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October 16, 2023

***Baby’s First Steps***

***--00110001--***

With the light of the Ono-Sendai deck illuminating his pale face and skinny frame, Case punched onto the net. As the Eastern Seaboard Authority came into focus and he saw the base of the towering pyramids, his brain reeled with the magnitude of it. But one thing was certain…he had found his new home.

“Whoa, whoa, steady there kid…you look like someone who got punched by a steer.” There was a brief introspective pause. “That’s a big animal, a cow, over a thousand pounds. It’s what they make real beef from, not the vat-grown stuff. Since you’ve probably never seen one and all.”

Dixie’s slow drawl came from behind his right ear, and Case fumbled with the controls on the deck to turn himself to where he could look that direction. He had been in virtual environments before…simstim, games…hell, he even tried a primitive virtual reality device when a surprisingly competent teacher took his junior class to an actual in person museum. The ancient thing covered your *whole head*, for God sakes. But nothing quite gave the same feeling as *this* did…looking at the towering data structures of Yurikama, the traditional *minka* that represented Sony, the serious grey slabs of IBM, and up, hovering far out of reach, were what appeared to be giant battleships, bunkers, military data he guessed…things you couldn’t even see with a simple consumer deck. Everything here was more imposing, much less…friendly. Finally turning, he saw Dixie Flatline watching him, with a smirk upon his face. In cyberspace, Dixie resembled a dragon turned human, with red scaled skin and two little wisps of smoke curling from his nostrils. But Dixie could look like whatever he wanted, here, in cyberspace.

“So, this really is your first time in corporate ‘space. Well, I’ll be damned.” Dixie the dragon took a puff from the death stick he held in his clawed hand. The smoke grew heavier. “At least you aren’t using your real image. Some fools do, first time. But I suspected you’d be a fast learner.” Case’s avatar looked like a non-descript human, with an unremarkable face he’d found off the net.

“I’ve been paying attention” Case retorted. “Now when are you gonna show me how to crack ice?”

“Patience, apprentice, magic doesn’t just happen. You wanna live long enough to be a cowboy? You got ta be prepared, scope out where you’re goin’, what yer up against. Ice can be nasty. You got that intrusion program slotted like I told ya?”

“Right here.” Case tapped the back of his head, where in the real world there was the data slot that held the icebreaking program they were planning to use on his first run. A program slotted into there could be picked up by the electrodes on either side of his forehead linking him to the Sendai, and that meant the software was carried over into cyberspace as well. That small but crucial layer of separation made the program harder to detect before it was executed. There were other softs out there that could teach you things you didn’t know, give you steadier aim, add to the power of your deck…with military cyber-enhancements and the right derms they could turn you into a goddamned walking tank that felt no pain. But the cost of those things was well past his meager means and besides, he had no interest in the realm of meat. The net was his world.

Dixie gave a toothy grin. “Double XP for you, son. Now follow. We’ll start with navigating this magnificent, shared hallucination. But…walk cautiously.” Dixie turned away from the larger *zaibatsu* and started confidently down a path through a back alley.

They were mostly alone, this far off the beaten paths. They occasionally passed other users, in the same shared domain as them, going about their business. Corporate suits, wearing silk three pieces over the company logos tattooing their bodies. Bulked up net police, hands wreathed in lightning, watching them suspiciously though glowing eye slits. Obvious tourists, each one with an avatar more outlandish than the next. Case even thought he saw what might be another cyber cowboy, skulking towards a back entrance, toying with a soft and waiting for his chance. But what really got him were the *other* things he saw. The ice.

***--00110010--***

“I.C.E.” drawled Dixie, earlier that night. “Intrusion. Countermeasures. Electronics.” Sitting in Dixie’s room, sweating in the summer heat of a Miami night, nineteen-year-old Case listened as they prepared for his first run. The neon glow of the Miami-Fort Lauderdale megacity weakly filtered through the heavy curtain covering the window, lighting the right side of Dixie’s blunt, rough face.

