



Card Fox

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CARD FOX

A retelling of "The Buffalo and the Field Mouse" Native
American legend

by

The following is a work of fiction, and takes place at an unspecified location somewhere within the Coastal Salish territories of the Pacific Northwest. With the exception of a fictitious background for the *Kateri Redfox* character, tribe names are not used to avoid unintended connotation.

Part of the story deals with the main character's understanding of tribal history and legend, and how those may or may not influence oneself or be appropriated or adopted by others. In several places, customs and etymology are explored, and are intended to foster discussion.

In the legend of the Buffalo and the Field Mouse, the moral of the story is the proud and the selfish lose everything in the end. In the not too distant future, a little mouse felled a buffalo and celebrated its victory.

Then along came a hungry fox.

Kateri Redfox followed Mark Johnson into the cramped security office. She sat where he pointed, a metal folding chair, and watched the Chief of Security melt into an ergonomic office chair behind a plain metal table. She offered him her Salish ID, an old government-issued identification card comprised of a blue wave etched into rectangular plastic. From within a chip broadcast: *Kateri Alahmoot Redfox is a member of the Snoqualmie tribe, of the Coast Salish peoples, a recognized First Nation (aka: Native American, Pacific Northwest)*. A supplemental chip abridged various licenses, regulatory controls, and then defunct Federal Communication Commission authorization codes. She pressed her thumb against the small silver sticker-chip to authorize the release of *psionics* certifications and placed the card on the table.

"Missus RedFox," Mark began.

"Miss," she corrected.

He passed his palm over the card twice and pushed it

towards her. "I scanned you at the threshold."

Kateri picked up the card and tucked it into her pocket. She folded her hands and placed them on the table. "The casino advertised for a card fox. Are you looking for game cheats?"

"First," he inhaled, spread his hands, and his sagging jowls billowed when he exhaled and said, "You're going to have to, I need you to, if you wouldn't mind, I need you to explain..."

"My name," she offered. The future had come and gone, and with its passage old attitudes aged to vintage intolerance.

"RedFox," he shook his head. "That sounds more Hollywood than Native American."

"As much as Bearstein," she said, referring to the casino president.

"John, mister Bearstein, is part Cherokee," Mark said.

"One point two percent," Kateri said, "With a two percent margin of error."

"Be that as it may..."

"Ninety one point nine percent," pointing at her chest, "With a zero point zero three margin. Only three documented, uh, what's the word you use nowadays?" She snapped her fingers three times. "Deviations."

"Alahmoot," Mark paused and glanced at a thin plastic display wrapping his left wrist. "That's a boy's name."

"I know." She smiled. "My great grandfather's."

"Nez Perce, not Coastal Salish."

She shrugged. "Deviation."

Mark took another deep breath. "Kateri is Mohawk."

"It means Catherine," she said.

"But, it's Mohawk."

"I'm not Mohawk, if that's what you're asking."

"It's strange," he said.

"Is your father named John?" she asked. Mark shook his head and then she asked, "Are you Roman?" Again, another head shake. "Then we can chalk up both our names to cultural appropriation and leave it at that."

Mark cycled his fingers between her and himself. "We're not getting off to a good start, you and I." He turned behind him, fished a folder from a leather satchel, and set it on the desk. He peeled open the manila leaf and took a single sheet of paper from within. "Normally I'd end the interview right now, but, quotas being what they are and you being the only psionisticist..."

"Tribal psionisticist," she said. "Psionics without cultural appreciation is like AI without humanity: Statistically precise, wildly inaccurate."

Momentarily, Mark closed his eyes, and then said, "Because you have ties to the tribe, that being you're Coastal

Salish, and given that there aren't that many psionics with the qualifications we need, we're obligated to conduct this interview in full. But," he wagged the piece of paper, "We're not obligated to hire." He set the paper on the table. "Can you explain this?"

She glanced at the sheet. "My DD214."

Mark held up the folder, showcasing the stack of wafer thin sheets clipped inside. "It says you were Delta Force." He snorted and reclined in his chair. "I'm sorry, I have a hard time imagining you..."

She circumspected middle-aged pudgy, hips mushing in her skirt, chest drooping into a sweater she knitted last spring. Years ago she snugly filled a small combat vest. Now she would struggle to squish into a loose-fit large. "That was several sizes ago."

"Everything is redacted, even your rank." He pointed to a blacked out line. "You could have been an airman."

"That's Air Force. I am, was, Army. I enlisted as a private, worked my way to master sergeant, received a battlefield commission to lieutenant, and then I worked my way up to colonel." She shrugged. "But, since that war wasn't really a war..."

"Your rank is blacked out," Mark repeated. "I can't do anything with this." He returned the document to the folder, closed it, and tossed it behind him onto the satchel. "I have a service job that pays less than minimum wage. Plus tips. Assuming I believe you. Why do you want this job?"

In another time, another place, he might have inquired about military benefits, pensions and retirement. But the Federal collapse ten years prior ended all of that. Kateri likened society to being feudal, though no one actually said so, and First Nation peoples were affected - and there she paused, staring at Mark's soulless gray eyes. *Well, times haven't changed much for us, have they?*

"I need the money, the crash of twenty-eight wiped out my retirement. And, my psionic implants preclude me from having a normal job. You said something about tips?"

He bobbed his head. "Generally, for service jobs, yes. Other non tipped service jobs are paid out from a pool, but employees have to work six months, nine for contractors, to draw a share from the pool. This contract would be over long before you'd qualify. Besides money, why do you want this job?"

"Why do I want to work here? Let's see," she said. "I'm a tribal spiritual leader, I'm certified in the now defunct Central Intelligence Agency's astral program, and I am cleared and authorized to use implanted psi hardware." She circled her

finger overhead, "When they bother to check, for anything that doesn't involve the military, government, aerospace, shipping, energy infrastructure, politics, or regulated financial industries, not including gambling establishments. The way it's worded, I can pretty much only work in an interrogation room, in the literal sense, or somewhere in a casino. So, here I am."

"Look," he said, and leaned across the desk, "We both know psionics is bullshit, and we're not looking for a shaman."

Kateri narrowed her eyes, folded her arms, and leaned over the table. "Native Americans don't have shamans. You would think, in this day and age, people would look that up before repeating it." She tossed her finger up at the ceiling, "Your AI suggest that?" When Mark didn't respond she said, "That's why you need me. A cadre of programmers and data analysts, entire organizations of people, can't train an AI to get such a fundamental concept straight. Your analytics software, though statistically accurate it may be, is wildly imprecise. Shamans are, originally, Siberian."

"We have the best artificial intelligence and data analytics, better than what the government or military has in some cases."

She smiled, unfolded her hands, and started to stand. "Then it either made a mistake in suggesting that you need me, or in suggesting I'm a shaman. Either way it's faulty, and it's probably not in any of our interests that I'm here."

He fanned his hand for her to sit down. "That's not what I meant."

"I know what you meant. You don't want someone from the tribe but you have to have someone. It's pretty ridiculous we've become minorities on our own reservation, in our own casino - "

"We're not here to discuss the politics of casino operations," he said. "Four weeks ago, we noticed an up-tick in payouts. Two weeks ago, our AI predicted it was a coordinated effort, but so far we haven't been able to pinpoint the cause."

"If you've got an AI able to plot predictive telemetrics, why did it suggest a psionacist?"

Mark shrugged. "I'm not sure, but it was very particular about both the skillset and tribal membership. Otherwise, I would have gone down to the store myself and picked up a *MyPsi*."

"That's a nice little galvanic skin sensor with an electromagnetic resonator aimed at the pineal gland. Sure, you'd have a nice slow dance with the spirit of your choice,

maybe a few interesting dreams, but that's not real psionics, or astral projection."

"Anyway, the AI didn't say we needed spiritual anything," he muttered.

"It's said that money is the root of all evil," she said. "If," and she held up her hand to hold back Mark's imminent retort, "If that is true, then money and spirituality are entwined."

"We don't need religion or spirituality," Mark said. "We need to find out who is collecting on a not so small fortune."

