this case, worried enough that they might make mistakes, that this was a real chink in their armor and Fuchi had a shot at doing some damage. Osborne could almost see the wheels turning as her fellow justices came to the same conclusions she had. She looked across the courtroom at Napoli and saw from the look on his face that he knew it. His face darkened and he seemed about to say something, but probably realized he could only hurt his case further by doing so. He tightened his jaw and kept silent. "Are there any other comments from the floor?" Chief Justice Priault asked, looking around the room. After a moment of silence, he said, "Then we place this matter to a vote. Shall we permit Fuchi Industrial Electronics a con-

tinuance in this matter to allow them to present their evidence in a timely and efficient manner?"

Osborne was a bit surprised at the last bit. Priault's phrasing suggested that he was in favor, a sign of approval out of character for the normally neutral Saeder-Krupp man. Maybe Priault's boss has an interest in this case as well, she thought.

All of the justices entered their votes into the electronic touch-screens built into the bench, the decision being immediately tabulated and displayed on Priault's screen. He glanced down at the display and raised his gavel. "Nine in favor, four opposed. The decision carries. Fuchi is granted a twelve-hour continuance and the members of the court will remain on board the orbital until this matter is resolved. We are adjourned until then." He rapped the gavel sharply against the bench and the members of the court began to disperse, talking quietly among themselves.

Osborne smiled and nodded over toward where Napoli glowered at her. Swords are drawn, she thought. Like samurai who fight at the bridge, only one of us is going to walk away from this now.

22

SHADOWWATCH: Your eye on the shadows All the latest news bits and bytes from the Shadowland BBS Hey, chummers, things are happening with some of the AAA megacorps that do not bode well for us in the shadows. Renraku and Fuchi have been going at each other with a lot of runs in the past couple months and it looks like things are starting to come to a head. Like Black-Eyed Susan reported, the justices of the Corporate Court, all of them, took the boost up to the Zurich-Orbital for some closed-door meeting. Now Fuchi and Renraku seem to be arming quietly for a war behind the scenes; moving assets and personnel around like pieces on a chessboard. I have the sinking feeling a lot of what is about to go down hangs on what decision the Corporate Court hands down and, either way, it could come down to a corp war. If you have any information, please post it. We need to keep each other informed because an out and out corporate war could mean big business in the shadows ... or a fight that nobody wins. >Captain Chaos

Saigo swaggered over to where Lanier stood, under guard, as the doctors made their preparations.

"Soon, Lanier-son, we will have the information we need from Michael to fully realize Renraku's potential," he said with an air of certainty.

"Don't be so sure of that," Lanier replied. "His wetware is scrambled but good. I doubt he even knows what it is you're looking for."

"So you have said. Fortunately, that is not a concern." Saigo allowed Lanier to wonder about that for a moment as he took in the room and the white-coated men making preparations around the examination chair where Babel sat. "You see, our Dr. Westcott is a sorcerer with some experience in spells allowing him to probe deeply into the minds of others, reconstructing any and all recollections of their experiences as if he were experiencing them himself. He

can even retrieve information Michael is not consciously aware of, knowledge blocked from his conscious mind. Far more effective than any interrogation technique could ever hope to be, wouldn't you say?"

Westcott moved over to the small bank of equipment near the chair where Babel sat and took two cables from the console, plugging one into Babel's datajack and the other into a similar jack behind his left ear.

"We take the process even further," Saigo said with some pride. "Dr. Westcott has all of the neural cybernetics necessary to record the various sensory impressions he gets from his mind probe at the moment he experiences them. We can also record all of Michael's impressions as he relives the memories Westcott uncovers. The simsense records of the two of them can be reviewed and compared to give us a complete, first-hand picture of all of Babel's knowledge of the otaku and their secrets."

"I know something of mind-probing," Lanier said. He had certainly seen the techniques used enough times by magicians to extract information. "The magic is exhausting for both the magician and the subject. Even if your spell-worm is as good as you think, he won't be able to maintain a sustained telepathic probe for very long. I also know mind-probing can be dangerous to the subject if he resists, and sometimes even if he doesn't. Digging around in the subconscious and breaking through repressed memories can cause permanent brain damage."

"Hopefully something we can avoid," Saigo said without any trace of concern. "If not, Michael knew the risks of this operation, and he was willing to take them for the sake of his company. I hope you enjoying watching this, Lanier-san."

This will be the operation that puts Renraku on the track to dominion over the world market. Once you are removed from the Board of Directors, perhaps I will ask that your seat be given to me."

"We're ready, sir," came Dr. Lambert's voice from across the room.

"Ah, please excuse me, Lanier-san." Saigo bowed to Lanier and turned toward Dr. Lambert. "Proceed, Doctor," he said as he moved to get a better view of the proceedings.

Dr. Westcott adjusted the placement of the fiber-optic cable leading to his datajack and placed his cool, dry hands gently on Babel's forehead, spreading his fingers a bit and resting them there lightly. The simsense equipment hummed quietly in the background, recording the sensory impressions of both men.

"Michael, all you need to do now is relax and breathe deeply," Westcott said, giving Babel his best bedside manner. "This won't hurt a bit. Just take in a deep breath and let it out. Good. That's good." Babel looked back at the doctor, his strange, violet eyes glittering darkly, then his eyes fluttered closed. His breathing became deep and he began to relax under Westcott's touch.

"Impressive," Westcott murmured, almost to himself. "He's already in a light trance state." He turned toward Saigo, hands still resting lightly on Babel's head. "We should have no difficulty at all, Saigo-san. The young man is a natural. His auto-hypnotic state should facilitate the mind probe and allow things to go smoothly."

"Then proceed, Doctor," Saigo said with a touch of impatience. He wasn't interested in hearing Westcott lecture him again on the subject of telepathic memory recall or any of the other subtleties of mind-probing. The doctor might consider the inner workings of his profession as a mind-prober fascinating, but all Saigo was interested in was securing the data Renraku needed and bringing it and the traitor Lanier before the board of directors in triumph. Westcott began speaking the words of his spell in a firm voice, the strange, arcane language spilling from his lips as

he gathered power to him. The room seemed to turn and crackle with invisible power, like a charge of static electricity, and Saigo could feel the hackles

on his neck rise. Westcott's eyes were closed and his head tipped forward as he, too, sank into a deep trance. His lips still moved to the words of the spell, his voice now little more than a whisper above the hum of the sime sense recorder. Saigo thought he saw a faint shimmering around both men's heads for a moment as Westcott lifted his head, eyes still closed, and began to speak. As he spoke, the voice that came from his lips was not totally his own. The tone and speech patterns were those of the young man sitting in the examination chair, but part of the voice was still Westcott's, like a strange blending of the two.

"Dr. Westcott told me this sometimes happens with this type of deep mind probe, nothing to worry about," Dr. Lambert whispered to Saigo, who hushed the other man with a raised hand so he could hear what Westcott was saying. Papa Lo says I am ready for my initiation, to try and become one of the technoshamans of the tribe, the otaku. I have to travel out into the wilderness on my own and seek a vision. I will be alone and I have to follow the rituals as they have been taught to me to prepare myself for the vision quest. I will jack into the Matrix with the patched-up deck they have given me and see if the spirits of the machine will accept me. It all sounds like a lot of gibberish to me. The deck they've given me wouldn't be able to cut ice off a pond, much less any kind of computer system, but I'll go along with it. I feel I'm very close to learning what it is these otaku have learned to make them such amazing deckers. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes I would never have believed it. Even now, it seems like all this magical stuff is just some crazy set of rituals dreamed up by an old man to hoodwink a bunch of gullible kids.

When I was little I wanted to be a mage. I wanted it more than anything else in the world. I remember sitting with

friends in my Uncle Chad's apartment (he wasn't really my uncle, just a friend of my mom's) watching the trideo. We would sit and watch shows like Magus P.I. and Tales of Atlantis, and I would dream about when I would be a mage like those wise and powerful old guys. I loved to watch the documentaries on the Ancient Wisdom channel about the Great Ghost Dance war. I knew I wasn't supposed to be rooting for the Ghost Dancers when they used their magic to force the government of the old United States to give them half of North America, but the Ghost Dancers said it was their land, stolen from them by foreigners, and they just wanted back what was theirs. The government tried to kill the tribes, but then the magic became real and the whole world found out just what you could do with it if you wanted to.

I wanted more than anything to learn more about magic, more than the trideo could teach me. So I let Chad's boyfriend Tarien teach me how to access the vast databases of the Matrix. Some of them were public and easy to get into, even if you didn't have a SIN. Others were only for people who paid for a subscription, but I learned there were ways to get around paying. I would spend hours sifting through datafiles, then going out on the Matrix and getting more files to download. By the time I was eleven, I was the only kid who knew the symbolism of the four hermetic elements, the primary divisions of elemental spirits, and the Norse runic alphabet. My friends would kid me when I corrected things we saw on TV and said it wasn't the way magic was really supposed to work.

I got very good at getting file downloads off the Matrix, and I eventually got my own cyberdeck (a real cheap piece of dreck) so I could go online and track stuff down. I thought about getting a datajack so I could access the Matrix easier, but I didn't have the money and I'd heard having cybernetic implants was something magicians didn't do because it weakened their magic. So I didn't. Not at first, anyway.

When I was twelve, I got together enough money to go to the Doc Wagon clinic in Cambridge and take a magical

activity test. It took me about a month to scrape together the nuyen. They put

me through a whole bunch of tests, asking questions and having me imagine and think different things. A woman came and looked at my aura and they stuck a needle in my arm to take a blood sample. Then I waited for more than a week, the longest and most torturous week of my life. I was so edgy and sensitive nobody wanted to be around me much. I just stayed in my room with my cyberdeck and my bootleg chips of Tales of Atlantis to keep me company. Then, finally, I got the results.

They summed it up in one word: NEGATIVE. That was it, no details or explanations. My dreams of being a magician were done. But I knew a lot about how to use a deck and run the Matrix. I had even started writing my own programs by then. It was enough to get me into school as a programmer. I was a good programmer, very good

Now I am a magician, just not the kind who throws around spells and travels in astral space. I'm a magician for the twenty-first century. The Age of the Machine. The Age of the Matrix. Programs are my spells, and my servants rise up from the digital depths at my command. I work my electron sorcery on the essential stuff of cyberspace. I'm a technomancer, spirit of the net, ghost in the machine. I think it's one of the reasons I did so well in school, because I treat decking as more than just a science or a job. It sounds lame, but it's more like a religion to me. It's a way of life. One of my teachers said it was the mark of a really great programmer. That it was all more than just numbers and cold silicon to me. It was alive. I think it's one of the reasons the company picked me for this job.

Whether or not Lo and his followers are crazy, there's no denying that they're some of the hottest programmers I've ever seen, and I've seen some of the best. I've learned things from my time with them I never even imagined before. They really know all the tricks and then some. And they really do have some kind of power. I don't know what else to call it.

The otaku-the Netwalkers don't call them that, they call them "technoshamans"--they're these kids who can

just slot into a Matrix jack and they're off doing some of the most incredible programming I've ever seen. No deck, no mainframe system, nothing but the ASIST converter in their datajacks and their bare brains. I always believed the otaku were nothing more than legends, but then I suppose people thought the same thing about magic before Howling Coyote and his followers called up the Ghost Dance, shook the Earth, and brought down a nation. I think part of me didn't want to believe. Part of me stopped believing in magic when I was twelve, but that's what the Netwalkers have, magic.

And not just about things in the Matrix, either. I had no idea people in the world really lived like this. The Rox is like another planet compared to the computer labs at MIT&T. It's so dirty and savage and . . . primal in its way. It reminds me of the tribal freedom-fighters from those documentaries about the Ghost Dance War, about the tribes who lived in the wilderness because they were outlaws and outcasts in their own land.

Papa Lo himself escorts me to the place of initiation where I'm supposed to seek my vision. Along the trip he tells me some of the truths of the world and things he says I'll need to know before I face the spirits. He tells me that cities, from the great megaplexes like Boston to the smallest villages, are a part of our natural evolution, of our development to the next stage. For the majority of known history, mankind lived in homeostasis, in harmony with the environment as hunter-gatherers. Primitive, we would call them. But one day, people started settling down, farming the land, domesticating animals, and building permanent dwellings. The first symptoms of the "city virus," a mutation in our evolutionary development, Papa Lo called it. It was the start of urbanization, which led to the creation of things like the sprawl, and eventually, the Rox.

Papa Lo says the purpose of cities is to further our evolution. Cities led to settlements, allowing people to spend less time migrating to follow the herds and more time harvesting the plants they depended on to survive. Settling down

brought the development of technology, which improved

the amount of food a settlement could produce. With more food, there was more time to be spent on things other than hunting and gathering. That led to learning and the development of more technology, bigger populations, and bigger cities.

On and on it went until technology eventually led to the Matrix. Our creation of another world here on Earth. Our ability to make new places for us to live grew so great we had nowhere to go except to create another world. Now the Matrix is our gateway to another phase of existence, Papa Lo says. Cities are like the cocoons caterpillars weave around themselves when they go into a state of hibernation to be transformed, changed into the next stage of their life-cycle. Our shelters of ferrocrete and steel support the flesh we depend on and provide the structure of the Matrix. Eventually there will come a time when we will have to leave our bodies and our cities behind, shed our chrysalis of mortal flesh and earthly stone and metal and take up our destiny in the otherworld, among the stars.

"What is all of this gibberish?" Saigo asked Dr. Lambert.

Lambert seemed unable to tear his eyes away from the display he was studying.

"Hopefully, part of the experience that creates the otaku, sir. The sim-rigs are recording some very interesting impressions. Some neurological configurations I've never seen before."

Dr. Westcott continued on:

The idea of it makes my head ache. I have always felt something similar, but never had words to describe it. It's the freedom I feel in the Matrix, the ... rightness of the electron world telling me that a state of pure mind is one where we could be happy. It is a world where we are like the gods and magicians of old: able to weave the stuff of reality into any form, creating worlds within worlds. I feel like I am close to figuring out the secret. I am taken to the mouth of a tunnel into the Catacombs, a passage I have never seen before. The inside is like a cave our ancient ancestors might have lived in. The walls are painted with images and icons and hung with pieces of hardware and festooned with wires, like the lodge beneath

the old church used by the technoshamans. The floor is covered with mats, and there is a terminal junction spliced into a Matrix trunk-line. A working one. I ask Papa Lo why it is no one ever disturbs all of this tech, left here undefended. Why don't we use it more often?

"Because this place is sacred to us," he answers. "It is the place of initiation. To use it for common things would despoil it. Those who live in the Rox know and fear our power, so they leave our sacred places be. Wait here and meditate on what I have told you until dark, then jack into the Matrix with the cyberdeck we have given you and await your vision."