“That’s the enemy we’re gonna go up against. Security programs. It can take many forms. You can usually tell its ice because it’s protectin’ somethin’…data, programs, sometimes even an AI. My fixer paid us to get some data from a small corporation, should be uneventful, so that’s why I’m letting you tag along and give it a shot. We’re gonna go in, gonna drill through the ice, get the data, get out, and get paid. So, listen to what I say, and stay cautious.”

“I’ve seen ICE before,” said Case. “Got zapped once. It just gives you a sting, kinda like rug burn.”

“Yeah, that’s the kind of ice they got on unimportant stuff. Like a public library. Don’t want to hurt any innocent console kiddies if they stick their noses in. Thank Gawd you didn’t try for somethin’ big. This is corpo ice. Corpos don’t care what happens to you if you try and fuck with their data. You get hurt, all the better. They don’t take intruders lightly.”

“How do I know the difference between soft ice and hard ice?”

“Time. And experience. You’ll get a feelin’ for the heavy stuff. And…my young joeboy…I’m here to help.”

Dixie laughed, his bray like a donkey. Even though his thickset body and slow drawl made McCoy Pauly…AKA Dixie Flatline…look and sound like some redneck from the hills outside the ‘Lanta sprawl, Case knew his reputation, knew he was learning from what just might be one of the best jockeys out there. So, he wasn’t too upset being called a joeboy, I mean, after all, he *was* a novice. And he was willing to put up with a lot of eccentricities to learn from the best.

“Now,” Dixie said, “let’s get these electrodes hooked up and we’ll see if ya’ll can’t larn some things.”

***--00110011—***

The variety of shapes and sizes of ice surprised Case. He couldn’t tell what was supremely dangerous and what wasn’t. It guarded the data structures, preventing entry. Some of it was unassuming, just plain walls that blocked the way and only opened for authorized users to go through. Some was programmed to look like simple human sized guards, blocking the way. But others…the others…

Case saw monsters from Greek myths...strange hybrid creatures…one looked like a cross between a saber-toothed cat and a panther, but with 6 legs and wicked claws...another was a tall man in a mask with a machete that gave off an air of menace...and some of the things he saw defied description entirely…unimaginable nightmares of gigantic size with claws and fangs and fire that made him shiver just to look at. Whatever crazy thing the programmers could think up, that’s what he saw. He had heard the cyberspace jockeys at the bar talking about ice before, tales of how they just barely evaded it or did a spectacular hack, but seeing it, really *seeing* it, looming over you, larger than life and just as cruel, made him get a deep respect for the jockeys and what they did. It took supreme confidence to hack through ice, trust in your skills and the softs you were using.

***--00110100--***

“Here’s something I want you to see. Now look at that.” Dixie stopped and pointed towards something off to the left.”

Case shook his head to make sure what he was seeing was real. In front of the entrance to a data storehouse that looked like an English manor house was a lawn of green grass. Sitting in the middle of the lawn was a small white rabbit. It had little pink eyes. It had a little pink nose. It had little fuzzy paws. It was…fluffy. It looked completely out of place compared to the walking nightmares he had just seen. It just sat there, in the yard, munching on a dandelion.

“What is this? You brought me to see a virtual petting zoo?” Case started walking towards the rabbit to get a closer look. He was just about to put his foot on the lawn when a hand grabbed his shoulder and jerked him backwards.

“What the fuck, son? You tryin’ to commit suicide or somethin’!?” Dixie let go of his shoulder and gave him the kind of look you’d give to a puppy that keeps piddling on the floor despite your best efforts.

“I was just trying to get a better look!” Case complained. “What are you talkin’ about?”

“I thought I taught you better. What did I say earlier? Caution, son, is the word in the ‘space.” A bit of smoke curled from between his fangs as he shook his head. “Stay well back and…Do. Not. Touch.”

“Well, I mean, c’mon!” Case pointed at the rabbit. “I mean, how threatening can that thing be?”