"And you want to pay someone less than minimum wage to do that."

Mark smirked. *Of course he finds that amusing.* The concept of a federally mandated minimum wage went the way of the Federal government's monetary policy: Right down the toilet. He said, "A tribesman. Woman. Person. A tribal member. Yes."

"Then for less than minimum wage, plus no tips, I can do that."

Mark nodded and presented Kateri with a standard employment contract chip. She took the ceramic chip and pressed her thumb into the abraded surface until it pulsed. Then, she handed it back to Mark.

Kateri offered another card, plain stock printed with several communication contacts. "Wave this frequency. Or email. Or call. Whichever you want. Inform whoever answers of the contract specifics."

Mark took the card, pressed his lips together. "Why?"

"I have military psionic hardware. When I use it, certain people, eventually, will notice, and you don't want those people here."

"How long do you think it will take?" Mark asked.

"I'll take a look around. I should have a better idea before I leave today."

Walking the casino floor reminded Kateri of the many months spent with the Army in a Mesoamerican jungle. First came surreal attachment, of suspecting she may somehow belong, even if distantly, to those who once trod those paths. Soon after followed separation anxiety, a feeling of having that carnal belonging wrested from her. Living in and being divorced of home at the same time.

You have to lose yourself before you can know yourself, Kateri's commanding officer had been fond of saying. On multiple occasions she observed him sampling intoxicating substances: A coca leaf, a psychoactive toad, and, one time,

upon hearing a local legend, he sought out a particular snake. While on patrol, he happened upon the possible snake of mind-altering legend, removed his left glove, and attempted to grasp it by the neck in order to extract its venom. Soon after, the entire squid watched him crap himself to death. Not by the venom from the inevitable bite; a nuero-chip hastily re-coded for anti-venom cured that. However, the venom carried along an antibiotic-resistant parasite that gave him explosive dysentery. For some reason, Kateri thought, people became more psychotic the further into the jungle they traveled. The wild yet vacant eyes of the gamers, like prey stalked by sociopathic foreign predators, reminded her of those missions.

Kateri stood at a chandelier's penumbra near the edge of the wood floor, waiting for the thought to pass. With emotional detachment restored and the pursuit less like psi-stalking through a rain forest, she resumed walking. From the perimeter, she passed banks of progressive electronic games including slots and digital poker. A dark blue band glowed on an inner track separating tables from electronic games; wave games. Gambling straight from the mind. Players stood and staggered along the ring, staring with slack jaws, muscles constricting at each virtual false memory of a throw, each faux exertion on a mechanical slot lever, each punch, jab and duck of a prize fight. Then came the table games. Which game attracted a percentage of the crowd was carefully controlled. With a mere gesture or automated conditional response, an AI calculated how best to compel players. This was made possible by massive amounts of data, mathematical formula, and sensitive environmental controls for manipulating temperature, humidity, odor, ionization, oxygen levels, and more.

She rubbed her thumb against her index finger. Following a specific sequence of strokes and taps, her psionic subsystem would be engaged.

Psionics was no more mystical than combining high-resolution monitors and AI. With massive compute capacity, access to a person's dossier and predilections, a casino AI could steer a candidate customer into taking the most expensive risk and, by way of dopamine manipulation, experience the greatest sense of reward. Data came in, was analyzed, and conclusions revealed. Data about everything was everywhere, and, paradoxically at least to the security- and privacy-minded, visible. A quantum computer didn't need to break cryptography, a high-class escort given brain damage with sensors implanted in her head and an AI to filter the thoughts and memories of high-profile targets brought the world psionics. *Privacy is Truly Dead*, the headlines blared, followed by a quaint science-fiction rendering of what a

psionacist was going to look like. The *Age of Psionics* had arrived. Although told what technological advances made psionics possible, and some believed psionists owed their capabilities to mutation or magic. Digest the right data within the right time window and the future could be predicted. Data at an atomic level existed everywhere for all to see, assuming they had the hardware, and quantum communication and processing that no individual could possibly afford. Due to the quantum configurations, entanglement nodes were dedicated to each psionist. Somewhere in the world, quantum hardware coupled to her implants waited. Just for Kateri.

And the moment she completed the sequence, system notifications would identify, without a doubt, that Kateri was activate. Guessing Mark ignored her request, she flicked her right earlobe twice, browsed her ocular display to an entry labeled *Tad Williams - IT*, and waved him.

"Hey," Tad grumbled, sounding half-asleep. "Haven't heard from you in a while. How're things?"

"Workin' when and wherever."

"Anything interesting?"

"Take a look." Kateri knew he would confirm her location anyway.

"Casino gig? Nice."

"You would think so. Anyway, I'm checking in before switching on, in case they didn't call it in."

"I hadn't heard," he said. "I'll clear the alerts. Do you know for how long?"

"A couple days, maybe a week."

"I'll put it in for two."

"Thanks," she said. "What's the load like today?"

"Pretty quiet. Had a spike last night, but it looks like you should be lag-free. Also, you need to update your..."

Interrupting the lecture on system updates, she said, "Great, thank you. Take care."

She tapped her earlobe again to end the wave. Then, she rubbed her right thumb and forefinger together, two long strokes, three taps, two long strokes, and three short side-to-side strokes. The ocular display illuminated her peripheral vision, and the power-up sequence began with *low battery*.

Crap! She grit her teeth, walked off the casino floor, retreating to the security office. Mark looked up from his desk and she asked, "Is there a high-v I can use?"

He stared at her for a moment, chewing his lower lip aside, and then nodded towards a small reception desk. "There should be one in the floor jack."

She turned, brushed a lock of hair from her cheek and over her shoulder, and walked to the desk. A recessed outlet behind a brass plate included the diamond-shaped port used for a high-voltage connection. She unclasped her charm bracelet, slipped it from her wrist, and opened the caps to expose diamond-wire connections. Probing the back of her ankle for the jack, one end of the bracelet found its way into the port. She scooted her leg over the outlet and inserted the other end. Kateri chose a rapid charge, and selected *all systems*. *They're going to notice this on their power bill*. A battery display flickered and she watched it quickly fill. After passing a quarter charge, firmware updates began to download. Kateri canceled them soonafter, long suspecting whoever funded the data centers were actively attempting to brick her hardware. Why they didn't just shut down the data centers was beyond her. *Or I'm being conspiratorial*.

A fully charged implant battery, when new, lasted for fourteen days of continuous operation. Her implant battery was replaced some ten years ago, and only seemed to hold around seventy percent of its stated capacity. Kateri disconnected the power connection when she reached a fifty percent charge. *About five days*, she thought, ignoring the nine-day suggested battery life with low-impact usage.

She returned to the casino floor, started up her implants, and loaded a package of filtering, predictive, and learning algorithms. Having learned the importance of establishing a baseline, she expected initial results to approximately match the casino's AI. Without it, customers could and would claim their AI had already identified a particular result, and she would not be paid.

First to be cataloged were low-probability cheats. Card marking, mucking, and posting were largely eradicated, except, possibly at two active tables in the back where real cards and chips were being used. Everywhere else cards had been replaced with holographs and virtual chips. Without direct access, she could only hypothesize cheating that took place between interconnected systems and financial processing routines. Monitoring augmented play could be problematic for physical games, while the wave/virtual games were straightforward. Most times, casinos wanted her to find collusion, particularly blind collusion, something the AIs had a harder time spotting. Cold decks and rigged games, unlikely jackpot winners, and a heavy in the parking lot to collect seventy five percent of the winnings, leaving barely enough to cover tax obligations, were not uncommon. Nowadays, AIs had up-to-date models of collusion patterns. Once a method was identified, such as edge sorting virtual cards which, in order to be photorealistic,

included unique graphic design elements, it became a matter of AI training and employing a specialist to clean-up and weigh the result. Kateri walked between banks of slot machines, around the virtual band of wave games, and to the card tables. Results streamed through her implants, evaluated and summarized nearly instantaneously via quantum communication. A initial mission report became available, which she waved to Mark.

Kateri returned to the security office and rapped her knuckles on the door.