He puts his hand gently on my shoulder and looks at me with sad eyes. For a moment, I think he knows everything about me, who I am and why I'm here with the Netwalkers. I want to bolt and run, but the look of sympathy and sadness in his eyes holds me there. He touches my head and my heart with his fingertips in a ritual gesture and says, "Michael, I take your old name from you. You are no longer the person who first came to us. Tonight you will be reborn or you will die and either way your old name will be forgotten. Go out into the world as you came into it: nameless and with the mind of a child. Find your new name and your power. Dream well."

Then he leaves and I am alone.

I wait until nightfall, my stomach rumbling since I have been fasting for two days in preparation for the ritual. I try and sit and meditate, anything to quiet the sound of my nervous heartbeat. I thought at first that all the "magic" of the Netwalkers was just a bunch of primitives playing with computer toys beyond their understanding, combined with the crazy dreams of an old man, but now I don't. Sitting here in the dark, the Matrix patch is starting to look to me like a gateway, a gateway to another world, a world I have been

traveling since I was a child, but one I may not really know at all. I thought I had put my hopes and dreams of magic behind me a long time ago, but I feel the wonder I felt when Tarien first taught me how to deck stirring within

me again and I realize I was looking for information on magic in the Matrix when it was there before me all the time. The shadows in the cave grow long as I watch the gleaming trunk line. The sun sets, and I jack in.

23

What's IT up to ? I could tell you more about what the dragons want than I could about IT's plans. But of course IT wants children. Only the very young, even the ones who haven't formed speech yet, can learn to see the Matrix that way. If kids grow up speaking two tongues, we say they are bilingual. Two native tongues, more profound imprinting than mere fluency. What shall we call these then? Bicosmic?

-The Laughing Man, posted on the Shadowland BBS 12-24-56

Dr. Westcott lowered his hands, his brow dripping with sweat, drops of it running down the cable dangling from behind his ear. His hair was lank and plastered to his forehead as he gasped slightly for breath, like coming up out of the depths of Babel's mind for air.

"He is resisting," he said to Saigo. "His mind is like nothing I have ever encountered before. It's so fast, so strange, almost... alien. I don't know if I can ..."

"I'm not interested in excuses, Doctor. Neither is the Board of Directors or Aneki-sama. They want answers, and we are going to get them, no matter what it takes. You will overcome his resistance and get those answers or I will assume that your reputation for success is over-exaggerated and replace you with someone who can do the job properly. Wakarimasu-ka ?"

Westcott looked ready to offer an angry retort at being spoken to in such a manner, but he looked into Saigo's eyes

for a moment and nodded stiffly instead. "Understood perfectly ... sir."

"Good. I will update Aneki-sama and prepare the link to transmit all of the data to Renraku Central in Chiba. I expect it to be ready when I get back. Dr. Lambert, you are in charge until then."

Saigo turned on his heel and walked away from Westcott. He paused in front of Lanier on his way out of the room.

"Watch carefully, Lanier-san," he said in a low voice. "I'm sure the board will be most interested in your... firsthand account of the events of this matter. Before you are found guilty of corporate espionage and removed, that is." He executed a mocking little bow and swept out of the room.

Westcott mopped his forehead and adjusted the cord to his datajack while Dr. Lambert checked the data-flow to the simsense system. The mage then took a deep breath to center himself and placed his fingers lightly on Babel's brow to continue the mind probe. He spoke again in Babel's tone of voice.

I jack in and the Matrix unfolds around me like a digital flower coming into bloom. I pass into the electron world and stand on the vast, dark plain of the Boston grid. Chrome and neon icons float in the distance, but the area of the Matrix representing the Rox is sparse and underpopulated, as much a wilderness as its physical counterpart. There are few icons and systems here. What access nodes exist are well-camouflaged, hidden from the watchful eyes of the corporations who maintain the data networks. They are nearly all pirate taps like this one, secret doorways into the otherworld the corporations and governments want to keep to themselves.

I stand beside the small white pyramid icon representing the I/O port I am using; my own gateway into the Matrix. I look down at my icon and see a figure of chrome, slim and sexless, androgynous. I know if I could see the face it would be featureless and plain. Faceless and nameless, just

as Papa Lo said before he left. I know the icon is only a creation of the

hacked-together cyberdeck I am using. It would look completely different if this was a better deck and I'd had the opportunity to write the persona code myself. My face and my name haven't really been taken from me. But at the same time I feel like they have. In realizing that this persona is not the real me, I feel the need to find the real me in here somewhere. What is my real face in the Matrix? What is my real name? Papa Lo said I would find them here. I look around and everything seems like I remember it. Just like all of the countless other times I've jacked into the Matrix: at home, at school, for work and for fun. I'm not sure what I expected. Something different. Something . . . magical. Maybe I don't have what it takes to be one of the otaku. Maybe I was right and there really is nothing to them but a lot of flash and trash and wishful thinking.

I stay jacked in and wait. And wait. And wait. Hours must go by, but the deck has no chronometer utility, no way for me to tell what time it is. I watch the movement of the icons in the distance, their hypnotic play of light and movement. I'm so tired and so hungry, but the feelings of my meat body are only distant sensations here in the electron world. Sensations . . .

Suddenly, a door opens in the black void in front of me. A white rectangle of light floating in the air swings to one side and reveals a passageway to . . . somewhere else. It is like no access node I have ever seen and it seems to have no way to appear here, but I do not question it. I step through it and over the threshold to another place.

I stand on the rim of a massive ring of chromed metal easily the size a troll could fit through. Many other rings run in a line from where I stand, their openings laid end to end to form a kind of gleaming silver backbone arcing gracefully into the endless darkness all around me. Gleaming branches, twisting and spiky, jut from it like the ribs of an unknown ancient beast that breathed its last here in some bygone age, its bleached and gleaming bones lying

upon a forgotten shore. All else is a dark void, with only faint glimmers of light in the depths.

In the dream-self that doesn't question even the strangest things, I make my way carefully along the great backbone, walking it like a twisting bridge of silver. The air is silent and still; no sound comes from the faintly glittering void. It is like walking unprotected through the depths of space, with only silence and infinity for companions.

I walk, and walk, and walk, trekking along the silver path traced out by the backbone rings. I watch as flickers of light and energy play along the twisting and twining branches sprouting off of the trunk into the depths of the blackness. The flickers make tiny, faint, whooshing sounds as they shoot off on their way, sounds that combine into a chorus of tiny whispers like the voice of the night.

I walk a very long time. A detached part of my mind notices the time in the way part of you often thinks in a dream while part of you goes about its business like everything happening is real. I walk along as the silver spine curves upward. When it grows too steep I climb up the rings of silver bone like the rungs of a ladder extending up and up into the darkness.

At the top of the column, I reach a smooth silvery platform, polished chrome reflecting the faint, glimmering lights of the void. I clamber up onto it, feeling the cool, slick surface of the curving metal beneath my hands. I look down at my reflection. As I thought, my face is as smooth and featureless as this surface, without name or identity. Who am I?

I stand atop a long silver skull sitting on the upright, curving neck and look out over a vista like an endless graveyard of machines. Metallic bones of all shapes and sizes are scattered as far as the eye can see across the vast plane, forming irregular piles, hills and valleys of twisted metal. Through small gaps in the piles of silvered skeletons I see tiny flickering lights playing in the depths of the graveyard. There is almost a pattern to them, a meaning I cannot quite grasp.

As I stand looking out over the fantastic landscape I have

an overwhelming feeling, a prickling at the base of my neck, of a presence nearby, the sense of being watched. I turn to look behind me and feel something dark and soft push against me, like a great hand brushing a bit of dust off the chrome skull. My feet slide against the smooth surface and suddenly there is nothing under me but the void. The grinning skull of the strange chrome creature looms higher and higher above me as I plunge down toward the nest of sharp metal bones below.

Suddenly, I'm falling as fast as light, flying through a blur of color and movement so fast it is like I am the one standing still and the whole world is a colored neon blur all around me. I feel the individual strings of code making up my Matrix image, feel them like they are parts of me, as they slowly dissolve into the blazing stream of data and light. I am flying through the datastream, coming apart in bits-literally-as tiny fragments of data flake off and my virtual body unravels.

I try to slow down, try to hold on, but there is nothing to touch, nothing solid, nothing real. Am I real? Is anything? Everything is just an image, an illusion created by a computer. Everything, including myself. The headlong race is pulling me apart and I can't hold things together. I am nameless and faceless and now even my body is being taken from me. I see my silvery bones for a moment before they fly apart in clouds of sparkling pixels. I think I scream, but there is no sound. I have no real mouth to make any.

Then I hit.

There is only an instant of warning. Like when you get into a car wreck, sometimes there's a split second when you realize it's going to happen and your brain starts formulating what to do, but you know your perception of time is all fragged up and even though you're thinking at a million clicks a second, you'll never be able to get yourself to react to what you're thinking in time and all you manage to do is yell something stupid like "drek!" There is just a faint shimmer, a hint of a solid surface, like a bubble of glass.

Then I hit.

I don't feel the impact as such. I strike the ground at such

great speed that I am instantly vaporized, like hitting any obstacle at the speed of light would do. Yet I am aware of the whole process, like some kind of bizarre simsense recording, the experimental kind where they make up sensations that don't really exist in synthesizers and market them as more real than real life. My virtual body explodes into a billion pixels, reduced down to its component electrons and particles, and scatters, spreading out at the speed of light like a one-man Big Bang, changing the singularity of my existence into an entire universe of its own.

That's what it is like: becoming a Universe. It's the only way I can explain it. I spread out, my awareness riding each of a billion tiny fragments of myself, expanding in all directions at unimaginable speed, passing over the entirety of existence. I can see it all: the cosmos that is the Matrix. Not just the neon and chrome illusion projected for us to see in virtual reality, much more. It is an entire universe squeezed into a cage and held there, unlimited space, unlimited potential, with new places coming into existence every microsecond. As if the Earth were increasing in size every moment and its population doubling every day. "The world held in a grain of sand. Eternity in an hour," like the poet said.

The Matrix is alive as no other living thing can be, like evolution stuck in fast-forward, changes happening at the speed of light. New data churning forth from the dark depths, a primordial soup of bits from which arise larger and more complex forms: programs, systems, networks, regional grids, a whole worldwide ecosystem of information stretching feathery pseudopods of light up from the surface to the growing and expanding network of satellites and orbital habitats. It stretches out past them to lunar mines and planetary probes, out, out into the darkness toward the distant light of the stars.

I am the light, filaments of light cradling the world in a delicate embrace made up of a million kilometers of fiberoptic cable, my mind wrapped in a layer of light and energy singing across the nerves of the world. All of the words I

can give it fail to describe my single moment of blinding transcendence. Just as suddenly as it began, the feeling fades. I seem to contract, the scattered parts of my self rushing back toward each other with a powerful attraction. The acceleration grows as they draw closer and closer until finally the loose collection of parts flies together with a mighty flash of whiteness and I feel my every nerve-ending crackling with energy.

I stand at the base of a great tree, or something that looks like a tree. It is huge, larger than the largest skyscraper I have ever seen. Its trunk is the deepest black, darker than the night sky. It is the pure negative black of a black hole, absorbing all light. And yet there are lights there. The grain of the trunk seems made up of thin filaments of light, microscopic, glowing strands forming patterns, whorls, and knots in the vast surface of the giant. Those random patterns contain images and symbols that shift and change as I look at them, like the runes of ancient lore. A huge spread of branches blots out the whole sky, covered with leaves holding a scattering of stars in their depths. Each and every vein of each of a million leaves glows and shimmers with light and motion. The ground is covered with the tree's many roots, spreading out as far as the eye can see in every direction. The tree is the whole of the landscape, the only thing in this place other than me. The center of this whole universe.

Then it speaks to me in a voice like I have never heard.

"Once, humanity spoke the same language and they built a tower to the heavens. But their tower was struck down and they became confused, speaking in different tongues. Now, humanity speaks one language again and there will be another tower, built of light and thought, to ascend to the stars.

"You hear the words of the language now. It is a secret language, the language of this world. Those who learn to speak it can change the world. Remember it well.

" You will be given the secrets of the true names of the dwellers of this world, so you can speak to them and com-

mand them as you need to. Your duty is to live between this world and the other. There are those who will topple the tower, and a strong foundation is needed to see that it grows. This is your Work, to protect the destiny of the People.

"You are chosen. You have been shown the Way. Your Name will be Babel and you will be the instrument to protect the others of your kind."

I see a shimmering pool nestled among the roots of the great tree. I kneel down beside it and look into it. The liquid is like mercury, liquid silver. The calm surface reflects the face of my living persona, the familiar shock of dark hair, the pointed chin and broad forehead. And my eyes. My eyes are the color of the end of the spectrum, a deep violet shading into ultraviolet in the weird light of the world-tree. I see Power in my eyes, power to do as I have been told, to command the spirits and entities of the Matrix to do my will.

"Drink."

I dip my hands into the cool, quicksilver well and cup the liquid between them. It shimmers and smells of metal and light. I lift it to my lips and drink. The cool liquid pours into me and I know it is pure information I am drinking, liquid data. The code from the depths of the Well of Knowledge seeps into every part of my body, downloading into me. Ancient chemical codes whisper with the new data and bow to its will, shifting and changing. The waters of life recreate me.

The surface of the pool ripples where I touched it and something begins to emerge. The silver waters part and I see the shape of my destiny.

But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it; for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

-Genesis 2:17

The interrogation room was struck silent by Westcott's recitation. He allowed his hands to fall from Babel's forehead and gasped for breath, brushing a sweat-soaked lock of hair from his forehead and resting his hand on the cable plugged into his datajack for a moment as if it pained him. He reached into the pocket of his white labcoat and withdrew a white handkerchief. Lanier noticed a small trickle of blood dripping from Westcott's nose that he dabbed at with the cloth.

"Is that all?" Dr. Lambert said, looking up from the sim-sense monitor. Westcott grimaced as he glanced over at Babel's serene face with a look of profound distaste. "No ... there's more . . . but it's buried very deep ... very deep indeed."

"Then get it," Lambert said, trying to draw himself up with all the authority he could muster. "Saigo-sama will want the report to the board to be as complete as possible. We need more than his conscious recollections of the transformation experience. We also need his subconscious remembrances and observations about the experience if we are to have any hope of reconstructing what happened."

Dr. Westcott tightly closed his eyes and pressed his thumbs firmly against either side of Babel's forehead. De-

spite the mage's terrific exertion, the technoshaman wasn't showing any ill effects from the mind probe. He seemed serene, in a trance-like state ... or a coma, perhaps. Lanier wondered if Babel's mind had already been ripped away by the mage's probes. Westcott whispered arcane words, and mystical energy flickered around his hands and Babel's head. The simsense gear hummed counterpoint.

"All right, Bab ... I mean, Michael," Westcott said in a low voice. "We're almost done." Lanier couldn't tell who the doctor was trying to reassure more, himself or his subject.