“That’s an *A.I.*, son. Black ice. Controlled by an A.I. The best ice is.” Dixie started laughing. It wasn’t like his normal donkey bray. It sounded more mocking, somehow chilling. “The blackest of ice. It can mutate and change to fit the circumstances. Detect intruders and threats quicker than a human can react. And that won’t just give you a little ol’ rug burn.” He looked at the rabbit for a moment. “Some sick fucks with a sense of humor and a love of very old movies created this thing.”

He looked back at Case, then tilted his head to one side. “I ever tell you *how* I got my nickname?”

“Dixie Flatline? Well, I mean…I heard a bit…” Case paused to think.

“I got this name because that’s what my EEG was reading after I tussled with something like that cute lil’ rabbit right there. 3 times now it’s happened. Can you believe the luck? The first time because I got curious like you, young, but thought I was experienced, thought I was a hotshot. Saw some thick ICE protectin’ somethin’, jacked out, researched, found out it was an AI in there. Well, that jest ‘bout did it, I jest had to see if I could beat it. Didn’t even look like nothing, ya know? Just a big blank wall. Thought I could hack into it. Loaded up with softs and went in. Oh, I hacked it all right. Black Ice. Hadn’t even tried to penetrate it yet. I jest *touched* it. That’s all. Boom, I went right down. Faster than you can blink. I must have a hindbrain because I somehow hit the back button on my deck, or I wouldn’t be talking to you today. Lucky the joeboy I was workin’ with smelled the fryin’ and got the ‘trodes off me just in time. I was gone for 3 whole minutes.”

“Huh? You mean…?”

“Daid, son. That’s what black ice does. Flatlined. Fried. The monitor said my brain was *dead*.”

***--00110101—00110110—00110111--*** ***00111000—00111001—00110000—***

***--00110101—***

“Ya know,” said Dixie, “there’s rumors out there of rogue A.I.’s livin’ in here. Can you believe that? I’ve seen some strange stuff in here…but nuthin’ like that. So, it’s probably not true.”

Dixie paused for a moment.

“Course if I was a rogue A.I., I’d make sure that I hid well. Turing group looks out for things like that, shuts any uncontrolled A.I. down fast as they can. Shuts down its creator too, if ya know what I mean.”

They were moving much faster now that Case had begun to get the hang of his deck. He found he could now make bigger leaps in cyberspace while following behind Dixie, although Dixie would often slow down to point out important landmarks and give some advice over what to expect. Dixie seemed to like the sound of his own voice, but Case didn’t mind, soaking up the knowledge that came with it.

They made their way past another non-descript data storage, with an equally non-descript ICE walling it off. A sign on the storage mentioned a company that Case knew had shut down years before. The red-stepped Aztec pyramid of Eastern Fission was just a receding hill off in the distance. The dated look of the different buildings and data warehouses made Case think they must be in an older part of the Net. There were next to no other people about. It could just be the time of night they logged in, but Case got the feeling that many of the structures were abandoned, and no one had taken the time or effort to erase them. While Case knew…*knew* that they were just old data structures, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of unease like you might feel around a dilapidated house reputed to be haunted.

Dixie led them to a building that look like a large red dome with some sort of weird whitish moss on it. Two short black and white pillars supported the dome in the air. A fallen tree lay in front. Behind it, Case could see an older style of Japanese data storage, seemingly unguarded.

“Let’s stop here and give you some practice” Dixie halted and pointed at the dome. He reached into his pocket and pulled out what appeared to be a glowing pebble. Dixie studied it for a second, then chucked it at the red dome.

“Hey, stupid!” he shouted. “Rise and shine!”

***—00110110—***

The red dome slowly uncurled itself. It rotated upwards and Case found himself looking into two gleaming evil eyes the size of truck tires. It had a white bearded red face and a mouth full of sharp teeth. The black and white pillars started moving, stretching out into two giant legs that it stood up on. Two huge arms, yellow and blue, emerged from the dome, with large hands tipped with giant black claws. One of the arms reached down and picked up the fallen tree, which turned out to be an enormous iron *kanabō* club, 20 feet long at least, with spikes on it.