Mark held up two fingers. "Our AI found these already. Low probabilities of successful execution. Not an issue."

"I figured it would," she said. "That's a baseline that should be similar to your AI algorithmic output." She waited for Mark and then asked, "Is that similar?"

Mark grumbled, shrugged, and bobbed his head. "More or less."

"Nothing else worth mentioning?" she prompted. "No new predictive monitors? I need to know in case anyone else knows."

He shook his head. "Standard package."

You don't know, she thought. *Or don't want to say.* She gestured to the door. "I'm going to make a second round with the actual psionics now, and am hoping to avoid false positives, or worse, deceptive narratives due to incomplete information." When Mark offered no response, she said, "Some establishments don't pay for reports that confirm baselines, or that highlight problems whose revelations might affect their own jobs." Still no response. "Ok," she said. "So as far as your AI is concerned, the report I sent you is accurate and there are no other watches."

"Well," Mark began and held up his index finger. "We're piloting a prediction package and," he flattened his palm on the table top, flicked all four of his fingers over the surface to wave the information to Kateri.

Kateri sifted through the report. Many reasons came to mind as to why their pilot program would fail, but she bit her tongue and made a mental note that it was being run. It included a suite of algorithms building up a recurrent neural network to predict advanced collusion. A software replacement package for a psionacist. *Psionics is Dead*, a recent technology article asserted. *AI Is Still The Future*, went the byline. *Well, the job market for psionacists is certainly dying*, she thought, at least in depression-wracked North America. "Thank you," she said.

She returned to the casino floor for the third time, feeling less like a military patrol and more like janitorial

duty. All she needed was a mop and a bucket.

As with most other casinos started and operated by Native Americans on tribal land, this casino was Native American in name only. When the depression hit, banking shenanigans made it easy for investment groups to wrest control. Except to meet minimum employment requirements by hiring tribe members for the lowest paid roles, the owners hired cronies to fill preferred positions. Scanning tribe members first served two purposes: One, the executives expected it, for in their minds it wouldn't be racist if a fellow member conducted the investigation; Two, statistically a coordinated attempt to defraud the casino would come from a group that felt wronged by the casino owners. Kateri walked through the banks of slot machines, heading towards a janitorial crew making its way between a row of restaurant kiosks and inexpensive games. Her hands felt clammy as she approached.

When she was able to focus on the young man and woman, whom she assumed were of a Salish tribe, she enabled data feeds for their person, context, and spawned inflection links to whatever they touched, came into contact with, or moved within proximity. She shunted the data into a bucket of auto-generated graphs and relationships into a machine learning queue. To that noise she added the processes to build recurrent neural networks and nonlinear autoregressive exogenous models, and topped it off with an initial set of predictive and fraud models.

From the perspective of another tribe member, she knew, more often than not, they would consider her a turncoat. She didn't need psionics to predict that, although her systems did report a ninety-two percent chance of a hostile disposition.

"Hello," Kateri said as she approached the young man and woman.

The woman set her floor sweeper down and leaned on it, and the man cinched both hands across the cleaning cart's metal bar. Her monitors scanned every motion made, calculating what each had likely been doing, what they may have done had she not interrupted, and what they would likely do next. She enabled neural mapping on both.

"Hi," the young woman said. She checked the tuck on her white shirt into her uniform navy pants, around a pudgy midriff, and adjusted her name badge over her slender chest.

The young man wore the same uniform, affected by his own nuanced physique. Athletic torso, underworked legs, thin arms, a little bit of a gut, and, in his case, haphazard attention paid to shaving that morning. "Hi," he said.

"My name is Kateri Redfox."

"Lucy and David," the young woman said. "Stanwood. He's

my brother."

"I'm Salish," Kateri said with an uneasy smile. "In case you thought I was Mohawk."

"Why would we think that?" Lucy asked.

"My name. Kateri is Mohawk. It means Catherine."

"I'm sure if our culture hadn't been usurped by post-collapse carpetbaggers I'd remember enough to care." Lucy adjusted the carpet sweeper from her left hand to her right. She inhaled, looked at her brother, then said to Kateri, "It's nice to meet you. How may we be of service?"

"I guess that makes us the scalawags." Kateri offered a smile, though Lucy and David appeared nonplussed. "I'm consulting with the security office, and since we're from the same tribe I think, I thought I'd introduce myself."

"I don't know you," David said. "I've never seen you at a potlatch. At any of them."

Kateri tapped her head with her index and middle fingers. "Not invited. Can't go. Military augments."

"So," Lucy began, wringing both hands around the carpet sweeper pole. "You're a, um, mind reader."

"Psionicist," she said.

Lucy fanned her hand between Kateri and herself. "You're reading us now, I take it?"

She nodded.

"You know," David said, "Their AI scans us every day, all day and all night, including all our waves, emails, and any other media activity."

"I know," Kateri said. She took three steps to stand closer and not obstruct the path between the slots and the restaurants. "I, uh, I'm," she faltered.

"Profiling us," David said and nodded to Lucy. "Racially profiling because if something is wrong, it must be our fault. We must be getting back at the investors who took over, because they must have been underhanded in their dealings with us, and our present situation is entirely due to our own mismanagement of our resources."

She smirked, shrugged, and nodded. "Yes, that's pretty much the reason why I'm talking with you first. Actually -"

"You don't need to talk to us at all," Lucy said, and picked up the sweeper. "You can do your spying at a distance." She swung the sweeper head around her toes. "You know, we're not being paid while we're standing here talking to you. The second you showed up, we were automatically checked out on a break."

"Sorry," Kateri offered.

"Hey, it's not her fault," David muttered to Lucy. "Leave it alone."

"I'll let you two go back to work," she said, and then

nodded. "I just wanted to say hello to a familiar face."

"We don't know you," David replied, though without animosity in his tone. "The only thing we have in common, I assume, is we work for shit wages in the same casino."

Kateri nodded, held up her hand to wave goodbye and then turned away. She flagged the conversation and requested a quantum analysis to mine the collected brain activity. Whatever the siblings were thinking would be a simple though computationally expensive matter of memory extraction.

A shadowy weight descended on her chest and shoulders, her sinuses tingled. As she began to walk away, she glanced at the preliminary predictions. Likelihood of fraudulent activity: High. Likelihood of collusion: Certain. *That's a useless prediction. They're siblings*, she thought. Probability of gross effect on recent financial prediction deviations: Indeterminate. Enough to accuse them of something, but not anything specific. *Of course*, she thought darkly. She submitted the batch for summarization and analysis, and immediately received a server latency warning.

Some tens of paces away from the Stanwood siblings, Kateri turned to watch them. It would have been nice if there had been some camaraderie, even if little more than like-minded chit-chat. But, David and Lucy had kept to themselves, and as soon as the lag cleared up Kateri expected an analysis would confirm the racial profiling long since practiced. *Well, this sucks*, she thought. She didn't want to give them a pass because of who they were, and there was no guarantee that, no matter the result of the analysis, they were the cause of the financial issue. Mark and executive management would use any indeterminate result to weave whatever fiction fit their message. *The natives are getting restless*.

Then, in the corner of her eye, she saw it: A little black ball of fuzz skittered from beneath a chair, away from Lucy's carpet sweeper, and ducked between two slot machines. Whether from curiosity or an attempt to distract herself from the unpleasant reality of her conversation with the Stanwoods, though she tried to convince herself it was to test latency, she added the little rodent to a parallel analysis.

"Well," Mark said from behind her. She turned, startled by his interruption. "Any clues?"

I only just spoke with- she thought, starting to look after David and Lucy. *Well, you already think they are guilty*, she thought. Even if they were, and they were statistically likely to be involved in something, and knowing that the casino AI arrived at a similar conclusion, she preferred not

to second guess and rather wait for the actual result.

"CPU lag," she said. She'd never encountered it being this slow before, but offered, knowing the AI monitored her as well, as honestly as possible without reaching any conclusions, "It should be a few more minutes and I'll know."