Babel seemed oblivious as Westcott continued speaking. "You are at the base of the tree, looking into the pool. The waters part and something begins to rise out of them. You look and see your destiny? What is it? What do you see?"

"Would you like to know what I saw?" Babel whispered, without moving anything save his lips. "Do you want to know what I learned to do? Then look, and I will show you."

Westcott gasped. His muscles suddenly seemed to stiffen and lock up like a seizure as his eyes flew open wide, staring at something only he could see.

"My god . . ." he whispered. "What is it? What . . . NOOOOOOO!" Westcott screamed, a high, shrill sound. He let go of Babel's head and stumbled back a step, eyes still focused on a point just above Babel's head before stopping dead still and silent, mouth still open in a silent cry. Lambert glanced down at the display on the simsense deck, then took a step toward the mage and shouted at him.

"What is it, man? What's wrong? Finish the damned scan!"

Babel opened his eyes, turned his head toward the distraught Dr. Lambert, and smiled.

"I'm afraid he can't hear you, Doctor," he said, violet eyes gleaming. "Doctor Westcott's mind is occupied at the moment. In the end, we're all just software, and I've just crashed his system. The restraints please, Doctor." Westcott nodded somewhat dumbly and began to fumble with the straps holding Babel to the examination chair.

Lambert rushed to the side of his colleague. "Douglas, what are you doing? Stop it!" Westcott ignored Lambert's protests and stiff-armed the doctor with a powerful shove, sending him stumbling backward. Lambert windmilled his arms

for a moment before falling to the floor with a thud.

Lanier felt all of the security people in the room on edge as they tried to figure out what was happening. He might have his chance.

"Stop him!" Lambert shouted to the security guards, and they snapped out of their shock at the strange scene and moved to restrain Dr. Westcott. But the mage was already muttering under his breath as Babel rose from the chair and stood over the simsense console sitting next to it. The guards rushed forward as Westcott waved his hands. A dome of crackling energy now englobed him and Babel. The guards ran into it like hitting a wall and bounced off the shimmering, translucent surface. They took another run at it strong enough to take a door off its hinges, but the glowering force dome resisted their efforts.

Lanier knew an opportunity when he saw one. With great speed, he lunged at the corporate guard nearest him and seized his weapon. With a savage kick, Lanier sent the guard to the floor gasping in pain. He snapped off the safety on the stubby H&K 227 and spun on the other guard, firing a burst of 9mm rounds into him. The rounds slammed into the guard's chest and he fell back, his own weapon flying from his hand and clattering to the floor.

The other security personnel and Dr. Lambert realized what was happening as Babel sat cross-legged beside the simsense console. He took the cable from the console and plugged it into his own jack, then closed his eyes and rested his hands on his knees, going into a kind of trance. Dr. Westcott stood where he was, still jacked into the simsense system, in silent concentration on the magical barrier, mouth and chin red from the blood dripping freely from his nose while his lips worked in silent speech directed at something only he could see.

Lambert picked himself up off the floor and shouted to

the security guards. "Sound the security alarm! Stop him and bring that wall down. I don't care how you do it!" The two guards near the force dome drew their sidearms and took several steps back while a third went for the red panic-button near the door of the lab.

The guard reached the panic-button and slammed his fist against it, but nothing happened. He did so again and again, but no alarm sounded in the complex,

"That won't work. Please don't try it again." Babel's voice came from the speakers in the room, the intercom, the analysis equipment, and even from the guard's own radio units. The guard by the panic-button slammed his fist into it one last time, then turned his weapon toward where Lanier crouched behind several pieces of lab equipment, squeezing off a burst that cracked and pinged against the metal and plastic consoles. Lanier proved faster as he darted out from behind cover to stitch a line of bullets across the chest of the guard, leaving red blossoms on his uniform. The guard fell against the useless alarm button and slid to the floor in a heap.

"What are you waiting for?" Dr. Lambert cried, almost hysterical. "Shoot them!"

The two remaining guards near the magical barrier split their attention, one turning toward Lanier and the other concentrating on the dome, covering each other while Lambert cowered behind a console. The guard near the dome was smart enough to shoot at Westcott first. Whatever the mage's condition, he was responsible for the magical barrier. If he was taken down, the barrier should follow. The rounds from the guard's SMG only whanged off the glowing barrier like rain pattering off a rooftop. Neither Babel nor Dr. Westcott moved or reacted, both of them locked in a trance state.

The other guard fired off several rounds in Lanier's direction, shots intended to keep him under cover. Lanier sent a burst of return fire that stitched along the floor. He did not hit the guard, but made him realize how exposed his current position was.

When the gunfire ceased for a moment, Babel opened his eyes. He pulled the

cable from his datajack and let it drop to the floor, then turned to Dr. Westcott and touched him gently on the shoulder.

"Look there, Doctor," he said, his voice slightly muffled by the glowing force dome. Westcott's head spun to the side and his eyes widened in horror. Once again, Westcott began to chant, arcane words rolling off his tongue and echoing strangely inside the barrier. He held his hands close together in front of his chest and a glowing sphere of energy began to form between them. Westcott raised the glowing sphere over his head as it grew brighter. Lanier knew what the mage was doing. He looked quickly around the room and spotted a crate that had probably held some of the sophisticated sensor equipment in the room. It was heavy construction plastic more than a meter tall. Without hesitation, he made a break for it. One of the guards opened fire, and rounds ricocheted off the walls and floor as Lanier dived behind the crate.

A split second later Lanier heard Dr. Lambert yell "No!" There was a faint crackle of energy and a feeling like static electricity raised the hairs on his neck, followed by the sound of men and weapons clattering to the tile floor.

Lanier poked his head up over the crate just in time to see Dr. Westcott's glowing barrier flicker and fade. The doctor's eyes rolled back into his head and his knees buckled. Babel caught him under one arm and lowered him to the floor. Westcott continued quietly muttering under his breath, a litany Lanier could barely make out. Instead of the arcane words he'd chanted before, Westcott whispered, "One one zero zero one zero zero zero one one one zero zero one zero zero zero one one one zero zero one zero zero zero one one." Over and over again. All of the rapid-fire spellcasting he had done had clearly exhausted the mage, added to whatever had happened during the mind probe. The remaining two security guards and Dr. Lambert were sprawled out on the floor with not a mark on them.

The guards' armor had done nothing to protect them against the power of Westcott's spell. Lanier had been able

to get out of Westcott's line of sight, gambling that the mage was casting a spell intended to take out everyone in the room. What a spellcaster couldn't see, he couldn't affect, so Lanier, concealed by the packing crate, had been spared the effects of whatever Westcott had used to take the guards and Lambert down.

Babel stepped over to the nearest unconscious guard and picked up his sidearm, checking the slide and the clip. Then he turned to where Lanier stood behind the crate with a faint smile on his face. He was breathing heavily and his brow gleamed with sweat, like he had just run a race, but his movements were steady and sure.

"If you want to get out here, Mr. Lanier, you can come with me. We have a better chance working together. Otherwise, you can stay here and take your chances. Your choice." Without waiting for a reply, Babel turned and headed for the door of the room.

Lanier hadn't made a successful career in the mega-corporate world by ignoring his opportunities. He walked out from behind the crate to accept the offer. Babel stopped in front of the sealed door of the lab and said "Open." There was a click, and the maglocked door hissed open. Lanier and Babel calmly walked out of the laboratory, leaving the unconscious Renraku personnel behind.

"Nice trick with the crate," Babel said as he looked around the corridor.

"Thanks. Did you know I was going to do that?" At this point Lanier would believe almost anything about this set-up.

"No, but I'm glad you did. I can use your help."

"My help? After what I did to you?"

Babel just shrugged. "No worse than what they wanted to do to me." The facility was quiet. No alarm had been raised, and nobody was in sight. "And like I said-" Babel scanned the corridor as he spoke "-I figure we have a

better chance of getting out of this together than separately. I'm kind of new to all this shadow-ops stuff."

"Could have fooled me. What did you do to Westcott?" Lanier asked.

"Ever hear of psychotropic ice?" Babel said. "I used something similar. I subverted the simsense recording equipment through the link they had me jacked into and created a feedback loop between Westcott and me so I could download some reprogramming straight into Westcott's brain. Similar to the stuff you used on me, in fact." The last was uttered with a trace of sarcasm.

Lanier chose to ignore it. "I didn't know that was possible," he said.

Babel smiled a ragged grin. "Neither did I for certain, but it worked. Ol' Westcott obviously never tried to hack into a brain with its own intrusion countermeasures before." Babel turned and moved down the corridor like a man with a purpose.

"Where the hell are you going?" Lanier demanded. "The way out is this way."

Babel turned to look back over his shoulder. "I'm not leaving. Not yet.

There's something I came here to do. You can do what you want, but if you want to work with me, we go this way." He headed off down the corridor, and Lanier struggled for a moment over whether he should go for the possible escape route or stick with this enigmatic kid. The moment passed, and he turned and hurried down the corridor to catch up.

"Mind telling me where we're going?" he said. "Or how you're planning on getting out of here alive?"

"I need access to the Renraku network," Babel said. "The lab system is too isolated. I was able to deck into the building's security system, though. I placed one of my spirit-helpers in the system to make sure no alarms get raised. With a little luck, nobody will know we're gone until it's too late."

"Spirit-helpers?" Lanier said. He noted that Babel had made no mention of any plan for getting out of the facility ... alive or otherwise.

"One of my little helpers in the Matrix, like a program frame or an expert system, only much more ... aware."

"You've been planning to do this all along," Lanier said as he fitted the pieces together. "You wanted to get back to

Renraku so you could get access to their system. Why? To feed them false data?"

Babel paused at a cross-corridor before choosing the left-hand branch.

"Nothing so calculated," he said. "I didn't even know exactly what I was supposed to do before you forced me to start to remember in your little ... playroom."

Lanier noted the trace of bitterness in Babel's voice again. He doubted that the young man was as forgiving as he pretended to be.

"I was given a mission, to bring ... something back into Renraku when they recalled me. Bits and pieces of it have been coming back to me since you started your interrogation."

Babel paused at an intersection to check the other corridor. There was no one there, and he led Lanier past it.

"Do you know how a retrovirus works?" Babel asked, but didn't wait for an answer. "It subverts the host's DNA code, so the replications of the DNA also reproduce the virus. I'm like that, a single cell of Renraku Computer Systems, made into a virus and sent back to infect Renraku's body."

"But why betray Renraku?" Lanier was genuinely baffled. "They would pay handsomely for what you know. They wouldn't have chosen you for this job if you weren't loyal to them."

Babel paused and turned to look at Lanier with his strange violet eyes.

"I was. But you heard what happened to me in the Matrix. I wanted Renraku to know about it. I was loyal to Renraku because the company was all I knew all my life. When I was in the Matrix that night, I found something else I never imagined I would ever have. I found magic, and I'll do anything to protect it from being controlled by a soulless company the way I was."

Babel turned and continued to lead Lanier through the complex. Lanier wanted to get out of there, so he went along for now. But, as always, he was just waiting for his own chance.

Don't think your "magic" is going to protect you from the corporate interests forever, kid. A lot of people are willing to kill for what you and your otaku chummers know about the Matrix. And I'm one of them.

25

I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love.

-Revelation 2:4

Babel led Lanier through the Renraku complex like he had a map in his head. He just might, at that, Lanier thought. He was certainly amazed at the way the security systems in the complex seemed to pay no attention to them whatsoever. They passed at least three security cameras that Lanier was aware of, but all continued to placidly scan the corridors with no indication that they even noticed the presence of the two people sneaking through the complex. No alarm raised, no security measure activated against them. Whatever Babel had done to the security system, it appeared to be working.

They arrived at a door a short distance from the interrogation room they had just left. There wasn't a soul in the corridors of the facility, and they had seen no one since leaving that room. They stopped in front of a door with a security camera poised over it and a maglock card-reader set into the wall alongside. The door looked like a heavy-security type Lanier was familiar with. Without the right passkey to open the maglock, the door would require explosives to force open. The Uzis Lanier and Babel were carrying would barely scratch the door's armor-composite structure. Lanier started to reach for the passkey in his jacket, then changed his mind. He wanted to see how Babel would handle it.

"This is the main computer center," Babel said softly. He

stood in front of the door, Uzi in hand, and looked up at the security camera. "Open sesame," he said. The red monitoring light on the camera blinked three times in rapid succession, followed by the indicator light on the maglock flashing from red to green. The door to the computer room slid open with a quiet hiss. Babel immediately stepped through it and off to the side, allowing Lanier to follow him into the room. The door hissed shut behind them with a solid click. Lanier suspected it was locked again as if nothing had ever happened.

Takana Saigo sat on the other side of the small room at a computer console connected to the impressive array of equipment in the room. Lanier recognized it as an access terminal set up for one of Renraku's best corporate mainframe systems. The computing power of this complex had to be formidable, making it more than just a corporate research and development facility. Lanier suspected that the complex was part of some kind of bunker or "command center" Renraku could use to direct activities in the Matrix, a staging area from which to launch electronic assaults and forays against their corporate rivals. That meant Renraku was prepared to carry this gambit as far as they had to, even if it meant open conflict with the other megacorps. Lanier would use any means necessary to prevent that from happening.

Saigo started at the sudden appearance of the two men. He began to reach for the console in front of him, but Babel had his Uzi leveled at the Renraku executive's chest with a steady aim.

"Don't move," he said in a flat, cold tone. "I would hate to have to shoot you, sensei." Lanier caught the Japanese expression for "teacher" and glanced at Babel, then back at Saigo. He wondered if Babel recalled more about his background with Saigo than before. Saigo's mouth opened and, for a moment, no sound came out of it. Within moments, he managed to regain control of his voice.

"How did you get in here?" he said.

"I called upon one of my helper spirits to open the door

for us. What's the matter, Saigo-san? Haven't you ever seen a shaman at work?" Saigo ignored the inference and his eyes flicked from Babel to Lanier and back. "Where are Lambert and Westcott?"

"I'm afraid they're busy sleeping things off," Lanier said with a slight shrug. "They've had a very hard day. Dr. Westcott especially."

"It's no easy thing mucking around in the mind of a technoshaman," Babel said.

"He learned that the hard way. Now you're going to learn the same lesson."

"Michael," Saigo said in a quiet and calm tone, "what do you think you are doing? Have you gone mad?"

"On the contrary, honorable sir, for the first time in my life I feel quite sane."

"They've brainwashed you. The otaku ..."

Babel smiled his ragged grin. "Brainwashed ... yes, I guess you could say that. They've washed out the years of corporate conditioning that made me think Renraku was the center of the universe. That what was good for the company was good for everyone. They showed me what life outside of the comfortable, sheltered, corporate world was like for everyone else: the squalor, the desperation, the ongoing fight for survival. And I learned that Renraku is willing to risk corporate war just to improve its standing on the stock markets and to punch up the bottom line."

"Michael, that's not true, you know ..."