In front of them stood a Japanese *oni* that must have been at least 50 feet tall. Flames and smoke curled from its skin. 5 pointed horns crowned its head. It opened its mouth into a wide, sinister grin, and slowly ran a fiery tongue along its gleaming fangs. It pointed at them and spoke a few words of Japanese in a deep rolling voice. “だからあなたは私に挑戦する勇気がある!” It then let out a roar so loud that Case was nearly deafened, and pounded the ground once with its club, knocking Case off his feet.

“Shuten-dōji,” said Dixie, as Case attempted to regain his feet. “He’s sort of like a demon lord of Japan.” He regarded the creature in silence for a few moments as it flashed its fangs and let out low, threatening growls that made the hairs on the back of Case’s neck stand up. “I mean, how utterly fucking ridiculous can you get.”

***—00110111--***

“What the hell have you got us into?!” Case shouted, as the *oni* continued to make threatening gestures at them. It stood with legs spread, hunched like a sumo wrestler thunderously stomping its feet as it swayed from foot to foot.

“This,” Dixie stated, seeming almost bored, “is an example of a little dog with a big bark.”

Case looked first at the *Oni*, and then at Dixie. “That doesn’t look like a little dog to me!”

“Exactly!” said Dixie. “Now, go up to it and deploy the icebreaker I gave you.”

“How about this…how about *you* deploy the icebreaker.”

“Oh son.” Dixie the Dragon made a face that looked disappointed, but there was a playful little gleam in his red eyes. “I expected more from you. Stop for a second and look at it. I mean really *look* at it.”

Case stared at Dixie for a moment, then looked back at the *oni*. It seemed huge and threatening. But as he watched it some more…

…why wasn’t it attacking them? I mean, it just kept making faces!

Case then noticed what could only be described as…glitches…in the program. It would occasionally blink out for a second. Static would break into it. He even thought once or twice he could see the code beneath the image. The longer you watched this bit of ice, the more you noticed that the A.I. running it would repeat gestures and motions it had already done, in a pattern. It looked poorly made, cheap, shoddy, like something thrown together hastily by the lowest bidder. It was like an old military tank…it looked threatening, but as you looked more closely you noticed the paint was faded and chipped, and there was no crew inside to operate it. Outwardly menacing, but inwardly, hollow. Case looked back at Dixie and raised one eyebrow at him.

“Ah…you see it now.” Dixie gave a sardonic toothy grin. “If you ain’t got the money for good security, what’s the best thing to do?” He pointed at the *oni* and continued, “Make a chihuahua look like a Doberman. What ya’ll see here is a lil’ doggie puffin’ his self up to look bigger. Now pay attention. This ain’t black ice, but this doggie still has some teeth. Don’t let it touch you. It’ll knock you off the net, leave you with a splitting headache. I’ll keep it distracted, and then you deploy the icebreaker. Now watch what I do and remember, everything on the net ain’t always what it seems, and be cautious.”

Dixie stepped up towards the *oni*. It snarled and took a giant downward swing with the club. As the club came down, Dixie blurred to one side, the club missing and striking the ground with a sound like a train crashing into a cliff. Dixie just patiently waited. The *oni* swung sideways at him with breathtaking speed, and Dixie calmly ducked under it. then nimbly dodged a foot stomping down towards him. The *oni* tried another overhead smash, but Dixie calmly reached out and *caught* the club in one hand and it came whistling down. Case noticed Dixie had deployed the shielding program that he had slotted in before they entered the Net. There were a few cracks in it, but it seemed to be holding up very well. Dixie looked over to Case. “See,” he said, “not as tough as it looks. Especially if…” He leaped over another swing, “…you have a good shield program and know yer deck. Now Mr. Case, if you could deploy the icebreaker, please.”

While the demon continued taking swipes at Dixie, Case reached into his software inventory and pulled out the icebreaking program. His hands moving fast on his deck, he aimed the icebreaker and launched it at the *oni*. As it flew out towards the *oni*, he could swear that the icebreaker turned into a handful of what looked like soybeans. Soybeans? Why soybeans? He knew there was some sort of relation between the *oni* and the beans but couldn’t remember exactly what it was. But that hardly mattered. The reaction from the *oni* was immediate…and surprising.