He held up three fingers. "Three one hundreths of a second. That's how long it took our AI to -"

"To make an initial prediction, yes. I was able to do that relatively quickly. I'm now," she paused, considering whether Mark was the type of customer to relish in the details, such as how she needed to build up a recurrent neural network and run sweeps of pattern and predictive analytics. No, she answered herself. *I don't think he is.* "Doing the psionics part," she said more simply.

Mark gestured as though she were intended to infer something from his palm. "They're implicated."

"In what?" she asked. "I don't know enough yet to make that assertion. As far as I know, right now, they could be conspiring to take an extra creamer with their coffee."

"Then what do you know?" he challenged.

Kateri shrugged, and thinking of the little ball of fuzz, pointed towards the slot machines. "You have rats. At least one." Coincidentally, the lag didn't affect computing the mysterious rodent's origins and predicted behavior. Glowing paths of probabilities illuminated her eyes, and darkened paths of likely transit dampened and criss-crossed the illuminated bands. She wagged her finger along the paths. "Picking up crumbs under the tables, skittering between the slot machines." She craned her neck, trying to look over the slots and across the gaming floor, but didn't have the height for that perspective. "Coming and going from the back, over there."

"Rats?" Mark chuckled. "You're serious. You don't mean rat as a euphemism, do you? You mean an actual, literal rodent."

She nodded. "Yes." Then, she bobbed her head. "Not actually a rat. I think, well, the statistical likelihood is it's some kind of a small mouse. Still a rodent! Possibly a vole."

"And this has what to do with the Stanwoods being complicit in defrauding the casino?"

"I didn't say they were," she said. "You asked what I had found. For certain, I found there is at least one rodent loose in the casino."

"How about you bring me something more useful next time."

"I didn't bring -" she began.

"You know what I mean. Every second you're out here

muddles our predictive results."

"Because that is just a *Hopfield* network, and you're not retraining your connections -"

"Let me know when you have something concrete," he said. "And, what your projected completion time is by close of business today."

"The casino doesn't close," she said.

"You know what I mean," he repeated, visibly annoyed. He lifted his chin towards the ceiling, loose and baggy flesh stretching into a swollen gullet on his neck. "I'm having a hard time envisioning you in the military with this, I don't know, attitude. Is this how you worked when you were with the Army?"

"No," she said, sheepishly, and shook her head. Then, she lifted her eyes. "But I can't do here what I did there. That would be illegal by international law."

He shrugged. "I don't know that we're a real country any more. There must be some wiggle room in there." He laughed, perversely she thought.

Why does every customer think they deserve maximum service for a sub-minimum price? "I will find the cause," she said. "If I do anything that violates the Greenland Convention on Psionics, such as attempting a mind grab, it would mean any results are inadmissible."

"On the other hand, we'd know who it was."

"There is that," she admitted.

Kateri glanced along the path the vole had taken, and while looking away added a watch to Mark. Doing so, broadening her search from two to three, was standard procedure, and would also slow down the process even further. *We both know what my report will say, she thought. I just want a little more time to look around before I start calling the Standwoods thieves.* "Like I said, I'll have my estimates by close of business," she said in a conciliatory tone. "Six o'clock?"

"That will be fine," Mark said and then started walking towards his office.

Kateri continued walking around the casino, attaching watches to players and employees who exceeded risk indexes based on her own deterministic formulas. One pair in particular caught her attention: A man played blackjack on a physical table, while a woman played virtual blackjack from the wave band. After twenty minutes, they changed position. When she walked past them again some thirty minutes later, they had changed again. Although their game-play remained within averages, if not below, something was off about their behavior. But, she couldn't put her finger on it and the CPU

lag was still holding up the detailed analytics.

There, under the roulette table, she spied the vole again. Only for a moment, the little black mouse paused as though to look in her direction, and then skittered behind a bag that had been placed on the floor, and scurried beyond towards the slot machines.

"Excuse me," a heavyset man said, stopping before walking directly into her. He dabbed his perspiring forehead with his sleeve.

Kateri glanced up, and saw his aura flash purple, swirled with yellow. The color subdued to a nominal pink, and then to a suspicious crystalline rose. She attached a watch and ran psychotelemetrics which, like the vole and unlike the Stanwoods, returned with favorable speed. Reading psionics results was an art in and of itself. A bevy of possibilities could be inferred, but by attaching deductive learning algorithms infused with predictive and psychotelemetric models she discovered that, almost certainly, the man had managed to rig a bank of progressive slots through an electrical splice in the mens room.

"Pardon me." It was, after all, her fault for being in his way. At least according to his thought pattern. She smiled, tipped her head down. *Prick.*

She continued walking and waved the security office. "Mark," she began when the security chief accepted the connection, "I found someone rigging the slots." She forwarded the results to him.

A moment passed and Mark said, "Not a priority." Another pause. "I mean, our AI is tracking it."

I bet, she thought, and then smiled at her pun. *I bet in a casino.*

All around her flashed signs she cared not read. *This is what you've become,* she thought. *Willfully blind, ignoring the ongoing decimation of a people by a faceless financier.*

And there were other signs only visible through psionics, blaring a vision hard to ignore. A pattern of collusion coalesced: Telemetrics projected certain people would interact with various food vendors at specific times, but to what end, or any culprits, existed in the margins as a suspicious gap on the kind of chart that most non-psionicists tended to ignore. These signs she observed as a fractal overlay showing a confluence of suspicious activity originating somewhere else, outside, where the little black vole predictably went.

She checked the time: Ten past noon. "I'm tracking a convergence zone," she said aloud and waved her vocals to Mark. "Somewhere outside. I'll be off your grid for a bit."

"We only pay for floor time," Mark's voice buzzed in her

ear.

And you'll only get what you pay for, her retort fomented. But she bit her tongue and instead said, "I'll be back and give you an update."

Mark didn't respond, and Kateri followed the holographic projections across the gaming floor, through a service hallway and to a ceramic fire door. She pushed it open, wincing at the thought it would set off an alarm. It didn't. Outside, scattered raindrops fell from an autumn sky, rich copper sunlight drawing out the emerald green from coniferous trees, sharpening the blue behind the drab cirrus clouds, and accentuating the distant Olympic peaks.

After exiting the casino, her projections quickly diminished in the open space. She knew she would have to recalculate the telemetrics, and attempt retrocognition.

Retrocognition meant activating astral projection. *I was hoping to avoid going astral,* she thought. And then, because she was alone, and because it seemed appropriate, she said aloud to the sky as she activated astral projection, "Okay, ancestors of mine, hit me with your best shot."

In the nineteen seventies, the Central Intelligence Agency conducted remote viewing experiments in the name of astral projection. *Parlor tricks,* claimed Kateri's first psionics instructor. *Parlor tricks and spies make for magic.* Astral projection through psionics took a decidedly different direction. Instead of claiming to eject the conscious spirit from the host, psionics, like the CIA program, faked it by massively overloading the host's senses with data such that they could very well have left their body. Many an early student wound up astral-walking their way into an early grave until they opted for an overlay instead of full immersion. Astral projection was, therefore, a fancy augmented-reality implant.

Retrocognition by way of astral projection was no more mystical than psychotelemetry: Quantum communication, massive computing hardware, myriad data points. It was an indirect perception of the past, a probability of what likely happened to yield the observable outcome. Kateri could perceive herself in a possible past situation, and by following an established watch, revisit, in a way, what may have transpired. On the other hand, moving around with the present overlaid by possible pasts made the world all the more surreal.

Kateri followed the vole's projected convergence, rendered as a luminescent trail, through the parking lot to a bus stop, and onto an awaiting bus. She took a window seat opposite the middle door. Empty, the only sound came from the

audible tick of the automatic pilot's departure countdown. *Fifteen, ten, five, three, one.* The doors hissed shut, and the bus rose on a belching pillow of air. The autopilot shifted into drive, several gears grinding below her feet, and the bus' ratty hover canopy scraped along the street, around the tight turn of a freeway on-ramp, until the scraping drowned in engine whine. For a moment, she closed her eyes to the pretend serenity of a bus ride, a reminder of a time when the world seemed fuller and signs of despair and disrepair didn't lurk outside every window. She looked along the greenish trail of holographic light projected onto the highway and disappearing into the distance, cobwebs of intersecting influencers creeping in and out of passing on-ramps and exits.