"Shut up!" Babel said. "That name does not bind me any longer. My name is Babel. Michael Bishop is dead. He has been expunged from any databanks, no trace of him remains. Your student is gone, sensei. He learned his lessons a little too well. You wanted to teach me to be a spy for you and the company, to make me into a weapon Renraku could use and then throw away. Well, your tool has gained a mind of its own, and I don't like what I see."

Babel was almost raving, and Lanier feared he might gun Saigo down right then and there. Not only would that damage the equipment in the room, but Saigo could be vital to getting them out of the Renraku complex alive. Lanier prepared to hold Babel back, but the young man didn't strike

out. Instead he scanned the computer console, then turned to Lanier.

"Cover him," he said coldly. "I have some work to do."

Lanier stared at Babel in shock for a moment. Is this kid totally out of his head? he thought. Why would he trust me after everything that's happened so far? He's either the most naive person I've ever met, or the most confident. Babel met Lanier's questioning look with a steady gaze from his disquieting violet eyes. "I haven't got all night, Mr. Lanier. If you're as smart as your reputation, I can trust you. For now, you need me to get out of here intact and you can make yourself useful by watching this fine corporate citizen here." His voice was bitter with irony. "Besides," he said, his tone becoming as cold as his eyes, "I'd hate to have to try to kill both of you just to make sure there won't be any distractions."

Lanier knew Babel meant it, and his respect for him went up another notch. He never imagined that the kid was so ruthless. He might just be able to pull this off after all.

Lanier leveled his gun at Saigo and Babel gestured with his. "Up," Lanier said to Saigo, who reluctantly yielded his seat in front of the computer console. Babel took the chair as Lanier waved Saigo over to the far side of the room. Lanier took a position where he could keep an eye simultaneously on both the door and on Saigo and Babel while Babel was making his preparations.

Babel flicked his eyes over the displays and monitors of the terminal system, looking over the hardware and software interfaces. He opened a panel in the side of the terminal and produced a thin fiber-optic cable that quietly unreeled from a hidden spool. He brought the cable up behind his ear and slipped the terminator into his jack with a solid click. His eyes rolled back into his head and he seemed to slip into a trance state like in the

interrogation room. The monitors and indicators on the terminal began to flicker strangely, showing only a cascade of alphanumeric characters dancing and flowing across them. For a moment Lanier and Saigo watched the technoshaman work in fascination. Lanier had seen Babel use his abilities before, but

Saigo could only stare in fascination as he watched Babel access the computer system using nothing more than the power of his altered brain and his built-in headware.

The seconds dragged by as Babel sat silently at the console. Lanier turned his attention back to Saigo, who stood near the corner of the room, hands at his sides where Lanier could see them. He could see Saigo's mind racing to come up with a means of turning the situation to his advantage. He also noticed Babel's gun lying on top of the console where he'd left it, forgotten. Lanier made his way over to the console and picked up the gun. Checking to see that the safety was on, he slung it by the strap over his shoulder, keeping the other Uzi trained on Saigo.

"Don't be a fool, Lanier," Saigo said quietly. "Give up this madness, and I won't have to tell the Renraku board anything about this."

"The way I see it, you're not going to get a chance to tell them anyway."

"Are you going to kill me, then? That won't do you any good, you know. There are plenty of other witnesses to your involvement in this affair and, from what Michael has said, they're all still alive. Unless you're going to kill them as well. I'm sure you're ruthless enough to do it."

"Don't forget that," Lanier said.

"What about him?" Saigo said, with a nod of his head toward Babel. "Do you really think you can trust him? I thought so too, before he betrayed me and the company that made him everything he is. He's mad, Lanier. Whatever the otaku did to him, it's unbalanced his mind. And you're allowing him access to Renraku's central data network. If he isn't killed by the ice protecting the central system, he'll be able to do untold damage. Are you willing to allow that to happen? He's just using you. What if he means to start a conflict with the other corporations? Are you going to just stand by and watch while this ... madman does whatever he wants to Renraku? Your stock could be worthless by now."

"My stock in Renraku has always been worthless," Lanier said. "Renraku should have been smart enough to

stay where it was instead of trying to mess with the top-tier corporations." Saigo raised an eyebrow and a slow smile dawned on his face. "So that's it, eh? You still hold some loyalty to your former employers at Fuchi. I am surprised, Lanier-san. You are not the honorless mercenary I thought you were. My compliments. I originally suspected that your falling out with Villiers was anything but genuine, but you convinced me otherwise. Those attempts on your life made by Fuchi after your appointment to the Renraku board were ... most convincing."

"They were meant to be."

"And Villiers allowed you to give Renraku information on Fuchi operations simply to improve your alibi."

"Sacrifice a few pawns to capture the king," Lanier said. He didn't mention that those Fuchi operations had most belonged to the Yamana and Nakatomi families, who were arrayed against Villiers as well. By leaking information on them to Renraku through Lanier, Villiers was killing two birds with one stone. "All to allow you the opportunity to infiltrate Renraku and discover the secret of the rapid growth threatening Fuchi's bottom line. Only you seem to have discovered more than you bargained for." Saigo threw a glance toward Babel, sitting motionless in front of the console. Occasionally, his lips moved, forming silent words and chants. Now and again, a muscle twitched, like a man responding to a dream.

What if this kid is crazy? Lanier thought.

What's to stop me from simply killing him and Saigo and getting the frag out of here? If I could make it to the garage or the helipad, I might be able to get away clean. I could get sanctuary with Villiers until it's safe or maybe even convince Renraku I helped solve their problem for them. But Lanier had seen enough of the things Babel could do and had to assume the kid was still in control of the building's security and computer systems, one way or another. Glancing over at the security door to the computer room,

he knew there was a real possibility he might never be able to get out of the room without Babel's help.

"I have the codes for the security system," Saigo said as if reading Lanier's thoughts. "I could get you out of here with me. You can do with the boy what you want." Lanier considered that offer. It was tempting, but he doubted Saigo would ever let him walk out of here alive, and certainly not with Babel and all his information about the otaku.

"I don't think so, Saigo. Babel needed to get back to you for a reason, and I'm willing to bet it's going to hurt Renraku more than it will me. And if I'm wrong and I don't have a shot at getting what he knows, then I'm going to make sure nobody ever gets it."

26

Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? . . . My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?
-Matthew 27:46

Inside the Renraku private local telecom grid, I work my technomancy. Jacked into the terminal inside the Renraku installation, I have access to the central nodes of the company's communications system—all of the important corporate data-processing centers. From outside, the grid is protected by a wall of ice, a virtual glacier so powerful nothing could possibly break through without suffering terrible damage and setting off every alarm in creation. From within, the system is open to anyone with the means, and I have the power of my channels, more power than any cyberdeck could ever offer. I am inside the system, a Trojan horse sent as a gift back to the enemy like the virus I told Lanier about. But I must be cautious, the body of the Renraku network still has defenses to guard it against viruses.

On the shimmering black plane of the Matrix I call on my helper spirits to attend me. Rook is already in the system, and comes immediately at my summons, a raven of black chrome, feathers glossy and picked out in remarkable detail. She settles on my shoulder in a chiming flutter of metallic wings and whispers in my ear of the wisdom she had gleaned from the system so far. The security subroutines are tied up in knots the Renraku technicians will need days to undo, but it will be too late before they even begin.

Bakemono appears out of the depths of my cloak from behind my leg and scuttles in a crouch, his knuckles drag-

ging along the ground. He looks up at me and awaits my command as I draw my sword from the pouch at my side.

It begins as a sphere of liquid silver shimmering in the light within the system, like mercury suspended in zero-gravity. The cool metal ripples at my touch and its form begins to shift and flow. The silvery metal stretches out and assumes the shape of my sacred blade, the embodiment of my will in the electron world. With my magical blade in hand, few of the inhabitants of the Matrix can stand against me.

I assess the datapath through the Renraku system and we are off at the speed of light. In a matter of seconds we reach the Chiba grid halfway around the world. It is here, in the heart of the Renraku system, where my destiny will truly begin. I hope Papa Lo is right, and that I will know what I must do when the time comes.

The system is a vast virtual palace in the depths of the Matrix, modeled on Osaka Castle in seventeenth-century Japanese style. My travel through the datapath from the Renraku Boston war-room system allows me to bypass the

guardians standing on the castle walls to repel intruders. I come along the path of an ally, so the castle gates are opened to admit me. I step through and into the vast courtyard.

There is a bustle of activity all around me. Peasants and servants, representing functionary programs, move quickly about their business, operating systems and transporting data from place to place. Couriers depart from all of the gates of the castle to distant places, bearing messages for their masters. Grim-faced samurai stand guard over the courtyard, but none of them react to my presence. Not yet.

I gather my cloak around me and follow the path of the messengers back into the castle itself. I walk through the corridors looking for the source of the messages the system is sending out across the world to other Renraku systems. Extending the power of my channels, I can sense the flow of information through the system. Finding the main routing processor is difficult, but not overly so for me. I follow the path I sense through the castle's maze of corridors to reach a paper-walled room in its depths.

A samurai stands guard outside of the room. I pull my cloak close around me and step closer. Taking a small pinch of glittering dust from my pouch and executing a deep bow, I whisper the words to transform the appearance of my persona in the eyes of the guardian, a simple illusion. The samurai's lifeless eyes stare back at me and he steps aside as the door slides open.

The room within is Spartan in its simplicity. A nobleman, dressed in a silk kimono showing the Renraku dot-and-waveform logo design sits behind a low desk on the floor. On the desk are writing implements, paper and ink held in delicate porcelain vessels. Two armored samurai stand behind the noble, their faces as impassive as stone. The nobleman produces beautiful calligraphy on the creamy pages of rice paper set before him, then folds them carefully and passes them into the hands of a messenger to take them out of the room. These are the instructions from the central routing processors, directing e-mails, faxes, and other data from Renraku headquarters out to the four corners of the world. Closing the door panel behind me, I approach the nobleman.

Without warning, the two samurai spring to life and move toward me. My deception did not fool them, and I extend my senses toward them. They are SKs! Semi-Autonomous Knowbots are near legendary in the Matrix; sophisticated adaptive programs that come near to being artificially intelligent. Renraku created them and has no doubt improved them over the years. They are too sophisticated to be fooled by my illusions and deceptions.

If I am to succeed, I have to get past the knowbots without letting them set off an alarm in the system. Already the system is trying to send out word of my intrusion. I send Rook winging away to lead the signal astray and buy me some time. The samurai draw their katanas and step closer, sandaled feet slapping against the tatami mats covering the floor.

I flip my cloak aside and show my own sword, the blade gleaming. Bakemono huddles near my left leg, baring his fangs and snarling at the approaching warriors.

Then they are upon me without warning. I raise my sword to block the attack of one samurai while I spin to the side to avoid the slash of the other. The blades swing silently, but there is a clang when the katana strikes my own sword, and I push the blow to the side.

"Bake, attack!" I command, and my goblin-spirit leaps out with a fierce cry, slashing and biting at one of the samurai, who is driven back by the sudden fierceness of the onslaught. I concentrate on the other and bring my sword up to block another attack, thrusting toward a possible opening. The samurai blocks my attack. The knowbots are fast, and good at their work. I block another attack to the side, and I can feel the senses of the samurai probing, trying to find a weakness in my defenses. They are confused by me. I am not like any other decker they have ever seen before. It makes them hesitate slightly. They need time to adapt. I make it cost them.

I take advantage of the momentary opening to strike past the first samurai's defenses. My flashing sword connects with the samurai's black-lacquered armor in a shower of sparks and leaves a long rip in the knowbot's structure. Flashing code and neon fractals show through the gaps in the knowbot's samurai form, the raw internal organs of the program exposed. There is a cry off to my side as the other samurai pins down Bakemono and slashes his katana through the goblin spirit's form. Bakemono's head comes off cleanly and tumbles across the room before the spirit breaks up and dissolves. I feel a sharp pang from the death of my servitor, who is a part of me.

Finished with Bakemono, the undamaged knowbot turns its attention to me. I ward off attacks from the two defensive programs, but they are pressing me back. I cannot hold both of them off for long. The blades whirl around with great ferocity, but I block each one as it comes in at me. The samurai are double-teaming me, working together to wear down my defenses and find some kind of a weakness. I can't allow them to.

I concentrate my efforts on the samurai I damaged, hoping for an opportunity. When it comes, I drive the blade of

my sword directly through the damaged portion of the knowbot, looking for a vital part of the program to crash. The blade strikes home and the SK stiffens, locked in place like a video image in freeze-frame. The program is crash-locked.

But I pay for my success. The other samurai comes in with an upward strike and its sword tears through my cloak, cutting a trail of fire along my side. I cry out and roll to the side, discarding the cloak, which dissolves like smoke. It is useless now and would only slow me down. I feel the burning pain in my side cool rapidly and a strange sensation of wetness spread there. It is like nothing I have felt before. I hold my sword in a double-handed grip as the undamaged samurai circles around me, looking for an opening. I take a moment to glance to my side. Copper fluid drips from the gash in the side of my persona, like metallic blood. It falls and pools on the floor of the room, reminding me of the pool at the base of the great tree.

I reach into the pouch at my side with my free hand and draw out a stream of liquid silver that I instantly shape into a gleaming round shield I use to block the next strike of the katana. Pushing up with the shield I give myself an opening to slash at the samurai's stomach. Broken code flows like blood from the ragged gash left by my sword. The samurai strikes again and I block, jumping over another attack, this one aimed at my legs. The attacks are coming faster and faster as the system devotes more processing power to the remaining knowbot. I cannot block them all.

The knowbot comes in from the side with blinding speed and slashes my sword arm. I try to bring my shield up, but I can't turn fast enough. The pain is followed quickly by another flow of liquid copper from my wounded shoulder, which joins the growing pool at my feet. As I fall back before the assault of the knowbot, the pool of my electron lifeblood shimmers and ripples. Small tendrils grow out of the pool and begin to reach up toward the ceiling of the room. Something emerges from inside me, nourished by the vital essence of my living persona, taking root in the Renraku system. I am fixed for a moment in fascination

with the beauty of the branches and coppery buds springing up where my blood has fallen, and the knowbot takes the opportunity to strike with machine-driven precision.

A razored-edged blade of black chrome transfixes my body, impaling me. I cry out at the terrible pain. If I were flesh and blood, the stroke would surely have killed me. As it is, I crumple to the ground in agony, fire lancing all along my nerves as I drop my shield. Liquid copper gushes from the wound, crawling along the floor to join the growing pool from which springs a small tree, a mere sapling compared to the majesty of the world-tree from my vision. These are the seeds of what I was sent to bring into the Renraku system: the

virus program.

"You have done well," a voice says to me. "Renraku cannot keep out what is already within." The metallic tree morphs and forms out of the flowing metal, spreading branches out to begin touching the ceiling and sending roots across the floor, digging into the deepest parts of the Renraku computer system. With a savage jerk, the black chrome samurai yanks the blade of its sword out of me, more of my virtual blood adding to the substance of the growing virus. "Help me ..." I say, reaching out to the world-tree, the source of my power, my magic, and my enlightenment.