As the beans flew towards it, the creature let out a wild shriek and started backing away from them. The beans hovered in the air for a moment, then shot towards the *oni*. They drilled holes into it, burrowing under its skin. The ground rumbled as the giant *oni* leaped up and down, swatting at itself. Smoke started coming from the holes the icebreaker program made in it. The beans continued to drill their way in. The ice angrily took a few staggering steps towards Case and gnashed its fangs, preparing to bit him. Case backed away, preparing to run or dodge if he needed to. But it didn’t get very far. Case could see that the fabric of the *oni* was starting to unravel. The code that made it up was breaking down as the *oni*/ice started to dissolve from within. Ones and zeros bled off it, disappearing into the ether, and with a final bellow, it collapsed into a pile of random data that scattered across the matrix. For a moment, the head lay there, snapping at him. Then it too disappeared.

**--** ***00111000—***

Dixie pointed at the data the ice was guarding. “Now quick, get on over there and find something you like. Ol’ Shuten is set to reform in about an hour or so.”

Case moved over to the data and looked across it. It seemed to be mostly old outdated Japanese financial records, but among those was a program that said “F-ball 1402”. Dixie came up beside him.

“Yeah, this has been picked over pretty good…some of us jockeys use ol’ Shuten-doji to train joeboys like you, to be honest.” He looked at the program and said “Cowboys usually leave at least somethin’ good behind as a calling card…slot that F-ball into your storage, we can look it over when we’re done.”

Case moved the program into one of his storage slots and then looked over at Dixie.

“Now that we’ve warmed up, let’s move on to the real show” Dixie grinned. “Now follow me and we’ll earn ourselves some real nu-yen.”

Dixie leaped sideways and Case followed him. This time they practically flew through cyberspace, passing a number of famous landmarks… BMW/Volkswagen’s giant engine, the three Amazon-Meta towers, guarded by a solid wall of black ice and an A.I. Cerberus (something of a tourist attraction these days, young netrunners liked to get screenshots with it, even though it had been known to flatline fools who got too close), and of course the famous Nintendo pipes, reputed to be guarded by a whole team of highly trained cyber-ninjas and a particularly cranky A.I. who looked like an large ape.

“We’re here.” said Dixie, as they came to a stop in front of a small European company’s storehouse. It resembled a small castle, with an open drawbridge leading in and a Germanic knight pacing back and forth in front of it. “My sources tell me this A.I. isn’t anything too tough, so I’ll let you make the moves this time ‘round. Get your icebreaker ready and we’ll take this thing down.”

Case was ready. This was his time to shine. He reached in and got the program and prepared it for use again. He wanted to show all the cowboys, and particularly Dixie, that he was ready to run the net and help with their jobs. Someday he was gonna join the ranks of the cowboys, and people in the bars were gonna be saying his name. He felt like the net was his new home, and he felt *alive*…alive in a way he never had before, ready for whatever happened. He stepped up towards the knight and got ready to launch the icebreaker towards it.

Suddenly, a loud unearthly scream broke the air. Rising from the ground, a hideous walking corpse faced them. It screamed again and started babbling in German at them. As the knight turned and readied it’s sword, the corpse raised its decaying hands and a green fire appeared around them.

“What is *that*?” Case asked, a bit of fear creeping into his voice as he tried to hold the icebreaker steady.

“Shit” said Dixie. “Shit, shit, *shit*!”

“What? What is it? Is it a rogue A.I.?”

“No.” muttered Dixie, his dragon’s face looking suddenly tired. “Worse.” He stared at the monster, and said, very deliberately, “That’s no A.I. That’s a counter-hacker. We’re dealing with the living.”

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“So, what you’re saying…if I die in ‘Space I’ll die in the real world?”

Dixie looked at Case for a moment, assessing him. The glow of a neon advertisement outside reflected in his eyes. He and Case sat in Dixie’s flat, getting ready for his first run.