She widened her eyes and felt a jolt when, over her shoulder, she saw a young girl of twelve or thirteen years of age, who she hadn't seen before, stand and approach from the back bench. The girl had long straight black hair and wore a Coastal Salish ceremonial dress, bleached elk hide with white and blue bead work on the belt and shoulders. Without asking, the girl sat beside Kateri and gathered the long leather tassels from her hem and sleeves from spilling into Kateri's seat.

"That's a very pretty dress," Kateri said to the girl.

"Thank you." The girl brushed out the tassels on her left sleeve. "It's my potlatch dress." Then, beaming with pride, she whispered, "My grandmother helped me." She touched the bead work. "I tried but I can never get the beads straight. She has a way with it that makes it look so easy."

"Is that where you're going now? A potlatch?"

The girl stared with what Kateri took to be disbelief. "Serious? I mean, it's not illegal anymore -" she trailed off.

Nineteen fifty one, an infographic flared. *Yeah, I got that too*, she thought, as though there were some inner dialog with the various computers. The state of the hover bus, apart from floating above the ground and driving on auto-pilot, could very well have been accurate to around that period, or the present. Hard to tell, though likely not relevant. Yet, *why are you here?*

"Are you -" the girl started to ask.

"Going?" Kateri said with a smile, looked down at her sweater. "Oh, no, I..." *Can't, wouldn't, couldn't...* "I'm not really dressed for it."

The girl turned her torso towards Kateri. "You know, it's not like before."

The many customs and rules of the earlier potlatches spooled by. *Don't need it*, she chided the computer, though it

provided a history of potlatch customs and rules nonetheless.

"I mean, you don't even need to have a dress, I'm just in a few dances, and I'm going to recite a story in *Lushootseed*, you know, our language." She held up her hand and hastily added, "I mean, I didn't mean to presume you're of a Salish tribe, I mean, are you?"

Kateri shrugged and nodded, offered the girl a light smile.

She returned a wide smile. "I'm Matika."

"I'm," she started, "Not lucky to have a pretty name like yours. Kateri. It's Mohawk, not typical of a Salish tribe."

"Sounds cool though," she said. "Kinda rad, actually."

Kateri's infographic amended the date projection. Seventies to nineteen nineties. Strongly in the mid-nineteen eighties.

"What were you going to recite in *Lushootseed*?"

"Oh, you speak it? I mean, sorry, I shouldn't assume. Do you want to hear it? I can always use the practice."

Before Kateri could finish nodding, the girl immediately began her recitation.

"This is the story of the buffalo and the field mouse. Once there was a little mouse who challenged a buffalo to a fight. The mouse crawled inside its ear and scratched away with its little claws, and then asked the buffalo to give up. The buffalo wasn't about to give up to a little mouse, so the mouse crawled inside the other ear and scratched away until the buffalo fell down dead. Can you believe a little mouse killing a buffalo? But, it did, and it was so proud of what it had accomplished. Now, the mouse had a different problem because it was too small to carve up the buffalo. Along came a red fox who offered to help, but the mouse was very stingy with what it would share of the buffalo, so the red fox ate the mouse!"

"Very well done," Kateri said, having followed along entirely due to her translator implant doing the heavy lifting. "Coincidentally, I forgot to mention my last name is Redfox."

The girl's smile waned. "I know."

The bus pulled alongside a stop near a rundown housing development. Matika pointed at a decrepit totem pole leaning against a rock wall advertising the name of the neighborhood. "Someone let coyote out, and he sent the mouse to kill our buffalo. Now we need a fox."

Kateri looked from the girl to the totem pole, its wood having splintered and paint long since faded from rain and weather. Then, her wave implant chimed while her thumb and index finger pulsed. Staring at the forlorn relic, she tapped

them together to open the connection.

"Sorry to do this to you," Tad's voice resonated in her ears. "I have a priority request that'll cause some network and CPU lag. You should disable retrocognition, or disconnect altogether."

Kateria pressed her lips together. *I hate being deprioritized.* She tapped her temple and disengaged the retrocognition and astral projection implants, leaving her core psionics implants active. A battery warning flared: 30% remaining. *You've got to be kidding.* She kicked her calf back against the bench, feeling the battery implant shift against her muscle sinew.

"For how long?" she asked.

Tad didn't respond for an uncomfortable number of seconds, before answering, "It will be a while."

Kese, she thought, and marveled at how quickly an early and seemingly forgotten memory came back in startling clarity, her friends and her trying to cuss in their ancestral language. "They're back to that angle? Claim capacity issues every time I try to switch on?"

"You know how it is," Tad's said with consoling warmth. "We've been through this before, nothing new. And, would you please update your..."

"Well," Kateri said, her breath condensing on the window glass, "Thanks for doing what you could."

She turned away from the window, rolling her eyes, ready to use a common analogy to explain away her side of the conversation with Tad to Matika. But, when she looked, the girl had disappeared and she sat alone in the rickety hover bus. *I knew you didn't exist,* she thought as she stood from her seat, fighting hip joints cemented in place by a failed actuator that once offered increased strength. She smashed her fist against her fleshy hip until the actuator unseized and she was able to move, and departed through the rear doors. The hover bus continued on its way, leaving her to contemplate the rundown neighborhood with appropriated signage.

And, apparently, an old woman.

Kateri verified she had disabled the astral projection and retrocognition implants, and, for sanity's sake and to conserve battery life, shut down the remaining implants.

The old woman wore what appeared to be a handmade straw hat and leaned on a thick cane, gripping the pole in a weathered hand. Strange, the old woman appeared in a dress similar to the young girl. She squinted at Kateri, deep creases shifting on her brow and around her eyes.

"I know you," the old woman said.

"Matika," Kateri said, a distant memory returning that

must have been the basis for the young girl on the bus. She tried to remember how she once addressed the woman. "Ska, skuy? Skuy Matika?"

"Not quite," the elderly Matika replied, "But close enough." She struggled to take a step, and then another.

"Here, let me," Kateri started towards her to provide assistance.

"Still a silly little girl," Matika said, holding up her hand. "I'm merely feeble, but I manage." She took two more tentative steps, stopped to lean on her cane, and then beckoned Kateri with an extended arm.

Kateri walked towards what turned into an embrace. "I remember you," Kateri whispered, and at once felt a flood of emotion. She touched her eyes, tears long from falling beginning to bead. She dabbed at her nose, took a step back, and looked at the rundown development. "Why are you out here? Do you live here?"

Matika shrugged and pivoted on her cane. "Just as nosy as I recollect, too." She waved off any retort from Kateri and inclined herself towards the totem pole. "I'm here to pay my respects."

"That's just some old builder's poorly thought out cultural appropriation," Kateri said of the totem pole. "It can't be real."

But Matika only looked on in silence.

Kateri approached the totem pole and pointed to the lowest exposed portion where any semblance of a feature had been lost to exposure and damage. "Coyote wasn't even a traditional Coastal Salish..." she began.

And Matika struggled to walk aside Kateri and barked, "And who told you that?" Before Kateri replied, she extended a gnarled finger and pressed it firmly on Kateri's forehead. "All that junk you put in your body made you confused."

"Fine, yes, Flathead and *Interior* Salish had coyote stories, but *Coastal Salish*..."

"Coyote is part our creation story, the Salish." Matika sounded exasperated, but not scolding.

"But it came from the interior first."

"And they brought it with them or heard about it from somewhere else."

"I just meant the Coastal, we..."

"You mean you. We're better that our stories have breadth and depth, twist and turn like the Snake, rage and roar, bring life and power across all those on its banks. Not some shallow narrow little crick that seems pristine and may be fine for a toad. Sing a song to a salmon about that crick. Hear how fulfilling it is?"

"Fine," Kateri said, "Cultural appropriation is apparently okay."