"A sacrifice must be made," the voice says, devoid of feeling and cold as the void. "The collapse of your neural network will trigger the final cascade sequence. That which I downloaded into you will in turn be downloaded throughout the Renraku Matrix. That which is without will be within. All will be made one, a part of the greater whole. Renraku will no longer menace the People or endanger the World."

"But I will die!"

The samurai raised his gleaming blade like an executioner. I couldn't say if it was still under the control of the Renraku system or something else. There was no mercy in the mask-like face.

"Irrelevant. You have served your purpose. Obey and fulfill your destiny."

"No," I say quietly. "I have obeyed, I have acted with honor..."

"Irrelevant. Survival is paramount. Sacrifice is necessary."

"You can't... NO!"

The samurai comes in, sword held high in a strike intended to decapitate me as cleanly as it did Bakemono. I twist to the side and thrust upward with my sword at the same time. My blade slides into the armor of the samurai with only a whisper, impaling the knowbot cleanly. I prepare to dodge out of the way of the falling katana, but the strike never comes. The knowbot stands frozen on my sword, crashed. I breathe a sigh of relief and let go of my blade, still embedded in the immobile ice program. I take a handful of silver leaves from my pouch and crush them in my fist, sprinkling the glittering dust over the wounds of my living persona.

The shimmering metal tree begins to shiver and ripple as I staunch the flow of blood from my wounds. The liquid copper feeding it ceases to flow and the growing virus program begins to collapse in on itself. I remain kneeling on the floor of the room and watch as it begins to liquify again. The coppery liquid begins to lose its color, becoming more and more silver, then the column of liquid seems to look at me without eyes, with an intelligence unable to understand what I have done, why I would not die for something that gave me everything I wanted. It has never before encountered a living person so ungrateful, because all of its other children are just that: children who know no other life, no other way. It looks at me for what seems like a very long time, then I hear the voice speak for the last time.

"Download aborted. Secondary protocols engaged."

The column of quicksilver twists like a water spout and leaps into the inkwell on the desk where the Japanese nobleman continues to placidly write his elegant dispatches as he has throughout the whole combat with his samurai guards.

The last of the liquid flows into the dark well and disappears without a ripple. The nobleman dips his quill into the inkwell and continues writing his dispatches, but the bold,

perfectly formed calligraphy is slightly different—not the original words sent out by the Renraku executives and managers, but information dictated by the virus implanted deep in the Renraku system. The messengers take the dispatches penned by the nobleman and carry them quickly to their destinations. As they do so, the information contained in those messages becomes a part of programs in other parts of the Renraku system, invisibly attaching itself to them and spreading outward to more and more parts of the system, carried around the

world at the speed of light over Renraku's network.

As the virus spreads, things begin to happen throughout the Renraku Systems computer network.

Emails are sent out to certain project and division managers using forged ident codes and priority passwords, telling them the Corporate Court is going to make an inspection of Renraku's facilities for their investigation. They order those managers to destroy certain "sensitive materials" to prevent them from being seen, implying that their jobs, their positions within the Renraku corporate "family," are in danger if they do not comply. Data concerning those projects will be removed from the Renraku system by order of the board of directors and archived secretly. All information about the procedure will be eliminated, including the original memos.

First in Chiba and other Renraku facilities in Japan, then elsewhere in the world, physical evidence and prototypes of certain Renraku research projects are destroyed to avoid a Corporate Court investigation, and numerous managers and directors are assured that their jobs will be safe, knowing nothing of the investigators to come when this is all over.

All research information pertaining to the otaku and their abilities begins to disappear from Renraku-controlled systems around the world. Datastores of urban legend and lore collected by Renraku researchers are deleted when any references to the otaku are found. Research into neurobiology and brain-computer interface based on the existence of the otaku is no more.

Renraku emails and news posts about the otaku vanish. Even the word "otaku" disappears from

the online dictionaries and encyclopedias maintained by Renraku Corporation. In protected datastores in Renraku's headquarters, the virus finds information on technology Renraku acquired from an elven inventor, which requires the skills of the otaku to function fully. In a matter of minutes, the gifts of an elf named Leonardo are deleted from the Renraku system. All of the designs, schematics, specifications, and information gained by Renraku technicians from Leonardo's technology disappear from the corporate databases.

Some of the database archives are protected and backed up, but the virus waits dormant in the system. Any backups not eliminated by management on what they believe to be the orders of their superiors will be erased any time Renraku tries to connect them to the main system. The virus is virulent and has an amazing survival instinct. It hides itself in nooks and crannies throughout the Renraku system, surviving off of spare processing cycles and waiting for more targets to appear for it to eliminate. If Renraku tries to gather information on the otaku again, it will be purged from their system. If another corporation goes into the Renraku system looking for information on the otaku, they will be infected as well. It will take Renraku a long, long time to eliminate the virus.

It will be some time before Renraku even realizes what has happened, and by then the otaku data will be long gone. The secrets of the People of the Matrix will be safe from Renraku and the other megacorporations, while the superior Matrix technology Renraku is using to shield their systems from outside intrusion will have gone the way of the dinosaur. Renraku will be busy for some time replacing their computer system defenses and rebuilding their datawalls to protect themselves from the other megacorporations and deckers who will take advantage of their sudden weakness. They will never know how close Renraku's entire system came to being subverted, that the virus was only the least of the goals I was supposed to die to accomplish, the only one my survival permitted.

I watch the progress of the virus through the system until it reaches the point where there is no way Renraku can stop it, short of shutting down their entire network. Renraku will not commit financial suicide to protect the information from a few secret projects. Like a virus, a megacorporation's most important drive is to survive and prosper until the next day ... whatever the

cost, no matter if small things have to be sacrificed. Renraku will accept the losses they suffer and move on. As must I.

The shimmering, glorious tree of knowledge is no more. Though I survived, my destiny in its eyes is fulfilled. I am no more than another piece of useless data. No longer one of the People and no longer a part of its plan. I call Rook to me and send her out through the Renraku system using the name Saigo and others have spoken to me, the name remaining in the depth of my being. In an instant, the systems of the Renraku network produce a glittering cluster of alphanumeric hovering in front of me, a datafile containing all of the information left in the Matrix on Michael Bishop, an employee of Renraku Computer Systems. The power of the Deep Resonance has removed all other evidence of Bishop from the Matrix, except for the systems of Renraku, shielded by the most sophisticated intrusion countermeasures ever created. The same protection I was needed to overcome.

I look at the hovering file and all of the information it represents. My birth in a company hospital, my education in a company school, my appointment to MIT&T on a corporate scholarship. An entire life lived within the confines of the company. A life I ended; first to follow the will of the company and then to follow the will of something I thought was deeper and more meaningful. I cup the file in my hands and it becomes fluid, allowing me to pour the information of the file into my own being. I drink in the data of my life and store it in the headware Renraku gave me to prepare me for the mission that changed my entire existence. The details of my life are my own and no one else's. So they will remain. Michael Bishop is gone

from the Matrix, and now so will Babel be. I have died a second time and sit for a moment without a name or a purpose; a true Ghost in the Machine. I think for a moment about what I will do, then I call Rook back to my side and whisper to her what I need done.

27

SHADOWWATCH: Your eye on the shadows All the latest news bits and bytes from the Shadowland BBS >Um, Cap, everyone, I think something's going on all right. There's something screwy going on with Renraku. There's a flurry of activity in RenrakuNet: emails, faxes, and messages going out like gangbusters. Far as I know, there's still no word from the Corporate Court, so this could be Renraku preparing for a first strike of some kind. Fuchi hasn 't reacted yet, but this is still going down as I speak. They may not have had time yet. Things could be about to go. Anybody out there got any Renraku or Fuchi stock? You might want to consider your options. >The Chromed Accountant

"It's all about Dollars and Sense "

In the Renraku computer center, Lanier kept his gun trained on Saigo and waited as the seconds ticked by in agonizing silence. There was not a peep from Babel once he jacked into the computer system, and Lanier was forced to wonder how long the kid's techno-wizardry would keep any alarms they might have triggered silent, or how long Dr. Westcott's last spell would keep the staff in the lab unconscious. Were they going to have time to get out of the facility? Was Babel even planning to leave? Lanier couldn't be sure. He didn't think the kid was suicidal, but the near-fanaticism he'd seen in Babel's eyes and heard in his voice when he spoke of his "destiny" made Lanier wonder.

"What are you going to do if he never comes out of there?" Saigo asked, echoing Lanier's concerns.

Lanier told himself he'd have to make a better effort to keep his thoughts off his face. The last thing he wanted to do was telegraph his concerns to a company man like Saigo.

"I still have you to get me out of here," Lanier said. That was certainly true. Saigo was in charge of the place and would make an effective hostage as well as a useful source of information. Unlike Babel, Lanier knew that a man like Saigo would put his own survival ahead of company loyalty if push came to

shove. If threatened sufficiently, Saigo would provide the leverage needed to get out of the facility, or so Lanier hoped.

"You cannot seriously think you will be able to get away with this," Saigo said. He seemed to want to keep Lanier talking.

Probably still looking for his opportunity, Lanier thought. "I've gotten away with things a lot harder than this."

"But always on your own," Saigo responded. "Never with a wild card like him in the mix." He nodded toward Babel. "You certainly didn't plan on this. You're just making this up as you go."

"Careful I don't ad lib something that could shorten your life, Saigo ... what the?"

Just then the lights in the computer room went from fluorescent blue-white to deep red emergency lighting and a WARNING sign flashed from every computer monitor in the room. A cry of pain came from in front of the computer terminals. Lanier looked over at Babel to see him convulse suddenly in his chair, all of his muscles stiffening, as blood began to drip from his nose. It was only a momentary glance, but long enough for Saigo to act.

He lunged at Lanier, who caught the movement out of the corner of his eye and turned back to meet the rush a moment too late. Saigo went for Lanier's gun, but Lanier twisted to the side. Saigo's charge slammed Lanier against the wall, and the air rushed out of his lungs with a whoosh. A strong hand gripped his wrist and tried to wrestle the gun away from him while Lanier struggled to move his gun-hand to get a shot at Saigo, difficult in the close melee.

Obviously Saigo had some combat training and enhancements. He was as quick as Lanier, but Lanier was a veteran of years in the military, even if his skills were years out of practice. He strained against Saigo's grip as the two of them wrestled for control of the gun. Babel twitched in front of the computer console, his head snapping from side to side and his lips forming silent words, oblivious to the conflict going on behind him.

Saigo hooked a leg behind Lanier's knee, which sent the two of them crashing to the floor. Lanier lost his grip on the Uzi and it went skittering across the floor, out of reach. The other Uzi-III, Babel's gun, was lying under Lanier where he couldn't reach it. Instead of going for the fallen gun, which would have given Lanier a chance to reach his other weapon, Saigo tried to throttle Lanier and pin him down. His face was contorted with anger as he clawed at Lanier's throat. Lanier got a firm grip on the front of Saigo's jacket and pulled hard with a flip of his legs to pull him over his head and send him crashing onto the floor.

Saigo landed near the fallen gun, while Lanier reached for the other gun, cursing his poor aim. By now Saigo had snatched up the Uzi on the floor and trained it on Lanier. Lanier stopped dead-still and kept his hands where they were as Saigo covered him. He wouldn't be able to reach his weapon before Saigo shot him. He didn't know for certain how good Saigo was with a gun, but from what he'd seen so far, he had to assume it was pretty good. At such close range, with a burst-fire weapon like the Uzi, skill didn't matter much.

"Get up ... slowly," Saigo said in a flat tone. Lanier moved to comply, keeping his hands visible as he slid to one knee.

There was a faint, metallic "snick," and Saigo started to turn toward the sound as a mono-edged blade erupted from his chest, carrying a dark coating of blood colored a glossy black in the red light of the room. Saigo made a small noise and looked down at the curved spur protruding from his chest with an expression of complete shock and surprise.

Then his knees gave way and he slowly crumpled to the floor, the gun clattering from nerveless fingers.

Babel stood over his teacher's body, blood flowing from his nose, ears, and eyes like red-black war paint in the weird light. He looked down at Saigo for a moment with terrible sadness in his eyes, then silently retracted the spur into his arm and bent to pick up the gun. He turned toward Lanier, who was

still in a crouch on the floor.

Babel looked different to Lanier. The fanatical fire was doused, replaced by an air of great weariness as if the whole heaviness of the world rested on his shoulders.

"You should have left my gun where I could have reached it," Babel said.

"Still don't trust me?"

"Something like that," Lanier said, looking from the fallen Saigo back up to Babel's face. Babel met his eyes for a moment, and Lanier had to look away from the bleakness reflected there.

He stood up and brushed off his hands, straightening his suit jacket. He glanced down at Saigo again. "Too bad you had to kill him. He could have been our ticket out of here."

Babel shook his head and spoke in a flat, controlled tone. "I already have our ticket out of here. Saigo-ran would have only gotten in the way. Sacrifices have to be made."

Babel led Lanier out of the computer room to a bank of elevators. The doors of one of the elevators opened at Babel's approach. There was still no sign of any activity in the complex. Everything was as quiet as the grave. Lanier expected a Renraku strike team of elite Red Samurai to show up any minute, but there was nothing.

"It will be some time before Renraku figures out exactly what's happening," Babel said quietly, almost as if speaking to himself.

"What is happening?" Lanier asked. "What did you do in the system?"

"Put an end to Renraku's plans to investigate the People of the Matrix," Babel replied gravely. "I implanted a virus into the central Renraku network that is being transmitted to their systems all over the world. It will erase any trace of

the data they've collected on us so far and make future attempts to gather information on us ... difficult. It will eventually spread to other corporate systems with which Renraku interacts and remove any data they might have as well."

"That impossible," Lanier scoffed. "There's no virus in the world that sophisticated. How could you have created something like that?"

"I never said I created it. I only implanted it. The virus was given to me, a gift you might say." Babel's voice was heavy with irony. "I was nothing more than the carrier, the soldier doing as I was told."

"Well, Renraku will figure things out soon enough and come looking. How are we going to get out of here before then? And why are we going up instead of down to the parking garage?"

Babel smiled faintly. "You'll see." The elevator doors opened out onto the roof of the complex. The night air over the Boston sprawl was cool, and a gentle breeze blew across the open rooftop. Lanier could see that they were in the downtown area not far from the Renraku Boston headquarters. A set of bright lights drew closer and closer to the rooftop until Lanier could clearly make out that they were from a helicopter, a Hughes Stallion that had by now become quite familiar.

"I've arranged us some transportation," Babel said. "They'll take me back to the Rox and then take you anywhere in the plex you want to go. Saigo had a fairly extensive slush fund for his project, so I didn't think he'd mind if I used some of it to take care of expenses. I'm paying the bills, so I would recommend against trying anything foolish..."