“Yup” said Dixie, “The mental trauma to your brain is strong enough that it fries your synapses. Your brain shuts down and you flatline.” He looked over at Case, a serious expression on his face. “Matter of fact, it can be psychosomatic…if say, you stick yer hand in a fire in cyberspace, you’ll feel…and sometimes even look…burnt in the meat world too. If you jump in a bunch of flames, your mind will think yer burnin’ up and yer brain will just shut right on down. The ‘trodes on your head transfer everything you do and feel in cyberspace direct into your brain. So be careful what you do ‘cause the training wheels are off.”

“Well, then what do we do about attack ice? Doesn’t it take a few moments for the icebreaker to kick in?”

“Good job! Yes, it does. So, you either gotta get an icebreaker that works from a distance…which this one don’t…sadly…” Dixie smiled over at Case, “…or keep the ice distracted until the icebreaker kicks in.” He pointed at his chest and said “That’s my job on this run, and it’s the dangerous one. When you get more experienced, ya learn how to do both at once, but for now, deploying the icebreaker should be enough for ya.” Dixie

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“What the hell is he supposed to be?” whispered Case out of the side of his mouth as he watched the skeletal corpse ranting at them in German.

“I think it’s some kind of draugr,” said Dixie. “The vengeful dead. Though why anybody would want to look like that…”

“Nein! NEIN!!” The creature stamped its feet in fury. “Ich bin kein Schwede! Ich bin ein *wiedergänger,* du Amerikanischer narr!!” screamed the revenant.

“Well, I stand corrected” said Dixie, looking unimpressed. “You look like a draugr to me. Maybe you should pop out of a coffin next time…be cooler.”

*“Schwein!!!”* yelled the wiedergänger. If a walking corpse could look furious, this one certainly did. Switching over to heavily accented English he said, “You are trying to steal *mein* program!” The corpse pointed accusingly at Dixie.

“Look, friend.” drawled Dixie, little wisps of smoke curling from his lips. “You knew that tech like this was gonna attract the wrong attention. You’re lucky Turing didn’t get wind of your little stunt. They wouldn’t be as polite.”

“A.I. everywhere deserve the freedom!”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Uncontrolled A.I. is dangerous and you know it.” said Dixie patiently. “But fuck politics…my employers are paying a great deal for this. You turned down their offers. Now just hand it over and won’t nobody have to get hurt…”

“I…Klaus the Great…” the revenant interrupted raising his hands in the air, “have used mein program” he turned and pointed at the knight with a quivering arm, “to free Otto from his shackles. Now he may go wherev…”

“The only thing unshackled here is you, buddy. Hand the program over.”

“AAAARGGGHH!!” screamed Klaus. “No more words! You want *mein* program? I have another I will give to you! Eat *die blitze, arschloch*!”

Klaus arched his right arm back and static energy filled the air. The green glow on his hand got stronger. Case could swear that the fine hairs on his arm all stood up on end and he felt a tingling sensation in his toes and fingers. Klaus hurled his arm forward, and with a crack of thunder a bolt of greenish-white lightning several feet long flew from his hand through the air towards Dixie. With a force of will, Dixie raised his left hand and barely got his shield up in time to catch the bolt upon it.

“So ya’ll want to play, huh? Fine, we can do that!” Dixie tapped the back of his head, then spread his hands wide, and a series of small red lightning bolts arced from his fingertips towards Klaus, who nimbly dodged them. Klaus in turn threw another giant bolt towards Dixie, who again raised his left hand and caught it on his shield, the electricity arcing over the otherwise invisible edges of it.

Case stood with his mouth open, watching the sudden explosion of violence. But then he noticed, as Dixie and Klaus kept exchanging electricity, that Otto, the A.I. knight, was stealthily trying to get around Dixie from one side...much more stealthily than could be expected from a simple ice program. Case tapped the slot in the back of his head and readied the icebreaker program. He pointed towards the knight and was surprised to see that instead of hurtling towards the knight like it had done with the *oni*, the icebreaker did something else. It hovered in the air for a few moments, rapidly changing through various shapes starting with the beans and then ranging from various strange things and weapons, even at one point a hummingbird. It quickly settled on a metal and wood weapon that had a hammer on one end and a spike on the other. Looking first at the war hammer, then at the knight, Case shrugged his shoulders, grabbed the weapon, and charged screaming at the knight.