"Child," Matika scolded, "Girl with a *Mohawk* name. You're old enough to be a mother to a mother, old enough to know better, and I can tell you're none of those." She lifted the cane and pointed at the totem pole. "That's cultural appropriation. Using something that has meaning, or should have meaning, to us, for an entirely different and disrespectful purpose. If our shaman adopted—"

"Shaman is *Siberian*!"

"That doesn't mean it's wrong. Where did our people come from so long ago?" Matika hefted the cane and tapped Kateri's shoulder. "Have you ever considered that all of our cultures, First Nations, Americans, South Americans, share common roots, some nourishing others withered, and our stories have similar themes? Stop looking at the differences to identify everything. Try looking for similarities for a change, what we have in common that nourishes, because we can't relate to others without something in common. If others never know who we are, then we never were except by our mistranslated, misunderstood, misplaced and misused remnants."

Matika looked back at the totem pole. "If our *shaman* wanted to invoke the spirit of a kangaroo, yes, I'd have questions. Or, maybe, they knew something I didn't. There were kangaroos at the zoo when there was a zoo. They weren't here at the start but that doesn't mean we have to ignore them when someone brought them here. Their presence influences our culture whether we like it or not. We can revile kangaroos, or embrace kangaroos, tell ourselves kangaroos really don't have much to do with ourselves as a people, but we shouldn't ignore that kangaroos once lived nearby." She snarled at the totem pole, or, perhaps Kateri thought, the sign it accentuated. "Nobody should make such a mockery."

"I guess I could see a shaman," Kateri muttered the word, "invoking the kangaroo spirit."

"Don't be ridiculous," Matika said with a wry smile. "How many Salish totem poles have a kangaroo on them? You're missing my point. When your grandfather carved that pole, he put coyote, not kangaroo, because..."

"My grandfather carved..."

"No!" Matika laughed a crazed cackle. "You have no sense of humor anymore. It looks like an old school project. Look at that bear. They must have let the lower grades carve that one. And no, before you ask, you didn't carve it either. My point is it's disrespectful to use it this way."

"And coyote is missing," Kateri added.

"That too," Matika said, and then smiled warmly. She put

her arm around Kateri and said, "I missed you. Did I ever tell you the moral to the story of the buffalo and the mouse?" Kateri shook her head, and she explained, "If you are proud and selfish you will lose everything."

The battery alarm flared. *%5 Remaining. What? I turned everything off.* She touched Matika's hand which wrapped Kateri's torso, smiled as if to excuse herself, and tapped her temple. Retrocognition and astral projection indicators showed those implants were running hot and with zero lag. *I know I turned you off.* She disabled them.

And Matika disappeared, leaving behind a momentary sensation of her arm around Kateri's torso.

Kateri stared at the totem pole, feeling a gray cloud sink from her forehead, down and through her throat, into her lungs and stomach. "Well that's too bad," she whispered aloud.

She returned to the bus stop, sat down on the part of a rusted bench that didn't threaten to spear her with a frayed metal strand, and waited. After some minutes spent in stupefied reflection, a bus arrived and settled on its canopy with a whoosh of oily air. She boarded, took a seat near the front, and rode it back to the casino. The bus arrived as the sun began its decent towards the Olympic mountains and cast its golden glow over the distant Puget Sound.

Kateri trekked across the parking lot towards the entrance, still in a daze from her discussion with the elderly Matika. While traipsing across a grass median she felt something squirm under foot. The vole, pinned by the tail under her toe, writhed. *How?* She looked around the parking lot as though someone played an active role in such random circumstance. The vole thrashed against the side of her shoe. She squatted down, picked up the little rodent and peaked at it in her cupped hands.

"Just so we're clear," she told it, "There is no way I'm actually eating you."

Kateri carried the vole across the casino driveway towards the front door, unsure as to why her analysis flagged the rodent and unable to investigate with the majority of her implants disabled due to a critically low battery. As she veered into a trickle of foot traffic entering and exiting through the bank of revolving doors, she paused to watch a delivery truck drive around the side. She glanced from her cupped hands, past the front door and to the side of the building, and began to walk after the delivery truck. With no pockets large enough to conceal the vole, she turned her hand until it seemed the rodent would be obscured from view and without appearing, she thought, *like someone up to no good.*

Nonetheless, the security system likely flagged her for appearing suspicious.

The delivery truck had backed up to a door and staff were unloading what at a distance appeared to be food. A security guard held the door open for the delivery staff, and she paced her approach while pulling her identification card from her front pocket. She stopped by the guard and offered her identification.

"A moment," the guard said, and consulted a display on his wrist. "This entry is for kitchen staff."

"I am consulting today, following a telemetric. Mark Johnson will confirm."

"I know that, obviously," he sniffed. "But why not go through the front door?"

Kateri wagged her finger from the rear of the casino, along the south side driveway, towards the front parking lot. "Telemetric? I'm following it. And it leads -" She pointed along the length of the south wall, across the door, and paused at completing the sentence. With her implants off, she didn't have evidence anything of interest entered that specific door, and the ever present security cameras watching, listening, and analyzing every action and word would spot a bad lie a mile away, and flag a good lie all the same. So, best not to lie at all by telling the truth. The vole did cross by this area. Just not through the door, and since she never asked to enter that particular door, she left it to the guard to offer her entry.

The guard shrugged, fiddled with his wrist screen, and then motioned her inside. As Kateri started to step across the threshold, he held out his hand and asked, "No food, no liquids, nothing, right?"

Kateri shook her head, and held out her left hand; the vole squirmed in her right. "No."

The guard dropped his hand, though as she passed through the door, she turned and asked, "For security, I assume?"

"That," the guard began, then shrugged. "You know, policy."

"Oh, sorry, one other question. Is there a high-v back here?"

The guard gestured through the door and bent his wrist to point westward. "Past the freezers, left, at the refrigerators, down the hall past the restrooms. Kitchen staff break room. That has one."

Kateri walked across what looked like a loading dock. The walk-in freezer announced itself with a distinctive rattle and frosted plastic stench. Adjacent to the freezer, the refrigerator whistled and whined, its door ajar leaving only yellowed vertical plastic strips to contain its chill. A wet concrete hallway separated the refrigerator from a climate-

controlled storage room, and she followed through a pungent cloud emanating from alcoves on either side of the hall. Past the restrooms, she came to a nondescript metal door labeled *Staff* in black stencil. She pulled it open to find a small room containing a few plastic tables and chairs, a kitchen counter and sink, and little else. With no sign of any appliance other than the overhead light, she searched the wall around the room, the floor, the back-splash behind the sink, to no avail. She opened the cabinets underneath the sink, looked behind a leaking garbage disposal and saw it was plugged into an inverter to convert high-v to standard voltage.

Gross, she thought, holding the vole in one hand, reaching behind the leaky disposal and yanking out the high-v cable. She set the vole in the sink for lack of another storage container, unfastened her charm bracelet, and inserted the connection into her ankle port. She sat down on the floor, put her ankle under the sink, and once more had to reach around the filthy disposal to plug it in. With one leg under the sink, and the other leg folder across, she thought, *how degrading*.

And, nothing. No sign of power.

She unplugged the cable, stood, watched the vole scurry around the sink for a moment. *It's a high-v outlet*, she told herself. There's probably a switch, she tapped her fingers around the back of the back-splash and the sink, but the only indication of any mechanical circuit was an in-surface disposal toggle. "They couldn't have been that dumb," she muttered aloud, and, since she had unplugged it, didn't hesitate to press the disposal switch with the vole now scurrying around the porcelain.

Kateri sat down, reconnected the high-v cable to her ankle and, when the power options flared in her ocular display, nodded, saying, "They were that dumb."

Rapid-charge. No to updates. And, when her battery level passed three percent, she started reactivating her core implants. While they cycled on, she flicked her right earlobe twice to activate her wave and said aloud to send her vocals to Mark, "I'm back."

"You were out for nearly three hours. Do you have your estimates?"

"I will by six," she said.

After Mark ended the wave, and while in an awkward and unflattering position, her ocular display flashed. Tad again. She tapped her thumb and index finger to accept the new wave.

"Lag should be clear," he said. "Also, some of that, a lot actually, was due to your own hung processes, probably from

rejecting the upgrades. Two of them had been stuck for years and have been hampering battery. I cleared them out, and that should fix the battery drain."