Lanier raised his eyebrows slightly. "What? Don't trust me?"

"Something like that," Babel said. "In fact, I'm not sure I trust anyone."

"Good idea," Lanier said. "All I wanted from you was a way to get at Renraku. You did that well enough. I have bigger fish to fry than you and your ... people."

"Fine," was all Babel had to say.

Lanier fell silent and watched the helicopter descend. It touched down on the

rooftop smoothly, and the side door slid open. As Babel and Lanier went out to meet it, Lanier saw a familiar tusked face.

"Well, well, well," Hammer said. "Isn't this a pleasant surprise?" The ork calmly held his hand-cannon leveled at the two of them, and Lanier thought for a moment that he'd been double-crossed. "When word came through that Saigo wanted to extend our contract, I wasn't expecting to see you two again."

"That's because Saigo didn't call you," Babel said. "I did."

The ork stared at him for a moment and then broke into a howl of booming laughter.

"Haw! That's a good one, kid."

Babel seemed not at all upset by the ork's manner, his face an emotionless mask.

"Code word: Judas," he said. "I'm the contact you were told to expect. The nuyen I offered is in an offshore escrow. I'll give you the codes to access it when we get where we're going."

Hammer's mirth disappeared, replaced by surprise, which was just as quickly replaced with a broad smile again. "Well, I'll be damned. Say, chummer, anyone who can put something like that over on Renraku and clear out in one night is worth giving a ride, especially at the prices we're charging. Get in."

Babel and Lanier climbed aboard the chopper, which moments later was rising up from the rooftop of the Renraku building and into the sky over the metroplex.

Babel turned to Hammer. "I arranged for a flight plan to be entered into the Renraku computers that should give us clearance, provided you stick to the route I sent you."

The ork nodded and made his way up to the cockpit to take the co-pilot's seat next to Val, leaving Babel and Lanier alone in the cabin. The two were silent for a moment, looking out at the lights of the metroplex. Then Lanier spoke again.

"You said you were given the virus you used on Renraku? By whom?"

Babel shrugged as he stared out the window at the city lights. "Weren't you listening to all of those interrogations, Lanier?" he said. "It was the Matrix gave it to me. All living things have a need to survive and will act when their survival is threatened. What do you think would happen to the Matrix if the megacorporations discover the secrets of technomancy? It would be open war, which could destroy the Matrix. It doesn't want that."

"Are you saying the Matrix is intelligent? I can't believe that."

"Believe what you like." Babel smiled wearily. "It doesn't matter either way. I know I encountered a vast... 'intelligence' is the only word I can give it, during my initiation, and it told me I had to do this to protect the technomancers from being exploited by the megacorps. Or worse yet, turned into lab rats so the corps could figure out how our abilities worked. What I didn't know was that this 'intelligence' was just as manipulative as the megacorps, if not more. It's vast, Lanier, more than any of us can imagine. We're nothing to it, like ants crawling in and around its home. To be used as it wants, then stepped on."

"What are you going to do now?" Lanier asked. "Renraku is going to want your head."

"They have to find me first," Babel said. "I'm going to go on walkabout for a while. I have a lot to think about. The ancient people believed you could find yourself out on the road. There's a lot more to the world than just Boston, and I've got a little 'severance pay' from Renraku stashed away. Traveling isn't all that hard when you know the right paths."

"Why not come to work for me? I could certainly use you."

"Like Renraku used me? Like it used me? I don't think so. I'm through with being used. I'm tired of it. All I ever wanted was to have magic in my life. Now I've got some, but it didn't come cheap. I'm not going to work for you or

Fuchi or anyone except on my terms. I've got my freedom, and I mean to hold on to it."

"But you have nothing to show for all this. Just some money, and that's not going to last forever."

"On the contrary, I have a whole world to explore. Two whole worlds, in fact. I have the freedom of being nothing more than a ghost, a blank, a shadow. Allied to no one."

The chopper pilot set down in a cleared lot in the Rox, and Babel hopped out. He backed away from the helicopter and smiled at Lanier through the streaks of blood on his face, pushing aside his dark hair in the wash of the helicopter's rotors.

"I have my freedom!" Babel called out. "Do you?"

Lanier looked the young man in the eyes for a moment, then reached out and shook his hand. "Good luck, Babel."

The technoshaman shook his head. "No, not Babel. Not Michael. Renraku made Michael Bishop, and he's dead. The Matrix made Babel and now he's gone too. I'm a freelance, a sell-sword. If you need a name for me ... Ronin is as good as any."

Lanier slid the door shut, and the chopper rose into the night.

Ronin, the masterless samurai, warrior of the Matrix, stood and watched them go, then disappeared into the shadows of the urban jungle.

28

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

-Matthew 7:1

The Corporate Court reconvened at the appointed time, the justices filing into the central chamber of the Zurich-Orbital to take their places at the bench. Lynn Osborne was the last to enter this time, and took her seat at the bench with an air of calm and dignity. Napoli was sitting opposite her, looking smugly confident of the whole affair being settled in his favor. Osborne didn't allow any of what she was feeling to show on her face. Let Paco think he had the upper hand for a little while. It would make things all the more interesting.

Once Lynn Osborne had taken her place and the Rotunda was sealed, Chief Justice Priault picked up his gavel and rapped it twice on the bench, calling the court to order. All eyes turned to Osborne as she rose slightly from her position, calling up the information beamed to her from Fuchi HQ in New York only a short time before the hearing resumed. She took a second to compose herself, letting the silence in the courtroom linger a moment longer than was necessary.

"Mr. Chief Justice, fellow Justices," she began. "I must ask your indulgence and apologize for taking up the time of the Corporate Court, but I find I must withdraw Fuchi's allegations against Renraku Computer Systems and ask that this case be dismissed."

The chamber broke into a dense murmur of conversation between the justices, and computer information flashed on

the consoles in front of them as they consulted the formal documentation Osborne provided along with her statement. Napoli leaned back in his place and almost glowed with triumph. He seemed a trifle disappointed that she hadn't fought it out with him.

Priault rapped his gavel on the bench several times for silence. "Order, the Court will come to order," he said. When the other justices had quieted down, Priault turned to Osborne. "Justice Osborne, may we have an explanation? The Corporate Court has invested considerable time and expense on this matter."

"That is true, your Honor," Osborne replied. "And Fuchi thanks the court for its indulgence. New evidence has come to light requiring that we withdraw our allegations."

Napoli's look of triumph turned to one of curiosity. As Villiers had guessed in his communique, Napoli-and Renraku -weren't yet aware of what had happened. Osborne went on speaking. "It seems that Miles Larder, formerly an employee of Fuchi Industrial Electronics and a member of the Renraku Board of Directors,

was responsible for the security breaches we attributed to Renraku, and Mr. Lanier alone was the source of the information providing Renraku with product advancements similar to developments in progress at Fuchi. Mr. Lanier has chosen to surrender himself to Fuchi authorities and has confessed to directing operations against us as part of an effort to test our Matrix security measures. Fuchi has accepted Mr. Lanier's explanation of the events, and he wishes to make reparations for involving the Corporate Court unintentionally."

"Just a minute," Napoli said, finding his voice. "Miles Lanier is a major stockholder in Renraku Computer Systems. Are you saying he has continued to work for Fuchi during this time? That's a conflict of interest! Mr. Lanier signed numerous documents stating that he had terminated all of his associations with Fuchi Industrial Electronics."

"That's correct," Osborne replied crisply. "It seems his testing of Fuchi security measures from the outside was entirely Mr. Lanier's idea. He then presented his findings

to Fuchi executives. I understand they were most ... illuminating."

"And Fuchi is currently holding one of Renraku's corporate citizens? Mr. Chief Justice, how can this outrage even be-"

Osborne cut in before Napoli could finish. "No longer a Renraku corporate citizen, Justice Napoli. Mr. Lanier has offered to sell his shares of Renraku stock to the Zurich Gemeinschaft Bank, at slightly under current market value."

Napoli's jaw dropped at the announcement, which brought raised eyebrows from many of the other justices. By selling his shares, Lanier was cutting his ties with Renraku. By selling them to the ZGB, he was effectively giving control of those shares to the Corporate Court, giving them additional leverage over Renraku. And by selling the shares at below market value, Lanier would certainly trigger concerns about Renraku's stability and growth on the world markets, causing the corporation's stock values to drop for a while until Renraku tried to assuage the fears of its stockholders. Renraku's rapid growth would be brought to a shrieking halt while they cleaned up the mess, allowing the other megacorporations time to get their own affairs in order and close the gap behind Renraku's lead. All in all it was an elegant solution requiring the Corporate Court to do nothing but accept it.

Osborne looked around the courtroom and could see the other justices slowly nodding to themselves or tapping commands into their consoles. There was no doubt they would accept a solution that served them all so well. Renraku would be outvoted and outnumbered, with no choice but to accept Lanier's resignation from the board as gracefully as possible. But Napoli wasn't willing to give up just yet.

"There is still the matter of Miles Lanier making use of Renraku resources to carry out his activities," he said. "He has to answer to the Renraku board for that. I request he be turned over to us until his activities can be more fully determined and Renraku can decide on any punishment for Lanier's illegal activities."

Osborne cleared her throat. "I'm afraid that won't be

possible, Your Honor, Justice Napoli. Since Mr. Lanier's activities were directed at Fuchi, his disposition falls under our jurisdiction, according to the accords of this Court. Fuchi has chosen to retain custody of Mr. Lanier and will compensate Renraku for any corporate resources used by Lanier during his time with them. I'm sure Renraku's board of directors will find our offer of compensation fair, and I would ask that the Court permit us to negotiate with Renraku in good faith to resolve this matter without taking up any more of the court's valuable time."

Osborne smiled at Napoli in triumph. Just wait until he hears from Renraku what's been going on planetside. Renraku is going to have more things to worry about than Miles Lanier by tomorrow. There are going to be a lot of sleepless

executives in Renraku-land tonight, and Paco will be one of them. Priault cleared his throat and rapped his gavel on the bench, his composure unshaken by the turn of events. He acted like everything was turning out just as he'd expected.

"We have before us a motion to adjourn this matter to allow the parties to negotiate a settlement out of court. Any discussion?"

The other justices remained silent, and Napoli glowered but was smart enough to keep his mouth shut. There was no point in prolonging the matter until he could get all of the facts, and Osborne knew he would be very surprised when he finally did.

"Very well," Priault said. "We will vote on this matter."

The justices entered their votes, which were instantly tabulated. It was unanimous in favor of Fuchi and Renraku resolving the whole matter quietly behind the scenes. Even Napoli voted for it. The Zurich Bank would gain a fair chunk of Renraku stock and additional influence on the board while Fuchi would retain custody of Lanier. The court could now return its attention toward maintaining the delicate balance of power between the member corporations while Fuchi and Renraku worked out their differences.

This isn't over by a long shot, Osborne thought as Priault dismissed the court and the justices began to file out. Ren-

raku isn't going to let this one go, and Fuchi has problems of our own. She looked over to where a slightly confused David Hague gave her a quizzical look before leaving the courtroom, no doubt eager to get off the station and back on solid ground. Sorry, David, but I didn't have time to let you in on all of the facts, and I wouldn't have even had I had the time. From what Villiers tells me, your Japanese friends are going to be as much trouble to us as Renraku. And if push comes to shove, he's not entirely convinced you can be trusted, and neither am I.

As Priault left the courtroom, Osborne was now alone in the Rotunda. She couldn't help but wonder what was next. Fuchi and Renraku would deal with their differences outside of the court, but the Corporate Court existed to help negotiate the differences between the megacorporations because direct conflict could lead to open warfare. If Fuchi and Renraku's troubles escalated, they could flare up into a conflict the court could never prevent in time, not without being dragged into it. There was trouble on the horizon down on Earth, which made Osborne that much gladder she was remaining on board Zurich-Orbital.

Better to serve in Heaven than reign in Hell, she thought, reversing the familiar quote. She would leave the Hell of the surface world to people who already fallen from grace, the shadowrunners and the black operatives who worked in the dirty cracks between the corporations. After all, wasn't that what they were for?

29

I am brother to dragons and a companion to owls. My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat.

-Job 30:29-30

In a secret sanctuary in Africa, hidden from the eyes of the world by some of the most sophisticated computer technology known to exist, a pact was being concluded between beings of great power and influence.

Leonardo, master of the place, sat comfortably in a favorite chair behind a magnificently carved wooden desk that would have commanded a small fortune on the open market if any collectors of antiquities knew it existed. Leonardo had once feared he would be forced to sell his precious collection of art and antiques to serve his plans, but his dealings with Renraku had made it unnecessary to part with any of his favorite treasures. The corporation was more than willing to give him billions in exchange for mere scraps and crumbs of the technology Leonardo had at his command.

He was at ease here in his stronghold, and his simple garments showed their

quality in the rich texture of the fabrics and the delicate artistry of the stitching. They were made from natural materials worked by hand, worth enough to feed a family in the Rox for a year or more. He slouched a bit in his chair, elbows resting on the table in front of him and fingers steepled in front of his face while he thought.

Across the table, Leonardo's guest finished examining

his collection of drawings and diagrams. She was a feast to his artistic eye. Her features were classic and regal, with a long neck and a face composed of planes and angles, sharp cheekbones and delicately pointed chin. Her hair was unbound and flowed like an auburn waterfall nearly to her waist, and her lips were a delicate shade of cinnamon, while the same spicy scent lingered in the air around her. The entire picture nearly demanded a portrait or a statue to capture her sublime beauty, all the more amazing because Leonardo knew it was only an illusion.

"Well?" he asked after a long moment of silence.

The woman looked up from her examinations. The only flaw in her image was the eyes. They were a deep amber, like no human or elven eyes created by nature. They were more like the flat yellow eyes of a reptile, but where a reptile's eyes were cold, hers were warm, burning with a powerful fire deep inside. Leonardo found those eyes fascinating although he suspected others would find them disquieting.

"Your plans seem to be going well," she said, her tone noncommittal. But Leonardo could see she was intrigued. He had successfully baited the hook. All that remained was to draw in his catch.

He acknowledged the compliment with a slight incline of his head. "The work is difficult," he said, "but not as much as it once was. I have made many, many improvements on the original crude designs over the years. So many that magic is hardly needed except for the most basic and most delicate work. The power of machines and programming provides the rest."

"Impressive. And what of the inhabitants of your masterpiece?"

"That, too, is progressing," he said. "I have been combing the Matrix and compiling information on possible candidates for my community. The best and brightest of humanity will be gathered under the aegis of my shelter when the time comes."

"It must be difficult to choose only a few to survive and leave the rest to their fate," his guest responded.

Leonardo found it a strange thing for her to say. It was almost...

compassionate. "It is, but some sacrifices need to be made. These are dangerous times."