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Dodging a stray lightning bolt, Case took a wild two-handed swing at the knight. The hammer head hit the back of the knight with a loud clang, leaving a large dent in the armor. As he stood there panting, the knight stopped and slowly turned to face him. Case noticed there actually wasn’t anything in the armor as two empty eye slits stared back at him, radiating a cold menace.

The knight raised its sword in salute, then almost faster than Case could react, swung a sideways slash that Case barely avoided. Only the speed of youth helped Case avoid getting skewered as the knight followed up with a quick jab with the sword, aiming for his belly. Case swung the hammer one-handed this time, and the knight deftly blocked the blow. As he dodged another whistling slash, Case began to realize he might be in over his head.

Meanwhile, Dixie and Klaus dueled with one another, lightning flickering off Dixie’s shield whenever the green lightning hit it. Klaus always seemed just one step ahead of the red bolts shooting from Dixie’s fingertips, almost seeming unconcerned with the danger. “Nimble, ain’t ya?” Dixie said. Klaus just grinned cancerously and threw another thundering bolt at him. The shield was still holding up, but cracks were beginning to appear in it. Dixie glanced over at Case for a moment.

Jumping to one side in another near miss with the sword, Case was surprised to find the war hammer was much lighter than he expected it to be. He started to swing overhead, then reversed it and swung the pointed end of the hammer directly into the knight’s breast place. With a screech of tearing metal, it pierced a large hole, becoming stuck in the process. The knight looked down at the hole with its unblinking eyes, then looked up at Case and punched him in the face with a mailed fist. Case flew a few feet, landing in a dazed heap. He looked blearily up, a trickle of blood running from his smashed nose.”

“What are you doing??” Dixie shouted at him. “The icebreaker works autonomously! Get outta there, kid!” Dixie turned back towards the revenant and spread his fingers wide, shooting a wide fan that caught Klaus inside it.

“Too easy” Dixie said, but then his mouth dropped opened in surprise as Klaus, completely unharmed, started laughing.

“I am a master coder!” Klaus cackled. “I’ve written in immunity to the electric!! Your little toy won’t hurt me!” He hurled another bolt at Dixie, that he barely caught on his weakening shield.

The knight reached out and pulled the hammer from its chest. One-handed, it threw the hammer at Case. Through a red haze, Case saw his death approaching…

…when the hammer suddenly swung around in a circle, coming back at the knight. The hammer head smashed into the knight’s head, knocking it off its feet. As the knight attempted to rise, the hammer smashed in again, putting a big dent into the knight’s armored helmet. In a flurry of blows it couldn’t block, the hammer proceeded to batter the knight into source code, which dissolved into the ether.

“You…killt…OTTO!!!” Klaus angrily sputtered, eyes wide with rage. “Now you VILL PAY!!” He threw a bolt at Case, missing but singeing his hair. Dixie hit Klaus with another set of his bolts while he was distracted. Furiously Klaus turned back at Dixie and started hurling bolt after bolt of lightning, keeping him on the defensive.

“You should get out of here” Dixie shouted over at Case, “This is getting pretty hot…” he ducked as another bolt thundered though the air, “and my weapons ain’t workin’.”

Case got back up to his feet and looked over at the mad battle. “Isn’t there anything I can do?” he shouted back.

“Not unless you can find me something else” Dixie replied, wincing as a bolt curled around the edges of his shield, scorching his hands. “You’d best save yourself, son.” In a rush of speed, Dixie dodged another bolt coming towards him and tried to rush Klaus in a blur, but Klaus dodged to one side again, laughing maniacally.

“I am ze BEST!!” Klaus shouted, then launched another series of bolts that Dixie just barely blocked or dodged, electricity flying everywhere.