"It's an old battery."

"You're old," Tad said, condescendingly she thought, though became playful when adding, "I mean, you have a self-healing battery. It will take a full charge until the day you die."

"And?" she prompted. *What a dick, calling me old.*

"Check your battery. It should be charging faster."

"Okay, I see that now. Thank you." She tried to sound grateful, still annoyed at his remark. It seemed ineffable having an implant she thought obsolete return to full operational status.

"Please install the updates. At least the core ones, or this will happen again."

"Fine," Kateri said, and a moment later a system patch status message flared across the upper display, overlapping the battery charge indicator which now accepted a proper high-v charge.

"There, that was it," Tad said. "See, that wasn't so bad."

"Thanks Tad," she said, and severed the connection.

As the reinvigorated battery, no longer lamed by mysterious hung processes, *canceled updates my patootie*, rapidly filled, she listened to the cacophony of vendors and suppliers shifting around their wares, the HVAC rattle a loose flange somewhere in the ceiling, and, then, an unexpected silence from the sink bowl. She tapped on the underside of the sink, tipping her ear towards the basin, and heard nothing. Wincing, she tapped the attached garbage disposal. Nothing. Following the drain to its crook, she tapped the pipe. No sound, no vibration, no indication that life occupied the plumbing. The battery indicator pulsed, greedily slurping power as told by the uncomfortable warmth radiating in her calf. Old memories returned, of fingers burnt when plucking a high-v cable out of the port embedded in her skin, and the various tricks tried to combat-configure her psionics rig. It was possible some of those hung processes were left over from so long ago, meant to throttle down the recharge because, as the warmth grew to discomfort, she went to pull out the diamond cable and *holy hell that hurts!*

She grabbed the cable by a charm hanging at the midpoint, it too quite warm, and yanked it from the wall. Pulling herself up to the sink, she moved to start running water over her singed fingertips when she remembered the vole. A quick scan around the counter top revealed no sign, and she squinted at the disposal. Stupid rat. "Hey," she said, and tapped on the sink. "You in there?" Gingerly, she prodded the silicone

baffle and tried to look inside, only met with a greasy film and unpleasant stench on her fingers. She ran the water, which came at an eco-friendly trickle through an aerator, then shut it off, listening for any sound. Inhaling deeply, Kateri stuck her fingers into the disposal and felt around, encountering all sorts of gummy residue that felt nothing like a rodent. "Well," she said, pulling her hand out, shaking off the gunk, and rinsing it under the faucet. "I tried." She dried her hands on a dingy dish rag, and, precisely as the thought crossed that, like Matika, the vole didn't exist, perhaps being an artifact of another stuck process, she noticed Lucy and David Stanwood standing in the doorway.

Kateri made a tremulous smile and raised her hand in greeting.

"Not really," Lucy said, and walked to the corner and sat at a table. David joined her, and they quickly rifled through a well creased paper bag, removing sandwiches, fruit, cheese, and cut vegetables.

"You had us chasing a rat all afternoon," David muttered as he shook a sandwich from a plastic bag.

"Coincidentally," Kateri said, looking towards the sink.

"There wasn't one?" Lucy asked.

"It may have..." Kateri started, but what could she say that didn't sound like raw incompetence on her part.

"It was a nice three-hour unpaid break," David finished.

"I think..." Kateri began again.

"You think," Lucy spat, and Kateri then noticed the break room, while outfitted with two optical cameras, lacked the more advanced sensors. Even with a wide-angle view, the Stanwoods seemed to have chosen a position that fell into a blind spot. "You don't think," Lucy went on. "You're a puppet. You regurgitate what some AI tells you to think."

"Not quite," Kateri said. "But, I can see..."

"You only see what you're told to see," she argued. "Blind to reality, deaf to truth, mute to anything unscripted." Lucy laughed sardonically. "You'd catch on fire if you had to solve a real problem with real facts."

Kateri nodded. She had heard Lucy's argument many times before. "You're right. That's a fallacy of AI. If you leave something out, it creates a gap, and over time it's..." And, as her implants finished their power-up cycle, running much faster with the hung processes cleared, and the battery life showing the most duration she'd seen in over a decade, how the results flowed. "Obvious."

She pointed at the paper bag. "I thought you weren't supposed to bring food in from outside."

Lucy crumpled up the paper bag and threw it towards the trash, missing by some margin. "Now you won't let us eat?"

Thanks a lot."

Kateri shook her head, glanced at the optical camera, and stepped towards the table where she thought she'd be within the blind spot. "The casino's AI should have figured out you were bringing in your own food. That doesn't look like it came from one of the restaurants."

"Obvious," David said, parroting Kateri.

"Which means," Kateri said, "It's ignoring you."

David swooped his finger around the ceiling. "That thing micromanages every second of every thing we do."

Kateri shook her head. "No, I mean..." And paused as so many telemetric results became available. *Why would the AI ignore someone bringing in food if the policy seemed so important the guards enforce it?* The obvious answers being it wasn't really enforced, or it didn't apply to employees. But, the data didn't support either answer. Instead, it spiraled into a vortex of land trusts acquiring residential properties, building purchases, management contracts, vendor agreements, food service providers, and a telltale gap: such an innocuous-seeming rule had to be ignored for employees, or maybe only tribe members. Staring with glazed eyes through the depth of rendered graphics and data routes, stitching together a narrative that excluded all of the sensitive details the casino didn't share, all she could say was:

"Wow. That's perverse." She focused on David and Lucy. "You pooled your money. You, others, and created..." The business relationships rendered in stark, multi-colored and overlapping lines. "You," she paused, and then spoke quietly, "Own the..."

And both the Stanwood's faces were red, anger creasing their mouths and brows. "It's not illegal," David said, and Lucy added, "We didn't do anything wrong."

Realizing the connection, Kateri said, "No, not wrong. Right." She touched her sternum. "I'm not the fox. You are."

"Whatever," David said, dejected. "Not anymore. They'll figure it out now, we'll get fired, they'll change vendors."

"It was just starting to pay off, too," Lucy muttered.

Kateri rearranged her supposition into an order for analysis, and soon after the result supported the postulation. David and Lucy weren't stealing money, the casino was trying to avoid paying money. And it went far beyond and into the past than whatever moonlight scenario the Stanwood's had concocted. The entire casino purchase had been one elaborate shell game, with the investment company diverting commissions due the tribe into money-laundering gifts, unintentionally leaving the tribe as unwitting stakeholders in companies they never knew existed.

"I think," Kateri said, the data yielding a profound

radiance that seemed to make the room glow. "I think it'll pay off more than you think." She gestured at the table as though the Stanwoods could see the same report images augmenting her field of vision. "You bought a vendor owned in part by a Salish tribe, with a company not overtly associated to the tribe. And," she paused, sifting through results looking for, *there*, in a postulated graph of the AI's neural network, came the obvious answer: The casino's AI intentionally ignored tribal financial relationships with secondary and tertiary vendors. "The AI is ignoring it."

"What's *it*?" Lucy asked.

"The money. The money they think was stolen," Kateri said. "When the vendors calculate income, that goes," she waved her hand around the room, "all over the place before it comes right back to the investment company that bought the casino. And now, because they had to train the AI to turn a blind eye to income due to the tribe, they are caught off guard because they owe money that wasn't filtered out to an entity the AI can't identify."

"So, what? They owe us a bunch of money from the casino?" David asked.

Kateri shook her head. "No, the casino was legitimately sold. The proceeds, however, were funneled into vendors, land acquisitions, management companies. Because you bought a vendor your tribe already owned, their AI cannot and will never be able to ignore this situation simply because the entirety of its training is predicated on ignoring you."

Looking vexed, David said, "Again, so what?"

"I'm pretty sure I can help you," Kateri offered.

"With what?" David prodded. "Help with what we did for ourselves, or help get us fired?"

Kateri pointed at the uneaten food on the table. "I need your sandwich. And the fruit."

Disgusted, Lucy pushed the food across the table. "I knew you couldn't help but meddle."