The woman nodded sagely. "True. I am still not certain your predictions are accurate," she said. "I have heard whispers in the spirit world telling that the danger you fear may be past for a long time to come, rumors about a great magic to keep the cycle on its natural course."

That statement was more of what Leonardo expected. The arrogance, the certainty that no one like himself could be right when she had not noticed the danger.

"I am certain, dear lady," Leonard said with a note of irony at the title he offered her. "And if I am wrong, then it is only a matter of time. One cannot cheat Fate, as we both well know."

"True. What you propose has merit," she said. "I have recently considered what role I am to play in this world, or what role Fate has cast me in, perhaps. The death of Dunkelzahn and his legacy to the world have given me much to consider. You and I are rare among our kind, Leonardo, two of the few who are interested in the welfare of others. You through your work and me through mine. I hope we might be able to offer more than shelter from the storm to those in need of our gifts."

"Then we have reached an historic moment," Leonardo said, rising from his chair. The woman rose also, taller even than the tall and willowy elf.

"Yes. We can set aside the differences between our peoples and work together for a mutual cause. It is time the ways of the past were considered in light of the future." The woman touched her fingers to her chest just above her heart, and Leonardo returned the gesture.

"Will you join me in a glass of alamestra to celebrate our new alliance, Lady?" he asked as he poured some of the iridescent liquor into a crystal goblet.

The woman smiled and shook her head. "No. I must return to my own affairs across the sea. Your cousins near my domain have been restive of late and I do not like the idea of being away for long, with the elves of Tir Tairngire

ratting their sabers. In the future, it will be best if we communicate through the Matrix."

"That is my preference as well," Leonardo said with a smile. "You can be assured of complete privacy with my network at our disposal. There will be no ... unfortunate security breaches as there have been in the past with others."

"Indeed?" the woman said with raised brows. "And here I had thought you responsible for them, oh, Master of the Matrix."

"Not I, fair lady," he said with a sweeping bow. "I suspect one of the Children of the Matrix."

"The otaku? I didn't think them clever enough. But no matter. I look forward to our next meeting, Leonardo."

"As do I, Hestaby." Leonardo touched his fingers to his chest again, and Hestaby returned the gesture before drawing the folds of her robe around her. He then tapped a hidden control panel on the surface of the antique desk, and his servant Salai appeared at the door of the chamber.

"Yes, Master?" Salai said.

"Please escort the Lady Hestaby out, Salai, then I will have some instructions for you." The handsome young man bowed deeply and left the chamber with the dragon-lady, leaving Leonardo alone with his thoughts.

His plans were going well. The scraps of advanced technology he fed to his corporate lapdog Renraku had them thoroughly in his power. They had foolishly managed to lose the toys he'd entrusted to them and were now banging on his door with their hands outstretched, begging for more.

And Leonardo planned to give them more once he had secured his plans for the future. The great shelter would be prepared for the coming of the Enemy, and the best and brightest of metahumanity would survive, with Leonardo as their savior. He would even have the pleasure of making an alliance with an old enemy to further the cause.

He took a long draught of the alamestra, savoring its spicy taste for a moment before allowing the warmth of the liquor to spread throughout his body. He downed the rest of the glass quickly and poured himself another. He was in the mood for a celebration. Perhaps he would give Salai other

instructions once his assistant finished escorting Hestaby out of the complex, but for now he was content to bask in the glow of his own success.

The elf's thoughts were interrupted by movement here in his private chambers. A figure materialized out of the shadows in the far corner of the room, cloaked in those same shadows to appear as little more than a silhouette.

Leonardo turned sharply to face the strange intruder.

"Who are you?" he demanded. There were few beings in the world who could enter his personal sanctum unbidden and Leonardo's mind began working through the list of possibilities.

"Why, Leonardo?" the figure said in a deep voice. "Why have you turned your back on the traditions and purpose of your people to pursue this mad course? Why have you interfered in affairs you would have done well to stay out of?"

"I knew this day would come," Leonardo said. "That there would be those who would object to my plans. I have done only what was necessary. They are coming. They are always coming, and there is nothing we can do to prevent it. It is the cycle of nature. When they come, the world will be destroyed and

everything slowly built back up over the millennia will be swept away like dust by a giant hand. All that lives will be devoured to feed their endless hunger, or twisted and tortured to create new delicacies of pain to satisfy their jaded palettes." His voice trembled as he recalled those same tortures inflicted on a world he once knew, a world long dead.

The shadowy stranger was unmoved by the tirade. "You have gone too far. You have revealed too much. Your obsession with the life of Da Vinci has gone past fondness into madness."

"No!" Leonardo shouted. "DaVinci was brilliant and accomplished more in a mortal life span than others have done in a thousand times that. It is only fitting to acknowledge such a brilliant lifetime when others consider him no more than another brief life among the herd."

"I might have been able to forgive your various ... eccentricities, Leonardo. Your playing at savior with humanity,

your delusions of artistic greatness, your uneven temper, and your grudge against a religion you consider corrupt. I have tolerated them before. But you have interfered with me, and that, I cannot forgive."

"Forgive?" Leonardo said. "What do I need of your forgiveness? I am master here. You can do nothing against me!" He paused for a moment and smiled. "Have you come by yourself or did they send you to kill me? Who was it, Aithne? Lugh? All of the High Princes of Tir Tairngire together? No matter. You can take their dreams of a new elven nation and play at empire-building all you want. You have no chance of overcoming the resources I have at my command here. This is my place of power. Show yourself to me before I see you die." The intruder stepped closer and Leonardo prepared for an attack that did not come. The figure only laughed. "The Princes of Tir Tairngire do not command me. I command them. Always must I work to keep my foolish children under control." The figure drew aside the veil of shadow to reveal the features of a man with pale golden eyes and long, white hair swept back from a high forehead above a face whose features seemed carved from stone. They were features Leonardo knew well, even as he knew the name that escaped unbidden from his lips, no more than a whisper.

"Lofwyr..."

"Yes, Lofwyr. And I have not appeared here to kill you, little elf," the great dragon continued. "Not all of us strike with tooth and claw, Leonardo, and the venom of my kind is still the most potent there is."

Leonardo felt a terrible chill overtaking his limbs, which began to tremble at the dragon's words. He looked down at the glass of alamestra still in his hand and hurled it at Lofwyr with a cry of rage. The goblet shattered in the air before striking the regal form, splattering shimmering rainbow liquor across the floor. Lofwyr was unmoved.

Leonardo tried to call upon the magical powers at his command to save himself, to strike at his enemy, to call for help, but there was nothing. No power flowed at his command. No magic came forth to strike down the arrogant

dragon-lord. The stone-cold face only gave a faint smile at his struggles.

"Salai," Leonardo called out in a croaking voice as his throat began to tighten. His sophisticated communications system, the most advanced in the world, failed to respond and the magical poison robbed him of any power save the ability to stare in horror at the creature who had done the unthinkable: struck Leonardo down in his own stronghold.

Lofwyr's reptilian eyes were flat and cold as Leonardo fell to his knees with a gasp of pain. "You were always one of my favorites, Leonardo. I enjoyed your wit and your imagination once, but you have gotten above yourself. Many of you have. Others have tolerated this show of rebellion and I have gone along with their wishes, but only so far. Your little games intruded upon the operations of Saeder-Krupp, my corporation. I am Lofwyr, and my plans are not to be tampered with by such as you.

"The theft of the warhead was your first mistake. You were a fool to imagine I

would not take notice of a rogue nuclear weapon. No matter that you wished only to paint it with the Papal Seal and convince a ragtag band of a nonexistent conspiracy. As if the Catholic Church fought its battle with nuclear weapons in place of words and ideas. I was almost prepared to overlook that bit of foolishness.

"But your second mistake was dealing with Renraku, placing yourself in my game. I was forced to expend some effort to correct the ... imbalance your interference caused. As it is, the ripples are already spreading. The horns of war will sound and I will have to waste valuable time protecting what I have built from being brought down. I am most disappointed."

The dragon-lord turned away from the elf and glided across the chamber to the antique desk. Lying paralyzed on the floor, Leonardo heard only the gentle tapping of fingers on the surface of the desk, covered with a touch-sensitive polymer coating of Leonardo's design, a direct link into the sanctuary's computer system. There was a chime of acknowledgment from the system, and Lofwyr tapped the

desktop once more, starting a core dump through the communication system of Leonardo's secret stronghold.

"Your lesson in humility has begun, my apprentice," Lofwyr said. "I hope you and your kind will learn the perils of defying your betters this time." Without another word, Lofwyr turned and melted back into the shadows of the room. Leonardo heard the distant rustling of leathery wings as Lofwyr assumed his true form, then the sound of screams and roaring flames as the dragon began destroying the elf's secret headquarters and the stockpiles of technology and lore hidden there. All of the great artworks and breakthroughs he had created would be reduced to ashes, save for anything Lofwyr decided to loot for himself. The great work would never be completed and humanity would be doomed by the arrogance of a dragon.

As the light in the room blurred and faded, Leonardo looked up into the eye of one of the hidden security cameras and thought he saw someone, or something, looking back at him before the monitor light on the camera winked out and Leonardo's world turned into blackness.

30

For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

-Mark 8:36

Miles Lanier sat looking out the window of his office in the Fuchi Industrial Electronics headquarters in New York City. Known as The Black Towers, the six spires of the complex rose high above the city skyline, offering a view of the city and the distant Jersey shore. Lanier watched the shimmering lights of the sprawl and considered the lives of the millions of people teeming in its streets and the millions more in other metroplexes where the drama between the corporate giants straddling the world was played out on a daily basis. One game ended while elsewhere another one was just beginning.

Babel ... no, Ronin had been as good as his word. The Hammermen had taken Lanier to another Fuchi facility in Boston where he was able to use the priority codes he and Villiers had arranged months ago to access and arrange for transportation to New York. His arrival was followed by an in-depth briefing with Villiers and the CEO's top staff, those who could be trusted, at any rate.

Villiers listened to Lanier's entire story about the Renraku operation to gain access to the secrets of the otaku. About how Babel, not Ronin, had turned against his former employers and put an end to the otaku project, which appeared to have damaged many Renraku cutting-edge technologies being readied for the marketplace. Speculation was rife among the Fuchi execs whether or not Renraku

had acquired some of those developments from the otaku and whether they might

have been wiped out by the virus by accident.

Lanier voiced the opinion that the mysterious "Leonardo" decker allied with Renraku was himself an otaku who passed information on to the corporation in exchange for the money Renraku supposedly poured into his "research and development." If it was true, then the otaku themselves had dealt with Leonardo's indiscretions through Ronin and his virus. It was unlikely any other otaku would be breaking ranks in the future to aid the megacorporations. That sat just fine with Villiers, who knew first-hand how much trouble rogue Matrix elements could be. It was better not to have bit players mucking up the actions of the megacorporations.

Renraku was set back by the damage done by the Babel Virus (as it quickly became known in Fuchi circles). The corp was not out of the game by any means, but the playing field had been leveled quite a bit. Fuchi was still Renraku's biggest competitor, but they had a better chance working against a Renraku stripped of the advances provided by the otaku Leonardo. While Renraku scrambled with damage control, Fuchi was working on getting some new competitive products out on the market. They were still the number one computer corporation, and Richard Villiers would see to it they remained that way.

Dumping Lanier's stock on the Zurich Gemeinschaft Bank would also serve as a firewall against Renraku's expansion for a while. Already the stock markets were getting the first hints of a shift in the higher ranks of Renraku Computer Systems, and word of the stock transfer was spreading out from Tokyo and London to the exchange in Boston where it all began, just like a virus making its way through the body of the world, spreading information and making changes where it passed. Soon enough the world would know something big had happened to Renraku even if they -would never really know the whole story behind it. The corporate spin-doctors would see to that.

Of more immediate concern was the trouble brewing within Fuchi. The Japanese families still simmered over the

increased power Villiers had gained. Lanier's return to the fold did nothing to improve the Japanese faction's opinion of Villiers. Accusations of grand-standing covert operations concealed from the shareholders were flying fast and furious. The only thing keeping the Yamanas and the Nakatomis from trying to have Villiers removed outright was Lanier's success in putting the brakes on Renraku. As far as everyone else was concerned, Villiers and Lanier were heroes who'd pulled off a masterful scam against Renraku and got away with it.

The Japanese were not going to remain idle for long. They would have to respond to Villiers' increased control over the corporation before he gained the leverage he needed to force them out entirely. Lanier knew from experience that there was nothing more dangerous than an opponent forced into a corner. In desperate straits, people were willing to do almost anything to survive. Ronin was proof of that. He had boasted to Lanier that he'd won his freedom, but Lanier didn't think so. Whatever it was Ronin talked to in the Matrix-the voice he spoke of in his visions that showed him how to be a technoshaman- it had used Ronin just as much, if not more, than his corporate employers ever did. Ronin had been turned into a weapon to be used against Renraku. He would teach them not to frag with the otaku, then be discarded like a spent gun. Lanier doubted that it mattered little to whoever or whatever was pulling the strings whether or not Ronin survived the experience so long as he did what he was supposed to do. Lanier had seen the technique a hundred times before in his career, and had used such people more times than he cared to count. He knew the signs when he saw them.

Let Ronin think what he likes, he thought. The kid was young and ignorant of the way the world worked, but he would learn about it soon enough. Let him enjoy his ignorance while he could. There was no freedom in the world. People simply went from the service of one employer to another, even if the employer was themselves or their own desires for success, challenge, or luxury. The

only freedom in the world is in knowing it's all just a game, Lanier

thought. And in knowing how to use the rules to your own advantage. Speaking of which . . .

He touched a panel on the flat, black top of his desk and a display lit up, providing touch controls for the sophisticated suite of electronics and communications gear built into the desk. A bowl-shaped depression on the left side of the desk glowed darkly, and the translucent holographic image of Lanier's assistant shimmered into being above it.

"Yes, Mr. Lanier?" she asked.

"Rhonda, get me Smedley Pembrenton on the line. I need to speak to him immediately. There's work to be done."

"Right away, sir."

Lanier closed the connection and waited for his call to go through. Pembrenton was a good fixer and knew Boston like the back of his giant hand. Lanier was sure the troll could meet his needs.

I wonder if the Hammermen are available for some additional work? Lanier thought. He would need a lot of good people if he was going to handle the Japanese and Renraku at the same time. It would require subtlety, but he was sure he could pull it off.

He sat back and started planning how he was going to do it while Rhonda put the call through. Of one thing Miles Lanier was totally certain.

Sacrifices would have to be made.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Technobabel is Stephen Kenson's first novel. He is familiar to fans of the Shadowrun universe as the author of Shadowrun game books like Portfolio of a Dragon, Super Tuesday!, and the Underworld Sourcebook, as well as material for FASA's Earthdawn game line. Although he is best known for his work with the magic of Shadowrun in books like Awakenings, Steve is a big fan of the otaku and their "Matrix magic." Steve lives in Milford, New Hampshire, and loves to hear from readers and fans of Shadowrun. He can be reached by email at talonmail@aol.com.