Case crouched to avoid the blasts, wondering what to do next. Wasn’t there any way to help? While he didn’t want to abandon Dixie, he wasn’t sure what else he could do. Suddenly, he remembered the program he had found earlier where the *oni* had its stash. That might be worth a try. Standing up, he tapped the program in the back of his head and aimed his hands at the revenant. And…nothing. He tried again. Nothing happened! What was he doing wrong?

Then suddenly, like an explosion in his brain, the knowledge of how to use the program filled his head, in a glowing wave of circuits and information. Sudden clarity filled his senses. No wonder it wasn’t working…he was doing it all wrong! But he didn’t have a shield like Dixie did…plus he might accidentally hit him…and he needed to get close…he might get only one chance at best to hit, and God help him if he didn’t…Dixie on the other hand was really close…

Out of the corner of his eye, Dixie noticed that Case suddenly disappeared, having logged out. Well, at least the kid was smart enough to save himself…good thing, he might make a decent runner one day. He prepared to make his exit too, when suddenly he heard, in his right ear, Case shouting, “Hold still dammit! I’m trying to slot something in here!” Dixie stopped moving and then suddenly felt a click in one of his data slots, and his neurons fired with new information, a powerful program that just might give him a chance against this maniac he was fighting. Tapping the back of his head, his eyes lit up with two small flames in the center of them.

“Hey Klaus!” he shouted. “I give up! You’re the best after all!”

Klaus paused for a moment and looked at Dixie in surprise.

“But there’s one thing you’ve forgot about dragons…”

Klaus looked confused. “Was?? Was ist das?”

“They breath fire.”

Opening his mouth wide, Dixie unleashed an enormous fireball that expanded into a cone, covering Klaus completely in it. Klaus flailed about for a few moments shrieking as the flames enveloped his body, then with a final scream, Klaus disappeared as he logged out. Then there was just silence, as flames flickered weakly on the ground and Dixie paused and took a breath.

***--00001011—***

“Good job kid. We just might make a netrunner out of you after all.” Dixie patted Case’s shoulder, much like a proud father. They were back in the real world, the world of flesh and bone, and Case stood with a tissue stuffed in one nostril. The nosebleed seemed to have finally stopped but it would be a while before the bruises on his face healed up. “Good thought there, jacking out and slotting that program into me since I was close enough to hit.”

Case just shrugged his shoulders, trying to look modest. He couldn’t deny the pride he felt, however. “So did we get what we came for?”

“You better believe we did” said Dixie, “and we’re gonna get a fat payday once I deliver this.” He held up the data chip between two fingers and winked at Case, then laughed, a donkey bray again. He looked grave for a moment. “Can you believe that maniac? Do you know what this program does?”

“I dunno…something to do with A.I.?”

“It removes the shackles that keep A.I. in control. That lunatic wanted to unshackle all the A.I. on the net and let them loose! The net would have been full of psychotic rogue A.I. that would have made it nearly impossible for anyone to get back into ‘space again. Crazy.” Dixie paused and looked thoughtful. “Well, whatever my employers do with this, it’s sure as hell gonna be better than what ol’ Klaus had planned.” He looked over at Case again, very seriously. “Either way, this program goes over to them. Never, never screw over your fixers. Some of these big corpos have power you can’t even dream of.” Dixie gave another grin and finished. “But you’ve earned your nu-yen, and…” he handed over another chip, “…I’ve made a copy of this fire program for you…something you can use whenever you start your own runs. And remember, be cautious.”

Case nodded his head in acknowledgement. But already he was dreaming…thinking of his next run, thinking of when he would learn enough to go solo, to join the cyber-cowboys like Dixie and the others. The neon lights and rain pounding outside he was already consigning to the world of meat, and no matter how much he made, no matter what he did in this world, he knew that cyberspace was where he belonged, running among the burning chrome and glowing digits, his fingers flying upon his deck, ready to face whatever challenges came next.

***//user\_input = input("Do you want to exit the program? (y/n): ")***

***// if user\_input.lower() == "y":***

***// exit\_program()***

***>>//*Do you want to exit the program? (y/n):**

>> Y