"Trust me," Kateri said, but by then Lucy and David were on their way to the door.

After the Stanwoods left without further remark, Kateri gathered up the food and created a makeshift charcuterie display on a small bamboo cutting board. She opened a wave to Mark, and when he answered and before he could inquire about estimates, she let him know she was able to provide her findings. It took Mark a few tens of seconds to respond. He did so by inviting her to the board room to present the results to John Bearstein, the CEO, and himself.

Departing the break room and walking through the corridor towards the loading dock, Kateri balanced the charcuterie

board on her left hand while using her right fingers to sift through analysis results. As with prior casino engagements, she suspected the executives were more interested in results than presentation, so the mere mention a result was available garnered attention. And, she tabulated the hours, suspecting Mark would balk at paying for the time she spent off premises, if the billable hours remained under five, they could hand her the digital equivalent of a crisp twenty and act as though they did her a favor. As she turned left near the walk-in freezers, she asked one of the staff for directions to the board room which was unexpectedly easy to find. Walk straight, take a left at the security office, proceed ahead to the large conference room right next to the door leading to the casino floor. When she passed Mark's office, she didn't see him, and soon after thought she was in the wrong location because she was the first to arrive at the board room.

Kateri set the charcuterie board in the center of the table, straightened the items into a decorative fan, and sat down in one of the seats.

Now certain of the results, she anticipated the reception. Customers wanted, expected, demanded a particular result, but the heuristics invariably told another story. In this case, she had started with a deep learned model of a neural network composed of target scans, quantum memory and observation, and a learning vector quantized the mined data to yield an undesirable truth.

Mark navigated his rotund frame through the doorway and walked hurriedly to Kateri. She stood from her seat and he whispered none-too-secretively, "I had someone look into your rodent problem. Do you want to guess what they found?"

"Nothing," Kateri replied.

"I recall you saying we had a real rodent. Not a euphemism."

"The rodent is real, metaphorically it's a vole."

Mark turned red, biting down a retort as John Bearstein, the casino's CEO, entered, sat down, and drummed his fingers on the conference room table. Mark instructed, "Make sure your implants are off."

Kateri waited for Mark and several other employees to sit at the table. Standing behind her chair, she queued the mission log summary. John prompted her with, "Whenever you're ready," to which she read through the salient points.

Four weeks ago, the account payable for a vendor owned by the Stanwoods came due, which she conveyed as, "Four weeks ago, you saw an increase in payments." Because, through an elaborate shell game, the vendor was owned by a Coastal Salish tribe, and therefore including, even though a miniscule stake, the Standwoods. Tribal ownership was hidden through an ongoing shuffle of implied ownership to avoid reporting profit.

"Two weeks ago, your AI deduced the increase in payments was due to collusion." She paused. "For some reason, I thought you were looking for gaming cheats."

Mark shrugged. "We never said anything of the sort."

"Nonetheless, the payment exceeded some threshold?" She paused, looking around the room for any sign of confirmation.

A middle aged man nodded. "There are several pending anomalies."

As he spoke, Mark shifted over several chairs to whisper with John, and John interrupted the man by stating, "I'm interested in who is responsible. I have people and AI to handle the numbers and discover the cause."

"We know it's the Stanwoods," Mark added, though received a glare from John. "We hired you for confirmation."

Of course you know, she thought. The payment is made out to a company where they are listed as beneficiaries. Attempting to convey a sense of absent mindedness, though quite intentional, she leaned over the table, picked up a piece of Lucy's sandwich and nibbled on the edge. The dried smoked meat tasted terrible, and she muttered, "This is disgusting."

"Really?" A young man asked. "Our deli is great." He picked up another piece of sandwich, bit it, and made a sour expression. "Ugh."

"Who," John prompted. "The Stanwoods?"

Kateri pointed at the small butcher block with David's and Lucy's leftover lunch. "That is the Standwood's lunch."

Mark snapped his fingers. "Who cares? We have a policy against outside food. They're in violation and can be fired."

Kateri shook her head. "No, they aren't."

"Who?" John seethed. "What does some janitors' lunches have to do with this?"

"Your AI is trained to avoid certain conditions related to tribe members. It can't see this piece of sandwich when the Stanwoods or I hold it, because if it does, then it can't continue to ignore the payments owed to the tribe, including the Stanwoods." She pointed to the young man who tried the sandwich. "It saw him, though. He violated your policy."

"Enough," John barked. "It's the Stanwoods. You all but said so." He passed his hand between Mark and her. "Wave your report to Mark." He stood to leave.

Kateri nodded, and sent the analysis results to Mark. "There, Mark has a copy. And, I assume, so does your AI. You just trained your AI to notice the Stanwoods."

John stood, pushing his chair back with his knees, and walked to the door.

Kateri asked, "You understand what that means, right? Your entire business model is predicated on not paying what's owed

the tribe. All of the..."

"Get her out of here," John snapped to Mark.

"The payment went through, didn't it?" Kateri asked those looking nervously at each other and John. "Right? Automatic approval. This is just the beginning." Nearly laughing, she called after John, "You used a memory network, it won't forget. It can't. There's no stopping it now."

The others quickly filed out of the conference room, leaving Mark and a pair of security guards to escort Kateri from the premises.

As they neared the front door, Kateri asked, "Do you know what happened to the vole?"

"It didn't exist," Mark said.

"It was so consumed with taking all of the buffalo, in it's greed it didn't see what the fox had planned."

After walking through the doors, she turned around and held out her hand. Her AI suggested a probability of a payment of twenty three dollars and fourteen cents. *No, it'll be a twenty*, she thought.

"Right, fine," Mark said. He tapped on his watch a few times and angrily swiped his finger. "There, that's twenty." Kateri beamed internally at her AI's prediction, while Mark dug around in his pocket. He handed her an assortment of change. "Here, that's the standard of living fee."

"Thanks," Kateri muttered, looking at the jumble of change. She stuffed it into her pocket without counting it. The glowing estimate from the AI pulsed and underlined fourteen cents. She sighed, thinking, *Yeah, I can count too.*

he began to reach for her charm bracelet, but still holding the vole, deposited it in the sink. *Damn it.* She had left it in Mark's office.

(Ending - Kateri, after the spiritual journey taken in the previous part, connects the events to the legend of the Buffalo and the Field Mouse. She returns, this time intent on catching the vole, who she now sees as an equivalency to finding the source. She realizes that David and Lucy Standwood have been orchestrating to bankrupt the casino in order to return the facility to the tribe, but, strangely, in a largely legal way; the vole, the real vole, turns out to be a financial tool the investment banker uses as established writ to force harsh conditions on the tribes post investment in order to maximize profit - they are, collectively, the vole, or, per the story, the field mouse being greedy and

selfish. When Kateri gives the sandwich to Mark and John, implied to be made from the vole but it's not, she in effect tests an exploit/backdoor in the financial model that could ultimately cause its long-ago built neural networks to collapse; that swift pounce of the fox - and because she and the Standwoods now know it has that fault, trying to go to a backup wouldn't work without retraining decades worth of models, they only need to pounce)

(by feeding the vole meat to Mark and John, she exploits a very curious tiny logic error in the AI in that the meat, being clean, from a known taxonomy, prepared and sold by the casino restaurant, but not from a known vendor, causes a programming fault in an old module related to liability coverage, which intersects with the revenue and fiscal planning modules. This leads the AI into a state necessitating a neural network rebuild to eliminate the faulty module, which in turn eliminates the faulty accounting rule used by the investment bank)

Released from her contract, owed eight dollars for her efforts (though she spent the last few hours topping off her batteries, so is content with that), she has a veiled discussion with Lucy and David, relating the story, that the fox has eaten the mouse, and, the buffalo can once more roam the pasture but be on the lookout for more mice.

The ending is indeterminate : The investment bank can no longer profit off the casino without paying off the massive amount of arrearred profit owed the tribe,

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"Spiritual psionicist," she said. "Psionics without spirituality is like AI without humanity: Statistically precise and wildly inaccurate."

... a tribal spiritual leader