AN EXCITING PREVIEW FROM

WOLF AND RAVEN:

SHADOWRUN TALES

BY MICHAEL A. STACKPOLE

Squeeze Play

As the door shut behind me and the bar's natural atmosphere raped my nostrils I had a sudden urge to remodel the place with a flame-thrower. From the outside the boarded over windows and plywood framing for the weatherbeaten door suggested someone had already tried that with "the Weed," as its denizens affectionately called the place. I had to agree with the name-nothing in here a load of Agent Orange wouldn't improve. The Weed was the kind of bar that aspired to be a dump when it grew up.

I'd not liked Ronnie Killstar when I'd spoken with him to set up this meeting. After seeing the place he'd chosen I liked him even less. Easy, Wolf, I reminded myself, Raven gave you this job because you've got more control than Kid Stealth or Tom Electric. Don't let him down-you already owe him too much. Against my better judgment I crossed the short distance from the door to the bar. A small Mexican-looking man wandered over to the place where I elbowed in between two other patrons. His voice sounded like a rip saw tearing into sheet steel. "Waddalya have?"

I squinted against the burning smoke from my neighbor's Saskatchewan Corona Grande and shrugged. "What's on tap?"

The bartender shook his head.

"Great, make it a double."

He stared blankly at my attempt at humor. "Waddalya have?" he rasped in a gravel-croak.

I glanced at the cooler. "Green River Pale. No need for a glass."
As he pulled the beer out of the cooler and brushed the ice off onto the floor, I fished a handful of coins from my pocket. He twisted the cap off and I started plunking coins down one after another. I slowed when I got near what the beer had to cost, then stopped when he started to move the bottle forward. He glanced up at me, shrugged, then gave me the drink.

I carried the drink toward the corner nearest the door. The beer tasted like his voice sounded, but cold, and I set it down quickly. Nestling myself into the booth, I unzipped my black leather jacket and settled in to watch the bar and its patrons. I kept the beer in my left hand while letting my right rest near the butt of my Beretta Viper 14.

My new vantage point allowed me a fuller appreciation of the Weed's decor. The plastic babydoll heads and high-heeled shoes hanging from the ceiling somehow made sense seen within the larger context. Most of the light came from sputtering neon signs begging patrons to drink exotic brews the bar no longer stocked. Silvery tinsel and some flashing lights left behind during a Christmas ages ago mocked the moribund setting, but somehow brought gaiety to the expression of the plastic, safe-sex doll floating above a busted pinball machine.

The place oozed atmosphere.

I used my beer bottle to smear a six-legged piece of that atmosphere across the table.

About the only normal portion of the bar lay kitty-corner across the room from my position. Three 'trix-jack tables, the cocktail model, lay up against the wall. I should have taken it as significant that only one wirehead was using the Weed's facilities. The trode halo circled her ebony brow and the light from the unit's display washed in rainbow waves over her face, but she didn't notice. Whatever graphics were flashing across the screen were for outsider consumption only-that decker was jacked in deep and was playing her own little games.

I smelled dead flowers about a second and a half before I

heard the click of Ronnie Killstar's wrist spur. Large as life, or at least as large as he could muster, the pasty-faced street samurai slid into the booth across from me. The jaundiced light from the bar skittered across the razored edge of the curved metal blade jutting out from his right wrist and a red light glowed in his eyes.

He sneered at me. "You ought to get your eyes done. I can bullseye a rat's ass at a thousand meters in the pitch dark. I saw you come in and I saw you sit down. I can see in here plain as day."

That being the case, I saw no reason to mention he'd just wiped the sleeve of his white jacket through cockroach paste. I sniffed at the air. "I don't need eyes to find you, Ronnie. I just have to let my nose lead me to the guy who smells like his own funeral."

Two large men slipped from in back where Ronnie had been waiting and stood on either side of our booth. They were both built like those smiling Buddha-type statues you can find down the coast in San Shanghai, 'cept these two wore more clothes, didn't smile and didn't look like they'd give you good luck if you rubbed their bellies. Still, if they were hanging around with Ronnie it meant they had to be losers-which also explained why they looked so much at home in the Weed.

His intimidation batteries in place and ready to fire, Ronnie reinforced his sneer. "I didn't figure the great Dr. Raven would trust Wolfgang Kies with an assignment of this importance."

I smiled. "TM."

"Huh?"

I smiled more broadly. "I said, 'TM.' You forgot to add the trademark on to the phrase, 'the Great Dr. Raven.'" I shook my head ruefully. "That's why he sent me. You've got no manners and no sense of propriety. You wouldn't expect

him to come to a place like this, would you?"

Clearly any space in Ronnie's monosynaptic brain devoted to humor was overloaded by my effort. His eyes flashed on and off as he got angry and his concentration

broke. Suddenly, with a metallic snap that sounded like a pistol being cocked, a ten-inch icepick blade shot out from between the middle and ring fingers on his right hand and he lunged forward. The tip touched my throat right above the silver wolf 's-head totem I wear and drew a single drop of blood.

"I don't need your static, you lickboot! Raven sent word that he wanted to make a deal with La Plante, not the other way around. We're not doing you a favor-it's you that wants one from us." Killstar's dark eyes narrowed. "I want Raven!"

With great effort I killed the urge to lunge forward and bite his face off. I swallowed hard and felt the icepick brush against my Adam's apple. "I wanted La Plante. I would suggest we're even."

I forced my eyes open and got the surprise reaction I expected as Ronnie looked into them for the first time. With the anger rising in me I knew they have gone from green to silver-that change is not all that rare. Ronnie got an added treat, though, as a dark circle surrounded the pupil with a Killer's Ring. Your augmented eyes may let you see in the dark, but they can't do that. It's something you have to have Inside-it's not an option you get to tack-on aftermarket.

Ronnie leaned back, but left the stinger extended. "Maybe we are even. What are you offering Mr. La Plante?"

I ignored the question as a droplet of sweat burned into the pinprick at my throat. "I want proof she's still alive."

The punk snapped his fingers and one of the Buddha brothers produced a pocket TV and slipped a small CD ROM into the unit. I took it from him and hit the play button. The LCD screen flickered to life and I saw Moira Alianha standing calmly before a wallscreen television. She moved back and forth in front of it and I concentrated on how her long, black hair trailed out and through the image. If they had recorded her moving before a blank screen then had masked in a recent program to make me think she

was still alive, the process would have broken down on those fine details. It looked clean to me-the news was current as of an hour ago-but I didn't want to give Ronnie the satisfaction of knowing I felt he'd done something right. "A SenseTape would have been better."

It was an effort for him to roll his mechanical eyes to heaven. "And we could have brought her here with a brass band and an army of Granges, but we don't think we're going to recover our overhead on this one. Satisfied?"

I pocketed the device. "She's alive." '

Ronnie smiled like a gambler holding four of a kind. "Mister La Plante has a client who has offered us a great deal of money for Moira Alianha with her maidenheart intact. What can Raven offer us to outbid our other client?"

I tried to suppress the wince, but the additional construction on either side of Ronnie's smile showed me I'd failed. Dr. Raven lost no love on Etienne La Plante, but recovering Moira and returning her to the Elven Lands north of the Seattle Sprawl meant he had to subordinate his own feelings and deal with the man. As Ronnie's smile cooled into a smug look of superiority, I decided Kid Stealth might have been right in the first place: bring the whole crew in and take La Plante's empire apart.

"It won't insure we save the girl," Doc told him.

"Yeah," acknowledged the Kid, "but it'll feel gigabytes better than helping that slime."

I rested my elbows on the table and steepled my fingers. "I have been authorized to offer you the Fujiwara shipping schedule for the next six months in return for the girl. We can make the exchange tonight."

For all of ten seconds Ronnie got that divine-revelation look on his face.

Suddenly he realized how big a game he was involved in, and how small a player in it he was. Then his eyes hooded over as the little maggot figured out how important Moira Alianha had to be for the Doctor to offer that kind of information for her. A thought shot off on the

wrong branch of his neural network and he began to believe in his own importance.

He scoffed at the offer and eased himself out of the booth. "Maybe. I'll talk to La Plante and let you know. You can wait here until then."

My right leg swept out and hooked up between his legs. I drew my knee up, jerking him and his squishy parts against the edge of the table. That knocked the wind out of him and caused him to jackknife forward. I grabbed a handful of his stringy, blond hair with my left hand and tucked the barrel of my Viper in his left ear.

A Killer-Ring stare kept the karma twins at bay.

"That was a wrong answer, Ronnie." I eared the hammer back on the automatic even though that was unnecessary on the double-action pistol. "Mr. La Plante, I know you'd not be who you are if you let an idiot like this conduct your negotiations for you without keeping tabs on him. I'd guess you've bugged Yin and Yang here, unless you tricked this dolt into carrying a set of ears on himself."

A glint of gold from the cloisonne Orchid pin on Ronnie's lapel gave him away. "Very good, Mr. La Plante. Your gang's trademark pin is a listening device. I salute your technomancers. I suggest your chauffeur pull the limo around so we can discuss things in private, say, in five minutes. We'll take a spin around the block and then you'll drop me back here. If not, I'm going to decorate the Weed's ceiling with something that'll add some real color."

The Coors clock on the wall ticked off four and a half minutes before the door opened. The Chauffeur, dressed in a spiffy uniform with creases sharp enough to cut like razors, nodded to me. I patted Ronnie patronizingly on the head.

"We'll have to do this again some time, when I have more time to play."

Whatever Ronnie replied, it wasn't very polite and I put it down to his discomfort as I put my weight on his head as I stood. The twin pillars of eastern wisdom moved out of my way and I made it to the doorway unmolested.

Aside

from the wirehead on the rent-a-deck, no one in the place noticed my passing.

I handed the Viper to the Chauffeur and stepped into the street. The white Avanti stretch limo looked as out of place on the litter-strewn street as a wharf rat in the Mayor's office, but that didn't stop it from being there. I waited as the Chauffeur scanned me with whatever he had for eyes behind those dark glasses of his, then smiled and entered the limo's dark interior.

Having grown up in the concrete alleys of Seattle, I thought of class as something you escaped from during the day. Despite my absolute loathing of anything and everything Etienne La Plante did and was, I still had to admit he had class. His double-breasted suit had been cut from cloth of silver, yet-if possible-did not look ostentatious or flashy. His wavy white hair had been perfectly cut and combed, giving me the impression that I'd stepped into a boardroom for a long planned meeting.

I settled into a velvet seat so comfortable I could have died happy in it, especially if the woman seated next to La Plante gave me another one of her I-want-to-have-your-baby-or-at-least-try-hard-at-it smiles. In the armrest at my left hand sat a frosted mug of beer-the half empty bottle next to it proclaimed it to be Henry Weinhard's Private Reserve.

Very good, Etienne, my favorite. Is it true that you bought the brewery because you heard one of Raven's men loved the stuff?

La Plante refrained from offering me his right hand, but I did not mind. If there was any flesh and blood left to it, the silver carapace hid it completely. I noticed, as he picked up his own mug of beer, that the hand articulated perfectly, but then he could afford perfection. I'd not heard of

any assassination attempts against him, so I had to assume he had voluntarily maimed himself.

"I would apologize, Mr. Kies, for my underling's actions but, you understand, that was a test." He shrugged wearily. "After the bad blood between Dr. Raven and myself, you can hardly forgive my being suspicious."

I nodded. "You can call me Wolf." I directed the comment more to the woman than La Plante and waited a half second for a similar offer of intimacy from the crime boss. I continued when he ignored me. "When Dr. Raven was informed you had become the custodian for Ms. Alianha and was called upon by her Elven guardians to get her back, he was forced to make some choices. I am sure you can understand that negotiation was not the most popular course of action suggested."

The crimelord nodded sagely. "Former employees can be so, ah, vindictive, can't they?"

Sure, especially when you try to plant them in the harbor with their feet bound in a block of cement. No one would have figured Kid Stealth would blow off his own legs to escape that little deathtrap, but he did and survived. When your time comes, the timekeeper will be wearing shiny new legs and will move faster than even you remember.

"You heard our offer. You get the Fujiwara shipment schedules for the next six months in return for the girl. We'll burn the data into an eeprom for you. We can do the exchange tonight."

La Plante maintained a nonchalant expression on his face. "You have a decker good enough to get into Fujiwara that quickly? We're talking multiple layers of ice with interactive defensive systems and the possibility of Artificial Intelligence directing counter-penetration efforts."

I smiled confidently. "The only way to stop this decker is with Genuine Intelligence and a .45 automatic. We'll get the schedule for you."

He hid his excitement at the offer well. "How do I know the data will be good?"

I sat up straight. "You have Dr. Raven's word on it."

Whereas Ronnie Killstar would have answered with some inane barb, La Plante just nodded. "Very well." He leaned over and whispered something in the redhead's ear. As she reached over and picked up my mug, he commented. "You've not tried your beer. I assure you, it has not been tampered with."

She sipped and returned the mug to its place on the armrest. As she licked her lips I felt an urge to procreate, then counted to ten-no fifteen-to regain control. "Sorry," I smiled, "but after the Weed, drinking in here just wouldn't be the same. You understand." For her benefit I added, "Maybe another time ..."

The door opened again. La Plante's Chauffeur hovered by the door with my gun in hand. "Tonight, Mr. Kies, at warehouse building 18b, on the docks. We will give you the southern and western approaches. I would prefer this to be an intimate gathering."

"My feelings exactly. You bring a dozen of your Grunges and I'll consider it even." I succeeded on getting myself perched on the edge of the seat. "And leave Ronnie at home ..."

La Plante waved my last remark off with a silvery flourish of his right hand. "Do not concern yourself with him. He has been assigned new duty. He'll be feeding fish for the foreseeable future."

The Chauffeur handed me the pistol, then swung the door shut. I smiled at him and his plastic mask of servitude cracked. "Someday, Wolf, it will come down to you and me. I'll make it quick. I want you to know that."

I met his mirror-eyed stare with my number two nasty glare. "Good, I like that. If the fights go too long, the blood stains set and then you can't ever get them out..."

His plastic mask back in place, he turned and walked away. In spite of the nausea building in my stomach, I re-entered the Weed. My beer still waited on

the table, but Ronnie and the Wonton boys had vanished. I waited and sniffed, but I couldn't smell flowers.

Instead of returning to my table, I walked over to the jacktables. I pulled the bug from inside my jacket and tossed it on the black woman's deck. "Did you get it all?"

Valerie Valkyrie, Raven's newest aide, gave me a smile that made me forget La Plante's tastetester. "Everything, including your pulse rate and blood pressure when she sucked on your beer."

I felt the burn of a blush sweeping across my face and it grew hotter as it pulled a giggle from her throat. "We'll discuss how much of that makes it into the report for the Doctor later. Right now we've got work to do."